

The Big Issues for the infant church – Stephen Dolley

My brief is to give an overview of the non-Pauline epistles. Hebrews, James, Peter, John & Jude. These epistles span the entire period of the NT, and reveal the changing issues that confronted the early church. We will place the letters in context by following the development of these issues.

For various reasons, some commentators have questioned the authorship and dating of many of these letters. I will not go into any of these issues, but present here what appears to me to be the simplest reconstruction of events, taking the letters as authentic.

Ritual Purity

Jewish rules concerning ritual purity were a cause of much debate and disagreement within the earliest Christian communities. The Jews would not share meals with gentiles, lest they break the Mosaic food laws, and they insisted on ritual washing of their hands before meals. Within the wholly Jewish Christian communities in Jerusalem this was not a problem. But when persecution arose only few years after the crucifixion, and many Jews fled for a while to Antioch¹, ritual purity became a big issue. Many god-fearing Gentiles joined the believing Jews which raised some big questions: Were Jewish believers able to share meals with gentile believers? Or did gentiles have to become Jewish proselytes?

The letter to the Galatians gives us Paul's account of the Antioch incident where Peter withdrew from eating with Gentiles when some Jews from Jerusalem turned up insisting on the need for maintaining Jewish purity laws. This letter is his white-hot defence of his gospel; a gospel free from the requirement to observe the Law of Moses regarding circumcision, food laws, purity rites and the Sabbath.

Application of Antioch Incident

At the heart of the debate about ritual observance was the relationship between the gospel and strongly held beliefs about secondary issues – in this case Jewish culture. We see here the seeds of denominationalism. Paul planted a church, then Judaisers would follow behind and try to change the churches attitude to Jewish culture. Then Paul would return to defend his gospel and refute the Judaisers arguments and so the tango would continue. Paul understood that the gospel and the culture were two separate things – a truth largely lost on the church through history.

We can so easily equate the Christian life with our nice middle class lifestyles and values – not realising that the very orderliness and togetherness that we may enjoy appears as an unattainable aspiration to the broken chaotic community we are trying to reach – often creating a very serious barrier to the gospel.

Culture and faith become so entwined that we are often blind to point at which one ends and the other begins. Cross-cultural evangelism normally refers to evangelism across national or religious cultures, but I think we could consider all our evangelism to be cross cultural. Non-Christians have a different culture from churched Christians, and if we are

¹ Acts 11:19-26

to reach them effectively, and without unnecessary obstructions, we do well to reflect on the lessons to be learnt from the first century debates about ritual purity.

James – faithfulness, not orthodoxy

It is extraordinary that in this letter from a Jewish religious leader, written to instruct Jews on behaviour, there is not one mention of ritual purity and food laws. We have records of 341 rabbinic rulings from the first century. Of these two thirds relate to table-fellowship.² Yet from James, not one. This is truly remarkable, especially as we know from Acts that “many thousands of Jews have believed, and all of them are zealous for the law.” (Acts 21:20) Perhaps James understood better than most, that Jewish customs were a distraction from the gospel.

It might seem strange that there is nothing in the letter about faith in Christ, nor how we are justified, nor what Christ achieved on the cross. These are matters that occupy most of Paul’s letters, written as they were to gentiles. But the perspective for a Jewish believer was quite different. They were already God’s chosen people, justified by virtue of the covenants God had made with them through Abraham and Moses. Of course, Christ was the promised Messiah and the suffering servant in whose death they had the ultimate atoning sacrifice. But these things were givens for the communities James was writing to. James principal concern was not teaching the doctrine of salvation, but teaching them how to live in such a way as to remain faithful to God, and not incur His wrath as so many generations had done before.

James’ is attacking the ingrained Jewish belief that correct faith is the most important factor in salvation. This is the second big issue that we see confronting the infant church. James says, “Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”

Application of James

It should come as no surprise to us that the issues that James sought to address still confront the church today. People who have been Church goers for a long time can very easily forget that God’s call on their lives is discipleship, not church attendance. Those who have an interest in doctrine or theology can likewise forget that discipleship consists firstly of love, not conformity to a particular doctrine. We can all become accustomed to the trappings of our faith, and either conveniently or unwittingly, forget the radical nature of discipleship. This is the second Big Issue facing the infant church that we encounter in the NT.

² Neusner, *Rabbinic Traditions*, pp291-4

Hebrews – Look forwards, not backwards

The letter to the Hebrews was probably written a few years after James' letter. It addresses the next big issue that faced the infant church – the inevitable severing of the relationship between the old Jewish faith and the Messianic faith. It reveals a serious re-thinking of the whole relationship since the Council of Jerusalem. Relations in Jerusalem between the Messianic and non-messianic Jews was becoming increasingly strained. The Jews attacked Paul during his third visit to Jerusalem, (Acts 21:27ff³) and not long after James himself was stoned by the Jewish Sanhedrin (AD 60). Indeed, it is possible that James' martyrdom was the stimulus for writing the letter. It was becoming clear that the Christian church could not hope to last much longer as part of the Jewish faith. As it turned out, in AD64 the Christians were declared to be outside the Jewish faith in Rome, and in AD70 the Jerusalem Christians were finally expelled from the Jewish faith. Twenty years later a curse against the Christians was written into their Sabbath prayers in an attempt to make it impossible for Christians to attend synagogue worship.

