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Who is Jesus? (John 1:1–5)

No portion of the Scriptures is used more frequently to introduce people to the Christian faith than the Gospel according to John. The reason is obvious. The Fourth Gospel distils the essence of the good news about Jesus Christ and presents it in a clear, concise and compelling way. It is straightforward and to the point. As an introduction to the whole depth and breadth of God's Word, it is user-friendly. John says as much towards the end of his account, when he tells us that 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (20:31). His theme is nothing less than the transcendent glory of Jesus Christ, who is the very Word of God. And just as the words that we speak tell other people what we want them to know, so Christ has revealed the Father in his own

person, being ‘the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person’ (Heb. 1:3). The apostle tells a world of ordinary people what they need to know about Jesus, so as to believe the good news about him and have new life through his name.

There is something of a paradox in this approach, for this ‘easy’ introduction to the gospel of Jesus Christ begins with the highest and most profound of truths. There is no gradual build-up to the idea that Jesus the man is God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity made flesh. There is no painstaking development of a case for these assertions. We are thrown in at the deep end! Jesus is proclaimed, with unclouded simplicity and majestic profundity, to be the Word of God, the Creator of the world and the Light of men! We are taken immediately to eternity before the creation of the world and are given a vision in words of the pre-incarnate glory of the Son of God. Both faith and mind are challenged from the first syllables of the Gospel. Who was this Jesus, who ministered among us for a few years and was subsequently executed by the Romans? With breathtaking boldness, John affirms that he is God (1:1–2), Creator (1:3) and life and light (1:4–5).

Jesus is God (John 1:1–2)

The first doctrine of John’s Gospel is that Jesus is God. It is clear from 1:14 that this person whom John calls ‘the Word’ (ὁ λόγος / *ho logos*) is none other than Jesus before his incarnation (which literally means ‘enfleshment’): ‘And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us.’ Three co-ordinate truths are presented in these verses:

namely, that Jesus is the eternal Logos, or Word (1:1,14; 1 John 1:1; Rev. 19:13), that he is coequal with God the Father and that he is truly God.

In the beginning was the Word (1:1a)

1:1. *In the beginning was the Word...*

Jesus is the eternal Word of God. Two incontrovertible facts stand out. The first is that Jesus is the eternal wisdom and will of God, while the second is that he is—as the writer to the Hebrews puts it—‘the express image of [God’s] person’ (Heb. 1:3).

This means that Jesus *is* divine wisdom and he *communicates* something of that wisdom to the human race because he is the Son of God who took our flesh and lived among us. Both the prophecies of the Old Testament and the revelations of the New Testament confirm this with irrefutable clarity (Prov. 8:15–30; Micah 5:2; 1 Cor. 1:24; Heb. 1:3). Jesus is ‘the Word’ precisely because he eternally reflects the mind of God and, in time and history, reveals that mind to humankind. He is both *ratio* (thought) and *oratio* (speech). He is the person in whom the wisdom of God is pre-eminently revealed.

Note, too, that he was this Word ‘in the beginning’. The parallel with Genesis is deliberate and unmistakable. The Word is uncreated and eternal. He is deity himself. ‘Genesis 1 described God’s first creation,’ observes Leon Morris. ‘John’s theme is God’s new creation ... brought about through the agency of the *Logos*, the very Word of God.’¹

The Word was with God (1:1b)

1:1. ... *and the Word was with God...*

Jesus is coequal with God the Father. Not only did he have a personal existence as eternal as that of God the Father, but he bore a precise and intimate relationship with, or towards, God (πρὸς τὸν θεόν / *pros ton theon*). ‘He existed in the closest possible connection with the Father.’² He was with the Father, but a distinct personality from the Father. John enlarges on this in his first letter: ‘That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us)’ (1 John 1:1–2, AV).

The Word was God (1:1–2)

1:1–2. ... *and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.*

John is emphatic: the Word ‘was God’. Jesus is not ‘a god’, as the spurious New World Translation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses has it.³ The Greek text has no article—literally it reads: ‘and God was the Word’ (καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος). The absence of an article—definite or indefinite—in connection with ‘God’ (θεός / *theos*), notes Shedd, ‘converts the word into the abstract, denoting the species “deity”’.⁴ That is to say, not only was Jesus the eternal Word (1:1a) and, therefore, coexistent ‘with God’ the Father (1:1b), but he is himself a divine person. Jesus is elsewhere variously called ‘the true God’ and ‘the eternally blessed God’, or just ‘God’ (1 John 5:20; Rom.

9:5; Heb. 1:8). There is simply no room for any fudging. There is no textual basis for denying the deity of Jesus Christ.

The Word is God: ‘He was in the beginning with God.’ John wants us to be in no doubt as to his meaning. Jesus is the Word incarnate. Jesus is therefore God incarnate. This is at the heart of the gospel. Against all fudging and sceptical theological speculation, we must say with John Calvin, ‘I am unwilling to carry the abstruseness of philosophy beyond the measure of my faith.’⁵ Why? Because a Jesus who is no more than a personification of great wisdom (but is not wisdom himself), or is merely a good man and a marvellous teacher (as opposed to the light of the world), or is someone we think of as divine and inspiring to us subjectively (but is not actually God), is a man-made myth, powerless to save a single soul. To live and die and rise again for sinners in order objectively and definitively to remove their guilt and sin and give them new life requires that Jesus be the Son of God incarnate. The best example in the world could not actually save a flea! We needed real atonement cancelling real sins, not good advice, moral influence or myths that make us feel good. John was establishing the qualifications of Jesus the man to be the Redeemer of other men.

Jesus is Creator (John 1:3)

1:3. All things were made through him, and without him nothing was made that was made.