

Study 21: 1 John – The Christian Life

Background. It didn't take long for some early enthusiastic converts to Christianity to begin a reinterpretation of their newfound faith in terms of modern thought. For these Christians living in the Roman Empire of the First Century, this meant attempting to form a bridge between the teachings of Jesus and the religious and philosophical thinking that came out of the pagan sects of the time, some of Greek origin and others from farther East. A general term used to describe most of these movements is *Gnosticism*. Its origin is in the Greek word for knowledge: *gnosis*.

Briefly, and very basically, Gnosticism was a movement that excluded some of the cruder elements of pagan polytheism and added certain philosophical truths and poetic symbolism, all with the aim of producing a religious faith and practice that was purer and more reasonable. Although Gnosticism came in many different flavors, we can make some general observations that apply to the movement as a whole:

- ✠ To the Gnostic, matter, the material world, is evil; and so it was not created by God
- ✠ Jesus could not, then, be God incarnate
- ✠ Man's soul is a kind of prisoner in this evil world, having been exiled from a spiritual world of light
- ✠ Through a special, supernatural, and mystic kind of knowledge (*gnosis*), man's rational spirit can liberate itself and rise to this world of light
- ✠ The ultimate goal is to be absorbed in the Divine
- ✠ Only the masses believe in the faith as found in the Gospels and taught by the Church
- ✠ Gnostics believed that they (the elite) had a higher morality which placed them above the ordinary concerns for right and wrong, good and evil

Gnosticism had arisen in the East in various forms before Jesus came into the world, but once Christianity made its appearance some early converts with Gnostic leanings attempted to introduce Gnostic thought into Christian teaching and practice.

John and Gnosticism. It would seem that St. John had encountered such attempts to fuse Christianity with some form of Gnosticism. As you might imagine, this movement to distort Christianity led to quite a bit of dissention, particularly among the Churches of Asia where Gnosticism had some well-established roots among philosophers and the intelligentsia. John quite likely came into contact with these people during his time in Ephesus where he spent his later years. No doubt he also was well informed about what was happening in the Church throughout the empire and recognized the dangers of a heresy such as Gnosticism. It would seem this first letter was aimed at countering this dangerous movement and other early attempts to alter Christianity.

John's First Letter. John was writing to those Christians who were mature in their faith [1 Jn 2:7; 18-27; 3:11], his spiritual "children." Typical of John's writings, it is a profound letter, deep in its spiritual insight and yet simple and clear in its approach and language.

We don't know exactly when John composed this first of his three letters, but it was probably sometime during the latter part of the First Century, not long after he wrote his Gospel. We will soon begin our study of that Gospel which can only be described as one of the highpoints of New Testament revelation. But before we turn to John's Gospel, it's important to develop an understanding of the kind of thinking that the Apostles, and particularly the long-lived John, had to deal with at this crucial time in the Church's history. This *First Letter of John* will help us gain this understanding.

Our world today bears little resemblance to the world in which John lived, and the religious arguments and subsequent strife that surrounded this ancient heretical movement are probably of little interest to most of us. But in every age there are those who would destroy the unity that Jesus Christ desired for His Church. And so it makes sense to learn from John how best to cope with such threats. But more

importantly, in this brief letter we can discover much about the very nature of Christianity from Jesus' "beloved" Apostle himself. As we study it we will find that John had a lot to say that we still desperately need to hear today.

Now open your Bible and read the *First Letter of John*. As you read you might want to make the following notations in the margin alongside these portions of John's Letter:

- ✠ The True Christian Community – 1 Jn 1:3-7
- ✠ What is Christianity? – 1 Jn 1:5-2:28
- ✠ Life in the Family of God – 1 Jn 2:29-4:12
- ✠ The Certainty of Faith – 1 Jn 4:13-5:13
- ✠ Postscript – 1 Jn 5:14-21

The Christian Life. The Gnostic teachers of John's day claimed to possess "secret" knowledge. They believed that they were part of a secret fellowship far superior to that experienced in ordinary Christian communities. It was their belief that their union with God was so exalted and so intimate that they were far above all mere human, earthly relationships. Such thinking also led them to believe that they could live lives beyond any concern for questions of right or wrong conduct. As you might imagine it wasn't long before this distorted version of Christianity began to look very un-Christian.

In his letter, therefore, John outlines the nature of the *true* Christian community and the solidarity such community demands of us. He completely repudiates the Gnostic idea of union with the *Great Alone* in his "commandment" beginning with 1 Jn 2:7 and the verses that follow. His counsel instructs the Christian not only to seek intimate union with God, the Father, but also to seek loving relationships with his brothers and sisters in faith, for as Christians we are all members of the family of God.

In 1 Jn 1:3-7 we are given a description of the true Christian community and the conditions necessary for its realization:

"...what we have seen and heard we proclaim now to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; for our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing this so that our joy may be complete. Now this is the message that we have heard from him and proclaim to you: God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say, "We have fellowship with him," while we continue to walk in darkness, we lie and do not act in truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of his Son Jesus cleanses us from all sin."

And in chapter four John emphasizes the importance and meaning of love in the Christian's life. It is, John tells us, the presence of the Holy Spirit and the love of Christians for one another that is the real test of true community.

