

**Because He First Loved Us**  
An Exegesis of 1 John 4:7-21 within the Context of 1 John  
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**The Rhetoric of 1 John**

The first epistle of John opens with an ethical appeal to the authority of the author's eye-witness testimony as one who had been with Jesus (and because of that had knowledge of "what was from the beginning"<sup>1</sup>): "what we have heard, seen, looked at, and touched" (1:1); followed immediately by the directly stated goal of the epistle: "so that you also may have fellowship with us," and so that "our joy may be complete" (1:3-4). "Fellowship with us" (in other words, as we shall see, the fellowship that believers have with one another), and the source of the believers' joy, are summarily equated with the fellowship we have with "the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1:3). The author then identifies the singular message with which he has been entrusted: "God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all" (1:5).<sup>2</sup> In this light is fellowship with God and with one another, and the cleansing from sin by the blood of Christ (1:7). This singular message is stated later as the command to love one another (3:11), and the source of love is repeatedly identified as God (4:7-8,12,16), thus equating God's light with God's love. Indeed, "whoever loves a brother or sister lives in the light" (2:10).

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<sup>1</sup> The relationship between the opening of John's first epistle and the opening of his gospel would be hard to miss, as they both begin with "the beginning" (cf. John 1:1).

<sup>2</sup> We would be neglectful if we did not acknowledge the connection here to the identity of Christ as "the light shining in darkness" (cf. John 1:4,5), as it seems evident that the author of this epistle is drawing from his own earlier writing. Raymond E. Brown is one of many scholars who acknowledge this connection: Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary*, 4th Rev ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1988), 109.

The summary statement in the epistle's opening paragraph of the over-arching goal of fellowship—with one another, and with God through Jesus Christ—is followed by a series of other “so that” statements of the author's *telos*: so that *you* “may not sin” (2:1); so that *we* may have “confidence and not be put to shame” and have “boldness” at his *parousia*, also called “the day of judgment” (2:28; 4:17-18); so that *we* “might live through Him” (4:9); so that *you* may know you have eternal life (5:13); and so that *we* may know Him who is true” (5:20). In light of the author's emphasis on fellowship, it is reasonable to conclude that his use of the terms “you” and “we” interchangeably throughout this epistle is indicative of his close identification with his audience. The relational and tenderhearted nature of his persuasion and the personal commitment underlying his appeals are also evident in his use of familial terms of address: “little children” (2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21) and “beloved” (2:7; 3:2,21; 4:1,7,11).

The persuasive argumentation of 1 John is methodical and consistent. The author uses repetition to emphasize his imperatives, and appeals to the felt need of his audience for assurance to motivate obedience. For example, the command to “love one another” is repeated at least six times (3:11,18,23; 4:7,11,21). When we love one another, we know that we “live in the light” (2:9-10); we “know that we have passed from death to life” (3:14); we “know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him” (3:19); we may be sure we have been “born of God and know God” (4:7); and we know “God lives in us and His love is perfected in us” (4:12). Similarly, the author appeals to his audience's need for assurance in conjunction with his imperatives to “obey His commandments.” It is by obeying His commandments that we “may be sure we know Him” (2:3), and that we “abide in Him” and He abides in us (3:24). The integral,

reciprocal relationship between love and obedience, and between our love for God and for one another, is poignantly summarized here: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey His commandments” (5:2). It should be noted in this discussion of the relationship between love and obedience that just as to love is to obey, to obey is to believe: “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” (3:23).

