

3. The Christian has an obligation of obedience to Jesus' commandments, so much so that John insisted that obedience demonstrates that a person has come to know Him. For a *Christian* is one who is *in Christ* – one who shares in His life by His Spirit. The Christian is one with His Lord and this unity expresses itself in conformity to His mind, affections and will. This is why John defined obedience to Jesus' commandments as obedience to His *word*. Such obedience amounts to conformity to Jesus Himself since His spoken "word" reflects and expresses His person as the incarnate Word. Jesus' words are the truth because they perfectly accord with His person and work and He is Himself the truth (John 1:14-17, 8:31-32, 14:6, 12-21, 16:13-15, 18:37): *the truth of God, the truth of man and the truth of God's purposes for His creation which are centered in man.*

John was adamant concerning the Christian obligation of authentic obedience, but he wanted his readers to understand that he wasn't imposing something new on them: The "commandment" he was writing to them was the "word" which they had heard "from the beginning" (2:7). His instruction accorded with what they'd heard and received when they first came to the knowledge of Jesus; it reiterated the commandment Jesus had given to His disciples and which they were to take into the world. *That commandment was the obligation of love which is the defining pattern of the new creation Jesus had inaugurated by His death and resurrection* (ref. John 15:1-16:15, 17:20-23).

- a. John insisted that he wasn't issuing a new commandment, but only reasserting what his readers had heard "from the beginning." Some have argued that he was directing his words to those in the community who were undermining the truth of Jesus' person and work (and perhaps John's teaching and the things he'd written in his gospel account). If such ones accused John of adding to Jesus' "word," the truth was that they were the ones introducing novel ideas; his instruction echoed what he'd received from the Lord and he'd never deviated from it.

But there is another dimension to John's claim that his commandment wasn't new. John was concerned with the obligation of love, and this obligation preceded Jesus as the marrow of God's covenant relationship with Israel (ref. again Matthew 22:34-40). Even more, Israel's obligation of love as Yahweh's *covenant son* reflected His requirement of all human beings. For God is love and humans are His image and likeness; therefore, their righteousness – like His – is existence defined and governed by love. In every sense, then, John could insist that the commandment he was referring to is not new. His readers had heard this "word" from the beginning of their exposure to the truth of the Messiah, but it extended all the way back through Israel's history to the very outset of God's relationship with His human creature (ref. 1 John 3:11-12).

- b. At the same time, John recognized that this former ("old") commandment was also a *new* commandment (2:8). This Greek adjective indicates newness related to *kind* or *quality* rather than origination (as in *newly made*) and John indicated the sort of newness he had in mind by associating it with Jesus and those who belong to Him: This new commandment "*is true in Him and in you.*" The former commandment had now attained a newness in relation to Jesus and His people.

This statement is critically important, for it points to the fundamental concept which underlies everything John believed and taught – indeed everything pertaining to the entire Christ-event and the “good news” it heralded. *This concept is the all-encompassing transformation – the new creation – which God had brought about in the person and work of His Messiah-Son.* John was reminding his readers of the truth that the former commandment had become new in and through Jesus and so in and through those who share in His resurrection life as the Last Adam and first-fruits of God’s new creation. That is to say, the commandment’s newness was a matter of fulfillment and actual realization, not the imposition of some new demand. The Law commanded Israel’s love and Jesus, who embodied Israel as Yahweh’s faithful covenant son, had fulfilled this commandment by His life and self-giving death. He is defined by love and so, therefore, are those who share in Him as True Man. So John: The commandment has become true – i.e., actualized in human existence and practice – *in Him and so in those who know Him as sharers in Him.*

The commandment is new in the sense that Jesus has fulfilled and transformed it. Its former existence has yielded to its new, “christified” one and John highlighted this dynamic using the imagery of light and darkness: Jesus transformed the commandment by overcoming the former order – the “darkness” – in which the commandment existed and operated. He confronted and conquered the darkness of the “old” creation by the introducing into it the light of His own person: *“the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining”* (2:8b; cf. Isaiah 9:1-7; Luke 1:67-79; etc.). Again, light and darkness are common themes in John’s writings, light being associated with God’s person, presence, truth and work and darkness as the absence of this light (cf. John 1:1-9, 8:12, 9:5, 12:23-46; 1 John 1:5-7). Darkness, then, is the creational state which results from alienation from the God who is light; it defines the creation under the curse (cf. Psalm 82, 107:1-15, 112:1-4; Isaiah 8:1-9:7, 42:1-16, 49:1-13, 59:1-60:3). Thus the passing of the darkness implies the reintroduction of light in a new day – the dawning new day of the creation’s renewal and restoration to its God.

