

## GOD MADE FLESH

Scripture Reading: John 1:1-8, 14, RSV

Stretched out on the table before the Apostle John is a parchment on which he will write some of the most important words mankind will ever read. He is confronted with wanting to express what could not be said with words; yet it could not be suppressed. How does one begin to portray the unique and unforgettable? How does one capture the essence of a life so singular that anyone who knew Him was overwhelmed?

John certainly knew how the other gospel writers began their accounts. They had started with Christ's birth and His genealogy. But Christ's peerless life needed more than a unique birth to explain it. So by a flickering candle the aged apostle writes nothing less than a hymn that goes back before the birth of Christ, before the beginning of Creation as we know it, to that time in eternity when Christ was indeed God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God; [These words of John are probably the most dramatic in the New Testament, the clearest statement of Christ's preexistence and uniqueness.] all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men (John 1:1-4).

John must have worked for hours on just those four verses and he understood the profound theological implications of every word he was using.

In calling Christ the "Word" John is packing all the power the term had in the Old Testament. It is by the Word of the Lord that the heavens were made, and the Jews were liberated from the Egyptians. Everything that happened in the Old Testament happened because God spoke. The Jews believed that words had power to change things. In addition to that, John is invoking all of the meanings that the Greeks attached to that term, "Word." In Greek philosophy there was that rational principle which unified all the universe, which made everything intelligible so that people could make sense of what they were experiencing.

This Word, he said, was with God and the Word was God. So far, he has already virtually destroyed some Jewish presuppositions, but by the time we get to verse 14 John realizes that he is attacking every human philosophical and theological system. None of the superlatives can catch up with the uniqueness of the Person John is describing. When he says that all things were made by him, we are sure that he is trying to take aim at the Gnostics, a group in the early church who believed that the creation of the world was the result of a waterfall of God's presence, that it emanated from God. But the idea that this was done because Christ, a man, had willed it in eternity was a vastly different concept.

In describing the uniqueness of Christ in these first 14-16 verses, John is trying to show that there is some difficulty in coming to believe in this Man—that to believe that a human being is indeed God in the ultimate sense is not easy. In the next two chapters he is going to show us how Jesus tried to show He was God. He wants us to see the very interesting responses that people made to Christ's revelation of Himself.

## Document Title

He starts out by referring to John the Baptist, the very first witness of the uniqueness of Jesus on earth. Jesus was so ordinary, so unexceptional, that his family and the people in His hometown did not recognize Him. John the writer is saying more than that; he is saying that when they had the chance to recognize Him they refused to.

He says that John the Baptist “bore witness to the light that all might believe through him.” In using the word light, John the apostle is thinking about all the “light” that had ever come through the prophets. But now comes this Light which enlightens every person and that is such a blaze of glory that no one can be mistaken about Him if he wants to know the truth. Nevertheless only John the Baptist seemed to recognize Him.

Where is the proof, however, that Jesus could be recognized? It is in John the Baptist and in what happened later. In Chapter 1:19 John tells that the priests and Levites came from Jerusalem to ask the Baptist who he was. They knew that he was unique. There is no doubt that John was the prominent man in Palestine at the time these events took place. He had created a stir that was shaking even the throne of Herod. The Jews were tempted to believe that he was indeed a special prophet—Elijah come back to earth. They even asked if he were the Messiah. John, however, would not allow himself to be identified with any of these titles.

How did he identify himself? “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness. I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom You do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie.”

What a contrast has been drawn! John the Baptist could easily have become serious competition to Christ. The writer John is trying to show that even the Baptist recognized that he was unworthy to untie Christ's sandals, routine behavior for a slave.

All through this first chapter John the apostle wants to exalt Christ, to make Him stand out above everybody who has ever existed, particularly John the Baptist. Instead of calling attention to himself, John the Baptist points to Christ.

