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RETHINKING THE ETHICS OF JOHN

Craig R. Koester

The essays in *Rethinking the Ethics of John*, edited by Jan van der Watt and Ruben Zimmermann (2012), reflect promising new directions in the study of the ethical dimensions of the Johannine writings. The contributors challenge the common tendency to relegate John's gospel and epistles to the periphery when exploring New Testament ethics. In the past, interpreters have often noted that the Fourth Gospel includes little explicit ethical teaching. There are no lists of virtues and vices, and no deliberations about practical issues like marriage and divorce, sexual misconduct, social conflict, or relationship to the government. To be sure, the Fourth Gospel includes the command to 'love one another,' but it offers little elaboration about how that is to take shape in action. For many interpreters, the Fourth Gospel's ethical dimension has appeared to be 'ambiguous, incoherent and incomplete' (Lund, 265; cf. van der Watt and Zimmermann, ix).

The problem of discerning an ethical dimension in John was forcefully stated some years ago by Wayne Meeks, whose negative judgment of John's value for moral formation is often noted in this volume. Meeks said that first, John offers no explicit moral instruction and limits the love command to showing love for others in the Johannine circle. Second, the gospel includes no plausible and universalizable model for human behavior. John's Jesus can scarcely be considered a human figure and the others in the story represent the situation of a small embattled Christian community, whose behaviors cannot easily be generalized. Third, ethical discourse must appeal to reason, whereas John's worldview is not only irrational but antirational. The enigmatic sayings of the Johannine Jesus overthrow ordinary rationality and cannot be taken as the foundation for ethics. Fourth, everything in John's narrative world seems predetermined, so that there is no truly free decision making. Only those who have been chosen out of the world can make the right moral choice (Meeks 1996: 318-19). According to Meeks, that worldview may have appeal for the aesthete, 'but hardly for the ethical person' (Meeks 1996: 320). He concluded that the only way John managed to find a cherished place in the moral sensibilities of western readers was 'through an endless series of more or less strong misreadings' (Meeks 1996: 317).

Other recent contributions to the discussion, however, have included more positive proposals concerning the ethical dimensions of John. Some have focused on the implications of the love command for specific moral action (Popkes 2006; Schnelle 2006, 2009). Others explore the way the gospel's narrative form communicates values with significant ethical implications. Of special interest are the values and behaviors presented through the interaction of characters in the story and the gospel's rich collection of images (Nissen 1999; van der Watt 2006). Continuing this encouraging trend, the essays in the present volume offer a welcome series of studies on ethics in John's gospel and first epistle using a variety of approaches. Given the range of the material, let me reflect on these contributions in light of the volume's leading questions.

Ethics and Narrative

One of the basic issues in exploring Johannine ethics concerns the nature of ethics itself. In its simplest form, ethical inquiry means asking ‘What should I do?’ and ‘Why?’ But as Michael Labahn notes, the formal study of ethics usually means critical reflection on behavior based on a theoretical and methodological framework. The problem is that neither the Johannine writings nor any other NT texts undertake such a systematic approach to ethics and all of them generally fail to provide critical argumentation in support of their moral teachings (p. 6). Accordingly, Labahn proposes that an ‘ethical text’ is one that ‘(a) provides a reflective orientation toward the reader’s actual “way of life” (b) by defining how to behave and act (c) according to a value system that is developed and supported by the text, its characters, and/or its setting, (d) in relation to a specific social group and/or to the surrounding society at large’. The corollary to this definition is that ethical texts are not only descriptive but ‘attempt to persuade the reader to embrace the norms that they promote as normative’ (p. 7).

The definition rightly acknowledges that critical reflection on behavior is integral to the study of ethics. That aspect distinguishes ethics from the investigation of ‘ethos,’ which involves describing the habitual and often unreflective behavior of a group. To consider the Johannine ethos one would ask what values and patterns of conduct seem to be typical of Johannine Christians and presupposed in the gospel. But ethics goes a step further by asking ‘why’ someone should embrace such values and adopt a particular course of action (Labahn, pp. 7-8; Zimmermann, pp. 58-59). A central argument of this volume is that the gospel’s narrative form does provide critical reflection on behavior. Therefore, these studies seek to go beyond simply describing the Johannine ethos in order to consider how the gospel’s narrative reveals an underlying value system that includes critical reflection and can therefore be considered ‘ethics’ or at least ‘implicit ethics’ (van der Watt and Zimmermann, p. x).

