

MAD MAN OR GOD-MAN

by Ray C. Stedman

We are resuming our studies in the Gospel of John after a lapse of almost three months. Strikingly, John also resumes his account in Verse 22 of Chapter 10 after a lapse of about three months in the life and ministry of our Lord. If you look carefully at the early verses in Chapter 10 you will find that they took place in Jerusalem in connection with the Feast of Tabernacles (which is held in early October), while the opening words of our text today are, "It was the Feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem." That Feast, which we call by the much more familiar term "Hanukkah," is celebrated when we Christians celebrate Christmas, in late December, so there is a gap in time between Verse 21 and Verse 22 of approximately three months duration.

That, of course, raises the question: where was Jesus during this time? The most likely answer is that he had returned to Galilee to minister there. The Gospel of Luke records many incidents in the life of Jesus that took place in Galilee. It seems that these events occurred in this interim period when, following the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus went back to Galilee and there sent out the seventy disciples to the various cities in Galilee. Jesus himself did many amazing miracles during this time.

Here, then, in Verse 22 is the record of a quick return trip to Jerusalem which he made, following which he traveled to the area of Perea, in the region of the Jordan River, between Galilee and the Dead Sea.

It was the Feast of the Dedication at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. {John 10:22-23 RSV}

Winter in Israel is the rainy season. The "portico of Solomon" was a large roofed-in enclosure supported by beautiful columns that filled one side of the temple arena. There, sheltered from the rain, our Lord resumed his teaching ministry during the Feast of Hanukkah. Hanukkah celebrates the purification and rededication of the temple after its defilement under the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes, in the year 165 BC. The feast looks back on that dramatic, exciting period in Israel's history when the Maccabee family revolted against Israel's Syrian overlords. After a terrible time of murder and slaughter, and defilement of the temple courts by the offering of pigs on the altars of Judah, Judas Maccabeus and his sons drove out the Syrians, reclaimed the temple for the Lord and dedicated it anew. That event is celebrated down to this day in the Feast of Hanukkah.

It seems likely that Jesus returned to Jerusalem for two main reasons:

First, he wanted to resume his wonderful teaching about his role as the Shepherd of Israel. This whole 10th chapter is built about the theme, "The Lord is my Shepherd." Here Jesus speaks of himself as the Great Shepherd who gives his life for the sheep, the True Shepherd who is not like the thieves and robbers, etc.

The second reason for his return seems to be to make arrangements for his final return to Jerusalem when he would come to offer himself as the Lamb of God, slain for the sins of the whole world. Later in this Gospel we learn that he came down the Mount of Olives on that last week, riding upon a donkey, for which arrangements had been made in advance. When he entered the city he sent his disciples to find a man who was carrying a water jar on his head. That was a woman's work; men did not do that in those days. Thus to find a man carrying a water jar on his head would be a very remarkable sight. This man would lead them to the "upper room" that had already been hired by our Lord, evidently on this hurried visit to Jerusalem.

Continuing, John tells us in Verse 24:

So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense?" [Literally, "How long are you going to raise our minds, i.e., tantalize us?"] If you are the Christ [the Messiah], tell us plainly." Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me;

but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." {John 10:24-26 RSV}

In this remarkable scene, it is evident that the Jews deliberately encircled our Lord (that is what John suggests in the word he uses here) so that he could not get away, forcing him to face their question, "Are you the Messiah, or aren't you? If you are, tell us plainly." Our Lord's answer was, "I have already told you." According to John's account he never had really said to these men, "I am the Messiah." He did say that to the woman at the well of Samaria, and he did say to the man who was born blind (John 9), "I am the Son of God," but to these Jewish leaders, these Pharisees, he had never said, "I am the Messiah." The reason, of course, was that their idea of what the Messiah would do and Jesus' fulfillment of the predictions of the Messiah were wide apart. They pictured the Messiah as a conquering hero who, like the family of Judas Maccabeus, would drive out the Romans, free the temple and enable the Jewish nation to again gain control of the land. But Jesus gave no indication that he ever intended to do that. Therefore, for him to say to them, "I am the Messiah" would have been to arouse totally false hopes in their minds. But he did tell them by other means that he was the Messiah.

