The Nearness of God

His Presence with His People

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For Kathy,
who has read my thoughts for over forty years
and has encouraged me to write some of them down
before I forget them

For our wonderful children
and grandchildren, because our heartfelt
prayers for them have been that they experience
a "walk" with the Lord over their lifetimes

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Series Introduction

BELIEVERS TODAY need quality literature that attracts them to good theology and builds them up in their faith. Currently, readers may find several sets of lengthy—and rather technical—books on Reformed theology, as well as some that are helpful and semipopular. Explorations in Biblical Theology takes a more mid-range approach, seeking to offer readers the substantial content of the more lengthy books, on the one hand, while striving for the readability of the semipopular books, on the other.

The series includes two types of books: (1) some treating biblical themes and (2) others treating the theology of specific biblical books. The volumes dealing with biblical themes seek to cover the whole range of Christian theology, from the doctrine of God to last things. Representative early offerings in the series focus on the empowering of the Holy Spirit, justification, the presence of God, preservation and apostasy, and substitutionary atonement. Works dealing with the theology of specific biblical books include volumes on 1 and 2 Samuel, the Psalms, and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and Mark, Romans, and James in the New Testament.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is written for college seniors, seminarians, pastors, and thoughtful lay readers. These volumes are intended to be accessible and not obscured by excessive references to Hebrew, Greek, or theological jargon.

Each book seeks to be solidly Reformed in orientation, because the writers love the Reformed faith. The various theological themes and biblical books are treated from the perspective of biblical theology. Writers either trace doctrines through the Bible or open up the theology of the specific books they treat.

Writers desire not merely to dispense the Bible's good information, but also to apply that information to real needs today.

Explorations in Biblical Theology is committed to being warm and winsome, with a focus on applying God's truth to life. Authors aim to treat those with whom they disagree as they themselves would want to be treated. The motives for the rejection of error are not to fight, hurt, or wound, but to protect, help, and heal. The authors of this series will be godly, capable scholars with a commitment to Reformed theology and a burden to minister that theology clearly to God's people.

Robert A. Peterson
Series Editor

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Introduction

I REMEMBER a day in my teens when I wanted to journey across a lake in my single-person sailboat. When I started out, the wind was strong but the weather was not threatening. The sailing was wonderful as I skimmed back and forth across the water. Suddenly, when I was in the middle of the large lake, a storm invaded the area. The wind capsized the boat; lightning crackled overhead; and the waves became so large that I was tossed around like a garment in a washing machine. I desperately needed "presences" to help me. I cried for help, but my voice was drowned in the maelstrom. Where are other people, when I need them! Then I cried to Someone, and somehow I kicked and flailed my way to shore, bloodied and exhausted. Every life is a journey, and every person is formed by presences, for better or worse, the presence of God being the most important of all.

Presences also lurk everywhere beneath the surface of biblical narratives in ways that touch us:

- [To Adam]: "Where are you?" (Gen. 3:9)
- "God called . . . 'Moses! Moses!'" (Ex. 3:4)
- "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want." (Ps. 23:1)
- "'Who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isa. 6:8)
- "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (Matt. 16:13)
- "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)
- "I have been crucified with Christ . . . but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2:20)

- "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matt. 28:20)

In each instance, God and a biblical character are present—with us. Absence does not seem to be an option in biblical theology.

The dominant theme, "his presence," is a startling notion, when the pervasively secular world around us lives as if God's existence is a diminishing possibility. "Presence" is a biblical term that connotes relationships, human and divine, in all of their facets. Presence means that God is with his creation generally as well as with his people intimately. This book is not about the possibility of God's existence. Instead, it is about the biblical God, who is personally with us in our joys and sorrows, our wants and needs, our successes and failures. If we struggle with the existence of God, are we ready to entertain the belief in a personal relationship with him? What if we are "gods," as proven by our ability to engineer projects, programs, procedures, and people with a profitability that evokes the admiration of our peers? Do I even need God, we ask, if I can be promoted up the chain of command and buy all of the pleasures and happiness that I want? When we ask these sorts of questions or make these kinds of claims, we intuitively suspect that something is missing in our self-based bravado. This is especially true when we reach our goals and are ambushed by emptiness. Robert Roberts tells us why such questions can only terminate with God: "Central to a Christian account of personality is the idea that the human heart needs God. . . . The Christian understanding of the psyche is that it is restless until it rests in God."[1] This Augustinian restlessness is experienced as a sense of alienation, a competitive struggle for survival lest we perish like the millions of people around the world who are embroiled in catastrophes, wars, and pestilences. Colin Gunton laments: "The other becomes the person or thing

1. Robert C. Roberts, *Spiritual Emotions: A Psychology of Christian Virtues* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 35–36.

from which we must escape or over which one must rule if one is to be human."[2]

The modern human condition, which spawned today's secularity, raises two related issues that concern presence and our need for meaningful relationships on our pilgrimage through life. First is the issue of individuality, secularity's near cousin. The authors of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* stress the fact that this is the primary roadblock in our attempts to form authentic communities, in which people genuinely care about one another. "Individualism," they state, "lies at the very core of American culture. . . . We believe in the dignity, indeed the sacredness, of the individual."[3] They identified a number of different types of the complex concept of individualism: biblical, civic, philosophical, and personal. They note that as individualism became more dominant in scientifically sophisticated societies, the inadequacies of personal autonomy (or independence) have become more apparent. In other words, many people value their privacy more than their relationships, to their own detriment. Consequently, they forfeit the blessing of others, which the Bible declares to be a basic tenet of meaningful living. One of my students, who came from a more "primitive" country, wrote a paper on loneliness in American society. He stated that this was one of his first observations when he arrived. The problem could be clearly identified, and the evidence was overwhelming. The final project ended up as a ten-page paper with more than seventy-five footnotes!

The second issue is the impersonalness of a technological world, whose primary characteristics have become virtual (as in reality) and artificial (as in intelligence). An incredible century of discovery and innovation has created a difficult environment for thinking about God's presence. He is invisible in our material world of media presences; he is an absentee "clockmaker," who fails to stop the rampant evils that interfere with an empty

2. Colin Gunton, *The One, The Three, and the Many: God, Creation and the Culture of Modernity*, the 1992 Bampton Lectures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 71.

3. Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 142.

optimism that we need as a placebo; and he fails to flaunt his infinite abilities, when we need them most to satisfy insatiable desires. Today, if you have it, you parade it ostentatiously and walk with a swagger. Why does God restrain himself and honor patience, when he could expand his influence so easily with instant gratification?

I needed God and friends in the storm. At other times I have yearned for companionship to share wonderful experiences in life. Sometimes an experience is not at its best when we are alone. Several years ago, I was in Boston for a conference. The Museum of Fine Arts featured a rare display of Egyptian art and artifacts. Having studied "Pharaohs of the Sun" (Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and Tutankhamen) for years, I determined that I had to see the exhibit by that name. I tried to find someone to go with me, but no one shared this passion. So, I stole away from the presentations and committees to see the things that I had read about. The experience was breathtaking! It was neither virtual nor artificial. I stood in front of priceless, irreplaceable displays, wanting to share excitement and insights with someone. Life is formed by presences such as this, and we want to share them with people around us. We are formed by our experiences with God, and believers want other people to know how wonderful he is.

