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Session 5 - The Divisive Christ

Bible Passages:

- John 7:1-52

Brief Notes:

I doubt many people would claim this chapter as their favourite in John's Gospel. The narrative is less immediately engaging, and apart from the impassioned appeal in verses 37-39 there are fewer "nuggets" than one finds in other chapters. The chapter is shot through with hostility towards Jesus and unbelief. We read (v.43) that "the people were divided because of Jesus", and the picture painted is of Jesus as *The Divisive Christ*: not quite the comforting and encouraging picture our groups may be wanting, but there is comfort and encouragement here, as well as realism and truth which we need (which of course is why John chooses to include this).

1-13

We are reminded as the chapter opens of the murderous opposition Jesus faced in Judea (cf. 5:18), but chapter 6 ended with many of his followers in Galilee deserting him, which prompts his brothers to suggest a plan to win back the favour of the crowds. The Feast of Tabernacles was the most popular of the annual festivals, so Jerusalem would be the ideal public stage to win a following with some attention-grabbing miracles. The brothers seem to have no doubts about Jesus' ability to perform signs and wonders, but their lack of faith (v.5) shows that they had not

grasped or accepted what his signs signified. They see miracles as the way to win the approval of the people, whereas Jesus knows he will have to face the hatred of the world (v.7). There will be a time to show himself to the world, and then as he is lifted up he will indeed draw all people to himself (Jn.12:23,32), but “not yet”, so when he goes up this time, there’s no triumphal entry, he arrives after the crowds and in secret.

Both the way this little section begins and ends draws particular attention to the opposition of the authorities and the inadequate but benevolent opinion of his brothers and those considering him a “good man”. That frame serves to highlight in particular Jesus’ comment in verse 7, which I take it therefore is a verse worth pondering. How do we see Jesus testifying to the evil in the seemingly very moral world around him? It’s not that Jesus was some moral crusader, tut-tutting at society’s sins (moral crusaders don’t make such gracious appeals, for a start, they merely condemn). His repeated charge is that they don’t know and submit to the Scriptures, and they don’t know or honour God: the evidence of both being their failure to believe in him.

14-36

Teachers would commonly reference the rabbis from whom they had learnt, but Jesus claims that his teaching comes from God himself. There is no higher authority that might validate such a claim, the proof of the pudding is in the eating – choosing to believe and obey (v.17). Jesus is making a huge claim for himself – and huge claims usually indicate huge egos and a concern for personal glory, but Jesus’ concern is for the Father’s glory: that too testifies to the truth of his claim. The Jews might have responded that they have chosen to do the will of God, but Jesus points to their failure to keep the law and to properly apply the law. The miracle referred to is the one in chapter 5.

If in vv.14-24 the focus was on where Jesus’ teaching comes from, in vv.25-36 the issue is more where Jesus himself comes from. The crowd presumably knew of Scriptures about the birthplace of the Messiah (cf. verse 42), their point in v.27 is that the Messiah was surely to be someone special who would simply appear and usher in God’s kingdom. They don’t really know where Jesus is from, though, and moreover they do not know God. Jesus’ concern seems to be not simply to accuse, but to woo: he is saying “I know God, I come from God, on his authority. I am here to make God known to you.” But such claims stir their hostility, there are attempts to seize Jesus, which are thwarted, then guards are sent to arrest him but they don’t – perhaps because Jesus is heard to say that he will soon be going and will make himself scarce (the crowd didn’t quite know how to understand his reference to returning to heaven either).

37-52

Jesus’s wonderful invitation is the climax of the chapter, coming as it does on the climactic day of the feast. The feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated God’s provision of the harvest and looked back to his provision in the wilderness, also looked forward to the pouring out of the Spirit in the

last days. And a feature of the festival was the pouring out of water over the altar, making these words especially poignant: all that the festival looked forward to was to be found in him. The offer is not to the worthy, but to the thirsty, to anyone who will come to Jesus and believe in him; that thirst permanently and abundantly met in the gift of the Spirit. The chapter ends showing the vague but uncommitted perception of the crowd and the settled blind rejection of the Jewish leaders. It is surely helpful for us to notice the response Jesus faced, since it is what we can expect: hatred, uncommitted benevolence, misunderstanding, and yet the mention of Nicodemus and his insistence of properly examining the evidence, bearing in mind his eventual faith (19:39), offers hope too.

Discussion Questions:

- What recurring themes are there in this chapter?
- What attitudes towards Jesus do we see in vv.1-13?
- Why do Jesus' brothers want him to go up to Jerusalem?
- They want people to love him, but what does Jesus say he is bound to face? Why?
- How does Jesus testify to the evil in the world? How have we seen that? How do we see it here?
- What does Jesus claim for himself in vv.16-18?
- How can such a claim be validated?
- How is it not monstrously egotistical?
- What is Jesus' charge against them?
- Why do they struggle to accept that Jesus is the Messiah?
- What does Jesus say about himself in vv.28-36?
- What does he say about the people?
- In the context of the chapter what is perhaps surprising about this climactic appeal in vv.37-39?
- What is offered? How? To whom?
- What is the response?

Summary questions might be –

- What encouragements should we take from what John shows us here about Jesus?
- What lessons might we take from what John shows us of the response Jesus received?

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Supported by [Allchurches Trust](#) and [The Jerusalem Trust](#).



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