

## JOHN'S WITNESS TO THE HISTORICAL JESUS

LEO G. COX, PH.D.

While in our present era many liberal scholars find it increasingly difficult to believe the truth of miraculous events recorded in the Scriptures, it is interesting to study some of the New Testament writings with this perspective in view. It seems a bit strange to hear scholars reject certain accounts because, they say, it is impossible to believe them in our modern, scientific age, when one finds thinkers in John's day denying the accounts because they seemed incredible in their time. These first century heretics may not have possessed the modern, scientific perspective, but they did find an historical incarnation offensive to their presuppositions.

Without taking time to discuss the authorship of the Johannine writings, I will assume that John the Apostle was the author. The epistles of John are best understood as a defense of the Gospel against certain false teachings that were disturbing these Asian churches. In his First Epistle John claimed that these false prophets were in darkness (1:6) and called them deceivers and liars (1:8-10). These troublemakers disobeyed God's commandments (2:4), hated their brothers (2:9), denied the Lord Jesus (2:22) and His Incarnation (4:2), and were called anti-christs (4:3). These persons described in the First Epistle had been in the church, but were now outside (2:19); in the Second Epistle they appear to be messengers traveling about (v. 10); in the Third Epistle, a false leader had established a stronghold within the Christian group (vv. 9-10).

Who were these false teachers and what were they saying? In his First Epistle John began immediately with a defense of the temporal reality of Jesus. Concerning the "Word of life" he wrote, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands" (1:1). John clearly portrayed Christ here as the Eternal One with the Father, yet insisted that He came to earth in physical form. The story of Christ's birth, growing up and physical activity was no myth for John; Christ's body was not a mere appearance or phantom. John was there; he had with his own eyes, ears, and touch beheld and confirmed that Jesus' body was real. These opponents obviously denied this physical reality of Jesus, and thus rejected John's testimony. For John's readers there came a choice. Either they were to believe what John, who had been present with Jesus, claimed, or else accept the denial by the other teachers, who were not there when Jesus lived. Who knew the most about this anyway—the original witnesses, or the skeptical intellectuals?

Apparently these liberal teachers believed it was possible to retain the reality of a truth conveyed from God, and reject the "form" in which

it came. Their minds were too sophisticated to need a historical Jesus; they believed they could know directly from God all that was needed. Their authority superceded that of John anyhow. For them little value came through the original witnesses. Those witnesses were gullible and just thought they saw. In reality, they said, Jesus only appeared to be physical. These apostolic witnesses must be mistaken, because God could not become man in the physical sense. Any brilliant person should know this!

John's purpose in writing his Gospel was in a general sense just the opposite of that for the epistles. There he emphasized continually the eternity of Christ's being, and His mighty power. Quite obviously the aim in the Gospel was to convince the readers that Jesus of Nazareth was in reality the Son of God. There Christ's humanity was assumed while His divine nature was portrayed. In the epistles, on the other hand, the eternal being of Christ was assumed, and the humanity was defended. Either error—a denial of deity or a denial of humanity—was a denial of the Incarnation, and therefore an attack upon the atoning work of Christ.

These heretics about whom John was writing in his epistles seemed unable to reconcile the spiritual reality of Christ with the idea of temporal reality. They wanted to retain the eternity of the Word and the spiritual significance of the Gospel without believing that God Himself had really become man in Jesus Christ. The idea of God's becoming man, living, suffering and dying as a man, was obnoxious to them. Such disturbed the niceties of their intellectual processes and hurt their presentation of Christianity to their "respectable" audiences. They must change the Gospel to fit their "modern" minds!

The false philosophy already current in John's day was an incipient Gnosticism. Its basic belief that only spirit is good and that all matter is essentially evil was infiltrating the minds of certain thinkers connected with the Church. Their despising of the world of matter and thus the physical body caused them to revise the accepted Christological teaching. For them a free spirit imprisoned in a house of evil should seek release rather than adhere to a view that brought God down to physical dimensions. Broadly speaking Gnosticism took two forms—Docetism and Cerinthianism.<sup>1</sup>

Docetism denied any physical body for Jesus at all and made the earthly activity of Jesus to be merely various theophanies. What many today claim for the resurrection appearances of Jesus as vision or spiritual experiences became for the Docetists the explanation for all the accounts of a life of Jesus. All reported physical activity became for them merely myth or legend.

