

So, That Was Christmas ... Now What?

I John 1:1-4

I must confess that the lead-up to Christmas for me this year was a little more manic than I prefer it. Linda is convinced that taking a week of vacation in December threw everything out of kilter. I was still involved with planning and executing a special outreach event as well as with our usual annual events. In the meantime, no little gremlins stepped up to decorate the house or do any of the requisite Christmas shopping. Still, in the midst of it all, we did find time to be captivated by the precious images of the season – a baby in a manger, angels and shepherds in the countryside near Bethlehem, wise men from the East, a village carpenter and a virgin girl.

Christmas 2007 is past – now what? How important is it that we process what we have seen and heard? God came to us in human form. Is that literally what happened? Does anything of significance revolve around whether or not that literally happened? If it was all just a lovely myth, does that have any negative bearing on the value of our faith or on our ability to serve God and our fellow-man in the months ahead? After all, there are many movements within what we call Christianity that do not take literally very much at all of what we call the story of Christmas. Essentially, what I am asking is this: “Does it matter whether we treat the Incarnation as doctrine of myth? Does it matter if Jesus was in every respect human and in every respect divine?”

When Steve Spurrier was Florida’s football coach, he told Gator fans of a fire at rival Auburn’s football dorm that had destroyed 20 books: “The real tragedy,” he added, “was that 15 hadn’t been colored yet.” For years, we have observed that college football may not always be about the pursuit of learning. Far more lamentable to us should be a steadily growing indifference that the church be a place for learning and embracing ancient biblical truths about God.

Many Christians have stopped caring about doctrine. Leaders seem to be reading. Christian bookstores are doing as well as ever, but the focus of this quest for information has clearly shifted from a theological emphasis to a pragmatic one. What works? What attracts people? It’s good to be concerned that the church is growing, but are we equally concerned that people are growing on the meat of God’s truth? One observer of churches makes this troubling observation:

“Search committees are more concerned about finding a pastor who has a vision and method for church expansion than about finding a pastor who has a comprehensive understanding of God’s truth and a passion for teaching it. Seminary graduates and young pastors I encounter increasingly have as their model of success the corporate CEO, the person who can deftly manage people rather than the teacher who can communicate sound doctrine.” - Mike Andrus

This de-emphasis on doctrine has taken a toll. James Dobson cites a 1991 Barna survey:

“Interviewees were asked, ‘Do you agree strongly, agree somewhat, disagree somewhat, or disagree strongly with the following statement: There is no such thing as absolute truth; different people can define truth in conflicting ways and still be correct.’ Only 28% of the respondents expressed strong belief in “absolute truth.” More surprisingly, only 23% of born-again Christians accepted this idea! What a telling revelation! If more than 75% of the followers of Christ say nothing can be known for certain, does this indicate, as it seems, that they are not convinced that Jesus existed ...”

It’s not enough simply to enjoy Christmas. It very much matters that you believe it. God became a man when He entered into His own creation, robed in human flesh as a helpless infant.

Many years after that first Christmas, the Apostle John ministered in Ephesus. He may have been in his eighties or nineties when a group of characters professing to be followers of Jesus began to promote a peculiar version of Christianity tainted by a worldly philosophy. They taught that matter was evil, spirit was good, and that the purpose of this life is to somehow rise above the evil of our bodies so that our spirits can achieve full enlightenment. It sounds like Nirvana. Call it what you will, personal sin was minimized because the development of mind and spirit was all that mattered. There was at least one implication of this teaching that was enough to bring one aged Apostle firing out of his front-porch rocking chair and into the fray of the current debate.

The heretics taught that since all matter was evil and all spirit was good, then God, Who is Spirit, could not have come into the world in human flesh. Later versions of this heresy suggested that Jesus was a normal man that God adopted for His purposes. John seems to be reacting to the idea that Jesus was not a man at all, perhaps, just a phantom, an apparition that appeared to be real.

Not a man? This always matters and not only at Christmastime. A spirit being that moved among men, but only feigned a physical death on a cross would have accomplished nothing. For that matter, a mere man dying on a cross would have had his own baggage with which to contend. John knew that Jesus was a real man and truly God. He remembered. He was there. The first four verses of 1 John as Jim read them appear to be one neatly polished paragraph. In the original, it is one broken, agitated, run-on sentence. It is the language of man with a story his heart is burning to set straight.