The value of narrative for the study of ethics was noted by Alasdair MacIntyre, who said, ‘I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself to be a part?’ (1984: 201). Narratives reflect the desire for coherence. They do not simply list a series of events but attempt to discern the flow of things. As people seek to live with integrity they try to set their actions within the larger framework of a life story, and they struggle to make their actions congruent with the values that the story represents. The Fourth Gospel shapes behavior by telling the story of God in Jesus Christ (Zimmermann, p. 66). That story does not outline ethical theory but it does provide critical reflection on what people do and why. Through the portrayals of characters, along with words of instruction and a variety of images, the gospel draws readers to certain forms of belief and action that are deemed positive, while alienating them from the forms that are negative. Through the story readers gain a sense not only of what one should do but why one should live and act in a certain way.

The levels of action in the Fourth Gospel include the works of God, Jesus, and human beings. Each level is related to the others (Weyer-Menkhoff, pp. 159-74; Löhr, pp. 229-49). It has often been noted that Jesus plays a central role as a model for behavior. When washing the disciples’ feet he says, ‘I have set you an example, that you should also do as I have done to you’ (John 13.15). Since Jesus takes on the role of a servant or slave, the disciples are to do the same. If Jesus dies like a seed in order to bear much fruit, his followers are also to die to themselves through their service (12.24-25). As God sent Jesus into the world, Jesus now sends his disciples (17.18; 20.21). If Jesus is the good shepherd, he also entrusts responsibility for shepherding to others (21.15-19).

Yet Zimmermann's essay rightly points out that the gospel does not simply identify proper behavior as the imitation of Jesus (p. 73). Jesus has a unique role that cannot be assumed by others. His death is redemptive in a way that his followers' death to self is not. He is the light of the world and his followers are to walk in his light (8.12). Others may act as shepherds, but the flock continues to belong to Jesus the good shepherd. I would add that this nuance also applies to the relationship of human action to the action of God. The miraculous signs may show that Jesus can do whatever he sees his Father doing (5.19-23), but the same cannot be said of other human beings. Their capacities are limited. Accordingly, a number of essays point out the 'responsive' nature of Johannine ethics. People give what they have first received. They love others because they have been loved by God in Jesus. Their actions are not autonomous but proceed from the relationship that God has established (Zimmermann, p. 80; Rabens, pp. 120-22; Weyer-Menkhoff, pp. 160-63, 174; Stare, p. 228). We might bring this perspective more directly into dialogue with the ethical question, 'What should I do?' by saying 'Do what is congruent with what God has done in Jesus'. That in turn invites consideration of what such actions might look like.

The Command to Love One Another

Jesus' command to 'love one another as I have loved you' is a major focus for the discussion of Johannine ethics (15.12; cf. 13.34; 1 John 3.11). Interpretations of the command have varied significantly. First, some construe the love command as a broad ethical mandate. Accordingly, when asking 'What should I do?' the Johannine response would be, 'Do the loving thing'. A classic representative of that view is the eighteenth-century writer Gotthold Lessing, who took it as an ethical criterion for all humanity. Second, others read it in the opposite way as a boundary-creating command. Jesus' followers are to love one another, rather than the world, so that they create an in-group that sets itself apart from the world. From this perspective the Johannine writings run counter to Jesus' emphasis on love of neighbor and even love of one's enemies by limiting the scope of love and turning it into a purely sectarian bond. Third, still others agree that the love command focuses on the community, while emphasizing that such love is also outward looking, since it is integral to the Christian witness to the world (John 13.34-35). Putting love into action provides practical evidence as to why outsiders should become members of the community.