Furthermore, just as to love and believe is to obey; to love and believe is to be born of God. By loving one another we prove that we have been born of God (4:7); and everyone who “believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God” (5:1). And so the author’s argumentation follows logically, that whoever is born of God does not sin (3:9; 5:18). While we are not able to develop fully the doctrine of imputed righteousness from this context alone, we have a strong indication of its fact in both places where it is mentioned that one who is born of God does not—and in fact, cannot—sin. In the first place, “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” (3:9). The word “because” is of paramount significance: those who have been born of God cannot sin *because* Christ, the sinless One, abides in them. The implication is clear that it is Christ’s sinless nature dwelling within believers that make them sinless in God’s eyes, rather than the believer’s own actions. In the second place, “We know that *those* who are born of God do not sin, but *the one* who was born of God protects them, and the evil one does not touch them” (5:18). Here the contrast may be between *the many* believers who are born of God, and the *one* (singular, “God’s seed,” cf. 3:9) who was born of God and is *the One* who protects (keeps

or guards, Gr. *Tereo*) all those who belong to Him and who are covered by His righteousness. It is significant as well that the author's conclusion that "one who is born of God does not sin" in chapter three is preceded by this gospel proclamation in chapter one: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:9). It follows then that those who have been forgiven and permanently cleansed of *all unrighteousness*<sup>3</sup> are those who have been born of God, and are no longer considered sinners (transgressors of the law, cf. 3:4) in God's eyes. The fact that there were those who had yet to believe the gospel in hearing of this epistle is well established by the author's stated purpose at the outset ("so that you also may have fellowship with us," cf. 1:3-4), which indicates that some had not yet entered into fellowship with other believers or with God through Christ. It is consistent therefore with the author's orderly style of persuasive argument that his identification of those who *have been* born of God be preceded by an instruction of how one *comes to be* born of God.

In keeping with the preeminence of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the identity of those who have been born of God by it, the imperative to "not believe every spirit, but test the spirits" (4:1) is related to the epistle's Christological foundation as well as its eschatological paradigm. First, the author justifies the relevance and import of his imperative: "for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (4:1); and then he states clearly how his audience is to distinguish between the Spirit of God and a spirit that is not from God: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is

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<sup>3</sup> As New Testament writers consistently do, this writer is drawing directly upon Old Testament language here, to state that this psalm of David, which is prophetic of the New Covenant in Christ's blood, is fulfilled by the gospel: "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Psalm 51:2).

from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God” (4:2-3).<sup>4</sup> Chapter one establishes that “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). In chapter two, Jesus Christ is called “the righteous,” and the “atoning sacrifice for our sins” (2:1-2), in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy identifying this Savior as Israel’s promised Messiah, “the Righteous One” who would make His people righteous (Isaiah 53:11; Jeremiah 23:5-6). In chapter five, Jesus Christ is identified as the source of eternal life: “God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (5:11-12). Jesus’ identity as God incarnate is strongly suggested here: “No one who denies the Son has the Father; everyone who confesses the Son has the Father also” (2:23).<sup>5</sup>

The general eschatological context evident throughout this epistle (2:8,17,18,28; 3:2; 4:3,17; 5:4,5) is also seen in the specific context of the imperative to “test every spirit.” “Every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God,” and is also called “the spirit of antichrist” (3:4). This “antichrist”<sup>6</sup> is a spirit that they had heard was coming, and now was already there; and by this they knew for certain that it *was* “the last hour” (2:18). This is a lying spirit, which denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22). This same lying spirit is at work in anyone who says that he has not sinned (1:8,10); or who says he knows God but does not obey His commandments (2:4). These “antichrists” are clearly recognized as

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<sup>4</sup> Commentators have offered various explanations of the error that had found its way into the church that this author is combating. According to *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “he may be challenging a super-spiritualized Christology by asserting that Jesus’ humanity is as theologically integral to his personality as is his divinity.” Or, he “may be correcting a view that granted Jesus’ humanity without according it salvific consequence”: Fred B. Craddock, Leander E. Keck, Luke Johnson and Christopher C. Rowland, *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Hebrews - Revelation (Volume 12)* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 426.

<sup>5</sup> This language seems directly drawn from John’s gospel (cf. John 5:23; 15:23).

<sup>6</sup> It is important to acknowledge that “antichrist” never refers to a specific individual, but rather to “every spirit that does not confess Jesus” (4:3); and anyone who “denies the Father and the Son” (2:22).

those who “went out from us,” proving they that they did not “belong to us” (2:19); and they have made God a liar by their unbelief (5:10).

