

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A look at 1 John: 1 John 4:1-21

We open our exposition of 1 John 4 this morning by referring back to 1 John 3:24 where we find John saying *“And we know that He abideth in us, by the Spirit whom he hath given us.”* Here the Apostle is clearly referring to the Holy Spirit. In 1 John 4:1 we read *“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world.”* So here the Apostle is warning us that there are other spirits in the world whose testimony is in direct opposition to that which the Holy Spirit of God would make known.

In 1 John 2:18 he had intimated *“Even now there are many antichrists, by which we know that it is the last time.”* These spirits are false spirits and are purveyors of false teaching. Imitation has long been one of Satan's ploys. From the earliest times both primitive and modern man of whatever nation or colour have always had an appreciation of some Supreme Being to whom should be given allegiance and even worship. Satan knows this and has responded by sending out evil teachers to divert men's thoughts from the true God who has manifested Himself.

Man is a triune being composed of body soul and spirit and it is this which gives us the capacity to know and so we can read in Romans 8:16, *“The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.”* The Holy Spirit working in unison with our spirit enables us to discern good from evil and so we read in the Authorised Version in 1 John 4:2 that *“every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God.”* This is not a good translation for it simply means that the confession is only an historical one, simply that Jesus Christ was a man here upon earth. The second “that” and the “is” should not be there and the reading should simply be *“every spirit that confesseth Jesus Christ come in flesh, is of God.”* It is not merely an historical acknowledgement but a confession of the person of Christ - who He is.

An ordinary man could have come in no other way but in the flesh for the simple reason that he is in the flesh, but Jesus Christ is of God and could have come in other ways, for example it is generally thought that the angel that appeared to Abraham was in fact a theophany or a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God. The confession here is truly a confession of His deity. This the spirits of the antichrists deny as John says in 1 John 2:22-23, *“Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son the same hath not the Father; he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also.”* Jehovah's Witnesses, Moslems, and Josephus do not deny His presence on earth, but will not confess that He is Jehovah the Saviour, the Christ the anointed of God.

In 1 John 4:3 John states the negative side. An abbreviated rendering of this verse but which nevertheless has excellent authority translates it *“and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus...”* (1 John 4:3) Such a translation emphasises the person of the Lord and obviates any historical event. A professing teacher who cannot make such a confession is “not of God” (1 John 4:3). Paul, in Acts 20:29, had warned the Ephesians elders of false teachers who would come in amongst the saints. John who outlived all his contemporaries was a witness to the fact.

In 1 John 4:4 the opening pronoun is emphatic; John is about to distinguish between the children of God and those of the world. The former are overcomers for they had rejected the false teaching of the anti-Christian teachers. The latter are indwelt by the spirit of the wicked one and in 1 John 5:19 he says that they lay in Satan the chief who is behind these spirits of error. On the other hand, the children of God, and again the pronoun is emphatic, *“are indwelt by the Spirit of God who is greater than he that is in the world”* (1 John 4:4). What a mighty resource the Christian has!

The false teachers who are of the world proclaim what the world wants to hear and so the world listens to them and receives them. Paul in 2 Timothy 4:3 refers to these very same people saying, *“The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine but, after their own lusts, shall they heap up to themselves teachers, having itching ears...”* I cannot help but think we have very much such preaching in our present day. How many preachers there are who from their pulpits will proclaim politics and philosophy and their congregations will go away and say “That was a good sermon was it not?” But how much do we hear of the sinfulness of men and of salvation through the blood of Christ? The ears are tickled but the consciences are not touched. But says John, *“we are of God”* (1 John 4:6).

No doubt he is here referring to himself and the other Apostles of those early days who were the mouthpieces of God. Today their teaching is incorporated into the New Testament and now this is our authority. By accepting it we demonstrate that we are of God. By reading and studying it we may judge what is truth and what is error. The Apostle Paul touches on this subject in 1 Corinthians 14:37-38. Here we read; *"If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord. But if any man be ignorant, let him be ignorant."*

Without doubt we are in the last days, the Apostles and the Prophets have gone but the New Testament remains. Antichrists abound and just as they refused the apostolic teaching of former days so today they refuse the teaching of the New Testament. They are not *"of God"* (1 John 4:6). Another has said, "The essential principle for faith is to have God speaking to His children in His word", (Kelly, W: *An Exposition of the Epistles of John the Apostle*).

1 John 4:1-6 is a parenthesis and in 1 John 4:7 John returns to his theme with which 1 John 3 ends, *"This is His commandment ... that we should love one another."* From 1 John 4:7-21 the Apostle's accent is on love, both the love of God Himself and that of His children and twice in this passage we are told that *"God is love"*, 1 John 4:8, 16. In 1 John 1:5 the Apostle tells us that *"God is light."* This is not an attribute of God such as power - wisdom or righteousness; but what is intrinsic to God. Light has reference to His purity, His detection of and refutation of evil. Love again is not an attribute but is the very essence of God's nature revealing itself by its actions. For its display, love needs an object and so we read in John 3:16, *"God so loved ... the world"*, and in 1 John 4:10, *"God loved us."*

So John reverts to his former theme and exhorts in 1 John 4:7 *"Let us love one another..."* This is the natural outcome of the fact that we are Christians for *"love is of God"*, (1 John 4:7). Love originates with Him and it flows forth from Him. As we have already stated love is His nature and as Peter tells us in 2 Peter 1:4 *"we are partakers of the divine nature."* So we are *"born of God"* (1 John 4:7), we *"know God"* (1 John 4:7) and we have the *"nature of God"* (2 Peter 1:4). That means that all this should be exemplified by our love for one another. Of course "love" in this context has to be understood according to the truth of scripture. Generally the term merely has reference to natural affections and perhaps more often than not it is connected with the display of sexual passions. There is probably no word in the English language that has been so debased as the word "love". But in scripture it has a much deeper and profound meaning. For instance God's love is demonstrated even in His chastening. Hebrews 12:6 states *"For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth."* It may be that occasionally our love for a fellow believer has to be shown by a word of reproof.

