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The Discernment of God's Will according to the First Epistle of John¹

Abstract: Among the books of the New Testament, the First Epistle of John may at first appear to treat discerning God's will as the subject of the author's marginal concern. However, this article demonstrates that the explicit references to God's will in 2:17 and 5:14 do not exhaust the topic as presented in the Epistle. The need to do what 'pleases God,' as referred to in 3:22, plays a significant role. This exegetical study of the canonical form of the text, which employs a synchronic approach, involves three stages. The first one aims to identify the terms that express God's will in 1 John. The second defines the actions associated with discerning and fulfilling God's will. Finally, the third stage consists of a pragmatic analysis of the text. In addition to discussing the effects of knowing and fulfilling God's will by the Epistle's addressees; the final part of the study highlights the persuasive function of the Letter, which calls upon its audience to apply the exhortations contained within.

Keywords: discernment, knowing, God's will, First Epistle of John, exegesis

In view of the number of references to God's will (τὸ θέλημα τοῦ Θεοῦ) throughout John's work, the two occurrences in the First Epistle (2:17; 5:14) seem a modest contribution to the paraenesis regarding this important topic of spiritual life. However, when one considers the necessity of doing what 'pleases God,' presented in 3:22, the claim above loses its force. The Hebraism ποιεῖν τὰ ἀρεστά, used therein, creates space in order to determine actions that are an expression of God's expectations, consistent with what He offers and what is an expression of His will. This issue in John was explored

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in detail by theologians in the 1960s and 1970s.² Later studies, including commentaries, focused on God's will in this Epistle of John only marginally (Bastianel 1994, 15; Bottino 1994, 201; Köstenberger 2009, 367, 270) or not at all,³ as if this source of living water had been exhausted.⁴ Meanwhile, a careful analysis of the Letter in the context of contemporary challenges faced by the Church and the pursuit of the synodal path (Francis 2015, 1139) provides an impetus for a new search aiming to discover what God's will is for those who remain in communion with the Father and Son, and wish to form it with the witnesses of the Word revealed to them (1:2–3). The circumstances of community life – both for the first addressees of John's Letter and for its contemporary readers – are similar. Both groups, wounded by the scandal of schism and threatened by the activity of false prophets and antichrists (Fossati 2012, 20), should examine what comes from the Spirit of God (4:1) and ask anew: What is the will of God for us? To what does it lead? How can one discern it and respond to it?

The questions posed above require new answers and determine the order of the research process applying a synchronic approach, oriented at the text in its canonical form. The first stage of its analysis focuses on determining the terminology that expresses God's will in the First Epistle of John and makes it possible to define its object. The second stage of the study seeks to distinguish the actions needed to know God's will. The third and final stage involves a pragmatic analysis, with particular attention to the text's persuasive dimension. In addition to outlining the benefits of obeying God's will, this phase also indicates the attitudes that Christians are expected to adopt

² Four publications deserve attention: Johnston (1961), Blank (1973), Segalla (1974), with a very good exegetic and theological analysis of 1 John 2:17; 3:22 and 5:14 in the context of the Fourth Gospel, and Malatesta (1978).

³ The theme of God's will in the First Epistle of John is not mentioned at all, e.g., by Lieu (1991). This striking deficiency in the presentation of the theology of the First Epistle of John is fortunately amended in the commentary of Lieu (2008, 56, 78, 96, 224, 226).

⁴ Literature on the remaining biblical books is significantly richer. Here is a list of the most important publications: Di Pinto (1976); Yeomans (1978, 122–27); Palliparambil (1986); Lorenzani (1994); Miller (2007); Badiola Sáenz de Ugarte (2009); Baker (2012); Marcato (2012); Daley (2021).

toward the world and those who belong to it, as presented in the First Epistle of John.

