

## **The Gospel of John (3); The Prologue (1:1-18) (part 3)**

### **Introduction:**

This is the third Lord's Day in our study of the Gospel According to John. We are presently working through John's Prologue, which is contained in verses 1 through 18. As we have already noted, John's purpose in his prologue was to establish at the outset of his Gospel that the invisible God was working within history through His Word to save His people from their sin.

John's Prologue first introduces us to the pre-incarnate Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity. He is set forth as the eternal Word, who was with God in the beginning, who was in fact, God (1:1). John declared, secondly, that this Word of God was present and active in the creation of all things; the Word was the agent through which God created everything (1:3). Thirdly, John stated that the presence of the Word continued to be active in the world which He made, in that He gave life and enhanced life as the true light of the world (1:4). But the world that He created was enveloped in darkness, a dreadful spiritual condition, that in which the inhabitants of the world are unable to see and perceive the light of the Word in His world, which was an emblem of His presence and activity (1:5). So God sent a witness to the Light, even John the Baptist, who testified of the Light so that all may see and believe (1:6-8).

We now arrive to verse 10, in which we read of the Word Himself having come into the world, but no one in the world knew Him or received Him for who He was. Even His own people, the Jews, did not receive Him (1:11). But some did receive Him, according to verses 12 and 13, but they did so only due to the grace of God causing them to be born anew spiritually, which enabled them to see and believe, and, thereby, enabled to become the children of God.

The outline that we have been developing is as follows:

- I. The Prologue of the Gospel of John (1:1-18)**
  - A. The Introduction of the Word (1:1-5)**
  - B. The Witness of the Word (1:6-8)**

Today, we will address

- C. The Manifestation of the Word (1:9-13)**

Commentators of John's Gospel differ in the content and order of their outlines of the Gospel. For example, the outline above reflects a change of emphasis from John the Baptist's *witness to the Word*, which is contained in verses 6 through 8, to *the manifestation of the Word* that begins with verse 9 and continues through verse 13. But others, including the translators of the New King James translation, include verse 9 in the previous paragraph, which they consider as verses 3 through 9. These NKJV translators then have verses 10 through 13 in the next paragraph, with verse 14 separated from those verses in yet another new paragraph.

Now, although the translation that we are using is the NKJV, the outline we are using differs from the paragraph division of the prologue of the NKJV. Our outline follows the paragraph distinctions of the English Standard Version (ESV). The ESV has the Prologue organized in four paragraphs, the first paragraph contains verses 1 through 5, the second is verses 6 through 8, the third paragraph is verses 9 through 13, and the fourth paragraph of the Prologue is in verses 14 through 18.<sup>1</sup> I think that one of the major reasons for differences of opinion on how to organize or outline John's Gospel is due to the repetition

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<sup>1</sup> The NKJV has the Prologue of verses 1-18 set forth in 6 paragraphs.

of words and phrases, which on the surface seem to suggest the continuance of the paragraph, but upon closer inspection other distinctions suggest differently.

Let us read our text, **John 1:9-13**.

That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world. <sup>10</sup>He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup>He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. <sup>12</sup>But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

We will consider the meaning and emphasis of each of these verses:

### **I. The Word is the Light of every man in the world. (1:9)**

The NKJV, which we just read, translates **verse 9** this way: ***“That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.”*** Although we are using the NKJV, we must point out its faulty translation of this verse. And as we do, let us remember that although the original writings of the original writers are the inerrant, and inspired Word of God, the translations of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament into other languages are only inspired to the degree they accurately reflect the original writings. Our translations are good, but they are not perfect, and the NKJV (and KJV) translators were wrong here in their translation.

Again, the NKJV (and KJV) reads, ***“That was the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world.”*** But actually, the phrase, “coming into the world” is a reference to “the true Light” which was “coming into the world”, not “to every man.” John’s Gospel never uses that expression, “coming into the world” as a description of people in general,<sup>2</sup> but The Gospel does have this expression used elsewhere of Jesus Christ coming into the world. And so, a better translation of verse 9 would be as the ESV reads, ***“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.”*** To see that this is best, we might consider our Lord’s own words in John 12:36, which reads, ***“I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness”*** (John 12:46).

This corrected translation is agreed upon by most commentators. **William Hendriksen** wrote this:

The phrase *coming into the world* must not be understood as modifying *every man*, as the A. V. (KJV) renders it. The Gospel of John does not contain any indisputed passage in which the expression *coming into the world* refers to the birth of an ordinary human being. On the other hand, it is customary for the apostle to speak of *Christ* as the One who *came into the world*: 3:19; 9:39; 11:27; 12:46; 16:28; and 18:37).<sup>3</sup>

But the question still needs to be answered regarding verse 9: Is the true Light coming into the world referring to the eternal Word of God illuminating all humanity from the foundation of the world, in that the Light was coming into the world? Or rather, is the Light coming into the world a reference to the incarnation, when the Word became flesh? The answer is probably that it is referring to both. The Light has always been coming into the world to illuminate mankind, but the Light came most fully and clearly in the incarnation, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

“The true Light” is the subject of this sentence. Here we have the familiar repetition of terms that is common to John’s writing style. The Gospel writer has already used this term, “light”, five times in the previous five verses (vs. 4-8). Here are those five occurrences:

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<sup>2</sup> It is true that there are a few Jewish references in which people are said to be “coming into the world”, but the Scriptures use this expression only of the Lord Jesus in His incarnation.

