

The Gospel of John #1

by: Ronald L. Dart

The apostle John presents us with the most astonishing theology, and he does it right off the bat without a preamble. He posed the early theologians of the church with a dilemma. The church from the get-go was composed entirely of Jews, who were, as strictly monotheistic as any Muslim would ever be. John presents us with the Messiah, who is both Son of Man and Son of God. The Jews who heard Jesus knew precisely what Jesus meant when He said, "He was the Son of God." To them, it meant that He was claiming divinity and they thought it was blasphemy and were ready to kill Him for it.

Polytheism and the Trinity

But the theologians of the second and third centuries were moving into a Greek and Roman world where polytheism was normal. How did they avoid the stigma of polytheism while recognizing that Jesus was indeed God in the flesh, and that He spoke at the same time to His Father who was God in heaven?

The result was the Trinity, in one or more, of its versions. It is defined as the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three persons in one Godhead, that is according to normal Christian dogma. Thus, they could have three persons who are God, and not only that but they are one God and thereby they have squared the circle. They have managed to take three and make them one, and therefore they were not polytheistic as the pagans all over the place around them were.

Now the idea of the Trinity is found nowhere in either the Old Testament nor in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. It is just simply not there. It was the theologians' solution to a knotty problem presented by Jesus Himself and by the evangelists who told the world about Him. Now that solution has become the litmus test for Christian dogma. If you do not subscribe to the Trinity you are not considered to be a Christian by most of mainstream Christianity.

One theologian I used to know, opined that if one was able to see the throne of God in heaven, one would see there, not two persons but one being. Now he said this in spite of Peter, who said that "Jesus was raised from the dead and is gone into heaven and is on the right hand of God, angels and authorities and powers being made subject unto Him" (1 Peter 1:21, 3:22).

God the Father and God the Son

Now I daresay that most Christian people think of God the Father, sitting on a throne, and Jesus sitting at His right hand and therefore they would in their minds' eye, imagine two persons sitting on two thrones, and they have Paul who said, and I quote, "It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:34).

Now Paul is persistent in this description, he uses it over and over again, so I'm sure that Christian people can be forgiven for thinking of Father and Son, sitting side-by-side at the helm of the universe.

United? Oh of course. Of one spirit? Certainly. But indistinguishable from one another. Oh, absolutely not. The Son is not the Father. The Father is not the Son. The Son makes intercession with the Father. They are two, excuse me, two individuals.

Now there may be some convoluted theological estimation of all this, but I figure that most readers of the Bible really don't have a problem with it. They see, God the Father and God the Son, as two distinct persons, united in purpose and in spirit, and that's just the way they think about it, when they read their Bibles and when they pray and when they think about God in general.

Now if they engage in a theological argument on the subject. Well, who knows where they are going to end up.

I'm just talking about the way people naturally tend to think about the God they read about in the Bible. They would imagine a family portrait that would show the Father on a throne and Jesus sitting on another throne at the Father's right. The Holy Spirit, well the Holy Spirit is a ghost and you don't see ghosts.

It really doesn't make a lot of difference how we explain it. Jews and Muslims see us Christians as polytheistic. They think we believe in more than one God.

Four Witnesses of Jesus Christ

Now when we open the Bible, we find four witnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. They are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The first three are called synoptic, that is 'seeing with one eye' Gospels, they tell the same story from almost the same point of view, but they are different in very small ways.

But John is different. For one thing John is writing to the Gentiles. His audience is exclusively Gentile. They have a completely different platform from which to view the story and if you don't think that affects the way a story has to be told you're not paying attention. The fact of the matter is, if you're writing to an audience that is all Jewish, top to bottom, and side to side, you will explain the gospel in one way, if you're writing this gospel for Gentiles,

you are going to have to address it differently because they just don't see things the same way. They would not use the same idioms of speech, they won't have the same culture that surrounds the gospel and so you have to tell them things in a little different terms.

So John's audience is completely different and has a different platform from which to view the story and that affects John in the way that he tells it.

On another front, John has encountered a set of heresies that the other evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke, have apparently not had to deal with. You get clues to this in John's letters, first John, second John, and third John. New questions have been raised and John has to deal with them. Whatever the reason for it, it's mainly John who presents us with the Christology that posed the problem for second and third century CE theologians. Christology is the study of Christ and John is unique in this regard.

