

Loving the Light
1 John 1:1-10
Sermon preached by Andy Kumpel
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I wonder what the phrase Summer of Love makes you think of? Forty four years have passed since the official Summer of Love on the corner of **Haight and Ashbury** kicked off the hippie revolution. In the summer of 1967 over 100,000 people descended on this famous street corner in San Francisco in an effort to express themselves in a new way that became known as free love. This led to movements of **demonstration against the US war in Vietnam** and other famous events such as **Woodstock in the summer of 1969**. Some of us weren't around to remember this time, **but some were**. Our society has been impacted by a new attempt to understand what love is and how love behaves. Our marriages and families have changed dramatically over this time period.

Before 1965 the divorce rate in America was holding steady between 2-3%. Since 1985 the rate of divorce has hovered around 50% year after year. We don't just see the effects of redefining love from divorce. The free love movement that began in the 1960s has created an attitude that is contrary to God's design. This attitude is "me centered". So many in

our world today are not asking questions about how to better love God or how to better serve people, instead they are looking out for themselves. The ideas of love without restrictions or boundaries that came from hippie love in the 1960s are contrary to the divine love that comes from knowing the boundaries of God's law which was designed for our good. So this summer, we are going to explore the book of 1 John which is a book about divine love. We have the final word on the subject of love, so we have the chance to think about the phrase Summer of Love in a new light.

Before we jump right into the text of chapter 1 of 1 John, it is helpful to gain some background information about why John wrote this letter in the first place. The churches that John had ministered to in Asia Minor were facing both outside persecution and internal conflict. So the letters of John know conflict and struggle. They were born in the midst of intense controversy. In their pages John works to give guidance; in doing so, he draws a sweeping panorama of what should be normal Christian thought and behavior when congregational life gets tough. But this hardly means that we have to be in crisis to appreciate the words of these letters. While the original context may have been in conflict,

still, the substance of John's response to this conflict has value for many other situations.

A helpful backdrop is to understand who were John's opponents. Now don't misunderstand me when I use the term opponents. John didn't have a rivalry like the **Vikings and Packers**. But there were some groups who were teaching things that were contrary to the experience that John had as an eyewitness to the life and ministry of Jesus. So, John seeks in his letters to set things right.

The first group in opposition to John's teaching were the **Secessionists**. This term might remind you of the **Civil War era** in the US when the Confederacy in the south seceded from the union with the north. In the first century church secessionists were Christians who had begun to draw lines between themselves and others in the church. This group became a sort of elitist faction in the church that embraced another form of Christianity that led them to make wrong judgments about Christian living. Here are a few areas where the secessionists may have been boasting wrongly.

- They boast that they are “without sin”. 1 John 1:8
- They boast that they “have fellowship” with God, but walk in darkness. 1 John 1:6
- They boast that they “know God” but nevertheless are disobedient. 1 John 2:4
- They boast that they “love God” but hate their brothers and sisters. 1 John 4:20
- They boast that they are “in the light” but hate their fellow Christians. 1 John 2:9

The second opponent of John’s is a group called **Dualists**. Dualists were not necessarily an organized group, but they were people who held common views of Christ. This viewpoint added to the gospel that John preached. Dualism is the tendency to divide the world into opposing forces like light and darkness, spirit and flesh, or above and below. For the first century dualist it was easy fall into teaching about Jesus that denied certain aspects of Jesus’

incarnation that are clearly taught throughout the gospels.

So a dualist would commonly hold these views:

- They deny the Son. 1 John 2:23
- They deny that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.
John 4:2, 2 John 7
- They deny that Jesus is the Christ. 1 John 2:22

Dualism seems like an easy teaching to follow as we sometimes struggle to understand spiritual truth that is so abstract and ethereal.

I grew up in the Roman Catholic church and as I was coming to an understanding of my faith in Christ as a teenager I struggled to work out which parts of my faith heritage were truth from God and which were added on later. It would have been easy for me to fall into a dualistic view of God because dualism gives more of a concrete answer to spiritual questions. For example, instead of trying to understand the mystery of the trinity, a dualist says Jesus was human, not God.

