

# "That You May Believe: An Editorial"

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In this issue of 'Themelios', both Steve Motyer's Guest Editorial and the extract from David Wenham's booklet have focused on the Gospel of John. Irrespective of the detailed state of contemporary scholarship, and despite any protests from conservative scholars, many still have the impression that John is a comparatively unreliable source for the life and teaching of Jesus, if we want are actual happenings and spoken words. The interpretation of John is important if we want to preserve the traditional christological and trinitarian teaching of the Church. But we should also note that John is the most epistemologically self-conscious of the Gospel writings, indeed, of all the New Testament documents. There is a marked and sustained interest in believing and in knowing – the grounds for our believing and the causes of our knowing. The structure of a religious epistemology that is informed by the Bible comes to light with peculiar clarity in this Gospel.

'...These [things] are written that you may believe...', says John, and tells us in whom and for what purpose we must believe.<sup>1</sup> Following so closely after the words 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed', John's eternal evangel at first sounds like an invitation to a faith that does not depend on sight. It is not. Our faith does not depend on our sight, but it does depend on the sight of others. Were that not the case, John's concern to document the thoroughly empirical grounds on which faith arose would be hard to understand. We must clarify three points here.

1. In saying that our faith depends on what others saw (and heard) we are talking about its logical structure, not of individual psychology and subjectivity. Faith is doubtless formed and fostered in a variety of ways corresponding to the stages of life, yet it derives its objective justification from its grounding in testimony received and accepted. This is fundamentally testimony to what is seen and heard. No Gospel writer attends to the empirical basis of faith more than does John.<sup>2</sup>

2. In speaking of faith 'depending' on the sight of others and of the 'basis' of faith, one is not saying that seeing and hearing constitute faith or that they guarantee faith. Believing is other and more than seeing and hearing; seeing and hearing may not generate faith. Nor is faith principally regarded as the most rational or logical of steps to take on the basis of what is seen and heard. The empirical constitutes a *sign* not a *demonstration* of the truth of Jesus Christ, although those who receive the sign have some explaining to do, if they fail to follow where it leads.

3. In referring to faith based on, while not equated with, or very strictly entailed by, what others saw and heard, one is not presuming that hearers of the word occupy some neutral ground, so that the intellect naturally attends to the testimony and faith takes its flight equally naturally. John consistently draws our attention to what is called the *volitional* element in faith. That is, the will of the person, the disposition of the heart, the spiritual openness of the hearer all help to determine what is attended to, what is received, what is believed.

These three things need to be kept in mind as we speak to others that they may believe. They can be glossed as follows.

1. Enormous sophistication has gone into academic biblical studies over the last centuries. We must certainly be alert to the varieties of literary genre, the subtleties of apostolic craftsmanship, and the whole range of disciplines and informed speculations that inform the field of NT, including the study of the Gospels. But it remains a stubborn fact that the authors show every intention of issuing reports of empirical happenings, not, of course, from some allegedly neutral standpoint, but from the perspective of faith. It is not untutored and plebeian innocence, but a matter of solidly scientific observation, to say of this witness what has often been said of the claims of Christ: it is either badly muddled, tortuously deceiving or substantially reliable.<sup>3</sup>

2. If the witness is credible, we are dealing with evidence that demands a verdict, rather than a compelling logical demonstration. But that is no surprise. Informed personal commitment, not strict logical demonstration, is the goal of the witness. Logical demonstration engages only the faculty of reasoning; it fastens on to that to which reason must or must not assent, not what the person must or must not do. Faith is not quite like grasping the last proposition in the chain of deductions, like a train that moves on from one stop to another until it arrives at the terminus. Rather, it contemplates what is signified on the basis of the sign, and is finally confronted with the life that is the light of man.

