

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Text:	John 1:1-14	Gary L. W. Johnson
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THE ONLY BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD

Newsweek magazine launched a broadside attack on the Bible in its cover story for December 23, 2014 entitled “The Bible: So Misunderstood It’s a Sin.” The hatchet job was the work of Kurt Eichenwald, a regular reporter for *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*. His background is in business and finance – he has ZERO training in Biblical and theological fields – and it shows. Albert Mohler describes it as “an irresponsible (screed) of post-Christian (invective) leveled against the Bible and, even more to the point, against evangelical Christianity. It is one of the most irresponsible articles ever to appear in a journalistic guide.”¹ A number of very capable evangelical scholars took Eichenwald out to the proverbial woodshed and gave him a well-deserved whipping.² Over the past few years the kind of garbage that *Newsweek* dished out has become fairly common. The most blatant appeared in the novel *The Da Vinci Code*. With over 46 million copies in print, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* has become a major factor in determining how people view Jesus and the Christian faith. Evangelical Christians in particular are worried about the influence on the faith from a single source they regard as a piece of well-written fiction that masquerades itself as historical fact. The movie version of *The Da Vinci Code* was released in 2006 and became the second highest grossing film of the year. An amazing amount of scholarly response, primarily by Evangelicals, criticizing the story and calling into question Brown’s claims that the book is “historically” accurate. To give just one example, noted evangelical New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary is following up the criticisms of the novel in his book, *The Gospel Code*, with lectures in Singapore, Turkey, and 30 U.S. cities. He’s given 55 broadcast interviews.³ The conservative Roman Catholic group Opus Dei, portrayed as villainous in the story, is among those asking Sony Corp. to issue a disclaimer with the film. Assaults on “Da Vinci” don’t just come from evangelicals like Witherington, or from Roman Catholic leaders such as Chicago’s Cardinal Francis George, who says Brown is waging “an attack on the Catholic Church” through preposterous historical claims. Among more liberal thinkers, Harold Attridge, dean of Yale’s Divinity School, says Brown has “wildly misinterpreted” early Christianity. Bart Ehrman, who teaches religion at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, likens the phenomenon to the excitement in the 19th century when deluded masses thought Jesus would return in 1844 (which gave birth to the Seventh-day Adventists). Ehrman, whose own book, (*Misquoting Jesus*), proposed a radical approach to the text of the New Testament,⁴ nonetheless sees Brown’s book in a decidedly negative light. The novel’s impact on religious ideas in popular culture, he says, is “quite unlike anything we’ve experienced in our lifetimes.” Ehrman details Brown’s numerous mistakes in truth and fiction in *The Da Vinci Code* and asks: “Why didn’t he simply get his facts straight?”

The problem is that *The Da Vinci Code* is billed as more than mere fiction. Brown’s opening page begins with the word “FACT” and asserts that all descriptions of documents “are accurate.” “It is a book about big ideas, you can love them or you can hate them,” Brown said in a speech. “But we’re all talking about them, and that’s really the point.” Brown told National Public Radio’s “Weekend Edition” during a 2003 publicity tour (he declines interviews now) that his characters and action are fictional but “the ancient history, the secret documents, the rituals, all of this is factual.” Around the

same time, on CNN he said, “the background is all true.” But as documented above, Christian scholars from across the spectrum beg to differ. Among the key issues none is more critical than the way *The Da Vinci Code* approaches the doctrine the divinity of Christ. Brown’s version in “Da Vinci” viewed Jesus as a mere mortal until A.D. 325 when the Emperor Constantine “turned Jesus into a deity” by getting the council of Nicea to endorse divine status by “a relatively close vote.” This is just one example where Brown deliberately resorts to falsehood. Contrary to Brown’s blatant distortion, this was not done for “political reasons” nor was it a “close vote.” There were 318 bishops in attendance at Nicea and 316 affirmed the statements in its creed and only 2 abstained.⁵ Ancient church experts like Larry Hurtado of Scotland’s University of Edinburgh, whose highly acclaimed book on the Person of Christ examines first century belief in Jesus’ divinity, says that “on chronology, issues, developments, and all the matters asserted, Brown strikes out; he doesn’t even get on base.” “In arguing that the Bible supports the use of the word *begotten* to speak of the eternal generation of The Nicæa Creed declares: “We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father [*ek tēs ousias tou patros*], God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father [*homoousion tō patri*], through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into the heavens. And he will come to judge both the living and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit. But, those who say, Once he was not, or he was not before his generation, or he came to be out of nothing, or who assert that he, the Son of God, is of a different *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them.”

