

# 1

## The incarnate Word

*Please read 1 John 1:1-4*

### **The historical foundation**

John begins with vital words. He tells us that the Son was from the beginning, but that he revealed himself in human history, and that the apostles had heard, seen and touched him. The Christian faith is not just about ideas. It does not matter too much when Confucius or Buddha lived, nor how they died; what matters is their teaching; not so with Christianity. When the apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of what he had delivered to them first of all, he spoke of Christ who died for our sins according to the Scriptures, of his burial and his rising from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). The Christian faith is not simply a set of ideas about daily living; it is the proclamation of Christ and his coming into the world as a fact of history.

The Son of God existed from the beginning with the Father. He was *'that which was from the beginning'* (1:1)<sup>1</sup> and *'with the Father'* (1:2). Although John does not employ identical phrasing, he is quite deliberately echoing the opening words of his own Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1), which in turn was echoing Genesis 1:1: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' We live in an age when hardly a day goes past without the deity of Christ being denied by some bishop or academic theologian. Christ is portrayed as only a man—at most as a man who reveals God to us. But Scripture tells us that the Son is one with the Father. He is not a man amongst men; he is the Eternal One who existed from the beginning.

The Eternal One did not remain in heaven but became incarnate. John says that *'The life was manifested'* (1:2). The New International Version says, 'The life appeared,' while the Jerusalem Bible translates it as 'That life was made visible.' The Eternal One from heaven took the physical form of a man. He did not simply dwell in the body of a man, but became a man. As John later warned, 'Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God' (4:2). According to Irenaeus, John once met the Gnostic Cerinthus in the bathhouse at Ephesus and immediately fled because Cerinthus was one who denied Christ's incarnation. Like many in the New Age movement today, Cerinthus thought that the divine Christ descended on the man Jesus at his baptism, and then left him before Jesus suffered on the cross. The Christian faith, however, proclaims the reality of the incarnation. We cannot see God because he is Spirit (John 4:24), but God has become man in Christ Jesus.

This is the central claim of the Christian faith. Take away this truth, and the whole of Christianity falls to pieces—Christ's

teachings, his miracles, his death for sinners, his resurrection and his promises to raise the dead, to forgive sinners who have faith in him and to judge the world. Every word he uttered and every deed he undertook rest upon the premise of his being the God-man. If Christ is not the Eternal One made man, he is the most audacious deceiver who ever lived. Confucius and Buddha never claimed to be God in the flesh. Christ did. The foundation of the Christian faith is the God-man Jesus Christ; he himself is the greatest miracle in Christianity.

We can thank God that there is a reliable apostolic witness to so stupendous a person. The apostles were truly privileged, as Christ himself pointed out: 'But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it' (Matthew 13:16-17).

To paraphrase the apostle John, 'We saw him with our eyes, we touched him with our hands and we heard his voice with our ears' (1:1-3; see also 4:14). The apostles were eyewitnesses who, for the most part, sealed their testimony to Christ with their own blood. At the Last Supper John leaned on the bosom of the Lord (John 13:23). Later John saw what happened at the crucifixion, and so he declared of himself that 'He who has seen has testified, and his testimony is true; and he knows that he is telling the truth, so that you may believe' (John 19:35). Thomas would not believe that Christ had risen from the dead until he had seen the print of the nails in Christ's hand and put his finger into the print of the nails, and put his hand into Christ's side which had been pierced by the spear (John 20:25-27).

Christ is not physically walking around on earth today. We can

only know about him through the apostolic writings. That is the way God planned it—Christ prayed for those who would believe in him through the word of the apostles (John 17:20). We have not seen Christ (John 20:29; 1 Peter 1:8), but we are called upon to believe in him as we read of him in the eyewitness accounts of the apostles. Christ is declared to us (1:3); the apostles ‘*bear witness*’ to him (1:2). People who claim to be Christians, with or without clerical garb, may speak glibly of the symbolic value of the resurrection or affirm, in the words of Peter Cameron, Australia’s latest heretic, that ‘God is like a house with many gates, the gates being the different religions.’<sup>2</sup> But the true Christian is very different—he knows that the Eternal One has become man and that the apostles have recorded their testimony to him in authoritative eyewitness accounts.

