

The Great Community of Love — 7

1 John 4:1-12

James Packer, writing concerning Jonathan Edwards, put it that:

What Edwards, standing in the Reformational mainstream, meant by religion is very clear. It is the life of regeneration, repentance, and assured faith and hope in Christ, based on knowing oneself to be a justified and adopted child of God whom the Triune Lord has loved from eternity, whom the Son has redeemed by dying on the cross, and whom the Holy Spirit, the divine change agent, now indwells.¹

Packer develops this analysis, but it is notable that among the primary elements is ‘assured faith and hope’. Edwards himself asserts that assurance of itself is not a *proof* of salvation,² but that it is nonetheless as significant feature in the lives of men and women in the scriptures. But what proof would it be if the evidence is essentially unseen, or if the result was a certainty that by its nature removed the need for faith?

1 John 3:24 appears to say that the gift of the Spirit proves (‘we know’) that Christ abides in us, and that is correct, but there are other elements to be considered. There are many who will claim to do or say things by the Holy Spirit, but is the claim correct? Up to this point, John has been pointing to the evidences of the presence of the Spirit, the anointing which we received. These include the changed attitude of the believers towards (i) sin: believers will hate it and actively reject its presence; (ii) Jesus: believers will not shift from the dynamic revelation of the Son which came to them through the apostolic message. It cannot be that there will be some variation or alternative to this which may come at some later time (Gal. 1:6-9); and (iii) the other members of the church: believers love one another. However imperfectly they may do so, nevertheless there is a powerful reality in the relationship which now exists between them. When these evidences of the Spirit’s anointing are recognised, then ‘we know that he abides in us’.

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. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³and 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. ⁴Little 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. ⁵They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We 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. (1 John 4:1-6)

What of those who, claiming to have received the Spirit, call into question the validity of the believers’ confidence? John’s reply is that the ‘spirits’ should be tested. It is conspicuous that right through the scriptures the presence of the Spirit of God relates to prophetic ministry. That was probably the case in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 14:37-38) and is so here. When John writes, ‘Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God’, he is not saying that some people may be demon

¹ J. I. Packer, ‘The Glory of God and the Reviving of Religion: A Study in the Mind of Jonathan Edwards’, in John Piper and Justin Taylor (General Editors), *A God Entranced Vision of All Things: The Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, Crossway Books, Wheaton, 2004, p. 95.

² *Treatise Concerning the Religious Affections*, Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1961, p. 95ff.

possessed (however true that may be) and/or that by asking the ‘spirit’ certain questions its true identity may be determined. Some point to the confession that ‘Jesus Christ has come in the flesh’ (1 John 4:3) as being determinative: ‘This is the criterion by which true and false prophetic spirits may be distinguished’.³ Without pursuing the whole topic, I should say that neither the reference to the gift of discernment in 1 Corinthians 12:10 (where there is no discussion or explanation) nor the example of Jesus and the apostles permits me to see that method as a way of dealing with the demonic *or* with John’s concern here. Rather, if the presence of the Spirit of God relates to the prophetic ministry, then John’s explanation is simple: ‘Many false prophets have gone out into the world’.

This is not new. We can quickly recall the confrontations between the prophets of God and the false prophets who were active in Judah and Israel. For instance, 1 Kings 22, describing the work of the prophet Micaiah, attributes the advice of the false prophets to ‘a lying spirit’ (v. 23), which has, incidentally, been identified as the only time in the Old Testament where the word spirit is ‘clearly personalised’.⁴ Since antichrists were so conspicuously present and active among John’s readers to deceive the church, seeing it is the last hour the problem is even more acute.

How may we know whether the ‘spirit’ which motivates the prophet is from God or not? The answer, in principle, is the same as it has always been: listen to what the prophet says. Here John says that

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.

As we have said previously, the full nature of the secessionists’ claims is not given by John. We understand that they claimed that ‘Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh’ but we remain unclear as to what they meant by it. What we can conclude, however, is that the final point of reference for the evaluation of their ‘prophetic’ message is the apostolic testimony. When Jesus told the disciples, ‘You are witnesses of these things’ (Luke 24:48), he was speaking primarily to the apostles. It is the apostles and their word which is the authorised testimony to Christ. It is the apostolic message which is ‘the word of God’ (1 Thess. 2:13). The exhortation by John in 1 John 2:24, ‘Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you’, is, therefore, of supreme importance. It is by means of the apostolic testimony and our ongoing response of faith in Christ who is revealed through it that we abide ‘in the Son and in the Father’ and so receive the promised eternal life (1 John 2:24-25).

