

Christmas Perspective

Why Bother?

December 4, 2016

**PRELUDE – Angels We Have Heard on High
Worship – Angels We Have Heard on High /
Transition / Whom Shall I Fear?**

Welcome – Shannon

Feature – Jingle Bell Rock / Offering

Good morning everyone.

Just three weeks from now, it will be Christmas Day ... which means, if you haven't already, it's time to get busy with some "snowing and blowing," "dancing and prancing" and "a-mixing and a-mingling" to say nothing of all the other things involved with the massive production that is Christmas in our country.

Speaking of that production, I'm curious ...

- How many of you have purchased at least one Christmas gift?
- How many of you have not yet gotten anything?
- How many are completely finished with your gift buying?
(Please see me after this service. I could use your help!)

I'm also curious ...

- How many are completely finished with decorating?
(We are at our home and I have to say that Jetta has done a fine job, too).
- Anyone not yet begun that little project?
Don't worry; we're not going to judge you.
(Slackers 😊)
- How many have completely scheduled the three or four days leading up to Christmas and/or the three or four that follow it? You

know where you're going to be and when and with whom.

Christmas really is a huge production isn't it?

In fact, I can't think of anything else during the year – I'm talking holidays and birthdays and vacations – that comes anywhere close to the amount of strategic and financial planning required to pull off Christmas American-style. Thanksgiving might approach it on the strategic side but you're not buying Thanksgiving presents for everyone, so it's not nearly the same in terms of overall planning.

Now, what's fascinating about this (at least to me) is that the production we call "Christmas" used to be so much less than it is today. Whereas today, we spend hours and hours wondering what we're going to buy for people (most of whom already have everything they need or want), back in the day, it was a lot simpler.

Kinda like this ...

Video – Jolly Old St. Nicholas (0.9 mins)

Begin: Couple playing wood percussion

End: Fades with percussion

Even the musical instruments were simpler. And “skates, sleds, and picture books” for presents? Pretty simple!

In fact, not only was Christmas much less of a production than it is today, at one point it was actually *illegal* to celebrate Christmas. Back when the first settlers journeyed to the “New World” (as they called it), many of them came to escape the decadence of the “Old World”; a decadence which included Christmas and the way it was celebrated. In many towns and villages, the Christmas season had become just an excuse to party and get drunk. (Hmmm ...)

Anyway, one commentator of that era wrote that “men did more to dishonor Christ in the 12 days

of Christmas than they did all year.”ⁱ

The chief concern for many devout Christians wasn't putting *Christ* into *Christmas*. It was taking *Christmas* out of *Christianity*ⁱⁱ which is why, in 1659, the Colony of Massachusetts banned it.ⁱⁱⁱ For 22 years, up until 1681, anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit in the city of Boston was fined the sum of five shillings!^{iv}

Eventually, however, as our country became more civilized and Christians became less legalistic, Christmas rebounded to the point where, today, it's hard to imagine our culture without it. It's a big deal for pretty much everyone, regardless of their religious or secular persuasion.

But have you ever wondered how it all started in the first place – why we even bother with Christmas?

When you're a kid, that question never crosses your mind. You just think, “Presents? Food? A

week off from school? I'm good with it!"

But, eventually, many of us began to wonder: *why do we make such a big deal about Christmas?*

Cultural Reasons

Of course, from the very limited viewpoint of recent history, the reasons why it's a big deal culturally are pretty clear.

1. First of all, there's the momentum of tradition.

Most of us do Christmas every year simply because ... *that's just what we do*. It never occurs to us to think about *not* doing it. It's tradition. And there's momentum behind it.

2. Another reason why Christmas is a big deal culturally is that our economy depends on it.

I'm sure it's no surprise to you that the top retail

sales period across the entire year is the Christmas season. Without Christmas, Black Friday and Cyber Monday and the entire month of December wouldn't contribute nearly as much to the profit margin of many companies ... which is why one commentator sarcastically remarked that "corporate America should get down on its knees and thank God that the baby Jesus was born two thousand years ago."^v

3. For a lot of us, Christmas is a big deal because it reconnects families.

In fact, I'm curious: this Christmas, how many will be either traveling to see family or have family that is traveling to see you? Lots of us. Family is a big deal.