I. The Eyewitnesses of Jesus (verse 1)

¹That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched - this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

A. John Was in a Unique Position to Set the Record Straight

John was probably the last of the Twelve alive. He remembered when Jesus said: "... many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it" (Matthew 13:17). After Jesus was crucified, resurrected and ascended back to heaven, John took Mary, the mother of Jesus, into his home. He had stood side by side with Peter in the early Jerusalem church as the Jewish rulers attempted to silence them. They responded, "... Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19, 20).

When Jesus met John and his brother James, they were dubbed the "*Sons of Thunder*." They were loudmouthed and hotheaded. John probably didn't look much like a "Son of Thunder" any more, but that passionate demeanor, now under the control of his Master, resurfaced as he wrote his response to the deceivers. He was not relying on innovation, afterthought or philosophical musings. He would take his readers back to the beginning, back to square one of the Gospel.

B. The Word of Life Appeared in Human History

John speaks for those who lived and died as eyewitnesses of Jesus. **We heard Him. We saw Him. We were in His physical presence. We looked at him.** Here John uses a word that means to gaze upon something intently. As disciples, they had studied Jesus. **Our hands have touched Him.** This is the same word used when the crucified Jesus appeared alive again to His disciples:

³⁷They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! **Touch me and see;** a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.

⁴⁰When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate it in their presence. Luke 24:37-43

John must have wondered, "Who are these guys and where did they come up with these ideas?" John would tell them what He had observed with His physical senses day in and day out for three years. They were in no position to debate the facts. They could call him a liar, a nut, or they could believe him, but they could not start making things up. They were not there. He was.

II. The Essence of Jesus (verse 2)

... this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

A. The Eternal Life Who Was with the Father Came to Men

Luke describes the events surrounding the birth of Jesus, probably using Mary herself as his chief source. Matthew depicts Jesus as the *messiah* of Old Testament prophecy. He was adored by magi from the East. Even as an infant, he was perceived as a threat by nutty old King Herod.

In *John*, Jesus is the Word, the *logos*, the full expression of God to us so that we may know what the Father is like. In this letter, Jesus is still the *logos*, but here He is the "word of life" or the full expression of what life is supposed to be. There is a quality and eternality to the life that we were created to enjoy in God's presence before sin and death entered the picture. Jesus was "with" the Father, which means face to face with Him. Jesus laid that status aside and garbed Himself in human flesh to demonstrate what eternal life was intended to be – a life totally dependant upon and devoted to the Father. Then, this perfect man became our perfect Sacrifice.

To be a Christian is not to adhere to one philosophy or religious creed among the thousands available. To be a Christian is to be covered by the atoning blood of Jesus so that you may be restored to the "eternal life" forfeited by your sin. John is very clear about this later in his letter:

¹¹And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹²He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. – 1 John 5:11, 12

B. If Jesus Is Not God AND Man, Our Hope for Eternal Life Caves in

Did God really become a man? Did Jesus die a real death, in perfect trust that His Father would raise Him from the dead, or was it all just pretend? Was He a perfect human sacrifice because of His perfect human life, or was He just some emissary from heaven that never possessed any real potential to stray from the Father's plan? Is He a perfect High Priest who truly knows the struggle of temptation, or was that a sham as well? If God meant what He said about the requirement of blood to atone for sin, then can the phantom blood of a specter really satisfy divine justice? And, if gimmicks are satisfactory, then, why not let people make up their own?

There was a man who hated church, but loved ducks. However, his ducks weren't too bright. They wouldn't go south in the winter. He fretted as each day got colder. He put grain on the ground, trying to lead the ducks into the warmth of the barn, but they wouldn't take the bait. He left the barn doors open at night, but the ducks never noticed. As the weather got even colder, he tried more tricks. He played music inside the barn. He put fox decoys around the barnyard to scare the ducks into the barn. Frustrated, he finally attempted to herd the ducks into the barn - but the more he waved and shouted, the more skittish they became. His efforts only caused them to flee even farther away from the shelter, which their loving "duck-shepherd" was offering them.

