

I. THE WORD AND THE WITNESS

Today it is often assumed that the Christian understanding of ultimate matters—the origin of life, the meaning of life, the basic framework that gives explanations to science and reason—is substantially weakened by the discoveries of the scientific consensus over the last hundreds of years. You will often come across someone who says, “I can’t believe that, because of science.” Or they will say, “That old-fashioned myth about Christianity is simply not credible anymore.” If you ever find yourself wondering about the basic truth structure of Christianity, or if you have conversations with people who do, then John, and especially John chapter 1, is for you! Here we discover that the underpinning *logos*, or structure and order of the universe, is all centered on a person. John’s logic is persuasive, and his foundational commitment to the truth of God as revealed in Christ is no small superficiality; it is deeper than the ocean.

The fourth-century bishop and theologian Augustine is said to have commented that the Gospel of John is “deep enough for an elephant to swim and shallow enough for a child not to drown.” John’s “Prologue” is one of the most profound parts of John, but at the same time its message is quite simple. Probably the easiest way to understand its main theme is by comparing the beginning and end of this introduction to John’s Gospel. (Note, though, that the division of the first eighteen verses from the rest of John was probably not technically formalized until sometime after 1777, with Griesbach’s edition of the Greek New Testament. It is arguable that

the **archetype** contained no division at **verse 18***, though it did have one at **verse 5**. This guide maintains the (now) traditional view of John's "Prologue" (meaning the first 18 verses), but examines those verses for the way they also introduce the role of John the Baptist, which is otherwise likely to be viewed as a digression in the argument; his role is further developed after **verse 19**. (For more detail on this point, see P. J. Williams, "Not the Prologue of John," in the *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*.)

In the Beginning

Verse 1 reads, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." **Verse 14a** reads, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us."

John's Prologue, then, at its most simple, is a description of how the Word, which was in the beginning, became flesh. This subject of "the Word" runs throughout the first 18 verses. The scholar D. A. Carson puts it this way:

"The emphasis of the Prologue ... is on the revelation of the Word as the ultimate disclosure of God himself." (*John*, page 135)

There is one other major aspect of the theme in these verses: the witness. You can see this in the second half of **verse 14** and the beginning of **verse 15**: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son ... full of **grace** and truth. John testified concerning him..."

Throughout the early verses of John's Gospel, then, you will find two interlocking and interweaving themes that intertwine like two pieces of string: the Word and the witness.

- The Word: **verses 1-5**
- The witness: **verses 6-9**
- The Word: **verses 10-14a**
- The witness: **verses 14b-18**

* All John verse references being looked at in each chapter part are in **bold**.

So John's Prologue may be summarized most simply by these two themes of "the Word" and "the witness," along the lines of this one statement: How the Word that was in the beginning became flesh, and how we witnessed to this Word. As Köstenberger writes:

"In Jesus, God has come to take up residence among his people once again, in a way even more intimate than when he dwelt in the midst of wilderness Israel in the tabernacle. Moses met God and heard his word in the 'tent of meeting'; now people may meet God and hear him in the flesh of Jesus." (*John*, page 41)

That said, while John's Prologue is indeed "shallow enough for a child not to drown," it is also "deep enough for an elephant to swim." The challenge is to plumb the depths without getting lost or disorientated, or drowning! And the way to do that is to keep in mind the basic message and simple structure of these two intertwining themes of "the Word" and "the witness."

In **verses 1-5** ("the Word"), John tells us of the identity of this Word and his role in creation. When John says that the Word was "in the beginning" (**v 1**), he is referring to the first sentence of the whole Bible, Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning God created..." John is making the remarkable claim that the Word that became flesh is the eternal Word that "was with God in the beginning" (John **1:2**), which was the Word by which God made everything (**v 3**—"And God said..." occurs frequently in Genesis 1), and that was God himself (John **1:1**).

