

Shall We Promote Deniers of Atonement as Long as They Confess Incarnation



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By T. R. Halvorson

Abstract

This essay challenges the ecclesial reasoning that permits promotion of teachers who deny the atonement provided they confess the Incarnation, a position advanced through a narrow reading of 2 John 7–11. The argument under scrutiny holds that, because John wrote to address Cerinthian Gnosticism—a heresy centered on the Incarnation—the passage’s prohibitions do not extend to teachers who err on the atonement. Two foundational claims of this syllogism are examined and refuted.

First, the essay demonstrates that Cerinthian Gnosticism was inseparably an atonement problem as well as an Incarnation problem. Drawing on patristic sources including Irenaeus of Lyons and Hippolytus of Rome, and on modern historians of doctrine including Jaroslav Pelikan, J. N. D. Kelly, and Francis Pieper, the essay shows that the Cerinthian separation of the divine Christ from the suffering human Jesus necessarily evacuated the crucifixion of substitutionary, atoning power. Thus, the Cerinthian error was inherently both Christological and soteriological. No orthodox interpreter, ancient or modern, has treated the Cerinthian error as confined to Christological metaphysics while leaving soteriology intact.

Second, the essay argues that 2 John’s scope exceeds both Cerinthianism specifically and the Incarnation narrowly construed. Utilizing Bruce Schuchard’s *Concordia Commentary on 1–3 John* as a primary exegetical guide, the essay establishes that 2 John functions as a cover letter to 1 John, and that together John’s letters address a broad secessionist (“gone out from us”) movement rooted in the Greco-Roman philosophical dogma of divine impassibility (the divine cannot suffer or die). Precisely *because* Jesus suffers and dies in the *atonement*, the secessionists attacked incarnation and “do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.” Thus, John’s epistles cannot be reduced to a narrow metaphysical claim about the Incarnation ignoring atonement. In direct statements, Schuchard refutes the narrowing of 2 John to a myopically Cerinthian problem. Hermeneutical analysis of the names “Jesus” and “Christ,” the stereotyped formula “comes in the flesh,” the mutually interpretive relationship of 1 and 2 John, and Polycarp’s early reception of the Johannine text all confirm that Incarnation and atonement are treated as a unified doctrinal whole throughout the Johannine corpus. The apostolic proclamation, the offices of prophet, priest, and king, and the *pro nobis* of Incarnation all tie the Incarnation to the atoning sacrifice. Denying the latter while claiming the former severs the Gospel itself and endangers justification by faith.

The essay concludes by examining the pastoral and ecclesiastical consequences John draws from this teaching, including prohibitions against welcoming or promoting such teachers, and applies these conclusions to contemporary questions of platforming, publishing, and pastoral formation. Fidelity to the doctrine of Christ requires rejecting the promotion of atonement deniers however erudite or otherwise appealing they may be.

Outline

- I. Introduction
- II. The Cerinthian Problem is an Atonement Problem
- III. 2 John is Far Broader than the Cerinthians and Includes the Atonement
- IV. Consequences in the Text
- V. Ridicule of Narrowness
- VI. Some Applications

I. Introduction

Questions

Are there any teachers we should not promote? If so, which ones? What is the basis for decision?

How Discussions Usually Go

When this question arises, often someone mentions Romans 16:17¹ or 2 John 7-11.² Then someone else often gives a learned reason why those texts do not apply. As cases of this conversation accumulate, we never seem to come across any where we would not promote a false teacher. It is admitted that in theory, there possibly could be some imaginary false teacher we should not promote, but it never is the false teacher under discussion. Case by case, Paul and John – the Holy Spirit – are silenced, and false teachers are given voice.

A Recent Experience

In a recent experience, a teacher being considered for promotion denies the atonement. One participant in the consideration raised 2 John 7-11 and said the teacher should not be promoted. Now catch this: no one raised any disagreement with or qualification of the proposition that the teacher teaches falsely about the atonement. The point of disagreement in the discussion was not about that. The disagreement was whether denial of the atonement is within the scope of 2 John 7-11.

An erudite participant said, 2 John was written to address the problem of the Cerinthian Gnostics.³ Their error was a denial of the Incarnation, not a denial of the atonement, he said. Therefore, erudition concludes, it is okay to promote a false teacher on the atonement so long as he confesses the Incarnation and we are not promoting what he falsely teaches about the atonement. By dint of erudition (to say nothing of other admirable attributes of the speaker), this argument was accepted almost without examination and the group proceeded to promote the false teacher.

Two Elements of the Syllogism

Notice two elements in that syllogism:

¹ Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.

² 7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but *that* we may receive a full reward. 9 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; 11 for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

³ Named for Cerinthus (c. 50–100 AD).

1. While false on the Incarnation, the Cerinthian Gnostics were okay on the atonement. (Without this proposition, the argument would have collapsed.)
2. 2 John is limited to addressing Cerinthian Gnosticism and hence to the Incarnation.

Both are false. Let us look at these two faulty elements one at a time, as follows:

- The Cerinthian Problem Is an Atonement Problem
- 2 John Is Far Broader than the Cerinthians and Includes the Atonement

After that we will consider consequences stated by John in his text for disobeying what God commands in the text, and then we will look at a few applications

II. The Cerinthian Problem Is An Atonement Problem

Sure, the Cerinthian problem is an Incarnation problem. But it is also, and inextricably, an atonement problem. The Cerinthians did not get atonement right while getting the Incarnation wrong.

Let's look at the evidence.

Cerinthianism: Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus Haereses (Against Heresies)*, Book I, Chapter 26 is the foundational primary academic source upon which subsequent historical analysis relies. Writing around 180 AD, Irenaeus explicitly documents that the separation of the divine "Christ" from the human "Jesus" completely stripped the crucifixion of cosmic or saving power.

Irenaeus records that Cerinthus taught that Jesus suffered and rose again, while "the Christ remained impassible, since he was a spiritual being." By maintaining that the divine aspect of the savior did not suffer, Cerinthianism systematically denies the orthodox requirement for substitutionary atonement—namely, that a dual-natured God-Man must offer himself as a divine sacrifice.

Cerinthianism: Jaroslav Pelikan

Jaroslav Pelikan, one of the most prominent 20th-century historians of Christian dogma, in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600), analyzes the structural conflict between Gnostic Christologies and the early Church's view of salvation.

Pelikan details how the "separationist" Christology of groups like the Cerinthians fundamentally altered the purpose of the cross. Because salvation in these systems was predicated on gnosis (the divine revelation of the unknown Father brought down by the Christ sprite at baptism), the crucifixion was stripped of its status as a vicarious payment for sin. Instead, the crucifixion was reduced to the execution of a mortal instrument, invalidating any theology of objective substitutionary atonement.

Cerinthianism: J. N. D. Kelly

J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* is regarded by many as the gold-standard academic textbook on patristic theology and early heresy.

Kelly clarifies that for Gnostic theologians operating under the Cerinthian mold, the cross lacked any objective, sacrificial, or atoning value. He notes that because the divine, impassible spirit withdrew before the passion, the suffering on the cross was entirely humanized. In early heretical systems that split the savior in this manner, "atonement" via a substitutionary sacrifice was entirely replaced by an illuminative model of salvation. The human Jesus was merely a vehicle for teaching, not a sacrificial lamb taking on the wrath of God.

