

Confident Love / Epistles of John

November 15, 2020

With this lesson, we move from the Gospel of John to the Epistles of John. You will notice considerable similarity in both theme and style. The epistles, of course, serve a very different purpose. Just as Paul's letters, they are written to deal with particular problems that were coming up in the churches. These three letters, all fairly short, seem to be written from Ephesus to churches in the surrounding areas (though there are other theories). The best guess from the events described suggests a date of about 100 A.D. The church had not yet come under systematic persecution, but that danger was on the horizon. The immediate problem, however, was heresy within the church.

The lesson writer, Eugene March, quite appropriately puts before us the question of what is most important, sound doctrine, or what we do. This can be thought of as a "works versus faith" debate. Which saves us, belief in Jesus? Or the practical things we do for others? Suppose someone was generous and kind and did many thoughtful and considerate things for others, as described in Matthew 25:31-40, but was an avowed demon-worshiping witch. What then? Or completely selfish in actions and words but a professed believer in Jesus as savior? I'll get back to address this question later.

I think the writer of the epistles was facing such questions from within the early church. By 100 A.D. or so, the church was dealing with issues it had not seen earlier. Many members were second or even third generation Christians. Some were falling away. In 90 A.D. at the Council of Jamnia, the Jewish leadership decided formally that one could not be both a Christian and a Jew. Christians were to be cursed. So Jewish Christians were put in a difficult situation. The Romans had made allowances for Judaism, a pass on the requirement to say "Caesar is Lord." Christians would not be granted that privilege. The most serious challenge was rooted in the very nature of Greek philosophy and language: Gnosticism.

It was a particularly Greek concept to consider the material world, and the body, inferior and essentially evil. Spirit and ideas were superior and good, imprisoned in the evil and material world and body. The spirit was from God, but the material universe from an evil being or god. So, the problem was for the spirit to escape the material body and world. Gnosticism, in one or another of its many

variants, was the secret knowledge and rituals by which the spirit could be liberated. This kind of Greek thinking is still with us today, and even has some validity when carefully considered. Even now we often think of the material world as evil and broken. What awaits our spirits is a heavenly spiritual place, where those physical liabilities no longer exist. Yet, when we read our Bible, in Genesis 1, God created the world good, and blessed it. It was a good God who created this material world. It is not the material world which is evil, but the sin that came into it, as described in Genesis in and after the Garden of Eden. That perspective is part of our Jewish heritage as Christians. If denied, that puts us on the road to a Gnostic pitfall.

The early Christians had problems with all this, especially as the Jewish influence in early churches waned. One particular variant of Gnosticism concerned John, “Docetism.” You could translate this into English (as Barclay does) as “Seemism.” This term is derived from the Greek verb *dokein*, which means, *to seem*. *Dokein* is the word from which we derive the English word *docent*, someone who poses in historical exhibits pretending to be an inhabitant of earlier times. The Gnostic idea here was that the Spirit of God in Jesus did NOT become flesh, and dwell on earth among men. It just seemed to. Jesus didn’t really die on the cross; he just seemed to. The spirit of God was good, but all flesh is evil. In their thought, a good God could not have actually inhabited or been physically present in a material body. That just seemed to be the case. God was not incarnate in Jesus. This takes away the God’s purpose and the significance of Jesus’s life and sacrifice.

There are various ways such a perspective takes you away from what we would call Christian orthodoxy. One is to believe that Jesus was just a great man, a prophet maybe, fully human, but faithful to a good, spiritual God. It is my understanding that the Copts are an example of a church with this doctrine. The second was that Jesus was divine, God. But he wasn’t really human, but a spirit. He wasn’t of real flesh and bone, but just seemed to be. This second perspective was how the Docetists saw things. Ultimately, the Roman emperor Constantine called the Council of Nicea to resolve matters. The Nicene Creed declared that Jesus was both fully human and fully God. Anyone who would not declare that, such as Docetists and other types of Gnostics, or Copts, were heretics. As such, they were not considered true members of the church. Gradually, over the millennia, the Church fractured over other issues of doctrine as well. For example, we as Presbyterians don’t answer to the Pope’s authority.

Back in John's day, he was wrestling with this issue. In the Gospel of John, we read, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) In so writing, John is saying, "The Word" (God) was really truly a living, physical being who was here on earth. He didn't just *seem* to be here. The gospel writer goes on to tell the story of that real, physical Jesus. He tells us what Jesus taught, what He said, what He told his disciples to do, and how He died on the cross as an example of God's love. That love was for his disciples, for us, and indeed for all the world. It really happened; it didn't just seem to, like a magic trick or an illusion.

The epistles were written close to the same time as the gospel, or, at least, about the time that the gospel was edited into its final canonical form. But instead of telling the gospel story, they are applying that same message, the good news, within the context of a church struggling with this heretical Gnostic doctrine. To John, doctrine mattered.

So, that returns us to the theme of this lesson. What about doctrine, or faith - what we believe, versus works? John answers that question both ways. He says you **MUST** believe Jesus really was human, a man of flesh and blood, and didn't just seem to be. You must also love one another, as Jesus commanded in His Farewell Discourse that we studied last week.

Now, you might ask, as I did with that hypothetical question earlier, suppose someone is righteous but does not believe in Jesus? Does doctrine matter? The Jews, for example. They don't believe in Jesus, but many are truly righteous. John isn't dealing with the Jews in these letters though, he's dealing with people from within the church. People who deny the humanity of Jesus. When they do that, they deny the suffering of Jesus on the cross. God's spirit was untouched. That would mean that God did **NOT** so love the world that he gave His "only begotten son," an incarnation of Himself, to suffer and die out of love for us. If God does not feel the need to show love for us, what motivates us to show love for anyone else? So, what did the Docetists do? Rather, what they did't do, was show love for each other. It was irrelevant to them. They were busy trying to learn that secret knowledge, and the necessary rituals, that would put them into the spiritual realm ahead of others.

John firmly believed that Doctrine / Faith and Works are coupled. John says what we believe is apparent in what we do. The essential "fruit" of true faith, the belief that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, is love. If a person or community does not

show that love, something is wrong, and something is amiss. Demonstration of that love is a valid test.

The Gnostic perspective could lead to three different forms of practical consequences. Here I'm following Barclay (but not in details):

1. Ascetism, with fasting and celibacy and rigid control, even deliberate ill-treatment of the self. The idea that celibacy is better than marriage, and sex is sin, go back to Gnostic influences.

2. The idea that the body doesn't matter, so self-indulgence can't be a sin. This leads to satisfying appetites without limit, even hurting others, whose material bodies don't matter either. An extreme offshoot of this was, that to get the requisite knowledge Gnosticism sought, you had to experience all of these things of life at the deepest level. This is somewhat reminiscent of the modern era drug user trying everything that might be available for the sake of the experience, regardless of consequences.

3. A Gnostic could regard himself as so spiritual that he was beyond the touch of sin and so was perfect. He need not be concerned with any earthly things.

Another consequence of Gnosticism was one of class separation. All living creatures possessed *psuche*, which could be considered the spark of life. The goal of Gnosticism was to liberate the good, spiritual soul, the *pneuma* that every man had, from the prison house of the evil, corrupt body. Both *psuche* and *pneuma* could be translated as English "soul." This took study and discipline and intellectual effort. There were those with the resources and time to pursue such efforts, but most did not. Barclay writes, "The Gnostics had names for these two classes of men. ... The *psuchikoi*, who could never advance beyond the principle of (merely) physical life and never attain any to anything else than what was to all intents and purposes animal living; and the *pneumatikoi*, who were truly spiritual and truly akin to God."

This is what amounts to a form of intellectual snobbery. The more educated, intelligent and accomplished looking down on their inferiors. In essence, the *pneumatikoi* were a spiritual aristocracy. Such an attitude is destructive of any shared community, and it was destructive in the churches of John's day. The same kind of thing, not in the form of Gnostic secret knowledge, but in other forms, can

be just as destructive in our day. John's message is that Jesus is for everybody! We don't have to be scholars. We don't have to be well educated. We don't have to have leisure time for esoteric pursuits. What we need is to accept that we are all sinners, in need of God's grace through Jesus. A Jesus who, as a physical human, incarnate of God, knew what it was to be human. He died for us on that cross. We need to show that we have accepted that love and grace in the way that we live, by showing it to others.

Now, Jesus didn't say that in Matthew's "the sheep and the goats" parable of the Last Judgment. In the parable, the King judges entirely on what the righteous have done. No mention is made of what they may believe, their doctrine. So what of the hypothetical good-doing demon worshiper I mentioned earlier? Such a person would have a very serious disconnect within their very being, where their way of living does not reflect what they believe. Is that even possible? I find even more disturbing the flip case, of someone who professes a sincere Christianity but whose life is full of conceit, contempt for others, and uncaring. John's position is that works reflect what a person believes. If you don't see the love, there is something wrong with beliefs. If you see genuine love, agape love, God is there. These odd cases are just the hypothetical examples of the sort philosophers like to debate. We don't really have to decide such cases. That's God's business. We need but live out 1 John 3:23,

“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.”

As usual, I do have some differences with the author with respect to how this lesson might be applied to public policy. A government is not capable of love. Things that people receive from a government, they receive as their right, by having a particular need for which the law has provided, or by some corruption that allows them to receive benefits to which they are not really entitled. Doing good by empowering government to act on our behalf, so we don't need to be personally involved with doing good for those in need, diminishes both us than those so helped. Furthermore, government does such things by taking money from others. The wealthy and powerful have always been more adept than others at avoiding such taxation.

Prayer: *Gracious Lord, enable us to abide in your love in order to keep our eye on you no matter what comes. Amen.*