The Greek of the second half of **verse 1** is literally "and God was the Word." The great sixteenth-century **Reformer** Martin Luther believed it should have been translated that way. Today, **Jehovah's Witnesses** think that because there is no definite article ("the" in English) before "God" in that second half of the verse, it should be translated as "the Word was a god." However, the same construction in Greek is used later in verse 49, which is translated by everyone, including the Jehovah's Witnesses, as, "You are the king of Israel" (not a king of Israel). Scholars agree that if John had wanted to write that the Word was fully God, then, literally, "and God was the Word" is how to do it in Greek:

“The force of the *anarthrous* is probably not so much that of definiteness as that of quality: Jesus ‘shared the essence of the Father, though they differed in person.’”

(Köstenberger, *John*, page 28)

This Word was “toward” God, literally, suggesting an eternal bond face to face between co-equal Persons enjoying relationship with each other:

“For John, the reason the Son can make the Father known is not only because he was in the bosom of the Father, but because he is also the Word who was in the beginning with God. He is described as God.”

(S. Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, page 356)

As the fourth-century bishop and celebrated preacher Gregory of Nazianzus, nicknamed “Goldentongue,” said:

“I cannot think of the One without the Three forthwith shining around me.”

(Quoted in John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 1, page 9)

The “Word” in Greek is *logos*, a well-known Greek term that was used by Greek philosophers for the ancient principle that undergirded everything. Most likely, John is using this specific term primarily to reference Genesis 1:1—“In the beginning”:

“The Prologue summarizes how the ‘Word’, which was with God in the very beginning, came into the sphere of time, history, tangibility—in other words, how the Son of God was sent into the world to become the Jesus of history, so that the glory and grace of God might be uniquely and perfectly disclosed”

(D. A. Carson, *John*, page 111)

But John’s purpose is also to build a bridge to a **worldview** which believed that there was some eternal principle of *logos* behind everything:

“The scope of Jesus’ own **salvific** mission is the whole world. He is the light that shines in the world, enlightening every man by his coming into the world.”

(S. Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, page 172)

Today, too, that kind of **apologetic** for the existence of God is compelling. Atheists are ultimately making the claim that thought, ideas, and immaterial intelligence are generated by matter. This appears unlikely at a rational level: those who demand that there is nothing but matter are using arguments that are nonmaterial. Atheism is arguably a logically self-refuting proposition. John makes the case that the *logos*—the immaterial intelligence which alone can explain rational thought, the laws of science, and the mathematical structure of reality—is actually a Person to whom he witnesses.

Those who demand there is nothing but matter are using arguments that are nonmaterial.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John **1:5**) is a little opaque. Does John mean the light of salvation or the light of conscience? Does he mean that the darkness has not intellectually understood or has not actually overcome it (the word can have both meanings)? Here we start to explore a facet of John’s writing that has infuriated experts and engaged children. John deliberately uses language with intentional depth of meaning. We have to be careful not to read into John all sorts of things that he never intended. But on occasions, we can see that John deliberately envisioned more than one level of meaning with one word. Here, John means that the light of creation, shining in human conscience and the natural order, while damaged by human rebellion after Genesis 3, has not been destroyed, and that the darkness has also not overcome that light.

In the writing of the apostle Paul, in Romans 1:20 and 3:21, we can see a commentary on this verse. Romans 1:20 tells us that “since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.” God has shown himself in creation: the light shines, and yet the darkness has not

understood it or overcome it. There is in creation a light, a light of God, that shines in the darkness, and yet the darkness does not receive it. We naturally do not receive the light of nature, and yet that light shines, so that we are without excuse. But then also, in this majestic sentence in John **1:5**, there is an element of salvific revelation (it isn't just about the light of nature or creation). So Romans 3:21 tells us that "the righteousness of God has been made known"; God has revealed himself as the way of salvation in Christ, that saving light is shining at the **incarnation** and at the crucifixion and resurrection; and that light is also present here in this verse in John 1. As Carson puts it:

"The 'darkness' in John is not only absence of light, but positive evil (3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46; 1 John 1:5-6; 2:8-9, 11); the light is not only revelation bound up with creation, but with salvation ... it is quite possible that John ... wants his readers to see in the Word both the light of creation and the light of the **redemption** the Word brings in his incarnation." (*John*, pages 119-120)

The Son of God and the Children of God

In John **1:6-9** we meet John, the man often known as John the Baptist. Here in John's Gospel he is described as John the Witness (**v 7-8**). John is introduced here, and then we will hear more about him in the rest of chapter 1 from **verse 19** onwards.

