

“Was Made Manifest”

The first in a Series of Sermons on John’s Epistles

Texts: 1 John 1:1-4; Jeremiah 23:16-24

I know of no religious truth claim quite like the one found in the opening verses of John’s first epistle. According to the author (John)—who claims to be an eyewitness to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ—God himself was manifest in the flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The author knows this to be true, because with his own ears he has heard God in the flesh teach and preach. With his own eyes, John has seen God in the flesh perform miracles, demonstrate his glory, and present himself alive after his resurrection from the dead. With his own hands, John has reached out and touched the very son of God. Even as John opens this epistle, he proclaims to us that we too may have fellowship with that same incarnate word whom John describes throughout this epistle as God manifest in the flesh. Therefore, Christianity is a religion of flesh and blood, anchored in the public record of history, and not in the secret recesses of the sinful human heart.

We begin a new series on the epistles of John. These epistles include the letters known to us as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John. In order to interpret these epistles correctly, it is vital that we know something about the historical background and circumstances which led to their composition. Therefore, I’d like to spend some of our time this morning going through this material before we turn our attention to the first four verses of John’s first epistle, in which John announces his intention to proclaim to us that Jesus is the word of life, God manifest in the flesh.

The historical circumstances which led to the writing of John’s epistles is vastly different from that of the Book of James, or the Epistle of Jude, which we covered earlier this year. James was written about ten years after Christ’s death, resurrection and ascension to a group of persecuted Jewish Christians living throughout Palestine and Syria. John, on the other hand, is writing to a group of house churches in and around Ephesus (made up of Jews and Gentiles). Not only does John compose these epistles as much as a generation later, the churches to which he was writing are facing a number of false teachers who were denying that Jesus was God in the flesh. Sadly, many of those teaching such a thing are men who have departed from the faith. Thus John must deal with an entirely different set of circumstances than James. If James was the earliest letter in the New Testament, the epistles of John are surely among the last documents to be included in the canon of the New Testament.

The case is overwhelming that these three letters were written by John the Apostle. Based upon the grammar and style of these three letters, there can be no doubt that they were written by the same person who composed the Gospel of John.¹ In fact, virtually every line in this epistle demonstrates some sort of similarity to, or dependance upon, the Gospel of John.² Although critical scholars go to unbelievable lengths to argue that these letters were not actually written by John the Apostle, they are not driven to this conclusion because of any evidence, but because of their rather ingenious, but purely speculative

¹ Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary, 1984), xxii.

² Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 757-759.

theories about gospel origins.³ The traditional view that the gospel and the three letters of John all came from John the Apostle, still has far and away the most evidence in its favor.⁴

The early church was unanimous in its testimony that both the gospel and these three letters come from the hand of John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. Recall that John's brother James (who is not the author of the Epistle of James—that epistle came from the other James, the brother of Jesus), also was a member of Jesus' inner circle (along with his brother John, and the Apostle Peter). A number of early Christian writings (written before the end of the first century) allude to John's epistles. Polycarp—who was an elder in the church of Smyrna and who was martyred about 165 A.D.—claimed to have been a disciple of John. He mentions John's teaching about antichrist in an epistle written about 140 A.D. Papias—an elder in the first part of second century in what is now Turkey—also knew of John's epistles. Other church fathers like Irenaeus, Clement, and Tertullian all knew of these epistles, and tie them directly to John the Apostle of whom they all believe to be the author of the fourth gospel.⁵ In fact, there are no challenges to John's authorship of these letters until much, much, later.

The more important questions for us are “when did John write these epistles?” and “did he write them before, or after, he wrote his gospel?” Here again, church tradition is helpful. Tradition holds that in the days immediately before Rome surrounded and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple (in A. D. 70), John along with Philip (the apostle) left Jerusalem and made their way to Ephesus (in Asia Minor), the city with which John was long associated, and where it is believed that he was buried.⁶ According to Luke 21:20, Jesus warned the disciples that when they saw Jerusalem surrounded by armies they were to flee because the destruction of the city was near. Apparently, John heeded Jesus' warning, fled Jerusalem, and lived out the rest of his life in Ephesus, dying of old age at some point during the reign of the Roman emperor Trajan (who reigned from 98-117 A.D.). If John were a young man during the time he was with Jesus, he died as an elderly man (tradition says in his nineties) at some point after his exile to the Island of Patmos, where he has given the vision we know as the Book of Revelation (likely written about 95 A.D.).