Contributors to this volume generally develop the third perspective on the love command in helpful ways. While recognizing the Johannine distinction between the believing community and the world, they find the Johannine perspective to be ultimately world engaging rather than world negating. The most basic point is that for John the world has become alienated from God and yet it remains the object of divine love. God's sending of Jesus expresses his love for such a world and it is done so that the world's relationship with its Creator might be restored (3.16). If the followers of Jesus are to act in ways congruent with what God has done, then their witness to the world must attest to God's love for the world. A purely sectarian form of love would not do so (Labahn, pp. 3-5, 20-28; Zimmerman, pp. 47-51; Lund, pp. 266-69).

Next, Jesus conveys love through actions that are paradigmatic for his followers. One of these is the footwashing, which translates love into an act of devoted service to others. Although the footwashing was done within the circle of disciples, we might develop the lines taken in this volume even further by deepening the engagement with the narrative context. The gospel makes clear that during the footwashing, Satan was present and active in Judas, who was about to betray Jesus. Yet Jesus washed the feet of all the disciples, including Judas his adversary (13.1-11). If the

disciples are to do what Jesus did, then tangible acts of love are to be extended even to one's enemies (13.12-17). Also note that the immediate narrative context of the love command breaks down the simple lines between those in the community and those in the world. Immediately prior to the command, Jesus addresses his disciples in the same way as he has addressed his opponents. In 13.33 he tells them, 'as I said to the Jews'—who had failed to understand him and belonged to the world (7.32-34; 8.21-23), so now I say to you,' the disciples. 'Where I am going you cannot come'. After giving the new commandment in 13.34-35, Jesus tells of Peter's upcoming denial in 13.36-38. That literary framing of the love command shows that those to whom it is given are limited and flawed human beings, who share the traits of the world itself.

Similar dynamics emerge from the connection between the love commandment and the notion of friendship. After the love command is given a second time in 15.12, Jesus adds, 'No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (15.13). The value of the concept of friendship for ethics is suggested by the next statement, which says the disciples are Jesus' friends if they 'do' what he has commanded them by putting love into action (15.14). In antiquity, friendship was a topic in philosophical treatises on ethics, and John develops common aspects of the theme. If the highest form of friendship involves equality, Jesus moves in this direction by saying that his disciples are not his slaves but his friends. If friends are to speak the truth freely and openly with each other (*parrhsi/a*), then this is the way Jesus addresses his followers (Rabens, pp. 128-30).

It is clear that relating love to the ideal of friendship can influence actions within the believing community, but the question is whether it has any significance for behavior outside that community. One aspect is suggested by the importance of truthful and open speech in all one's relationships. Jesus said that he spoke the truth openly (*parrhsi/a*) 'to the world,' when he taught in synagogues and in the temple where all Jews came together (18.20; cf. 7.26). By analogy, his followers should openly speak the truth to the world as well (Zimmermann, pp. 74-79). Another aspect is that the philosophical ideal is to 'lay down one's life for one's friends,' which Jesus does through his crucifixion (15.13). Yet the crucifixion also goes beyond friendship in a way that transforms conventional thinking about. According to John, Jesus gave himself not only for his friends but as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (1.29). He did not only give his life for those with whom he was already in relationship but gave his life to create new relationships with a world estranged from God (Koester 2008. 108-23). That in turn presses his followers to see self-sacrifice as a way of serving a community of friends as well as looking beyond it to engage the wider world.

The Interplay of Love, Life, and Truth

Reading these essays together shows that love is only one factor in shaping human actions according to the Fourth Gospel, and we do well to ask how love relates to other narrative themes. 'Life' (*zwh/*) plays a central role. Theologically, God the Father has life in himself and is the source of life for others (5.26). As the Word and Son of God, Jesus also has inherent life, which characterizes his identity (1.1-4; 5.26). Jesus is called the bread of life (6.35) and the bringer of the light of life (8.12). He is the resurrection and the life (11.25), and the way, the truth, and the life (14.6). He came that people might have life in abundance (10.10). As the one who embodies and gives life, Jesus conveys life through his own actions of healing, feeding, and giving life to the dead, as well as through the words that evoke the faith that the gospel considers to be integral

to authentic life (Zimmermann, pp. 54-55). So if people ask, 'What should I do?' one might respond, 'Do what brings life'.

