

The Great Community of Love – 3

1 John 2:1-11

If the precise nature of the problem being addressed in 1 John is uncertain, to a certain extent so is the solution. That is hardly surprising, given our distance from the original situation. And we have to admit that not only are we ignorant of the problem, we are ignorant of the people being addressed and even of the identity of the author. But the early church did not venerate the letter because it was a manual for dealing with a particular problem; they valued it because it was (probably) apostolic and, if so, then it was of great value as an exposition of the gospel which had been proclaimed to them and which had been the means by which the revelation of God had come to them, as it had to the original apostles.

That revelation was, and still is, dynamic. God himself had spoken to the hearers with the result that those who believed that word came into a rich fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Of course, the revelation was not ‘objective’ in the sense that it was scientifically verifiable, but neither was it ‘subjective’ in the sense that it took place only within the senses of the recipient. Rather, the revelation was objective in as much as God did something concrete in us. While we may have a conscious ‘experience’ of it, the reality does not depend on the experience at all. As Paul put it, God rescued us from the authority of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13), meaning, in other terms, that we were transferred from being in Adam to being in Christ. Furthermore, all who are ‘in Christ’ are one with each other, since all share this common redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:14).

The significance of this salvation is borne in on us through the preaching of the gospel and the gift of faith. Faith does bring experience, albeit a provisional experience (Rom. 8:18-25), so that the reality of redemption is known as we live in the revelation that is given, namely, the revelation of our continual need of the blood of Christ to cleanse us from all sin (1 John 1:7). More, living in that redemption implies living in the fellowship of the redeemed (1 John 2:19). William Barclay has observed:

There is a certain kind of so-called conversion which separates a man from his fellow men. It may fill him with a self-righteousness which rejoices in its own superiority to those who have had no like experience. It may move a man to a Pharisaic self-isolation. There have in fact been not a few so-called conversions as a result of which a man has left the Church to belong to some smaller and holier body. The plain truth is that such a one should very seriously examine himself, if he finds what he regards as his Christian experience separating him from his fellow-men, or his fellow-Christians.¹

Walking in the light as he is in the light does not mean perfection – yet – though it certainly means a disciplined response to the revelation of redemption

The demand that the Atonement shall be exhibited in vital relation to a new life in which sin is overcome... is entirely legitimate, and it touches a weak point in the traditional Protestant doctrine. Dr. [Thomas] Chalmers tells us that he was brought up – such was the effect of the current orthodoxy upon him – in a certain distrust of good works. Some were certainly wanted, but not as being themselves salvation, only, as he puts it, as tokens of justification. It

¹ William Barclay, *In the Hands of God*, quoted at <http://cqod.gospelcom.net/>.

was a distinct stage in his religious progress when he realised that true justification sanctifies, and that the soul can and ought to abandon itself spontaneously and joyfully to do the good that it delights in... An atonement that does not regenerate... is not an atonement in which men can be asked to believe.²

There are two inseparable aspects of the work of Christ: the work of forgiveness and the resulting holiness ('true justification sanctifies') worked out in daily living. This is not at all unrealistic. Obviously, the penitent thief demonstrates that resulting holiness *in daily living* is not essential to salvation in that sort of situation, but where a person claims forgiveness but does not choose to express the consequences of it then there may be every reason to doubt the genuineness of his or her faith, or, at least, of their appreciation of it. So John writes:

¹My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. ³Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. ⁴Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not obey his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist; ⁵but whoever obeys his word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection. By this we may be sure that we are in him: ⁶whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked. (1 John 2:1-6)

If we insist that what we do is not sin, then it is easy to live without sin. In contrast, John's point is that we should live without sin while recognising that we do *sin*. He has stressed that we need to call it as it is,³ and in doing so he expresses the whole purpose of God, that we may not sin! Jesus told the man who was healed, 'Go and sin no more' (John 5:14) and Paul's strong response to the suggestion, 'Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?' was, 'By no means' (Rom. 6:1-2). To sit lightly on the matter of living in holiness is to sit lightly on the work of Christ in the atonement.