Although some scholars tie the date of John's Gospel to the time of upheaval in Jerusalem (before A.D. 70), when there was been need to record the teaching of Jesus to proclaim in the churches, especially after the death of Paul (in Rome about A.D. 66),⁷ I think the evidence points toward a later period, after John had relocated to Ephesus. Given the similarities between the gospel and the epistles, we know that they came from the same hand and were likely within a few years of each other. So, either John's gospel is an expansion of the themes set out earlier in his three epistles, or else the epistles are written to elaborate on themes in the gospel and to correct false teachers who were distorting John's gospel.

³ See, for example; Brown, The Epistles of John, 69-115.

⁴ See, for example Donald Guthrie, New Testament Introduction (Downers Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1990), 858-864; Carson, Moo, Morris, An Introduction to the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 446-450.

⁵ See the discussion in Brown, The Epistles of John, 6-9.

⁶ Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, XXXI.

⁷ See Daniel Wallace's discussion of this @ Bible.org.

The latter seems to me to be the case, especially given John's comments in 1 John 2:19–21, "*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth.*" John assumes the reader of this epistle already knows the truth, an indication that John wrote his gospel first (whether that be in Jerusalem or in Ephesus), and that the epistles were written a bit later, to more fully explain certain things in his gospel that were being distorted by false teachers, people whom John describes as having departed from the faith, and who were doing the work of antichrist.

This brings us to a discussion as to why John wrote these epistles. If these letters were written after the gospel, then John is writing to do two things. One purpose in writing is clearly pastoral. Like the epistles of James and Jude, this letter lacks the formal introduction and closing personal greetings we see in the letters of Paul. One explanation as to why John's epistle comes in the form of a letter—the content and structure of these epistles seems disjointed at first—is that like James, John's first epistle is actually a sermon of sorts, intended to be read in the churches. In fact, as we'll see, a number of scholars believe that both 2nd and 3rd John were cover letters, sent along with this epistle to different destinations.

That this letter is really a sermon is supported in 1 John 5:13 when John spells out his basic purpose in writing. "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*" This virtually echoes the familiar purpose statement of John's gospel, found in John 20:31: "*These [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*" To those who haven't read his gospel, this epistle will give them a helpful summary. To those who have read his gospel previously but have questions about its content, hopefully, this letter will clarify and correct any misunderstandings or questions they may have about what it means to have eternal life. And so in a sense then, John preaches to his reader. He presents the truth in a very direct and positive way, knowing that truth drives out error.⁸

But John also has another important purpose in writing. We can deduce from the contents of this letter, that there were false teachers in and around Ephesus who were actively attempting to deceive God's people. As I mentioned a bit ago, John indicates that some of these false teachers "went out from us," meaning that at one time, apparently, they were professing Christians. Now they are apostates, teaching a dangerous false doctrine. The specific error they were teaching is addressed by John in 2:22—"who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son." Some had believed that Jesus was the son of God, the word made flesh, but had abandoned that belief. John speaks of those who now reject Jesus as God manifest in the flesh as having been seduced by the spirit of antichrist (1 John 4:3). As we will see, what John says about antichrist and what the contemporary prophecy pundits say about antichrist are two very different things!

What led people to embrace this heresy? We do know that Asia Minor (modern Turkey, where Ephesus was located) was home to an early form of Gnosticism. Gnosticism did not become a full-blown religious system for another half-century—but the seeds of this heresy had already been sown in Hellenistic [Greek] soil. Therefore, it is important to understand a few things about Gnosticism so as to understand what John is combating. Gnostic thinkers set up a dualism between pure spirit (the good) and matter (which is evil). The word "gnostic" comes from the Greek word "to know" and refers to the

⁸ Guthrie, New Testament Introduction, 866-868.

secret knowledge that enlightened followers gain, usually through some sort of religious experience taught them by an “enlightened teacher.” Only “insiders” are in the know. Gnostic teachers often claimed to possess secret teachings of Jesus, which is why all the apocryphal gospels appear after this time (i.e., the “lost books”—like the *Gospel of Thomas*) which are attributed to apostles, but are obvious forgeries, and filled with Gnostic and heretical ideas about Jesus.

