

Voices of Rwanda

Five Studies in the First Letter of John

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Church Home Group Resources Ltd

First Published in 2004 by
Church Home Group Resources Ltd
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN x-xxxxx-xxx-x

Printed in Great Britain by [Printer's name]

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Studies in the First Letter of John

Draft 6.0

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Introduction

This set of studies is designed for church groups wanting to engage in Bible study that is challenging and that has practical implications for the lives of those taking part. It is based on the first letter of John and draws on the experience of the people of Rwanda in the Diocese of Cyangugu to provide a context in which Christians are attempting to live out the Gospel in a demanding set of human circumstances.

Geoffrey Daintree, one of the authors of this study, is Canon of the Cathedral of Cyangugu¹ and has worked with the people and the Church in Rwanda. For these studies and for his own work on the theology of forgiveness Geoffrey has interviewed many of the people he knows and has worked with in Rwanda to hear their stories. Through his encounter with a wide range of Rwandan voices we have tried to provide insights into what it might mean to be “salt and light” as Christians in the United Kingdom in the 21st Century.

Accompanying Video

There is a video to accompany these study notes called “Voices of Rwanda: Bishops’ Reflections”. The video features Bishop Geoffrey Rwubusisi of Cyangugu in Rwanda and Bishop John Hind of Chichester in England. They reflect on the stories and study themes, giving a contrasting Rwandan and English perspective on the issues. We strongly recommend using the video with the study materials.

How to use these study notes

These study notes are designed to be used by all members of the group participating in the study. We have not provided specific guidance for the person(s) leading the group. Rather we have included supporting material for everyone taking part.

Each study has the same basic structure:

Story (Allow 10 minutes)

A real-life story from Rwanda to provide an entry into the theme of the study. These personal stories were collected in Rwanda, in Cyangugu Diocese, by Geoffrey Daintree.

A member of the group should read the story out loud

Activity (Allow 10 minutes)

For each study we provide two short activities for the group to illustrate an aspect of the theme. Activity A has a “workplace” context while Activity B has a more general context. The activities can be worked on by the whole group in plenary or in smaller groups with a brief feedback from each smaller group to the whole group (you may have to allow more time if you work in smaller groups).

Theme (Allow 5 minutes)

A brief introduction to the main theme of the study

¹ Pronounced “changoogoo”

Bible passage (Allow 5 minutes)

A bible passage to be read out loud

Video (Allow 10 minutes)

If you are using the accompanying video (see above) then this is a good point in the study to use it

Questions (Allow 30 minutes, but it can be longer)

Questions for the group as discussion starters

There are ten questions for each study to be used by the group as discussion starters. Questions 6-10 are generally inclined to be more “theological” in character than Questions 1-5. The number of questions attempted will depend on the amount of time the group has for this section of the study. We expect that groups will dip into several questions until they find one or more that they feel they want to explore more deeply.

There are many different ways in which the questions section of the study can be organised. With a small group of participants a plenary discussion is probably the most appropriate. With a larger group it may be better to break into smaller groups, possibly even in different rooms if that is possible. The groups can discuss the same questions or different ones but it is important that an opportunity is created for groups to feed back to each other and to hear reactions to their feedback. Of course, this will require more time if people are to be enabled to enter into the discussions at a reasonably deep level.

Drawing it together (Allow 10 minutes)

Suggestions for ways in which the study can be drawn together and some suggested key conclusions and practical outcomes

Prayer (Allow 10 minutes)

Some suggestions for prayer to close the study

It is important that the group is enabled to bring before God things that have been laid on their hearts by their participation in the study.

Rwanda

A brief introduction to the country and its context

Geography

Rwanda is a land-locked country located in the Great Lakes region of East Africa. The land area is less than half the area of Scotland. The terrain is mostly grassy uplands and hills, with some mountainous areas in the west. It is called the *land of a thousand hills*. About half the land is used for crops the rest is mostly forest or pasture.



Climate

The weather in Rwanda has been described as being like a typical British summer: warm and sunny, cloudy and rainy. The main rainy season is March-May. The average temperature is in the range 24.6-27.6 °C and it is hottest in August and September.

