

Why do we Believe?

by Ray C. Stedman

We are approaching the close of this little letter of the Apostle John, whose task was the calling back of the church to foundational things. He is John the Mender, who, when the Lord Jesus called him to the ministry, was found mending his nets. He concludes this letter with certain final notes of positive conviction. The last few verses repeat again and again the little phrase, we know. It is that note of positive assurance that is always a key mark of true Christianity, quite in contrast to the spirit of the age in which we live. Christians are to be dogmatic about certain fundamental things because they have found him who is the truth. We know certain things and we are to say them forthrightly, unabashedly, without any sense of shame and hesitation.

Now we do not know everything, and if we give the impression we do we are distorting the faith. But there are things we know – certain essential facts of faith.

In the early days of Mt. Hermon there came out from the East a well-known Bible teacher named Dr. Joseph Conrad. He rather startled the audience at Mt. Hermon in one of the summer conferences by saying something like this: “Dear friends, I want you to know at the very beginning of my ministry with you that I am not dogmatic about the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ. I am not dogmatic about the bodily resurrection of Christ, nor am I at all dogmatic about the substitutionary atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ.” At this point an unbelieving gasp went up from that conservative audience. But then, marshaling all his forces with great intensity, he said, “No, I am not dogmatic; I am bulldogmatic!”

There is something of that note of intensity conveyed to us by the closing notes of John’s letter. “I am bulldogmatic,” he seems to be saying, “about certain fundamental issues.”

Now as you know, the spirit of our age is that nothing is certain, everything is tentative. We are told we cannot know anything for sure. Unfortunately that spirit has permeated the Christian church, and we find men standing in pulpits and declaring such nonsense all over our land and the world, in the name of Jesus Christ. According to Philip Wylie, we Americans are rapidly becoming a “nothing” people, “a generation of zeros,” because we do not believe anything. We do not think anything can be believed. This is the fundamental philosophy of the age in which we live.

Yet strangely enough, with this most unreasonably inconsistent, the very same people who teach this kind of philosophy, oftentimes turn around and accuse Christians of exercising what they call “blind faith,” i.e., faith without any basis in fact. They charge us with accepting the Scriptures by an act of will. That we simply choose to believe them without any reasonable evidence for it. They say to us, rather condescendingly at times, “I would love to believe like you do, but I simply cannot.” By that they imply that they cannot so divorce their will from their reason and act so unreasonably as to believe a thing without any basis in fact.

I hope you recognize that all of this argument is so much eyewash. The whole genius of the Christian faith is that it rests upon facts. These facts are the acts of God in history, the incontrovertible movements of God which cannot be explained away or dismissed by a mere wave of the hand. They are imbedded in the record of the human race. A careful survey of these acts of God in history actually serves to compel belief; so that it is not belief that is unreasonable, it is unbelief. One must struggle and exert painful effort in order to convince oneself that these facts are not true. Thus John, as he comes now to the close of this letter, quickly surveys for us the evidence for our faith. He declares why it is that we believe what we be-

lieve, using, for the sake of brevity, certain very eloquent symbols.

This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree. {1 Jn 5:6-8 RSV}

Those who use the King James Version will note that there is a verse apparently omitted from the Revised Standard Version text, Verse No. 7. Most of you already know that this verse is properly omitted because it has no manuscript support earlier than the 15th century A. D. The King James translators did not have access to the number of manuscripts that are available today and therefore did not recognize this. But it is universally agreed today among Bible scholars that the statement concerning three witnesses in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, is not a genuine part of the Scriptures and so is omitted from the RSV text. The RSV, you will note, takes part of Verse 6 and makes it Verse 7 so that the numbering carries right through.

Now as John declares in this text, there are three witnesses. Two of them are external and historical, and one of them is internal and personal; but all three are intricately related together, forming a marvelous fabric of testimony that is powerful in the extreme. Proverbs says a three-fold cord is not quickly broken, and here are three mighty testimonies to the fundamental facts upon which Christian faith rests. But faith is not a set of facts. Faith is acting upon the facts which you believe. It is necessary to interject that element of activity before belief becomes faith. Faith, however, rests upon facts, and here are the three facts.

