

The Great Community of Love — 5

1 John 3:1-10

Divisions in churches are not happy. Actually neither, sometimes, are chapter divisions in the Bible. The commencement of chapter 3 of I John is probably one of those instances. Perhaps we could have the opening verses of chapter 3 this way:

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that everyone who does right has been born of him. ¹See 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. ²Beloved, 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. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 2:29-3:3)

In chapter 2 John describes the turmoil caused by the words and actions of those whom he describes as 'antichrists' as being an expected part of 'the last hour', and the fact that the evil one is present and active in this and other forms is plain proof that the last hour is here. The apostle Peter, faced with the same situation, wrote:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

Both these apostles recognised that the readers were, and are, living in the last hour, and both, along with the rest of the New Testament writers, looked to the hope of Christ's appearing. It is the appearance of 'anti-Christ's', those who stand against Christ and his character and actions, which is so unsettling.

It seems that the claims of these antichrists to some superior truth must have been quite persuasive. Without for one moment conceding their point, whatever the precise details were, he still took them to be a serious threat. So he urges that his readers must not forget the great wonder of their redemption and the powerful results of God's work for them and in them. They should know that they have been anointed by the Holy One and that they are now set to know the truth; in Paul's words, they 'have the mind of Christ' (1 Cor. 2:16). With such an anointing they should know that they know the Father, that their sins are forgiven and that, while they may be buffeted by the evil one, they are in no danger from him as they have already conquered him in Christ. Far from lamenting their weakness, they should boast in it, they should acknowledge that their weakness is the way things must be if grace is to be known in its fulness, while as men and women of grace they are indeed strong, having all the resources of Christ their conquering King. As he is, so are we in this world.

Over against the claims of those who would deceive them, John urges his readers to abide in what they have heard from the beginning. If they do that they actually abide in the Father and the Son and, therefore, abide in the action of his promise of eternal life. If the readers abide in Christ they need have no cause for anxiety at his coming, for to abide in him is to abide in the action of his cross. There can be no shame when the causes of shame have been totally and permanently removed through the 'propitiatory' work of Christ.

The obvious response to this ought to be that the person who knows that cleansing will do right, for the simple reason that they have been born of God and will therefore evidence their Father's righteous character.

What is significant, though, is that there is more than a mere change in status when a person comes to Christ. Grace does genuinely transform a person and that is what must be declared. ‘See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.’ See what love the Father has given us!’ We are now his children!¹ Understanding it or appreciating the vastness of it does not alter it or add to it, that is what we are (John 1:12). Furthermore, this is a very real experience, since the gift of the Holy Spirit brings the reality of Fatherhood home to us in rich abundance. *We cry, Abba Father!* (Gal. 4:4-7; Rom. 8:15; cf. Mark 14:36).

It becomes quickly obvious that the world around us does not see us that way. Quite often it is the heretics who receive most approval from the world, and that is hardly surprising, since men and women outside of Christ must always suppress the truth of God (Rom. 1:18). In John’s words, the world does not know us as we are because it does not know him. Jesus himself said: ‘You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me you would know my Father also’ (John 8:19). It does not know him because it *will* not know him. It does not because it will not know us, it dare not know us as we are. It has a fundamental blindness (2 Cor. 4:3-4). The time will come, however, when,

I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you. (Rev. 3:9)

‘Beloved, we are God’s children now’. It is salutary to note that John calls his readers ‘Beloved’. It is all too easy for those in leadership to assume either some superior position or even to see the readers or hearers as, even if mildly, his enemies. Take the Old Testament prophets, whom the people of Israel persecuted and even killed. We have noted how Calvin saw the prophets’ attitude towards their people.² John calls these readers ‘beloved’ because he does love them, and he loves them because he and they are loved with such amazing love. True ministry recognises that the one in a position of leadership stands equally under grace and is equally the object of redeeming love.