He makes clear in his answer three basic reasons for unbelief in him. Many have asked, "Why don't people believe in Jesus? Why didn't the Jews believe in him, and why don't they today believe in Jesus? If he fulfilled the Scriptures so accurately, and so fully, why don't they believe in him?" Here our Lord gives three reasons for that:

First, it is not because of lack of information! The Jews asked him, "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." To that he replied, "I told you." He had not done so in words, but he had done so in deeds. He went on to say, "The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me." The prophet Isaiah had predicted that, when the Messiah came, the ears of the deaf would be unstopped, the eyes of the blind would be opened, the lame would leap as the hart, and the tongue of the dumb would sing, (Isaiah 35). All of these things had taken place under Jesus' ministry. So Jesus clearly indicated by his deeds that he was the Messiah, but he had not said so in words.

Sometimes it is very difficult for us to understand Scripture because we have such twisted ideas of what it is really saying. I am reminded of a story a friend of mine, Don Moomaw, told me. Some of you will recognize that Don, who once was an All-American football player at UCLA, is President Reagan's pastor. He ministers at Bel Air Presbyterian Church in the Los Angeles area. One morning Don decided to drive down the hill from where he lives to pick up a newspaper from the newsstand at the bottom of the hill. Dressed only in his pajama shorts, he got into his car but found that the battery was low. He thought he would give the car a shove, hoping that the battery would function as the car rolled down the hill. But the car failed to start; it just kept rolling down the hill and he found himself on a busy suburban street dressed only in his pajama shorts, unable to get back up the hill. Resourceful fellow that he is, Don decided there was nothing else to do but face his predicament. He got out of the car and rang the doorbell of a nearby house. A woman opened the door and Don told her, "I am the pastor of the Bel Air Presbyterian Church!" Can you imagine how difficult it was for him to convince her that this huge hulk of a man dressed in pajama shorts was the dignified pastor of the well-known Bel Air Presbyterian Church up on the hill? Somehow he managed to do that. She let him in to use the phone so he could call his wife and have her come down in the other car and pick him up.

What a difficult thing it is to convince people when you do not look like what they expect! That is the problem Jesus had. The Jews expected a military leader who would free them from the yoke of Rome, but he came as the Suffering Servant of Jehovah to give himself on behalf of the sins of man and break through the stranglehold of evil which Satan has upon our race. That is why he had not said to them, "I am the Messiah."

The second thing Jesus pointed out in his reply is that, though he had told them, they had rejected the evidence he gave: "The works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me; but you do not believe..." He was referring to the wonderful works of healing which he had done to fulfill the word of the prophet Isaiah. Why did they not believe him? Because, as they read the Scriptures, they selected the evidence they wanted to believe and left the rest.

That is a common phenomenon. We have been getting a lot of it in this election year. If you watched the Democratic or the Republican conventions, or both, and if you listen to the political speeches that are being

made today, you will find this kind of a thing going on all the time. The Democrats tell us that the problem is, the Republicans are a confused bunch of addleheaded people who have crazy ideas about how to run things -- and the fact that they have been fairly successful in having their way of late is the reason why we have such a mess in our world. If you listen to the Republicans, on the other hand, they sound like the Democrats have never done anything right, and have messed everything up. All the problems that we are facing today are their fault. Each side supports their arguments by quoting reams of statistics, by various polls and figures, etc., until it all looks very believable. I hope by now we have learned that it is all done, not with mirrors, but by a process of selectively picking through the evidence they want to emphasize while ignoring the rest.

This is exactly what happens when people read about Jesus and yet fail to believe in him. Both Jew and Gentile alike indulge in this. They only believe what they want to believe.

The third reason is the most significant of all: "You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep." Jesus is saying, "You have never come to me. You have never got close. You have never really found out who I am. You have never asked me to do anything in your life. You have no personal testimony of what I can do. You have not been part of my sheep." This is the reason why many people never find God.

I got a rather poignant letter from a woman not long ago. At great length she described to me how she had been seeking God all her life. She wanted desperately to be a Christian, she wrote. She had done everything people had told her to do, read all the relevant passages, and believed everything she was told. She was longing for peace, longing for a sense of God's presence in her life and the joy that Christians talked about. Yet, though she did everything they told her to do, nothing ever happened. Somebody had given her my name, or she had read one of our papers, and she wrote to me. "I don't know if you can help me or not," she wrote. "You will probably tell me what everybody else has told me, but I have tried all that and it doesn't work." Just as gently and graciously as I could I wrote back to her, and said, "Do you hear what you are saying? You are talking about God, and the promises he has made. You are talking about a God who cannot fail, who does not lie, who offers freely a way of redemption to those who will genuinely receive it, and yet by your language you are telling me that he has failed, he has lied to you, he has not done what you have asked him to do, and it is all his fault. I urge you to bring that problem to him. Tell him that you do not understand yet how to come; you have not clearly seen how. But don't blame him, because God cannot fail." I have not heard from her, so I do not know what the result of that was.

