

New Recipe

April 26, 2015

4th Sunday of Eastertide

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

Acts 4:5-12

Psalm 23

1 John 3:16-24

John 10:11-18



Coca-Cola has decided to change its formula once again, offering a new version called "Coca-Cola Life." It was launched in Argentina before being test-marketed in the United Kingdom, and may soon have its debut in the United States.

Coca-Cola Bottling Company has experimented with new formulas and products many times. Some changes have worked. Others haven't. This new formula will be called, Coke Life.

People are wondering if it is healthier than regular Coke, since its formula contains a sweetener from natural sources. "Coca-Cola Life" will get its sweetness from sugar and stevia, which is derived from a plant in the chrysanthemum family.¹ Instead of regular Coke's 140 calories per can, Life will have 89.

Coca-Cola has just started offering Life — or will soon.

Jesus Christ has been offering Life for quite some time.

As we explore this morning's Bible passages we may have some similar questions. Did Jesus keep the original formula or did it somehow become changed just a little. What's the formula, really?²

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). That's what God said to Moses and the people of Israel. Now throughout the gospel of John, we hear the promise of life. In fact, the gospel was written "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life" (John 20:31). There in the 20th chapter of John, the author of the gospel clearly stated his purpose for writing the gospel in the first place. The gospel begins with the Word of God taking the human form of Jesus, and we're promised that "what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people" (John 1:3-4).

Emerging New Formula

Belief. Life. Light. Put these ingredients together, and you can see that a new formula is

¹ "New Coke." <http://en.wikipedia.org>

² Hofherr, Justine. "Is the new Coca-Cola 'Life' healthier than regular Coke? (And will it come to the US?)." *Boston.com*. June 17, 2014.

beginning to emerge.

John goes on to tell us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

So now it seems that love is being added to the formula of life and light as well a kind of life that extends beyond the grave — to eternal life.

Describing himself, Jesus says, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). "I am the way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

- Life in his name.
- Eternal life.
- The light of life.
- Abundant life.
- The way, the truth and the life.
- Life, life, life.

Christ Life — not the same old formula. It's a new one based on believing in Jesus and loving one another.

As far as formulas go, the old one has been terrific. For thousands of years, it has worked well in a variety of forms in most of the world's religions. Jews believe that "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Hindus affirm that "one should not behave toward others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself." Buddhists say that you should "hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." And Muslims believe that "no one of you is a believer until he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself."

There's nothing secret about this formula. Even

Jesus endorsed it when he made it a part of his great commandment. "Love the Lord your God," said Jesus, and "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39).

But surprisingly, in the first of his New Testament letters, the apostle John offers a new recipe: "this is [God's] commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (v. 23).

Believe in Jesus. Love one another. Not exactly the same old formula.

When New Coke was Introduced

When 30 years ago, in April, 1985, Coca-Cola changed its formula and introduced the product they called "New Coke." The response was overwhelmingly negative, and within three months the original formula was back on the market. How bad was it? The company hotline received 1,500 calls a day, almost four times what they usually logged. Psychiatrists listened in on calls and heard people talking as though they were grieving the death of a family member.

Southerners saw the change through the lens of the Civil War, describing it as yet another surrender to the Yankees. Even Fidel Castro despised New Coke, reportedly calling it "a sign of American capitalist decadence."

Bottom line: Be careful when you change a successful brand. You might end up breaking something that doesn't need fixing.

So what is the apostle John up to? For starters, he wants to put a human face on the commandment to love one another — the face of Jesus Christ. "We know love by this," he says to his brothers and sisters in Christ, "that he laid down his life for us" (v. 16). John knows that the problem with the love commandment is that it can easily become sickeningly sweet, with people enjoying the pleasant taste of tender emotions and charitable thoughts. So he changes the formula to include the bitter sacrifice of

Christ on the cross.

Such a change of ingredients can actually change our behavior. "We ought to lay down our lives for one another," insists John, following the example of Jesus (v. 16). Under this new formula, sacrificial giving becomes a central part of the Christian life, one that simply cannot be denied. John asks his followers, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" (v. 17).³

Monday of This Week

I was sitting at my desk in the office on Monday when Doris ushered in a woman I had never met before. Doris was preparing to leave, but Ashley and Steve had come to get ready for the choir rehearsal that they were conducting on Mondays at 6:30pm. If you have never sung before, you ought to give this a try. Ashley and Steve are wonderful and patient and have been teaching us basic skills beginning with rhythm.

Well, this woman needed a place to stay for the night. My evening was booked and transporting her to a woman's shelter in the city would mean not showing up for my evening commitments. She also needed legal help, but as I suspected that would only be the tip of the iceberg. So, I made some phone calls on her behalf and then took her to a hotel and paid for the evening there, gave her the address and phone number of an attorney in this congregation she could call the next day.

