

WE LOVE BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US

by Steve Zeisler

Norman Rockwell was a beloved American artist of a generation ago. Among the best-known of Rockwell's works is a painting of a white-haired grandmother with a beautiful smile on her face, placing a platter of roasted turkey on a table. Just over her right shoulder is a white-haired grandfather wearing suit and tie, with carving implements on the table before him. And ringing the table are the bright faces of their children and grandchildren, we presume, gathered together for a Thanksgiving feast.

I had the interesting experience in the days leading up to Thanksgiving this year of hearing reference made to this painting no fewer than five times, and each time as a negative example. In one case, there was discussion of the food that would be served on Thanksgiving day, and reference was made to the fact that this is no longer a nation of farmers who raise potatoes, poultry and vegetables. The observer was calling for more cultural variety in the food of the holidays. In another case, someone commented on sexual stereotypes and how unseemly it was to have the grandmother figure coming from the kitchen with apron on, and the grandfather figure as the patriarchal carver. In yet another case, someone referring to the painting commented on how complex family life is today. Most families we are told consist of ex-spouses, half-siblings and so on. "Traditional" families are now a thing of the past.

What is it that people long for during the holidays? What makes a family gathering successful? It's not the taste of turkey with cranberry sauce, the cost of presents you open at Christmas, the number of people who raise a glass together at a New Year's Eve party. It's not the visible, tangible elements that are most important during this season. It is the invisible values by which we interpret these events that are critical.

First John 2:17 says, "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever." John is making a declaration about things that we cannot see, about realities in the future. The world, the tangible things of this life, the experiences that we have with our five senses, will all eventually fade to nothingness. But to do the will of God is to achieve immortality. In 2 Corinthians 4:18 Paul said something similar: "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

Are the skeptics right?

Let's think again about holiday expectations, about family experiences around the dinner table. Is love between human beings real or not? There are many leaders of thought who are chipping away at the notion that human love is possible. Everything, they say, is a product of biological determinants. Our genes are programmed to reproduce themselves in the next generation, and all of our experiences in life are products of this evolutionary drive. So it may feel as if we love spouse and children, but such feelings are a charade, manipulating us to protect offspring so they can grow up and spread our genes into the next generation. You may imagine that the people who have invited you for Thanksgiving really care for you, but they don't. We're so desperate to be cared for that we willingly play the polite games around the table, but nobody really loves anybody.

And the arguments go on. There is no such thing as commitment. You're a fool to believe the promise, "I will stay with you always," because many people who have made those promises are now divorced. Children are foolish to trust their parents in a world where so many kids are abandoned.

What is the truth about invisible things? Is the hope of God's love for us and his command that we love each other founded on anything? The Bible takes that question very seriously.

In 1 John 4, John makes some powerful pronouncements about the nature of love: "...God is love." "...Since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (describing the sacrificial love of God who sent his Son for our sakes). Now, there are plenty of people who will say that the biblical announcement is as

wrong-headed, unstable, and inaccurate as the feelings you have about holiday traditions and family life---it's all made up. How can we have confidence in what we read in the Bible?

In verse 12 John takes this problem on directly: "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." God is invisible. That's part of the problem. And secondly, love is incomplete. Our experience of being loved by God and of loving each other is never full. That observation can be taken as a challenge (see Discovery Paper 4440). We have an opportunity to make plain what is invisible, to love each other so that people begin to perceive God alive in the world! We can trust God to make us more full of genuine Christian love for each other.

But the observation that God is invisible and that love is incomplete can equally be a source of insecurity. How do we know that God will ever be seen if he's not seen? If our love is incomplete, how do we know that it won't fade to nothingness? How do we know that we didn't make it up, that something of substance has happened? The challenge, therefore, becomes a source of worry and concern, and questions arise. John takes on the questions in verses 13-21. Note that verse 13 would be better translated (in the New International Version), "By this we know...." This is a Greek construction he uses eight times in this letter as a pointer to the evidence.

[By this] we know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Verse 12 talks about God's living in us. Verse 13 picks up the point and expands it. We know that we live in him and he in us. That describes what cannot be seen. So how do we know it's true, what is the evidence? When I gave my life to Jesus Christ, nothing about me changed in my outward appearance. My features were the same, I wore the same clothes the next day.