This is where many people are today. They say they have tried to come to God, and they blame him because nothing happens. But God cannot fail. It is we who need to learn more, we who need to humble ourselves, and come, and say, "Lord, teach me what is wrong." Had these Pharisees done this they would have found him. But Jesus said, "You have not come. You are not of my sheep."

All of this provides the setting for one of the greatest passages in all of Scripture. It is one of my favorite verses, and perhaps yours too.

"My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." {John 10:27-29 RSV}

What a marvelous word of assurance to us! In it, our Lord indicates two major things. First, the answer to the question, "How can you tell a true Christian from a mere professor?"; and secondly, the answer to the question almost everybody asks, "Can a true believer be lost after he or she has once been born again?"

Verse 27 answers the first question. "How can you tell a true believer from a mere professor?" Here are three marks:

First, "My sheep hear my voice." That is, they are drawn to what Jesus has to say. They believe that what he says is the truth, and they long to hear more. One of the things that has encouraged me through 34 years of ministry (by the way, I began ministering here at Palo Alto exactly 34 years ago next Sunday), has been the hunger of people for the word of Jesus. How it has drawn people, and ministered to them, and fed them, and

how they love to hear it! What brings out such a large crowd as we have here today on a holiday Sunday when you could be out in the mountains or down at the beach, as most people are? It is the voice of Jesus. It is his insight into life, his understanding of the secrets of existence, his solution to the problems with which every one of us wrestle, his offer of deliverance from the inner bondage which we experience as we seek to live life and find ourselves continually trapped and enmeshed in wrong things, in hurt and anguish and pain. It is the word of Jesus that brings you here, the word declared in the Scriptures and by the confirmation of the Spirit within. That is the first characteristic of a true sheep: One who longs to hear the word of God. He wants to know more. He reads and studies and learns and comes regularly to hear the word of God. "My sheep hear my voice."

Secondly, "I know them." When the sheep read the Word they have a sense of welcome from the Lord himself. They know that this word of deliverance, this word of healing, applies to them. They feel accepted. They know they belong. They feel a Father's arms around them and a Father's heart beating in their concern and their care. They know that there is a personal relationship established. They have become the "children of God." That is what Jesus means. One of the marks of true believers is they always have a sense they belong to God, that they are his children, part of his family, and welcomed by the Lord Jesus himself. This is what Paul refers to in Romans 8, "his spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God," {cf, Rom 8:16}.

Then the third mark: "They follow me." That is, they obey Jesus; they do what he commands. This does not mean that they always do so instantaneously, without struggle. All of us struggle at times with what our Lord says; all of us resist at times. Sometimes the word needs to be brought clearly and sharply into focus in our life. But the point of it is, once we see what Jesus wants, the attitude of a true sheep is, "Lord, even though it hurts, even though it costs, I will do what you say. I will follow you." Jesus himself made that clear when he said, "If anyone will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me," {Matt 16:24, Mark 8:34, Luke 9:23}. This is the mark of a true sheep: He obeys what the Lord says. We do not follow the world, we follow the Lord. The two are going in opposite directions. When the choice is made, it is a choice in favor of obeying the Lord Jesus.

The Apostle Paul says the same thing in his letter to Timothy: "The foundation of the Lord stands sure, having this seal, the Lord knows them that are his," {cf, 2 Tim 2:19a}. There is divine recognition. But that is not all: "Let him that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity," {cf, 2 Tim 2:19b}. Let him turn his back on what is wrong and obey and follow his Lord. That is the mark of a sheep. Anybody who is not doing that has no right to call himself or herself a Christian. If we are resisting the Lord in an area that we know to be right and if we insist on living that way we have no right to the title of Christian.

Why do sheep act this way? What has made the difference?

Jesus tells us three things that he has done which make his sheep act as they do. It is not something he will do when the sheep do their part -- this is not a chronological succession here; it is an explanation of what lies behind the actions of sheep. Again, there are three things:

First, "I give unto them eternal life." That is stated in the present indicative tense: "I keep on giving to them eternal life." What holds us to Jesus? Why do we gather here on a Sunday morning, exerting a lot of effort to get here? Some dress up, some don't, but we all come. (That's all right. There is nothing that says you have to wear a tie on Sunday morning to be acceptable to God.) What brings us? It is the life he gives, the peace, the joy, the love that we feel, the sense of inner serenity, the forgiveness, the sense of belonging and being guarded and kept and loved, that is what brings us. It is a quality of life which comes so continually to us that we would give up anything else rather than give that up. We are drawn because he keeps on giving us life, eternal life, God's kind of life.

