

The Great Community of Love – 4

1 John 2:12-29

John's emphasis in his letter has been on the fellowship his readers have with each other as the result of the dynamic revelation of the Word of God which has brought them into fellowship with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ. It is reasonably certain that most believers today would give assent to that emphasis. At times, though, the assent could be to something other than what John is saying. The reason is that 'fellowship' is treated by many as something we do. Fellowship is regarded as the result of the actions of individual Christians who determine to sacrifice certain times or privileges in order to meet with others for (if I may use the phrase without being regarded as cynical) 'a time of fellowship', after which they will return to their original occupations etc.

This is not to suggest that there may not be a real warmth of genuine affection between believers. However, observation does reveal that there may be other underlying issues which contribute to the way things function. These issues flow from the fundamental individualism which afflicts each person. Who am *I*? That is the question so often prominent in Christian circles. Getting *my* own identity clear is paramount. *My* self esteem, *my* position in Christ, and so on! And without a doubt, *my preferences* are a priority in so much of Christian society. The individual and his or her personal salvation. And how much of our observation is free from the same attitudes?

Paul wrote:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:12-13)

The point he is making in that context is the fundamental unity of the believers and so their functioning in love as the one body. He is saying that individualism has no place in Christian behavior. And that includes the pious individualism which excludes others because of their perceived guilt, especially since the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. John Calvin is reported as saying:

But if the holy prophets had scruples against separating themselves from the church because of many great misdeeds, not of one man or another but of almost all the people, we claim too much for ourselves if we dare withdraw at once from the communion of the church just because the morals of all do not meet our standard, or even square with the profession of Christian faith.¹

Of course love does not ignore the sin and weakness of others, but precisely because it is love it insists on seeing others as they are. So:

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins are forgiven on account of his name.

¹³I am writing to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young people, because you have conquered the evil one.

¹⁴I write to you, children, because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young people, because you are strong and the word of God abides in you,

¹ Source unknown.

and you have overcome the evil one. (1 John 2:12-14)

We may well be saved in hope, and John will address that later, but we are saved! And that salvation is staggering in its proportions. To be redeemed is to be wondrously transformed. Not perfect or incapable of sin, but transformed nonetheless, and faith must see that. Perhaps we can say that once we were slaves of sin (John 8:34) which meant that our ‘default setting’ was always a sinful determination to be our own god, in whatever form that determination may have been expressed. We were under an obligation, through guilt, to serve ourselves. God had given us up to that (see Rom. 1:18-32). Redemption means that we have been taken out of that situation through the removal of our guilt by the blood of Christ. To continue the metaphor, we have been ‘re-set’, we have a new default setting, with the law of God written anew on the heart. So we are no longer under the obligation to sin!

It is that which makes John’s statement so sensible: I am writing ... so that you may not sin’ (1 John 2:1), ‘*Your sins are forgiven* on account of his name’ (1 John 2:12).

The passage of 1 John 2:12-14 is intriguing for other reasons, and we have no explanation for them. For instance, the distinction between the three groups, children, young people and fathers, is not obvious. John even uses different Greek words for ‘children’ in verses 12 and 14.² He also uses different tenses for the verbs, as indicated in the NRSV by ‘I am writing’ and ‘I write’. Perhaps this is just artistic licence? It is not important in the long run.

What is important is that forgiveness is an established fact. And we are forgiven, not for our own sakes, but (literally) ‘through his name’, the name of the one who loves us and gave himself for us, without even first gaining our permission (as if we were gods who could, or would, actually approve). Quite the opposite; the work of redemption extends to making us willing, to freeing our wills. Without wanting to minimise the extent of the transformation he has worked in us, he has forgiven us and we can take it or leave it, but it is done. Love or hate it, and there is no middle ground, the work is done.

Twice the ‘fathers’ are addressed as those who ‘know him who is from the beginning’. Of course John can write this on the basis of Jeremiah 31:34, ‘they will all know me’, but now the reality has come. You know him! It is simply a fact. The degree to which they participate in that privilege and reality remains to be seen, but the fact is not in dispute. We know him because he has acted for us and in us to bring us to life; we are his children (1 John 3:1-2). ‘From the beginning’ is the phrase used at the beginning of the letter with reference to Christ, although as John developed his opening statements it was clear that the reference must include the Father with the Son for it not possible to know one and not the other (1 John 1:3). But the point is that the fathers actually know him. Could there be anything more rich and energising than that, for to know him and to live in that knowledge is nothing less than eternal life (John 17:3; cf. 1 John 2:24-25)?