This book is about questions and issues like these. It is about God's revelation of his presence and his desire for relationship with his people. It is about how he providentially works in our world to reproduce his loving character in our communities—and churches. This raises a different set of questions. Why am I unfamiliar with "presence," if the concept is a biblical emphasis? How do I overcome the image of God as an irascible old Judge who drives everyone from his presence? How could anyone have "so loved the world" with its genocidal tendencies that he would come to save those who trust him with their deepest needs and desires? How can my understanding of God's presence enrich my personal relationships, and answer my nagging doubts and persistent problems in areas such as health and finances? Will

he guide me to where I am supposed to be, when I do not have any idea where I am going?

The depth of our needs is reflected in our pilgrimage in general. The history of literature has made people aware that the journey is a wonderful metaphor for life. From Homer and Virgil, to the biblical cloud of pilgrims (Heb. 12:1), to Bunyan, among others, we share departure, adventure, and destination in the quest for personal meaning and significance along the way. My study of our journeys indicates that they focus on personal identity, discovering our "selves," a search that begins in our first year of life and continues dynamically to the golden years. John Calvin's magisterial *Institutes of the Christian Religion* centers on the need to know ourselves as the springboard for knowing God as Creator and Redeemer. He understood that a knowledge of God's presence is inextricably connected to a proper view of ourselves as we journey through life.

American individuality involves an unending struggle with issues of diversity and community around us. We start with an awareness of personal and social diversity that makes us crave acceptance from neighborhood playmates, and then peers in kindergarten. We are different from every other person, and we want to be exceptional compared with everyone else. We strive to be king or queen on the royal mountaintop, according to the childhood game, while numerous children imaginatively play in the valleys below for our benefit.

After years of life, we discover that our identity is layered and that we look at life through different lenses according to our stages and seasons: infancy, childhood, adolescence, and early, middle, and late adulthood. Now, I qualify as a "mature adult" and realize with greater clarity who I am: "If they make meaning as young adults by fashioning dreams, now they make meaning by shaping memories."[4] As a child I was formed by the rules and traditions of my family; as a young Christian I was formed by

4. John Kotre and Elizabeth Hall, *Seasons of Life: Our Dramatic Journey from Birth to Death* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1990), 377. The list of life's stages is theirs.

a very strict regimen of biblical disciplines. As I have aged, the rules and regimen have faded and blended into an adulthood that does not want to go back to my past. However, I would not trade the formative discipline that I received for anything. I walk on a safe path with wise counsel in my heart that warned me about self-destructive pitfalls along the way. For example, I was raised with the Westminster Shorter Catechism principle that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." When I came to crossroads in my pilgrimage, this truth guided me in choosing the best paths for a lifetime.

We can add to individuality and personal development the diversity of biblical journeys. One would think that a theme such as presence in personal encounters—with subthemes such as God's Word, prayer, and worship—would mean an uncomplicated synthesis of presence and pilgrimage and a clear-cut procedure on how to walk with the Lord. This expectation ignores the numerous authors under the divine Author, and the distinctiveness of each character's journey in different times and places. Mary the friend of Jesus should not be confused with his mother Mary, and David's pilgrimage should not be understood in precisely the same way as the apostle Paul's. But these distinctions should not interfere with the attempt to show how the presence of the living God, the covenantal principles of grace and faith, and the common goal of the New Jerusalem meld diversities into unities. In fact, the Bible seems to be telling us that looking at the same truths from different angles enriches our understanding. In Bruce Waltke's words, "The disparate melodies of the individual books form a harmony, not a cacophony, because all the books assume the ideas entailed in I AM's covenants with Israel and contribute to themes associated with those covenants."[5]

This harmony is illustrated in the relationship of two famous prophets in 2 Kings 2. Elijah and Elisha apparently had very different personalities, but they were close friends and shared the same calling. The Lord was leading them to the Jordan River,

5. Bruce Waltke with Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 50–51.

where he would take Elijah to be with himself and Elisha would assume prophetic leadership in Israel. A company of prophets kept reminding Elisha of Elijah's departure, but Elisha was grieved over his fellow pilgrim's ascension to the Lord, "Do not speak of it" (2 Kings 2:3, 5). The presence of God guided them as they walked along together (2:6, 11). I wonder what these friends said to each other and the Lord on this journey. There were conversations about "the end," because Elijah asked, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?" And Elisha responded, "Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit" (2:9), perhaps because he feared that he could not be the dynamic leader that his mentor had been. When Elijah was taken in the chariot of fire, Elisha cried out "My father! My father!" and tore his clothes (2:12). "Where now is the LORD, the God of Elijah?" he asked (2:14). He lost the presence of his friend, but he gained the enabling presence of God's Spirit, which was evident to his peers (2:15). Life is a journey to our Jericho, and we like Elisha are formed by presence, with the Presence being most necessary.

Finally, different cultures across space and time represent different identities that experience God's presence with diverse priorities and perspectives. A passion of my adult life has been India, which is as remote and different from America as cultures can be. I have been amazed at God's boundless abilities to bless the body of Christ with his presence in radically different circumstances. My Indian friends are among my greatest blessings. They have taught me that in Christ we can transcend differences and walk together to his Holy City. Our countries are growing together. But long before recent trends, we have shared rich fellowship based on our common Source, relationships, values, and destination.

Issues of diversity in personal identity, perspectives about life, biblical journeys, and cultural differences can be disconcerting. With so many options in ways that people live, how do we choose which journey is best for us? Why are so many people choosing paths and affiliations that are different from their backgrounds, a significant trend in America? Were the biblical char-

acters content with their choices, and could they change if they became disappointed with God or their peers?

Besides diversity, the second issue in an American pilgrimage is community. I have read a large number of books about spirituality, and they all seem to assume that we need close relationships for spiritual fulfillment. However, they also advise a freedom from distractions, so that we can live with a total focus and commitment. We can walk with God, we claim, if we could escape the impediments that get in our way. We could have community, if we could be free to surround ourselves with people we like. What we fail to consider in our frustrations is that our individuality is inextricably meshed with our communities. We come from families, as dysfunctional as they may be, that involve parental or sibling responsibilities. We are involved with schools, whose curricula have much to do with our futures. We work in companies, where we compete for our livelihood. We may be married with children, whose welfare is dependent on our faithfulness, wisdom, and expertise. We live in cities and countries, which have common standards for citizenship from which we cannot be exempt. If I want to live in my country, I must contribute my taxes and a chunk of time like my fellow citizens. The issue is not whether we experience community or not; the issue is whether we travel with God in the communities in which we participate.

So, how can I mature in my relationship with God when I am forced into overcommitments by authorities over me? As a recent convert to Christianity, if I prioritize my walk with the Lord, then will I jeopardize my family, my job, or my friendships? How do I negotiate the impasses between these rocks and hard places? A very common concern today is compatibility. How can I grow in Christian relationships, if I don't feel welcomed or accepted by Christian communities in my area? What friendships should I cultivate to form my life with God? I would like to marry in Christ, but why don't I feel this kind of attraction in my Christian relationships?

