

# **1JOHN**

**The First Letter of John**

## Introduction

Following tradition, we have entitled this document 'The First Letter of John'. However, it is more like a treatise, and can be called a 'letter' only in the sense that it is intended to be read publicly in the various congregations that make up the church in which the author exercises a leadership role. The author is not named in the document itself. From the beginning it has been called 'The First Letter of John' because of the obvious similarities in ideas and language between it and 'The Gospel according to John'. At the same time there are significant differences between these two works.

Scholars present different suggestions to explain the similarities and the differences. Until a consensus is reached it is enough for us to note that both documents clearly come from within the same community. Where the symbolic, imaginative, 'poetic' language of the Gospel is open to different interpretations, and was in fact interpreted differently, the Letter takes a clear position in a number of important areas, and does so quite deliberately. It may be that the author of the letter is deliberately commenting on the Gospel. Be that as it may, he is certainly commenting on ideas that are expressed in the Gospel, and interpreting these ideas in a way that he claims is true to the tradition, in contradistinction to the ways these ideas have been misinterpreted by those responsible for the erroneous teaching which he sets out to oppose. We will indicate the key ideas stressed by our author as they occur in the letter. However, an introductory overview here may prove helpful.

Some time after the death of the Beloved Disciple (referred to in the Gospel, 21:23), a serious rift in the understanding of Jesus divided the community. The author of this Letter deliberately sets out to expound the truth about Jesus as it has been authoritatively handed down in the traditions of the community. He particularly stresses the reality and the importance of Jesus' human experience, which his opponents consider irrelevant, at least from the point of view of religious revelation and human salvation. The Gospel powerfully states: 'The Word became *flesh* and lived among us' (John 1:14). It is this that our author underlines when he insists that it is *Jesus*, the real, human, Jesus, who is the Son of God:

We declare to you ... what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands ... so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

– 1John 1:1-3

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.

– 1John 4:2-3

Along with this stress on Jesus' 'flesh' is an insistence on the importance of Jesus' passion and death, his 'blood':

If we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

– 1John 1:7

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

– 1John 2:2

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

– 1John 3:16

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

– 1John 4:10

Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that *Jesus* is the Son of God? This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood.

– 1John 5:5-6

There is a parallel stress on the importance of the human behaviour of those who wish to be true disciples of Jesus and to experience the salvation which Jesus offers. Jesus' humanity matters, and so does ours. Whereas the Gospel places its whole focus on love, the author of the Letter spells out some of the implications of love in living a genuine moral life. The opponents seem to have claimed an intimacy with God to the point of being sinless:

If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true ... If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ... If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

– 1John 1:6,8,10

Whoever 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 ... Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked ... Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.

– 1John 2:4,6,9

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.

– 1John 4:20

They failed to emphasise the commandments:

By this we may be sure that we know him, if we obey his commandments. Whoever 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.

– 1John 2:3-4

We receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him ... All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them.

– 1John 3:22,24

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments.

– 1John 5:2-3

## Introduction

The author of the Letter stresses that goodness is not just a matter of enlightenment, but must be lived, especially in practical love:

Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked.  
– 1John 2:6

All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.  
– 1John 3:3

Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.  
– 1John 3:18

All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.  
– 1John 3:24

They are to 'walk in the light' – something that is demonstrated in loving other members of the Christian community: 'Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling'(1John 2:10). This is distinguished from 'walking in darkness' – something that is demonstrated by hating other members of the Christian community and by not 'doing justice':

Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.  
– 1John 2:9

The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.  
– 1John 3:10

Sin does not come from God, and 'no one who abides in God sins'(3:6; 3:9). Those who are walking in darkness are in sin that is 'towards death'(5:17). Those walking in light must admit that there is sin in their life too: 'If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us'(1:8); but 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin'(1:7), and 'If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world'(2:1-2). The author's appeal is to 'love in truth and in action'(3:18), and to trust in God who is 'greater than our hearts'(3:20). He accents community love (4:12) because his concern in this document is with the Christian community and not the mission of the community to the world. Eternal life is experienced now:

This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us.  
– 1John 1:2

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  
– 1John 2:5

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.  
– 1John 3:1

As these texts demonstrate, our experience of sharing God's life is conditional on our living a moral life. The following text makes this abundantly clear:

The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.

– 1John 3:10

Furthermore, our communion with God now does not exhaust all that God has promised us. Fullness of life is yet to come:

Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

– 1John 3:2

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.

– 1John 4:17

The Gospel emphasises the gift of the Spirit. The author of the Letter stresses the need to discern claimed manifestations of the Spirit: 'Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world' (4:1). This may well be because his opponents were claiming the inspiration of the Spirit to support their views. Note that he does not appeal to institutional authority, but rather to the experience of the Spirit in the community :

As 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.

– 1John 2:27

We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

– 1John 4:6

It is reasonable to work on the assumption that this letter was composed within the community of the Beloved Disciple in Ephesus in the last decade of the first century. The text is found in all the major early manuscripts, including the fourth century parchment Codexes, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, and the fifth century parchment Codex Alexandrinus. Parts of the letter are quoted by two authors writing in the middle of the second century. Polycarp of Smyrna quotes 4:2-3 in his Letter to the Philippians 7:1, and Justin Martyr quotes 3:1-2 in his Dialogue 123.9. The Muratorian Canon (c.200AD) quotes 1:1,4. Eusebius follows Origen in placing 1John among the accepted writings of the New Testament (*History of the Church*, 3.24).

A suggested structure for John's First Letter

<b>Prologue</b> : Accent on historical reality and actual experience	1:1-4
<b>I. The Christian life as 'walking in light'</b> (1:5 - 3:10)	
1. We are in communion with God if our behaviour is light, not darkness	1:5-7
2. Behaviour in the light is not the result of our inherent sinlessness, but results from cleansing effected by 'the blood of Jesus'(1:7), our 'atoning sacrifice'(2:2)	1:8 - 2:2
3. Forgiveness is assured if we name and face our sin. Behaving as Jesus behaved means obeying his commands. This is now possible 'because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining'(2:8). His command is that there be love between members of the community	2:3-11
4. Do not love the world	2:12-17
5. Antichrists have broken from the community, denying that 'Jesus is the Christ'(2:22)	2:18-23
6. They do not need the kind of anointing by the Spirit which the false teachers are claiming	2:24-27
7. If we abide in him we are God's children now, but 'what we will be has not yet been revealed ... when he is revealed we will be like him, for we will see him as he is'(3:3)	2:28-3:3
8. 'All who do not do what is right and who are not loving their brothers and sisters are not from God'(3:10)	3:4-10
<b>II. Abiding in Christ means loving as he loved</b> (3:11 - 5:12)	
1. Love within the community is a sign of having passed from death to life. This means following Jesus' example in laying down our lives for one another and giving practical help to those who are in need. Appeal is made to their experience of the Spirit (3:24)	3:11-24
2. Inner movements of mind and heart must be subjected to discernment: 'By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God'(4:2)	4:1-6
3. God's love is revealed in sending 'his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins'(4:10). 'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is perfected in us'(4:11-12). Appeal is made to the experience of the Spirit (4:13). 'As he is, so we are in this world'(4:17). This means loving members of the Christian community	4:7-21

