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# APOLOGETIC USE OF "SIGN" IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

by MORRIS INCH

**P**ROFESSOR INCH, of the Department of Bible and Philosophy at Wheaton College, is another newcomer to our pages. We welcome his examination of the contemporary relevance of the distinctive role of the Greek word "semeion" in the Gospel of John.

**M**ARTIN MARTY has heralded a new day for Christian apologetics. If his tidings are true, this may be an announcement that Christianity has survived the crisis in secular theology as well as escaped the archaic and inflexible mould of Constantinian Christendom. It is within the framework of such a possibility, where signs may again be evidence rather than embarrassment, that these considerations are entertained.

## I. SIGN AND MEANING

Sign is the means by which Christ's claim is commended for believing response (20: 30-31). John seems bent on underscoring the rationale and reality of Christian experience. Apologetics, for him, is in a phrase, a considered faith.

John is not only interested in a calculated belief, but in commending it to others. Those who read his words were already far removed from the scene of Jesus' public ministry, insensitive to the impact of His personal dynamic, and incredulous of reports which had been circulated. John wishes to bridge the chasm with appropriate evidence for faith to negotiate. Then, apologetics is not only a considered but considerate expression of faith (cf. 1 Peter 3: 15).

The signs are selected (20: 30), and abridged (21: 25). It is the Person and efficacious words of Christ, rather than His performance and wonder, which is central to John's thrust (20: 31). So the signs are not to confound but reveal, not to be entries in Ripley's "Believe It or Not", but in the gospel's "that you might believe".

Signs are not self-evident meaning. The resurrection of a man from the dead would be subject to endless speculation. What made Jesus' restoral so unique was that it came against the background of a messianic preparation and as fulfilment. That is, it was not an extraordinary event in what was otherwise an ordinary life within an equally undistinctive religious tradition.

The resurrection was the climax to a profound interpretation of history, based upon a Divine revelation-human response theme.

The point is aptly illustrated in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman (4: 1-42). He engages her interest through a promise of life enrichment, nourishes it by way of revealing a confidence, and climaxes the interaction with His claim to be the Messiah. As a result, the woman gathered a company which after sitting under Jesus' teaching for two days, confessed to the woman: "It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Saviour of the world" (4: 42).

The account of the excommunicated enthusiast is to similar intent (9: 1-10: 21). Jesus rejects the alternatives that the man's blindness is the result of personal or parental evil, and describes it as the occasion for God's restorative work. The man's physical condition responds immediately, and his spiritual sight gradually, from a faint glimmering into "one called Jesus" (9: 11) to the dazzling recognition: "Lord, I believe" (9: 38).

Confession was exit from the synagogue (9: 22) but entrance into abundant life (10: 10). Jesus proceeds with the humanistic qualities of the Christian faith, the healing aspects of life lived in response to Divine challenge. In response to antagonism, He asks that His claim be compared to the teaching of Scripture (10: 34-36) and the testimony of His good works (10: 37-38). If you will, there was a convergence of evidence, a locus of meaning.

To this is added the witness of those schooled under John the Baptist: "While John performed no sign, yet everything John said about this man was true" (10: 41). Many believed as the result. That is, life fitted into the messianic framework, both in its extent—a redemptive interpretation of history, and its extension—the particular incidents of Jesus' ministry as correlation of the prophetic testimony. Christ brought into focus *all* of life, and into relationship *each* aspect of it. The sign did not stand as a bizarre interjection, but a meaningful unit of Divine revelation and human appropriation.

## II. SIGN WITHOUT FAITH

Neither faith nor sign stand alone. Faith is the context of sign, and sign is the text of faith. John pictures the crass multitude as demanding signs to self-activate faith (6: 30-31). Jesus refrained. Instead, he lectured on the gifts which might be experienced in relationship, the means made available to men who know the

Master. Similarly, when beseeched by a royal official on behalf of his critically ill son, Jesus chided him for requiring signs and wonders (4: 48). Perhaps driven to a deeper level of apprehension and/or concern, the ruler pleaded for the life of his son. No sign was given, save the *word* that the son would live. The man departed in belief, and to find that his faith had been well-placed.