Finally, questions like these have underscored the fact that our Lord is the epicenter of biblical journeys. On the road to Emmaus,

"Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). Moses regarded "disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt" and "persevered because he saw him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:26–27). Because the Lord Jesus "went before us" into "the inner sanctuary" of God's presence, he is the rightful guide for us through life to the same destination (Heb. 6:20, 19). He is the "author and perfecter of our faith," whose example encourages us through weariness and discouragement (Heb. 12:2–3). As God's supreme revelation, the incarnate Son is "the image of the invisible God," the Creator and Sustainer of all things, the head of the church, the firstfruit of resurrection, and the Savior of the world (Col. 1:15–20). As our Savior, he is also our example in the way of love (John 13:34; 1 Peter 2:21). Yes, our goal is to be like him as we travel through this life. But beyond that, he is the center, who brings perspective and enablement to an otherwise impossible pilgrimage. As we examine parts of the Bible, we must remember that Jesus dwelt among us, so that in the light of his glory we can see the way to his glorious presence in the New Jerusalem. Meanwhile, we remember his assurances, "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" and "I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am" (Matt. 28:20; John 14:3).

The book begins with the incarnation as God's tabernacle in our midst (John 1:14; 2:19–22; chapter 1). Christ is the perfect mentor for God's people, who are to live wisely in light of the past as they expectantly await the sight of God's city in the future. He is God's immediate presence on earth without parallel. Next, we look at the patriarchs and Moses (chapters 2–3), who walked as prayerful pilgrims before the name, face, Word, and glory of God. They demonstrated the walk of faith that resulted in a special presence of God with believers in addition to his providential presence over his creation. They are witnesses who encourage us to do likewise. A pilgrimage with God necessarily centers in worship (chapter 4). On Mount Sinai, Moses received the pattern for the worship center that mandated a God-centered way of living

as exemplified by our Lord. We, like the Israelites, often want to be "like the nations." The chapter on the prophets discusses false worship that accompanies addictive desires (chapter 5). Here we see God's presence among believers in spite of the majority's unbelief and the need for the redeeming presence of the Messiah. The new covenant (Jer. 31) predicted forgiveness in the Messiah's sacrifice on the cross and the indwelling presence of the Spirit to address Israel's needs. We share the benefits of these promises as we follow the Cornerstone of our temple, even Jesus, to the Holy City, whose architect and builder is God.

This book has a couple of distinguishing characteristics. First, it contains an unusually large number of biblical quotations. As far as possible, I have tried to let the Bible tell its own story. I want readers to experience the unforgettable beauty of its language as it aligns God's loyal compassion with his desire for our loving obedience. I hope Christians will use the quotations to reflect on the life-impacting way that the Scriptures deal with *The Nearness of God: His Presence with His People* with our Savior at its center.

Second, the book matches its practical title with application. Each chapter includes some discussion of how the biblical content touches our personal lives, our homes, our churches, or our societies. How do lessons from the ancient world apply to our modern lifestyles? How could Jesus live perfectly without a cell phone, computer, and car? What do the tabernacle and temple teach us about authentic worship? Are we aware that the Spirit indwells us, and are we seen by our neighbors as God's "living epistles"? How does our present life affect our future as the "bride" of the Lamb? What will eternal life be like? I have struggled with these questions and have been blessed by my own encounters with God's presence as I have contemplated them. The book relates a number of extraordinary challenges and extreme illnesses that I have experienced along the way. I share them, because I think that some readers will identify with them and because the Lord has been with me through them. I invite you to join me on this blessed journey.

1

Incarnation as Presence

Admit that even if Christ were only a character in a great story, the fact that this story could have been imagined and desired by featherless bipeds who only knew that they didn't know, would be as miraculous (miraculously mysterious) as the fact that the son of a real God was really incarnated. This natural and earthly mystery would never stop stirring and softening the hearts of unbelievers.—Umberto Eco[1]

"THE WORD became flesh and dwelt among us." We should be filled with wonder when we think deeply about this truth. A good friend, who has traveled extensively since childhood, recently visited Israel for the first time. She has been a believer for many years and has known the presence of God through the Holy Spirit. She was surprised by her excitement as she visited the holy sites. She saw scenes and sights that the Lord might have experienced before her. This, she reflected, is where God incarnate had actually lived! She now remembers that she felt a special presence of God in that place. Her heart was stirred and

1. Umberto Eco and Cardinal Mara Martini, *Belief or Nonbelief: A Confrontation*, trans. Minna Proctor (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1997), 102.

softened by the fact that the Son of the living God had come in love for her and was with her "in his place."

What does "incarnate presence" mean? Interestingly, the Bible expressed the idea of presence with "face" (*panîm* in Hebrew and *prosopon* in Greek). When we see another face, we encounter the immediate presence of the person as opposed to indirect, media-like acquaintances. In experiences of the presence of other people and God, issues of relationship and accountability follow. I remember occasions such as assemblies and classes when the roll was called. I would hear my name and respond with "here." Similarly, from a momentous event in history, God is present in Christ forevermore. He is "here," and all people must respond to his advent. As the apostle John expressed Jesus' presence in 1:9: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." In the words of Matthew 1:23 (quoting Isa. 7:14): "'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.'"

Even more amazing than the thought of God walking in Palestine as the Messiah is an understanding of the *kind* of person who has lived authentically in our midst. Scholars have advanced theories about what personhood means, without reaching definitive conclusions. We might encounter humanitarians and conclude that we have experienced genuine compassion. Conversely, we might encounter arrogant, cruel, and spiteful people and regret that we have made their acquaintance. Sometimes we wonder whether most of our peers are only using us and others to get whatever will make them happy. In the seemingly endless encounters in life, we might confront the One we most want to meet, the "One and Only" perfection that can meet our needs in this sinful, strife-torn world. In Christ we see priorities for service and salvation, for the poor and the publicans, and for heavenly ideals as well as earthly realities. We will probably be uncomfortable with our imperfections in his presence until we discover that his love graciously dispels our fears. Eco, one of the great writers of the preceding century, reminded us that our Lord has stirred and softened countless numbers of people throughout the world.

This chapter will discuss the subject of presence in the gospel of John's prologue (1:1–18) and attempt to connect the statement of "incarnation as presence" with humanity's timeless needs for an abiding encounter with the Truth. It will challenge us to relate the meaning of God's presence in Christ to our pilgrimage with him until "we shall see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). The chapter will focus on the meaning of John 1:14 in the context of the prologue and, less specifically, the gospel of John as a whole. It will do this in seven parts:

- The Word in Flesh
- The Word and Salvation
- The Word and Perseverance
- The Word as Tabernacle
- The Word as Grace and Truth
- The Word and the Law
- The Word and Our World

"The Word in Flesh," the initial part, is the unifying truth of the incarnation as the full revelation and supreme expression of the presence of God in Jesus Christ. The chapter will advance the elements and aspects of John 1 with a unifying focus on Christ as presence. The concluding part, "The Word and Our World," will present the implications of the incarnation for our lives in today's world.

Christ's incarnation is supremely important because it gives us the perspective and priorities that we need, when we sometimes lose heart because of unbearable circumstances, or when we are so immersed in daily routines that we take his presence for granted. Machines such as computers are attractive because they are subject to our whims and are useful until they break. They are not personal presences and do not require relationships and accountability. People are presences, on the other hand, but very few of them will become the kind of friend who will be there when we need them. Friendships unfortunately break like machines. Neither machines nor people can be substitutes for

a saving relationship with our heavenly Father who has loved us in his Son. Christ, in turn, through the Holy Spirit enriches our relationships and ennobles our chores with a meaning and purpose that can transform our days into his service.

