

CHAPTER ONE

THE TRUE VOICE

*“Twas much, that man was made like God before,
But that God should be made like man, much more.”*

-John Donne

Though his life started in beauty, it ended in tragedy. His name was “Adam” — a life-size sculpture of the Biblical figure dating back to the 15th century. During Adam’s tenure at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, he toppled from his pedestal, shattering into hundreds of pieces. At the time, no one was quite certain just how he fell, let alone how to reassemble his fragments into a cohesive whole. Personally, I feel bad for the poor security guard who had to convince his supervisor: “It was like that when I clocked in this morning.” But when Carol Vogel chronicled the restoration project for *The New York Times*, her article’s title could just as easily serve as mankind’s collective autobiography: “Recreating Adam, From Hundreds of Pieces, After the Fall.”¹

For centuries, Adam and Eve have served as icons of humanity’s fall from grace. The Christian story starts with “In the beginning,” then readers watch in horror as tragedy unfolds. And for the rest of human history, all of our educational efforts, political programs, and religious rituals have been a long-standing attempt to put the shattered fragments back together again.

DOES LIFE HAVE MEANING?

Adam’s legacy leaves us asking a basic question: What is the meaning of life? For most of western history, the answer to this question has been found in family ties and religious traditions. Today’s culture insists that meaning and purpose ultimately rest with the individual. “There is no one big cosmic meaning for all,” writes international novelist Anaías Nin. “There is only the meaning we give to our life, an individual meaning, an individual plot, like an individual novel, a book for each person.”²

On the surface, this sounds liberating. Set free from the confines of the past, you and I live by only one absolute rule: “be true to yourself.” And everyone from Walt Disney to our political pundits hammer home the same message: a message extolling the great, irrepressible *You*. In fact, to suggest

¹ Carol Vogel, “Recreating Adam, From Hundreds of Pieces, After the Fall,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/09/arts/design/recreating-adam-from-hundreds-of-fragments-after-the-fall.html>

² Anaías Nin, *The Diary of Anaías Nin: Volume II*. (United States: Harcourt and Brace Company, 1967), 45.

that someone conform to an external tradition or set of ideals is, at best, culturally backward — and at worst a violent act of oppression.

Being “true to yourself” may be superficially liberating, but it’s ultimately exhausting. Why? Because if I’m in charge of constructing my own identity, I’m also in charge of my own upkeep. I have to work hard to ensure that you see me for my perfected surface, those traits that I want you to associate with me.

I learned this lesson in another art gallery. The Dallas Museum of Art was featuring a traveling exhibit of the works of Henri Matisse. If you’re familiar with the artist, you know he paints nudes — though you’d never quite know it by looking at them. His paintings are composed of large blocks and circles of solid colors, arranged in such a way that the finished work resembles the human form. What I didn’t know is that before putting brush to canvas, Matisse would cut out shapes of colored paper, then use thumbtacks to arrange them on the canvas until he got it just right. But when you see his artwork in person, you see all the tiny pinpricks that dot each canvas — the evidence of a painter who had to keep arranging and rearranging over and over and over again until he finally got it right.

So, again, being “true to yourself” condemns you to a lifetime of trying to construct and maintain your image. Lose weight. Wear the right clothes. Get a good job. Eat clean. Younger generations are particularly vulnerable to an image-obsessed world, which is why they spend so much time preening on social media. Over time, our souls develop “pinpricks” of their own — the painful remnants of a lifetime spent trying to “get it right.”

What we need is a voice to guide us, to help us understand who we are, where we’ve come from, and where we’re going. Indie artist Fleet Foxes sing of this hope in their song “Helplessness Blues:” “What’s my name, what’s my station? Oh, just tell me what I should do.”³ As we open the pages of John’s biography of Jesus, we find a Light that illuminates our confusion.

THE ETERNAL WORD

When John opens his gospel, he doesn’t take us to the Christmas-card images of the manger. He takes us back before the wise men and the shepherds, back to when time first began. It’s as if John wants to emphasize that if we want to understand this strange story of Jesus, we must understand him on the broader landscape of eternity. And so, John cribs directly from the pages of Genesis, telling us:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was fully God. The Word was with God in the beginning. All things were created by him, and apart from him not one thing was created that has been created. In him was life, and the life was the light of mankind. And the light shines on in the darkness, but the darkness has not mastered it.” (John 1:1-5)

³ Fleet Foxes, “Helplessness Blues,” from the 2011 album of the same name.

John's entire prologue is saturated in rich, theological truth. Here, he starts by telling us that Jesus is the eternal "Word" of God. In many cultures, a person's "word" is associated with a person's character. We might say, "I'll take your word for it," or "He's as good as his word." Here, something similar is happening. As one writer puts it, "Where God is, his Word is, and vice versa."⁴

Read John's gospel in its original Greek, and you'll see that it goes even deeper than that. "Word" is a translation of the Greek term *Logos*, a word would be understood differently based on a person's cultural background. For the ancient Greeks, the *Logos* was something like the "voice of reason" in philosophy. These readers would have instantly understood John as saying that Jesus gives order and meaning to all that exists. Jewish readers would have seen multiple layers of meaning behind the *Logos*. First, God creates the entire universe "with a word of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6), a fact that John himself repeats in these opening verses. Second, readers would connect the *Logos* with the "Word of God" — that is, the Bible itself (Psalm 119:105). Still other Jewish texts described Wisdom as a woman who "raises her voice" (Proverbs 8:1), which may also have influenced John's thinking. Finally, God's word carried the promise of salvation and healing for the people of God (Psalm 107:20). Jesus, therefore, represents "the personal energy of Jehovah and the rationality of a Greek philosopher."⁵

While these shades of meaning are all present in this single *Logos*, they all terminate on the same point. If you want to find life's ultimate meaning, John says, you won't find it in a set of abstract principles. You'll find it in a Person. John Calvin famously observed that you can't truly know yourself until you know who God is,⁶ and here John makes something of the same point. If you want to truly understand what life is fundamentally about, you'll find it in the person of Jesus Christ.

DIVINE CHOREOGRAPHY

John goes further. He claims that this eternal Word "was with God and the Word was God." At first blush, this may sound confusing. How can Jesus be *with* God as well as *be* God? What we're seeing is a sliver of a much larger idea known as the Trinity. According to this belief, God eternally exists as a community of three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God, yet wholly distinct from the others. That's why elsewhere, Jesus tells his closest followers that "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (John 14:9-10). Father and Son share a claim to be an eternal, self-existent Creator God, but they remain distinct from one another — and distinct from the Spirit.

The mystery of the Trinity has captivated minds since the days of the early church. C.S. Lewis noted that "In Christianity God is not a static thing...but a dynamic, pulsating activity, a life, almost a kind of drama. Almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance." Dance may be an overstatement, though there is something of a "diving choreography" to the whole thing. And in Jesus, the choreography changed, though adhering to God's divine script. The Father sends the Son, and in turn the two send the Spirit. Jesus, the eternal Son, steps from heaven's stage to the earthly one, and in so doing "acted out the drama of man's salvation."⁷

⁴ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 472.

⁵ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*. (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 15-16.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.1.

⁷ Eric Osborn, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy*, Quoted from Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 39.

THE RESPONSE OF THE WORLD TO THE WORD

Jesus is no mere moral teacher; he is God himself. John goes on to explain how Jesus' forerunner, John the Baptist, would roll out the red carpet — only to experience a mixed response:

“A man came, sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify about the light, so that everyone might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify about the light.

The true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was created by him, but the world did not recognize him. He came to what was his own, but his own people did not receive him. But to all who have received him— those who believe in his name— he has given the right to become God's children — children not born by human parents or by human desire or a husband's decision, but by God.” (John 1:6-13)

The message of Jesus Christ would not fully penetrate the minds of ancient hearers any more than it does our minds today. In a Christmas sermon, N.T. Wright notes the bizarre nature of Christ's earthly arrival:

“Christmas is not about the living God coming to tell us everything's all right. John's gospel isn't about Jesus speaking the truth and everyone saying ‘Of course! Why didn't we realize it before?’ It is about God shining his clear, bright torch into the darkness of our world, our lives, our hearts, our imaginations, and the darkness not comprehending it. It's about God, God-as-a-little-child, speaking the word of truth, and nobody knowing what he's talking about.”⁸

Why would Jesus be greeted with such a response? John has already given us a clue at the conclusion of the preceding section. “The light shines in the darkness,” John tells us. “But the darkness has not *mastered* it.” The word here is deliberately ambiguous, and even some English translations seem to struggle with what John means exactly. Does John mean that the light of Jesus cannot be *overcome* by human evil, or that the light of Jesus cannot be *understood* by human ignorance? The original Greek term (*katalambano*) seems to indicate both, and here the rendering “mastered” perfectly captures John's dual meaning. John is concerned about both moral as well as intellectual darkness, a problem that remains a challenge even today.

First, some people reject Jesus out of an open hostility toward the Christian message. For example, some might point out that Christianity has been responsible for a great deal of historic injustice. Likewise, to suggest that Jesus is the only way is dogmatic and intolerant. After all, aren't we all God's children? This may not be “evil” of the moustache-twirling variety, but it still represents an opposition to Christian belief.

Second, some people reject him out of a confused perception of who God is. Look again at John's text: “he came to what was his own, and his own people did not receive him.” In John's day, this was the people of Israel who refused to acknowledge Jesus' claims to kingship. Today, it's the

⁸ N.T. Wright, “What is This Word?” appearing online at <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/03/29/what-is-this-word/>

church crowd, or at least the ones who call themselves God’s children by virtue of their moral records or religious upbringing.

If we jump down a bit, John challenges both of these positions with his final verse: “No one has ever seen God,” he admits. Yet “the only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known” (John 1:18). In John’s Greek, the phrase “made God known” comes from a single Greek term (*exegesato* — where scholars get the word “exegesis”). The term referred to scholars pouring over ancient texts to try and discover the meaning. It’s no stretch to say that Jesus is the *narration* of God. Everything about the Bible ultimately points to Jesus.

So, if you’re a skeptic, you have to contend with the fact that while other religious founders point to a unique set of teachings, Christianity’s teachings point to Jesus Christ himself. You can pick apart and “deconstruct” a text; you can’t so easily deconstruct a person. If Jesus is who he claims to be, then only Christianity offers a path to God.

If you’re a deeply religious person, you can’t so easily treat the Bible as if it were an ethical rulebook. Jesus himself confronts this impulse by telling Israel’s leaders: “You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). It’s not that Jesus is superior to the Bible. But we cannot fully understand the Bible until we understand how every word points toward Jesus.

The gospel creates a third way between these two dilemmas. Through Jesus, we can be born again — not through the usual, natural way, he tells us. We become “God’s children” only by God’s supernatural transformation. If you consider yourself a truly spiritual person, then you’ll find true flourishing not with a lifetime of self-discovery, but the renewal of yourself through God’s grace and grace alone.

THE GOD OF OUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Having now established that Jesus is fully God, John also clarifies that Jesus is fully human:

“Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory— the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father. John testified about him and shouted out, “This one was the one about whom I said, ‘He who comes after me is greater than I am, because he existed before me.’” For we have all received from his fullness one gracious gift after another. For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came about through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. The only one, himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known.” (John 1:14-18)

Jewish readers would instantly notice the similarities between the Greek word for “dwell” and the Hebrew *shekinah*. This term referred to God’s glorious presence localized in a building — first the traveling worship center known as the Tabernacle, later the Temple. According to John, Jesus “Tabernacled” among his people. His presence isn’t confined to a building or religious ceremony. He moved into our neighborhood.

This, too, makes Christianity unique among world religions. Other faiths emphasize the need to work up to God through a religious system. Even religions like Buddhism, which don't necessarily feature a "god" still insist that enlightenment is achievable only through an eightfold path of moral teachings. Christianity is the only religion that says that God came down to us, "full of grace and truth." Grace to do what? To become God's children. This is the method by which God adopts us into his family. The heartbeat of the Bible (and indeed, the Law of Moses) is grace poured out through Jesus Christ.

THE GOD WHO GETS ME

The arrival of Jesus was so strange, so unexpected, that the early Church created a word to describe it: *incarnation*. When I lived in Texas, I developed a deep, soul-level appreciation for Tex-Mex cuisine. When teaching on this subject to college students, we found that the word *incarnation* is similar to order *salsa con carne* — salsa "with meat." When John says that "the Word became flesh," that's what he's talking about: that the eternal Son of God "became meat," a man of flesh and blood and sinew.

Why was this necessary? Because the only way to mount a rescue operation was for Jesus to become like the ones he came to rescue. The second-century teacher Irenaeus put it this way:

"For he came to save all though means of himself...He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children; thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness, and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. Likewise, he was an old man for old men, that he might be a perfect Master for all..."⁹

This also means that Jesus uniquely understands you. If you've ever endured a painful experience, you know that few things are worse than having someone say: "I understand." Because they rarely ever do. But when Jesus came to earth, he experienced virtually everything that our inglorious humanity has to offer — from diaper rash to hangnails to teenage acne and beyond. He would experience hunger. He would experience grief. And, ultimately, he would experience death on our behalf, so that by his sacrifice we can be made whole.

Robert Klitzman is a psychiatrist from Columbia Medical Center, and the author of a book called *When Doctors Become Patients*. He explores how physicians change their bedside manner after experiencing what life is like on the other side of a hospital bed. Doctors notice mistakes. They become irritated at minor inconveniences, such as a broken TV or delay in treatment. They begin to realize that complaints of insomnia or nausea should be taken more seriously than doctors often do. Klitzman admits that during his own experience, he encountered a new understanding of what his patients must be going through. "I felt weak and ashamed," he writes, "and [I] began to appreciate...the embarrassment and stigma my patients felt."¹⁰

⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1:391

¹⁰ Robert Klitzman, *When Doctors Become Patients*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

To be sure, the all-knowing God of the universe can never be surprised by human suffering. Nevertheless, the incarnation of Jesus provides the assurance that whatever you're going through, we have a God who is capable of "sympathizing with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). Though he would remain sinless, Jesus still shares in our weaknesses, so that we might experience his strength.

GOOD NEWS HAS A BODY

Of course, for many people today, having a body isn't exactly "good news." For starters, our external reality rarely lives up to our culture's expectations or our own self-image. If you're a man, having a body is not good news, especially if you lack a set of "six-pack abs," or lack the power, strength, and sexual virility of today's icons of masculinity. If you're a woman, having a body is not good news, not just because you can't live up to cultural standards of "thinness," but because your body leaves you vulnerable to the leering gaze (or worse) of men. Some women's bodies experience the suffering—deep, bone-numbing suffering—of infertility and miscarriage. And for still others, having a body is not good news, because you face a confusion of who you are in your mind and your body's external gender.

Having a body is not always good news. But good news has a body. Jesus Christ—the very "word of God" became a part of God's created world (John 1:14). The Son of God had a human body very much like our own, and in that body He lived, He ate, He wept, and He died. But that body was also redeemed through the resurrection — transformed from mere dust to something "imperishable." So, too, can we place our hope in the God who takes on flesh to live among us.

The ancient writer Athanasius puts it this way:

"You know what happens when a portrait that has been painted on a panel becomes obliterated through external stains. The artist does not throw away the panel, but the subject of the portrait has to come and sit for it again, and then the likeness is re-drawn on the same material. Even so was it with the All-holy Son of God. He, the Image of the Father, came and dwelt in our midst, in order that He might renew mankind made after Himself..."¹¹

In a very real sense, the incarnation of Jesus Christ is the end to all human striving. We don't have to deal with the "pinpricks" anymore. We don't have to keep arranging our pieces to construct our own identities. Jesus Christ puts the broken pieces of Adam back together again. Trust in him, and his perfect record of moral integrity can become the central part of your identity. The Son of God became a human being, so that human beings might become the children of God. Trust in him, John invites. That's where your purpose truly begins — fresh and wild and *alive*.

¹¹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, III.14