4. Faith and God's command of love 5:1-5  
 5. Water, blood and the Spirit, all witness to Jesus 5:6-8  
 6. Appeal to the experience of the Spirit, 'the testimony in their hearts'(5:10) 5:9-12

**Concluding Remarks**

Jesus revealed the true God. Sin that is not unto death  
 can be forgiven 5:13-21

**Lectionary Readings**

1:1-10		not in Sunday or Weekday Lectionary
2:1-5a		3rd Sunday of Easter, Year B
	2:3-11	29th December
	2:12-17	30th December
	2:18-21	31st December
	2:22-28	2nd January
	2:29 - 3:6	3rd January
3:1-2,21-24		Holy Family, Year C
3:1-3		All Saints, November 1st
3:1-2		4th Sunday of Easter, Year B
	3:7-10	4th January
	3:11-21	5th January
3:14-16		All Souls, November 2nd
3:18-24		5th Sunday of Easter, Year B
	3:22 - 4:6	7th January
4:7-10		6th Sunday of Easter, Year B
	4:7-10	8th January
4:7-16		Sacred Heart of Jesus, Year A
4:11-16		7th Sunday of Easter, Year B
	4:11-18	9th January
	4:19 - 5:4	10th January
5:1-9		Baptism of Jesus, Year B
5:1-6		2nd Sunday of Easter, Year B
	5:5-13	11th January
	5:14-21	12th January

**<sup>1</sup>We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life —**

**<sup>2</sup>this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us —**

**<sup>3</sup>we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ**

**<sup>4</sup>and we (NRSV 'We are') are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.**

The author is writing on behalf of those in the community ('we') who have a special place because of their relationship with the renowned and beloved founder of the community, the Beloved Disciple. His words parallel those of the Prologue of the Gospel: 'the Word became flesh and lived among *us*, and *we* have seen his glory' (John 1:14). This is the same 'we' that we find in the concluding words of the Gospel. After claiming the authority of the Beloved Disciple, now dead, for the contents of the Gospel, the author, who may well be the author also of this letter, continues; '*we* know that his testimony is true' (John 21:24).

The Gospel opens with the words 'in the beginning', recalling the opening words of the Book of Genesis, but taking us outside time to the eternal mystery of God's being. Since the aim of this treatise is to give an orthodox interpretation of the faith of the community which is found also in the Gospel, it is likely that the expression 'the beginning' echoes its use in the Gospel Prologue. However, as soon becomes apparent, here the accent is on the traditional teaching and experience of the community from *its* beginning.

It is possible that the author shared the Beloved Disciple's intimate knowledge of Jesus prior to Jesus' crucifixion and that it is this that he is insisting on when he stresses that he and those he represents have seen and touched Jesus, the word of life. However it is probably more likely that he is speaking of what he and the other leaders of the community have experienced during the long years of their acquaintance with the Beloved Disciple. It is also possible that the 'we' here is meant to include all the members of the community and that the author is reminding them of the many ways in which they have experienced in their midst the presence of Jesus and so 'eternal life'. In any case, he is insisting that to enjoy true life they must remain in communion with Jesus and so with those who were close to the Beloved Disciple (compare John 17:3).

This link between communion with Jesus and communion with the community is echoed in other early Christian writings:

As the Lord was united to the Father and did nothing without Him ... so you do nothing without the bishop and presbyters.

— Ignatius of Antioch, *To the Magnesians* 7:1

One cannot have God for Father who has not the church for mother.

— Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Catholic Church* 6,149-150



Though the word ‘gospel’ (Greek: εὐαγγέλιον) does not occur in the Gospel or Letters of John, the ‘message’ (Greek: μήνυμα) of which he speaks here is, indeed, part of the gospel. It is a message concerning God which came from Jesus during his public ministry (1:3). It is a message that continues to come from Jesus speaking through his Spirit in the community, for, as Jesus promised: ‘When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears’ (John 16:13). The author claims to be proclaiming traditional, orthodox teaching. That God is light and not dark is traditional (see Psalm 27:1). The author states it here for two reasons. First, he wants them to contemplate the human Jesus in whom the divine light was manifest. We might recall the following words from the Gospel:

In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

– John 1:4-9

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

– John 8:12

His second reason is to underline the necessity of remaining ‘in him’ if we are to be in the light. As he will write later: ‘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*’ (2:5). The Gospel, too, speaks about being ‘in him’:

On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

– John 14:20

As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us.

– John 17:21

If we are in him it will show in the way we live:

This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil.

– John 3:19

The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you ... I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness.

– John 12:35,46

**<sup>5</sup>This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.**

**<sup>6</sup>If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true;**

**<sup>7</sup>but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**

**<sup>8</sup>If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**

**<sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

It would seem that there are those who claim that they are in communion with Jesus and that that is enough. What they do is irrelevant. The author's response is not unlike that of James. It is not enough to claim to believe. Real faith includes obedience and is demonstrated in the way we actually live. The truth is something that must be 'done'. We must live the life we claim to share. We find the same set of images in the Gospel: 'those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God' (John 3:21). As Paul puts it, we must 'do the truth in love' (Ephesians 4:15), which means 'living as children of light' (Ephesians 5:8). Furthermore, living in communion with Jesus involves living in communion with the community of his disciples.

When we 'walk in darkness' by behaving in ways that are not in accordance with the life revealed by Jesus, all is not necessarily lost, so long as we do not fool ourselves that it doesn't matter. It does matter. It is sin, but it is from sin that Jesus saves us by his 'blood'. Central to what the author is saying in this letter is that it was Jesus' real human life that he gave for us. It was real blood that he shed upon the cross. The stress on 'blood' in the sacrificial cult of Israel is traditional:

The life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.

– Leviticus 17:11

We find Jesus' self-giving spoken of in terms of blood in other writings of the New Testament, especially in Hebrews and Revelation which make extensive use of cultic imagery:

How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to worship the living God.

– Hebrews 9:14

He loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.

– Revelation 1:5

By your blood you ransomed saints for God.

– Revelation 5:9 (see 7:14; 12:11)

We find echoes of this language in John's reflection on the necessity of drinking the blood of Jesus (see John 6:53-56) and in the way he draws attention to the blood that flowed from the heart of Jesus pierced on the cross (see John 19:34).