There are those, first of all, symbolized by the water and the blood. You will note that these mark events which lay at the beginning and end of our Lord's public ministry on earth: the water of baptism at the beginning, the blood of the cross at the end. Christ, himself, is the centering ground of Christian faith. This is always true. It is Jesus Christ himself who is the supreme fact upon which Christian faith rests. But two unique qualities mark his life, symbolized here by the water and the blood.

The water, of course, refers to that event at the Jordan River when our Lord went down to be baptized by John the Baptist. After he came up out of the water, the Holy Spirit came upon him in the form of a dove and a voice from heaven declared, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," {Matt 3:17, Mark 1:11}. That event thus declared the sinlessness of his life.

The water of baptism was the water of cleansing. For the sin-defiled members of the human race it was necessary as a symbolic representation of what God did when a sinner returned to his Lord. There must be a cleansing, a forgiveness of sin. But the Lord Jesus did not personally require such a cleansing, and it was this that gave pause to John the Baptist when he saw the Lord coming toward him. He said, "Are you coming to be baptized of me? Why, I ought to be baptized of you," {cf, Matt 3:14}. And you remember Jesus said to him, "Allow it to be so, for thus it behooves us to fulfill all righteousness" {cf, Matt 3:15}, i.e., "Go ahead anyway, because I am taking the place of man, as representative man, and as representative man I am assuming the burden of guilt and sin for the whole race. Therefore, I need to be baptized." Yet the Father's voice made very clear that there was not one stain, one spot in himself, to mar the record. Water, therefore, was the sign of a perfect humanity. Here was one who all his life had done that which pleased the Father and who had never once stepped outside the bounds of the Father's will. During his public ministry again and again he held up his stainless record before his enemies, challenging them to find any fault in it. "Which of you," he says, "convinces me of sin?" {cf, John 8:46}. It is this unblemished, spotless record that is testimony of a life that came from God. How else can you explain the person of the Lord Jesus Christ if he be not from God, God manifest in the flesh? This is part of the proof of our faith, this sinless life.

"Ah, yes," says the liberal, "I am willing to accept that. I believe that he came as the perfect example for us to imitate. If we simply follow the life of Jesus and imitate his example, we too will live the kind of life that is pleasing to God." But notice that John, in symbol, denies that. He says, "He came not with water only, but with water and blood." A sinless life is insufficient for faith. It does not really help us. To look at the spotless, stainless life of the Son of God is the most condemning thing I know. It shames me, it discour-

ages me. I could never approach that kind of living, and I do not know anyone else who can. No, faith requires something else. It requires an atoning death, it requires blood. To the Hebrew mind this is most eloquent, speaking of life poured out, forfeited life. It is life that no longer has the right to live, blood poured out as a sacrifice.

Yet again, it was not for himself. He was put to death, but not for his own sins, but for the sins of the world. The death of Jesus only makes sense as we see that it was for others. As the prophet Isaiah predicted,

He was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was laid upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. {cf, Isa 53:5 KJV}

It was even as those passersby threw in his face as he hung upon the cross. In unconscious irony they cried out, "He saved others; himself he could not save," {cf, Matt 27:42}. How true it was. His life was for others, he laid down his life on our behalf.

It is this, John says, that is the ground of faith. How else can you explain the fact that the Gospels give the greatest part of their account to the record of the death of Jesus? Though his words captured the attention of men, for crowds followed him everywhere to hear him, and though those words still startle and amaze men as they read them today, yet the focus of the gospel is not upon the teachings of Jesus but upon the death of Jesus. That last memorable week, with all its significant events, occupies the greatest part of each of the Gospels. The attention of heaven and earth seems to be focused upon the mighty event when the Son of God hung upon a bloody cross on a hill outside Jerusalem. The sun became black with darkness for those many hours.

This becomes an essential ingredient of the good news that Christians declare. Paul said, "He [Christ] died for our sins," {1 Cor 15:3}. That is the point of it, *for our sins*. If we do not add that, the death of Christ is a pointless experience. There is no adequate explanation for the cross, apart from this. Thus, the sinless life of Jesus and his death on behalf of others can only be explained in terms of God entering human history to do a most remarkable thing on behalf of men. They are sturdy facts upon which faith can rest.

