

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

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INTRODUCTION

Of the three letters of John, 1 John is by far the longest: its 105 verses are divided up into five chapters.. By contrast 2 & 3 John have 13 and 15 verses respectively and have no chapter divisions - they are the shortest letters in the New Testament.

Although 1 John is termed a letter, strictly speaking it does not have the form of a letter. It has, for instance, no opening address - we are not told whom the letter is written. Nor does it have a closing greeting - no indication is given of who has written the letter. On the other hand, 1 John is not a general piece of Christian writing. It has clearly a particular situation in mind. Perhaps we should best liken this letter to a sermon addressed by a pastor to a group of churches in his care.

Both 2 John and 3 John are without question proper letters. Each of them is the length of an ordinary private letter of the time, which could be written on a standard-sized piece of papyrus (about 25 cm by 20 cm). 2 John is addressed to "the chosen lady and her children" (1). Almost certainly, John does not have a particular "lady" in mind. Rather, the "lady" (*kuriake*) in question represents the church, which belongs to "the Lord" (*kurios* - the original Greek contains a word play). The church itself, however, is not specified. By contrast 3 John is addressed to a definite individual, Gaius. Who this Gaius was, we do not know. The name itself was very common. It is generally assumed that all three letters were probably written in Ephesus to Christians in that general locality.

The letters do not name their author, but in 2 and 3 John the author refers to himself as "the elder" (2 Jn 1 & 3 Jn 1). The word "elder" could just mean an older man - indeed, in the ancient world anybody over 40 came into that category. On the other hand, in church circles the word came to be used of a bishop-like figure exercising leadership and oversight (see Acts 20.17,22).

The traditional view is that all three letters were written by the Fourth Evangelist. The vocabulary, the style, and the theology, are all very similar to that of the Gospel. In both the letters and the Gospels we find the same themes of light and darkness, good and evil, love and hate, life and death.

We have no way of precisely dating the letters. Since many passages in the letters need the help of the Fourth Gospel to explain them, it is likely that the Gospel was written first. The letters are generally thought to have been written toward the end of the first century.

In the New English Bible 1 John is given the heading "*Recall to Fundamentals*". John was concerned to recall the churches in his care to true faith in Jesus. In this regard the first four verses of 1 John set the scene for much of that which is to come.

John begins his letter by pointing to the true nature of Jesus. Jesus was the "Word of Life" who was "from the beginning.... with the Father". This was "the life" which "appeared" and which John now "proclaims". In other words, the young Galilean, crucified between the two bandits that first Good Friday, was no ordinary preacher: he was the Son of God. John in particular is concerned to emphasise the physical reality of the life of Jesus. Jesus was no phantom-like spirit, but rather a man who could be "touched". "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard" (1.2).

In the second place, John draws attention to how the person of Jesus forms the basis of all Christian fellowship: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us" (1.3). Christian fellowship is based on common believing in Jesus Christ. There can be no true fellowship between persons who disagree on their understanding of Jesus. Although John had a particular concern for a common understanding of the doctrine of the incarnation (4.2-3), the same is true of the doctrines of the atonement and of the resurrection. To have fellowship with one another we have to have a common faith in the incarnate, crucified and risen Christ.

In the third place, John draws attention to how the person of Jesus forms the basis of all true fellowship with God. "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his son, Jesus Christ" (1.3). The one necessitates the other. The God with whom we may have fellowship is the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. There can be no true relationship with God apart from with his Son, Jesus Christ. As John makes clear in his Gospel, Jesus alone is the true and living way to the Father (Jn 14.6).

Wednesday 9 February

“I seek you with all my heart” (Ps 119.10)

There are no limits to God’s forgiveness

1 John 1.1-10

There is no sin too deep for God to deal with. However, badly we may have let God down, however badly we may have behaved toward others, there is always the possibility of forgiveness. God is able to purify us from “all sin” (1.7), from “all unrighteousness” (1.9). There is the possibility of forgiveness even for those who murder and rape, just as there was the possibility of forgiveness for those who put the Son of God to death. There is in principle no unforgivable sin. Sadly, time and again people have tortured their consciences with the thought that they have committed the unforgivable sin. But the so-called “sin against the Holy Spirit”, for which Jesus said there is no forgiveness, was in fact the refusal to recognise that In Jesus there is forgiveness (see Mark 3.29-30).