To the ‘young people’³ he writes ‘you have conquered the evil one’ and later he adds ‘you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one’. There is no ‘ought to’ in any of this. It is simply true that they have conquered the evil one. The tense of the verb ‘have conquered’⁴ is such as the imply a

² He uses *τεκνία* (*teknia*) in vs. 12 and *παιδιά* (*paidia*) in vs. 14.

³ This is, I think, a good translation of *νεανίσκοι* (*neaniskoi*), translated elsewhere as ‘young men’. However there is no general term available, a problem in most languages.

⁴ *νενικήκατε* (*nenikēkate*) is the perfect tense.

past action with present results. Well, then, at what point did they conquer the evil one? John says later that ‘the Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil’ (1 John 3:8, cf. Acts 10:38; Heb. 2:14; John 12:31; Rev. 12:10-11). The young people have conquered the evil one because Jesus has conquered the evil one and they are in him. In the same way as we are forgiven through his name, so the victory is through his name. It is through the action of grace that we are strong and it is because the word of God abides in us. That word is the word which God has spoken and continues to speak, the word of truth, and strength and victory are known as we live in that word.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; ¹⁶for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches—comes not from the Father but from the world. ¹⁷And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever. (1 John 2:15-17)

If what John has written is the way things are, then the implications are obvious: ‘Do not love the world or the things in the world’. This obligation parallels that expressed in Colossians 3:1-3:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Plainly, love for the world is incompatible with love for God. As in 1 John 2:5, where the love of God is perfected in the obedient so, here, disobedience is an active denial of the love of God.⁵ The ‘world’ is the whole system organised in opposition to God. It may not appear as organised, but Paul wrote of people ‘following the course of this world’ (Eph. 2:2), the whole ‘sphere of existence’⁶ which the world has.

John’s description of the world’s mindset, its priorities, ‘the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches’ (lit. ‘the pride of life’) is reminiscent of the temptation in Eden (Gen. 3:6). If that is John’s intention then perhaps the description is not of particular sins so much as of the mindset of the flesh which is opposed to the will of God (cf. Rom. 8:5-8). But let there be no mistake; ‘the world and its desire are passing away’. Those who opt for it will find themselves allied to a system under the present and the final judgement of God (see 2 Cor. 6:14-7:1; 2 Pet. 3:1-12; Rev. 18:9-10).

Children, it is the last hour! As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come. From this we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. ²⁰But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge. ²¹I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and you know that no lie comes from the truth. ²²Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. ²³No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also. ²⁴Let what you heard from the beginning abide in

⁵ This is not just love *for* God, but is the active contradiction of the love of God himself.

⁶ Eph. 2:2 has ‘the age (αἰῶνα, *aiōna*) of this world’, not referring to chronological age but to a functioning system. Cf. 1 Cor. 10:11; Gal. 1:4.

you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. ²⁵And this is what he has promised us, eternal life.

²⁶I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. ²⁷As for you, the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things, and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, abide in him. ²⁸And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming. (1 John 2:18-28)

John now turns to the present situation faced by his readers. The reason these folk are in such turmoil is that it is ‘the last hour’ and therefore ‘many antichrists’ have arisen. So the readers should not be surprised but, recognising the truth of what God has done, they can persevere in confidence, calmly assured of their position over against those who attempt to disconcert them.

‘The last hour’ is a phrase meaning much the same as ‘the last days’. It is obviously not a literal hour of sixty minutes, but carries the sense that all is reaching a climax and that we are involved in the moral action of God’s purposes. The age to come (Heb. 6:5) is presently breaking into the lives of men and women and the present evil age (Gal. 1:4) is rapidly approaching its destruction. It is a time of ferment and the evil one knows that his time is short.

The term ‘antichrist’ occurs only in 1 John (2:18, 22; 4:3) and 2 John 7). It hardly seems to refer to a spectacular evil personage who will arise at the climax of history. The term means what it says, anti-Christ. and though the readers have been told ‘that antichrist is coming’ (and whatever they understood by that and who told them that is not known), John’s response is calm: ‘Of course, not one but many antichrists have arisen. However else would we know that we are living in the last hour?’ The battle in which we are involved is not a threat to our salvation but evidence of it (Rev. 12:13-17).

