

## God Dwells With Us

In the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew records that the birth of Jesus was fulfillment of prophecy uttered by Isaiah. Matthew says in verse 23 of chapter 1, ***“Behold, the virgin shall be with Child, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel; which is, being interpreted, God with us.”*** This prophecy was proclaimed originally in Isaiah 7:14: ***“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel.”***

The Holy Spirit first inspired the prophet Isaiah to include these words in the prophecy we just read and the Holy Spirit also inspired Matthew to quote Isaiah's prophecy in his Gospel. I have heard these words at least once (and usually two or three times) every Christmas season for as far back as I can remember. I am sure that many of you can say the same thing as well.

The virgin birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a basic article of Christian faith. Anyone who claims to be a Christian must believe in the virgin birth of the Savior. These words that Matthew quotes from Isaiah are a part of the support for that article of faith. By the inspiration of the Holy Spirit Matthew joined Isaiah's prophetic words to the Savior's birth narrative in order to express the wonder of God's plan for our salvation.

The original context of these words in Isaiah, however, is something that most people do not expect. These words were a sign that God sent through His prophet Isaiah. They were a sign against a king named Ahaz and a sign against all fallen flesh. That is not how we are used to hearing the verse. But it is true. The virgin's conception of Jesus the Christ is a sign against our inability to save ourselves. Everything man does is full of sin and death and destruction. We were in dire need of a Savior!

But God had a plan that would remedy this situation, and that is that He would come in the flesh and dwell among men. And it is against this backdrop that the Apostle John framed his Gospel message.

The author of the Fourth Gospel was the younger of the two sons of a man named Zebedee, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, who resided at Bethsaida, where were born Peter and Andrew his brother, and Philip also. John's mother's name was Salome, who, though not without her own imperfections as she sought seats of special honor for her sons in the Lord's Kingdom (Matthew 20:20-28), was one of those dear and honored women who accompanied the Lord on one of His preaching circuits through Galilee, ministering to His bodily needs; who followed Him to the cross, and bought sweet spices to anoint Him after His burial, but, on bringing them to the grave, on the morning of the First Day of the week, found their loving services gloriously superseded by His resurrection ere they arrived. His father, Zebedee, appears to have been in good circumstances, a

man of means, owning a vessel of his own and having hired servants (Mark 1:20). John, whose occupation was that of a fisherman with his father, was beyond doubt a disciple of John the Immerser, and one of the two who had the first interview with Jesus. He was called while engaged at his secular occupation (Matthew 4:21-22), and again on a memorable occasion (Luke 5:1-11), and finally chosen as one of the Twelve Apostles (Matthew 10:2). He was the youngest of the Apostles, and he and James his brother were named in the native tongue by Him Who knows the heart, "Boanerges," which Mark (Mark 3:17) explains to mean "Sons of Thunder"; no doubt from their natural vehemence of character. They and Peter constituted that select triumvirate who witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus (Luke 9:28). But the highest honor bestowed on this disciple was his being admitted to the bosom place with his Lord at the table, as **"the disciple whom Jesus loved"** (John 13:23; John 20:2; John 21:7; John 21:24), and to have committed to him by the dying Redeemer the care of His mother (John 19:26-27). There can be no reasonable doubt that this distinction was due to a sympathy with His own spirit and mind on the part of John which the all-penetrating eye of their common Master beheld in none of the rest; and although this was probably never seen either in his life or in his ministry by his fellow apostles, it is brought out wonderfully in his writings, which, in Christ-like spirituality, heavenliness, and love, surpass, we may freely say, all the other inspired writings.

John himself pretty much sums up in his own words in John 20:31 the purpose of writing of this Gospel: **"but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."** So at its core, the Gospel of John is a highly evangelistic book. But beyond this, there is a deeper significance and purpose in John's Gospel, as well as his other contributions to the New Testament: he was engaging in full warfare against one of the most damning and dangerous heresies the Lord's church has ever faced, and that is Gnosticism.

While studying from the book of 1 John one morning in Bible class, it occurred to me that one of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries of the church, Gnosticism, was still influencing many in the Lord's body today. How dreadfully sad a commentary that is, for the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Peter, but particularly the Apostle John fought hard to combat this false doctrine almost two millennia ago.

The Gnostics taught that Christ was a pantheistic (of nature) emanation or manifestation, lower than God, who only seemed to appear in the flesh. To the Gnostic all matter or material was essentially evil, and since Christ was an emanation and not evil, He could not have taken on human flesh. Gnostics firmly denied the Incarnation of Christ, stating that He was only an apparition (with an immaterial appearance) Who left no footprints.