However, there is an important condition attached to forgiveness. Forgiveness involves confession. God forgives “if we confess our sins” (1.9). We need to face up to the seriousness of what we have done and call ‘a spade a spade’. It is perhaps not without significance that John speaks of “sin” in the plural. John has in mind the confession of particular acts of sin, rather than just the acknowledgement of “sin” in general. Vagueness in confession is understandable when it comes to public worship, but in private we must be specific and actually name our sin before God. If we are to be forgiven, then we need to face up squarely to our sin.

This, of course, doesn’t mean that we should go on to plague our consciences lest there be an unconfessed sin. God does not refuse to forgive us for failing to be totally self-aware - in that case, who then would be forgiven? However, God does want us to be real. He wants us to be honest with ourselves and with him by facing up to the seriousness of our sin. Then he will forgive!.

Praise God that with Jesus there is always a new beginning

Thursday 10 February

Jesus has come to our rescue

“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law” (Ps 119.18)

1 John 2.1-11

John writes this letter to help his readers not to fall into sin. However, he is a realist and knows that they will sin (2.1). Fortunately sin does not need to have the last word, for Jesus has come to the rescue.

John at this point employs two metaphors. The first involves a picture of a heavenly

court of law. We find ourselves arraigned before the Judge of all the earth. The evidence against us is overwhelming - it is clear to all that we are guilty. Conviction is certain - the evidence against us is overwhelming. But in this hopeless situation we discover that we have been provided with a heavenly lawyer, an advocate who "speaks to the Father in our defence" (see also Rom 8.34).

When Jesus argues our cause at the bar of God's justice, he does not pretend that we have not sinned. Nor does he seek to mitigate on our behalf, as if there were extenuating circumstances, for we are without excuse. Rather, he points out to God the Judge that the matter has been dealt with - justice has already been done. As "the Righteous One" (2.1), he pleads his own righteousness before God on the basis of his own righteousness displayed on the Cross.

At this point the picture shifts from the law courts to the temple courts, and we discover that Jesus himself has paid the penalty for our sins. "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (2.2). God, however, is not to be understood as some hard-hearted judge who begrudges forgiving the sinner. For God is not only the object of the saving action of Jesus - he is also the subject (see 4.9,10). The God who is light (1.5), whose innate sense of justice has been offended by our sin, is also the God who is love (4.8), who has sent his Son to deal with our sin.

There are limits to comprehension, but no limits to worship. Let's praise God for Jesus and his Cross.

Friday 11 February

Don't deceive yourself!!

"Keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me" (Ps 119.29)

1 John 2.12-17

It is easy for us to deceive ourselves (see Jer 17.9). Time and again God's people have been deceived by the Tempter's subtle ploys (see 1 Cor 10,12). Here, for instance, it is precisely those whose faith is unquestioned (2.12-14) who are warned of the deceitfulness of the "world" (2.15-17). The "world" in question is not the world which God created for us to enjoy (see John 1.3), but rather the "world" of sinful humankind which has set itself in opposition to God and to his ways.

John warns against three aspects of this sinful 'world'. In the first place, he warns against "the cravings of sinful people" (2.16). These "cravings" - literally "the desire of the flesh" - are not to be simplistically equated with crude forms of sexual misbehaviour. The "flesh" in Biblical thinking is anything which may offer a bridgehead to sin - any sinful "craving" in fact. Such cravings can often appear very sophisticated - and therefore be all the more deceptive.

In the second place, John warns against "the lust of the eyes" (2.16). Such lust is not to be restricted to the allure of pornographic material. 'Window-shopping' can take

many a form. Indeed, visiting somebody's home may result in 'lusting' after things. The object of our desire may in itself not be sinful, but the acquisitive spirit which sees nothing without wanting to have it is most definitely sinful.

In the third place John warns against "the boasting of what they have and do" (2.16). Pretentiousness is not limited to non-Christians. A trip to the Holy Land or a visit to a Bible convention can also become the spur to pretentious conversation.

The danger of all these worldly temptations is that they lead us to attach undue significance to things which are essentially transitory. Permanence in fact belongs only to those who seek to do God's will (2.17).

What practical difference does my faith make to my living? Does my lifestyle reflect a different set of values from that of my neighbours

Saturday 12 February

Don't allow others to deceive you!

"Give me understanding, and I will keep your law and obey it with all my heart" (Ps 119.34)

1 John 2.18-29

The Pope, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin have all been identified with the Antichrist. But who is the Antichrist? In the New Testament the term "antichrist" is only found in John's letters (1 Jn 2.18,22; 4.3; 2 Jn 7) and simply means "the one who opposes God". The precise nature of that opposition to God varies. Jesus in his teaching about the end-time, for instance, spoke of "the abomination of desolation" who would seek to supplant the true worship of God (see Mark 13.14). Paul spoke about the "man of lawlessness" (2 Thess 2.3). In Revelation the Antichrist figure is probably the Roman emperor, who is worshipped as "Lord and God" (see Rev 13).

