

In the Beginning Was The Word

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on John

The majestic opening of John's Gospel which starts with the words "in the beginning" shows the limitless scope of the Word's work. The Word is the definitive self-expression of God, the one through whom God created all things in the beginning.

The Word is working; and because his work began in the beginning, all subsequent human labor is derived from his initial labor. Derived is not too strong a word, because everything people work with was created by him. Many Christians continue to labor under the delusion that the Messiah only began working once things had gone irredeemably wrong. Once we recognize that the Messiah was working materially with God from the beginning, we can reject every creation-denying (and thus work-denigrating) theology.

John's Gospel is not grounded in a dichotomy of the spiritual versus the material. It does not portray salvation as the liberation of the human spirit from the shackles of the material body. The proponents of such dualistic philosophies have often turned to the language of the Gospel of John to support their views. While it is true that John frequently records Jesus' use of contrasts such as light/darkness, these contrasts highlight the conflict between God's ways and the ways of evil. They do not constitute a division of the universe into dual sub-universes. They certainly do not call Jesus' followers to abandon some sort of secular world in order to enter a spiritual one. Instead, Jesus employs the contrasts to call his followers to receive and use the power of God's spirit in the present world.

Indeed, Jesus' first sign in the book of John occurs within the material world. Changing water into wine at a wedding in Cana lays the foundation for understanding the subsequent signs. Jesus does it reluctantly, and only in the face of a pressing human need and to honor his mother's request.

Far from being an unmoved mover (as some Greeks regarded God), Jesus shows himself to be the loving, responsive Son of the loving, eternal Father and the beloved human mother.

The fact that Jesus turns water to wine shows that he is like the Father not only in love, but also in his power over creation. Attentive readers of John should not be surprised that the Word who made all things, now made flesh himself, is able to bring material blessings to his people. What is most surprising, perhaps, is that this apparently unplanned miracle ends up pointing unmistakably to Jesus' ultimate purpose. He has come to draw people to God's consummate wedding feast, where they will joyfully dine with him together. Jesus' mighty works, done with the stuff of the present world order, are amazing blessings in the here and now; and they also point to still greater blessings in the world to come.