The epistle concludes with a final imperative: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols” (5:21). This warning against idolatry summarizes all previous contrasts originally introduced by the epistle’s opening message: “God is light, and in Him there is no darkness” (1:5); and is in the context of the author’s final and climactic affirmation of Christ’s deity: “He is the true God and eternal life” (5:20). Therefore, the “idolatry” of which he speaks is likely representative of the afore-mentioned spirit of antichrist—or any deception that would seek to keep God’s people in darkness by lying against the gospel of Christ, the “true light” which was already shining and overtaking the darkness which was—in fact, *eschatologically*--passing away (2:8).<sup>7</sup>

#### **Because He First Loved Us (4:7-21)**

This passage immediately follows the imperative to “test the spirits, to see whether they are from God” (4:1f) discussed in the overview above, and also the confidence-inspiring encouragement that “the one who is in *you* [who have the Spirit of God] is greater than the one who is in the world” (4:5). As we will see, it serves primarily as an assurance and a security for believers that we have been truly “born of God” as we love one another, because “love is from God” (4:7). We also have this assurance and security by His Spirit, by which we confess that Jesus is the Son of God (4:13-15). This Spirit is contrasted to the spirit of “antichrist” which does not confess Jesus (4:3). Within the epistle as a whole, this passage functions to repeat and reconfirm the author’s argument

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<sup>7</sup> Again, there is little doubt that the same author’s gospel is in reference and being directly alluded to (cf. John 1:5; 3:19; 8:12; 12:35,46).

that our love for one another is our assurance that we are born of God and abide in Him, and He in us (4:13-16; cf. 2:24; 3:24). It also shows us how God’s love for us has been revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ (4:9-10), and exhorts us to respond to that love by loving one another (4:11). This passage serves the agenda of the entire epistle by pointing us to the ultimate example of love—Christ’s sacrifice—which is also what motivates and causes the response of our love: “we love because He first loved us” (4:19).

The apostle begins by repeating the imperative stated earlier (3:11,23) to “love one another,” and provides a compelling motivation for obedience, which appeals to the need of his “beloved” for assurance that they “have been born of God and know God” (4:7). To say that everyone who loves is born of God is especially significant in light of the earlier statement that those who have been born of God do not and *cannot* sin (3:9). As we saw earlier, sin is defined in this epistle as being “guilty of lawlessness” (3:4). Therefore we may logically conclude that the only way we could ever be declared sinless, or incapable of sinning, would be for the judgment of the law against us to be nullified. And from this we conclude that one who has been “born of God” is no longer judged guilty by the law. This is not, as some may suggest, a “progressive” or gradual or ongoing salvation yet unfulfilled, for it is declared without ambiguity that “everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ *has been* born of God” (5:1). It is our belief in Jesus Christ that results in our being “born of God” (which is equated with our being declared sinless); and it is our love for one another that evidences it.

As this passage makes clear, the command to love one another is rooted in the incarnation. “God is love” (4:8), but we have not seen God (4:12,20). So God revealed

His love by sending His Son into the world (4:9). “This is love, not that we loved God”—for we do not possess this quality, nor do we have any ability to perform this action apart from Him—“but that He loved us” (4:10). We love therefore—God and one another—“*because* He first loved us” (4:19). The word “because” implies something beyond mere motivation. It implies causality. We are commanded to love, and if we love, when we love, it is *because* He first loved us. The act of our love toward God and toward one another, even while in obedience to a command, is also revealed as a natural outgrowth of our identity as those who have been born of God. In fact, if we do not love, then it is revealed that we have not been born of God and do not know God, because “*everyone* who loves is born of God and knows God” and *anyone* who “does not love does not know God” (4:7-8). This is why it provides such an assurance to our hearts that we abide in Him, and He in us, when we obey His command to love (4:12-13). This should put to rest any suggestion of antinomianism, or the notion that to understand ourselves as those who cannot sin in God’s sight (in other words, are not judged guilty of lawlessness, cf. 3:4) is to say that our outward actions don’t matter. For it is not possible to separate or distinguish our love for one another (the *evidence* that God abides in us, 4:12) from the *fact* that He does abide in us and has given us His Spirit (4:13). Indeed, if we love God (*because* He first loved us) we *must* love our brothers and sisters also (4:21).