Cerinthiansim: Examples Could be Multiplied

Not surprisingly, given the essential agreement of Iranaeus, Pelikan, and Kelly above, examples underscoring the falsehood of the proposition that Cerinthianism was okay on the atonement, just not on the Incarnation, could be multiplied. Here are a dozen more:

- Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Volume II: Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Section 123: Cerinthus).
- Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* (Refutation of All Heresies), Section 28.
- Hippolytus of Rome, *Refutation of All Heresies* (Philosophumena), Book VII, Chapter 21.
- Pseudo-Tertullian, *Against All Heresies*, Chapter III.
- Eusebius of Caesarea, *Historia Ecclesiastica* (Church History), Book III, Chapter 28
- Alois Wurm, *Cerinth – ein Gnostiker oder Judaist?* (Theologische Quartalschrift, 1904).
- Matti Myllykoski, "Cerinthus" in *A Companion to Second-Century Christian "Heretics"* (Brill, 2005).
- Michael J. Kok, "Classifying Cerinthus's Christology" (*Journal of Early Christian History*, 2019).
- Simone Pétrement, *A Separate God: The Origins and Teaching of Gnosticism* (Harper & Row, 1984).
- Gregg Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Zondervan, 2011).
- John Arendzen, "Cerinthus" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (Robert Appleton Company, 1908).
- John McClintock and James Strong, "Cerinthus" in *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*.

Bibliographies in and around this matter include:

- “Cerinthus (fl. c.100)” Bibliography (EarlyChurch.org.uk)⁴
- “Gnosticism and Early Christology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*⁵
- *Bibliography in Atonement: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Adam J. Johnson, 2015)⁶
- “The Apostolic Fathers and Second-Century Heresies” in *The Death of Christ Bibliography* (Martin Hengel)⁷
- “The Polemical Context of the Johannine Epistles” Bibliography in *The Epistles of John* (Raymond E. Brown, Anchor Bible Commentary)⁸
- “Cerinthus and the Fourth Gospel” Bibliography in *Gospel of John Research Guides* (Craig S. Keener)⁹

⁴ This structured bibliography indexes crucial secondary academic literature tracing Cerinthianism. It features G. Bardy’s “Cérinthe” (*Revue Biblique* 30, 1921), which is the standard historical-critical study deconstructing how Cerinthus’s separationist system separated the cross from salvation. It also links to Charles E. Hill’s “Cerinthus, Gnostic or Chiliast?” (*Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2000), which directly tracks the early church’s response to Cerinthus’s subversion of orthodox soteriology.

⁵ The extensive bibliography at the end of the chapters on early heresies lists works analyzing the collision between Gnostic “possessionist” Christology and orthodox “incarnational” soteriology. The indexed works demonstrate that by removing the Divine from the crucifixion, Cerinthus structurally opposed the nascent orthodox view that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself.

⁶ This volume contains a comprehensive bibliography tracking what defines “orthodoxy” in atonement theory versus early heretical models. The compiled sources highlight how the early Church Fathers (like Irenaeus) had to explicitly argue for a unified God-man sacrifice to defeat the Cerinthian separationist framework, which stripped the cross of its objective, penal, or substitutionary power.

⁷ Hengel’s classic research on the origins of atonement doctrine contains a highly detailed bibliography focusing on the 1st and 2nd centuries. It catalogs academic entries detailing how early orthodox writers (like Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp) deliberately emphasized the *blood* and *physical suffering* of Christ to directly refute heretics like Cerinthus, who taught that salvation was achieved via legalism and *gnosis* rather than substitutionary sacrifice.

⁸ Brown’s masterful, multi-page bibliography lists decades of international academic literature regarding the “opponents” in 1 John. The referenced studies focus heavily on the Cerinthian deniers of the atonement, specifically analyzing 1 John 5:6 (“not by water only, but by water and blood”). The listed books and articles detail how the Johannine author was defending a proto-orthodox substitutionary/cleansing model of Christ’s blood against Cerinthus’s water-only (baptism-only) soteriology.

⁹ Keener’s massive bibliographic apparatus indexes historical data regarding the early Church tradition that John wrote his Gospel to counter Cerinthus. The compiled works focus on the Prologue (“The Word became flesh”) as an aggressive, early orthodox defense of an incarnational atonement model, directly opposing the Cerinthian view that the divine Christ fled from the flesh before the sacrifice.

Gnostics in Pieper's *Dogmatics*

Cerinthianism is one of “the ‘species’ of Gnosticism.”¹⁰ In speaking of Gnosticism and several of its species on the Incarnation and the atonement, Pieper says:

Gnosticism knows nothing of the guilt of sin resting upon mankind, which calls for a *satisfactio vicaria*, but, following its principle of Dualism, only knows of a sin substance (hyle) which had entered into man. Redemption consists not in the removal of the guilt of sin, but in getting rid of the sinful matter, Christ showing the way. The more serious-minded Gnostics sought to accomplish this by way of asceticism. But also those who curtailed and mutilated the human nature of Christ (Apollinarians, Eutychians, Monotheletes, Weigelians, etc.) lost sight of the need of a *satisfactio vicaria*. They forgot that the Redeemer not only needed to appear in the flesh, but had to perform *work* (עמל) in the assumed flesh.²⁵ The Redeemer had to take the place of men both in keeping the requirements of the Law and in suffering the penalties of the Law, the Law which was given to men and binds all men (Gal. 4:4-5; 3:13), and this He could do only by becoming like unto all men in all things, sin excepted, by assuming the full human nature.¹¹

²⁵ Is. 53:11: “He shall see of the travail (עמל) of His soul.” *Lehre und Wehre*, 56, p. 246 f.: “The term ‘travail of His soul’ refers to the suffering and death of Christ, עמל expresses both labor and trouble. Christ’s suffering was painful labor, and His *soul* labored, Christ labored with all the powers of body and soul,” etc.

Thus, in Pieper, the Gnostics did not get Incarnation right but atonement wrong.

Cerinthianism: Lay Resources

We do not have to consult sources aimed at or normally used only by academics or professional theologians to learn the same thing.

For example, Concordia Publishing House publishes the marvelous two-volume *Lutheran Bible Companion* that is great for lay people. While discussing Cerinthus in the context of 1, 2, and 3 John, it says:

Cerinthus, according to Irenaeus, taught that ... at His passion, however, the “heavenly Christ” again left Jesus, and only Jesus the man suffered and died. In other words, the Christ came “by water” (the Baptism of Jesus), but did not come “by blood” (the Passion and death of Jesus). The cross of Jesus, the shed blood of the Son of God, which the apostolic witness celebrated as the crown and culmination of the ministry of Christ, was thus ignored or relegated to the background. The blood of Jesus, the Son of God, was no longer the blood that

¹⁰ C. FitzSimons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy: An Affirmation of Christian Orthodoxy* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1994), 55.

¹¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II.67.

“cleanses us from all sin” (1JN 1:7).¹²

That makes it plain that what Cerinthus especially denied is that in his coming, Christ did his atoning work.

