

The moral crisis that we face as a society has been brought about by anti-institutional, anti-establishment attitude that the Baby boomers have brought with them from the sixties. A shift has taken place as people have realised that society is not so much a community but a resource. It is no longer important what contribution we make to those around us, but what around us contributes to who we are. We don't find our identity by giving, we find it by taking.

This is only increasing as we see that the sense of community that has been so integral to our existence throughout history is being broken down into a selection of people that we choose to engage with. Instead of having to relate to people in our immediate community we have options. There is nowhere near as much risk in being vulnerable now. Log off, speak to the hand, don't call me. It doesn't quite work in a smaller non-mobile community. In the old days, when people were born into a town and lived there until they died, they had to learn to get along or the community wouldn't function. We don't need to learn that now.

Consider how people would be born into learning their father's trade. Hence the surnames, baker, smith, farmer, carver, miller etc etc etc. But now we have left all this behind. Our identity is not so much tied up in the history of our family, but in what we achieve as individuals.

We experience more relational control now than we ever have— We have escape routes.

But who knows how useful that is? Our technology and our social opinion is pushing us in non-relational directions. What are we looking down the barrel of in the next 10 years as the children of a society of single parent families, spilt parenting etc start to make policy? I am afraid that we are only becoming shallower and vaguer in who we are and want to be.

We are losing our foothold on what it means to be a relational being because relationship is a choice. Take for

example the internet chat rooms where you can log on under any name, gender, age, physical condition you want. You masquerade around these places pretending to be someone else. You can open yourself up to complete strangers under the guise of vulnerability—you can log off whenever you want to. You can jump out of the conversation at any point never to return to that relationship again.

We are the ones in control, this relationship will only last as long as I say. We are the most important people in our relationships now. Love is not a feeling, nor is it a choice, it is an elusive ideal that we can never understand, so why try?

As we have elevated self above others, we have in many senses divorced ourselves from meaning. Notice how shallow we are when it comes to finding meaning in this world now. Hairstyles, job status, popularity, clothing styles—even our opinions are fashionable. I do find a sense of self-worth in the brand of shoes that I wear. That's my hypocrisy there—or is it still hypocrisy if I'm admitting to it? We've talked about our gadgets and cell-phones in the past, and we think that they are getting us more connected. Since when has text messaging been a good way of building relationships? How useful is e-mail in getting to know someone? You can create more masks through words than you can in real life. And it can backfire too, I've discovered that sarcasm doesn't travel with my e-mails and it's put me in hot-water a few times. The written word can be misunderstood too. So is that building relationship or is it simply distributing information? We are being told that they are both the same thing.

But are these technologies assisting us in becoming more connected? Or are they reinforcing disconnection?

What on earth has this got to do with 1 John? 1 John is a pastoral letter, it is written primarily to help the church understand that the primary understanding of the Christian faith is love. It's that phrase again, "love God, love People." On a relational level, anything else is sin.

Disconnection and breakdown of community is probably the biggest cause for sin. And this is the connection. As we are isolated by technology, we become more important as individuals. As we become more important as individuals, the community dissolves, because they become dispensable. We can move in and out of any community as much as we want, or as much as our fragile selves can cope with. Community needs to serve us rather than the other way round. 1 John is deeply concerned with us learning about the preciousness of the community that is gathered because of God. He sees church is so important for reshaping society. But to look at us, so far so bad.

I was talking with someone the other day who said to me, “God created us as relational beings. We need to ask ourselves, is what we are doing moving toward or away from relationship?” He was saying this in the context of how we define what is a sin. And I’ve been thinking that this is a really helpful way of assessing our actions.

The first few verses of this chapter are bringing this into perspective. John is saying that we need to get a handle on the fact that love changes people. It does. Love changes people, it’s not rocket science. This is the stuff of basic parenting. Love is a need, and it changes people.

This is why we have faith. We are Christian, because the love of Jesus is the most pure love of all and as we understand and experience that we are changed. This is John’s point here.

Think about how amazing it is that God would want to have anything to do with us, let alone call us his children? Adopt us into his family? God the perfect takes us the imperfect. And what is supposed to happen then?

We change.

