



1 John 2:18-27: Why our theology matters

I remember a few years ago moving into a flat share with a Christian guy who was slightly younger than I was. And on the first night we got onto talking about our interests and I shared that I was very interested in the Bible and reading theological books. His response to that was 'Hmmm, I don't really pay much attention to doctrine. Our beliefs matter! John could not be clearer. We must take an active interest in whether the things we believe are true! In that sense every Christian must be a theologian because of false teachers and heretics, then and now. These aren't people with whom we might have minor

disagreements: Calvinism vs Arminianism. Infant baptism vs believer's baptism. Constitutionalism vs Cessationists. These are what we might call open hand issues. We can disagree while still being brothers and sisters in Christ! John has in mind people whose theological beliefs differ from us on the essentials, that is closed hand beliefs: what is sin, the person and work of Jesus, the Trinity, salvation, the authority of the Bible. These are non-negotiables where if someone stands against these things they have fallen into heresy and false teaching and are under condemnation unless they return to the truth! Such a person denies the Father and the Son, (vs22) and so doesn't know God! Theology matters.

Warning John is writing to his 'dear children,' telling them that 'this is the last hour' or the 'end times'. That is the period between Christ's ascension and his return. One of the marks of the last days, according to John, is that an antichrist will come just as antichrists have already come! The word "anti" means against! John seems to suggest that there will be one individual in the future who is against Christ or maybe someone who will set themselves up in place of Christ, as an alternative! We could speculate who this person is and whether they're already in our midst or not, but we're not doing that. There were also already many antichrists around in John's time and they are marked by three distinguishing features! If we look at chapters 1 and 13, John writes about sin. It appears these antichrists were denying sin. They were holding to a heresy which was an early form of Gnosticism that taught that the spiritual was clean and the physical was dirty. And so God cannot dirty himself as a physical man and what you did in the physical didn't really matter. Also, in chapter 4:2-3 we read, "This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God; every Spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus, is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world." These are big errors to teach and big errors to fall into. These are salvation issues. You see belief is an essential part of the Christian faith and salvation! But we must still believe the right things.

The second distinguishing feature of these people is that they have left the church. (V19), "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us, they would have remained with us; but their going out showed that none of them belonged to us". It appears these people that John has in mind were once part of the church community but one day, they left and never came back. The disagreement was purely doctrinal. Deep down they did not believe the same closed hand principles the rest of the church believed! So, although they may have been in membership of the local church on paper, they were not members of the universal church, the worldwide body of believers. It's why we do membership interviews. The third distinguishing thing about them is in verse 26, "that they lead you astray"! I don't think that's necessarily to say that every false teacher is doing it deliberately. I remember during my student days encountering two missionaries who were from one of the sects. I don't believe they were deliberately out to deceive me because they were convinced that they were right, but they were nevertheless mistaken. And as sincere and honest as their intentions were, they were trying to draw me away from the truth using very clever tactics. They'd ask me what I believed, and they would come back affirming it, and go deeper into what they believed and frame it in a way that would almost sound right to me! Thinking deeper about the conversation I realised that we were not at all on the same page. I dread to think what would have happened to my flat mate who 'doesn't pay much attention to theology and doctrine' had he encountered them! So, John warns the believers against these antichrists. They are those who deny the reality of sin, the Father and the Son. They had left the church because they were never truly a member. And now they are trying to lead others astray, even if they were honest in their intentions.

Encouragement These verses are designed to encourage and offer assurance "But you have an anointing from the Holy Spirit, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth". "As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you". (v20-21 & 27). That doesn't mean we don't need pastors or teachers to open up the Bible, but the Holy Spirit is the chief teacher and one who gives clarity to us and "teaches you about all things. That anointing is real, not counterfeit. Just as he has taught you, remain in him." John's aim in this passage is primarily to assure real Christians of the reality of their own relationship with God the Father through Christ by drawing a contrast between them and the antichrists. And one thing which marks the real Christian from the antichrists is the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity! He is the one who draws us to faith in Christ. When we are justified by faith he comes and lives inside us. He works in us convicting us of sin when we fall and making us more like Jesus! But he also teaches us discernment to help us know right from wrong, (v 27). That is, when I for example, meet those evangelists, or maybe we read a book, or listen to a preacher. when we test it with the help of the Spirit, we should know the difference between right and wrong. This isn't necessarily a cognitive disagreement over those open hand issues when we end up agreeing to disagree while still having unity in Christ together! This is spiritual discernment, where our response is 'This just doesn't seem true. And I'm not sure we're in fellowship.' The reason we can discern is because as Spirit filled Christians, we know the truth. Even the youngest Christian, who has the Spirit can discern the truth from a lie! When we hear or read something that makes us uncomfortable or doesn't seem right, we, with the help of the Holy Spirit teaching us, search the Scriptures, to discover the truth. The second encouragement we see in this passage is that Christians are to continue in what they have been taught! "As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you will also remain in the Father". (v24) 'What you have heard is the good news of the kingdom of God; the teaching of the apostles. When the Son became man in the person of Jesus, he did not leave his deity behind in heaven. At the incarnation the eternally divine Son of God added to himself a human nature. This man was born as the person Jesus. Truly God and truly man. He humbled himself to death on a cross. He did this to redeem us from our very real sin problem. He then rose again and ascended to heaven where he is now and where we will be one day if this message remains in us! Even when we've had times in church history where the truth has been under threat and even when the majority have gone the other way, God has made sure that there was still a light however faint it may have been!

In the 300'sAD when Arius was preaching that the Son was a created being and not eternally one with the Father he amassed a huge following. St. Athanasius of Alexandria in opposed him and stood against the world. During the medieval period as the church became increasingly corrupt God gave us John Wycliffe (later condemned as a heretic whose remains were exhumed and burned in 1428). and John Hus, (Hus paid the ultimate price for his loyalty to truth). Eventually 100 years later the gospel was upheld by Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin so that we could remain in the Son and the Father. We must keep the gospel at the centre not only of your personal life, but also at the centre of church life.

The final encouragement is eternal life as promised to all who remain in Christ, (v 25). The fact that it's promised is such a great motivation to keep going and to keep the message at the centre of our lives and the life of our church. It's promised! It's guaranteed to every true Christian, so much so that it begins now! The moment we profess faith in Jesus we are justified fully and eternal life is ours! If you've ever been included in a last will and testament, you have an inheritance guaranteed even if you don't physically have it yet. Eternal life is a present and future possession. "And this is the testimony; God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life." (1Jn 5: 10-11) This is a sober challenge! if his message remains in us and we in him, we have eternal life.

Conclusion This passage isn't meant to frighten, but to encourage and assure. Eternal life! We can have it and we can know it by keeping the truth of the gospel message in us. And if we do, Christ remains in us! Being confident of these things will help our assurance. It will keep us on the straight and narrow and we won't be led astray! Friends, that's why theology matters.

AMEN