As another example for lay people, Concordia Publishing House publishes the widely praised *The Lutheran Study Bible*. In its introduction to 1, 2, and 3 John, it says:

He also writes here vigorously against the Cerinthians, against the spirit of Antichrist, which was beginning even then to deny that Christ has come in the flesh, and which is today for the first time really in full sway. For although people do not now publicly deny with their lips that Christ has come in the flesh, they do deny it with their hearts, by their teaching and life. For he who would be righteous and saved by his own works and deeds is as much denying Christ, since Christ has come in the flesh for the very purpose of making us righteous and saving us without our works, by his blood alone.¹³

That flatly says Cerinthianism lives in the denial that Christ made us righteous by his blood, that is, denial of atonement.

Cerinthianism: Some Conclusions

From the foregoing, we can make some conclusions that are relevant to the syllogism about 2 John 7-11.

1. There is practically no orthodox Christian of any denomination or tradition, and not even one that I could find, who agrees with the proposition that, while false on the Incarnation, the Cerinthian Gnostics were okay on the atonement. The weight of evidence against this is as if a building fell over on us.
2. We never should have expected that the person of Christ would be amputated from his work, that the atonement would be divorced from the Incarnation. The reason the Cerinthians were even looking at the Incarnation was the atonement. In the atonement, Jesus Christ suffers for us. Without the atonement, his suffering would not even have been under examination. Once the atonement necessitated a consideration of his suffering, then the Cerinthian idea that the divine is impassable – that God cannot suffer as Jesus did in the atonement – compelled them to back into an assertion about the person of Christ, namely, that on the cross He was human but not divine.

In this scenario, even if we were to accept the second erroneous element of the syllogism listed earlier in this essay that limits the scope of 2 John to addressing Cerinthianism, that would necessarily *include* the atonement with the Incarnation rather than exclude it. The

¹² *Lutheran Bible Companion*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), II.741.

¹³ *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2169.

sylllogism that grounded the decision of the group in the recent experience described above was a bust under its own weight.

Pro Nobis

We should not have expected the atonement to be estranged from the Incarnation given our Nicene faith in which we confess, “Who *for us* men and *for our salvation*, came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary.”

Christ did not come for nothing. He came for us

Christ’s incarnation is for something. God did not idly come into the flesh to do nothing, or to do something that did not require him to be in the flesh. He came “for us and for our salvation.” For that, Christ came into the flesh, and for that, it was necessary that Christ come in the flesh.

In the first dogmatics used to form pastors in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, which had been written by Johann Wilhelm Baier and then edited and annotated by C. F. W. Walther, Baier says:

It is certain that the Son of God did *not* assume human nature from a certain necessity *and not* without reason, *but* by the grace of some *end*, and indeed, that in the assumed human nature, and through it, *He made the salvation of human sinners.*¹⁴ [emphasis in original]

Repeatedly, Jesus ties his coming to his saving. That is why he came, to save. He says, “The Son of Man has *come* to seek and to *save* that which was lost.” (Luke 19:10; also Matthew 18:11). He says, “The Son of Man did not *come* to be served, but to serve, and *to give His life a ransom* for many.” (Matthew 20:28; also Mark 10:45) The disciples who would have called down fire on the Samaritan village separated the dignity of the Person of Christ, which was insulted by its rejection of him, from his work of salvation. For that, He “turned and rebuked them,” saying, “For the Son of Man did not *come* to destroy men’s lives but to *save* them.” To separate Jesus’ coming in the flesh from his seeking, saving, giving his life, and ransoming throws over his own repeated statements tying his coming and saving together.

In the syllogism, what happened to the *pro nobis* (for us) hallmark of Lutheran doctrine? How do you get from the Incarnation to justification (the doctrine on which the church stands or falls) apart from the atonement? The *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article V, paragraph 101, confesses

We are justified only when we receive Christ as the Atoning Sacrifice and believe that for Christ’s sake God is reconciled to us. Neither is justification even to be dreamed of without Christ as the Atonement.

¹⁴ Johann Wilhelm Baier and C. F. W. Walther, trans. Theodore E. Mayes, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Baier-Walther* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc. 2023), 19.

Propitiation for us commences at Christ's conception

Lutheran theologians emphasize that the propitiatory work of Christ did not commence only with his Baptism, or his appearing in public ministry, or only on the cross. They emphasize that from the moment of conception, his conception, incarnation, and everything in his incarnate life was *pro nobis*, for us and for our salvation. The instant of Christ's Incarnation is the instant of propitiation commencing.

For example, Abraham Calov (1612-86) assigned as a thesis to be defended by his doctoral student, M. Johannes Ernestus Hertzog, the following: "The Durative *Terminus a Quo* (Beginning) of the ἰλασμός [Propitiation] Is the First Moment of the Incarnation; the *Terminus ad Quem* (End), the Death of the Cross." I shouldn't wonder if people today would think this useless splitting of hairs, but the reason for this disputation was the Papistic denial of this thesis¹⁵ and the disastrous effects that denial had on justification. Hertzog began his defense as follows:

1. The conception, nativity, circumcision, etc. of CHRIST are propitiatory: "for us a Child is born, for us a Son is given" (Isa. 9:6). From the very beginning, Jesus is said (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11) to be working salvation. Furthermore, our ἰλασμός [propitiation] performed the divine will throughout His whole life (Ps. 40:7; Heb. 10:5) and was made obedient even to the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8), since in that life it was for us that He rendered obedience to the divine Law (Matt. 6:17, 20) under which He was for our sake (Gal. 4:4).¹⁶

Examples of this from Luther, the Confessors of the Augsburg Confession, and Lutheran Orthodoxy could be multiplied, but we will "fast forward" to Pieper, who says:

Christ's official duties did not begin with His Baptism, which was His solemn induction into His *public* ministry, but with His incarnation, with which His humiliation coincided. Christ was the Christ for us in His very conception, birth, circumcision, filial obedience, etc. Christ began the work of redemption as already stated, very early.¹⁷

By separating atonement from the Incarnation, the syllogism makes the Incarnation abstract and idle. It strips Incarnation of its *pro nobis* character. It relegates justification to something we could not even dream of.

III. 2 John Is Far Broader than the Cerinthians and Includes the Atonement

We move now to the second element of the syllogism, that 2 John is limited to addressing

¹⁵ Abraham Calov, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Abraham Calov*, trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024), 166.

¹⁶ Calov, *Atonement*, 165.

¹⁷ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.331.

Cerinthian Gnosticism and hence to the Incarnation. On that proposition, it is said that we may promote teachers who are false on the atonement so long as they are right on the Incarnation and what we promote from them is not on the atonement.

We will traverse this field as follows:

1. We will unpack the names “Jesus” and “Christ” because they appear directly in the clause from John’s text that the erudite use in the faulty syllogism. The Name Jesus Christ speaks against the syllogism.
2. We will identify who caused the problem that John addresses in 2 John 7-11, a circle of people vastly wider than the Cerinthians. Once we know who they are and what they all have in common, we will see that the problem inextricably involves the atonement.
3. We will observe the exegesis of the text in the *Concordia Commentary* series and two rifle shots against the syllogism:
 - a. Explicit and repeated statements that the problem is not just the Cerinthians; and
 - b. Statements joining the person and work of Christ, not isolating the atonement from the Incarnation.
4. In particular, we will observe the exegesis of “the teaching of Christ” and “this teaching” in the *Concordia Commentary* series as including the atonement.
5. We will learn that the saying “Jesus Christ comes in the flesh” is a stereotyped expression that speaks against the syllogism.
6. We will observe significant echoes of 2 John 7 in the early reception of the letter by the Church as evidenced in Polycarp’s *Epistle to the Philippians*. Unless we want to break from that reception, 2 John 7-11 embraces atonement together with the Incarnation.

