

Certainty of the Gospel

My brother in law gave me a book a few years ago called, "Great lies to tell young children". Leaving aside the obvious moral and ethical concerns about lying, it is surprisingly funny and entertaining. I have two examples that I think are genuinely very funny.

Example 1

Example 2

The lies in the book are absurd, tiny mice in batteries, ridiculous. Also the lies are on the whole harmless, even if Lucas did believe he could lift himself off the floor sitting in a chair it was unlikely to cause him significant harm. However, the lies that the false teachers, called the Gnostic were teaching the congregation in the Churches John was writing to were certainly equally absurd but are in no way harmless. The absurd Gnostic lies were leading Believers to destruction and threatening to tear apart the fellowship through uncertainty and doubt. The Gnostics two main lies were firstly, that to be saved you needed special mystical knowledge that they alone possessed and secondly their teaching that Jesus wasn't really the Christ, that is God incarnate.

As we learned last week the 1st Century Believers in Northern Turkey faced similar challenges that we 21st Century believers also face today, who to believe, what to believe. We 21st century Believers live in society that creates a constant stress of uncertainty and doubt. We are surrounded by the likes of this.

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The what and who of our faith are constantly being called in to question. These attacks can and do cause uncertainty and doubt within us all. We all experience doubt and uncertainty and so did the man that Jesus called the greatest man born of woman, John the Baptist. Even after John's great declaration that Jesus was the lamb of the of God to take away the sins of the world John struggled with uncertainty and doubt. From his prison cell he sent his disciples to ask Jesus "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else? You can read the whole account in Matthew 11:

2 – 15. Even the greatest of Saints struggle with doubt and uncertainty. If we are honest with ourselves, we are far more uncertain and doubting than we would want others to know about our faith. It is our uncertainty and doubt that make John's letter all the more relevant and important to us. As John writes to debunk the Gnostic lies, banish doubt and give certainty to the 1st century Believers in Northern Turkey his words can minister to us, bringing certainty to our lives and allaying our doubts.

John begins his letter by challenging the Gnostics head on. The Gnostics claimed to have had mystical experience where they received a, "new" revelation from God. John contrasts their claimed revelation, with the revelation he received "the word of life". He states that this "word of life" was from the beginning, that the "word of life" was with God even before the creation was formed. What contrast there is between the "word of life" John proclaims which is eternal and unchanging and from God compared the Gnostics revelation which was temporal and from man.

John then makes a remarkable claim about the "word of life", "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life." How could have John heard, seen and most importantly touched this eternal "word of life" that was with God? John answers the question by writing, "*The life appeared*" that is that the Word became flesh and lived for a while amongst us. This is an equivocal reference to Jesus. John is clear that Jesus was the physical manifestation of the eternal "word of life" that was with God from the beginning. This stress on the material manifestation of Christ to human ears, eyes and touch is of course directed against the Gnostics who denied that Jesus was the Christ. The "Word of life", that is the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel we believe in is the historical incarnation of the eternal "Word of life". It is impossible to distinguish between Jesus and the Christ, between the historical and the eternal. They are the same person who is both God and man. What we know of this "Word of life", that is the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel we believe is result of God's decision to make it known. This is the great uniqueness of our faith that it is God who reached out to man and made Himself known. This is unlike all other religions which involve man reaching out to God to attempt to know Him. To know God's "Word of life", the incarnate Christ is to know all we need to have life and fellowship with God, we neither need to add to it as the Gnostics were doing or take away from it, Jesus Christ is

sufficient. This is the great certainty at the heart of our faith that the “Word of life” was made manifest in Jesus the Christ.