Just as God’s love was performed toward us by the incarnation, causing us to love Him and one another in response, its character was visibly demonstrated as an example for us to follow. This is love: that God loved us “and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice (cf. 2:2)<sup>8</sup> for our sins,” and since God loved us “so much”—*this* much—“we

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<sup>8</sup> The *atoning* (Gr: *Hilasmos*) sacrifice is that which *satisfied* God, removing the fear of judgment for all believers (cf. 2:28; 4:17-18). This passage lends tremendous support to the doctrine of substitutionary



also ought to love one another” (4:10-11). Christ’s example of sacrificial love is also mentioned earlier in this epistle: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another” (3:16). The exhortation to “lay down our lives for one another” is clarified in most practical terms: “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” (3:17-18). We are not left without an explanation then, of what following the example of Christ’s sacrifice in our relationships with one another will look like in our daily lives.

The established fact that Jesus was the “atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10) and the author’s testimony that he has *seen* Jesus, and thereby knows Him to be the Savior (4:14), are both essential precedents for our assurance of the love God has for us (4:16). For God abides in those who believe the gospel—we who confess that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of the world—and we abide in God (4:14-16). It is through this co-abiding, or co-habitation, that God’s Spirit within us (4:13) assures us that His love has been perfected among us (4:17), and it is this assurance that removes our fear of judgment (4:17-18). We must first acknowledge the specific eschatological context of “the day of judgment” here. This day was soon approaching for them (cf. 2:18) and is now past to us. However, the comfort remains throughout all ages that “perfect love casts out fear” and this fear is defined as the fear of punishment (4:18). They were in need of assurance that there was no fear of punishment to accompany that soon coming “day of judgment” for

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atonement. Other commentators support this conclusion: I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John (The New International Commentary on the New Testament)*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 118-119.

those who abided in God, because Jesus had already performed the “atoning sacrifice” for their sins, thereby taking that punishment upon Himself. God’s justice toward His people was forever satisfied (Gr: *Hilasmos*) by the cross. It cannot be overstated therefore how important Christ’s substitutionary atonement—fully performed and completed---is to the “casting out” of the fear of judgment for all God’s people, for all time.

Finally, the apostle concludes, “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (4:20). This logical rhetoric becomes the basis for the exhortation that follows: “those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also” (4:21). Again we see this command as grounded--rhetorically and experientially--in the incarnation. The foundation for the apostle’s argumentation is laid with the preceding statement, “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” (4:2-3). The lying spirit that does not confess Jesus (the spirit of antichrist, vs. 3) is evidenced in those who say they love God but hate their brothers and sisters. For even though we have not seen God, He abides in us “who confess that Jesus is the Son of God” (4:15). And His presence in us is evidenced by our love for our brothers and sisters. And even though we have not seen God, “if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us” (4:12). We may say therefore that we “see” God (or are assured of His presence with us) in and through our love for one another, which we practice *because* He first loved us by sending His son. There is a strong implication here that in our communion with one another in Christ, we experience the presence of Christ, which was

only made possible by His incarnation. The incarnation then is repeatedly emphasized as the entire basis for the conclusion, “We love *because* He first loved us” (4:19).