In desperation, the man fell to his knees sobbing, knowing that the ducks would surely die soon. There was nothing he could do to help them - nothing, because he, a human being, was simply unfathomable to the little ducks. He thought, "If only I could be one of them, I could show them, communicate to them, and they would accept me, and not be afraid of me, and I could bring them to the safety and warmth of the place which I have prepared for them." Just then he heard the bells at the nearby church ringing for Christmas Eve services - and he realized for the first time what that babe in Bethlehem, the incarnation of God in the flesh, was really all about ...

III. The Essentiality of Jesus (verses 3, 4)

A. Divine Fellowship Hinges on the Veracity of the Apostolic Witness to Jesus verse 3

... ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

If you were raised in church, the word "fellowship" may awaken all sorts of images in your mind. It can mean a carry-in dinner. Fellowship can mean men eating breakfast together, golfing together, or breaking and fixing things together. Fellowship can mean going on a church outing. It seems that in one way or another, fellowship always has to do with folks hanging out together, usually having fun. Fun is not synonymous with fellowship, but fellowship ought to be enjoyed.

Of course, the Greek word means to have *ALL* things in common – fun and otherwise, not like the old joke where Tonto and the Lone Ranger ride into a canyon together to suddenly encounter Indian warriors on horses, dressed for battle, all around them. The Lone Ranger turned to Tonto and asked, "What are we going to do?" Tonto replied, "What you mean 'we,' pale face?"

Fellowship was not always fun in the New Testament. We read of "the fellowship of ministering to the saints" through sacrifice and of "the fellowship of the gospel" that Paul wrote about while in prison. In a way known only partially to us, we have the privilege of knowing "the fellowship of sharing Christ's sufferings." I'm all for fun, but to John, fellowship was sharing life, its blessings and its demands, with one another, with Jesus and with the Father Himself.

Modern media would certainly hammer John for His rigid exclusivity. He essentially said, "We proclaim to you that Jesus came in the flesh and took our sins. That is the *ONLY* way that we can have fellowship together or with God." That doesn't mean John would ever be rude or that he would refuse to eat or go golfing with an unbeliever. It simply means that no man can share the eternal life of Christ with a community of true believers if that man rejects the testimony of His eyewitnesses who have proclaimed His humanity, His deity, His death and His Resurrection.

B. Real Joy Hinges on the Veracity of the Apostolic Witness to Jesus verse 4

...⁴We write this to make our joy complete.

How Christian joy is to be expressed is hard to nail down. Some Christians always look as though they were born during a crab-apple harvest. Preachers rightfully scold them for that. Others run about, chronically positive, even in situations where such positivism smacks of all the authenticity of a plastic banana, but those who know and love them know that they are hurting inside. Most preachers would not want to endorse that either. Joy needs to be real.

True joy is the settled conviction that underneath everything, God's hand sustains us. This is what John desires for His readers. Joy manifests itself in different ways at different times. Sometimes, joy may laugh hysterically, but joy is never a shallow and plastic giddiness that camouflages the struggles of real life. True joy sometimes expresses itself in a sober and steady confidence in God. We are never commanded to giggle in the face of our hardships.

However true joy manifests itself at any given moment, it is always as powerful to sustain a believer in a trial as it is to prompt laughter in moments of delight. And, it is always the fruit of a settled faith about the Gospel – that Jesus died and was raised to life to secure life for His people.

If John lived in our age, nothing would have been more admirable than for him to simply look the other way and not engage himself in a debate over the nature of Christ. After all, if no one ever questions another's point of view, especially, one's religious point of view, isn't that the key to getting along? Does not the world today encourage such tolerance? You live by your truth. I'll live by my truth, and we'll both try real hard not to sound like zealots or bigots.

What a ridiculous and naïve approach to truth! John knew that if any belief structure is to ever culminate in joy, it must be true. Otherwise, it can only crash and burn. The joy that the world brings is tied to our circumstances. When giddy circumstances fade, so does the joy that accompanies them. Real joy is rooted in sound doctrine. God became a man, entering this world as a babe. Then, He grew up and took our sins to a cross. Because He did, we can now possess the eternal life that the Creator intended for us. That's real joy, and only Jesus secures it for us.

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