

# The Great Community of Love – 1

## 1 John 1:1-4

These studies are based on the First Letter of John. In them we will work through the letter, and no doubt that will mean we encounter some items that are hard to understand. As one writer put it:

In I John it is virtually impossible to detect a structured sequence of thought. ... It has been said with only moderate exaggeration that, because of grammatical impreciseness, every sentence in I John can be interpreted in three different ways.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, strangely, while that may be so, we will no doubt find some of the complexities enriching and, even more, that there is really no difficulty for men and women of faith. The truth quickly communicates itself and faith recognises the Master's voice. That is why even our final ignorance of the identity of the author (the work is anonymous) and of the first recipients or their circumstances is of little real consequence.

It may be worth suggesting that, in the providence of God, there is so much of the background of the New Testament documents of which we remain uncertain. Who?, what?, when?, where?, why? etc. are all valid questions, but precise answers so often elude us.<sup>2</sup> All we have are the writer's answers but we are not certain of the questions. There is an advantage in all that, since we are presented with a word which the Spirit speaks to every generation. The effort to discover the precise background of the church being addressed is totally valid, but it can occasionally lead to treating the various New Testament documents as if they were locked into their original context. But to hold to the authority of the Scriptures means that we hold to the authority of God himself.

The *precise* reason the letter was written is unclear. It was obviously written to counter the claims, both theological and ethical, of some who had been members of the church but who had recently left it (2:19), but exactly what those claims were is hard to determine. Obviously the claims bore some relationship to the person of Christ, but whether they were saying that he was not fully man or that he was not fully God cannot be finally decided. Again, we must stress that our knowledge of the truth does not depend on any reconstruction of the presumed theology of these people. Had that been important it would have been made perfectly clear. It seems more reasonable to say that the claims of the heretics are really irrelevant; what is important is the truth of Christ and its implications.

More even than that is the fact that all that we know of Christ comes by revelation. In the final analysis, we can, of ourselves, discern nothing of Christ other than what is given to us (cf. Mark 4:11; Deut. 29:29).

The opening verses of the letter link revelation with the historical person of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Anchor Bible) Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1982, p. x.

<sup>2</sup> We have noted that the letter is anonymous. Some even question whether the work is a letter at all, because of its style. The reason the letter is attributed to John is its similarities with the Gospel of John. The letters of 2 and 3 John bear the signature of 'The Elder', though they are evidently written by the author of 1 John.

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>We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1-4).

What is plain is that John regards revelation as dynamic. It is not information to be digested and reproduced so much as a relationship which has been established and in which we live.

John's declaration was not the result of years of theological reflection, moulded and modified to suit the conditions of the readers and hearers. It flowed out of his direct personal, indeed, day to day physical contact with the Man Jesus.

In spite of the NRSV text quoted above, John did not commence with the words, 'We declare to you...' <sup>3</sup> Instead there is the dramatic statement:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— (RSV)

'That which was from the beginning' may point to a number of things. 'From the beginning'<sup>4</sup> is a phrase used eight times in 1 John (1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24 twice; 3:8, 11) as well as twice in 2 John (verses 5 and 6). It may refer to the beginning of creation (as in Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1, though that points to 'the beginning' as preceding creation). It may refer, as it clearly does later in 3:8ff., to the beginning of human history when the devil demonstrated his murderous nature (see John 8:44) both in killing Adam and Eve and then in bringing murder into the human sphere in the story of Cain and Abel, which is the issue to which John refers in 3:12. In 2:24 the reference could be to the beginning when the gospel proclamation came to the readers. Finally, it may refer here to the personal appearing of the Son of God in the flesh. That would certainly suit the phrases that follow, but would it exhaust John's meaning?

While the above quote from Raymond Brown is doubtless correct, we may well take it that John was saying far more than only one of the offered alternatives. It may well be that his intention was that the one who existed from all eternity as the Son, and who was and is the word of life, was also the one whom John and his associates knew in the intimacy of human living, thus they heard Jesus, they actually saw him with their eyes and they watched him and with their hands they had touched the word of life!