During my first year of Seminary I unknowingly fell prey to a heretical view of Jesus. Thankfully my theology professor caught on quickly and set me straight. I remember getting my paper back and reading the comments on the final page that said “Andy, good paper, but you’ve adopted a view of Gnosticism that was denounced as heresy in the third century.”

This is the third opponent of John’s: a group called the **Gnostics**. Unlike dualists, Gnostics were an organized movement that originated in the first century and continued beyond John’s time well into the third century. Gnosticism comes from the Greek term **Gnosis = Knowledge**. You can even see where the English term borrows its silent **K** from the Greek silent **G**. Gnostics were a group who emphasized a secret teaching or secret knowledge about God that was necessary for salvation. The message of Jesus became more important than the man Jesus or the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

Well, enough background, let’s jump right into the text of 1 John 1. John starts out right away by confusing us. If you open your Bible to 1 John and read the first paragraph you might feel like you were hit upside the head with a

grammar book. Our English translations have tried to smooth out the original Greek in the first four verses, but here we face what C.H. Dodd famously called a “grammatical tangle”. Its just plain tough language, but John writes this way for a reason. He is trying to convey what is important. He’s talking about a concept and he uses this phrase “**that which was**”. Before actually telling us the thing that which was he describes that which was in various ways. So John says this concept that which was **what was from the beginning**. That which was **what we have heard**. That which was **what we have seen with our eyes**. That which was **what we have held in our hands and touched**. This idea or concept that John is describing in a peculiar way doesn’t really flow for us. But that is why it is important for us to understand the opponents John faced and what exactly was at stake.

The way that John stacks the descriptions of the thing that which was puts the emphasis not on some abstract doctrine about Jesus or the importance of preaching about Jesus. Rather John places the importance on the reality of Jesus’ personhood – his incarnation or entry into history. In Christ, God walked with humankind, and anyone who had contact with that reality, anyone who had heard, seen and

touched that reality, could never make it less than pivotal in their life. As I've studied all of this history of various movements within Christianity and the intricacies of language I've been left with a big question looming over me: so what? Why should I care that John organized his thought in some peculiar way? Why does it matter what heresy was being espoused 2000 years ago? Frankly, it doesn't matter much unless it impacts my life now.

This is the beauty of John's letters, they are so practical because they teach truth that we experience in real life today. So I want to spend the rest of our time exploring the question: **how do we love the light?**

So, when we understand that God is light and we are moved to love the light, the first expression we see of this in 1 John is that **we hold to the scandal of the incarnation.** For John nothing else is as important as the fact that God broke into our universe and became one of us. The most world changing event in human history happened in the birth of the baby Jesus. John says "**We proclaim to you the *eternal life*, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.**" **1 John 1:2** Of course John is writing about Jesus. And he's writing this way because Jesus has been watered

down to a message in his day. This is why the incarnation becomes a scandal. I would submit to you that this is exactly where John's letter becomes relevant to us. Because we also live at a time when it is easy to water down Jesus to a message. The most famous part of 1 John 1 actually helps us to water down the person of Jesus. Three simple words: **God is light**. It is incredibly easy to make those three words mean whatever we want. Over centuries of the church the person of Jesus has been watered down to a message of universal love or an agenda of human rights or even a movement of spirituality. The response to the truth that God is light can certainly take the shape of a response of love, or social activism or even being moved spiritually, but if we are missing the central reason that Jesus left his Father's side in heaven to become human, then the incarnation becomes hollow. Jesus himself tells us the reason for his coming in John's gospel account "**I have come so that they may have life, and have it to the full.**"

John 10:10

The latest movement to water down Jesus Christ comes in the name of tolerance. We might fall into the kind of thinking where the idea that God is light means that in order to not offend our neighbor we say that whatever you

want to believe is right for you. But this is not the kind of light that John is writing about. John says “**God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.**” **1 John 1:5.** This kind of light brings truth to the forefront. It reveals what is hiding in dark places. It lays bare everything before a holy God. We cannot hide behind tolerance for God’s light will reveal the truth.