So then we test the spirits by comparing the claims of the ‘prophets’ with the apostolic testimony to Christ. For us that means testing the message of the prophets against the message of the New Testament, and so also against the message of the Old Testament. The need for genuine prophecy in the church (see 1 Cor. 14:1 etc.) is therefore closely paralleled by the need for sound teaching. The true pastor must, then, be ‘an apt teacher’ (1 Tim. 3:2) if the church is to hear the genuine prophetic word and not be deceived by impostors. We might compare Ephesians 4:11 where the pastor and teacher are probably the one role.

The activity of false prophets is not surprising. The false prophet with the counterfeit word had been a factor since the fall, but now John’s readers had been

³ F. Martin, ‘Discernment of Spirits, Gift of’ in Stanley M. Burgess and Gary B. McGee (Ed’s), *Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 244. Martin may have been only referring to the context of 1 John 4, though he does not say so.

⁴ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit*, Nisbet and Co., London, 1928, p. 9.

warned of the coming of antichrist and they could see that the spirit of antichrist was at work in their world, before their eyes. Antichrist is not some figure yet to appear in the future, he is cunningly active now, as ever. It is not unreasonable to understand 'antichrist' as an alternate title for the devil, Satan. This is so especially in the light of what follows in verse 4 compared with 1 John 3:8 and 5:18-19.

No one relishes a confrontation with the powers of darkness. It is a draining experience (Mark 5:30), requiring far more strength and resources than we ourselves possess (cf. Eph. 6:10ff). But that is no cause for fear. As John has been urging his readers to confidence, so here he can say, 'Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them', that is, the spirits of these 'prophets'. You are already victorious! Of course, it is not through some personal strength that we have overcome (cf. 1 John 2:12-14). Rather, we are victorious because 'the one who is in [us] is greater than the one who is in the world'. In the same way, Jesus said, 'Take courage. I have conquered the world' (John 16:33). So we have overcome the hostile spirits, because we are in Christ. So 1 John 5:4-5:

for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. ⁵Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4-5)

The apparent success of the false prophets is simply due to the fact that the world loves its own. What these prophets say is what the world wants them to say so the world listens to them with rapt attention. As we see elsewhere in scripture (e.g. 2 Cor. 4:1-6), the world will only hear the word of God when God himself reveals the truth to their blinded sight.

Again, the distinctions are clear:

They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We 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.

Of course, those who listen to us are not doing so in any sense of us being personally significant. They listen to us because they recognise that what we say is what Christ is saying. Thus Jesus said, 'My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me' (John 10:27). Those who reject us and our message are not, finally, rejecting us at all, but Christ. At this point we too must be confronted. If there is a trace of ego in us, then we risk our whole ministry.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In 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. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. (1 John 4:7-12)

How, then, should we live? The answer is simple, yet profound. 'Let us love one another'. There is a command here, but it must be noted that it is a command to continue that which is already taking place. This is seen in 1 John 3:13 and 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 etc. but is also evidenced by what John wrote. 'Let us love one another' uses the present tense and that implies the continuation of what is already happening. So the command is certainly not to initiate something from within our

own resources. On the contrary, ‘love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.’ This does not mean that *by means of* loving we know God; it means instead that only by being born of God and knowing God *can* we love. ‘Love is from God’ means that all love flows from God and that if and when we love it will be his love flowing through us. That is the love which Paul says has been flooded into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us, the love which has at its heart the work of the cross (Rom. 5:5-8). That is why the believer in Christ must abide in the apostolic gospel. In the wisdom of God, God has chosen to reveal himself through that gospel. The power of God is for those who believe that gospel (1 Cor. 1:17; Rom. 1:16-17) and the gift of the Spirit came, and goes on coming, the same way (Gal. 3:1-5). From that comes John’s statement later, ‘We have known and now know and have believed and now believe⁵ the love which God has in⁶ us’ (1 John 4:16).

The distinction John has been making throughout the letter is now made again: ‘Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love’. One of the features of the use of the words ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’ in the scriptures is their orientation towards personal relationship. ‘Know’ is a euphemism for sexual intercourse, and while that aspect is not even hinted at in biblical worship, unlike the sexual aspects of some pagan religions, the matter of deep union with God is. While analytical definition may elude us, surely there can be no more intimate relationship than that described in John 14:23:

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.