Natural vegetation ranges from dense equatorial forest in the northwest to tropical savannah in the east. Natural forests have all but disappeared under the influence of increasing population and pressure on the land.

Wildlife

Wildlife includes elephant, hippo, crocodile, wild boar, leopard, antelope and flying lemurs but their numbers are very small. Rwanda is home for half of the world's remaining mountain gorillas (about 300 at the time of writing).

Agriculture

Rwanda's economy is largely based on agriculture, which contributes 80% of all exports. Most of the people in rural Rwanda depend on subsistence agriculture and livestock farming with 80% of the population owning land and 20% renting land. However, land infertility coupled with an insufficient area available to each family result in inadequate agricultural production and malnutrition.

In Rwandan culture, women do most of the farm work while men tend to be more involved in the marketing and management of the products



and hold the cash. Diet consists generally of sweet potatoes, beans, maize, peas, millet and a variety of fruits in season. The main trading crops are Arabica coffee (70%); tea (10%); sweet potatoes; maize; ground nuts (peanuts) and bananas. During the 1994 genocide, many rural dwellers stayed on the land and some agricultural production continued. There was major disruption, however, and a substantial proportion of crops were lost. Livestock was almost totally destroyed, coffee and tea production dropped to unprecedented levels and processing stopped. Large swathes of forest were destroyed or severely damaged.

Population

Rwanda is the most densely populated country in Africa (290 residents per sq. km). Over 90% of its population lives in rural areas. The census in 1978 showed the population to be 4.8 million; in January 2002 the figure was 7.4 million.

Rwanda's population is made up of three main ethnic groups. The Twa, the earliest known inhabitants in Rwanda, are a minority group of less than 1% of the population. Prior to 1994, Hutus made up 90% and Tutsis up to 10% of the population. In 2002, following the genocide and return of former exiles and refugees, Hutus made up 84% and Tutsis 15% of the population.

In 2000 it was estimated that 70% of the population were living below the poverty line. Only 44% of people have access to safe drinking water and many live in tents or damaged houses.

Culture and Education

The family unit is central to life in Rwanda, with the extended family playing a vital role in people's lives. The government aims to provide education throughout the country and it is compulsory for children between the ages of 7-15. However, much of the population cannot afford the fees and remains illiterate (adult literacy is 48.3%). There is a University in Butare.

Most members of a family unit are employed in activities ranging from farming to traditional crafts such as pottery, basketry, painting, woodcarving and metal work.

Religion

Nowhere in Africa has Christianity had a more decisive impact than in Rwanda. More than 90% of Rwanda's people are baptised Christians. 56% of the population are Roman Catholic, 26% Protestant, 11% are Adventist, 5% Muslim and less than 1% Animist.

A significant number of Rwandans, however, practice both their traditional religion and Christianity at the same time. At the core of traditional religion is a supreme being or spirit called *Imana* who can only be addressed through intermediaries. These intermediaries can be the spirits of deceased family members, known as *abazima*, and illustrious ancestors who have become minor deities. They can also be key Christian figures such as saints, biblical characters or even Jesus Himself. *Ryangombe* and *Nyabingi* are two venerated ancestral deities that can intercede and ask for power and benevolence from Imana. *Ryangombe* is venerated mostly in southern and western Rwanda. *Nyabingi* is a goddess venerated mostly in northern Rwanda.

History

Rwanda's earliest inhabitants were pygmoid hunter-gatherers, ancestors of the Twa. Hutu farmers from the Congo basin, seeking to settle good land, gradually established

themselves. The cattle raising Tutsi's probably entered the country from the north some time later.

In the 19th century German explorers arrived, together with Roman Catholic missionaries. The country became incorporated into German East Africa. The Tutsi's maintained a good working relationship with the Germans (and later the Belgians) who occupied the country during World War One.

Following the First World War Rwanda was mandated to Belgium by the old League of Nations. That situation remained in force until after the Second World War, when it became a UN trust territory.

In 1959 the Hutu majority overthrew the ruling Tutsi king. During the following years thousands of Tutsis were killed, and some 150,000 driven into exile in neighbouring countries. The children of these refugees later formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front and began the civil war in 1990.