Paul, too, states that ‘we have been justified by his blood’(Romans 5:9; compare Acts 20:28). Recall his words in his correspondence with Corinth: ‘The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?’(1Corinthians 10:16). ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’ (1Corinthians 11:25). How can Jesus’ blood cleanse us from sin? We must reject the suggestion that we are freed because God punished Christ instead of us. Jesus was innocent. He could not be the object of the ‘punishment of God’. We must also reject the suggestion that because of what Jesus did God pretends that we are other than we really are, and simply chooses not to punish us. This involves God declaring us to be righteous in spite of the fact that we are not. Divine punishment is not an extra that God can put aside at will. It is the consequence of the disorder that sin is and that sin causes. The only way to avert the punishment is to get rid of the sin of which it is the consequence.

We sin because we do not believe in God’s love. God wanted to convince us of his love. He did so in Jesus, in Jesus’ living and life-giving. In spite of all the efforts to stop Jesus believing in God’s love, even the threat of death, he remained faithful. Others failed to listen, failed to believe or to obey, and went ahead with his murder. Acting sinfully, and therefore acting contrary to God’s will, they put Jesus to death. Jesus made a love-offering even of his death, and God raised him to life, proving that he was as Jesus believed him to be. God used the example of Jesus’ faith to open our hearts to believe as Jesus believed. Moreover, the love-Spirit of God is poured out by the risen Christ to enable us to believe, and to sustain a life that is free from the domination of sin. On our own this is not possible, but we are not on our own. God promised: ‘I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me’(Jeremiah 33:8). Through the gift of the Spirit of Jesus, God has been faithful to that promise. The life he gave to Jesus when he raised him from death he has given to all who share Jesus’ faith.

The faith of Jesus inspires and makes possible a sharing in his faith by others. It is on the basis of this faith, the faith of Jesus himself which we share, that we are brought into communion with God, and it is this communion that cleanses us from sin. What Jesus did makes our faith possible. It does not, however, substitute for it. If we reject the offer of a share in his faith, we will not be able to resist being dominated by sin, and we will not evade the punishment which is consequent upon it. Only that person is redeemed who accepts God’s offer and lives accordingly. This is the point that John is stressing in the present text. Our faith must be real, otherwise our claim to be in communion with God is a deception.

If we ‘walk in the light’ we can be confident that our faith is real, and through the reality of our communion, the life which Jesus poured out in love for us will continue to cleanse us from ‘all sin’. As Paul says: ‘In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace’(Ephesians 1:7). We can pray confidently with the Psalmist: ‘Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin’(Psalm 51:1-2).

**<sup>10</sup>If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**

From what the author writes here we can deduce that others are claiming that, because of their faith in Jesus and their communion with him, God does not consider their behaviour sinful. Besides challenging these people to look honestly at their actual behaviour, he reminds them that to speak in this way is to accuse God of lying. It shows that God's 'word is not in us'. John does not quote God's word at this stage. We might refer to the first of the quotations given by Paul when he is making the point that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Romans 3:23). He paraphrases Psalm 14:1-3

There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.

– Romans 3:10-12

To deny that we sin is to share the condemnation pronounced by Jesus himself: 'you do not have his word abiding in you, because you do not believe him whom he has sent' (John 5:38). If the 'word of life' (1:1) is not dwelling in us we belong with those of whom Jesus said: 'you will die in your sin' (John 8:21). We recall the exhortation of James: 'Welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls' (James 1:21).

Having identified with the other leaders in the community by using ‘we’, our author now asserts his own authority, using ‘my’ and ‘I’. While not claiming to be above sin, they must determine to avoid it. At the same time, if they fail, they must not lose heart. ‘Christ the righteous’, Jesus the Son of God, who offered up his life for us even to the shedding of his blood, is in the presence of his Father. Just as the high priest approached the mercy seat (Greek: hilastērion) in the sanctuary of the temple on the Day of Atonement, offering the blood of animals as an ‘atoning sacrifice’ (Greek: hilasmos) to God for the sins of the people, so Jesus stands, as our ‘advocate’ (Greek: paraklētos) in the presence of the ‘merciful’ (Greek: hileos) Father, offering himself, offering his own blood, ‘for the sins of the whole world’.

When he says that Jesus is ‘with’ (Greek: pros) the Father, he is saying more than that Jesus is in the presence of the Father. He is also in an intimate communion that draws him into his Father’s embrace. pros is also used in the Gospel prologue for the Word being ‘with’ God (John 1:1). As our advocate he is pleading our cause with the Father. Paul has the same teaching: ‘Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us’ (Romans 8:34). As our author has already said, he is drawing us into the same communion of love (see 1:3), and it is this communion that ‘cleanses us from all sins’ (1:7). We recall Paul’s teaching: ‘They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (hilastērion) by his blood, effective through faith’ (Romans 3:24-25).

We might recall the following prayer:

You, our God, are kind and true, patient and ruling all things in mercy. For even if we sin we are yours, knowing your power; but we will not sin, because we know that you acknowledge us as yours.

– Wisdom 15:1-2

Jesus is our ‘merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement (Greek: hilaskomai) for the sins of the people’ (Hebrews 2:17). With magnificent insight into the all-encompassing love of the heart of Jesus, our author adds: ‘not for our sins only but also for the sins of the whole world.’ This is the ‘Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29).

**<sup>1</sup>My 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;**  
**<sup>2</sup>and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.**

Communion is shown in obedience

**<sup>3</sup>Now by this we may be sure that we know him, if we keep [NRSV 'obey'] his commandments.**

**<sup>4</sup>Whoever says, 'I have come to know him,' but does not keep [NRSV 'obey'] his commandments, is a liar, and in such a person the truth does not exist;**

When John speaks of 'knowing God' he is speaking in traditional terms of the knowledge that comes only through intimate communion, knowledge through love. He is making the obvious point that we cannot know God in this way without wanting only what God wants. Holding fast to God's will is a sure sign of the reality of our communion. Failure to do so demonstrates that our claim to intimacy is a deception. The Psalmist expresses his delight in knowing and keeping God's will as it is expressed in the Torah:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

– Psalm 119:7-10

It was the failure of the people to keep God's commandments that drew from Hosea this lament: 'There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land'(Hosea 4:1). Through Jeremiah, God promised: 'I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart'(Jeremiah 24:7). Similarly, Ezekiel: 'A 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. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances'(Ezekiel 36:26-27).

John's words here echo those of Jesus:

They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.

– John 14:21

As John will continue to insist throughout this letter, the commandment that he has in mind is especially the commandment upon which Jesus insisted at the last supper: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another'(John 13:34). 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you'(John 15:12). 'I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another'(John 15:17).

