

Birth of a Child

There is nothing unusual about the birth of a child, billions have been born. While it is a wonderful and special event for the father and the mother and a memorable anniversary to celebrate for the child, it's difficult to say that any birth in and of itself is special because births are so usual.

But the birth of the Christmas Christ was different. So different, in fact, that all the events of history are clocked in terms of the calendar that is based upon when he was born. Everything is pegged in terms of being before or after the birth of Jesus Christ. It is now, all of these years later, an event that we celebrate for weeks in advance. In our country it is the largest retail season by far in all the year. It is the date on which the most cease fires have taken place in wars around the world as people have stopped to commemorate that special day. It's the one time of year that people are most likely to return to God and to church within our culture. And yet there is a surprising lack of understanding of this Christmas Christ. You would think with all of the attention, with even our calendar dating from his birth, that we would know far more than we do. Yet, there is surprising ignorance of the most monumental and significant event of all of history.

Who is this Christmas Christ and what does his coming mean? Was he merely a child extraordinary because when born he was placed in a manger in a stable cave in Bethlehem? Is he different only because all of the drawings and pictures that we see have a halo over his head? Most baby pictures we see don't have that and so does the halo distinguish him? No, it is far more than that. It was surprisingly well articulated by the prophet Isaiah 700 years before Mary had her first child, in Isaiah 9:6-7:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

Who is this Christmas Christ? Well, he is man. The prophet says, "For unto us a child is born" — very carefully crafted words, chosen with absolute precision, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit. "For unto

us a child is born" speaks of the humanity of this Christmas Christ, for birth is the one experience that we all as humans share in common. It is the universal experience.

Life begins at conception and then there is an explosion of multiplying cells as the imprint and design in our chromosomes begins to fill out the shape of our body. There's the skeleton and the organs, there are the hands and the feet and the eyes and ears and nose, the facial expressions and the pattern for personality. All of this takes nine months to develop. When the child is born it is a traumatic and a painful experience for both the mother and the infant. It's a moment that is a combination of extraordinary danger including the risk of death, and extraordinary opportunity for all the possibilities of life. Then, when the child is born, there is another explosion of growth, not only the development and maturing of the body but all of the learning, all of the socialization. Learning to walk and to talk and to relate to people, the development of emotions, the building of skills, as each individual fills out all of the potential and all of the opportunity for the raw materials of life.

It was this that the Christmas child experienced. For while it is true that his conception was supernatural, thereafter his developments and birth were quite natural. He developed in the womb of a teenage virgin, a Jewish girl, in Palestine. He was born as other babies are born. She experienced contractions and dilation, the birth and afterbirth. The child was born and was not exceptional to look at. When she walked down the streets of Bethlehem carrying that infant no one pointed or said anything — he didn't have a halo over his head. He was, at least by human appearance, quite ordinary and quite unexceptional.

Jesus learned to walk and to talk. He memorized as he went to school. He built friendships; he fell down and was bruised and bled; he experienced the range of human emotions and human experiences much like

the range of emotions and experiences that are ours. I know there are people who say he must have been very

different in his childhood. He must have stood out as being quite exceptional, except the evidence is really to the contrary. As he grew into maturity and people were starting to recognize him as the Savior, his own brothers and sisters were not among them. Those who had seen him grow up and had known him from his

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earliest years saw him more as a sibling than as a savior. They were slow to believe that he was very special or that he was the Messiah.

When he grew into full manhood, when he was mature, he was a man; he was human. His stomach growled when he was hungry, when he became tired he had to sleep. He had all the emotions from fear to anger and love to hate. He had friends; he had disappointments. He was tempted. Tempted to steal from the store and tempted to cheat on tests, tempted to lust. The book of Hebrews says that he was tempted in every point just as we are, yet without sin. All of which is to say — he was very human. All of the essence of humanity was his as it is ours. There was not the least bit of him that could be said to be incomplete as far as his humanity was concerned. This Jesus, this Christmas Christ, was a child who was born and became mature. If we were to see him today we would not identify him as any different from any of the rest of us. We would say in our vernacular that he is our kind of guy, just like us. He's a man.

But telling the truth about the Christmas child would be incomplete if we were to ignore what the prophet said next, "...to us a son is given." Isaiah was carefully explaining, fully inspired by the Holy Spirit, that not only is Jesus a man, but he is God. When we consider these words we are treading in an area that is sacred and that is admittedly difficult to understand. Even when we stretch the categories of our thinking to comprehend what is meant by this Christmas Christ being God and the son given, even at our best and greatest stretch, we fall short of full comprehension.

