

# The Great Community of Love — 8

## 1 John 4:13-21

In the spiritual battles we face, it sometimes seems that clichés abound and that they are usually unhelpful. Having a phrase for each situation is often a cover for uncertainty. John's readers have been hit hard by their opponents, so that even their own salvation seems called into question. But how do you respond when those you once called 'brothers' reject you and leave the community? What if they accuse *you* of failure and justify their own decisions, declaring themselves guiltless?

Sitting in stunned reaction to the attacks of those secessionists is understandable but not of any value. Those who left have given every evidence that the spirit who drives them is the spirit of antichrist. Over against that evidence, the readers can have a powerful assurance that they are truly born of God, and this assurance will be theirs when they see the evidences of the Spirit's work in their own lives.

What must be stressed is that this assurance is not simply a *passive* recognition of our salvation. The reality of salvation is known in *active* participation in that salvation. That is why Hebrews 11:1 says that 'faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (AV). That writer was urging his readers to faith, not as assent to certain doctrines but as whole hearted engagement with the hope set before them. When they live that way then the substance of what is hoped for is borne in on them and they have evidence of things which as yet cannot be seen.<sup>1</sup>

So with John's readers. If God is love and his love is purposive, that is, if it has a clear goal which it is accomplishing, then that purpose will be seen and experienced when the recipients of that love move out in love to one another: 'No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected [i.e. it reaches its full goal] in *us*' (1 John 4:12). So the love of the believers is a powerful witness to the truth of God, as Jesus had already said:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. <sup>35</sup>By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (John 13:34-35).

By their love for one another the whole action and purpose of God's love may be seen. Clearly, too, this rescues us from regarding Christian love as some introspective 'do-goodery', or as a refusal to recognise sin in others when it is plainly there, in this case in the secessionists. True Christian love will, indeed it must, call a spade a spade, while moving out to others with the same dynamic and purpose as God's love. This is hardly unexpected since Christian love flows from his love.

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By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. <sup>14</sup>And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. <sup>15</sup>God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. <sup>16</sup>So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. (1 John 4:13-16a)

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<sup>1</sup> In think it can be demonstrated that the AV's translation is quite satisfactory from a lexical point of view, and that from a theological point of view it is superior to the NIV's 'Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see'. The NIV (possibly) equates faith with certainty in such a way that if a person is uncertain for some reason then their faith could be in question.

The matter of assurance is still to the fore. John is concerned to state that the reception of the Spirit (cf. 1 John 3:24) always relates us directly and *experientially* to the truth of God. We have no question concerning the authority of the scriptures, (although the early Christians did not have exactly the same standard as the scriptures as we know them did not exist for quite some time after the birth of the church) but neither should we have any question about the place of experience in the Christian life. As we have seen earlier, assurance is not a proof, but it is still a reality to which John could point. In verse 12 he wrote: ‘if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us’, and he continues by saying: ‘by this *we know* that we abide<sup>2</sup> in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.’ Our confidence comes because the Spirit has been given to us and the evidence of the Spirit’s presence and work in us is seen in the active love of the believers. Paul had said as much in Romans 5:5: ‘and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.’ There, Paul says that we move confidently towards our goal because the love of God has been given to us. Here, John says ‘by this we know’; if we ask whether the ‘this’ refers to the love of God at work in us or to the Holy Spirit, the answer must surely be ‘both’.

When we received the Spirit we received an anointing from the Holy One and now we all have knowledge. By this anointing not only the apostles, who were eye witnesses, but also the readers ‘have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world’. This seeing is not that of merely understanding. It is the same as that of the Galatians, ‘before [whose] eyes Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified’ (Gal. 3:1). They ‘saw’ because the proclamation of the apostles was the vehicle of revelation.

As a result of the dynamic within the apostolic proclamation, that is, the dynamic of the action of Christ revealing himself to the hearers and effecting their response of faith, the believers now ‘confess that Jesus is the Son of God’. John is, of course, responding to the situation faced by the first readers, with the associated claims of those who had left the fellowship. Whatever the precise nature of those claims may have been, though, the truth of Jesus’ identity as Son of God and Savior of the world was an essential feature of the apostolic message. For example, John’s Gospel was written so that the readers may ‘believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God’ (John 20:31) and also, when Paul was transformed through meeting the risen Jesus, ‘immediately he began to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues, saying, “He is the Son of God”’ (Acts 9:20).<sup>3</sup>

Almost from the beginning, the church has confessed itself to be ‘one, holy, catholic and apostolic’. It is apostolic primarily because God has bound himself to the apostolic message. Any divergence from the apostolic message is not the Christian gospel at all. But when a person confesses<sup>4</sup> that Jesus is the Son of God, that is, he or she receives the revelation which comes through the apostles’ message, that person is brought into a direct and intimate relationship with God himself: God abides in him and he in God.

Nor is this relationship anything less than a rich experience of the love of God. John writes that ‘we have known and we have believed the love which God has for

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<sup>2</sup> The same verb is used in verse 12 where it is translated as ‘live’.

<sup>3</sup> The equation of ‘Son of God’ with ‘Messiah’ can be traced back to Ps. 2, with the implication that the Messiah is also the King; see John 1:49.

<sup>4</sup> This is a single action, referring to the time of conversion, though doubtless implying that such a confession continues throughout life.

us'. The language is precise; 'we have known' and 'we have believed' are both perfect tenses, meaning that there was a moment in the past when we came to this knowledge and faith and that we actually go on knowing and believing. We are born again into this ongoing experience of and faith in the love of God. Such is the vastness of regeneration. There is nothing coolly rational about it, though all our rational faculties are fully engaged. The love of God revealed in the atonement (1 John 4:9-10) has come to us in a way that we must *see*: we are children of God, even if others do not see us that way (1 John 3:1-2).