John uses the genitive form of the word ‘God’ to qualify ‘love’. This indicates only that the two nouns are to be read in relationship. What the relationship is must be determined from the context, and in the present context the expression includes a number of relationships. Primarily, John is speaking about our love for God. However, this love is itself a gift from God and so he is speaking also of God’s love which embraced his Son and which has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

John is reminding his readers that the goal (Greek: telos) of this gift of God’s love is that we allow this love to radiate out to others. In other words, God’s love for us attains its goal, ‘reaches perfection’ (Greek: teleioō) when, in obedience to the command of Jesus we ‘love one another as I have loved you’ (John 15:12). John will make this point later when he writes: ‘In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another’ (4:10-11).

We could also say that our love for God reaches perfection when our whole being is transformed by God’s love so that we respond with perfect love and this love flows out to others who share in God’s life. Jesus is our model. ‘We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another’ (1John 3:16). Furthermore, we are not being asked to do the impossible by repeating what Jesus did. Jesus commands us to love as he loves, but not without giving us his love which makes it possible for us to do as he commands.

There is only one love and it is the very being of God. Jesus shares in this divine essence, and, through the gift of his Spirit, he draws us also into the same divine communion. We are being asked to live this love in our relationships with others in the community.

In no sense is John’s perspective limited to the Christian community. He has already spoken about the love of Jesus which reaches out to heal ‘the whole world’ (2:2). However, his focus in this letter is on the community, and his criticism is of those who claim to be Christians but who have broken away from the faith and the love to which the community is committed.

**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.**

**<sup>7</sup>Beloved, 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.**

**<sup>8</sup>Yet 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.**

For the first time in this letter, the author addresses the community in a term of special affection, 'beloved'. As fellow members of the community of the Beloved Disciple they enjoy a special love from the Father and the Son. They are also to have a special love for each other. He is not asking them to do anything new. The command of love is found in the Torah: 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord' (Leviticus 19:18). This command extended to strangers living in the land: 'you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God' (Leviticus 19:34). Furthermore, they learned from the Beloved Disciple himself how Jesus insisted on the importance of this love. They have known of it since their conversion.

Yet, in another sense it is new, because, as Jesus himself said: 'I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another' (John 13:34). It is new because it is Jesus' own love which they are to give each other. This love is 'true in Jesus' for it is the expression of the communion which Jesus has with God who alone knows real love. It is 'true in you', because he is speaking of the love experienced by the community. They have been drawn into this same real communion.

This commandment is new because Jesus lives it perfectly, and because it can be seen in the Christian community when the members are in communion with each other. It is not an unrealisable ideal to which they are commanded to aspire. 'The true light is already shining'.



The author has already stated that those who break communion by behaving in unloving ways to their brothers and sisters do not know God (see 2:4). Their behaviour demonstrates that they do not live in God (see 2:6). He goes on to say here that they may claim to be living in the light, but, in fact, their behaviour shows that they are in darkness.

John's focus on the special love which members of the community are commanded to have for one another and which is possible only within it is a focus which we find elsewhere in the New Testament. Paul, for example, without restricting love to the community urges those to whom he is writing to have a special love for each other: 'May the Lord make you increase and abound in *love for one another* and for all, just as we abound in love for you' (1Thessalonians 3:12). 'Seek to *do good to one another* and to all' (1Thessalonians 5:15). Peter writes: 'Honour everyone. Love the family of believers' (1Peter 2:17). We hear the following from the author of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Let mutual love continue' (Hebrews 13:1).

Where such love is practised, people are living in the light. There is no reason to fear stumbling. Where such love is not practised, darkness spreads its ugly cloak over everything causing people to stumble (Greek: skandalon). We recall Jesus' warning: 'Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks! Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes!' (Matthew 18:7).

Those who choose not to love, choose not to see. If we keep Jesus' command of love we need have no fear of stumbling:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

– John 8:12

The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.

– John 12:35-36

**<sup>9</sup>Whoever says, 'I am in the light,' while hating a brother or sister, is still in the darkness.**

**<sup>10</sup>Whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light, and in such a person there is no cause for stumbling.**

**<sup>11</sup>But 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.**

**<sup>12</sup>I am writing to you, little children: [NRSV 'because'] your sins are forgiven on account of his name.**

**<sup>13</sup>I am writing to you, fathers: [NRSV 'because'] you know him who is from the beginning.**

**I am writing to you, young people: [NRSV 'because'] you have conquered the evil one.**

**<sup>14</sup>I write to you, children: [NRSV 'because'] you know the Father.**

**I write to you, fathers: [NRSV 'because'] you know him who is from the beginning.**

**I write to you, young people: [NRSV 'because'] you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.**

To the whole community whom he addresses affectionately as 'little children' (of God), the author gives the assurance that their sins have been forgiven 'on account of Jesus' name'; that is to say, because of Jesus' self-giving in love. He may also be referring to their baptism which was in Jesus' name. In the light of what he has already written, it is clear that he is not saying that they are now innocent of sin. Rather, he is reminding them that they must never let sin cause them to despair. They can always go to Jesus their advocate. Two statements by Peter are relevant to what John is saying here:

Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

– Acts 2:38

All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

– Acts 10:43

The Christian life is a life lived in communion with Jesus. Jesus' love is assured. Whatever happens in our lives, we are to look to Jesus and confidently welcome the healing love which he offers.

Twice, after addressing the whole community as 'children', he offers his advice, encouragement and support firstly to the older members of the community, those who knew the Beloved Disciple personally and so are in touch with the beginnings of the community and its traditions. He then offers his advice, encouragement and support to the younger members of the community who have held fast to their faith in spite of the problems that they have had to face. All of them, old and young, 'know the Father'. Through their communion with Jesus they have experienced the intimacy of God's love. The author, therefore, is confident that they will understand what he is saying.

He stresses the fact that, for the younger members of the community especially, it is important that they continue the struggle and overcome 'the evil one'.

Having reached out in love to embrace in love the whole community, old and young, the author calls them to make a choice between God, their 'Father' and so the source of their life, and what he calls, simply, 'the world'. To choose the world is to demonstrate that the Father's love, and therefore the Father's life, is not in them.

He describes what he means by 'the world'. We love the world when the choices which we make are determined by 'the desire of the flesh'; that is to say, the desires that come from our unpurified hearts, unenlightened by the Spirit. To be led by these desires means that we are not living the life of Jesus. As Jesus said:

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

– John 3:6

It is the Spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless.

– John 6:63

We recall Paul's advice:

Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

– Romans 13:14

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence ... Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit.

– Galatians 5:13-16

We love the world when the choices which we make are determined by 'the desire of the eyes', greedy for the superficial and passing pleasure we get from whatever appeals to our senses. We love the world when what matters to us are the possessions we acquire in this present physical existence (Greek: bios), rather than the real life which is our communion with God in Christ and the life of love that flows from it.

