

The Word became flesh

By Ross Callaghan

<http://rosscallaghan.yolasite.com>

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world

He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1-14

The first 14 verses of John's Gospel are 'one of the greatest adventures of religious thought ever achieved by the mind of man'. (Barclay). Let's reflect on them as we consider how we can be effective in reaching our generation for Christ. The issues we are facing are similar to those John faced!

The circumstances of John's gospel.

1. Most Christians were from a Gentile/Greek background

The Church had begun in Judaism and most of its first members were Jews. John's Gospel was written about 60 years after Jesus died. By then the Church had moved from its Jewish foundation and had spread throughout the Roman/Greek world. Christians were being strongly influenced by the Gentile culture they had grown up in, and lived in every day.

(That's why John's Gospel is so different to the others. Matthew, Mark and Luke were written when the Church still had a strong Jewish perspective. Greeks reading Matthew's Gospel, for example, wouldn't care about the genealogies, or quotes from the Old Testament; wouldn't have heard of King David, and wouldn't be interested in the Jewish laws and customs....).

Christianity needed to be re-stated so its essential truths would be relevant for Christians (and potential Christians) in a different culture, and would be meaningful in that culture.

We are in a similar situation. We need to present the Gospel in a way that is relevant for people for whom God is totally irrelevant; who have little or no knowledge of Jesus, and who are strongly influenced (whether they know it or not!) by secular humanistic philosophies.

2. There were strongly held philosophies (including philosophies about God)

a. The concept of logos (word, reason, intelligence)

To the Greek the Word of God meant the reasoning, intelligent, guiding, correcting, controlling mind and wisdom of God. The logos is behind everything that happens. Why is there night/day? How were we made? Why do things happen as they do? How can we know right from wrong? Easy! The logos of God. The logos pervades all things; makes sense of the world, and keeps everything in its proper order.

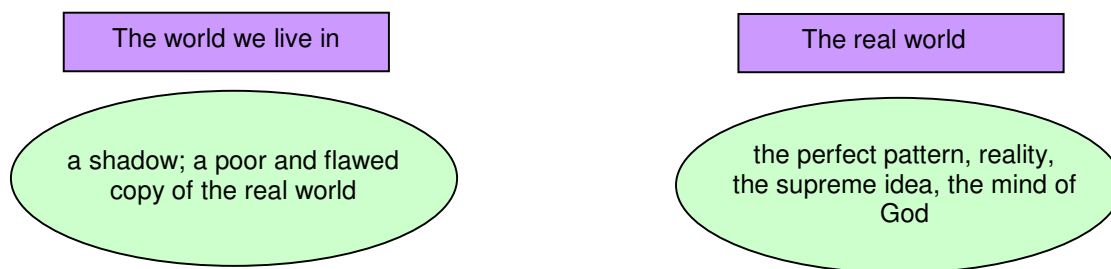
To the Jew a word wasn't just a sound. It has an independent existence, was powerful and did things. Blessings are conferred by words. Wisdom is often personified. Names and their meanings are all important. By His Word God created the world. God speaks and things happen. By His Word God gives life and light. God is His Word. (So much so that the writers of the Targums - translations of the scriptures into Aramaic so the common people could understand - tried to de-personalise the Word, separating it from His Person!).

Both Jew and Greek recognised that it was the Word of God that made everything, sustains everything and makes sense of life.

So John says, (and we need to say) "If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. He shows us God's mind, reason, intelligence, thoughts and being. He has always been; He has always been with God; He created everything; He is God. The mind of God became a person! Jesus is the logos!"

b. The concept of reality

The Greeks believed there were two worlds:



The big question was "How can we move from the shadow to the reality?"

John says: "Jesus is the reality! Look to Him, know Him! Jesus is the logos (mind/reason/intelligence) of God. All of God's fullness dwells in Him. Everything Jesus says and does enables us to see into the reality of God.

The Greek word for reality is *alethinous* and for truth is *alethes*. They are the same thing!

