

1 John 1

This is the first of three letters attributed to John. They were almost certainly written by the same person – identified as an elder – as the gospel of John. Whether that elder is the actual apostle John or an elder in his community is less clear, but probably that doesn't matter.

The first of the three letters also isn't really in the form of a letter but more like a sermon or essay written for the community.

All the letters in the New Testament were written to a specific community to deal with a specific problem or issue. We are left to parse out what that issue might have been and how it applies to us. There are timeless themes and there are things that really only applied to that community. But at least with this first letter from John, the themes are pretty timeless.

So, what seems to be the issue in John's first letter?

John's gospel and the letters were written to a Christian community of disciples, likely started by John the apostle. The date is probably the 90's – so 60 years after Jesus and 40 years after the earliest of Paul's letters. Like the early church in general, the community was at first a part of the Jewish synagogue. But the dispute over Jesus' identity became too bitter and the community was expelled from the synagogue.

Now, they are learning what it means to live as a community of believers outside the fellowship of friends and family they relied on. It would have been a tough time.

So, the problem. It appears that there are false teachers who have stirred up the community. There may have even been a break-off group that started their own church.

It appears these false teachers were teaching that the Christ – the Messiah – did not really come as a true flesh and blood human. They said that Jesus only appeared human, and his death wasn't a real death, but merely looked like it.

This is a heresy known as Docetism. It's closely related to Gnosticism. Gnostics believed that not only did Christ not come in a real human body, but human bodies are also downright evil. Gnosticism taught that through special knowledge of Christ, salvation was escape from our evil human bodies and escape from the evil material world into a spiritual realm.

It should be immediately apparent that Gnosticism is alive and well even today.

And if you paid any attention during our trip through John's gospel, you know that this is the exact opposite of John's gospel and the central importance of incarnation in it.

These false teachers may also have minimized the importance of a life of discipleship and the dangers of sin – maybe they figured if we're getting out of this place anyway, who cares about what happens here. Or they may have taught that their own relationship with God was so far superior to others that they didn't sin at all.

John called these false teachers anti-Christ.

The beginning of his letter emphasizes that this word of life could be heard and seen and touched with their hands. The incarnation is real.

But sin is also real.

Central to John's theology is belief...and belief is relationship. It's relationship with Jesus that shapes everything about our lives as disciples.

When you are in relationship with Christ, you will walk in the light of truth and not the shadow of sin. But the reality of a beloved but material world is that sin exists, even in believers. John assures us though that when we do mess up, Christ is our advocate.

Paul also dealt with false teachers. However, Paul wrote much earlier than John and the false teachings hadn't really coalesced into anything that the church ultimately declared a heresy. The false teachers John's community was dealing with seem to be early gnostics. And Gnosticism was declared a heresy...a false teaching.

So, let's talk about heresy and heretics. How did the church decide something was heresy? Has the church ever been wrong? And who is Pastor Kris's favorite heretic? We had a whole seminary class on early church history that dealt with the various heresies. So getting very in depth in a 10 minute sermon isn't very practical. But we'll dip our toes in.

There are few things in the history of the Christian church that arouse anger and hostility quite like the arguments about what marked orthodox doctrine.

Another early heresy was the opposite of the Docetism and Gnosticism of John's false teachers. It was proclaimed by a priest named Arius and was called Arianism. This is oversimplified but, basically Arius believed that Jesus was created by God and was human not divine.

His heresy became popular and widespread enough that a church council was called by Emperor Constantine. The council was called the first Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed

came out of it. Reports were that the argument at the council grew so heated that not-so-jolly old St. Nicholas punched Arius in the face. And ultimately Arianism was denounced as heresy.

So how did the church decide these two heresies were false? This one's pretty easy. While all of the gospels support both Jesus' divinity and humanity, nowhere is that more pronounced than John's gospel. Jesus in John states his divinity himself when he says I and the Father are one and the Father is in me and I am in the Father.

And John begins the whole story with "in the beginning was the word and the word was God. And that word became flesh." Real flesh and blood human. And real God.

So any heresy that denied either Jesus' full humanity or his full divinity was easy to dispel. Although one has to regret the violence of punching a heretic.

But it got a lot less clear-cut when the church became a church that was enmeshed with Empire. Too often heretics were proclaimed as such because their teachings were a threat to power of the church, which also meant it was a threat to the power of the Empire.

Martin Luther is of course perhaps our most famous heretic. He was excommunicated by the Roman Catholic church and narrowly escaped death. Other reformers weren't so lucky. His heresy was to say that people are justified by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and not by the works the church said needed to happen.

John's gospel was influential on Luther's theology, but even more so was Paul. I mean Paul literally said, "For **by grace** you have been **saved** through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast." So, Luther is on pretty solid ground biblically.

So, is Luther Pastor Kris's favorite heretic?

Actually no. It's Pelagius. Who's heard of Pelagius?

Pelagius was a fifth century monk and theologian. Unlike the false teachers in John's community, Pelagius did not fall afoul of scripture. In fact, from what I've read, he never taught anything that wasn't supported by the Bible.

What he ran up against was church doctrine. First was the church's doctrine of original sin which was beginning to be developed at that time. The doctrine of original sin says that the sin of Adam and Eve is essentially sexually transmitted through the generations – that all babies are born inherently sinful.

Pelagius said, along with Genesis, that we are created good...created in God's image. He emphasized the sacredness of all humans.

He also taught that God's spirit is in all of creation and that nature could be a place of worship as much as a grand cathedral. The church didn't like that either. Said it was pagan.

Pelagius was also accused of saying humans could save themselves from their sin. It appears he never actually said that. He said that because of the presence of the sacred in everyone we do have the capacity to choose good.

But he did take sin seriously and did say we need Christ to deal with sin. He just said that our sinfulness isn't what's at the core of us – our core is our creation in God's image. Salvation through Christ strips away that which buries and distorts that core.

Essentially, it's a view that says through Christ, God is incarnate in all of creation.

And we're back to the beginning and the word was with God and was God and all that was created was through that word.

Pelagius's theology meshed very well with the Celts who did bring their pagan understandings of the sacredness of all creation into their own Christian faith. It's a way of viewing God and creation that seems to me more biblical than some of the church's doctrines, even now.

But the church had the power of empire behind it and Pelagius...and the Celts...lost out. But can you imagine how the world might have been different if we truly believed all people and all of creation are sacred? Would people have been so quick to enslave others? Would we have treated the planet a little better? Would we treat each other better now?

I don't have all the answers. But I do think Pelagius was onto something.

Well, anyway, that was kind of meander away from the John's letter. And it's probably not every day you'll hear a preacher defend a heretic...although we Lutherans have been doing just that for centuries.

Discernment of what's good and evil and true and false is as important now as it was in the first century. Jesus Christ as revealed in scripture is the bedrock for our discernment as Christians. Over the next couple of weeks, we'll talk more about how we can use that revelation in tackling some of the thorny questions in our own time.