

The Limits Of Love

Introduction. Richard Whately once said, "Everyone wishes to have truth on his side, but not everyone wishes to be on the side of truth." Throughout the centuries, even in the church's darkest hours, there have always been those who were faithful to evangelize the lost with the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.

John knew that there is no substitute for teaching that Jesus is truth and stressed the importance of it in 2 John. Truth and love are inseparable. Therefore, those who do not love do not practice the truth, and those who uphold the truth must do so in love (Ephesians 4:15).

I. ***Loving In The Truth***

- A. The Bible is clear that love is the defining mark of a true Christian, and the lack of it characterizes unbelievers (1 John 2:9-11). In one sense, what John wrote was not a new commandment. "New" is *kainos*, which refers not to something new in time, but new in essential character. The command to love is not unique to the New Testament (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18; cf. Matthew 22:37-39).
- B. However, viewed from another perspective the commandment was new (1 John 2:7-8) in at least three senses.
 1. The command to love belongs to the new age inaugurated by the coming of Christ. We now live in the spiritual kingdom (Luke 17:20-21). The "true light" is shining, and has rescued us from the "domain of darkness" (Colossians 1:13).
 2. Love is "true in him;" that is, it has now been perfectly modeled by the Lord Jesus Christ. He is an example of how to love (John 13:1, 34-35).
 3. Christians have a new understanding of love through the revelation of the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5). This love is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22); thus Paul could write that we "are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9).
- C. Love is not more important than truth or belief, but love offers the clearest test of the truthfulness of confession and the sincerity of obedience. Belief may be faked and confession only of the lips, but love is harder to counterfeit. The defining characteristic of love is that we "walk according to His commandments" (John 14:15; 15:10; 1 John 5:3). The Old Testament even viewed obedience to God as the ultimate expression of love for Him (Deuteronomy 11:1; Joshua 22:5; Nehemiah 1:5). The New Testament makes the point even clearer.

II. ***Being Loyal To The Truth***

- A. Biblical love does not imply a naive, uncritical, undiscerning acceptance of anyone who claims to represent Jesus Christ. Having stressed the importance of love, John immediately sets limits on it.
- B. Christians cannot, in the name of love, embrace deceivers who have gone out into the world; followers of the true Christ cannot love antichrists; those who are committed to biblical truth cannot have fellowship with those who pervert it.
 - 1. "Deceivers" translates the plural word of *planos*, which literally means "a wanderer" (the English word "planet" derives from it). In this case, it refers to those who wander from the truth of scripture; who corrupt it; who lead others astray from it; who are impostors (2 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 2:4; Jude 13).
 - 2. The New Testament is full of warnings about them infiltrating the church (Matthew 7:15-20; Acts 20:29; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; 1 Timothy 4:1; 1 John 4:1-3). Everywhere the gospel goes, Satan's helpers are sure to follow, perverting the message and polluting the church.
- C. There are many ways to undermine the gospel, but John had in mind those false teachers who were denying that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. They were forerunners of the dangerous Gnostic heresy, which posed one of the gravest threats to the early church.
- D. Knowing the serious threat the false teachers posed, John warned his readers to watch. Every congregation must be vigilant because what is at stake is so vital. John did not want the church to lose what they together had accomplished. The church today has a legacy that has been handed down to it, a heritage that must be preserved at all costs.

III. ***Guarding The Truth***

- A. Those who are loyal to scripture will naturally seek to protect it. Going too far means "going beyond an established bounds of teaching or instruction, with the implication of failure to obey properly" (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6).
- B. Instead, we "abide" (remain, continue, persist) in the truth. False teachers are not content to remain within the confines of scripture, but invariably add erroneous interpretations and distortions to the Bible.
- C. What is the "doctrine of Christ"? Many say that it is the biblical teaching about Christ, and as long as we agree with various aspects of His life, we can have fellowship even though we may have doctrinal differences. Nevertheless, how the phrase is used elsewhere can help us determine its meaning.

1. The doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Matthew 16:12).
 2. The doctrine of Balaam (Revelation 2:14).
 3. The doctrine of the Nicolaitans (Revelation 2:15).
 4. Is this the information about these groups or is it their teaching? What about the "doctrine of Christ" in Hebrews 6:1? Is it fundamentals about Him or His gospel?
- D. John plainly states that whoever alters, adds to, or denies the content of the gospel does not have God (cf. Matthew 11:27; John 5:23; 15:23; 1 John 2:23; Revelation 22:18-19). Conversely, when one abides in the teaching, they have both the Father and the Son.
- E. Hospitality for traveling preachers was common in the culture (cf. Luke 9:1-6; 10:1-12). If false teachers establish themselves in people's homes, they will eventually worm their way into churches. Because of this danger, John forbade giving them a greeting.
1. Irenaeus relates that the "church father" Polycarp, when asked by the notorious heretic Marcion, "Do you know me?" replied, "I do know you -- the firstborn of Satan" (*Against Heresies*, 3.3.4). Who would say this today (1 John 3:10)?
 2. John himself once encountered Cerinthus (another notorious heretic) in a public bathhouse in Ephesus. Instead of greeting him, John turned and fled, saying, "Let us fly, lest even the bathhouse fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4).
- F. A greeting was a common way to convey joy between Christians. But greeting a false teacher is an affirmation of agreement, thereby giving the appearance of affirming what they teach and lending them credibility. These workers of Satan must be exposed and shunned, not affirmed and welcomed.
1. False teachers naturally like to decry such treatment as harsh, intolerant, and unloving. There is no hatred or retaliation, but love forbids allowing dangerous deceivers to find a foothold among Christians.
 2. The church cannot aid or abet spiritual misfits by doing anything that would acknowledge them as faithful. The one who does so participates in their evil deeds by helping them further their deception.

IV. **Learning The Truth**

- A. The conclusion of this brief epistle reveals one last responsibility we have toward the truth. Despite all that John had taught those Christians, they still needed to learn more (2 Timothy 2:15; 2 Peter 3:18).

- B. He did not want to write to them, but see them "face to face," an idiomatic expression comparable to the English expression "eyeball to eyeball" (Numbers 12:8).
- C. The result of her learning the truth would be that her joy would be made full (cf. 1 John 1:4). The greater the knowledge of the truth, the greater the Christian's joy (Jeremiah 15:16; John 15:11; 17:13).

Conclusion. In an age of relativism and skepticism, the church must remain firmly anchored to the solid foundation of divine truth. There is no place for shallow preaching, for worship based on emotion devoid of truth, or for tolerating false teaching. There is no virtue in ignorance; no substitute for learning, loving, and guarding the truth. Only by so doing will the church be able to fulfill its divine calling to be the "pillar and support of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), shining the light of God's truth in the world of darkness. "Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth" (Henry David Thoreau).