In the Beginning was the Word

Now let me illustrate the problem for you. John begins his testimony with a conundrum. He says in John chapter 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} The same was in the beginning with God."

Now how can one be God and be with God at the same time? If we define God as the supreme being, then this equation seems impossible. If the Word was with God, then the Word is other than God. How can one be other than God, and be God at the same time? It's a conundrum.

The problem arises out of a simple problem in semantics. What do you mean by God? If you assume that God refers to a kind of being of which one is supreme, then the problem dissolves.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the supreme God and the Word was also God."

It is no problem when you get at it from this angle. The difficulty arises, though, when you deal with the question, "Are we talking about two Gods?" Are we monotheistic or are we not? And that my friends is where the problem arises. Most of the time when we speak of God, we are referring to God the Father, but in the Bible, that is not always the case. So with that in mind, what in the world is John saying?

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} The same was in the beginning with God. {3} All things were made by Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made."

The Word is not a part of the creation. The Word is the creator, which leads me to call Him the "uncreated Word of God," So who or what is this Word and how and in what way is the Word distinct from the Father?

The Word that we are talking about here, then is the Creator. He is behind everything that we see and know and experience.

John goes on to say, {4} "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. {5} And the light shines in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not."

The darkness just didn't get it.

John the Baptist

"There was a man sent from God, whose name was John" (John 1:6).

Now this John is not the same John who is writing for us here. This one that he is talking about is John the Baptist.

"The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through Him might believe. {8} He, (that is John the Baptist,) was not that Light. He was sent to bear witness of that Light, {9} That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world."

John is a poet and it is very easy to see especially in his epistles, even when he is writing a letter, he writes with a certain rhythm. He has a style all of his own. If you're a Greek student translating your way through it, you immediately know this is John.

John is telling us that Jesus was the life of men and that He was the Light of the world and that John the Baptist was only sent to bear witness and to bear testimony to it.

Verse 10, "Jesus, the Word, the Light, was in the world and the world was made by Him and the world didn't know Him."

And it is true. Jesus was here, He was the Creator, He was in the flesh, and nobody knew him. Now we have the Creator of the world, in the world, but we have more than that.

Sons of God

Continuing in verse 11 of John 1, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. {12} But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name, {13} Who were born, not of blood, not of the will of the flesh, nor the will of man, but of God."

Now hold on a minute here. If Jesus, talking to the Pharisees, claiming to be the Son of God was called blasphemous because that was tantamount to claiming to be God. What does it mean when it says that those who receive Him receive the power to become sons of God? Now I realize you are playing around here with theologies that will be very disturbing to

people, but when you are a son of God, you are the same kind of being that God is. Aren't you?

I am my father's son, my father is a human being, I am a human being. Now if we are the sons of God, He is a God being, would we not then be something like God beings. Now this probably comes as a shock to some people. Now I know there are some people who would even think this is blasphemous, but C.S. Lewis in the third to last chapter in 'Mere Christianity,' called, "Counting the Cost" made it very clear that he believes that man is to become God. Lesser to God, lesser than the Father, but nevertheless the same kind of being. And this is a fundamental doctrine of the Greek Orthodox Church as well.

It is surprising in a way, that so many Christians don't seem to understand this or grasp what it means, because it sits here and stares at us right off the page.

The Word Became Flesh

"To all that believe on Him, they're going to receive the power to become sons of God," and then He goes on to say this in John 1 verse 14, "And the Word, (which was with God and was God) was made flesh and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth."

And now we come to the inescapable truth of what John is talking about in this whole section. The Word became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, who was also the Messiah, the Christ, but at the same time was God in the flesh.

John has, in his marvelous poetic style, told us that Jesus is the Creator, He is God. He was with God from the beginning as the Word, that God became flesh and dwelt among us. He came to the Jews, who were His own, and the Jews did not receive Him.

Is there any question in your mind at this point who John is talking about? The Word of God, that it is Jesus who came in the flesh to His own and was not received and at the same time he tells us that it was Jesus who was the Creator. Oh sure, the Father was involved in it as well and there is no question about that. What's the difference between an architect and a general contractor? The fact is that the two of them created everything that you and I see. Jesus Himself was not created. He always was.

