

WHO IS JESUS?

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we are beginning studies in the Gospel according to John. This gospel was written by the disciple of whom it was said, "Jesus loved him." John was the closest intimate of our Lord during the days of his ministry, so this constitutes a very important gospel.

In September of 1950 I came to this area, to what was then called Peninsula Bible Fellowship, to begin a ministry, after three months of travel and close companionship with Dr. H. A. Ironside. Dr. Ironside (who was often called "The Apostle of Fundamentalism"), was well known as a great Bible teacher. He had been pastor for eighteen years at the Moody Memorial Church in Chicago. I had long admired him as a model of expository preaching.

It was a great and choice privilege to be with Dr. Ironside for three months. It was a fascinating time for me. Because he was almost blind with cataracts in both eyes, I was his constant companion. I was his chauffeur, his secretary, and his companion. We lived, ate, bled and died together for three months. Because I was young I listened to him with great interest, and watched everything he did. I saw his great strengths as a Bible teacher. I saw his warmth and compassion as a human being, and I saw some weaknesses. Though all this was thirty-three years ago, I have never forgotten any of the events of that three months. He made an unforgettable impression upon me. As the saying goes. "I could write a book."

Yet what a faint and very feeble illustration that is of the tremendous impact made on the Apostle John by three-and-a-half years of close companionship with Jesus of Nazareth. John was an old man when he wrote this gospel. As best we can tell, he wrote it from the city of Ephesus, where he settled after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 A.D., in order to guide and direct the Christian community in that great Roman center. He wrote this, probably, toward the close of the first century. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke had already been written and widely circulated among the early Christians. All the letters of Paul had been written, as had all the letters of Peter.

This gospel was one of the last books of the New Testament to be written. Because it came so late, many have felt that John had perhaps forgotten some of the details of the things that had happened to him. He does not retrace many of the events recorded in the so-called synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. (That word, synoptic, means "to see together." Those gospels cover pretty much the same material from somewhat slightly different points of view.) But John's gospel is different. John himself has told us (in Chapter 20, Verses 30-31), why he wrote this gospel:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [signs] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, [the Messiah], and the Son of God [a divine human person] and that believing you may have life in his name. {John 20:30-31 RSV}

It is clear that John's method is selection, and his purpose is regeneration: life in the name of Jesus; real vital, exciting, compelling, fulfilling, satisfying life, what Jesus meant when he said, "I have come that you might have life and that you might have it more abundantly."

Although John has allowed perhaps forty or fifty years to go by since the events he records here, nevertheless we must remember that he has been retelling this story almost every day for all those years. He was, of course, helped by the promise of Jesus that when the Spirit came, "He would take of the things of Christ and bring them to your remembrance," {cf, John 14:26}. The apostles not only had their vivid memories, but they had the help of the Spirit to recall what Jesus had said on specific occasions, and they meditated many long hours over those events. Perhaps that is why John could add insights and interpretations to his accounts that the others do not include. All this was burned into the apostles' memories by this constant recitation of what had

happened. Through the course of the years they never forgot what Jesus said and did. We can be certain that this is an authentic witness from an authentic disciple, who recalls clearly and vividly everything that Jesus said and did in those three-and-a-half marvelous years.

John begins his gospel with an eighteen-verse introduction, the theme of which is the question: "Who is Jesus -- really?" Where did he come from? What is represented in the remarkable manifestation that was the life of Jesus of Nazareth? This prologue contains a summary of John's most profound convictions about our Lord. It focuses on the central fact of Christian faith: Christianity is not a philosophy; it is about a Person, and that Person is central to all Christian faith. To take Jesus out of Christianity would be like taking numbers out of mathematics, like taking doctors out of medicine, or like trying to think of daylight without the sun. Jesus is absolutely central to Christian faith. That is what constitutes Christianity as a unique religion. All the other great religions of earth center upon the teaching, the ideas, the philosophies that are represented in them, but not Christianity. It centers upon a marvelous, beautiful, remarkable, astonishing Person.