In John's letters the Antichrist figure is a symbol of false teaching rather than of false worship. Although the precise nature of this false teaching is uncertain, it appears to have centred around a false view of the incarnation. It is possible that some taught that Jesus was a mere man, and was not truly the "Christ", God's "Son" (2.22,23). Alternatively, some may have been unable to believe that "the Word became flesh" (Jn 1.14) and so taught that Jesus never became a real man (see 4.2). The truth is that Christian teaching must hold to both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. The tension between the two can never be satisfactorily resolved.

The person of Jesus continues to be opposed even today. Jesus is opposed by the false picture many secular books, musicals, and TV programmes, give of his humanity. Jesus is also opposed even in certain church circles, where he is reduced to one Saviour amongst many, as if salvation is no longer to be found exclusively in him. Christian doctrine remains a battleground of ideas. Unfortunately many Christians today seem more concerned with spirit-inspired worship than with spiritual inspired truth. But

according to John it is the latter which characterised those who “have an anointing from the Holy One” (2.20).

Praise God for the Spirit given to lead us “into all truth” (John 16.13)

Monday 14 February

Grow in grace!

“Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight” (Ps 119.34)

1 John 3.1-10

To what degree should we expect the church to be different from the world? The ‘realist’ teaches that the church is as much made of up sinners as the world outside. Christians therefore should not be surprised when they are let down by fellow Christians, for we all are fallible. By contrast, John is an ‘idealist’. He looks for a church that is pure and free from sin. In this passage he states, restates, and restates yet again, that Christians do not sin (3.6, 9-10). In doing so, John challenges the moral complacency not only of the Christians to whom he was writing but also of many Christians today. For in reaction to the hypocrisy which characterised some of our Victorian forbears, we have become much more accepting of the sinner - if not of the sin.

But was John indulging in a certain amount of wishful thinking? Is it true that Christians ‘cannot’ - as distinct from ‘should not’ - sin? The perfectionism which appears to be implicit here is ruled out by his earlier statement that “we deceive ourselves” if we claim to be without sin (1.8).

Every translation is an interpretation and this is particularly true of the NIV here. For the NIV understands John to be speaking of habitual sin. E.g. in 1.6. John is not maintaining the impossibility of Christians sinning (“no one who lives in Christ sins”) but rather he is ruling out continuous sinning (“no one who lives in him keeps on sinning”). I.e. Christians will not seek to make sin a deliberate habit.

Yet, there are times when we find it difficult to break from certain sinful habits. John suggests that the way forward is to focus not so much on the temptation as on the Lord, in whom we are called to live (3.5). Similarly, we need to focus not so much on the negative virtue of sinlessness, as on the positive command to love our brothers and sisters (3.10).

How can I grow in grace today?

Tuesday 15 February

The eleventh commandment?

“How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” (Ps 119.103)

1 John 3.11-24

Jesus in the Upper Room gave his disciples a new commandment to “love one another” even as he had loved them (Jn 13.34;15.12). This commandment has sometimes been termed the ‘eleventh commandment’. But such an expression is misleading. The command to love is not just one more commandment - it sums up all the other ten (see Matt 22.34-40; Rom 13.8-10).

John develops the teaching of Jesus in the Upper Room. Love is the acid test of a Christian. Where there is no love, there is no life (3.14). It is not that loving becomes more important than believing - for John 'orthodoxy' (right believing) is as important as 'orthopraxis' (right living) - but simply that loving is the evidence that one has truly been born again of God's Spirit.

Jesus is the pattern for our loving (3.16). Christian loving is therefore by definition sacrificial in nature; it is about laying down our lives for our brothers and sisters (3.16). Such a laying down of life does not necessarily entail a literal dying for one another. John rather has in mind the costly sharing of material possessions with brothers and sisters who are in need (3.17). Needless to say, John is not thinking of the occasional charitable donation, but rather of a radical sustained form of sharing evidenced first in the life of the Jerusalem church (see Acts 2.44,45).

At this point John becomes most challenging. We are accustomed to equating Christian giving with supporting an institution. In such a context commitment is often expressed through ‘tithing’. But John, in line with New Testament thinking in general, understands ‘being church’ in more personal terms: we belong not to an institution, but rather to a family in which are called to love one another. Where love is concerned tithing becomes irrelevant, for love has no limits. Love involves the total giving of self.