Why Call Him Jesus?

We should observe all the text of 2 John 7-11, and not just the clause used in the syllogism: “who do not confess that Jesus Christ comes in the flesh.” But even with that textual reductionism, the error of this element of the syllogism already is evident. For that clause says *who* comes in the flesh, and this reveals not only his *person* but also his *work*, not only the Incarnation, but the atonement.

If the atonement is not in view, why call him Jesus?

“You shall call His name JESUS [ΙΗΣΟΥΣ, HE IS SALVATION, or YAHWEH SAVES), for He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21) As Jeffrey A. Gibbs observes in the *Concordia Commentary*,

αὐτός γάρ σώσει—The nominative use of αὐτός is emphatic (“he *himself* will

save”). There are twenty-one nominative uses of αὐτός in Matthew, all having an emphatic function; see, for example, 3:11; 8:24; 16:20.¹⁸

Shall we divest Jesus’ Name of its intensive meaning so that this text is only about the Incarnation without it being about salvation? In the very announcement of the Incarnation to Joseph, the angel of the Lord united the Incarnation with salvation. And it is not as if Christ does not have many other names or titles that could have been used were it not for the fact that salvation and Incarnation are inseparable. The angel is not telling Joseph to keep Mary as his wife only because of Incarnation, but because the Incarnate One is the Savior.

Why Call Him Christ?

Similarly, why call him Christ?

Christ from Greek is the same as Messiah from Hebrew. Both mean anointed. What does anointed mean? It means that God has appointed Christ to offices. As Elisha was anointed to be prophet, Christ is anointed our prophet. As Aaron was anointed to be priest, Christ is anointed our priest. As David was anointed to be king, Christ is anointed our king.¹⁹

Baier and Walther link the names “Jesus” and “Christ” to these offices. Jesus was anointed into these offices to save. Walther’s annotations elaborate on this from Kromayer, Gerhard, and Brochmand.²⁰

In these offices, Christ is *pro nobis*, for us. By carrying out his vocations in these offices, Christ saves us. Pieper says:

In the natural order of things, the doctrine of Christ’s office or works follows the doctrine of Christ’s person. Christ’s works of office (*officium Christi*) is defined by everything Christ, the Son of God, who was made man, did or does for the salvation of mankind.

Christ’s office is in short expressed in the names “Jesus” and “Christ”. Scripture itself interprets these names for us, Matthew 1:21, John 1:41, and John 4:42. These are a Gospel *in nuce* (in a nutshell). About the names “Jesus” and “Christ”, as well as the correct interpretation of the anointing, see Baier § 1, nota b, III, 101; Kromayer and Gerhard p 101.²¹

The names “Jesus” and “Christ” are a “Gospel *in nuce* (in a nutshell).” Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord ... has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor.” (Luke 4:18) If we

¹⁸ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary, Matthew 1:1—11:1* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 99.

¹⁹ Franz Pieper, “The Doctrine of Christ’s Work” in *Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology: Franz Pieper* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024), 4-5; Baier-Walther, *Atonement*, 19-22.

²⁰ Baier-Walther, *Atonement*, 19-22.

²¹ Pieper, “Doctrine of Christ’s Work,” 2-3.

remove the Gospel from his name, we make it simply a sound and not a name. What Gospel can there be with no atonement. Again,

We are justified only when we receive Christ as the Atoning Sacrifice and believe that for Christ's sake God is reconciled to us. Neither is justification even to be dreamed of without Christ as the Atonement. (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article V, paragraph 101.)

When John says “Jesus Christ comes in the flesh,” should we abolish “Jesus” and “Christ” from the text by excluding the Gospel, atonement, and justification?

What does Christ do as priest? The office of priest has two essential ministries:²²

1. To offer sacrifice to propitiate for our sin.
2. To intercede for us with God.

Lutheran theologians often designate that first ministry as *satisfaction*.²³

As Calov says, “A twofold act befits Christ as Priest: the first is sacrificial offering, the last is priestly intercession.”²⁴ The two ministries are connected, for as Calov says:

The Priestly Office ... is the function of Christ the Θεάνθρωπος [God-Man], offering Himself to God the Father as the sacrifice for mankind, and by the power of this offering interceding for the same [mankind] in order to acquire and apply grace and salvation.

Notice the union of the Incarnation—of Christ the Θεάνθρωπος [God-Man]—with this office and ministry. Also notice that the second ministry of intercession, Christ prays to God for us based on the sacrifice. There is no intercession in this office without the sacrifice, without the atonement.

What does Christ do as prophet? “The grace which Christ proclaimed as Prophet He purchased for us as Priest.”²⁵ Or we could say it the other way around: The grace Christ purchased for us as Priest He proclaims as Prophet. Pieper soundly says:

Observe how the offices of Christ are interrelated. If Christ in His priestly office has achieved only a quasi-reconciliation of men with God, the message of the prophetic office could deal only with a quasi-reconciliation. If, however,

²² Johann Wilhelm Baier and C. F. W. Walther, trans. Theodore E. Mayes, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Baier-Walther* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc. 2023),

²³ Johannes Quenstedt, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Johannes Quenstedt*, 2nd ed., trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2023), 15 et seq. Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces. On the Person and Office of Christ*, trans. Richard J. Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), IV. 320.

²⁴ Abraham Calov, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Abraham Calov* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024), 47.

²⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.342.

through His substitutional life and suffering, Christ has brought about a real, a complete, an objective reconciliation of men with God, then the Gospel brings to all men the message of grace, which they need only to accept by faith in order to be made possessors of the grace gained by Christ. It is folly to say that the Socinians, the rationalists, and others, who deny the substitutional satisfaction of Christ, grant that He had at least a prophetic office. Christ as Prophet could in that case no longer dispense the grace of God to the world lying under the curse of sin, but would be only a preacher of morality, who is teaching and urging men to gain salvation by their own virtuous strivings. The question, then, as to what Christ did as our High Priest is of supreme importance.²⁶

What does Christ do as king? He rules over the whole world and the whole universe, but in distinguishable kingdoms. In the present, Christ rules over both believers and unbelievers, but as differently as faith and unbelief are different. He rules unbelievers in his kingdom of power, but He rules the household of faith in his kingdom of grace. In eternity, Christ will rule in his kingdom of glory.²⁷

Of these, when John says, “those who do not confess that Jesus Christ comes in the flesh,” he is addressing the present and he is showing the division between the kingdom of power and the kingdom of grace. But is there any kingdom of grace without the atonement and justification? No more than a prophet could announce grace won by a priest who made no atonement could a king rule in a kingdom of grace if no priest made atonement. Without the atonement, there is no Gospel to believe, no believers, no kingdom, and no king.

Hermeneutical Background

John served as father of the house churches of Asia Minor for decades. The faithful children of the many elect sisters (churches) of the region have been and still are his children. He preferred to deliver his teaching orally through the church’s worship, its catechesis, visits, and the like.²⁸

Under Emperor Domitian, John was exiled to the island of Patmos. This resulted in an extended time without the stabilizing influence of John as the region’s elder father. That vacuum took a toll on the children. False teaching persuaded some to abandon the faith and the life of the community.²⁹

Under Domitian’s successor, Nerva, John was allowed to return home to Ephesus.³⁰ John

²⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.342.