She did get in touch with this attorney who took two hours of his time to listen and give some advice. Even though it may not have been what she wanted to hear, it gave evidence of his willingness to sacrifice some of his expertise not only as an attorney but as a Dad who has listened

many times with sensitivity and care. We have since connected a little on what transpired.

There are times I wonder if God goes about arranging circumstances for us to give more serious consideration of scripture. There you are, reading, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?" when someone needing help walks into your space.

If I had given no help, I would probably not have slept very well for I would have had to admit that John asks a good question here? Where do we see God's love in a person who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Where do we see God's love in such a person? We don't. It just isn't there.

Love is seen in action, not in words and I would be brought to repentance as I commonly am each time I walk into this sanctuary and see the picture of the Good Samaritan depicted in this window.

J.M. Darley and C. D. Batson study

In 1973 J.M. Darley and C. D. Batson, C.D. published their famous paper that was being prepared as partial fulfillment of their Ph. D. degrees entitled, "From Jerusalem to Jericho": A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior".⁴ This famous study has been written about in myriad numbers of Psychology and Social Work books and papers ever since. Previous analysis had failed to find a link between personality traits and the likelihood of helping others in an emergency. However, changes in the number of people present did have an effect on behavior.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is an interesting example. What possessed the priest and the Levite to pass by the injured man on the

³ Raj, T.V. Antony. "Love your neighbor as yourself." *Inspirations — from the Gospels*.

March 16, 2012,
<http://tvaraj2inspirations.wordpress.com>.

⁴ JPSP, 1973, 27, 100-108

side of the road? Possibly they were in a hurry and were filled with busy, important thoughts. Maybe the Samaritan was in less of a hurry. Or maybe the virtues that the religious leaders espoused were not something they followed themselves (unlike the Samaritan).

The researchers had three hypotheses:

1. People thinking religious, "helping" thoughts would still be no more likely than others to offer assistance.
2. People in a hurry will be less likely to offer aid than others.
3. People who are religious in a Samaritan fashion will be more likely to help than those of a priest or Levite fashion. In other words, people who are religious for what it will gain them will be less likely than those who value religion for its own value or are searching for meaning in life.

I was among a group of seminary students who were focusing on Christian or religious education at the seminary at the time. We were recruited by Dan Batson.

Another group first completed personality questionnaires about their faith (to help evaluate hypothesis #3). Later they began experimental procedures in one building and then were told to go to another building to continue. On the way they encountered a man slumped in an alleyway (the victim's condition unknown -- hurt, or drunk? This was where I came into the picture. Using some make-up and costuming from McCarter Theater, I got to play the drunk in the ally. I even got to have some spirits for olfactory costuming.

Darley and Batson varied the amount of urgency they told the subjects before sending them to the other building, and the task they would do when they got there. One task was to prepare a talk about seminary jobs, and the other about the story of the Good Samaritan. In one condition they told the subject they were late for the next

task, in the other they said they had a few minutes but they should head on over anyway.

In an alleyway they passed this fellow sitting slumped in doorway, who moaned and coughed twice as they walked by. They set up a scale of helping:

- 0=failed to notice victim as in need
- 1=perceived need but did not offer aid
- 2=did not stop but helped indirectly (told the aide on their arrival)
- 3=stopped and asked if victim needed help
- 4=after stopping, insisted on taking victim inside and then left him.
- 5=refused to leave victim, or insisted on taking him somewhere

after arrival at the 2nd research site, they had the subject give the talk and then answer a helping behavior questionnaire.

Results:

The amount of "hurriness" induced in the subject had a major effect on helping behavior, but the task variable did not (even when the talk was about the Good Samaritan).

Overall 40% offered some help to the victim. In low hurry situations, 63% helped, medium hurry 45% and high hurry 10%. There was little correlation between "religious types" and helping behavior. The only variable that showed some effect was "religion as a quest" and strong familiarity with Jesus. Of the people who helped, those who saw religion as a quest were far less likely to offer substantial help than those who scored low on this statement. But those who seemed to see their faith tied strongly to Jesus and his message had different scores.

Conclusions:

Ironically, a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if he is going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building!). But those who seemed to be eager to be disciples and follow Jesus were moved more

readily to compassion. Some even complained about their sense of guilt and their callousness in their failure to render assistance.

As I have reflected on what happened with this experiment long ago, I have started to wonder. Have we jettisoned and thrown away our ethics or has our ethics become a luxury as the speed of our daily lives has increased? As our lives become busier, have we narrowed our focus on helping? What will happen if fewer people know Jesus?