4. Finally, another reason Christmas is a big deal is because it fulfills our need to give.

A few years ago, after so much emphasis on the spending of Black Friday and then Cyber Monday, someone came up with the idea of Giving

Tuesday. And more and more, that is as much a part of the Christmas kickoff as the Friday and the Monday.

Why? Because most people feel good when they give. And Christmas taps into that more than any other time of the year.

So, there's some very strong cultural momentum that ensures that Christmas is and will be a big deal for years to come. We "bother" with Christmas ...

- Because of tradition
- Because of the economy
- Because it brings families together
- And because, as those created to reflect who God is, we have an inborn need to give.

Christian Reasons

Now, having said all of that, what I *really* want to

talk to you about this morning is why and how Christmas became a big deal in the *very* first place – as in way, way, way back in the day; as in 1,700 years ago – when the leaders of the church decided that it was important to create a special Holy Day (or holiday) to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus.

After all, there's no place in the Bible that tells those of us who are Christians that we should do that. We're told to remember His teaching. We're told to remember His death on the cross. We even have a ceremony we call "communion" to help us do that.

But in the earliest days of Christianity and for several hundred years following, the birthday of Jesus was not even on the radar.

So, what happened? What led to *the birth of Christmas* as a day on which to celebrate *the birth of Jesus of Nazareth*?

Historians tell us that there were two primary motivating factors, the first of which you've probably heard about.

1. And that is ... the early church established Christmas to replace pagan celebrations.

I say that you've probably heard this one, because it's one of the most popular arguments these days *against* Christmas. It's usually stated in a rather condescending manner such as:

“I don't know why you Christians are so upset about anyone supposedly taking Christ out of Christmas. Truth is, Christ never really was *in* Christmas because the early church fathers just played copycat. They took an existing holiday and reshaped it for their own purposes.”

Or, as Freedom from Religion Foundation President, Anne Gaylor, puts it:

“For a fact, the Christians stole Christmas,”

she says. “We don’t mind sharing the season with them, but we don’t like the pretense that it is the birthday of Jesus. [December 25th] is the ‘Birthday of the Unconquered Sun’ (S-U-N). Christmas is a relic of [the ancient pagan practice of] sun worship.”^{vi}

And she’s right about that (although saying Christians “stole” the date might be a little over the top).

Somewhere around A.D. 350, after ignoring the birth of Jesus for three centuries, church leaders chose to Christianize an existing season of celebration that was commonly observed in the Roman world in late December, including what was known as “the festival of the Sun” or “Saturnalia.” (Because there are no records of the date of Jesus’ birth, church leaders were free to pick any date and they picked that one and called it “the Christ Mass” – meaning “The Messiah is sent” which is what happened when Jesus was born.^{vii})

Of course, the question is ... why? Why did they “steal” Saturnalia?

The most prevalent answer is that they did it in order to get people to become Christians.

The story goes that after the converted Roman emperor, Constantine, had declared Christianity to be the official religion of Rome, he and the church struggled to convert the general populace from their pagan practices, particularly this celebration of the god of the Sun. (Apparently, it was quite a festive season and people didn't want to give it up). So, instead of suppressing it, the Church just transformed its meaning and thus people were willing to become Christians.

Now, just to be clear, this theory of the origin of Christmas is not universally accepted by scholars as there are a few problems with it ... the main one being that it's not until *the 12th century* (800 years later!) that we find the first written suggestion

that Jesus' birth celebration was deliberately set at the time of pagan feasts. Nowhere is it recorded by the Christian theologians of *the 4th century*, which is odd given that were typically quite verbose in their writings.^{viii}

In truth, no one knows for sure what the motive was for choosing December 25th. However, focusing on that question – the question of “why Saturnalia” – distracts from the far more important question of “why at all?”

In other words “why, after 300 years of neglect, did the leaders of the church decide it was important to celebrate Jesus' birth?” I mean, if all they wanted to do was to Christianize a pagan holiday, they could have easily chosen to celebrate some other event in Jesus' life.

But they didn't.