In John 15 Jesus used the analogy of a vine and branches to describe our life in Christ. We are the branches, and we are hooked into Christ, the vine, from whom we derive nourishment. He shares his life with us. But how do we know?

The testimony of the Spirit

Verse 13 says we know because he has given us of his Spirit. Back in 3:24 a very similar argument was made: "And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us." John went on at that point to direct his readers to "test the spirits," to make sure they were listening to the spirit of truth rather than the spirit of error. Here he describes the testimony of the Spirit of God. It has to do with doctrine, which may seem curious. Most of us think about the experience of the Spirit and the experience of love as being primarily emotional: waves of enthusiasm, powerful shakings and energizings, miraculous adventures, and so on.

Speaking of the apostles John says, "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world." The Spirit identified Jesus of Nazareth as Savior of the world for his earliest followers. Verse 15 expands this work of the Spirit to all subsequent generations: "If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God."

You can't acknowledge that Jesus---the one who was born of Mary, raised in Nazareth, and known to the world as the carpenter's son; who began his public ministry in Galilee, continued in Judea, and was executed on a cross---is the Son of God, unless the Spirit of God makes it plain within you. "Acknowledge" is really better translated "confess" here. If you can make this confession, believing it in your heart, building your life on it as reality, then the Spirit has taken up residence within you. And if it's true that the Spirit, who gives the power of God to believe, is present in your life, then everything else declared here is true. Then God is love, and he does love us, and it is imperative that we love each other. It is true that we don't have anything to fear and that our sins have been forgiven. Jesus came as Savior of the world, and he is Savior of my life as well. The Bible does indeed have the right to interpret the invisible. We didn't make it up. All the implications are valid. The debunkers are wrong.

I've lived most of my life in the San Francisco peninsula region. This area is among the most ruthlessly humanistic places in the world. Palo Alto and its environs are dominated by a university that is deeply antagonistic to the gospel. To make a statement like verse 14, "And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son [the only one] to be the Savior of the world," is both politically incorrect and intellectually infantile. There is no Father (a hateful term) in heaven. Saying that he sent his Son as if there were only one channel, one spokesman, one sacrifice, one Savior, negating all other religions is arrogant. Saying that the world needs saving is foolish; the world is improving all the time. Testimony of these things to others smacks of cultural imperialism. In this region, statements like those John is making here are rejected out of hand by those who prefer the glory of man to the glory of God.

I was a young Christian when I entered Stanford as a freshman. We were required to take a year long course on the history of Western Civilization. During the first quarter we studied the Old Testament and later the Roman period, including the writing of the New Testament. One assignment was to write a paper on a topic of our choice. I wrote a paper on why I believed that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a fact of history, not a myth. I got a blistering note from the instructor rejecting the paper. It may have been a terrible paper, but that wasn't why he rejected it. He said, "You have no business subjecting such a question to intellectual scrutiny in the modern world," and tossed the paper back at me, refusing to read it, much less grade it.

All of the serious thinking I've done since age eighteen has taken place in this humanistic community. Yet, though I have had periods of doubt, I've never been able to say that Jesus Christ is not the Son of God.

When I was first a Christian, I didn't know anything about the arguments claiming that the Bible should be disregarded. I didn't know anything about the reams of scholarship which argue that this is a human document, the product of people who were influenced by the eras in which they lived and devoid of divine inspiration. I know these arguments now. When I was first a Christian, I didn't know many hypocrites. Most of the Christians I knew then were godly people, and I assumed all Christians were. But I have since encountered a great number of failed believers and serious hypocrites who claim to be Christians, but are not; they are wolves in sheep's clothing. I didn't know much about other religions and their claims to speak of God more truthfully than the gospel of Christ does. I know a great deal more now about other religions, and have many friends of other faiths.

Though I now have many reasons to question the claims of the gospel, I find myself more sure than ever that the Father sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. There is only one Savior---Jesus the Son of God. Anyone who can confess that Jesus is the Son of God lives in him and he in God. How can that be? The only explanation I have is that the Holy Spirit himself has brought conviction to me and other believers. When I first came to Christ, what I believed was, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." What I believe today is, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." And that can only be because the Spirit of God has made that truth unshakable

As I read the Bible, I find myself where Jesus' disciples were at the end of his bread-of-life discourse (see John 6:25-69). With all the hard sayings he had made, which became the cause of many of his followers turning from him, Jesus said to them, "Do you want to leave too?" Peter replied, "Where would we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." The Bible rings more true and is more vital, more profound every time I read it. How can that be? That's what Jesus said would happen when the Spirit was given: "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will

teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26).

Love vs. fear

Let's move on to the second paragraph we are considering. It begins in the middle of verse 16: "God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." The argument that John is advancing here has to do with the incompleteness of love. Because love is incomplete, the threat is that it will never be complete. Because you and I love God only partially, because we love each other badly, because there are times when we take two steps forward and three steps back in our walk with the Lord, in the way we trust Christ and the way we care for each other, the threat is that love will never be complete. Perhaps we have fooled ourselves into believing that we have made any progress in the Christian life, and the process will grind to a halt someday.

People who begin to fear that love will fail draw the shields of protection around them. Like turtles, they pull back into a shell. But the challenge John makes here is that we can't love if we're afraid. Love is the antagonist of fear, and fear the antagonist of love. Perfect love drives out fear. It's a fight. Either fear grips our hearts and we're afraid of being vulnerable, we can't reach out, we can't care because we might get hurt if we care. And we draw the protections around us tighter and tighter. We won't be touched or reach out to touch another, lest we be burned in the process. Or we begin to take risks for love's sake, and fear is driven from the field. Perfect love destroys fear. Even baby steps of growth in love diminish fear. Fear recedes as the Lord gives us the strength to care about people who are difficult, to open ourselves up.

The center of this argument John is making is important. Look at verse 17: "...Because in this world we are like him." Was Jesus well protected? Was he kept from danger? We could answer both yes and no. But was he fearless? Absolutely. Never has there been a more fearless individual than Christ. There is no record of a single encounter from his infancy and childhood through all of his adult years when the Lord was afraid, put off, uncertain, or defensive about himself. He was the master of every circumstance he was in, every conversation, every relationship, every setting. But he was also plotted against and falsely accused. He was rejected by the leaders of his nation. He was put on trial and convicted by the Roman government. He was misunderstood and rejected by his family. He was abandoned by his faithful followers for whom he poured out his life.

What does that say to us? The reason he was fearless was not that circumstances always favored him, but that he knew that his heavenly Father was protecting him. He knew that his Father had a purpose for him and that his life would fulfill its purpose. He would say to those who opposed him, "No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (John 10:18). No one could take from him what he wasn't willing to give them, because he had a Father in heaven who was Sovereign over everything, who was protecting him. And as he was, so are we. We are like him in the world. We may be misunderstood or rejected, our friends may abandon us, we may be in dangerous circumstances. But we don't have to be afraid, because love drives out fear. We don't have to be afraid of judgment, that our life will be weighed and found wanting in the end. We don't have to be afraid of punishment, because someone has been punished for us. As we grow in love, we find that a life of hiding, defensiveness, covering over, and fearfulness is changed. And in practical terms as we reach out to others and love them, we find ourselves growing more fearless.

Because he first loved us

In the last paragraph, verses 19-21, John takes a different tack, warning against arrogance. Because God is invisible and love is incomplete, we may at times begin to take ourselves too seriously: "I will become the doer of great deeds. I'll become the one whose life is given over to saving other people. I'll discern the spiritual secrets." (The gnostics, against whom John was writing, wanted to find spiritual secrets that made ordinary mortals into supermen.) We begin to imagine that our part in the play is bigger than it is. In fact, "We love--not because we're good at it, because we've become shining examples to our children and everyone around us, because we've disciplined ourselves--but because we've been loved. We love because he first loved us. We are always the undeserving recipients of God's love.

That's why John goes on to say, "If we think ourselves important enough that we can put down other people, make fun of the weak, or engage in prejudices against the needy; if we imagine ourselves to be such impressive versions of the human species that we permit ourselves to be arrogant, cold, and unloving of others---then we're liars and fools." Verse 20: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen." God remains invisible. But if we have been loved by him, the inevitable result is that we'll love those whom we can see, as recipients of the love of God.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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