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Falling on Deaf Ears: The Church's Struggle to Keep the Love Command

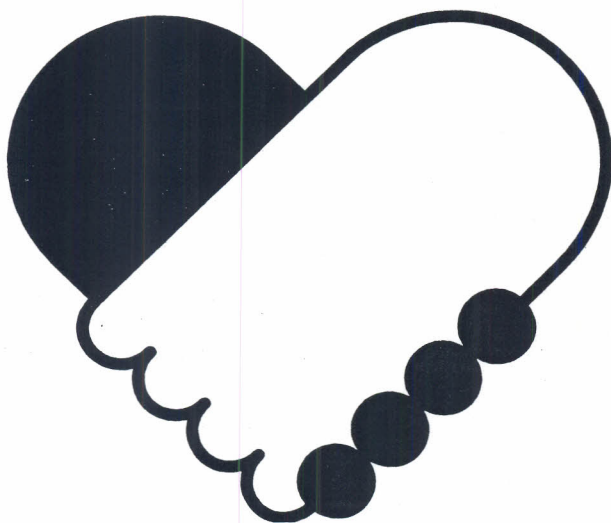
JOHN YORK

Few statements attributed to Jesus in the Gospels are more straightforward and easy to comprehend than this: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13.34-35). The inability of the followers of Jesus to live by these words, from the first century to the present, needs no documentation. In American Christianity, the hallmark of church life has not been the uniqueness of our love, but the multitude of ways we can find to differentiate our beliefs and practices and then be unloving to all who disagree with our choices. Even within a particular congregation or even a specific family, "love one another" faces a multitude of challenges as human beings act in less than loving ways.

Perhaps there is some comfort in Scot McKnight's reminder that the person traditionally recognized as the author of the Gospel of John – the "beloved disciple" – did not suddenly become a loving person.¹ If the author of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John is indeed the brother of James and one of the first selected by Jesus to be a disciple, then his journey to love was not an overnight trip. In a similar way, the contemporary struggle to live out the love command can perhaps take comfort in the Epistles of John. Particularly in 1 John, the elder repeatedly tries to communicate the love command of Jesus to a circumstance in which Christians seem best known for how they are *not* loving toward one another.

We do not know how 1, 2 and 3 John are related to each other – or even if they are related. One suggestion is that all three were written at approximately the same time to the same church. Third John was written to a specific leader in that church. Second John was a cover letter written to the church itself, in which John addresses the divisions that had fractured the fellowship (i.e., common union, community) of that church. First John is a sermon that accompanied that letter.²

The assumption of this paper is that the recipients of this sermon already had access to the Gospel of John. But misunderstanding about the identity and teaching of Jesus in the Gospel led to all kinds of conflicts in the church. First John is not a letter like the other two – there is no particular person or church addressed. It's a sermon, an exhortation. John believed that God *had* broken into history in the Incarnation. John had experienced it and had been



1. Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2004). 102-110.

changed. And he believed the faithful proclamation of that message could create true community among alienated, dysfunctional people.

John writes to a church that has just undergone a major catastrophe, just lived through the first full-blown schism in church history and is reeling from the experience of trying to sort out truth and falsehood, faith and failure. Part one of the sermon runs from 1.5-3.10. It is John's warning against certain false teachers who had disrupted the peace and unity of the holy community with their reinterpretation of the message about Christ. They had been exposed as false teachers not only by their teaching but by their behavior as well. They had "gone out" from the body and broken fellowship with their sisters and brothers. Part two begins at 3.11 and goes through 5.12, and focuses less on the false teachers and their secession than the welfare of those who have been grieved by their error, their departure and their disruptive behaviors.

Throughout the sermon, as many commentators have pointed out, John uses strong polarities to distinguish the true followers of Jesus from those who left the community: light/darkness; love/hate; faithful community/world; life/death; obedience/lawlessness, etc. He also believes in a particular relational duality for Jesus: He is the Word that is God; He is also the Word that became flesh (John 1.1, 14). The Father and the Son are one and abide in each other; "If you have seen the Father, you have seen the Son" (John 14.9-10). "Whoever acknowledges the Son acknowledges the Father" (1 John 2.23). At the same time that God and Jesus are identified as one, John also maintains that Jesus is to be fully identified with humanity. The ultimate litmus for "spirits" and disciples is believing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (1 John 4.1-2).

The second relational duality that John maintains in the Epistle is that of faithful followers. Anyone claiming loving relationship with the Father and Son also lives in loving relationship with other disciples of Jesus. The latter case is made in the context of other dualisms, namely walking in light versus walking in darkness, being loved or hated by the world.