Jesus was easily the most shattering, the most radical and truly revolutionary character that ever has appeared in human history. More books have been written about Jesus than any other figure of the past. More music has been composed, more pictures have been painted, more great drama has been written about Jesus than any other person.

Have you ever wondered why? Why is it that human beings have never been able to forget Jesus of Nazareth? Why does he not fade into the dim past as others have? We do not spend that much time with Alexander the Great, or Julius Caesar, or other great leaders. We still know who they are but we do not spend all that focus of interest and attention on them. But Jesus looms as large in our society as if he was contemporary with us. Why is that? Why is he the most powerful personality ever to appear on this planet?

That is what John is answering for us in this prologue to his gospel: Who is Jesus?

We are going to take only the first four verses of this gospel this morning, but in these verses John gives three reasons why this remarkable, astonishing remembrance of Christ persists in the earth: it is because of who Jesus was.

The first reason he puts very bluntly and unmistakably: Jesus is God! John 1:1-4:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.
{John 1:1-4 RSV}

Remember, that was not written about some mystic, divine being up in heaven somewhere. That was written to describe the identity of a Man who once walked this earth, who lived and breathed like we do. John knew this Man intimately. He ate with him and slept with him out in the open; touched him and handled him, heard him and followed him. These are the remarkable conclusions to which John has come as he has thought about the life, the death and the resurrection of that remarkable Man.

The first thing John wants us to understand is that Jesus was God. First, he was the Word of God: In the beginning was the Word." The "Word" here is the Greek word, *logos*, which means the same as our word, W-O-R-D. What is a word, anyway? A word is an audible or a visual expression of a thought. Thoughts are incommunicable until they are put into words. Several times the Scripture asks, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" The answer is, "No one." Nobody knows what God thinks until he tells us. In fact, we might just as well ask, "Who has known your mind?" until you express it in words. Who has known my thoughts? I am trying to convey to you today the thoughts that are in my mind, and the only medium I have is words. You are listening to what I am trying to say, so you are thinking my thoughts because my words shape and form the meaning of them. That is what John means here. When Jesus was among us as a man he expressed what was going on in the mind of God. He told us the thoughts of God. He was God's utterance on earth, unveiling to us what Paul calls "that secret and hidden wisdom of God," {cf, 1 Cor 2:7}. What God thinks is reality; that is what ultimately comes into being. God thought about an earth and it came into being. God thought about a

universe and it sprang into being. God thought about everything we see around us -- even we ourselves -- and we came into being. So what exists are the thoughts of God. That is ultimate; that is behind everything. Jesus came to unfold that to us and convey it in words that we cannot mistake.

Furthermore, that Word is *from the beginning* : "In the beginning was the Word." The beginning of what? Well, the beginning of everything. In other words, this Word of God was eternal; it always has existed. It was not called Jesus before he came as a man. The Word, then, was called other names in the Old Testament. You will find that he is called "The Angel of the Lord," or sometimes simply, "the Son." Jesus was the Son of God before he came to earth.

We do not have any history before we come to earth, but Jesus did. He could remember, perhaps, times when he was with the Father before the universe began. We cannot do that. I remember as a boy wishing that I had been alive during some of the exciting events of World War I, but it was all over before I showed up. Some of you younger people wish you had been around as you watched exciting events unfold on *The Winds of War* on television recently. But Jesus had a history before he came to earth, and John tells us it was that of the Word. In the book of Hebrews we read, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son," {Heb 1:1-2a RSV}. Jesus is the eternal Son, the eternal Word.