Beginning with verse 35, it becomes apparent that even John's disciples began to recognize that Jesus was different. We are told that John was standing with two of his disciples when Jesus walked by. John said “Behold the Lamb of God.” The first two disciples who heard this statement followed Jesus.

What is happening here? John the writer wants us to understand that the person who could have weaned away followers from Christ, stepped aside when Jesus was revealed. John sent his own disciples to follow Him. From a human point of view John should never have recognized Christ because of the effect this recognition had on John's mission. On the strength of John's testimony, the two disciples left him and followed Jesus. One of the disciples was Peter and the other was probably John the writer.

The chapter presents the beginning of people coming to understand and believe in Jesus Christ. It is not full belief; they are just beginning. Not until the 11th verse of chapter 2 did full belief come at the miracle at Cana. Day by day as they walk with Him these disciples are gaining important insights which are reflected in the titles they are giving to Christ. Jesus is first called Rabbi, then someone calls Him

the Christ or the Messiah; another person calls Him the Prophet. Finally Nathanael says, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God."

John is showing us a gradual progression of understanding and faith in Christ and His uniqueness. This ought to say something to us, especially the people who are new believers. It is not possible to have full, deep, abiding, strong faith in the beginning. You can believe with all of your heart, but your capacity to believe is still immature. The challenges to my faith that I might be able to endure now, I am sure I could not have endured as a teenager first coming into the Seventh-day Adventist Church. What you are capable of withstanding is something that grows. Faith should never be seen as a static, arrived-at point, but always as a kind of growing experience.

What kind of men were those who followed Jesus? It is interesting, that in Jesus' response to their following Him, He says "What do you seek? What are you looking for?" They said to Him, "Rabbi, where are you staying? We know that you are just moving around and teaching, but we want to be with you." Jesus says, "Come and see." The word "come" is used repeatedly by John to illustrate a person's coming to faith. In other words, you don't see first and then believe; you must come and **then** you will see. Understanding must come after one takes the risk. John indicts people, the Jews in particular, because they refuse to take the risk. They could not see because they would not believe. It is not that they would not believe because they could not see.

Some of Jesus' disciples were fishermen; they were principally ordinary men. What is the point? First of all, John is saying that the leaders of Judaism, the most brilliantly trained in the schools of the rabbis, would not come. Ordinary people would. This becomes an indictment on the leaders and a praise of ordinary people. Jesus had to test the gospel on whether or not His message would appeal to the average person. If only exceptional people responded, then He would have lost the masses.

Will Christ have universal appeal? The answer in this chapter is Yes. In the few instances when Andrew is mentioned, he is introducing someone to Christ. Very little is said about Phillip, only that he asked Jesus to show the Father and his later witness to the Ethiopian. Of course, Peter becomes very prominent in the inner circle, but Nathanael is mentioned only once (unless Bartholomew is also Nathanael). It is interesting that his first reaction to the news that we have found the Messiah is one of doubt, particularly when he hears that the Messiah has come from Nazareth. This is the first hint in John that those who are steeped in the law are the ones that Jesus will have the most trouble with.

Every person who has decided to follow Christ in chapter 1 has been approached by Jesus in a different way. You cannot find the same phrases or the same methods employed for any two of these people. I think there is something important implied here. I believe in training classes for Bible studies and for witnessing, but I think we ought to be very careful that anyone trying to win souls should pay close attention to the fact that Christ never approached two people in the same way. Human beings are too varied and complex to use the same kind of mechanical method in witnessing to them about Christ. Textbooks about witnessing do not really hit the mark. You can have basic principles that everyone can grasp, but we must be creative and innovative in various situations to reach each individual. That is why the Holy Spirit is needed.

What Jesus said to Nicodemus He did not say to the woman at the well; what He said to her is not repeated to the nobleman. He reaches them in different places with different kinds of approaches.

