

The Last Eyewitness, I

Third Generation Believers (1 Jn 1:1-4)

September 28, 2003

THIRD GENERATION BELIEVERS

In 70 A.D. the Romans destroyed Jerusalem (and the temple) just as Jesus had predicted some 40 years earlier:

As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down." - Mark 13:1-2 NIV

Christians were scattered throughout the empire. Believers were threatened by persecution from without and corruption from within. By 85 A.D. two major perversions were challenging the faith:

1. The Ebionites were denying the *deity* of Christ
 - To them, Jesus had simply been a good teacher. This guy walked their streets, seriously, how could He be God?
2. The Docetists were denying the *humanity* of Christ
 - To them, Jesus hadn't become human; He only *appeared* to have died on the cross. Seriously, how can God die?

More than fifty years had passed since Jesus had lived and died ... and lived. And those who'd seen and heard Him firsthand, who'd witnessed the miracles and the resurrection, were long gone.

There's an interesting trend that tends to happen to any great movement over the course of three generations:

1. The first generation is typified by conviction

Great truths have been experienced and witnessed. These people are filled with fiery passion and will die for their cause.

2. The second generation is typified by belief

They've heard exciting first-hand accounts, but the passion can fade as they debate and defend the truths they've been taught.

3. The third generation is typified by opinion

Unless they work to stay true to first-generation truth, they unwittingly allow it to become diluted, altered, & counterfeited.

- By 85 A.D. many false teachers had infested the faith.

THE LAST EYEWITNESS

But, in the pagan city of Ephesus in 85 A.D. there lived a very old man who had seen everything and still had his fiery passion. If you'd stood on this street, you would've met the last living eyewitness of Christ. Now about 80-years-old, the only apostle ...

- To be known as "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (*Jn 21:20*)
- To care for Jesus' own mother until her death. (*Jn 19:26-27*)
- To be spared martyrdom for his faith.

He was about to write a first-hand account to this 3rd generation.

Q: How many NT books are attributed to the Apostle John?

A: Five: Gospel of John; 1st, 2nd, & 3rd John; Revelation.

We'll examine the three letters that John wrote in order to put believers back on track. We'll just be looking at his opening:

That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we have **looked at** and our hands have **touched** — this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. – 1 John 1:1-4 NIV

He's so eager to challenge the Ebionites (who denied Christ's deity) and the Docetists (who denied Christ's humanity) that he doesn't even say "hello" or "To" or "From". He fires off with:

- That which was from the beginning. He was the Eternal One!
- That which we heard, saw, examined and touched. He was human!

And John immediately establishes his credentials and authority:

- We (the disciples) have seen it ... you haven't!
- He appeared to us ... not to you!

TRUSTING JOHN'S AUTHORITY

It's no wonder John had little patience with the heretics who denied the actuality of the Lord's body.

- He tells us he leaned on Jesus at the last supper. (*Jn 13:23-25*)

And there was a time (shortly after the resurrection) when John himself thought that Jesus didn't have a real body:

They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. [Jesus] said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." - Luke 24:37-39 NIV

The word Jesus uses for "touch" (handled) is "pselaphao." The same word John used to say, "That which our hands have touched." John speaks with the authority of one who knows what it is to doubt, and what it is to discover the reality of Christ.

- We're a lot like those third-generation believers.
- We're third-generation believers, 96 times removed

We still need the same message they needed. And we've been given the same (exact) message they received: John's letters.

Q: Which typifies your faith: opinion, belief, or conviction?

I find that my faith hasn't nearly as much to do with debating opinions or accepting truth. I believe the Bible is God's word.

- [For me] Faith is about staying committed to my convictions

It's difficult staying true to that which I already accept and believe to be good and right.

FELLOWSHIP OF BELIEVERS

John says for this, we need each other. In fact, his chief concern for writing this letter was to cultivate our fellowship with one another and with the Lord.

We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. – 1 John 1:3 NIV

When John says fellowship, he isn't talking pot lucks! He's referring to:

- A commitment to shared beliefs
- A dedication to mutual obedience

To John, fellowship requires action. He wants us not only to know the truth about Christ, but to act on that truth. There're two classic moments when our faith tends to become more opinion than conviction:

1. When temptation hits and the Lord seems irrelevant

Sometimes it would just be very convenient if Christianity were not true. – C.S. Lewis

This is when we are tempted to ignore the deity of Christ. But we must remember that He is sovereign and holy.

- He doesn't play church or "do religion."
- His commands are not optional to His followers.

2. When bad times hit and the Lord seems so uncaring

This is when we need to remember the humanity of Christ. He understands suffering and isolation; He knows heart ache.

- And he endured it all because of His compassion for us.

It's not really reason that robs my faith; it's my imagination and emotions. It's my moods.

Now that I am a Christian I do have moods in which the whole thing looks very improbable: but when I was an atheist I had moods in which Christianity looked terrible probable – C.S. Lewis

Beginning next Sunday, we're really going to dig into John's letter. Until then, we'll end here on this simple message for us third-generation believers:

- Whatever heresies attack your faith, remember to hang onto Jesus in all His fullness ... with conviction.
- For only then will our joy be complete.