John the Witness's preaching was so powerful that some might have been liable to think that he himself was the Word. The author John was careful to make sure that no one could misunderstand: John was only a witness to the Word (**v 8**), which John (the author) also calls "the light" (**v 4-5, 8-9**), employing another technique of his—different **metaphors** pointing to the same reality.

From **verses 10 to 14a**, John again describes the Word. This time, he describes the response of people to the Word when he became flesh. He came to "his own"—that is, Israel—and they did not receive him or recognize him (**v 11**). He came to "the world" he had made, all peoples, and they did not recognize him either (**v 10**). "Yet to all

who did receive him ... he gave the right to become children of God" (v 12). The early **church father** Chrysostom commented:

"He became Son of man, who was God's own Son, in order that he might make the sons of men to be children of God." (*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament IV*, page 40)

These children are, John (the writer) continues, "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will" (v 13); he does not specify exactly how this "new birth" happens, but he does say who did it. When you receive Jesus, now as then, you are "born of God" and become a "child of God." The new birth is of inestimable value. I love the words of the great Victorian preacher C.H. Spurgeon:

"One grain of faith [in Christ] is worth more than a diamond the size of the world—yes, though you should thread such jewels together, as many as the stars of heaven for number, they would be worth nothing compared with the smallest atom of faith in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God."
(*Sermon #2259*, Volume 38)

This is the work of God himself. Jesus will explain more about this new birth later in John 3 when he is quizzed by Nicodemus.

Then in **1:14b-18**, we return to "the witness." If the first verse of the Gospel was profound because it described the **pre-existent**, personal, eternal *logos* as fully God, these verses are even more profound because they describe this *logos* as also fully human flesh. The Reformer John Calvin outlines something of what this signifies:

"Christ, when he became man, did not cease to be what he formerly was, and that no change took place in that eternal essence of God which was clothed with flesh. In short, the Son of God began to be man in such a manner that he still continues to be that eternal Word who had no beginning of time."

(*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 1, pages 20-21)

The Bible claims that Jesus was fully God and fully man in one Person. John puts it like this: "We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and

only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v 14b). The Word "dwelt" or "tabernacled" among us. God, in the Old Testament, commanded that a tabernacle be put up in the desert as the place where he symbolically dwelt (Exodus 40:34). Then, when King Solomon finally built God's glorious temple in Jerusalem, the glory of God filled that place (2 Chronicles 7:1-3). But now the real and full glory of God dwelled with—"tabernacled"—with people in the very person of Jesus the Christ. Through his Spirit he tabernacles with us still today:

"There is a place where God does still meet with man and hold fellowship with him. That place is the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ, 'in whom dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.' The manhood of Christ is become to us the **anti-type** of that tent in the center of the camp! God is in Christ Jesus! Christ Jesus is God! And in his blessed Person, God dwells in the midst of us as in a tent." (Spurgeon, *Sermon #1862*, Volume 31)

In John 1:15, we hear the summary of John the Witness's message:

"He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me." John is not just saying that Jesus came "before" him because he was the pre-existent, personal, eternal *logos* now in flesh; he is saying that he is "first" of him. He is not just greater, he is the greatest. He is not just before; he is primary, number one, first. Other prophets came before John; Jesus was first: "In the beginning was the Word" (v 1) and then "the Word became flesh" (v 14).