Secondly, that quality of life has an element of assurance: it will never end. It has a certainty of safety, of security about it. It can never end. We will never perish. Isn't that a marvelous word? We live in a world that is perishing, a world that is headed for judgment, for ultimate destruction. People all around us are committed to ways of life that end at last in hell -- we shall never perish! What a wonderful word of assurance. It is a life that survives death, that even disdains death. Everyone in this congregation is headed for death, yet many

among us are unafraid. They do not look with terrible tragic hopelessness toward the future. They know that a way has been provided by which they will not even know death or sense it when it happens, but they will be ushered immediately into glory and life and truth.

Thirdly, this is a life which is guarded, kept, protected by two unconquerable Beings. Jesus said, "No one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." In Colossians, Paul puts these two things together: "Your life is hid with Christ in God," {Col 3:3}. What a wonderful view that is of our safety! No one, not even we ourselves, can take us out of the Father's hand.

I remember my patron saint, Dr. H. A. Ironside, telling about preaching once on this theme of the safety and security of the believer. A woman came up to him afterwards and said to him, "I don't agree with your doctrine." "What don't you agree with?" he asked her. "Well, this doctrine of once saved, always saved," she replied. He said to her, "Let me read you a verse that says that." She said, "Oh, I know what you are going to read. You are going to read John 10:28, aren't you?" He replied, "As a matter of fact that is the verse I was going to read." So he read the words, "'I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish and no one can snatch them out of my hand.' Do you believe that?" he asked her. "Not according to your interpretation," she replied. "But I didn't interpret it, I just read it to you," Dr. Ironside said. "Well," she replied, "I don't believe the way you see it." Then let me read it this way," he said. "Supposing it said, 'I give them life for 20 years, and they shall never perish for 20 years and no one can snatch them out of my hand for 20 years,' what would you think about that?" She said, "I think they would be safe for 20 years." He said, "Let us say 40 years. Would they be safe for 40 years?" "Yes," she said, "I think they would be safe for 40 years." "But it doesn't say 20 or 40 years, it says eternal life: 'and they shall never perish.'" The Greek text is very strong at that point. What it literally says is, "They shall not ever perish forever." Let's read it that way: "I give unto them life forever and they shall never perish forever." Do you believe that?" he asked her. "Not according to your interpretation," was her response. At this point he used to say, "A man convinced, against his will, is of the same opinion still, and a woman -- is sometimes as bad as a man."

It is true. You cannot convince anybody who does not wish to be convinced. But the verse is very clear, isn't it? "They shall never perish." No one, not even the person himself, can take a believer out of the Father's hand, because the Father is greater than all. We are kept by the sovereign power and love of God. We may struggle, we may hurt, we may go through times of dark, deep depression and times of doubt and despair, but we shall never perish if we have come to him and are part of his flock.

This leads us to another marvelous statement, a staggering claim by Jesus:

"I and the Father are one." [And immediately John adds]

The Jews took up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?" The Jews answered him, "It is not for good work but for blasphemy; because you being a man, make yourself God." {John 10:30-33 RSV}

Many hold that Jesus never claimed to be God, but the Jews clearly understood this to be such a claim and their immediate reaction is to run and find stones (that is what is suggested by the word John uses here), in order to put him to death. They did so because the Law directed that if a man claimed to be God he was a dangerous person; he might influence others to think he was God, so he must be eliminated from society, put to death by stoning. On hearing these words of Jesus, the Jews thought, "Aha, we've got him now. He has made a claim that is so clear we don't even have to wait for the Romans to rule on this. We'll stone him right here in the temple courts and put him to death according to the Law because of what he said."

Notice how Jesus very quietly and unperturbedly forces them to establish the ground of their accusations: "Which of my good works are you stoning me for?" he asks them. But nobody ever stoned anyone for good works -- the Law made no provision for that -- so they hastily clear up that point: "No, no, we're not stoning you for your good works. We don't deny them; they've been good works. We are stoning you because of what you said: "I and the Father are one." That means you are claiming to be God, and that's blasphemy.

That's why we are stoning you."

Our Lord responds in a most remarkable way, by quoting the 82nd Psalm:

"Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods'? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and scripture cannot be broken)," {John 10:34b-35 RSV}

Notice that point: "Scripture cannot be broken." It can never be wrong. It cannot be set aside. It is not filled with errors. It cannot be broken. This is our Lord's view of the whole Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. It cannot be wrong, therefore if it calls men "gods" they must, in some sense, be gods.

