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# The Anthropology of John and the Johannine Epistles: A Relational Anthropology\*

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In the words of Ray Anderson, “The attempt of theology to speak of the uniqueness of human personhood has not been altogether successful.”<sup>1</sup> Anderson clarifies that some of the challenge for theologians is in establishing the meaning of “being.” For New Testament scholars, who live in a world of texts, words, and discourses, the challenge is not so much the defining of “being” but that the New Testament documents do not speak directly to the concept of theological anthropology. The New Testament focuses primarily on God, Jesus, and the redemption of God’s people made possible through the life and work of Jesus the Messiah, and thus, New Testament perspectives on humanity must often be implied from the portrayals of God and Jesus.

The emphasis of the Gospel of John and 1, 2, and 3 John is undoubtedly on the Father and Jesus as the Revealer of the Father, but the Johannine literature offers insight into theological anthropology because of the implications that the sending of the Son and his revelation of the Father have for humanity. The anthropology that we find in the Johannine literature is relational in nature. Human beings are either in relationship with God or they are not. They believe and thus overcome the world (1 Jn 5:4-5), are born of God (Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 3:1-2; 5:1), remain in him (Jn 6:55; 15:4-5; 1 Jn 4:15-16), and become one with the Father and the Son (Jn 17:21); or they do not believe and remain part of the world, reject Jesus, and hate the light (1:11; 3:20; 7:7; 1 Jn 1:6; 2:11; 3:10). Belief in the one whom God sent allows human beings to have eternal life (Jn 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:40; 1 Jn 2:25). “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (Jn 17:3). Again, “we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life (1 Jn 5:20; cf. 2 Jn 1-2, 9).” The knowledge spoken of here is not a rational knowledge, but it is an intimate relationship in which the believer or the possessor of the knowledge enters into fellowship with God as one who is a child of God and is “in him” (Jn 1:12; 14:23; 15:4-5; 17:21; 1 Jn 1:3; 2:28).<sup>2</sup>

The Gospel and the epistles assume an estranged relationship between God and humanity. In the Gospel, the separation between God and humanity is heightened through the sending of the Son because Jesus’ coming forces a decision of belief or unbelief and the light he brings exposes humanity’s deeds (Jn 3:20-21). But in the Johannine Epistles, the separation exists between human beings—the children of God and the children of the devil. Sin has a role in this antagonism, and belief in Jesus serves as the means of bridging the separation. The anthropology

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\* I would like to dedicate this essay to Professor I. Howard Marshall, who passed away as I was completing the section on 1–3 John. Howard was a respected scholar and a humble human being. His life reflected what it means *μενεῖν ἐν αὐτῷ*.

<sup>1</sup> Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (New York: Scribner, 1951, 1955), 2.78.

of both the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John is relational; humanity either is or is not in relationship with God.

Throughout this essay, I will frame this examination of the Johannine literature in terms of traditional theological categories of anthropology: humans as created beings, salvation, sin and judgment, and human agency versus divine agency.<sup>3</sup> However, the Gospel and epistles do not speak to these topics in this systematic framework, and these categories are often interconnected with various Johannine themes. Thus, I will strive to remain true to the Johannine language and will attempt to avoid imposing theological structures on the texts.

#### [A] Humanity in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God so that those who believe in him may have eternal life (20:31). It does not specifically answer questions about the nature of humanity, but an understanding of the human person is implicit in the purpose of the Gospel because the revelation of Jesus as sent from God requires human beings to come to a decision about his identity. Is Jesus who he claims to be? Is he the Messiah, Son of God? The Johannine Jesus may not have come to “seek and save the lost” (Lk. 19:10), yet the reason for his coming into the world is not far from this. John the Baptist declares that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29), and Jesus says of himself, “I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness” (12:46). The coming of Jesus for the purpose of bringing light into the darkened world creates an expectation that human beings must accept or reject Jesus (1:9-10). His own reject him (1:11), but those who receive him are given the right to enter into relationship with him and become children of God (1:12). And it is in this saving belief that we see hints of the Gospel’s perspective on humanity, particularly with regard to sin, salvation, judgment, and divine and human agency. Human beings either believe, and so become children of God and mutually indwell the Father and the Son, or do not believe, and so are not in relation to God.<sup>4</sup>

#### [B] Humans as part of Creation

The Fourth Gospel begins by echoing the opening line of Genesis with the familiar words “In the beginning. . . .” The echo draws attention to the theme of creation, which only becomes more explicit in the following verses. John 1:3 states, “All things were made through [the Word], and not one thing which has been made was made apart from him” (cf. 1:10).<sup>5</sup> Human beings are obviously part of the “all things” (πάντα) created through the Word. In Genesis, human beings are created on the sixth day as the last of God’s creative work (Gen. 1:26-31). John’s focus, however, is not on the details of creation but instead the role of the Word in the act of creation.

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Cortez, *Theological Anthropology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York; London: T&T Clark, 2010), 1–13.

<sup>4</sup> Craig R. Koester, “What Does It Mean to Be Human? Imagery and the Human Condition in John’s Gospel,” in *Imagery in the Gospel of John: Terms, Forms, Themes, and Theology of Johannine Figurative Language*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 403–20, also understands the Gospel’s anthropology as relational, particularly with regard to Johannine imagery.

<sup>5</sup> See Masanobu Endo, *Creation and Christology: A Study on the Johannine Prologue in the Light of Early Jewish Creation Accounts*, WUNT II/149 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 206–219.

Everything has come into being through Jesus, including humanity. Thus, humans are created beings and part of the world which God the Father made through his Son.