The first of John's direct statements regarding the love command comes in 2.7-11, where the power of obedience resides in one being able to grasp the language of *abiding*:³ "whoever says, 'I abide in him' ought to walk as he walked." That is the language of Jesus in John 15. It is the language of relational presence, the claim that just as Jesus and God abide in one another, so now they abide in us. So if they really abide in us and with us, our walk – our life – ought to mirror the life of Jesus. Obedience is the direct result of his abiding presence. John says you can't claim that you participate in that abiding and act some other way than Jesus would act.⁴ As part one of the sermon ends (3.9-10), John adds the image of being born of God. God's seed, God's implanted presence, abides in those who abide in him, in those born of God (3.9). Those who share in the righteousness of the Son and are children of God live out lives of righteousness. And when people see them, they can distinguish between children of the devil and children of God: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God, nor is anyone who does not love his brother (3.10).

Any good sermon has transitions, and for John that is 3.11: "This is the message we heard from the beginning: We should love one another." Following the negative example of behavior that is the opposite of love (Cain), Jesus Christ become the positive role model – Jesus laid down his life; his followers ought to lay down their lives.

3. It seems to me that the translation of *meno* as "abide" (RSV, NRSV) better conveys relational presence than the NIV choice of "remain." The term is used twenty-three times in 1 John and fifteen times in John 14-15. The term combines with *koinonia* ("fellowship," used four times in 1 John 1.3-7) to state the relational claims of a shared life in Jesus Christ.

4. The language of "abiding" throughout 1 John seems dependent on John 15, particularly verses 9-15: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 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. You are my friends if you do what I command you" (John 15.9-14).

“We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death. All who hate a brother or sister are murderers, and you know that murderers do not have eternal life abiding in them. We know love by this that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. 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? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action” (1 John 3.14-18).

John then specifically names a circumstance. Love responds to a brother who is in need. The haves take care of the have-nots; anything less is not love. Yet John seems to recognize immediately that his audience faces failure on this point, much as they do with committing sin (1 John 2.1-2). Just as Jesus Christ is “advocate” before the Father when one admits committing a sin, so in this instance, when the heart condemns, God is greater than our hearts (3.19).

God’s gracious behavior makes it possible to live in a kind of harmonious relationship with God and one another that issues forth in prayers that are answered and lives lived before God that are pleasing to him (1 John 3.21-22). That premise then leads to yet another statement of the love command, only this time loving one another is one side of a two-sided coin: “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” (1 John 3.23). In John’s writings, keeping the commandments always seems to come down to two things: Believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and love one another. In other words, the two greatest commands – love God and love your neighbor as yourself – now are filtered through the experience of God becoming flesh and calling humanity to himself through the cross event. To believe in the name of his Son Jesus is not merely to give mental assent to the idea. Kathleen Norris provides a helpful discussion of “belief” in her book *Amazing Grace*.⁵ She opens her chapter on the subject by reminding the reader that the Greek root for the word “believe” means “to give one’s heart to.” In other words, it’s more than an intellectual exercise. She writes, “The word ‘belief’ has been impoverished; it has come to mean a head-over-heart intellectual assent. When people ask, ‘What do you believe?’ they are usually asking ‘What do you think?’” She goes on to describe belief as a whole person process that involves not just mental agreement with an idea but also embraces doubts and ambiguities. To give one’s heart to something is more of a journey than an intellectual moment.

That is our experience of faith in the Son Jesus Christ. It is also our experience of learning to love one another. It is a journey into obedience, not a moment when we intellectually got it right in our heads. John then has a final word of great news as this section closes: “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” (1 John 3.24). There is our language of “abiding” again. It is the reassuring promise of God-presence that empowers the journey of faith, the journey of experienced love and obedience, the journey of belief in the Son Jesus Christ, and the journey of love for one another. It is the presence of the Spirit through which God makes his home in the brothers and sisters.

Alan Culpepper writes of vv. 23-24,

The conclusion of this section sums up the elder’s understanding of what it means to be a Christian as well as any verse in the Epistle. It is a definitive statement of ‘the message which you heard from the beginning’ (3.11) – the words with which this section began. The command is two-fold and both parts are drawn from the gospel: believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ (John 1.12; 3.16; 14.1; 20.31), and love one another (John 13.34; 15.12). This two-fold command is the Johannine version of the great command to love God and love your neighbor as yourself (Mark 12.28-31; Deut 6.4; Lev 19.18). While the love com-

5. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 62-68. Cf. Johannes Lowe and Eugene Nida, eds., *Greek-English Lexicon* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 370.

mand has already been treated extensively (2.7-11; 3.11, 16-18), this is the first reference to believing. The command to believe will occur through the rest of the letter, however. Here it is attached to “the name of his Son.” Believing in Jesus (5.1, 5, 10) or in his name (5.13) is tantamount to receiving his revelation of the Father and the salvation he offers (John 3.18).⁶

In chapter four, John returns to this major theme one more time, bringing together the same relational terms. The ability to love one another comes from the God who is love (1 John 4.7-8). Those who know God are born of God, but the way in which anyone knows about the love of God is through God sending his only son in the world “that we might live through him” (4.9-10). The son Jesus Christ empowers our forgiveness; it is the love of God in the Son toward humans that empowers love for one another and, in turn, demonstrates that “God lives in us and his love is made complete in us” (4.12).

