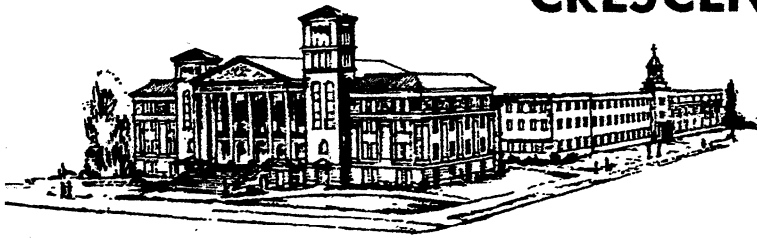


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH"

Sunday Morning, October 29, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: John 1:1-18

Oftentimes I am asked to single out the most significant issue in the Christian religion. This is an age of summaries, and people are clamoring for an irreducible minimum. They are looking for the "sine qua non" - that without which there is nothing. My answer to such inquiries is always this: the identity of Christ is the central issue of Christianity. Our religion had its beginning in Him, and all Christian theology and ethics and anthropology and soteriology ultimately depend on who He was and what He did. In my opinion this is the pivot on which the whole cone rests, and as goes one's concept of Christ, so goes one's Christian experience.

Long ago, toward the turn of the first century, a man by the name of John of Ephesus felt this same way. He had experienced Christ at the deepest levels of his life, and he wanted to proclaim Him in all of His fullness. And so this one began to structure what we now call "the Fourth Gospel." How would he communicate his understanding of Christ? What concept could he find that would convey both to the Jew and to the Greek the identity of this One? He must have pondered long and hard, and finally one day made up his mind: "I shall set Christ forth as 'the Word'." And so he began that magnificent prologue: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." (John 1:1). In this concept and in the passage, we had the classic attempt in all Scripture to define the essence of "the Christ-event." Here is the finest Biblical answer to the questions of who He was and what He did.

We may well begin by asking ourselves: what does the writer mean by this term "the Word"? What did it say to the men of his day and what can it say to us? First we must note that it was a familiar idea to all of the ancient cultures. The Greeks used it to specify the order and rationality of life. The Word, or "Logos" as they put it, was the Mind back of all creation and the Reason that permeated all of life. Every individual had a "spark" of this in him and thus he was able to know the world. To the Greek mind the Word was the purpose behind all existence. The Hebrews conceived of it in more concrete terms. To them a word was a unit of energy, an objective entity that possessed power to cause results. To speak a word was like firing a bullet into a situation; it went out to effect some condition. You will remember that in the Genesis account of creation, God's action is that of speaking (Genesis 1). It is by "His Word" that all things came into existence. As Jewish thought developed, this Word was always His medium of activity. "The word of the Lord" came to the prophets, guided the people, disclosed His will; in short, it was His means of contact with men. Thus, this idiom drew heavily on familiar ideas of that day. When the writer spoke of "the Word," men of his day thought of that creative, powerful purpose of God in relation to the world.

But there is a more basic significance to the concept than these historical opinions. Words in every age have possessed a certain character. They are vehicles of communication. They have revelational power. They are the bridges across which we can transfer ideas from one mind to another. No matter what the language, words are always the same. They are playing a crucial role in what we are doing right now. I had certain concepts in my mind; I want to give them to you. How am I doing it? Through these guttural sounds that have meaning for you. Thus, words are a basic form of communication, and this general characteristic is very important in understanding the terminology of this passage. When the author spoke of "the Word," the Greek thought of Reason and the Hebrew of creative action, but all men think of a vehicle of revelation - a means of conveying an idea from one person to another.

With all this as background, let us look now at this particular passage. The writer begins by saying that the Word was eternal, that the Word was the companion of God, that the Word was divine in all respects (John 1:1). The Word was the agent of creation (1:2-3), as the Jews believed, and the light which lighteth every man (1:9), as the Greeks believed. Then he speaks of the Word "coming unto his own" (1:11), and climaxes the passage by saying: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory" (1:14). This was the most staggering, unprecedented, unbelievable assertion of all. John means that the Reason back of all of life took the form of a man; that the creative Power through whom all exists became a human being. This was unheard of to the Greek and absolutely incredible to the Hebrew, and is still a claim that is unique in all history and to all religions. Yet the writer maintains that this is the true identity of Christ. The God whom no man had ever seen at any time was made known in the only begotten Son (1:18).

I think the idea of communication is the reason the writer chose the term "the Word." It was not so much its heritage in Greek and Hebrew thought; it was the revelational connotation. Jesus was "the Word" of God, the means by which God disclosed Himself. Just as spoken words put concepts in a form that can be grasped by another mind, so Jesus puts God in the range of human understanding. By nature, God and man are utterly distinct. The ontological chasm is absolute. "His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8). He is wholly other, entirely different, above and beyond the level of man's existence. With our limited capacities we cannot know Him as He is. But He has acted where we are helpless. He has chosen to cross the chasm and put Himself in a form that we can comprehend.

