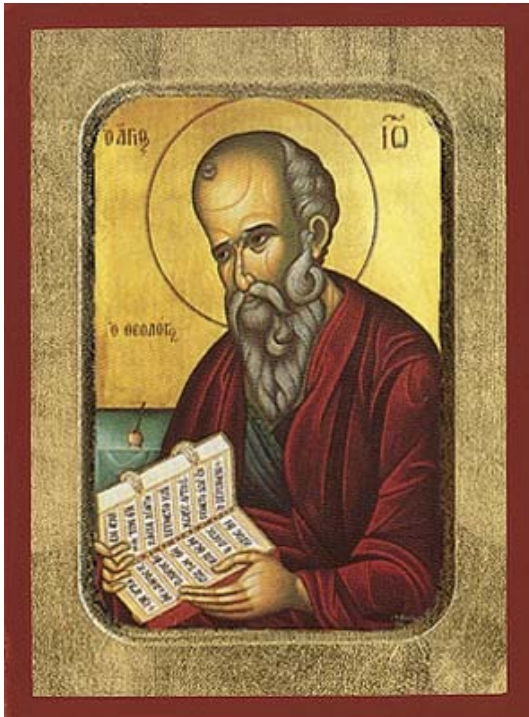


The Reality of Sin

This weekly bulletin insert complements the curriculum published by the Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America. This and many other Christian Education resources are available at <http://dce.oca.org>.



The verses I John 1:8 to 2:6 contain a striking statement: "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." Another memorable verse follows: "If we say that we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and His word is not in us."

The directness of these verses makes it clear that the writer, John the Apostle and Evangelist, must have been dealing with some disturbing challenges to the Christian faith.

Those challenges came from the various groups and sects that appeared in the earliest days of the Christian Church, when John was writing. Many of these groups, influenced by Oriental or Greek pagan philosophies, taught that the soul is the only important part of the human being. The body is a prison from which the soul must strive to escape. In fact, all material things, including the body, are unworthy of salvation.

Devaluing matter led these groups to have ideas about Jesus Christ that were not those of the Church. A belief system called Docetism (from the Greek word for "to seem") taught that Christ did not really come as a true human being; He only seemed to do so. The Docetists couldn't accept that God would lower Himself to take on a material body.

But our faith is based on Jesus Christ coming to our world as true Man and true God. He had to take on everything that is ours, including a body, in order to save it. Our bodies will be resurrected in glory, not cast off as worthless. We are whole beings—body, soul, spirit—and our wholeness is eternally precious to God.

When John writes that if we say we have not sinned "we make God a liar" he is referring to another teaching of some groups in his time. They said that sin is unimportant. It is merely something done in the body, and if the body and matter are unimportant, so is sin.

But John insists, by referring to Jesus Christ as the eternal One whom "our hands have handled" (1:1), that God honored matter and the body when He sent His Son in the body. Therefore, everything we do in the body is important, and the reality is that sin exists and must be struggled against so that it can be overcome. To deny the reality of sin is to deny what Christ's coming as Man showed us, and that denial makes God a liar. It also endangers our salvation, because denying sin is deceiving ourselves, and turns us away from repentance.

But the reality of sin doesn't leave us without hope. John reminds us that we are called to obey God, and to love each other as He loves us. We may fall short, but when that happens, Jesus Christ is our advocate before the Father. He is the expiation "for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (2:2).