Instead they chose His birth, which is even more fascinating when you realize that the common practice of Christians up until that point was to celebrate the day of a person's *death* – not the day of their *birth*. For instance, very early in its history, the church not only held an annual observance of the death of Christ (on Good Friday), it also honored many of the early martyrs on the day of *their* death.^{ix}

But at this particular point in time, the church leaders decided to draw a line in the sand and say “let’s break with tradition and specifically remember *Jesus’ birth* on December 25th.”

Why bother? What was the big deal?

Well, if you look closely at what was going on within the church during that particular era, what you see (in a multitude of writings) is a great theological struggle over the exact nature of the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

- Was he truly God?
- Or was he just a man who became fully-possessed by God at his baptism?
- Was he even a real human being with real flesh and blood?
- Or was he just an avatar; an apparition, like a ghost?

This fourth century controversy over the nature of Christ led to an increased emphasis on what theologians call “the doctrine of the incarnation” – the idea that Jesus was fully God and fully human at the same time.

And this is the second motivating factor behind the birth of Christmas as a day on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth.^x

2. We have Christmas because the early church felt it necessary to reaffirm the Incarnation: that Jesus really was “God in the flesh.”

They wanted to firmly plant in the minds of

Christians the truth that Jesus, while being fully God, was also a literal flesh and blood human being just like you and me.

Of course, that's what the first followers of Jesus had said about Him all along.

To the Galatians, the Apostle Paul wrote that

...

*When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman
...Galatians 4:4 (NIV)*

To the Colossians he wrote:

*In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form. Colossians
2:9 (NIV)*

In another letter he quoted an early Christian hymn:

He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the

nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory. 1 Timothy 3:16 (NIV)

The author of the New Testament book of Hebrews wrote:

*Both the one who makes men holy [Jesus] and those who are made holy [us] are of the same family ... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity ...
Hebrews 2:11,14 (NIV)*

And there is the clearest statement of all in the first chapter of John's Gospel, which says:

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.
John 1:14 (NIV)*

Of course, the question is ... if the idea of the Incarnation was already so foundational to classic Christianity, why did the church feel such a need

to hammer it home at this point in time?

Of Gnostics and Incarnation

To answer that question, you need to understand that Christianity began at about the same time as another powerful spiritual influence known as *Gnosticism* was overtaking the Roman Empire. (And I'll apologize in advance because this is going to get a bit technical for a couple of minutes, but it's important, so try to hang with me.)

Gnosticism is a word that comes from the Greek word “gnosis” (meaning “knowledge”). The basic belief of Gnosticism was (and is) that physical matter is evil and, therefore, “spiritual enlightenment” (gnosis) is supreme. It was to be pursued above all else.

There were many consequential beliefs that followed from this, but the most important was this: since physical matter was evil and flesh was physical matter, then flesh was evil.

Therefore, there was no way that a holy God would ever “put on” flesh.

Greek scholar William Barclay writes: “to the Greek the body was an evil, a prison-house in which the soul was shackled, a tomb in which the spirit was confined. Plutarch, the wise old Greek, did not even believe that God could control the happenings of this world directly; he had to do it by deputies and intermediaries, for, as [he] saw it, it was nothing less than blasphemy to involve God in the affairs of the world.”

So, as Christianity spread beyond its Hebrew origins from Jerusalem and Judea and Samaria into all the world, this was the primary mindset it encountered. And people who had been influenced by this mindset of Gnosticism found it hard to accept that Jesus was truly flesh and blood. Instead, they reasoned that he must have only *appeared* to be human.

- What seemed to be a body was not in fact a real body.
- Therefore, He could not really *feel* hunger and weariness, sorrow and pain;
- Therefore, Jesus was, in fact, a disembodied spirit in the apparent form of a man.^{xi}

Now, this may not sound like such a big deal to you and I, but it was huge. Eventually, as people combined the teachings of classical Christianity with Gnosticism (which often happens – people like to combine different belief systems) ... as Gnosticism began to take root ...

- It reduced Jesus to a *divine idea* instead of a *real person*.
- It turned “Christ” into a “mystical figure” and detached him from the historical person of Jesus of Nazareth as described in the gospel.
- It turned the cross and the resurrection into symbolic events and not real ones. After all,

since our bodies are inherently evil and therefore irredeemable, why would the Christ have to literally die and rise again to save them?

Therefore (and most importantly) ...

