

Homiletics Analysis: John 1:1–51

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

John 1 opens the Fourth Gospel with a deliberate, theologically loaded prologue (vv. 1–18) before shifting to narrative testimony (vv. 19–51). The prologue moves from eternity to incarnation: the Word (*Logos*) who existed before all things, through whom all things were made, who is the light of men, enters the world He made and is rejected by His own — yet those who receive Him are born of God. The prologue culminates in the stunning assertion that the invisible God has been exegeted (*exēgēsato*, v. 18) by the only Son. The remainder of the chapter records John the Baptist’s testimony to the religious authorities (vv. 19–28), his identification of Jesus as the Lamb of God (vv. 29–34), the calling of the first disciples (vv. 35–51), and a climactic promise that greater things — heaven opened and angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man — still await. The chapter moves architecturally: eternal identity → incarnation → rejection and reception → testimony → recognition → promise.

This Text — Intent

God’s intent through this chapter is to arrest the reader before anything else happens — before the first sign, the first discourse, the first conflict — with the full identity of Jesus. The reader is not permitted to work up to Christology gradually. They are given it immediately: this man is the eternal Word, the divine light, the only Son who has made the Father known. Everything else in the Gospel will be heard in this light. The intent is not merely cognitive orientation but worshipful confrontation: the reader is being asked, before they advance another page, whether they will be among those who “received Him” or among “His own” who did not. Faith and its opposite are already the stakes.

Subject Sentence: The eternal Word becomes flesh to make the invisible God fully known and receivable.

Primary Claim: God is presenting Jesus in His full divine identity before the Gospel narrative begins — so that every subsequent encounter, sign, and claim in this Gospel is heard as an encounter not with a remarkable teacher but with the eternal Word made flesh; the reader is invited, from the first verse, to receive or reject the one in whom alone they can become children of God.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Identity of the Logos (v. 1)

The opening — “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*” — is the most contested verse in the Gospel and perhaps in the New Testament. The Jehovah’s Witnesses tradition (following the New World Translation) renders the final clause “*the Word was a god*,” exploiting the absence of the definite article before *theos* to argue for a lesser divine being. This reading should be *refuted*: the absence of the article before a predicate nominative is grammatically expected in Greek when the predicate precedes the verb (Colwell’s Rule, and more precisely, the semantic analysis of Philip Harner and Paul Dixon confirm that an anarthrous predicate nominative in this construction indicates qualitative force — “the Word had the nature of God”). Furthermore, John’s own prologue immediately identifies the Word as the agent of all creation (v. 3: “apart from him not one thing came into being”), a role scripture reserves unambiguously for God alone (Isaiah 44:24; Colossians 1:16). The three-clause structure of v. 1 is carefully designed: the Word’s eternal existence, personal distinction from God, and full divine nature — all three together preclude both modalism (one Person with different masks) and subordinationism (a lesser divine being).

The Prologue as Hymn or Theological Prose

A secondary interpretive question concerns the genre of vv. 1–18: many scholars identify an underlying hymn that John has edited and expanded with Baptist insertions (vv. 6–8, 15). This is worth *acknowledging* for its illumination of the liturgical weight of the passage, but it should not control the exegesis. Whether the prologue derives from an earlier source or is John’s own composition, the canonical text as we have it functions as a unified theological preface. The Baptist insertions, rather than being awkward intrusions, are carefully placed: they ground the eternal in the historical, insisting that the incarnate Word had a specific, datable witness. John’s Gospel is not Gnostic mythology — it insists on the bodily, historical particularity of the Word who “became flesh.”

“The Word was God” — Subordinationist and Arian Readings

Beyond the Jehovah’s Witnesses, broader subordinationist readings have historically attempted to read v. 1c as indicating a derivative or secondary divinity. This should be *refuted* on the same grounds above and additionally on the basis of the prologue’s climax: v. 18 declares that “no one has ever seen God” but that “the only God (*monogenēs theos*), who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” The most defensible textual reading of v. 18 identifies the Son as himself *theos* — “only God” or “God the only Son” — closing the prologue with the same Christological affirmation with which it opened. The Nicene settlement that the Son is *homoousios* (of the same substance) with the Father is not imported into John but is the correct reading of what John says.