## **Spiritual consequences**

### **1. Fellowship**

The first consequence of believing this truth is fellowship. John writes so ‘*that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*’ (1:3). Christian fellowship is not simply enjoying oneself with other Christians at a picnic. There is nothing wrong with that, but we need to be clear first as to what constitutes Christian fellowship. Fellowship concerns sharing at the deepest level; it speaks of a partnership. It is more than friendship and, in one sense, it is more than love because we are commanded to love all, even our enemies (Matthew 5:43–48). But righteousness can have no fellowship with lawlessness nor light with darkness (2 Corinthians 6:14). John says that he wants his readers to have fellowship with him (he actually says ‘us’) and with the Father and the Son. We can only have fellowship with someone if we ourselves are joined by saving faith to Christ and the other

person also shares that same faith. Christians enjoy fellowship around the God-man Jesus Christ and the apostolic witness to him. Only those who would receive what John wrote about Christ could share in this fellowship (1:3).

Churches often go astray in this matter. In Australia during the 1960s the Presbyterian Church was involved in negotiations with the Methodist and Congregational Churches regarding a possible union—a union which actually came about in 1977 with the formation of the Uniting Church of Australia. In 1967 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church proposed that union be achieved first; then a commission would draw up a shared confession of faith. That is the wrong order. A Christian does not have fellowship with other professing Christians and then decide what they believe. The apostle John says that we receive the apostolic truth first, then have fellowship on that basis. Evangelical Christians cannot have fellowship with liberal ‘Christians’, as John Stott seems to think.<sup>3</sup> Evangelical Christians must seek first to be used of God to lead their liberal friends into a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Word of God.

Luke tells us that the early Christians ‘continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers’ (Acts 2:42). All four things mentioned there are important, but the order is equally important. Christians may have non-Christian friends, they may enjoy their company in many respects, they may even find in certain circumstances that they are married to non-Christians,<sup>4</sup> but they can only have fellowship with other Christians, with those who also continue steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine. This fellowship cuts across denominations. An evangelical Presbyterian can have fellowship with a Baptist who knows the Lord, but not with a liberal Presbyterian who thinks that all religions lead to heaven.

Fellowship is not based on a shared view of the form of church government, or of baptism, but on Christ and his inerrant Word.

Not only does the Christian enjoy fellowship with other Christians, but he also has fellowship with the Father and with Christ, his Son. Christians can easily fall into the trap of trying to live on a past experience. They might point back, for example, to the time when they were converted to Christ. But John emphasizes here that we are to live day by day in communion with God. We do not simply want to know *about* him; we want to know him. A man who receives a letter from an absent friend is happy, but far happier is the man who actually meets with and enjoys the immediate company of that friend.

## **2. Joy**

The second consequence of believing the apostolic truth is joy: *'And these things we write to you that your joy may be full'* (1:4). Many manuscripts have *'our joy'* rather than *'your joy'* (for example, see the RSV and NIV), but either way it is clear that the Christian life is to be a life of joy (see 3 John 4). In John 15, Christ speaks of himself as the true vine while professing Christians are the branches. He tells them to abide in his love and his commandments and then adds, *'These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full'* (John 15:11).

The Christian life is a joyful life. It is a long way removed from the contrived and brainless kind of joy found in the uncontrolled laughter of the so-called 'Toronto Blessing'. The Bible warns against 'the laughter of the fool' (Ecclesiastes 7:6). Christian joy is not mere excitement, but is a calm, deep and sober happiness which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in us (Galatians 5:22-23). If you profess to belong to Christ, and you

find that you are constantly mournful and depressed, there is something wrong. John's first epistle was written that we might have joy. As Charles Simeon put it, "There are but two lessons for the Christian to learn: the one is, to enjoy God in everything; the other is, to enjoy everything in God."<sup>5</sup>

When you have fellowship with the Father, the Son and with other Christians on the basis of Christ as the Eternal One made flesh, you will know joy. You will know why you are here on earth and you will know where you are going. The world delights in a full bank account or the latest gadget for the house, but the Christian has far more reason for joy—he or she enjoys a right relationship with God and his people. So far we have seen that 1 John was written to reveal Christ to us, that we might have fellowship with God and with those who trust him too, and to experience the fulness of joy through this knowledge. These are good reasons to continue to study John's first epistle.