

5. Of all the ways in which the Father's children share in and manifest His likeness, the most fundamental and most important is their love. Because God *is* love, it's impossible that His sons and daughters should not be characterized by love. John understood this, and so made this theme the centerpiece of his instruction. He's already spoken to the issue of love (ref. 2:7-11, 3:13-24), and here returns to it by way of bringing his letter to its climax (4:7-5:3). Because John stepped away from this subject to address the matter of spiritual discernment, only to then return to it, some have seen 4:1-6 as an awkward insertion in the middle of a larger context. But the truth is that the discernment John was calling for is precisely one way in which Christians fulfill their calling to love one another. For love pursues the true good of the other, and conformity to the true and living Christ is the ultimate good for every human being. Therefore, Christians seeking to safeguard themselves and their brethren from deceiving and destructive influences is a preeminent ministration of love. Love *acts*, but always in service of the truth. Love is, as one man put it, "*the mode of knowing that includes, but transcends all other modes of knowing.*" And so, when John reiterated the obligation of Christians to love one another (4:7), he wasn't changing the subject, but showing that his instruction on "testing the spirits" is itself a practical articulation of what love for the brethren looks like.
- a. John began this section by stating the fundamental truth that underlies and informs the issue of Christian love, which is that love is entirely a divine quality. As such, it only exists in the human realm in those human beings who share in the divine nature: "*Love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God*" (4:7). Two things are critically important in this statement: The first is that love originates and has its true substance in the person of God; the second is that love exists in humans in connection with an intimate *relational* knowledge of God that is grounded in sharing in God's life and nature. Verse 8, then, expresses the same truths, but from the negative vantage point: "*Whoever doesn't love, doesn't know God, for God is love.*"
- b. John's assertions about love imply that it is foreign to human beings in their natural state. This means that the way people define love and the things they point to as examples of it may *approximate* it, but they necessarily fall short of the truth of it. And what John implied in verses 7-8 he directly affirmed in his next two statements (4:9-10). These statements emphasize that one must look to God's actions to discern what love is. Both actions pertain to God's sending of His Son, but the first focuses on *incarnation*, while the second focuses on *propitiation*.

Some English versions obscure John's meaning in verse 9 by the way they render his prepositional phrase in the first part of the sentence. The ASV and NAS, among others, express the idea of God's love being manifest *in* us. The point of his statement, then, is that God's love is manifest as an *inward phenomenon* experienced by those who obtain eternal life as the result of Jesus coming into the world. But a better understanding – one that better suits the context – is that John was referring to the outward, observable manifestation of God's love in the incarnation: "*By this the love of God was manifest **among** us, namely that God sent His Son into the world so that we might live through Him.*"

God makes known the truth of love by His own actions, and John specifically mentioned the incarnation as one such action. But the issue in this testimony to God's love isn't simply the *fact* of incarnation, but the *purpose* for it. John recognized the "Word becoming flesh" as critical to God accomplishing His design for His creation. The incarnation was the Father *sending* His son into the world, but with a very specific mission in view. The Son came as the Father's *apostle* and minister of life, even as Jesus would later send His disciples as apostles in the cause of His apostolic mission (John 17:18-23).

John's point, then, was not that the incarnation *as such* manifests God's love, but that love is revealed and demonstrated in the incarnation as it was foundational to the divine work of love that God accomplished in the Christ event. *The incarnation manifested God's love – and so love as it actually is – by being the beginning of the new creation that was the goal of that love.*

In the incarnate Messiah, God and man were forever reconciled, even as man himself was renewed as divine image-son. And that reconciliation and human renewal were the promise of the same outcome for the human race and the entire cursed creation. This is what Jesus had in mind when he declared that "God so loved the world that He gave His Son..." (John 3:16-17).

John regarded the Father's sending of the Son as the supreme expression of the divine love – not the mere act of sending as such, but what it entailed and the purpose for it. When God sent the Son into the world, He was sending *Himself*; He was fulfilling His long-standing promise through His prophets to return to Zion. And this return wasn't metaphorical or ethereal, but actual and physical in the unique miracle of incarnation: *The Creator God and covenant Lord of Israel entered into His creation in a new and profound way as taking it to Himself by uniting Himself with His human creature in complete and everlasting union.* If one would attempt to define and grasp God's love for His creation, he must first ponder the astonishing, awe-inspiring mystery of incarnation.

The incarnation made the divine love tangible and visible and it provided critical insight into its nature and goal, but it wasn't sufficient in itself. First of all, the incarnation didn't provide a complete explanation of God's love. But more importantly, it didn't fully realize the goal and work of that love. It was absolutely crucial, but incomplete; incarnation served the goal of *propitiation*. Thus John: the love of God was *manifested* in the incarnation (i.e., in the sending of the Son), but God's love *consists* in this, that the Son came as propitiation for sin (4:10).

John here embodied the entirety of the divine love in the Son's work of propitiation, and this demands careful consideration. For propitiation is only one dimension of Christ's work; specifically, it pertains to God's appeasement of His indignation against the offense of sin. As noted previously (in the treatment of 2:2), John alone employed this term, and he used it with respect to the issue of Creator/creation estrangement and its resolution in Christ.