The other form coming from Cerinthus was more subtle. He taught

1. William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, pp. 8, 9.

that Jesus was born as any man and lived as man in obedience to God. At His baptism Jesus was filled with the Spirit of Christ who remained upon the man Jesus until the time of suffering at the cross. When Jesus neared the end, the Divine Spirit, Christ, left the human Jesus, Who then died as a man on the cross.

For John such false ideas struck at the very heart of the Gospel. For him the sufferings and death of Jesus the Son of God could in no wise be subtracted from the Gospel message. In his First Epistle he wrote, "This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with water only, but with the water and with the blood" (5:6). For John the words, "water" and "blood," obviously were very significant. In the Gospel he recorded that when the spear pierced Jesus' side, "straightway there came out blood and water. And he that hath seen hath borne witness, and his witness is true: and he knoweth that he saith is true, that ye also may believe" (John 19:34-35). There was no doubt in John's mind concerning the fact of the *physical* death of the Son of God! While first century liberals denied the death of Christ, the Son of God, and though twentieth century liberals announce the "death of God" apart from Christ, John the Apostle, who was there at that crucial event pronounced the actual death of Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God!

It appears that the Gnostics acknowledged the coming of Jesus Christ by "water" but not by "blood." Their teaching of the Spirit's descent on Jesus at the baptism is assumed in the word, "water."<sup>2</sup> While the false teachers allowed the Divine Spirit's habitation in Jesus occurring at the baptism, John saw the baptism as a witness that Jesus was the Son of God (John 1:29-34). The "water" witnessed to the historical fact that God had taken on human flesh, became man, and identified Himself with fallen humanity. It bore testimony to the Incarnation of Jesus.

John in his epistle did not stop to argue with the skeptics about any differences in view about the water. He quickly struck at the major issue—"the blood." For him Christ the Son of God was also Jesus the man. There was no separation, but a true union of the two natures. The death of Jesus Christ was a physical reality. The voice of God was heard at the baptism, and the voice of God was heard at the cross. The blood at Calvary witnessed to the Divine atonement for mankind. Liberals of the first and twentieth centuries find the cross a stumbling block, but for true believers it is the power of God. For the Gnostics the cross was only for the man Jesus;<sup>3</sup> thus it had little significance for the Gospel.

John added a third witness to the historical reality of Jesus Christ when he wrote, "For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood" (5:8). If the "water" refers to the baptism of Jesus and the "blood" to the event at Calvary, then the "Spirit" may refer to Pentecost. At each of these events a voice was heard. At the baptism,

2. Brooke F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 182.

3. Barclay, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

the Father's voice said, "This is my Son." On the cross Jesus cried, "It is finished." On the day of Pentecost Peter through the Spirit declared, "This is that which was spoken." Here is a three-fold witness through three historical events whose central truth any de-mythologizing will render false.

It appears clear that John saw these witnesses as continuing in the practices of the Church. Two millenniums later these same witnesses are present. From the baptism of Jesus came the practice of Christian baptism, which is the witness of "water." Christ inaugurated the Lord's Supper on the eve of the cross, and this holy sacrament today witnesses to the death of Christ. The Spirit's witness may be less tangible as a voice to the believer's heart, but becomes more objectified as a continuing witness in the form of the Written Word. Adam Clarke suggested that since the Scriptures proceed from the Holy Spirit, they are His witness to the believer.<sup>4</sup>

These three great historical events and their continuing presence within the historical Church agree in witness to the one great truth—Christ the Son of God became man, and died for our sins. These "are the three who bear witness" and "the witness of God is greater" than "the witness of men" (5:8-9). If three human witnesses established a matter in the Old Testament (Deut. 19:15), how much more do these three heavenly witnesses confirm the historical reality of Jesus Christ!

The thesis of John's First Letter is based upon a two-fold test for truth.<sup>5</sup> One aspect of this test is the *practical*—obedience to Christ, keeping the commandments and walking in the light. The other aspect is *belief*—believing that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Practice and belief were equally important to John, although he spent more space in this epistle on the practical aspect. In fact it is doubtful if he believed that one aspect of this test could exist without the other. Bad practice leads to wrong ideas, and wrong ideas lead to faulty practice. To be certain of truth one must meet this two-fold test.

The Gnostic false philosophy struck not only at the heart of Christian belief, but also at the holy life. On their part there was no serious view of sin. Sin was looked upon as the evil in matter. For some the shunning of material things was a way to be free from sin. This idea led to asceticism. For others, since matter could not harm the spirit, free outlet was given the flesh and resulted in licentious living. In either case there was no real consciousness of sin.

