

“Down and Dirty: God’s Definitive Autobiography”

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Third in a series on John’s Prologue

John 1.14-18

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How do you know someone?

You see them for the first time. You now know they exist and what they look like. You watch them, how they move, what they wear, how they look. You know some things about them, but you don’t know them.

You move closer, and start overhearing their conversation. You listen to what they talk about, their tone of voice, how they speak to and about others. Now you know more about them. Still, you don’t know them.

You start asking around. You find out their name. You Google them. Follow them on Twitter. View their profile on LinkedIn. Since they are lax with their privacy settings, you check them out of Facebook. You’re finding out more and more about them. (You’re also creepy!)

Let’s get creepier! You follow them around. You tap their phone. Set up cameras in their house. (Please don’t ever. . .) You know so much about them! But do you know them?

No, A huge difference lies between “knowing about” and “knowing.” I only know you if you tell me about yourself, reveal yourself to me. I only know you in relationship with you, person-to-person. Knowing is more than information, even important information. Knowing is personal.¹

II

What about God? How do you know God?

You can’t see God. Actually, that tells us something. God is not like us. God is spirit, not physical. Still, not being able to see God leaves us at a disadvantage.

Can you overhear God’s conversations? Slip into the back row at worship. Sneak up behind someone praying. (You are creepy!) Does that tell you about God? You hear what they are saying to God. You learn what they think God is like. But what is God saying to

¹ See Douglas John Hall’s discussion in Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 369-88.

them?

You ask around about God, getting many viewpoints. You devour books about God. You find out all sorts of ideas. And you are more confused. One person says one thing, the next says the opposite. Do you know God any better?

You think philosophically. You surmise that any being worthy of being “God” must know everything (omniscient; philosophers love words like that). God must be everywhere (omnipresent). God must be all-powerful (omnipotent). God must not depend on anything, but everything must depend on God. And so on. You know a lot about God. The more you know, the more you realize how much you don’t know. If God is real, then God must be so far beyond our understanding.

Do you know God? Remember, there is such a difference between “knowing about” and “knowing.” The only way I can know God is if God tells me, shows me. I can only know God in relationship. Knowing is personal.

III

Suppose you are an artist, and a funny one too! You start a comic strip. A very popular comic strip. Suppose your name is Bill Watterson, and you create *Calvin and Hobbes*². You make the whole *Calvin and Hobbes* world: the little boy Calvin, his real-life friend Hobbes the Tiger (whom everyone else mistakenly believes is a stuffed toy), Mom and Dad. Even Susie Dirkins, Calvin’s nemesis. You guide them through their many adventures. You are a good creator.

Now suppose you want Calvin and Hobbes to know you, Bill Watterson. You could start talking to the page. Would that work? Could they even hear you?

You could write some words into the strip. Use extra-large, bold letters in a text bubble coming from the sky. These two philosopher-theologians (Hobbes and Calvin) would certainly have a lot to talk about, imagining what you are like, “The Great Text Bubble in the Sky.” Still, would they know you?

Or, you could draw yourself into the strip. Insert a “Bill Watterson” character. He’d look like you, though necessarily limited to ink and that two-dimensional world. He would act like you act. He would say the things you say. Would Calvin and Hobbes know you? Yes, they only

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvin_and_Hobbes. The strip ran from 1985 to 1995.

way they can, through your character.³

IV

Now, let's hear our Scripture for today. [Actually, we're going to watch it, from a film called "The Gospel of John."⁴

The Word became flesh and made his home among us.
We have seen his glory,
glory like that of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John testified about him, crying out,
"This is the one of whom I said,
'He who comes after me
is greater than me
because he existed before me.'"

From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.
The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known.

John 1.14-19 (CEB; alt)

I imagined the comic-strip artist becoming ink. In real life, the Word became flesh.

The Word, who is God. The Word, who is the Creator. God's self-expression of God's very self. The meaning, the purpose, the love who underlies and sustains the cosmos.

The Word became flesh. Not just "spirit." It doesn't even say "person." Flesh. Skin and bone, blood and organs and fat. Flesh. Dale Bruner says that in Jesus, God got "down and dirty."⁵ Exactly.