"John bare witness of Him," {15} "and he cried, saying. "This was He of whom I spoke, "He who comes after me is preferred before me, for He was before me.""

Now this is the testimony of John the Baptist that we are talking about here. John the Baptist says, "Jesus, who was born after him, was before him." John the Baptist's testimony is that Jesus preexisted His human birth. He preexisted John. He was the Word. The word 'was' means He existed before me.

Grace and Truth Came By Jesus Christ

Now as I said, Jesus was actually born after John, and yet John says "He was before me." Of course He was, He was with God, and was God in the beginning, according to John.

Verse 16 of John 1 states, "And of his fullness have we all received, and grace for grace. {17} For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

It was not only grace, but truth that came by Jesus Christ (John 1:17). By this time, the law and the Scriptures had been so corrupted and misinterpreted by the Jews in that form, that it could no longer be called the truth. Jesus came to correct that and you see it so clearly in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew beginning in chapter 5.

No Man Has Seen God At Any Time

John goes on to say something else that is surprising. He says in John 1 verse 18, "No man has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him."

And right here, John drops a real problem in our laps because in the Old Testament a few people, not many, but a few actually did see God. Moses saw Him, but only His back parts (Exodus 33:22-23), but he saw Him. What you may not realize is that the 70 elders who were the leaders of Israel at that time, also sat down and ate in God's presence and saw Him (Exodus 24:9-11).

So what was John talking about when he says "no man has seen God at any time"? The only way I can understand this is to accept the simple fact that no man had seen God the Father at any time. What they saw in the Old Testament was the uncreated Word of God, who was God, who became Jesus Christ in the flesh, the Son of God who is at the right hand of God and who declared God to man, so that we would know Him and know about Him and understand what He's doing.

It is only in Jesus Christ that we even understand that the Father is there and what He is really like.

John the Baptist's Record

John the Baptist was a very significant player when he came on the scene. He was so much so, that many people wondered if John the Baptist was the Messiah himself.

John clarified that and goes on to say in John 1 verse 19, "This is the record of John." Our John that we are reading about now is quoting John the Baptist's record. "This is the record of John, "When the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" {20} He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ.""

Now that is really an interesting statement, because by this time Messianic fever was really running rampant in Jerusalem and throughout the Jewish world. They were expecting something about this time, and so when John the Baptist comes on the scene, everybody wanted to know, "Who are you?"

He says, "Oh no, it is not me. I am not the Christ." {21} "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am Not!" "Are you that prophet?" He answered "No!"

Now there is a reason for these questions. In Malachi chapter 4, there's an interesting prophecy about looking down toward the end times. It says in chapter 4 verse five of Malachi, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. {6} He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to the fathers, lest I come and smite the earth with a curse." Or as the Hebrew has it, "with utter destruction."

So the Jews, realizing that this prophecy had not yet been fulfilled and expecting Elijah to come before the very end of the ages, thought maybe, John the Baptist would be Elijah and ask him. He said "No, not me!" Now Jesus, will later, correct that a little bit because He will say that "John came in the spirit and the power of Elijah" (Matthew 17:11-13, Luke 1:12-17), not that he necessarily was Elijah in the flesh.

The other side of this thing is that they said "Are you that prophet?" John said "No." This is a reference to Deuteronomy 18 verse 15 where Moses said, "The LORD your God will raise up unto you a prophet from the midst of you of your brethren, like unto me, unto him you shall listen."

And so the Jews in addition to expecting Elijah also expected 'that prophet,' that special prophet who would come in the future who would be as important to them, important in their history, as Moses was in his generation.

Continuing in verse 22 of John 1, the priests and Levites from Jerusalem ask John, "Are you him?" They wanted to know, and he said "No, I am not!" And they said, "Who are you then, that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" {23} John said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said the prophet Isaiah."

John saw himself as a fulfillment of a passage out of Isaiah and the Pharisees who came to John would've understood this reference quite clearly and it would have made sense to them.

The priests and Levites from Jerusalem ask John, "Who are you?" And he said, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord, as said Isaiah."