Faith does not have to look for signs, but to the Saviour. There is something very unhealthy about demanding wonders for the purpose of initiating or bolstering faith. Perhaps I may be permitted the recital of a personal incident in this connection. It happened one morning when I was in the process of shaving, and musing over my ineffectiveness in a struggling church. Then, as clearly as if someone were standing in the room, I heard: "Do not be weary in well doing, for in due season you shall reap, if you do not faint".

It was a startling experience. I looked around, but there was no one there. I went to the door, to see if my wife was playing tricks on me. She was not in the vicinity. Remembering Augustine's experience, I even peered out the window, although it opened from the second storey.

Now, had there been someone with me would they have heard a voice? I doubt it. I am not even convinced that God would use the King James Version in quoting. But God spoke, calling me from despair and defeat to the task at hand. Was this occasion a testimony to my deep spirituality? Not in the least. Should it be commended as the experience to be actively sought after? Quite the reverse. It was suggestive, not of my nearness, but distance from the Almighty. It was His loud voice, because the gentle whispers went unheeded. It was: "Hey, Inch, come out of it".

To put it another way, John's apologetic lays the stress on witness rather than wonder. Signs are merely means in God's providence and not ends to be desired as illustrative of spiritual attainment. More success may be expected from sharing the ways in which we are experiencing the fulness of Christ's love, than in attempting to manufacture the mysterious. Bonhoeffer's "world come of age" may be pertinent here in that the twentieth century looks to the Christian for responsible maturity rather than cultic child play. It is more concerned with faith giving evidence than in evidence demanding faith.

### III. FAITH WITHOUT SIGN

However, it is credulity rather than faith which disregards evidence. Faith is obligated to do its home work. John takes us

back to the first sign, the miraculous provision for the marriage festival at Cana of Galilee (2: 1-11). It was the occasion where his disciples had reason to, and did in effect, believe (2: 11). The sign was of privileged nature, known only to His circle of followers, and the servants who had been involved.

The clandestine nature of the event is explained by the sentence: "My hour has not yet come" (2: 4). The subsequent signs would be more or less public in nature, dependent upon the phase of Jesus' ministry—more characteristic of the Synoptic stress, and the unique preparation of individuals—more illustrative of the Johannine writing.

The private nature of the sign is in sharp contrast to the public use which John makes of it. The situation has changed, altering the purpose to which the evidence may be put. However, the sign is not produced for, but serves, the need which is apprehended.

John leaves no doubt but that Jesus performed signs. The multitude were attracted to Him for this reason (6: 2), and those who believed asked: "When the Christ shall come, He will not perform more signs than those which this man does, will He?" (7: 31). Even the chief priests and Pharisees acknowledged that many signs were being worked, and that all might be swept away in a surge of faith, an event of such magnitude as to endanger their standing with the Rome authorities (11: 48). Their decision to eliminate Jesus was related to the inability to deny His signs.

Later Rabbinicism was still unable to ignore the facts, but attributed them to magic. For instance, Tractate *Sanhedrin* 48a reads in part: "And it is tradition: on the eve of Pesah they hung Jeshu. And the crier went forth before him forty days, (saying Jeshu) goes forth to be stoned, because he has practised magic and deceived and led astray Israel". The signs stand to be treated by faith or doubt.

#### IV. SIGN AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DISBELIEF

The most extensive of John's reports are those dealing with the raising of Lazarus, and the resurrection of Jesus. This fits well with the writer's stress on eternal and abundant life, and invites our more careful scrutiny.

Marcus Dods, alone among those commentators consulted, picks up the apologetic thrust of the account on Lazarus. He concludes that Jesus is shown to be the Christ by this event, its impact being felt first among Lazarus' intimates (12: 1-11), then upon the people generally (12: 12-19), and finally by the gentile world (12: 20-36).

This sign seems developed to demonstrate the persuasiveness of Jesus' messianic claim:

1. It is known to Lazarus' associates. The report was not a matter of hearsay or of some garbled tradition. Those best in a place to know the facts, and make an appropriate deduction, attested the sign. Many travelled not only to hear Jesus but to see the man who had been raised from the dead (12: 9).