<sup>3</sup> William Hendriksen, ***John***, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 79.

<sup>4</sup>In Him was life, and the life was the *light* of men. <sup>5</sup>And the *light* shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. <sup>6</sup>There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. <sup>7</sup>This man came for a witness, to bear witness of the *Light*, that all through him might believe. <sup>8</sup>He was not that *Light*, but was sent to bear witness of that *Light*. (John 1:4-8)

And then we read again, verse 9, “The true *Light*, which gives *light* to everyone, was coming into the world.”

Because of the frequent use of this term, “Light” in the previous five verses, it is understandable why there are those who link verse 9 with these earlier verses as belonging in the same paragraph (e.g. NKJV). But whereas in the verses before verse 9 the Gospel writer was emphasizing the “Word” in a cosmological sense--the Word *outside* the world, beginning with verse 9 we read of the Word at work *within* the world. Here is a rather difficult to comprehend, but accurate assessment of where the Prologue takes the reader:

Having plunged the Word into the history of the world, the prologue is now able to make manifest the Word, leading to the coalescence of the cosmological and historic strands of the plot—the incarnation (v. 14). The focus has now shifted so that the work of the Word is now a work in the world. This shift in focus gives warrant to considering vv. 9-14 as a distinct section within the prologue. As part of the prologue, this section is guiding the reader to see the invisible in the visible with the climax being the incarnation—the visible manifestation of the Word.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, what John was doing was progressing through his prologue to bring the Word of God in eternity (1:1), before creation, to His manifestation to the world in His incarnation (v. 14). In verse 9 John does not fully state the incarnation of the Word that became flesh, but He is introducing and suggesting this event, which he will not overtly declare until verse 14.

Now even though the term, “light” is repeated here, verse 9 contains additional information that is not previously found in the prologue. First, the Light is described as “The *true* Light.” The Greek construction gives emphasis to this quality of being true. John speaks of “The Light, the True.”<sup>5</sup> That John describes the “Light” as “true”, indicates that the Light is “real, ideal, genuine.”<sup>6</sup> “The emphasis is to make clear that this light is the light *par excellence*, and its qualifier, “true,” implies that it is real, authentic, and genuine even if it is not recognized as such (vv. 10-11).”<sup>7</sup>

What is precisely meant by the idea that *the true Light gives light to every man coming into the world*? There are a number of proposals as to the Gospel writer’s meaning. **William Hendriksen** identified five of them as follows:

- a) Christ, who is the light, actually grants spiritual illumination, in the highest and fullest sense of the term, to every human being dwelling on earth, without exception.
- b) He grants this spiritual illumination, which renews both heart and mind, to every covenant-child (whether elect or not).<sup>8</sup> Some lose it again.
- c) He grants this supreme blessing to every man who is saved; in the sense that not one of the saved receives his illumination from any other source.
- d) He bestows upon every human individual, without exception, the light of reason and conscience.
- e) He illumines every man who hears the Gospel; i.e., he imparts a degree of understanding regarding spiritual matters (not necessarily resulting in salvation) to all those ears and minds are reached by the message of salvation. The majority, however, do not respond favorably. Many who have the light prefer

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<sup>4</sup> Edward W. Klink, III, *John*. Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Zondervan, 2016), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> Greek: τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν (*to phos to alaythinon*)

<sup>6</sup> William Hendriksen, *John*, New Testament Commentary (Baker Academic, 1953), p. 77.

<sup>7</sup> Klink, p. 99.

<sup>8</sup> This would be the view of some who are paedobaptist, who believe that the natural born children of believing parents are “covenant children.” Baptists would reject this position forthrightly.

darkness. Some, however, due entirely to the sovereign, saving grace of God, receive the word with the proper attitude of heart and mind, and obtain everlasting life.

Hendriksen then argues which is the most likely a right interpretation. He wrote:

**a.** and **b.** can be rejected at once. The Fourth Gospel teaches a limited atonement. Not every one is saved, but those who are saved remain saved (10:28). Although **d.** is favored by eminent conservative exegetes and proclaims an element of truth that must not be denied, we do not believe that in this context -- or anywhere in the Fourth Gospel where the term light is used -- the reference is specifically to the light of reason and conscience...

As we see it, the only defensible views are **c.** and **e.** And of these two we prefer the latter (**e.**), for the following reasons. First, this explanation is in harmony with the succeeding context... Secondly, this explanation is also in harmony with the *preceding* context; see verses 4 and 5... Thirdly, this interpretation accords well with similar passages in the same Gospel. Fourthly, this view is entirely in harmony with Hebrews 6:4-8 where the same verb illumine is used here and in 1:9.<sup>9</sup>

Although Hendriksen makes some good points, I believe that there is another, better, understanding of what is expressed in verse 9. The above proposed explanations either speak of understanding of salvation given to all people without distinction, which certainly is not biblical, or to professing Christians or true Christians only. But verse 9 is universal in scope. It seems to speak of all mankind without exception. Hendriksen's understanding limits those influenced by the light of the Word only to those people who have been exposed to the teaching of the Holy Scriptures. Again, verse 9 reads, "The true light, *which gives light to everyone*, was coming into the world." It seems to suggest that this speaks of an understanding of God that God grants to every human being, whether Christian or not. This idea is set forth elsewhere, in that God has revealed His law in a measure to all human beings, rendering them responsible and accountable before God for their knowledge. This was the understanding of **Arthur Pink** that he set forth in his commentary on the Gospel of John:

