

Christmas 2018

God Incarnate

John 1:1-18

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God Incarnate

Scripture

I recently reread J. I. Packer's classic book titled, *Knowing God*.¹ It is a wonderful book designed to help its readers learn what it means to know God. One of the chapters is titled, "God Incarnate." I would like to draw the material from that chapter for today's message.

Let us learn about God incarnate as we read John 1:1-18:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

⁹The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. ¹²But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from

¹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973).

the Father, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’ ”) ¹⁶ For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known. (John 1:1-18)

Introduction

J. I. Packer writes in “God Incarnate” as follows:

It is no wonder that thoughtful people find the gospel of Jesus Christ hard to believe, for the realities with which it deals pass our understanding. But it is sad that so many make faith harder than it need be, by finding difficulties in the wrong places.

Take the atonement, for instance. Many feel difficulty there. How, they ask, can we believe that the death of Jesus of Nazareth—one man, expiring on a Roman gibbet—put away a world’s sins? How can that death have any bearing on God’s forgiveness of our sins today?

Or take the resurrection, which seems to many a stumbling block. How, they ask, can we believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead? Granted, it is hard to deny that the tomb was empty—but surely the difficulty of believing that Jesus emerged from it into unending bodily life is even greater? Is not any form of the theory of temporary resuscitation after a faint, or of the stealing of the body, easier to credit than the Christian doctrine of the resurrection?

Or, again, take the virgin birth, which has been widely denied among Protestants in this century. How, people ask, can one possibly believe in such a biological anomaly?

Or take the Gospel miracles; many find a source of difficulty here. Granted, they say, that Jesus healed (it is hard, on the evidence, to doubt that he did, and in any case history has known other healers); how can one believe that he walked on the water, or fed the five thousand, or raised the dead? Stories like that are surely quite incredible. With these and similar problems many minds on the fringes of faith are deeply perplexed today.

But in fact the real difficulty, the supreme mystery with which the gospel confronts us, does not lie here at all. It lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, nor in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of Incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—that the second person of the Godhead became the “second man” (1 Cor 15:47), determining human destiny, the second representative head of the race, and that he took humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as he was human.²

On that first Christmas day in Bethlehem a baby was born to a woman—a girl, really—named Mary. His conception was by the power of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:20). **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1:14a). God became man. The divine Son became a Jew. The Almighty Creator of the entire universe became a helpless, wriggly, crying baby who was wrapped in swaddling clothes and placed in a cattle feeding trough in the region of Bethlehem.

This reality is far more staggering than any science fiction. It is far more difficult to grasp than any myth or story. God Almighty became a needy baby.

But, this is the truth of the incarnation. I like the way

² J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 52-53.

Packer writes about this. He says:

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke tell us in some detail how the Son of God came to this world. He was born outside a small hotel in an obscure Jewish village in the great days of the Roman Empire. The story is usually prettied up when we tell it Christmas by Christmas, but it is really rather beastly and cruel. The reason why Jesus was born outside the hotel is that it was full and nobody would offer a bed to a woman in labor, so that she had to have her baby in the stables and cradle him in a cattle trough. The story is told dispassionately and without comment, but no thoughtful reader can help shuddering at the picture of callousness and degradation that it draws.³

The point of the Gospel writers is not so much to make us cringe at the circumstances of the baby's birth but to emphasize the identity of the baby. You see, the baby born in Bethlehem was none other than the Son of God. Not, *a* son, but *the* Son of God. Or, to put it more accurately, God *the* Son. John stresses this truth four times in the first three chapters of his Gospel (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18).

The Apostle John wrote his Gospel to help his readers understand the identity of Jesus. Toward the end of his Gospel John states the reason he wrote his Gospel, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, *the Son of God*, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30–31).

Now, John knew that the expression "the Son of God" had the potential to confuse his readers. He wanted his readers to be clear that Jesus was fully God and fully man. So, when

³ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 54.

John began his Gospel he did not use the term “Son” in the opening sentences. Instead, he used the term “Word.” The Jews—and readers of the Old Testament—would immediately understand the significance of this term. As Packer says, “God’s Word in the Old Testament is his creative utterance, his power in action fulfilling his purpose.”⁴ In Genesis 1 we read how God said, “Let there be...and there was...” (1:3). The Word of God is God at work.

Lesson

In John 1:1-18 we learn seven truths about the Word.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Word Is Eternal (1:1a)
2. The Word Is Personality (1:1b)
3. The Word Is Deity (1:1c)
4. The Word Is Creating (1:3)
5. The Word Is Animating (1:4a)
6. The Word Is Revealing (1:4b)
7. The Word Is Incarnate (1:14a)

I. The Word Is Eternal (1:1a)

First, the Word is eternal.

John writes in verse 1a: **“In the beginning was the Word.”** John is making a deliberate reference to Genesis 1:1, where we read, “In the beginning, God....” Readers of the Old Testament understood that God is eternal from their reading of Genesis 1:1. Now, John wants his readers to know that **the Word** was there too—**“in the beginning.”** When there was

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 56.

nothing in the entire universe, **the Word** was there.

So, the Word is eternal.

II. **The Word Is Personality (1:1b)**

Second, the Word is personality.

John writes in verse 1b: “...and the **Word** was with **God.**” **The Word** is a personal being. He was present **with God** in the beginning. There was a relationship between **the Word** and **God**. Packer puts it this way, “The power that fulfills God’s purposes is the power of a distinct personal being, one who stands in an eternal relation to God of active fellowship (this is what the phrase means).”⁵

So, the Word is eternal and has personality.

