

2 John 7-13 The danger of deception

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We've had some pretty good lessons
in how academic stuff matters over the last couple of years.
Many of us get pretty impatient
when it seems like fine distinctions are being drawn.
Does it really matter?
Can we just get on with things?
Especially when we don't really understand the things in question.
It's a lot of hard work
to understand the issues in something that isn't your field.
Should virologists be able to do gain of function research?
It would have seemed a pretty academic question 2 years ago.
5 Million deaths later, it doesn't seem quite so academic.
These questions can have real impact in the real world.

So it is with questions about the details
of Jesus' divine and human natures.
Instinctively, most people want to just say,
"Look he was a good bloke,
let's focus on what he taught
and leave the theologians to debate the intricacies
in the safety of their ivory towers."
But that's not the perspective of the apostle John.
He warns in the most urgent terms.
Today I'm focusing on verses 7-13 of our reading.
And this is how it begins,
"I say this because many deceivers,
who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh,
have gone out into the world."
This was a consistent concern for the apostle John.
1 John 2:22 "Who is the liar?
It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ.
Such a person is the antichrist -

denying the Father and the Son."

1 John 4:2-3 "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 similar concerns in 1 John to 2 John.

It's the same group of false teachers that John is warning against.

Now when you read these words from our position in the 21C, it would be easy to gain the impression that there were people running around saying that Jesus never lived. Certainly there is the odd cuckoo out there writing atheist propaganda who has made that claim.

Richard Dawkins did in one of his books.

He later backed away from it but it's there in print.

Of course sensible historians, even atheist ones, laugh at such ridiculous claims.

Jesus is attested to by the ancient historians

Tactitus, Suetonius and Josephus

as well as all the Bible authors.

He is the best attested figure in ancient history.

If you doubt whether Jesus lived, to be consistent,

you would have to doubt every other figure in ancient history.

You'd have to say you aren't sure

whether Cleopatra existed or Julius Caesar.

It's nuts.

But that's not actually the false teaching

that was being peddled to the church John is writing to.

When John says

"do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh"

what he means is this.

Jesus was a carpenter from Nazareth, a good man.
 But at some point in his life, probably at his baptism,
 an emanation from God came upon him.
 It was like he was possessed by a divine spirit.
 And then at some point just before his crucifixion,
 that divine spirit left him.
 The false teachers would be presenting this
 as a new improved version of Christianity.
 It's 'more technically accurate
 than the simplified version you were first taught.
 That was the beginners version, you know.'
 And so people would say to themselves,
 'Oh we don't want to get stuck with the beginners version.
 We are mature sophisticated people.
 We better upgrade our understanding.'
 And then the false teaching takes root in the church.
 That's the big problem that John is trying to counteract.

Why is it a big problem?

It sounds like a technical thing for ivory tower theologians.

Well the thing is,

that once you start to separate the Spirit of Christ from the human Jesus,
 then you are undermining the very gospel that saves us,
 and you are free to dispense with
 whatever inconvenient moral teachings of Christianity
 you take a disliking to.

That's two big problems.

1. Undermining the gospel.

Unless Jesus is fully man and fully God when he goes to the cross,
 then he can't be the perfect substitute for our sins.

The one who redeems us must be truly human.

Unless Jesus was truly human,

then he couldn't obey the whole law as a representative of humanity,
 and he couldn't suffer the punishment of the cross
 as a representative of humanity.

If he's not truly human, then he doesn't represent us.
But then unless Jesus is fully divine,
he couldn't bear the righteous anger of God against sin
and still overcome death by his resurrection.
Without Jesus being fully divine,
there is no victory.
So anything that separates the human Jesus from the divine Christ
undermines the gospel that saves us.

2. It also undermines Christian ethical teaching.
This was true in the first century in the time of John.
You only have to read Paul's first letter to the Corinthians,
to see that false teaching had very concrete ethical implications.
The false teachers John was combating
in the following decades gained the name Gnostics.
And their false teaching was a problem for another 250 years.
It was out of a gnostic cult called the Manicheans
that St Augustine was saved in the 4th century.
Their teaching had a very 'spirit is good body is bad' flavour to it.
And if body is bad,
then it doesn't really matter what you do with your body, does it?
So that leads to all kinds of licentiousness and immorality.
Have a read of a biography of Augustine and you'll get the picture.
It was true then and it's also true now.
People who deny that the historical Jesus
was the eternal Son of God today,
also manage to jettison the ethical teachings that they don't agree with.
It's not hard to see how this happens.
Anything they don't agree with,
"Oh that was just the human Jesus.
That teaching was not from the divine Son of God."
Simple and very enticing,
because you can live however you want to.
You just fashion your morality to suit yourself.