3. If we insist that belief and knowledge in things religious have to do with the will and the disposition of the heart, this is not a case of special pleading, nor an indication that arguments have run out of steam. On the contrary, such an insistence is consistent with other facets of human experience. Of certain realities, Baron von Hugel once said:

*We get to know such realities slowly, laboriously, intermittently, partially; we get to know them, not inevitably nor altogether apart from our dispositions, but only if we are sufficiently awake to care to know them, sufficiently generous to pay the price continuously which is strictly necessary if this knowledge and love are not to shrink but to grow. We indeed get to know them - in*

*proportion as we become less self-occupied, less self-centred, more outward-moving, less obstinate and insistent, more gladly lost in the crowd, more rich in giving all we have, and especially all we are, our very selves.<sup>4</sup>*

These words lead us to recall a sentence written by Nietzsche, one of the most strident and effective critics of Christianity in the modern era. 'What is now decisive against Christianity is our taste, no longer our reasons.'<sup>5</sup> Perhaps some will quarrel with the 'now': has it not always been so, and is that not presupposed in what is said about the volitional aspects of believing? Perhaps so. But does the relation of taste to reason and to the possibilities of faith remain constant? Can a generation not be peculiarly addicted to taste or to a peculiar taste? And do tastes change? At any rate, we must be as sensitive to the perceived or real ethos, fragrance, flavour of our Christianity as to its logic, grounds and rationale.

The times they are a-changing. The pressures of pluralism and relativism; widespread moral anarchy; the intrusive presence of technologies, managerial styles and sensory stimuli, mean that the paths of the mind appear to be more varied, less predictable, less clearly delineated than some of us have ever found before. Good can come of this in our sharing of the faith, for we are forced to get to know persons as persons and not treat them as geometrically-calculable animated spiritual and intellectual packages.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, we may fail to gauge the extent and the angle of people's alienation from the gospel. The logical structures within which we think through our own faith must be derived, as far as can be, from the gospel and the Scriptures. Hence our reference to John. But we need to understand the detailed morphology of human lives in the late second millennium, as well. '...He knew what was in a man' said John, of Jesus (2.25). It has been well remarked that Jesus did not just know what was in mankind; he knew what was in the man in front of him.

In his *Ethics*, written many decades ago, Bonhoeffer refers to Soloviev's story of the Antichrist where the heads of the persecuted churches, in the last days before the return of Christ, 'discuss the question of what is for each of them the most precious thing in Christianity.' The decisive answer is:

*'Jesus Christ Himself. Only he who shares in Him has the power to withstand and to overcome. He is the centre and the strength of the Bible, of the Church, and of theology, but also of humanity, of reason, of justice and of culture. Everything must return to Him; it is only under His protection that it can live. There seems to be a general unconscious knowledge which, in the hour of ultimate peril, leads everything which desires not to fall victim to the Antichrist to take refuge in Christ'.<sup>7</sup>*

This is a fine christology and encouraging vision, but what do we make of the last sentence? How much 'unconscious

knowledge' will we discover today? Do we find nothing in the end? Or is there something worse than the void? Just what do we have to drill through to find it? Or can we find a route that avoids the drilling? The questions admittedly strike a rhetorical note; they are actually quite humdrum, we may say, and a little exposure to the Scriptures will provide some answers. We certainly should mine the Scriptures for answers and this is a mine which will ever yield a greater wealth than we imagined possible. What became flesh, John tells us, is the Word through whom the universe was created, in whom it finds its coherent meaning, from whom emanates all human wisdom for, as other biblical authors will remind us, the Word and Wisdom are one.

Faith, then, humbly grounded in the report of unlearned and learned folk alike, is equally poised to contemplate the high reaches of reality in worshipping thought and to enter into the minutiae of the neighbour's circumstance in loving service. It labours incessantly that the world may believe. If its labour is a labour of love, its love's labour will not be lost.

<sup>1</sup> John 20.31, although there is a textual variant.

<sup>2</sup> We are thinking here of the presentation of the Gospel as a whole; Luke, of course, has a celebrated early announcement that critical research of empirical testimony is the basis of the ordered crafting of his own account (1.3)

<sup>3</sup> That is, Jesus was, spoke, and acted, as reported. Reference to 'substantial' reliability in this context does not, of course, preclude belief in detailed reliability. I do not see how our heightened sensibilities about literary genre etc. forces us to modify this simple schema very much.

<sup>4</sup> F.von Hugel, 'On the Preliminaries to Religious Belief and on the Facts of Suffering, Faith and Love' in *Essays and Addresses on the Philosophy of Religion* (London: Dent, 1924) p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> *The Gay Science*, tr. W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974) III.132

<sup>6</sup> This is not to deny, however, that attitudes can be trans-culturally remarkably homogeneous.

<sup>7</sup> New York: Macmillan, 1965, p.56