2. It triggered the populace's support of Jesus. John presses the issue deftly: "So the multitude who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead, were bearing Him witness", and adds, "for this cause also the multitude went and met Him, because they heard that He had performed this sign" (12: 17-18). The fact could not be ignored, and the clamour has left the word indelibly recorded on human history.

3. It initiated gentile interest. John was not unmindful of the differences in religious background between the Jews and their Greek neighbours. Time had already illustrated that Jesus' appeal was universal, and John describes it as so from the beginning. Lazarus' restoration was not the product of a peculiar religious imagination, but an event capable of general recognition.

Then, why did not all believe? They did not, as we are assured: "But though He had performed so many signs before them, they were not believing in Him" (12: 37). The explanation is that evidence commends but does not coerce faith.

Is John's rationale plausible to post-secular man? I suspect so. His elaboration follows two lines: the blindness of man's nature (12: 40), and the pressure of society (12: 42-43).

John refers to Isaiah 6 as a description of the hardness of man's heart. The context is the Isaiah's vision of God, his sense of guilt and subsequent cleansing, and his enthusiastic readiness to be God's messenger, only to be warned of the resistance which may be expected. It suggests that the light-giving word also has the potential of bringing a more oppressive darkness.

An illustration may help clarify the point. A man comes in off the darkened street to face the painful light of the room. His first reaction is to turn away. It would be more comfortable in the darkness to which he has become accustomed. However, if the person allows for adjustment, he will soon see with a clarity which had previously escaped him. The test is to tolerate the momentary discomfort for the gain anticipated.

Human nature is like that. It perverts life and jealously resists any effort to correct what has been constructed. Counsellors would

be quick to recognize the fact: the counsellee enters, talks about everything but the issue, and finally gets down to the subject; there is progress being made, and he is at the threshold of self-discovery; this is the moment of crisis, the point where every resource is brought to bear in order to assist him on. If he turns back here it will be to a greater darkness than he has before experienced, but if he goes on, there may be resolution to his problem.

Some issues are comparatively insignificant, and for this reason the *status quo* syndrome is hardly perceived, but where the meaning of life itself is involved the effect is pronounced. Such is the case implied in the confession "My Lord and my God" (20: 28), and the corollary: "that believing you may have life in His name" (20: 31).

The nature of the light from which man recoils (12: 40) or to which he responds (20: 31) is personal, the incarnated luminary of God (12: 45). John explains: "For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who practises the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God" (3: 20-21). That is not to say that the disciple or his Master is unsympathetic to the traumatic proportions of the encounter, for there is the encouragement that Jesus' coming is not for the purposes of condemning but saving man (3: 17).

Does it follow that there is a simple correlation between disbelief and personal reluctance to believe? Not at all. John goes on to discuss the effect of social pressures on an individual (12: 42-3). There were those who secretly acknowledged, but refused to confess publicly because of their position in the community.

The pressures at this time were great, perhaps illustrated by Nicodemus' visit by night, though he freely acknowledges the signs as being of Divine origin (3: 2). There are no more severe forms for social sanction to take than that of religion. It removes human prerogatives in the name of God.

Darkness is not only harboured personally, but compounded in terms of society. Jesus describes it as "the world", the antithetical complexity of perversion which resists Divine mercy and grace (15: 19). It breeds hate for all that is unlike itself (15: 25), and demanded the Saviour's crucifixion (19: 15).

#### V. SIGN AND SALVATION

The second sign which John treats at great length is the

resurrection of Jesus. It was God's resolute yes to man's persistent no. It is the vindication of the Almighty over the vindictiveness of the world. There is a kind of cosmic dimension to this sign, on the basis of which Paul will announce that men everywhere are required to repent (Acts 17: 30).

The transition from futility to faith in John is grand. Mary Magdalene weeps in the garden for she does not know where the body has been taken. A figure stands by her, asking the cause for her sorrow and the purpose for her presence. Then, there is the familiar address: "Mary", causing her to turn to the speaker. She recognizes him: "Rabboni". Jesus cautions her against restraining Him, for He has a task to accomplish, and Mary rushes to the disciples with the announcement, "I have seen the Lord" (20: 11-18).