The antichrists to whom he refers were real people, men and women who had previously been part of the fellowship of the believers. They had left the fellowship and that doubtless caused those who remained to be somewhat uncertain as to their own position. But John writes to assure them that they are of the truth and that those who left were not. Had they been truly one with the readers they would not have left. Their real purpose was not purity but destruction and their leaving has demonstrated that.

The readers, on the other hand, have been anointed by the Holy One and all have knowledge.⁷ The readers have received ‘the Spirit of truth’ (John 16:13) and so, whatever the claims of the antichrists may have been, the readers know the truth. This is more than knowledge of theological facts. As John has already said, they know the Father, they know him who is from the beginning. That is why they know everything, even if they yet need to discover the details of what they know. Their knowledge is a personal, intimate knowledge of the truth himself. Consequently John is not writing to instruct them as to the truth but to reassure them that they do indeed know it (him). What is more, no lie comes from the truth, something John has been reinforcing (1 John 1:6, 8; 2:4).

Again, we must admit that the precise details of the problem John is addressing are unknown. What we can discern is that the problem involved ‘liars’ who denied ‘that Jesus is the Christ’. In 1 John 4:2-3 the subject is the false prophets who deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh. It seems that the point is the denial of the true

⁷ It is not clear whether John wrote ‘all of you have knowledge’ or ‘you know all things’.

nature of Jesus as the Christ (i.e. the Jewish Messiah, the anointed one), probably of Jesus the divine word become flesh. This is a denial of the Father and the Son. If these people reject the apostolic word concerning Jesus, they are rejecting Jesus himself and thus rejecting the Father who sent him.

This denial of the nature of Jesus is of far more than academic interest; it is the denial of the relationship which the Word of God brings into being. To deny the Son means that a person does not have the Father, whereas to confess the Son is to have the Father also.

It is imperative, then, that what the readers heard from the beginning, that is, the apostolic word as revealed by the Spirit, should abide in them. Neither they nor we can afford to drift from what and who we know. As we abide in the truth then we are abiding in the Father and the Son. To abide is to be in the action of his purposes for his family, and his purpose, is eternal life. Having the word of Christ dwell in us richly is to abide in the Father and the Son and so to know the essence of eternal life now. This is surely parallel with Peter's statement:

His divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. ⁴Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, and may become participants of the divine nature. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

Those who have left the fellowship claiming to have the truth are actually attempting to deceive the readers. It is an assertion that truth leaves the fellowship with them. But, over against that, John says, 'the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you'. We need not fear that the truth of God may some day be removed from us, as if our salvation depends on others. The anointing remains and we have no need of a 'priesthood' through whom we must approach God for our supply. The claims of others to some superior knowledge are countered by the reality that the anointing we received from the Holy One actually teaches us about all things. The anointing has brought us to intimate knowledge of the Father and the Son and nothing can remove that or render it uncertain.

While we do not need to come to others for our knowledge of God, that does not, obviously, mean that teachers are not needed in the community of faith. Plainly they are, as we see in Paul's letters. But such teachers will be recognised as they themselves speak consistently with the apostolic gospel and at best they will only teach us to know what we already know. So we must not be deceived into thinking that we have a dependence on other human beings for our knowledge and life. We need not abide in them; we must abide in the anointing.

Put simply, the Holy Spirit caused us to believe the word which was spoken to us and so we received the Father and the Son. How utterly foolish we would be to fail to live in that anointing! The triune God has come to us in all his fulness and drawn us into the intimacy of the divine family. We are already fulfilled by being where we are, so how could we presume to submit to those who would make us dependent on them for our fulfilment?

The passage closes with a reminder of the goal of this abiding, this staying in the anointing. When he⁸ is made known⁹ to us (NRSV ‘revealed’) we will not be ashamed before him in his presence¹⁰ (NRSV ‘coming’).

© Ian Pennicook May 2008

⁸ Who ‘he’ is is not specified. In 1 John 3 the reference is to the Father (vs. 1), and to God (vs. 2) although the clear message of the New Testament is that it Jesus, the Messiah, who will return in the clouds of glory (Acts 1:11; Mark 13:26 etc).

⁹ Gk. φανερωθῆ (phanerōthē), ‘made manifest’.

¹⁰ Gk. παρουσία (parousia), ‘presence’.