The author appeals to all, old and young, to realise that God is the source of their life and to want only what God wants. The key to life is to 'do the will of God' If we do that we will really live, and we will live 'forever'. Peter has the same advice:

Live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires but by the will of God.

– 1Peter 4:2

**<sup>15</sup>Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world;**

**<sup>16</sup>for all that is in the world—the desire of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, taking pride in what this present life brings (NRSV 'the pride in riches')—comes not from the Father but from the world.**

**<sup>17</sup>And the world and its desire are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever.**

**<sup>18</sup>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.**

**<sup>19</sup>They 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.**

**<sup>20</sup>But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge.**

Though the expression ‘the last hour’ is found only here in the New Testament, the idea is found throughout. Peter speaks of Christ being revealed ‘at the end of the ages’ (1Peter 1:20). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that God has spoken to us through his Son ‘in these last days’ (Hebrews 1:2). James (5:3), Jude (18) and Paul (2Timothy 3:1), all refer to their time as ‘the last days’, awaiting the parousia of Christ and the full realisation of God’s reign.

The word ‘antichrist’ too is not found outside the Letters of John, but the idea is. Jesus himself prophesied: ‘false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect’ (Matthew 24:24). John sees these words of Jesus as being realised by those in the Christian community who have broken away and are attempting to undermine the faith of those to whom he is writing by propagating ideas which are contrary to the tradition which ‘you have heard’. The fact that they left the community is a sign, for John, that they never really belonged. In identifying the antichrist in this way, John is highlighting the evil of schism in the community, and so the necessity of community if we are to be faithful to Christ.

Turning again to the faithful ones in the community, John reassures them by reminding them of their baptism and the ‘anointing’ (Greek: *chrisma*) of the Spirit which they received from Christ, an anointing which embraced them in the love which Christ, ‘the Holy One’ (John 6:69), has with the Father. They share in Jesus’ own anointing (see Acts 4:27; 10:38). As Paul says:

It is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his seal on us and giving us his Spirit in our hearts as a first instalment.

– 2Corinthians 1:21-22

Those who have broken away from the community, the antichrists, have been claiming their own special anointing and a special enlightenment that goes with it. John is reassuring his readers. They do not need the kind of spiritual experience and knowledge claimed by the antichrists. He alludes to the words of Jeremiah: ‘No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord’ (Jeremiah 31:34, quoted in John 6:45). It is enough that they be attentive to the Spirit of Christ and to God’s word that has been planted in their souls.

Lest his letter appear to contradict what he has just said, he states that he is not writing because they do not know the truth and so need to be told. It is because they know that he is writing, to remind them, and to reassure them.

We already know that the schismatic teachers are claiming a special fellowship with God (1:5). They are also claiming to be above sin (1:8,10), to live in God (2:6) and in the light (2:9). Now we are given an insight into the key error in their teaching. As those who claim to be Christians, they obviously see themselves as having a special relationship to Christ. The problem lies in what they are denying, and it would appear that they are denying the salvific relevance of the humanity of Jesus, including his way of life and especially his way of giving his life on the cross. When John writes: 'they deny that Jesus is the Christ' the accent goes on Jesus, not Christ. They are denying that *Jesus*, the real, human Jesus of flesh and blood, is the anointed Messiah.

In so doing they are denying the special relationship of Jesus to God (whatever they might be saying about the pre-existent Word, or the glorified Christ). To deny the human reality of Jesus is to deny the incarnation. It is to lift the Christ out of the real human situation of the world and into the ethereal sphere of gods and demigods and spiritual ideas. It is to cut at the very heart of Christianity which is about real human beings learning to live real loving lives through their obedience to the inspiration of Christ's Spirit. Their heresy is to deny that God is the Father of the human Jesus and so to deny the Son and so the Father. It demonstrates that they are in communion with neither the Son nor the Father.

Those who remain in communion with the teaching of the Beloved Disciple do not need the kind of 'anointing' being claimed by those who are causing divisions in the community. They have been promised 'eternal life' (see 1:2). They must not let these false teachers deprive them of communion with Jesus and so jeopardise their chances of enjoying this life with the Son and the Father (see John 5:24-29). They are to 'abide in him', encouraged by Jesus' words: 'As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love' (John 15:9).

**<sup>21</sup>I 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. <sup>22</sup>Who 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. <sup>23</sup>No one who denies the Son has the Father; every one who confesses the Son has the Father also.**

**<sup>24</sup>Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father.**

**<sup>25</sup>And this is what he has promised us, eternal life. <sup>26</sup>I write these things to you concerning those who would deceive you. <sup>27</sup>As 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.**

**<sup>28</sup>And 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.**

**<sup>29</sup>If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him.**

Though the idea permeates this letter, this is in fact the only time we find the word ‘coming’ (Greek:  $\epsilon\lambda\theta\epsilon\iota\varsigma$ ) in the Johannine writings. This is ‘the last hour’ (2:18). The exalted Christ is coming to bring to its completion the renewal of all things that he achieved by his self-giving on the cross. Those to whom John is writing are sharing in his life. They must remain in communion with him and not be deceived into abandoning their faith in Jesus or the community of those who abide in him. Then they will be able to welcome the coming Christ, confident in the judgment which they will receive, unlike those of whom Jesus said:

Those who are ashamed of me and of my words ... of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.

– Mark 8:38

Rather, they will take consolation from these other words of Jesus:

Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life.

– John 5:24

Those who are ‘born of God’ live the life of God. It can be seen that they are ‘born from above’ (John 3:3) by the fact that they do the will of God - a will that John has already clearly states means living a life of love. If they live in this way, they will live in the light and it will be ‘clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God’ (John 3:21). There are many parallels between what John is writing here and the words of Peter:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is ... kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time ... Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children ... be holy yourselves in all your conduct ... Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart. You have been born anew, not of perishable but of imperishable seed, through the living and enduring word of God.

– 1 Peter 1:3-5, 13-15, 22-23

God is our 'Father' because God has given us a share in the life of his Son. The world is not open to the Spirit because it does not know the Father as he has been revealed to us by his Son. We, on the contrary, already share this life and so are already God's children. However, we are only at the beginning of a journey of faith that will be completed when all is revealed at the coming of Christ. We do not yet know all that this will mean. Paul, too, speaks of 'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him' (1Corinthians 2:9). 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known' (1Corinthians 13:12).

However, we know this much; we will be as Jesus, God's Son, is, for 'all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2Corinthians 3:18). This transformation into Christ is in process now. Then it will be complete.

Speaking of seeing God, John echoes the words of Jesus: 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8). Since, as Christians, this is our hope, we must purify ourselves, or rather, we must allow the fire of God's love to purify us till we are 'as pure as Christ'. Peter agrees with John that this process of purification is a process of purifying love: 'Now that you have purified your souls by your obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart' (1Peter 1:22).

