

# CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

## *Lesson 8 Part 1*

### The Trinity 1 – Biblical Basis

Let me read you something:

‘The Bible does not teach the Trinity doctrine. Rather, it says that there is only one true and eternal God. “Jehovah our God is one Jehovah” (Deuteronomy 6:4) He is the Creator- eternal, almighty, without equal. Jesus is not Almighty God. Jesus lived on earth as a perfect man and died for imperfect mankind. God kindly accepted the life of Jesus as a ransom, and thus through him is the salvation of the faithful. This is God’s will.’

So reads a tract from the Jehovah’s Witnesses, entitled ‘Who are Jehovah’s Witnesses?’ So it is obvious that if you were to ask the question of a Jehovah’s Witness, ‘Is the Trinity Biblical?’ the answer given would be a resounding ‘No’!

A similar sentiment was expressed by Thomas Jefferson, the Third President of the United States,

‘When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic’ that three are one, and one are three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the very simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since his day, and got back to the pure and simple doctrines he taught, we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples.’

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which that statement from the Jehovah’s Witnesses is actually correct. Strictly speaking, the Bible does not *teach* the Trinity doctrine in such a way that you can turn to a passage which is the equivalent to the statement of faith from Deuteronomy 6:4 for example,

‘‘Here O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.’’,

so we might read something along the lines of, ‘The LORD your God is one God who in his oneness exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.’ No such verse exists. That kind of formulation comes later in the early church in the form of certain creeds like the Nicene Creed for example. It would be more accurate to say that the Bible *reflects* and *expresses* the Trinity doctrine,

and it does so in a variety of different and surprising ways as we shall see. Of course this means that Thomas Jefferson is monumentally wrong. Both Jesus and his disciples spoke and wrote in such a way that their teaching requires the doctrine of the Trinity; nothing less will do justice to the data of the New Testament. However, it is not just a matter of picking out certain proof texts, (although there are passages which cannot be understood in any other way except on the basis that God is three persons in one being), rather, it is that the Biblical revelation in general and the New Testament in particular proceeds according to the belief that God is Triune. There is the 'une' - unity or oneness of God, and the 'tri' -the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit- three distinct persons, but co-equally and co-eternally Yahweh God.

What is so striking is that this belief permeates the *whole* of the New Testament and is assumed by the first Christians without them feeling they had to give arguments or reasons to back up their belief. This in itself is very impressive because most of these folk were *Jews*, and the one thing which marked out the Jews from any other race on earth was that they were passionately monotheistic- believing in only *one* God. One of the earliest Jewish creeds, what is called the *Shema* is found in the Book of Deuteronomy 6:4-

‘Here O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.’

Not two or three or 26- but one. The word used here, ‘echad’ (dx'a,) allows for some sort of complexity or plurality within that oneness. The same word (echad) is used of husband and wife becoming ‘one’ flesh in Genesis 2:24 through the act of sexual intercourse, or the gathering of the tribes of Israel together as ‘one’ man in Judges 20:1. So an over-translation of this verse would be: ‘Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is *oneness*.’

Similarly, the first Christians were passionate about that belief too and would have given no quarter to, for example, the view of the Romans that there were many gods. This was the Roman pantheon. And so we find the apostle Paul writing to Christians in pagan Corinth,

‘So, then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but *one*.’

—Pure monotheism. But then in the next breath Paul goes on to say,

‘*Yet* for us there is but one God, the Father from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord (and remember Lord in the OT is the name of God, Yahweh), Jesus

Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live' (1 Cor 8:4-6).

One God- and yet he is at *least* the Father and the Son. Jesus is spoken of in *exactly* the same terms as God the Father- as Creator and Sustainer.

Paul was not stupid, someone who would easily get his math wrong. He has been spoken of as one of the most intelligent and influential men that has ever lived. Nor was he someone who was starting a new religion, he was a Jew of Jews, a 'One God' man all the way to the death if needs be (Phil 3:2-6). And yet without batting an eyelid or having any sense of awkwardness, Paul speaks of Jesus as being equally God with the Father as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. The question is, why? How did it happen? We shall see why and how in a moment.