On 1 July 1962 Belgium, under the direction of the UN, granted independence to Rwanda.

East African Revival

The first Christian mission in Rwanda was established in 1900 by the White Fathers, many of them French-speaking Catholics. They were soon followed by Protestant missionaries, including many Anglicans, and by 1913 all four gospels were available in Kinyarwanda, the common language of both Tutsi and Hutu.

Evangelism progressed gradually in Rwanda to the 1930s when, as some commentators said at the time, "the Holy Spirit blew like a tornado across Rwanda." Some of the key actors in the revival were Joe Church, a missionary physician, and several African Christian converts, including Simeoni Nsibami, his younger brother Blasio Kigozi, and a hospital worker Yosiya Kinuka. A full account of the East African Revival can be found in Meg Guillebaud's book "Rwanda: The Land that God Forgot?" A shorter account was available, at the time of writing, at

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2003/003/9.28.html>

Blasio Kigozi is better remembered for his three key questions about Uganda's church in 1936:

- What is the cause of the coldness and deadness of the church?
- Why are people allowed to come to the Lord's Table, who are living in open sin?
- What must be done to bring revival to the church?

However, it was in Gahini in eastern Rwanda in June 1936 that revival first broke out. Over the next several years, this charismatic revival spread through East Africa and was accompanied by controversy and charges of "devil-worship." However, the revival was characterised by a deep conviction of sin followed by personal confession and a renewed commitment to "walking in the light" of Scripture.

Recent history

Rwanda's recent history is marked by the tragic four year civil strife from late 1990 to 1994, during which close to one million people lost their lives. The genocide began on 6 April 1994 and in one hundred days 800,000 people were killed - often in very brutal ways. The trauma of the genocide caused over one million Rwandans to be displaced as refugees. A massive international relief effort was launched, but supplies were always

inadequate. Inevitably there were outbreaks of dysentery and cholera, which claimed more lives.

Most of the refugees have now returned to Rwanda. Trials are taking place of the many thousands of prisoners accused of acts of genocide. The prisons still remain vastly overcrowded. A traditional justice system of village courts (Gacaca²) is being reintroduced in an attempt to relieve the pressure on the national courts. Today there is a remnant of Hutu extremists in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and the need for military alertness has hindered Rwanda's re-development.

Theological College

In 2001 the House of Bishops in Rwanda determined that God was leading them to establish an Anglican Theological College in the country. At a consultation meeting between CMS and the House of Bishops Canon Geoffrey Daintree was commissioned to raise funds for this project.

In Rwanda the church and its pastoral leadership play a very important role in each community. The ordained minister has several roles:

- Caring for a broken community that is trying to rebuild the most basic elements of trust that enable them to function socially
- Teaching people how to make the best with their meagre resources – often the minister is one of the few people with access to knowledge about sustainable development
- Leading by example – as an act of Christian compassion – *all* ministers in Rwanda have taken genocide orphans into their families
- Providing a reason for hope in a society where many genocide survivors live in a state of constant depression and find it hard to see any reason for optimism about their futures

To be able to fulfil these roles ministers need training and support. The level of education of ordained ministers is very low. At the time of writing there were about 300 Anglican priests in Rwanda and of these 39 had Diplomas in Theology, 15 had degrees, 4 had Masters level degrees and none of them had a Doctorate.

The Theological College would play a very important role in raising the standards of Theological education not just for Anglican ministers but for other Christian denominations as well. It would also be an important centre for Development studies and for the dissemination of sustainable methods of agriculture in a very poor economy.

The vision of the House of Bishops of Rwanda is that it would be a beacon of hope and a centre of Christian learning, prayer and reflection.

² Pronounced "gachacha"

Study 1

Walk in the Light

Azariah, the Archdeacon's story

On 6 April 1994 the mass killings started.

A week later I called the church leaders – especially Thomas, who is now a priest – and told them I wanted to leave, afraid that I would die. Others had fled. Thomas encouraged me to stay as he believed that the war would not continue. I thought his support would be sufficient. Then the war came to our church.

I read Psalm 70 as a prayer for myself. After reading the Psalm we heard a great shout that people were being killed. We went outside and saw that the Interahamwe³ had surrounded our home. I went into my house with my wife and house-girl. I said we must pray and prepare to die.

