

The Final “Word” on Christmas

John 1:1-18

Not all the traditions of Christmas are equal. There was a time when, had I dared to drag home a Christmas tree without Linda’s approval it would have been considered an affront on the sacred bond of matrimony. She had a vision of the perfect tree, and I had to handle and spin every tree on the lot before I would hear the words, “That’s it! That’s the one!” Over the course of 28 years, she has decided that she’s not fond of cold weather. Now, if she goes with me at all to get a tree, it takes about nine seconds. Sometimes, she just says, “Aw! You got the tree. You know what I like.”

Trees, stockings, packages and Santa are all familiar images of Christmas, but obviously, Christians could never pull off the celebration without the other pictures, those painted by the Gospel writers.

Matthew tells us of Magi bearing gifts following a star to Bethlehem and of a paranoid King slaughtering every baby boy in Bethlehem so as to eliminate any rivals for his throne. Luke writes of an overrun inn and a manger bed for the infant Jesus. He tells us of angels singing in the skies outside of Bethlehem and of shepherds visiting the infant Christ on the night of His birth. We rely on the images of Matthew and Luke. What would be left of Christmas without them? Such a question may cross our minds when we see the sacred expressions of Christmas under attack as they are this year.

Actually, however, there would still be the essence of what Christmas means to a people of faith, for it is neither Matthew nor Luke that record the clearest statement of that essence. John never mentions a manger, angels, shepherds, Magi, a star, Herod, or a virgin birth. But, it is John, the author of the fourth Gospel, who best describes what Christmas means to mankind.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, oral reports of His life circulated for about twenty years. Mark wrote the earliest Gospel. Perhaps, he felt the life of Christ needed to be written down before any more time elapsed. A little later, Matthew wrote a Gospel to Jewish believers to fully show that Jesus was the *Messiah* that they had been waiting for through hundreds of years of history. Luke wrote so as to give an “orderly account” of the life of Christ to a man named (or nicknamed) *Theophilus*, which means a “lover of God.” Matthew, Mark, and Luke were each written to believing communities so that they would have a written record of the life of Jesus, lest corruption set in due to “word of mouth.”

A few more decades passed before John decided to write his account of the life of Jesus. The earlier writers had done fine jobs, but they had not addressed the world John lived in or, for that matter, in which most of us now live. John was living among Gentiles in Ephesus. The temple in faraway Jerusalem had been destroyed years earlier. Judaism and the Jewish roots of Jesus were pretty irrelevant to John’s neighbors. Christianity was well established among the Gentiles, but it was now being subjected to the analysis of philosophers, who were corrupting the simple truths of the faith.

John, now an old man, wrote with an agenda that Matthew, Mark, and Luke could never have anticipated. He selected material from his personal experiences with Jesus, not to supplement the other accounts, but to drive home key points that had to be made. John was the last living intimate link to the earthly ministry of Jesus and he had some facts about Christ to establish before the so-called wise men of his age fouled up everything. John did not write to believers but to a Gentile world and he did so in order to produce faith in the real Jesus. So, while the events surrounding the birth of Jesus are lovely accounts of the hand of God intervening in human history, the essential meaning of those events should not be misplaced in the pageantry. In Jesus, God became a man.

John introduced his readers to “the Word” which actually established some common ground between his gentile audience and the Jewish roots of Christianity. God’s Word as His dynamic agent for doing things that only God can do was an idea deeply ingrained in the Jews. After all, God had created the world by His spoken utterance. Greek philosophers also spoke of a *logos* or, a “word” behind creation in a metaphysical sense, a “force” or the mystery behind creation, but not necessarily as a personal God with a distinct character. So, when John writes in verse 14, “The Word became flesh . . .” he is saying to everyone in his day that Jesus became a man to describe God to the rest of us as fully as He can be described. And, as we will see, Jesus not only shows us God. He brings God’s salvation to man.

I. The Preexistence of Jesus (1-5)

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

A. Jesus Is the Life and Light of for Men

Life and light are important themes throughout John’s Gospel. Here, they are closely identified with the Word at creation. Before God declared, “Let there be light,” the earth was formless, empty and dark. Jews knew that God’s light dispelled the darkness of creation and provided an arena for Him to bring about His order. Life came only as God breathed it into Adam’s lungs. John’s gentile audience knew that whoever John was speaking of as this *logos* also brought life and light to men. Of course, John was speaking of spiritual life and light as well their natural counterparts. Jesus came to dispel spiritual death and darkness. However, this spiritual death and darkness are not readily driven away.