³ I learned the "Calvin and Hobbes" illustration from John Bowen when we worked together in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. John has since become director of the Institute of Evangelism at Wycliffe College, Toronto.

⁴ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospel_of_John_\(film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospel_of_John_(film)). We watched the entire prologue, from 0:45 to 4:21. You can watch it online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5hexhw3wWmE>. Better yet, buy it and support solid filmmaker efforts like this one.

⁵ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 34.

The Word dwelt among us. The word “dwelt” (*skēnoō* in Greek) is about setting up camp, pitching a tent. Eugene Peterson put it this way: God moved into the neighbourhood. Exactly.

Spirituality can be so, well, spiritual. The Greeks, the thought-leaders of Jesus’ day, loved the idea of the Word, above everything, ordering all things. But the idea that the Divine Word would become flesh . . . flesh is weak, flesh suffers pain, flesh can be smelly, flesh dies. God becoming flesh . . . preposterous!⁶

And the idea that he would be “fleshed” in a particular place, on a specific date. And that he would hail from a backwater hamlet, from a crushed people . . . ridiculous.

Preposterous, ridiculous. Or, exactly! This is the fundamental claim of Christianity: In Jesus, God became a human being without ceasing to be God. We call it “incarnation”; that means “become flesh.” We celebrate it as the most important thing that ever happened⁷. To many, it is offensive: too mundane and messy for God who is holy; too specific, confined, limited for God who is everywhere. To us, though, this great “coming down” movement of God is glorious.⁸

Glorious. Exactly. We suppose glory to be impressive, beautiful, honourable, majestic, magnificent. In Jesus, the Word become flesh, and in him we see God’s glory: unremarkable, ordinary, plain, even dishonourable and disgraced. For God’s glory in Jesus is most seen in his death on a cross, that emblem of suffering and shame.

Saint Augustine said this about God the Word: “See how rich he is: ‘All things were made through him.’ See how poor he is: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.’⁹”

V

What is a biography? It is a life-story someone writes about someone else. An autobiography is what someone writes about themselves. It’s their own self-explanation, their own self-interpretation.

Jesus is God’s authorized autobiography.¹⁰

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I-XII* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 31.

⁷ G. O’Day, quoted in Bruner 34.

⁸ Bruner, 34.

⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁰ “Jesus of Nazareth is the invisible God’s authorized exegete and exegesis, God’s authorized self-interpretation and self-explanation.

As we know, a biography is the story of the life of a person by another person; an autobiography, on the other

*No one has ever seen God.
God the only Son,
who is at the Father's side,
has made God known.*

Jesus was a long time ago. But God has not left us without witnesses. In gospels like John's we experience Jesus from those who were with him face to face.¹¹ And God the Holy Spirit fills us now, leading us to Jesus.

Do you want to know God? Look at Jesus.¹² Study him carefully. Listen to him closely. Follow him. Pay attention to him.¹³

See him giving freedom to those oppressed. Watch him search out and find those lost. Witness him challenge hypocrisy, empty religion and misuse of power. Experience him heal the sick and forgive those in sin.

When Jesus says, "Follow me," he is God calling you. When you learn from Jesus, you are learning from God. When you experience Jesus' challenge, he is God refining you. When you behold Jesus giving himself, he is God going to the cross. When you rejoice in Jesus resurrecting, you are experiencing the beginning of God's new creation.

Knowing God would be impossible, except for Jesus. Because of him, you can.

hand, is a person's self-explanation and self-interpretation.

Jesus, the eternal Word of God in the flesh, is God's Autobiography." Bruner, 40.

¹¹ See 1st John 1.1-2.

¹² In verse 18, John writes that Jesus "has made [God] known." The Greek words here, *ekeinos exegetato*, literally means "that explained." We could say that Jesus "exegeted" God.

¹³ N.

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Wright says, "That's the theme of this gospel [of John]: if you want to know who the true God is, take a long and hard look at Jesus." John for Everyone, Part 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 5.