My wife Ruth managed to escape through a hole in the wall. The Interahamwe didn't realise that she had escaped and I don't know how she managed to get away without being seen, for they had surrounded the whole house. I was taken and stripped, they started beating me. I was bleeding and crying. They said they would kill me after they had dealt with my wife and children – but they couldn't find them.

They took all our belongings, leaving us nothing. I was taken to an official who said I ought to die as I was working against the government and I was taken to the prison. When I asked to go to the toilet, one of the children of the official took me out of the prison and hid me. He had been visited by Thomas who told him that I was a Pastor and that he must take care of me. It turned out that the wife of the official was one of Thomas' relatives. I was taken to a place to sleep.

The next day they asked for money. I said my money was with the Bishop – but I knew he didn't have any money for me. I had to write a letter to the Bishop saying my life was in danger so please give these people my money. I knew I was telling a lie. They left to visit Bishop Daniel. After they had gone Thomas came and took me to the official with my son Paul. There I was told that my sister had been killed and that he had my wife and other children. Thomas said he would try to help us escape.

He was sorry that he had advised me to stay before. He felt responsible for the death of my sister. I encouraged him not to feel bad, for that is the way of war. He took my son Paul and hid us in his house.

Many people had already died in my parish by then. The Interahamwe knew where I was, but they were still looking for my wife to kill her. I took off my clerical collar and we started on our journey. On the way we saw some Interahamwe and hid by the side of the path until they passed by. We went through the bush until we reached the place he had prepared for us to hide. When we reached this place Thomas was afraid that he would be killed for hiding us.

We were shown where to sleep. Thomas and his brother continued to look for a way for us to escape and cross over into Burundi.

³ "Interahamwe" literally means "those who stand together", and was a civilian militia, mainly made up of young unemployed men.

At 3 am they woke us up and had with them my wife Ruth and the children and our house-girl – everyone except for my sister who had been killed. We went to the border of Burundi. Thomas said goodbye with much sorrow. I thanked God and told Thomas that he should not feel guilt about my sister. Then we crossed into Burundi.

(This is only the beginning of the long and harrowing story of Azariah’s experiences during the Genocide. When he finished telling his story to Geoffrey he said: “You have been born once and you will die once. You may be killed, you will go to heaven. So better to die while working for God: that is most important.” Then they prayed together).

Activities

Psalm 70

“God! Please hurry to my rescue! God, come quickly to my side! Those who are out to get me – let them fall all over themselves. Those who relish my downfall – send them down a blind alley. Give them a taste of their own medicine, those gossips off clucking their tongues. Let those on the hunt for you sing and celebrate. Let all who love your saving way say over and over, “God is mighty!” But I’ve lost it. I’m wasted. God – quickly, quickly! Quick to my side, quick to my rescue! GOD, don’t lose a minute.”
[Message version]

Read this psalm that Azariah read when the killing began. Take a few moments to share with each other the kinds of situations in which you might want to pray this psalm.

Choose one of the two following short activities. You can work on the activity together as group in plenary or you might consider breaking up into smaller groups. If you break up into smaller groups it would be a good idea to let each group feed back their key conclusions to the rest. You may have to allow more time for the feedback.

Figure 1: Martin’s e-mail

Jeri

We’re putting together the insurance claim following the fire in the Hertford office. I know you were keen for me to get you a new laptop so here’s the opportunity. You need to send me a written memo saying that you left the laptop in the Hertford office – make sure it’s dated the day after the fire. A few of the really old laptops were burnt in the fire so we can claim one of them was yours

Martin

Figure 2: Jim's note

Janice

I'm really sorry but I've been caught on a speed camera again. If I take the points for this one it will mean losing my license. You've got a clean license, so can you be a real darling and say it was you driving the car? I know it's a lot to ask but you know I need to drive for work.

Love and kisses,

Grateful Jim

Activity A: Martin's e-mail

Make sure everyone in the group has access to the e-mail text in Figure 1 (make a photocopy if necessary). Martin is Jeri's boss.