The Word in Flesh

The centerpiece for the presence of God in our lives is an emphatic statement of weighty proportions: "the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). As Leon Morris describes it, "In one short, shattering expression John unveils the great idea at the heart of Christianity that the very Word of God took flesh for man's salvation."[2] The expression stands between the deity of the Logos (1:1–3) and the call of John the Baptist: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29). John's statement that the Word became incarnate affirms that the unique, divine Son entered the new condition of flesh to fully reveal the Godhead by his glorious signs and explanatory discourses. Because of his authenticated revelation and completed mission, believers have enjoyed extraordinary lives in the presence of God and his people.

The Word from Above

The term *logos* had many shades of meaning in John's world, and most of his readers would have been familiar with them. Philosophers known as Stoics used it for a pervasive, rational principle that ordered life. The rabbis speculated that it was identified with a preexistent *torah* (or word). John's use of *logos* in his prologue is broad enough for a wide range of meanings, because it encompasses creation and varied responses of the world to the advent of the Creator (1:3–5, 10). John presents this breadth of meaning with concrete relationships and events

2. Leon Morris, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 102.

that he called *signs*: the transformation of water into wine, the need for personal rebirth, the nourishment of truth, the calming of storms, the granting of sight, the security of godly care, and, supremely, the gracious bestowal of life to Lazarus after he died (11:39). Most scholars note, however, that in chapter one *logos* is unmistakably Hebraic and that "in the beginning" points to Genesis 1. Thus, Logos is a name of God that identifies his effective presence in creation, revelation, and salvation. The Word is the unique human person, who, as God in his gracious fullness, brings life to bear on a world that is dissolving itself in its secular acids.

John's teaching about Christ focuses on the statement about incarnation in verse 14. Beasley-Murray has aptly summarized John's use of the title in his prologue:

> The employment of the Logos concept in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel is the supreme example within Christian history of the communication of the gospel in terms understood and appreciated by the nations. As Paul stood on Mars Hill and declared, "That which you worship and do not know, I now proclaim" (Acts 17:23), so the Evangelist set forth to the world his own thoughts familiar to all about the Logos in relation to the world, startlingly modified by the affirmation of the Incarnation, and then went on in the Gospel to tell how the Word acted in the words and deeds of Jesus and brought about the redemption of the nations.[3]

John, in other words, was using a common term with many meanings, so that all of his readers could understand his essential message. The divine Logos made everything and, as the source of all life and light, became flesh and dwelt among us.

3. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 36 (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 10. An insightful summary of issues in the prologue can be found in John Painter, "Rereading Genesis in the Prologue of John," in *Neotestamentica et Philonica: Studies in Honor of Peder Borgen*, eds. David Aune, Torrey Seland, and Jarl Henning Ulrichsen (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2003), 179–201.

The Word as Flesh

"Flesh" (translating *sarx*) refers to people as bodily creatures that are earthly and liable to sin. John could have used more abstract terms for "humanity," but this word was vital for his emphases. The bodily form requires a human birth (1:13), which in Jesus' case also requires deity, for the Logos/Son gave his flesh for the life of his people. In Rudolf Schnackenburg's words, "The Logos becomes *sarx* in order to give this *sarx* over to death; the Incarnation is being taken seriously."[4] Incarnation is the definitive answer to the deadly human condition. The root meaning of the term is simply "humanity" (17:2). However, in John the fleshly world is immersed in unbelief, so its secondary connotations can be very negative.

Many interpretations of John 1:14 tend to make deity and humanity antithetical, in part because of the strong connotations of "flesh." They draw contrasts between eternity in 1:1–2 and the historical manifestation in 1:14 as well as in the statement that the Logos was "with the Father" and then "with us" in time. Bultmann, for example, so emphasized humanity that the Revealer is "nothing but" a man.[5] On the other hand, Käsemann underscores deity to the point that the Revealer is "nothing but" God "striding across the earth."[6] John, however, places the natures side by side; the divine Logos became human flesh, because in his uniqueness there is no inconsistency. The "enfleshed" Logos declared, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), and "before Abraham was born, I am" (8:58). His audience "picked up stones to stone him" for blasphemy, but they were forced to wait until his time had come. Present or past, the truths of Jesus as God and man and as God's supreme presence on earth have never been easy to understand.

4. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2 vols., trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1982), 2.55.

5. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 62–3.

6. Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. by W. J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), 159–61.

A partial explanation of the union of the natures in Jesus lies in the Word's creation of humanity "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27). As inexhaustible as the incarnation is for discussion, the "image" doctrine affirms that humanity's life was sourced in the breath of God (Gen. 2:7) and that we are godlike as vice-regents (or ambassadors) of the Creator but are not divine. Though we are not gods, we are created to experience the presence of God, and this fellowship is possible because the incarnate One is the precise, perfect Image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15; 2 Cor. 4:4). He is "in very nature God," who was "made in human likeness" to become "obedient to death" at Calvary (Phil. 2:6–8). As both God and man, the Son is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being," who "after he had provided purification for sins . . . sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb. 1:3). As fully God and fully man united in one person, he could righteously satisfy God's perfection, lovingly forgive our sins that were not his own, and serve as the "one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom" for the many who would believe (1 Tim. 2:5–6; Mark 10:45).

The Word as Unique

The councils of Nicea and Chalcedon classically formulated the union of the deity and full humanity of the Son of God as the only kind of person who could save this sinful world. John's prologue similarly emphasizes that the divine Word became human and that Jesus of Nazareth was this unique mediator as validated by his life, death, and resurrection. God created humanity for fellowship with himself, and our sin, rather than our human nature, has tragically separated the world from the Light of Life. By faith in God's mediator alone, believers "become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (John 1:12–13).

A contemporary problem with this understanding of the incarnation is its uniqueness. If Christ is the absolutely perfect

answer for human needs, then Christianity is correct and other religions do not address our need for salvation. Many scholars are making every effort to globalize religion; that is, they argue that the world's religions are inclusive ways to the same Deity and that no one can claim to be the only way to truth. We live in an era of resurgent pantheistic movements. Pantheism, which is represented by religions such as Hinduism, believes that everything is god; thus, divine presences are as pervasive as the powers around us that we worship. These kinds of presences are all-inclusive and result in a proliferation of impersonal, natural powers that dissolve in an intoxicating brew of man-centered fantasies. Such impersonal non-presences must deny the exclusiveness of the Light that gives light to every person in the world.

In a century of developing interest in the relationship of religion and science, the trend has been toward "pan-en-theism," pantheism's cousin that hypothesizes that God is evolving with the processes of the world. The presence is the process, but one can hardly be a pilgrim without a definable destination. In our context of "many ways to the same gods," we are confused by an increasing number of spiritual options and the possibility that people are "lost" if they do not know the Lord. However, according to John, there is only a single correct turn in the road of life; pro or con, we choose based on "the Way, the Truth, and the Life."

