



The Gospel of John

“The Word Became Flesh”

John 1:14–18

October 6, 2013

Introduction

For the first five centuries of its existence, the early church went to bat defending the biblical doctrine of the Incarnation. During that same period many false teachings had arisen regarding the hypostatic union — the union of the divine and human natures in Christ. Many theories were put forth, examined, and rejected by the church. For example, some argued that Jesus did not have a human spirit, but rather that His divine spirit united with a human body. That view preserved His deity, but at the expense of denying His full humanity. Others suggested that the divine Christ-spirit entered the man Jesus at His baptism, and left Him before His crucifixion. Another group held that Jesus was a created being, and thus inferior to God the Father. Still others viewed Him as two separate persons, one human and the other divine. According to that teaching Jesus was a mere man in whom God dwelt.

All of these views were fatally flawed by denying either Jesus Christ’s full deity or His full humanity. The true church rejected them all in favor of the biblical view of Jesus as the God-man. But the fact that the true church has always embraced this biblical doctrine does not mean that it has not ceased to be fought over. It is still a major target for false teachers, false religions, and cults. The apostle John makes it clear in his epistles that a correct view of Jesus as both divine and human was an essential mark of salvation (1 John 1:1–3; 2:22–24; 4:1–3, 14; 5:1, 10–12, 20; 2 John 3, 7, 9).

Throughout the opening prologue to his gospel, John has declared several truths regarding Christ’s deity and incarnation. Those truths reach a pinnacle in verses 14–18. They summarize the prologue, which in turn summarizes the entire book.

The Nature of the Incarnation (v. 14)

In verse 14, John boldly announces the incarnation (or enfleshment) of the Word and goes on to describe His relationship to the Old Testament

system. Before the incarnation, the Old Testament revealed God’s way of dealing with mankind. The Jewish nation had been brought into a covenant relation with God, and the Mosaic Law provided the framework through which men could live lives pleasing to God.

The phrase “became flesh” means that the Word took upon Himself humanity. He did not cease to be God, nor was His deity changed in any way; rather He added humanity to what He already was. The Greek term for flesh is *sarx* (σάρξ). It appears here as a qualitative noun, meaning that the Word took on the quality of flesh, i.e. a human nature. This is the supreme revelation of God! Consider what the author of Hebrews says of Jesus:

“God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...” ~Hebrews 1:1–2a

In the Old Testament, God made His dwelling among the Jewish people through the tabernacle and later the temple. The shekinah glory that shone forth from these buildings was an evidence of God’s presence. At the incarnation, Jesus came personally into the realm of humanity to dwell among mankind. There was no longer a priestly barrier erected between God and the masses. All people could come and see Him, hear Him, and touch Him. John describes his own experience as an eyewitness of these things. What he saw as he was with Christ was the very glory of God the Father displayed through the person, words, and deeds of Jesus. In the Old Testament, “glory” was the term used to denote the visible manifestation of God in a theophany, e.g. “When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by” (Exod 33:22).

The Word is described as the “One and Only.” The Greek word for this is *monogenēs* (μονογενής) and has the sense of “uniqueness” or “one-of-a-kind.” Some translations describe the Word as “the only begotten of the Father” (KJV, NKJV, NASB), but the word *monogenēs* does not mean “to beget.” Begotten comes from *gennaō* (γεννάω), which is rooted in Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation of the New Testament (late 4th cent.). Notice how this was mistranslated here:

monogenēs = “unique” / “one-of-a-kind”
↓
gennaō = “begotten”

Some heretics have constructed a false system of theology on the term “begotten,” suggesting that the divine Word had no preexistence but came into being at the time of the incarnation. But notice Hebrews 11:7 where the Greek term is used in an identical fashion. Isaac is called Abraham’s *monogenēs*. Isaac is *not* Abraham’s only son (cf. Gen 16:15; 25:1–6), but he is Abraham’s special or unique son (Gen 22:12)! The same can be said of the Word. God has many children (all born-again believers), but only one unique Son (Jesus) who enjoys this special relationship with God the Father. This same relationship is depicted in the famous verse John 3:16.

“Full of grace and truth” perfectly describes the Word as the revealer of the Father. Grace brings to mind God’s mercy and favor toward mankind, while truth depicts His fidelity to His promises. If we want to know what God the Father is like, we need only look to His Son, Jesus Christ. Interestingly, these are the two attributes most closely connected with salvation. Salvation comes wholly by believing God’s *truth* in the gospel, by which we receive His saving *grace*. But salvation does not come apart from God’s Son, Jesus Christ. A vague belief about God will not result in salvation. Only by believing that Jesus is God will one be saved (John 8:24). Those who reject God’s full revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ will be eternally lost.