Who needs my love today?

Wednesday 16 February

The true Christian

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Ps 119.105)

1 John 4.1-12

What is a Christian? In a world where denominations are numbered not by the hundred, but by the thousand, one may well wonder whether unanimity can ever be reached on the definition of a true Christian. Fortunately, John offers a guide. In this passage he suggests two marks or "tests" of the true follower of Jesus.

In the first place, a Christian is characterised by a true understanding of the person of Jesus. "This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (4.2-3). In the prevailing Greek culture of John's day most people believed the body was evil - they used to describe the body as a prison house in which the soul was shackled. The idea of God actually becoming man was anathema to them. Indeed, there were some in the church who refused to believe that the Word had become flesh (see 1.1-3: also John 1.14). Instead they affirmed that Jesus only seemed to be a man. His body was not real - Jesus did not really feel hunger and tiredness, he did not really experience sorrow and pain. Indeed, some went so far as to say that Jesus did not really die on a Cross. This was the background against which John maintained that a key test of whether or not a person was a Christian was whether or not they believed that God had actually come into the world in the person of his Son. Today we live in a different world. Today, most people have no difficulty in accepting the humanity of Jesus - rather many have difficulty in accepting the full divinity of Jesus. Nonetheless, John's general point still remains true. An orthodox understanding of the person of Jesus is still paramount. Christian faith stands or falls with our understanding of the person of Jesus.

However, right believing (*orthodoxy*), vital as it is, is of itself not sufficient. A second key test is 'right living' (*orthopraxis*). "Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love" (4.7-8: see also 4.20). For John the acid test as to whether or not a person is a true Christian is the way in which they express their love. Significantly, John's emphasis is not on our love for God but rather our love for one another (4.12). Love for others expressed in loving actions is the outward and visible sign of genuine Christian faith. . . :

To what extent do I bear the marks of a Christian?

Thursday 17 February

Love drives out fear

"The unfolding of your words gives light; it gives understanding to the simple" (Ps 119.130)

1 John 4.13-21

John's First Letter contains two great affirmations about God. The first is that "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1.6). This is a frightening thought. It means that God is the very essence of goodness and that therefore he cannot tolerate the presence of sin in any shape or form. Although by comparison with others we may appear to live good lives, the fact is that once our lives are exposed to the light of God's purity, even our best is shown to be flawed. Who then will be able to stand before God on the Last Day? It is enough to make anybody fearful. Like Adam and Eve in the Garden we may wish to hide ourselves from God (Gen 3.8). Or like Isaiah in the Temple we may cry out, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Is 6.5).

But John also affirms that "God is love" (4.8, 16), and precisely because God is love, there is no need to fear. This is not because God turns a blind eye to our sin, but rather because he has dealt with our sin by sending his Son to be "an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4.10). It is precisely because of what God has done for us in Jesus that we need no longer fear "punishment" (4.18).

However, the Cross does not enable us to rest on our laurels. In response to God's love, we are called to reflect his love in our lives (4.16). Indeed, John states that "we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him" (4.17). At first sight it might appear that our confidence lies in what we have become. However, self-confidence is misplaced. The degree to which we are like Jesus is in fact only a reflection of the work of God's Spirit in our lives.

Reflect on how love, and not courage, is the answer to fear.

Friday 18 February

The faith that overcomes the world

"All your words are true; all your righteous laws are eternal" (Ps 119.160)

1 John 5.1-12

What is the nature of Christian believing? What does it mean to believe "that Jesus is the Son of God" (5.4,5)? Yet again John returns to the theme of incarnation. However whereas he has previously emphasised the importance of believing that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4.2: see also 1.1-3), he now develops his thinking by showing that the incarnation was less an event and more a process. The coming of Jesus into the world involved not just his birth, but the whole of his life.

Over against those false teachers who taught that Jesus only appeared to be a man, John has a full-blooded understanding of the incarnation. In the first place, Jesus came "by water" (5.6). Almost certainly John is referring to the baptism of Jesus. There in the waters of the Jordan, Jesus, the Lamb of God, took the first step to the Cross by identifying himself with the sinfulness of humankind. Jesus did not just become one of us in our humanity, he became one with us in our sin. In the second place, Jesus came "by blood" (5.6). Almost certainly John is referring to the Cross of Jesus. It was there at Calvary that Jesus, the Lamb of God, fully identified himself with us and in so doing took away the sin of the world (4.14: also Jn 1.29)

The baptism and the Cross of Jesus point to the true depths of the incarnation. They are witnesses to the person of Jesus (5.7,8). So too is the Spirit: "It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth" (5.6). Almost certainly this does not refer to the inward subjective witness of the Spirit (see 5.13), but rather to the more objective work of the Spirit of truth in guiding the church "into all the truth" as it reflects upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (see Jn 16.7-13).