III. **The Word Is Deity (1:1c)**

Third, the Word is deity.

John writes in verse 1c: “...and the **Word** was **God.**” **The Word** and **God** are two distinct beings. Here John is affirming the deity of **the Word**, which is identical to the deity of the Father. John is making a distinction between two beings, which is part of the mystery of the unity within the Godhead.

Jehovah’s Witnesses translate this phrase as, “...and the Word was a god.” They say that in Greek the word for God (*theos*) always has a definite article before it when it is referring to the biblical God (with a capital “G”). When there is no article, it is a reference to a false god (with a little “g”). However, in 1933, E. C. Colwell published a rule stating that “that definite predicate nominatives that precede the verb usually lack

⁵ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 56.

the article.”⁶ Our phrase has two nouns: “the Word” and “God.” Basically, Colwell’s Rule means that you only need one article (“the”) to govern both nouns. Therefore, the Jehovah’s Witnesses are wrong to translate this as, “...and the Word was a god.” The correct translation is, “...and the Word was **God.**” Thus, John is affirming the deity of **the Word.**

So, the Word is eternal, personality, and deity.

IV. The Word Is Creating (1:3)

Fourth, the Word is creating.

John writes in verse 3: “**All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**” So, properly speaking, it was the Word who created **all things**. When we read in Genesis 1:1 that “in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” it is really the Word who created **all things**. Again, there is an identification of “God” in Genesis 1:1 with the one through whom **all things were made**.

And more than that, the one who created **all things** was not himself created. He could not, and did not, create himself. John affirms that the Word is the creator because “**all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.**”

So, the Word is eternal, personality, deity, and creating.

V. The Word Is Animating (1:4a)

Fifth, the Word is animating.

⁶ Matthew S. DeMoss, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of New Testament Greek* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 32.

John writes in verse 4a: **“In him was life.”** The Word is the one who creates life. There is no life apart from the Word. The Bible clearly affirms that the origin and continuation of physical life, in all its forms, is given and maintained by the Word. Created things do not have life in themselves; they only have life as it is given to them by the Word. That is why the Psalmist says of the Word, “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them” (Psalm 139:16).

Some biologists and other scientists are trying to create new life. In a November 2017 article in the *Independent*, a newspaper in the United Kingdom, the author expressed excitement over the creation of new living organisms. At one point in the article, the author wrote, “Creating new forms of life, however, is not the main point.”⁷ The main point is to create new organisms to treat disease. Perhaps it is an issue of semantics, but biologists will never be able to create new life. They will always be using existing material, whereas only the Word, the second person of the Godhead, has life in himself and is able to create life.

So, the Word is eternal, personality, deity, creating, and animating.

VI. The Word Is Revealing (1:4b)

Sixth, the Word is revealing.

John writes in verse 4b: **“...and the life was the light of men.”** The Word not only gives life, he gives **light** too. What

⁷ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/artificial-life-synthetic-dna-scientists-living-organisms-create-scripps-research-institute-floyd-a8083966.html>.

does that mean? That means that the Word enables his creatures to understand and apprehend the truth about themselves, their world, and even their need of a new relationship with their Creator. The Word guides his creatures by the light of his truth into a right relationship with himself. It is in this way that the Word reveals truth to his creatures.

So, the Word is eternal, personality, deity, creating, animating, and revealing.

VII. The Word Is Incarnate (1:14a)

And seventh, the Word is incarnate.

John writes in verse 14a: **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”** In his Gospel, John finally makes the connection between **the Word** and baby born in Bethlehem. **The Word became flesh** and was born as a baby in Bethlehem. Moreover, he **dwelt among us**. John, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used a very interesting word for **“dwelt.”** The Greek word for **dwelt** (*eskenosen*) means “tent, abode, to encamp, pitch a tent.” It has the idea of “the body as the dwelling place of the soul, tabernacle, tent.”⁸ It is the same word that was used of the tabernacle in the Old Testament. The significance of using that word is that it reminded the readers of the Old Testament of the dwelling place of God, because God was understood to dwell in the tabernacle. So, John is intentionally helping his readers understand that God, in the person of Jesus, was tabernacling once again **among us**.

Yes, that little baby born to Mary in the stable is none other than the eternal Word of God!

⁸ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

So, Packer notes:

And now, having shown us who and what the Word is—a divine Person, author of all things—John indicates an identification. The Word, he tells us, was revealed by the Incarnation to be God’s Son. “We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father” (1:14). The identification is confirmed in verse 18: “The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father” (KJV). Thus John establishes the point at which he was aiming throughout. He has now made it clear what is meant by calling Jesus the Son of God. The Son of God is the Word of God. We see what the Word is; well, that is what the Son is. Such is the prologue’s message.⁹

So, the Word is eternal, personality, deity, creating, animating, revealing, and incarnate.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a statement from Packer, “When, therefore, the Bible proclaims Jesus as the Son of God, the statement is meant as an assertion of his distinct personal deity. The Christmas message rests on the staggering fact that the child in the manger was—*God*.”¹⁰

The Word’s ultimate purpose was to die in order to purchase salvation for sinners. He did so, and God accepted his sacrifice by raising him from the dead. Therefore, this Christmas, let us believe and affirm that Jesus is God incarnate, the Savior of sinners, and let us therefore worship him now and always. Amen.

⁹ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 57.

¹⁰ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 57.

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*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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