²⁷ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.385, 387-389. Martin Chemnitz, *The Lord’s Prayer*, trans. Georg Williams (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), 47-50.

²⁸ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 3, 8-9

²⁹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 3.

³⁰ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 55.

sees the need to do something he preferred not to do: deliver his teaching in writing. *How did he do it?*

Hoping now to visit again and soon, but knowing both the seriousness of the situation and that his days as their elder father are numbered—for his age is advanced—John sends a general epistle or letter, 1 John, together with *its introductory cover letter, 2 John*.³¹

Under the caption, “A Cover Letter (2 John),” Schuchard says:

“This letter was not meant to stand alone, any more than 3 John was.” To be sure, “there is something to be said for the view that its [1 John’s] atypical form is a reflection of its author’s intention to send it to several congregations along with an accompanying note personalizing each delivery.”³²

Schuchard begins his Commentary section on 2 John saying:

“Anyone familiar with 1 John will recognize that 2 John encapsulates the situation and problems that lie behind 1 John.” 2 John, however, “adds no substantially new content” to 1 John. So why was 2 John written? Answer: to provide a cover letter for 1 John that includes personal greetings from the elder to each of the Christian communities of the province of Asia Minor to which the companion pieces, 1 and 2 John, are being sent. Therefore, 2 John *abounds in terse references to issues and themes that find fuller treatment only in the Letter that it introduces*. The extent to which 2 John’s themes consistently anticipate those of 1 John suggests strongly that the one was constructed to serve as an introduction to the other.³³

“As companion pieces especially 1 John, 2 John, and—in the case of Gaius—3 John were received together as a written form of correspondence.”³⁴ This has hermeneutical impact.

There is very little justification for separating the three Letters. “Both the title and the history of the tradition tell against that, and their inner connection does so even more.” The works mutually interpret each another, as together they

³¹ Schuchard, *1-3 John* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 3 (emphasis added). See also at 18.

³² Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 20, quoting Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, Vol. 1: *A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 1:563 and D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 669. Also at 593, “2 John ‘was not meant to stand alone, any more than 3 John was.’ That with which 2 John was meant to stand is, in fact, 1 John, which lacks many of the characteristics of an ancient letter. Indeed, the atypical quality of 1 John reflects John’s intention ‘to send it to several congregations along with an accompanying note personalizing each delivery.’ That note is 2 John.4.” (also quoting Witherington, Carson, and Moo).

³³ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 612 (numerous citations omitted).

³⁴ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 23.

respond to the elder's concern that his career-long work, "the truth of his proclamation of Christ," is in jeopardy. For John, "antichrist" is already in evidence in the present experience of "many antichrists" (1 Jn 2:18-19). "Victory over the world is something to be safeguarded by remaining in the faith as passed down by the conservators of the apostolic tradition (1 Jn 5:4-5) rather than being derailed by innovations and deviations." The passion of the elder, "who here saw a threat to the foundation pillar, the heart, of his testimony to Christ, the incarnation of the Son of God in the man Jesus of Nazareth *and at the same time its consummation in his dying on the cross for the salvation of the world*, is all too understandable."³⁵

John composed and delivered the Apocalypse first, then the Letters. Only after them does he finally compose his last will and testament, his Gospel.³⁶ John gives his authoritative witness to the message of the inbreaking into the world of the last hour through "the person *and work*, through the *historical words and deeds*, of the man Jesus, the Christ, the Son of god."³⁷

Rallying the faithful so that none would be lost to the ongoing threat of deception, John urges his children with a threefold exhortation: (1) to confess by the Spirit in this last hour both a "who" *and a "what,"* both the man Jesus (the "who") as the Son of the Father and the Christ of God come in the flesh in truth and love, and *the fulfillment (the "what") of God's historic dealings with his people of old through the same Jesus' atoning sacrifice of himself, through his shed blood, a cleansing flood*, conferring the life of the age to come, which is come even now, . . .³⁸

John focuses his letters on matters internal rather than external, on the need for the faithful to rally again to the side of the eyewitnesses whose instruction is in no way a novelty, but is instead what they have heard from the beginning. None but these and their emissaries are to be welcomed into the community. None but these are to be greeted as brothers, lest the promised full reward and joy of the life of the age to come which is ours in fellowship with the eyewitnesses be lost, whose own Spirit-wrought fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. All else is idolatry and death. Hoping to visit again and soon, but knowing both the seriousness of the situation and that his days as their elder father are numbered, John does again what he previously has chosen not to do:

³⁵ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 34-35, quoting Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 34, 46, David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods, and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 472.

³⁶ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 3.

³⁷ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 3 (emphasis added).

³⁸ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 4 (emphasis added).

he writes.³⁹

While Johns writes in Ephesus, it was home to a multitude of cults. Two held the greatest influence “and therefore would have posed the greatest challenge to later Christians: the cult of Artemis and the cult of the emperor.”⁴⁰ While Cerinthians might have participated in those cults, neither of those cults is Cerinthianism.

Schuchard invests three pages of his commentary in developing the nature of these cults and their surprising magnitude.⁴¹ Were you and I somehow dropped into the middle of that culture, we might feel these two cults suffocatingly ubiquitous and potent. One is struck with the fact that while Cerintianism certainly is among the false teachings John must address, to reduce the problem to that is myopic when the scale of these two cults is known.

The Problem of the Secessionists

Indeed, the very next thing Schuchard does is devote more than three pages under the caption, “The Problem of the Secessionists.” He establishes this as the main problem John is confronting.

He did not say Cerinthians. He did not even say any other “species of Gnosticism,”⁴² such as Sethians, Valentinians, Basilideans, Barbeliotes, Archontics, Simonians (followers of Simon Magus who appears in Acts 8, often considered proto-Gnostic), Menandrians, Marcionites, Carpocratians, Docetae or Docetics, Borborites, Naassenes, Perates, Valesians, Heracleonites, Ptolemaeans, Saturnilians, Elkesaites, or Mandaeans. Many of these were catalogued by Irenaeus and Epiphanius. Instead, he said “Secessionists.”

Why did Schuchard called the problem Secessionists? Because he is exegeting John’s text and what did John write? He says in 1 John the false prophets have “gone out.” (1 John 4:1) He says in 2 John the deceivers have “gone out.” (2 John 7) A secessionist is someone who has gone out from where he was. The secessionists are not simply antichrists who have gone into the world from just anywhere. No. They have gone out *from the church* into the world. They seceded from the church. John says:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us. (1 John 2:19)

Look at the hazard: they already were what they were, namely, not of us. But previously what they were was not yet manifest. The infection is there before the symptoms.

Schuchard says:

³⁹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 4.

⁴⁰ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 11.

⁴¹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 11-13.

⁴² Allison, *Cruelty of Heresy*, 55.

