

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD

Like it or not, we live and move and must deal with a culture that tends to interpret life in the fragmented image-oriented world of television. This profoundly affects how we think and express ourselves. People today, for instance, think almost exclusively in pictures. Images dominate the mental landscape. Even the movement from one image to another occurs along lines established in large measure by cultural habit rather than by way of any natural connections between the images. In other words, the relationship between the images is purely arbitrary. This has prompted Richard Lints to write: “The argument that thinking and reflecting on the work and words of God ought to be the means by which we bring coherence to the disparate mental images of the modern person is open to the criticism that it assumes the truth of the conclusion we are attempting to establish – namely, that truth is best established by thinking and reflecting. The project will not appear ‘reasonable’ to many modern evangelicals because this is not the manner in which they normally connect up the images of their own lives. They live on the practical side of the chasm, and such values as coherence and reasonableness are not preeminently important to them.”¹

When we read John 1:14, “We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth,” are we prone to think that the glory manifested in the incarnate Word was openly visible to the naked eye? Did Jesus walk around with some kind of glow or luminescence that served to visibly tell all who saw Him that He was no mere mortal but was, in fact, the eternal Son of God?

- I. **CHRIST’S INCARNATION (1:14a).** The Word became flesh. The One who is said to be *with God* in 1:1 is now declared to also be *with us*. “The verb ‘was made’ (*egenetō*, from *ginomai*) ‘expresses that a person or thing changes its property and enters into a new condition, becomes something that it was not before.’ The tense is aorist, implying a definite and completed action; there is no going back upon the incarnation. The act of self-humbling on the part of God is irreversible; he is eternally ‘Emmanuel,’ God with us. God the Son, without ceasing for a moment to be divine, has united to himself a full human nature and become an authentic human person, ‘God with us.’ In Jesus Christ, God was ‘made man.’”² The Word brought about the first creation (1:3) and He is also the One who enters human history to redeem creation. He who was infinite now becomes finite. The Invisible becomes tangible. That which was *beyond* the reach of the human mind now *stoops*, and we are permitted to see, as it were, the face of God.³ The Word (one of His divine titles) became flesh (assumed humanity). “He became,” wrote Pink, “what He was not previously. He did not cease to be God, but He became Man.”⁴

- II. CHRIST'S PILGRIMAGE (1:14b).** “. . . and lived for a while among us.” The word translated *lived* in the NIV, and *dwelt* in the ESV, is *skēnoō*. It means to literally pitch one's tent, to tabernacle, and is probably an allusion to Exodus 25:8, where we read that the tabernacle of Israel was the place where God met with His people (cf. Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 7:25; 13:15). Pink has made some interesting observations regarding this. We learn that the tabernacle, among other things, was of humble appearance. It was God's dwelling place, where God's Shekinah glory was manifested. It was the place where God met with men. Christ is that (cf. John 14:16; 1 Timothy 2:5). The tabernacle was the place where the Law was preserved, and Christ is the One who perfects, keeps and preserves the Law (Hebrews 10:5-7 and Psalm 40:7-8). The tabernacle was the place where sacrifices were made. So it is with Christ; His body and blood (his tent) is what makes atonement. The tabernacle was the place where the priests were fed (Leviticus 6:16, 26); Christ is the Bread of Life who nourishes His body, the Church (Ephesians 5:29). The tabernacle was the place of worship. It is in Christ and it is only by Him that our worship is given and accepted by the Father (cf. Ephesians 2:18; Hebrews 13:15).
- III. CHRIST'S WITNESSES⁵ (1:14c).** John informs that “we have seen His glory.” This glory is described as that of “the only-begotten of the Father” (KJV). You will note that the NIV reads, “the glory of the one and only Son.” The Greek word *monogenēs* means absolutely unique (not begotten). Christ is referred to as the *monogenēs* also in 1:18; 3:16 and 18. The word declares that Jesus stands *alone* in His unique Sonship. There is no other like Him. The problem with translating this “only-begotten” is that it gives the mistaken impression that the Son had an origin or birth in relationship to the Father. (This is, in fact, how groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses read the term.) Christ is an *eternal* Son, and if people complain and say “how can a Son be eternal?”, then remind them of Augustine's words: “Show me and explain to me an eternal Father, and I will show to you and explain to you an eternal Son!”⁶ Vincent helpfully points out that *monogenēs* “should be compared Paul's *prōtotokos*, *first born* (Rom. viii. 29; Col. i. 15, 18), which occurs but once in John (Apoc. i. 5), and in Heb. i. 6; xi. 28; xii. 23. John's word marks the relation to the Father as unique, stating the fact in itself. Paul's word places the eternal Son in relation to the universe. Paul's word emphasizes His existence before created things; John's His distinctness from created things.”⁷
- IV. CHRIST'S GLORY (1:14d).** The glory Christ displayed was not perceived by everyone. It was not something that could be seen, like the eclipse of the sun. We are told in John 2:11 on the occasion of Christ's first miracle (the turning of the water into wine) that He *revealed* His glory – but *only* His immediate disciples put their faith in Him. “The miraculous sign was not itself unshielded glory; the eyes of faith were necessary to ‘see’ the glory that was revealed by the sign. Then, as the book progresses, the revelation of Jesus' glory is especially tied to Jesus' cross and the exaltation that ensues – and certainly only those who have faith ‘see’ the glory of God in the Word-made-flesh in events such as these. There is a hiddenness to the display of glory in the incarnate Word, a hiddenness penetrated by the Evangelist and the early witnesses who could say, *We have seen his glory.*”⁸ “The glory the eyewitnesses saw was *full of grace and truth*. The expression ‘grace and truth’ (*charis kai alētheia*) is found only twice in the NT, here and in 1:17. It is almost certainly the evangelist's rendering of a similar expression ‘kindness and faithfulness’ (*eleos kai alētheia*) that is used frequently in the LXX as a translation of the Hebrew expression *hesed we'emet* (e.g. Jos. 2:14; 2 Sa. 2:6; 15:20; Pss. 24:10 [ET 25:10], 60:8 [ET 61:7]; 83:12 [ET 84:11]; 84:11 [ET 85:10]; 88:15 [ET 89:14]). The expression used in Exodus 34:6-7, a passage in which God makes his glory known to Moses: ‘And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, “the Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to