So what is John talking about? The prophecy comes out of the 40th chapter of Isaiah. A beautiful passage that has been adapted in Handel's Messiah and probably other places as well.

"Comfort you, comfort you my people," says your God. {2} "Speak comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, it is finished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she has received of the Lord's hand double for her sins. {3} The voice of him that cries in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.""

Wow, so John the Baptist saw himself as this voice, and it is pretty plain as you read through this, we are talking messianic prophecies.

Isaiah continued in verse 4, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: {5} And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD has spoken it."

This is about as messianic as anything John could have said. He didn't have to cite the whole Scripture. Those people listening to him knew what it said.

Continuing in John 1 and verse 24, "They which were sent were Pharisees {25} And they said to John the Baptist, "Why are you baptizing if you're not Christ and you are not Elijah nor the prophet, why are you baptizing then?" {26} John answered them, "I baptized with water, but there stands one among you"" (This must have been a shock to them.) ""There stands one among you, whom you don't know, {27}He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

John had a profoundly high view of this One who is to come. He is here, baptizing with water but He is going to do more than that.

Behold, the Lamb of God

Now it says in John 1 verse 28, "These things were done at Bethabara beyond Jordan, where John was baptizing. {29} The very next day John sees Jesus coming down the bank of the river toward him and he said to anyone who was standing close that could hear him, "Behold, the Lamb of God, which takes away the sin of the world.""

In Handel's Messiah, the chorus that sings this, just absolutely melts my soul. It is unbelievably strong. We know what it means as we look back down through the centuries and we look at the whole New Testament and this sings to us, "Behold, look, the Lamb of God."

Now Jesus was a man and a lamb was a sacrifice, in the sense that John was using the term. Obviously, any lamb that took away sins was a sacrificial lamb. It was going to die.

Everyone then seemed to expect the Messiah to come and throw out the Romans and be the physical leader and take over and lead the country into a brave new world.

Christian readers take that statement for granted that John made, but it is astonishing. I can't think of anything John could have said that would've been more astonishing to the people who heard it the first time when it came out of John's lips, because he designated Jesus Christ, walking on the bank of the Jordan River that day, as a dying Messiah. It assumed the sacrifice of the person of whom he was speaking.

John right away, and perhaps because it was real to him because somebody talked to John and sent him out there to baptize and told him to do it and told him how to recognize the Messiah, so he also knew that the Messiah who was to come would be a suffering and dying Messiah. No one seems to have grasp the significance of what John was saying until much later.

John said in verse 30, "This is he of whom I said, "After me there comes a man preferred before me, for He was before me." {31} Then John says, "I didn't know Him. I just knew that He should be made manifest to Israel and therefore I came baptizing with water." {32} And John bore record saying, " (and this is an important statement, John was sent to bear testimony so he did testify, saying,) "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and it abode upon Him. {33} And I didn't know Him, but he that sent me to baptize with water, the same said to me, "Upon whom you shall see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, the same is He that baptizes with the Holy Spirit.""

Witnesses and Testimony

So we have here a transition and there is something curious about all of this in that God seems to feel it is very important that there be witnesses and testimony on all of these things. In fact, the four Gospels are four independent testimonies of the life, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And it shouldn't be too surprising, because the Bible says, "In the mouth of two or three witnesses every word must be established" (Deuteronomy 19:15, Matthew 18:16, 2 Corinthians 13:1).

"And I saw," said John in verse 34, "I bare record that this is the Son of God," {35} And the next day after John stood, and two of his disciples were there, {36} And looking up on Jesus as he walked, he said, "Behold the Lamb of God," {37} And the two disciples who heard him speak, listened and they turned and they followed after Jesus. {38} Jesus turned back and saw them walking along behind Him, and said, "What are you looking for?" And they said to Him, "Rabbi, where are you dwelling?" {39} He said, "Come along and see." So they came and saw where he dwelt and they stayed with Him that day for it was late. {40} One of the two that heard John speak and followed him was a man named Andrew.""

He doesn't seem to have a significant name, but his brother did, his name was Simon Peter.
{41} "So he went and found his brother Simon Peter, and said, "We have found the Messiah,
which is interpreted, the Christ."

We will learn more the next time. I am Ronald L. Dart.

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