

Jesus Christ – the Life and Light  
John 1:1 – 5  
Fairview Presbyterian Church  
December 26, 2010

**In the first four verses of John’s gospel we are told six key truths regarding the Word of God.**

At the beginning of a musical there is usually played what is called an ‘overture.’ An overture is a musical piece that highlights and introduces the music to follow. Typically the overture will state the main musical themes of the protagonist, antagonist, chorus and other key characters. Listen carefully to the overture and you will hear those themes repeated as the musical story unfolds.

The opening five verses of John’s gospel form the overture of the story he is telling. The key themes are all here in these opening verses. Everything he wants you to know about the person of Jesus Christ is touched upon in these opening words. Specifically, there are seven things he tells about the Word of God in these opening verses. In fact, through v. 4 he has revealed six of the key truths. He is saving the most astonishing one for v. 14. We will look at it in three weeks, on June 1<sup>st</sup>. But for now, I want to review the four things we have learned about the Word of God so far and look at the two new additional truths he reveals in v. 4.

**The Word was present ‘in the beginning’ – the word is eternal.**

In the beginning was the Word

We are dependent creatures. We require certain things in order to exist: things such as food, water, and air. Without these things we die. We also require space and time in order to exist. Our lives unfold in the sweep of history, playing out in the world as we know it. We are also relationally dependent. We depend upon our relationships with other humans to strengthen and encourage us in life. We cannot imagine an independent being. As creatures we are woven into the stuff of the universe and are dependent upon it. This is a significant contrast to what John tells us about the Word of God.

When John writes that the Word ‘was’ ‘in the beginning’ he is saying that the Word exists *before* creation existed. He is saying that God, the Word, is not created. He *was*, in the beginning. Creation comes into existence, but the Word is *self-existent*.

There is an important distinction here. We are not saying that God is *self-creating*. The idea of *self-creation* is nonsense. Self-creating is an irrational concept. The reason is that in order for something to be ‘*self-creating*’ implies that it must exist *before* it exists – which is gibberish. Something cannot exist *before* it exists. Or, put differently, in order for something to be self-creating it would have to create itself *out of nothing*, but if there is *nothing*, then who (or what) is the *something* which does the creating out of *nothing*? You see the logical tangle that

results.

God cannot be *self created*. But God can be *self existent*. This is what makes him the Supreme Being and the source of all else. Self existence does not violate rational thinking whereas self creating does. Self existence is a rational concept. It is rationally coherent to say that God is *self existent*. In creation, every effect must have a cause; every outcome must have an antecedent, a prior cause. But God himself is not a cause or an effect. He is eternal. He has no precursor. He has no beginning and so has no need of an antecedent. He subsists in himself. He always was and is. He himself has and is the power of being.

This is the first thing John tells us: the eternity of the Word.

### **The Word was with God – a distinction of personality** and the Word was with God

An image that has been used historically to describe the United States is that of a 'melting pot.' This image captures the idea that the United States is largely a nation of immigrants in which the various cultures, classes, and ethnic groups have been brought together and, out of the heat generated from the challenging task of nation building, these diverse groups have blended together to form an identity uniquely American. In the last twenty years with the rise of 'diversity' education and 'multiculturalism' this image has been challenged and replaced with the idea of a salad bowl. The argument being that we should not seek a single American identity – as suggested in the image of a melting pot – but rather a pleasant mix of various cultures all residing together in the same land but retaining their distinctive flavors and textures.

This conflict of images represents one of the great philosophical debates which can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece. It is the question of the one or the many. How is can find unity – the one – in the midst of the diversity of our world? Or, if we find unity, how can we do so without losing our individuality? If the United States is a 'melting pot' then our distinctiveness is lost. Or, on the other hand, if our cultural distinctives are retained and celebrated then our unity as a single nation is undermined. If all is one, then individuality is lost. If all are individuals, then unity is unobtainable. How do we preserve the one without doing injustice to the other?

John's declaration in v. 1 that '*in the beginning was the Word and the Word was **with God***' represents a revolution in revealed truth and philosophical understanding. John is making a distinction of persons, of personality, within the unity of the eternal godhead. He is saying that in God we find unity in diversity and diversity within unity. In Christian theology, Trinity is the word used to describe the fullness of the godhead in unity and diversity. The essence of God is unity. We declare that we worship one God. But within that unity is a distinction of persons: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God is God in essence, but three in persons. The persons are not created; they subsist together within the Godhead. Within the

persons of the Trinity are real differences, but not essential differences. Because they are one in being, essence, they all share equally the attributes of deity. Water is water. Steam is water. Ice is water. Three forms, but one essence. The analogy is not perfect, but it does provide some helpful insight.