John fervently attacked this false philosophy. These opponents claimed to know God, but walked in darkness (1:6). In their view, since man is a spiritual being, sin cannot really touch him; so in reality he

4. Adam Clarke, *The New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*, Vol. 2, p. 924.

5. Westcott, *op. cit.* p. 181.

was not a sinner, nor was he sinful. By special knowledge, the Gnostic was released from the bondage of matter, and thus lived above any sin. After John declared that the obedient believer experienced the cleansing of the blood "from all sin" (1:7), he then warned those who claimed they possessed no sin (1:8). Apparently they saw no need for the blood of Christ as a cleansing agent.

Furthermore, in the Gnostic view, there was no need of confession of sins. After John declared the believer's forgiveness and cleansing after confession of sins, he then pointed out the lie of those who claimed that they had not sinned. It appears that these liberals of the first century saw no act as being wrong before God; nor did they have any place for sinful depravity. This form of Pelagianism denied original sin and professed a maturity that found old fashioned morality out of place. Probably twentieth century "new morality" is not so new after all!

Actually this false teaching divided the Church and struck directly at the heart of Christian fellowship.<sup>6</sup> The heretics had once been in the Church, but had separated from the true believers (2:19). At least this early Church was sufficiently alive to render a false teaching uncomfortable in it. The skeptics left the body of the faithful, but were still attempting to mislead persons within the church. John not only warned against the dangers, but assured the believers of their security in the anointing of the Spirit (2:26-28).

John believed that the acceptance of the apostolic witness to the historical Jesus was necessary for true fellowship in the Church. He wrote this letter in order to make clear where true fellowship existed (1:3). A denial of John's declaration brought darkness and destroyed fellowship. Those who denied the apostolic witness broke fellowship with both the Church and the Father (1:2). And this denial cut off, not only the spiritual vision of Christ, but struck at John's testimony of Christ's physical reality (1:1). John saw no fellowship with God if the reality of Jesus Christ's physical existence were rejected. John did not deny the spiritual vision of Christ, nor the spiritual birth of believers. However, he insisted that his physical observations and contacts with the physical Jesus are an integral part of the Christian faith.

For John this point was crucial. Many were trying to create a Christ who was known only to a special group. For them Christ's physical reality was unnecessary, in fact impossible. Therefore apostolic testimony was relatively unimportant. The old attack against basic Christian faith is not too different from that of our times. The denial of physical events that surrounded Christ's life is not so modern after all! Barclay's description fits both the first and twentieth century:

Here then is a picture of these gnostic heretics. They talked of being born of God, of walking in the light, of having no sin,

6. Barclay, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-14.

of dwelling in God, of knowing God. These were their catch phrases. They had no idea of destroying the church and the faith. By their way of it they were going to cleanse the church of what they regarded as dead wood and they were going to make Christianity an intellectually respectable philosophy fit to stand beside the great systems of the day. But the effect of their teaching was to destroy the entire nation, to eliminate the Christian ethic, and to make fellowship within the church impossible.<sup>7</sup>

Today we do not have alive with us persons like John who had seen and heard Jesus Christ. John soon left the believing community and ended the personal, direct line to the historical Jesus. However, there are the written records that these witnesses produced or authorized. These books preserve the words of the men who saw. Whenever anyone denies the authority of the men who wrote under divine inspiration, he denies the apostolic witness. When one reckons that the Scriptures contain error, even about physical events, the line of fellowship back to the early Church, the apostles and to Jesus Christ and to the Father is broken for him. If one cannot depend upon the Written Word, then he is lost in the vain reasonings of men, and soon both Jesus and God are dead for him.

It is meaningless to claim acceptance of eternal or spiritual truth discovered in the physical events of the Bible, and then reject the physical reality of these events. Certainly there are truths taught in the events, but a separation of the truth from the event, and the denial of the event, spell spiritual ruin. Without the physical realities there is no Incarnation, no atonement, and no salvation. In such vain views are darkness, disobedience and falsehood. Such persons may still use Christian terms, words, and phrases, but their leadership is false, and their paths lead to death.

Thank God, we have an historical Jesus who is our Lord and Savior. God the Son became man, lived, taught, worked miracles, suffered and died, and rose again according to the Scriptures. He ascended to God, from whom He will come again to receive us to Himself, with whom we shall ever be. Wherefore comfort one another with these words.

Marion College  
Marion, Indiana

7. *Ibid.*, p. 15.