

THE ETERNAL WORD: GOD THE SON IN ETERNITY PAST

JOHN 1:1-3

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1-3). It is often the case that familiar sentences are familiar because of how powerful or world-changing they have been. They are familiar because of how defining they are, and so it is here in John 1. These familiar words are revolutionary. They set Christianity gloriously apart from every other belief system.

The Eternal Word

John is simply exegeting Genesis 1. There in the very beginning in Genesis 1, we see how the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Why was He doing that? For the same reason He later hovered over the waters of the Jordan at the baptism of Jesus. The Spirit was there to anoint the Word as He went out to do His work. In creation and in salvation, in creation and in new creation, the Spirit anoints the Word, and so God speaks and, on His divine breath, His Word goes out. His Word goes out and light and life and all creation are brought into being.

It's not that in the beginning the Word came into existence as creation came into existence (John 1:3). He is not a creature. No, here is a Word who was with God and who was God. Now, that alone tells us something quite unique, extraordinary, and simply delightful about this God. For it is not simply that here is

a God who *happens* to speak (the gods of most religions are said to speak at some point). No, this is a different claim.

It is of the very nature of this God to have a Word to speak. This God cannot be Wordless, for the Word is God. God cannot be without His Word. Here is a God who could not be anything but communicative, expansive, outgoing. Since God cannot be without this Word, here is a God who cannot be reclusive.

For eternity, this Word sounds out, telling us of an uncontainable God, a God of exuberance, of superabundance, an overflowing God, not needy but supremely full and overflowing: a glorious God of grace. Here is a God who loves to give Himself.

It is Genesis 1 that is dominant in John's mind as he wrote these opening verses. "In the beginning," "the light shines in the darkness" (vv. 1, 5). And that helps us see that John has a Hebrew scriptural idea of what "word" means. This is not a Hellenistic import on the faith.

But to appreciate a little more deeply what John meant when he wrote of the "Word," it's worth seeing something else from the Old Testament that seems to have been on his mind. Genesis 1 is dominant, to be sure. But in verse 14, John writes that the word "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory." Here, John chooses an unusual verb to express what he means.

More literally, he writes that the Word "tented" or "pitched his tent" among us. And with this mention of glory, it seems clear that John is thinking of the tabernacle, the tent where the Lord would come and be with His people in the wilderness, and where His glory would be seen. As the Israelites saw the bright glory cloud filling the tabernacle, so the Word is where we see the glory of God. It is a surprising glory we see in the One who became flesh and dwelt among us. But in the humility of that One who had no pillow, in His humility, grace, righteousness, gentleness, and faithfulness; in the compassion of the One who went all the way to the cross—we see His glory, a glory unlike the glory of any other.

Now, in the innermost part of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, the Lord was described as being enthroned between the cherubim of the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant (Lev. 16:2; 1 Sam. 4:4). And inside that gold-plated ark/throne were kept the two tablets on which were written the ten "words" or commandments: the law, *the Word of God*. For the Israelites, it modeled the truth that the Word of God belongs in the presence, in the very throne, of God!

The Word of God, then, is the One who belongs in deepest, most essential closeness with God, and the One who displays the innermost reality of who God is. He is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). For He Himself is God. He is God's "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14).

This was the subject of what was perhaps the greatest battle that the church fought in the centuries after the New Testament: to uphold the belief that Jesus truly is God, none other than the Lord God of Israel Himself.

That He is, as was enshrined in those stirring words of the Nicene Creed, "God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father." Those doctrinal words are pastoral dynamite. The great Puritan theologian John Owen saw this with great clarity in his wonderful work *Communion with God*.¹ Owen explained in the first third of that book how so many Christians labor under the misapprehension that behind gracious Jesus, the friend of sinners, is some more sinister being, one thinner on compassion, grace, beauty, and goodness—one we would like to know less.

Owen pointed out that since Jesus is this Word, we can be rid of that horrid idea. *There is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus*. One with His Father, He is the Word, the imprint, the expression, the radiance, the glory of who His Father is. If you've seen Him, you've seen His Father. And that means that through Christ, I know what God is truly like. Through Christ, I see how much this God detests sin. Through Christ, I see that, like the sinful, dying thief, a sinner like me can cry, "Remember me," for I know how He will respond. Though I'm so spiritually lame, leprous, diseased, and dirty, I can call out to Him. For I know just what He is like toward the weak and sick.