Today the problem of tolerance that we face is that it puts us into false fellowship with others. John describes what true fellowship is. “**Our fellowship is with the Father and with his son, Jesus Christ.**” **1 John 1:3.** I find a helpful way to consider this kind of true fellowship is with this image of an **equilateral triangle** . You’ll notice that my relationship to you or any other believer is the same distance as my relationship to God. So fellowship is not just the coincidence of a shared experience of God, where we compare our private spiritual walks; it is living and experiencing the Father and Son together as believers. It’s a lot like going to Target Field to watch the Twins play. If you go to a game on Monday and I go to a game on Saturday, then we get together the following week to talk about it, we don’t have a shared experience with the Minnesota Twins. Even if we go to the same game, but I sit

on the third base line and you sit in the outfield we still haven't shared an experience. But if you invite me to join you in your box to watch the Twins play, then we've shared the experience. John says that true fellowship means that you and I have been in the presence of the Father and Son with one another. When we allow the popular idea of tolerance to take the place of Jesus, then we no longer are in Biblical fellowship with one another.

Throughout the history of the church various movements have formed that have become known as Christian separatists. The most famous is the English Puritan group that later became known as Congregationalists. They were led by theologian Robert Browne in the late 1500s. Later many Christians from this movement settled in **New England** and formed some of the first churches in the US. These kinds of Christian separatist groups have had various reasons for separating themselves from other church denominations, but most all of them point to 1 John as grounds for separation.

However, this text has also been interpreted as grounds for maintaining fellowship within the body of Christ, but exhorting one another toward the truth. This leads us to the

second answer to the question: how do we love the light?

We wrestle through theological distinctives vs. church unity. This is really a subordinate idea to what it means to

have true Biblical fellowship with one another. But it is perhaps where our relationships with one another break apart most often. This was also true in John's day. The churches of the first century often struggled with internal

unity. We've already heard about some of the distinct problems that John was facing from groups that wanted to deny Christ's humanity or deny that he was indeed the messiah. John described this behavior succinctly saying

“If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” 1 John

1:6. Modern psychologists call this cognitive dissonance, which describes the uneasiness we feel when holding

conflicting ideas simultaneously. John simply says that we are lying to ourselves. Then he says **“But if we walk in the**

light...” 1 John 1:7. There is a concept that we might easily

miss that is vital to understand our struggle with theological distinctives. The important word is “walk” or “walking”. We

may have some sense of what the metaphor walking in the darkness or light means. But we may get a picture of

walking through a shadow as if one minute I'm in the light

and the next I'm in the darkness. The term that John uses actually might be better translated as walking around and it gives us the sense of a way of living. So John's intention is not to describe a scenario where we move in and out of the light casually. Instead the phrase walking in darkness carries a heavy burden as one who makes a conscious choice to live far from God's truth. Likewise, the phrase walking in the light, as Jesus is in the light, denotes an everyday practice of being in God's truth.

Since John means for us to be in fellowship with Jesus as a way of life it helps us to balance the struggle between theological distinctives vs. church unity. We haven't yet unpacked these phrases. So let's start with theological distinctives. These might be major theological tenets such as God's existence or the way that God imparts faith to us. Or they might fall under what we think of as second or even third ring theological issues like views of the Holy Spirit or the ordination of female clergy. The tension between these distinctions in what we believe God has told us through his word and whether we can really be in fellowship with one another in the church body is real. Churches have divided over much lesser issues. So John wants us to wrestle with the difficulty that all churches will face at one time or

another. When the pastor says something that we disagree with or even when we are in discord with another person in our small group Bible study, what is the appropriate response? Do we leave this church to go find another one down the street? Maybe we stay at church but find a new small group.

Or maybe you lean toward to opposite response where church unity is at a premium. Then the question John would have us wrestle with is: what essential beliefs are non-negotiable? Are we willing to compromise on the virgin birth of Jesus, our view of scripture, charismatic gifts, the sacraments, universalism, gay clergy, or praying to the saints? For the sake of maintaining unity in the church do we bend in all of these areas? Is there ever a breaking point? At least we can tell that John would have our starting point be the incarnation of Christ. Jesus in history is the touchstone from which all of these other doctrines emerge.