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God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. <sup>17</sup>Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. <sup>18</sup>There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. <sup>19</sup>We love because he first loved us. <sup>20</sup>Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. <sup>21</sup>The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:16b-21).

There is a moral obligation laid upon us. It flows from the character of God, namely, that God is love. If his love is revealed in his action so must ours be expressed in action. A continued knowledge of his love relates to a continued response of love. It is those who abide in love who abide in God, and God abides in them.

Why is the love of God perfected in us, as it is (1 John 4:12)? And why should we continue to live in love as we must? The answer is that what we are is not yet fully revealed. There is a day coming when Christ will be seen (1 John 2:28; 3:2) and that day will be 'the day of judgment'. On that day the final declaration will be made. Of course, the action of redemption and atonement has taken place already, but then it will all be made clear. We may well *assume* our salvation, but the apostles never permit us to *presume upon* it. There is no reason to fear the day of judgment when we are living in the purpose of his love and know its goal being reached in us. Indeed, we may be bold, strongly confident, on that day.

The basis for our strong confidence is not within us. The basis is that 'as he is, so are we in this world'. Who 'he' is has not been specified, but the antecedent is God in verse 16. It is usual to assume that it is Jesus who is being referred to, but in 1 John 3:2 the same problem was encountered. There, 'we shall be like him' has the Father as the antecedent.<sup>5</sup> While this detail may be unclear, the overall thrust of the apostolic message is clear. We stand uncondemned now because we are in Christ; he died to sin once for all and the life he lives he lives to God (Rom. 6:10) and it is that alone which determines our present standing (Rom. 6:11). As he is with regards to the judgment day, so are we.

So there is no fear for those in him, but, precisely, 'there is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.' If we take phrases out of context, we may create problems for ourselves. So to say that perfect love casts our fear may give the impression that there is something defective with our love (or his!) if we have any sense of fear or anxiety or whatever. But within the context of the letter, the perfection of love has been clearly defined. Love is perfected among us as we love one another (1 John

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<sup>5</sup> See above p. 21f. for a brief discussion of the issue in the context of chapter 3. The way John switches between 'the Father' and 'God' might also be noticed.

4:12). ‘Perfect love’ refers to the goal of God’s love having been accomplished in the establishment of a body of believers who love one another.<sup>6</sup> It does not mean anything else. The reason why perfect love casts out fear is because perfect love refers to the evidence of the work of Christ and the Spirit in us. So there can be no place for fear of judgment when we are living in the action of God’s love. Perfect love, perfected love, brings a person to the certain hope of glory (Rom. 5:1-5) and not to the hope, the expectation or goal, of judgment. God in his love has acted to remove all guilt (the meaning behind ‘propitiation’) so the one who abides in the love of God is abiding in the truth of what God has done and so in the experience of freedom from guilt and from all that is associated with it.

‘Fear has to do with punishment’. Literally this reads ‘fear has correction’ or ‘has penalty’. Fear has to do with future punishment, so that the one who does not abide in the love of God will have uncertain dread of the coming judgment. That is true. Also true is that fear contains the punishment now. The one who fears is not living in the perfected love of God and so living as if the wrath of God was still an issue determining our life. But if Christ is the propitiation for our sins then the wrath of God has been ended for us. Christ has saved us from the wrath now and from the wrath to come (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10).

To abide in God’s love, then, is a thrilling power for life. It is not only that we have a desire for escape from unpleasantness now, true as that may be, but we do have an experience of total union with God now, which death (so called, see John 11:26) cannot diminish. Indeed, the physical experience of death will only bring the present experience, the present reality, to brilliant clarity, when ‘we will see him as he is’.

So, do we love? If the answer is ‘yes’ then the reason is obvious. ‘We love because he first loved us’. If we have assurance and certainty in life, it is all from him. Our loving is not because of us, at any point. We love *only* because he first loved us. Just as it was with Israel and the command to them to love the Lord with all their being (Deut. 6:5 and 7:7-9) so it is with us. It was God’s love which brought us to love and which enables us to love. In fact, any love we express is from God. Unless and until God acted in love we could only remain dead in trespasses and sins, as children of wrath. And even now, we can only work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, *for it is God who is at work in us both to will and to work for his good pleasure* (Phil. 2:12-13).

There is a further dimension to this. If we are to love, then it must be as his love motivates and ‘constrains’ us to do so. Love which is motivated by any other factor is not of God. For example, love driven by legal obligation is not true love. The genuine exercise of love is rich, warm and powerful because it is the expression of a heart touched by and continually driven by overwhelming love revealed at the cross of Christ. ‘Keep yourselves in the love of God’ (Jude 21) means ‘May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (Gal. 6:14). It means that unless ‘the blood of Jesus, his Son, goes on cleaning us from all sin’ (1 John 1:7) we cannot love as he loves.

In stark, practical terms, ‘Those who say, “I love God,” and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (1 John 4:20). True love for God will, as

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<sup>6</sup> See page 34.

we have seen, always issue in love for the brothers and sisters. Where one is absent, the other will also be absent, in spite of all protestations to the contrary.

Love is an obligation. It is a command to be obeyed. It has been so from the beginning, that is, from creation, and is renewed in the new creation. Nothing has changed. 'Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.' It cannot be otherwise.