This is not a technical thing for ivory tower theologians.
It has real and devastating impacts in the church.
Every single cult that operates in the world today
has separated the divine and human natures of Jesus.
The JW's, the Mormons, the Christadelphians,
they are all some variation on the false teachers of John's day.
And their false teaching undermines the gospel
and denies their followers eternal salvation.

That's serious.

It's not ivory tower.

The false teaching that Gafcon was set up to oppose
undermines the ethical teaching of the Lord Jesus.

And again it's not ivory tower stuff.

The African bishops who lead Gafcon were motivated
by a desire to help faithful Christians in the West.

That's true.

But they were also motivated
because the departures from Christian morality
that were occurring in the West
were causing their own churches
to come under violent persecution from Muslims in their own land.
"Look at what sort of behaviour you guys are aligned with.
Allahu Akbar! We will punish you for this."

How did the earliest Christian mark themselves out,
to distinguish themselves from the false teaching of the deceivers?

Their first creed was coined to say,
"This is who we are as Christians".

It was very simple.

Not the complicated and long creeds we have today.

The first creed was simply,

"Jesus is Lord!"

As Paul said to the Romans, Rom 10:9,

"If you declare with your mouth,

'Jesus is Lord',

and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

We might read 'Jesus is Lord' and think to ourselves, Jesus is boss of the universe, or something like that.

But for the earliest Christians it was more simple than that. Right through the OT, the covenant name of God was Yahweh. And in their Greek Bibles in Jesus day, 'Yahweh' was rendered in Greek 'Lord'. 'Jesus is Lord' means 'Jesus is Yahweh'. Jesus is one who we read about in the OT come to live among us. Jesus and the Father are one.

Jesus is Yahweh.

Jesus is Lord.

If a church is prepared to acknowledge that Jesus is Yahweh come in the flesh, that is a true church.

If a church teaches that Jesus was merely a carpenter from Nazareth who had some divine emanation come upon him, that is a false church.

'Jesus is Lord' is the test of faithfulness.

Ok then, a warning an exhortation and an instruction that follow from this.

Here's the warning.

Verse 8, "Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully."

It's a similar warning to the one on Jesus lips in Mk 10:5,

"Watch out that no one deceives you!"

We've worked hard to follow Jesus.

I know some ladies at our church

that have worked very hard to follow Jesus this week.

Worn themselves out cleaning Mavis' house and then backed up and catered for a funeral.

I bet they slept well after that.

When you work hard for something,

you don't want to see it slip through your fingers.
Nothing annoys me more than patiently grinding out a small advantage
in a tournament game of chess for two hours,
slowly, slowly increasing the advantage till it's a winning advantage,
and then one stupid mistake,
and it's all gone.

Five seconds inattention can destroy hours of hard work.
Well that was an illustration that probably only Lech can relate to.
But five seconds of inattention behind the wheel of a car.
You can relate to that.

We've worked hard to follow Jesus.
For many here that means decades of humble and selfless service.
You wouldn't want to let some silver tongued deceiver
disqualify you from the prize after all that hard work!
You want to be fully rewarded.

Here's the exhortation.

Verse 9, "Anyone who runs ahead
and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God;
whoever continues in the teaching of Christ has both Father and Son."

The exhortation is simple.

Continue in the teaching of Christ.

Running ahead would be adopting
the sophisticated teachings of the deceivers
who say that the man Jesus had an emanation from God.
It sounds like getting ahead because it's very intellectual.
But in the end you don't have God.

You aren't getting ahead,
you are getting left out.

Continuing in the teaching of Jesus.

It's something that Jesus himself emphasised is crucially important.