A good illustration of what I am talking about is the familiar process of radio broadcasting. This is so commonplace to us that perhaps you have forgotten exactly what happens. The station sends out sound waves, but they are inaudible to the human ear. Right here the room is full of them, but we do not have the capacity to receive them. But you can take a little radio set, turn the dials properly, and it will convert those inaudible waves to sounds you can hear. The radio transposes those waves to a frequency that is accessible to human ears. In all reverence let us say this: what a radio set is to inaudible sound waves, Jesus is to God. He puts Him on the human frequency; He transposes Him to the key that we can apprehend. He is "the visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15); "to see Him is to see the Father" (John 14:9). This is John's answer to the question of Christ's identity; He is "the Word," God's means of making Himself known to men.

But we might go on to ask: what is the significance of His coming? What effect does it have and what can it mean to me? John answers this with two words: grace and truth (John 1:14). The Christ-event was filled with both of these, and they adequately summarize the result of His work.

Sunday Morning, October 29, 1961

Grace is the willingness to give more than is deserved, a generosity that flows out in spite of the object, not because of it. And such a quality is apparent from the beginning to the end of the experience of Christ. The very fact that He would come to this world at all is significant. The way He lived - seeking and searching for all that were lost - is a glowing confirmation of grace. It set the relation of God to man in a totally different light. Before Christ, God was thought of as detached from this world. The heathen felt that God was either indifferent or even hostile to their fortunes. In ancient writings He is often pictured as sitting on some sunny mountain, absorbed in self-contemplation, and oblivious to men as if they were puppies rolling at His feet. The Jews had a much higher concept of God than this, but He was still remote. His relation to earth was one of law and justice, and men were left to struggle as they could for His favor. But in Christ all of this was changed. God was not indifferent, and He proved this by leaving heaven to enter the raw, sore heart of human life. No doctor can minister to the wounded on the battlefield by staying safely in his office; he must dare to go where the wounded are. And God did not try to save us by "remote control"; He came where things were the worst at great cost to Himself. Nor was His primary interest in law or equivalent justice. Had He operated in this way, He would never have bothered to come, but simply dismissed the whole business by saying: "They had their chance; they sinned, so let them go." But this was not His attitude at all. He was more interested in the man himself than He was his mistakes. Man's soul seemed more important than his sin, and God was willing to talk of "a second chance." In His eyes man's failure was not the final word. He picked up the fallen creature and called forth new life by forgiving the past and instilling hope for the future. He dared to suggest that life could be different; that men did not have to go on forever just as they were. And He offered to help make that possible, no matter how sordid the past had been. This was not justice, to be sure; this was redeeming grace. A God of law came through Moses, but a God of grace is seen in Jesus Christ (John 1:17). This does not mean that sin is unimportant; it rather means that God can overcome it. It is really a doctrine of hope based squarely on the potency of grace. God does not give up when sin has ravaged His creature. Rather, He painfully descends to the fallen, becomes involved alongside him, whispers hope that things can change, and gets underneath to help him up. This is grace - undoing what sin has done - and this is God as seen in Jesus. The first effect of His coming is this - God is grace, not law; He gives more than we deserve; He refuses to let sin have the final say; He never gives up hope; He is more interested in redemption than retribution; our souls are more important than our sins. God is grace!

The second result is summed up in the word truth. Because the Word was made flesh, we can now know what God is like. The veil of Mystery has been rent from top to bottom. What once was unknown and confused and incomprehensible has now been declared. Men in all generations have beat their knuckles bloody on the gates of heaven; they have cried in the words of the prophet: "Oh that we might know Him, who He is and what He is like!" This insatiable human desire has been fulfilled in Christ. He is "the Truth" (John 14:6); the fullness of God dwelt in Him bodily (Colossians 1:19); the God, who had hinted of Him in diverse ways and in different places, in the last day spoke clearly in the Son (Hebrew 1:4). He who appeared to Israel as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 25:8-9) has appeared now in the countenance of Jesus Christ. Just like a flash of lightning that illuminates what was hidden in the darkness, Jesus gives us a glimpse into the nature of God. The coming of Christ was "full of truth." Every age has posed the perennial question: "What is God like?" Now we have an answer: God is like Jesus.

"FULL OF GRACE AND TRUTH"

Sunday Morning, October 29, 1961

Page Four

This brings us back to where we started. The most significant issue in the Christian religion is Jesus Christ - who He was and what He did. This is the "sine qua non," and as you think here so goes your whole faith. John had an answer to these questions. Who was Jesus? The Word made flesh, God in a form that men could understand! And what did He do? He brought grace and truth to this world!

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed."