

## On Truth and Love in the Writings of St. John the Evangelist by Bishop Theophan the Recluse

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*Bishop Theophan explains how "St. John the Evangelist does not allow one to say: Believe any way you wish, only love" in a clarifying analysis of St. John's theology of love and belief. This essay is especially relevant to the current debate on ecumenism.*

The Holy Apostle and Evangelist John the Theologian, the beloved disciple of the Lord, is above all an example and a teacher of love. Love breathes through his gospel, lessons about love fill his epistles and his life serves as a striking example of love.

He expounded on all the mysteries of love – its source, its movement in deeds, and its culmination – and where it leads all that follow it, to the heights. In this subject of love St. John is especially well known, and no matter who would begin to muse, about love he would immediately bring to mind St. John as the model of love and turn to him as to a teacher of love.

Now let us examine how contemporary wise men have made use of this teaching. They possess a special kind of vain wisdom called "Indifferentism" by which they reason say: believe as you like, it makes no difference – just love everyone like brothers, be charitable to them, and have a good influence on them. They point out that the Evangelist John the Theologian writes only about love. For him love is light and life and all perfection. According to his words the person who does not love walks in darkness, abides in death, and is a murderer. It is well known that when St. John grew old and was unable to walk they carried him to church. There he only admonished, "Brethren! let us love one another." Thus he so valued love. They tell us that we also should love like that and only love, believing any way we wish.

I myself have had to listen to such "wisdom." Perhaps you have also had to listen to or will hear something similar to this. Let us contrast their false teaching with the true teaching of St. John the Theologian and then protect our thoughts from wavering from the fundamentals of Christian good sense into the vain wisdom of the "indifferent ones." These so-called "wise" people desire to build everything without God – their external welfare and their morality. From this they strive wherever possible to craftily weave a school of thought where there is no need to talk about God. And they beat their drums about love. They tell us to love one another and here there is nothing to think about God. It is especially on this point where the Holy Evangelist routs them. Although St John continuously, and exactly reminds us to love one another, he also

places love in such a close bound with God, with love for God and the knowledge of God, that it is impossible to separate them. Behold where St. John's love originates, *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.* And he adds, *Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.* (I John 4:10, 11). According to his reasoning, our mutual love must be built up by the action of faith in the Lord, Who came to save us, and consequently it is not all right to believe as you want. Further he teaches, *Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God;* (John 4:7) *If we love one another, God dwelleth in us ...* (I John 4:12) *God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God and God in him.* (I John 4:16). You see, he does not say a word about love without speaking about God and the Saviour. Love is from God and leads to God. Thus he who says that he loves his brother, and does not know and love God and the Saviour, is a liar and the truth is not in him cf. (John 4:20,2:4). Therefore it is possible to summarize the entire teaching of the Holy Evangelist on love in the following words: in order to love your neighbor you must love God, and in order to love God, you must, of course come to know Him within yourself and especially in His salvific activity on us. We must know and believe. What does the will of God consist of? In faith and love: thus the commandment says: *That we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another.* (I John 3:23). It does not only command us to love but to believe in the Lord, and in such a way that faith is the source of love. If one were to gather into one all the places where St. John the Evangelist speaks only of love, one could still not confirm his teaching by the false reasoning: only love and believe as you want.

Besides his teaching on love he also speaks of faith, independent of the law of love. Behold how he categorically rejects those who say, believe as you want. What does he preach about from the very first verses: *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looketh upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us; That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.* (I John 1:1-3). The most important point with St. John and all the apostles is the teaching about communion with God through the Lord Jesus Christ, from which proceeds communion of the faithful with one another. How can we have the one without the other. Further St. John asks the question: who is a liar? and answers thus: *Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father... Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.* (I John 2:22, 23. 4:15). The whole matter is summed up in confessing the Lord Jesus Christ to be the Son of God and to be God. How then could one possibly say, "Believe any way you want"?

