

Brotherly Love As Condition For Perfect Love Of God (1J 4:12)*

Introduction

In the First Epistle of John and in the Fourth Gospel, the whole of Christ's ethics is put into the commandment of brotherly love. No other moral obligation has been emphasized so strongly as brotherly or neighborly love (1J 2:7-11; 3:10-18; 4:7.11-12; 20-21; 5:1-2). It is a commandment (*entole*, see: 1J 2:7-8; 3:23) equally important as the obligation to love God (1J 4:21) and it gives Christians a mission of filling all their lives with love for their fellow brothers. The Apostle elaborates on this thought in a helical way around the central theme of unifying with God, which for Christians is manifested by the unity with fellow humans. It is already introduced in the prologue (1J 1:3) and the thought returns also in the ending part of the letter (1J 5:16)¹. Living in the light of faith, free from errors and with love for neighbors is presented as the basic condition of uniting with God. As faith and love are inseparable in Christian life².

John's teachings on brotherly love in the First Epistle can be put in the following points:

- a. Brotherly love as an old and new commandment in the context of the metaphors of light and darkness (1J 2:7-11);
- b. Motivation for brotherly love (1J 3:10-15);
- c. Ways of practicing brotherly love (1J 3:16-18; 5,16);
- d. Supernatural character of brotherly love (1J 4:7-5:2).

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¹ Cf. *Traduction Oecuménique de la Bible. Edition integrale, Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1975, 739f. (In the English version, all quotations from the New Testament are based on the English Standard Version – translator's note).

² Cf. T. Hermann, *Elementy konstytutywne chrześcijańskiego życia w ujęciu św. Jana*, HD 3(1977), 172f.

One might easily notice the gradual shift from the commandment to actual source of brotherly love, which is God. Brotherly love is of God (1J 4:7), God is love (1J 4:8.16), brotherly love is the condition of God's perfect love (1J 4:12), the great importance of love in experiencing peace (1J 4:17-18), inseparable unity of God's love and brotherly love (1J 4:20,21-5:2) is the key point in John's teachings about love of fellow-man as brothers.

From this peak point of John's teachings we would like to extract and reflect on the statement that brotherly love is the condition of the God's perfect love. The Evangelist puts it in these words: "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (1J 4:12).

This paper is an analysis of John's words and their context. The reason to raise the subject is its constant relevance in everyday Christian life that obliges us to perfect the practice of the highest imperative of love.

*"No one has ever seen God; If we love one another,
God abides in us..."*

In the pericope revealing the supernatural character and source of brotherly love (1J 4:7-5:2) the Apostle teaches: let us love one another, for love is from God (1J 4:7); God is love (1J 4:8); His love is reflected in the Incarnation and Redemption undertaken out of pre-existing kindness (1J 4:9-10); God's love is so great that it should inspire people to love one another (1J 4:11). Finally, Saint John concludes: "if we love one another, God abides in us..." This statement has its powerful inner logic. Since God and love is one, then as consequence abiding in love is abiding in God. A loving human is filled by God, God lives within him – "ho Theos en hemin mnei," God grants him with a unique inner strength.

Saint John concludes with the statement "God is love" by saying that whoever has a particle of love is part of this Godly attribute and is united with God, as he puts it: "God abides in us." And vice versa: he who rejects love from his heart, separates himself from God. Abiding in love is a sign and effect of unity with God expressed by the formula of interpermeation and common action of God and creation: "God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1J 4:16).

Christians are privileged with the presence of the Father and the Son, they love one another with the same God's love, and create unity that can be compared to the unity of the Trinity (J 17:21- 23). Brotherly love is the continuation of God's love in our relations with others. The neighborly community of Christians draws its origins from the union between believers and the

Father and the Son. At the same time, it is a sign of real participation in the Godly life³.

According to Saint John, the only way to understand brotherly love is to see it as stemming from the Father's love for us expressed through His Son. God's *agape* is the source and a model for any other kind of love. Father loves His Son (J 3:35; 5:20; 10:17; 15:9a-10b; 17:24,26); the way the Father loves His Son, the Son loves believers (J 13:1-34; 15:9,12); the way the Son loves believers, they shall love one another (J 13:34; 15:12; 1J 3:16; 4:11; 4:19;). For St. John, the new and distinctively Christian aspect of brotherly love is the fact that God's love, which is manifested in relations between the Three persons of God and in the relation towards humans constitutes the motive and sets an example for our love⁴.

