

Editorial: Learning from John Today

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“There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9b). This well-known statement from Ecclesiastes is an important reminder that every “new” viewpoint to come down the pike has probably already been propounded somewhere in the past, and, more than likely, it is probably a view that is tinged with error. Doubtless the reason we often neglect this fact is also tied to another famous observation of the author of Ecclesiastes: “there is no remembrance of men of old” (Eccl 1:11a). It is for this reason that someone has wisely stated, “If we do not learn the lessons of history, we are doomed to repeat its mistakes.”

Now what is true in general is especially the case in the area of biblical studies, theology, and even the church’s understanding of the gospel. One does not have to read far in the New Testament to discover that “new” views that arise are more indebted to old philosophical, social, religious, and cultural ideas than to the Word of God. This was certainly the situation that the apostle John addressed when he wrote his letters. Most scholars agree that the setting of these letters is towards the end of the first century, as the church is beginning to face the rising pressure of an incipient Gnosticism—a Gnosticism which is heavily indebted to various pagan Greek philosophic and religious traditions, but not to the sureties of the gospel itself. That is why John is so concerned that, if this early-Gnosticism begins to take hold in the church, ultimately what is at stake is the gospel itself—hence the command to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God”

(1 John 4:1). Just because a teaching is “new” does not mean that it is better. In fact, given its “newness,” it is more than likely something very old and in error. The critical test of any “new” viewpoint, any new fresh articulation of the gospel, is whether it corresponds to the faith once delivered to the saints.

If ever the church needed to learn this lesson, it is today. Around us on every side are calls to “revision” Christian theology, to “re-imagine” evangelism, to “re-think” how we do church, and even to “re-articulate” the very nature of the gospel for our postmodern times. No doubt, those who promote such views, like John’s opponents in the first century, see themselves as being on the cutting edge of new Christian theological reflection; people who are speaking afresh to Christianity’s current cultured despisers. However, by contrast, John reminds us that we must continually go back to what was “from the beginning” and to the testimony of the first eyewitnesses who bore witness to the Word—who alone is the way, the truth, and the life. Even though John’s letters are relatively brief and apparently simple to read and understand, they are profound in their simplicity and crucial reminders of what is essential for the church in every age: to hold fast to the truth of the gospel centered in Christ, who alone brings life and salvation.

But it is not only the importance of truth that John stresses to churches facing “new” teaching. John understands profoundly that “ideas have consequences.” False doctrinal teaching also leads to

immoral living. If one is thinking biblically, one cannot break the link between genuine faith and obedience. That is why, especially in 1 John, John lays out, indeed circles around, three interlocking tests in order to help Christians in every age not only to discern truth from error (4:1-3), but also to help reassure genuine believers that they are truly trusting in Christ as the adopted children of God (5:13). These tests, famously known as the truth test, the moral test, and the love test, demonstrate that true gospel believing and living stand and fall together. For the person who believes the truth is not only born of God, but he or she delights to do the will of God and is characterized by a deep love for God and God's people. Furthermore, the one who confesses love for God and his people is the one who obeys the commands of God and holds fast to the truth of the gospel. In many ways, even though we continue to speak of three tests, it is better to speak of three tests as three aspects of one test. Once again, if ever the church needed to learn this lesson, it is today. In a day in which the link between belief and behavior is compromised, where talk of "love" is nebulous and undefined, where "spirituality" is divorced from truth and morality, and an individualistic Christianity still continues to dominate in so many respects, we need to hear from God's Word that truth, obedience, and love are not an option for the Christian church, rather they are the very evidence that the church is truly the church.

It is for these reasons, and many more, that this edition of *SBJT* is devoted to a study of the Johannine letters. No doubt, we certainly need to read, hear, and obey all of Scripture, but given some of the pressing issues of our day, the Johannine

letters are of critical importance to reflect on in order to call the church back to the centrality of the gospel and its entailments for our lives. Barry Joslin and John Polhill begin our study of John's letters by giving us very helpful overviews of 1 John, and 2 and 3 John respectively. Given that 2 and 3 John are so often neglected in our study of Scripture, the article by John Polhill is particularly instructive. After our initial introductory overviews of the Johannine letters, our remaining articles focus on specific issues within 1 John. A. B. Caneday specifically reflects upon the three tests and demonstrates how they are crucial to a proper understanding of perseverance and assurance in the Christian life. Colin Kruse, an author very conversant with 1 John, not only addresses a tension often noticed in the letter surrounding the relation between sin and perfection in the Christian life, but also makes headway in bringing clarity to this often cited tension in the letter. Finally, Randall Tan concludes our study by giving us some practical help in laying out a method for Bible study as applied to 1 John.

It is my prayer that our study of John's letters will help contemporary Christians to renew ourselves afresh to the study of God's Word and to learn with John of old that we must continually "test the spirits" by bringing all of our thought and life in conformity to our Lord Jesus Christ.