**<sup>1</sup>See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him.**

**<sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.**

**<sup>3</sup>And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.**

In him there is no sin

**<sup>4</sup>Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.**

**<sup>5</sup>You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.**

**<sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.**

To grasp what John is saying here we must recall what he wrote earlier:

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

– 1John 1:8-10

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.

– 1John 2:1

Though John is writing to encourage us not to sin, in fact we do sin, and it is essential that we acknowledge our sin and open ourselves to receive the forgiveness that we are being offered. John does not want us to so focus on forgiveness that we lose our horror of sin, and forget what sin really is. It is, as he says here, ‘lawlessness’. It is doing what the devil did, putting our desires before the will of God. Whenever we sin, we demonstrate that, to that extent, we do not yet really know God. Only when we see God will we fully know God, and only then will we be sinless. In the meantime, because we have been given the Spirit we are growing in love and we are coming to see. John is urging us to take sin as seriously as it should be taken and not to underestimate what a terrible and destructive thing it is.

To the extent that we abide in God by living the life of Jesus, to that extent we will not sin. To the extent that we sin we see how far we have yet to go to be ‘as pure as he is’(3:3). Sin is incompatible with living the Christian life. Paul is equally explicit in showing the horror of sin:

What partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship is there between light and darkness? What agreement does Christ have with Beliar?

– 2Corinthians 6:14-15



The contrast which John makes here is more than a repetition of his condemnation of those who do not love the community and who have broken from it. It is more than a repetition of the darkness that dominates the world. This is an example of the word of God which is ‘living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart’ (Hebrews 4:12). John wants all those to whom he is writing to recognise whatever darkness there is in their souls for what it is and to see that it is enlightened by grace. John’s words apply in a dramatic way to the antichrists, but none of us can listen to them and remain complacent. Listen to Jesus as he speaks to those who have no place in their hearts for his revealing word:

You are from your father the devil, and you choose to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.

– John 8:44

However, it is not an even struggle between God and the devil for our souls. John speaks of God’s ‘seed’. God is the source of our life. He does not speak of the devil begetting anyone. We become ‘children of the devil’ not because of something the devil does, but because we choose to behave as the devil behaved, following our own will and rejecting the will of God. When we sin we demonstrate the limits of our knowing of God. We also demonstrate how unfree we are: ‘Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin’ (John 8:34).

John concludes this resounding denunciation of sin on the theme that is central to his letter: it is our love of our brothers and sisters that shows whether or not we are children of God, living God’s life, or children of the devil, following the devil’s way of lawlessness.

**<sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.**

**<sup>8</sup>Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning.**

**The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.**

**<sup>9</sup>Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God’s seed abides in them; they cannot sin, because they have been born of God.**

**<sup>10</sup>The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters.**

**<sup>11</sup>For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.**

**<sup>12</sup>We must not be like Cain who was from the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own deeds were evil and his brother's righteous.**

**<sup>13</sup>Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you.**

**<sup>14</sup>We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.**

**<sup>15</sup>All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them.**

**<sup>16</sup>We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.**

**<sup>17</sup>How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?**

The commandment to love one another formed part of their initial catechesis, coming, as we have already heard, from Jesus himself: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you' (John 15:12). Murder is the ultimate outcome of hatred, and John turns to the example of Cain (see Genesis 4 and John 8:39-44) to show what can happen when a brother hates another brother – which is what those who have broken away from the community are doing.

For the only time in the letter, in verse thirteen John addresses his readers as 'brothers', no doubt reinforcing the reference just made to Cain and Abel. Those who have broken away have chosen the ways of the world and are identified here with the world and with hate, the contrary of love. We are reminded of Jesus' words at the last supper where he, too, follows the commandment of love with a warning to his disciples not to be surprised when they encounter hatred:

I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you.

– John 15:17-18

It is God's love that takes us from death to life, and the presence of God's life in us is revealed through the love we have for one another. Love, therefore, causes life as well as being a sign of its presence.

His reference to Jesus reminds us of Jesus' words concerning the Good Shepherd who 'lays down his life for the sheep' (John 10:11). He also echoes Jesus' other words:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.

– John 15:12-13

If God's love is truly in us it will necessarily reveal its presence through our love for others. We find the same practical teaching in the Torah (see Deuteronomy 15:7-9). James, too, writes: 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that?' (James 2:15-16)

Our love must bear fruit in deeds that flow from the truth, that is, from the revelation of God given in Jesus, and from the life of Jesus in which we share.

John seems to be envisaging a situation when we are moved by God's love to give practical care to a needy brother or sister, but our 'hearts' - which includes our thoughts - are by nature self-centred and they will dissuade us in any number of ways from the 'unreasonable' act of love. Our hearts will tend to condemn us for being generous. John, however, is assuring us that the generous God can overcome the hesitations and rationalisations of our ungenerous hearts. We must trust in the guidance of the Spirit and respond to the impulses of grace even when we find ourselves resisting.

Our hearts, on the other hand, can be trained and purified by grace. They will be strengthened to trust that all things are possible to God and we will become more and more open to the miracles that grace can perform through us when God so wills. The message is traditional: 'If you remove unrighteous-ness from your tents ... You will pray to him, and he will hear you' (Job 22:23, 27).

The commandment is not simply a commandment to love, it is a commandment to love with the love of the heart of Jesus. This is possible only if we believe in Jesus as the Son who lives the life of his Father, God. It is God's love that we are to give each other. We are to let Christ love others in and through us. He is the vine. We are only branches. The life and growth must come from him and it is his fruit that we bear. John composed his Gospel to help persuade us of this: 'that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

Verse twenty-four reminds us of Paul's assertion that 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

**<sup>18</sup>Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.**

**<sup>19</sup>And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will persuade [NRSV 'reassure'] our hearts before him**

**<sup>20</sup>whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.**

**<sup>21</sup>Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God;**

**<sup>22</sup>and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.**

**<sup>23</sup>And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.**

**<sup>24</sup>All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.**

**<sup>1</sup>Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.**

**<sup>2</sup>By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God,**

**<sup>3</sup>and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the world.**

**<sup>4</sup>Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.**

**<sup>5</sup>They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them.**

**<sup>6</sup>We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.**

John has said that ‘by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us’(3:24). However, it is not enough to claim to be speaking and living according to the Spirit. The claim must be tested. Jesus warned his disciples against those who make false claims to be speaking in God’s name: ‘Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves’ (Matthew 7:15). ‘And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray’(Matthew 24:11). The problem was not restricted to the communities to whom John is writing. Paul writes: ‘Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good’(1Thessalonians 5:19-21). Another author writes: ‘false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions. They will even deny the Master who bought them’(2Peter 2:1). True prophecy, on the other hand, ‘never came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God’(2Peter 1:21).