Jesus is
not just
greater,
he is the
greatest.

The next verses not only give a sense of the overflowing blessing and grace that come from receiving Jesus ("one gracious blessing after another"—v 16, NLT). They also tell us how the whole Bible, Old Testament and New Testament, fits together:

“Studious attention to the law will reveal the one in whom the grace and truth of God are embodied. The **Torah** itself is a witness to Jesus.”

(Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ*, page 238)

Jesus, the Word, is preached by all the words of the Bible. Every grace comes from him. This is “grace upon grace” (**v 16**, ESV); the grace of the Law of Moses—which was a response to God’s rescue of his people from Egypt—and now the “grace and truth” that “came through Jesus Christ” (**v 17**).

The word “truth” is another key word in John’s Gospel. If we have read John’s Gospel before, as soon as we hear it, we can think of Jesus saying, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). We might also think of **Pilate** saying, “What is truth?” (18:38). The truth that came through Jesus Christ is the truth of how to come to the Father. Jesus is the truth, for Jesus is the way to the Father God. If you have seen him, you have seen God. If the “god” we worship is different from Jesus, then that “god” is not the true God. Through Jesus come both grace and truth (**1:17**).

John now concludes his introduction: “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known” (**v 18**). Essentially, this verse functions as a summary of what John has already written about the Word (“In the beginning was the Word,” **v 1**; “the Word became flesh,” **v 14**), and about the witness (“We have seen his glory,” **v 14**). The rest of the Gospel will now record the witness to this Word.

This revelation of the Son, recorded for us here, calls us to faith, and through personal trust in him, to discovering life and fullness of life in his name. The Gospel of John, each step of the way, will call us to find real life and true life through the real and true Word made flesh.

Questions for reflection

1. If no one has ever seen God, and if God has made himself known in Jesus, how should we answer the person who says, "I would believe in God if I could see him"?
2. Do you struggle more to appreciate the all-powerful divinity of God's Son, or the humble humanity of God's Son? How have these verses helped you?
3. Which single verse from this section could you memorize and call to mind throughout each day to remind you of who God is and who you are?

PART TWO

Not Me, But Him

Humility is a virtue more honored in the breach, and it is more often true than we would like to admit that all our motives are shockingly mixed—all of which makes John the Baptist's approach to Jesus remarkable. So focused was he on who Christ is that he was able to point others to Christ, making sure that his very own followers understood that the really important person was not himself but Jesus. He took, as it were, his huge account of Twitter followers and pointed them to follow another person instead. John is saying, "not me, but him."

"It is the mark of a truly great man that he can gently, but firmly, detach his followers, so that they may go after a greater."

(Köstenberger, *John*, page 73)

In 1:1-18, we saw how the Word has become flesh that we might believe in him and receive him, and so become children of God, and receive grace upon grace from his fullness. To receive all this from God through faith in Christ means we must actually trust Christ personally, putting our faith in him directly and throughout our lives. Part of grasping that truth of Christ and trusting him is encountering the witnesses that point to Christ. Pre-eminent among them is John the Baptist.

So John, the author of the Gospel, now introduces us to the other John, known as John the Baptist, by means of two stories. Each of them is meant to tell us that John the Baptist was basically a witness. The first story, from **verses 19-28**, tells us that a significant part of John's preaching was telling people that he was nothing special. He was not the Messiah; he was not Elijah returned; nor was he the Prophet (**v 20-21**). He was simply a "voice of one calling in the wilderness" (**v 23**). This first section is John saying, *Not me...* The second story, from **verses 29-34**, which occurs on the "next day" is John saying, *...but him*. These verses then can be summarized by the phrase, *Not me, but him*.

Making the Way Straight

There are, though, many different aspects of these two stories that underline this overall theme of John witnessing to Jesus.