But the primary issue with which John must deal is the gnostic dualism which holds that matter is evil *because* it is matter. If matter is evil, how can Jesus Christ be God manifest in the flesh? How could God (who is pure spirit) ever take to himself a true human nature (i.e. “flesh”)? The false teachers whom John opposes are troubled by the very idea of Christ’s incarnation—God manifest in the flesh is an impossibility for them. This explains why John emphasizes the point that God was made manifest so emphatically. If flesh is evil because it is material, then how can Jesus take to himself a true human nature? Pure spirit could never exist in an incarnate form. But if Jesus is God manifest in the flesh, the supposed dualism between matter and spirit has been completely overturned. This is why John anchors the very truth and essence of Christianity in the fact of the incarnation. Christianity is true because in Jesus, God was made manifest in the flesh. To deny the incarnation is to embrace the spirit of antichrist.

The Gnostic counterclaim to Christ’s incarnation was to argue that while Jesus was fully God, he only appeared (or manifested himself) in human form. In other words, Jesus was fully God, but he only took the form, or the appearance of a man. This is the ancient heresy called docetism (from the Greek word to “seem”). When John speaks of people denying that Jesus is the Christ, it is to this heresy that he is referring. And John speaks of those who teach such a thing as “antichrists”—hardly a complementary term. This is why the docetic heresy is such a threat to Christianity and why John opposes it so militantly. There is a famous story recounted by Polycarp of how the Apostle John had been in the public bath house in Ephesus and encountered a man named Cerinthus, who was a noted gnostic teacher. John supposedly exclaimed, “Let us save ourselves: the bath house may fall down, for inside in Cerinthus, the enemy of truth.”⁹ John could not countenance being in the same building with the man.

The serious threat posed by this early form of Gnosticism, the possible presence of an arch-heretic like Cerinthus in the area around Ephesus, along the rise of the docetic heresy (Jesus was God, but only appeared in human form) explains why John opens his epistle by making the truth claim that Jesus was God manifest in the flesh. Despite the docetic heresy and the claims made by heretics like Cerinthus, John knows otherwise. John has seen, heard, and touched the very word made flesh.

So with that in mind, we turn to our text, the first four verses of 1 John.

S“*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*”

The first thing to keep in mind as we work through these verses is to notice their strong similarity to the

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4. See the discussion of the possibility of Cerinthus being John’s primary opponent in this epistle; Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 766-771.

prologue of John's gospel (vv. 1-14). In the epistles, as in the gospel, John speaks of the "word of life." In his epistle, John not only opens by focusing upon Jesus as the word of life and God manifest in the flesh, but he closes with this same theme as well. In 1 John 5:20, John concludes this epistle with these words. *"And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."* So, from the opening words to the closing, John is concerned to remind his reader of what they already know (not what they need to learn from some "enlightened teacher)—that in the person of Jesus Christ, who is true God and true man—God came to earth, to save us from our sins. This is all the more remarkable when we consider a passage such as Jeremiah 23:24 (from our Old Testament lesson), in which we read God declaring of himself, *"Do I not fill heaven and earth?"* Yes, he does. And now in the word of life, that same God was made manifest in the flesh. In the incarnation of Jesus, the transcendent God becomes immanent and even dwells among us (John 1:14).

While John will have a great deal to say about the Christian life—especially the need for God's people to love one another, he begins by reaffirming the humanity of Jesus. If we do not understand who Jesus is, then we cannot understand what he came to do. And if we don't understand both his person and work, then we will quickly fall prey to that notion which characterizes all false religion, our works earn favor with God. No, what we do as Christians flows out from our faith in Christ—who is the one who gives us eternal life as a free gift. We do not find salvation through some sort of quest to discover the hidden mysteries which Jesus came to reveal to a few "enlightened ones." John's whole point is that salvation comes to us publicly in the word who was made manifest—hence John's emphasis upon seeing, hearing, and touching the one who gives life in verse 1—*"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life."* A phantom, docetic Jesus cannot be touched. Recall the wonderful statement uttered by Jesus as recorded in Luke's gospel. *"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have"* (Luke 24:39).

Verse 2 is an elaboration upon John's prior comment. *"The life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us."* The life (which is a reference to the eternal life that Jesus gives) was made manifest (was revealed) in his earthly ministry. John's connection of this life to the word ties this to Christ's person as well as to Christian preaching of that word, i.e., the gospel.¹⁰ John has made this point earlier in his gospel—when he recounts Jesus speaking of himself in these terms *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life"* (John 14:6). In chapter 3 of this epistle, John ties this directly to Jesus' messianic mission. In verses 5 and 8 of 1 John 3 we read, *"You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. . . . Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."* Jesus "appeared" not as a ghost, or as an apparition, but was revealed (or was made manifest) in the flesh.