These Gnostics, whose name comes from the Greek word for knowledge, **gnosis**, professed to be Christians but claimed to have “additional knowledge” (hence their name), superior to what the apostles taught. They claimed that a person could not be completely fulfilled until he had been initiated into their deeper “truths.” Some taught that matter was evil, and that therefore the Man Jesus could not be God. They made a distinction between Jesus and the Christ. “The Christ,” they claimed, was a divine emanation which came upon Jesus at His baptism and left Him before His death, perhaps in the Garden of Gethsemane. According to them, Jesus “did” die, but the Christ did “not” die. They insisted that the heavenly Christ was too holy and spiritual to be soiled by permanent contact with human flesh. In short, they denied the Incarnation, that Jesus is the Christ, and that Jesus Christ is both God and Man.

It is this denying of God coming in the flesh that John begins his Gospel, refuting it head on as he takes no prisoners: **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** It is not an accident that John began his testimony with the same words as did Moses back in Genesis 1:1: **“In the beginning,”** for Moses went on to describe how God created the universe, the culmination of which was the creating of man in God’s image. John, after stating plainly how the Word was in the beginning, and the Word was with God because the Word was God, says, in verses 2 and 3, **“He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made that was made.”**

The first fourteen verses of the Gospel of John are introductory. In order to set at rest all controversy the Divine nature of Jesus Christ, John glances, in the first three verses, back to the beginning, recorded in Genesis, and affirms: (1) That He Who was afterwards manifested as the Christ existed before creation began; (2) that He was present with God; (3) that He was Divine; (4) that He was the Word; (5) that by or through Him were all things made that were made (John 1:3). The first chapter of Genesis helps us to understand its meaning. God said, **“Let there be light”** (Genesis 1:3), **“Let there be a firmament”** (Genesis 1:6), **“Let the Earth bring forth”** (Genesis 1:11), etc., and it was done. God exhibits His creative power through the Word, and manifests His will through the Word.

It is obvious from the reading of these verses that John has established the eternal existence of the Word, and that the Word is God. He then moves on in verses 9 through 11 to show that the Word became flesh, striking again at the heart of the heretical teaching of Gnosticism: **“The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world knew Him not. He came to His own home, and His own people received Him not.”** But if there was any doubt of the fact of God dwelling in the flesh, John refutes it by saying in verse 14, **“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.”**

At its core, Gnosticism teaches that **spirit** is entirely good while **matter** is entirely evil. From this dualism lacking in any biblical foundation came five important doctrinal errors:

1. Man's physical body, comprised of matter, is therefore evil.
2. Salvation occurs not through having obedient faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God, but through the escaping from the body by means of enlightenment, or "special knowledge."
3. Christ could not have appeared in the flesh since flesh is sinful. Therefore, according to some of the followers of Gnosticism, He either only "appeared" to have a body, or, as others stated, the Divine Spirit of Christ joined Him at the point of baptism, but left Him before He died.
4. Since the body was considered evil it of necessity had to be treated harshly.
5. This dualism belief naturally and paradoxically led its adherents to engage in licentious behavior. They reasoned that since all physical matter was evil – and not the breaking of God's commandments – then the breaking of God's law was of no moral consequence to the spirit.

Coupled with the denial of the Incarnation and Deity of Christ, the Gnostics denied the vicarious (substitutional) death of Christ on the cross of Calvary for the sins of the world. To the Gnostics, not only could Christ not have taken on evil human flesh, but as a Divine Being, He could not have taken on sin for any purpose. Therefore, the Gnostics denied that God through Christ paid the penalty-price for the sin of man by means of His spiritual death on the cross of Calvary; rather, they held Christ up as a divine teacher and it was through His teachings and revelations that man was to evolve intellectually into a higher state of self-awareness, which was man's salvation.

With this understanding of the heresy of Gnosticism, and realizing that much of the purpose of John's writings were intended to correct such false beliefs, several passages that have been difficult for Christians to interpret, become clear. For instance, consider the following passages in the book of 1 John:

**1 John 4:1-3** ("Jesus Christ has come in the flesh")

***"Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world."***

Why is John in this epistle stressing that the admission that **Christ has come in the flesh** is evident that a spirit (and in this case one may interpret spirit as a person's spirit) is either of (representing) or not of God? It is because of the Gnostics and their incessant teaching that God could not have come in the flesh, which is a key element of Christian doctrine.

**1 John 5:6-8** (“by water and blood”)

***“This is He Who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit Who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. For there are Three that bear witness in Heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these Three are One. And there are three that bear witness on Earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.”***

There is a great deal of controversy and discussion that has arisen through the years over the meaning and interpretation of the words, ***“This is He Who came by water and blood.”*** Some believe that the ***“water and blood”*** refer to that which flowed from the Savior's side in John 19:34 after the Roman soldier pierced Jesus' dead body with a spear. Others feel that the ***“water”*** refers to the Spirit of God and that the ***“blood”*** refers to the blood shed on Calvary. Still others believe it is a reference to natural birth, where both “water and blood” are present. I believe there might be a fourth interpretation that takes particular account of the Gnostic heresy which the Apostle John was seeking to combat in this Epistle.

As mentioned earlier, the Gnostics believed that Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and left Him before His passion, namely in the Garden of Gethsemane. In other words, they would say, “The Christ did not die on the cross, but Jesus the man died.” This, of course, robs Jesus of His work of any atoning value for the sins of others. I believe that John is using ***“water”*** as an emblem of Jesus' baptism and ***“blood”*** as a symbol of His atoning death. These were the two key points of His public ministry. Jesus said He was to be suffered to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness, and it is through His shed blood that we are washed clean in baptism.

John is saying that Jesus was just as much the Christ when He died on the cross as when He was baptized in the Jordan. “This is He Who came by water and by blood – not only by water” (which the Gnostics would concede), “but by water and by blood.” It seems that the human heart is perpetually trying to rid itself of the doctrine of the atonement. Men would like to have the Lord Jesus as a perfect Man, the ideal Example, who has given us a marvelous code of morals. But John here insists that the Lord Jesus is not only Perfect Man, but Perfect God also, and that the same One Who was baptized in the Jordan River gave His life as a sacrifice for sinners. Men say to Christ, “Come down from the cross

and we will believe on You.” If they can just eliminate the cross from their thinking, they will be happy. But John says, “No. You cannot have the Lord Jesus Christ apart from His perfect redemptive work at Calvary.” Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:18, **“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

**“It is the Spirit Who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.”** This means that the Holy Spirit of God always testifies to the truth concerning the Lord Jesus which John has been unfolding. He bears witness that Christ came not with water only, but with **“water”** and with **“blood,”** because this is the truth of God.

Having stated in the previous verses the Person and work of Jesus Christ, John now goes on to state the trustworthiness of our belief in Him. He says that **“there are three that bear witness** (the words “in Earth” should not be included), **the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.”** Although the word of God should be sufficient for us, as a basis of faith, He condescends to give us a threefold witness concerning the truth. First of all, **“the Spirit”** of God bears witness to the truth that Jesus Christ is God and that He is the only Savior of the world. It is my contention that the first Witness, **“the Spirit,”** was when Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in His mother, Mary. This witness of the Spirit is found in the written Word of God.

Then there is the second witness of **“the water.”** We believe that this refers to what happened when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus as He arose out of the water at the baptism of the Lord by John the Immerser. At that event, God opened the heavens and publicly proclaimed, **“This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.”** Thus, God the Father added His own witness to God the Spirit concerning the Person of Christ. It was at this point that Jesus assumed His position or office as Savior of the world, the purpose for which God the Father had sent Him into the world in the first place.

Finally, there is the third witness of **“the blood.”** The third witness was when Jesus Christ shed His blood through His sacrificial death upon the cross as an expiation, an atonement, for the sins of the world. It was on the cross that the Lord Jesus Christ bore witness concerning Himself that He was the Son of God. No one took His life from Him; He laid it down by Himself (John 10:17). If He were a mere man, He could not have done this. **“The blood”** of the Lord Jesus Christ witnesses that the sin question has been settled once and for all to the satisfaction of God. All **“these three”** witnesses **“agree as one.”** That is, they are united in their testimony concerning the perfection of the Person and work of Christ, Lord Immanuel, God With Us Who came in the flesh and dwelt among men.

The Bible student can see that it is only by knowing what John is attempting to correct, the heresy of Gnosticism, is it then possible to derive the correct interpretation of these two passages in 1 John. But aside from these, the student

of the Bible can be certain there are other passages in the Bible which become much clearer by understanding the doctrine of and struggle against Gnosticism in the early Church.

One need not delve too deeply to see that many of the professed groups falling under the umbrella of Christendom still have major portions of some of these doctrines as central practices and tenets of their faith. Too, many secret societies and New Age religions thrive by claiming they alone are the enlightened ones.

There are mysteries belonging to the divine nature and to the relation between the Son and the Father that we have to wait for eternity to solve. They are too deep for human solution, but this is clear: that God created and speaks to man through the Word. As we clothe our thoughts in words, so God reveals His will by the Word, and when the Word is clothed in flesh, as the Teacher of men, we recognize Him as Jesus Christ.