

First John is written as a sermon with the key purpose to defend Christian communities against false prophets and to remind them that as children of God they are to live in the light and love one another. The distracting teaching is rooted in doctism: the ancient belief, common in Greco-Roman culture, in the superiority of everything that is “spiritual” over the “physical”. It led to much debate and division in the church over the nature of Jesus as God (leading to the adoption of first great Christian Creeds: The Apostle’s and Nicene Creeds). This worldview taught by these false prophets also seemed to imply that there is no connection between our spiritual-ity (beliefs) and physical actions (ethics). The pastoral author writes to counter that false teaching, reminding the church of what it means to be a child of God, and to see in Christ the invisible God, modeling our lives – spiritual and physical – on his life and example. Love is more than a feeling, it’s a concrete action. Confessing belief in Christ and living rooted in God’s love is inseparable from loving as Christ loves: being willing to give life for one in need, to lay aside our self-concern to choose to obey love.<sup>8</sup>

**Spirit|spirits|Spirit of God** : the use of the word “spirit” ([pneumos] in Greek meaning spirit, breath, wind, or ghost) is a bit confusing. The author seems to be harkening directly back to John 16:12-14 in which the Spirit of God is lifted up as the person who will confirm, convict and clarify about the truth. “12 [Jesus said:] ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. 13 When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. 14 He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’” Throughout the Christian Scriptures the Spirit of God is also called the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Truth.

**ANTICHRIST**: We’ve become so used to these terms that we often forget that the word is only used in 1 and 2 John within the Bible (first in 1 John 2:10 & 22). Curiously here it’s used both in the singular and plural. The Greek word suggests “substitute messiah” implying that such person(s) are false prophets, teaching a false Christ, or substitute messiah; that’s to say that they are rival teachers within the community who advance fundamentally different theological ideas about Jesus. They seemed to have offered a teaching that deviated so much from what the people had heard from the beginning (the past) as in verse 24, that it denied Jesus as the son of God, and thus denied God. Their teaching went against the confession of faith central to the community rallied around John’s gospel: “<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” - John 20:30-31<sup>8</sup>

The use of **COMMANDMENT**, **ABIDE**, **LOVE**, *world*, from the beginning in the text are strongly related to their original use in the gospel of John, specifically John 15.

*world* is the contrast to what is of God, made flesh in Jesus and characterizes the people of God as opposed to the people of the *world*. Creation (what God made) is not bad or evil, rather it’s the *world* that we as human beings have twisted creation into.

February 24, 2019

## 1 John 4:1-19

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the *world*. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the **ANTICHRIST**, of which you have heard that it is coming; and now it is already in the *world*. <sup>4</sup> Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the *world*. <sup>5</sup> They are from the *world*; therefore what they say is from the *world*, and the *world* listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, let us **LOVE** one another, because **LOVE** is from God; everyone who **LOVES** is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup> Whoever does not **LOVE** does not know God, for God is **LOVE**. <sup>9</sup> God’s **LOVE** was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the *world* so that we might live through him. <sup>10</sup> In this is **LOVE**, not that we loved God but that he **LOVED** us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. <sup>11</sup> Beloved, since God

**LOVED** us so much, we also ought to LOVE one another.<sup>12</sup> No one has ever seen God; if we **LOVE** one another, God lives in us, and his **LOVE** is perfected in us.

<sup>13</sup> By this we know that we **ABIDE** in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.<sup>14</sup> And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world.<sup>15</sup> God **ABIDES** in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they **ABIDE** in God.<sup>16</sup> So we have known and believe the **LOVE** that God has for us. God is **LOVE**, and those who abide in **LOVE** abide in God, and God abides in them.<sup>17</sup> **LOVE** has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this **world**.<sup>18</sup> There is no fear in **LOVE**, but perfect **LOVE** casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.<sup>19</sup> We **LOVE** because he first **LOVED** us.

#### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What shimmers in your attention in this reading?
- Inherent in the text today is the evocation of a debate, division or dispute within the community over topics of theology and ethics, in particular in the understanding – or confession – of Jesus as the Christ. How do you handle such debates? Do you – or we as the church – tend to paint them in black and white terms of a cosmic struggle of good versus bad? Or do you look more for how to invoke spiritual authority in order to discern the better, or best way forward? How are we called to love as Christ loves even in disputes and debates?
- Right belief is demonstrated by living in and from that belief, that's to say the proof or demonstration of faith is active love of others as God loves us. It's similar to the book of James which says "faith without works is dead." Here faith without love isn't true faith. How does that play out in our community life? In how we choose our leaders? In how we approach Christian education? What about in your own personal life in terms of hard relationships, that may need forgiveness, expressions of gratitude and in which may it's hard to say – and do – I love you?

*God sent his son into the world:* this expression in verse 9 echoes John 3:16 & John 10 & 15:

<sup>16</sup> "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the *world* to condemn the *world*, but in order that the *world* might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God."

and in John 10:11-18 & 15:13 Jesus defines love as self-giving action: "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep..." "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

**ABIDE**: this word is heavily used in the letter, pointing back to a metaphor first used by Jesus of the mutual love seen in how a vine and its branches are connected and interdependent. "<sup>4</sup> **ABIDE** in me as I **ABIDE** in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it **ABIDES** in the vine, neither can you unless you **ABIDE** in me.<sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who **ABIDE** in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." John 15:4-5 This metaphor lifts up the essential mutuality and interdependence of a relationship with God through Christ, as well as a relationship with our brothers, sisters & neighbors.

**LOVE**: throughout this selection, and the entire pastoral letter of 1 John is defined more as an action or activity than a word or idea. It's not just a command of God, but the very nature and person of God. The logic drawn is that if God abides, or lives, in us, and we abide in God, then we will be like God: we will love as God loves. The nature of God, the fabric of reality is social or relational. That's what it means for us to be created "in the image of God" – Genesis 1:27 commonly called the *missio dei* in theology (the mission/purpose of God)

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<sup>5</sup> In my notes, I borrowed freely from *Seek. Find.: The Bible for All People* (The Contemporary English Version) ABS 2006 and *The Epistles of John*. David Resenberg. Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.