But more than that, John says that that Word was with God. That is where a problem arises. That means that the Word is distinct from the Father; two separate Persons, yet so close that the Word was intimately involved with the Father so that their thoughts, their meanings, and their purposes were one. That is what Jesus himself said, "I and my Father are one," {John 10:30 KJV}. He does not mean one and the same. Some are confused about this. They say, "How could Jesus be God and the Father be God? How could the Son be his own Father?" That is because people think *one* means *one and the same* . But they are not, they are two separate persons. When you think of persons in this sense, do not think of bodies. Bodies are not essential to persons. There are probably a thousand persons in this room. Fortunately you all brought your bodies so we can see you. But you could be here fully as much, whoever you are, without a body because your essential nature is not your body, but you. Persons are basically spirits. John declares here that the eternal Son, Jesus, was a person, and the Father was a person, and they were one in purpose and action.

Finally, John makes the blunt statement, "And that Word was God." No doubt about it! Jehovah's Witnesses and Unitarians deny this great truth that Jesus was God. But there is no other translation of this statement possible without violating the laws of Greek grammar and the theological statements of other Scriptures. If we say, as the Jehovah's Witnesses want us to say, "Jesus was a God," then we are introducing the whole realm of polytheism, multiple gods. But if there is only one God and Jesus was a God, then he was the God. That is what John affirms right at the beginning of his gospel.

I recognize that that is hard to understand. Last week, together with a number of other evangelical leaders, I met in Los Angeles with eleven of the top rabbis of this country, men from Washington, New York and Chicago, the top leadership of the Reformed Jewish congregations. We met precisely for the purpose of discussing the different points of view that Jews and Christians have and how we look at one another. It was a warm and amicable meeting. We ended up with a tremendous desire to continue these exploratory talks.

But as we began, one of the rabbis read a statement of Christian doctrines to us and asked us to state whether or not we agreed with them. When he came to the one that stated, "We believe that God exists as three persons in one," he said, "I'm sure you understand we would differ with you a great deal at that point." That was probably the understatement of the day! I did understand that. Jews, Muslims and Christians all believe there is only one God. In that we share a uniqueness among the world's religions. Hindus believe in many gods, Buddhists believe there is no god, that man is his own god; but Christians, Jews and Muslims all believe there is only one God. Yet when the Christian definition of that one God is given, it includes three Persons.

The Jews deny this. They say there is only one person in the Godhood, and that is the Father alone. But, because of the testimony of the Scripture, the evidence of the life of Jesus, and even statements within the Old Testament, Christians have come to understand that God is revealing a complexity in his personage -- that he exists as three Persons, sharing the same divine essence, so that there is one God, but three Persons make him

up. Thus in the first chapter of the Bible God says, "Let us make man in our image," {Gen 1:26}. A plurality is clearly indicated right from the very beginning. This is where we differ from the Jews.

It is hard, I know, to grasp that. We do not have a lot to help us.

I remember the story of the mother who was ironing while her little son was drawing pictures. The mother asked him, "What are you drawing?" He said, "I'm drawing a picture of God." She said, "How can you do that? Nobody knows what God looks like." He said, "They will when I get through!"

Many have tried to draw a picture of God to help people understand the Trinity. Trinity is really a brief way of saying tri-unity, three-in-one. I do not have time to go into that at length this morning other than to say I believe with all my heart that that image of God is not only stamped on us -- that we, too, are tri-unities -- but that it is stamped in everything in the universe around us; that time and space and matter can all be demonstrated to be made up of three divisions, each of which includes the whole of the others. That is what a tri-unity is. Well, enough of that.

John says without any doubt that Jesus is God.

Then John declares that Jesus is the Creator of all things. This accounts for Jesus' strange and remarkable personality. He is the originator of all things: "He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him. and without him was not anything made that was made." Eight times in the opening chapter of Genesis it says. "And God said." God said, "Let there be light, and there was light," {Gen 1:3}; God said, "Let there be a firmament between the heavens and the earth and there was," {cf, Gen 1:6}; God said, "Let the earth bring forth trees and vegetation" {cf, Gen 1:11}, and these sprang into being. The Word, the Son of God, was speaking into being what the Father had designed in that amazing mind of his.

Any scientist who studies in the natural realm is always astonished when he comes to see the complexity of life, the marvelous symmetry of things, what lies behind all visible matter, the molecules, the atom, the make-up of a flower or of a star. The obvious order, design and symmetry of everything is astonishing; it is amazing.