“Lamb of God” (v. 29) — Sacrificial vs. Apocalyptic

John the Baptist's cry "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" is sometimes read with an apocalyptic rather than sacrificial emphasis — the "lamb" as a conquering figure (as in Revelation) rather than a substitutionary offering. This is worth *qualifying*: the image does carry eschatological weight (the one who takes away sin is doing something cosmic and final), but the primary referent in context is sacrificial. The Passover lamb imagery is unmistakable in a Gospel that will time the crucifixion to Passover preparation day (John 19:14, 31). "Takes away the sin of the world" (*airon tēn hamartian tou kosmou*) is substitutionary-substitutional in force — bearing and removing, not merely defeating. The Reformed reading holds that both dimensions are present but that the substitutionary-sacrificial dimension is primary.

"The world" (v. 29) — Universal vs. Particular Atonement

The scope of "the sin of the world" in v. 29 is contested between Reformed and Arminian readings. The Arminian tradition reads this as a universal atonement making salvation accessible to all without exception; the Reformed tradition distinguishes between the sufficiency of Christ's atonement (sufficient for all) and its efficacy (effective for those who receive him, i.e., the elect). John's own Gospel sustains both emphases: the universal scope of the offer ("whoever believes," vv. 7, 12) and the particular efficacy of divine birth ("born of God," v. 13, which is not generated by human will). The Reformed reading does not narrow v. 29 artificially — it holds the full universal language of the offer while grounding efficacious reception in God's sovereign initiative.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 1:1–3** — "In the beginning God created... and God said": John's opening echo is deliberate; the creating Word of Genesis is now identified with the divine Son who was present at and agent of that creation. The new creation has the same Word at its center.
- **Exodus 33:18–34:8; 40:34–35** — Moses asks to see God's glory and is told no one can see God's face and live; the tabernacle fills with divine glory. John 1:14 and 1:18 directly answer this: the Word "tabernacled" (*eskēnōsen*) among us and we beheld His glory; the invisible God has now been fully "exegeted" by the Son.
- **Isaiah 53:7** — "Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter": the Servant Song provides the sacrificial lamb typology that John the Baptist's declaration ("Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world") invokes; what Isaiah prophesied, John identifies as embodied in this specific person.
- **Proverbs 8:22–31; Sirach 24** — The personified Wisdom tradition, present before creation and delighting in the inhabited world, provides the Jewish conceptual background for the *Logos* claim; John both draws on this tradition and transcends it, because the Word is not a divine attribute personified but a divine Person incarnate.

- **Colossians 1:15–20** — Paul’s Christ-hymn corroborates the Johannine Logos Christology: Christ as the image of the invisible God, firstborn over all creation, in whom all things hold together and through whom all things are reconciled. The canonical witness to the pre-existent, creative, redeeming Son is not idiosyncratic to John.

Aim: To establish, before any application is attempted, that the whole Gospel of John — and therefore the whole of Christian faith — stands or falls on the identity of Jesus as the eternal Word made flesh, and to press the reader toward the specific decision John 1 demands: receive him or pass by.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1:1	The Word’s eternal existence, personal distinction, and divine nature	Three clauses; deliberate, creedal rhythm; echoes Genesis 1:1
1:2	The Word was with God in the beginning	Consolidates vv. 1a and 1b; establishes pre-existence before creation
1:3	All things created through the Word; nothing made without Him	Absolute creative agency; excludes the Word from the category of “created things”
1:4–5	Life is in the Word; that life is the light of men; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it	Light/darkness motif introduced; “has not overcome” may be translated “comprehended” or “extinguished” — both nuances present
1:6–8	John the Baptist introduced — sent from God, not the light, but bearing witness to the light	Interrupts the Logos meditation deliberately; anchors the eternal Word in historical witness
1:9–10	The true light coming into the world; the world made through Him did not know Him	The irony of creation failing to recognize its Creator
1:11	He came to His own; His	“His own” (<i>ta idia / hoi idioi</i>): first neuter (His own