The first, in the first section from **verses 19-28**, is that of **irony**. We are introduced to a group of priests and Levites who have been sent down from Jerusalem by the “Jewish leaders in Jerusalem” (**v 19**). Given that Jerusalem, as a predominantly Jewish city, had many Jews in it, John’s way of describing this sending group is a little unusual. What he seems to be indicating is that the elite group who were running things in Jerusalem had got wind of a religious disturbance taking place in the desert region, and were wanting to find out what was going on. So they sent their representatives to John to perform a spot inspection, a bit like a bishop sending his representative to a wayward preacher to discover whether what he is preaching is truly sound. They were performing a “visitation,” and they would report what they discovered back to the Jerusalem religious elite (**v 22**). There were Pharisees among them as well (**v 24**)—that strict sect of Judaism that especially emphasized the law. This appears to be a pincer movement upon John’s credibility as a preacher: the temple elite (priests and Levites) and the scholarly legal Scripture elite (the Pharisees) are both descending upon John and are about to quiz him as to his soundness. We know from the other Gospels (Matthew 3; Mark 1:1-11; Luke 3:1-22) that John was a rather alarming figure. He would have been quite young too. He wore strange clothes, lived in strange places, and apparently—so they heard—had a strange message (Mark 1:4-8).

As Carson points out, in his appearance and in his message:

“John resembled the Old Testament prophets who sought to call out a holy remnant from the descendants of **Abraham**, and anticipated Jesus’ insistence that his messianic community would transcend the barriers of race and depend on personal faith and new birth (Matthew 8:5-12; John 3:1-16).” (*John*, page 146)

It was important that they got to the bottom of things and brought the matter to a head so that John could either be corrected or (if he

proved resistant) marginalized and brought down, undermining his influence.

The irony of this event, which must have felt distinctly alarming to John as he preached away in the desert, is brought out by John the author with a subtle twist of words. These representatives had been “sent” by the Jerusalem elite to John (John **1:19**), but John himself had been “sent” by God (v 6)! Who was going to win that encounter? The elite were sending their representatives to test out whether God’s representative was **kosher!**

In **verse 23**, John the Baptist very carefully answers by quoting from the Bible (Isaiah 40:3). He uses the words of one of the greatest Old Testament prophets to explain that his role is to “make straight the way for the Lord.” John is saying that his message is the same as the message of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was designed to point people to God’s Son, his Redeemer, his Messiah, the Christ, Jesus, the Word made flesh. That was the whole purpose—at a macro, big-picture level—of the Old Testament. John is saying that he is not the fulfillment of that Old Testament, but instead is preaching the same message as the Old Testament. This is why it is helpful to think of John as the greatest of the Old Testament preachers. They pointed to Jesus from a distance; John alone saw Jesus and pointed directly to him. But their message was all the same: *Not me, but him.*

John, of course, is baptizing (John **1:25**), and this raises questions, just as it still does today. No one really knows where the Jewish practice of ritual washing and baptizing came from originally. It seems that the fact that John was baptizing did not need explaining (and therefore John was using an already-existing practice), but *why* he was baptizing did require explanation. Archaeologists have discovered baths for ritual washings, and it appears that John was fitting into an already-existing pattern of “baptism of repentance” (Mark 1:4). Centuries before, Naaman the Syrian had been immersed in the water of the Jordan on the instructions of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5). What is more, Israel as a whole country had come through the “waters of

baptism” when they went through the Red Sea safely and were rescued from the Egyptian army (Exodus 14; see 1 Corinthians 10:2). By offering baptism, John is saying that a great new stage of redemption is about to occur, and he is inviting those who are willing to receive this “Word” to come to the waters of baptism in order to be ready. John makes this point clear when he says, “I baptize with water ... but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie” (John 1:26-27). In other words, *Not me*. All this took place in Bethany (v 28).

Look, the Lamb of God!

But who is this other person, who as yet they “do not know” (introduced in **verse 26**)? The “next day” John will show them (v 29). Jesus comes to them, and John recognizes him and tells them that “this is the one” (v 30): *Not me, but him*. “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (v 29).