The combination of unprecedented catastrophes and extraordinary accomplishments in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has led many scholars to an accommodation of Christianity to the times by redefining Jesus Christ into a less-demanding "Jesus of history" as distinct from a "Christ of faith." We know practically nothing about Jesus' history, they claim, so we can fan our spirituality (our inner sense of innocence or transcendence) into a hope for meaningful living. They hold that an ancient book such as the Bible does not address the magnitude and complexity of modern concerns. We now accept "post-Christian" as a rather common epitaph for cultures around the world. Symptomatic of this trend, at a popular level, are novels that speculate that if Jesus really was "in flesh," then he must have succumbed to

his "last temptation" and married with royal offspring. "Codes" that record quests for his grail, accordingly, were suppressed as threats to the power of the church.

Nevertheless, John had commitment to a unique person for all generations in mind, and, strange as it may seem to modern people, contemporary commitment to Christ is included in his call. Though Jesus lived in Palestine long ago, believers have experienced his presence in every generation. His resurrection and God's presence through the indwelling Spirit in the church mean that everyone encounters the same person, who does not change "yesterday, or today, or forever." The Son does not mutate according to the changing trends in different historical periods. He is the Way, and no one comes to the Father except through him. Because he is unique and his saving work is finished, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The Word and Salvation

The issue for the apostle John is salvation, which other religions ignore because they have no meaningful doctrine of sin. One would think that if God so loved the world that he "enfleshed" his One and Only Son to save it, then sinners would see their need and respond in faith. But most of them have not! The rejection of the Logos is sometimes translated in John 1:5 in terms of a darkened world that did not understand him. A preferable meaning of the verse concerns conflict and rejection, so that it would read, "the darkness/world did not overcome him."

"Incarnation as presence" is presented in John as offensive for at least two reasons. First, incarnation offended Jesus' audiences because his claims contradicted their traditions and expectations. That God became flesh, taking on true and full humanity (John 6:52), including known origins (6:42), was a staggering truth. In John 6:52 the Jews argued sharply among themselves: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The idea that "living bread"

would give eternal nourishment was more than their manna-oriented minds could digest! The disparity between Fatherly perfection and sinful realities only compounded the offense. In John 6:42 a hostile audience queried, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" In the preceding chapter, Jesus explained that "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (5:22–23). The Father and the Son say and do the same things and receive equal worship! Furthermore, the "perfect peasant" claimed superiority to their exalted fathers: "It is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven" (6:32). This hostility and conflict seem to crystallize in 8:37: "I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word." Jesus' audiences may have puzzled over these matters, as the church has for centuries, but they clearly understood their charge of blasphemy (19:7): "He must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God."

Second, incarnation as presence is offensive because unbelievers prefer the lusts of the flesh to the love of God: "Men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). The hostility is most explicitly expressed in 1 John 2:15: "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Conflict and rejection were evident when Jesus spoke of his advent in antithetical terms in John 3:10–21: from above (heaven)/from below (earth), life/death, salvation/judgment, light/darkness, and love/hate. The lusts of the flesh are the outgrowth of the negative side of each of these antitheses. Sin has its own risky appeal and illusion of pleasure. In this sin-filled world, sins seem so unnaturally natural, and can be conveniently rationalized.

The world's conflict with its offensive Savior is graphically illustrated at the crucifixion in John 19:1–6 with the various tortures, the false accusations, and the persistent cries for Jesus' death. In this setting we can see the countercultural fact that highlights the grace and love of God. God did not love sinners because they were lovely and worthy. In view of his initiative, God

loved even when "his own" were evil. From a human perspective, sinners responded because his grace moved them to a recognition of their need to be changed from seeking illusory pleasures in an evil lifestyle to a relationship with him. In this light, the incarnation as divine presence should be seen as an invasion of love (1 John 4:7–21).

The saving intent of the idea of the Word made flesh in John's Gospel should be understood further in terms of the book's purpose and the prologue's style. The apostle explicitly states his purpose in John 20:31: "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." The book was designed to promote faith in the people whom the Father gave the Son (as described in 6:44): "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." The statement introduces issues of sources, background, and authorship that repeatedly surface in John's writings. Many signs that Christ performed were not recorded, and John's selection of signs was designed to engender belief in "Jesus . . . the Christ, the Son of God." Recognizing that Christianity was birthed in the crucible of Israel, he had an evident concern to address the religious and cultural threats against a proper Christology (1 John 4:2–3).[7]

The gospel of John has been an outstanding evangelistic tract for the church, because people read about Jesus' encounters and identify with his audiences. We recognize our resistance to God's love, fearing that he might interfere with a lifestyle that we have enjoyed for years. We realize that we love the world for what it can do for us, instead of loving God in the world to bless people around us. We often feel that we must perform perfectly

7. The scholarly consensus is that John the apostle wrote his book around the end of the first century. He addressed, among other things, a "docetic" denial of the humanity of Jesus as well as hostility from the synagogue. The docetic concern is reflected in the emphasis on incarnation as "flesh" and the notion of "fullness" (John 1:16). Gnostics believed that the high god was reflected in emanations of lesser deities. John appears to be arguing that all the blessings of deity reside in the "full" deity of the Word. In this regard, his point is similar to Paul in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9, where "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form."

to achieve our dreams, yet our evaluations reveal that much of what we do is very imperfect. We can conclude that we are too unworthy to be saved until we discover in John that God graciously saves the least worthy of people. Finally, in the humblest of ways, we acknowledge our sin and trust Christ as our Savior. Why, most of us ask ourselves, did we wait so long to experience the joys of his loving presence?

The Word and Perseverance

In addition to salvation, John was concerned for the well-being of his "children," believers for whom he was pastorally responsible. Hostility toward believers emerges in John 6:60–71, the promise of persecution in 15:18–16:4, and Peter's confrontations and denials just before the crucifixion. John feared that his people would go astray when they were persecuted, so he cautioned them, "so that when the time comes you will remember that I warned you" (16:4). Scholars have concluded that John wrote to churches in Asia Minor. We know that believers in these churches were persecuted as he predicted. He was concerned that they should receive strength from a sense of the presence of their "first love," as "in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death" at Pergamum in Asia Minor (Rev. 2:13). Antipas died for his faith, while most of us experience no worse than occasional discomfort. However, the bottom line is the same; the unique presence of the Logos in flesh should encourage the children of God to abide in their faith (John 1:12) in their hostile world (John 1:10–11).

Furthermore, an understanding of the prologue's "rhythmic prose" can insightfully develop John's pastoral concern.[8] Its distinctive vocabulary (such as *logos*, grace, and fullness) and its thematic integrity are noted in support of the suggestion that it is an early poem or hymn in praise of the Logos. Parallels in

8. The phrase was proposed by C. K. Barrett in *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1955), 126.

Paul's writings are frequently cited (e.g., Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; and 1 Tim. 3:16).[9] The core of the hymn in verses 1–5, 10–12, 14, 16 seems to contain a hymn or confession that was familiar to John's readers.

The significance of the poetic style is that John used the Lord's public signs and private teachings as a defense of convictions about Christ with which his readers were already familiar. The presence of God as a comforting truth would have faded in persecution. Like us, they were strengthened by common worship and confessional affirmation. They needed to abide in their commitments rather than leaving the family of believers with whom they had shared fellowship. In this light, the prologue has been compared to an overture of an opera, which is apropos. It introduces the content and sets the tone for the memories that follow, rising in crescendo through dissonance to the completion of salvation. In the face of disorienting opposition, John reminded his readers that the incarnational presence is the Truth that they needed to maintain not only for their salvation but also for the fullness of his grace that they had experienced.