In the context of the community, John states that they can recognise the falsity of the claims being made by the schismatic teachers by the fact that they deny the redemptive significance of Jesus’ humanity. They are being inspired not by the Spirit of God but by the spirit that opposes Christ (see 2:18).

He offers the faithful community the same reassurance which he earlier offered to the younger members: ‘you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one’(2:14). He said earlier that God was greater than their hesitant, self-centred, hearts (3:20). He now assures them that God whose Spirit dwells in them is more powerful than the evil spirit who exercises power in the world that is closed to God’s Spirit. Jesus who said: ‘In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’(John 16:33), will see that they, too, through the power of his Spirit, will be victorious.

Jesus also said: ‘Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice’(John 18:37). To be sure that they are listening to Jesus’ word, they must remain in communion with the witnesses who are in the school of tradition that comes from the Beloved Disciple.

John returns to his central theme. Claims to be living in communion with God can be tested by looking at the life of the person making the claim. God's life is a life of self-giving, a life of love. It must be the same for anyone claiming to be living God's life. To the extent that any of us fail in love we are not living out of our communion with God. If our lives give no signs of love then we cannot be in communion with God, we cannot 'know God'.

The proof that God is a 'God of love' (2Corinthians 13:11) is his gift to us, indeed to 'the whole world' (2:2), of his one and only Son whose mission it was to give us a share in his life of communion with the Father. To know what love is we do not look at what we are doing, but at what God does as revealed in the self-giving, atoning, love of his Son. As he wrote earlier: 'the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin' (1:7). 'He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world' (2:2).

Paul, too, directs our gaze to God's action: 'When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit' (Titus 3:4-5).

How do we know that God is love? By contemplating the way of life lived by Jesus. It is Jesus who makes the invisible God visible, for he is the perfect expression in human form of who God is and of how God relates to us: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' (John 1:18).

God gives us through Jesus a share in his life, which is a life of self-giving, a life of love-communion. To discern whether or not we or others are in fact living in this divine communion, we need only look at our lives. One cannot live God's life without that life bearing fruit in our loving others. Where this love is lacking, as is evident in the behaviour of those who have broken from the community, any claims to be inspired by the Spirit or to know God or to be living in communion with Christ are manifestly false and are to be rejected.

**<sup>7</sup>Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.**

**<sup>8</sup>Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.**

**<sup>9</sup>God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.**

**<sup>10</sup>In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

**<sup>11</sup>Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.**

**<sup>12</sup>No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.**

**<sup>13</sup>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 Saviour 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.**

**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.**

If our lives do witness to God's love, we can know that God is abiding in us. Our loving is a fruit of the gift of God's Spirit. As he wrote earlier: 'By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us'(3:24). As Paul says: 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

For the most part this letter is concerned with life within the Christian community. However, once again (see 2:2), we see the universal vision of the author. It is because 'the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world'(compare John 4:42), that it is essential that the community of Jesus' disciples be seen to be a community in which God's love is active. A community claiming to be Christian yet lacking love is a scandal to the world.

'God is love'(also 4:8). If, in obedience to the command of Jesus (see 2:5), we love one another (see 4:12), we have nothing to fear 'on the day of judgment', for we are already, now 'in this world' living the life of communion with God in which eternal life consists.

The schismatics are claiming to be without fear, based on their self-deception that they are above sin. The freedom from fear which John is encouraging is based, not on the innocence of the community, but on their experience of love which is a sign of God's forgiveness. The basis of their security is the love which God has for them. Their loving shows that this love is, indeed, dwelling in them.

Verse one echoes the following statement in which the author of the Fourth Gospel asserts that his purpose in writing is ‘that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name’ (John 20:31).

John has asserted a number of times that the proof that our love of God is real is that we obey God’s commandment and love one another. Here he looks at the connection from another angle and asserts that only the person who truly loves God can really love another person, since all love comes from God. Obedience is necessary, and obedience itself, like love, is possible only by a grace of God. It is only because God loves us that we are able to obey.

This is another attempt to encourage the communities who are remaining faithful to the tradition. Those who have broken away are saying that behaviour is irrelevant to salvation. John is saying that it matters what we do, but that God will always give us the strength to follow his commands.

He adds that ‘his commandments are not burdensome. We recall the words of Moses: ‘Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you’ (Deuteronomy 30:11). We are reminded, too, of Jesus’ words: ‘My yoke is easy, and my burden is light’ (Matthew 11:30). We are reminded also of Paul’s words: ‘I can do all things through him who strengthens me’ (Philippians 4:13).

We might reflect upon the following statement from a Roman document from the first half of the second century:

The person who has the Lord in his heart is able to master all things and all these commandments; but those who have the Lord on their lips while their heart is hardened ... for them these commandments are hard and difficult to walk in ... Put the Lord into your heart and you shall now that nothing is easier or sweeter or more gentle than these commandments.

– Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 12.4.3-5

**<sup>1</sup>Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child.**

**<sup>2</sup>By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments.**

**<sup>3</sup>For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome,**

**<sup>4</sup>for whatever is born of God conquers the world.**

**<sup>4b</sup>And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.**

**<sup>5</sup>Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?**

**<sup>6</sup>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.**

**<sup>7</sup>There are three that testify:**

**<sup>8</sup>the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree.**

[The following expansion of verses 7-8 found its way into the Latin text some time in the third or fourth century. It is noted here because of its importance in the history of the use of First John in the Western church. Erasmus included this expanded text in the third edition of his Greek NT (1522).

‘There are three who testify in heaven: Father, Word and Holy Spirit; and these three are one; and there are three who testify on earth: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three are unto one.’]

The importance of believing is a theme that runs right through the Gospel and Letters of John. The word occurs over one hundred times. However, in every instance except here in verse four it is the verb  $\square\square\square\square\square\square$  which is used, not to noun  $\square\square\square\square\square$ . Faith is very much something that we do. This is picked up rather nicely in the English ‘be-lieve’ composed as it is of the word ‘love’(‘lieve’) and the verb ‘be’. To believe is for John to exist in the love of God and to act out of the love which God is and which God gives to us. To believe that Jesus is the Son of God involves an acknowledgment of the truth that the human Jesus lives God’s life and gives to those who cling to him a share in this divine communion. It means actually remaining in that communion in such a way that all our attitudes, decisions and actions flow from it.

At his baptism in the Jordan, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus and remained in him. Jesus shared this experience with others when he baptised them with the Holy Spirit. It seems that the schismatic teachers were highlighting this aspect of Jesus’ baptising activity during his public ministry (see John 3:22,26; 4:1). In this sense one could say that he ‘came by water’.