[Scripture says these men are gods, therefore] **"do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, 'You are blaspheming,' because I said, 'I am the Son of God?'" {John 10:36 RSV}**

Again, many hold that Jesus never claimed to be the Son of God. Well, mark this in your Bible. This is where he clearly quotes himself as claiming to be the Son of God.

Note the force of his argument. The 82nd Psalm begins,

**God has taken his place in the divine council;
In the midst of the gods he holds judgment: {Psa 82:1 RSV}**

This psalm deals with the judges of Israel, the human judges who settled disputes -- the Supreme Court, if you like -- of Israel. What the psalm is saying is that these men are acting as agents of God: God is in their midst; the judgment they pronounce is the judgment of God. The psalm clearly calls them "gods." Verse 6 of this Psalm, the verse Jesus quoted, says,

**I say, "You are gods,
sons of the Most High, all of you;
nevertheless, you shall die like men,
and fall like any prince." {Psa 82:6-7 RSV}**

His argument is, "If men, plain vanilla men just like other men, who serve as judges and do God's work in that way can be called gods without blasphemy -- even the Scriptures do it and they cannot be wrong -- how can you accuse me of blasphemy when I claim to be a Son of God and do the work of God?" Many people think that that is all Jesus meant to claim: That all he is saying is, "I am just like these other men in the Old Testament who were judges. They could be called gods and weren't stoned for blasphemy, why, then, are you stoning me when I say I am a Son of God? The psalm says, 'You are the sons of the Most High,' so why should I be accused of blasphemy for saying the same thing?" Some of the scholars claim this is what Jesus is claiming -- that he is merely a man doing the work of God. But that ignores the words of Jesus here that go far, far beyond that. What he said was, "Do you say of him whom the Father sanctified. (consecrated), and sent into the world...?" That is a claim no mere man can make. He is saying, "I existed before I came to earth. Before I appeared as a man I existed. I came from God. I was sent of God. I was one with God." This, without doubt, is a claim for the sharing of deity. His argument then becomes, "If mere men who do God's work can be called "gods" without blasphemy, how then can you charge one who is one with God and comes from God a blasphemer?"

The other day I was driving with my youngest grandson, Luke, who is four, through a part of Palo Alto where my wife and I first lived when we came here 34 years ago. I said to Luke, "I used to live here on this street a long time ago, before you were born or your mother was born." He looked at me and said, "Where was I then?" I said, "I don't know where you were. Your mother wasn't even born yet. I don't even know where she was." No one can claim to have pre-existed, but Jesus did, and when he makes this claim he is claiming to share the nature of God. This is why the Apostle Paul could declare so clearly, "He is the image of the invisible God," {Col 1:15}. "He is the creator of all things," {cf, Col 1:16}; "and by him all things hold together," {cf, Col 1:17b RSV}. John says the same thing in the opening of this gospel. Clearly our Lord claims oneness with God.

Then he rests it again on the unshakable evidence:

"If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me;" {John 10:37 RSV}

Isn't that amazing? Jesus said, "Do not believe me just because of my words, my claims. If God does not confirm what I say by works then you do not have to believe me."

"but if I do them [the works of God], even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand [the most vital truth in all the universe] that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." {John 10:38 RSV}

What a startling claim! "Either Jesus is a totally mad person, on a par," as C. S. Lewis put it, "with a man who claims to be a poached egg -- out of his mind, uttering meaningless, garbled, rambling, megalomaniacal statements -- or he is telling the truth. And if he is telling the truth he is the most important Being in the universe. He is at the center of everything: He is the center of life, the giver of truth. Jesus of Nazareth is the center of everything. To ignore him is to grope in darkness, to live in rebellion, to miss out on joy, peace and love, and end at last as part of the world's fiery judgment."

But all who heard Jesus do not reject him. John goes on to tell us:

Again they tried to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.

He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John at first baptized [that is where he began his ministry] and there he remained. And many came to him; and they said, "John did no sign, but everything that John said about this man was true." And many believed in him there. {John 10:40-42 RSV}

They saw the confirmation of the word of John {the Baptist} in the works of Jesus. Here is where Jesus rests his case. It is interesting that nobody today ever seriously makes the claim that Jesus was a mad man! I have never seen any serious attempt to claim that he was out of his mind. His works were so true, so helpful, so delivering, such a blessing to everyone. His words and his works have released people for centuries. Nobody claims he is mad. The only conclusion left is that he is indeed God become man. The mystery of his existence is this: He is the God-man.

We are called to worship him, to follow him, and obey him. This is the only way we can find our way safely through life.

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