God's giving of life in Jesus is directed toward the world as a whole. Mira Stare notes that Jesus comes to bring life 'to the world,' which encompasses all of humanity (6.33, 51; cf. 1.4). In John, 'life' is a relational concept that includes a life-giving relationship with God as well as with other people. People enter true life through faith and live out that life through love, as they are sent into the world (13.34-35; 17.1-3, 21-23; Stare, pp. 213-28). These observations can be related to those of Christos Karakoulis, who explores the way in which the love and life-giving care of Jesus are expressed in his own actions as well as those of his followers. He suggests that Jesus' singular 'work' (εργον) encompasses his whole soteriological mission, while his 'works' in the plural are the concrete deeds through which he carries it out in the world. The related term 'signs' (σημει~α) pertains to works with a miraculous quality (Karakoulis, p. 203; cf. Löhr, pp. 229-49).

Karakoulis's comments show the interrelationship of love and life in Jesus' signs and works. Jesus gives life to a dying child and to the dead Lazarus. He heals the lame and blind, and provides people with wine and bread. Such works show compassion and reveal God's love for the world and his desire that it have life. By extension, Jesus' followers will also seek to bring life and love to the world through concrete actions (Karakoulis, pp. 204-5). We might make these observations more pointed than these essays suggest by adding that Jesus extends his gift of life even to the unbelieving. He healed a man at Bethzatha, even though the man expressed no faith and ended up reporting Jesus to the hostile authorities (5.1-18). Then Jesus gave food to a crowd that misunderstood him and later turned away in unbelief (6.1-71). In terms of ethics, those dynamics underscore that the extension of the gift of life takes the form of tangible actions, such as healing and feeding, and it is not limited to situations where the gift will be reciprocated.

Love and life function together with a third narrative element, which is truth. John's gospel says that God is true (3.33) and that the incarnate Word was full of grace and truth (1.14), so that Jesus himself can be called the truth (14.6). That aspect of Jesus' identity is expressed in his actions, for he came into the world to bear witness to the truth (18.36-37). The importance of truth is evident in Jesus' encounters with people throughout the narrative. Jesus speaks the truth about people, even when circumstances would otherwise conceal it. He exposes the ignorance of Nicodemus (3.1-10), tells the Samaritan woman about her life (4.16-18), and exposes the inconsistencies and murderous intentions of his adversaries (7.14-31; 8.31-59; 9.40-41). Paul Anderson proposes linking disputes about truth to different phases in the development of Johannine Christianity, suggesting that discerning the truth was integral to the patterns of leadership in the community that produced John's gospel and epistles (pp. 290-318).

Given the prominence of this theme, one might respond to the ethical question, 'What should I do?' by saying, 'Do what is true'. The gospel uses such language when speaking about human behavior. It distinguishes those who do what is evil from those who 'do what is true' (ο(de poiw~n th\n a)lh/qeian), whose 'deeds have been done in God' (3.21). We might bring the theme of truth more directly into discussion of this volume's central thesis by noting that the narrative does provide critical reflection on the ethical implications of doing what is true. It shows that those who wrongly judge by appearances rather than right judgment (7.24) translate falsehood into action by condemning Jesus for healing and claiming to be from God, and by expelling the man born blind from the community after he spoke the truth about his healer (8.46-47, 59; 9.24-34). Those who falsely see Jesus as a political threat plan to kill the risen Lazarus for contributing to Jesus' popularity (12.9-11). For a time Pilate seems ready to act on the basis of truth by releasing Jesus, whom he rightly judges to be guiltless, but falsehood prevails when Pilate condemns the

innocent Jesus to death (18.38-40; 19.16). By way of contrast, Jesus' speaks the truth that God is the source of life, and his acts of healing and feeding are congruent with that central truth (1.4, 14; 5.21; 10.32, 37-38).

Drawing together the themes of the essays noted above suggests that in the Fourth Gospel ethical action is discerned through the interplay of at least three elements.¹ No one of these elements is adequate when taken alone. When asking, 'What should I do?' love is a factor, yet authentic love expresses the truth about God and the world, and the actions that love produces ultimately foster life. For example, Jesus loves the disciples, and that means telling them the truth about themselves rather than allowing love to mask the truth (13.1, 38). Again, Jesus' adversaries may attempt to foster life for the people by suppressing the truth and killing Jesus, but the gospel shows that this way of trying to foster life is unethical (11.45-53).

