

Eyewitnesses

Text:

I John 1:1-4

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen *it*, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

Introduction:

This is the opening paragraph of what we call the First Epistle of John. Unlike II and III John that we have just considered, I John does not begin as a letter. In fact, its opening immediately makes us think of the opening to the Gospel of John. While the opening of the Epistle is considerably shorter than the prologue to the Gospel, it does contain numerous common themes. Among them are the beginning, the Word of life, the Incarnation, light, life and witness. All of these themes will be developed within the five chapters of I John. What I want us to see from this passage is first, John's position in writing this document, and secondly his purposes.

I. John's Position

The "Word of Life" is the central theme of this paragraph and of this Epistle. This is a reference both to Jesus Christ, that life which was "with the Father and was manifested (or revealed) unto us, and to the life-giving message about Jesus Christ which John says that he is declaring to us. As we have emphasized all along the way in this study of John's Epistles, the perspective is post-incarnation, post-resurrection. The darkness is passing and the true light which is Jesus Christ is already shining (2:8). Everything has changed because of the revelation of the Word of life, who is the light of the world who now shines in the darkness of human existence bringing to all of us the great hope of eternal life.

But how do we know that this is true? How do we know that Jesus Christ really is the "light of life", the Savior, the source of eternal life? And how do we sort out the conflicting theories about who he was and what he accomplished. These were relevant questions when John was writing and they are still relevant questions.

Verse one supplies an important piece of the answer to this question: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.” I would like to emphasize two things that are present in this verse: first, the reality of the eyewitnesses, and secondly, the plurality of the eyewitnesses.

In answer to the question: “How do I know that the gospel is true?” John, the rest of the New Testament and Christians throughout Christian history have given two primary responses: first, the clearly attested facts about Jesus Christ, especially his resurrection, and secondly, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. We will take up the second line of reasoning later when John does, but here he emphasizes the first line of reasoning. What Christians believe and declare really did happen in human history and these events were done openly and they were openly observed. As surprising as they were, and as they still are, multiple witnesses bore testimony to the fact that they really did occur. Not only did they bear testimony to the fact that these events occurred, but they were so convinced that they had occurred, that they were willing to stake their lives on the hope that derived from their occurrence to the point that many of them died as martyrs. Indeed our English word “martyr” derives from the word that in our text is translated “to bear witness”.

Now martyrdom in itself is no proof of the truth of the thing for which one dies. Many people throughout history have died because they thought something was true, not because it actually was. But in the case of the Apostles, and other witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, it is different. Here we have a group of individuals, who when Jesus was crucified, thought they had been wrong. Their hopes were dashed and they were on the point of giving up and returning to their former way of life. They had been anticipating neither the crucifixion nor the resurrection, and when the first occurred they were completely disheartened until they were overwhelmingly surprised by the second. They were then so transformed and energized by the reality of the risen Christ that they spent the rest of their lives spreading the good news that Jesus Christ had conquered death and brought us the hope of eternal life and salvation to the ends of the earth; most of them eventually suffering martyr’s deaths for that conviction. We might die for someone else’s lie because we are convinced that it is true. But these men all died for their conviction that the good news about Jesus Christ that they were declaring to the world was true. Not one of them ever changed his story, and no one has ever been able to give an adequate explanation of their transformation and consequent accomplishments other than the explanation they themselves gave: “He is risen.”

This is the reason the New Testament puts such an emphasis on eyewitness. In Acts 26, with his life on the line, Paul addresses King Agrippa in his own defense. In verse 26 he says to him: “For the king knows about these things, and to him I speak boldly. For I am persuaded that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this has not been done in a corner.” Peter puts it this way: “For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2Pe 1:16). We could add many other passages, but this is sufficient to communicate the idea. God acted in history for our salvation in a clearly observable way. What he did was witnessed by credible witnesses and they bore testimony with their words and with their lives to God’s acts. It is first upon God’s acts, and then upon the apostolic witness to those acts that our faith is founded.

To the reality of the eyewitness we need to add a word about their plurality. Notice that although it is a single individual who is writing, John, yet he uses the plural pronoun “we”. Who is the “we”? It is John and his fellow eyewitnesses. John was not alone in seeing, hearing, and touching the “Word of life.” This is important because it removes the possibility of hallucination or delusion. Something as momentous as the gospel would be highly doubtful if it were founded upon the testimony of a single witness. One of the possibilities that critics of the gospel and of the resurrection have suggested is that of delusion or hallucination. The fallacy of that theory is that hallucinations by their very nature are private; they are the experience of a single individual. They may be very real to the person experiencing them, but they are obviously delusional to everyone else. This is the reason that God did what he did in the way that he did it. Most of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus were to groups of individuals, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 15 to as many as 500 on one occasion. One person can see most anything, but 12 people do not have a common hallucination, and most certainly not 500.