### **The Incarnational Character of Christian Community**

One commentator has suggested, “If one disregards the significance of Jesus’ incarnation, life, and death, it follows rather naturally that one will disregard the significance of all human life. The affirmations that Jesus ‘came in the flesh’ testify to the significance of human life, whether it be Jesus’ life or that of his followers.”<sup>9</sup> As we have seen, those affirmations are presented in 1 John, and specifically in 1 John 4:7-21, as the foundation for the commandment we have been given to “love one another,” through which we are assured of God’s presence with us. Christ gave us the ultimate example of love by His life “in the flesh” (4:2), which His disciples “saw with their eyes, and touched with their hands” (1:1). This was the “word which became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1) and now, because He abides in us (2:14; 3:9, 24; 4:15-16), “as He is, so are we in this world” (4:17). There can be no clearer statement that it is we who make Christ’s incarnation visible to the world, by our love for one another, even now. As Ephesians says, “we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones” (Ephesians 5:30, YLT). Regardless of the fact that Paul is speaking metaphorically, using the image of a physical body to picture us as the church as intimately and inextricably connected to Christ and to one another in Him; this cohabitative communion is experienced when we *physically* live the life He *physically* lived before us, as our example, to follow in His

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<sup>9</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 540.

steps (1 Peter 2:21). And His love for us is seen by the world around us in our *visibly* (and yes, even *physically*) *demonstrated* love for one another (John 13:34).

Earlier in 1 John, we have the epistle's most practical statement of what it means to obey the commandment to love one another as Christ has loved us: "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" (3:16-18). This is very similar to what James says: "If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that" (James 2:15-16)? It may be easy for us to dismiss examples like these, especially when we live in relatively affluent communities, as not applicable to us today. The first century church in some places held their possessions in common, and individuals often sold their possessions and redistributed the proceeds to those among them who had need (Acts 2:44-45), a practice to which the pervasive spirits of individualism and consumerism in our society today are diametrically opposed. Furthermore, we may not recognize just how influenced we have become by our individualist and consumer-driven society because we dismiss the early church's practice of sharing material goods as unnecessary and irrelevant. There is another danger, though, and that is that we can take passages like these that speak of caring for each other's physical needs *too* physically, adopting an exclusively social gospel which has no salvific value to the world, and abandons the unique character of the church as God's holy and peculiar people, by neglecting the "priestly" role we have been called to fulfill toward

one another (1 Peter 2:9). We can in fact put actions to our words, “keep warm and eat your fill,” by physically clothing the naked and feeding the hungry, and yet completely neglect the incarnational communion that Christ called us to in His command, “love one another as I have loved you.” It’s very easy to write a check, when you have money. But we could write such a check every day, supposedly in obedience to our Biblical example to physically care for those who are physically in need, and fail to recognize what is indeed the primary significance of Christ’s command, and the very physically present, tangible ways we are called to love as He loved, making His incarnation visible to the world in our “communal life” as His unique people, the church, in which He dwells. Biblical, Christian communion—or loving as Christ loved—is an experience that is in fact *unique* to Christ’s body.

Our Christian communities today may not experience physical hunger. We might say we are “blessed” for that, but then, such “blessedness” is not likely to foster interdependence upon one another, or help us experience—presently and physically—the communion that uniquely belongs to those who belong to Christ. According to John’s epistle, “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” (3:23). Paul states Christ’s commandment, or law, a little differently: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). Perhaps no one in our “Christian community” has ever experienced physical hunger, thirst, nakedness or homelessness. But some may have been divorced. Another’s unmarried teenaged daughter may have become pregnant. Perhaps another’s son has said, “Dad, I’m gay.” Or even, “Mom, I’m an atheist.” Some of us struggle with depression. Some of us struggle with alcohol or

drug abuse; and some with anger, or guilt, or pride. Sometimes we may fear judgment, because of what we have experienced from the “church” before when we have dared to share these things. But in all of these things, when we “bear these burdens” for one another, and when we show the love toward one another that Christ has shown us by covering one another’s faults (cf. 1 Peter 4:8) just as His mercy has completely covered ours; we have the unique privilege to be the incarnational presence of Christ to each other, and thereby profoundly experience the assurance that He abides in us, and we in Him. “For we are members of His body,” His flesh and bones, and “no one ever hates his own flesh, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church” (Ephesians 5:29-30). *Because* Christ has indeed “come in the flesh,” and *first* loved us, we love one another.