In contrast to Genesis, however, the Fourth Gospel does not declare all of creation to be good. The world, which came into being through the Word, is a place of darkness to which the light comes and shines (1:4, 9-10). Jesus is the light that gives light to all humanity (1:9), but the human beings whose works are evil love the darkness more than the light (3:19-20). They are even said to hate the light (3:20), and elsewhere more explicitly still, the world is said to hate Jesus and his Father (7:7; 15:8, 23). This antagonism between God and the world does not negate God's declaration of creation as good, and by extension the goodness of created humanity (cf. Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31),<sup>6</sup> but the antagonism reflects a world that has been tainted by the sin of Adam and Eve. Nowhere in the Johannine literature are Adam and Eve or the account of their disobedience mentioned,<sup>7</sup> but the events of Genesis 3 lurk in the background. For example, the devil is described as ἀνθρωποκτόνος ("murderer" or "human killer"), a ψεύστης ("liar"), and ὁ πατήρ αὐτοῦ ("the father of it," that is the father of the lie or the liar<sup>8</sup>), and he has been these from the beginning (Jn 8:44; cf. Gen. 2:17; 3:3-4; Wis. 2:24).<sup>9</sup> Adam and Eve may not be mentioned, but the Fourth Gospel assumes their disobedience and the resulting separation between God and the world (i.e., between God and humanity<sup>10</sup>) as a given.<sup>11</sup>

This separation between God and humanity is a cosmological separation. Its cosmological nature is noticeable in God's sending Jesus *into* the world (εἰς τὸν κόσμον: Jn 1:9-10; 3:17, 19; 9:39; 10:36; 12:46), Jesus as the light and the world as in darkness (1:5, 9-10), and Jesus' description of his opponents as "from below" (ἐκ τῶν κάτω) and himself as "from above" (ἐκ τῶν ἄνω). They are from this world but he is not (8:23; cf. 3:31). Jesus has come into the world and will return to his Father (16:10, 28), and both "the Jews" (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι)<sup>12</sup> and his disciples do not know where he is going and are unable to follow him (7:34; 8:21; 13:33, 36; cf. 14:4-5; 16:5). Jesus is from above. His place is with the Father where he had glory before the foundation of the world (1:1-2; 3:13; 17:5; cf. 6:62). He is not from this world, but human beings are from this

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<sup>6</sup> Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, THNKT 4 (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2004), 76. See further below on belief and sin.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Cain in 1 Jn 3:12 and the Pauline references to Adam (Rom. 5:12-14; 1 Cor. 15:21-22, 45-49; 1 Tim. 2:13-14).

<sup>8</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John (I-XII): Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, AB 29 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966), 358.

<sup>9</sup> Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014), 122.

<sup>10</sup> The Fourth Gospel often uses the word κόσμος ("world") to refer to humanity in general (1:10; 7:4; 12:19). See Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2.15; Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 80-81; Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 121.

<sup>11</sup> D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 81, 83.

<sup>12</sup> As is common in Johannine studies, I will use "the Jews" to indicate instances of the term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι. There are various opinions on the translation of this term and what was meant by it, especially considering anti-Semitic views that have resulted. For various views on the meaning of the term, see most recently, Timothy Michael Law and Charles Halton, eds., *Jew and Judean: A MARGINALIA Forum on Politics and Historiography in the Translation of Ancient Texts* (Los Angeles: Marginalia Review of Books, 2014), <http://marginalia.lareviewofbooks.org/jew-judean-forum/>.

world.<sup>13</sup> Humanity may have been part of God's good creation, but humans are now separated from God and are not in relationship with him.<sup>14</sup>

## [B] Sin and Judgment

While the Gospel of John assumes humanity's cosmological separation and lack of relationship with God, the cause of the separation is humanity's sin. Craig Koester states: "In a profound sense sin and death are dehumanizing, because they separate human beings from the God who made them and from the life for which they were created."<sup>15</sup> The existence of humanity's sin is implied at the beginning of the Gospel in John the Baptist's cry "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29).<sup>16</sup> Not only that, but his statement reflects the possibility of sin's removal. The Fourth Gospel draws attention to humanity's sinfulness on other occasions as well:

This is the judgment that the light has come into the world and humans [οἱ ἄνθρωποι] loved the darkness more than the light for their works were evil [πονηρὰ τὰ ἔργα]. For everyone practicing evil [φαῦλα πράσσων] hates the light and does not come to the light so that their works might not be brought to light [ἐλεγχθῆ] (3:19-20).

Again, in 5:29, but with an eschatological sense, those practicing evil (τὰ φαῦλα πράξαντες) will be raised to a resurrection of judgment. Humanity is sinful; its works are evil. Human beings love the darkness and need a savior (4:42).

Although the Gospel of John presents an understanding of sin that assumes Adam and Eve's sinfulness, humanity's sin is "identical with unfaith," and their sin is convicted because humans do not believe in Jesus (15:22, 24; 16:8).<sup>17</sup> In other words, according to John, sin existed before Jesus was sent by the Father, but it is Jesus as the light coming into the darkness that makes the world guilty of sin (1:9-10; 8:12; 9:4-5). Jesus states this explicitly in 15:22 and 24: "If I had not come and spoken to them [the world, 15:19], they would not have been guilty of sin. . . . If I had not done among them works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father." Later Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin because they do not believe in him (16:8-9). Likewise, at the end ch. 9, the

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<sup>13</sup> See Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, "Self, Identity, and Body in Paul and John," in *Self, Soul, and Body in Religious Experience*, ed. A. I. Baumgarten, J. Assman, and G. G. Strouma, SHR 78 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 184–97 (184–85); contra Jeffrey A. Trumbower, *Born from Above: The Anthropology of the Gospel of John*, HUT 29 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> There is, however, an ambiguity in the presentation of Jesus' disciples. The disciples were given to Jesus from the world, they are in the world, and he prays that they not be taken from the world (17:6, 11, 15). Yet, Jesus can also say that his disciples are not from the world just as he is not from the world (17:14, 16). Thus, even though Jesus' disciples still remain in the world, they are no longer from the world. This change of sphere indicates that the separation between God and humanity may be bridged. See below.

<sup>15</sup> Koester, "What Does It Mean to Be Human?," 408, although Koester notes two causes of separation: sin and human creatureliness, or essentially what I have referred to as cosmological separation (407).

<sup>16</sup> For Rainer Metzner, *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 115–158, Jn 1:29 is the central thesis of the Gospel.

<sup>17</sup> Udo Schnelle, *The Human Condition: Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul, and John*, trans. O. C. Dean Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 140; also Craig R. Koester, "The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition: Exploring the Theology of John's Gospel," in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, ed. John R. Donahue (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 141–57 (145, 146).

Pharisees' claim to see indicates their blindness and that their sin remains (9:41). The impression given from these statements is that guilt regarding sin and the conviction of sin would not have taken place if Jesus had not come into the world.<sup>18</sup> His presence in the world brings about the judgment of sin.

