

tical philosophy which denied that the body and flesh of the Messiah Yeshua was real, resulting in deep divisions among the confessed followers of Yeshua, so in our day the deity of Yeshua is increasingly under attack. But if we will accept the Scriptures as the final authority in all matters relating to our faith and the manner in which we live out our faith, then we will be firm on the deity of Yeshua as well as His real manhood, not thinking that in our finite abilities we could ever fathom the mystery of Yeshua's incarnation. What we cannot fully explain, we most certainly must fully believe and confess, for it is the very truth that the Scriptures repeatedly enjoin upon us.

**4 I was very glad to find *some* of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment *to do* from the Father.**

As John begins the body of the epistle, he recounts an event in which he apparently met some of the members of the community (here referred to as “children” since the *ekklesia* or community to which he is writing is considered the “mother”), or about whom he had received a report, who evidenced an outward and vibrant faith, for they were “walking in the truth.” Given the emphasis in the opening of the epistle on the truth being centered in Yeshua and in His being the true, incarnate, divine Messiah, it seems clear that what caused John to have real joy was to know in fact that these believers were strong in their confession of Yeshua as Immanuel, “God with us,” and that He is the promised Messiah Who had accomplished eternal redemption for all who would believe in Him. In the face of increasing persecution and the rise of false teachers and teaching, they had remained firm in accepting and living out the truth as it is in Yeshua the Messiah. And this means to live in accordance with God's revealed will, that is, the inspired Scriptures. Obviously, in the late 1st Century when John is writing this epistle, the Apostolic Scriptures as we now have them had not yet been completely gathered. But the Scriptures of the Tanach, as well as the teachings of the Apostles which they had, were entirely sufficient for faith and *halachah* (walking out God's truth) pleasing to God.

And thus John adds “just as we have received commandment *to do* from the Father.” The commandment received is another way of simply referring to the “Torah,” i.e., God's teaching and instructions for living righteously before Him. Here, at the very beginning of this epistle, John emphasizes that the word of God, the Scriptures revealed and inspired by His Spirit, are the very foundation and rule by which God's people may live out the truth. And ultimately, this truth is summed up in God's Son, Yeshua, our Messiah.

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Yeshua Messiah, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (1Jn 3:23)

**5 Now I ask you, lady, not as though *I were* writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning, that we love one another.**

The opening word “Now” (literally, “And now..., καὶ νῦν”) functions to mark the end of the epistle’s opening salutation and the main purpose of the letter, that is, the author explaining his own heartfelt exhortation to the community to which he is writing.

He begins by exhorting or urging the community to a walk of faith characterized by obedience and love. The NASB “I ask you” translates the Greek ἐρωτῶ σε (*erōtō se*), but the verb ἐρωτάω (*erōtāō*) often carries the meaning “to ask.” It can also have the sense of “entreat” or “urge,”<sup>1</sup> and the context would opt for this sense. Additionally, the fact that the verb itself is in the present tense would fit best with the idea of “urging” or “entreating.” So the sense of John’s words here is “Now I entreat or urge you, lady... that we love one another.” Here, once again, John includes himself, for he uses the plural “we.” As any good teacher should do, so John makes clear that he does not expect something of those he teaches which he is unwilling himself to do.

Once again, John address the “lady” (κυρία, *kuria*), a term we have understood from the opening verse of the epistle as referring to the whole community of believers, i.e., the *ekklesia*. John, as the Apostle of Yeshua, is therefore exercising his apostolic responsibilities by urging or exhorting the community as being disciples of Yeshua to love one another. In giving this exhortation, John is fulfilling the very mission to which Yeshua sent him. For the Apostles were commanded and commissioned by Yeshua Himself to make disciples of all the nations and to do so by teaching them all that Yeshua had commanded His Apostles.

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19–20)

1 See Moulton & Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament* (Eerdmans, 1930), p.255, ad. loc. “ἐρωτάω, in the sense of “ask,” “entreat,” is so amply vouched for in the Κοινή that it is quite unnecessary to bring in the influence of the Heb. לָאָחַז.”

Here is a clear reference to the fact that Yeshua intended His Apostles not only to take the gospel to the nations, but also to teach them to observe the very commandments that were given to the Apostles themselves. And what commandments were these that Yeshua would have taught and reinforced to His own disciples? He tells us explicitly in Matthew's Gospel.