It speaks of the relation which Christ sustains to men, all men — He is their "light." This is confirmed by what we read in verse 9, "That was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world." In what sense, then, is Christ as "the life" the "light of men?" We answer, in that which renders men accountable creatures. Every rational man is morally enlightened. All rational men "show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness" (Romans 2:15). It is this "light," which lightens every man that cometh into the world, that constitutes them responsible human beings... By nature, spiritually, he is "dead in trespasses and sins." Yet, notwithstanding, the natural man is a responsible being before God, to Whom he shall give an account of himself; responsible, because the work of God's law is written in his heart, his conscience also bearing witness, and this, we take it, is the "light" which is referred to in John 1:4, and the "lighteneth" in John 1:9. "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not" (John 1:5).

Let us again give more direct attention to the word, "light", in verse 9. John wrote, "*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.*" "Light" is used 20 times in John's Gospel. Seven of those occurrences are found in John 1:4-9. And so, the word is repeated in the text itself, and this explains why in our study of this passage this word, "light", keeps resurfacing. I used the word, "light", on 54 occasions in our initial sermon notes on this passage two weeks ago. I used the word, "light", 68 times last in our notes for last Lord's Day. (I have already used the word, "light", 65 times thus far in today's notes.) It is an important word which we need to understand and reinforce as it re-occurs in the text.

In John's Gospel "light" is a reference to Jesus Christ Himself, and more specifically, of the life that Jesus Christ bestows to the world. John had declared this forthrightly in verse 4, "In Him was life, and the life was the light of men." As in the first creation God said, "Let there be Light", which commenced the

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<sup>9</sup> Hendriksen, pp. 78f.

appearance of life in the new world, so when Jesus Christ is perceived for who He is and the light of His life is manifest to them, life results. Paul wrote similarly:

But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, <sup>4</sup>whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the *light* of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. <sup>5</sup>For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. <sup>6</sup>For it is the God who commanded *light* to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*. (2 Cor. 4:3-6)

One final word regarding verse 9. This is the first occasion in which the word “world” is used in John’s Gospel. John uses this term 70 times in His Gospel. We will see that there are a number of different nuances of meaning of this term, which must be considered as we consider this word in its various contexts.

## II. The World does not know the Word. (1:10)

John 1:10 reads, *“He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.”* The word, “world”, was first used at the end of verse 9, which we just considered. However, it is used three times here in verse 10 and it is in this verse that the term becomes used in a way that is reflected in many places in John’s Gospel. As one stated,

Although “world” is first mentioned in v. 9, it is in v. 10 where it begins to receive important definition, which becomes foundational to the use of this central term in the Gospel.<sup>10</sup>

Notice the “movement” of the Word of God with respect to “the world” from verse 9 to verse 10. In verse 9 we read of the “the true Light (Word)” *“coming into* the world”, but in verse 10 we read that *“He was in* the world.” In verse 9 John spoke of the “Light” of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, or the eternally begotten Son of God, as coming into the world throughout history, illuminating all mankind with (general) knowledge of the true God and knowledge of sin in the conscience of all people everywhere.<sup>11</sup> But in verse 10 we have a reference to the incarnation, to the person of Jesus Christ throughout His earthly sojourn, but the world did not know Him. **Arthur Pink** agreed with this understanding of verse 10:

“He was in the world” refers, we believe, to His incarnation and the thirty-three years during which He tabernacled among men. Then it is said “and the world was made by him.” This is to magnify the Divine glory of the One who had become incarnate, and to emphasize the tragedy of what follows, “and the world knew him not.” “He was in the world.” Who was? None other than the One who had made it. And how was He received? The great Creator was about to appear: will not a thrill of glad expectancy run around the world? He is coming not to judge, but to save. He is to appear not as a haughty Despot, but as a Man “holy, harmless, undefiled;” not to be ministered unto, but to minister. Will not such an One receive a hearty welcome? Alas, “the world knew him not.” Full of their own schemes and pursuits, they thought nothing of Him. Unspeakably tragic is this, yet something even more pathetic follows.

John declared that “the world was made *through* Him.” The Greek preposition is quite precise in its meaning. The Word, that is, the preincarnate Word of God, was the *agent* through whom God created the world. In creation God the Father had issued the decree to create. God the Son was the agent Who then executed the decree to create. The Son of God created the world(s) through the power of the Holy Spirit. Other places in the New Testament that speak of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity as the Creator use the same precise language. For example, consider these few verses:

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<sup>10</sup> Klink, p. 101.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom. 1:21.

“For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created *through Him* and for Him. (Col. 1:16)

“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup>but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things, *through Whom* also He created the world.” (Heb. 1:1f)

With regard to the Word of God as the agent through which God (the Father) created all things, we might consider a word from Isaiah’s prophecy. Although the passage is commonly applied to the Holy Scriptures, and can as easily, if not more so, be applied to the Living Word of God that God the Father sent on His creative and redemptive missions.

Seek the LORD while He may be found,  
Call upon Him while He is near.  
<sup>7</sup>Let the wicked forsake his way,  
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
Let him return to the LORD,  
And He will have mercy on him;  
And to our God,  
For He will abundantly pardon.