B. What Message Was Burning in the Old Apostle’s Heart?

When he is honest, natural man yearns for God. Only an arrogant fool denies God’s existence in his heart of hearts. Creation’s wonders, coupled with human mortality, awaken in us a curiosity about our origin and our ultimate destiny. But, natural man lacks the resources, the data and the holiness to prove or disprove anything for certain. World religions represent human efforts to know God. Sometimes, these efforts are ethically noble. Sometimes, they are weirdly wicked, but that’s what one gets when one gropes in darkness looking for something, but not sure what it should look like.

Certain philosophers of John’s day concluded that that which was spirit was always good and that the material realm was always evil. If the notion of God in the flesh is difficult for us to fathom, it was even more so for them. When Christian doctrine began to be tainted by these secular ideas, some in the church who wanted to remain respectful of Jesus suggested that He was either a phantom spirit that only appeared to be a man or, that He was a man adopted by God for a redemptive purpose.

John wrote to verify for the record that Jesus was God, of the same essence as the Creator. The Old Testament God of plagues, wrath and judgment didn’t go soft because of anything Jesus did to appease Him. God is like Jesus, because Jesus is God. God has always been as Jesus revealed Him

to be. Just like Old Testament JEHOVAH, Jesus is a holy Friend to those who keep His covenant. And, just like that same JEHOVAH, Jesus will show Himself to be a holy Terror to those who reject Him.

II. The Preeminence of Jesus (6-9)

⁶There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. ⁸He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. ⁹The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

A. John the Gospel Writer Addresses Some Issue Pertaining to John the Baptist

John the Apostle is writing about John the Baptist. I'll try to keep the players straight. Mark equates the "beginning of the gospel" with the appearance of John the Baptist (Mark 1:1-3). Luke gives great attention to the birth of John the Baptist, who drew huge crowds to the wilderness, was a fiery preacher of righteousness and a martyr. He was the stuff of which heroes are made.

Perhaps, inappropriate hero worship directed toward John the Baptist was confusing the gentiles that John the Apostle lived amongst. As they assessed the Christian faith, some may have found John the Baptist to be a more awe-inspiring champion than the lowly Jesus. Of course, John the writer's gentile neighbors were not steeped in Jewish messianic expectations that included a forerunner. For some reason, John the writer felt a need to clarify the preeminence of Jesus, especially as it pertained to John the Baptist.

B. What Message Was Burning in the Old Apostle's Heart?

The light of God is Jesus ... period. He is the "true light" of which the John the Baptist was only a forerunner and herald. Of course, nobody understood this better than John the Baptist who said:

... 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less. – John 3:28-30

Jesus Himself said that John the Baptist was the greatest man ever born of a woman. Still, that's a far cry from being the way to God. History is filled with great men and women of God. Our own lives are filled with teachers and mentors that have affected us greatly. We read our favorite authors and thinkers. All such people are gifts of Christ to His church, but only Jesus Himself could claim, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

III. The Personality of Jesus (10-14)

¹⁰He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. ¹¹He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. ¹²Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God--
¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

¹⁴The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

A. Jesus Was an Unlikely Deity

When John wrote of the Word's "own", he was speaking of Israel, God's covenant nation. God had given to Israel the land of Palestine and had preserved them in that land for many centuries. The nation was allegedly looking for *Messiah*, an anointed King from God. Yet, when Jesus came, they missed the fact that He was *Messiah*. How could they ever have grasped His deity? God's people rejected the fulfillment of His every promise to them. Ultimately, they killed Him. How? Why?

The Jews were looking for a *messiah* that harmonized with their pride as a people and their hatred of the Romans that occupied their land. The *messiah* of their dreams was regal, warlike and jingoistic. Jesus was meek, gracious and devoid of any ethnic prejudices. He presented God as One Who was driven by love for the whole world rather than simply by hostility towards the gentiles. But, to those that did recognize that He was indeed God's *Logos*, He imparted the eternal life and light of God. The Jews were God's people by virtue of their natural birth. The true children of God, regardless of bloodline or human choices about having children, are those newly born of God by faith in Jesus.

