

Unit 17 Assignment

Enduring Convictions: John's Gospel



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Assignment Unit 17

Enduring Convictions: John's Gospel

1 Interview a senior local preacher in your circuit. Ask them about their ministry as a preacher and about 'enduring convictions' that have been underlying it.

- a. describe how those convictions shaped the course of their ministry and how the changing life of the church also changed their ministry.

The Interviewee: Dr John White CBE.

John considers his as an experiential ministry in that he is called to share his insights of faith.

With the decline of religious education in schools, the decline of a teaching ministry from the pulpit and lack of formal Bible study his preaching ministry is increasingly anchored in Biblical insight in parallel with his personal insight. He feels it is now more necessary to teach the Biblical basis of what he is drawing from his personal experience. There can no longer be an assumption that the Biblical ground work is in place in a congregation from which to start.

For John the path to faith has been long, often tenuous and punctuated by spiritual highs and lows. He has endeavoured to live that faith within the context of a busy professional and family life. For John it has been an enduring conviction that we must live in the world while trying not to be of the world. He is attracted to the Celtic insight into Christianity because of its conviction of the sacrament of the ordinary and an engagement with the real world rather than a withdrawal from it.

Finding faith, for John, has been a progression and not an instantaneous event. It comes from a multiplicity of experiences that have shaped that progression.

The changing life of the church has impacted on John's ministry firstly because of the diminution of a taught ministry. At the beginning of his preaching career some 40 years ago congregations were far more Biblically informed. John is greatly aware of the tension's between the organised church and the promulgation of the gospel by the members of the church. He feels there is too much emphasis on structure and systems within the buildings and too little on living the Christian life in the world. This has changed John's ministry into being more concerned with facing the realities of Christian life than merely filling the seats of church buildings.

Liturgically John is increasingly drawn towards a contemplative style of worship with an appreciation of the certainty of the Eucharistic celebration and the attraction of silence. This has impacted on the structure of his services.

John's pivotal points of faith and enduring conviction are summarised as:

- The universality of God's love which is both personal and corporate.
- Finding God is a progressive experience and therefore never absolute.
- The triune God in the person of the Holy Spirit continues with humanity and therefore with him.
- Separation from God is not possible from any quarter, nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

b. compare their reflections with the enduring convictions underlying your own calling to a preaching ministry.

I have always considered mine to be a worship ministry. I feel called to lead people to a spiritual place where they can be open to know the presence of God.

Unlike John's start point of a lack of Biblical knowledge for experiential preaching, worship always starts in the world at a point where a person is only conscious of their surroundings, the people around them, their behaviour, their appearance and everything our senses allow us to comprehend. It is from this point that all start and have always started. The challenge in worship is to create an environment where the congregation can go to be open to God's presence and that place can be different for each person in the congregation. The similarity for everyone is that we must be capable of losing where we are to find where God is. The multiplicity of ways to approach and worship God is further complicated by the world in which we live and the effect it has on the individuals needs at a specific moment in time, or in any specific moment in worship.

Many people can use music in worship to create the right atmosphere but if a specific tune or phrase invokes a certain memory the atmosphere can be instantly destroyed. A Christian dancer friend of mine had an injured ankle preventing her from dancing. She had no problem worshipping however until, at one service, the hymn 'Over the mountains and the seas' was used and at the point where the lyric goes "oh I feel like dancing . . ." she realised how much she did feel like dancing and the moment was lost.

Whereas John had inherited his Christianity which was then nurtured and grew over the years, I moved away from religion completely as a young teenager when the Methodist church had nothing to keep me interested in it. My 'Emmaus road' was the quarterdeck of a Royal Naval warship and though the experience forced me to believe in Jesus I was reluctant to acknowledge I needed him for a long time. I spent many years fighting off what I knew to be true but thought it might stifle the exciting life I was leading. It was only the revelation that a life lived for Jesus could be even more exciting that it was presently that bought me back to a church community.