1. Terms Expressing God's Will in 1 John

The manifestation (φανερόω) of God in time is a phenomenon that expresses His will and at the same time makes it visible, audible and tangible, thus cognisable or discernible, and finally real in the sense that it can be accepted and lived by, even though it may not be fully understood (Brooke 2014, 1). In the First Epistle of John, the most perfect form of God's historical self-revelation is the incarnation of the Word of life (1:2),⁵ which – together with others – the author has heard, seen and touched with his own hands (1:1, 3). Such a vivid experience cannot be ignored, so for John it becomes an imperative to witness (μαρτυρέω; 1:2; 4:14; Segalla 1974, 5) and proclaim (ἀπαγγέλλω; 1:2) what is God's will, namely, initiated through Christ's coming into the world, the communion with the Father and Son, as well as the first witnesses of faith (1:3),⁶ so that those who share it may reach complete joy (1:4).

Since the κοινωνία (co-participation)⁷ referred to in the Epistle was instituted by God, it also supernaturally becomes the environment for the revelation (Fabris 2007, 44) and discernment of God's will (Balz and Scharge 1985, 201); what was, as John states, from the beginning (1:1) and is the necessary proclamation (ἀναγγέλλω) of the Message (ἡ ἀγγελία; 1:5; 3:11; Malatesta 1978, 105). It consists of all that God gives (δίδωμι)⁸ and testifies

⁵ As aptly noted by Segall, the word of Jesus includes the entire revelation of the Father – regarding what people should believe in and how they should act (Segalla 1974, 281).

⁶ Brown (1988, 109) sees them as tradition bearers and interpreters from the Johannine School.

⁷ A good study of the term κοινωνία can be found in an article by Urbanek (2015).

⁸ The object of God's act of giving is love (3:1), the commandment to believe in Jesus as the Son of God (3:23), the Spirit (3:24; 4:13), eternal life (5:11). Finally, in 5:20 the Son of God gives believers the capacity of the mind to know God, who the Letter's author refers to as True (ὁ ἀληθινός).

(μαρτυρέω)⁹ to man, and is an expression of His saving and life-giving will. In the Epistle, it is illustrated by light (τὸ φῶς; 1:5, 7; 2:8, 9, 10; cf. Gen 1:3–4; Lieu 2008, 78) identified with God, and unconditional love (ἀγάπη; 4:8, 16), which both lead to the removal of the darkness of sin (1:7, 9; 2:2, 8; 3:5), the destruction of the devil's work (3:8), the giving or restoration of the sinner's life (1:2; 2:25; 3:16; 4:9; 5:1, 11, 12, 13, 16); and finally his birth from God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18) and making him God's child (3:1, 2). This revealed truth of faith, proclaimed to the Letter's addressees by John, is Christocentric¹⁰ and hopeful (Szymik 2011, 24). Centred on Jesus as sent (ἀποστέλλω) from the Father (4:9, 10, 14), it points believers to a historically established point of reference (Smalley 1984, 9), a measure of their perfection and a pattern of conduct (3:6) in the fulfilment of the commandments (ἐντολαί; 2:3, 4; 3:22, 24), especially the commandments of love (2:7, 8; 3:23; 4:21; 5:2, 3), which are expressions of God's will (Segalla 1974, 280) and essence (Brown 1982, 283). On the other hand, it opens up to believers the eschatological prospect of becoming like Him (3:2), which motivates them to keep His teaching (ὁ λόγος; 2:5),¹¹ live righteously on earth (2:29; 3:7), and thus act before God as it pleases Him (3:22). Parallel to Jesus' words in the Fourth Gospel (8:29), the phrase ποιεῖν τὰ ἄρεστά, like ποιεῖν τὴν ἀλήθειαν (1 John 1:6),¹² points to the necessity of a close union with the Father's will, as exemplified by the Son of God to his disciples – in all truth, without exception, at all times, to the point of laying down His own life

⁹ It should be noted that the act of witnessing is explicitly attributed to God in 5:9, 10, while in 5:6 the witness of Christ is the Spirit; and in 5:7–8 – there are three of them: the Spirit, water and blood.

¹⁰ The Christocentrism of the theology of the First Epistle of John does not testify to its unique character but genetic identity with the apostolic tradition (Blank 1973, 84).

¹¹ The commandments (αἱ ἐντολαί) mentioned in 2:3–4 are replaced by teaching (ὁ λόγος) in 2:5, which refers to the word of Jesus, here for the first time in 1 John linked with God's love (ἡ ἀγάπη τοῦ θεοῦ), which it expresses (Yarbrough 2008, 85–86).