John often calls Jesus the true/real xxxx (God, bread, vine, judge etc). The message is that in Jesus alone there is reality and truth in a world of shadows, copies and imperfection.

Again we are in a similar situation. People won't accept one 'truth' in a pluralistic world. Each person can have their own 'truths' as long as they are caring, tolerant, accepting, non-judgmental (and all the other pc qualities).

What people want is reality, worked out in a real world, making sense of life in a world where 'I' is all important, (and God is irrelevant).

If we are to get through our message needs to be focused on reality. As John did, focus people on Jesus who is the great reality. He will bring to people's lives everything they have yearned for. Know Jesus and you will know reality in every area of your life. (Rather than an approach based on truth eg. 'The Bible says...'; rationalizing; trying to prove aspects by apologetics; using tracts etc.).

Let's present Jesus as the only way to reality in the family, work, finances, creativity, future, inner life, eternity ...

And you will know the truth (reality) and the truth (reality) will make you free. John 8:32

c. Heresies within the Church

Living in a non-Christian (or anti-Christian) culture can easily affect the way Christians think. Within its first 50 or 60 years the Church had developed a number of heresies.

Some had elevated John the Baptist and built a sect around him. (eg. In Acts 19 people baptised by John needed to be filled with the Holy Spirit). Every reference to John the Baptist in John's Gospel, without criticizing him, seeks to correct this by putting John the Baptist in his right place in God's order and elevating Jesus. eg. Chapter 1: 6-9.

Today we have a similar situation when some Pastors get elevated and have enormous power in Christian's lives. Let's not place anybody in the Church in a position of worship. Humility and servant hood should be the characteristics of genuine leaders. Jesus is the Head of the Church, not Pastors!

The main heresy that John needed to address was **Gnosticism**.

Main beliefs of Gnosticism

- In the beginning just two things existed: God and matter. God is pure spirit. Matter is evil; spirit is good.
- God can't have anything to do with matter because it is evil.
- To create the universe God put out emanations (Aeons), further and further from Himself.
- The creator God (Demiurge) came from one of the emanations Sophia (wisdom) and is like Jehovah, the God of the Old Testament. She is hostile to the true God.
- The world is flawed. Space and time separate us from God. The laws of nature and moral laws enslave us. People (Adam) living in a flawed, material world are ignorant of the divine spark within them, but have the possibility for this to be awakened.
- The awakening is through knowledge (gnosis). This comes through spiritual revelations given by Messengers of Light (mainly Seth, Jesus, Mani and Sophia). Salvation doesn't come by faith, obedience or good works.
- Growth in gnosis can only occur while we are alive. Death releases the divine spark but it gets re-incarnated for further cycles and continued evolution.
- Ethics, morality and rules serve the Demiurge. The inner spark brings about personal morality rather than rules, so matters of conduct are left to individual choice. "Since the effort is to restore the wholeness and unity of the Godhead, active rebellion against the moral law of the Old Testament is enjoined upon every man".
- Growth in gnosis is a cosmic event.
- Christ and Sophia await the spiritual person, to welcome us to Pleroma (fullness: Paradise).
- In time every spiritual being will achieve gnosis, be re-united with our angelic twin – our higher self, and enter Pleroma.

From this some Christians had come to believe Jesus was just one of the emanations, not divine. (Compare to v1, 2) Others (the Docetists) said Jesus had no body: He was like a phantom and only seemed to be a man. (but in v14 John says 'The word became flesh').

It's easy to see that many current worldviews (especially those promoted in the Da Vinci Code) are still Gnostic in origin! We need to understand the way people think and recognise that it doesn't come from a Christian world view. We need to communicate the Gospel to them based on an understanding of the philosophical base on which they have built their lives. Also, we need to recognise that we are being influenced every day to think and act in these ways. Be aware!

John presents Jesus as undeniably human and undeniably divine. And so should we!