Ethics in Relation to Jesus and Jewish Law

The complexity of ethical discernment in the Fourth Gospel is evident in that both Jesus and his adversaries ground their conduct theologically. Both connect right actions to an understanding of who God is. For the Jewish authorities in the narrative, God's will is communicated through the law of Moses. When asking 'What should I do?' their response would be, 'Follow the law' because that is where the wisdom of God is found. Yet the Fourth Gospel ascribes many of the traits of God's wisdom to Jesus, who was with God in the beginning, descended from God to instruct the world, was rejected by many, and re-ascended to a place with God (Glicksman, pp. 83-101). Jesus claims to communicate what he received directly from God. He does so in a manner that is not derived from the law and yet is congruent with the law (5.39-47; 7.14-18). So when asking, 'What should I do?' the Fourth Evangelist's response would be, 'Follow Jesus'.

The difference between these perspectives is evident in the narratives of disputes over the Sabbath. Jesus argues that it is right to heal on the Sabbath, even in cases like the invalid at Bethzatha and man born blind, whose lives are not in danger. The reason is that God gives life each day of the week, including the Sabbath, and Jesus also gives life (5.1-47; 9.1-41). In contrast, Jesus' opponents argue that such healings are wrong because they violate command to refrain from work on the Sabbath. Although some interpreters argue that Jesus simply interprets the law in a new and more expansive way, William Loader maintains that Jesus replaces the law. The reason is not that the law is bad but because a new era has come, when Christ takes the place of the older institutions (4.21-23). The contrast between the law and Christ 'is not bad and good, but good and better' (Loader, p. 150). The gospel presupposes some of the values attested in the law, but it insists that those who follow the witness of the law ultimately move beyond it, so that they center their perspective on ethics in Jesus (Lund, pp. 269-73).

The Johannine Jesus and his opponents sometimes agree on certain ethical principles, which are attested in the law, though they work out the implications differently. For example, the narrative shows that both agree that blasphemy is wrong. The disputed issue is whether Jesus' claim to be one with God does or does not constitute blasphemy (10.30-33; Labahn, p. 29). Jan van der Watt proposes that the disputes in the gospel are not about the value of the law itself but over conflicting perspectives on the law. Jesus' opponents interpret the Sabbath law through

¹ Glen Lund also notes the interplay of multiple elements. He relates the love command to the command to keep or abide in Jesus' word (14.23-24; 15.7), as Urban von Wahlde suggested (1990), but he adds a third element, which is the command that the disciples be sent into the world (17.18; 20.21; Lund, pp. 276-77).

history and tradition, basing their condemnation of Jesus' healings on a narrow view of his violation of Sabbath regulations. In contrast, the gospel advocates a broader view, which reflects 'theological common sense' by recognizing that healing shows divine action and approval, which means that healing on the Sabbath is not against God's law. To support this contention, the gospel effectively shows that the opponents are the ones who violate the principles in the Decalogue because they seek their own honor and refuse to honor God, and they bear false witness against Jesus, which leads to his unlawful death, which violates the command against killing. In the end, van der Watt's perspective is not so different from Loader's emphasis on the centrality of Christ, since he finds that what gives a person the perspective needed to understand the law and to perform the appropriate ethical action is coming to faith in Jesus, who reveals the will of God (van der Watt, pp. 175-91).

Karl Weyer-Menkoff expands the discussion by exploring the connection between faith in Jesus and the narrative portions of the law. He emphasizes that faith is not a self-generated or autonomous action but a relationship that is generated in response to Jesus. As people are brought to faith, they are moved to act according to the pattern set by Jesus, whose own actions are congruent with what he sees his Father doing (5.19). Weyer-Menkoff sees an interplay between the works of God depicted in Jewish Scripture and the works of Jesus portrayed in John. For example, the betrothal stories in Genesis and Exodus show God guiding Isaac's servant, Jacob, and Moses toward new relationships that emerge beside a well. In a similar way, Jesus' journey to the well in Samaria shows him carrying out the work of God through his encounter with the Samaritan woman by the well in John 4 (pp. 159-74). The problem with this approach is that it shows readers only *that* they have to respond to the work of God, but it says little about *what* they should do or how they might draw more broadly on biblical narrative for ethical deliberation (p. 174). The challenge of deriving a specific course of action from the Fourth Gospel raises again the question of how much responsibility people actually have for ethical discernment, according to John.