Another great Puritan preacher, Stephen Charnock, once wrote,

Is not God the Father of lights, the supreme truth, the most delectable object. . . . Is he not light without darkness, love without unkindness, goodness without evil, purity without filth, all excellency to please, without a spot to displease? Are not all other things infinitely short of him, more below him than a cab of dung is below the glory of the sun?

Isn't that the delight in God that we want for ourselves and for every believer? Here was a man besotted with God, a man who, through the gales and storms of life, seemed to carry this core of sunshine with him: his knowledge of God. But where did such gladness come from? Charnock could not have been plainer: true knowledge of the living God is found in and through Christ. But what we see in Christ is so beautiful it can make the sad sing for joy and the dead spring to life:

1. John Owen, *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991).

2. Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 91.

Nothing of God looks terrible in Christ to a believer. The sun is risen, shadows are vanished, God walks upon the battlements of love, justice hath left its sting in a Saviour's side, the law is disarmed, weapons out of his hand, his bosom open, his bowels yearn, his heart pants, sweetness and love is in all his carriage. And this is life eternal, to know God believingly in the glories of his mercy and justice in Jesus Christ.³

In Jesus Christ, we exchange darkness for light as we think of God. For, unlike all the idols of human religion, He perfectly shows us an unsurpassably desirable God, a righteous and kind God, a God who makes us tremble in awe and rejoice in wonder.

Another great pastoral benefit comes from verse 3: "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Christ the eternal Word is the one through whom all things were made. But secular thinking in the West has eaten away at this like acid in the church. And it has left many Christians with the sneaking suspicion that while Jesus is a savior, He's not really the Creator of all. So they sing of His love on a Sunday—and *there* they feel it is true—but walking home through the streets, past the people and the places where real life goes on, they don't feel it is *Christ's* world. As if the universe is a neutral place, a secular place. As if Christianity is just something we have smeared on top of real life. And Jesus is reduced to being little more than a comforting nibble of spiritual chocolate, an option alongside other hobbies, an imaginary friend who "saves souls" but not much else.

The Bible knows of no such piffing and laughable little Christ. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Christians, therefore, cannot jettison this truth when we walk out into the world. Jesus Christ is the one "from whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6). He is the Word, the agent of creation who continues to uphold and sustain the creation He brought into being.

From the tinnest sea urchin to the brightest star, all things bear *His* magnificent stamp. The heavens cannot but declare *His* glory, for they are *His* craftsmanship, and they continue to hold together only in Him. *His* character is written into the grain of the universe so intimately that even to think against Christ the Logos you must think against logic and descend into folly—and so it is the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). In *His* world, our faculties work better the more they are harnessed to faith in Him. Then we are able to be more

logical, more vibrant, more imaginative, and more creative, for we are working with the map of the universe as He made it.

The Eternal Son

But there is another eternal title of Christ that starts creeping into John's prologue.

In the first few verses, John focuses on the title "the Word." But he shifts from this in verse 12. "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become *children of God*" (emphasis added). How so? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v. 14; emphasis added). Further, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (v. 18).

For as well as being God's eternal Word, this One is also God's eternal Son. In those titles, you can feel some of the difference of meaning. "Word" is a title that speaks more of *His oneness with God*, the fact that He is God; "Son" brings out the other sweet truth, that He has a real *relationship* with God His Father.

Once again, Christianity has something over every other belief system in the world. It is an infinitely superior truth that no human mind ever dreamed of. John is saying that God is eternally a Father loving His Son. (The Spirit John will teach about later.) Later, in John 17:24, he'll record Jesus saying, "Father . . . you loved me before the foundation of the world." Every other belief system in history has had either fundamental nothingness or fundamental chaos out of which everything has come, or else a god or gods who only want to throw their weight around. Such invented gods want servants or company, and that is their reason to create. But here in John's gospel, we see an entirely different God: an Almighty God who is love.