¹² This Hebraism signifies man's acceptance of God's will, which is expressed in the Law and requires a moral stand corresponding to it (Segalla 1974, 283).

(3:16). It is, therefore, the measure of the fulfilment of God's will that does not so much exceed the Old Testament ideal of religious righteousness (cf. Deut 6:18; Ezra 7:18; Isa 38:3; Hiebert 1989, 316) as it is expressed primarily in generous love (ἡ ἀγάπη) for everyone without exception.¹³ Since love belongs to the essence of God, its presence in the lives of God's children guarantees their eternal continuance (2:17) and the efficacy of the prayers they offer to the Father (5:14). One must therefore answer the question of how the will of God, so multidimensionally presented by John, can, in light of his writing, be known/discerned and fulfilled.

2. Activities for Knowing/Discerning and Fulfilling God's Will

It seems that mere readiness to hear (ἀκούω), see (ὁράω, θεάομαι) and physically experience (ψηλαφάω; 1:1–3) God's will is not yet sufficient to discern (γινώσκω) it properly, let alone believe (πιστεύω) in it and trust (παρηρησία) that it will be fulfilled. Those who left the community of the Letter's addressees, although they went out from among them, were not of them (2:19). They followed what was of the world and passed away with its lust (ἡ ἐπιθυμία), clearly opposed to the will of God (2:16–17; Segalla 1974, 276). What, then, is crucial in the process of discerning God's will in order to be able to distinguish it from what it is not?

In the epilogue of the Epistle, John states that the discernment of the True One depends on the disposition of the mind (διάνοια)¹⁴ received from the Son of God (5:20). Thus, discerning and obeying God's will is a process that involves not only people as recipients of the will, but also the One who reveals Himself to them in time, wanting them, through purification (ἀγνίζω), to become like Him

¹³ The idea of righteousness motivated by the love of God and thy neighbour is also present in the Old Testament (Deut 6:4), but the fundamental difference is that a brother – neighbour (ἀδελφός) is not every man (cf. Luke 10:29–37) but another Israelite (Deut 1:16; 15:7; 17:15).

¹⁴ In line with Bultmann (1973, 89) and others following his interpretation (cf. Smalley 1984, 306), they indicate a relationship between the hapax διάνοια in 5:20 and the noun χρίσμα, which appears in 2:20 and 2:27.

in the end (3:2–3; Rosik 2008, 43–44; cf. Żywica 2018, 15–16).¹⁵ The anointing (χρῖσμα) granted from God not only fills those born of Him with knowledge but also instructs them about the truth (2:20, 27; Kempiaik 2008, 128–29; Malina 2008, 322). As a result, everyone who has received it is able to recognise the lie, walks (περιπατέω) in the light like Christ (1:6–7; 2:6) and abides in it (2:10; cf. 2:6). This powerful relationship with Jesus, which is expressed by the verb μένω,¹⁶ protects those born of God from leading a double life. It involves walking in darkness – a metaphor for abiding in sin (2:9, 11) – while declaring one’s participation in communion with the Father and the Son (1:6). This is, in the judgement of the author of the First Epistle, a state of spiritual blindness, which involves lying to oneself, and results in there being no truth in man (1:8). Therefore, he either does not know what God’s will is, succumbing to a lie (2:22, 26), or he consciously rejects it, acting against it even when he acts unjustly and lives in lawlessness (3:4; 5:17), which leads to deadly hatred (3:12, 15). Of course, walking in the light does not exclude sin in the lives of God’s children (1:8). It does, however, make it possible to always notice it in time and confess it¹⁷ with a conviction that it will be forgiven by God (1:9; Cook 1966, 258). Abiding in the light, therefore, provides one with the understanding of the Father’s salvific will revealed in Christ and the sacrifice of his Son, whose blood cleanses one from every sin (1:7; 2:2). This act does not merely do justice. First and foremost, it is an expression of God’s generous love (3:1; 4:9), to which John refers as a fundamental principle of Christian

¹⁵ In 1 John 3:3 one can recognize the biblical idea of preserving cultic purity, present in Exod 19:10; Num 8:21; 11:18; 1 Chron 15:12; 2 Chron 29:1, and motivated with God’s call upon Israelites to be holy like He is holy: Lev 11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7; cf. 1 Pet 1:16. Unlike the practices of biblical Israel, Christ’s work brings effective liberation from every sin, and enables believers to participate in communion with God, which was unattainable before.