John uses an unusual expression to describe this fullness of grace in verse 16. The New International Version translates the literal "grace instead of grace" with "one blessing after another." The phrase is followed by a comparison with the Mosaic Law. Carson articulates John's point:

> The law, i.e. the law-covenant, was given by grace, and anticipated the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ; now that he has come, that same prophetic law-covenant is necessarily superseded by that which it "prophesied" would come. . . . It is this prophecy/fulfillment motif that explains why the two displays of grace are not precisely identical. The flow of the passage and the burden of the book as a whole magnify the fresh grace that has come in Jesus Christ.[10]

9. For discussion of hymnic parallels, see J. T. Sanders, *New Testament Christological Hymns*, SNTSMS, vol. 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1971.

10. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 133.

Carson succeeds in establishing the supremacy of Christ's revelation without discounting the grace of God in the giving of the law. He connects the presence of the Word with the grace that sustains the children of God.

Believers in Christ should know that life after salvation is not exempt from ever-present trials in a sin-filled world. We have our own problems in addition to the cares of our families and circles of friends. We huddle in funeral parlors, hospitals, workplaces, and even homes, wondering whether God cares enough to keep us from severe physical and emotional pain. The answers should never be glib, and sometimes we may never receive the answers that we have come to expect as an entitlement. How should we respond?

The story of the man born blind in John 9 captures these tensions. Jesus healed a pitiful outcast, who immediately testified before his neighbors, family, and religious leaders that he had obeyed Jesus and gained his sight. Everyone rejected his testimony; even his parents did not stand with him, because they were afraid they would be cast out of the synagogue if they spoke for him (9:22). The authorities "threw him out" (9:34). His response was "'Lord, I believe,' and he worshiped him" (9:38). Jesus explained that "this happened so that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (9:3). A full explanation of the will of God in the healed man's life was not given, and frequently we lack all that we would like to know about God's ways in our own lives. We do know, however, that the incarnation emphasized the humble way in which the Son of God obediently lived and suffered for the needs of his people: life, nourishment, security, and assurance. We also have a clear presentation of the proper response to incredible suffering—we should persevere in God's presence with faith and worship!

The Word as Tabernacle

John emphasizes two implications of the incarnation. The first one was that the Logos made flesh had "made his dwelling

among us." He came as flesh to be the immediate presence of God among his people. "Made his dwelling" (Greek *eskenosen*) can also be rendered "pitched his tent" or "tabernacled." John was referring to the fact that God's presence with Israel was in the midst of the people, whether in the tent of meeting or the Holy of Holies in the worship center. When the tabernacle was completed, "the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Ex. 40:34). For rabbinical writers "the divine dwelling" meant the *Shekinah*, the visible presence of God among the Israelites. John seems to have had in mind the visible glory of God, and perhaps even the term *Shekinah*. Thus, he placed the incarnate Word in continuum with Israel's worship center as a culminating expression of God's presence.

The second implication of the incarnation was the fact that John and other eyewitnesses could gaze at divine glory enfleshed.[11] In Thomas's case, the doubter could see *and feel* the risen Lord's scarred hands and side and conclude, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28). Inherent in the emphasis is the validation of the Christ who became the cornerstone of the church's confession about the Word of life, "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched" (1 John 1:1). We are told in John 1:18 that "no one has ever seen God," which recalls Moses' request to "see" the divine glory with God's response that "you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live" (Ex. 33:18). Moses saw only God's "back" (33:21–23), but even that encounter served as a powerful prelude to the revelation of the law. John, however, tells us, he had "seen" God's glory in the incarnation.

Two aspects of the Son's presence are singled out. First, his dwelling was "the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father." "One and Only" (*monogenes*) stresses the uniqueness of the Word, unique as God/man who has made known

11. Merrill Tenney suggests that this glorious presence alludes to the apostles' experience at the transfiguration, when John was privileged to behold Christ's divine radiance. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 9: John–Acts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 33.

the Trinity (John 1:18).[12] The glory of the Son was manifested in his "signs" (2:11) and in his death (19:35) and resurrection (20:24–30). The miraculous signs were spectacular acts of God that prompted Jesus' observers to inquire about his identity and mission. The connection of miracles and signs suggests that John was using an Old Testament emphasis that focused less on the spectacle of miracle than on the intensification of revelation. The signs, in other words, underscored Jesus' glory as the full revelation of the Father. "No one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing," said Nicodemus, "if God were not with him" (3:2). But the most profound aspect of his glory is the humble way in which the Son of God obediently lived and suffered for the needs of his people. His discourses, like his signs, were "from the Father." Characteristically, John referred to the Father more than twice as often as the other Gospels do. The obvious reason is his concern to place the incarnation in the perspective of Trinitarian presence. Other men may customarily glorify themselves (5:44), Jesus testified, but he sought only God's glory (5:41; cf. 12:43). Thus, when Jesus answered Philip with, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (14:9), in effect he proclaimed his incarnation as Trinitarian presence.

Therefore, the second person of the Trinity became human to be the saving presence of God on earth. He accomplished salvation for people, whom John describes as gifts from the Father to his Son. His life exemplified an abiding godliness in Trinitarian fellowship. The lives of his children should do the same. We are, in John's terms, born spiritually to dwell in the presence of our Creator.

12. *Monogenes* frequently translates the Hebrew *yahid* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The term is derived from *ginomai* rather than *gennao*; thus it is connected etymologically with being rather then begetting. We should avoid any notion that suggests the Son is not eternal. An alternative rendering is "beloved" (*agapetos*). In Genesis 22 *agapetos* renders *yahid* with reference to Abraham's "uniquely beloved" Isaac (cf. Heb. 11:17). The theme surfaces indirectly with John's emphasis on the love of God that should characterize his beloved community (John 13:34–35; 1 John 4:7–21).

The Word as Grace and Truth

The second aspect of the Son's glory concerns his being "full of grace and truth" (1:14–16). The combination of terms occurs only here in the New Testament, and John's single use of the term "grace" is here, even though the concept pervades his writings. "Grace and truth," however, occurs frequently in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, reflecting the Hebrew terms *hesedh* and *'emeth*. We can note Exodus 34:6, where the Lord manifested his glory to Moses and identified himself as "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in *love and faithfulness*." In Psalm 85:9–10, the psalmist celebrates the nearness of salvation to those who fear the Lord, "that his glory may dwell in our land" where "*love and faithfulness* meet." Grace and truth together emphasize the covenantal faithfulness of God, which received its complete expression in the advent of the Messiah.