In 8:21-30, the tension heightens between Jesus and Pharisees (8:13), and sin is central to the confrontation. Jesus speaks to his opponents about their inability to follow him and tells them that they will die in their sins (8:21). He says that he is from above and they are from below. They are from this world and he is not (8:23). He continues, "unless you believe that I am [ἐγώ εἰμι], you will die in your sins" (8:24). Ultimately, sin is unbelief, and lack of belief in Jesus results in conviction and judgment,<sup>19</sup> and as stated earlier in the Gospel, the "wrath of God remains" on those who do not believe (3:36). In the words of Hermann Ridderbos, "What light and darkness, life and nonlife, 'evil and worthless' and 'doing the truth' are, therefore, is determined by whether or not one knows and accepts the light (cf. 1:4, 5, 9ff.)."<sup>20</sup>

Sin and the darkness of the world existed before Jesus was sent by the Father, but the Gospel of John indicates that Jesus' presence in the world brings about the judgment of sin. Those who do not believe in him will die in their sins and be convicted of them. The guilt of humanity exists because Jesus has come and not all have believed in him as a result of his words and actions. Because of sin, there is no relationship with God.

#### [B] Believing in Jesus: Eternal Life or Judgment

Sin may be the cause of humanity's antagonism with God, but the separation may be overcome. If sin, which is unbelief, is the cause of the separation, it should be unsurprising if belief leads to relationship with God and the one whom he sent. To quote Koester, "faith enables people to be most fully human because it binds people to God and thereby brings them life."<sup>21</sup> Because Jesus has come into the world, human beings must choose whether to believe or not to believe in him.<sup>22</sup> They must make a decision about his identity. Is he the Messiah, Son of God? Is he from above? Is he the Bread from Heaven, the light of the world, the Good Shepherd? Is he one with God? Is God his Father? Throughout the Gospel, we see the Johannine characters coming to terms with this choice. Whether it is the crowds (2:23; 6:25-31; 7:25-31, 40-44; 10:42; 11:45-46), Jesus' disciples (2:11; 6:66), or individual characters such as Nicodemus (3:2-9; cf. 7:50-52; 19:39), the Samaritan woman (4:29), the official (4:50, 53) the lame man (5:8-9, 13), Jesus' brothers (7:5), the man born blind (9:38), or Martha (11:27), humanity has two responses to Jesus: to believe or not to believe (12:46, 48).

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 82: "the Gospel almost goes out of its way to indicate that the seriousness of the human plight would not even have been known apart from the revelation of God in Jesus Christ..."

<sup>19</sup> Metzner, *Das Verständnis der Sünde im Johannesevangelium*, 172-173. Metzner also refers to sin as the world's self-love ("Eigenliebe") and self-separation from the love of God ("Sich-Entziehen aus dem Liebe Gottes") (224-230).

<sup>20</sup> Herman Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 142.

<sup>21</sup> Koester, "What Does It Mean to Be Human?," 408.

<sup>22</sup> Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2.63; Cf. Trumbower, *Born from Above*, who argues that the Gospel of John assumes a gnostic conception of fixed origins. One is either from above or from below, and thus belief in the Son of God is dependent upon one's origin.

This choice between belief and unbelief leads either to judgment or to eternal life. John 3:15-18 makes this quite clear. Those who believe in the Son do not perish but have eternal life. As we have seen above, sin ends in death. Jesus says, “unless you believe that I am you will die in your sins” (8:24; cf. 8:21; 10:28). Much of the imagery in the Fourth Gospel implies the death of those who do not believe. Those who do not eat the bread of life do not live (6:53), and the branches that do not remain in the vine die (15:5-6).<sup>23</sup> Death underlines the finality of the separation between the life-giving Father and Son and unbelieving human beings (5:21). Yet this is not merely a future event, those who do not believe are, in fact, already judged (3:18). Judgment and the resulting death, although retaining a future sense (5:28-29; 6:39-40; 12:48),<sup>24</sup> are present realities for unbelievers.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, those who believe have already passed from death to life (5:24). They do not remain in darkness (12:46) and are no longer part of the world (17:14, 16). Believers become children of God, which has nothing to do with human birth (1:12-13; 3:4-6), but is rather about entering into relationship with God. Belief, thus, dislodges humans from the world and aligns them with God in antagonism against the world. As a result of this realignment, believers become hated by the world just as the world hates God and his Son (15:18-19; cf. 17:6). Humanity’s belief or unbelief leads to judgment or eternal life, either death and a continued separation from God or a relationship of mutual indwelling with him (14:23; 15:4; 17:3, 21).

#### [B] The Belief of Humanity and Divine or Human Agency

If in John lack of belief is sin (8:24) and if it is belief in Jesus that allows one to cross over from death to life and enter into relationship with God (5:24), is humanity’s choice to believe or not to believe in Jesus free or is it determined? Is God the agent of the choice or are human beings? It would seem that belief would be the sort of decision that human beings are capable of making; however, the Gospel of John’s presentation of humanity suggests that belief in Jesus is less than free because of the deep separation between God and human beings.

The Fourth Gospel contains some explicitly deterministic statements, implying divine agency. Jesus says in 6:44, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” And again in 6:65, “no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” The darkness is diametrically opposed to the light and to God and is unable to come to Jesus apart from the Father’s drawing of human beings to himself. Human beings belong to the earth and are not from above (3:31). They are slaves to sin (8:34). Without the Father’s work of drawing, those from below cannot receive or believe in what is from above, let alone become one with the Father and his Son who are from above. It is the Son sent by the Father out of love for the world who is able

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<sup>23</sup> Koester, “What Does It Mean to Be Human?,” 409–416.

<sup>24</sup> On the future eschatology of these passages, see Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie 3. Die eschatologische Verkündigung in den johanneischen Texten*, vol. 3, WUNT 117 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 381–397.

