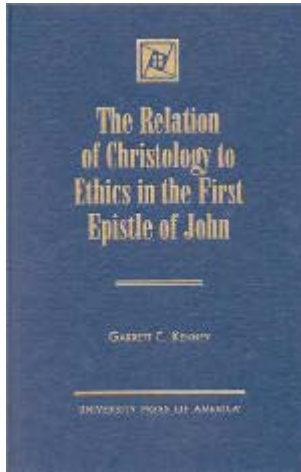


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Kenney, Garrett C.

The Relation of Christology to Ethics in the First Epistle of John

Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001. Pp. x + 58, Cloth, \$29.00, ISBN 0761818677.

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This small book is a revised thesis, originally for the master's degree in 1986 at Gonzaga University. It has not been substantially updated. The bibliography contains no entries for works published after 1984.

Despite these limitations, this study is well conceived and carefully argued. The author, Garrett Kenney, Senior Lecturer at Eastern Washington University, sets forth in detail the relationship between Christology and ethics in 1 John. He sees the epistle as a theological and moral corrective to the docetic tendencies of the Fourth Gospel. "Christology determines ethics," he argues, and the Christology of 1 John centers on the value of the earthly life and expiatory death of Jesus. Those who affirm God's love, evident in the death of Jesus, are ethically and spiritually transformed to live as Jesus lived.

In a brief introduction, the author gives an overview of the book and his purpose, then defines how he is using the terms *Christology* and *ethics*. He is concerned with the identity and importance of Jesus Christ for the epistle's author and community, not with broader christological issues. Ethics concerns "the general moral theology" and the "spirituality" of the original author and Johannine group. Kenney also promises some reflection on the application of his study to Christians today.

Chapter 1 (eleven pages plus endnotes) covers the questions of authorship, historical setting, and structure in 1 John. While the early external evidence concluded that the apostle John the son of Zebedee wrote the Fourth Gospel and all three letters bearing his name, Kenney properly observes that the internal evidence does not support this conclusion. The “Elder” associated with 1 John does not write or act as one with apostolic authority. He is concerned with the correct interpretation of the authoritative tradition of the Fourth Gospel, produced about a decade before his writing of the letters, and is best understood as a disciple of the author of the Gospel and possibly as the final redactor of the Gospel.

In support of his conclusion, Kenney cites the linguistic and theological differences between 1 John and the Fourth Gospel that were adduced by C. H. Dodd. He also follows Raymond Brown’s complex theory of the five-stage “composition history” of the Fourth Gospel set forth in his Anchor Bible commentary on *The Epistles of John*. Throughout the book Kenney frequently follows Brown’s lead on a number of historical and exegetical issues (e.g., the structure of 1 John). Brown’s writings on Johannine topics are the most frequently cited sources, other than the biblical text, in the extensive endnotes to each chapter. Kenney also favors reading the Fourth Gospel on multiple levels, as suggested by J. Louis Martyn.

Kenney thinks that the secessionists, the opponents continually in view in 1 John, had a docetic understanding of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel in which Jesus’ humanity was relativized compared to the glory of his preexistence and self-revelation. (Why Kenney calls this an “incarnational Christology” [7, 25] is unclear. There is ample reason to think that the secessionists did not hold to an incarnational Christology but rejected the notion of Jesus Christ having come in the flesh [1 John 4:1-2; 2 John 7.]

He also believes that the secessionists held a “docetic ethic.” They believed that “the specific actions of Jesus’ life were not salvifically significant” (9), so they reasoned that if Jesus’ earthly life was not important, then there were no particularly significant standards for Christian ethical conduct. By contrast, the author of 1 John argues for both an incarnational Christology, in which the saving death of Jesus is vital, as well as for a Christian ethic of union with Jesus and imitation of his life, in which ethics (based on the example of Jesus’ love) is also salvifically important.

The strongest section of the book is chapter 2 (twenty pages plus endnotes), “Exegesis of and Commentary on First John.” It does not contain a full commentary on 1 John, but it does cover the whole epistle and focuses on the relation between Christology and ethics in each section of 1 John. Kenney’s exegesis is often insightful and shows the deeply intertwined connections between the Elder’s view of the person of Jesus, his life and work (especially his saving death), and the conduct of Johannine Christians.

Kenney amply supports his thesis that Christology determines ethics. The secessionists' docetic Christology yields a lack of love for others, whereas the Elder's emphasis on God's love in redemption leads to the believer's following Christ's example of love. Both the Elder and his opponents are engaging in an interpretation of the Johannine tradition as represented in the Gospel, each side taking a trajectory in different direction.

Highlights from the exegetical chapter include a helpful discussion of *ap' arches* ("from the beginning"; a reference not to preexistence but to Jesus' life and work); a defense of the impersonal use of *logos* in the prologue of the epistle; and explanations of various topics, including the use of the "comprehensive neuter" particle *ho* in the prologue as a summary of Jesus' whole earthly ministry and a refocusing of attention away from a Christology of glory; how "God is light" in 1:5 has both christological and behavioral implications; that Jesus' love command in 2:7-11 is a gift that leads us to return love for love; Jesus as both "expiatory means" and "exemplary model" in the larger section 1:5-2:11; the interpretation of 2:12-17 as assurance and warnings; the competing views of perfectionist holiness and their eschatological context, especially in 2:28-3:10; the unity of Christology and ethics in the love sections of the epistle (3:11-24; 4:7-5:4a); and the understanding of idolatry in 5:21 to mean "be ethically what you are Christologically!"

Two weaker points in this exegetical section occur on pages 26 and 31. Kenney says that in 2:22 the author's emphasis has shifted to "the identification of the Christ as none other than the earthly, righteous, sacrificing *Jews*" (emphasis added). Kenney probably means "Jesus," a change, however, in his text that requires more than just a simple one-letter typo. Coincidentally, it is with regard to the same theological point, the identity of the Christ as "Jesus," that the second needed clarification occurs. In 4:2, Kenney still thinks that the secessionists held an incarnational Christology (yet were docetists) and thinks that he has shown this in the introduction, when in reality he has more asserted it than proved it. A clarification of Kenney's view of the secessionists' docetic yet incarnational Christology is needed.

The final section of the book is an eight-page "Summary Statement Regarding the Relation of Christology to Ethics, Pastoral Application." The pastoral application consists of "ten components of Christian spirituality." They cover: the Trinity, Christology, Holy Spirit, Scripture-authority, the church, liturgy, incarnation, "historical consciousness," and "openness to change and new formulations." Kenney here takes insights gained from his study of the relation of Christology to ethics in 1 John and applies them creatively and sensitively to the lives contemporary Christians and the church.

This study of an important aspect of 1 John would be a useful addition to college and seminary libraries.