Do not think that I came to abolish the Torah or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Torah until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. (Matt 5:17–19)

It is clear, then, that John is urging the community to which he is writing to love and guard the commandments of the Torah, the very commandments Yeshua emphasized and demonstrated in His own sinless life upon the earth. And this is emphasized by John's next words in our text:

*not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have had from the beginning...*— Many commentators interpret John's words here to refer to Yeshua's own commandment, "to love one another," as found in John 13:34, for Yeshua Himself indicates that He is giving His disciples a "new commandment" (Ἐντολὴν καινὴν δίδωμι ὑμῖν).

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (Jn 13:34)

But what does Yeshua mean here by referring to the commandment to love one another as "new"? Surely it is not something never before commanded. For the Torah itself explicitly commands us to love one another.

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. (Lev 19:18)

No doubt the answer to this question comes in Yeshua's example and His words "as I have loved you." As Hengstenberg writes:

To love our neighbor as ourselves, Lev 19:18, is just the same precept in the New Testament as in the Old: Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39. Yet this commandment also has, in a certain sense, become new. First, it has received a new foundation in the love of Christ. The Lord has saved the expositors from speculating as to what the newness of the law consists in, by adding “as I have loved you.” Christ exhibits the commandment as a new one, after He has come to the perfection of the manifestation of His own love, and His departure from the disciples was impending....<sup>1</sup>

What Hengstenberg is emphasizing is simply that both the extent and character of the love God commands His people has its greatest and perfect representation in the death of Yeshua for His own. Indeed, in Yeshua the love of God is ultimately and fully displayed. Even as the author of Hebrews expresses:

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. (Heb 1:1–2)

Thus, in this sense the commandment “to love one another” has taken on a new reality in that we should understand the very concept of love far better having witnessed the love of God demonstrated in the person and work of His Son, Yeshua.

An additional aspect of the commandment which could be framed as “new,” at least to the Jewish believers of the 1st Century, is that Yeshua, by unwrapping the commandments from the entanglement of man-made laws, brought back the range of meaning in the word “neighbor” to its original extent. Whereas the command of Lev 19:18 appears to have been primarily viewed in 1st Century Judaism as referring to loving those who are ethnically part of the Jewish community, Yeshua brings the commandment back to its original intent, showing that one’s “neighbor” means “a fellow believer” whether Jew or Gentile. In this He gave a “renewal” to the commandment.

There is a sense, then, that when Yeshua referred to the commandment to love one’s neighbor as “new,” His words carried a subtle but real rebuke to His disciples, for the love commandment had been constrained by the Jewish teachers to a parameter which God never intended. Indeed, from the beginning God had revealed His plan to bring

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<sup>1</sup> E. W. Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (T&T Clark, 1865), 1.173.

in His chosen ones from all the nations, and this promise constituted the Gospel, as Paul teaches.

The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “ALL THE NATIONS WILL BE BLESSED IN YOU.” (Gal 3:8)

Thus, when John writes that he is urging upon his readers “not a new commandment but one which they had from the beginning,” he is not referring to a commandment which was first known through the teachings of Yeshua,<sup>1</sup> but one which was demonstrated by God’s covenant faithfulness to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, revealed in the very words of Moses and the prophets, and then ultimately given its greatest expression in the person and work of Yeshua.

*...that we love one another.* – It is important to see how John combines “love” with “commandment” in our text, which has parallels both in 1John as well as in John’s Gospel.

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. (Jn 13:34)

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you....This I command you, that you love one another. (Jn 15:12, 17)

This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Yeshua Messiah, and love one another, just as He commanded us. (1Jn 3:23)

And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also. (1Jn 4:21)

By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome. (1Jn 5:2–3)

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1 Contrary to Christian commentators, e.g., Kistemaker, 2John, p. 378: “The command is not new but old. That is, “we have had [it] from the beginning.” God the Father gave this command through his Son to us (refer to Jn 13:34). We have had this command ever since Jesus preached the gospel during his earthly ministry.”

That John combines this commandment with love makes it amply clear that love as the Scriptures teach is not based upon one's feelings or emotion or variously defined by each individual. To love one another as God intends is to live out the very commandments God has given us in His Torah. In fact, genuine faith in God yields true love for God as well as love for one's fellow believer, and both flow from a heart of obedience to Him. In this regard note John 3:36.

He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him. (Jn 3:36)

Note carefully the parallel terms "believes" and "obey." The positive statement is "He who believes in the Son." But the opposite is not stated as we might expect, as "but he who does not believe in the Son," but rather "he who does not obey the Son." Clearly, the one who "believes in the Son" is known as one who "obeys the Son." Faith and obedience are inseparable components of saving faith. And since loving one's fellow believer is a commandment of God, to love one another therefore is an essential fruit of all who are children of God by faith in Yeshua.