Believers are people with a goal. They are maturing, but their walk is one of faith and not of sight (cf. Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Cor. 5:7). We simply do not yet see the final product. Humanly, we can see only as the world sees. We are mere mortals, whose claim to sonship is so often sadly contradicted by our (unwilling) behaviour (Rom. 7:15-25; 1 John 1:8; 2:1). We are men and women whose fellowship, though sweet now, is often touched by our frailty. In the words of Charles Wesley:

And if our fellowship below
In Jesus be so sweet,
What heights of rapture shall we know
When round his throne we meet.³

The anointing which we received has convinced us that ‘we are God’s children now’. What we shall be is not visible yet, but nonetheless we know the goal of our maturing, for we know that we, having been born of the Father and made his children, will be fully like him.⁴ How can we be like the Father? The answer is simple: we can be like

¹ See February study, *n.* 2.

² See May study.

³ ‘All praise to our redeeming Lord’, N^o 150 New Creation Hymn Book.

⁴ The antecedent of ‘him’, i.e. the word to which it points back, is ‘the Father’, although it is understood that our likeness will be to the Son.

the Father as *the* Son is like the Father (Rom 8:29; Eph. 4:13; Heb. 2:10). Further, we know that the process will be complete when *he* appears (see Col. 3:1-4; 2 Tim. 4:8). On that day we will see him as he is; there will then be no hindrance to our seeing, as there is now.⁵

If, then, our hope is of our likeness to Christ, then it follows that we will be, even now, purifying ourselves as he is pure. This was the point made earlier in the letter, we must walk in the light, we should not sin, we must do right. We must remind ourselves that this is not moralism; it is the moral response which is both commanded and evoked by such great love.

In verses 4-10, John proceeds to expand on this by explaining the basis on which we ought to be purifying ourselves.

Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. ⁸Everyone 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. ⁹Those 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. ¹⁰The 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. (1 John 3:4-10)

First the principle: 'Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness: sin is lawlessness.' We must ask whether this a general definition of sin. Given that the heavens declare God's righteousness, his moral glory (see Pss. 97:6 and 19:1, 7), this need not be a reference to the written law of Israel and so would apply to all sin, both under the Law and apart from the Law (Rom. 2:12). But it could also be a specific reference to the commandment to love one's brother and sister which formed the basis for 1 John 2:3-11 and is still in John's mind in 1 John 3:10.⁶

God is righteous, meaning he is totally consistent with his own nature, and a righteous person is one who is made consistent through the atonement in order to go on being righteous (cf. Rom. 8:4, where the fulfilling of the righteous demand of the law in us is with the ongoing life of righteousness in view). Christ appeared in order to take away sin, and there is no sin in him. So the obvious response is to abide in him. But we should note that abiding in Christ is not a mystical matter. It is not simply going through a mental routine of convincing ourselves of our position; it is a moral matter. 'No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him.'

John has already said that Christians do sin and that they only know the dimensions of forgiveness when they acknowledge that (1 John 1:8-9; also 2:1f), and that those who say that they have the fellowship with the Father and the Son described in the prologue while walking in darkness are liars (1 John 1:5-6). So then, given that, this statement in verse 6, 'No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either

⁵ The exact meaning of '*for* we will see him...' is not clear. Is John saying that we will be like him *because* (*for*) we will see him as he is, or is he saying that 'we do *know* ... *because* ...'? Whatever the precise connection meant by *because*, the moral implication is not diminished.

⁶ Ps. 51:3 says, 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.'. The LXX has 'I know my *lawlessness*', the same word John uses.

seen him or known him' can hardly be taken as saying that Christians are beyond committing sin. But it can be seen to say that it is impossible that a person who deliberately and consciously abides in Christ can act contrary to *his* character.