- c. Verses 9-11 make explicit what John implied in verse 5: *This former commandment made new in Jesus and His disciples is the obligation of love for the brethren.* Again, this “word” was embodied in the Ten Words and, along with its counterpart of love for God, formed the substance of Yahweh’s *Torah* to Israel. It was a commandment “from the beginning” and John’s readers (whether Jew or Gentile) would have been familiar with it (ref. Acts 15:19-21).

This commandment to love was not a new “word,” but it had become new in Jesus so as to become true in Him in a way it wasn’t true before (cf. John 13:34). So also it had become true in His disciples as never before with men: *The “old” commandment was “new” for them in the sense that they now enjoyed a new relationship with it. It was formerly commanded of them, but was now being actualized in them.* In the Messiah, they were now the sort of people which the commandment specified – people of love who are thus children of God in truth.

John associated this newness with the dispelling of darkness and the intrusion of light, but as a *progressing development*: The darkness was *passing* in view of the light *already shining*, but the new “day” hadn’t yet fully dawned. John saw his time as a time of transition in which the world was moving from darkness to the fullness of light. He knew that the “true light” had come and was dispelling the darkness, but he also recognized that this process wasn’t yet complete; he was living in the “last hour” in which the former order was passing away. This “hour” would culminate with the Messiah’s appearing to bring the everlasting brightness of His presence and rule over His renewed creation (ref. 2:15-3:3). Though John didn’t use the expression, it’s clear he was alluding to the *already-but-not-yet* nature of the present age and the present form of Christ’s kingdom. The new day of new creation in Jesus has dawned, but the darkness of the former order hasn’t yet passed out of existence (cf. 1:6, 2:9-11; also John 3:19-21, 8:12, 12:35-46).

- d. The “new” commandment exists in the sphere of light and so is kept by those who inhabit the light (2:9-10; cf. 1:5-7). But light and darkness are mutually exclusive; they cannot exist together. Darkness is the absence of light, so that light dispels darkness as “something” displaces “nothing.” Thus John’s logic: *Love exists only in the realm of light, so that it isn’t found in the realm of darkness*. For this reason the one who loves shows by his love that he is a son of light and a son of the day (cf. John 12:35-36; Ephesians 5:8; Philippians 2:12-16; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-8). Conversely, the one who doesn’t love – the one who “hates” – doesn’t dwell in the light and so necessarily remains in the realm of darkness; he continues to live according to the former order of human existence which Jesus condemned and put to death in Himself. For all those outside of Christ, this former order is all they know; they *are* darkness even as they inhabit it. But for those who’ve entered the light (Colossians 1:1-14), walking in darkness renders them liars: They lie against the truth of themselves and the truth of Jesus’ triumph over the darkness.

And as darkness is privation (the absence of light), so also hatred is privation; it is the absence of love. This is a crucial point that must not be missed: *Hatred, in its essence, doesn’t concern attitudes, words or actions as such, but a way of being human*. Everyone who doesn’t love *hates*, but love is defined by God Himself and finds its true and full expression in the incarnate Messiah, the True Man. This means that everyone who doesn’t share in His life is characterized by hatred, regardless of his conduct (Titus 3:1-7). Hatred is human existence in the domain of darkness – the realm of death, and all people inhabit this domain who haven’t entered the realm of light in Jesus. Life in Him means entering the light and so entering the realm defined and governed by love (cf. 1 John 3:9-14, 4:7-8).

And so those who claim to “walk in the light” (cf. 1:5-7) while hating their brother actually continue in darkness, whatever they believe about themselves. In fact, John implies that such persons are *self-deceived*: The darkness leaves them “blind,” unable to perceive their surroundings or where they’re going. They themselves stumble (whether or not they’re Christians) and so cannot help but lead others to stumble with them (2:10-11; cf. Matthew 15:1-14, 23:15-28).