John claims to have personally seen the “word of life” made flesh, Jesus. He claims to have heard Him speak, seen Him live His life and even to have touched His person. When John claims to have heard, seen and touched he is not just claiming to superficially experienced the Christ; the words he uses in the ancient Greek have much more meaning. When John claims to have seen he uses a Greek word which means to behold intelligently, so as to grasp the meaning and significance of that which come into vision. John is claiming to have studied Jesus. When John says our hands have touched the Greek used means to examine closely as perhaps a doctor would examine a patient. So, when John says he testifies that the “word of life” became flesh in Jesus he is acting like an expert witness in a court of law. As an expert witness he can testify through his own experience and his own careful study that Jesus is indeed the Christ the eternal “word of God”. When John speaks, he speaks as one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus, an Apostle and his voice is an authoritative voice proclaiming Jesus as the “word of life”. Using a modern turn of speech to express this truth you could say John has been there, done it and bought the t-shirt. How unlike the Gnostic teachers, who could only claim vague mystical experiences to go on; they had never been there, never done it but however do absurdly claim to have the T-shirt. Some of you may have heard of Woodstock. Woodstock was a famous/infamous music festival held August 15–18, 1969, in upstate New York. In later years it was very fashionable to claim you had attended Woodstock and T-shirts claiming that wearer had been at Woodstock became common. It is reckoned that tens of millions of these t-shirts have been produced. The problem was only 500,000 thousand people had actually attended the festival. So, the vast majority of those sporting a t-shirt claiming to have been at Woodstock actually hadn’t ever been there. The Gnostics were like those sad t-shirt wearing individuals who claimed to have been at Woodstock but hadn’t. The Gnostics claimed to have revelation but didn’t.

After showing the difference between himself and the Gnostics and between their revelation and God’s revelation to him. John moves on to the why he is writing to the Believers, *“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus*

Christ.” It may seem strange that John states his aim as fellowship and not salvation. Yet properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation in its widest embrace, including reconciliation to God in Christ, holiness of life and incorporation into church. Just as the Son, who is eternal life, was eternally with the Father so John purposes that we fellowship with God the Father and God the Son and so with each other. Fellowship as it is used here is a particular Christian word denoting common participation in the grace of God, the salvation of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit which the spiritual birth right of all believers. It is our common possession of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, which makes us one.

When I think of Hurst Green Evangelical Church, I do think of fellowship rather than church, perhaps we should change the name? In our fellowship we are all very different people; at different stages of our life, from different social and economic backgrounds, with different life experiences, with different goals for our lives and each of us experiencing life storms in a unique way. We are not united in our political views or our views on the environment or even on our views on how to tackle Cov 19. What brings us together is our fellowship with God the Father and God the Son which allows us to fellowship with each other. This is good news for us and our fellowship because it means that whoever God brings to us whether they are old or young, rich or poor, your kind of person or not we can have fellowship with them if they have fellowship with God.

I was trying to think of an illustration of this type of fellowship, and I thought of a scene from the film Titanic. In the scene a lifeboat had been lowered into the water and was pulling away from the stricken ship. In the lifeboat was a motley collection of men, women and children some from first class, some from second and third class. They are all cold and terrified. Some are trying to man the oars and draw the little boat further from the sinking ship. This motley crew has fellowship, that is a common purpose, a shared experience, relationship with each other, a mutual care and concern for one another because of the lifeboat. They can only have fellowship because of the lifeboat. Take away the lifeboat and all you have are some people stuck on a sinking ship or drowning in the freezing water. The “word of life” is our lifeboat that allows us to have fellowship together; that is have a common purpose, a

shared experience, relationship with each other, a mutual care and concern for one another. Like all illustrations this one has limits and it is well not to push it beyond those limits. That said I do think it is a good illustration as far as it goes.

Returning to our theme of certainty in an uncertain world, here are four reasons that we can have certainty about what John is writing about and our faith.

Firstly, the message John preached was the message that God made known. It is not the invention of any man, but a great truth made known by God Himself. We can trust this “word of life” because we can trust its author, God Himself.

Secondly, John personally examined and experienced the “word of life” made flesh in Jesus Christ. His message was not learnt from an airy-fairy mystical experience but from the real tangible experience of the “word of life” made flesh in Jesus. We can trust John and indeed the Bible because it is the testimony of those who have been there, done it and bought the t-shirt.

Thirdly, we have a fixed point of reference to compare what John proclaims against; that is Jesus Christ the manifestation of the eternal “word of God”. We can test any revelation that someone claims to have Jesus own words to determine their truth. Remember from last week, we have the anointing within us that is the Holy Spirit who will lead us into truth, who will help us discern truth from lie.

Fourthly John preaches for pure motives. John preaches the “word of life” so that the believers may have fellowship with God and each other. There was nothing in it for him.