<sup>25</sup> On humanity and eschatology in John, see Jaime Clark-Soles, “‘I Will Raise [Whom?] up on the Last Day’: Anthropology as a Feature of Johannine Eschatology,” in *New Currents Through John: A Global Perspective*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Tom Thatcher, SBL Resources for Biblical Study 54 (Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 29–53.

to set humans free from slavery to sin (3:16; 8:36). The implication is that it is not a human being's own will that enables freedom.<sup>26</sup>

Similarly, those who come to the Father and the Son are those who have been given to Jesus by the Father (6:37, 39; 17:12). Becoming a child of God is entirely the work of the Spirit and has nothing to do with the flesh<sup>27</sup> (3:6; cf. 6:63). Rudolf Schnackenburg notes that the three negative statements about human birth in 1:12-13 show that being born from God is “the incomprehensible work of the divine Spirit, utterly beyond man’s reach.”<sup>28</sup> Not being born of the “will of man, but of God” may indicate that it is God’s will which makes becoming a child of God possible. Again in the words of Schnackenburg: “Natural birth does not make one a child of God, nor any other natural process. It is a strictly supernatural event, wrought by God alone.”<sup>29</sup> On the question of human or divine agency, the Gospel of John’s portrayal of such a deep separation and antagonism between God and humanity suggests the impossibility of a free choice to believe in Jesus. Belief itself and being born of God can only take place if God draws human beings to himself.<sup>30</sup>

Yet even though belief is presented as entirely God’s prerogative, Udo Schnelle notes that God’s drawing of individuals makes human choice possible and does not negate free will.<sup>31</sup> For the Johannine author, “Human beings are supposed to let themselves be moved to faith, for God’s salvific will does not abolish human freedom of decision.”<sup>32</sup> There is an apparent paradoxical nature to the Gospel’s portrayal of agency, since human beings are responsible to believe in Jesus<sup>33</sup> but simultaneously the Fourth Gospel presents God as the sole mover in salvation.<sup>34</sup> We may explain the paradox in various ways, but we are limited in contemporary discussions of agency, since, as John Barclay has rightly pointed out, contemporary discussions “often . . . mask fundamental differences of conceptuality” with those of the ancient world.<sup>35</sup> Regardless of how we describe it, the Gospel of John presents agency as an apparent paradox. It portrays God as the one who draws every human to himself,<sup>36</sup> yet the Gospel also portrays human beings as those

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<sup>26</sup> Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2.21; see Schnelle, *Human Condition*, 126, for a more passages reflecting divine agency.

<sup>27</sup> “Flesh” (σάρξ) in the Gospel of John refers primarily to humanity and does not carrying a negative connotation as in Pauline usage. See 1:14 and below.

<sup>28</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1967), 1.263.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> And even that initial drawing may not be enough to remain in him, since Jesus chose the Twelve and he said one of them was a devil (6.70).

<sup>31</sup> Also, Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2.23.

<sup>32</sup> Schnelle, *Human Condition*, 127.

<sup>33</sup> Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 94.

<sup>34</sup> See Marianne Meye Thompson, “When the Ending Is Not the End,” in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 74, who states: “While there are many interpretations of the meaning of such phrases as ‘drawn by the Father’ and ‘taught by God,’ it is difficult to find a way to read these statements without making it clear that for people to have faith in Jesus, God must do something; God must draw, and God must teach. The wind must blow, and the wind blows where it wills.”

<sup>35</sup> John M. G. Barclay, “Introduction,” in *Divine and Human Agency in Paul and His Cultural Environment*, ed. John M. G. Barclay and Simon J. Gathercole, LNTS 335 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 1–8 (4).

<sup>36</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, “Inclusivism and Exclusivism in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Word, Theology, and Community in John*, ed. John Painter, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002); Rainbow, *Johannine Theology*, 141–145.



who make and are held responsible for their own choices regarding belief.<sup>37</sup> From its cosmological perspective, the Fourth Gospel appears to emphasize divine agency; however, that appearance may be due to our perspective and not that of the Gospel of John.<sup>38</sup>

#### [B] Jesus as a Human: The Word became Flesh

The topics discussed thus far are relevant for any discussion of theological anthropology, but any discussion of this subject in John's Gospel cannot fail to mention the Word becoming flesh (ὁ λογος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, 1:14). The Word that was with God in the beginning became flesh and dwelt among humanity. The world did not receive him, but those who were drawn by God believed in him and became children of God (1:1-2, 10-14). The enfleshed Word is the antithesis of the opposition between God and humanity. The one from above, sent by the Father came into the world but was not from the world. He was the Son and not a slave to sin (8:34). He came to take away the sin of the world, and as the Son he freed human beings from the slavery of sin (8:31-32).

In John's Gospel, σὰρξ ("flesh") refers to human beings generally and does not carry the negative sense of its Pauline usage where it represents the sinful nature (e.g. Rom 7:14; 8:7).<sup>39</sup> The Word becoming flesh means that the Son of God became a human being and dwelt with humanity.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the term "flesh" is neutral, and any negativity exists only because flesh, that is humanity, is separated from God. Yet, God bridges the antagonism by sending his Son into the world. The light comes into the darkness in a new creative moment. The one "from above" enters into the "below" and lives with those from below as a human being. The world which is where Jesus is not "from" becomes where he remains (Jn 1:39) as the true image of God, revealing the Father and also making possible an example of humanity in relationship with God (1:18; 17:23).

The dwelling of the Word ἐν ἡμῖν ("among us") echoes the dwelling of God with his people in the wilderness. After Moses and the people erect the tabernacle in the midst of the camp, God descends on the tabernacle in the form of a cloud, and his glory fills the tabernacle (Exod. 40:34-35). Again, at the dedication of Solomon's temple, God's glory fills the temple signaling his presence with his people (1 Kgs. 8:10-11). In Jn 1:14, "the Word became flesh and tabernacled [ἐσκήνωσεν] among us and we have seen his glory." God again came to dwell with his people and reveal his glory, but in this instance, it takes place in the human being, Jesus Christ. A renewed relationship between God and his people is made possible through God's Son becoming human and living among humanity.

The Word dwells with humanity and God's glory may be seen in him, in a human being (1:14; 12:41). Those humans who believe in the Father and the one he sent will enter into a mutually

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<sup>37</sup> See Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 76–78.

<sup>38</sup> Jan G. Van der Watt, "Ethics Alive in Imagery," in *Imagery in the Gospel of John*, ed. Jörg Frey, Jan G. Van der Watt, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 200 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 421–48, notes that freedom according to John is "to be free to be who you are in the presence and to the glory of God" (433).

<sup>39</sup> Clark-Soles, "I Will Raise," 37–38; and also Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 39–49, in more detail.