'The word of life' is more than just a divine fiat.<sup>5</sup> Verse 2, puts it:

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—

Eternal life is a person, the person who was with the Father and who was revealed to humanity in the figure of Jesus Christ the incarnate word. We must say that this is far more than a mystical way of expressing ourselves. This is a recognition that we tend to speak and function in ways that are far less than the truth. What people call reality,

<sup>3</sup> The NIV has a similar approach to the NRSV.

<sup>4</sup> ἀπ' ἀρχῆς (*ap' archēs*).

<sup>5</sup> 1. a formal or official authorization of something; 2. an authoritative and often arbitrary command.

or 'the real world' is usually a somewhat two dimensional matter, whereas, when Jesus Christ is seen for who he is and known in fellowship, then there is a knowing which transcends anything we can imagine from our own resources. For instance, in 2:20, John writes of the anointing we have received from the Holy One, resulting in us knowing 'all things'. One does not simply *know about* the Son of God, one *has* the Son and so has life or one does not have him and so does not have life (5:12).

The apostolic proclamation is never just the recitation of facts or the imparting of information, as if human beings can give rational consideration to such material. Romans 1:18-23 shows us that whenever the truth of God is seen, men and women deny it by suppressing all that it involves. This is the hiding from God of Genesis 3:8 worked out in ways that are totally opposed to the righteousness of God. However, Paul makes it plain that such behaviour is not genuinely rational, in spite of the often amazing capacities of human beings:

they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools... (Rom. 1:21-22)

The apostolic proclamation is the announcement of the things that have been seen and heard (cf. Acts 4:20) and the result is not just that people agree on certain points but that a fellowship is established between speaker and hearer. The Greek word for fellowship is *koinōnia*, and refers to a binding together,<sup>6</sup> a communion which transcends mere association. The closest example humanity can experience is that of the one-flesh relationship of marriage. This *koinōnia* is effected by the proclamation, since by the announcement of what has been seen and heard, Christ himself speaks eternal life into the hearer. In other words, we have fellowship with each other because the fundamental fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. The union of the Father and the Son includes those who have the Son.

We should see how John 17:20-24 opens up the richness of this communion, and we should also see that Jesus' prayer has, in fact, been answered. This communion is not an ideal to be sought but a reality to be lived in. Hence the Ephesians are urged to be eager to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Eph. 4:3). It is this which makes the fracturing of communion, as evidently was the case in the church receiving this letter, or the failure to live in *genuine community*, such an ugly distortion of the truth as it is in Christ.

Geoffrey Bingham has put it:

Community is a corporate matter in which all are saints and all live by the grace of God and the interaction and support of all others. Community is a living company whose members know the joy of mutual love.<sup>7</sup>

What is plain, and what must be received and understood, is that 'living in community' has little to do with living in the same geographical locality or attending the same building etc. Genuine community is known in the communion we have with each other in the communion of the triune God, the fellowship brought to us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (cf. 2 Cor. 13:13).

The joy of mutual love is at the heart of John's letter. His strong statements in criticism of those who have left the fellowship are not a contradiction of love but the expression of it. John 17:13 speaks of Jesus' desire for the disciples to have *his* joy

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<sup>6</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, 'Fellowship, Communion' in Alan Richardson (Ed), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, SCM, London, 1957, p. 81.

<sup>7</sup> *Love is the Spur*, Eyrie Books, North Parramatta, 2004, p. 152.

made complete in them. John's desire is to have that joy fulfilled by the fellowship living in the mutual love which flows to them through new birth. 'We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete' (1:4). Joy that is contained and restrained is joy that cannot be fulfilled: it must be proclaimed (John 15:11), hence his urging:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. (1 John 4:7).

Or, as that could well be, 'Let us *go on loving one another...*' The miracle has happened; all that remains is for us to go on believing God and to go on living in the great community of love he has brought into being through the Son of his love (1 Thess. 4:9-10). That is not a matter of emotional responses to other people; it is a matter of our wills responding in obedience:

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. (1 John 3:23-24)

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