

1 John 2:12-14: Little Children, Young Men & Fathers

I am writing to you, little children, because your sins have been forgiven you for His name's sake. I am writing to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I am writing to you, young men, because you have overcome the evil one. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father. I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.

Exposition

The Relevance of a Split Audience & Progressive Age Groups

John is writing to a broader group of believers, but is identifying that they are all of different ages and of different points of maturity within the group. This allows the contents of his letter to be understood in the context of sanctification. As the believer is predestined to be conformed to the image of Christ (Romans 8:29) we can rest assured that while these age groups may be somewhat dynamic in correlation to maturity, the believer is not capable of preventing this conformation.

It should be noted that there should be a sense of age appropriateness for the concepts here so that we see that maturity is progressing as would be expected as normal in a physical sense. One does not (normally) expect that elders would be still walking in immaturity in a human development context. Similarly in most cases we should expect to see rapid development of new believers who are of more mature ages as they are able to grasp many theological concepts quickly due to quality doctrinal teaching.

Out of Order

As a side note: some theologians have pointed out that the order of the ages is different than children, young men, and lastly fathers within the text. Using this out of sequence observation as a foundation they have suggested that the age implications of the specific terms should be ignored and that these principles apply to all believers no matter their age and maturity. This doesn't seem consistent with normative hermeneutics and is not the position of Holly Hills. Other passages such as 1 Timothy 5:1-2 and Titus 2:1-8 follow along with the age pattern implied by this passage and so the broader message of scripture seems to imply something about proper maturity. Additionally the Jewish culture and Old Testament understanding under the Law would definitely build upon these concepts of older men leading the younger men and discipling them unto maturity.

Qualities of the Children

John addresses the children first and last in this passage. The contents certainly apply to the youngest in Christ specifically, but also carry through to the young men and fathers in application as well.

Sins have been forgiven For His Name's Sake (2:12)

There is a theme throughout scripture, even in the Old Testament, that God forgives, saves, and sanctifies saints for His name's sake (see: Psalm 23:3; 79:9; 106:8; 25:11; Ezekiel 20:44; Romans 1:5). John would be reminding Jewish readers of something they would most likely be familiar with, but every reader of this letter should be reminded that salvation was God's doing and not their own. Salvation is not merited, but is instead a gracious, merciful gift of God – an everlasting blessing.

Know the Father (2:13)

Seeing as that the children are saved it is not surprising that they also know the Father. However, Matthew 11:27 shows us that the relationship with the heavenly Father comes through Christ. This is obviously an important relationship that can only come through the proper introduction. This is possible because the believer is in Christ (Romans 6:11; 8:1, 39) and Christ is in the Father (John 10:38).

Qualities of the Young Men

Contrasting with the Little children the young men have a sense of maturity in their walk. Not only do they have a relationship, but also they have a maturity that shows that they understand reckoning and have a deeper knowledge of God's word. They are described as strong in their walk as well, something that a younger would need to see modeled out through living.

Overcome the Evil One (2:13, 14)

John emphasizes the concept of overcoming in his letter mentioning it in chapter 2, implying it in 3, and being explicit about it in 4:4 and 5:4. John explains that the Holy Spirit (through our walking in faith) enables all who are born of God to be able to overcome the world.

Strong

Similar to a human developing physically a spiritually maturing believer would be expected to be strong and stable. Paul in writing to the Ephesians tells them that they should be strong in 6:10 and then proceeds to outline how being armoured in Christ enables them to be strong and stand firm against the schemes of the devil.

Word of God Abides in You

John's gospel account as well as this first letter mentions abiding a number of times. The principle of abiding is an important one as it implies a relationship that is in fellowship. Furthermore since this is the word of God we see that it is a reference to the revelation, yes, but to Christ as well (John 1:1, 1 John 1:1). A maturing believer will see the truth of God's word applied as they walk in fellowship. The Lord will bring about a deeper appropriation of the truths within the scriptures as the believer abides in Him.

Qualities of the Fathers

John repeats the same concept in two tenses: he says he is writing and he has written to the fathers. There is some implication here that John had written other letters and that they did not survive to the canon of the New Testament, but even if this is not the case we see that John is writing to them to remind them of their role as mature believers.

Known Him From the Beginning (2:13,14)

John writes about the concept of the beginning throughout his writings including John 6:64; 1 John 1:1; 1 John 2:24. While not entirely used this way in all of his letters John appears to imply the beginning of the church age with this passage. As is discussed in Paul's writings explicitly there is a sense of responsibility for the older believers to share the knowledge and understanding that they have had from the beginning with the "young men" and the "children."