<sup>40</sup> Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is clearly understood to be a human being by others. See Thompson, *The Incarnate Word*, 49–52; Smith, *Theology of the Gospel of John*, 166–167.

indwelling relationship, being one with the Father and the Son. For those who believe and love God, the Father and Jesus will come and make their dwelling (*μονήν*) with them (14:23; cf. 15:4-5; 17:23). Through the Son becoming a human being and his revelation of the Father, humans may enter into a mutually abiding relationship with God.

#### [B] Gospel Summary

The Gospel of John's anthropology is ultimately relational. Although God created human beings and declared all creation "good," the Gospel depicts a stark separation between God and humanity. The separation is described primarily in spatial terms: humans are from this world; Jesus is not from this world. The antagonism is so great that humans hate the light and reject the one God sent. Sin is the cause of this separation, and sin, according to the Fourth Gospel, is unbelief, which leads to judgment and death. Jesus' coming into the world brings about the conviction of sin because it forces a decision concerning his identity. Humans, however, can receive eternal life and become children of God by believing in Jesus because the Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world. John's Gospel gives the appearance that this decision is dependent upon the Father drawing humans and is not solely their own decision, yet humans remain responsible for their belief or unbelief. According to John, God sent his Son to make possible the reestablishment of his relationship with creation. Only through the Word made flesh can flesh become spirit and dwell with the Father and the Son.

#### [A] Humanity in the Johannine Epistles

An examination of the anthropology of the Johannine Epistles reveals numerous conceptual and verbal similarities with the Gospel of John, but a significant difference exists in the anthropological perspective of the epistles, and especially 1 John. While 1 John shares language and ideas with the Gospel, the epistle is more ethical in orientation and contains a slight emphasis on eschatological expectation. The epistles seem to be written for a different purpose than the Gospel, namely believers rather than for belief (1 Jn 5:13; cf. Jn 20:31). The emphases of the anthropological perspectives show some dissimilarity from the Gospel, yet the epistles also reflect a relational anthropology.

#### [B] Separation between Humanity

First John presents the world in an antagonistic relationship with God in a manner similar to the Fourth Gospel, but the dynamics of the antagonism are significantly changed. No longer is the primary antagonism between God and humanity, but it is now between the world and the children of God. The author of 1 John states, "We know we are from God and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (5:19; also 4:4-5). The world hates believers, and believers should not be surprised at this (3:13; cf. Jn 15:18). First John tells its audience not to love the world or the things of the world (2:15) because the things in the world are not from the Father (*ἐκ τοῦ πατρὸς*) but from the world (*ἐκ τοῦ κοσμοῦ*, 2.16). These "worldly things" are the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, and the pride of life (2:16).<sup>41</sup> That they are described as "in

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<sup>41</sup> Judith M. Lieu, *I, II, & III John: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 95, suggests that "the author is drawing on what were probably conventional formulations in order to infuse the rather abstract concept of 'the world' with the immediacy of potential threat".

the world” and “from the world” indicates their separation from God, and the separation has an eschatological implication: “The world and its desires pass away, but the one doing the will of God remains forever [μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα]” (2:17). “Remaining forever” and the passing away of the world highlight the separation between the world and God and between those doing God’s will and those by implication acting on the desires of the world. I. Howard Marshall states: “[human beings] cannot be neutral: they must belong to one side or the other.”<sup>42</sup> In other words, they are in relationship with God or they are not.

The antagonism in 1 John differs from that in the Gospel of John because in 1 John Jesus has already come (4:9-10). The word of life has been revealed; he has been heard, seen, beheld, and touched (1:1-2). His coming, which forced humanity to believe or not to believe, has now created a division between human beings, between those who believe and do the truth and those who do not believe and do not do the truth. The believers became children of God (3:1, 23; cf. Jn 1:12-13) and crossed over from death to life (3:14; cf. Jn 5:24). This movement from death to life is also a crossing over from the world to the Father. Those who believe are no longer children of the devil but children of God (3:10; cf. Jn 8:44).

The antagonism that humanity had for God is no longer monolithic. Some human beings have entered into a familial relationship with God through belief, and, in the words of C. H. Dodd, “a new kind of humanity has emerged.”<sup>43</sup> These believers have overcome the false prophets and the world (4:1, 4; 5:4-5). This language of overcoming or victory (νίκη, νικάω) highlights the antagonism that now exists between human beings. Through belief in Jesus as the Messiah (5:1; cf. 2:22; 4:15; 5:5), some human beings are no longer in an antagonistic relationship with God, but those who do not believe remain part of the world. Those who have joined with God and become his children are now separated from their fellow human beings because they have believed that Jesus is the Son of God (3:23; cf. 3:1; 4:7).

#### [B] Sin in 1 John

The dichotomy between these two groups of human beings is noticeable in their relationship to sin. Unlike the Gospel where sin is failure to believe in Jesus, in 1 John, sin is associated more with deeds and serves as a distinguishing marker between the children of God and the children of the devil (3:8-9).<sup>44</sup> It is the children of the devil who sin and commit lawlessness (3:4, 8-10). Sinning is not something that those born of God do. The children of God walk in the light (1:6) and do not sin (3:6-10; 5:18). Sin therefore remains part of the human condition, but only for those humans who are not children of God.

However, 1 John presents an apparent paradoxical perspective on sin. First John 1:8-10 states that all have sin, and those who claim to not have sin do not have God’s word in them. Yet, in 3:6-10, the children of God do not sin while the children of the devil do. Is it the case that everyone has sin which should be confessed (1 Jn 1:8-10) or are the children of God without sin

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<sup>42</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 185.

<sup>43</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, MNTC (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1946), 69.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew D. Jensen, “The Structure and Argument of 1 John,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35, no. 1 (2012): 69–70, argues for the centrality of the themes of sin and love.