We must pay some attention to this formula, the new one in 1 John.

Pepsi built factories in many of the former Soviet states a long time before its great rival, Coca-Cola Company, got on the market there. So, when Coca-Cola opened its first factory in Georgia, not our state, but this Soviet one, the company decided to promote it as much as they could. They invited Eduard Shevardnadze, the president of the country, for the celebration, and he agreed to be there.

The great day came, the first bottle of Coke was about to roll off from the assembly line, the president of the country, the national TV channel's cameras and reporters were all there.

The first bottle arrived, they freshly opened it, and handed it to Mr. Shevardnadze. He picked it up, sipped some, and, with the whole country watching, said "Great taste ... just like Pepsi!"

We'll have to pay some attention to this new formula

Life. That is what Christ has offered us. In a world filled with death, we are offered life. In a world overcome by sickness and disease, we have been offered life eternal. In a world consumed with taking life, we are offered life. In a world that is tired and weary, we are offered life through love.

Religious people have a tendency to put conditions on God's love. "Well, if you are

righteous enough God will love you." But Paul wrote for us, "While we were yet sinners Christ died for us." There are no conditions. God loves you. God accepts you. You are loved.

Here is where many parents miss the mark. They may not know how to express unconditional love especially if they were never loved that way themselves. There was always an "if" connected to the love they received. "If you make Mommy or Daddy proud, then we will love you. If you make good grades in school, then Mommy and Daddy will love you. If you accept our values, then Mommy and Daddy will love you." Always an "if." The cross is the most precious symbol in this world because it represents what everyone in this world desperately needs: unconditional love.

Dr. Joyce Brothers once said that children need to be loved without qualification so the seed of self-esteem can grow. "Such unconditional love does not mean you set no limits," says Dr. Brothers. "Setting boundaries demonstrates to a child how important he or she is to you. When a child oversteps, show disappointment with the behavior, not with the child."

That's a fine line, but it is an important one: show disappointment with the behavior, not with the child. In other words, rather than saying, "Tommy, you are a bad boy," say, "Tommy you did a bad thing." Our children are our children whether they live up to our expectations or not. And we love them--even when they disappoint us. We love them--even though they have not been all we want them to be. And from where do we understand this? From some guru writing child development books? No, it comes straight from the scriptures.

John summarizes his new formula with the words "Believe in the name of [God's] Son Jesus Christ and love one another" (v. 23). He links belief in Jesus with love for one another, knowing that the clearest example of love is the sacrificial life and death of Christ. The result of this new formula is a close connection to God, one in which "all who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them" (v. 24).

John says that we'll know that God lives in us "by the Spirit that he has given us" (v. 24).

But for those who dare to sip this new flavor, abundant life awaits. Believing in Jesus and loving one another draws us closer to God and one another, and allows us actually to *abide in God*. To abide is to live or to dwell in something — to accept, observe and follow a particular path. So when we believe in Jesus and love one another, we abide in God and God abides in us.

"And by this we know that he abides in us," says John, "by the Spirit that he has given us" (v. 24).

Of course, not everyone is going to be happy with this new formula for a relatively old brand. Changes can be met with fierce resistance, such as occurred with New Coke exactly 30 years ago. Christ Life is not going to be for everyone.

So give it a try. You have nothing to lose, and a new life to gain.

Pre-Sermon Thoughts on 1 John 3:16-24

In many ways 1 John 3:16-24 is a commentary on John 15:1-17. Moreover, the opening declaration of 1 John 3:16-24 not only frames, but also directs, readers to the heart of this passage: "We know love by this." With absolute confidence, the author asserts that love is known by means of Jesus' sacrificial death — he is the one who "laid down his life for us." For that reason, "we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (v. 16; cf. John 15:13). John then asks, "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (v. 17)

Although the preceding query could be viewed merely as hypothetical — that is, as a rhetorical device — in all likelihood the question arose because the author either knew or suspected that there were disciples in the Johannine community who were acting selfishly by refusing to share their possessions with those in need. Such conduct is not only deemed reprehensible because it is incompatible with Jesus' example, it also is contrary to the church's history and established practice. From the founding of the church on Pentecost to the generous saints in Macedonia and Achaia who sent gifts by Paul's hand to assist the poor in Jerusalem, Jesus' earliest disciples freely shared their possessions with those in need (cf. Acts 2:44; 4:32-35; Romans 15:25-29).

