

THE COMMUNITY OF PERFECT LOVE

Let's look again at some familiar words from John's first letter:

¹³By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit. ¹⁴We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. ¹⁶We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.
1 Jn 4:13-18 NASU

God is forming *churches*; He's forming *communities*. That's a *corporate* reality. But the way *in* to these communities is to be *added*, and we're added as *individuals*.

Picture yourself as an unbeliever. How are you added to God's community, and what stages do you then go through?

Stage 1 – Entry

The Father has sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him and he in God.

You've previously lived *outside* the community, not really knowing the love of God. Then one day something happens. It may feel sudden, or it may clearly be a gradual process, but somehow you are impacted by the truth of the gospel. You may hear it proclaimed in public by a preacher, you may hear it on television or radio, you may hear it through a friend in conversation, you may read it in print. But however it comes, you begin to understand that, "*God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*" And something connects within you, you know in your heart that it's true, and you respond, placing your faith and trust in Jesus the Son of God—and you *enter in* to God's community.

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. This is what has happened. We have come to know and have faith in the love of God. *God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.*

There's a cry for this in the world today. The song by Foreigner from the eighties echoes and resonates with a whole generation: "*I want to know what love is. I want you to show me.*" A hardened and cynical society cries out for a demonstration of love. What much of the Church takes for granted would be revolutionary in society, if only the world could see.

Stage 2 – Adjustment

So you're *in* the community, and you begin to look around and see how it is and how it works. It's all new and very different. You may be *enrapt*. Everything seems perfect, and you wonder where you've *been* all your life! You're thoroughly happy to be included.

But then as the honeymoon phase wanes, you begin to be aware of imperfections in the other people, and you have a desire to test the reality of some of the things you see. As well as that, your values and assumptions are being exposed and challenged, and some adjustments must be made.

You live in love. What does it mean to live in love? What is love anyway?

Most have been taught that love is a powerful emotion, but in reality love is *not* primarily an emotion. Love is a *commitment*. God's love is His commitment to *us*. *Our* love is our commitment to God and to each other. Love is a desire for the *other's* highest good, and a commitment to it.

Love isn't saying "yes" to everybody's demand. Love isn't "an ocean of niceness"! Love is *tough* as well as nice. Love confronts, love corrects, love disciplines, love speaks the truth, love says "no" as well as "yes", love puts its foot down, love exercises authority. And love covers over a multitude of sins.

God is love—and yet He brings correction, discipline and firmness. Parents know that it's not the "loving" thing to do to leave children unrestricted and uncorrected. In families, love that leads to growth and maturity operates through authority and accountability. It's the same in the Church, the family of God.

Conversely, *judgement* can result in doing nothing. "*Ephraim is joined to idols; leave him alone!*" (Hos 4:17) God loves you just the way you are, but too much to leave you that way! He wants our adjustment.

We come in from the outside where it's all democratic and "one man one vote". We come in to the Kingdom of God, where it's *not* democratic—*God* rules, not His people! That takes *adjustment*. We've said, "Jesus is Lord!" It's easy to say, until I realise it means that I'm *not*. That takes *adjustment*.

As well as directly, God also works through *delegated* authorities, even in the Church—pastors, elders and various church leaders. Direct authority is easier, because we're more confident that *He* won't get it wrong. But direct is also easier because if Jesus says something I don't like, I can always assume that He didn't really say it, it was just my imagination. However, if delegated authority says something, I find it more difficult to dismiss it as my imagination! That takes *adjustment*.

Having entered, we need to learn what love really means, and how love operates in the community, the family of God.

Stage 3 – Security

So you're settled, you appreciate the way things are, you're at home in God's love. Now what?

Now is the time to grow in security, going *deeper* in the work of salvation. Verse 18 says: "*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.*"

There are four kinds of fear. There's natural fear that leads us to pull back from danger. It's our defence mechanism. There's the fear of Lord, which the Bible says is the beginning of wisdom. These two are positive. Then there's the fear of man, which brings a snare. Lastly, there is a long list of irrational fears—fear of the future, fear of death, fear of the dark, fear of spiders, and so on. These last two are negative, they function as the opposite of faith, and they lead to *insecurity*. But *perfect love casts out fear*.

God loves us with a perfect love—that's true, and it *does* deal with fear. But we also need to be *perfected* or *completed* in that love. The *one who fears is not perfected in love*. Although forgiven, many still have a fear of punishment or judgement, and it's rooted in a lack of abiding in God's love. *By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment*. God's love in the community is perfecting or completing *us* in love, so that we can be free from fear, secure in Him and have complete confidence on the day of

judgement. He wants to develop that security in us. We're being perfected in love, and fear is being cast out.

Stage 4 – Maturity

We have confidence on the day of judgement *because as He is, so also are we in this world*— in other words, because of Christ-likeness. You as an individual are being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ, yes. But the real focus here is on us *as a Body* becoming more Christ-like, functioning *together* like Jesus Christ on the earth. We have different personalities, different gifts and abilities, different levels of revelation and understanding, different emphases, different functions. We each have the same *value*, but different tasks to fulfil. We're members of a *Body*, which is greater than the sum of the parts, and which is truly becoming the *Body of Christ*.

We need each other. Our maturity is in the Body.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Eph 4:14-16

As we abide, love is perfected in us and we are perfected in love as a community, a corporate Body. And thus we truly are becoming "the community of perfect love".

George Alexander
November 2004

Note: All Bible quotations are NIV unless otherwise stated.