Our tendency has been to follow Saint Augustine's famous saying "**In the essentials *unity*, in doubtful things *liberty*, but in all things *charity*.**" This is a nice pithy saying, but the difficulty is in actually living this out. That is what John describes as walking the light. The same light

where Jesus walked while Pharisees conjured up questions to trip him up. This is why becoming an apprentice of Jesus is vital to our spiritual growth. The more we know Jesus the more our responses to life's circumstances will be moving toward becoming like Jesus.

The third answer to the question: how do we love the light? **We explore walking with Jesus today.** We've already explored the significance of the concept of walking in the light as a way of life. So I want to drill down to the next level. I invite you to explore this question with me:

what does it mean to hear, see, and touch Jesus? Let me ask it again. What does it mean to hear, see, and touch Jesus? Some of us are disarmed by this question because it is not the way that we process our own spiritual relationship with God. We may want to think, feel or know rather than hear, see and touch. But these are the ways that John writes about experiencing Jesus and they are important ways for us to consider. It may stretch us to ask and answer this question, but what could be better in our faith than to be stretched?

Let's begin with what it means to hear Jesus. Just like hearing my wife or my friends or my kids, to hear Jesus I

have to be ready to listen to Jesus. As I was preparing this sermon earlier this week my plans didn't work out the way I had hoped. Thursday morning my three year old daughter Hannah wasn't feeling well. I wasn't really ready to hear her because I had to get into the office to finish preparing my sermon. So I didn't really listen to the signals she was giving me. They weren't difficult signals either. She said, "Daddy, I'm sick." I responded compassionately "You're OK Hannah, let's get ready for daycare." It wasn't until Hannah threw up all over herself, her car seat, and the car on the way to daycare that I actually heard what she had been trying to tell me. I wasn't ready to hear Hannah because her sickness didn't fit into my priorities for the day. Sometimes we are not ready to listen to what Jesus wants to tell us.

So, what are the ways that we can hear Jesus, once we are ready? Well the primary places that Jesus speaks to us are through his word and through prayer. John writes about the experience of hearing Jesus. I've been learning a lot about this in my own life recently and I've noticed that for me hearing Jesus takes an intentional invitation for God to talk to me followed by some space for me to listen. I'm not a morning person, so I have a difficult time with making a space to hear God first thing in the morning. I don't really

wake up in the morning until I take a shower, so each morning in the shower I try to allow the conversation with God to begin. I pray a simple prayer that goes like this, “God, I don't want to do this day alone. Help me to hear your voice today and be open to respond.”

Its a five second prayer, but on days that I pray that prayer I have a much better experience of hearing God's voice. The second way to walk with Jesus that John mentions is the see Jesus. If we take this idea too literally it leads to frustration because we don't actually know what Jesus looks like. But John is using a familiar metaphor of seeing with eyes of faith. **“We live by faith, not by sight.”** **2 Corinthians 5:7.** When we see the world through faith we learn to look at events and people the way that Jesus did. We remember how Jesus saw spiritual truth in the everyday items like a loaf of bread or a handful of seed. John shows us how the incarnation of Jesus Christ changes the way we see life everyday.

Finally, John says that he had the experience of touching Jesus. For John this was literal because he walked side by side with Jesus. We remembered that the disciples touched the wounds in Jesus' side after he was raised from

the dead. They often broke bread together so they knew what it meant to touch Jesus in a very real way. For us, the experience of hearing the voice of God and seeing with eyes of faith sometimes feels like we are talking on the phone or maybe skyping with God at best. Skype is a wonderful way to see your loved ones who are far away, but it is not the same as being together. But can we really experience touching Jesus like John did? This is where we have to get our minds around the promise of the Holy Spirit. Jesus left his disciples, but he said to them **“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.” John 14: 16-17.**

Walking with Jesus means we open our lives not only to the truth of God in human flesh, but also the experience of the Holy Spirit abiding within us. This is how we can love the light that is Jesus Christ.

Let us pray