¹⁶ The verb μένω is one of John’s preferred terms. Out of its 118 occurrences in the New Testament, as many as 53 can be found in John’s work (33x in John; 18x in 1 John; 2x in 2 John; 1x in Rev).

¹⁷ An active voice of the conditional mode of the verb ὁμολογέω in 1:9 indicates that the confession of sins expressed using it does not happen once but repeatedly (Glasscock 2009, 222).

and social life (3:16; 4:19, 21). When it is the object of the authentic faith of God's children (4:16), it is naturally reflected in their practice of brotherly love (3:23; 4:7, 11; Kozyra 2008, 242; Miczyński 2011, 128), especially with regard to the needy (3:17), but also in the keeping (τηρέω; 2:3, 4; 3:22, 24) of the commandments, which is not burdensome thanks to love (5:2–3), regardless of the sophistication of spiritual life. It is expressed in 2:12–14 by the categories of the Letter's addressees mentioned by the author: fathers, young men and children. Representatives of each of these groups are called upon to know God's will and respond to it with confidence (2:28; 3:21; 4:17; 5:14) and without fear (4:18). The latter threatens anyone who succumbs to the teaching of false prophets. This is why John advises the addressees of his Epistle not to trust every spirit, but to test them (δοκιμάζω; 4:1). What is the criterion for discernment in this case? The author of the Letter provides two of them, aimed – as it may be supposed – against Docetists or Gnostics (Brown 1982, 558).

The first criterion involves recognising that Christ as the Son of God is truly human – 'he came in the flesh' (4:2). The second, on the other hand, involves listening to the community belonging to God (4:4, 6)¹⁸ and born of him (4:7),¹⁹ who proclaim that love has been revealed in sending His only Son into the world (4:9). The discernment of God's will, therefore, takes place in conformity with the professed kerygma and in full communion with the community (Strecker 1996, 209), which safeguards its unadulterated transmission (Clifton Black II 1986, 135). By the same token, anyone who usurps the right to explain the truths of the Christian faith and discern God's will without sharing in his life becomes a false prophet (ψευδοπροφήτης; 4:1; Jaromin 2008, 62).²⁰ The fact that, according to John, a number of them appeared

¹⁸ Used in 4:6, the pronoun 'we' has a communicative function – it enables the Letter's author to identify with the community of addressees (Klauck 1991, 240–41, cf. more on this function 73–78).

¹⁹ The plural form of the subject in 4:6 suggests that the Letter's author identifies with his addressees, with whom he shares the same faith.

²⁰ According to E. Ruckstuhl, the false prophets mentioned by John did not emigrate from the community to operate elsewhere. They remained within the community but joined the group of God's opponents (Ruckstuhl 1985, 60).

should mobilise believers to be more vigilant and concerned about living in the truth, as highlighted by the polyptoton used in 5:20: ‘We also know that the Son of God has come and has given us discernment to know the one who is true (τὸν ἀληθινόν). And we are in the one who is true (ἐν τῷ ἀληθινῷ), in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true (ὁ ἀληθινός) God and eternal life.’ In view of the object and purpose of discerning and performing God’s will, so personally defined in the First Epistle of John, one must into the effects it has on the lives of believers.

3. Effects of Knowing and Obeying God’s Will

The first fundamental effect of knowing, accepting and performing God’s will for man is, in light of the First Epistle of John, a change in his mode of existence: born of God (2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18), he becomes His child (3:1, 2, 10; 5:2) and has eternal life (5:11–13). This special relationship obliges one to speak, think and act in a way that is radically different from the expectations of the transient world (2:16–17). Since God is the truth and life, anything that does not lead to Him – or is directly opposed to Him (Cox 1881, 428; coming from the devil) – is outside the order of light, which for Christians is the proper setting for the formation of the community of faith, defined as *κοινωνία* (1:3; van der Merwe 2005, 458–59). Abiding in it produces a further effect of knowing and fulfilling God’s will in the form of joy, which is experienced not only temporally. John expresses this in his Epistle with the periphrasis used in 1:4. It is formed in the text by the grammatical construction of the verb εἰμί (“I am”) in the connective mode with the past participle of the verb πληρόω in *perfectum* (Plummer and Elledge 2024, 9). Joy, which is already shared by believers, will be perfect because it will reach its fullness. When? Probably when, with the second coming of Christ and the revelation of God, the hope instilled in His children that they will be like Him is realised (3:2).

