

Living in the Light

“Discipline” is a complex word in English because it can mean punishment for doing something wrong, or it can



Michael K. Olmsted

mean to control your thoughts and actions for a good result. “Punishment” appears on our key words list, meaning a just result for bad behavior. “Forgiveness” represents the result of leniency when one is deserving of punishment but receives pardon instead. “Grace” is the word that confounds us because it not only represents forgiveness, but declares a generosity beyond legalism and predictable reason.

Thinking about the Apostle John, author of this beautiful brief letter, I remember his closeness to Jesus as the one disciple who stayed with Jesus through everything, to the conclusion of the cross and the discovery of the empty tomb. John witnessed the birth of the church at Pentecost, the spread of the gospel across the Roman world and confronted the early heireses that threatened the amazing gospel of grace. John knew a lot about words, from the Jewish Scriptures to the brilliant teachings of Jesus as they played out in the lives of real people. John has the gift of using words to challenge, encourage and thrill our hungry hearts with God’s promises.

As in this letter, John used the idea that “In (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men ... there was the true light” (John 1:4-5, 9). By the time of this letter, the church was being threatened by a fashionable aberrant version of Christianity, a darkness that threatened the foundations of the gospel of grace with a blend of pagan religious thought, a denial of the incarnation of Christ and a separation of spiritual life from any moral/ethical expectation. This movement was called Gnosticism, drawing from the Greek word diagnosis (knowledge) and teaching that one truly finds God through mystical experiences.

Gnosticism taught that the spirit is good, matter is evil and the two cannot be combined. Gnostics taught that Jesus “appeared” to be human, but was more like a spirit or phantom figure. So, the death and resurrection were earthly events

that have no real impact on humanity, except that the “spirit” of Christ entered the body of Jesus at his baptism and departed just before the crucifixion. The Gnostics were not interested in words like discipline, punishment, forgiveness and grace. For them there was no connection between how one lives on this earth and spiritual life.

No wonder John used the obvious difference between light and darkness to contrast the life and teachings of Jesus with a religion that dismissed morality as a necessity of faith. John is clear that God is light and Jesus is light (see John 8:12). Each person must choose whether to live in fellowship with God in the light, or choose to live in spiritual darkness without hope.

John lays out his argument that spiritual life is God’s gift through Christ with three simple ideas. First, we are all afflicted with a sinful nature (vv. 8-10). We are like our original parents in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). The consequences of eating the forbidden fruit are not that we have become like God, but instead have been plagued by spiritual nakedness, a lifetime of hard labor, travail in childbirth and death. That list simply reminds us that when we think we own the universe, we are wise enough to rule mankind and we can attain to a semblance of divinity, then we find ourselves in a place of calamity and darkness. We have all sinned! If we deny our sin “we make (God) a liar and his word is not in us” (1:10). Pay attention to any news program and you realize John knows what he is talking about.

Second, spiritual life is God’s gift, which we are free to accept or reject. The Gnostics believed that not all humanity possessed the “divine spark” and could know the secret truths of the spiritual life, leaving the majority in the emptiness of this physical existence. But John’s reason for writing this letter is to urge Christians to make the decision not to live in sinfulness (2:1). He goes on to say that when we fail, instead of being cast away from God, we find forgiveness and a new beginning through “Christ the righteousness one” who is “God’s way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world” (2:1-2). Spiritual life is not the exclusive privilege of a few, but God’s gift to all

Formations

March 19, 2017

Scripture: 1 John 1:5-2:6

who believe!

Third, this incredible gift of God’s forgiveness is so complete it is as though our sins never occurred! “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from everything we’ve done wrong” (1:9). The idea that sin is insignificant because it is part of this unimportant material world is a convenient delusion if you think yourself one of the special enlightened ones. But what if you are not one of the “select”? What if you are doomed in a world that has no future or meaning?

The children of God are blessed because in the extravagance of God’s grace there is an invitation to all, a way to find healing for our brokenness, a promise of love and guidance through the ugliness of life. How do we learn and grow as God’s children? We strive to “keep his commandments,” which translates into our desire to become more like Christ in our actions and relationships. Perfection is not in the text, but desire and effort are strongly implied. And when we do well in patterning our life on that of Christ, then “we know we are in him” (2:5).

Jesus did not come into this world to create a secret society of privileged spiritual beings living in disregard of God’s character and creation. From the beginning in Eden through every day of this world, God has sought a loving relationship with us. The openness and capacity of God’s love cannot be described by words. His grace cannot be reduced to a secret formula destined for a select few. Two thousand years ago on an ordinary Friday afternoon, outside the city of Jerusalem on a hill dominated by Roman authority and religious rejection, the Son of God stretched out his arms on a cross of human punishment and died for anyone and everyone who chooses to accept God’s grace. This is the light that banishes all darkness. This is God’s gift of life, the only true light of the world!

Retired after 46 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.