

The point of the incarnation

John 1:1-18

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In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (The Word) was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through (the Word); not one thing came into being without (the Word).

What came into being through (the Word) was life, a life that was light for humans. That light shines in darkness, and darkness does not extinguish it.

There was a man, named John, sent from God. He came as a witness that he might bear witness concerning the light, so that all might believe through his witness. He was not the light himself but rather he came to bear witness concerning the light.

The true light that enlightens every person was coming into the world, though the light was already in the world. The world came into being through (the light) but the world did not know him.

He came to his own and his own did not receive him. But, as many as did receive him, he gave to them the power to become God's offspring, to all those who believe in his name. They are born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of a man's desire, but are begotten and conceived by God.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We beheld the Word's glory, glory as of a father's only begotten, full of grace and truth.

John bore witness concerning him and cried out saying: This is the one concerning whom I said: The one who comes after me ranks before me because he always was before me.

We have all received from his fullness, grace upon grace. The law was given through Moses; grace and truth have come to be through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God; the only-begotten one, the one who is always in the bosom of the Father, that one has made God known.

Like a mighty trumpet blast, the first 18 verses of John's Gospel announce the whole Gospel:

- What God is going to do.
- Who is going to do it, when, and where.
- Why God is going to do it.

That Gospel proclamation clearly points to the Word taking flesh among us. But, what is the point of that “taking of flesh”, that incarnation? Why do it this way?

(1) Is the point to show that the Word can take flesh in the creation?

It is true that the Gospel opens with the very same words that open the first book of the Old Testament: “In the beginning”, words that preface the entire display of God’s mighty creation through the power of his speech, his Word. But even though God never takes flesh in that early story, God can still walk about in his creation and look for the man and woman that He created. God would not have had to become flesh to seek out humanity.

(2) Does the Word become flesh to make the truth known?

No, the truth – life and light – were already in the world from the start of creation. The Word of God first creates light. In John’s opening words light again is at the start. It is not light as luminescence that is at the start of creation or here in John’s Gospel; light is the very stuff of life: “what was created was life, and that life is the light of humanity”. Where God brings about life, darkness recedes like a shadow at mid-day. When God takes on flesh, darkness will again be forced to recede, but that light was always in the world.

(3) Nor is the point of the word taking flesh, the incarnation, to speak a prophetic word to the people of Israel: that is John’s role.

Throughout the entire history of the people of Israel, God had sent prophetic messengers who pointed accurately to the light and to God. The true prophets of God do not point to themselves; they point away from themselves, toward God and the work of God. This is true of Jeremiah, of Elijah, of Amos, and Hosea, and Malachi, and all of the others, right up to the last prophet of Israel, John the Baptist: “he was not the light, but (he came) in order that he might bear witness concerning the light”.

The point of the incarnation is not to bring the people of Israel back to the light by shaming the prophetically as to their failed responsibilities: that is John’s role. And as we know, John was largely unsuccessful in his prophetic task, not because of any failure on his part, but because of the one who ultimately did take flesh.

No, the point of the incarnation is expressed in vs 12: God took flesh and came among us SO THAT whoever encountered Him might be able to receive Him and thus begin to grow as a child of God.

Anyone! God did not limit those who would come to him by appearing only to Israel and allowing Israelites to accept him. Whoever encountered him: centurions, Samaritan women, tax collectors, prostitutes, the disenfranchised and the rejects. Anyone who encounters the Word made flesh and accepts him is born of God and begins to be a new creation, a new people, a new family. In fact, they begin to be a new kind of person, a new race.

It's that dramatic. The first creation saw the creation of the human race, of a man and a woman, who would have offspring that would populate the earth that God had created. But, what God is going to do in Jesus, the Word made flesh, is to populate the earth with a spiritual race, not a physical human race. By His word, God is going to go among us, speaking the truth, making the Father known, and as people hear and receive his word, as opposed to hearing and rejecting his word, they will mysteriously be born a new person, not one who comes from a man and woman, but one can only be described as coming from God.

(1) What do these people look like? How would I **recognise** them?