It is important to remember that in speaking these things we are not 'defining' the doctrine of God. We are incapable of doing so. Rather, we are defining the boundaries regarding how we are to speak properly about God. We wish to speak truthfully, rightfully and honorably regarding God whom we serve. This language helps us know the lines out side of which we dare not step.

The Word is eternal. The Word is a person within the godhead. The Word is God.

### **The Word was God – a declaration of deity** and the Word was God

John has already told us that the Word is eternal and a distinctive person in the godhead. Why does he now go on to say explicitly that the Word is God? Why is it necessary that he drive home the declaration of the Word's full deity?

It is important to remember the context in which John writes. I remember once hearing the great missionary Leslie Newbigin speak about the challenges of being an evangelist on behalf of the Christian gospel in the nation of India. "*How do you declare Christian truth*" he asked, "*in a language which drips with the assumptions of Hinduism?*" John's problem was similar. He is writing in Greek and in the words he chooses he is drawing upon Greek philosophy to declare the truth of Christ the Word of God. But he knows that he must guard against misunderstandings which might arise from some aspects of Greek language and culture.

For this reason John understands that it is important that his meaning not be confused with Greek pagan belief. John is making his case that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. But in calling Jesus Christ God's '*Son*' he does not wish for his readers to misunderstand and think of the sonship of Christ as a Greek pagan might think of Hercules, the son of Jupiter. In Greek mythology the Greek gods are constantly cavorting with humans and the legend of Hercules is perhaps the best known example of their dalliances. Hercules is the son of Zeus and Alcmena. He is great and he is gifted, but he is mortal, he is not a god. In significant contrast John wants us to know that the Word he is writing of is more than Hercules. The Word is co-equal to God.

The Word is eternal. The Word is a person within the godhead. The Word is God. Fourthly, the Word is the agency through which all things have been made.

### **All things were made through the Word – an affirmation of Creatorship**

<sup>3</sup> Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made

If I say that Shakespeare is the author of Hamlet then one reasonable conclusion from that statement is that Shakespeare himself is not Hamlet. If I say that the sculptor Rodin created 'The Thinker' then we know that Rodin is not the art work 'The Thinker.' A creator stands apart from and is distinct from his creation. The word we use is 'transcendent.' He is above and beyond his creation.

When John says that it was through the Word that creation was created he is telling us that the Word is above and beyond creation. He is transcendent over it. This is important because this sets the Christian world view in stark contrast to those who seek to find God *within* nature. God is not found within nature. He is above and beyond it. The heavens 'declare God's glory' but they do not reveal his person. A study of Hamlet can reflect Shakespeare's greatness as an author, but it will not introduce you to him as a person.

The declaration of the Word as 'creator' is very significant. One of the basic philosophical questions of life is this: '*Why is there something other than nothing?*' Why does anything exist at all? In part the answer is because God himself is self-existent. He alone has within himself the power of being, the power to create. Try and imagine nothing: not vast space, not unending time, but instead 'no thing.' Nothing is the negation of something, the negation of everything. If there ever was a time in which nothing existed, including God, then what would we have now? We would have nothing. If there was once nothing, then all you get is nothing. You cannot get *something* from nothing: nothing cannot produce anything.

For this reason, the self-existence of God is a rational necessity. How did anything come to be that is? The answer is God's sovereignty over *nothing*. Where did anything come from? Unless there is someone or something that exists in itself, then nothing could exist. That creation exists at all means that God must be self-existent. He is the one who has sovereignty and is transcendent over the created world. The creator is not the creation. He is distinct from it. We worship the creator, not the creation.

The Word is eternal. The Word is a person within the godhead. The Word is God. The Word is the agency through which all things have been made. And the Word is the source of life for all living things.

### **The Word is the source of life for all living things – the Word animates**

In him was life,

What is the difference between a supreme being and a human being? Both have the word being in their name. Both share something in common. Both have *being*. But a supreme being is transcendent. He is above and beyond the creation itself. God differs in kind from ordinary being. He has being in and of himself. You and I do not have being in ourselves. Our being is dependent upon food, oxygen, water, relationships, space and time. We are contingent beings. Our lives are not our own. Our life is given to us. It comes from somewhere outside of ourselves.

We are not our own.