The letter prepares the Jewish believers for the inevitable full breach with the Jewish religion. It spells out the issues of faith and what it now means to be God's covenant people, urging them to press right on into the full inheritance God has got for them. It is, for a Jew, a truly radical letter, moving the argument that Paul had with Peter at Antioch forward to a whole new plain. Now, even Jewish believers are being taught that the Jewish ritual law is of no further use. "They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order." (Heb 9:10). What this author now so clearly sees, is that Christ not only fulfils the Law by giving Himself as a once-for-all atoning sacrifice, but by doing so, renders the Law obsolete. The new covenant "has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear" (8:13).

The author urges his readers to look forward to the ultimate fulfilment of the great promises of blessing that God swore to Abraham, not back to the law which could never achieve Israel's hope. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (12:1).

Application of Hebrews

The big issue addressed by the writer to the Hebrews was the throwing off of the hindrances of their old religious culture in order to embrace the fullness of all that God had for them. This issue has faced the church again and again down through the centuries, as the church has time and again got stuck in politically or worldly motivated ruts, hindering the work of the church and the growth of the saints. Whether it has been right at such junctures for new churches and denominations to be established I cannot say, but certainly a way has to be found by every believer to keep pressing on. This letter is the

³ "When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, "Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place."

most powerfully stirring teaching we have in the scriptures to keep us moving on with God.

1 Peter – live Godly lives to confound false accusations

Peter made his second visit to Rome, around AD 63, to visit Paul in prison. He was alarmed at the opposition mounting against the Christian community there. It is quite possible that it was during his visit that the church was officially expelled from the Jewish community in Rome.

Christians were accused by Romans of atheism, since they did not worship any visible god, of superstition and anti-social behaviour since they abstained from the drunken socialising that was the norm in Gentile society. Because of the rising persecution they often met in secret, arousing suspicion of insurrection. Added to all this, their sharing the body and blood of Christ in communion was interpreted as cannibalism and their love for one another was interpreted as incest and fornication. The influential Jews who opposed Christianity stirred up trouble for them by characterising Christianity as a mutinous and subversive cult.

So it was that Christian churches across the empire were beginning to face varying degrees of persecution through false allegations from the local populations, the Jewish synagogues and the Romans. Christians are beginning to feel like “aliens and exiles”. So Peter writes to the churches in Asia Minor to prepare them for the next big issue facing the infant church – living Godly lives to confound false accusations.

Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us... For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.” (1Pe 2:11-12,15)

Peter writes to these mostly gentile churches, redefining Israel as the people of faith in Christ (thus following the conclusion of Hebrews). He encourages them that though they have been expelled from the Jewish “chosen people” they are the true “chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”

Peter give apostolic authority to the teaching that the Christian church has replaced the Jewish faith as the people of God. But this reality must be demonstrated in the godliness of the Christian’s lives, especially at this critical time of conflict between the old order and the new.

Application of 1Peter

The Big Issue addressed by Peter was living such godly lives as to silence the false accusations against them. This again is a very relevant issue for the church today. The media seem unrelenting in its characterising Christianity as a dying, hypocritical and damaging superstition of inadequate people. In the face of much that is not good in the

witness of the church, it is imperative that Christians demonstrate the falseness of this characterisation through godly lives and truly loving relationships, extending forgiveness and love to all, even those who deserve it the least.

Jude – standing against a twisted gospel

About a year after Peter wrote his letter, fire engulfed Rome and Nero cast the blame on the Christians, killing them in their thousands. Peter and Paul were caught up in the trouble and martyred. Meanwhile the Jews in Jerusalem revolted against Rome and the Christians, heeding Jesus' prior warnings, fled the city. As a result, they were deemed traitors by the Jews and expelled from the Jewish faith.

But another big issue was emerging to threaten the infant church; false teachers were beginning to travel around the churches, perverting the gospel of grace, saying it didn't matter how one behaved and even denying the Lordship of Christ. Such teaching was beginning to pose a serious threat.

The letter of Jude, brother of the martyred James, captures the moment when the leaders of the church became aware of this new threat. Jude had been planning to write to the churches a very positive letter celebrating their salvation in Christ Jesus, but he tells us (v3ff) that he has instead rushed off an urgent letter warning them against licentious heretics.

Application of Jude

Immorality sanctioned by false teaching has been a recurring problem in the church to this day, usually where one strong leader has a controlling hold over his congregation. But it also happens where a strong cultural norm becomes accepted in the church. Television and films are unquestionably threatening the moral norms in churches today, in exactly the same way as Jude's false teachers. Sex before marriage and unfaithfulness in marriage are considered inevitable, if not normal, in many churches. We could point to a variety of sexual morals that are under attack. But what about our love affair with wealth and possessions? Our flagrant use of irreplaceable resources? Our isolated detachment from the injustice and poverty suffered by the world's peoples? We would do well to imagine Jude writing to our church. What would he see that we have become blind to?