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As we begin chapter 2 we see this small group who have just begun to believe and we have the first of the signs which John tells about the miracle of the water being changed into wine. Many scholars have spent a lot of time trying to discover the meaning of this story. None of the other gospels records this miracle, and it seems a bit out of place because nobody is hungry, sick, crippled or dying. All they were doing was having a party, and they had probably already consumed a lot of wine.

One suggested reason for Mary approaching Jesus is that all of the guests at a wedding were to contribute to the wine supply. The amount of wine for that wedding feast was partly dependent on Jesus and His disciples. It has been suggested that they did not bring any wine because of their poverty. Mary was insinuating that Jesus should do something about the short supply. I believe this is a more plausible suggestion than many I have read.

Other reasons given for this miracle are the fact that Jesus wanted to show He was a social person, that He was putting His stamp of approval on marriage.

But John appears to have a deeper meaning in mind, because in verse 11 of chapter 2 he tells us that this was the first of the signs Jesus did, and He manifested His glory in this miracle and His disciples believed in Him. We must notice that this miracle is set in a wedding. In the Old Testament a wedding is used to symbolize the days of the Messiah, and Jesus used the wedding and the banquet as a symbol of His kingdom. Also, Jesus repeatedly compared His teaching with new wine and said that the new wine He was bringing was not going to be contained in the old wineskins—the old symbols, teachings and traditions are not going to be able to hold what Christ was trying to reveal.

My message will expand and the faith the people have in me will eventually break and destroy the Jewish tradition.

The abundance of wine is also mentioned in the Old Testament and symbolizes the joy of the final days when the Messiah comes. I believe that when the disciples and the guests saw the water turn into wine, they began to realize the implications of who Jesus was and what He was saying. Christ is indeed the Messiah of the last days, they realized, and He is going to replace the old.

Later Jesus stands up at one feast after the other and tells the Jews, “Everything that you are now celebrating is gone; it is superseded. You have a temple in which you worship? Forget the temple; I am the Temple. You have a table of shewbread which you believe is consecrated to the Lord? Forget the table of shewbread; I am the Bread of Life. You have a candlestick? I am the Light of the World.”

In writing about this chapter Ellen White said:

The ministry of Christ was in marked contrast to that of the Jewish elders. Their regard for tradition and formalism had destroyed all real freedom of thought and action. They lived in continual dread of defilement. To avoid contact with the “unclean” they kept aloof... [Christ] tried to free the people from the senseless rules that bound them (*Desire of Ages*, p. 150).

John wants us to see that this is one reason why Jesus was destroyed. The question that the reader has to ask himself, even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, even in the “remnant” Seventh-day Adventist Church, is. Were Christ to be here today, would He be having to free us from senseless rules, traditions and formalisms

that have bound us so that we no longer have freedom of thought and action? Is there anything that we think Jesus would reorient in terms of our priorities? Have we subordinated people to institutions as the Jews had done? Or do we think we are so closely knit with His mind and heart that we are in “good shape?”

One of the things that I am concerned about is that whenever we read the New Testament, we apply everything to what happened **then** to **those** people. We seem to think that because they lived 2,000 years ago, what was said to them cannot possibly apply to us; we have changed in a significant way. But the message of the gospel is that every generation has the same problems—they just wear different suits, comb their hair differently and have greater technology. We have to realize that our problems are no different. The Christ who comes to the 20th century leadership and members of the church is basically just as threatening and stands in judgment just as severely as He did in the 1<sup>st</sup> century.

I am not sure that ire would see Christ's words and actions if He were alive today as a liberating, freeing revelation from God; we might see Him as a threat to our survival and kill Him. Would the Seventh-day Adventist Church crucify Jesus?

In the last two verses of chapter 2, it says:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover feast, many believed in his name when they saw the signs which he did; but Jesus did not trust himself to them, because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man (John 2:24,25).

This initial response of faith, as Jesus more clearly revealed the truth about Himself and what His mission was, would inevitably turn people against Him. This response would not last, so He would not trust Himself to them.

So John asks the reader: Can Jesus trust Himself to you? That is the question for us today.