When John says that he is writing in order that the readers may not sin, he is obviously expressing far more than a pious wish. The scriptures do not tease us with unrealisable ideals. The purpose John has is attainable, and we can say that, if for no other reason than that Jesus himself abstained from sin. He was and is righteous, at every point totally consistent with the character of God. We must avoid at all costs the temptation to docetism, that is, the assertion that Jesus only *seemed* to be fully human while in reality he was actually God in human form (is this what lies behind 1 John 4:2?). His humanity was total, as was his deity. But it was in his humanity that the work of salvation took place. See, for example, the language of Romans 5:12-21 where Paul contrasts the works of the two 'men' and also the use of such passages as Psalm 8 in descriptions of Jesus and his ministry (e.g. Eph. 1:22). So the statement that 'while it is not impossible for a Christian to sin, it is possible for a Christian not to sin'⁴ must be true. It must be possible for us to put to death what is earthly in us, and for us not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies (Col. 3:5; Rom. 6:12), otherwise those commands become meaningless.

² James Denney, *The Atonement and the Modern Mind*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1903, p. 40f.

³ 'It is characteristic of the thinking of our time that the problem of guilt and forgiveness has been pushed into the background and seems to disappear more and more. Modern thought is impersonal. There are, even today, a great many people who understand that man needs salvation, but there are very few who are convinced that he needs forgiveness and redemption... Sin is understood as imperfection, sensuality, worldliness – but not as guilt.' (Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World*, The Student Christian Movement Press, London, 1932, p. 49.)

⁴ This was said to us by Geoffrey Bingham on many occasions.

However, John has already established that Christians are still sinners. We are by no means physically incapable of sin. Quite the contrary; our boast is never in our ability now to be without sin. It is a boast in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 6:14), which goes on cleansing and renewing and motivating to true holiness of living. It is the boast that God has made him to be our wisdom, righteousness sanctification and redemption, so that our boast is in the Lord alone (1 Cor. 1:30-31).

Jesus Christ, the righteous, is our advocate with the Father. He is not, we should note, our advocate over against the Father. He is not pleading on our behalf against the demands of the wrath of God. Always he is with the Father and stands as our surety in the face of all accusations of guilt and all demands for justice. And demands for justice there are. The accuser roars of ills done and demands a suitable penalty while our own consciences will often join in those apparently pious demands. Such expressions of rank unbelief as ‘I must learn to forgive myself’ are regularly heard, even on the lips of the saints. The response of Charles Wesley was to pen the following:⁵

Still the small inward Voice I hear,
That whispers all my Sins forgiv'n;
Still the atoning Blood is near,
That quench'd the Wrath of hostile Heav'n:
I feel the Life his Wounds impart;
I feel the Saviour in my Heart.

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.
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And claim the crown, through Christ, my own

The wrath of hostile heaven is quenched. Jesus Christ has saved us from the wrath (Rom. 5:9). That is the meaning of the word used by John in 1 John 2:2, which is translated usually as ‘atoning sacrifice’ etc. in modern translations. The old word ‘propitiation’ is, I maintain, far more appropriate as a translation. It means the removal of wrath by the offering of a gift,⁶ which, if nothing else, shows *why* a sacrifice of atonement is needed.

Jesus Christ the righteous is the propitiation for our sins. He has quenched the wrath by shedding his own blood for our sins. The just demands have been met, once and for all.

But John adds that he is also the propitiation for the sins of the whole world. He wrote that ‘God so loved the world’ (John 3:16). And John is not alone, since Paul wrote that ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19) and that ‘through [his son] God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col. 1:20). Certainly

⁵ Note that the first of these verses is actually the fifth of the verses written in the famous hymn ‘And can it be’. Also, ‘Self-pity is not only unnecessary but an arrogant assertion that God’s mercy is inadequate or, itself, unnecessary. In such a situation we can never enjoy the freedom which is ours’ (Ian Pennicook, *To Live is Christ*, to be published in 2008, p. 37).

⁶ See my paper, ‘The gift of propitiation and its fruits’, given at the 2000 Western Australian Pastors School for a fuller treatment.

there are questions which arise and which have puzzled believers about the extent of the atonement, but there can be no doubt that the apostles saw that there was a vast work done on the cross. In some way, all the sin of the world was judged and all the power of the evil one dissolved. Hence Paul added that the apostolic work was to call on men and women to be reconciled to the God who had reconciled them to himself. The gospel is a 'word of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:19-20) and the only sin we have to declare is forgiven sin, even to those who have not accepted or even will not accept that.

