



# Love in 1 John

Patrick J. Griffiths

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Waukesha Bible Church  
553 W24079 Glendale Road  
Waukesha, Wisconsin 53189  
[www.waukeshabible.org](http://www.waukeshabible.org)

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# An Introduction

In the study of the Bible several initial thoughts might prove helpful. First, the Bible came to us from God. It is an inspired book. In fact, it is the only book ever written by God through human instrumentation. Second, the Bible tells a single *Story*. This *Story* has six broad “acts”: God, Creation, Rejection, Redemption, Re-Creation and Joy through Worship. Third, at the center of this *Story* is Jesus. He is God’s means of rescuing the fallen, reversing the curse and restoring everything back to its original design. Fourth, in reading the Bible different approaches can be employed. They are as follows.

1. Historical theology looks at theological thought within its historical **development**. It provides a snapshot of thought. It speaks to what people thought during a specific period within church history.
2. Biblical theology considers thought as presented by a **single book** of the Bible or by a **single author** such as the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts or the 13 Letters written by the Apostle Paul.
3. Systematic theology seeks to take all of the various categories touched on by the various books and **catalogue** common themes.
4. Finally, dogmatic theology gives **labels** to groupings and presuppositions made by Systematic theology such as Dispensational or Covenant Theology and Reformed and Arminian Theologies.

The short readings you are about to encounter focus on biblical theology within the author’s historical context. The Apostle John wrote the Gospel of John, the three Letters of John and the Book of Revelation. These readings will only

focus on his first Letter. Although this is the limitation of the study, it is not inconsistent with anything anyone would read elsewhere. What such a study does do is force us to wrestle with what Pastor John is saying and not read into the text something that is not being said by the Apostle. Each study has a thorough reading of the various passages. Although it might prove daunting initially, the return on this small investment is notable.

So enjoy. May the following readings drive you into the text and then through the text to Jesus. Truly, He is beautiful.

# Love in 1 John

I believe it helps our understanding of Pastor John's picture of love by noting two background colors. First, the New Testament describes Pastor John in the following manner.

- Our Lord placed him inside of His inner circle of disciples (Matt. 17:1; Mark 5:37; 13:3; 14:33; Luke 8:51; 22:8). He was trustworthy and faithful.
- He was given the nickname "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17). Apparently he could have quite a temper and was noted for his passionate fire.
- He had zero tolerance for those who did not follow the Lord the same way he followed the Lord (Mark 9:38; Luke 9:49). He was opinionated and narrow-minded.
- In his own work he refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (John 21:7, 24; 20:2; 21:20; 13:23-26). He was capable of leaning on the breast of Jesus without suspicion.

Second, those who had left the local fellowship or were disciplined out of the fellowship no longer loved the fellowship. They claimed to love God, but had no love for Jesus or His body, the local assembly.

To love the Body of Jesus, His church, is to love Jesus. Pastor John speaks of those who practice righteousness by their continued awareness of who they are and who Jesus is. Those born of God recognize themselves inside of God's *Story*. Those who are born of the devil do not accept God's *Story*. They reject His authorship and thus it is right to call them sinners in need of a singular Savior. They do not practice righteousness. They are not confessors.

Pastor John shows how those born of God not only practice righteousness (2:28-3:9), but also love one another (vv. 11-24 [i.e. the church community]). Our present passage speaks to this second element of how the children of God and the children of the devil are unveiled.

Throughout the Letter of 1 John there is a consistent appeal to love one's brother and sister in Christ. Often such an exhortation is read individually without any thought of the larger community. Yet if we are reading the historical context for 1 John correctly, Pastor John is speaking against those who have left the local assembly either voluntarily or through church discipline. In leaving, they no longer love the leadership of the church [i.e. Pastor John and the Elders] or the assembly left behind. Pastor John's exhortation is "do not say you love the Father, if you do not love His church." Such a separation is impossible. Pastor John continually points out to the reader that it is impossible for one to say they love God if they do not love Jesus and His Church [i.e. the brethren]. This is what our text speaks to.

John uses the noun (*αγαπη*) fourteen times and the verb (*αγαπαω*) seventeen times and the affectionate title of "beloved" (*αγαπητος*) five times in this short epistle. Thus, John's treatment of this theme is far from casual. The word for "friend" [**phileo**] is not used in 1 John.