Notice, first of all, as Barrett observes, “the emphasis on the eternal generation of the Son. He is begotten from the Father. But by *begotten*, the Nicene fathers did not mean what the Arians meant, that the Son is created. No, the Son is begotten, not made. There’s a difference. For us creatures, to be begotten is to come into existence for the first time. Arius was so literal in his thinking that he could not understand that the biblical metaphor, when applied to God, defies any limitations it might have in our world. Yes, the Son is begotten – that is the very definition of a Son. But since this is the eternal, infinite, immutable, and impassible God we are talking about, the Son’s generation is eternal, infinite, immutable, and impassible, meaning he can have no beginning as creation does.”⁷ 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 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 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.⁸ 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.”⁹
- II. **CHRIST’S PILGRIMAGE (1:14b).** “. . . and lived for a while among us.” The word translated *lived* in the NIV 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 is 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; Hebrew 13:15).

III. CHRIST'S WITNESS¹⁰ (1:14c). John informs, "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 *monogēnes* means absolutely unique. "In arguing that the Bible supports the use of the word *begotten* to speak of the eternal generation of the Son, I must comment on the five Johannine texts that designate the Son as *monogenēs* (Jn. 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 Jn. 4L9). As we have seen, there is now general agreement that the correct translation of this word is *unique* or *only*, rather than *only begotten*. The use of this word in reference to the Son is, however, still relevant to any study of Scripture investigating the eternal begetting of the Son. The Greek-speaking church fathers saw these texts that use the word *monogenēs* as highly significant, not because they thought the word meant *only begotten* and thus spoke of the Son's eternal generation, but because they understood it to mean *unique*. This designation set Jesus Christ apart from all others. What made him utterly unique, they concluded, was that he alone is eternally begotten, not made. All else in the world is created in time; the Son is *eternally begotten, not created*, along with the Holy Spirit, who eternally proceeds.¹⁰ 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."¹¹

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 to *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.*"¹² "This glory of the enfleshed Logos is *full of grace and truth* (John 1:14b). In general, grace originally meant something like *that which causes joy*, and then it came to signify *goodwill, kindness, unmerited favor*. The term *grace (charis)* is used only three times in the prologue, and nowhere else in John's Gospel. It is Paul who particularly develops the ramifications of grace elsewhere in the New Testament. John directly contrasts *the law given by Moses* to the *grace and truth [that] came by Jesus Christ* (John 1:17). "It is not that the law was ever without grace, nor that the grace of God in Christ ever excludes the structure of law (for law expresses the very character of God, and Christian ethics involve obedience to the Lord – cf. John 14:15), but it is rather a matter of emphasis. The law, while providing a mediator and sacrifice for sin, nevertheless focuses on the objective holiness of God, which shows up our Adamic

sinfulness, and hence our need of grace. Grace, however, focuses on what God has done for us in his Son that we could never do for ourselves. The *definition* of grace by the Apostle Paul in II Corinthians 8:9 expresses succinctly what the coming of Christ in the flesh has achieved for sinners who believe: *For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.* What John says is not unlike that: knowing who the incarnate Word is, is a receiving of *grace for grace* out of the divine fullness (John 1:16).¹³

- 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 relation, 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; whom He is *with.* He is yet not another than this God, but Himself is this God."¹⁴

CONCLUSION: C. A. Carter has pointed out that "From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible presents God as acting in history as judge of the entire world and the savior of his people. The Bible itself is the record of God's self-revelation to his people through the prophets of the Old Testament and, supremely, in Jesus Christ, as witnessed to by the New Testament apostles. *The Word became flesh* (John 1:14). The startling message proclaimed by the apostles and church fathers to the Greco-Roman world was that the God of the Jews and Christians is the God of the philosophers – that is, simple, immutable, eternal, self-existent, and First Cause of the universe – and that this one has spoken through the prophets and become incarnate in Jesus Christ. What is startling about this is that at least some of those who heard this message could understand the concept of an immutable First Cause, but they could not imagine thinking of such a being as personal or as speaking to us. They could also easily imagine the concept of a god speaking, acting, and doing miracles, but no one had ever suggested that the gods of the Greek and Roman pantheon were simple or immutable or eternal or self-existent or the first cause of all things. They could understand both senses of the word *God (theos)*, but they could not grasp how anyone could believe that both senses could be combined into one concept of God. This message was new, paradoxical, and threatened to overthrow their entire worldview. But central to the message preached by the early church was precisely this point: the simple, immutable, eternal, self-existent, First Cause of the universe has spoken through the prophets and become incarnate in Jesus Christ. The early church did not first invent a theory sufficient to explain how such a thing could happen and then argue that it had happened. Instead, they discovered that it had happened, and then they had to figure out how to proclaim it and clarify exactly what they were saying and not saying in doing so. That such a being could speak and act in history is precisely what makes the Christian doctrine of God unique and absolutely devastating to anyone who wants to domesticate God or imagine God in ways that make God less than the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. To confess belief in *God the Father Almighty* is to declare that only this one is legitimately to be worshiped and that all people everywhere must bow before him."¹⁵