John insists that Jesus came ‘not with the water only but with the water and the blood’. In other words, it was through his gift of his life pouring out on Calvary that Jesus gave us the fullness of the Spirit. As he said earlier, it is ‘the blood of Jesus his Son’ that ‘cleanses us from all sin’(1:7). The gift of the Spirit is a gift of love, and love, as John keeps insisting, is the gift of self. God’s gift is demonstrated in the gift of his only Son: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’(John 3:16). This self-giving finds its perfect human expression in Jesus’ free gift of himself, even making his death a gift of love: ‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends’(John 15:13). The importance of blood and water is dramatically highlighted in the verses which form the climax of the Gospel:

One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out. (He who saw this has testified so that you also may believe. His testimony is true, and he knows that he tells the truth).

– John 19:34-35



The testimony of the Spirit is through the testimony of the Beloved Disciple: 'This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true'(John 21:24). It is continued in the life of the community that is in communion with this testimony. The insistence on the threefold testimony in the life of the community highlights the importance of what later became known as the three sacraments of initiation.

The testimony of water is expressed liturgically in the sacrament of Baptism:

One who has bathed does not need to wash, but is entirely clean.

– John 13:10

No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.

– John 3:5

The testimony of blood is expressed liturgically in the sacrament of the Eucharist:

The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

– 1John 1:7

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

– 1John 2:2

In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

– 1John 4:10

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

– John 6:53-56

The testimony of the Spirit is expressed liturgically in the sacrament of Confirmation, in which the continuing presence of the Spirit guiding us to truth is emphasised:

It is the Spirit that gives life.

– John 6:63

You have been anointed by the Holy One ... his anointing teaches you about all things.

– 1John 2:20,27

This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

– John 14:17

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.

– John 15:26

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.

– John 16:13

**<sup>9</sup>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.**

**<sup>10</sup>Those 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.**

**<sup>11</sup>And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.**

**<sup>12</sup>Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.**

The reference here to human testimony and to the testimony of God being greater reminds us of Jesus' words in relation to the human witness given to him by John the Baptist: 'He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light. But I have a testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father has given me to complete, the very works that I am doing, testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me' (John 5:35-36).

Our author seems to be referring to the witness of the Beloved Disciple and indeed to that of those who have remained faithful to the tradition given to them by him. Important as this is, ultimately what matters is the present witness of God through the action of the Holy Spirit in giving them a share in the divine communion in which eternal life consists. Because of what he has said about the importance of love within the community and the need to be discerning in regard to claims to be acting from the Spirit, John judges that it is now safe to stress the importance of the testimony which is in their hearts: the testimony of the indwelling Spirit who witnesses to the reality of the communion in love which is the essence of the Christian experience. We might reflect on the following texts from the Gospel of John which express the communion in love which Jesus has with his Father and which he offers to us:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.

– John 6:56

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

– John 14:23

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

– John 15:4-5

I ask that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me ... I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.

– John 17:21,26

John's reasons for writing echo the reasons given in the Gospel: 'These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31).

John has been focusing throughout this letter on the fruit that demonstrates the reality of our communion with Jesus: the fruit of love. Here he focuses on the experience of the communion, the experience we call prayer. For prayer, the prayer of faith, is the breathing of the Spirit of Jesus in our souls. If we are truly in communion with Jesus his Spirit will inspire our prayer, and the petitions which we make to God will certainly be answered, because they will be petitions not arising out of our own feeble spirit but from the Spirit of Jesus. They will necessarily, therefore, be 'according to God's will'. As he has said already: 'we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him' (3:22). We find this stressed, too, in the Gospel where Jesus says:

If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

– John 14:14; see 15:16; 16:24

John introduces the subject of prayer to encourage the community to pray for each other when they sin. He has already made it clear that those who have left the community never really were true believers (see 2:19). This is the distinction which he seems to be making here. To abandon the community by apostasy is to turn one's back on Jesus the only one through whom forgiveness can come. To do so is 'mortal'. John makes it clear that he is not speaking about this (compare John 17:9). He is speaking about those who believe in Jesus and so who are living a life of love, but who sin and who need to forgiveness and purification that comes from the heart of Jesus.

We should not assume that the author is absolutely against praying for those in mortal sin. Rather, he is concerned to protect the fragile and hurting community against the aggressive behaviour of those who have split off. Things might change, but as things are he judges it is better not to have any relationship with them, even prayer. The community is too vulnerable even for that. We might compare Paul's advice in 2Thessalonians 3:14, 1Timothy 4:7 and 2Timothy 2:23.

**<sup>13</sup>I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.**

**<sup>14</sup>And this is the boldness we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.**

**<sup>15</sup>And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have obtained the requests made of him.**

**<sup>16</sup>If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one—to those whose sin is not mortal. There is sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that.**

**<sup>17</sup>All wrongdoing is sin, but there is sin that is not mortal.**

**<sup>18</sup>We know that those who are born of God do not sin, but the one who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them.**

**<sup>19</sup>We know that we are God's children, and that the whole world lies under the power of the evil one.**

**<sup>20</sup>And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.**

**<sup>21</sup>Little children, keep yourselves from idols.**

Those who truly believe in Jesus are not without sin (see 1:9; 2:2), but they remain in communion with Jesus and, encouraged by the love of their brothers and sisters, and by their prayer, they know to turn to Jesus for the grace of repentance and forgiveness. They do not remain in sin, because, as John keeps insisting, sin is incompatible with living the life of God given us by Jesus (see 3:9). Nor is their sin mortal. It does not completely destroy the life of Jesus in them, for they are protected from the evil one by Jesus in whom they believe. As Jesus himself says: 'While I was with them, I protected them in your name that you have given me. I guarded them'(John 17:12).

Those who stay within the community of believers know the living and true God and so experience eternal life. As he said earlier: 'This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us'(1John 1:2). In the Gospel we read: 'This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent'(John 17:3). 'Through believing you may have life in his name'(John 20:31).

The last sentence in verse twenty may refer to Jesus. However it may also refer to God. The latter is more likely granted the normal New Testament restriction of the term 'God' to the God and Father of Jesus.

John concludes his letter with a final warning not to get caught up in the false god whom the schismatics are worshipping. By breaking away from the community, they have rejected the God revealed by Jesus. The sentiment expressed here can be found also among the members of the Qumran community:

Damned be anyone initiated with unrepentant heart, who enters this Covenant, then sets up the stumbling block of his sin, so turning apostate ... He shall be cut off from all the Sons of Light because of his apostasy from God, brought about by unrepentance and the stumbling block of sin. He shall cast his lot with those damned for all time.

– Community Rule 1QS 2:11-12,16-17

The danger posed by the heretical teaching is so great that they must protect themselves from it at all costs.