The secessionists' recent departure from the church (1 Jn 2:18-19) had a certain "destabilising influence" on the community. That which deceived these was still threatening to deceive others (1 Jn 2:26). Therefore, all such false thinking, all such false teaching, proved "the real occasion for the writing of all three letters."⁴³

With the two dominant cults and the plethora of species of Gnostics it is not surprising to find Schuchard asking:

So who were the secessionists? What can we know about them in John's context where false prophets (1 Jn 4:1), deceivers (2 Jn 7), and antichrists (1 Jn 2:18,22; 4:3; 2 Jn 7) were all too easy to find?⁴⁴

What did all the secessionists, not just the Cerinthians, have in common. Despite all the differentiations of the cults and species (denominations, if you will) of Gnosticism, they did share something: belief in *divine impassability*, that *God could not suffer or die*.

In the understanding of the educated intellectuals of John's day, "a divine figure would have to be incapable of suffering and immortal." Thus, the deceivers of 1 and 2 John "could take up the christology developed in the teaching of the elder only by dissolving the skilful radical dialectical unity between the earthly Jesus and the heavenly Son sent into the world and appealing one-sidedly and speculatively to the latter."

The stimulus for some to depart from the church therefore came from the outside, from "the widespread philosophical and religious dogma of the immutability and impassibility of God," from a remarkably idolatrous society (1 Jn 5:21). That a teacher like *Cerinthus* had a special influence here *need not at all be the case*. For, even *apart from the teachings of Cerinthus*, not some but many would have held that "a divine being could certainly for a time take human form and even enter into a man, but could never become truly man, participate in human weakness, suffer and die."⁴⁵

Schuchard and the commentators he cites say not only that Cerinthus was not the sole false teacher John was addressing, but that it need not at all be the case that "a teacher like Cerinthus had a special influence." There is such a slough of teachings and teachers for the impassability

⁴³ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 14 (emphasis added), quoting Paul R. Trebilco, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 288, and Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1990), 40.

⁴⁴ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 14.

⁴⁵ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 14-15, quoting Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 72, and citing David K. Rensberger, *The Epistles of John*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 12-13.

of God that, while Cerinthus certainly fits, neither he nor any other particular teacher need be specially, let alone exclusively, in view.

In scholarship's history, many have attempted to identify the secessionists with one or another of the known movements of John's day. Some have proposed that the secessionists were charismatics or Jews, others that they were Cerinthians or the Docetists that Ignatius opposed, still others that they were Gnostics. Some have even argued for the influence of more than one movement. We must conclude, however, that *all such attempts are "misguided."* From the evidence as thus far detailed, we have no reason "to suppose that the 'separatists' of I John 2.19 had a strictly fixed doctrinal system and were a firmly organized group." I John's picture of them is "too fluid and blurred for such conjectures," as fluid and blurred, in fact, as was the pluriform thinking of the peoples of the day.

Therefore, that which threatened to deceive (2:26) was *in the day's "air."* Its thinking, its exponents, were *literally everywhere*. The danger, then, the threat of deceit, would have been a constant and deadly one, working ever and always to erode the necessary belief and understanding of the person *and work* of Jesus, imperiling the necessary understanding of faith and life.⁴⁶

Indeed "The Greek philosopher whose thinking has enjoyed the most extensive influence across the expanse of history is Plato (ca. 427-347 BC)," and both Cerinthian and Docetic Gnosticism are simply two among many schools of thought deriving from Plato that a divine spirit could not have become a material human being.⁴⁷

This basic philosophical assumption [of Platonism] when applied to the Christian gospel led to two well-known christological heresies in the second century, Cerinthianism and docetism (cf. the apostle Paul's warning in Col. 2:8). Both of these schools of thought attempted to understand Jesus in ways that were compatible with philosophical currents of the time, and both denied the humanity of Jesus, though each in a different way. John's letter does not dwell on the christological errors that were current at his time, and therefore it is *unwise to lean heavily on either of these as the specific background* of the book. They are *simply two examples* from the ancient world of the kind of thinking that John would oppose; the actual situation of his day *may have had nothing [directly] to do with either of these schools* of thought.⁴⁸

We have seen rifle shots—statement that take pointed aim—at the notion that in 2 John 7-11, John is only concerned with the Cerinthians and the Incarnation, that he is concerned only

⁴⁶ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 16-17 (numerous citations omitted).

⁴⁷ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 15.

⁴⁸ Karen H. Jobes, *Letters to the Church: A Survey of Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 420 as quoted in Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 15.

with Christology and not soteriology, that he is concerned only with the person of Christ and not his work of atonement for us.

Impassability Roots the Denial of Incarnation in the Atonement

So now we know:

- The problem John is addressing in his cover letter in 2 John 7-11 which, because it is a cover letter written at the same time for the same reason and to accompany and cover 1 John, and because of how its text refers in shorthand to the text of 1 John, is the same problem he is addressing in 1 John.
- The problem is the false teaching of the secessionists.
- The secessionists are a diverse range of isms that share a belief in divine impassability.

Was ist das? What is that problem? Why is impassability a problem for a sheer incarnation without suffering or dying? Immutability is a problem for sheer incarnation, but the focus of impassability is that Jesus Christ came in the flesh *to suffer and die for sinners*. Because the divine could not suffer or die, the deity of Jesus Christ, at least on the cross if not at other times, had to be denied, but the secessionists backed into that conclusion only because of having started at the cross. The atonement and Christ's suffering therein is the root of the denial of the Incarnation. So then, the secessionists have only a human Jesus on the cross, which, note well: ***is no atonement***. They started with the atonement, gutted the person of Christ of his divinity, and that gutted the atonement. The atonement bookends the problem with the Incarnation in the middle. Yes, the Incarnation is in the middle, but it is surrounded by atonement. The secessionists refused "to attach any salvific importance to the earthly career of Jesus, including the very manner of his death,"⁴⁹

Thus, to say that 2 John is only about the Cerinthians and therefore only about the Incarnation, so that false teachers on the atonement are not among the secessionists is profoundly erroneous. And when we observe the declarations and warnings in 2 John 7-11, this error is enormously hazardous.

"The Teaching of Christ" and "This Teaching"

Schuchard observes that, "Three references to the 'teaching' (διδασκαλία) of Christ appear in the body of the rhetorical discourse's second half (2 Jn 9a, 9b, 10a)."⁵⁰ In verse 9,

The genitive τῆς διδασκαλίας τοῦ Χριστοῦ is both subjective and objective: going too far, the one who fails to abide in the teaching of Christ leaves behind both the

⁴⁹ Fernando F. Segovia, "Recent Research in the Johannine Letters," *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987):136, paraphrasing Brown, as quoted in Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 16.

⁵⁰ ⁵⁰ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 597.

teaching that Christ offers and the teaching that is about Christ.⁵¹

In other words, teaching “of” Christ means both the teaching about Christ and the teaching that Christ did. What did Jesus teach? Which parts of his teaching were resisted the most. The most resisted parts were:

- That He had to suffer.
- That sin is forgiven by grace for the sake of his suffering.

Recall Christ’s three predictions of his suffering and death and the resistance of the disciples to that teaching? In his first prediction, Jesus tells them He must go to Jerusalem, suffer, be rejected, be killed, and rise on the third day. (Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22) In his second prediction, Jesus again says He will be delivered into human hands, killed, and raised on the third day. (Matthew 17:22–23, Mark 9:31, Luke 9:44) In his third prediction, on the road to Jerusalem, Jesus gives the most detailed prediction: betrayal, condemnation, mockery, flogging, crucifixion, and resurrection. (Matthew 20:18–19, Mark 10:33–34, Luke 18:31–33)

Then Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “Far be it from You, Lord; this shall not happen to You!” But He turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men.” (Matthew 16:22-23; Mark 8:32b-33)

For Peter, the Incarnation was fine. The atonement? Not so much. Jesus calls Peter “Satan,” and not surprisingly John calls deniers of the atonement “antichrist.” These go together.