Empowerment and Freedom for Ethical Action

Earlier we noted Wayne Meeks' critique of Johannine ethics, which argued that the gospel not only lacks ethical guidance but denies that people had the freedom to make ethical decisions. From this perspective, the gospel has a deterministic worldview in which there are two groups of people: those who are from below and those who are born from above; and it is only those who are chosen out of the world who can live in an ethical manner (Meeks 1996: 319). The essays in the present volume, however, provide promising alternatives. They generally reframe the issue in a more positive way, opening up directions for further research.

One aspect concerns the issue of being empowered for ethical action. The worldview of John's gospel is that the world is not a neutral sphere in which people simply determine a course of action by rational choice. People are subject to influence by the forces of truth and falsehood, life and death, love and hate. Such a worldview does not reduce human life to a predetermined course of action, but it recognizes that ethical decisions are made in the context of competing forms of influence, which is why the gospel must call people to faith and obedience (Eynikel, pp. 102-13).

Some forms of philosophy recognized that an ethical life involves formative influences. The Stoics could speak of a person's nature changing for the better as it was infused with the

material pneu~ma, thus enabling them to live in accordance with nature, while Philo understood the pneu~ma as that which binds people to God and empowers ethical action. The Fourth Gospel also recognizes the need for ethical empowerment, since one can only obey the command to give love if one has first experienced love through life in community and the Spirit-Paraclete that is active there (Rabens, pp. 114-39). Love—a factor that is integral to John’s ethical vision—cannot be self-generated. It is the fruit of a relationship with Jesus, experienced in community. Believers are the like the branches of a vine, which receive the love they in turn give to others (Caragounis, pp. 250-63).

What I would add to this discussion is that the gospel can make sharp distinctions between the community and the world, and depict actions falling into the categories of light and darkness. But the gospel also subverts those distinctions through its narrative. A good example is the Samaritan woman, whose responses to Jesus are remarkably ambiguous. She recognizes that he is a Jewish man and a prophet, but stops short of actually identifying him as Messiah and never makes an open profession of faith. Yet she is the one who actually acts as a disciple by inviting others to ‘Come and see,’ whereas the disciples who openly profess faith fail to act in this way (4.28-33; cf. 1.39, 46). The man born blind consistently speaks the truth even before he says, ‘I believe’ (9.11, 17, 24-38). It also recognizes that those who do profess faith in Jesus are capable of enormous moral failings, such as Peter following Jesus and yet lying about his identity as a disciple (18.15-27). The gospel pictures a situation that is dynamic rather than static, where the apparent insiders may act faithlessly and the outsiders may do what is true, at least to some extent.

A second aspect concerns John’s use of a few key principles, which are stated briefly and presented in characters and images, instead of giving detailed directives about behavior. Glen Lund observes that in practice the Johannine community would have understood ethical behavior in light of communal values that were shaped by Jewish tradition and memories of Jesus but were not codified in written form. When dealing with questions of behavior, they would have to work with the values presupposed by the group. There is a strong positive aspect to this approach. John’s gospel ‘replaces detailed, rigid regulation with a more dynamic an open-ended standard for determining morality’ (p. 282). An approach that is ‘based on broad principles, fleshed out through participation in mystic union with God, is much freer, simpler and more responsive than a system based on fixed rules or traditions’ (p. 284). That gave the community the flexibility to develop patterns that fit their situation, which evolved over time (cf. Labahn, p. 42).

