

And Must This Body Die?

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

And must this body die,
This well-wrought frame decay?
And must these active limbs of mine
Lie mould'ring in the clay?

Corruption, earth, and worms
Shall but refine this flesh,
'Till my triumphant spirit comes
To put it on afresh.

God my Redeemer lives,
And often from the skies
Looks down, and watches all my dust,
'Till he shall bid it rise.

Array'd in glorious grace
Shall these vile bodies shine,
And ev'ry shape, and ev'ry face
Be heavenly and divine.

These lively hopes we owe,
Lord, to thy dying love;
O may we bless thy grace below,
And sing thy grace above.

Saviour, accept the praise
Of these our humble songs,
'Till tunes of nobler sounds we raise
With our immortal tongues.

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Christ in 1 John 1

Kevin T. Bauder

John addresses several issues in his epistles. Among these, he tackles the ideas proposed by Gnosticism. Although it was still a relatively new theology, John had first-hand acquaintance with Gnostic ideas. During his old age, he lived in Ephesus at the same time as Cerinthus, one of the most influential Gnostic teachers.

Beginning with the first verse of the first chapter of his first epistle, John confronts Gnosticism directly: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life...." John is here writing as the final surviving representative of the apostolic company. The "we" is "we apostles," and not just "we Christians." John is confronting Gnosticism with the apostles' direct and personal experience of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Interestingly, John does not write directly about Christ. He does not say, "He who," but "that which." John is writing not so much about Christ's person as about the events and factual data pertaining to Christ. His goal is to certify that these events and data are beyond question. The facts about Jesus Christ have existed "from the beginning." John is making up nothing new.

John uses four verbs to describe the apostles' experience of Christ. The first two verbs are perfect tenses, while the second two are aorist tenses. Interpreters always face the temptation of over-exegeting changes in language, but here the shift in tenses does seem to be significant. John's thrust seems to be that he is emphasizing the enduring results of the first two verbs while underlining the factual nature of the second two.

In the first clause John calls attention to, "That which we have heard." Here he is drawing attention to the utterances of Jesus, and the perfect tense seems to say, "And those words still reverberate in our ears." One thinks of the apostles listening to the Sermon on the Mount, the Sermon on the Plain, the Olivet Discourse, the Kingdom Parables. One also thinks of the short utterances of Jesus that provoked such strong reactions, everything from "Thy sins be forgiven thee," to "Peace, be still," to "It is finished." John may even be remembering words of Jesus that were never recorded in Scripture. Now,



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decades later, as the last remaining apostle, John still cannot get those words out of his ears.

John continues with, “That which we have seen with our eyes.” On behalf of all the apostles, John is bearing both earwitness and eyewitness testimony. He knows whereof he speaks, because he has seen it. He saw the healings. He saw the leprosy vanish at Jesus’ touch. He saw the stormy sea become like glass when Jesus spoke. He saw Jesus lifted up on the cross. He saw the empty tomb, and he saw the risen Christ. And what he saw is still burned into his sight, as vivid in his mind’s eye as the day he saw it.

Then John says, “That which we looked upon.” The word for looking is much stronger than the previous word for seeing. It conveys the idea of intensity and scrutiny, of taking something in and evaluating it. This would be a word for a jeweler evaluating a gemstone through his loupe or a pathologist examining an unknown bacterium through his microscope. As a matter of fact, John and the other apostles had the opportunity to subject the Lord Jesus to extended scrutiny. For at least three years they lived with Him day and night. They knew His habits and character. They saw His reactions under all sorts of circumstances, from adulation to persecution to rejection to betrayal. They would have discovered any flaw. But everything they examined led them only to the highest evaluation of Jesus’ person.

Finally, John says, “That which our hands have handled.” Here John directly confronts the Gnostic rejection of Christ’s material body. Hands cannot handle a spirit, but John and others did handle the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, Jesus lived a life of blunt physicality. Mary gave birth to a material body and laid it in the manger. She fed Him at her breast and changed His swaddling clothes. One can only imagine the physical shoulder-rubbing that took place between the Lord and His apostles during the rough-and-tumble of active life. Key moments of Jesus’ ministry involved physical touch: the woman who touched His garment, the blind man to whose eyes He applied mud, Peter sinking into the sea. People had to handle His body to take it down from the cross, clean and prepare it for burial, and place it in the tomb. After His resurrection, His feet were grasped by Mary and His wounds were handled by Thomas.

These four verbs stand as a direct refutation of Gnostic thought. The succeeding verses clearly show that John is talking about Jesus Christ, the Son of God the Father. This phrasing assumes that the human Jesus is the divine Christ, a point that John makes explicit later in the epistle. Special emphasis is laid on Jesus’ embodiment and materiality.

How important are these teachings? John says that he is announcing them so that believers might have fellowship with God the Father, with Jesus Christ, and even with “us,” the apostolic company. In other words, the identity of Jesus as the Christ, His position as God’s divine Son, and His

presence in the world as a material person are essential—fundamental—to the gospel and the Christian fellowship. A clearer repudiation of Gnosticism would not be possible.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