(3:6-10)? How can one be free from sin (3:6, 9) and yet deceive oneself by claiming to be without sin (1:8)? Both Marshall and Lieu highlight the way in which 1 John often presents contradictory concepts on sin. We read that “no one who remains in him sins” (3:6a), but the author exhorts the audience to avoid sin and to do righteousness on multiple occasions. For example, in 2:1 the author states “these things have been written so that you do not sin.”<sup>45</sup> Or again, “no one who sins has seen him or known him” (3:6b), but previously the author has claimed to have seen him (1:1-3) and has told the readers that they have “known him” (2:13-14).<sup>46</sup>

Various suggestions have been made to explain 1 John’s contradictory perspectives on sin. First, one can make a distinction between verbal ideas. Not having sin (ἁμαρτίαν οὐκ ἔχομεν, 1:8) may be different from “doing sin” (ὁ ποιῶν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν, 3:4, 8, 9; cf. Jn 8:34). Second, the perfect tense of the verb “sin” in 1:10 (ἥμαρτήκαμεν) may be differentiated from the present tense of the same verb in 3:9 (ἁμαρτάνειν). This “grammatical subtlety”<sup>47</sup> may present a contrast between the existence of sin in a believer in 1:8-10 and a believer’s ongoing, habitual sin in 3:6-10. Dodd, however, argues that these two passages are not so much contradictory as they are different perspectives on the issue of sin for different groups of people.<sup>48</sup> In other words, one group of believers needed to be informed of their necessity to be cleansed from sin (1:7-9). Another group needed to know that becoming children of God and being cleansed from sin did not allow them the freedom to sin (3:6; 2:15; cf. 3:4; Rom 6:1). Marshall on the other hand understands the difference between the passages as an eschatological difference. Sinlessness is an ideal, something to be striven for, but it is only an eschatological reality.<sup>49</sup>

The sinfulness of humanity and God’s lack of sin remain key aspects in the separation between God and human beings. God is light and in him there is no darkness at all (1:5). Humans have sin and do sin, but those who become children of God do not sin. The act of sin or doing unrighteousness serves to mark the gap that has been created between believers and unbelievers.<sup>50</sup> Believers are to do and keep God’s commands, walk in the truth, walk in the light, have fellowship with God and one another, love one another, and believe in God’s son Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Jn 1-2, 6, 9; 3 Jn 5). Unbelievers do not do these things. Thus, sin serves as an outward indication of whether a human being has become a child of God and entered into relationship with God.

[B] Becoming Children of God and Overcoming the World: Belief and Salvation in 1–3 John

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<sup>45</sup> See Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 178, citing 2:1, 15, 29; 3:12, 18; 5:21.

<sup>46</sup> Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 132.

<sup>47</sup> Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 80.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 80–81; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. Reginald Fuller and Ilse Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 173; cf. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 132, who refers to the different “rhetorical context of each stage of the letter.”

<sup>49</sup> Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 182–183, 187. Whether he is correct or not, which I tend to think he is, I suspect that Marshall’s Wesleyan roots are not unconnected to his view here.

<sup>50</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannine Epistles*, 176.

While sin forms one marker of the stark divide between the children of God and the children of the devil (3:10), there is indication in 1 John that these are not permanent categories.<sup>51</sup> Sin may be overcome so that humans who belong to the world may become children of God. Twice in 1 Jn 1:7-10, which makes clear that sin is part of the human experience (esp. 1:8), we read that God has made possible the forgiveness of sin through Jesus: “If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). And again, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous [πίστος καὶ δίκαιος] in order that he might take away our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness [ἀδικίας]” (1:9).

Jesus has a role in the removal of sin, and it is his appearance that makes forgiveness possible. First John 3:5 states, “that one was revealed in order that he might take away sins” (3:5). His appearance also results in the destruction of the devil’s works (1 Jn 3:8-12). However, it is Jesus’ death and not merely his appearance that brings about a reversal of sin. The cleansing of sin takes place through Jesus’ blood, implying that Jesus’ death is the means of the removal of sin, a point made clearer in 3:16: “he laid down his life for us” (cf. Jn 10:11, 15; 15:13). Forgiveness of sin and cleansing from unrighteousness are possible for human beings, and they take place because of Jesus’ appearance and through his blood (1 Jn 1:7b; cf. 5:16–17).

The connection to Jesus’ death, while remaining implicit in the mention of blood in 1:7, may also be noticeable in the similarity of language concerning the “taking away” of sin. There is a close resemblance between 1 John 1:9; 3:5 and John the Baptist’s statement about the Lamb of God in Jn 1:29:

1 Jn 1:9: ἵνα ἀφῆ ἡμῶν ἀμαρτίας (“in order that he might take away our sins”)

1 Jn 3:5: ἵνα τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἄρῃ (“in order that he might take away sins”)

Jn 1:29: ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἀμαρτίαν τοῦ κοσμοῦ (“the one taking away the sin of the world”)

The connection to the Lamb of God imagery, the taking away of sin, and Jesus’ blood indicates the significance of Jesus’ death for the forgiveness of sins.<sup>52</sup>

The role of Jesus’ death in the taking away of sins becomes more evident in 1 Jn. 2:1-2. Jesus Messiah is the παράκλητον (“advocate”) before the Father for those who sin. He is a ἱλασμός “for our sins” but also “for the sins of the whole world.” The term ἱλασμός is also used in 4:10: God “loved us and sent his son as a ἱλασμός for our sins.” This word is clearly suggestive of the removal or forgiveness of humanity’s sin through Jesus’ death<sup>53</sup> and implies the atoning nature of Jesus’ death. The term ἱλασμός has long been recognized to echo the LXX terminology related to the atoning of sin on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:9).<sup>54</sup> Whether as expiating or propitiating, God makes possible the forgiveness of sins through Jesus’ death and thus allows

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<sup>51</sup> See Marshall, *Epistles of John*, 184–185, on whether one can switch groups. cf. Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 140–141.

<sup>52</sup> See M. J. J. Menken, “The ‘Lamb of God’ (John 1,29) in the Light of 1 Jn 3,4-7,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 581–90.

<sup>53</sup> John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina 18 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 159.