We have all wondered at what we have seen through some of the discoveries of science. All of that was in the thought of God, but it never would have been expressed until the Son said it; he spoke and these things came into being. So this amazing Man, Jesus of Nazareth, in the mystery of his being. was not only a human being here on earth with us, John says, but was the One who spoke the universe into existence at the beginning. He understands it; he knows how it functions; he is able to direct it, guard it and guide it. He spoke it into being.

Furthermore, John says, Jesus sustains it: "Without him was not anything made that was made." He is essential to it; he is what keeps it going and holds it in existence. I have always been fascinated by the great linear accelerator that runs out into the mountains back of Stanford University. You cross over it almost without thinking when you drive up Highway 280 to San Francisco. This linear accelerator is a great atom-smasher, which takes energy that is developed at the beginning of that great tunnel and increases its speed constantly until it approaches the speed of light so that the energy particles smash into a target of an atom at the end. Why does it take so much power to break loose what is in an atom so that scientists might investigate the electrons, the protons and other particles that make up that atom? Why does it take so much power to break it apart? Science has long asked that question, but has failed to come up with an answer to it. There is a force that they cannot describe or understand that holds all things together.

The Apostle Paul tells us in Colossians what that force is: "He [Jesus] holds all things together," {cf, Col 1:17 RSV}. Hebrews says, "He [Jesus] is upholding the universe by the word of his power," {cf, Heb 1:3}. That is why we cannot forget Jesus: we are held together here this morning by his word and his power. That is why we do not fall apart and blast into smithereens. Something holds us together, and that is from him.

The third thing John says is that Jesus is the originator of two tremendously essential things that we need: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men." The contribution that Jesus makes to us is our very life.

What is life? Everybody senses the difference between life and death. A scientist can analyze what elements make up a living substance, but when he puts it all together it does not have life. The elements are there, the chemistry is there, but something is missing. It will not grow; it will not develop; it is not alive. What is life? No one knows. Again, life is one of the great mysteries. But what the Word declares to us and what all science is busy trying to demonstrate is that God is alone the source of life; Jesus is life! Plants have life; he gave it to them. Animals have a higher form of life; he gave it to them. Men have still a higher form of life, and he is the source of it. Thus we cannot escape him, we cannot forget him. Jesus stands at the beginning and the end of every human life. Ultimately our life goes back to him when it ceases down here.

More than that, when life is given there comes with it light. Light here is a symbol of knowledge, of understanding, of truth. You and I can go to school and learn because we have human life, but Jesus speaks of an eternal life, a higher level, supernatural life, life that does not die. John declares in his letter, "He that has the Son has that kind of life, and he that does not have the Son does not have that kind of life," {cf, 1 Jn 5:12}. So eternal life comes only from Christ. When you have life from him you have the possibility of light as well. That is why there is no possibility of understanding the world and the universe in which we live without eternal life from the Son of God.

Everywhere in Scripture we are invited to pursue knowledge and discover what is around us in all the exciting mysteries God has hidden in life. We can pursue science, medicine, art, literature and politics, and all that is right. But there is something more. If that is all we have, life at that level is narrow, cramped and limited, and we can never understand what is really happening. It is only as we come to the level of divine light, understanding as it is in the Scriptures, coming from the lips of Jesus, that we begin to put all the pieces together. Only then can we see who we are, why we are here, and get the answers to all the puzzles and conundrums of life.

So when John introduces his gospel he wants us to understand this: that the One he is going to talk about, this amazing man from Nazareth, is God himself somehow become a Man. He is the Creator become part of his creation, the Originator of life and of wisdom who somehow limited himself to learning as a little child, growing and partaking with us in the search for truth, and, at last, manifesting the fullness of it in his resurrected power. This is the One who is at the center of our faith. That is why we cannot forget Jesus. Every human being sooner or later must deal with Jesus of Nazareth. He is the ultimate crisis in every human life.

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