Faith and love are signs of new birth (1Jn 5:1; 4:7). They are also commandments. Some people object that faith and love are not amenable to discipline and are beyond the reach of commandments. How can you tell me, they ask, to believe what I do not believe or love whom I do not love? The answer to this question lies in the nature of Christian faith and love. It is when faith is regarded as an intuition and love as an emotion that they appear to lie beyond the sphere of duty. But Christian faith is an obedience response to God's self-revelation in Christ. This revelation has a moral content....Similarly, Christian love belongs rather to the sphere of action than of emotion. It is not an involuntary, uncontrollable passion, but unselfish service undertaken by deliberate choice. So faith and love are commanded.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, in emphasizing that loving one's fellow believer flows from a heart of obedience to God, this means that such love includes encouragement and help as well as patience and forbearance, sorrowing with those who sorrow and rejoicing with those who rejoice. But it also encompasses speaking the truth in love, which may mean engaging in "tough love," where kind and careful exhortations and loving correc-

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1 John Stott, *2John*, pp. 206–7.

tion is given to guard one another from that which would hinder or waylay one's walk with the Lord.

And in the next verse John makes this understanding of "love" explicit.

**6 And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.**

Here John makes a categorical statement: genuine love is the fruit of living out God's commandments. Note how John uses his common way of referring to the believer's life by the word "walk." This is analogous to the Hebrew term *halachah* (הֲלָכָה), which became the common term in the later rabbinic literature to denote the accepted manner in which one was to obey the commandments. But the use of the metaphor "to walk" as denoting the pattern of one's life is well attested in the Tanach.<sup>1</sup> Thus, to "walk according to His commandments" is to make His Torah, God's revealed will, a pattern of life. To do so, however, is only possible from a heart that has experienced the love of God and continues to grow in faith by the sanctifying work of the Spirit. Such spiritual growth enables the believer to grow in understanding and in experiencing God's unspeakable gift of salvation in Yeshua. This, in turn, gives greater ability and desire to obey God's commandments and thus to engage in love as defined by God.

Notice that in our verse, John admonishes us "to walk according to His commandments" (plural) and then states "This is the commandment" (singular). Since the Greek words for "commandment" (ἐντολή, *entolē*) and "love" (ἀγάπη, *agapē*) are both feminine, the final "it" in the phrase "walk in it" (ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατῆτε) is feminine and could therefore refer to either. Even though the use of the singular "commandment" can, at times, refer to the whole of God's commandments,<sup>2</sup> in this context it seems best to understand John to be saying the love for God and for one's fellow believer is that which should characterize the life of the believer. Paul makes a similar statement in Rom 13:8.

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Torah. (Rom 8:13)

No doubt Paul's words are based upon those of Yeshua when He was

1 E.g., 1Sam 8:3, 5; 1Ki 2:3-4; 3:14; Is 8:11; 33:15, etc.

2 E.g., Note Rom 7:9-13 in which Paul uses the singular "commandment" to refer to the whole Torah.

asked which was the greatest commandment in the Torah. His answer encompassed the two “love imperatives”:

YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND.’ This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments depend the whole Torah and the Prophets. (Matt 22:37–40)

Some have interpreted this saying of Yeshua as replacing the whole of the Torah with just two commandments. But they miss the point. Yeshua is not diminishing the Torah, but describing the high watermark of true obedience. For unless obedience is from a heart of love to God, which then ignites love for one’s neighbor, there is no true obedience but only perfunctory compliance or self-aggrandizing actions. And what is more, to love God with all of one’s heart, soul, and mind is to love Him by giving all of one’s life to Him. This means loving Him in all aspects of one’s living. Thus, rather than diminishing the Torah, Yeshua’s summation goes to the heart of what constitutes true faith in God and obedience to His revealed will.

Further, the freedom we have in Messiah is freedom from the curse of the Torah, for Yeshua has become a curse for us (Gal 3:13) and taken our penalty upon Himself. Thus, true freedom is both the desire and ability to obey God’s commandments, as the Psalmist writes:

And I will walk at liberty (בְּרִחְבָּהּ, in a broad place), for I seek Your precepts. (Ps 119:45)

**7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Yeshua Messiah as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the anti-Messiah.**

In this verse John reveals the purpose of his having emphasized the love commandment first: the enemy would seek to derail believers and to snatch away those who are seeking the truth in order to disrupt the fellowship of the believing community and to diminish their effective witness for Yeshua. From John’s point-of-view as he writes these inspired words, one of the most important defenses that will guard the believing community against the erosion of the truth by false teachers is a strong and growing love for God’s truth and a well practiced love for each other. The enemy’s strategy is to divide and conquer, but he can never win against God’s people when they remain steadfast in obedience to God’s commandments and therefore in loving each other.