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."¹⁶ 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). Peter Lewis explains: “Jesus is the unique, supreme, and, in al ultimate sense, the only revealer of God. No other can reveal God as Jesus reveals God: His revelation is personal, underived, and absolute. Jesus is not simply a word *about* God, nor even only a word *from* God; He Himself *is* the Word of God, and He Himself is God the Word. As the Word, He is and always has been all that God has to say about Himself. In Himself He is God’s self-revelation, and in His work He is God’s saving revelation. He is God’s speaking and acting Word. When John says, *No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only . . . has made him known*, he is not saying that we cannot know the first person of the triune Godhead, but only the second. He is recalling God’s word to Moses, who had requested to see God’s glory: *you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live* (Exodus 33:20, RSV). Moses, after all, *saw God* only in a diminished sense; he saw the afterglow of God’s glory (Exodus 33:20-23), just as Isaiah saw only the hem of God’s glorious garment in the temple (Isaiah 6:1, 5). Moses was in danger (Exodus 33:20-22), and Isaiah overcome with fear and shame (Isaiah 6:5). Sinful men and women cannot live in the blaze of God’s holy being. John is saying here that God in His glory can only be known in and through the Son, the Word, whose unique work it is to reveal the otherwise unknowable and unapproachable Godhead.”¹⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Albert Mohler, “Newsweek On The Bible: So Misrepresented It’s a Sin,” albertmohler.com, Monday, Dec. 29, 2014.

² These include Dan Wallace (“Predictable Christmas Fare: *Newsweek’s* tirade Against The Bible,” danielbwallace.com, Dec. 28, 2014); Michael Kruger, “A Christmas Gift from the Mainstream Media: *Newsweek* Takes a Desperate Swipe at the Integrity of The Bible,” Michael J. Kruger’s blog *Cannon Fodder*, michaeltkruger.com (Dec. 30, 2014); Darrell Bock responds to Kurt Eichenwald’s *Newsweek* article on the Bible, [the gospelcoalition.org](http://thegospelcoalition.org) (Jan. 14, 2015). Eichenwald’s ignorance is appalling. One example is his claim that the King James Version of 1612 was translated from Latin!

³ Witherington maintains an excellent website that deals extensively with Gnosticism in both its ancient and present day forms, cf. www.benwitherington.blogspot.com. Witherington was also recently quoted by FoxNews.com “Impending *Da Vinci Code* Movie Release Spurs Religious Debate” (May 1, 2006).

⁴ [Reformation 21 online.org](http://Reformation21online.org) has a review of Ehrman’s book by Mike Kruger, who many of you will remember served here as an associate pastor before completing his Ph.D. degree in Scotland. Mike now serves as president and professor of NT at RTS in Charlotte, N.C.

⁵ H. O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Doubleday, 1984), p. 116-123. For the record, *Da Vinci* had no “code;” art historians are as frustrated with Dan Brown’s misstatements as are Catholic and evangelical theologians. Cf. J. Garlow and P. Jones, *Cracking Da Vinci’s Code* (Victor Books, 2004).

⁶ [Reformation 21 online.org](http://Reformation21online.org), op. cit.

⁷ M. Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Baker Books, 2021), p. 50.

⁸ “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 man.” B. F. Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes* (rpt. Baker, 1980), p. 27.

⁹ A. W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John I* (rpt. Bible Truth Depot, 1945), p. 32.

¹⁰ 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 Scriptures, 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.

¹¹ K. Giles, *The Eternal Generation of The Son: Maintaining Orthodoxy in Trinitarian Theology* (IVP, 2012), p. 81.

¹² “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.

¹³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 130.

¹⁴ Warfield, op. cit., p. 191.

¹⁵ C. A. Carter, *Contemplating God in The Great Tradition: Recovering Trinitarian Classical Theism* (Baker Academic, 2021), p. 73.

¹⁶ 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).

¹⁷ Peter Lewis, *The Glory of Christ* (Moody, 1997), p. 120.