It turned salvation into the experience of a secret, spiritual knowledge personally revealed to each individual by the “mystical Christ” instead of a literal and physical atonement for sins that we have committed in the body.

And at the time when the Church Fathers made the decision to celebrate Christmas, there were many supposedly Christian leaders and churches promoting this view, that being a Christian was primarily about having spiritual experiences where people would “sense the Spirit” or feel “overwhelmed by the love of God” and *not* about redemption from the power and penalty of sin.

Does that sound familiar? Have you ever heard anything like that from some of the spiritual

leaders and churches in our day?

I'm sure you have because it's everywhere.

Whenever you hear that “it doesn't matter what you believe about Jesus” or that, “well, Jesus didn't really rise from the dead and, in fact, there might not have actually been a Jesus of Nazareth;” whenever you hear that “what really matters is that you try to sense God in everyday life and in every person and that you just try to be a good person” ... what you're hearing sounds warm and spiritual and meaningful *but it's not Christianity*. It's Gnosticism.

And Gnosticism is alive and well within modern Christianity.

In fact, while researching for this message, I came across a Christmas sermon from a church that actually associates itself with Gnostic Christianity.

“The birth of the Christ child is a sublime and timeless mystery. There is no book, no scripture, no authority outside of one’s Self that is an authentic source regarding such a mystery. It is a mystery that can only be witnessed individually in each one’s own heart.”

“Christmas is not about the celebration of a historical birth. Christmas is about becoming conscious of the renewing light that streams into the soul on Holy Night, that kindles into flame the soul spark within us, the birth of the Christ-Light within us.”^{xii}

That sounds so enlightened doesn’t it?

And this is why the doctrine of the Incarnation is so important. It’s what keeps Christianity from slowly deteriorating into a hodgepodge of self-focused New Age mysticism.

And the early church fathers recognized this and,

by instituting the celebration of the *birth* of Christ – the literal putting on by God of human flesh – they drew a line against a teaching that was plaguing true Christianity and threatening to rob it of its uniqueness and relationship to the real world in which we all live.

And that relationship to reality was so clear to the first disciples that Jesus' best friend, John, wrote about Him ...

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. [referring to Jesus]

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.
1 John 1:1-2 (NIV)

By the way, Barclay writes that the Greek word

that John uses for 'seeing' is "used in the New Testament more than twenty times and is *always* used of actual physical sight. This is no 'spiritual vision' seen with the eye of the soul or of the mind."

This is the assertion that "God could and did become a human person; that God could and did enter into this life that we live; that eternity could and did appear in time; that somehow the Creator could and did appear in creation in such a way that men's eyes could actually see him."

"Make no mistake," John was saying, "Jesus was no phantom or apparition. We saw him, we heard him and we touched him. He was as real as you and me."

And this is why Christmas matters. This is why, in spite of the commercialism, in spite of the connections that Christmas trees and Santa and lights and caroling and even the date of December 25th have with ancient pagan celebrations,

Christians ought to, at some level, “bother with Christmas.”

To paraphrase that commentator I quoted earlier, this is why Christians ought to get down on their knees and thank God that the early Church Fathers had the guts to go against 300 years of tradition and start celebrating Jesus’ *birth* as well as His death and His resurrection.

So What?

Now, I’ve just given you a pretty good shot of “gnosis” (or knowledge) here, and I hope you’re feeling a bit “enlightened” spiritually. But we’ve got to ask “so what” at this point or we’ll wind up falling into the same trap that Gnosticism does: *knowledge merely for the sake of knowledge* and *knowledge merely for the sake of making us feel good about ourselves*.

So why does it matter that God really did become fully human at Christmas? What does that mean

to you and me? What are the implications?

Well, theologians have filled libraries in discussing the implications of the Incarnation of God so we can barely scratch the surface so in the time that remains I want to just give you a few brief thoughts.

1. The Incarnation means that the things of our world are good and God can use them for our good.^{xiii}

Now, I don't mean that the evil propagated by humans is good, but that what God created is good. I mean that God has chosen the physical 'stuff' of this world to deal with us.

He sanctifies life in the body by taking part in it.

He uses everyday ordinary things to deal with us, to speak to us, and to refresh us - - such as bread and juice, water for baptism, a sinful and failing human like me to speak His Word.