However, before we do let me make a few preliminary remarks:

First, belief in the Trinity is a matter of *revelation* and not *speculation*. Contrary to what the Jehovah's Witness's teach, this was not something dreamt up by speculative theologians in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, it is something which is part of the very fabric of the revelation we have of God's plan of redemption in the Bible. Most certainly it was the case later theologians tried to carefully put that belief together in words which would preserve and clearly express the Bible's revelation (as we shall see in our next lesson), but they didn't invent it- they expounded it.

Secondly, the whole notion of the Trinity is unique because God is unique. You can't point to *anything* else in creation and say, 'Look, the Trinity is like that', because God as Trinity is not like anything or anyone else. So while we may sometimes try to use illustrations to get over some aspect of the Trinity, like, water can be found in three states- liquid, gas and solid, yet all are composed of water, that illustration breaks down when applied to God, because he really is not like that. That illustration if pressed is the heresy called 'modalism' which the early church condemned, as we shall see in the next lesson. The Trinity is in a class all by itself. It is what is called *sui generis*, which is why it makes it very difficult, but not impossible, for us to get our heads around it. What is more, talk of water or shamrocks is to talk about *things*. But things can't love or relate-only persons can do that. And that is what the one God is- three persons in an ongoing eternal relationship of love which flows out to embrace people like you and me.

Which leads on to the third point, there is always going to be an element of mystery due to the limits of our imagination and the greatness of God. The

crucial question to be answered is not: ‘Can we fully understand it?’ But, ‘Has God revealed it?’ And if he has, then we are to believe it because nothing less than a right view of God, and so a right view of salvation, depends upon it

What do I mean by that? Here is one theologian, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformer, John Calvin,

‘God so proclaims himself the sole God as to offer himself to be contemplated clearly as three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.’<sup>1</sup>

Let me put it this way: to worship anything or anyone other than God is idolatry. We must worship and serve the one true and living God, the Bible is quite clear about that. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us to worship God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. So, if we *don't* do that, then we are not worshipping the true God and therefore would be guilty of idolatry. We are left with, in the words of Calvin, only the ‘bare and empty *name* of God’ and not the reality.

How, then, does the Bible reflect the truth about the Trinity? Let's be Trinitarian in our approach and look at three ways in which it does so.

First, we see the Trinity in the **devotion** or worship of the first Christians. We have already observed that the early Christians were dyed in the wool monotheists- ‘one God only’ people. And yet they offer worship to God as Father, God as Son and God as Holy Spirit. And there are little phrases which we take for granted but which are packed with theological dynamite which reflect this.

In the first place we have the *greetings* such as 1 Thessalonians 1:1,

‘To the church of the Thessalonians *in* God the Father *and* the Lord Jesus Christ.’

You can see how this group of Christians might have some mystical union with God, but how can they be ‘in’ a mere man- Jesus Christ? Of course they can't if he is a *mere* man, but they can if he is God. What Paul is doing is putting the two together, or as we would say, God the Father and God the Son, as if to say, ‘these two who are God, are one God and so the only God who exists and you Christians gathering in Thessalonica are *in* him.’

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:13.2, Ed John T. McNeill (Westminster Press, 1960)

Secondly, we have the *blessings*- for example, 2 Corinthians 13:14,

‘May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.’

Again, we are so familiar with these words that the profound significance and oddity are lost on us. Jews knew where grace (*charis*) came from- God. They knew where love (*agape*) came from- God. They also knew where fellowship (*koinonia*) came from- God. Yet, there was only *one* God, and he is the source of all three blessings- how? Because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Notice too how Jesus is placed before God the Father in this Trinitarian blessing, underscoring his equality with the Father, and, we may also add, the Spirit.

Then thirdly, we have the *praises*, as we find in what could be a kind of ‘hymn’ in Ephesians 1:1-11. Here Paul traces all the blessings of salvation to the Father, who chose us; to Christ who redeemed us by his blood; and to the Holy Spirit who seals our final inheritance.

‘Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ... he (Father) chose us in him before the creation of the world....in (Christ) we have redemption through his blood.....having believed you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit.’

Paul is overflowing with praise- not to some vague idea called ‘God’- a mere name, but to a God who is personally known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The next big question is: from where did these first believers get their belief and practice to worship God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, being mindful that they were Jews, having imbibed with their mother’s milk the belief that there is only one God and to worship so called other gods or human beings is idolatry? Let me say that they didn’t sit down and form a committee to come up with the idea! No. The most obvious source for their ‘Trinitarian consciousness’ if I may put it like that, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself, their experience of him and his teaching.