Adding to Lund’s observations, I would compare the Johannine approach to using a compass rather than a map to determine a course of action. The basic commitments to love, truth, and life are the primary points of reference, which then require that people discern how to traverse the distinctive challenges of their social landscape. In practice there might be several viable routes through a complex topography, all of which make use of the key reference points in various ways. At the same time, a particular path might depart too far from one of them and require that community discernment call for a different direction. The use of a few key ideas, which can easily be remembered—instead of longer and more complex instructions—provides a community with common points to which people might appeal when seeking consensus (Koester 2003: 264-70). The danger in providing this degree of freedom and responsibility for ethical discernment is that the quest for consensus may fail, and some within a community may determine that the interpretations advocated by others have negated the basic values of the group. The Johannine Epistles attest to just such a situation (Lund, pp. 280-81).

Ethics in 1 John

The struggle reflected in 1 John centers on a division within the community over matters of belief and behavior. Disputes over the question of Jesus' humanity involved belief, yet they culminated in some members leaving the community, which was an action that violated the command to 'love one another' (1 John 2.7-11, 29; 3.11). Jeffrey Brickle observes that the author's response to the ethical problem of breaking fellowship (*koinwni/a*) had multiple dimensions. The basis for ethical behavior is following the love command and example of Jesus, so that one will 'walk' as Christ walked (2.6; 3.11). That way of life means maintaining fellowship with the author's group rather than those who have left, since they ally themselves with the world and its hatred and lust (2.9-17). For Brickle, the author of 1 John does not so much argue his case as repeat his perspective multiple times in order to reinforce the importance of remaining connected to Jesus, the tradition, and the community (Brickle, pp. 340-49).

A sharp critique of 1 John is offered by Tom Thatcher, who emphasizes the ethical paradox created by this text. While stressing the command to 'love one another,' the writer shows a hateful attitude toward opponents, who are vilified as antichrists, and he warns readers not to love the world (2.15-19). Thatcher proposes that 1 John used the memory of Cain and Abel as a template (3.8-15). According to Gen 4.4-5, God found Abel's actions acceptable and those of Cain unacceptable. The writer inferred that each man acted out of his own underlying character, which God judged accordingly. The author does the same in his own situation, associating his own group with Abel and his opponents with Cain. The problem is that if his situation simply manifests an age-old tension between two kinds of people, then there are no resources for conflict resolution. The author could simply write off the opponents because they were acting according to their spiritual descent and nothing could be done about it (Thatcher, pp. 350-73). One question, however, is whether the brief mention of Cain in 1 John 3.12 allows the story to function so broadly as a template. Another is whether the outlook in 1 John might include elements that are more dynamic and open to self-criticism.

The essay by Udo Schnelle suggests a more positive reading of 1 John by returning to the love as that which defines God's own character. Schnelle points out that the passage that says, 'God is love' (4.8, 16) also speaks of divine love coming to expression through God's sending of the Son into the world, which is the realm of sin and alienation. For love to reach its goal it must overcome sin through the atoning action of Christ, who does not accept the world as it is but is the Savior of the world. Through this action, a community of love is created (4.9-16; pp. 332-35). Although Schnelle emphasizes the community as the place where God's love is made visible (p. 331), he can also say that 'God's love aims for the inclusion of all creation into the unity with the Father and the Son which gives true life' (p. 330).

Schnelle does not take up Thatcher's question about how such an emphasis on love can be reconciled with the harsh language used for those who have separated from the community, but the interplay of love, truth, and life that emerged in other parts of this volume suggest lines for further exploration, since those themes appear in 1 John as well as the gospel. An intriguing dimension is that 1 John recognizes that the forces operative among the opponents might also be present in his own group. If he warns about the antichrists who work through deception (2.18, 26; 4.1-6), he also tells his own group that they deceive themselves if they say they are without sin (1.8-10). If the writer warns readers not to love the world, he explains that it means not turning love toward the desires of the flesh, greed, and pride, which characterize the world (2.15-16). But

if God sent the Son to save the world from sin (2.2; 4.14), the faithful ‘overcome’ the world’s deception by attesting to the truth of God that gives life (4.4; 5.4-5, 11).

The points of agreement and difference between the contributions in this volume will stimulate further work on the question of Johannine ethics. The attention to narrative as a form of critical reflection on human actions, and the recognition that multiple literary and theological themes are at work in these texts opens up fresh avenues for consideration of this important topic.

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