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	own did not receive Him	things/realm), then masculine (His own people); rejection at both levels
1:12–13	To those who received Him — authority to become children of God; born not of human will but of God	The decisive contrast: reception yields divine adoption; birth is entirely of God’s initiative
1:14	The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us; we beheld His glory — full of grace and truth	The incarnation stated; <i>eskēnōsen</i> echoes the Tabernacle; “we beheld” — eyewitness claim embedded
1:15	John the Baptist’s testimony: “He who comes after me ranks before me, because He was before me”	Temporal paradox: the one born after John existed before John — pre-existence asserted within history
1:16–17	From His fullness grace upon grace; law through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ	First use of the name “Jesus Christ” in the Gospel; Moses/Jesus contrast; not law vs. grace but escalation of grace
1:18	No one has seen God; the only Son (God) at the Father’s side has made Him known	Climax of prologue; the Father’s invisibility resolved in the Son’s <i>exēgēsis</i> ; “exegeted” God
1:19–23	Priests and Levites question John the Baptist: Are you the Christ? Elijah? The Prophet? John denies all and quotes Isaiah 40:3	John’s self-definition is entirely negative and then scriptural; he is voice, not message
1:24–28	Pharisees question the Baptist’s authority to baptize; John points to the one standing among them whom they do not know	Ironical: the Word stands among His questioners unrecognized; anticipates the Gospel’s central conflict
1:29–31	John sees Jesus; “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”; John again subordinates himself	“Takes away” (<i>airon</i>) — present participle, ongoing bearing and removal; “of the world” — scope is cosmic
1:32–34	John testifies to the Spirit	John’s testimony grounded

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	descending like a dove on Jesus; John identifies Him as the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and as the Son of God	in divine revelation, not personal inference; “Son of God” — the Gospel’s central confession (cf. 20:31)
1:35–37	Two disciples of John hear him call Jesus the Lamb of God and follow Jesus	Transfer of discipleship from John to Jesus; John’s mission as preparatory is enacted
1:38–39	Jesus turns and asks, “What are you seeking?”; they ask where He is staying; “Come and see”	First words of Jesus in the Gospel; “What are you seeking?” — the question the whole Gospel asks of every reader
1:40–42	Andrew finds Simon his brother; “We have found the Messiah”; Jesus names Simon — Cephas/Peter	Jesus’ sovereign renaming of Simon anticipates Peter’s future; “We have found” — the joy of discovery, though the finding was initiated by divine drawing
1:43–44	Philip found by Jesus and called to follow; Philip from Bethsaida	Jesus as active subject — “Jesus found Philip”; the initiative is His
1:45–46	Philip finds Nathanael; “We have found him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote”; Nathanael’s skepticism: “Can anything good come from Nazareth?”; Philip: “Come and see”	The canonical testimony (Moses, prophets) and personal invitation are the two modes of evangelism
1:47–48	Jesus sees Nathanael coming; “Behold, an Israelite in whom there is no deceit”; Nathanael marvels that Jesus knew him under the fig tree	“Saw you when you were under the fig tree” — supernatural knowledge; echoes Jacob/Israel; Nathanael is a “true Israel”
1:49	Nathanael: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel”	The prologue’s theology enacted in miniature: a person encounters Jesus and makes the central

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1:50–51	Jesus: “Because I said I saw you under the fig tree, you believe? You will see greater things”; “You will see heaven opened and the angels ascending and descending on the Son of Man”	confession The Jacob’s ladder allusion (Genesis 28); Jesus is the meeting point of heaven and earth; the disciples’ understanding is only beginning

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1:1–18	The Prologue: The Eternal Word Becomes Flesh
2	1:19–28	The Witness Denies Himself: John the Baptist Before the Authorities
3	1:29–34	The Identification: Behold the Lamb of God
4	1:35–42	The First Disciples: Following the Word
5	1:43–51	The Gathering: Philip, Nathanael, and the Promise of Greater Things

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The eternal Word becomes flesh to make the invisible God fully known and receivable.

Primary Claim: God is presenting Jesus in His full divine identity before the Gospel narrative begins — so that every subsequent encounter, sign, and claim in this Gospel is heard as an encounter not with a remarkable teacher but with the eternal Word made flesh; the reader is invited, from the first verse, to receive or reject the one in whom alone they can become children of God.