John's point is that God's proclamation of grace and truth to Moses has now been incarnated in the Word. Unlike "grace," "truth" is one of his most distinctive terms. His use of the concept, in a variety of forms, far surpasses the other Gospels. Like the Old Testament, John defines truth as characteristic of God. And he affirms that Jesus is God's reality and Truth. "I am the way and the truth and the life," Jesus claimed in 14:6, the source of all grace and truth in the world (1:17). Hence, truth is not teaching about God so much as God's very reality—occurring!—in Jesus. The difference is between personal encounter, "Do you know him?" and impersonal assent, "Do you believe it?" In him is life as "the only true God" (17:3). Consequently, in him the believer is freed from guilt and slavery to the world (8:31–32). God's steadfast love and trustworthiness in the prologue are in view in spite of unbelief. In short, Jesus is the Truth regardless of how many votes he gets; truth, according to John, is not a matter of popular choice. Yancey captures the implication well: "It would be easier, I sometimes think, if God had given us a set of ideas to mull over and kick around and decide whether to accept or reject.

He did not. He gave us himself in the form of a person."[13] Thus, Christianity is not only adherence to beliefs but also relationship with a Person, a commitment that assumes the presence of God in the believer's life. A Christian is a follower of Christ, and this identification has been validated by the faith of believers, who have been his abiding body and family for millennia.

God has been gracious to the world as well. In Buechner's words, "The poor, the brokenhearted, the disinherited, the riffraff—from the beginning of his ministry these were the ones that Jesus particularly addressed himself to rather than to the ones who would have given him a more powerful following."[14] The issue was faith without regard for worldly status and circumstances. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea exemplify the "leaders [who] believed in him" (12:42), but the preponderance of "the needy" substantiates Buechner's point. John could have called these people "pilgrims" who were passing through the wilderness of the world and were questing for "a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (4:14).

No episode demonstrates God's grace and truth in Christ more clearly than Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in chapter 4. While the disciples had gone for food, Jesus was resting by Jacob's well. He requested a drink from a woman, who was surprised because "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (4:9). Jesus answered her with his ability to provide "living water" that would satisfy her thirst forever. His invitation to her "husband" revealed his knowledge that she had loose relationships with several men rather than a marriage. Interestingly, his knowledge and her response led Jesus to invite her to worship God "in spirit and truth" (4:23). Realizing that he was the Messiah, she went to her town, where many believed that he really was "the Savior of the world" (4:39–42). Meanwhile, he explained to the disciples that his "food" was to reap the harvest of the Father (4:34–38). Thus, the glorious presence of God was manifested in his incarnate Truth to the Samaritan woman and her town.

13. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 261.

14. Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus, A Life Story* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005), 38.

The Word and the Law

The prologue's uncharacteristic "grace upon grace" ("one blessing after another" in NIV) in John 1:16 is further explained with the revelation of the Lord through Moses (John 1:17). The rabbis identified Moses as "the first deliverer." He was remembered for his extraordinary intimacy with God: "My servant Moses . . . is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD. . . . Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face" (Num. 12:7–8; Deut. 34:10). The law, reflecting this intimacy, expressed the "enduring love" and truth of the Lord's will for his people (Deut. 32:10–12, 46–47). Moses authored the law that pointed to the full expression of truth in "Jesus Christ," the first time that this title is used in the book (John 1:17). Its use here serves as a literary bridge to messianic speculations that were abroad (1:19–28). In 1:44–45, Philip alludes to the coming "prophet like [Moses]" (Deut.18:18) in saying, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote." If Moses was to an extraordinary degree a revered mediator for Israel, then Christ is the Mediator *par excellence* for all people.

This comparison raises the issue of Jesus' relationship to the Jews and the patriarchs in John's gospel. The matter is of utmost importance because questions have been raised about possible anti-Semitism in the book. There are seventy-one references to "the Jews" in sixty-seven verses; thirty have a neutral meaning or refer to Jewish believers, and forty-one depict the Jewish people or their leaders as hostile toward Jesus. The tendency in the book is for references to hostility to be implied in earlier chapters, while they become increasingly explicit as the crucifixion approaches. We should note that Jesus insisted that "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). Therefore, since anti-Semitism must mean general hostility toward Jews and since John was a Jew writing

for Christian Jews, he obviously desired to commend Christ for his comment on their allegiance.[15]

The issue in the comparison was between faith in Mosaic tradition or the incarnate Son of God, who is Truth. John wrote at a time when exclusion from the synagogue threatened many Hebrew Christians, a persecution that had been directed first at Jesus (John 15:18–25).[16] In 6:30–34 the Jews asked for a sign like the manna that had been given by Moses. Jesus responded that his Father, rather than Moses, had given the manna and had now given "the bread of God . . . who comes down from heaven and gives light to the world" (6:33). Similarly, in 8:31–59, the children of Abraham debated with Jesus about the Fatherhood and family of God. The Jewish leaders suffered from blinding "cataracts," because their faith was in their identity as descendants of Abraham and disciples of Moses (9:28). In summary, one can conclude that the Gospel reflected intra-Jewish issues and conflicts in which believers were being distanced from nonbelievers.

In John 1:18, John advanced a similar point in saying: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Moses, as noted earlier, did not see God's full presence (Ex. 33:23). Now, however, God the Son fully reveals the Trinity. He is God's self-communication issuing from his own position of intimacy in the Father's presence. Even though "Father" often means "God" in John, we do well to remember Raymond Brown's caveat on John 1:1: "By emphasizing the relationship between the Word and God the Father, 1:1b

15. Sigfred Pederson has a very helpful discussion of the problem in his "Anti-Judaism in John's Gospel: John 8," in *New Readings in John: Literary and Theological Perspectives. Essays from the Scandinavian Conference on the Fourth Gospel, in Århus,1997*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, vol. 182, eds. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pederson (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 172–93. He concludes that the evangelist does not condemn Jewish people as such, 193. Andreas Köstenberger similarly concludes, "It must be said that any such charge against a document whose writer (the apostle John) is a Jew, and whose major 'hero' (Jesus) is a Jew (cf. 4:9), seems at the outset rather implausible," *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 248.

16. The Jewish opposition seems to be related to the *Birkath ha-minim*, a "Twelfth Benediction" issued at Jamnia by Samuel the Small that expelled Christians from the synagogue as heretics (ca. AD 85).

at the same time implicitly distinguishes them."[17] Thus, the issue is revelation of Trinitarian relationships rather than a confusion of the persons of the Godhead.

The intimacy of the Father and the Son extends to believers who share their familial relationship in grace: "All that the Father gives me will come to me," Jesus reveals in 6:37–40: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life." Again, in 10:29, "My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." Barclay captures the desired effect in God's family when he concludes: "God can never be a stranger to us again."[18] When we consider John's teaching that the children of faith are the family of God, then perhaps we can soften the emphasis by saying, "God *should* never be a stranger again," because, in honesty, we can feel like strangers in the presence of passages like these.

The Word and Our World

The apostle invites his readers to participate in the blessings of life with the present tense. In John 1:5 he writes that the Life and Light of men "shines" in the darkness. "I am the light of the world," Jesus emphasizes. "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (8:12; cf. Ps. 36:9). The function of light is to dispel darkness, but the implied advent of the Logos in the initial verses means that he never ceases to shine. Like the invisible, infrared rays that are revealed by a spectroscope, so God's presence is made visible in the incarnation and in the lives of believers. Then, another shift to the present tense occurs in verse 15, where John the Baptist testifies concerning the One and Only Word. The author's intent is evidently that John the Baptist's sermons are still "audible" and that recipients of

17. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible Commentaries (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 1.5.