anger, abounding in love and faithfulness (*hesed we'emet*), maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin.” The ‘love and faithfulness’ that constituted the glory of God proclaimed to Moses is now found in the Word incarnate. What was *proclaimed* to Moses by the Lord as He passed by has now been *seen*, embodied in the incarnate Word, by the eyewitnesses.”⁹

V. **CHRIST’S ETERNALITY (1:14e).** He came forth “from the Father.” In 1:18 He is declared to be “at the Father’s side.” “This language,” as Warfield has observed, “is pregnant. It is not merely coexistence with God that is asserted, as of two beings standing side by side, united in a local revelation, or even in a common conception. What is suggested is an active relation of intercourse. The distinct personality of the Word is therefore not obscurely intimated. From all eternity the Word has been with God as a fellow: He who in the very beginning already ‘was,’ ‘was’ also in communion with God. Though He was thus in some sense a second along with God, He was nevertheless not a separate being from God: ‘And the Word was’ – still the eternal ‘was’ – ‘God.’ In some sense distinguishable from God, He was in an equally true sense identical with God. There is but one eternal God; this eternal God, the Word is; in whatever sense we may distinguish Him from the God whom He is ‘with,’ He is yet not another than this God, but Himself is this God.”¹⁰

CONCLUSION: How do you *think* of God? Do you *picture* Him to be some sort of celestial grandfather, like that depicted by Michelangelo in the Creation scene on the Sistine Chapel? Listen to the words of John Calvin: “For God so proclaims Himself the sole God as to offer Himself to be contemplated clearly in three persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”¹¹ You can only truly *know* God by knowing Christ as He is set forth in Scripture as the One sent by the Father to be the Crucified and Risen Redeemer (1 Corinthians 2:2). As we celebrate Christmas, let us ponder the truth of John 1:14 and its implications. Jesus came into their fallen world on a rescue mission. Alistair Begg captures the significance of this when he declared: “He came to earth ‘to seek and to save what was lost’ (Luke 19:10). ‘For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life’ (John 3:16 NKJV). So when, as the hymn from 1 Timothy 3:16 puts it, ‘He appeared in a body,’ Jesus became what He was not, namely, a man, without ever ceasing to be what He was, namely, God. ‘Christ did not become God, but He who was God became a Man by taking our nature into His. He was not somebody in between God and man, a demigod or superman, but He was both God and man.’ This truth is a cornerstone of basic Christianity. The deity of Jesus Christ is the essential presupposition of the finality of Christian revelation and the validity of Christian redemption. If Jesus is not Immanuel, God with us, then His revelation is not final and may be superseded. If we deny Christ’s deity, then we are destined to grope forever in the darkness of our enlightened reason. If Jesus is not who He claimed to be, then His death for our sins is of no value and does not in any way alter our standing before God. Consequently, any sense that we may have of peace and forgiveness would be just feelings and nothing more. He may have been a superstar, but a mere man could never be our Savior.”¹²

ENDNOTES

¹ R. Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1993), p. 6.

² Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: The Bible Speaks Today Series* (IVP, 1993), p. 46.

³ “It is impossible, so far as our experience yet goes, for man to have direct knowledge of God as God. He can come to know Him only through One who shares both the human and divine natures, and who is in vital fellowship both with God and with man.” B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 27.

⁴ A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John I* (rpt. Bible Truth Depot, 1945), p. 32.

⁵ The Gospel of John places great emphasis on what it means to be a witness. John uses the noun 14 times and the verb 33 times. “There is a sevenfold witness: in addition to the witness of John, there is that of the Father, of the Son, of the Holy Spirit, of the Scripture, of Jesus’ work and of people who responded to Jesus’ ministry. That is an impressive list and shows that the Evangelist saw ample testimony to Jesus. There is no excuse for not believing.” Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* (Zondervan, 1986), p. 239.

⁶ “The adjective ‘only begotten’ conveys the idea, not of derivation and subordination, but of uniqueness and consubstantiality: Jesus is all that God is, and He alone is this.” *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield II* (rpt. Baker, 1981), p. 194.

⁷ M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies In The New Testament: The Writings of John II* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1969), p. 53.

⁸ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 130.

⁹ Colin G. Kruse, *John: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (IVP, 2007), p. 69.

¹⁰ Warfield, op. cit., p. 191.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (The Westminster Press, 1975), Bk. 1, CH XIII, Sec. 2. Earlier he says, “Surely, His infinity ought to make us afraid to try to measure Him by our own senses.” (Sec. 1)

¹² Alistair Begg, *What Angels Wish They Knew: The Basics of True Christianity* (Moody, 1998), p. 99.