How do we *know* that our sins are forgiven? Taken out of context, verses 3-6 could seem to say that obedience to Christ's commandments produces certainty. Actually the opposite is true. Obedience is the *evidence* of forgiveness. That is because the work of salvation is vast. Ezekiel 36: 25-27, for example:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Being made clean is associated with the transformation of the will. Where there is forgiveness of sins and regeneration there is also a new orientation towards obedience. The heart is now set to keep his commandments, even if the flesh remains resistant (see Romans 7-8; also Jer. 31:31-34). The problem would be if there was no desire to be godly and if there was no confession that we are sinners in constant need of grace. The fundamental feature of obedience is not success but faith. Salvation is from faith to faith (Rom. 1:17) and the apostolic proclamation is intended to bring about 'the obedience of faith' (Rom. 1:5). Where there is this obedience, then it is clear that the love of God has 'reached perfection'. In other words, the goal of love is the life of faith, where there is new longing for godliness and a deep trust in God's declaration that all our ungodliness has been cleansed by his work. Obedience does not win any position for us; it is rather the recognition of the position we have.

[W]hoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk just as he walked.

⁷Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. ⁸Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. ⁹Whoever says, "I am in the light," while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness. ¹⁰Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling. ¹¹But whoever hates another believer is in the darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness. (1 John 2:6-11).

The measure is Jesus himself. The way we must live is the way he lived. Even here, though, the issue is not merely one of keeping rules. John is, of course, responding to the situation of his readers, but when he does so, he writes in terms that reflect the great eternal. The ten commandments, for instance, are, at their heart, an expression of the love of God. Thus, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18 and 34. Even deeper than this is the being of God himself; God is love (1 John 4:8, 16).

That is why John can say that what he writes is not a new commandment. It has always been this way because always creation has been structured to express the being of God. Yet the commandment is new, inasmuch as it has acquired a dramatic freshness because it is true in him and in us. The revelation we received has brought the truth of the character and person of God into us. The commandment is now part of

the essential life of the believers. The reason is simply that the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. God is in action and the commandment to love is now the way his people are constituted. The power of darkness has been irrevocably broken (Col. 1:13; 2 Cor. 4:6).

Given that the divisions in the church are as ungodly as are any divisions within the rest of humanity, and perhaps more culpable, accommodation to bitterness and unforgiveness can never be justified. It is not possible to be in the light and to hate one's brother. Where the love of God is perfected it will be seen in the flow of love, which is the essential nature of creation and, in particular, of the new creation.

Of course, the immediate reference is to one's 'brother' ('another believer'). The discussion revolves around the Christian community and the claims of those who declare themselves members of it. It is lack of love among believers which is the particular issue here. It is the one who loves his brother who walks in the light. This love will not bring us into the light nor keep us in the light: it is only the work of the cross which can accomplish that. But as we love we live. That is the way of the one who lives in the light.

To love a brother or sister means that 'there is no cause for stumbling', there is literally 'no scandal'. The one who walks in the light will never be scandalised by the actions of a brother or sister. My brother and sister are clean, not by their own behaviour but through the work of the cross, which is the great scandal to the natural man or woman. So often people are scandalised by that work of God that has washed sinners clean, so that we cannot and often will not accept our weak brothers and sisters as made clean by and kept clean in Christ. Such a harsh judgmental approach is divisive and indicates that we are no longer walking in the light as he is in the light.

The one who hates his brother or sister for whom Christ died and for whose sins Christ is the advocate and propitiation (Rom. 14:15), is actually walking in the darkness and, perhaps in spite of claims to the contrary, does not know where he is going. Darkness has brought on blindness. Where the truth of the atonement is persistently and habitually rejected we must question whether such a person actually knows God, for 'whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love' (1 John 4:8). The solution is not to enforce love but so to proclaim the love of God in Christ that the response of love is evoked by God himself.

If the person involved is a believer, then the situation is probably no different. Always, when we believers sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and he is the propitiation for our sins. Our delight is not to respond in harsh criticism but to remind our brothers and sisters of the immensity of their standing in Christ and to see them renewed in his love (cf. Gal. 6:1-5).

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