But beyond these two historical evidences, John says, there lies yet a third: that mysterious, subjective, yet powerfully compelling evidence of the witness of the Spirit within. By this he means that when the story of the sinless life and the cross is told, whether it be told simply or with eloquence, wherever the story is told the Spirit of God works in the hearts of many to make it extremely personal. Such listeners suddenly see themselves as involved in the incidents, as caught up in the mighty sweep of these events and becoming part and parcel of them. The whole meaning of it becomes personalized for them so it is no longer, "Christ died for the world," but "Christ died for me." That is the witness of the Holy Spirit.

John Newton, who wrote so many of our hymns, was, for many years of his life a reckless, dissolute reprobate, living the wildest sort of life, until he became, at last, a slave even to slaves. With his health ruined, he was on a voyage back to England from Africa when, in the midst of a storm, God spoke to his heart and he found the Christ he had long rejected. He became one of the outstanding spokesmen of the gospel of his day, and he put his own testimony in these simple words.

In evil long I took delight
Unawed by shame or fear
Until a new object met my sight
And stopped my wild career.

I saw One hanging on a tree
In agony and blood
Who fixed his languid eyes on me
As near His cross I stood.

Sure, never till my latest breath
Will I forget that look
It seemed to charge me with His death
Though not a word He spoke.

My conscience owned and felt my guilt
And plunged me in despair
I saw my sins His blood had spilt
And served to nail Him there.

A second look He gave
Which said, "I freely all forgive.
My blood was for thy ransom paid
I died that thou may'st live."

That is it, you see. That is the witness of the Spirit, that personalizing of the work of the cross that makes it come home to the individual in power. When the word of pardon is believed, the Spirit also gives a wonderful sense of forgiveness, a lifting of the burden of guilt, the sense of washing away of sins, and the peace of God is spoken to a guilty heart.

This is perhaps the greatest need of humanity in our day. Billy Graham said that when he was in London one of the heads of a mental hospital said to him, "Half of our patients could be immediately dismissed if they could obtain somehow the assurance of forgiveness." Forgiveness is the work of the Spirit. "His Spirit," Paul writes to the Romans, "bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," {cf, Rom 8:16}. That is an internal, personal, present confirmation of the one great fact declared by the sinless life (the water), and the atoning death (the blood), of the Lord Jesus Christ. These three mighty witnesses agree in one. What do they agree to? That, "he who knew no sin [that is his sinless life] was made sin for you [that is his blood], in order that we might be made the righteousness of God in him [that is the testimony of the Spirit]," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}. There you have the gospel, resting, you can see, upon these inescapable, historical events.

Therefore, far from faith being unreasonable, it is actually unbelief that is so, as John goes on now to argue in Verses 9 and 10.

If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has borne witness to his Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son. {1 Jn 5:9-10 RSV}

One of the commonest experiences of life is to act upon the word or testimony of another person, oftentimes even that of a stranger. We will do sometimes the most amazing things in response to the simple declaration of a person we have never met before.

Last April I had the privilege of leading a group of pilgrims to the Holy Land. We were innocents abroad, indeed. Most of us had never before been there, including the leader, and we did not

know what we would run into. But we had been given assurance, by means of a letter from a person in New York, whom I had not met, that someone would meet us at every place we landed and would help us to get through customs and take us through all the intricacies of entering a foreign land, booking hotels, etc. On the strength of that letter some twenty-five of us committed ourselves to the tender mercies of a stranger, and discovered that it all proved true. Everywhere we went, someone showed up to help us. We did not know whether to look for male or female or anything about how they would look, but the word of man proved true, and on the basis of it we committed ourselves to a considerably risky venture.

Now, is not God more dependable than man? That is John's argument. If you will take the word of a stranger and act on it, can you not believe the Word of God, especially when he has caused the testimony to be written down by the eyewitnesses of these events? In addition, when faith is exercised on the basis of that objective testimony, there is given a confirmation of the Spirit within which makes it wholly believable. Can you not exercise faith on that basis?

"Well," John says, "if you refuse to do that, then you are treating God as though he were a liar." You insult God if you do not believe the record he has given.

