

The Great Community of Love — 9

1 John 5:1-12

Although parts of John's letter appear complicated, his overall thrust is perfectly plain: it is inconceivable that someone who knows God should not love. This is so because God is love. The great revelation of the truth which is in Christ is, in experience, because it is in reality, a revelation of the Father's love. Believers have come to the point where that love of God was shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to them when they believed. Now, as they go on in faith, they go on knowing and believing the love which God has for them. What is also plain is that the faith they have and the love they experience and show is directly related to the apostolic gospel which was proclaimed to them. Diminish that gospel and all the experiences and the claims made concerning them lose their substance.

John has said that as the believers love one another they know the perfecting of God's love, as its goal is achieved in the formation of a great community of love. It is not great because it is numerically large in the eyes of those who see it; it is great because it is a substantial expression and anticipation of all that will be. So the love they know has a particular goal in mind. The focus is not on the present experience of the believers, important though that is. If the present experience is valid it only confirms our confidence concerning the day of judgment.

Believers and unbelievers alike are all moving towards the point where we will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and will receive the things done in the body, whether good or bad. But John has made it clear that the threat of punishment does not figure in this for those who are in Christ. Perfect love casts out fear, because fear relates to punishment and Christ stands as the propitiation for our sin. While, of itself, our physical participation in the new community of love does not *prove* anything, it does nonetheless indicate to faith that the apostolic word concerning the finished work of Christ is bearing fruit in us. In other words, we love because he has first and effectively loved us. On the other hand, those who say they love God while hating, that is, not loving, their brothers and sisters are simply liars. That is plainly because God has commanded us to love one another, and it is meaningless to say we love him while at the same time disobeying him.

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. ²By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. ³For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:1-5)

Just because we understand that truth is brought us by the revelation which God gives, that does not mean that we cannot see the simple logic in what is given. So, it is evident that if a person believes that Jesus is the Christ that person has been born of God (cf. 1 Cor. 12:3). Such faith (belief) is far more than assent to a set of statements concerning Jesus; it is the wholehearted response to the apostolic message. That message is the effective element because through it God acts to draw us to himself,

effecting faith in us. But the change is deeper than mere allegiance. It involves rebirth, with God as the ‘begetter’, the parent, the one bringing us to that rebirth.¹ Further, since rebirth came as a result of the action of the love of the one who brought us to rebirth, the result is that we are reborn in order to love the parent who loves us. That parent is the Father (1 John 3:1 etc.). It then follows that, if we love the Father, we will also love those who are also his children through rebirth. That is the principle. How do we know that we are in fact loving the children of God? The answer is that whenever we love God, the Father, and keep his commandments we are able to say, yes, I do love the children of God. That’s because his commandment was that we should love our brothers and sisters (see 1 John 2:7-11 and the contrary example of Cain in 1 John 3:11-12).

Someone might complain that keeping such a commandment is extremely difficult, especially in the face of the stress caused by those who now stand against us, and in John’s case they were those who had left the fellowship.² But that would be to misunderstand the nature of the commandment and the true nature of our rebirth. The commandment is not a burden, indeed it is the very heart of who we are as children of God (see Matt. 11:30). Believing that Jesus is the Son of God is such an extraordinary matter! God has worked a vast miracle in us: whatever³ is born of God actually overcomes the world. John has already exhorted the readers not to love the fading world or the things in it (1 John 2:15-17), so they should also see that they stand in triumph over the world. This is not through any personal qualities or abilities of their own, of course. The only way we can participate in that victory which Christ won for us is by faith, but that is exactly what we have been given. Faith conquers the world, not by making us appear victorious before others, or even by giving us special powers, though that may happen should God purpose it, but by bringing the full victory of the cross and resurrection to life in us. Regeneration is no small thing. We are now set to obey God, the law is now written on our hearts and the Spirit of God has restructured us to follow God’s statutes and be careful to observe his ordinances (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:25-27). Obedience is now our delight, as it was and is for Jesus (John 4:34; Heb. 10:5-7; cf. Ps. 40:8). Distinct as they may be, faith, obedience and love are all of a one in us.

¹ NRSV ‘parent’, ESV ‘Father’. The older versions AV and ASV have ‘him that begat’. John’s statement seems to be a general one, making the NRSV and NIV ‘father’ and the older translations preferable.

² The sad fact of people leaving churches can often be put down to the sinfulness of those who leave. That certainly appears to be the problem which John is addressing. But if we move beyond John’s immediate context, we can probably also see that there are people who leave, wrongly for sure, but for reasons beyond simple unbelief or whatever. Without excusing them, we might also be a little understanding towards them, for some people make it very hard for others to love them. What is more, the structures in many churches, denominational or otherwise, allow very little space for people to work out the action of love. The ‘Sunday ecclesiastical bus’ principle too often applies; people attend a gathering once a week and sit in rows facing the front, so that they really only come face to face with the service leader or preacher, and he, by nature of his role, is somewhat distant (and facing the back of the bus!). Fellowship is, at best, and for many, no more than the regular cup of tea after the bus has stopped. Where issues arise which, if unaddressed, can divide believers, we need to see sympathetically that opportunities for active love and reconciliation within the fellowship can actually be restricted by the way the church has structured itself. Active love of the brethren need not be an exhausting matter, though doubtless we too often make it so. Small wonder, then, that if people think that they have run out of energy, and especially if they assume that they must somehow self-generate the energy or must love from within their own resources, they find it easier to withdraw from the demands of true fellowship.