In his first epistle, John would write that "God is love" (4:8; emphasis added), for this God would not be who He is if He did not love. If at any time the Father did not have a Son whom He loved, then He simply would not be a Father. To be who He is, then, He must love. To be the Father *means* to love, to give out life, to beget the Son.

Now the eternal sonship of Christ is such a precious truth to Christians. And why that should be was proven well by Arius in the fourth century when he denied it. As Arius saw it, there once was a time when the Son was not. At some point, in other words, God had created the Son.

But here's how Arius saw God. It was obvious, he thought, that God wouldn't want to dirty His hands with creating a universe. So He created the Son to do that work for Him. First of all, that means that God is not eternally a Father, since

He doesn't eternally have a Son. In fact, He's not really a Father at all. There's the primary comfort of the Lord's Prayer gone up in a puff of philosophy.

Second, for Arius, it's not that the Father truly *loves* the Son; the Son was just His hired workman. And if the Bible ever spoke of the Father's pleasure in the Son, it can only have been because the Son had done a good job. That, presumably, is how to get in with Arius's God. No eternal Son, no Fatherly God, no gospel of grace.

There was also for Arius the problem of the Son's own motivation. Have Philippians 2 in mind, but then imagine that the Son was a creature who had never sat on the heavenly throne at the right hand of God. Now, why would He humble Himself from some exalted, semi-divine, angelic status in heaven? Why would He humble Himself down to the cross? What's His motivation?

His motivation must be that God would exalt Him to a heavenly glory He had never known before. So He's doing it for Himself. But that cannot be with the *eternal* Son. With the eternal Son, God is not using Him as hired help, and He's not using God to get heavenly glory. He's *eternally* been at the Father's side. He is the *eternally* beloved. His motivation was not to get for Himself a glory He had never had, but to *share* with us what He Himself had always enjoyed: sonship! To come to us and bring us in Him back to the exalted position He had always enjoyed with His Father.

And so who He is entirely shapes what it is He offers in the gospel. The person of Christ shapes the work of Christ and the nature of the gospel of Christ entirely. For the eternally beloved Son comes to us to share with us the very love that the Father has always lavished on Him. He comes to share with us and bring us into the life that is His, that we might be brought before the Most High—not just as forgiven sinners, not just as righteous, but as dearly beloved children sharing by the Spirit the Son's own "Abba!" cry. The Father's eternal love for the Son now encompasses us.

In verse 12 we read, "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, [the Son] gave the right to become children of God." This is a theme that then gets woven throughout the rest of John's gospel. In verse 18, the Son is presented as being eternally "in the bosom of the Father," according to the ESV footnote. He has that closeness and deep intimacy with His Father. Later, in 17:24, Jesus declares that His desire is that believers might be with Him where He is. And that gets modeled for us at the Last Supper in John 13. There, we read, "One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side," or more literally, according to the footnote, "in the bosom of Jesus" (John 13:23).

Jesus has eternally been in the bosom of the Father, and John is now in the bosom of Jesus, which is why Jesus can say to the Father in John 17:23, "You... have loved them even as you have loved me" (NIV). For the greatest privilege of the

gospel—capping off our election, our calling, our forgiveness, our being clothed in righteousness, shaping our sanctification, shaping our glorification—is that the Son shares with us His own sonship, that we might be known as the children of God.

Without the eternal Son, you don't get that gospel! No eternal Son, no sonship. No eternal Son, no eternal Father. If God is not Father, He couldn't give us the right to be His children. If He did not enjoy eternal fellowship with His Son, then one has to wonder if He has any fellowship to share with us, or if He even knows what fellowship looks like. If, for example, the Son was a creature and had not eternally been "in the bosom of the Father," knowing Him and being loved by Him, then what sort of relationship with the Father could He share with us? If the Son Himself had never been close to the Father, how could He bring us close? He could not bring us to that "children of God" relationship.

With no eternal Son, we must see that God would be loveless and that salvation would look entirely different. Distant hirelings we would remain, never to hear the Son's golden words to His Father: "you... have loved them even as you have loved me" (NIV). But the gospel of the eternal Son gives us such intimacy and confidence before our Father in heaven. We are beloved children of the Most High!