The love of God had been manifested to the Apostle John in that he was a witness of the Lord's presence here on earth. He opens this very epistle by speaking of the One *"...which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled of the Word of life"* (1 John 1:1). Such is not our privilege but the love of God has been manifested to us in the gospel. *"God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him"* (1 John 4:9). And then again in 1 John 4:10, *"God ... loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins."* Propitiation is that aspect of the death of Christ which so vindicated the holiness and righteousness of God that He can be merciful to the whole world. The word may correctly be translated "mercy seat", that is the place where the blood of the sin offering was sprinkled (see Exodus 25:17-22). When anyone appreciates this and believes it he acknowledges the truth of Romans 5:8, *"God commendeth His love towards us in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Notice that all is of God, *"Not that we loved God, but that He loved us..."* (1 John 4:10).

In 1 John 4:11 we are commanded that we *"ought to love one another"*. It is not a voluntary act but it is an obligation. I can almost hear someone saying, and indeed I fear that I might so say myself; "Do you know what brother So and So did to me or what sister So and So said about me? And you tell me that I ought to love them!" Well I am only quoting the commands of our Lord Jesus whom we do love (see John 13:34-35). It is assumed that we love God and according to what John is teaching here so should we love our brethren. In 2 Peter 1:7 we read *"add to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love."* The Greek word for "brotherly kindness" is simply "love", but of the sort that is shown in the world amongst men, but the word simply translated "love" (or "charity" in the Authorised Version) is that used for divine love and this is the love that is perfected in us (1 John 4:12). If God so loved us, even so we ought to love our brethren.

In 1 John 4:12, John repeats what he had said in John 1:18, *"No man hath seen God at any time..."* but on that occasion he immediately adds as an answer to such a situation, *"...the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared Him"* (John 1:18). But as John writes his epistle the Son has returned to glory and is out of our vision and the answer to our dilemma is, *"If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us"* (1 John 4:12). Romans 5:5 tells us that, *"...the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given to us."* Love amongst believers is the evidence that God dwells in them and we can say that God is seen in the saints.

In 1 John 3:24 we know by the Spirit that God abides in us. In 1 John 4:13 we know that we abide in Him. How many believers appreciate that they are indwelt by a divine Person who will "teach them all things"; *"guide [them] into all*

*truth*" (John 16:13), "*shew [them] things to come*" (John 16:13), "*receive of [Christ] and shew it to you*" (John 16:14) and perhaps His most blessed function, "*testify [of] Me*" (John 15:16), that, is of course, our beloved Lord.

In 1 John 4:14-16 we have the essence of the gospel and here John speaks from experience; every time he uses the pronoun "we" it is emphatic indicating that he is not talking about mere theories but what he knows to be fact: it is his first hand experience. He knows the truth "*that the Father sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world*" (1 John 4:14). He had been the writer who had penned John 3:16 no doubt the best known and best loved gospel verse throughout the world.

Notice again the all embracing appeal of the gospel. God's love in the gospel is not addressed only to the Jews or a certain selected company but to the "whole world." So here again in 1 John 4:15 we have that all embracing word "*whosoever*". Here too we have the confession necessary when a sinner believes the gospel, "*Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God...*" (1 John 4:15). Again there is a link with the Apostle's gospel, for in John 20:31 we are given the very reason why John wrote it: "*These are written that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name.*"

All these wonderful truths about which the Apostle has been writing give us a revelation of the love of God, the outward manifestation of Himself. The Christian believes it, revels in it, basks in it and dwells in it, and in so doing dwells in God and knows that God dwells in him. This serves as an emphasis of what John had stated in 2:24.

The opening clause in 1 John 4:17 should read "*Herein has love been perfected with us...*" The preposition "with" suggests proximity and "perfected" suggests that love has reached its climax. Hence we need not fear in the Day of Judgment. This, of course, does not refer to the great white throne of judgment that we read of in Revelation 20:11 where the sins of man are dealt with. Our sins have already been dealt with in the death of Christ. Here we have a reference to 2 Corinthians 5:10 which speaks of the judgment seat of Christ where our lives, not our sins, will come under review, what we did not understand down here will then be made clear to us and where, we trust, we shall hear "*Well done thou good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21). Not only need we not fear but, indeed, we may have boldness. Why so? On what authority?

The answer is "because as he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). The more I think about 1 John 4:17, the more I marvel. "As he is". Who? Christ Himself. Consider Him. The Son of God, the perfect Man, His immaculate life, His obedience, His grace, His holiness, all this and much more. Now God judges "As he is, so are ye". Fear and love are incompatible as 1 John 4:18 points out: "*We love him because He first loved us.*" The "him" should not really be there, because the Apostle is not expressing a specific truth but enunciating a principle. We certainly do love Him and would be included whether the "Him" was inserted or not. The thrust of these words is that we in loving are reflecting the nature of God Himself. And the test of our love is that if we say we love God whom we have not seen then we will certainly love our brethren whom we can see.

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