3. People were searching

The early Christians, (and everyone else), were searching for meaning and purpose in life. What is life all about? How can I find purpose? Where is meaning?

John's Gospel was written to answer these questions: *But these are written 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: 31

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. John 1: 4,5

Today most people don't want to see Jesus as the way to meaning in life. (They are in darkness and just don't understand!). So how can we help them see the light? Point them to Jesus! Only in Him does life really make sense. John says unashamedly "look to Jesus".

When people come to Jesus light comes into their lives:

- light that shines into darkness, fear, uncertainty and chaos
- light that exposes the evil that keeps us in bondage
- light that shows us the way life can and should be lived
- light that shows the way ahead to a fulfilled life
- light that overcomes doubts and despair
- light that removes the fear of death
- light that points to eternity.

These are just the things that people are searching for! And they are all (only) found in Jesus.

He was the real light, who, in His coming into the world, gives light to every man. John 1:9.

How does one come into this light? That's the big question!

Come to know Jesus. Accept Him and you find the light of the world!

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God. John 1:12,13

That's why God sent His Son. That's why the Word became flesh!

Let's be unashamed about pointing people to Jesus as the Saviour.

4. People needed an example

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:14

The fullness of God (mind, reason, intelligence, thoughts and being) became human. We can see Him. We can know Him!

To the Greeks this was amazing! They believed our bodies are evil; prisons containing our souls and confining our spirits. Yet John says the Word became flesh (*sarx*, the word used over and over to describe our fleshly fallen nature). We could see Him! God became man. He experienced what we experience. He knows! He cares! He understands.

And what is He like? Full of grace (in the way He lived and lives) and truth (in what He said and says). In other words Jesus was fully human and showed that humans can live as God intended. We can too (in relationship with Jesus).

Our example is also vital. We need to live our Christian lives with grace and truth, as we point people to Jesus. These days everyone is very aware of hypocrisy. Let's be genuine in our love, care, acceptance and sharing.

So John's Gospel explains what God has done in Christ, to people living in a culture that knows little or nothing about Him.

The messages for us, if we are to be effective in sharing the Gospel, are the same as for John:

- *Recognise that most people in our culture are strongly influenced by secular humanistic philosophies and God is totally irrelevant.*
- *We must point people to Jesus. "If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus".*
- *Focus on Jesus as the way to reality: in the family, work, finances, creativity, future, inner life, eternity ...*
- *Lift up Jesus, and be very wary of elevating people (like pastors).*
- *Present Jesus as fully God, yet fully human.*
- *Present Jesus as the one who brings light and truth into our lives.*
- *Present Jesus as the only Saviour.*
- *Be a great example of what Jesus can do in people: live with grace and truth.*

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Discussion questions

John portrays Jesus as the *Word become flesh*. What is the meaning and importance of this statement?

- for the early Christians?
- for those living in the 1st Century with a Gnostic philosophy?
- for those living in the 21st Century who may or may not know they are influenced by Gnostic philosophies?
- for Christians today?

John wrote his Gospel (including John 1:14) some 60 years after Jesus' resurrection. Why was it so important for John to write his Gospel in the way that he did? What had changed in the Church and in society over those 60 years that meant John needed to write as he did?

Are you being influenced by Gnostic philosophies? How? What can you do to make sure your thinking is in line with the truths of God's Word?

There are many other parts of the New Testament where prevailing Gnostic philosophies are challenged and countered. Identify these passages and explain what the Bible teaches in response.

Why did John call Jesus "the Word." What is the significance of this?

The *Word became flesh* says that God who is Spirit, became a man. Why did He do this? What would have happened if God had not become man?

Describe the relationship between the Father, the Son (i.e. Jesus as a man), and the Holy Spirit, during the time when Jesus was on earth as a man. How did this change after the resurrection?

How can we convince unbelievers that Jesus is God, and that they are accountable to Him?

How can we be effective in sharing the Gospel with unbelievers?