There is no other God who can do that, to bring us so close, to have us so loved, to give us such an exalted status. No other God could so win our hearts. Only with this God can we say with all sincerity, "Our Father," knowing that we pray, as old John Calvin put it, as if it were through the mouth of Jesus.⁴

The Most High delights to hear us as His very children, and enjoys our prayers as sweet-smelling incense before Him. Only with this God—with the eternal Son—is prayer a delightful privilege.

And, once again, all of this means you've got a salvation that is of grace from first to last. If salvation is not about being adopted into the family of the Father, it's just not so clear that it has to be entirely of grace. We sometimes speak as if our only problem before God is that God is perfect in holiness and we are not. But if our only problem is that we're not good enough, we'll have to give it another go. We'll try to sort ourselves out and do better. But if salvation is to be adopted as children into the Father's family, then our performance is just not going to work, because you simply cannot earn your way into a family.

God's blessing is sonship (v. 12)—becoming a child of God—and so effort can do nothing to get you into the family. Your efforts can only make you a slave,

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 3.20.21.

and no amount of effort can make you a son. All our efforts to win God's salvation by our own strength will only produce slaves—slaves who inherit nothing. But sonship is free!

Five hundred years ago, the neglect of the eternal Son, and how His person and being shapes the gospel, was at the very heart of the problem in the church. The person of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word and Son—His identity—did not shape and drive the gospel as people heard it. In medieval Roman Catholicism, Christ was only the delivery boy who brought us what we really wanted: "grace."

And, like spiritual Red Bull for the lazy, this "grace" was the thing people really wanted. It was the thing they needed to give them the energy to go out and do the holy things that would earn them heaven. And so the prize for the believer was so often some "thing" other than Christ. The prize was so often heaven, not Christ. Jesus Christ had been reduced to being one little brick in the wall of that system. To be honest, it didn't even have to be Him who'd won grace in the first place. St. Nicholas or St. Barbara or St. Anyone could have done it.

Then, in the Reformation, the world heard a profoundly Christ-centered message: that God does not give us some "thing" called "grace" to energize us so we could earn heaven. No, God gives His Son, His Word who became flesh. And it is from His fullness that we receive grace upon grace. The Eternal Son: *He* is the gift from heaven. Verse 12 says, "to all who did receive *him* . . . he gave the right to become children of God" (emphasis added). It is in Him we find ourselves clothed with righteousness and justified. In Him, the Son, we are adopted as the children of God. And in Him, we are therefore saved. And because we are in Him, we are kept to the uttermost.

In Reformation thought, Christ is the treasure, Christ is our security. In Reformation thought, Christ is the jewel and the cornerstone of the gospel, giving its shape and giving us a comfort and a joy that no gospel without Him could match. In Reformation thought, *solus Christus* was the center of the five solas, for it shaped what the Reformers meant when they talked about grace and faith. *Sola Gratia* ("grace alone"): when the Reformers talked about salvation by grace alone, they meant not that we're given some "thing" called grace, but that we're given *Christ* by the gracious kindness of God. *Sola Fide* ("faith alone"): faith is not some thing we do; it is the empty hand that receives Christ.

Sola Scriptura ("Scripture alone"): Scripture, our supreme authority, our deepest foundation, is about Him.

Soli Deo Gloria ("glory to God alone"): If you would know how to give God the glory, you would exalt Jesus Christ. For only through Christ is the glorying God glorified.

Let us preach Christ: Christ alone, the eternal Word, the eternal Son. For there is no gospel without Him. You can speak of grace, you can speak of faith, you can speak of hope, you can speak of the gospel, you can speak of grace alone. But there is no gospel if you do not preach Christ alone.

This is the center to which we must hold fast. Since we see in Him the radiance of God's glory, what better center is there to pledge ourselves to? In all our preaching, we preach Christ—Christ alone. We preach Him to ourselves, to His people, to the world. We preach His glorious person and His all-sufficient work, and that is what honors the Reformation. That is the beginning of all Reformation. This is what will reform lives and reform the church in our day. For when Christ alone is faithfully preached, the world will see His glory. That is the only light that will drive out and overcome all darkness.

