

Difficult texts: the author and content of the commandment in 1 John 3.23

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Abstract

Three interpretative problems with 1 John 3.23 are addressed. First, it is suggested that the subject of the verse changes halfway through, from ‘God’ to ‘Jesus Christ’. Second, belief ‘in the name’ of Jesus is taken to mean the acknowledgement of Jesus’ ultimate significance. Third, the single command both to believe and to love one another is suggested to be a way of opening up the life of the disciple to the acceptance of Jesus’ ultimate significance and a way in which such acceptance can be measured or deduced.

Keywords

belief, commandment, love, salvation, work

Introduction

To say that love is an important teaching and ethical stance in the New Testament is not at all controversial. Love features in many places in the writings of the early Church, in both those that made it into the New Testament and many that did not. But in the case of 1 John 3.23, the status of love is something of an underdeveloped study. In reading this verse, it becomes apparent that love is considered to be part of the same commandment as belief in Jesus, such that it is inseparable. It therefore appears to be the case that something is required, some ‘work’, as we might say, needs to be done, in order for salvation to be realized. This short study examines this verse by exploring three interpretative problems. First, I address the question

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of who has issued the commandment present in the verse. It is unclear whether the grammatical subject is God or Jesus Christ. Second, I briefly explore what is meant by belief ‘in the name’ of Jesus Christ. Third, I explore the extent to which the ‘work’ of love is required for salvation to operate, as it is understood in this verse, and I suggest that ‘love’ is used in this verse as a criterion by which belief in Christ is measured.

The text of 1 John 3.23 is well established, with only very minor variations, and none that seriously change the meaning of the verse. The verse is usually attested as follows:

Kai autē estin hē entolē autou hina pisteusōmen tō onomati tou huiou autou Iēsou Christou kai agapōmen allēlous kathōs edōken eōtolēn ēmin.

And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he gave [the] commandment to us.

Three interpretative problems

The first interpretive problem is to attempt to establish the subject of this verse. The first pronoun, ‘his’, refers to God, who has been the subject of the previous verses. It is hard to interpret to whom the following ‘he’ refers, as it could be God, or it could be Jesus Christ. The following verse, 1 John 3.24, provides no help to this interpretative problem as it says of the one keeping the commandment that such a one ‘abides in him’ (*en autō menei*), which could equally refer to either ‘God’ or ‘Jesus Christ’. John Parr assumes that ‘he’ in verse 23 refers to Christ, although he gives no reasoning for this.¹ On the other hand, Georg Strecker recognizes the interpretative difficulty in identifying to whom the second pronoun, ‘he’, refers. Strecker is confident that the subject of the following verses remains ‘God’ rather than ‘Christ’. On the other hand, he suggests that there is little distinction to be made as ‘Christ’ is seen in divine terms.² Nevertheless, he suggests that it is most likely that the subject remains constant throughout this passage, such that God is the subject. Ultimately this may be unanswerable as there is no grammatical information to tell us definitively either way. However, the command to love one another is familiar from John 13.34, where Jesus himself issues a ‘new commandment’ to his followers that they are to ‘love one another’ (*agapate allēlous*). It is usually assumed that 1 John was written after the Gospel of John. If this is so, then the author (who may or may not be the same as the author of the Gospel) is likely to have been consciously alluding to the commandment of Jesus. I suggest that the subject of 3.23 shifts halfway through the verse such that it begins by referring to God’s command, but ends by underscoring the knowledge that we have of the second half of this command because of the words of Jesus.

