

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: The Letters of John: Some Notes

Weather etc permitting, we are looking at the Letters in four sections: 1) John 1 Chapters 1 and 2; 2) John 1 Chapters 3 and 4:1-6; 3) John 1 Chapters 4: 7-21 and 5; and 4) John 2 and John 3. John 1 is very much a commentary on and to some extent development of key aspects of John's Gospel, written in the light of disputes within the Church between factions who all took that Gospel as their starting point, but then divided. The second and third letters are very much shorter, and concerned with two aspects of the rather divisive debate: 2) not being led astray – to be avoided; and 3) not listening to good advice – also to be avoided.

Some of this sounds a bit like one of those history lessons, which you hear as vaguely interesting, but then thin "Who cares?" But actually most of it is highly relevant, although we are no longer specifically concerned about Gnosticism (a big gap between the spiritual, which matters, and the material things, which don't) and Docetism (Jesus only seemed to be human, and so only seemed to die).

It seems most helpful to offer some notes that span all three letters. Incidentally, letters at that time followed a convention of letter writing, just as communications these days follow conventions.

- God is a verb and not a noun. This is literally true of the mysterious Old Testament YHWH which we tend to write as Jehovah. It is a verb – a doing word. In other words, we best describe God in action: creating, loving, saving...
- God and Love are indissoluble.
- Believing and Doing go together. So, while theology may seem to be playing about with words in order to describe the indescribable, it actually matters because what you believe determines what you do. For example, to quote both the theological debate John was addressing and ideas that are still around today: If you believe that Jesus was (is) fully human, you believe in trying to make a real difference to real people in a real world, by doing good in all you do, and not least in doing good to/for/with others. If on the other hand, you believe that Jesus was (is) wholly spiritual, and only spiritual things matter, you might adopt one of the two extremes: i) it's fine to get your hands (and the rest of you) dirty, as long as you are spiritually in the right place; or ii) the world and most of the human race are not worth bothering about, so I'll just withdraw into my cosy personal relationship with God and damn everything else.
- While Walking in the Light and Being Guided by the Spirit, are real enough, Christians have to struggle with a range of dilemmas where things aren't entirely clear. For example: (a) while we know (usually) the difference between right and wrong, and (often) choose the right, we do sin and need forgiveness, and start with a clean

sheet...and sin again and need forgiveness, and...; (b) while we [often] recognise truth when we hear it and false teaching when we hear it, it isn't always clear whether the "new" idea is a healthy challenge to our cherished false belief, or an unhealthy threat to our grasp of the truth. The Christian who refuses to listen to anything he or she doesn't much like the sound of could miss out on fresh insight. After all, Jesus spent a lot of time contending with devout Jews who knew what they believed, and were not going to listen to His heresies. Then there is (c): We have a, sometimes bitterly, divided Church because folk who disagreed labelled the other lot as heretics and went their own ways.

- There really isn't much point in NOT being honest wit God!
- The John letters pick up the child/teenager/adult/senior citizen terminology we commented on in John 21. It is likely that John is saying we all fit each of those descriptors.
- God's love needs to be reflected in our fellowship and in our relations with the "outside" world. The Incarnation really says that there aren't any outsiders. This raises issues about how any local church handles someone who doesn't quite fit, in terms of beliefs or in terms of behaviour.
- As with the Brexit debate, John uses sometimes extravagant language to make a real point. (Today's example is the suggestion that we are abandoning a three course meal for the sake of the uncertain prospect of a packet of crisps. (Jesus did the same sort of thing in his teaching.)
- The arrogant Christian isn't a Christian. He or she has been gifted everything by the One who emptied Himself to give.