

Doctrine With a Face

Our beliefs are about a Person.

“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

Polycarp, well known to Christians as a stunningly brave second-century martyr, used to tell a (perhaps legendary) story about the apostle John, recorded in the writings of an early church father named Irenaeus.

“There are also those who heard from him,” Irenaeus wrote of Polycarp, “that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within.’”*

Why John Ran

If it actually happened (it may be mere legend), what would make John flee, declaring Cerinthus an “enemy of the truth”? Cerinthus was a well-known early heretic who taught that Jesus was merely human; there was no miraculous virgin birth, and he claimed that creation was the work of a lesser god. He is probably best known for teaching that Jesus became Messiah at His baptism, but then as He went to the cross, the divine power that enabled His ministry departed, leaving behind a mere man to die.

Such errors became increasingly common through the early centuries of Christianity. They are, of course, completely contrary to everything the apostles had taught as they carried the gospel to the Roman Empire. Although John did not write his Gospel as a polemic against heretics, his opening words *do* serve as a corrective for those who might be tempted to demote Christ. They are among some of

the most beautiful found in the Bible, asserting that Creation was the work of none other than Christ Himself. “All things were made through Him,” John reminds us, “and without Him nothing was made that was made” (John 1:3).

John identifies Jesus as the *Logos*, a word that Greek philosophers would have found immensely interesting. The Greeks used the word differently than John did; to the Greek mind, *Logos* was the overarching, immovable principle that held the universe together, an unchanging constant behind an ever-moving cosmos. John was describing something different; he was drawing on the Scriptures to reveal Christ. But a Greek reader new to Christianity might have paused at John’s declaration: The God who created the universe and holds it together, the One who gave us life, has made a personal appearance on this planet—as a genuine flesh-and-blood human being. The Word became flesh. To a Greek mind, that would have been a revolutionary thought.

Reading the Bible Correctly

Jesus is the ultimate truth that lies behind everything we experience with our senses. The Greeks were unwittingly searching for Christ, as many people still do—but so were God’s covenant people. Inspired by the Spirit, John was careful to include these words from Jesus: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).

Academics from various traditions have long debated the best way to interpret the Scriptures, but in this statement Jesus gives us an all-important key: If you’re not seeing Christ in the words of the Bible, you’re reading it incorrectly. If Jesus is not the source and center of everything, you’ve got it wrong. If you attempt to understand our fundamental doctrines apart from the person and character of Christ, you’re going to get it wrong. If you—like ancient heretics—try to demote Christ . . . Again, you’ll never grasp the essential message of the Bible.

The Sabbath, after all, is not merely a rule; it’s an invitation to rest in the presence of Christ. The doctrine of baptism is an invitation to crucify the old self and begin a new life surrendered to the One who both made the universe and continues to hold it together. Principles for a healthy life were not given merely to extend our lifespans; the Bible is the operating manual for the human body, produced by the divine Manufacturer, and it reveals a way to move closer to God’s original design.

Writing to the church in Colossae, which was not terribly far from John’s home in Ephesus, Paul explained the essence of good doctrine. Speaking of the mystery being revealed to the church in the gospel, he wrote, “To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus” (Col. 1:27, 28).

The Point of Our Beliefs

All of this teaches us something important about our mission in a world living on the verge of the kingdom. Our prophetic movement was not born of committee deliberations, although committees certainly did meet to wrestle with the teachings of the Bible. It was rather born of Christ Himself, the very one on whom our existence depends. Pay close

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attention to the way Scripture describes our work and the setting in which it is said to take place:

“Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads” (Rev. 14:1). Without the Lamb, there is no Seventh-day Adventist Church. Without the Lamb, there is no message, because He is the center of it. To preach our doctrines apart from the person of Jesus is to get them completely wrong.

Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves when studying our fundamental beliefs is: “What does this teach me about who Jesus is and what He is like?” And then, when we set out to share those beliefs with someone else, that Christ-centered understanding needs to be the very heart of what we say to that person. If the Sabbath is nothing but an arbitrary rule, it becomes vacant of meaning. But if the Sabbath is a sign of a covenant with the Creator—a way to come closer to the one who made us, and become reshaped in His image—if it is about the Lord of the Sabbath and His love for us, then the day is understood to be filled with the power of the Spirit.

The Sabbath is not so much about a 24-hour period as it is about a Person. If the way we teach it to others doesn’t reflect that, again, we’ve got it wrong. It is entirely possible to mechanically, ritualistically observe the Sabbath every week for a lifetime and never really know the God behind it. Without Christ, it’s just a day off. But *with* Christ, it is a day that fills the soul, reminding us of where we come from, who we are, and where we’re headed. It is a potent reminder that Jesus is the point of all existence.

Did John really flee from the bathhouse because Cerinthus the heretic was there? Maybe. It might be just a story. But this much we *do* know: The Spirit made sure that John’s Gospel established Christ as the center of *everything* in an unmistakable way. It leaves those who might be tempted to think otherwise without an argument. ❧

* Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* (Rome: Aeterna Press, 2016), book 3, chap. 3, p. 182.