

# The Uniqueness of the Christian Faith

*John 1:1–14*

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## Introduction

There is a saying that gets used whenever people find themselves at odds with one another: *focus on what we have in common rather than our differences*. We hear it in politics, where two parties are urged to set aside their disagreements and work from shared ground. We hear it in conversations about what it means to be an American — a focus on the values, institutions, and commitments that tie us together. We hear it among Christians of different traditions, where the appeal is to hold lightly the distinctives of any one denomination and celebrate the faith we share. And we hear it, more and more, in conversations about religion in general — the suggestion that since all religions pray, and all religions believe in some kind of god, perhaps if we simply focus on those commonalities, we will get along with each other a great deal better.

I want to be clear: there are times when it is entirely right and appropriate to focus on what we hold in common, at every one of those levels. But there are also times when the pressure to emphasize the common becomes so intense that what is genuinely unique gets lost — obscured, forgotten, quietly set aside.

The Gospel of John is a remarkable book. Many scholars, and I count myself among them, believe it was the last of the four Gospels to be written — composed forty to fifty years after the resurrection of Jesus, after Matthew, Mark, and Luke had already been circulating among the churches. I believe Matthew, Mark, and Luke were all written within thirty years of the resurrection, before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. John writes after that destruction, from a greater distance, and with a particular urgency. Writing at that point in time, he provides the followers of Jesus with a critically important reminder of exactly what it means to follow Jesus — and exactly who Jesus is.

The early church faced pressure, as the church does in every generation, to blend in with the surrounding culture. Among Jewish communities, the emphasis fell on the law and ritual observance; there were even those who insisted that becoming a Christian required first becoming Jewish. Among Greeks and Romans, the tendency was to treat Christianity as simply another philosophy, another variation among the many schools of thought — something that could coexist comfortably with the supreme authority of Rome, so long as it did not press its claims too hard. Today the pressures take different forms, but the dynamic is the same. We see

it in churches where crosses are quietly removed from buildings and sanctuaries. We see it in preaching that is more often topical and therapeutic than biblical. We see it in worship that looks more like entertainment than adoration, and in a moral silence around issues of sexuality and materialism that would have been unrecognizable to earlier generations of believers.

Christians of every generation — from the apostolic age to our own — have faced pressure, and therefore temptation, to obscure the radical uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

I share all of this because in the first fourteen verses of the Gospel of John, we encounter three truths about the Christian faith that are utterly unique. These are not minor distinctives. They are the things that make Christianity incomparable among all the religious traditions this world has ever produced. They are: the nature of God, who is Triune — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the nature of Christ, who is fully God and fully man; and the nature of salvation, which is a gift from God received by faith. I want to walk through each of these in turn, and consider what they mean for us as followers of Jesus.

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## **I. The Nature of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit**

Every other religious tradition in the world — past and present — conceives of god as either a solitary being, isolated in his singularity; as one deity among many, locked in contention with rival powers; or as some nebulous force or energy diffused through the universe. Christianity is different. The God we worship, who is one God, exists within himself in an eternal relationship that we call the Trinity: three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I am well aware that the Trinity is not an easy doctrine to hold in our minds. John Wesley put it memorably: *“Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the Triune God.”* We struggle with it, and that struggle is honest. But the Triune nature of God is not optional for us as believers in Christ. It is not a theological luxury. It is the foundation of everything else.

And it is here, right at the opening of the Gospel of John. Earlier in our service we read from Genesis 1 alongside John 1, and I hope the connection registered. Genesis begins:

| *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)*

John begins:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1–5)*

John is clearly and deliberately directing us back to creation. He wants us to understand who Jesus is in the context of everything that exists. But go back to those first four verses of Genesis and look carefully, because I believe this is precisely the connection John is inviting us to make. We tend to read Genesis 1 as being primarily about the creation of the world, but in truth it is more fundamentally about God. Notice the distinct movements of God in those opening verses. In verse one, God is there at the beginning, and God creates. In verse two, we encounter chaos and darkness, over the face of which the Spirit of God hovers. In verse three, God speaks — “Let there be light” — and the Word goes forth, and there was. Then God separates the light from the darkness.

One God. And yet, from this one God, three persons are at work: the God from whom all creation originates; the Spirit of God hovering over the waters of chaos and darkness; and the Word of God going forth and bringing into being all that exists. Move further down to verse 26, when man and woman are made, and God says, “*Let us make man in our image.*” God exists in relationship. One God, three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This matters enormously — not merely as a doctrinal puzzle to solve, but because the relational nature of God defines everything about who we are and why we are here. C. S. Lewis saw this with characteristic clarity:

*“All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that ‘God is love.’ But they seem not to notice that the words ‘God is love’ have no real meaning unless God contains at least two persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love.”*

Since God exists relationally — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — creation itself is an outflow of that love. An overflow of it. And because you and I are made in his image, we are made for relationship with God. That, at its most basic, is what salvation means.

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## **II. The Nature of Christ: Fully God and Fully Man**

In every other religious tradition, the founder occupies one of two roles. He is either a prophet — someone like Moses or Muhammad or the Buddha, a human being who has received special

revelation from God and now conveys that message to others — or he is a divine being who has simply adopted a human disguise, the way the gods of Greek mythology would move among mortals while remaining fundamentally other. Christianity is unique in that Jesus Christ is neither of these things. He is not a prophet who delivers a message from God, and he is not a god wearing a human costume. He is fully human and fully God — simultaneously, without remainder on either side.

