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D'Esta Love
dlove@pepperdine.edu

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Love Not the World

D'ESTA LOVE

Recently, while on vacation, Stuart and I visited a Bible class whose text for study was, “Love not the world or the things in the world” (1 John 2.15a). The class struggled to define the “things in the world,” and had a lengthy conversation about the number of cell phones a family should have. At one point the topic shifted from the world’s goods to people who belong to the world. One person quickly reminded us that while our neighbors in the “denominational world” may be good people, they still teach error and are part of the world. It was evident that the members of this congregation believed they possessed the truth, which separated them from the world. Yet they lived in the world and possessed the world’s goods. So the conversation centered on defining who is of the world and who isn’t, and struggling with how much of the world’s goods they should possess. The discussion never moved beyond the first sentence in the text to questions of idolatry, desire or pride centered in the values of the world around them, or to explore the theological implications of divided loyalties. They certainly did not consider life that is centered in the eternal God juxtaposed to life centered in the world that is passing away, or the implications for ministry of being in the world, yet not of it.

To some degree we all struggle with our relationship to the world. How can the exhortation of 1 John to “love not the world” be instructive to us? Even more to the point, what can we learn from the writer of 1 John about the Christian community to which he writes and its relationship to the world that would suggest implications for ministry for the church today?

1 John describes a Christian community in crisis—a community split in two and from which many have left. With words that clearly echo the Gospel of John, the writer encourages those who remain to believe in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another. “And this is his commandment, we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. 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” (3.23). And so assurance is given to this afflicted community in an attempt to preserve its existence as they await the “last hour” (2.18). They are reminded that they have been forgiven, they have conquered the evil one, and they are strong because the word of God abides in them (2.12-14). In the midst of affirmation and assurance, the author also exhorts:

Do not love the world or the things in the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world; for 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. And the world and its desires are passing away, but those who do the will of God live forever (2.15-17).

Therefore, 1 John depicts a community of faith that apparently is struggling with the tension between loving the world and those who have returned to the world, and loving the family of faith.

So we ask again, what can we learn about this early Christian community that can be instructive to us? We can begin by exploring its development as a community of faith and its understanding of “the world.”

This is a Christian community that inhabits the dualistic thought world of John's Gospel. Carl Holladay, in his introduction to the New Testament, sees an alliance of 1 John with John's Gospel and instructs us to view the author of 1 John as "operating with a Johannine construal of the world." By this he means that "1 John divides reality into two opposing spheres: light and darkness" (1.5-10).¹ As in John's Gospel, sharp distinctions are drawn between polar opposites such as light and darkness, good and evil, life and death. Everything on the negative side of the equation falls into the realm of darkness, which is under the power of evil. Conversely, everything on the positive side falls into the realm of light and is under the protective care of God. Therefore, 1 John exhorts those who have fellowship with the light not to love the world, which belongs to the realm of darkness. The Christian community and the world are mutually exclusive realms. A great divide separates them; there is no middle ground.

THE WORLD

What is the meaning of "the world" in the Johannine writings? Did not Jesus say in John's Gospel, "For 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 view of the world as the object of God's saving love is one of three ways "the world" is understood in the Gospel and 1 John. In 1 John we read, "But 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 second view is that the world is the created order. "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?" (3.17), or "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" (4.17). Third, the world is synonymous to darkness. It is a realm under the power of the evil one, thus hostile to the ways of God. In John's Gospel Jesus tells his disciples, "If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you" (John 15.19). 1 John states a similar view, "Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you" (3.13), and "We know that we are God's children, and the whole world lies under the power of the evil one" (5.19). In 1 John, the realms of light and darkness represent the realms of good and evil, God and the devil. As Holladay observes, "people fall into one of two groups: children of God or children of the devil (3.10). Similarly there are only two possibilities for human discourse: truth and falsehood (1.6; 2.4, 21; 4.6)."² Since the world does not know the Father, the truth is not in them. Therefore, existence in the world is inauthentic and false.

Thus far we have described parallels between the Gospel of John and 1 John, but there are also differences worth noting. An understanding of the world as synonymous with darkness appears in both writings. However, we see a shift in what that understanding of the world spells out for the Christian community in 1 John, because its life setting is different from that of the community in the Gospel of John.

THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The Gospel of John reflects two life settings: the community with Jesus and his disciples and the church at the time the Gospel was written. In the first setting, Jesus is present with his disciples as he prepares them for his death and his return to the Father. In the final discourses of chapters 14 through 16 Jesus draws the disciples into a divine circle of fellowship in which they share the mutual life of the Spirit, the Father and the Son (John 14.10, 16-21). The disciples' new life, embedded in the vine, is secure in the love of God. The love they have for God and each other, and the love they receive, offer a contrast to the hatred they will

1. Carl R. Holladay, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 523.

2. *Ibid.*, 523.

experience in a hostile world that hates them as it hates Jesus. The love they share is also a witness to the world that they are Jesus' disciples.

In the seventeenth chapter, Jesus prays for this community of believers. They live in the world but are not of it. They abide in a fellowship that resides in the world but stands apart from it. Yet, Jesus prays for their protection from the evil one as he sends them into the world. "I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world...As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world" (John 17.15-16, 18).

The second life setting reflected in John is the church to which the Gospel is written. The church addressed by John's Gospel is, as Holladay describes it, a community that is "hunkered down, set against the world" and turned inward. It is "a community in solidarity, which can easily turn inward to breed its own form of communal self-love."³ Jesus had warned the disciples that the Jews would hate them and persecute them, expel them from their synagogues and even kill them (John 16.2). This is now the church's life setting. They are the object of the world's hatred. Holladay says, "Once Christians were excluded from the synagogue, the two worlds of Johannine thought became reinforced, providing the newly emerging Christian community boundaries broad enough to keep them separated from the world."⁴ As many scholars have observed, the Johannine community, standing against a hostile world, is best described as isolated and sectarian, particularly when buttressed by a dualistic worldview.

THE COMMUNITY IN 1 JOHN

As we return to 1 John, the dualistic themes of light/darkness; love/hate; truth/falsehood and life/death are ever present. The boundaries between the church and the world are defined but the hatred they experience is no longer from without. It is from within. Raymond Brown suggests that, "indeed, 1 John makes most sense if understood as written in a period following the appearance of the Gospel, when the struggle with the synagogue and 'the Jews' was no longer a major issue."⁵ The greater problem, according to C.H. Dodd, is from within the community or, more precisely, from those who have left it. The persecution that was evident in the Gospel is not reflected in the Epistles of John.⁶ So what changes have taken place? What happens to a community set apart from the world when the world no longer poses threat of death or expulsion from synagogues? Is it possible that their love, turned inward, is now devouring them as brothers and sisters are at war with each other, or that division has left them depleted and uncertain? Could it be that the boundaries between the world and the church have become less defined and concessions are being made with the surrounding culture?

We can ascertain from 1 John that this is a community in which the love of brother and sister has been threatened, the gospel has been distorted, and the church has been torn apart. It appears that the writer is drawing the circle more tightly to shore up the community and separate it from those who "went out from us" and have returned to the world (2.18).

In the writer's encouragement to this church, we hear the familiar Johannine language of "abiding in," sharing the Father's love, and love for one another. But now it has become more strongly the language of exclusion, with an emphasis on "we" and "us." Concerning those who left, the church is reminded that they do not accept Jesus as God's Son and their leaving makes it clear that they do not and never did "belong to us." But "we," on the other hand, abide in the Son and in the Father because "we" know the truth that Jesus

3. *Ibid.*, 217.

4. *Ibid.*, 213.

5. Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 383.

6. C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1946), 42.

is the Christ. Because “we” love our brothers and sisters “we” have passed from death to life. “We” have no sin because the blood of Jesus cleanses “us” of “our” sins. Furthermore, “we” are from God and have conquered the world. Those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, “they” are of the world. “They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them” (4.5). “We,” on the other hand, are from God. God lives in “us.” His love is perfected in “us.” “We” abide in him and he in “us.” God protects “us” from the evil one. Even language pertaining to the love of God is directed only toward the community of faith. “God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. 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” (4.9-10). This passage recalls John 3.16, but the emphasis has changed. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone that believes in him may not perish but have eternal life” (John 3.16). What has changed? The love of God for the world is excluded. The boundaries are being strengthened.

Conversely, 1 John suggests that those who went out from them belong to the darkness. “They” are sinners and liars. “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ” (2.22)? Therefore “they” do not walk in the light but in darkness. It is clear that those who have left have returned to the world and are at least part of what 1 John refers to as “in the world.”