Have you ever met someone that you thought: boy, there's something really special about this person. It's not in what he wears; it's not in what she looks like; it's not in the car they drive or don't drive... There's something different about this person. It may be that what the person says has the ring of truth about it, or simply when they speak you are reminded of the words of God. You are hearing a spiritual brother or a spiritual sister.

Or it could be that what you see them do reminds you of what Jesus did, or of how he did it. Perhaps it's the compassion that he shows. Perhaps it's the skill at diagnosing a problem in a way that transcends technical or learned skill. Or perhaps it's just that what they do seems so right.

The spiritual person senses in another spiritual person a kindred spirit, a brother or sister in spirit, if not in flesh. The person may have black skin, or be poor... but the spiritual person looks beyond the flesh of the first creation to the new creation. This is the point of the incarnation: the Word came among us to begin to bring to birth a whole new family, the family of God, your sisters and brothers, unlimited by space and time, some here, some elsewhere, some having died in their physical bodies, some not yet born in their physical form. These are people you cannot see with your physical eyes; you have to have spiritual eyes, the same kind of eyes that one needs to see the Word made flesh, rather than just Jesus, a healer or a great teacher, a baby in the manger, or a body on the cross.

To recognise a fellow member of God's family is something that we learn to do over time. Sometimes, it is true, we allow our old human vision to cloud our spiritual vision and when we do we become blind to who our spiritual brothers and sisters are. Usually, we do so because we can't really believe that so-and-so could be a Christian.

- Do you remember how the disciples berated Jesus when they found him talking to a woman, and a Samaritan at that?
- Or what about when the disciples tried to impede the children from coming to Jesus, since they really weren't important enough to waste his time?
- What about the teachers of Israel who were scandalised when Jesus touched the sick or ate with outcasts and sinners.

The point of the incarnation is that the son of man came to heal the sick, not to schmooze with the rich and prosperous in this life. **The Word does not limit where the word is planted, and neither should we.**

(2) There is a similarity between the Word's work in bringing about a new creation to what happens in the first creation: birth and growth take time. As happens with the human family, the new creation demands **patience**. God doesn't rush His purposes, and neither should we.

You look at a mother giving birth or a chick trying to break free of the egg or a cow giving birth to a calf... Do you see people around you who, within them something mighty is going on, something that you can't fully see with your human eyes yet, but you know... they are giving birth. Do you see people who, within them, God is giving birth to a new creation? Your job is to be a mid-wife: to assist, to be there to hold, to comfort and make the process as problem-free as possible, not to stand back and criticize. The point of the incarnation is that the birth is happening, thanks to the word of God who continues to bring new children to birth in some of the most surprising ways imaginable.

And patience doesn't stop at birth: You need to have patience when the new child comes forth. Sometimes we expect the child of God to spring full grown from the womb. It doesn't happen. The child of God grows with God through all eternity. Paul wrote to the young church in Thessalonica and to the young church in Corinth about how excited he was about their practice of spiritual gifts. He cautioned them about excesses and things that might get out of hand, but he said: do not quench the spirit; do not put a stop to spiritual gifts. These are fruits of the new creation. These are the new voices and new gifts of a new race of people. They are not the customs of the old creation, but so what: the old creation is passing away, behold the new has come!

The point of the incarnation? It was not for God to show himself off or to show that "he could do it"; it was not to shame anyone, though that happened. The point of the incarnation is expressed best by the Gospel writer later in the text: God loved the world in such a way that he sent his Son, his only Son, so that whoever might encounter him in his person, in the words of the Word, or in the actions of that same Word, might not perish as a member of this first creation but be born again, born of God, into a new creation and live abundantly for all eternity as a child of God.

That is what we really celebrate throughout this Christmas season, not just that God took flesh, as a human baby and grew to manhood, but that God took our flesh upon him in order to bring US to birth in a NEW creation, limited neither by space nor by time. We are now privileged to go forth with the Word and continue the word of the Word made flesh, and see a new people rise up to the glory of God, to whom be the glory, both now and forever.