This process, expected by God and requiring purification from sins, is made effective when it is accompanied by perfection in love. On the other hand, the will of God, fulfilled through it, in light of the First Letter of John produces peace of heart (3:19–20) and

removes anxiety (4:18) inherent in a person burdened by lawlessness. This state of anxiety, rendered by means of an absolute *hapax* – which in John's writing is the verb φοβέομαι (to be afraid) – evokes an unmistakable association with man's situation after his fall in paradise (Gen 3:19). The feeling of fear is, according to the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, the first symptom of distance from God. Consistently, the Letter's author calls anyone who rejects God's will and commits sin a child of the devil (3:10; cf. 3:8). In John, however, there are more deliberate associations with the biblical story of the origins of human sin in contrast to the revelation of God's saving will. One must mention Cain, referred to in the Epistle (3:12), and the sin that brings death (5:16). While in the first case, the motive for parallelism is the hatred of brethren commented upon by the author (2:9, 11; 3:13; 4:20), in the second case, the author does not provide a clear background to his claim. What is common instead is the situation of the loss of (eternal) life (Segalla 1974, 280), the danger of which is first signalled in the Bible by God's warning in Eden: 'lest you die' (Gen 3:3). Although it is difficult to fully identify the two cases mentioned in the Epistle, they may share one more aspect, namely the threat of tragic consequences of ignoring God's will, which John explicitly associates with eschatological punishment (κόλασις).²¹ Those born of God (4:18), however, do not experience it, even if, for some reason, they are still condemned by their heart (3:20). On the other hand, the burden of eternal punishment should be felt by one who persists in sin (Miguens 1976, 65). In all likelihood, the advice to exercise restraint in prayer for him serves to make the sinner aware of it. Although John does not forbid the community of believers to pray for one who commits a sin bringing death,²² he does not present such a practice as effective in

²¹ The noun κόλασις does not feature in Genesis, while in the New Testament it can be found only in 1 John 4:18 and Matt 25:46, where it signifies eternal punishment (Morgen 2005, 183).

²² When explaining a reference to a sin leading to death, exegetes most often identify it with apostasy, the rejection of Christ and fighting the Church, which is full of hatred. This important theme is discussed more broadly by Cox (1881), Poschmann (1940), Cook (1966), Lyonnet and Sabourin (1970), Trudinger (1971, 541–42); Reynolds (1973), Scholer (1975), Miguens (1976), Herrmann (1979),

restoring him to life (5:16). For he who by his conduct has excluded himself from the community of eternal life has no share in its goods as Christ is neither his Paraclete (Advocate, Defender, Comforter) nor the atoning sacrifice for his sins (2:2; 4:10; van der Merwe 2005, 450). They must first be confessed in order to return to the light (1:9–10) and then to act like Christ (1:6; Tan 2002, 608–9). The prayer of believers, John instructs, will then become an effective support for the sinner in discerning God's will (3:22; 5:14–15; Cox 1881, 419), and lead him to the life he has lost through sin (5:16).

What does this life consist of? John depicts it as abiding in God (3:24; 5:4–5), but also God's abiding in man who is born of Him (3:24), and finally he defines this life as the state of possession of the Son of God (5:12). This special – supernatural – relationship is revealed by the work of the Spirit, clearly when confronted with the activity of false prophets (4:1), in confessing and preaching the true faith in the incarnation of the Son of God and in the deity of Christ (4:2), in that He came into the world so that we might have life through Him (4:9).²³ Using comparison (*syncrisis*) – the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world (4:4) – the author of the Epistle argues that faithfulness to the divine will, revealed in and through Christ, ensures the victory of Christians over the transient world and the possession of the testimony of God (5:10) as an unshakable certainty in faith (Marshall 1978, 241). Then, using an antithesis, John demonstrates that the moral superiority of Christians over their adversaries also lies in their possessing, through the Spirit, an ability to distinguish the truth from falsehood, the Spirit of God from the spirit of the antichrist (4:6), and that their confidence placed in God is infallible. John's claim is made credible in two ways. Firstly, in the fact that God hears all the requests that believers address to Him (5:14), and secondly, that since they are guarded by God, they are invulnerable to Evil (5:18; cf. John 17:15; Matt 6:13). The author's statement leaves no margin for doubt.