Then there follows the warning: *Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Herein know ye the*

*Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist. (I John 4:1-3) He who says, "Believe as you want" does not confess Jesus Christ, for if he did confess Christ he would not speak thus. Therefore he cannot be from God. Where then is he from? – truly from the antichrist.*

Finally, the Holy Evangelist describes the whole essence of Christianity thus: *And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. (I John 5:11-12). Who possesses the Son of God? Those who believe in His name. Therefore he says, and writes: unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God, that ye may know that ye have eternal life ... (I John 5:13). Consequently, he who does not believe in the Son of God, has not eternal life.*

Could it

possibly make no difference how one wants to believe? No. *We know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us light and understanding, that we may know the true God, and that we may be in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life. (I John 5:20).*

These excerpts should be enough, I suppose, in order to show the Indifferentists that in vain do they seek to find support for their lie in the teaching of St. John the Theologian. It is more than likely that they make such claims without having ever read St. John's holy and divinely inspired writings, but rather quote him based on rumors about his overflowing love. Let them even now find something else besides the above argument, to defend their teaching to us believers. One word alone from the beloved disciple is sufficient to discredit their teaching and without any doubt to confirm our belief explicitly in that which was given to us by the Lord through the Holy Apostles and preserved by the Church.

I would only add the following consideration to the decisive words of the Apostle and Evangelist John: having estranged themselves in their minds from the Lord, these unbelievers grasp at acts of charity whose source and support are precisely love. They act in this way only to be founded on something without the assurance that they have found a solid basis. If only they had a clear understanding of how it is indeed possible for man to act in a fruitful way, they would never remain fixed on their teaching. The essence of the matter is – that we are not in the proper state. Therefore we cannot act in the right way. In order for us to act in the correct way we must enter into the right state. By our own powers we are not capable of doing this. The Lord, having come to the earth, lifted up man to the right state. He did not lead man into this state for His own sake but rather that man would accept from Him renewed humanness and thus gain the possibility of acting properly. We obtain this state through Holy Baptism, for those who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. From the time of Baptism we become

one with the Lord and begin to live His life and act by His power. Those who would claim love or the right action (for love is the fullness of the law) should first accept all the premises of Christianity in order to be able to walk rightly and deny their own falseness (lie). This is impossible without faith, for faith is the root of Christianity and beginning of everything. The Lord Himself says this: *Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except ye abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in Me. I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without Me ye can do nothing. If a man abide not in Me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.* (John 15: 4-6)

When someone begins to expound to you about love or fruitful action independent of true belief, tell him: Wait, first believe correctly. By faith acquire all the salvific precepts of Christianity. Through them be united with the Lord, make your life and strength depend on Him like you would on an injection for your health and then you will begin to act in a fruitful way. It is a fact that the witness to a righteous life is fruitful activity in love, but in order to attain it and to remain in it one must accept all of God's Truth with faith and pass through all of God's sanctifying actions [on one's self]. Only under these conditions, i.e., by abiding in True Love, may we grow up into Him in all things, Who is the head, even Christ (Eph. 4,15). We could summarize thus: he who does not have the right Faith cannot enter into the proper state, and he who does not enter into the right state cannot properly act. Now do you see how one cannot say: Believe as you wish, only love"?

Faith is not only the image of the knowledge of God and of our relationship to Him; it also includes all the salvific institutions [not just the Church as establishment but all that is contained within the Church for salvation] given by God. These salvific institutions maintain active faith. Our so-called wise men might not actually be opposed to Christian teaching, but, more than anything else, they are repulsed by Christian institutions. Since these institutions are nothing more than faith in reality and in action, then their main sin is that they do not want to act in the spirit of the Faith. One is only amazed at how these people so persistently expound about deeds and labors but remove themselves from activity in the realm of holy Faith. There is something amiss here. Surely they are acquainted with the laws of logical thought. There is such duplicity here that one must assume that they are not in fact doers, but are acted upon – they are the tools of a foreign spirit, and such a spirit that is itself foreign to Truth.

Brethren, having understood this, let us guard ourselves from the evil reasoning of this world. Only those who have never tasted the Truth can waver in it. Let us fulfill with humility and in the spirit of truth all that our holy Faith demands. Then we will have,

and carry within, a witness which will bring to naught all false arguments from without. May the Lord illumine us by His Truth. Amen.

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