John's declaration is that all life comes from God through the Word of God. Life is given by Jesus Christ. Its source is the Word. In the Word is life. There is a famous scene in the movie Schindler's List in which the Ben Kingsly character says "the list is life." He means that the only escape from the horrors of the Nazi death camp is to find one's name on Schindler's list and so be exempted from the death march. All life proceeds from Christ: plant life, animal life, and human life. Life is given and sustained by the Word of God. The life you live is given you by Jesus Christ. The lives of your children have been entrusted to you by Jesus Christ. The lives of your parents were given to them through the work of God's Word.

It is the recognition that life is given by the Word that has resulted in the high view of life found within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Human sacrifice has always been abhorrent to Jews and Christians. In the ancient world it was common for unwanted babies to be discarded on hilltops to be devoured by animals or to die of exposure. Early Christians began to systematically check these places to rescue unwanted children for they understood that the life of each child was a life given by God's Word. The Christian tradition developed a strong expectation and ethos that the weak, the infirm, the old, the frail, and the helpless retained value and dignity because the life within them was life given by God.

The Word is eternal. The Word is a person within the godhead. The Word is God. The Word is the agency through which all things have been made. And the Word is the source of life for all living things. Finally, John tells us that the Word is the source of light to our world. The Word reveals what needs to be known.

**The word is the source of light – the Word reveals what needs to be known**  
and that life was the light of men.

Why is Jesus Christ called 'logos,' the Word? John tells us that the Word is the source of light. The word reveals. It is by God's Word that we see. We think in words. Words are the way in which we communicate, with ourselves, with others and with God. It is God's Word that brings understanding. True understanding is through Jesus Christ.

The understanding he offers is in three areas.

### **The Word reveals knowledge and wisdom**

We have already seen how it is through Jesus Christ that the world was created. The Word has infused creation with his wisdom and knowledge. Modern science, as we know it, arose out of the Judeo Christian tradition. It was natural that it would be so. The ancient Greeks were great observers of nature and the roots of Western culture can be traced back to ancient Greece. But the cosmology

of ancient Greece did not encourage the systematic study *and experimentation* upon which modern science is founded. The Greek gods were constantly meddling in the world in unpredictable and childish ways. For this reason Greek cosmology lacked reason to believe in the constancy of nature. But as the Christian world view took hold it brought with it the conviction that as God himself is wise, orderly and consistent so too the world he has created would be founded upon wisdom and order. Out of this faith belief the idea of scientific experimentation arose and humankind began the disciplined and systematic study of our world.

This is the most general sense in which the Word gives knowledge and understanding. The Word has infused the world with his wisdom and, as confidence in the dependability of the world has taken root, the Word of God has provided the foundation for the efforts of modern science. Secondly, the Word gives spiritual understanding.

### **The Word gives spiritual understanding**

The knowledge of the world is what theologians call general revelation: it is knowledge available to all humans, whether or not they know and acknowledge God: but the Word of God is also the source of spiritual understanding. Here the idea is similar to what we spoke of last week that it is the Word of God who reveals God to us. We know God, insofar as he is to be known, through Jesus Christ. If you wish to know God, study Jesus Christ, for he reveals the Father. Words are the medium of communication. The Word is the medium of communication of God to humanity.

The Word of God reveals knowledge and wisdom regarding our world. The Word of God reveals the knowledge of God. Thirdly, the Word of God prompts our sense of justice, it provokes rational accountability.

### **The Word provokes rational accountability**

The Word has infused the created world with wisdom and knowledge. We discover that wisdom and knowledge as we learn the world about us. The Word has also infused the world with a moral dimension. The natural human sense of fairness, justice and accountability arises from this truth. Our God is just and righteous. In making us in his image he has infused within us a sense of rational accountability. Because of human sin and disobedience our sense of what is right and just is not always true. Our moral compass does not always point true north. But it is present. The Word provokes our sense of justice. By the Word we know the moral law and know that we are accountable.

### **Close**

The Word is eternal. The Word is a person within the godhead. The Word is God. The Word is the agency through which all things have been made. The Word is the source of life for all living things. Finally, John tells us that the Word is

the source of light to our world. The Word reveals what needs to be known. He has infused this world with wisdom to be discovered by human initiative. By the Word of God the knowledge of God is revealed to the world. And it is the Word of God who, in creating men and women in God's image, has given to us a sense of moral duty and justice.

These are the key truths John declares in the opening verses of his gospel. These verses serve as the overture of the gospel. These are themes John declares as he tells the story of the Word of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

Say 'Amen' Somebody