In chapter four John also gives us sound instruction on the discernment of spirits:

"Beloved, do not trust every spirit but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come in the flesh belongs to God, and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus does not belong to God. This is the spirit of the antichrist that, as you heard, is to come, but in fact is already in the world. You belong to God, children, and you have conquered them, for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They belong to the world; accordingly, their teaching belongs to the world, and the world listens to them. We belong to God, and anyone who knows God listens to us, while anyone who does not belong to God refuses to hear us. This is how we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of deceit."

The basic theme of the letter is our relationship with God, the very basis of our faith. John wants his children in faith to be certain about the nature of their relationship with God, of their sharing in God's life. As John told them: "I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God" [1 Jn 5:13]. Our certainty in faith comes not from ourselves but from Jesus: "Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life." And so, John tells us simply the basis and source of our faith. He emphasizes this as well in his Gospel: "But these are written that you may (come to) believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name." Through our faith in Jesus comes life!

Interestingly, John describes God and the life of God in which we share as Christians in terms of light, life and love. This is what we strive for as Christians just as we reject their opposites: darkness, death and hatred. John tells us clearly that we can achieve them only through Jesus Christ, and this, in fact, is the very basis of John's letter.

Behind the Words. Now let's look at some key concepts and passages in the *First Letter of John*.

✠ **Theme and Purpose of the Letter [1 Jn 1:1-4]**

John's very first sentence is so packed down and overflowing with ideas that for some it is a challenge to understand its meaning. You might find it helpful to compare it with the Prologue of John's Gospel [Jn 1:1-18]. John is actually telling his readers that his knowledge of the "word of life" comes from direct personal evidence. By "word of life" John means Jesus Christ and His proclamation of the Good News or the Gospel; that is, the divine reality disclosed to humanity for all time by God in His Son, Jesus Christ. John's purpose is to promote true Christian harmony in the face of divisiveness (by the Gnostics) and to present his credentials as an Apostle who has the authority to address these issues.

✠ **What is Christianity? [1 Jn 1:5-2:28]**

Here John sets out for us the distinctive features of Christianity as a way of life and as a belief. He first examines the various forms of religious experience – a main focus of the Gnostics – and then presents the central norm of the Christian life. This life is not wrapped up in exotic experiences, but instead is guided by the "new commandment" of Christ which has brought into being a new order, a new age, a completely new world for humanity. And then, finally, he launches into a direct attack on the dangerous doctrines of the Gnostics.

✠ **The Certainty of Faith. [1 Jn 4:13-5:13]**

Apparently the preaching of the Gnostics led to many disputes in the Christian communities of Asia. This in turn led many of the faithful to entertain doubts and even question their faith. To strengthen those who were wavering, John addressed himself to the problems of belief and doubt.

Unity of the Two Testaments. Throughout much of the Old Testament prominence is given to one's membership in the tribe and later in the nation. It is through this membership that a person receives rights and privileges. Even in his relationship with God, an individual Jew accepted that his blessings or punishments depended largely on the nation's fidelity or infidelity to the Covenant at Sinai. This idea of community solidarity is also present in John's First Letter, only now, and most significantly, it is based not on blood or nationality but on Christian love!

First John and the Liturgy. This letter is in many respects John's personal meditation on Christian faith and love. Because of the importance of this theme in the Christian life, passages from the letter are included in the liturgy throughout the year. To show how important the Church considers this letter of John, passages from it are read on the Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth and Sixth Sundays of Easter. This is particularly relevant to those who have been recently baptized at the Easter Vigil Mass because the readings focus on the fact that from now on the whole of their lives must be founded on *faith*, and the readings chosen describe the nature of this faith and the role it must play. See, in particular, 1 John 5:4-

10. We also find passages from First John among the readings of the Solemnities of both the Baptism of the Lord and the Sacred Heart.

Being a Doer of the Word. Like Paul, John was deeply troubled by the dissensions among the Christians of his day. All this disharmony and bickering threatened to tear apart the seamless garment that Christ had woven when He instituted His Church. The Church is no mere human association. Unlike social, civic or service organizations or political parties, which can overcome their difficulties through compromise or a little polite give and take, the Church exists only by sharing the Divine Life of her Founder, Jesus Christ. In other words, the Church must preach the Gospel without compromise.

Like John, we too should be deeply troubled today by the dissensions, suspicions, and divisions that have arisen both within and outside the Church. Pope John Paul II and our current Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, have both made Christian unity a key goal of their pontificates and continue to call us to join the Church in prayer for the reunion of all Christians.

Prayer is certainly necessary, but God calls us as well to be doers of the Word. We are called to love our Christian brothers and sisters and to do so not only in word but also in deed. Too many Christians think that the path to unity is through an ecumenism that is focused only on that which unites us. But as Pope Benedict XVI has made clear, true ecumenism means conversion to the truth. And for Christians, that means a return to the Church established by Christ and headed by his vicar on earth.

Study Questions:

1. Why do you think John placed so much emphasis on the nature of Christian community?
2. Provide a one-word description of the main theme of John's letter?
3. What Old Testament institution forms a background for John's teaching on the Christian community?
4. What do you think John means when he tells us, "Do not love the world," in 1 Jn 2:15-20?
5. What is John's teaching on sin? [See 1 Jn 1:8-2:2; 3:4-12; 5:18-21]
6. According to John, what is the relationship between faith and love? [See 1 Jn 3:19-24]
7. Is there any place for a healthy skepticism in the faith of the Christian? [1 Jn 4:1-6]