Thomas's case is still more striking. He had been absent at Jesus' first appearing to the disciples, and protested: "Unless I shall see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe". The disciples are again gathered in the closed room, when Jesus appears. He is aware of Thomas's altercation, and offers His body as confirmation of the sign. There follows the sublime confession: "My Lord and my God", to which Jesus pointedly replies: "Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who have not seen but believe" (20: 19-29).

John draws one and probably two conclusions on the basis of the resurrection. The first is evident. It is that man may believe (20: 29-31). Belief is appropriate, not on the basis of one remarkable event, but against the incarnate life of God, an effusion of divine light (1: 1-18). This was a moral miracle of life and testimony, the purity of which the world has not known nor could achieve.

The disciples had had difficulty understanding Jesus' warning of His impending death. This did not fit at all with their idea of the messianic rule, and for most, the thought was crowded to the back of their minds. Thomas was perhaps unique in his perception of the Lord's intent, and counselled his fellow-disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with Him" (11: 16). His was the "practical" kind of faith, which could accept anything up to and including death but not beyond.

The resurrection brought all men together where faith was credible. It demonstrated that life could be invested with meaning because death had been conquered by the act of God. It did not



in a sense manufacture faith, but it made plausible for men of succeeding generations.

Likely, John also meant to derive a second motif on the basis of the resurrection, i.e., that man may act in loving constraint (21: 1-23). There is pictured the restless return of the disciples to fishing, their lack of success, the appearing of Christ, His instruction and their subsequent success, breakfast by the seaside, and the three-way discussion among Jesus, Peter, and John. The play on *phileō* and *agapaō* in the inter-change probably suggests a missing but potential dimension in Peter's love, a theme which would characterize the Johannine Epistles.

*Agapē* supplies the condition necessary to follow Christ. It is the creative aspect of devotion, which is neither produced or restricted by encouragement. Peter would experience situations where all natural ties fail, and the need to call upon unconditional reserves (21: 18).

The very call of Jesus implies a possibility of attainment, consistent with His own conquest, not only over the extremities of life, but the loss of it as well. John leaves his discussion at the place of singular stewardship, without recourse to the failure of another as our excuse (21: 23). There is a timelessness to the appeal, which confronts man in whatever situation with the call of Christ.

This is freedom born of love. Those who boast the freedom of the world are in fact in bondage (8: 34), but they who serve Christ are truly free (8: 36). The resurrection is the sign of triumph, the indication that the children of darkness are in defeat and the sons of light are victorious. Hate is overcome by love because the Messiah has come.

An apologetic which stops short of ethic is poor consolation indeed. It dangles before perishing man an ideal incapable of being realized. John apparently uses the sign of the resurrection, not only to demonstrate the credibility of faith, but its possibility. He reminds us that we cannot only know about, but experience the power of salvation.

## VI. NON-JOHANNINE POSTSCRIPT

The twentieth century may not have come of age, but it has come far. The capabilities of modern man should not be minimized. Resources are staggering. Man is not necessarily the better as a result, but as Harvey Cox observes: "The stakes have gone up".

Along with this potential has come a stress on the situation, and a distrust of anything as old as yesterday. Man flounders as a

result, lacking the direction and motivation that the past can give him. His obligation lacks perspective.

There is indication that he is paying a high price for his situation. We may be approaching a social psychoticism of a magnitude never before realized, driven by the realization of a responsibility without rationale.

As a result, there is a tendency to surrender the responsibilities commensurate with the contemporary potential. This is particularly distressing when found in Christian circles, being in sharp contradiction to the tenor of John's writing. To be a follower of Christ is to be current, to apply the principles of discipleship regardless of the behaviour of others (21: 21).

To be current is never less than being Christian, for Christ is the "I Am", the timely which already precedes the traditional (8: 58). All else is dated and dragging, producing friction-tension against rapid cultural change. But change is not new to the Christian, and the acceleration of today is insignificant compared to the pilgrimage from the city of destruction to the habitation of life. The Christian knows, in Cox's words, "a mobile God", One who leads us beyond the narrow confines of filial security into a land of promise. He is neither first *nor* twentieth century, but for being a Christian is more first *and* twentieth century in his attitude and activism.

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