

John 15:9-17
May 4, 2024

The Rule of Love

As a lover of history and a Christian, I have always been interested in what in academic circles is called, “Christian origins.” And anyone who has seen, “The Greatest Story Ever Told,” or even, “The Ten Commandments,” or “Ben Hur,” or who has spent any time in Sunday School may think they already know, or, of course, any reader of the Bible.

There is, however, much left out of the story in the biblical accounts and great variety between the gospels, between the gospels and the epistles, and between the two testaments, old and new. And everything is clouded by the reality that the Bible was written primarily for theological reasons, so that history is a secondary concern. History is a prop for a theological presentation of life.

Sometimes the Bible describes things that no historical explanation can cover. Such is the case with the language and vocabulary in the Gospel of John, and the three letters that go by his name, and even the Book of Revelation.

One explanation for the diversity is that the early Christian churches were pretty much isolated from one another. They may even have lost contact with one another for decades at a time and simply developed different traditions. Then later, as they grew, they ran into each other again, found out they had different libraries, told different stories, developed

different theological ideas, they began to merge them together.

This understanding would explain the four gospels; it would explain the differences between the birth stories in Luke and Matthew, or the resurrection stories in Luke and John; the different parables told, different healing stories, even different timelines.

I am thinking of the Gospel of John, and how different it is from the other three. One explanation is that there was an isolated church, or set of churches, that was led by John the Apostle, the brother of James, the son of Zebedee, and for several years came to develop their own way of expressing their understanding of the faith. The gospel, the epistles, and the Apocalypse, were all a part of the library they produced that ended up in the New Testament.

One example of these differences involves the ways of talking about God’s love in the Bible.

Of course, there is the line from the Book of Leviticus quoted heavily in the New Testament, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Paul quoted it.

There is Paul’s way; “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails . . . And now these three

remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.”

And there is the way Jesus talks about love in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel when he says, “you have heard that it has been said, ‘love your friends and hate your enemies, but I say love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.’”

It is uniquely in John’s writings that we see two expressions, from the first epistle, “God is love,” and in this form, “love each other.” There are simply no expressions that capture the meaning of God’s love in its completeness. Thus it seems right that there is a collection of phrases, each capturing something of the grand reality, and in that way adding to our understanding.

We have ended up with phrases such as, “the greatest of these is love, and God is love; and the comprehensive directions to love each other, our neighbors, and our enemies.

Clearly, we can make an inference about the church to which John is writing, that they are engaged in difficult relationships. They were experiencing inner conflict, that is, tension within the gathering, rather than with some adversary outside the group or with the larger culture.

It is believed that for their gathering of believers there were some who were Jewish, some who were Gentile; some of the Jewish people were so committed to

the inclusion of the Gentiles that they were willing to sacrifice their place in the larger Jewish community. Others did not want to make that sacrifice.

During this time it is believed that the schism occurred. A decision was made, or a series of decisions, that believers in Jesus, Jew or Gentile, would no longer be welcomed in the synagogue fellowship.

Christianity began to emerge as a Gentile religion and Judaism went its way. This process of dividing was painful. Families were separated, friendships were sacrificed. The “expulsion from the synagogue” provides part of the context for John’s gospel.

Actually, it is not too hard to believe that this happened late in the first century, especially after the Jewish War, because similar situations happen all the time all over the world, right up to the present.

And it is happening now. Whether it is the Protestant/Catholic divide of the last 500 years, or the decline of the so called, “mainline,” or the “culture wars,” in our own time, we are faced with decisions about relationships to others, people very often at least, with whom we share this faith in Jesus, even if it seems to be all we share. And we are instructed that the first concern and highest priority is that we are to love . . . each other, our neighbors, and even our enemies.

And here in this place in John’s gospel it is this standard; “Greater love has no one than this: to lay

down one's life for one's friends." This is the example of Jesus. It sits before us as a great challenge.

I have often thought of the rule of love as one of the easiest things to preach. Who would openly disagree? But just beneath the surface there are complications, perhaps that is why it is so heartily emphasized in the Bible, and in the gospels, and in all the writings associated with John. It turns out to be *hard* in some situations.

But proclaim it we do, and will not stop. The scriptures do not stop. And there is more. The message of love is the central part of the theological interpretation of life that is the primary reason the bible was written. It is a message from God and the claim is that on the cross of Jesus, and in his raising, is the fullest expression of God's love. And this demonstration of God's love is the origin of the Christian faith, and it rises above historical explanations; and is the foundation of our hope.

When we experience failures of love, we know that we are forgiven, so we keep working on it, throughout our lives, remembering that we did not choose God, but God chose us to bear the lasting fruit.

And one more thing, love is not only linked to God, but also to joy, that ours may be complete. To the glory of God.

[Back](#)[Home](#)