Yet despite the consistent witness of other Christians, John's next comment — a warning to be sure — confirms that some believers in his community are clinging to their material goods. Instead of adhering to the church's customary practice regarding possessions, at least some were turning away from it. Therefore, John gently reminds them, "Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (v. 18). Moreover, it is "by this we will know that we are from the truth" (v. 19a). His admonition is the same one they "have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another," and it is by their love for one another that the author reassures them that they "have passed from death to life" (vv. 11, 14; cf. John 15:12).

Their love for each other entails an additional blessing. Specifically, we "reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us" (vv. 19b-20a). This assertion suggests that when we honestly acknowledge our sin, our confidence before God inevitably wavers, and, during these times, doubt can increase and certainty decrease. Even so, this doesn't necessarily mean that a person is without faith. On the contrary, one can believe and doubt at the same time (e.g., Mark 9:24). Thankfully, the litmus test isn't whether our faith is absolute, without any reservations. Rather than limit the examination to our faith, we are to scrutinize our *conduct* as well. In this case, the ultimate test of our faith is how we treat others,

especially those who need help.

John is clear: Christians are to love one another and lay down their lives for each other through the sacrificial gifts offered to others. On this basis, we remain confident that God will not condemn us because "[He] is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (v. 20b). Simply put, even though we are acutely aware of our imperfections (i.e., our sin; see 1:8-10), God looks at the totality of our lives, and we will be judged by our actions. He will consider whether we have loved our brothers and sisters, and used the world's goods to feed, clothe and shelter them; or, did we hate our brothers and sisters, reserving the world's goods for our own self-interests, and thus murder them as Cain did Abel, although admittedly at a more excruciatingly slower pace? As stated previously in 1 John, a disciple cannot claim to be "in the light while hating a brother or sister." Indeed, such a person is "in darkness, walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has brought on blindness" (2:9, 11).

What's more, on those occasions when "our hearts do not condemn us," God grants another privilege: "We have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him" (vv. 21-22; cf. John 15:7, 16). This benefit is not to be construed as *carte blanche* for personal gain. God will not grant the requests of those who seek the world's goods in order to satiate their own selfish desires. Instead, he honors the requests of those whose wills are aligned with his. Their requests are not directed toward themselves, but rather toward others, for their brothers and sisters whom they love. "[I]n such a person there is no cause for stumbling," therefore, God will honor all his or her requests (2:10, 15-17).

After asserting that God gives us "whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments," it's logical for readers to expect John to expand on this, but the shift to the singular in verse 23 is unexpected: "And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us." On one hand, the command to "believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" undoubtedly echoes John 20:31 in which John declares that "these [signs] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God." In addition, the command to "love one another" reiterates one central component of Jesus' final exhortations to his disciples on the night he was betrayed (cf. John 13:34; 15:12, 17). On the other hand, how does one command someone to believe? Is it right or even possible to compel another person to believe? Beyond that, is there one principal commandment that has two elements — belief and love — or is the command to love derived in some way from belief?

Arguably, the vacillation between the singular and plural is ultimately moot for at least two reasons. First, since John reverts back to the plural in verse 24a — "All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them" — the discrepancy is probably not all that significant. Second, Jesus himself spoke of the command to "love one another" and, then, shortly thereafter, said, "I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another" (John 15:12, 17). To put it differently, the commandments are summed up in the commandment to believe *and* love (cf. Mark 12:28-31). "And by this [i.e., whether defined as keeping the commandments or the commandment], we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us" (v. 24b; cf. John 15:10).

A simple poem has circulated on the Internet some years ago. It speaks of unconditional love and in some ways illustrates how we as human beings might transform what God does for us in a particular way in the way we might treat the ones God has given to us:

A weary mother returned from the store,
Lugging groceries through the kitchen door.
Awaiting her arrival was her eight-year-old son,
Eager to relate what his younger brother had done.
"While I was out playing and Dad was on a call,
T.J. took his crayons and wrote on the wall!
It's on the new paper you just hung in the den.
I told him you'd be mad at having to do it again."
She let out a moan and furrowed her brow.
"Where is your little brother right now?"
She emptied her arms and with a purposeful stride,
She marched to his closet where he had gone to hide.
She called his full name as she entered his room.
He trembled with fear--he knew that meant doom!
For the next ten minutes, she ranted and raved
About the expensive wallpaper and how she'd saved.
Lamenting all the work it would take to repair,
She condemned his actions and total lack of care.
The more she scolded, the madder she got,
Then stomped from his room, totally distraught!
She headed for the den to confirm her fears.
When she saw the wall, her eyes flooded with tears.
The message she read pierced her soul with a dart.
It said, "I love Mommy," surrounded by a heart.
Well, the wallpaper remained, just as she found it,
With an empty picture frame hung to surround it.
A reminder to her, and indeed to all,
Take time to read the handwriting on the wall.