<sup>54</sup> For a full discussion, see Toan Joseph Do, “Jesus’ Death as HILASMOS according to 1 John,” in *The Death of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Gilbert Van Belle, BETL 200 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2007), 537–53.

humans to enter into fellowship with him and his Son (1 Jn 1:7; 3:6).<sup>55</sup> Addressing this theological salvation, C. H. Dodd states, “We may not be able to give a fully reasoned theology of the [atonement], but we are entitled to believe, in face of the degradation of our common humanity, that God has done in Christ all that needs to be done to cleanse us, and done it with the complete adequacy possible only to infinite power and love.”<sup>56</sup> Dodd continues saying that God through Jesus made possible this “radical removal of the taint.”<sup>57</sup>

A human being can thus become a child of God by confessing sin and entering into fellowship with God (1:7) and abiding in him (3:6). As in the Gospel of John, belief plays a significant role in humanity’s relationship with God. The content of belief in 1 John is also similar with the Gospel, since 1 John is written to those who believe that Jesus is the Son of God (5:13; cf. Jn 20:31). While lack of belief is not explicitly sin in 1 John as in the Gospel, those who do not believe certain things about Jesus remain children of the devil. For example, whoever believes in Jesus as the Messiah has been born of God (1 Jn 5:1; cf. 2:22), and whoever believes that Jesus is the Son of God has overcome the world (5:5; cf. 4:15; 5:10). In other words, human beings who believe these things about Jesus are those who have become children of God and are no longer in an antagonistic relationship with God. Their belief in Jesus has bridged the gap of antagonism between God and humanity.

#### [B] Agency in 1 John: Human or Divine?

If belief is the primary link between God and the children of God, does the emphasis on belief indicate a greater emphasis on human agency in 1 John than in the Gospel? In the Gospel of John, belief is required of humans but the Father is described as the one who draws believers. In 1 John, by contrast, there appears to be a greater emphasis on human agency. Human beings who are born of God are required to act. They are to believe in Jesus, keep God’s commands, confess sin, walk in the light, love one another, and do righteousness, etc. The ethical requirements for those in God’s family are quite high: “Whatever we ask, we receive from him because we keep his commands and do the things pleasing before him. And this is his command that we believe in the name of his son Jesus Messiah and love one another just as he gave a command to us. And whoever keeps his commands remains in him, and by this we know that he remains in us, by the Spirit which he gave to us” (3:22-24). And elsewhere, “For this is the love of God, that we should keep his commands” (5:3). Keeping commands and confessing sin (1:9) appear to be efforts to be exerted by human beings.

However, before claiming that salvation in 1 John is entirely humanity’s responsibility, there are two considerations to make. First, these exhortations are written to believers—to those who believe in the name of the Son of God (5:13). The letter is written to those whose sins are forgiven (2:12), who have known from the beginning (2:13, 14), who have overcome the evil one (2:13), who know the Father (2:14), and who have the word of God dwelling within them (2:14). Thus, 1 John appears to be written to human beings who are already children of God (3:2), who have crossed over from death to life (3:14). The ethical exhortations are, therefore, not required

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<sup>55</sup> For a non-sacrificial view, see Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Dodd, *Johannine Epistles*, 29.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

for human beings to enter into relationship with God. Rather, they are ethical exhortations for those already in relationship with God. Those who do righteousness and walk in the light are recognizable as the children of God (2:29).

Second, divine agency is recognizable when we consider that entering into relationship with God is only made possible through God sending his Son. It is not human effort in 1 John that makes possible becoming a child of God. God “sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him” (4:9) and God “sent his Son as a ἰλασμός for our sins” (4:10). The sending of God’s Son is the revelation and evidence of this love (4:9-10; cf. Jn 3:16), and it is this great love that makes it possible for humans to become children of God (1 Jn 3:1).

While ethical demands may suggest a greater emphasis on human agency, these demands are written to those who already believe and it is ultimately God who makes becoming a child of God possible.<sup>58</sup> Thus, like the Gospel, 1 John maintains a paradoxical balance between divine and human agency.

#### [B] Eschatology and Human Existence in 1 John

Humanity’s ability to change from an antagonistic relationship with God to becoming one of his children takes place because of God’s love made evident in the sending of his Son. The status of human beings as children of God has, however, eschatological consequences. Those who have believed and become children of God have been given eternal life by God, and this eternal life is in his Son (5:11). In fact, the author continues in 5:13 to say that the epistle has been written so that those who believe “may know that they have life in his name.” This life is presently available to believers, but it is also eternal life (5:11, 20; cf. 1:2), which is also described as “the promise that God has promised” (αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐπαγγελία ἣν αὐτὸς ἐπηγγείλατο ἡμῖν; 2:25; cf. 1:5; 3:11). While believers already have eternal life, the “eternal” nature of the life indicates the ongoing, future nature of the life.<sup>59</sup> Eternal life is part of what it means to be in relationship with God (1:2-3; 5:20), to remain in him (2:24; 4:12-13, 15-16) and to have the Son and the Father (2:23; 5:11-12; 2 Jn 9). The eschatological reality of being in relationship with God is also apparent in 1 Jn 2:17: “And the world and its desires are passing away, but the one doing the will of God remains forever” (μένει εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, cf. 2 Jn 2).

On the other hand, the eschatological implications can also be negative for humans who do not believe. Believers have crossed over from death to life because they love their fellow believers, but the ones who do not love remain in death (μένει ἐν τῷ θανάτῳ, 3:14). Those who are murderers do not have eternal life remaining in them (3:15). Thus, life and death do not merely relate to a human being’s present, earthly existence, but life and death are also present and future consequences of humanity’s relationship with God (see 2 Jn 8).

First John 3:2-3 offers some further intriguing eschatological perspectives on humanity. These verses begin with the statement: “Now we are children of God,” implying that there was a time

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<sup>58</sup> Lieu, *I, II, & III John*, 134, states: “the language [of being born of God] ensures that change cannot naturally come about through any potential of the human actors.”

<sup>59</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1982), 168.

when believers were not children of God (also 3:1).<sup>60</sup> Being born of God depends on believing that Jesus is the Messiah. Becoming a child of God was not possible until the revelation of Jesus (ἐφανερώθη) through the Father's sending of him (3:2, 5), but it is "not yet revealed what we will be. We know that when he appears, we will be like him because we will see him just as he is" (3:2b). This appearing of Jesus is clearly a coming appearance (2:28) and not the appearance that has already taken place (3:5, 8; 4:10). The implication of 3:2 is that something greater is in store for those humans who are already children of God.<sup>61</sup> First John 3:3 refers to this as "hope". It is not clear what human beings will become (cf. 2 Cor. 3:18), but it is known that they will be like Jesus (ὅμοιοι αὐτῷ ἐσόμεθα). Another revealing of the Son will allow the children of God to be more like the Son of God.