2 Peter – The return of Christ – dealing with disappointment

The next Big Issue facing the infant church was the delayed return of Christ. This was anticipated by many to be imminent as tensions arose in Palestine between the Jews and the Romans. When Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed and still Jesus had not returned, many were deeply disappointed and started to question the whole teaching.

Peter, writing before these events, just before his martyrdom in Rome, anticipated this situation and wrote his second letter in response to the Lord showing him his death was near, "because I know that I will soon put this body aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me." (2Pe 1:14) This letter, sharing much in common with Jude, was probably written shortly after Jude's.

Chapter 3 addresses the next Big Issue facing the infant church. This was the delayed return of Christ. The return of Christ was a foundational part of the apostolic teaching and gave rise to various issues as each decade passed without the event taking place. Anticipating the issues that would arise as a result in the years to come, and knowing he was soon to die, he addresses this now.

They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." (3:4)

Peter explains that even though there will be a delay, He will surely return, and concludes with an exhortation to live godly lives:

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. (3:11)

Application of 2 Peter

The next Big Issue, then was the delay in Christ's return. This threatened the church with deep disappointment, leading to loss of hope and faith and a slide into lax lifestyles. This has remained an issue for the church in every generation since. The NT, including Jesus Himself, exhort us to anticipate His return and live lives that are trimmed and ready for that day. It is a remarkable fact that this anticipation has remained alive throughout 2000 years of church history. This anticipation has been fuelled in nearly every century by repeated powerful spiritual revivals all over the world. Yet as each revival has passed and church life has gradually resumed normality, Christians have had to resist the corrosive effects of deep disappointments that the high hopes raised in the flames of revival have not been realised.

The question of handling disappointments is not just an issue following times of revival. It arises in every day life, whether it be through unanswered prayer or through other Christians falling short of our expectations. A significant part of growing in maturity as a Christian is learning how to maintain hope and faith in the face of repeated disappointments.

John – contending for the truth

Not long after Peter wrote his second letter, there was a great Jewish uprising against the Romans. The Christians remembered Jesus' warnings to read the signs of the times and to flee Jerusalem when they saw the end was coming. There was a mass exodus of Christian Jews from Jerusalem to Petra and other towns. This put an end to the relationship between the Messianic and non-Messianic Jews who accused them of desertion and treachery. In AD70 Jerusalem was destroyed and the Jews were banished completely from Jerusalem. It became an entirely Gentile city, with a new Gentile church.

John moved to Ephesus from where, some 15 years later, he faced the next Big Issue to threaten the infant church. A new breed of false teachers arose who appealed to the philosophical ideas of the day. Their teachings were high-sounding and sophisticated, but they were the inventions of philosophy, departing grossly from the truth. They denied the true humanity of Christ, saying that he only seemed to be human, and denied that He was

killed on the cross. To counter this false teaching John added to the three existing Gospels his own. Here, he makes the definite claim that Jesus was truly human:

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”
(Joh 1:14)

He also makes his assertion of the death of Jesus extremely explicit:

One of the soldiers pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. (Joh 19:34-35)

Despite the circulation of his gospel, the heresy continued to grow. The apostles doctrine was being put down as “old hat” and these new philosophical ideas were becoming popular. Thus it was that the aged John, wrote his three letters.

John writes about “those who are trying to lead you astray” whose teachings, denying Christ was both man and God, caused a church split. “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” (1Jn2:19) “Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist.”(2Jn7) John writes about a church leader called “Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us” who was putting good people out of his church because they did not agree with him. (3Jn9)

John writes these powerful letters, strongly defending the humanity and divinity of Jesus, and urging his hearers to be faithful to the simple commandment that Jesus gave: to love one another.

Application of 1-3 John

From time to time throughout church history, new ideas have arisen which the church has perceived as a threat to the truth. Some of these ideas have been wrong and posed a genuine threat, such as the Gnosticism of the early centuries. Some new ideas have proved correct and were wrongly opposed, such as the discoveries about the nature of the universe. Some ideas have been wrong, but have quickly passed from mainstream public attention, such as “Jesus was a space man”, “The Bible Code” & “The Da Vinci Code”. Other ideas are more pervasive and damaging, such as the current trend for DIY religion, where spirituality has gained new respect, but in an existential framework, where anything goes as long as it works for you, and as long as you accept DIY truth. This is perhaps the greatest doctrinal threat to the church today. I’m sure it is very healthy to move from the doctrinal dogmatism that has always been found in much of the church, but our willingness to examine new ideas should be subject to the Holy Scriptures, and not judged simply by what seems to be desirable or sensible to us. Christians need to learn to contend for the truth using the scriptures, and to demonstrate that truth through their love.

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www.marpleparish.co.uk/Resources/theology2.htm