18. William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1955), 1.56.

God's grace "must become less," so the Son can be increasingly glorified (3:30). He challenges us to ask ourselves whether Jesus counts for us as he counted for him.

In Eco's words, the incarnation stirs and softens hearts. This chapter on the incarnation has affirmed his observation, because Jesus was the immediate presence of the living God, "God with us." Presence means being there with someone. The advent of the Son brought a timeless accountability, a confrontation of the Trinity with creation. In light of the incarnation, God's people must encounter their need for faith in heavenly ideals to follow the Savior's life of loving service. It should affect the way we live and the priorities that characterize us. "The Truth and the Life" is the unique way to experience God in salvation and perseverance, the man who "tabernacled" in our midst. In other words, that presence of the incarnate and resurrected Christ means that the Someone with us is God and man. He has confronted pilgrims with his fullness of grace and truth, the revelational presence of the otherwise invisible God. John's distinctive doctrine of rebirth points to the fact that people have been made to dwell with their Creator.

How do we project the absolute terms of John into today's relativism? How do we sense the personal presence of God as enfleshed Logos in our technique-oriented, mechanized world? How do we gaze at the glory of our God in a secularized culture, where God has become strange and the notion of pilgrimage has become a complicated and confusing process of self-discovery?

The State of the World

The riveting focus of the prologue's Christology may seem very distant to some readers who are torn between hope for the "good life" and threats of social catastrophes. We are too familiar with the fact that the public seeks escapes from reality with addictions that seemingly ease the pain of empty lives. John points us to the better way of a commitment to the Word that brings perspective and priorities to our walk in his ways. We need perspective in darkness, so that we can honor the Light in our midst.

We learn over time that his light and life in human flesh will lead us to his home, which our fleshly desires tend to obscure.

Concerning perspective, we must understand that the chaos of our times, as interesting and energetic as it might seem to be, is not worth a detour from the "grace upon grace" of a pilgrimage with the Lord. Change toward globalization in the last century is everywhere evident. Scientific progress has captured our collective imagination with revolutionary advances in fields such as transportation, information, communication, entertainment, engineering, and health care: from cars to space stations, from the telephone to wireless miniatures, from over-the-counter remedies to exotic surgeries, and from radio to virtual realities. The world and its corporations have become globalized machines with insatiable appetites for competitive growth, in an intense quest to be the biggest, brightest, and best.

Natural catastrophes and wars in recent decades have reminded us that our pride in human progress is inappropriate, since it has detracted from our sense of God's presence. At times we have become more comfortable with some things rather than some One. We have advanced technologically, even as we have declined morally. I have also read repeatedly in recent days that people are weary of the vague race for a success that has no substance in the end. We "succeed" and then wonder at what cost, or ask, "Is this what I have lived for?" We are taught that the way to succeed is to be faster, stronger, and more creative and visionary. But the years of a workaholic's pace wear thin, and we begin to wonder about Jesus' question, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44). As Christian pilgrims, how do we break through our prideful ambitions that reject the grace and love of the Word who came to assure us of God's presence with us?

The Path of the Pilgrim

Christians in developed nations cannot easily escape the perspectives and priorities that are based in our common his-

tories and societies. We can ill afford to throw darts at a world that we enjoy so much. We appreciate the excitement of scientific discoveries, from genetic possibilities to stellar exploration. We enjoy modern conveniences and would hardly trade them for the Spartan simplicity that served Jesus so well. We survived the century and entered the new millennium without a technological meltdown. Yet, our world too often has trapped us in its vise-like grip. We, like others around us, have become addicted to the adrenaline rushes of successful performances and new things. We too are driven by a quest for the mythical best. We cannot ignore the trends of the world, the critical comments of our neighbors, the frenzied pace of everyday living, and the ever-present competitions that threaten to entangle us. Yes, honestly, we have often "loved praise from men more than praise from God" (John 12:43), perhaps not realizing that praiseworthy lives before God result in respect and mutual appreciation in the church.

The darkness of the world in John, I have discovered, is so unrelenting that God has had to use personal crises to remind me that my deepest hunger is for assurance of his loving presence. Reynolds Price is insightful in his writing on John as "The Strangest Story": "Bizarre as it is in so many parts, he says in the clearest voice we have the sentence that mankind craves from stories—*The Maker of all things loves and wants me*."[19] The issue for us is whether the crisis is worth the assurance of his love.

In 1980 I traveled to teach in a seminary in India that I was privileged to start in partnership with an Indian believer. I remember my excitement as I taught eager students in a vastly different culture. Midway through the experience, however, my joy waned as I began to feel very sick. A steady diet of aspirin kept fever at bay for a time, but one morning I could not get up from my cot. I felt as though I was on fire. I remember a doctor and my students discussing my malaria and dysentery. I learned that the students had been praying over me constantly. In these kinds of experiences, alone and so far from home, one can gravitate toward

19. Alfred Corn, ed., *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 72.

either anger or peace. Why would God allow sacrificial service to end with a life-threatening illness? For me, the answer was a peace "that passes all understanding." Without all the trappings of modern comforts, I saw the glory of the Lord in a distinctively purifying way and experienced a memorable fullness of his grace. Despite the fifty pounds that I lost in those weeks, I have been to India many times since that initial visit. Each time I see faces that remind me of God's work in my heart many years ago. The seminary has grown, and a secondary school has been added to reach Hindu and Muslim children. A hospital now ministers to village people who cannot afford medical care without charity. And the House of Joy is a home for abandoned children, where they can grow in an atmosphere of the loving presence of the Lord.

Of course, we do not have to have crises to understand our need for God's loving presence in the Spirit. We can recite the disciplines that have helped many believers in their development: prayer, Bible study, worship, and regular fellowship. What I received, on the other hand, was a wake-up call to determine whether my Christianity was personally authentic! Paul Tournier, after careful reflection on superficial relationships, concluded, "Outside close intimacy and the miracle of the presence of God, real honesty seems to be utopian."[20] Without the crutches of customary conveniences and comforts to lean on, I had to ask myself whether my beliefs were real. Is our "One and Only Hope" alive? Is Easter true? If so, what difference does the Truth really make in the way I live?

The change in my perspective after my life-threatening illness may be compared to driving on a familiar road. At night (amid the pressures of the world) we can see the road and, if careful, perhaps drive without an accident. However, an unexpected obstacle in the road can surprise us and lead to tragic circumstances. But, in the daytime, we see everything with clarity and depth of field. Suffering and difficulties can be the blessings that lead us to a closer walk with the Lord. They shed light on the most important things in this life. We enjoy the blessings of the road because we

20. Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, trans. Edwin Hudson (New York, Evanston: Harper and Row, 1957), 30.

can see the dangers as well as the beautiful sights that the darkness formerly hid. My illness gave me urgency about the reality of John's appeal. It was as if God asked: "Do you love me? Then love me like your students loved you, when they prayed for you in my presence." I have learned that it is better to prioritize covenantal faithfulness with the Savior than to expend myself in the caprices of worldly demands. On that basis, in spite of our fears, failures, and hesitancy, we should invite him to "dwell" in our real, fleshly lives that he shared. By God's grace, we can live with godly priorities. We look forward now to the patriarchs in general and Moses in particular, who experienced God's presence in an unparalleled way before the incarnation.

"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

—John Newton, 1779