

Clarity and Grace: Gospel mission, the Church of God, and ministry in a messy world

Talk 3. Testing the spirits: 1 John 4 and the two key questions of faith

In this final talk, I want to explore how we might approach relating to other believers who articulate a significantly different understanding of Christian belief. I do so with some immediate disclaimers: I am wary of anyone who claims to know the heart and mind of anyone, or indeed, I am equally wary of anyone who believes they are truly in a position to do so.

That said, we are called to test the spirits, and to scrutinise teachings offered in the name of the church. I shall do this with reference to 1 John 4, written in the context of false teaching regarding the human embodiment of Jesus. However, it is not my purpose to explore the original context in detail, but identify the key questions of faith as they may guide our own questions regarding how to relate to members of the church who express a notably different theology.

Once again, let me be upfront: I am increasingly disconcerted by what some have called litmus test fellowship. Expressed crassly (and perhaps unfairly), it comes over as “You tell me what you believe, and I will decide whether you are truly saved or not”. As I say, it is not usually expressed quite so baldly, but that is the gist of it. And perhaps that is quite legitimate. We are after all called to guard the faith, and to keep false teachers at a distance.

On the other hand, I doubt few will say that our salvation is dependent on satisfying a doctrine exam. The grace of God is grounded in a love for this world, and for each of us, in varying degrees of fallen-ness and foolishness – our minds included. Now, the situation is obviously a lot more complex than that, and recognition of the grace of God is no excuse for mistruth and error, and certainly not if it is presented as superior to Scripture, reasonably interpreted. To be clear, I am not questioning the vital importance of statements of faith and affirmations articulated in the name of the Church, which of course is to say, in the name of Christ.

My question is more relational. How do we go about coming alongside, conversing and building relationships with those who profess a Christian commitment, and in good faith come to quite different positions? I am quite sure I am in no position to resolve these matters, but I do believe our passage gives us guidance as to where to start, and the essential qualities we are called to exhibit in terms of what we bring to such relationships.

I’ll read the passage, starting at 3:11 to provide the foundation for the elaboration given in chapter 4.

One thing becomes clear at the outset: what is expected of us is primarily relational, both in terms of Christ, and of one another. And of course, one word leaps out from the page: “love”. A word that is easy to say, impossible to define, and which can never be fully attained.

The passage makes two things clear: our opening question (in effect), needs to be not “*what* do you believe?”, but “*who* do you believe?” It is the object of our faith that gives it validity,

not the fact that we exhibit faith in some measure. Who we believe is more important than what we believe, or more precisely – and this is the first of the two key questions – *who we love above all else*.

And the second question cannot be separated, best expressed in Jesus' own words: "*who do you say that I am?*" These questions are certainly non-negotiable in terms of recognising Christian fellowship and kinship in the faith. Yet they are more than that; they are avenues to perhaps restore and/or establish some form of relationship, and speak of responsibilities to one another. The moment we say 'Our Father in heaven', we have sisters and brothers in Christ. They are a given, not an optional extra, and the way we approach such relationships matters to God.

The question of who we understand Jesus to be is a critical aspect of identifying who it is that we love, and in whom we place our faith. The opening verses of the letter (1 John 1:1-3) makes direct reference to the Jesus spoken of in the gospel traditions, starting with eye witness testimony, into oral tradition, and now transmitted through the Gospel documents. Note especially 1 John 1:3:

"We declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."

Any fellowship (*koinonia*) that binds us together is the basis for our fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

This then holds together both who it is that we love, who we understand Jesus to be, and then elaborates what it means to love Christ: it is to keep God's commands. Love will be evident from a commitment to obedience.

Consider 1 John 3:23:

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us. (1 Jn 3:23–24).

None of this is new, and I am sure it is considered carefully. I do not anticipate it is contentious.

But here is the challenge as it speaks to me: to what extent does the wider community regard the Christian community as a community characterised by genuine love? As much as we would wish it otherwise, the profile we have in wider circles is that we are quick to judge, prone to keep ourselves at a distance, and riven by dispute and splits.

I am not suggesting for a moment that we should position ourselves to gain public favour, yet the challenge still remains. We are struggling to present ourselves as truly welcoming, and on more occasions than we may care to admit, our church communities are marked by fear of those who are other than ourselves.

How might we stand at these crossroads, mindful of our calling to manifest the love of God through our love for one another, and our neighbours no less?

I have a few suggestions.

Firstly, we need to consider our varying modes as a church. There are at least three (undoubtedly more):

1. Reactive mode – responding to progressive agendas, and determined to push back, if not at least hold the line. This is a more political mode, and I suspect one we have been drawn into reluctantly, both in terms of changes and challenges within wider society, and similarly in terms of responding to developments within our church.
2. Proactive mode – demonstrating who we are ‘in truth and action’ (1 Jn 3:18), being the people we are called to be, as culture-makers, community-enhancers, and in God’s grace continuing the mission of Christ, empowered by the Spirit.
3. Prophetic mode – challenging the status quo, challenging our community to do better, to be mindful of what it means to live rightly and justly, and to make a difference in this world in and through the wisdom and instruction of God.

Now it seems to me, one way or another, we have found ourselves constantly drawn into reactive mode, and especially with regard to challenges to institutions like marriage, and consideration of possibilities and requests in support of those experiencing same sex attraction.

My own reflections and sense of vocation lie more in the proactive space. While remaining unconvinced of revisionist arguments over against traditional understanding of holy Matrimony, I recognise we have much to do to listen, hear, come alongside, and learn from the experiences of those who have significant questions as to whether the church is indeed a safe and welcoming place.

We have been greatly assisted over the past decade with books from those who affirm a high view of Scripture and place themselves under its authority, and have spoken honestly of their struggles, pain and anxieties. The very fact that such well-respected leaders did not feel safe until recent times to publicly acknowledge their sexuality, and spoken of the bruising nature of the political debates that have surrounded them. There is still significant stigma and suspicion associated with those who acknowledge same sex attraction, and sense that such are so marred in their humanity that they are in another ‘other’ category to heterosexuals. Have no doubt, these matters go deep in terms of personhood and identity.

I believe much more could be done with regard to recognising the importance of committed friendships, including emotional engagement and intimacy, without sexual dimensions. I know that is controversial, but voices such as Wesley Hill need to be heard. I believe a proactive mode, and even a prophetic voice, would respond to these voices differently compared to our ‘reactive’ mode.

Another avenue for discussion would be to pick and choose our battles strategically. If we were to distinguish ‘marriage’ as a generic term used by many different societies and cultures, from ‘holy Matrimony’ understood as something distinctively Judeo-Christian,

where God works in and through an event through which a man and a woman are joined as one in mystical union (as modelled by Christ to the Church).

This is not particularly radical. In Europe, there is a clear distinction between the civil marriage as authorised by the State, and the religious manifestation as some form of sacrament in which God brings two together. This may be a compromise to be argued – that members of the Church be respected in their understanding of holy Matrimony, while recognising that the State and wider community has a different understanding of marriage.

Recommended Reading:

Jeff Iorg (ed.), *Ministry in the New Marriage Culture*. B & H Publishing, 2015.

Wesley Hill, *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Zondervan, 2010

Wesley Hill, *Spiritual Friendship. Finding Love in the Church as a Celibate Gay Christian*. Brazos Press, 2015

Andrew Marin, *Love is an Orientation: Elevating the Conversation with the Gay Community*. IVP, 2009

Ed Shaw, *The plausibility problem: the church and same sex attraction*. IVP, 2015

Preston Sprinkle, *People to be loved. Why homosexuality is not just an issue*. Zondervan, 2015