Certainly, the verb 'sins' can be translated 'goes on sinning'. No one who abides in him goes on sinning, but if the effect of that is somehow to excuse a person in some way, that is, I can sin once but not go on sinning, then that is surely an incorrect way forward. John is saying that anyone who does what these people are doing cannot be abiding in him. They are sinning and excusing it, possibly even as being in some way necessary to the situation. But in the believer sin is *never* 'necessary' (so 1 John 2:1; Rom. 6:11-12; Col. 3:1-4, 5; 1 Pet. 1:14-16 etc.). John is saying that anyone who treats sin in any way other than with total abhorrence has neither seen nor known Christ. They are not Christians.⁷ To have seen Christ and known him is to have seen and known him as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. If it is true that these people do not know Christ, then it means that they do not have the intimacy with him that the word 'know' implies.

It is evident from this that, while John may well have had in mind the specific 'lawlessness' of the secessionists, sin in all its aspects must finally be the issue. It is not possible, it is utterly inconceivable, that the believer, as one who has been born of God, could choose to live and continue to live as one for whom the cross was powerless or ineffective. The readers, therefore, must not be deceived, either by the claims of others or by the innate deceitfulness of sin itself (Heb. 3:13). The person who is righteous is the person who exhibits that by righteous living. God is righteous, therefore his children will be likewise.

Verse 8ff recognises the situation that results from the fall of mankind and the consequent curse upon the serpent (Gen. 3:14-15). There are two 'fatherhoods' at work in the world. There is the Fatherhood of God, working through his Son to defeat the powers of evil and to ensure that the eternal purpose of his Fatherhood is accomplished. God will have many glorified sons (Heb. 2:10; Rom. 8:29; Rev. 21:7). Over against that purpose is the devil, that ancient serpent, who has his own children.

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)

This was spoken by Jesus to those who also were claiming to be acting in a godly manner.

Those who sin are exhibiting the destructive character of their father the devil. They sin, just as he has been sinning from the beginning. From the beginning, that is, from the beginning of the creation, it has been the devil who was the initiator of all lawlessness. So then, wherever there is sin, it must be seen to be consistent with the character of the evil one and not with the character of God.

⁷ If this sounds harsh, could it be that we have lost sight of the nature of the gift of repentance which is so intimately linked with faith? How could a person who has been given the capacity to repudiate all that is ungodly not treat sin as a deadly enemy to be avoided at all costs? Take the following as one example among many:

'If afore us were laid [together] all the pains in Hell and in Purgatory and in Earth—death and other—, and [by itself] sin, we should rather choose all that pain than sin. For sin is so vile and so greatly to be hated that it may be likened to no pain which is not sin. And to me was shewed no harder hell than sin. For a kind soul hath no hell but sin.'... (Juliana of Norwich, 1343-1417, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 'The Third Revelation').

Over against this is the great revelation of the Word in the incarnation. His purpose in becoming flesh was to destroy the works of the devil. He came to 'save his people *from* their sins' (Matt. 1:21).

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. (1 John 3:9)

John is uncompromising. While we have said that that it is *inconceivable* that the believer should sin, John goes somewhat further than that. His point is that if God cannot sin, and all would assent to that, then those who have his nature in them also cannot sin. Such is the vastness of regeneration. Paul in Romans 7:25 says as much when he says that now 'with my mind I am a slave to the law of God, but with my flesh I am a slave to the law of sin'. There has been a complete transformation. Now Paul is a man who hates the sin he sees and he declares that he actually does it against his will. Indeed, he declares that 'it is no longer I that do it but sin that dwells within me' (Rom. 7:17). Paul sees 'remaining sin' and longs to be released from it and his hope is tied in with the hope of the whole creation. But his security, described in Romans, does not lie in his longing to be free, evidence though that is of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34, but in the fact of the atonement. There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The same is the basis for John's writing here. He is urging that the readers do not sin but also that recognising remaining sin will so distress them that they will continually fly to the cross of Christ for cleansing. Just as the Law given to Israel was far more than prescriptions for correct living but included the means of continued righteousness through the atonement (Lev. 17:11) so, in the new covenant, the demand that sin be rejected contains the truth that sin has been defeated and that we are released from its bondage, that the blood of Jesus goes on cleansing us from all sin.

So the lines are clearly drawn:

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. (1 John 3:10)

When the Word is present in power, the demarcation is unavoidable.

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