Through our love of one another "God abides in us" – as the Apostle says – and he uses the words "in us" (*en hemin*) twice, emphasizing the presence of God in his believers. God is present in a Christian believer with His love and His life, which is how a man becomes reborn, becomes a new man. He has new life within him, new recognition, new nature. God's presence is the source of energy for Godly life that all believers should possess at all times⁵.

Saint John knows the power of love that is the force of life. For him, love does not depend on feeling; it has nothing to do with sentimentalism or unspecified humanitarianism. The subject of such love is another human seen as a brother. Its authenticity is proved by deeds (1J 3:18). It is ready for the greatest sacrifice (1J 3:16). Brotherly love guarantees a true cognition and knowledge – *gnosis* (1J 4:7.8); and it is the foundation of unity with God (1J 4:12.13)⁶.

God that abides in man reveals His presence in the world and reveals His "grace" in people, in His witnesses. Church is the community of these witnesses, an essential element of the history of salvation, a reality of mission and evangelism⁷. Church is a community of love, a community living on the spirit of love. Christians' moral life within family relations has a role of spreading the

³ Cf. D. Deden, *L'amore di Dio e la risposta dell'uomo nella Bibbia*, Bari 1971, 97; A. Feuillet, *Le mystère de l'amour divin dans la théologie Johannique*, Paris 1972, 108. A. Feuillet noticed that the abiding formula (the residing, staying, abiding, living in) is the highest form of the Biblical doctrine of covenant that was introduced in the Old Testament (Ez 34:30-31; Ps 2:16). Cf. *Un cas privilégié de pluralisme doctrinale: La conception différente de l'agape chez saint Jean*, "Esprit et Vie" 37(1972), 503.

⁴ Cf. N. Lazure, *Les valeurs morales de la théologie Johannique*, Paris 1965, 248.

⁵ Cf. L. Mora di, *Dio è amore*, Roma 1954, 190.

⁶ Cf. W. Grossouw, *Revelation and Redemption a sketch of the Theology of St John*, Westminster 1955, 48.

⁷ Cf. A. Bondeyne, *Jezus Chrystus wyzwala i jednoczy*, "Znak" 11-12 (1975), 1370.

love that is active in God. Brotherly love in all its acts is a manifestation of God's presence in the world, an epiphany of the God of love. This is what the Church brings to the world, the presence of God and experience of Him⁸. Through brotherly love the disciples, living in a world they do not belong to (J 17:11.15), give testimony to Jesus being the one sent directly by His Father (J 17:21)⁹.

This is actually what the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* refers to when it states: "For it is the function of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit Who renews and purifies her ceaselessly, to make God the Father and His Incarnate Son present and in a sense visible" and that: "What does the most reveal God's presence, however, is the brotherly charity of the faithful who are united in spirit as they work together for the faith of the Gospel and who prove themselves a sign of unity (*Gaudium et Spes*, 21)."

It is thus not surprising that after describing God's great love towards humans in the acts of Incarnation and Redemption (1J 4:9.10), the Apostle does not encourage people directly to love God, but to love one another, to engage in brotherly love: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1J 4:11). He adds: "No one has ever seen God" (1J 4:12a).

As a matter of fact, God cannot be seen due to His spiritual nature and transcendence (See: J 18; 1 Tim 6:16; Col. 1:15), but if God is love and being born from God proves participation in Godly *agape* (1J 4:7), and all the while brotherly love makes "God abide in us" (1J 4:12), then God's abiding in us allows us to truly recognize Him. This is what Christ talked about in his valediction when he told the Holy Spirit that the world does not see Him, but the disciples know Him for He shall dwell with them and be in them (J 14:17)¹⁰. If we love one another, God dwells in us according to the words of our Christ the Lord: "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (J 14:23).