The second problem to address, which is far easier to solve than the first, is around the command to ‘believe in the name’ of Jesus Christ. Strecker makes the helpful observation that ‘the name’ is idiomatic, standing for a ‘description of the

person'.³ Birger Olsson expands this to say that believing in 'the name' of Jesus Christ is believing 'in everything implied in the name Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God'.⁴ Olsson develops this with reference to the previous occurrence of 'name' in 1 John 2.12. He notes that, in the Hebrew Scriptures, 'a person's name stands for his or her identity and power . . . The formulation [in 1 John 2.12 and 3.23] presumably has its background in the baptism that took place in Jesus' name and that among other things had the forgiveness of sins as a consequence.'⁵ Judith Lieu notes that, in many places in the New Testament, activities are carried out in 'the name of Jesus', including baptism, petition, thanksgiving, miracles and so on. She suggests that 'the name . . . thus represents the full significance of the person and their authority'.⁶ 'Belief' in Jesus is not just an intellectual exercise here; rather, it is a commitment of life, a movement of heart as well as mind. In Strecker's words, it is an acknowledgement of 'the person of Jesus Christ as eschatological event'.⁷ It is the acknowledgement of the ultimate significance of Jesus.

The third problem in understanding this verse is that there is but one commandment which is referred to and yet this one commandment comes in two parts. The first part is belief in 'the name' of Jesus Christ and the second is to 'love one another'. Matthew Jensen suggests that the linking of faith and love 'demonstrates an ethical imperative to the message of the resurrected incarnate Christ'.⁸ Such a reading is possible, but the problem comes in deciding on the relationship of the ethical imperative to belief in the name of Jesus. In discussing John 13.34 (the place in the Gospel where Jesus gives the command to love one another), John Sanford notes that the verb 'to love' is in the subjunctive mood. Sanford suggests that this can be used to mean that 'you must love', but that the more natural reading in John 13.34 is that in admonishing the disciples to love one another, Jesus is also saying that the disciples (and we today) are to strive to 'become the kind of persons who are capable of that love'.⁹ He goes on to describe how the person who is able to undertake this love is the one 'who has dealt with his or her egocentricity'.¹⁰

It is noteworthy that the verb 'to love' in 1 John 3.24 is also in the subjunctive mood. If Sanford is right about the importance of this mood for understanding John 13, then the same surely applies in 1 John 3. It is not that the followers of Jesus are ordered to love one another and are promised dire consequences if they fail to do so. It is not possible to order people to love in this way. Instead, it is about a hope and a desire to strive towards this. Judith Lieu does not comment on the mood of the verb, but she does note the likelihood that the command to love is focused primarily on the community for whom the Johannine texts are composed.¹¹ This is about the disciples (and, when it was written, probably not the disciples in general, but a present group of disciples, a community) loving one another. In any living together with others there is always tension and the need for egocentricity to be held in check for the group to grow deeply with one another. The placing of the need to believe in the name of Jesus and of loving one another in the same commandment is psychologically observant. It is not that anyone is saved by loving one another, but rather that the fullest expression of belief in the name

of Jesus requires the diminution of our own egocentrism. Loving others is a requirement for believing in the name of Jesus because if someone is incapable of loving others, then they are incapable of loving Jesus. But also, gradually getting better at loving others is a natural outworking of believing in the name of Jesus. These two things are together in one commandment because they feed off one another in the human experience.

Conclusion

1 John 3.23 contains several difficulties for the interpreter. I suggest that the author of 1 John presents God as giving the twofold commandment to both believe in the name of Jesus Christ and to love one another, and that the author of 1 John also recalls that Jesus himself commanded love of one another. Belief in Jesus' name is idiomatic of acceptance of the ultimate significance of Jesus. However, 1 John 3.23 teaches that this significance is not fully accepted if love for one another is absent or underdeveloped. It is not that love is a 'work' that saves. Instead, it is the criterion (or at least one among other criteria) by which acceptance of the significance of Jesus can be measured – or, if not measured as such, then at least through love it is possible to deduce that one has accepted Jesus' significance. If love is absent, then our own egos are still too active to give proper significance to anyone else, including Jesus.

Notes

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9. John A. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: a psychological commentary on the Gospel of John* (New York NY: Crossroad, 1993), p. 260.
10. Sanford, *Mystical Christianity*.
11. Lieu, *I, II and III John*, pp. 143, 157ff.

Author biography

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