

## **The Prologue to John's Gospel: John 1:1-18**

Many scholars regard these verses as an early Christian hymn into which the author of the Gospel of John has inserted some prose statements about John (whom we call "John the Baptist." In this gospel prologue however, he is "John the Witness.")

The Gospel of John understands Jesus as a divine being who descended to earth from heaven, provided humans with what we need to become "children of God" (1:12), and then ascended again to the heavenly realm. This pattern would have been familiar to an ancient audience because Greek and Roman mythology had many stories of divine beings disguising themselves as humans, descending to earth to interact with human beings (sometimes helpfully), then returning to the heavenly realm. In the Old Testament (even in Luke's birth announcement), angels descend, take on human-like features, deliver a message, then return to heaven. Following this pattern, the prologue begins in the presence of God (1:1-2) and ends in the presence of God ("close to the Father's heart," or "in the bosom of the Father" – 1:18)

But this prologue makes a claim that would never have been made about any self-respecting Greek or Roman god: "The Word became flesh and lived among us," or as Eugene Peterson translates, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood" (1:14). The most important characteristic of the ancient gods was that they did not suffer or die, unlike mere mortals. The scandalous claim of the first Christians was that God had actually **become** flesh. God did not put on a human costume, or merely take the temporary shape of a human. God became a real flesh and blood human being --- Jesus of Nazareth. This "became flesh" phrase is where we get the concept of "incarnation" --- "in" means in and "carne" means meat or flesh.

**Have you ever gone to a part of the world, or even a part of Atlanta, where you felt uncomfortable? Maybe you were surrounded by people who looked different from you and maybe they looked on you as an alien. What the Gospel of John is claiming is that Jesus came to (literally) "pitch his tent" among people who were different from and dangerous to him. We are "his own people" who do not "welcome/receive" this stranger and are not inclined to trust him (what John calls "believe"). Christ continues to come to us anyway.**

In Proverbs 1:20 and following, “wisdom” is personified as a human being. In Proverbs 8:22 – 31, God’s wisdom is understood as the agent of creation, that is, the one through whom God created the world, including human beings. Jesus’s first followers, who were Jews, could not imagine how there could be two equal divine beings, Jesus and the Father. But in their tradition they did have this notion that God made everything “through” Wisdom, so that helped them to understand how to talk about Jesus.

**In Genesis 1, how did God go about creating things? Did he have to have stuff to work with?**

The answer to this question should make it easy to understand why the hymn at the beginning of John’s Gospel says, “All things came into being through [the Word] and without [the Word] not one thing came into being.” The Word is God’s word and as the agent of creation, the Word is inseparable from the Speaker. “The Word was God” (1:1).

As things turned out, the claim that the incarnate Savior whose death, resurrection, and second Advent repair the brokenness that human beings have caused in God’s Creation, was also the agent of Creation has been foundational. To the precursors of the Gnostics, who claimed that the Creator God and the Redeemer God were entirely different divinities, the author of John insists that the Word that became flesh was used by God to create the world. That means that redemption does not cancel out creation; redemption restores creation. It means that the material human body and other material things are not evil by contrast with spiritual things. The Word that became flesh to save us was responsible for making the material world in the first place and entered into the material world becoming a human being like all of us. Every aspect of Creation is good (Genesis 1) and every aspect of Creation can be turned into an idol by human sin and self-centeredness.

As Charles Wesley wrote in the carol, “Hark! The herald angels sing,”  
Christ, by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord;  
late in time behold him come, offspring of a virgin's womb.  
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail th' incarnate Deity,  
pleased with us in flesh to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.

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Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more may die,  
born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth.

### Thoughts on Christian maturity

One of the benefits of the incarnation to the daily Christian life is the fact that by becoming a human being Jesus sanctified human life with all of its frustrations, limitations, awkwardness and pain. The surrendered Christian is still a human being who, unlike God, cannot do “all things well.”

Sometimes earnest Christians fall prey to the idolatry of perfectionism and inability to say “no.” This is a particularly insidious kind of idolatry because it benefits so many people. How many times have we heard, “Ask \_\_\_\_\_ to do that. She is always willing and does such a good job.” The perfectionist enjoys being appreciated. It’s an addiction that produces a pleasant “high” from time to time. But it is an expensive habit.

Perfectionists can become resentful of people who are not as “faithful” as they are. But being nice Christians, they don’t express their resentment. They stuff it. This is hazardous to one’s health.

It is not always true, as the overworked church member believes, that “somebody has to do it.” Maybe God is ready to put an end to whatever it is and move on to something else. Maybe God gets bored when we do the same stuff year after year because “we always do that at this time of year.” Maybe this task needs to die so that something else can take its place.

Pray about your commitments for 2013. Which of them really ARE necessary for YOU to do? What things might God want to use another’s gifts to accomplish? What might not happen because the church calendar is so full that people with creative ideas are reluctant to add anything new? What do you feel called to do for which you have no time?

By contrast, if you are a person who is on the sidelines of this church, where would you love to jump in and serve?