As Urs von Balthazar points out, "this is what seems significant in the *agape* of Saint John: God is invisible, whoever lives in the neighborly love has God in him, a God that he can recognize and experience." You cannot see the invisible God, but we do see people, our neighbors, brothers. God can be seen in his children when they love one another¹¹.

⁸ Cf. L. Lochet, *Charité fraternelle et vie trinitaire*, "Nouvelle Revue Theologique" 2 (1956), 132.

⁹ Cf. W. Claude, *Amour*, in: *Vocabulaire de Théologie Biblique*, ed. X.L. Dufour, Paris 1964, 43.

¹⁰ Cf. C. Spicq, *Agape dans le Nouveau Testament*, Paris 1957-1959, III, 285f.

¹¹ Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Duch chrześcijański*, 135; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, Michigan 1970, 109.

Saint Augustine explains: “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us because he has given us of his Spirit” (1J 4:13). Good, thank God. We know he lives in us. How do we know that he lives in us? John says: “he has given us of his Spirit.” How do we know that “he has given us of his Spirit”? Ask your heart! If it is full of love, you have the Spirit of God. How do I know this is how you recognize the Spirit of God within you? Ask Paul: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Ro 5:5)¹².

God’s aim is to make people His friends, partners who are worthy of Him and to unite in love with them; as a result, to lead people to a unity of love for one another, and ultimately to make all humans live a life of love. It is the love of community that takes the center stage in John’s theology. There is no higher perfection than love in unity and communion with the Persons of God that happens through brotherly love¹³.

It might be important to point out that two statements by St. John are structured in the same way: “if we love one another, God abides in us” (1J 4:12) and: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God” (1J 4:15). In the first quote, the condition for God’s abiding in us is brotherly love (verse 12), and in the second it is acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Son of God (verse 15). So brotherly love and faith in Christ are interchangeable. This brings us to the conclusion that love and faith are connected to each other. Since the Apostle writes about both the brotherly love and faith in Christ as conditions of uniting with God then there is no brotherly love without faith and no faith without brotherly love for him which he emphasized by stating: “And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” (1J 3:23)¹⁴. This may serve as confirmation that faith and love are inseparable in Christian life.

“...and his love is perfected in us”

“God abides in us” and never ceases to love or manifest it towards His children. For a person who can enjoy the abiding of God in them, there is the issue of growing increasingly more in God’s love, which is “in us” – *en hamin* (1J 4:12)

¹² Cf. Saint Augustine, *Homilie na Ewangelie i Pierwszy List św. Jana*, Warsaw 1977, II, 475, ML 35, 1977ff.

¹³ Cf. A. Feuillet, *op. cit.*, 256f.

¹⁴ Cf. W. Thüsing, *Die Johannesbriefe*, Leipzig 1970, 148.

or “with us” – *met hemon* (1J 4:17). Love cannot grow on its own, since it is God’s attribute, but it can fill the soul and rule it completely. This is when we have the right to talk about the perfect love – *he teleia agape* (1J 4:18).

This perfection is mentioned several times in the First Epistle of John, see: 1J 2:5; 4:12; 4:17; 4:18. Christians can constantly improve the way they receive the love of God, and ultimately fill their entire soul with it¹⁵.

Love is verified mainly in following the commandments (J 15:10; 1J 3:23-24; 4:21; 5:2-3; 2J 5-6). “but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected” (1J 2:5). Following the commandments leads to going deeper into God, as our Lord Jesus Christ said: “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (J 14:23). “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1J 4:13); “And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us” (1J 3:24).

Saint John’s words about the love of God being perfected (1J 2:5) is usually interpreted as the perfect love of the faithful towards God which is a consequence of following the word of God. However, we believe it is also possible to understand the words in the sense of God’s love in and by itself, the love that exists in God. One might therefore ask: How can the love that exists in God become perfected? In the Gospel of St. John the highest form of this love is mentioned in these words: “having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (J 13:1). This means Christ’s love was ultimately fulfilled in the last moment of His life when He took death upon himself for people’s sins. In the First Epistle of John the love of God is also directed towards its ultimate end which is the moment of admitting humans the honor of being a child of God: “See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1J 3:1). So the love of God is complemented and perfected when it reaches the goal of granting people the privileges of salvation. Such an interpretation has its foundation and justification in the verses: 1J 4:12 and 1J 2:5, both similar in content and structure, as in both of these extracts after the words “God abides in us” this formula follows: “and his love is perfected in us.”¹⁶

