

Not to Condemn the World, but. . . (1/4)

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(1 out of 4)

Biblical Text: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Good morning. I am pleased and honored to be here with you today and to share with you some reflections on the Word of God.

I have been told that you are in the midst of a walk through the Gospel of John, seeking to discover what it may mean for your lives and for the life of the church today. I do not know exactly what passages you have already studied and which are pending. So, I have decided to focus our attention today not so much on a particular passage as on the Gospel of John as a whole and on its particular place within the New Testament.

There is a general agreement among scholars that the Gospel of John was the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written—although perhaps not as late as was once thought. The general consensus is that the first Gospel to be written was Mark, then Matthew, then Luke, and finally John.

If that is the case, the context in which each of the evangelists places his narrative is significant. Look at them in chronological order: Mark, the first Evangelist, is ready to dive into the middle of his story without much preliminary information. After a very brief reference to John the Baptist, he immediately moves to the baptism of Jesus.

But then, by the time Matthew comes around, he does not seem to consider that satisfactory. He finds we need to place the story of Jesus within the wider context of the entire history of Israel. He needs to show that this is not a Johnny-come-lately sort of thing, but the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham and his descendants, and therefore he begins his account with a genealogy that connects Jesus with Abraham.

Then, a few years later, Luke seems to believe that it is necessary to go beyond the limits of the children of Abraham, and to connect the story of Jesus with all of human history. That is why he includes so many references to emperors, governors, kings, and others. That is also the reason why he includes a genealogy that goes back, not just to Abraham, but also to the very beginning of human history, to Adam.

In that light, let us look at the Gospel of John. Apparently, the setting proposed by Luke is not enough for John. He is not content with going back to the beginning of human history. Rather, he goes back to the beginning before every beginning: “In the beginning was the Word.” And then he makes it clear that this must not be understood as a partial beginning, or as a beginning excluding some things: “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” “All things”; “not one thing.” These are radical, absolute words. John would never say that his message has to do only with spiritual things, nor even that his message has to do only with things that we deem good. He is talking about an eternal Word of God by whom and through whom all things come into existence.

We often speak about Jesus calling us into a new birth and a new life, or of Jesus calling us into a mission or a task. The importance of such callings goes without saying. But John would probably say that the first call of Jesus to us is the call into existence itself. When John speaks of the Word of God, he is referring to the same Word who in Genesis repeatedly says “let there be,” and there is. Not only our faith, but also our very existence, are the result of our being called by the Word of God—called from nothingness into being.

Then, still in those very first words of his Gospel, John makes it clear that this has to do not only with our existence, but also with whatever truth we may have. This One whom we have seen in Jesus, John would call “the true Light that enlightens everyone.” Notice that he does not say “the light of some people,” nor even “the light of those who believe in him.” Obviously, this

does not mean that believing in him makes no difference. John will make that quite clear throughout his Gospel. But it does mean that any light anyone might have, even though we may not see it as such, comes from the same eternal Word of God who first spoke our names; comes from the same eternal Light of God that we have seen in Jesus.

You may well have already learned in your introductory courses on church history that from a very early date Christians began to use these affirmations of the Gospel of John in order to claim that any truth, no matter where it seems to come from or who proclaims it, ultimately comes from the eternal Word of God—from “the Light that enlightens everyone.” Christians firmly rejected the various forms of idolatry that circulated at the time, and that were involved in practically every social activity. They also condemned and abhorred the various forms of immorality that were prevalent in their society. But even so, the basic word that comes from the Gospel of John is not primarily one of condemnation or of rejection, but one of seeing the action of God in everything that exists and the light of God in any truth that anyone has.

This was very significant for the early church as it set out to preach the gospel in a generally hostile environment that often looked at Christian teachings with contempt, and sometimes with an open hostility leading to persecution. Rather than responding with a similar contempt for everything in pagan culture, some of the greatest apologists in the early church looked for the good and the truth in pagan culture and philosophy, and claimed it to be the gift and teaching of the same Word of God whose presence in Jesus they proclaimed.

They did this inspired not only by the first words in the gospel of John, but also by some of the last words in the Gospel of Matthew: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” If we take these words literally, the reason for going and making disciples is not, as we often think, to take Jesus of all nations. Jesus himself tells us that he is already there, for he has all of authority in heaven and on earth. This authority of Jesus is not the purpose, but the reason why we are to go and make disciples. We do not take Jesus to the nations. Jesus is already over all the nations. We go to the nations so they might know the name, the deeds and the love of the One who has authority over them. We go to make disciples, to baptize and to teach. We go in the knowledge that the One who already has authority over the nations is with us always, to the end of the age.

Unfortunately and tragically, Christians have not always understood the Great Commission in this manner. We have often imagined that we are in sole possession of the truth, when in fact we as well as all the nations are under the sovereign power of the Truth who was at the beginning with God, of the Word at whose call all things are made and without whose voice nothing can even begin to exist, of the Light that shines in every person coming to this earth, no matter whether Christian, pagan, or atheist.

When we reflect on these things, what immediately comes to mind is the attitude of the early *conquistadores* who came to these lands and found in them nothing good but gold, for everything else—including every sense of mystery, every sense of justice, every sign of love

among these supposedly benighted people—was nothing but the work of demons. We think also of those a century later who claimed that by liberating Africans from servitude to their gods, and by making them their own slaves, they were somehow fulfilling the Great Commission.

But it is not necessary to go that far in history, for today we are living at a time very similar to the early centuries, when the church and Christian faith no longer have the public prestige and admiration they once enjoyed. In the early centuries, a Christian by the name of Alexamenos would have been shocked and outraged at seeing in a public place in Rome a caricature of a man crucified with the head of an ass, and a caption saying “Alexamenos worships God.” Today, all we have to do in order to experience similar outrage is to watch a comedy on television, to see the behavior of politicians who claim to be defending Christianity, or to listen to the conversation of a few young people on a public bus.

In response to such crass ignorance, to such painful stereotyping, and to all sorts of misrepresentations of our faith, we are tempted to fall into the mistakes of the conquistadores or the slave hunters, and speak only a harsh word to the sinful world. Sometimes—like the *conquistadores*—we even find ways to profit from our supposed defense of the faith. They have no faith! They are no good! All of them are nothing but evil! Despise, destroy, and condemn them and all they represent! ... And we might as well take possession of whatever spoils are left.

But that is not the way of the Gospel of John. Instead, John reminds us that this eternal Word of God, maker of all things, ruler of all power... became flesh! He came into what was his own, even though his own would not receive him. He came, and he was made flesh, “not to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.”

He came, and we beheld his glory, “full of grace and truth.” He came, and he sent his disciples, and he send us, “not to condemn the world, but so the world might be saved through him.” He came, and he has been given authority over heaven and earth. He came to the sinful world and to the mocking nations. And now, having all authority, from that sinful world and those mocking nations he calls us, reminding us that he has authority over them, and that he will be with us until the end of the age.

Go ye therefore, and make disciples, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved by him!