A call to share my excitement of following Jesus and utilise my given gifts was slow to be heard by me and, at the start, either misunderstood or misrepresented towards a far simpler calling. From junior church leader to worship band leader the enduring conviction that there is a place for everyone where they can be with God and that from corporate worship there can come personal spiritual revelation. It is a great frustration that the organised church gives a greater priority to doing what it thinks it does best, or what it knows more about, than looking at what the needs of its current and potential congregations are.

Increasing, like John, I recognise there is a need for people to engage their minds in worship as well as the heart and to spend time in contemplation. Personally though silence gets in the way of contemplation and I prefer to sing repetitively or without words putting my body on autopilot while I reflect on, and get close to, the living God. Personal prayer time has often been musically creative and is rarely quiet or without music. There is little or no distinction for me between personal worship and prayer. In the home church setting worship is often completely separated from prayer and intercession becomes more focused and more conversational with God.

Fundamentally the convictions that still endure for me are:

- We are saved from sin and death by God's Son Jesus Christ
- God's grace is freely given in advance of any action on our part.
- By the power of God's Holy Spirit we can live this life for Him.
- Everyone can approach and worship God individually through the medium of corporate worship.

2 Many verses of John's gospel are quoted to summarise key elements of the church's faith about Jesus. Identify ten 'enduring convictions' for a Methodist today that can be expressed as concise statements of faith.

a. five statements should reflect the nature of God.

1. There is only one God, the creator of everything that is seen and unseen, known and as yet unknown.
2. The permanence of God ensures that whatever we do and whatever we think or feel He will always be in the same place waiting for us.
3. God is, as the Trinity; Almighty Father, divine Son and wholly human Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit.
4. Jesus Christ, a man and God's only son died for us as a common criminal to pay the price of our sin and make us acceptable again to His Father, Almighty God.
5. Because of God's action through His Son's death on a cross we are adopted as a child of God and can call him Father as did His Son Jesus.

b. five statements should reflect God's relationship with humanity and all creation.

1. God's Grace is free gift, though undeserved, for all people
2. The Bible is the inspired word of God.
3. Holy Spirit is at work in our lives and available to help us encounter God.
4. Faith grows with knowledge and understanding and by the revelation of God by his Son Jesus through the Holy Spirit.
5. The Kingdom of God is in the lives of believers here and now and will be fulfilled with the coming of Christ

3 Choose one statement from your list in 2b and amplify its meaning and significance for today.

Faith grows with knowledge and understanding and by the revelation of God by his Son Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

“We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” NIV

God; the magnificent creator and sustainer of everything.
Because we believe in Jesus we are at peace with God.

What is so special about Jesus? Why is he, and should, be the centre of our lives.

Let us look at the story:

Jesus is God, as one part of the Trinity, and always was, right from the beginning. The old prophets knew he would come and they told everyone they met. But like most of us it's difficult to hear the word of God as clearly as we'd like to. So when he came it wasn't exactly like everyone expected. Jesus arrived as a baby, a human baby just like us, and just like us he grew up. The first hint of his power was when he was a young teenager and taken to the temple in Jerusalem by his parents. He spent the time discussing and arguing with the preachers and teachers there and then he gets reprimanded by his parents and sent home.

When Jesus was about 30 he went to see his cousin John, a prophet, who was baptising people in the river; telling them to repent and turn back to God. John knew who Jesus really was and asked Jesus to baptise him. But he wouldn't and as Jesus came up from being baptised by John the skies opened and God spoke *“this is my Son and with him I'm well pleased”* and then the spirit came over Jesus like a dove. He was then taken to the desert to be tempted by the devil who offered him everything if he would join up with him. Of course he didn't, he had bigger plans than just the here and now.