‘God is love’ says that love is the essential being of God, not as a mystical force dressed in personal terms but as the centre of the personal character of God. When we meet God we meet the one who loves us and who will love us through to his holy goal. But he loves us because he is love in himself.

While it is not John’s point, we may nonetheless say that John implies (since he does not *explicitly* state it) that *the Father is love*.⁷ Hence he says:

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. ¹⁰In 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.

It is impossible not to see John’s use of ‘God’ as referring to the Father, hence ‘*his Son*’. But it should be stressed that philosophical speculation about the Trinity was not a New Testament concern. The issue was far more immediate. All the New Testament writers were Jewish, of the new Israel, and now they are aware that the ‘One God’ of Israel is to be known not any longer as Yahweh but as Father. ‘For us there is one God, the Father’ (1 Cor. 8:6). Of course there is one God, that is fundamental to the revelation given to Moses (Deut. 6:4), but, since the revelation of God which has come in Jesus Christ, he is now revealed as Father and that revelation is not only for the intellect but for our whole being (Rom. 8:15).

That the Son should love (Gal. 2:20 etc.) and that love should come by the Spirit (Rom 15:30 etc.) is hardly an issue, since ‘God is love’ would mean that, before we

⁵ The two verbs are in the perfect tense.

⁶ The Greek has ἐν ἡμῖν (*en hēmin*), although a rigid translation of the preposition *en* is impossible.

⁷ ‘Whenever (ὁ) θεός is found in the NT, we are to assume that ὁ πατήρ is the referent unless the context makes this sense impossible. Nowhere is it appropriate to render ὁ θεός by “the divine essence” or “the Godhead” (Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1992, p. 271).

were created, the Father loved (loves) his Son and that the Holy Spirit is the personal agent of that love. But there is more: we have no knowledge of that eternal love other than as it comes to us in the action of redemption.

... the First Epistle of John (4.16) defines God by saying 'God is love'. It is not just that God loves, in the same way that he is sometimes angry. He is love. His very existence is love. He constitutes himself as love. That is what happens on the cross. This definition only acquires its full force when we continually make the way that leads to the definition clear to ourselves: Jesus' forsakenness on the cross, the surrender of the Son by the Father and the love which does everything—gives everything—suffers everything—for lost men and women. God is love. That means that God is self-giving. It means he exists for us: on the cross. To put it in trinitarian terms—The Father lets his Son sacrifice himself through the Spirit. The Father is crucifying love, the Son is crucified love, and the Holy Spirit is the unvanquishable power of the cross. The cross is at the centre of the Trinity. This brought out by tradition, when it takes up the Book of the Revelation's image of 'the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev.5.12). Before the world was, the sacrifice was already in God. No Trinity is conceivable without the Lamb, without the sacrifice of love, without the crucified Son. For he is the slaughtered Lamb glorified in eternity.⁸

Love is *shown* (NIV) in the action of redemption; whether or not it is recognised by men and women is quite secondary. Secret love, love which is not in deed and in truth, is not love; indeed the deeper the unexpressed 'love' (is it 'infatuation'?) the more it is ultimately destructive. The showing of God's love was in the sending of his Son into the world so that we might live through him. It had nothing to do with us loving God, since we did not and would not (cf. Rom. 1:30, we were 'God haters') but was totally his love for us (cf. Deut. 7:7-8). What is more, the love of God bore not only our hatred of God but more significantly his wrath against us in our fallenness. He sent his Son not to explain his love but to effect its goal by being the propitiation for our sins (see 1 John 2:1f).

God's love is not so much an example for us to follow, as if from our own resources. Love is actually evoked from us, meaning that his love liberates us into the action of his love. He has already made it clear that where there is no love it is because men and women do not know God. The obligation to love which is laid on us as creatures in the image of God comes now as the delight of those who know his love. It remains an obligation, but one written on heart.

No one has ever seen God (1 John 4:12, cf. John 1:18⁹). But if we love one another then it is *because* he lives in us and his love is perfected in us. John did not use the word 'because' but, once again, the matter of our loving is not that we could ever cause God to abide in us by it. But, and this must be faced, where we do not love there is a deep contradiction. Whatever else, if we will not love, we most certainly cannot claim that God abides in us. Assurance of the presence of God is for those who are engaged in the moral response of love evoked by his love. 'Perfected' refers to the goal of his love having been accomplished. And that goal is a great community of love which is the image and expression of the community of the One in Three.

⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God*, SCM Press, London, 1980, 1981, p. 82f.

⁹ The wording is not the same.