Applications (Five)

1. You have been handed the identity of Jesus before you are asked to do anything with Him — receive it before you reduce it. (*Mind/belief*) John 1 does not begin with Jesus' teachings, miracles, or moral example. It begins with His identity. Before you can follow Jesus faithfully, you must know who you are following — and John is insisting that you know this first: the person you are considering is the eternal Word, the agent of creation, the one who made the Father known. The great error of practical Christianity is to treat Jesus as a very helpful spiritual guide while having never genuinely reckoned with His identity. If the Logos is who John says He is, then every category in your life must be reorganized around Him — not accommodated to your existing framework. Sit with the prologue long enough to let it do what it intends: not inform you but confront you.

2. The darkness that does not overcome the light is the same darkness you are living in — which means the light is already shining into your actual situation.

(*Affections/worship*) Verse 5 is not an abstract cosmological statement. It is a pastoral promise delivered with cosmic authority. The darkness John has in mind is not merely the darkness of the pre-Christian world — it is the darkness of the human condition, which includes yours: confusion, grief, moral failure, spiritual blindness, the sense that nothing holds. And into that specific darkness, this specific light is shining, and the darkness is not winning. What should that produce in you is not calm resolution but awe — the kind of awe that tilts into worship. You are not fighting darkness alone. The uncreated light has entered the world and nothing that is dark can extinguish it. Let that move you.

3. The question Jesus asks His first followers is the question He is asking you: “What are you seeking?” (*Affections/worship*) Jesus' first words in the Fourth Gospel are not a command, a teaching, or a healing — they are a question: “What are you seeking?” (v. 38). This is John's way of pressing the reader into the text. What are you actually seeking? If you are seeking relief from suffering, a moral framework, community, meaning, or even religious experience, Jesus will eventually confront you with the fact that He is not primarily any of those things — He is the eternal Word, and He offers something larger than any of those goods: to become a child of God (v. 12). The discipleship problem in most churches is that people are seeking the wrong things from the right person. Let the question land: What are you actually seeking, and does it match who He actually is?

4. “His own did not receive Him” is not a description of ancient Israel only — examine whether you have received Him or merely processed Him. (*Mind/belief*) The rejection described in v. 11 is delivered with no editorial rage — just a matter-of-fact statement of the central tragedy of history. The Creator entered His own creation and was not recognized. The danger John is flagging is not that His audience will actively oppose Jesus — it is that they will encounter Him, handle Him, include Him in their religious world, and never actually receive Him. “Receiving” in v. 12 is not passive familiarity — it is an act of the will that yields a transformation of identity: you become a child of God. This is binary. You have either received Him — which means your fundamental identity is now defined by

this — or you have processed Him at religious arm's length. John 1 does not allow a comfortable middle category.

5. Evangelism in John 1 has two modes — canonical testimony and personal invitation — and you are equipped for both. (*Will/behavior*) Philip's encounter with Nathanael in vv. 45–46 gives a complete picture of how the Gospel spreads. Philip provides canonical testimony: "We have found him of whom Moses and the Prophets wrote." He grounds his claim in Scripture — the whole Old Testament as preparation for this moment. Then, when Nathanael objects, Philip does not argue — he invites: "Come and see." You have both of these. You have a Scripture that points to Christ across every page. And you have a person you know who has not yet come and seen. The call to evangelism here is not to have all the answers or to win every argument — it is to know who Jesus is from the whole of Scripture and then to say to the person in front of you: Come and see.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: John 1 establishes the irreducible foundation of Christian theology: the eternal, personal, divine Word who is fully God and who became fully human in Jesus Christ. This is not a theological claim among others — it is the claim on which every other Christian doctrine either stands or collapses. If the Word is not truly God, then the incarnation is not the meeting of heaven and earth, the atonement cannot bear infinite weight, and the new birth is not adoption into the life of God Himself. John 1 also establishes that the invisible God is not permanently unknowable — He has been fully and finally *exegeted* by the Son (v. 18), making the knowledge of God not a mystical achievement but a gift mediated through the person of Jesus Christ. The light-darkness motif, the rejection-and-reception structure, and the Lamb of God declaration together show that the eternal Word entered a world genuinely in darkness and bearing genuine sin, and that His coming addresses both.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: John 1 is a foundational locus for the Reformed doctrine of the Person of Christ and the *extra Calvinisticum* — the insistence that in the incarnation the divine nature was not confined to the human nature but that the eternal Son continued to sustain the universe (*ta panta*, v. 3) while also being present in the flesh. The prologue's insistence that reception yields divine sonship "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (v. 13) is among the strongest biblical statements of sovereign regeneration — the new birth is entirely of divine initiative, not human decision. This is not a peripheral point but the mechanism by which the Gospel's offer is actually received: not the natural response of the human will but the creative act of God bringing light out of darkness as He did in Genesis 1. The Baptist's role — entirely preparatory, entirely self-effacing, entirely pointing to Another — models the Reformed