In addition, Jesus' future appearance will bring about judgment.<sup>62</sup> The author writes: "And now, little children, remain in him in order that when he appears we may have boldness [παρρησίαν] and not be put to shame by him at his coming [παρουσία αὐτοῦ]" (2:28). The following verse mentions that Jesus is "righteous" (δίκαιός), which is also suggestive of judgment (2:29; cf. 2:1). Why the need for boldness and concern for being put to shame at his coming if judgment is not expected in some way? First John 4:17 makes the judgment more explicit: "In this, the love is perfected [τετελείται] with us so that we might have boldness [παρρησίαν] in the day of judgment [τῆ ἡμέρᾳ τῆς κρίσεως] because just as that one is so also are we in this world" (cf. 3:21). The repeated use of "boldness" in both instances ties Jesus' future appearance with the "day of judgment." For those in him the judgment holds no fear (4:18) or shame (2:28). But rather they may be bold in his presence quite possibly due to their being in him and like him (3:2). Those humans who are called children of God will become more like Jesus (3:1–2).

#### [B] Incarnation

As with the Gospel of John, the incarnation of God's Son is an important part of the Epistles of John, although for slightly different reasons. In the Gospel, the incarnation highlights Jesus' heavenly nature and true home in heaven as well as God returning to dwell with his people (Jn 1:14-18). The Gospel of John argues that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, while seeming to assume his humanity. The Johannine epistles, on the other hand, seem to argue that Jesus is the Messiah, Son of God *and* that he came in flesh. In 1 John in particular, Jesus' humanity appears to be questioned by some of the intended audience.

"Every spirit confessing that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is from God" (4:2). Those who do not confess Jesus as having come in the flesh are deceivers and the spirit of anti-Christ (2 Jn 7). The anti-Messiah and false prophets are those who deny Jesus came in flesh. They also deny that Jesus is the Messiah (1 Jn 2:22) and apparently that he was the Son of God (2:23; 4:14-15; 5:5,

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<sup>60</sup> Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 219, 220.

<sup>61</sup> Schnackenburg, *Johannine Epistles*, 157–160; and William R. G. Loader, *The Johannine Epistles* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), 33–34, suggest the resurrection of the dead is intended.

<sup>62</sup> Ruben Zimmermann, "Remembering the Future -- Eschatology in the Letters of John," in *Eschatology of the New Testament and Some Related Documents*, ed. Jan G. Van der Watt, WUNT II/315 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 514–34 (522).



10, 13). The phrase “in the flesh” (4:2) clearly serves as a referent to the humanity of Jesus.<sup>63</sup> The opening of 1 John also speaks without question to the physical reality of Jesus, the word of life. The author’s proclamation of Jesus having been heard, seen, beheld, and touched by hands only reinforces that witness (1:1). Raymond Brown states that this sensory language “makes a spiritualized interpretation far fetched. Clearly the author is claiming participation in a physical contact with Jesus.”<sup>64</sup>

For 1 John, Jesus’ humanity is necessary because his death makes possible the taking away of sin and allows him to be an atoning sacrifice (1:7, 9; 2:2; 4:10; cf. 5:6-8). Jesus’ blood cleanses all from sin, and thus the cleansing of sin and the existence of Jesus’ blood requires his humanity. For those who confess their sin, Jesus’ coming “in the flesh” allows for human beings to enter into relationship with the Father and the Son, to have fellowship with them, and to abide in them (1:3, 7; 3:24).

#### [B] Epistles Summary

The Johannine Epistles present a slightly different perspective on humanity than the Gospel of John. The antagonism between humanity and God has become an antagonism between humans, those who have become children of God and those who have not. Sin is one of the primary ways in which this separation is marked since those who are from God do not sin, and belief in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God is the way to overcome the world and become a child of God. As such, the epistles present a greater emphasis on human agency than the Gospel, while still indicating the role of divine agency. There are eschatological consequences to becoming children of God. Those who are children are no longer in death but those who are not remain in death. The salvation of the children of God is dependent upon the humanity of Jesus. Jesus’ coming in the flesh makes possible humanity’s opportunity to enter into relationship with God, through Jesus’ blood which cleanses from sin.

#### [A] Conclusion

The theological anthropology of the Gospel and Epistles of John is relational. Human beings have become separated from God, and it is only out of God’s love in sending his Son into the world that the separation may be bridged (Jn 3:16, 31, 36; 1 Jn 4:10). In the Gospel, the separation is between God and all humanity, but in the epistles, the separation exists between human beings, depending upon whether or not one has become a child of God. Ultimately, sin separates humanity from God, and only its removal makes possible a relationship with God. In the Gospel, Jesus takes away the sin of the world, and sin is essentially unbelief. Thus, sin is overcome by belief in Jesus. Relatedly, in 1 John, the blood of Jesus cleanses believers from all sin, but confession of sin is required. Sin in the epistles is more often described in an ethical

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, rev. ed., WBC 51 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 212; Karen H. Jobes, *1, 2, and 3 John*, ZECNT 19 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 178; More recently, scholars have understood the emphasis resting on the sacrificial death rather than the incarnation solely. See Martinus C. de Boer, “The Death of Jesus Christ and His Coming in the Flesh (1 John 4:2),” *Novum Testamentum* 33, no. 4 (1991): 326–46; Brown, *Epistles of John*, 76–79, 492; Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 260–261; cf. Paul Sevier Minear, “Idea of Incarnation in First John,” *Interpretation* 24, no. 3 (1970): 291–302.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, *Epistles of John*, 163, also 175.

manner. For both the Gospel and the epistles, the incarnation, God becoming a human being, is the means to a restored relationship between God and humanity. For the Gospel, the Word becoming flesh makes possible the dwelling of God with his people and the right to be born of God, to be called children of God. For 1 John, Jesus' coming in the flesh initiates fellowship between God and humanity, but this takes place through Jesus' death. For both, divine agency plays a significant role in bridging the separation between God and humanity. God sent the Son, God broke the slavery of sin, and God drew believers to himself. God gave humans the right to become his children through belief in his Son, the Messiah. Jesus becoming a human being is instrumental and a necessary part of humanity's hope of entering into relationship with God. If any humans should love the Son and keep his word, the Father will love them and the Father and the Son will come and make their dwelling with them (Jn 14:23; cf. 1 Jn 3:23-24).<sup>65</sup>

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