B. What Message Was Burning in the Old Apostle's Heart?

When John wrote his gospel, He did not record numerous miracles. He chose seven that uniquely demonstrated that God's glory rested upon Jesus. John linked most of these miracles to Jesus' great "I am" passages that asserted His deity. After He fed five thousand, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35). He announced, "I am the light of the world" as he healed a man born blind (9:5). Before He raised Lazarus from the dead, Jesus declared, "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25).

To this old eyewitness, it made no difference what any Jew thought *Messiah* ought to be like or how any sophisticated Greek thinker envisioned the *logos* behind creation. It makes no difference today how any sinner might try to fashion divine truth to his own advantage. The Word became flesh. He Who was of a different essence than men became a man. He "made his dwelling" with us. John had seen the glory of God in Christ. Jesus was and is uniquely the Son of God. My version speaks of "the One and Only." You've heard it rendered "the only begotten" Uniquely, Jesus came forth from God as His Son. Uniquely, Jesus brings God's grace to sinners. Uniquely, He reveals God's truth.

IV. The Purpose of Jesus (15-18)

¹⁵John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'" ¹⁶From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. ¹⁷For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known.

A. Jesus' Mission Was to Reveal God

Centuries before Jesus, a brutally honest Persian named Zoroaster said, "God will never be known unless he reveals himself in human form." We were created in God's image, but as sinners, we are too unlike God to ever figure Him out through our own efforts. Every honest man knows there is a God, but no sinner has seen Him. Jesus became the Man Who made God "knowable" for us.

The Law of Moses did not make God fully known. It was the basis of a covenant between Israel and God that Israel did not keep. The law's righteous standard only spotlighted Israel's guilt, condemning them all the more. Jesus brought grace to mankind. As God's free gift, we can become His children if we are in Jesus. Jesus came to die for your sins in your place, or as John the Baptist once told his disciples, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 2:29).

B. What Message Was Burning in the Old Apostle's Heart?

In John's day, true faith was being polluted by false teaching, distorted by legalism and watered down by an "anything goes" mentality. Sound familiar? John fought that battle long before us. Vital doctrine about the Person of Christ was under attack. John could have taken the position, "Well, so long as everyone who calls himself 'Christian' is sincere, there's not a problem." As long as the number of people professing Christ is growing, it does not matter if we see all Christ the same way. No, John knew the truth. The desire to set the record straight burned like a fire in the old man. Much was at stake. Eternal life for all who receive Jesus as God in the flesh was hanging in the balance. That is why it is so crucial that churches stand firmly on the Bible, that recorded testimony of the eyewitnesses, and not opportunistically cater to that which is currently in vogue for itching ears.

Conclusion

One night, angels sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests" (Luke 2:14). Years later, an old man wrote, "The Word became flesh ..." One story better lends itself to carols and pageantry, but the fact is they are the same story. Without shepherds, angels or Magi the message of Christmas is still, "God came to us and He brought grace with Him."

In my humble judgment, the best Christmas lyric ever written is the second stanza of the best carol. With apologies to my dear friends who have Brethren, Presbyterian, Baptist or Catholic backgrounds, the prize goes to ... a Methodist. Don't get excited, Larry, Chuck or Kay. This particular Methodist was an awful somber guy, and the carol was sung to a tune so cheerless that we would not even recognize the song. A century later, it took a Lutheran to liven up the carol with the tune to which we sing it today, and you are a pretty somber character if it takes a Lutheran to liven you up.

Still, I base the lyric award on how masterfully the writer weds the majestic splendor of Luke's Christmas with the profound truth of Christmas according to John's Gospel. And, the winner is Charles Wesley, the author of Hark! the Herald Angels Sing. Reflect with me on that second verse:

*Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord!*

*Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of a Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail th' incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with man to dwell
Jesus, our Emmanuel
Hark! The herald angels sing
"Glory to the newborn King!"*

That's good stuff. In Bethlehem's manger lay Emmanuel, the *Logos* of God become flesh!

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