<sup>8</sup>“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways,” says the LORD.

<sup>9</sup>“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways,  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

<sup>10</sup>“For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,  
And do not return there,  
But water the earth,  
And make it bring forth and bud,  
That it may give seed to the sower  
And bread to the eater,

<sup>11</sup>***So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;  
It shall not return to Me void,  
But it shall accomplish what I please,  
And it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.***

<sup>12</sup>“For you shall go out with joy,  
And be led out with peace;  
The mountains and the hills  
Shall break forth into singing before you,  
And all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isaiah 55:6-12)

Again, this passage is commonly applied to the Holy Scriptures, the written Word of God. And that is good that is applied in that way. But if you read it carefully, you see that the Word is personified. The Word is He that goes forth out of God’s mouth, in other words, the Word is an active entity going forth due to God’s decree (from His mouth). This Word accomplishes the purpose for which He was sent, and then He returns to God having accomplished all of God’s will. This is what the Pre-incarnate Word of God did in the creation of all things. This is also what the Word of God did in His incarnation. God sent Him forth and He

came into this world to accomplish all that the Father had assigned Him to do, securing the redemption of His people, reconciling the fallen and rebellious world unto Himself.

Now in John 1:10 we have stated that this world that God the Son had created was ignorant of Him. “...**and the world did not know Him.**” The New International Version (NIV) and the new Christian Standard Version (CSV) translate this clause, “the world did not *recognize* him.” This speaks of the incapability of people to know God, even though God has manifested Himself in very clear, continual, and extensive ways. The Light of God’s glory has bathed this world with the presence and knowledge of God, yet man does not “see” Him, does not “know” Him.

This conveys the truth that is everywhere found in the Holy Scriptures. We cannot know the one true God unless God reveals Himself to us individually. There are two reasons for this inability that characterizes each of us. ***First, there is the problem that God is an infinite spiritual being and we are finite physical beings.*** This renders us unable to know God in truth. There is a vast, even infinite distance between who God is and who we are. There is nothing created and physical which can accurately or fully depict or represent Him to us. God is infinite in all of His attributes and He is unchangeable in all of His dealings. He is too vast for our comprehension. He is too holy for our abiding in His presence, even seeing His presence as He is in truth is not possible for us. God Himself said, “Man shall not see me and live” (Exo. 33:20).

***The second reason we cannot know God is because we are sinners, and sin has rendered us unable to know Him through our own reason or effort.*** The Word of God teaches us, “There is none that seeks after God.” That would mean, of course, that sinful man unaided by God’s grace will not seek after the true God. When the true God begins to reveal Himself to fallen man, unless God has done in inward work of grace in his soul, he will continue void of redemptive grace. He will as Adam and flee from God and attempt to hide himself from Him (Cf. Gen. 3:8).

Because of our two-fold inability--we are finite and sinful--, if God is to be known by us, God must reveal Himself to us. It is a work of God’s grace in illumination that He reveals Himself to sinners. God must show us what He is like by what He has done and does. And He does so by the Holy Spirit illuminating the “true Light” in His Word, the Bible. God must reveal Himself to us by communicating to us through His Word that He has imparted to us. And it is only through Jesus Christ that we can know the true God, because in Him is joined His divine nature and our human nature. In this way we can come to know the true God as Jesus Christ reveals Him to us. Only through Jesus Christ are we able to have a relationship with God that we can experience and enjoy.

Our Lord Jesus Himself affirmed the inability that we have as finite, sinful creatures to know the true God apart from Him. He said these words:

“All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Matt. 11:27).

Before we move on from verse 10, let us consider closely the three uses of the word, “world.” We have said in the past that ultimately the precise definition of a word is shaped by the context in which the word is used. Here in verse 10, the first two uses of “world” carries the idea of the physical, created universe. But the third use of “world” carries a different meaning. It speaks of the human race; “the term is shown in its living, relational sense in the third clause.”<sup>12</sup> **Leon Morris** wrote,

Notice the subtle shift in meaning of the word “world.” On the first two occasions it refers to the earth together with all that is in it, including man. But on this third occasion it signifies men at large, more particularly those men who came into contact with Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Klink, p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 95f.

In order to interpret the Bible as God would have us do, we must pay close attention to the meaning of words within the sentence/context in which they are found.

### III. His own people did not receive Him. (1:11)

We read in John 1:11, “*He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him.*” This is a reference to the Jewish people generally. Only a relative few, a remnant of Jews believed on Jesus as the promised Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of God. This was one of the great “scandals” that the early churches had to overcome as it proclaimed the Gospel to the Roman world. The challenge would commonly arise, “If Jesus of Nazareth was the promised King of the Jews, why did not the Jews believe Him to be so?”

This was the charge that the Apostle Paul addressed in some detail and length in Romans 9. After Paul expressed his own love and concern for the salvation of the Jewish people, and as he was aware of this “question” that always loomed in the presentation of the Gospel, “Why did not the Jews believe on Him?”, Paul responded:

(1) It is not as though God had failed in an effort to save them, that their refusal to believe frustrated or defeated God’s purposes in history. Paul wrote in Romans 9:6, “But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.” That God failed in an effort to save some people is an unbiblical, even absurd idea.

(2) He then went on to declare, “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, ‘In Isaac your seed shall be called’” (Rom. 9:6, 7).

Here Paul draws a distinction between “Israel” and “Israel.” Our dispensational friends argue vehemently against our reformed theology when we advocate the Bible distinguishes between *physical Israel*, who are comprised of ethnic Jewish people, the physical descendants of Abraham, and *spiritual Israel*, which are all those who are saved from their sin by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. But here the apostle states the matter forthrightly. The Israel of God, the true people of God, are not identified by physical descent but by spiritual life imparted by God due to His promise to Abraham.

Paul stated very clearly in Romans 9:8, “That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.” Paul argued that this was true with Abraham’s children specifically. Although Abraham fathered Ishmael, long before Isaac was born, Ishmael was not heir to the promises that God had given to Abraham. Rather, God had promised Abraham that it was through Sarah that a child would be born that would be the heir of His promise to Abraham. Paul wrote in Romans 9:9, “For this is the word of promise: ‘At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son.’” Elsewhere Paul argues that true believers in Jesus Christ are children of promise, as Isaac was a child of promise. Whether or not they are Jewish or Gentile is immaterial (Gal. 4:28). Just as Isaac was the son that God had promised to Abraham and Sarah, so it is true of you, if you are a Christian, you are also a child of promise that God had promised to be redeemed and made a member of the family of God.

(3) Paul declared the fact that God’s promise of salvation was not based on physical descent by arguing from Jacob and Rebecca’s twin sons. Before they were born, contrary to convention, God declared to Rebecca that the younger son would have preeminence over the older; in other words, God’s grace in the promise of blessing of Abraham would be bestowed on Jacob but not on Esau, even though they were both physical descendants of the same father and mother, Isaac and Rebecca. Paul is proving by this that the blessing of God is not conveyed according to physical descent; rather, it is conferred upon those according to God’s election.

(4) Paul declared clearly that the reason God dealt in this way was to demonstrate that salvation was due wholly to God’s sovereign grace, not due to anything that a person does or does not do. God has elected sinners from fallen humanity and He has promised that He would save them from their sin wholly through His grace. Paul stated regarding God’s choice of Jacob and not Esau: “for the children not yet being born,



nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who calls” (Rom. 9:11).

Now when John wrote, “He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him”, he did not give a specific reason why this was the case. He was not arguing here as Paul did elsewhere that it was all in the sovereign purpose of God. What John is implying here is that Jesus Christ had come unto His own people, who should have recognized Him and acknowledged Him, but they failed to do so. John did not state it forthrightly, but it is certainly implied, that the Jewish people were to be faulted for their failure, for they had refused Him even though God had so wonderfully taught them and prepared them for His coming. Later in his Gospel he will state the reason that the entire world refused to receive Him. In John we read, “And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil” (John 3:19).

And of course, when we speak of the culpability of the Jewish people for not having received Him, we are not in any way putting them down and justifying ourselves. If it were not for the grace of God operative in our lives, we, too, would have continued to live in unbelief and in defiance of God’s laws and of His rightful rule over our lives.

#### **IV. The blessing of those who did receive Him.** (John 1:12, 13)

We read in verses 12 and 13 the wonderful blessing of those who receive Jesus Christ. John wrote, ***“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God”*** (1:12-13).

##### **A. “But as many as received Him...”**

Although His own people, the Jewish people, for the most part did not receive Him (as He is set forth in John’s Prologue), some did and do. And those who do so, are not necessarily Jewish, but Gentile as well.

While the world and its representative, the Jewish people, rejected the Savior, individuals accepted Him. But these persons receive the greatest spiritual benefit without respect to nationality or physical descent. The expression “as many as” amounts to “whosoever” whether Jewish or Gentile. The Jew was very slow to learn that in the new dispensation there are no special privileges based on physical relationships. And the evangelist is keenly aware of this Jewish trait, as he indicates again and again in his book. It is, therefore, not at all strange that John dwells on this great truth and develops it in some detail in verse 14.<sup>14</sup>

To them He gave the right or authority to become the children of God.

Now verse 12 is commonly used to justify and advocate the need or responsibility for the sinner to do something in order to obtain salvation. It is asserted that “to receive Him” means “to accept Him.” And although this is true, in a measure, it can be somewhat misleading. In other words, this idea of “receiving Him” is commonly used to appeal to non-Christians to make a decision “to accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior”, or to “accept Him into your heart”, which they are then told, “If you do this, then you will be saved.” This spirit of decisionism permeates evangelicalism. It is the belief that fallen man has the ability “to do his part” combined with “God doing His part”, which then results in salvation. In contrast to this combined effort of both God and man, which is sometimes called *synergism*, the Bible teaches *monergism*, that salvation is wholly due to God’s grace alone.

I would suggest that the idea of those who “received Him” in verse 12 describes more of a passive reception of Christ *bestowed* by God rather than an active acceptance of Christ *offered* by God. Please do

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<sup>14</sup> Hendriksen, pp. 80f.

not misunderstand, we are not saying that sinners do not have a responsibility when they hear and learn of Christ. Certainly they do. They are commanded to repent of their sin and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. But the idea of “receiving” Christ, I would suggest, is more of a result of God’s work of grace in the soul rather than an act our will in “accepting Christ.” Consider what this commentator had to say:

John simply begins v. 12 by telling that some “received him, in sharp contrast to those described in vv. 10-11. The term “received” can have a more general meaning related to reception (“receive what is offered”) or a more specific meaning related to authority (“accept or recognize someone’s authority”). Interestingly, the term is found to have the latter meaning in 5:43 and 13:20, and in both cases it is equated with “to believe” (cf. 5:44 and 13:19), matching the context of v. 12.

It would seem to me that John was giving great emphasis in verse 13 that the blessing these ones experienced, although conveyed to them through having “received Him”, was due solely to the sovereign regenerating grace of God, not due to some action they took. John very clearly stated after identifying them who received Him, that they “*were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God*” (v. 13).

It is very easy to understand this having “received Him” as something that has happened to you due to the grace of God rather than something you attained or obtained through taking action. This idea of having passively received Christ may be compared to Christians having passively received the Holy Spirit. We read in Acts 19 that Paul had encountered some Gentiles in Ephesus who had been baptized according to the baptism of John the Baptist, for they had not heard that Jesus Christ had appeared. In order for Paul to assess their spiritual condition he asked them the question, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” They responded to him, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit” (Acts 19:2). Paul was not asking them if they had “accepted” the Holy Spirit, but rather, had they experienced the risen Lord Jesus imparting the Holy Spirit to them, no doubt, looking for the same experience that had occurred to other believers on the Day of Pentecost.

Just as you and I received the Holy Spirit when God caused us to be born again, so we also had received Jesus Christ. Paul spoke of salvation as “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). When did you “receive” Christ? It happened when God in His sovereign grace caused you to be born again.

#### **B. “...to them He gave the right to become children of God...”**

This speaks of the blessing and privilege of becoming children in the family of God. As Christians, God is our Father, Jesus Christ is our elder brother (the first born Son), and we are brothers and sisters in God’s family. Our reception of Jesus Christ, even our believing on His name, gives us the right to this title and position.

I suspect that none of us can fathom what blessing this will bring to us one day. It brings blessing to us now in a great measure, most certainly. There are many promises in the Scriptures that are ours because we are God’s children that non-believers have no right to expect to regard as theirs. God has promised to provide for us as our Father. God has promised to protect us as a Father. God has promised to raise us as His children who are the objects of His loving attention and action. God the Father has promised His children that they will share in the inheritance of all things that was secured and given to His Son Jesus Christ. But there is future blessing of being His children that will only be realized by us at our future resurrection.

Paul wrote this regarding the glorious future that lies before us:

<sup>14</sup>For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” <sup>16</sup>The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, <sup>17</sup>and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

<sup>18</sup>For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. <sup>19</sup>For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; <sup>21</sup>because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. <sup>22</sup>For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. <sup>23</sup>Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. <sup>24</sup>For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. (Rom. 1:14-25)

We will address this matter more fully at a later time, Lord willing.

### C. *“to those who believe in His name...”*

John wrote that those who “received Him” are those who “are believing on His name.” The tense of the Greek verb, “believe” is in the present tense. It describes an action that is continuous. This is the result of having received Him. Contrary to the error of decisionism that often claims that a one-time decision or one-time act of faith in Jesus constitutes saving faith, John 1:12 identifies true Christians as continual believers—they are believing on His name. And believing “on His name” is much more than just trusting Him to forgive you. “Believing on His name” means to embrace everything His name includes.

The ‘name’ is more than a label; it is the character of the person, or even the person himself. ...such faith yields allegiance to the Word, trusts him completely, acknowledges his claims and confesses him with gratitude. This is what it means to ‘receive’ him.<sup>15</sup>

Here is a more extensive description of the meaning of “name”:

Notice they are to believe “on his name.” The “name” meant much more to people of antiquity than it does to us. For us it is a mere appellative, a convenient label whereby we distinguish one person from another. We ask, “What’s in a name?” and answer (with Shakespeare), “that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” The name for us is a matter of indifference. Not so in the ancient world. For men then it stood for the whole personality. When, for example, the Psalmist spoke of loving the name of God (Psa. 5:11), or when he prayed, “The name of the God of Jacob set thee up on high” (Psa. 20:1), he did not have in mind simply uttering the name, he was thinking of all that “God” means. The name in some way expressed the whole person. To believe “on the name” of the Word, then, means to trust the person of the Word. It is to believe in Him as He is. It is to believe that God is the God we see revealed in the Word and to put our trust in that God. This is more than simple credence. It is not believing that what He says is true, but trusting Him as a person. It is believing “in” or “on” Him.<sup>16</sup>

### D. *“...who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (1:13)*

John wrote of those who had received Him, those who are believing on His name, those who were given the right to become the children of God, that they “were born.” The form of the verb is a passive voice, aorist tense verb. It speaks of a single event that occurred in the experience of everyone who has become a true Christian. They “were born.” It speaks of a singular act of God in which He caused them to be spiritually born (again). He was declaring that this birth in which God had brought them *preceded* their believing. The ones who are believing *were* born of God. Here is a statement which declares faith to be

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<sup>15</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 125f.

<sup>16</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (William B. Eerdmans, 1971), p. 99.

subsequent to (to follow) the new birth, not the cause of it. Many evangelicals are wrongly taught that by believing you become born again. No, the Bible teaches that because you have been born again, you become a believer. The new birth precedes and results in true, continuing faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

Nowhere in the Bible does God provide steps you can take that will result in becoming born again. The new birth is a work of God's grace alone. The ones that experience the new birth are ones that God in His sovereignty has chosen to save from their sin and to bring them into His family.

Now in order for John to emphasize that the new birth is the work of God's grace and not due to something done or accomplished through the individual, he excludes all other possible explanations. Of Christians John says of them, "***who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.***" The way in which the Greek text reads is interesting. In order to emphasize the grace of God in the new birth, John first negates all other possible suggestions that some might wrongly believe resulted in the new birth. The verb "were born", although expressed at the beginning of the clause in all of the English translations, actually is positioned as the last word in the sentence by John. He did this for emphasis. If we were to follow the order in the Greek text but express it in English, it would read this way: "Who, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God were born." He negates any alternative cause of the new birth, and then concluded by asserting that God alone is the cause of the new birth.

1. John first declared that they were born again "***not of blood.***"

It matters not who your daddy is. There was a time when it did matter. Under the old covenant if you were a physically born descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you would be regarded within the covenant community of God. This did not mean that you had salvation, but you were greatly privileged and blessed being a citizen of Israel, that is, as long as the community was obedient to its covenant commitment and responsibility to keep the law of God. Then it mattered who your father was. Physical birth to a father or mother in the covenant brought you the privilege and blessing of being in that covenant community. It mattered who your parents were. The blessing of God came through the blood, through the natural descent from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But with the onset of the new covenant age, the one who came into the covenant community did so not based on if his parent was a believer, but he individually repented of his sin and believed the gospel. John the Baptist said it this way:

<sup>8</sup>Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup>Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:8-10)

This is where we differ significantly from our paedobaptist reformed friends and brethren. They teach that natural born children of believing parents are to be regarded as "covenant" children. They wrongly claim that Acts 2:38f supports their position. There Peter declared on the Day of Pentecost:

"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup> For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, ***everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.***" (Acts 2:38f).

No, it is not a promise to all children of believers, but a promise to as many as the Lord God calls to Himself. John declared that becoming a child of God is not due in any way to one's blood relation. That former distinction between peoples is set aside in the gospel. People do not become children of God through natural, physical birth, but through the spiritual birth that God brings about by His grace alone.

2. John then declared that they were born again not of blood, "***nor of the will of the flesh.***"

This dispels any idea that there is something you can do to bring about the new birth. People are not born again because of their “free will”, so-called. It is a work of God’s sovereign grace. If you hear anyone teach that if you follow certain steps the result will be your new birth, your regeneration, you should recognize immediately that one to be in error. People are not saved by their will, but due to God’s will.

3. And then John declared that they were born again not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, ***“nor of the will of man.”***

No man, however, sincere he is, however skilled he may be, however intelligent, winsome, articulate, accurate, precise in his speech--no man--can bring about the new birth of another. We are wholly incapable of bringing about new life in others. Oh yes, we can through our influence perhaps persuade someone to embrace in a measure what we believe and think, but in time he will prove only to be a proselyte, but no true convert. Yes, thankfully, God can use us, that is, use the message we proclaim to bring about the new birth in our hearers, but it is a matter wholly according to His sovereign pleasure, according to His grace. God uses the gospel to cause people to be born again, and we are privileged to proclaim the gospel. And thankfully, God is often pleased to bless the gospel we preach, causing people to be born again. But again, it is all due to the sovereign grace of God, but only if and when He chooses to do so. We are called to proclaim the Word faithfully, fully, and frequently. And we are to pray to God that He will bless His Word to the conversion of souls, causing them to be born again, giving to them the right to become children of God. May the Lord bless His gospel to the conversion of many in our day.

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Christ “we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom,  
that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” (Col. 1:28)

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Excursus

## The Sovereign Will of God or the Free Will of Man

By Pastor Lars Larson, PhD

The heart of the issue is this: *When God brings salvation to people, does He save them as a result of their choice born out of their free will, or rather, does God save His people wholly through His sovereign grace?* We are Reformed, which means that we understand the Scriptures to teach that salvation is wholly through the grace of God who saves His people due ultimately to *His* will. This must be so, for a sinful man does not have a free will, if what is meant by that he is capable to respond to God's invitation to salvation. *His will is free only in the sense that he is free to do as his mind and his affections incline him.* The problem is that his mind and affections are sinful, and so his will, that is, the choices he makes, are sinful also, and he has no ability in himself to change. That people are saved by the will of God, not by man's will, may be shown throughout Scripture. But we might simply cite **John 1:12** and **13**, in which the matter is stated quite clearly:

He (Jesus) was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. <sup>11</sup>He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. <sup>12</sup>But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, <sup>13</sup>who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh *nor of the will of man, but of God.*"

This debate about man's "free will" has raged since the early centuries of the Christian era (actually, even before that). Fallen man does not want to accept the teaching of Scripture that if a man is to be saved, it must be due to the grace of God alone. This matter of man's will has continuously emerged over history as a challenge to the biblical teaching of grace alone. One of the major opponents of grace came upon the scene in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. His name was **Pelagius**. Pelagius was born around AD 354 in the British Isles. He was a well-educated man, fluent in both Greek and Latin, and schooled in theology. He was generally known as a devout man who sought to live a holy life. He traveled to Rome and soon made a name for himself. He was a skilled orator and gathered a number of faithful followers of himself.

In about AD 405 Pelagius heard a quotation from **Augustine**, in his book, *Confessions*, which read, "Give me what you command and command what you will." Augustine believed and taught the sovereignty of God's grace in election and predestination. He also developed the teaching of the Bible regarding original sin, the teaching that Adam's sin resulted in the human race becoming sinners, wholly slaves to sin unless and until God sets them free. Pelagius reacted to Augustine's theology, claiming, teaching, and writing that *man has a free will and is able to believe the gospel apart from God's enabling grace.* Pelagius also denied the teaching of original sin, one aspect of that being that man's will was also corrupted by Adam's fall into sin. Augustine withstood Pelagius, writing and preaching in order to refute him and check his influence among Christians. Later Pelagius traveled to Palestine, where **Jerome**, the translator of the Latin Vulgate Version of the Bible, opposed him and his teaching. Eventually Pelagius was charged with heresy and a council was convened to assess and pass judgment on his teachings. Interestingly, Pelagius was exonerated at the first council held (the Council of Diospolis). But later, at the Council of Carthage (AD 418), the free will taught by Pelagius was condemned as unbiblical. Pelagianism was thereafter regarded as heresy.

After that official finding of the churches, rather than Pelagianism falling by the wayside, it morphed into a hybrid form of heresy which much later came to be known as **semi-Pelagianism**. This is *the teaching that man and God can cooperate to a certain degree in this salvation effort.* Full-blown Pelagianism teaches that man can, unaided by God's grace, make the first move toward God, and God then completes the salvation process. *Semi-Pelagianism teaches that man's will is free, but is aided by the grace of God to believe.* Semi-Pelagianism is also a denial of *sola gratia*, by grace alone, as is full Pelagianism. Semi-Pelagianism also teaches "free will", in other words, a man by his own effort or work may be coupled with God's grace which then results in salvation. Another term that is often used to describe this teaching is **synergism**. This is taken from two Greek words, *erg*, meaning "work", and *syn*, meaning "together." Synergism describes the teaching that both man and God cooperate together resulting in the man's salvation. This is a denial of *sola gratia*, that salvation is by grace alone.

Now some may wonder why we take the time to describe a heresy that was dealt with nearly 1700 years ago. It is because this error has existed in one form or another ever since the days of Pelagius. And it is widespread today. Interestingly, although Roman Catholicism declared Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism to be heresy, Rome itself teaches a semi-Pelagian gospel. Rome teaches that salvation is by God's grace, but is by the free will of man also.

This is one of the points of belief that cause us to regard ourselves as a Reformed church. The word that is commonly used to describe God's work alone is **monergism**, from *erg* meaning work, and *mono*, meaning "alone." The historic reformed position is that of **monergism: *God of His own free will saves His people***. We believe in monergism. God alone takes the initiative and saves His people by His grace. God comes to sinners who are condemned and incapable of responding to Him due to their sin, and He illuminates their hearts and minds to the truths of the gospel. God regenerates them, that is, causes them to be born again, thereby enabling their willing belief and compliance to the gospel. **Martin Luther** said this about "free will", so-called:

I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, My Lord, or come to Him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in truth faith.

Luther debated the Roman Catholic theologian, **Erasmus**, on the issue of the human will. One of Luther's classic books, *The Bondage of the Will*, is a record of Luther's arguments in this debate. The church historian, **Michael Haykin** stated,

The Reformation was not merely about justification through faith alone but, **more importantly**, it considered "...whether sinners are wholly helpless in their sin, and whether God is to be thought of as saving them by free, unconditional, invincible grace, not only justifying them for Christ's sake when they come to faith, but also raising them from the death of sin by His quickening Spirit in order to bring them to faith."

A generation after the initial Protestant Reformers, **Jacob Arminius** arose and taught a semi-Pelagian gospel. Those whose positions regarding the way of salvation agree with Arminius are known as **Arminians**. Arminians are semi-Pelagian. Although they may claim to believe in salvation by grace alone, it is their teaching that it is God's grace coupled with man's "free will" that brings about salvation. They hold to synergism, the cooperation and contribution of both God's grace and man's free will, that results in salvation. The Gospel of Arminianism is synergism, not monergism, which the Bible teaches.

Semi-Pelagianism, or synergism, is alive and well today. In fact, most evangelicals believe in a semi-Pelagian gospel. They believe and teach that man has a free will, that although he is a fallen, sinful creature. They believe that with some help from God, fallen man has the ability to freely believe on Jesus Christ for salvation. They may claim to believe salvation is by grace alone, but in reality they do not believe the Scriptures. They hold to the belief that God has made a plan of salvation and that it is up to man and his free will to respond to that gospel, resulting in his salvation. This is unbiblical. God's Word declares that salvation is by God's grace alone, not of any man's works. Salvation is of the Lord first to last.

*Sola gratia* (by grace alone, i.e. monergism) believes that in regeneration (the new birth) the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ independent of any cooperation from our unregenerate human nature. God quickens us (makes us spiritually alive) through the outward call of the preaching of His Word. God "disarms our innate hostility, removes our blindness, illumines our mind, creates understanding within us, turns our heart of stone to a heart of flesh resulting in a love of His Word, all that we might, with our renewed affections, willingly and gladly embrace Christ" (John Hendryx). We believe in man's will, but it is not free until God sets it free through the new birth. Then and only then are we able to respond to God in faith.

Most Christians deny this. They are Arminians. They are semi-Pelagian. They believe and teach that God saves people through man's cooperation. This is a denial of the clear teaching of Scripture. It takes away from the glory that is due to God alone. --