³ NIV and ESV have ‘everyone’, but John has used a neuter word, ‘everything’.

This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth.
⁷There are three that testify: ⁸the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. (1 John 5:6-8)

What John has written is less clear than we might wish, but this passage is also further complicated by having been modified somewhat by later ‘editors’. Their modifications appear in the AV (KJV) and the NKJV.⁴

We must ask what John meant by saying that Jesus ‘came by water and blood’ and that he did not come ‘by water only’. It seems reasonable to assume that the language was perfectly clear to the first readers and that it somehow related to the issues raised by the secessionists. Having said that faith that Jesus is the Son of God overcomes the world John then says that the Jesus in whom we believe also came by water and blood. We should tread gently here, since many others before us have expressed uncertainty about John’s meaning, even when offering their own possible solutions. Basically, suggestions come in these general areas:

1. Water and blood refer to the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. If this is so then the reference to the Lord’s Supper simply as ‘blood’ would be unique.

2. Water and blood refer to the incarnation of the eternal Son. This would be a somewhat complex way to describe Jesus as having been born of a woman through natural birth processes. The aim would be to stress his full humanity as distinct from some merely ‘apparent’ humanity.

3. Water and blood refer to Jesus baptism (water) and death (blood). This is the most common theory, though there are many variations. It means that ‘by water and blood’ is a statement about the way that Jesus’ life and death both contribute to his being the Son of God.⁵

4. Water and blood both refer to the death of Jesus, in particular to the testimony of the reliable witness of John 19:34. The only other reference to ‘blood’ in this letter (1 John 1:7) also refers to his death. If we accept this as the most likely explanation, then we would see again that John is emphasising the death of Jesus as the focal point of the life of the community of love.

5. A possible fifth way, a variant of number 3, might be to take water and blood as references to the incarnation, allowing that the choice of ‘water’ to describe this was determined not by John but by others, and the atonement. The phrase ‘not by water only’ was evidently one that needed careful clarification.

Whatever the meaning behind the phrase, John still insists the one who testifies to the truth of Jesus is the Spirit. This is because the Spirit is the truth. Truth is personal before ever it is propositional. It is the Spirit who leads us into the truth (see also John 16:12-15 etc.).

Verses 7 and 8 have caused considerable discussion in the past. The AV has:

For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. ⁸And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. (1 John 5:7-8)

⁴ Oh dear! My spelling checker offered ‘knaves’ as an alternative for NKJV.

⁵ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, p. 576.

While this translation seems a neat vindication of the doctrine of the Trinity, in fact it is based on textual evidence that is not in any way reliable. What seems almost certain is that these words were written long after the Trinitarian controversies in the early church. They are probably the result of a comment (a gloss) which was attached to a Latin manuscript and which, in the course of time and the process of copying manuscripts, became included into the Latin text of 1 John. It was then translated back into Greek and was then assumed to be part of the original letter written by John. But no early manuscripts support this as being an original part of John's letter.⁶ Using the Greek manuscripts available at the time, the AV provided it as a translation of the text it had.

John is saying that the Spirit testifies to the truth of Jesus, as also does the water and the blood. These three are in total harmony. The biblical principle of the testimony of two or three witnesses being required before evidence is accepted (Deut. 17:6) is being enforced. Here are three witnesses.

If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son. ¹⁰Those who believe in the Son of God have the testimony in their hearts. Those who do not believe in God have made him a liar by not believing in the testimony that God has given concerning his Son. ¹¹And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:9-12)

If we accept human testimony, as we obviously do, even in cases with the most severe consequences, then surely we will recognise that, over against that of sinful men and women, the testimony of God is greater. The testimony of God is sure, for God is light and in him is no darkness at all. The testimony of water, blood and the Spirit all declare the truth of Jesus Christ which has been proclaimed. These three are God's testimony to his own Son.

Those who believe in the Son of God not only have that threefold testimony before their eyes, they have it in the depths of their being. Their hearts resonate with an assurance of who Jesus is and what he has accomplished. They have received an anointing from the Holy One and now they know! Over against this are the ones who do not believe in God, that is, in this threefold testimony from God. They have rejected the apostolic gospel by which God's word concerning his Son has come to us. Indeed, by their refusal to accept that gospel, they are making God out to be a liar. We might note Paul's insistence that his gospel was not a human invention but came through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:11-12). Likewise Peter along with John said that could only speak, indeed they must speak, of what they had seen and heard (Acts 4:20).

So what is John saying? He is saying that this is what God has said concerning his Son. God has given us eternal life (1 John 1:1-4) and this life is in his Son. Those who have the Son, that is, the Son as God has revealed him, have that eternal life. Those who will not accept the testimony of God and who therefore will not have the Son, do not have life. Those who had rejected the apostolic teaching concerning Jesus Christ and had left the community were no doubt at the fore in John's thinking, but the

⁶ See Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, United Bible Societies, Stuttgart, 1975, pp. 715-717.

principle remains. If we have the Son we have life. That is the certainty of our inheritance.

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