The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:4, “Everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer.”

- Food is good, Jesus ate it.
- Drink, even alcoholic beverage, is good, since Jesus made wine.
- Clothing is good, Jesus wore it.
- Music is good. Laughter is good.

The Incarnation means that the things of our world are good and God can use them for our good.

2. The Incarnation also implies the *dignity* of life in this world.^{xiv}

In Gnosticism, since the physical world ultimately doesn't matter, physical suffering doesn't matter either. To be “enlightened” therefore means cultivating an attitude of detachment, even indifference. You don't have to care about

yourself or anyone else.

By contrast, as Christian philosopher C.S. Lewis once put it, “Christianity is a fighting religion.” By teaching the high value of the physical world, it motivates people to fight evil, disease and oppression in the world.

The Incarnation implies the dignity of life in this world.

3. The Incarnation means we don't need to have “spiritual experiences” to be good Christians.^{xv}

For instance, people assembled together hearing the Gospel taught by another human being is how God most often speaks to us not through a whisper or a sign in the heavens or a note on the pillow – though that sometimes does happen.

To be a good Christian means to express the kind of self-giving love and radical holiness that Jesus exemplified in the flesh, not experiences of self-

discovery.^{xvi}

4. The Incarnation means that our faith is rooted in solid history

... and not some kind of Gnostic fairytale.

5. The Incarnation calls us to look forward with hope and expectancy to the completion of the new and physical world in which God will put all things right ...

... and wipe away all tears from all eyes; a new physical world in which all knees will bow at the name of Jesus, not because, as Bishop N.T. Wright puts it, “Jesus was a teacher of wisdom, not because he showed us how we could get in touch with the hidden [divine within us], but because he died as the fulfillment of the Scriptural story of God’s people and rose as the fulfillment of the world-redeeming purposes of the same creator God.”^{xvii}

The Incarnation calls us to look forward with hope and expectancy of what God is going to do in

this world when Jesus returns.

6. Finally, the Incarnation reveals to us that God truly understands us and our lives and our challenges.

He is near to us not just in spirit (though He is!) but God is near to us in experience.

See, what some of us are experiencing right now in our lives is pain. Our bodies are breaking down; we've got some illness or disease. Some of us are experiencing relational issues or relational trauma. Some of us are worried about the future – we're worried about our income or we're worried about our kids. There are so many things of this life. And the incarnation means that Jesus was on this earth, he saw those things and he experienced some of those things. He understands and he is near because he has experienced life in the flesh just like we have.

And on that thought, let's close and let's pray together.

Jesus, let us experience a moment of peace and love this morning not as a result of some mystical moment but as we reflect on what it means that you were and are God in the flesh; that you physically came into our world and you will physically return to our world; that you were and are “God with us”, Emmanuel.

Amen.

Feature – All Is Well

CLOSING COMMENTS (w/Shannon)

1. Celebration of Christmas
2. Prayer pastor

Endnotes

ⁱ History Channel presentation @ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Inw2deKB-d8>

ⁱⁱ <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1868542,00.html>

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- ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.plaintruth.com/the_plain_truth/2010/12/when-christmas-was-illegal-in-america.html
- ^{iv} http://www.thehistoryofchristmas.com/ch/in_america.htm
- ^v Bill O'Reilly, article at www.billoreilly.com posted Thursday, Dec 01, 2005
- ^{vi} <http://www.atheistconvention.org.au/2011/12/22/the-christians-stole-christmas/>
- ^{vii} <https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/ISGODAGL.HTM>
- ^{viii} <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/biblical-topics/new-testament/how-december-25-became-christmas/>
- ^{ix} Christmas, Holman Bible Dictionary
- ^x Christmas, Holman Bible Dictionary.
- ^{xi} *ibid*
- ^{xii} From www.gnosis.org/ecclesia/homily_Christmas.htm
- ^{xiii} <http://lcmssermons.com/newsletters.php?sn=15>
- ^{xiv} <http://www.discovery.org/a/16091>
- ^{xv} *Ibid*
- ^{xvi} N.T. Wright
- ^{xvii} <http://www.spu.edu/depts/uc/response/summer2k5/features/davincicode.asp>