Let’s take the experience of Jesus for example and consider one episode which pinpoints this, namely, his baptism. This is what we read in Luke’s account,

‘When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came

from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22).

Right at the beginning of Jesus public ministry we have the three persons of the Godhead present. This only makes sense if faith in Christ is also a response to the Father who speaks from heaven, and an expectation of the power of the Spirit, represented symbolically as a dove. So we can only know Christ fully if we also know the Father who sent him and we receive the Spirit of truth, sent by Jesus after his death and resurrection. As we come to Jesus as God the Son, then we come to know God the Father, believing, because God the Spirit has come into our hearts to enable us to have saving trust.

As far as the teaching of Jesus is concerned there are plenty of places you could turn to but we will take a look at the end of Matthew's Gospel and chapter 28:19ff. This is often called the 'Great Commission' when the disciples received their marching orders from Jesus. He says that followers (disciples) are to be made from all nations and baptized into '*the* name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. That wording is very precise and highly significant. Jesus *doesn't* say into the '*names* of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (plural).' Why? Because that would mean there are three gods. The god called 'father', the god called 'son' and the god called 'Holy Spirit.' Neither does he say, 'in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit' without 'Son' and 'Spirit' having the definite article, for that formulation would give us only one God appearing in three different *guises*- sometimes he appears as Son, sometimes he reveals himself in the form of Father and at other times as Spirit- modalism. Look at this very carefully: it is *the name* (and 'the name' to Jews meant the name of Yahweh, a name a pious Jew would not even utter) - emphasizing that there is only *one* God, and yet this is the one God who is *the* Father, *the* Son and *the* Holy Spirit, so maintaining their distinctiveness. They share the one name- Yahweh- LORD, the 'godness' if you will, and yet remain three distinct identities, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That is what the Trinity is. Jesus implicitly taught it; the early Christians assumed and believed it; and we are to do the same.

This makes it clear that the early Christians symbolized that salvation was *entirely* from God by people being baptized into the name of the Trinity, which brings us to the second area which reflects the Trinity- **salvation**. It was the experience and revelation of God's rescue plan itself- the Gospel- which *demand*ed the belief in the Trinity.

Three passages from the Bible underscore this:

- 2 Corinthians 5:19-21, ‘*God* was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting men's sins against them.’ Notice the one involved was not just part of God, or a mere man who co-operated with God- but *God in Christ*.
- John 3:16, ‘*God* so loved the world that he gave his one and only *Son* so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.’ If salvation is *entirely* the work of *God*, then the *Son* who is sent must be God too. Otherwise it is God *plus* ‘another’.
- But what of the Spirit? Does he have any part in this? Indeed he does according to Hebrews 9:13-14. Contrasting Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross with the Old Testament sacrificial system we read: ‘The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal *Spirit* offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!’ The writer is saying that Jesus who was both priest and victim on the altar of the cross, offered himself as a sacrifice for our sins in the power of the Holy Spirit. We also know the Holy Spirit to be God because Paul spells that out for us in 2 Corinthians 3: 17: ‘Now the *Lord is* the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom.’ In other words, the whole of the Godhead is actively involved in saving us. That our salvation has a threefold source is also taught by the apostle Peter - ‘To God’s chosen people-chosen according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, through the sanctifying work of *the Spirit*, for obedience to *Jesus Christ*, sprinkled with his blood- 1 Peter 1:2. Don’t you find that moving-God is committed to us that much?’

Let’s think about it negatively to show how we are completely lost in our sins if the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Thomas Jefferson are right.

- ❖ If there is no Trinity, then Jesus who died on the cross is not *God* dying in our place, but a human being who dies to save us *from* God. Do you see the difference? If this is so, then we are not saved *by* God, but saved *from* God and then God is not our Savior, but a man (although it is difficult to see how a mere man could save us).
- ❖ If there is no Trinity, then the work of salvation cannot be the work of God, because for it to be entirely of God it requires *God* to be the priest who *offers* himself as the sacrifice; it requires *God* to be the one who *receives* the sacrifice and it must be *God* who *applies* the work of that

sacrifice to our lives. In other words, you need God the Son who died on the cross to redeem us, God the Father who accepts the sacrifice and forgives us, and God the Holy Spirit to work within us. In short you need the Trinity in order to be saved.