In the prior instance, John spoke of Jesus *Himself* as God's propitiation, not as having *made* propitiation. The same nuance occurs here: *The sent Son is propitiation for sin*. In both instances, John connected propitiation with incarnation, but not simply in terms of incarnation *facilitating* propitiation (i.e., Jesus had to be born in order to die an atoning death). Rather, his statement implies that incarnation somehow *embodies* propitiation. This may seem like an overreach, but this is because incarnation and atonement are typically treated separately as distinct aspects of God's work in Christ: Incarnation was the foundation for that work, whereas atonement was its climactic focal point; incarnation is about Jesus' birth, while atonement concerns His death; incarnation set the stage for atonement, but it is not part of Jesus' atoning work. And because propitiation is a dimension of atonement, it follows that the distinction between atonement and incarnation must be carried over to propitiation and incarnation.

Viewed from this usual perspective, it's difficult to see how (or why) John so closely connected incarnation and propitiation. Even more challenging is his insistence that these two together are the singularly great testimony to God's love. But his thinking becomes more transparent in the light of a more truly biblical understanding of atonement.

- Many, if not most Christians think of atonement in terms of satisfaction for sin. To say that Jesus "atoned for sin" is to say that He paid the penalty that human sin incurred. Thus atonement is viewed primarily as a *legal* concept – it is God's ordained means for satisfying the legal guilt and debt resulting from legal violation (law-breaking). Atonement pertains to sin and forgiveness, but as a judicial matter more than a relational one.
- But the goal of atonement isn't legal satisfaction, but *reconciliation*. Atonement does address legal guilt incurred through law-breaking, but law-breaking as violation of divine-human *relationship*, which is the concern of God's *torah* (law) in all of its formulations. Atonement reconciles God and human beings, but beyond merely resolving the enmity between them. God's intent in Christ was obtaining true *sons* and *daughters*; atonement looks to the formation of image-children who share in the life and love of their Father according to the principle of intimacy that is "*I in you and you in me*" (cf. Isaiah 53-54 with John 17:20-23; Romans 8:1-23; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Ephesians 1:3-6; Hebrews 2). This is the sense in which propitiation concerns human alienation and divine wrath; this is the sense in which propitiation is at the heart of atonement.

It was this understanding that enabled John to encompass Christ's atoning work within the concept of propitiation and also bind together propitiation and incarnation: Jesus the Messiah is Yahweh returned to Zion; He is the human embodiment of the living God such that, in His person, God and man are reconciled and united in an exhaustive and everlasting communion of love. In Him we see the reality of propitiation as the sovereign exertion of divine love.

- c. John exhorted his readers to love one another, not because it's good or right from an ethical standpoint (although it is), but because it's inherent in being a Christian. For Christians, by definition, are those who share in God's life and nature through union with Christ, and God is love. How, then, can one possess the divine life and nature that is defined by love and not be characterized by love? And so, the truth that God is love carries two implications:
- First, it implies that *no one* loves who is alienated from the life of God. For, it's not simply true that God loves; rather, love *inheres* in Him because He *is* love. This means that a person can only know love and appropriate it in his own life and experience when he shares in God's life; everyone who loves has been born of God.
  - But the converse is also true: All who share in God's life are characterized by love. Hence John could insist that those who don't love don't *know* God – that is, they have no living, relational knowledge of Him; they are not true children who share in His life and nature. Everyone who knows God has been born of God.

Given John's warnings about antichrist influences that were denying the incarnation – denying Jesus as the *enfleshed* Christ (cf. again 2:18-23, 4:1-3), it's likely that these statements connecting new birth, love and the knowledge of God had the Gnostic "Christians" in mind. For these were followers of the Christ who based their confidence in the fact that they had a superior, even esoteric knowledge of the Christ, and so of God Himself. Yet, from John's perspective, their denial of the incarnation proved that they didn't know either the Son or the Father (2:23). So their actions among the community of believers further proved this out. Whether or not they recognized it, they were of the *antichrist spirit*; in the name of drawing people closer to Christ, they were leading them away from Him. They were obscuring a true knowledge of the Messiah, and so acting contrary to the truth of love. In this way, they were demonstrating that they were not sharers in the God who is love, and so had no actual knowledge of Him or the Christ He had sent into the world. Claiming *gnosis*, they remained unknowing.

But John believed better of His readers: Here, for the final time, he addressed them as his *beloved* (4:11). He was confident that they did indeed know the Father and the Son as those "born from above." And sharing in the divine life by the renewing, indwelling Spirit, they were authentic children of God – children who were to manifest the divine love among themselves and in the world. But in order to do so, they must discern what love actually looks like, and for that insight John directed them toward God's manifest love: "*If, in this way, God loved us, we ought to love one another with the same love.*" John wasn't obligating his readers to incarnation or propitiation, but to the loving concern and goal behind them. The Father's love, manifest in the Son's person and work, pursued and accomplished creational reconciliation and the *shalom* and *shabbat* of new creation. So the children's love – which is His love – should display it and work for its fruition.