The Witness of John the Baptist to the Incarnation (v. 15)

Verse 15 forms somewhat of a parenthesis between verses 14 and 16. The gospel writer returns to the testimony of John the Baptist to explain his position in relation to Christ. The Word was connected to the Old Testament in the sense that He was directly witnessed by John the Baptist, who was the last of the Old Testament prophets (Matt 11:13; Luke 16:16). After 400 years without any direct revelation, the Spirit of God came upon John so that he might draw the attention of the Jewish nation to their Messiah.

John the Baptist testified that Jesus was preferred before him. Different versions will variously translate this as “preferred before” or “surpassed.” The idea is that Jesus is of a higher rank than John. The reason for this is also given: “He was before me.” This statement speaks to Christ’s preexistence. From a human perspective John was older. He was born six months before Jesus (Luke 1:26), and began his ministry before Jesus. But the Word had existed long before John, all the way into eternity past (cf. John 8:58).

The Impact of the Incarnation (vv. 16–18)

In verse 16, these seem to be the words of the author, not John the Baptist. If verse 16 is assigned to John the Baptist, then verses 17–18 should be as well, but those sound like a narrative comment by the author of the gospel. This verse is put here to give us a contrast. The Mosaic Law (v. 17), which stands here for the entire Old Testament economy, is contrasted with the new revelation in Christ.

The phrase at the end of verse 16 is literally “grace *for* [*anti* (ἀντι)] grace.” This phrase has been handled differently by translators. Some give the impression that as days come and go a new supply takes the place of the grace already bestowed.

“We have all received... ...grace upon grace.”	(NASB, ESV)
...grace after grace.”	(HCSB)
...one gracious gift after another.”	(NET)
...one blessing after another.”	(NIV 1984)

However, the normal way to express “grace *upon* grace” is to use the preposition *epi* (ἐπι). There is little evidence the preposition “for” (*anti*) means “upon” or “in addition to.” It is better to understand *anti* to carry its normal meaning of “instead of” or “in the place of.” Thus, from Christ’s fullness we have received grace *instead of* grace. Notice how this is reflected in the updated NIV:

“We have all received... ...grace in place of grace already given.”	(NIV 2011)
--	------------

The grace and truth that came through Jesus Christ is what replaces the law. And the law itself is understood to be an earlier display of grace (cf. Exod 34:6). The most common objection to this idea is verse 17 which would seem to suggest a contrast — that grace did not come through the Law. But there is nothing in the text that requires an absolute antithesis. The “for” at the beginning of verse 17 should be understood to denote cause. Note my own translation:

¹⁶ For out of His fullness we have all received grace in place of grace, ¹⁷ because *just* as the law was *graciously* given through Moses, so *also* grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.
(*italicized* words added for clarity)

The idea of these verses is that Christ is sufficient for all our needs. The truth of the gospel and the grace necessary for salvation can only be found in Christ.

The prologue reaches its grand conclusion in verse 18 with the proclamation that Christ the Word is the fullest revelation of the Father. No mere man has ever seen God's essence. The first part of this verse, "no man has ever seen God" is probably reflecting on the Old Testament situation. Even the various theophanies (preincarnate appearances of the Word) were only diminished manifestations of God. The fullest revelation now comes only through Christ.

This also answers the question of the content of faith for the Old Testament believer. Salvation has always been by faith. But the Old Testament saint was not responsible to believe the various truths about Christ that we see reflected in the New Testament. Old Testament people of faith like Abraham, Ruth, David, and Elijah were responsible for trusting in God and believing the truth He had revealed up to that time. But since the time of Christ's first coming, salvation is only possible through Christ Himself. This means that a modern Jew who claims to believe in the God of Abraham will die in his sins if he rejects Jesus Christ. Not only is He necessary for salvation, He is the exclusive channel of salvation.

The phrase "The only begotten Son" (NKJV) is really a combination of two words: *monogenēs thēos* (μόογενής θεός). Some versions translate this "God the One and Only." It might be better translated "the unique Son, Himself God." The term *thēos* stands in direct apposition to the term *monogenēs*. It's as though the two terms are looking at each other in a mirror. In other words, God (*thēos*) is in every sense directly equivalent to the unique, one-of-a-kind Son (*monogenēs*). The NET Bible does a very good job of rendering this verse:

"No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known."

~John 1:18 NET

This is another striking assertion of the deity of Jesus Christ. Despite the fact that Jesus and God the Father are different persons of the trinity, they share the closest of relationships and have all their attributes in common. And since Jesus is the fullest manifestation of God, those who

reject Christ are also rejecting God Himself. Jesus did not come to replace or supercede the God of the Old Testament. Rather He revealed Him more fully and is indeed the only channel today through which God may truly be known.

Conclusion

All of the themes seen in the prologue of John will be developed more fully throughout this book. But this we must not fail to recognize: the gospel is all about Jesus! He is the only One who has seen God, because He *is* Himself God. And He is our only hope for knowing God and obtaining salvation. If you have ever wondered about God, you need look no further than Christ. He is the answer! Will you trust Him today?

~AWB