Paul says in Galatians, “I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.” (Galatians 2:21) Note: *died* in vain, not was incarnate in vain. To deny salvation by grace is to deny the efficacy of the atonement. Carrying on in the next verse, Paul says, “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?” (Galatian 3:1) Of course there is no salvation by grace without the Incarnation. But Paul corrects legalism with the *death* of Christ and the clear portray of Christ as *crucified*.

Did any apostle ever preach the Incarnation without the atonement? Paul says of the apostles, “a e preach *Christ crucified*, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness.” (1 Corinthians 1:23) That is not Christ without the atonement. That is Christ crucified. Paul says, “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2). That is not Christ without crucifixion. That is Christ *and Him crucified*.

⁵¹ Schuchard, 1-3 John, 607.

Was there some other secret doctrine that the apostles taught everywhere else outside of Corinth and Galatia? Of course not. There is no apostolic preaching of Christ without the cross. Paul explains the ministry and word given to the apostles.

Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)

Luther says, "*Crux sola est nostra theologia* (The cross alone is our theology)."⁵² Is that just a slogan to puff up a prideful and imaginary denominational superiority at moments when we feel that need, or is it our actual, abiding, identifying faith? If we are right that *crux sola est nostra theologia*, and if Paul is right that "we," the apostles preach Christ crucified to both Jews and Greeks, and seek to know nothing but Christ and him crucified in Corinth, then how did John manage to muck it up and care only for Christ but not the cross in 2 John? He did not muck it up. His readers do.

A Stereotyped Expression

Schuchard renders the clause in 2 John 7b those who do not confess that Jesus Christ "comes" in the flesh.

The word "comes," then, "lays emphasis on the lasting, permanent union of the two natures of Christ." It is characteristic, characterizing, for Jesus is the coming one, who came, who comes, and who is to come *in the flesh*. John quotes a *stereotyped expression*. What Jesus has been *for us and for our salvation* he is and will be for time and for eternity.⁵³

A stereotyped expression is a fixed, formulaic, conventional phrase that is repeated so often it becomes a standard pattern rather than a fresh, original utterance. Thus, "Jesus Christ comes in the flesh" is a formula for the Incarnation and the atonement combined with a verb tense selected to assure us that the person and work of Christ stand effective for us for eternity.

"For it was as the one who became flesh (Jn 1:14)," observes Thompson, *1-3 John*, 153-54, "that he revealed the glory of God, and it was his flesh that he gave for the life of the world (Jn 6:51)." Thus, John "summarizes who Jesus is and what he has done for our salvation: he became flesh, and he gave that flesh

⁵² Martin Luther, Lectures on the Psalms (Psalm 5). *Luther's Works, Weimarer Ausgabe*, 5:176; *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vol. 14.

⁵³ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 627-628 (citations omitted).

in death so that we might have life.”⁵⁴

Separating the atonement out from “Jesus Christ comes in the flesh” guts the stereotyped expression of its standardized meaning.

Received Meaning: Polycarp’s Treatment

We can see a reflection of how the early Church understood John in a writing by Polycarp. On the question whether John was in Asia Minor when he wrote the letters, Schuchard uses Polycarp’s *Epistle to the Philippians* (AD 115-120). Polycarp and Papias are our earliest witnesses to where John was when he wrote the letters, and they served in Asia Minor after John.

Schuchard observes that Polycarp’s writing is “uniquely close to two Johannine passages,”⁵⁵ one of them being the first verse of our subject passage, 2 John 7. How did Polycarp speak about Jesus Christ coming in the flesh? Did he segregate that from the atonement?

In his *Epistle to the Philippians* (AD 115-120), Polycarp of Smyrna says this of those who refuse the cross:

For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist, and whoever does not confess the testimony of the cross is of the devil.... Therefore, leaving the foolishness of the crowd and its false teaching, let us turn back to the word that was delivered to us from the beginning.⁵⁶

“That Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” is not isolated from “the testimony of the cross.” Rather, they are treated as two aspects of a single teaching. “The testimony of the cross” appears in the sentence as an appositive of “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh,” and “is of the devil” is an appositive of “is an antichrist.”

IV. Consequences in the Text

A Deceiver, An Antichrist

In 2 John 7-11, John succinctly reveals consequences of denial of the doctrine of Christ.

For his first consequence, John says, “This is a deceiver and an antichrist”

⁵⁴ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 627-628, n 281.

⁵⁵ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 6, quoting Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, Anchor Bible 30 (Garden City, NY: 1982), 8.

⁵⁶ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 6, quoting Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 7:1-2.s

Harsh? Yes. But there it is. Even if we do not discern John's—the Holy Spirit's—reasons or like them, we must at least acknowledge apostolic authority, Scriptural authority, and the authority of God.

What will we accept from our Savior? The same Christ who suffered and died for you declares this. Did He love us and die for us and then stop loving us to say this unloving thing? No. He says this out of the same saving love of his cross. Be careful to receive this from Christ as He intends.

Who would know who is an antichrist, if not Christ? Perhaps it is not easy for our natural eyes and our natural understanding to recognize a deceiver, an antichrist. John says, "they went out that they might be made manifest." (1 John 2:19) They already were deceivers and antichrists, but that fact was not visible. It only became manifest when they went out. Up until then, their being deceivers and antichrists was an object of faith by taking Christ's word for it that anyone who denies the doctrine of Christ is a deceiver and an antichrist. This is another circumstance in which we walk by faith and not by sight. The Word gives discernment.

Should we have thought that it is antichrist to deny the Incarnation but not antichrist to deny Christ's atonement? No. It is antichrist to deny Christ's atonement.

Lose What We Worked For, Full Reward

John says, "Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward."

What have we worked for? What is a full reward? "Jesus answered and said to them, 'This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent.'" (John 5:29). "Therefore, for John, the *work* of the believer is to believe."⁵⁷ For the full reward, by faith, we have "present assurance of a future outcome," which outcome is "the blessings of the age that is to come."⁵⁸ Welcoming and promoting deniers of the doctrine of Christ hazards faith, assurance and reward.

Does Not Have God

John says, "No one who goes ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ has God."

We have God or we do not. We like to make exceptions for what we feel is nice. John says, "No one." No matter how it looks to our natural eyes, the eye of faith sees that whoever does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God. It is tragic. And it is true.

Do Not Receive, Do Not Greet

John says, "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into the house and do not greet him."

⁵⁷ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 629 (emphasis in original).

⁵⁸ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 627-630.

Because of lacking context and background for this verse, some have exaggerated what God commands here. Unfortunately, therefore, it is necessary to dwell on clarifying this. We can do this with excerpts from a couple of commentaries, first from Schuchard and then from Kretzmann.

