

1 John

Week 4: The world and the Spirit

Background Material:

Optional:

Describe the nature of prophecy at the end of the 1st c. to the 2nd c. using the Didache and M. Green:

Read the handout of a passage concerning the treatment of prophets from the Didache or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles. This document has two parts, the first teaching of the “two ways”, of life and death, and the second providing general guidance to converts (including, incidentally, a reference to baptism by sprinkling). The second part, from which this passage is taken, is believed to have originated in Syria, written between 90 and 100, contemporary with the writing of 1 Jn.

The Didache was discovered in an 11th-cent. codex by the Greek Orthodox bishop of Nicomedia in 1893 and created a splash as big as the Dead Sea Scrolls did after WW2. It is a document which had been referred to by other ancient sources such as Eusebius and Athanasius in the 4th c., but had been lost until the 19th.

Next, read the passage from M. Green’s Evangelism in the Early Church in which the Jew Celsus complains about Christian prophets.

Required:

Remind the group that John’s gospel is characterized by (1) high Christology: John emphasizes the ways in which Jesus was in control, even to the point that his final week is not his passion, but his glorification; (2) realized eschatology: For John the community is in the final hours, and the emphasis is on Jesus’ victory in the world; (3) direct dependence on God: Believers are branches of the true vine, and their command is to abide; in the same way, believers are all given the Spirit who leads each of them into all truth.

1. *Read 1 Jn 3:24-4:21. What is John’s response to the problem of those who were claiming to have direct inspiration from God, yet were espousing heresy? (In addition to 1 Jn 4, remember 1:1 and 3:24.) What litmus tests does he propose for detecting false beliefs and false prophets?*

There are five ways in which 1 Jn advises avoidance of heresy: (1) Avoid those who deny Jesus’ humanity [4:2]; (2) avoid those who deny apostolic teaching [1:1-3; 4:5-6]; (3) avoid those who don’t love others [4:7]; (4) avoid those who deny Jesus is the Son of God [4:15]; avoid those who do not have the Spirit [3:24].

2. *What in John’s Gospel account and theology might have led to the situation where some in the church were claiming to have this direct revelation from the Holy Spirit? Does John change his theology in response?*

So: John’s Christology minimizes the suffering of Jesus, emphasizing instead his mere assumption of bodily form. But if he doesn’t have to suffer the weakness of flesh, then perhaps he really wasn’t flesh at all. In which case, he doesn’t model sacrificial love at all either.

But in answer to this question: in GJohn, he makes it clear that all believers have the Spirit. As a result, each may lay claim to the inside scoop on Jesus and God, and who can gainsay them?

3. John seems to tie the docetic heresy—the idea that Christ didn’t come in the flesh—to a lack of ethics and love for one’s brothers and sisters. This heresy is also found in letters Ignatius of (Syrian) Antioch wrote around 15 years later (c. 110) to various churches. For instance:

I of A was bishop of Antioch. He was arrested and sent to Rome where he was martyred by wild beasts. Along the way he met with various church delegations and wrote letters to those he couldn’t meet with. His zeal was such that he actively resisted attempts by Christians in Rome to prevent his execution.

Note that Ray Brown doesn’t think the secessionists were denying the flesh in the same way as Ignatius’ docetists—see his 1 Jn commentary for details. I am not following that path here.

So what is the point of my standing well in the opinion of a man who blasphemes my Lord by denying that He ever bore a real human body? In saying that, he denies everything else about Him; and the body he himself is bearing must be nothing but a corpse... But look at the men who have those perverted notions about the grace of Jesus Christ which has come down to us, and see how contrary to the mind of God they are. They have no care for love, no thought for the widow and orphan, none at all for the afflicted, the captive, the hungry or thirsty. They even absent themselves from the Eucharist and the public prayers, because they will not admit that the Eucharist is the self-same body of our Savior Jesus Christ suffered for our sins, and which the Father in his goodness raised up again afterwards. (Smyrnaeans 5-7)

The following is a quote from Barbara Brown Taylor on the topic of the incarnation:

Relatively late in life, I have decided that incarnation is less a doctrine than a practice, which Jesus did not come to do once and for all but to show any who were willing how God’s word might become flesh in their own lives too.

“Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.”

“Give to everyone who begs from you.”

“Consider the lilies, how they grow.”

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you.”

In sayings like these, Jesus gave his followers teachings they could embody... To embrace the daily practice of incarnation is to walk the way of life that God opened up to us in Jesus Christ, by showing us how to inhabit our own flesh as fully and faithfully as he did his. ¹

What is the connection between a too-high docetic Christology and lack of charity or love for one another? How do you think your understanding of Jesus’ assumption of the flesh affects *your* actions towards others? How does your attitude towards the flesh (desire? loathing? indifference?) affect your view of the incarnate Jesus?

¹ “Practicing Incarnation”, *Christian Century*, Apr 5, 2005, p. 39.

4. In 4:12 John says, “No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” Commenting on this, the *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Epistles* (IVP) says, “Loving the unlovely or the difficult to love is an avenue, a mystical avenue, to discover God in our midst.” Have you ever found this to be true? What would it mean for you to see God, and how does loving others play a role in this for you? Whom does Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount will see God—and how does this relate to 1 Jn 4:12?