You are Jeri and you are very keen to get a new laptop. You receive Martin's e-mail and you realise that you are not going to get your new laptop unless you take part in the deception. As a Christian how should you react?

Activity B: Jim's Note

Make sure everyone in the group has access to the note in Figure 2 (make a photocopy if necessary). Jim is Janice's partner

You are Janice and you are rather proud of the fact that you have a clean license. However, you recognise that not being able to drive will make life very difficult for Jim at work. As a Christian how should you react?

Study theme

In Azariah's story he lied in defence of his own life. This is a very extreme situation but how far should we take the commandment not to lie? Is defence of life the greater consideration? Both activities were about lying for personal gain. Of course we know that it is wrong but the situations are tricky and involve the need to maintain relationships. How can this be done with integrity?

The theme of this study is "walk in the light". The expression "walking in the light" was used during the East African Revival to mean walking in close fellowship with Jesus and striving to live a life of holiness and purity. This is a key message to us from the first letter of John. It invites us to consider what it means to "walk in the light" in our work, our family, and in our society.

Bible passage

A member of the study group should read 1 John 1: 1-10

“From the very first day, we were there, taking it all in – we heard it with our own ears, saw it with our own eyes, verified it with our own hands. The Word of Life appeared right before our eyes; we saw it happen! And now we’re telling you in most sober prose that what we witnessed was, incredibly, this: The infinite Life of God himself took shape before us. We saw it, we heard it, and now we’re telling you so you can experience it along with us, this experience of communion with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.

Our motive for writing is simply this: We want you to enjoy this, too. Your joy will double our joy! This, in essence, is the message we heard from Christ and are passing on to you: God is light, pure light; there’s not a trace of darkness in him. If we claim that we experience a shared life with him and continue to stumble around in the dark, we’re obviously lying through our teeth – we’re not living what we claim. But if we walk in the light, God himself being the light, we also experience a shared life with one another, as the sacrificed blood of Jesus, God’s Son, purges all our sin. If we claim that we’re free of sin, we’re only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is errant nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins – make a clean breast of them – he won’t let us down; he’ll be true to himself. He’ll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we’ve never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God – make a liar out of him. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God.” [Message version]

Video

If you are using the video “Voices of Rwanda: Bishops’ Reflections” then this is a good point at which to show the first section “Walking in the Light”.

Questions

There are ten questions for use by the group as discussion starters. Please do not feel that you have to answer them all. You may like to dip into questions until you find one or two that the group wants to explore more deeply.

We have not included notes for leaders as such. However, we have given a few prompts with each question to help members of the group explore the wider ramifications of the question. It is not our intention to attempt to provide any answers. Indeed, with some of the more difficult questions the authors would be grateful if groups were to share with them any spiritual insights they have had that they feel might help others. Please feel free to e-mail us at Rwanda@witnessatwork.com

- 1** What do you understand by “personal holiness”?
 - What does John say about personal holiness in 1 John 1: 1-10?
 - What does “holy” mean when applied to a person?
 - How do you and other people know you have personal holiness?
 - What sort of things might you do, or not do if you have personal holiness?

- How do you fit being holy into a busy modern lifestyle without opting out of the “normal” modern lifestyle, e.g. by downshifting⁴?

2 What are the things in your life that diminish your relationship with God?

- What makes God more distant?
- Consider some specific examples such as: getting drunk; undermining colleagues at work in order to jockey for position; refusing to forgive because you enjoy the feeling of resentment.
- Are there things about the job you do, the way you enjoy your free time, the way you deal with other people that put up a barrier between you and God?

3 What things help you to live a life that pleases God?

- As well as prayer and the fellowship of other Christians are there other ways in which you have been enabled to develop a state of greater personal holiness?
- Have there been times in your life when you have felt that you are truly “walking in fellowship with Jesus”?
- How did that feel?
- What would you give (or give up) to get that feeling back again?

4 How do you evaluate your spiritual health?

- What does John say about sin in 1 John 1: 1-10?
- How has your relationship with the Holy Spirit developed?
- How do you put your experience of the Holy Spirit into words?
- Have there been times when you have felt deeply convicted of sin?