Suppose someone should come up to you and you would make to them some statement of fact, and they would say to you, "Well, you know, I'm trying to believe you." How would you regard that? Would you not take that as an insult? Would you not feel that they were definitely questioning your integrity, your character? If they say, "I wish I could believe what you say," would you not say, "What do you mean? Why can't you believe what I say? Do you think I'm a liar?" How much greater cause has God to say that to us when he has given us the record, indelibly engraved in history, and confirmed by the witness of the Spirit within? Yet men have the temerity to say to him, "Oh, I'm trying to believe. I wish I could believe. Oh, that I could convince myself that this is true!"

John moves at last to the heart of the whole matter in Verses 11-13:

And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He

who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life.

I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life. {1 Jn 5:11-13 RSV}

What is he saying?

Here is the testimony, he says. The whole point of the matter is that God has given to man the thing he lacks, eternal life. Not life in quantity, although it does include that – it is endless life – but primarily life in quality. Life abundant, life exciting. Life that is adventurous, full, meaningful, relevant, all these much-abused terms that are so widely used today. Life that is lived to the fullest, that is God’s gift to man. He who has the Son has life, because the Son is life. That is the whole point of this letter.

Dr. H. A. Ironside used to tell of a man who had great doubts about whether or not he was a Christian. He had been troubled by certain theorists who said that God only elected certain individuals to be saved; if you were not of the elect there was no chance for you. The perfectly proper Biblical truth of election had been distorted to extreme proportions, and he felt that there was no way that he could know whether or not he was among the elect. One day he went home after hearing a sermon on the verse, “As many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God. He that believes on the Son has eternal life,” {cf, John 1:12, 3:36}. He got down on his knees and said, “Now, Father, I want to settle this question. Show me whether I have eternal life, or not.” And opening his Bible, his eyes fell on these verses, “He who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son.” He said in his prayer, “Father, I don’t want to make you a liar and it says here that if I don’t believe the testimony that you give about the son I’m making you a liar. Now I don’t want to do that. What is the testimony?” And he read the next part, “This is the testimony,” and he stopped right there. He was so overwrought that he put his thumb over the rest of the verse and said, “Lord, it says here that if I don’t believe the testimony that you gave concerning your Son, I’m making you a liar, and I don’t want to make you a liar. I believe that I’ve got what that testimony is right under my thumb here, and I’m

going to take my thumb off and read it, and Lord, help me to believe it, because I don’t want to make you a liar.” With great trepidation he raised his thumb and read, “... that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son.” All of a sudden it came home to him. John makes it so clear, “He who has received the Son has the life; and he who has not received the Son has not the life.” No matter what else he may have, no matter how religious he may be, if he has not received the Son he does not have life. He entered into peace and became a preacher of this great truth.

This is the testimony. God has given us something, and it is wrapped up in a person, the Son of God. If you have received the Son, you have his life – manifested, of course, by the things John has been talking about in this letter: righteousness, truth, and love. If you have not received the Son of God, no matter how earnest you are, no matter how devoted you have been, no matter how religiously intent you have been, seeking to do everything you could think of to please God, if you do not have the Son, you do not have life. That is the issue, is it not? Either you have him, or you do not have him; either you know Jesus Christ, or you do not know him. There is no middle ground, it is one or the other.

So, John concludes,

I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, [in order] that you may know that you have eternal life. {1 Jn 5:13 RSV}

The purpose of this letter is to move us from doubt to certainty – “that we may know that we have eternal life.”

What about you?

As we come to the Lord’s Table, the very symbols speak to us of the great historical facts upon which our faith rests. But there is no value in the elements, there is nothing that will give you help by eating this bread or drinking this wine. They do nothing. They’re but symbols. Have you received the Son? That is the question.

He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. {1 Jn 5:12 RSV}

Prayer:

In these quiet moments, as we conclude the service, our Father, we pray that each one here may ask himself the question: "Do I have the Son?" For the whole issue of life is in that one question. The only way that we can receive the great gift that human nature lacks, the lost secret of our humanity, the only means by which our human lives can ever make sense, is by receiving the Son of God. "He that has the Son has

life; he that does not have the Son of God does not have life." Grant us now that in this moment, anyone who has not received the Son of God will respond to his wonderful invitation, "Behold! I stand at the door and knock; if any one hear my voice and open the door I will come in and will sup with him, and he with me." May many quietly, silently, now open the door of their hearts saying, "Father, send the Lord Jesus; Lord Jesus, come into my life and be my Lord." We ask in his name, Amen.