understanding of all human ministry: the preacher is not the light but the witness; Christ alone is the light.

Main Takeaway

The person this Gospel is about is not a wise teacher, a moral exemplar, or a spiritual guide who can be evaluated and adopted into your existing life. He is the eternal Word through whom every atom of the universe was made — and He stepped into His own creation to be rejected by it and to rescue those who receive Him. If you receive Him, you become a child of God. If you don't, you are among "His own" who did not know Him when He stood in the middle of their world. John does not allow you to stay neutral. Come and see — and decide.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the prologue as a theological introduction to skip past.** It is common to treat vv. 1–18 as a high-altitude theological flyover to dispatch quickly before getting to the "real" Gospel action. This inverts John's intent entirely. The prologue is the lens through which the entire Gospel must be read. A preacher who rushes past "the Word was God" to get to the Wedding at Cana has missed the architecture of the book. Exposition that lets the prologue do its full work will produce congregants who cannot hear a single subsequent episode without the weight of the eternal Word's identity pressing on them.
- **Moralizing the Baptist passages into a lesson about humility.** John the Baptist's self-effacement ("I am not the Christ," "I am not worthy to untie his sandal") is regularly preached as a model for personal humility. While the Baptist is indeed humble, this misses the point. His self-negation is not a character virtue to emulate — it is a theological claim about the nature of all ministry in relation to Christ. The lesson is Christological, not moral: *every human voice, including the preacher's, exists to point to the Word and then step back*. Preaching this as "be humble like John" is precisely the moralism that Clowney warns against.
- **Using John 1:12 ("received him") to smuggle in decisional regeneration.** The verb "received" (*elabon*) does genuinely involve human response, and John 1:12 is rightly applied to faith and reception. But v. 13 immediately qualifies and grounds the reception: those who received Him did so because they "were born of God" — not of human will. Preaching v. 12 in isolation produces a decisional theology where the new birth is the result of human choice; reading vv. 12–13 together (as John intends) shows that the human reception is the fruit of divine regeneration, not its cause. Do not separate them.

- **Softening “the darkness did not overcome it” into a vague reassurance.** Verse 5 is preached frequently as general comfort: “things will work out.” But John’s claim is more specific and more cosmic: the uncreated light entered a world actively hostile to it, and that world was unable to extinguish it — including at the cross. The darkness’s failure is not mere optimism; it is accomplished fact. Preach it with the force of a conquest, not the warmth of a sympathy card.
- **Treating “Lamb of God” as self-explanatory without unpacking the sacrificial and Passover freight.** In a culture with no working knowledge of Levitical sacrifice or Passover, “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” lands as a pleasant religious phrase. A preacher who does not stop to ask what a lamb *does* — who takes it, who brings it, what it dies for, and how its blood functions — will leave the congregation with a comforting image but no understanding of substitutionary atonement. The image is doing enormous theological work, and that work must be unpacked.
- **Ending on Nathanael’s confession without pressing the “greater things” promise.** Verse 49 is a satisfying landing point — “You are the Son of God, you are the King of Israel” — and many sermons close there. But Jesus immediately redirects: “You will see greater things.” The Jacob’s Ladder allusion of v. 51 promises that the disciples will see heaven opened on the Son of Man — Jesus as the meeting point between the divine and human worlds, the new Bethel. Closing at v. 49 produces a sermon about making a confession; including v. 50–51 produces a sermon about what that confession opens onto — a life in which the boundary between heaven and earth has been permanently breached in this person.