

"He first loved"

1 John 4

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A few thoughts on the fourth chapter of John's first epistle might profitably engage us, and as leading up to it we may refer briefly to the other chapters of the epistle.

In 1 John 1 we find the leading thought is fellowship. This stems from, "that which was from the beginning" — the manifestation of eternal life in the Son of God. The *gospel* of John undoubtedly gives prominence to the revelation of "The True God," whilst the *epistle* stresses the manifestation of life. 1 John 5 concludes the doctrine of the epistle with the profound declaration, ". . . Jesus Christ. This (One) is the true God, and eternal life."

Historically the apostles were first in the fellowship, but this epistle was written that we might share their fellowship, a fellowship which was, "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." Thus fellowship is with the Father and with the Son, with the apostles, and with one another (verse 7). Fellowship is "in the light," that is, in the full revelation of God, for "God is *in* the Light." It is based upon the cleansing efficacy of the blood of Jesus. Thus we are not only in the light, but we are fit, through the blood, to be there.

1 John 2 brings before us true growth in its various stages — "fathers," "young men," "little children." Whilst exposing the hindrances, it marks out the way to true growth — obedience to the Word as taught by the Holy Spirit.

1 John 3 extols the manner of the Father's love which has given to us our place as children of God, and destined us for glory with Christ in the day of His manifestation. The marks of the children are detailed — the practice of righteousness; the non-practice of sin; the practice of love; abiding in Christ; Christ abiding in them; having the Spirit as the power for apprehension and enjoyment. All this has in view the hope of being like Christ in the day of manifestation.

1 John 5 gives us the witness of the Spirit, the water and the blood, to the end that we may know that we have eternal life.

1 John 4, which we have specially in mind, emphasizes true knowledge.

Verse 2 — the knowledge of the Spirit of God;

vv. 6, 7 — the knowledge of God and of the Spirit of Truth and the spirit of error;

v. 13 - the knowledge that we dwell in God and He in us;

v. 16 - knowing the love which God hath to us.

The hall-mark of the Holy Spirit's ministry through the gifts is the confession "that Jesus Christ is come in flesh" (N. Tr.).

At least two truths are involved in this confession: —

1) His pre-incarnate existence, otherwise it would be pointless to speak of Him as *come* in flesh." this calls for faith in the Godhead glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2) His true humanity — "*come* in flesh." He passed angels by — "the Word became flesh." the predilection of God was in men.

Therefore let the twofold emphasis of this Scripture lay hold upon us. May it bow us in adoration, stir us to fidelity and deepen in us the knowledge of the design of God for our fullest blessing.

"Jesus Christ come (His pre-incarnate existence) in flesh (His incarnation)."

Whilst we cannot possibly overstate the truth as to His deity, let us not fail to appreciate the tremendous significance of His having become Man. This augurs richest blessing for men. He, who is ever God, became a Man in order that the wealth of the revelation of God might become available to men.

Verse 4 attests the moral superiority of the believer over the antagonists of Christ — the fruit of the power of the indwelling Spirit.

Vv. 5, 6 give to us the apostolic credentials — "We are of God."

The true knowledge of God is evidence by hearing the apostles. This involves the whole-hearted acceptance of the entire apostolic testimony. If we would have fellowship with the Father and with the Son, we *must* have fellowship with the apostles; we must accept their teaching. They taught "that which was from the beginning." They opened the door by their testimony into the blessing of the full knowledge of God. To refuse to hear the apostles is to confess our ignorance of, and alienation from, God.

v. 7 shows that the fruit of knowing God is the practice of love. That love expresses itself towards its visible objects — the brethren. All is the product of the love of God, "for love is of God."

v. 8 — it is impossible to know God and not to love; NOT LOVING is evidence of NOT KNOWING.

v. 9 gives us to see that there is nothing ethereal or theoretical about the love of God. It is substantive and practical, for it has been *manifested towards us*, God having sent His Son, the Only-begotten, "into the world, that we might live through Him" (v. 10).

There can be no reception of life except through righteousness (cf. Galatians 3: 21). Scripture couples life and righteousness. Hence the introduction of righteousness raises, along with the question of our state of death Godward, that also of our guilt.

"Herein is love . . . that He (God) loved us." The active expression of that love was the sending of His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. This emphasizes the sovereignty of the love of God, for we did not love Him. The cause of the loving was in Himself; the expression of it was the work of His Son at Calvary. Thus verse 9 involved Bethlehem — the Incarnation, whilst verse 10 involved Calvary — the Crucifixion! The Cradle and the Cross — infinite love!

This then is the mighty lever which would move us to love one another. The love of God has reached out *to us* through the Person and the work of the Son, now it would flow out *through us* to each other, verse 12. In this way there is the practical outshining of God, for "if we love one another, God dwelleth in us." How wonderful! This means that the family of God have the blessed privilege of perpetuating the life and character of the Son of God. Do we not read in John's Gospel, chapter 1 verse 18, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He hath declared him;" and now in our chapter — "No man that seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us." Thus God is being brought in living testimony before men as the saints live in the power of the divine nature.

Our speaking, our Scripture exposition, our preaching of the gospel, blessed as all these things

can be, are not the manifestation of God, but our love to the brethren is.

v. 13. If we are to know this blessedness of dwelling in God (communion) and of His dwelling in us (character and testimony), we are altogether dependent upon divine teaching and empowering. Praise God we are indwelt by the divine Teacher, the Holy Spirit — "He hath given us of His Spirit."

v. 14 shows that living, powerful testimony is the result, and that in this scene of sin, death and darkness. We are capacitated and empowered by the Holy Spirit — and only thus — to witness to the Saviour of the world, sent as such into the world by the Father.

In v. 15 we see that the way into this realm of righteousness and love is by the confession that Jesus is the Son of God.

v. 16 teaches us that the love of God is not a preaching subject merely, it is a heart-knowing reality. He has shed His love abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us (cf. Romans 5: 5). This is not testimony, though testimony will certainly be enlivened thereby, but it is for soul enjoyment.

v. 17. That love of God, manifested *towards* us, perfected *in* us, reaches its blessed end *with* us, by setting us consciously in mind and heart beyond judgment and in the enjoyment of the blessed truth that "as *He is*, so *are we* in this world."

Vv. 18, 19. Thus He leads us to this peak of Christian blessing and enjoyment — "We love (Him), because He first loved (us)." His love to us is causeless (ours to Him is causative), and there the soul rests, intelligently, joyfully, responsively and worshipfully.

Vv. 20, 21. Lest that love on our part be less than practical we are once more directed to the fact that the Christian circle is the sphere which that love permeates, and that the reality of love is tested by its expression to the brethren — "That he who loveth God love his brother also." Love in its exercise is considerate of others, and does not (as does the flesh) find any pleasure in uncovering another's sins; rather would it cover them (cf. Proverbs 10: 12; Proverbs 17: 9; 1 Corinthians 13: 6; James 5: 20; 1 Peter 4: 8).