In John's gospel we read,

Jn 8:31-32 "To the Jews who had believed in him, Jesus said,
"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

Then you will know the truth,

and the truth will set you free."
 So he was speaking to the Jews who had believed in him.
 He says that's not enough.
 You have to hold on to what you've believed.
 Continue in the teaching of Christ.

Sometimes you hear Christian parents and grandparents
 try to comfort themselves
 about their wayward children and grandchildren.
 "I saw him go forward at an altar call when he was 13 years old.
 He's completely walked away from it now.
 But I trust God that he will not lose any of his sheep.
 I know he will come back one day."
 Well, your heart goes out to them.
 They want to believe the best for their family members.
 They'd love it to be true.
 But I don't think they are holding on to a true promise of God.
 True sheep persevere in their faith to the end.
 It may be that God in his kindness
 will bring back these straying relatives.
 He's a generous and merciful God.
 But there's no promise that just because someone at one point
 makes a profession of faith,
 that they don't need to persevere in that faith to be saved.
 On the contrary, the writer to the Hebrews tells us this,
 Heb 3:14 "We have come to share in Christ,
 if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end."
 How do you tell if you are a real Christian?
 If you persevere in your faith.
 Yes Jesus won't lose any of the sheep the Father has given him.
 But how do we know which are those sheep?
 The ones that persevere in their faith to the end.
 Continue in the teaching of Christ!

A warning, an exhortation, and finally an instruction.

verse 11-12 "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them.

Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work."

To understand this,

you have to understand how ministry worked in the early church.

There was no YouTube.

If you had a message to get out there,

you couldn't just post a video to YouTube and hope it goes viral.

There was no MCG.

If you had a message to get out there,

you couldn't just hire the MCG, like Billy Graham did in 1959, and everyone caught the train in and listened to the message.

130000 people in one evening.

Largest crowd ever at the MCG.

You couldn't do that in the ancient world.

So what did you do if you had a message to get out there?

You travelled around and painstakingly preached it to lots of small congregations in each town.

That was how the ancient world worked.

And when you got to each small town, there was no hotel to stay in.

You were reliant on the good grace of someone in the local congregation to put you up.

If no one would offer you hospitality,

then you couldn't stop in that town,

unless you didn't want a bed for the night.

And because hospitality was crucial for travellers, it was also a social expectation.

If there was a traveller,

you just offered them hospitality.

It was what you did.

But John says, "No.

Harsh as it may seem,

you must not encourage false teaching,

by offering hospitality to false teachers.

If you do that,
you are enabling wickedness."
Now that just totally went against the grain
of the social conventions of the day.
It would be like today,
someone drives a long car trip to your town for an event.
And as they hop out of the car,
they say to you,
"Mind if I just pop into your place to use the loo?"
And you say, "Nah, you can just go behind the gum tree out the back."
It's like jaw dropping disrespect.
That's the level of the breaking of social norms that John is calling for.
You'd know well and truly that you weren't welcome.

Now John doesn't want Christians to be obnoxious
for fun or for bravado.
But he's saying, this is just too important.
You cannot. You must not enable this deception.
You have to cut off oxygen to it.
Don't take them into your house or welcome them.

Now don't get me wrong,
John is not saying to be rude to people,
just so that they know we disagree with them.
That's not the point.
Christians can be courteous to everyone.
The point is that we don't give false teaching a platform.

Well that's a very tricky thing to put into practice.
I'll tell you my favourite story about this issue.
In our Healesville church,
we had an old chap named Paul Hawksley.
He died a decade or so back.
Anyway, in his younger days,
he'd been the Treasurer of Holy Trinity Doncaster.

This was back in the 1980s.
Early 1980s.
And the Archbishop of the day
said he would appoint a certain minister to Holy Trinity Doncaster
who was a false teacher.
And Paul Hawksley said to the Archbishop.
"Archbishop Dann, you may appoint him.
That is your right as Archbishop.
But who will pay him?
Because I will not."
Paul Hawksley understood the teaching of 2 John.

Friends, Jesus is Lord!
Turn to your neighbour and tell them that Jesus is Lord.
Jesus is the eternal Son of God come in the flesh.
Don't let anyone deceive you so that you lose what you've worked for.
Continue in the teaching of Jesus to the end of your life.
And don't enable the teaching of anyone who brings another message.