

No.29, John's Epistles

John the Apostle is often referred to as "the Apostle of love" in that *love* is a dominant theme, both in his Gospel and in the Epistles that he wrote. But while he writes of the love that should exist between the Lord's people, his major emphasis is on the love that Christ has for His own. Twice in his Gospel John identifies himself as the disciple "whom Jesus loved" – John 13: 23 and also 19: 26. If not understood properly this identification mark may seem at first to be somewhat boastful, as if John received some special affection from Christ above the other disciples. However, what it simply signifies is that John marvelled at the Lord's love for him. He was amazed that the Lord would love him as an individual, thus he expressed his wonder at the love of Christ for him in such a term.

Due to his knowledge of Christ's love for him John was vehement in his love for Christ and could not entertain any opposition for his Saviour, a fact that comes out in various ways. For example, John and his brother James were surnamed *Boanerges* meaning "the sons of thunder" signifying that they had a vehemence in their nature which manifested itself in their passion for Christ. See Luke 9: 54-56 where such was their zeal for Christ they thought it right to have those Samaritans destroyed who opposed the Lord.

While John's zeal for Christ was undoubtedly tempered and brought under control as he matured in his spiritual life and service, yet his intolerance of any who attacked or opposed the Lord continued and stands out very prominently in his three epistles. Church history tells us that the first readers of John's gospel were the churches of Asia Minor, churches that were being threatened by the beginnings of a strange heresy known as *Gnosticism*, a heresy that fully appeared in the 2nd century. The term comes from the Greek word *gnosis* meaning "knowledge" with the claim of a secret knowledge to which only a small segment of humanity could come. Gnosticism was far removed from NT Christianity, holding very heretical views of the great fundamentals of the faith – God & creation, the doctrine of sin, the person and work of Christ, and the authority of Scripture.

Thus, in relation to Christ, John gives much attention to those who denied that He had come in the flesh, branding such a denial as an evidence of the spirit of antichrist, 1 John 4: 3. In this way we understand his reference to those who had departed from the true Church as being antichrists, 1 John 2: 18, & 2 John 7. Then in 3 John 4 John refers to his joy at hearing of believers walking in truth; language in which there is an incipient reference to rejection of that which is false. Therefore, the epistles of John were written because of the threat posed by this particular heresy.

We also group these three epistles of John together, not only because they have the same author & deal with this false doctrine of *Gnosticism* but also because they have a single theme – **the theme of fellowship**, though at first it is not easy to see that this subject does unite the epistles. But note the following thoughts. In 1 John the emphasis is on the fellowship that exists between those who are born of God. Then in 2 John a warning is given that the Church is not to have fellowship with any who reject Christ, v.10; and finally in 3 John the Apostle urges the acceptance of those who are the faithful servants of God which is tantamount to having fellowship with them, v.8. Therefore, the central message of these epistles is that Christ brings His people into a spiritual fellowship that is enjoyed only by those who are truly His and who manifest their genuineness by remaining faithful to Him. Note some points about this theme of fellowship with the Lord as it is central to John's epistles.

I. The Reality of This Fellowship

Believers have a real fellowship with the Lord; and to underline this fact is one of John's reasons for writing his first epistle, 1 John 1: 3; and note also vs. 6 & 7 where John develops this theme. The original word for "fellowship" chiefly denotes the idea of *partnership*, the concept of having something in common. It is therefore an apt & lovely word to indicate the central idea in real fellowship: fellowship exists due to having something in common. This is a remarkable fact – believers have fellowship with God because they have something in common with Him or they have a partnership with Him that is real.

The basis of this partnership with God is the merit of Christ's death. Christ is the propitiation for sin, 1 John 4: 10. First He propitiates God's wrath; and then He merits salvation for His people so that they are satisfied with Him and His work for them. Thus, God & His people meet at the cross; they come together in Christ. Note ch 4: 17 – believers are one with Christ; so that they are fully accepted with the Father.

II. The Result of This Fellowship

Fellowship with God results in two things.

(a) **It results in godliness & true holiness.** Genuine fellowship with God is not compatible with sinful living. John's argument is that a man cannot live in fellowship with the Lord and live a sinful life. A life of fellowship with God will lead to genuine holiness. All three epistles stress this point, 1 John 1: 7, 2 John 4 & 3 John 4.

As noted, the Church in John's day was subject to heretical teaching; teaching that was accompanied by wickedness. Thus, in 1 John the Apostle sets forth a seven-fold test of religious profession. See the following verses: 1: 6; 1: 8; 1: 10; 2: 4; 2: 6; 2: 9; & 4: 20. In each of these seven tests of Christian profession God's word

challenges & exposes the claims of empty professors, showing that the person whose profession is empty is not born of God. See 3: 9 – this verse does not teach that a true believer never sins which would be a contradiction of what John teaches in this epistle. Rather it teaches that a true believer does not live habitually in sin as his constant style of life. It also signifies that the believer is not like the unregenerate man the great goal of whose life is living for sin, loving & pursuing it. Where fellowship with God exists there will be likeness to Christ. Note the repeated use of the term “even as” showing the likeness between Christ & the true believer – 2: 6, 3: 3, 7.

(b) It results in assurance. There are various levels and sources of assurance – through resting on the promises that are attached to the Gospel, John 6: 37. Then there is the witness of the Spirit to our hearts, Rom 8: 16. But the witness of the Spirit is applied to the heart by the word, Heb 10: 15 & 16. Thus, in 1 John it is taught that assurance of salvation comes as a result of seeing a correlation between what we profess & what we do. Note – eight times in the epistle John uses terms such as *hereby we know, hereby ye know, or by this we know*. See ch 3: 18-19.

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