As they traveled, Christians relied a great deal on reciprocal hospitality, particularly the hospitality of more affluent Christians who owned houses and presided over households.” This was certainly true of the apostle Paul. While John may only be encouraging his hearers not to extend the kind of hospitality to an illicit itinerant teacher that would have afforded the visitor the status of a trustworthy individual or would have given the impression that he is “one of us” (cf. *Didache* 11), “it is also plausible that ‘house’ here refers to the house-church meeting, in which case the reference is not to general hospitality, but rather to allowing these people opportunities in Christian worship to spread their false views.”⁵⁹

It is one thing to invite a proselytizing representative of the Jehovah’s Witnesses into your house for the sake of countering the testimony that the other brings; it is another thing altogether to invite the guest to dinner and to spend the night, introducing him to family and friends, including brothers and sisters in the faith, as if he were one close to you and trusted, upon whom others too may confidently depend.⁶⁰

John prohibits not any and all forms of greeting. Rather, he prohibits one that would have been customary in welcoming a person into the fellowship of a house, especially that of a house church (see 2 Jn 13; 3 Jn 15). To extend the “right hand of fellowship” (Gal 2:9) to such a one is to aid and abet, to fellowship in his evil works. Some commentators brand John’s teaching un-Christian. Painter observes:

But this instruction does not concern a response to the poor or needy. It is a policy to refuse aid to a rival mission that, in the view of the Elder, was deceived and deceiving in its work. To aid what the Elder evaluated as “evil works” was to participate in the deception and its destructive consequences. Few people will give aid to causes they consider to be misguided and destructive or evil in their consequences.⁶¹

And now from Kretzmann:

⁵⁹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 632.

⁶⁰ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 632, n. 313.

⁶¹ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 633, quoting John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*. Sacra pagina 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 354-355.

Everyone to this day and hour that denies the manifestation of the Father in the Son for the salvation of the world by His suffering and death thereby denies the true, revealed God. No teaching is true, no teaching has a right to exist, which eliminates the redemption or obscures the glory of the Cross. On the other hand, every teacher, every believer that clings to that old doctrine of salvation through the blood of Christ, to the fact that God the Father sent His Son into the world that men should live through Him, has both the Father and the Son, is united with them by the bonds of the closest union, in faith.

There was need of caution in those days: If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house, and do not greet him, for he that greets him becomes a partaker of his wicked works. There was need of such caution and discrimination in receiving the wandering “apostles and prophets” of those days, who not only went from congregation to congregation, but also from house to house, trying to gain adherents for their false doctrines. St. John, therefore, gives the very good rule and precept that such people should be forbidden the house and that no one should wish them good luck in their undertaking, wish them well in their work. To this day the wandering preachers that are trying to gain proselytes for their false teaching should be treated in the same way: they should be refused admittance to the houses and should certainly not receive our good wishes in their evil work.⁶²

So, we are free to have many kinds of associations with people who deny the person or work of Christ. What we are not free to do is welcome and promote false teachers in a way that makes it appear we are in spiritual fellowship with them.

Fellowships in His Evil Works

We are not free to do that, “for the one who [in that sense] greets him *fellowships in his evil works*.”⁶³

We cannot escape this by characterizing it passively, as if fellowship is only an effect. The word for *fellowships* here is a verb.⁶⁴ It is a present tense, active voice, indicative mood, third person, singular verb. It might also be expressed as *shares in*, *partakes of*, or *participates in*, but Schuchard’s choice of *fellowships* is to be expected since the word is *κοινωνέω* (*koinōnei*). The word names something we actively do. We fellowship.

This is about fellowship. Here, fellowship is not a social matter. It is not an interpersonal matter. It is not about being such nice guys that we are nicer than God. Observe the text. John

⁶² Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible. New Testament* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), II.581.

⁶³ Translation by Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 595.

⁶⁴ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 634.

says fellowships in his evil *works*.⁶⁵ Here, fellowship is about works, and the works are what they confess and do not confess. The lack of doctrinal fellowship about the Incarnation and the atonement results in us fellowshiping in the evil works denying the Incarnation or atonement.

We like to weasel our way around plain words. We like to say, well, John uses the words “receive” and “greet” and that is not what we are doing. Oh, really? When we publish a heretic who denies vicarious satisfaction in the atonement, we are “receiving,” “greeting” and then some. We are way beyond receiving and greeting. We are fellowshiping, sharing, participating, partaking.

Truth and Love

There is a tendency to disdain what is viewed as excessive fussiness about doctrine including (A) whether 2 John is about the atonement along with the Incarnation and (B) what the right doctrine of atonement is. It is considered antithetical to love. This is a false dichotomy.

For John, *the truth and so also love* is at risk (cf. “whom I love in the truth,” 3 Jn 1). To be sure, the acutely threatening reality to which John responds binds all of his Letters together. For John, “one can only love ‘truly’ or ‘genuinely’ if one abides in the truth” with those who share in the fellowship of the beloved.⁶⁶

Love is not what we feel. God is love, and love is what God says it is.

V. Ridicule of Narrowness

I conclude that the doctrine embraced in 2 John 7-11 is both:

- Incarnation, and
- atonement.

So, for purposes of applying 2 John 7-11, my proposition is that we must not fellowship with one who denies either the Incarnation or the atonement.

In my experience, many ridicule this as narrow. But consider three factors:

1. Narrow or not, has it not been demonstrated above that John embraces both in the text? The ridicule, thus, is toward John, and before him, toward the Holy Spirit.
2. Good cases have been made that when John says “doctrine of Christ” or “this teaching” in 2 John, that is not limited to the Incarnation and the atonement. It just as likely means the entire apostolic doctrine, as many commentators say.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Schuchard’s translation, “evil works”, p. 593, 595. NKJV “evil deeds,” ESV2011 “wicked works,” Tyndale “evyll dedes,” Coverdale “euell dedes,” HCSB “švil work,” and LEB “švil deeds.”

⁶⁶ Schuchard, *1-3 John*, 617, quoting Marianne Meye Thompson, *1-3 John*, IV New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL; InverVarsity, 1992), 151.

⁶⁷ And well they do, considering: “According to Irenaeus, then, the ‘rule of truth’ received and confessed by every

3. Consider the many cardinal doctrines that I have not included: Trinity, creation, inspiration of Scripture, inerrancy of Scripture, original sin, Sacraments, absolution, election, conversion, good works, office of the ministry, and so on.

But when we cannot even agree on the necessity of two life-saving doctrines of the person and work of Christ, I rate it as a waste of time to talk about the rest of apostolic doctrine. Quibblers over the atonement as a requirement for fellowship are likely to quibble over other articles of faith in the Three Ecumenical Creeds as requirements for fellowship.

I am only asking for two apostolic doctrines. Can we agree on this much? If not, then engage the material, make your case *ad rem, de substantia rei*.

VI. Some Applications

Some things this text applies to when a teacher denies the Incarnation or the atonement:

- Platforming symposia and conference speakers
- Publishing through a synodical publishing house
- Promoting pastoral formation in synodically unauthorized seminaries that have professors who deny the atonement
- Ministerial candidacy and roster admission
- Ecclesial endorsements and public commendations

Christian at his baptism was transmitted by the apostles are repeatedly set forth by Irenaeus. In his *Contra Haereses* (I, 10, 1) one of these summaries reads as follows: "The Church dispersed through the whole world, to the ends of the earth has received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God, the Father Almighty, who has made heaven and earth and the sea and all things that are in them, and in one Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became *incarnate for our salvation* . . ." F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Lutheran Confessions*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 10, 195-196.