(Take encouragement from the way in which famous Christians in history seem to have a greater awareness of sin - their relationship with the Holy Spirit is so much closer and they are more sensitized to the things that “grieve the Spirit”)

- Have there been times when you have felt unable to pray?
- Do you seek the help of close Christian friends at such times?

(St Augustine described prayer as the “breathing of the soul” – if a person complains that they find difficulty in breathing then they clearly need medical help. So if a person complains of difficulty with prayer don’t they then need spiritual help?)

5 What do you understand by “Revival”?

- Have you ever had such a strong experience of the presence of God that it caused you to cry for joy or for repentance?
- Would you welcome such an experience?
- Do you consider this kind of experience of the Spirit to be impossible or inappropriate for you or for people in your church?

⁴ The expressions “downshifting” is used to describe taking a reduction in salary and responsibilities in order to be able to live a less pressured lifestyle

- Could it happen in your church? (see page 3 for a description of the East African Revival that started in Rwanda)

6 Syncretism: translating the name of God – how should we respond to it?

- Are we happy to accept Paul Tillich’s view that God is a matter of our “ultimate concern” – whatever we are prepared to die for, that is our God?
- How about the currently fashionable view that there are many versions of God and we should pick the one(s) that suits us?

Think about how you can respond credibly to people who profess to hold these positions

- What about Don Cupid’s ultimate modern form of syncretism: “taking leave of God”?

People who take this position participate in all the outward forms of religious activity whilst professing publicly that they know there is no “real” God “out there” but behaving as if there was is a “useful psychological resource”.

7 In Rwanda the underlying worship of Ryangombe and Nyabingi has not totally been eradicated even for Christians (see page 4 above): is UK folk religion harmless?

- What are the characteristics of modern UK folk religion?
- What about superstitions such as “touching wood”?
- Where does astrology fit in?
- What about alternative medicine?

8 It can be argued that a significant proportion of those attending churches are “folk religionists”. How do we respond to them?

- People who attend churches to participate in services but who do not profess a Christian commitment are sometimes referred to as “folk religionists”. Typically, they do not take part in other aspects of the church’s life, not even social events. Do you recognise this as a description of some of the people in your church?
- How can you tell a “folk religionist” from a “genuine” Christian?
- What impact does their presence have on the church?
- Are they part of the potential “harvest” or something more sinister?

(Some churches see such folk religionists as a drain on their evangelistic resources, others see them as people to be evangelised)

9 My neighbour is a good person, gives to charity and has been very kind to me but is not a Christian – why does it matter?

- Have you found yourself faced with this either as a genuine question or an argument for not participating in the life of the church?
- How do you (or would you) respond to it?
- Does “being a good person, giving to charity and being kind to your neighbours” qualify as personal holiness?

- Bishop Wallace Benn makes the point that merely being inoffensive is not a sign of God's presence and suggests that it is the testing times that will provide the measure of the person's relationship with God. Have you had practical experience of the "good non-religious person" put to the test by circumstances?
- Have *you* been put to the test by circumstances?

10 In Azariah's story was Thomas exercising personal holiness?

- Is there to be a radical, possibly dangerous, element in our personal holiness?
- What about the famous Christians in history who died rather than compromise their faith – was that a radical form of personal holiness?
- Can we be said to be exercising personal holiness if there is no personal cost?

Drawing it together

Members of the group should spend a few minutes reflecting on the things they have learned or been challenged by in the study.

It is important to realise that personal holiness is a crucial witness to the world. Hopefully, you will have had several insights into what that may mean for you in practice and been challenged in at least one area of your lives.

Identify those things that you think are particularly important points for prayer. If you have had a special realisation or insight, please share it with the rest of the group.

Prayer

Perhaps one or more members of the group could lead a time of prayer based on the items identified by the group

You may like to use the following prayer to finish the study:

Father God – purest light

We can't begin to tell you how astonished we are that your son Jesus should die for us. We are overwhelmed by your love. How can we tell you how grateful we are that you have forgiven us all our sins? Despite what you have done for us we continue to sin and you continue to forgive us.

We want to be holy because you are holy. We beg you to root out our sinful desires and replace them with a yearning for holiness. We want to walk in your light. We want to walk together as brothers and sisters in your perfect light