Such an understanding of God’s love towards people as we could see in the above-quoted text is also expressed by Saint Augustine: “Beloved, look: if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us. Start loving and you will become perfect. Have you started to love? Then God has started

¹⁵ Cf. C. Spicq, *op. cit.*, 347.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Dellings, *teleioo*, in: TWZNT, VIII, 82; N. Lazure, *op. cit.*, 236f.

to abide in you. Love the One who abides in you for Him to perfect you, as He has chosen to live in you in His perfect form.”¹⁷

The perfection of love also appears in how Christians experience the inner peace, safety and trust in waiting for the judgment day: “By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world” (1J 4:17); and: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love” (1J 4:18).

The one who loves, invited to be in contact with God the Father, because “he abides in God, and God abides in him” (1J 4:16), should never again live in fear of punishment, but instead get closer to God with courage and joyful hope that comes upon human from the presence of God. One should keep their heart in peace and in the belief that God’s love is infinite and as such lives in us, “abides” in *nas-menei*¹⁸.

Being aware of sin, a Christian reassures his heart before God (1J 3:19) and knows that God is generous and does not treat man according to his wrongdoings (1J 1:9; 2:1-2). Even though after the guilty escape of the first human (Gen 3:8-10) man feels he is a sinner (Luke 5:8-9) and his instinctive reaction is to see God as a Judge who punishes, it is with the revealing of the infinite nature of God’s love, and letting man participate in His life, in the fellowship of believers – *koinonia* (1J 1:6) that allows us to live in peace and joyful trust¹⁹. Saint John justifies his hopeful approach in these words: “because as he is (in heaven) so also are we in this world.” In the First Epistle of John the “He” (*ekeinos*) refers to Jesus Christ (1J 2,6; 3,3.5.7.16), but the already beloved one. As Jesus Christ is perfect in his love, so we are perfect through Him, through His anointing, through the Spirit, even though unlike Him, we still live in this world. We can have a joyful certainty and feel safe on the judgment day, because the same love of God is in us as the one that is finalized in Christ the Judge²⁰.

¹⁷ Cf. St. Augustine, *Homilie na Ewangelie i Pierwszy List św. Jana*, Warsaw 1977, II, 475, ML 35, 1977ff.

¹⁸ Cf. N. Lazure, op. cit., 248.

¹⁹ Cf. C. Spicq, op. cit., 349; C. Spicq, *La justification du charitable 1J 3, 19-21*, Biblica 40 (1959), 927. It is often pointed out that there is no “dread” of the day in St. John’s writings as we know it from the description of the final judgment in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead, John describes a serene and trustful anticipation of judgment day, which is a result of the fellowship of God and His Son. The fellowship – *koinonia* (1J 1:3) does not leave space for fear of the judgment day. See: S. Cipriani, *Il “giudizio” in San Giovanni*, in: *San Giovanni, Atti della XVII settimana biblica*, Brescia 1964, 179.

²⁰ Cf. W. Thüsing, op.cit., 155.

“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear” – as the Apostle teaches (1J 4:18). What he means is that love and fear cannot coexist, only in souls that are not yet fully developed. But since *agape* has grown its roots deep into the heart of Christian who “abides in God, and God abides in him” (1J 4:16), the perfect love comes to being – *he teleia agape*, which does not allow fear. This triumph of God’s love is the sign of perfection for Saint John²¹.

For Saint John to be a Christian means to love. He distinguishes two kinds of people: those who love and those who do not love (1J 3:10). A Christian prevails in love “*menai*” (1J 4:16). The expression “we in God” and “God in us” was introduced by John to express everything that refers to our full, perfect communion with God. The kind of love in which man is in communion with God is the real and “perfected” love of God, that is the love of God in us²².

“His love is perfected in us” (1J 4:12) as long as His Spirit, the power of His perfect love lives in us, as the following words suggest: “By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit” (1J 4:13)²³.