Jesus did not come to reveal some sort of esoteric knowledge to a few enlightened followers (as is typical of Gnosticism). Rather, Jesus was publicly revealed ("was made manifest") to do what was necessary (die upon the cross, live a perfect life, and cause us to be raised to newness of life in regeneration when we are "born again") so that we who were dead in sin, might have "life" (i.e. eternal life). The public and physical nature of Christ's redemptive work explains John's emphasis upon having seen this with his own eyes. Notice too that throughout this section John speaks in the first person plural—"we." He does

¹⁰ Smalley, 1, 2, 3, John, 6

this to emphasize the fact that he (and the disciples, and countless others) were eyewitnesses to Jesus' earthly ministry. Jesus didn't just "appear" in human form. He took to himself a true human nature. Jesus walked, talked, laughed, ate, went to the bathroom, became tired, slept, and even suffered. Jesus was no mere docetic phantom! He was God in human flesh! The one who brings eternal life, comes to us in human history.¹¹ John saw him, heard him, and even touched him.

But not only did John see this life revealed in Christ with his own eyes, he has already proclaimed this message of eternal life (in his gospel) and will do so again in this epistle. The whole point of Christ revealing himself in this way is so that his disciples might proclaim this message (the word of life) to the ends of the earth. If in Jesus God's people have eternal life, then God's people must bear witness to this same Jesus, by proclaiming both his person (true God and true man) and his work (he came to bring eternal life, having made a propitiation for our sins—cf. 1 John 2:2; 4:10). God was manifest in the flesh so that his people might proclaim this word of life to the nations. This is why the gospel is called "good news." Good news is something to be proclaimed. And according to John, proclaiming the good news is the way people receive eternal life!

This becomes clear in verse 3, when John points out "*that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*" John has seen him, heard him, touched him, and proclaimed him. The reason? So that sinners may receive eternal life, believe in him, and then enjoy fellowship with both Father and his Son Jesus, as well as with all those who have embraced this word of life by faith. That word (which always was, and was with the Father for all eternity) has now been proclaimed. And those who have found in Jesus the way (to God), the truth (Jesus accomplished all of these things in history) and the life (indeed, Jesus himself creates eternal life through the proclamation of the gospel), now enjoy "fellowship" (koinonia) with all those who have been given life. As John will put it in verse 20 of chapter 5, "*And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.*" All those who have life are "in him" and enjoy a bond of love and charity they could never know apart from Christ. John wants nothing more than for his readers to share in this fellowship.

And so John can say in verse 4, "*And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.*" This is John's hope as he writes. This is the blessing God has promised to his people. That God was manifest in the flesh is the basis of both our fellowship with God as well as with each other. As some have pointed out, John's words have an eschatological focus as well. One day that fellowship which we presently enjoy "in him," will be complete when we are in the presence of the Father and his Son Jesus. That is the ultimate and consummate blessing of eternal life. And while we know joy in this life because of Christ, when all is brought to completion, then our joy will be complete. What a glorious and remarkable promise. We will enjoy the most intimate and perfect fellowship with each other because of our mutual fellowship with the Father and the Son in their very presence. But this is the very thing the false teachers deny. This is why John bears direct witness to the word of life, God manifest in the flesh.

What then do we say by way of application?

From John's comments both here and in his gospel, it is clear that eternal life is tied to the fact

¹¹ John Stott, The Epistles of John, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 61-63.

that the very eternal word was made flesh and was made manifest in human history. Jesus doesn't save us by revealing to us "secret knowledge" so that we can discover the hidden path to enlightenment. Jesus did not merely "appear" in human form so as to impress us with his miraculous powers. As B. B. Warfield once pointed out, Christianity is unique among the world's religions because its major doctrines (like the incarnation) are also historical facts (that which John heard, saw, and touched). If John heard, saw and touched these things, then Christianity is true. If he didn't, then Christianity is false. It is that simple. Either God was made manifest in the flesh, or he wasn't. If he was, then Jesus alone is the word of life.

And the reason why the word of life was made manifest in the flesh is so that we might have eternal life. A docetic phantom cannot shed blood and offer up himself as a propitiation for our sins. A docetic Jesus cannot be born under the law to fulfill all righteousness by his perfect and faultless obedience to the law of God. No, this requires God to come in the flesh. In order for Jesus to be the word of life, he must take to himself a true human nature. He must do for us what he could not do for ourselves. And this is the message of John. And how do we know his message is true? Certainly not because someone has revealed to us the secrets about Jesus. No, we know this to be true because John saw him. John heard him. John touched him. And John says "*that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life.*" And that word of life is Jesus.