The faith that overcomes the world is faith rooted in the incarnate Lord.

Saturday 19 February

True prayer

“I rejoice in your promise like one who finds great spoil” (Ps 119.162)

1 John 5.13-21

God always "hears us" when we pray (5.14). However, this does not mean that he always gives a positive answer to our prayers. The key to answered prayer is that we pray "according to his will" (5.14). As Jesus himself taught, true prayer involves praying "your will be done" (Matt 6.10). Prayer is never a means of forcing our will upon God, but rather a means of our will being brought into line with God's will. This comes to clearest expression in Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matt 26.39). To pray "according to God's will" involves more than simply asking. It certainly involves more than the glib addition of "if it be your will".. It involves the hard work of listening to God, so that we ask God for what he wants, rather than what we want.

True prayer can never be limited to personal concerns. In particular, John suggests that true prayer involves seeking the spiritual welfare of others. For John encourages his readers to pray for a "brother or sister" who is straying from God's way (5.16). John draws a distinction between the sin that leads to death and the sin that does not lead to death (5.16), a distinction probably based on the Old Testament distinction between "intentional" and "unintentional" sin: forgiveness was provided for the latter by the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, but not for the former: (see Lev 4 & 5). Strangely John appears to imply that some may be beyond the reach of our prayers: However, although it is true that those who deliberately flout God's love are beyond the reach of salvation, the fact remains that where there is confession of sin, there is forgiveness (1.9.). The sin that leads to death does not inevitably result in death Furthermore, if God "does not want anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 1.9), then surely our prayers must include all.

For whom would God have me pray?

Monday 21 February

True communication

“Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing will make them stumble” (Ps 119.165)

2 John (1-13)

Without the letters of the New Testament we would be immeasurably poorer. What gems of Christian teaching are to be found in the letters of Paul, John and Peter, as also the letter to the Hebrews! Would the Christian faith have been the same if these letters had been lost? True, the loss of a brief letter like 2 John would not have materially affected our understanding of the Christian faith. For 2 John is basically a miniature of 1 John, with hardly a phrase not found in the bigger letter.

Yet, even the weightier letters of the New Testament have their limitations. For the written word all too often lends itself to misunderstanding. This was true, for instance, at Corinth (see, e.g. I Cor 5.9ff). It has also been true in many a local church situation since. Although letters of encouragement or of condolence can be greatly appreciated, letters of 'clarification' let alone of 'rebuke' can do untold harm.

John in this second letter appears to recognise the limitation of a letter. "I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete" (12). The fact is that five minutes spent "face to face" is often worth far more than five pages of "pen and ink". Letters may be quicker to write, but visiting someone in their home is more likely to build a relationship and lead to "joy".

Precisely why John wrote his letter is open to question. It may well be John was simply taking advantage of the presence of visitors from the church to pen his brief note. Clearly John was concerned by the spread of false teaching which denied the reality of the incarnation (v7). John urges the church to have no truck with people advocating such teaching: "Do not take them into your house or welcome them" (10). Christian love is not to be confused with tolerance of error. However, John realises that written advice is not sufficient. He needs to make the time to visit and to talk through the issue face to face.

Is there a pastoral visit I need to make?

Tuesday 22 February

True leadership

"Let me live that I may praise you, and may your laws sustain me" (Ps 119.175)

3 John (1-14)

The only example of one man ministry or one-man leadership in the New Testament is found here in 3 John, where Diotrephes is condemned as one "who loves to be first" (9). Elsewhere in the New Testament leadership is never the prerequisite of one person, but is always shared with others (see, for example, Acts 13.1; 14.23; 15.23; 20.17,28; Phil 1.1). However in this church Diotrephes appears to have been the sole leader. Nor did he apparently want to share the leadership. He seems to have been

almost dictatorial in his powers - authoritarian rather than authoritative (see 1 Pet 5.3). Certainly he was not prepared to listen to advice from outside. "He will have nothing to do with us" (9) writes John. He appears to have suppressed an earlier letter John had written to the church, and instead made malicious accusations against John (10). Furthermore, he clearly did not appreciate the ministry of travelling Christian teachers, and expelled from his church anybody giving such teachers a welcome (1.10).