Those who remain in the community of faith belong to the fellowship of light. Unlike those who rejected the atoning death of Jesus and left their fellowship, the atoning sacrifice of Jesus affirms that those who remain are saved, because the blood of Jesus cleanses them from all sin and that cleansing separates them from the world. This means that this community so loved by God has no choice but to love its brothers and sisters. Even acts of service are directed toward the brother and the sister and not the world (3.17). Thus, the love that binds them together is directed inward. What about the world? They are exhorted not to love the world or the things in the world.

What is the community’s relationship to the world? C.H. Dodd sees “the desires of the flesh, the desire of the eyes and pride in riches” as reflecting a way of life deeply rooted in the wider Greco-Roman society. He suggests that the writer is warning against “pagan society with its sensuality, superficiality and pretentiousness, its materialism and its egoism. These are the marks, our author means, of that old, bad order out of which the Christian has been brought into the new order inaugurated by Christ.”⁷ Dodd further suggests that since we hear nothing of actual persecution in 1 John, the boundaries between the Christian community and the world may be getting blurred. Perhaps those who went away are making compromises with the world, and even those who authentically belong to the community of faith may be drawn to greater accommodations with the surrounding culture. So the writer warns them at two levels: not to make compromises with the pagan world, and to regard those who left as belonging to the world. The world and all that belongs to it are passing away.

Thus, the writer of 1 John brings another dualism into focus. There is a distinction between those who are saved and those who are perishing. There is no middle ground. Therefore, do not give yourself to those things that are passing away. We have been born of God, the writer says. “And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” (5.11-12). We have already passed from death into life. Why would we want to live with dead things? This world and all that is in it is passing away. He has said it before “. . .the darkness is passing away” (2.8).

The sense that the world is perishing carries immediacy for this church. They have been told, “it is the last hour” (2.18). The writer encourages them to “abide in him, so that when he is revealed we may have confidence and not be put to shame before him at his coming” (2.28). The concern of 1 John is for the preservation of the abiding community for “his coming.” Therefore, no consideration is given in 1 John for the

7. *Ibid.*, 42.

redemptive love of the world. 1 John does not have an evangelistic message. The Johannine themes of witness and sending that appear in John's Gospel are absent from this writing. Even the love they have for each other is not viewed as a testimony or witness to the world as in John's Gospel, but as a confirmation to the church that they belong to God. The world is passing away, but "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" (5.20).

With this final affirmation, the writer brings a closing exhortation that echoes his exhortation to "love not the world." The world and all that is in it is not from the true God, therefore it is inauthentic and false. In the dualistic world of the Johannine community you cannot love God and love the world. To exchange the love of God for the love of the world is idolatrous. Furthermore, the love of the world is centered in the desires of the flesh and the pride of riches, none of which comes from God and all of which are passing away. Life in the world is vain, inauthentic and perishing. Life with God is true, authentic and eternal. Eternal life is for those who abide in him. And so the author brings one final exhortation, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5.21).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MINISTRY

What are the implications for ministry for the church today? We do not live in a dualistic, black and white world. We dwell in the middle ground and deal with the complexities of modern life, and many of us are at home with ambiguity and shades of grey. We also do not live with the sense of urgency that it is the last hour. We are at home in our world. We accept its values and are enmeshed in a consumer society that depends on an economy based on limited resources. Therefore, we are vulnerable to marketing and advertising appeals to the desires of the flesh, and pride in riches that make us want more of the world's goods.

The message of 1 John calls into question our accommodations with the surrounding culture. The church today needs the same reminders as the church of 1 John, centered in the great affirmations of the gospel. 1 John reminds us that the world is passing away, but our abiding place is in the world, although it does not belong to it. Our abiding place is a community of faith that resides in the world but stands separate from it. We have fellowship with God and one another, and the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. God has given us his Spirit, and we are his children. As children of God we are called to love one another as he has loved us. We have passed from death to life because God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son, who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins. We are called to the abundant life of God and the economy of a kingdom that does not pass away.

The proclamation of the gospel re-centers our values and our identity in the world. But our life setting is different from the church in 1 John. There may be a time for the church to hunker down, believe in God and love one another in isolation from the world. But that is not our time. We are concerned for our world. As we heed the warning that love of the world is idolatrous, we also hear the call of Jesus to a love for the world that is redemptive. Our dwelling place is in the fellowship of light, lived in the presence of God. Yet we are sent into the world for the sake of the world that it might know the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that is "for the sins of the whole world" (2.2).

D'ESTA LOVE is University Chaplain for Pepperdine University and co-editor of Leaven.