He started quite small, gathered a few men up to help him and to journey with him and went around teaching in the temples and healing people, and sometimes healing people on the Sabbath which was against the Jewish law. But worse, with one man who was lowered through the roof he said *“get up, you're sins are forgiven”*. Which was really against the law as only God can forgive sins. He also let his disciples pick and eat corn on the Sabbath. Crowds of people start to following Jesus and many are sick in some way so he heals them and he gets even more popular. The religious leaders are annoyed and firstly accuse Jesus of using the devil's power but Jesus comes back at them saying that what he is doing is driving the devil out so why would the devil do that?

Jesus then teaches the people by telling them simple stories but doesn't tell everyone what they mean. While travelling in a boat there's a great storm and Jesus calms it. He carries on healing people and teaching them about the kingdom of God, walking on water, feeding thousands with a few small fish and some bread and getting rid of demons. On occasions Jesus would go off to pray alone to his father. One time He went up a mountain and there was transformed into a brilliant white light and there were two others with him; Elijah, a great prophet of old and Moses who brought the Jewish nation out of Egypt. The disciples that were with him there were amazed.

A few times Jesus tries to tell the disciples about what was going to happen to him but they don't really want to know. And he carries on teaching about marriage, temptation, being first, being rich, about children, about serving others and all the time he's healing people and casting out demons.

By the time he rides into Jerusalem he's being hailed as some sort of superstar, he breaks up the temple because people are selling animals for sacrifice and changing money for the offering. By this time he's very famous with the temple priests, and they want him gone, people are looking to Jesus because he's doing the miracles so they feel his teaching must be right, and his teaching benefits everyone especially the poor and broken and not just the rich and the temple hierarchy. At every opportunity Jesus has a go at the church leaders because their teaching was wrong, their rules were wrong and they were wrong about Jesus.

The chief priests got people to lie about Jesus to get rid of him and then they had him arrested using Judas to point the finger. This was after Jesus and the disciples had had a Passover meal together, during which he'd told them what was about to happen. After the meal they went off to pray in a garden where Roman soldiers and temple guards arrested him. The Jewish leaders questioned and accused Jesus and even with lying witnesses they were struggling to make anything stick. Eventually the high Priest asks Jesus straight out "*are you the Son of God?*" and Jesus says "*I am*" and that was that. He's beaten by the temple guards and led away to the Romans.

He went before the Roman governor, Pilate who, although claiming to be the Son of God wasn't a crime against Rome, agreed to have him crucified to stop the crowds from rioting. The Roman soldiers then flogged him before taking him to a hill just outside the city to be crucified along with 2 other criminals. Nailed to the cross he hung there till he died. And at that point the huge curtain in the temple, through which only the high priest could enter, ripped from top to bottom. After the Roman soldiers had checked to make sure he was dead Jesus' body was taken down and laid in a tomb.

Three days later, when some women went to put oil on the body, the tomb was empty. He'd gone, left the grave clothes in a neat pile and disappeared. The dead Jesus was dead no more, but alive again, death couldn't stop the Son of God. He met people, spoke to people, eat, walked, talked and touched people, until everyone knew he was alive and then he went to be with his father, God, but left with the promise that someone else will follow to remain and to help.

So what's so special about Jesus?

Firstly, He came to us, we didn't go to him or call him down. God wanted to get to us.

Secondly, He came to heal and to teach. He showed us, in very practical ways, how we should treat others, especially those who are less fortunate for some reason. And how by believing in him his power is available for us to do God's work too.

Thirdly, He came to die. The gap between us and God had got so big there was no other way. People were, and still are, so sinful, so far from God's way of living that a major price has to be paid and that price is Jesus. And that is what makes Jesus special.

The Holy Spirit

¹³*But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.*

This is Jesus telling the disciples about the Holy Spirit. He'd not spoke of the Spirit before so they did not understand what Jesus was saying. But the Holy Spirit is able to help us understand, about Jesus, about God and about us.

In 'The Message' it says of the Spirit "*he will take you by the hand and guide you into all the truth there is*". And that's exactly what we want. Whether we are young or old, or a new Christian or mature in faith, there are always things we don't understand, things we can't fathom out.