I've taken the time to look up all the occurrences of "love" in this Letter and place its usage in several categories. I see the idea as seen in 1 John as sequential.

**First**, God is love and He loves.

Notice the following passages to support the idea that God is love and loves.

“But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him” (1 John 2:5).

“See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1).

“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 John 3:16).

<sup>7</sup>“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. <sup>8</sup>The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. <sup>9</sup>By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten 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 propitiation for our sins. <sup>11</sup>Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. <sup>12</sup>No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:7-12).

“We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16).

We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

When one speaks of God as love they must equally speak of His selfless act of sending His Son into the world to become the sacrifice whereby His justice would be answered and His wrath would be assuaged. In 1 John this connection is so tightly woven together that to separate them is a genuine travesty.

**Second**, those loved by God are called the beloved.

“Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard” (1 John 2:7).

“Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

“Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” (1 John 3:21).

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 John 4:1).

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

We love because we are loved. The present loving is because of a past love. His love causes our love. Our love is a consequence of Him loving His Church.

**Third**, because God loves us in Jesus we love one another.

The Scripture presupposes if one loves God, they will love one another, thus the admonition.

“The one who loves his brother abides in the Light and there is no cause for stumbling in him” (1 John 2:10).

“By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother” (1 John 3:10).



“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death” (1 John 3:14).

“But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (1 John 3:17).

“This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us” (1 John 3:23).

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

“No one has seen God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12).

“We love, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

“And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:21).

Because of the historical context of this Letter, the brother referred to are those within the local church. For Pastor John, to love one another means loving those inside of the local assembly. The function of loving one another is primary; the form that love takes is secondary.<sup>1</sup> That we are and will love His church is essential and an unavoidable consequence of loving Jesus. How that love is expressed is worked through corporate expression and personal gifting.

God is love and He loves. It is impossible for the God who loves to be less than loving. As such when He is in you, you cannot help but love those who are His. If we individualize this idea apart from the community of faith [i.e. the local church], we make it an impossible action. This not only

identifies the individual within the assembly, but it also identifies the assembly. No assembly can be identified as unloving simply because someone within the assembly behaves poorly. It is the whole that enables us to act out the love of God toward one another. The Church of Jesus Christ is a loving Church. This quality is noted by the name used to address them.

When the circle is complete and love has done its work, there is no fear. This is true of all who confess the *Story* to be true.

“By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world” (1 John 4:17).

Loving God and one another is not grievous or difficult because it is His love flowing in us and through us to those around us.

“For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

**Fourth**, Pastor John puts an inseparable link between loving Jesus [the head] and His people [i.e. the local church].

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (1 John 4:7).

“Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:11).

“And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:21).

<sup>1</sup> “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him. <sup>2</sup> By this

we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments" (1 John 5:1, 2).

Often we read "love one another" in the same vein we read "love your neighbor as yourself." We then ask the question "who is my neighbor?" From there we answer it with "any who are in need." Yet this inclusive application is empty if void of the direct and immediate application to those closest. The more direct and perhaps difficult application is with those closest to us. Loving the unknown individual is made easier by the romantic notion of an untouched life. But when life on life action exists within the assembly and humble responses are made to those with oversight, then "loving one another" is tinged with gray emotion.

Those who left the local church claimed to love God, but equally claimed to have no love for their local assembly. And their negative response to the leadership and disparagement of the congregant spoke of their non-love for Jesus and thus His church.

**Fifth**, if God is love and works His love in and through His people, what are we to do with those who seem not to love those He loves?

"If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

This is the challenge faced by any who read Pastor John's first Letter. The strength of what he says is resilient. The love God speaks of is not generic love, but a love showing itself in the context of the assembly.

**Sixth**, God's love in us negates our love for the world.

God's love in us is polarizing. The world rejects its sin and thus culpability before the God who created them and they equally reject their need of His redemptive *Story* in Jesus.

“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Not loving the world is a consequence of choosing to love God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The world is unbelief; choosing God is belief. Loving God is the only way of extracting oneself from the world. By agreeing with God's record, the world is overcome and our natural affection for it is broken.

Thus when we say “God is love” let us equally speak of His great offering in the person and work of Jesus Christ and what was accomplished through this offering in the forming of His body, the Church. Let us likewise mark how to love God is to equally love His church.

# ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For further expansion on the idea of function versus form see (Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Churchy*, "A Look Through Three Lenses," 32-46.)

# Studies in 1 John

## 10 of 11

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