REFLECTIONS

A number of things can now be said about John’s relational understanding of God and Christ and the followers of Christ who share in this “abiding” through the Holy Spirit (1 John 3.23-24).

1. John steadfastly maintains the oneness of God the Father and God the Son (John 1.1; 1 John 1.1-4). At the same time he also maintains that Jesus Christ shares the same oneness with humans, and that the latter must be “believed” by the faithful community.
2. Any claims to relationship with God the Father are made possible by belief in the Son. At the same time, fellowship with the Father and the Son is always demonstrated by and through fellowship with the brothers and sisters (loving one another).
3. Believing in the name of the Son Jesus Christ and loving one another are interdependent and are affirmed in the faith community by the abiding Holy Spirit.
4. Just as the Father abides in the Son and the Son in the Father, so also the faithful community abides in the Son (and the Father) by means of the abiding Spirit.
5. For John, the words “command” and “obey” are inextricably linked to the word “love.” That may seem unimportant, except for the fact that in so many instances we humans act as though “obeying God’s commands” trumps “loving one another.”

Apart from making any ontological claims about Trinitarian formulas in 1 John, there is little doubt that John’s language of “abiding” creates a relational trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit, with human belief in the Son opening the believer to the abiding Spirit. In what might be called a relational reciprocity, the abiding Spirit joins the believer to the relational community of Father, Son and Spirit. For John, the two greatest commands linked together by Jesus – the *Shema* (Deut 6.4-5) and the command to love neighbor as self (Lev 19.18) – are equivalent to faith in Jesus Christ and loving one another. Because of the relational oneness of Father and Son, belief in the Son testifies to one’s keeping of the *Shema* (Deut 6). Likewise, loving others is made obvious by the faithful community’s call to love one another. This exhortation is repeated almost verbatim in 4.21: “he who loves God should love his brother also.”

From John’s perspective, the opponents (antichrists) failed to keep the greatest commandments. They did not love God because they did not recognize God in Jesus having come in the flesh. Because loving others is predicated on participation in that “abiding” oneness of Father and Son, they could not love others in

6. R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, Knox Preaching Guides (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 74-75. Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1982), 418, makes a similar reference to v. 23 being analogous to the great commandment teaching of Jesus.

the community – they do not love their neighbor as self.⁷ There can be no doubt therefore about their identity as those who never were actually part of the community.

John appeals to his children in the faith to believe in the Son Jesus Christ and thus be empowered by the abiding Spirit. Through the Spirit's abiding presence they will overcome the obstacles of sin, prove false any claims to "know" Christ that eliminate either Jesus' oneness with the Father or his oneness with humans, and enjoy *koinonia* (fellowship) with each other and the Father, Son and Spirit. Love in action sees and responds to human need because that is what God the Father has done in sending his Son. Giving one's heart to the Son (faith) and loving one another become the source of community identity that is confirmed by the abiding Spirit.

THE CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGE

Perhaps one of the reasons that churches in the Western Enlightenment thought world have been better at fighting than loving is that our rational sensibilities stole the mystery of "abiding" from us. Perhaps we cannot keep the command because we cannot "hear" it as invitation into the relational community of God that is described. We have viewed sin judicially rather than relationally. We have viewed faith as intellectual process rather than giving one's whole person in trust to someone or something. We have fallen into intellectual ruts regarding doctrines of God, Christ and Spirit.

We have been better suited for making ontological arguments about Trinity than living relationally in the presence of Trinity. What we cannot explain with reason and philosophy becomes yet another breach of love and unity. Whenever we discover that we "know," whether it is our understanding of the Holy Spirit, or a particular Christology, knowing quickly trumps loving. While twenty-first century heresies may not resemble early Gnosticism or Docetism, we have our own ways of defining away the paradoxical oneness of God and Jesus and Spirit, or the paradox of God in the flesh who now "abides" in us.

The good news is that, on a number of fronts, avenues for hearing this message are appearing. There is a strong movement among emerging churches and what my friend David Fleer terms the "reforming center" in American Christianity to see the Christian story through relational lenses rather than dogmatic or judicial perspectives. Narrative readings have helped overcome atomistic readings. The new subjectivity of knowing actually is providing a renewed sense of mystery and faith in place of absolutism. While all of this can give rise to just another set of reasons to fight and label and distrust, it also leaves us open to John's invitation to "abide." There is a mystery to John's understanding of love that we are called to "give our hearts to." Christian witness and ministry should be shaped by the abiding life, in which we seek to live in the relational community of God, finding therein the expressions and means to love in word and deed.

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7. A concern for modern interpreters of 1 John is the apparent limitation of the love command to "the brothers and sisters." However the context of 1 John suggests that the crisis of the schism is more responsible for this community focus. Love within the community is to be the reflection of the love of God to others. "Loving one another" is to be testimony to God's love for all.