We can compare this with other religious claims. Islam, for example, is based on Mohammed’s claim that he received a series of revelations from the angel Gabriel which he in turn recited to the people, first of Mecca, and then of Medina. These so-called revelations were then eventually collected and written down into what we now know as the Quran. These revelations were, however, private. No one else saw the angel Gabriel, or heard what he said to Mohammed, and by Mohammed’s own testimony on the occasion of his first revelation he thought he had been visited by a demon. What this amounts to is that there is no supporting testimony. Our belief that Islam is true must rely entirely on whether we believe the testimony of one individual, Mohammed. A second example is Mormonism. The Book of Mormon was allegedly given to Joseph Smith in the following manner. The Angel Moroni appeared to him with golden tablets written in an ancient unknown language. He also gave him urim and thumin which enable him to decipher the golden plates and translate the Book of Mormon. The problem with all of this is that no one ever saw any of it except Joseph Smith. So again we must accept the truth of Mormonism on the basis of a single testimony.

Those who do not want to believe the truth about and the truth of Jesus Christ will always find reasons to believe that it isn’t true, and since it is what it is, there could never be any external evidence that would be so overwhelmingly convincing that all would believe it. In fact this would be contrary to God’s way. God leaves us a choice. This is the reason Pascal said: “There is enough light for those who will believe, and enough darkness for those who refuse to believe”. The deciding factor in faith will always go beyond the historical, but the historical reality of the truth of Jesus Christ is firmly established by reliable eyewitness and should not be a hindrance or a stumbling block to any sincere seeker of salvation in Jesus Christ.

On the other hand, the assurance of faith only comes by acting. John makes this clear to us in an incident that he records in the seventh chapter of his Gospel. Jesus had come to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. He had not come until the middle of the Feast which lasted for a week. Previous to his arrival, he had been the main subject of discussion. Because of the works that he had been doing and the words that he had been speaking, many were convinced that he must be the Messiah of Israel, or at least a prophet sent from God. When Jesus arrives and hears what they are saying about him he offers no easy solution to the dilemma, but does give them a sure way of coming to know whether, he is

indeed the one in whom they should believe or not. In verse 17 he addresses the gathered crowd and says: "If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority". His pronouncement implies two things. First, we cannot know the truth without a desire to embrace and act upon it. The desire to know God is the first step towards knowing him. This is the reason that, for some, no argument, no matter how sound and how convincing, will be sufficient to bring them to faith. The mind must be convinced by argument, but the will the heart must also be converted. Unless we desire to do God's will, we remain in the shadowlands of uncertainty, but if we desire to do God's will, then the mind will be freed to accept the reliability of record of the witnesses to the facts of the gospel.

Secondly, we must act. The proof is in the pudding. "Taste and see", says the Psalmist, "that the Lord is good." We must act on the faith that we have. The more we act upon the truth and the promises of Jesus Christ, the more convinced we will become of their truth. This is of course true with anything that does us good. A man might go all through his life saying to himself, for example "marriage is a good thing, and I would be a better man if I had a wife." He is convinced in his mind, by whatever arguments have appealed to him of the value of marriage, but unless he acts upon that conviction and actually makes an effort to find a wife and woo and win her and marry her he will never know with certainty whether his conviction is right or wrong.

Allow me to conclude by taking this analogy one step further. Let's suppose that our hesitating bachelor finds the courage to pursue his conviction and succeeds. He finds the woman of his dreams, wins her over and marries her. This of course is not a perfect analogy, because there is an unknown element in the analogy that is a certainty when we speak of faith in Jesus Christ. We cannot predict the outcome of his marriage, because we do not know the heart and the character of his bride. He may enter into his marriage with all good faith and make every effort to make it succeed only to have it fail, because in spite of his desire and efforts the bride fails. This will not happen with Christ. He is completely reliable. He is the same "yesterday, today, and forever". He who comes to him will not be cast out, but we must make that step of faith to come to him, we must act upon what conviction we have and as we act our conviction will be strengthened.