A full or perfect love is characterized by the Apostle in verse 10: “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” God Himself possesses love in the highest form. He grants it to His children, and by doing so he enables them to love one another and Himself. Love unites everyone who takes part in the same Godly nature. Saying that love is perfected is pointing to its fullness, its peak, its genuineness and authenticity. It is at the same time static and dynamic, as it means abiding or living in, as well as doing good. And in the words: “if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” we get a clear instruction that brotherly love can give us a certainty of God abiding in us because whoever loves takes part in the love that is God, and by doing so, he reaches the highest level of religious life. Through the love of all fellow Christians for one another, God’s love reaches its full potential and becomes perfected²⁴.

God’s *agape* in its infinite fullness becomes the source and model for all other types of love. Through Incarnation we know that God is love and that His

²¹ Cf. C. Spicq, *Agape...*, op. cit., 349.

²² Cf. J. Schneider, *Die Kirchenbriefe (Dans Neue Testament Deutsch, X)* Gottingen 1967, 167. We use the verb *menein* mainly as: abide, stay permanently, reside, live, occupy. It is often used in the First Epistle of John (1J 2:6,10,14,24,27,28; 3:6,9,14,15,17,24; 4:12,13,15,16), as well as in the Fourth Gospel. Cf. F. Gryglewicz, *Listy Katolickie, Wstęp, Przekład z oryginału, Komentarz*, Poznań 1959, 411.

²³ Cf. W. Thusing, op.cit., 145.

²⁴ Cf. C. Spicq, *L'amour de Dieu révélé aux hommes dans les écrits de saint Jean*, Paris 1978, 137f; R.R. Williams, *The Letters of John and James*, Cambridge 1965, 48f.

love is placed in us (J 17:23-26; 1J 4:8-16). The initiative comes from Him. Through the love that spreads onto man he experiences a great transformation and his relations with fellow Christians is directed. In our love towards our brothers the dynamics of God's love is revealed, and it takes on its full and perfect shape²⁵.

When God's love is seeded in the hearts of the faithful and God Himself abides in them, His love becomes perfect in the answer that they give to Him and His disciples. This way, the faithful reach the perfection of the Father that Christ talked about in his Sermon on the Mount: "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mat 5:48)²⁶.

The great significance of brotherly love is thus reflected in its reference to God. Loving one another is abiding in God, that is being united with Him in communion. God's love reaches its ultimate end within us, it reaches its perfection through communicating the benefits of salvation, which is the beginning of eternal life. This is what Saint Paul teaches us in his First Letter to Corinthians (1 Cor 13:8-13) by saying that love never ends. We can agree with Rene Laurentin that "there is at least one point in which the continuity between the earthly and eternal life is clear. This point is the love that develops on earth in mortal reality and which will be also experienced in eternity. So if one neglects this earthly love between people and only invests themselves in the eternal love for the invisible God, one lives in a lie which John also describes in his First Epistle (1J:10; 2:4; 2:22; 4:20; 5:10). This is when the mortal and eternal disperse into one another and become organically interconnected."²⁷

The community of Christian followers that manifests the greatest love and letting others and themselves know the love of God has a mission towards all the people whom Christ wishes to draw to himself (J 12:32). The love for fellow humans is a testimony given to the world about Jesus who was sent by his Father (J 17:21). "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (J 13:35).

Christians should see and acknowledge the love of God and really get to meet Him following Christ's commandments. And through their daily experience of faith they should not only experience God, but also give an actual proof of such experience to non-Christians²⁸.

²⁵ Cf. D. Deden, op. cit., 96f. D. Mollat, *Saint Jean Maître Spirituel*, Paris 1976, 129f.

²⁶ Cf. F.F. Bruce, op. cit., 109f.

²⁷ Cf. R. Laurentin, *Rozwój i zbawienie*, Warsaw 1972, 155f.

²⁸ Cf. Urs von Balthasar, *Spotkanie Boga w świecie dzisiejszym*, Concilium 1-10(1965)6, 427. J.J. Navone, *Temoignage personele, Une spiritualité biblique*, Paris 1968, 151.