This was the experience of the first Christians when they embraced the Gospel. The great B.B. Warfield describes what people find when they become Christians in this way, 'By means of this doctrine (the Christian believer) is able to think clearly and consequently of his threefold relation to the saving God, experiencing him as Fatherly love sending a redeemer, as redeeming love executing redemption, as saving love applying redemption; all manifestations in distinct methods and by distinct agencies of the one seeking and saving love of God.'<sup>2</sup>

Thirdly, we need the Trinity if we are going to experience **communion**, or fellowship (koinonia)- that is fellowship with God and with each other. How is the believer brought into a personal, spiritual relationship with God and so with each other as the Body of Christ? The answer: by the Trinity. Thus Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 12 vv 4- 6:

'There are different kinds of gifts, but the same *Spirit*.<sup>5</sup> There are different kinds of service, but the same *Lord* (Jesus).<sup>6</sup> There are different kinds of working, but the same God (Father) works all of them in all men.'

There is *one* God but there are *three* persons within the Godhead, each person having a different function to perform within the overall economy of our salvation. The term 'gifts'- (*charismata*)- tells us *what* God *the Spirit* gives- they are love gifts. The term 'service'- (*diakonia*)- ministries- tells us what *the Son* gives them *for*- service for others. The term workings or energisings – (*energemata*)- tells us *how* God *the Father* brings them into operation in our lives-by his power. So, these gifts to the church which come from God the Holy Spirit are meant to enable us to express the servanthood of the Son by the enabling power of the God the Father. In other words, you would not have the *church* if there were no Trinity!

I hope by now that you have got the message: no Trinity = no salvation; no Trinity = no church; no Trinity = no Christianity. But we *do* have the Trinity: there is one God who exists within the eternity of his own glorious being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Indeed, you cannot have a truly *Christian*

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Fred G. Zaspel, *The Theology of B.B. Warfield: A Systematic Survey* (Inter Varsity press, 2010), p. 190

experience without the Trinity. To be sure, some people believe in a so called 'god', but that is all it will remain- an idea, cold and distant, mainly something cerebral or as Calvin put it 'a name' flitting around the head. But the Trinitarian God is alive, vibrant, overflowing with energy and love, wanting to catch each one of us up into his Trinitarian life, loved as the Father loves the Son, awash with the Spirit. That is the *Christian* experience.

The former Principal of Moore College, Sydney, Dr. David Broughton Knox summarises the essential nature of this truth like this:

'The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of the Christian religion. Unless this doctrine is held firmly and truly, it is not possible to be a Christian. For the Christian is one who acknowledges Jesus as Lord, yet adheres to the religion of the Bible which emphasises so strongly that there is only one God.'<sup>3</sup>

However, it has to be admitted that some churches have too small a view of God because they focus on one person of the Trinity to neglect of the others.

A church which focuses on 'the Father' may have an unclear view of the Gospel and the need for a Saviour, for the emphasis is on the 'Fatherhood of God' which is vague and fluffy. A church which focuses on the Son may not have a proper value of creation and the good things in life given for us to manage and enjoy. A church which focuses on the Spirit may lack an awareness of the historical basis for our faith and slide into subjectivism-'God is as real as I feel'. But when we worship the God who is Trinity our experience is of a different order altogether. This is the way Dr Peter Adam puts it, which I found exciting and helpful:

'Life caught up in God is more like relating to a loving community than it is like relating to a loving individual. We turn to the Father; and he gives up the Son and the Spirit; we turn to the Son, and he shows us the Father and breathes the Spirit upon us; we turn to the Spirit, and he shows us the Father and the Son.'<sup>4</sup>

Are there any illustrations we can use to help us understand the Trinity? Not really, because by definition God as Trinity is *sui generis*. But there is one

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<sup>3</sup> D. Broughton Knox, 'God in Trinity' in *Selected Works, Volume I, The Doctrine of God*, Ed Tony Payne (Matthias Media, 2001), p. 73

<sup>4</sup> Dr Peter Adam, *The Trinity- What Difference Does it Make?* (Unpublished paper, Ridley College, Melbourne, 2004)

illustration which while not ‘explaining the Trinity as such does help us to be content with the limitations of our knowledge.