In some ways it is unfortunate that we do not hear Diotrephes' side of the story. It may well be, for instance, that he had grounds for resenting the intrusion of an older man (1) into the church's affairs, but if so he clearly did not know how to differ in a loving way. More seriously, he appears to have fallen into a failing known still today, viz. of confusing zeal for Christ with personal ambition. Diotrephes may well have had leadership gifts, but leadership gifts are of themselves insufficient. Christian character is also needed. Indeed, ultimately charisma is secondary to character.

Diotrephes served as a negative example to his contemporaries (11). He also serves as a warning to today's church, where the importance of strong leadership is often viewed as a necessary prerequisite for church growth. Leadership gifts of themselves are not enough - rather Christian leadership must always be characterised by the spirit of the Servant King.

What kind of example do I set to others in the church as I seek to serve my Lord?

REVIEW

In our introduction we emphasised the way in which John was concerned to recall the churches in his care to true faith in Jesus. In this review, however, we want to highlight the importance John attached to obedience to Jesus' commandment to his disciples in the Upper Room to "love one another" (Jn 13.34; 15.12). In the very first chapter of his first letter John introduces the theme of the "fellowship" (koinonia) we are called to enjoy, not just with the Father and with his Son, but also with one another (1 Jn 1.3). In his second chapter John speaks of obedience to the "new commandment" as a touchstone of true spiritual life (1 Jn 2.7-11). This theme is taken up again in the third chapter (1 Jn 3.11-24), and then further developed in the fourth (1 Jn 4.7-21), and briefly touched upon in the fifth (1 Jn 5.2,3). Love for one another is one of the key themes of 2 John (4-6), and surfaces even in 3 John (5-7).

Whatever else God calls us to be, he calls us in the first place to be loving. Love is defining hallmark of the Christian church. Without love a church is as lifeless as a shrivelled-up mummy in the sands of Egypt.

John emphasises the active nature of love (see 1 John 3.16-18). The love which we are called to show one another is not an emotion of the heart, but an act of the will. Precisely because love does not always come naturally and spontaneously, love is something which can be commanded and obeyed. Christians are not Spirit-directed robots, who do the will of God without needing to think or decide or exercise their wills. They are Spirit-directed human beings, who do the will of God precisely because

they do think, they do decide, and they do exercise their wills.

The very fact that John has to major on the need for God's people to love one another is an indication that not everything was right in the churches in his care. Sadly, Christians can be the most unloving of people. Even more sadly, sometimes they have been the most unloving of people precisely because they have brought God into the situation. For the fact is that where there is disagreement in the church of God, it is all too easy to presume that God is on our side and to conclude that therefore the other side must be doing the Devil's work. But we are called to love one another as God has loved us in Jesus, and this means that we are called to love one another unreservedly and without distinction. In 1 John the whole world is always within God's embrace (see 1 John 2.2; 4.14).

In reviewing these letters, it is interesting to reflect on how 1 John has been a source of inspiration for a whole host of modern Christian song writers.. Read through the letters again and as you do so, see what songs come to mind. Alternatively look up the Scriptural index of a song book and see what songs are listed under 1, 2 & 3 John.

For example, on the basis of 1 John 3.8 Graham Kendrick has written :

*"For this purpose Christ was revealed,
to destroy all the works of the Evil One;
Christ in us has overcome
so with gladness we sing
and welcome his kingdom in.
In the name of Jesus we stand
by the power of his blood we now claim this ground:
Satan has no authority here, powers of darkness must flee
for Christ has the victory.
Over sin he has conquered: Alleluia! he has conquered.
Over death victorious: Alleluia! victorious.
Over sickness he has triumphed: alleluia! he has triumphed.
Jesus reigns over all"*

Likewise on the basis of 1 John 4.4 Graham Kendrick has written:

*"He that is in us is greater than he that is in the world
Therefore I will sing and I will rejoice for his Spirit lives in me:
Christ the living One has overcome, and we share in his victory..
All the powers of death and hell and sin lie crushed beneath his feet:
Jesus owns the name above all names, crowned with honour and majesty"*

On the basis of 1 John 3.14 another modern song-writer, Dave Bilborough, has written:

*"Let there be love shared among us, let there be love in our eyes;
may now your love sweep this nation, cause us, o Lord, to arise:
give us a fresh understanding of brotherly love that is real;
let there be loved shared among us, let there be love!"*

Reflect on the extent to which these songs are faithful to John's intentions.