Here is how John describes it:

*There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light. The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:6–9)*

And then, skipping ahead to the culminating statement of the prologue:

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:14)*

John has already anchored us in Genesis 1, directing our minds to the creation of the world. Now, when he speaks of the Word — God himself — becoming flesh, he draws on another image that runs deep through the scriptural story.

That phrase in verse 14, “*dwelt among us*,” is worth pausing over. Literally, in the Greek, it means *he pitched his tent*. For anyone who knows the Old Testament, those words carry enormous weight. The story that runs through Genesis and into Exodus is this: at creation, man and woman lived in fellowship with God. But sin broke that fellowship, and the consequence of that broken relationship was bondage, slavery, and death — not merely as a metaphor, but very literally, in the book of Exodus, where the children of Israel are enslaved in Egypt and their sons are being murdered by Pharaoh. The entire story of Exodus is God liberating his people from that bondage and reestablishing the means for them to be in fellowship with him.

The means he established was an elaborate complex involving sacrifice, an altar, incense, the bread of the Presence — and at the center of it all, a priest entering into a place called the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant was kept, and above which the glory of God appeared. This entire complex, with the Holy of Holies at its heart, was housed in a tent. And it is called, multiple times throughout the Old Testament, *the tent of meeting* — the place where man meets God.

That is the same word John reaches for in verse 14. He wants us to make this connection. Jesus is the tent of meeting. He is the one in whom the full holiness and glory of God dwells, and yet he is also the man — the great High Priest — who approaches that holiness on our behalf. From the very beginning of his Gospel, John is telling us something remarkable and

irreducibly unique: the Word was made flesh, fully human, and yet the Word is God, through whom all creation came into being. He is the mediator. He is the meeting place of God and humanity.

This is why he alone is Christ and Savior. Being fully human, he knows our weakness from the inside. He has experienced our temptations, our fears, our struggles. He is one of us. And yet, being fully God, he is able to intercede for us — to be, as it were, the mercy seat, the place where God and humanity finally and fully meet. He alone is able and worthy to accomplish our salvation.

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### III. The Nature of Salvation: A Gift Received by Faith

This brings us to the third great uniqueness of the Christian faith, and in some ways it is the most striking of all.

Every other religious tradition in the world — regardless of its particular content, regardless of how different its ethics or cosmology or practices may be — follows the same basic pattern. The holy man, whether Moses or Muhammad or the Buddha or a Hindu yogi, receives a divine message and comes to tell us to shape up. They all teach salvation by works. The works may differ, and the salvation they describe may look quite different from one tradition to another, but the underlying structure is always the same: here is the goal — enlightenment, nirvana, heaven, liberation — and here is what you must do to get there. Follow the Eightfold Path. Observe the Five Pillars. Pursue the four ends of human life. Obey the law. The message is always: here is the destination, and here is the road you must walk to reach it.

Jesus says something entirely different. He does not come as a wise teacher offering a new set of instructions or modeling a better way to live. He says about himself: *I am the way*. Salvation — this restored relationship with God — is by him, through him, and accomplished by him. Not something he points toward, but something he is and something he does.

No one has ever said that. No one has ever taught that. It is utterly unique.

Here is how John puts it:

*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:9–13)*

Notice first what this passage says about you and me. We are included in the word *everyone*. We are included in *the world*. The passage is saying that the true light, the very Word through whom all things were made, came into the world he had created — and the world did not know him. That includes us. We live in a condition of alienation, separation from God. When Christians speak of the sinful nature of humanity, or of total depravity, this is what we mean — not simply that we make moral mistakes or fall short of a standard, but that we live in a state of fundamental separation from the God for whom we were made.

This is more than a moral failing. It is an ontological condition — a condition of our very nature — that we have no power within ourselves to change. The word *ontological* simply means it belongs to what we are, not merely to what we do. I can, through sheer willpower, choose not to overeat at lunch. It is hard, but it is possible. What I cannot do, regardless of how much willpower I exert, is stop needing food to live. That need is written into my nature. I have no say in the matter.

In the same way, there may be a genuinely good person — someone with remarkable self-discipline, who does not lie, does not cheat, does not steal; a generous, upstanding member of the community. What the world would call a truly good person. And we might assume that surely this person, of all people, is going to be all right before God. But here is what the Christian faith insists: being good does not save you. Not because goodness is worthless, but because salvation is not fundamentally about moral improvement. That is what every other religion says. The Christian message is something different: real life, real salvation, is *knowing God*. And we live in a world separated from him, with no power of our own to bridge that divide.

And so the good news — the uniqueness of the Christian faith — is this: *He came*. God himself pitched his tent among us. He stepped across the divide. And though many did not receive him — *he came to his own, and his own people did not receive him* — to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Note that image: *children of God*. Salvation is described in relational terms, because our God is a relational God, and salvation is nothing less than being brought into relationship with him.

You are not saved by who your parents are. You are not saved by your nationality or your heritage. You are not saved by how good you are. You are not saved through someone else's choice on your behalf. Salvation is a gift from God — given freely, received by faith. God the Father has sent the Son, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to save us — so that, in the power of that same Spirit, through the Son, all glory returns to the Father.

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## Conclusion

Our God is a relational God — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — and he has made you to live in relationship with him. God the Son stepped into the very world that was created through him, so that he might provide the way into that relationship. And that relationship is a gift, entirely from God — not contingent on who you are, who your parents are, or how well you have managed to live. It is simply received, as a gift, by faith that God himself empowers by his Spirit.

*To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.*

Amen.