When I began training as a local preacher I was quite confident in what I believed, I knew what I knew that I believed in. But as I continue to study I realise there is much more to Jesus and my faith in him. There are many big, deep, meaningful questions that I hadn't even considered asking before I started the course and have had to face up to. But the mystery that is our faith cannot be sorted by us alone, to understand the immensity of what Jesus is we need the Spirit and his ability to help us.

Understanding ones own faith is important, although complete understanding of it all will not be achieved, but to share that understanding as a Christian and as a preacher holds a great responsibility. Only by a reliance on the Holy Spirit can we hope to know enough of God through His Son Jesus to share with passion what we believe to be truth.

4 Reflect on how your own encounter with God has been a journey of discovery and learning with changes of perspective and milestones.

Coming back to God.

From a stance of “*I don’t need a God*” through “*I guess I do but I don’t want to admit it*” I eventually reached “*God, help me*”. The stages were far from straight forward or even easily identifiable but having got as far as accepting Jesus as my Saviour there was a period of doubt that, even though it’s promised, God could still love me after everything. Often I’d look around the congregation and wonder why no one else seemed to be struggling as I was.

At a very ordinary Sunday morning service I was encourage to take communion, something I had previously felt unable to do. It was as though I was a disciple and Jesus himself was breaking the bread and sharing the wine. The bond between God and I had been set right by this action of Jesus, He had made it all alright again for me.

Coming back to the church community.

I had attended services on Sundays for several years before the day I again took communion. But that was all I had done, it had had little impact on my life outside of Sunday morning. Following Jesus meant finding out who He really was and is and that entails effort and talking to other believers. Coffee bar conversations were mostly grounded in the weather and work and family but house group conversations moved from that to The Bible, Jesus and the way we are called to live. Involvement grows involvement and being involved means getting asked to get involved in other things.

Having discovered contemporary, pop, worship music at a Spring Harvest event I was firstly asked to share it with the junior church. This led to leading the young people in both worship and their Bible studies. Soon a worship band was created and occasionally even played in the main service.

Letting God lead.

God can be a gentle instructor as well as a ‘in at the deep end’ teacher. Sometimes the doors that opened weren’t even noticed, I just walked in and only later realised what I was doing; Junior Church training course, Disciple course, specific seminars at Spring Harvest and Easter People, Methodist Worship Leaders course. The band was leading several contemporary worship services around the circuit as well as ecumenical and secular gigs outside when I found myself sat opposite the Minister asking about the Local Preacher’s course. It is not a question of why I want to train as a local preacher. I simply follow God’s lead.

As the course progressed all the problems of how to manage my time between study, work, family and band dissolved and by faith I have moved from one day to the next in certainty that I do not walk this path alone.

Leading the church community

There was no shortage of advice when I first began my studies and Ministers and Local preachers were all happy to encourage and offer suggestions as a travelled around the circuit with my Mentor on note. One particular piece of advice cropped up repeatedly from many sources; that I should do as I’m told, keep from controversy, do things as they’ve always been done to pass the course. Then I can start to make changes. I am convinced that God does not want another generic local preacher clone, he chose me to be me and lead worship as me. This

has proved to be the case as I have led congregations while on trial. The reaction and comments from worshippers has encouraged me more and more to be me.

Sharing my experience of God.

It is of constant amazement to me that experiences from my life return to illustrate the lectionary reading or highlight a sermon point as though my life without God was the preparation for a life sharing my faith in God. Similarly, instances where I have been particularly close to God have served as examples of a true and relevant faith to those I have been able to speak to who are outside the church.

The Faith and Worship course itself has created as many questions as it has answered though I now feel more equipped to begin to address those questions. The activities along the way have resulted in some challenging sermons, some fascinating discussions and on occasions some new songs to use in worship.

Over the last 3 years or so I have had what I believe severely challenged, questioned and scrutinised and have arrived at this point stronger, more positive, more knowledgeable and more certain of my faith.

Rob Newton