You could see it in the following way. Think of the famous person you like the most. They ask you out to dinner at the Hyatt Kingsgate. What are you going to wear? Will you wear what you wear to work on the house or on your bike? Your

tramping Gear? Your Church clothes? Your jandals and shorts? Or would you get dressed up in the best clothes you can find, or go and buy some more, just so that you can fit into the occasion? We are not dressing up because we want to make an impression, but precisely because we don't want to make the wrong impression. We want to make it easy to relate with that person and so we treat them with respect and dignity.

In the same way, God has chosen to accept us, does that mean that we keep doing the things that he finds unacceptable? The sense of decorum for a Christian is to not sin. But we can put it better than that, the sense of decorum for a Christian is to completely love God and love people.

And this is what sets the scene for the next few verses.

Unfortunately, John goes even deeper than this. And to be honest I don't like it one bit because it creates enormous difficulties. Check out verse 9.

We have here a clear contradiction. You know how we often rubbish people for accusing the bible of being full of contradictions? You know how we say no that's not so? Well here we have it. It's black and white. In verse 9 John says that those who are born of God cannot sin. In Chapter 1 vs 8 he says that "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

It's bad enough that there are two very different points of view being expressed in the Bible, but what is worse is that not only is it the same author, but it's in the same letter too!

I want you to break into small groups of 5 for about 5 minutes to talk about that contradiction . . .

Ok what are some of the explanations here and then I'll tell you what I think.

What I think is this. That it is not so much that John is concerned about sin, but about the central truth of the

Gospel. **The Gospel is not about becoming sinless, it is about becoming someone who loves. Not sinning is the result of this.**

You we all sin. This is a simple fact. Even as Christians we sin. That's a truth that's nearly as sure as the fact that one day we will die. Simple as that. We are all going to sin again. There's no denying it. In fact most of us (if not all of us) are harbouring an unresolved issue as we sit here now. And you've just been reminded of it as I said that.

The reason I say this is that we seem to be living in a state of constant battle between what we desire to make ourselves feel better and the need for us to be transformed by God. Our desires are difficult to pin down as being righteous because it is motive more than action that makes something a sin. The minute I introduce my own wants into the equation of desire I don't know how selfish or unselfish it is. And we all live with this conflict of motives. Sometimes we can see where we are being honest, but more often than not we don't.

I think that sin is mainly about constructing ourselves without God's help. We are making our own little Towers of Babel. Our own little monuments for the world to look at and for ourselves to admire.

Do you see how difficult it is to come to terms with our sin? It means smashing down everything we have built and letting Jesus do the building. **Sin is whatever we do for self-interest that moves us both from relationship with others and moves us from relationship with God.**

Let's not lie about it, because we do indeed see that we do sin. If we say that we don't then we are liars.

So John is pointing this out but also saying that if we are born of God we cannot sin. And I think that he is saying this so that we don't get complacent, so we don't relax too much, so we don't sit comfortably with this terrible thing that we have to cope with. He is saying that the acceptable level of

sin for someone who is a child of God is zero. But we have Jesus who will stand for us as our advocate if we do sin.

But more to the point, and this is the main thing that we need to focus on in order to understand this paradox. **The reason we will not sin is not because we choose not to, but rather that we choose to love.** If we completely love God and love people, we will not sin. Simple as that. John's letter is all about bringing people to an understanding that this rule of life, love God and love people, is the answer to the problem of sin.

His focus is not on sin, but on the lack of love.

I don't know, it's still not clear in my head how John could reconcile the contradiction. It's all a bit vague. But what I do know is that in the end, we need to love God and love people. This is the only acceptable behaviour for a Christian, and it is the only way that we can watch sin truly dissolve away, and it is the only way that we can present good news to those around us.

Imagine if we all completely loved God and loved people. Just like Jesus. Imagine if we all completely loved God and loved people. How would that change us? How would that change our relationships? How would that change how we live? How we treat others? How we treat God?

Imagine the impact that this would have on the world around us? On relationships? On technology?

Now understand that this is not something to be imagined. This is what we must do. All of our imaginings are part of our calling.

We are Christians for a reason, and it's not just for a personal relationship with Jesus. It's to relate Jesus to the communities we are involved in.

And here we are again, and we are focussing on communion. And it is the table where love reigns supreme.