Swadling (1982), Załęski (1997), Griffith (1998), Tan (2002), Bottini (2005), Roitto (2012), van der Merwe (2005).

²³ Morgen (2005, 199) aptly claims that a historical event, such as Christ's coming to the world, is presented in 1 John 5:12 as the equivalent of salvation.

The paronomasia used in the text, by which the author identifies himself with the addressees of the Epistle by referring to common knowledge and beliefs shared with them, serves to inspire such a conviction in the addressees (Pitta and Filannino 2023, 338). In this way, those who fulfil God's will in the world become for their brothers concurring witnesses to unfailing hope that a faithful life with and for God not only builds a new social order and creates a new culture of life based on truth, but above all has its highest and fully attainable goal – salvation in Christ.

4. Conclusions

The presentation of God's will in the First Letter of John corresponds to the three stages of God's historical self-revelation. The first is to experience Him, the second to know Him and, finally, the third stage leads to the achievement of the goal set for man. It is participation in the eternal life of God, through eventually becoming like Him by following Christ.

From the perspective of John's paraenesis, God's will appears not as a norm or a set of rules of conduct, but as a salvific plan that man can discover and discern thanks to the community of God's children. The starting point in this process is the life of truth and purification from sins.

The discernment of God's will is presented by the Letter's author as a multidimensional process, involving both the volitional sphere and sensory perception – sight, hearing, speech, touch; mental processes (cognition, faith, trust, hope), emotions and feelings (love, joy, peace, fear, hatred, shame), which accompany the undertaking of actions in accordance with the plan of salvation, such as: loving the brethren and keeping the commandments, the word, the teaching of Jesus, or abstaining from what is against eternal life.

The process of discerning God's will, as described by John, is the foundation of Christian spirituality and a valuable proposal for the integral development of human beings at different stages of their lives – from childhood, through adolescence, to adulthood in its proper states.

Considering the number of proposals for self-realisation and life fulfilment in the transient and conflict-ridden world, discerning the will of God revealed in time proves to be the only certain means of maintaining spiritual balance. Life in accordance with God's will is accompanied by resolute awareness that, regardless of external circumstances, the humanity of each of us can only be fully realised in love.

Rozpoznawanie woli Bożej według Pierwszego Listu Jana

Abstrakt: Spośród ksiąg Nowego Testamentu Pierwszy List św. Jana tylko pozornie wydaje się być pismem, w którym temat rozeznawania woli Bożej należy do niszowych problemów podejmowanych przez jego autora. Niniejszy artykuł wykazuje, że bezpośrednio wzmianki dotyczące woli Bożej w 2,17 oraz 5,14 nie wyczerpują tematu, który w omawianym liście należy rozpatrywać, mając na uwadze przedstawioną w 3,22 konieczność pełnienia tego, co znajduje „upodobanie przed Bogiem”. Zrealizowane w podejściu synchronicznym badania egzegetyczne kanonicznej postaci tekstu obejmują trzy etapy. Pierwszy dotyczy ustalenia terminów wyrażających wolę Boga w 1 J. Drugi zmierza do określenia działań służących poznawaniu albo rozeznawaniu i wypełnieniu woli Bożej. Wreszcie trzeci obejmuje analizę pragmatyczną tekstu. Oprócz prezentacji skutków poznania i wypełniania woli Bożej przez adresatów listu w ostatniej części studium zwraca się uwagę na funkcję perswazyjną pisma, które od swoich adresatów wymaga aktualizacji zawartej w nim parenezy.

Słowa kluczowe: rozeznawanie, poznawanie, wola Boża, Pierwszy List Jana, egzegeza

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