The point that John the Baptist is making is one that he was particularly capable of preaching because he was the son of Zechariah, a priest. He knew about the sacrifice of lambs. He would have seen them sacrificed at the temple at Passover. John is saying that all that—all that memory of the Passover event, when Israel remembered how God had rescued them from Egypt and had passed over them when executing his judgment—was now fulfilled. In Egypt, God had sent his judgment on everyone, and all people, Israelite and Egyptian alike, were liable to that terrible judgment. But those who were covered by the sacrificial lamb—by the blood of that lamb daubed on the door posts—were passed over. There was a sacrifice in their place.

Any thinking person would have asked themselves whether a lamb was really a sufficient sacrifice for a person, let alone whether it really satisfied the righteous requirements of the law and of a blazingly holy God. *Now*, John is saying, *it is all explained*. Here he is: that (the Passover) was about this (Jesus). He is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (v 29).

Really, the whole Exodus story is being fulfilled in reverse. Those who are repentant are being baptized, and the Passover Lamb walks among them. He is far more than John, his ultimate origin demonstrating his infinite superiority (**v 30**; see v 15, **27**). Indeed, John did not at first know him, but the baptism ministry of John had its goal and intention in revealing Jesus for who he really is (**v 31**). This revelation of Jesus takes place in a supernatural event confirming his identity (**v 32**).

John's witness to Jesus is confirmed by a specific divine instruction he had been given that the Spirit of God would descend from heaven on the Messiah, and that this would be how John would recognize him (**v 33**). It is important to understand what John (the author) is saying and what he is not saying. John is not saying that at this moment Jesus became fully God. How could John be saying that when a few verses before he had told us that this Word was God (v 1), full of grace and truth (v 14), the only God, **begotten**, not made, and of one being with the Father, as the creeds put it?

What John (the author) is saying is that Jesus is the Spirit-anointed Author of life. Creation hovers behind this terminology. Genesis 1:2 tells us that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters." This Word who created all, and is the Creator, is now baptized in these waters, and the Spirit of God once more "hovers" over them. God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit rejoice together at this moment when their rescue plan for the world, the Word of God made flesh, is recognized by John the Baptist. The symbol of a "dove" (John **1:32**) specifically resonates with another Old Testament image, and offers peace and the calming of the waters of God's wrath: the dove of Noah, which was sent out after the flood had subsided to show that God's wrath was satisfied and peace had returned (Genesis 8:8-12). Reading this part of John 1 in light of Genesis makes it clear who Jesus is—"God's Chosen One" (John **1:34**)—and John is an eye-witness of this fact. He has "seen" and has "testified" to Jesus. The Word of God incarnate is seen; and the one who sees him, now recognizes him, and having recognized him, he faithfully bears witness.

We too, who through his written word encounter the incarnate Word—we who have heard and recognized—are to follow John the Baptist's example of not only "seeing" but also "testifying." How could we structure the pattern of our daily lives around making a priority of giving witness to what we know about Jesus?

One of the most surprising evangelistic sermons ever preached came from the heart of this passage: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (v 29). C.H. Spurgeon was practicing with the acoustics in a massive auditorium before he spoke there, and was testing those acoustics by means of saying this resounding text. A janitor, the story goes, heard the sentence "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" and was converted on the spot. It is as we look at that Lamb, rather than at ourselves, our problems, or other people, and it is as we call others away from centering on themselves to centering on him, that we find, and offer, life. Life in all its fullness—that great sub-theme of John—percolates through our beings as we behold, not ourselves, but him—the Lamb who takes away our sins.

Questions for reflection

1. "Not me, but him." To what extent does this attitude characterize your life? How could it do so more (be specific)?
2. Answer the question posed in the penultimate paragraph: How could *you* structure the pattern of your daily life around making a priority of giving witness to what you know about Jesus?
3. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" In less than a minute, how could you use that verse to explain to a non-Christian what Jesus offers them?