The illustration comes from C.S. Lewis in his book ‘Mere Christianity’.<sup>5</sup> He argues that in space we can move three ways- left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. These are the three dimensions. If we were using only one dimension, we would only be able to draw a straight line. With two dimensions we can draw a figure- maybe a square. But with three dimensions you can build that up into a solid body- a cube like a lump of sugar. The point is you advance to more real and complicated levels, but not leaving the lower levels behind, rather they are taken up *into* the higher levels.

He says that it is a little like that when we think of God as Triune. The human level is if you like at the simple and empty level. On the human level one person is one being, any two persons are separate beings, just as in two dimensions, on a piece of paper, one square is one figure and two squares-two figures. But on the Divine level, it is like a third dimension, you still find the personalities but they are combined in new ways which we on our simple level can’t imagine. In God’s dimension, you find this wonderful being who is three persons while remaining one being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube.

As with any illustration or analogy it has its limitations. The main problem with this is that it is a static picture of *dimensions*, whereas with God as he has revealed himself to us in Scripture is a dynamic of interrelated *persons*. Of course Lewis is fully aware of this which is why he entitled his chapter, ‘The Three-Personal God’. What this illustration does help to serve is that there is no inherent contradiction in the idea of God as Trinity, any more than there is an inherent contradiction between squares and cubes.

As we shall see in the next lesson, what the early church Father’s sought to do through their creeds and supporting writings was to find ways of formulating these Biblical truths, within the limitations of human words and categories available to them, which remained true to Scripture, drew the boundaries of orthodoxy and which avoided misunderstanding. I hope that this lesson has at least given you the confidence to know that Trinitarian doctrine is Biblical and breathtakingly relevant.

My good friend Dr Mike Reeves in his excellent book on the Trinity puts it like this:

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<sup>5</sup> C. S. Lewis, ‘The Three-Personal God’ in *Mere Christianity*, (Fount, 1978), pp. 137-141

‘The irony could not be thicker: what we assume would be a dull or peculiar irrelevance turns out to be the source of all that is good in Christianity. Neither a problem or a technicality, the triune being of God is the vital oxygen of Christian life and joy.’<sup>6</sup>

### POINTS FOR HOME

- John wrote his Gospel so ‘that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.’ (John 20:31). This is an invitation to a Trinitarian faith. Jesus is the *Son* of God, sent by his *Father*. He is the *Christ*, anointed by *the Spirit*. When we start with Jesus we get the Triune God. Let us be Trinitarian in our thinking and praying. Let us enter into and enjoy the life of the Trinity in our prayer life by praying to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit.
- A weak view of the Trinity will result in a weak view of our salvation. May our praise be fuelled by the thought that so great is God’s love and so great is our need that *all* the persons of the Trinity are involved in our rescue. The Father decreed it, the Son executed it and the Spirit applies it- and so God’s Triune love guarantees it!
- The way God communicates to us in Scripture is also Trinitarian. God the Father is the ‘speaker’, the originator of his self-revelation ‘In the past God [the Father] spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways’ (Heb. 1:1). The Word (logos) is the content of his revelation, ‘but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son’ (Heb. 1:2), the whole of the Old Testament prepares the way for him and the New Testament is all about him and his significance. The Spirit brings Scripture into being through men, ‘All Scripture is breathed out by God’ (comes on God’s ‘breath’/Spirit) and brings about change in people’s lives, ‘and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness’ (2:Tim. 3:16). Keep on memorising those Scriptures!

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Reeves, *The Good God* (Paternoster, 2012), p. xvi

## HOME WORK

To recap, we are memorizing 1 John this year in the English Standard Version. That amounts to two verses a week. To be current, we need to have memorized 1 John 1:1-2:2. One chapter down, four to go!

**1John 1:1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— **3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. **4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

**1:5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. **6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. **8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. **10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

**1John 2:1** My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. **2** He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for

ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. <sup>3</sup> And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. <sup>4</sup> Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, <sup>5</sup> but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: <sup>6</sup> whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.

<sup>7</sup> Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. <sup>8</sup> At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

<sup>9</sup> Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness.

<sup>10</sup> Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling.