

Month of Mission  
iii. The Purpose of the Church  
Ephesians 4:1-16

Paul Minear's classic work "Images of the Church in the New Testament" refers to no less than ninety-six word pictures of the church. We have already focused on Paul's image of the church as a healthy body (Eph 4:7-16). We will now highlight John's emphasis on the church as loving community (1 John 4:7-9). Paul spent three years at Ephesus grounding believers in the gospel. Thereafter he wrote them a letter from prison in Rome in the early 60's AD, prior to his martyrdom. The apostle John remained in Jerusalem, moving to Ephesus shortly before the fall of Jerusalem and the desecration of the Temple. The church at Ephesus under John served as a hub to reach the Roman province of Asia and he wrote his 3 letters there in the late 80's. They afford a fascinating insight to the situation which prevailed in Ephesus a generation after Paul's ministry there in the early 50's.

Noteworthy too is the transformation of John from the Son of Thunder when he responded to Jesus' call of discipleship to the apostle of love. The church father Jerome wrote that when the aged John became so weak that he could no longer preach, he was carried into the congregation at Ephesus and exhorted the congregation with the words "Little children love one another". When his hearers grew tired of this message which he repeated so often, he replied "Because it is the Lord's command, and if this is all you do, it is enough".

The writing of Paul is quite different to that of John. Paul is linear and logical. John is spiral and repetitive (1,2,3 John), and symbolic and apocalyptic (Revelation). 1 John introduces three tests of authentic faith viz.

- i. Obedience or the moral test (2:3-6)
- ii. Love or the social test (2:7-11)
- iii. Belief or the doctrinal test (2:18-27)

John emphasises the practical outworking of the gospel in the life of the church. Just as creation is subject to the law of atrophy in which energy dissipates over time, our expression and experience of love is prone to diminish unless steps are taken to counter the downward trend. Accordingly, John arrests the church at Ephesus, so astute and competent in most things, with the challenge, "You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen". (Rev 2:4,5) He calls the church to repent lest she become a hindrance to the gospel, as Paul put it "a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" (1 Cor 13:1).

John's emphasis on love is grounded in the character of God. God is love. If we reverse the order to love is God, we reduce the majesty and marvel of God's great love to the level of human inconsistency. Hence John's repeated refrain "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God". (1 Jn 3:1) "We love because he first loved us" (4:19) "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (4:10). The cross is both the demonstration of God's love and the enabling of love on our part as the implications of Jesus selfless sacrifice for our sins are worked out in our lives.

As marvellous as the church is: a loving community indwelt by the life of Christ, it has a shadow side viz its human face. John addresses this in his third letter. He writes about the disruptive Diotrephes "who loves to be first... spreading malicious nonsense (3 Jn 9,10). We need to walk in the light and practise truth lest the pursuit of an abstract ideal becomes an empty substitute for the real thing. Walking in obedience, expressing love and living in the light are the marks of authentic faith.

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