Let me begin by explaining that God is infinite. He does not have the limitations that we, as mortals and finite persons, have. His infinity means that he never began and that he will never end. That's hard for us to comprehend because we don't usually operate with that type of category. The categories of our mind are well-shaped in terms of everything having a start and a finish. We think of birth to death. When we speak of the calendar we assume that it starts on January 1 and that it concludes on December 31st. Careers begin with the first day of employment and they end with retirement or termination or quitting. Everything that we think about has a start and a finish and so it's almost impossible for us to deal with the concept of infinity.

I remember very well as a child trying to think that through. I was a grade schooler and one night I asked my parents if I could sleep out in the backyard. We lived somewhat in the country so there weren't

street lights. On that very clear night there were lots of stars. I laid there on my back, slow to go to sleep, and watched the stars. It seemed as if the longer I looked, the more stars there were. As I looked at the sky, I reflected on the things I learned in science classes at school, knowing that our earth, as large as it seems to us, is really quite a tiny speck in the proportions of the universe. Our sun, although it's very big in comparison to our earth, is really a tiny star in comparison to the others. I knew that light travels at an incredibly fast rate and that the nearest of those stars that I could see were light years away.

I wondered as I stared at the stars if some of them had long gone out and the message was taking all that time to travel through space. Our vast solar system is only a small part of our galaxy, the milky way, and there are many galaxies far larger than ours in our universe. But what really got to me was thinking that if I went in that direction as far as far could be, traveling faster than the speed of light, no matter how far I would go, there was always more. That made my head ache — and still does! In all the imaginations of my mind, no matter how far I went in any

direction, there was no end, no beginning, absolutely limitless. I still don't really pretend to understand infin-

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ity. I can't comprehend it because my mind does not have that kind of category to deal with it. But it's true. Just because I can't reach that far or even think that far does not diminish the reality.

So it is with God. God is infinite. He never began and he will never end. If it were possible to go back in time a billion, trillion years — God would already be there. Or go a billion, trillion years into the future and God will be there. He never began and he will never end. He is eternal. He is infinite. Again, very difficult to comprehend, but none the less true.

This infinite, eternal God has chosen to reveal himself to us and the record of that revelation is in the Bible. It is the record of God condescending to our level of understanding and yet we, in our finite limitation, still have some difficulty taking it in. This God who has revealed himself to us, has revealed himself as one God and three persons. That's also pretty hard to understand because again we don't have the categories for dealing with that. One God, but three persons, named Father, Son and Spirit, each one fully equal, each one fully God, sharing together a combined essence but having individual personalities among them. We are told in this revelation of this

great triune God that he loved us enough to choose to become one of us.

God the Son condescended to come to earth and nine months before that first Christmas the eternal son of God came to dwell in the embryo attached to the uterus of a teenage Jewish girl in Palestine. He who is named light, for nine months was in complete darkness. He who was all-powerful and all-knowing chose to take on the human limitations of space and of knowledge. The theologians call it the incarnation or the son of God coming in flesh. He was born and he developed and matured, and this unique union of God and man, deity and humanity, became united in the person of Jesus Christ.

I think if we were able today to interview the angels of heaven they would still be dumbstruck at what God chose to do. They would be hard put to comprehend or explain this amazing event that took place. For you see, while we talk about Jesus beginning in time, “for unto us a child is born,” we must also speak of the son of God as never beginning. “Unto us a son is given.” Now the prophet goes on to explain even more about this Christmas Christ using royal terminology. He says that he is man; he is God; he is magnificent. Call him “wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace,” names that no human king or queen ever could rightly deserve.

He is first called wonderful counselor for ancient and modern kings and queens alike have counselors — those who advise in foreign affairs and economics and matter of state. Counselors who are experienced and wise give advice on how the design of the kingdom ought be and how the rule ought be managed. We don't live in a monarchy so we don't really understand that, but for us that would be comparable to having a foreign affairs adviser or a council of economic advisers or the cabinet for the president of the United States. It is from these counselors that wisdom is gotten and plans are laid. Here we are being told that King Jesus is one who has all of the knowledge and all of the wisdom and all of the resources himself, that he can give his own wonderful counsel. He is able himself to lay out the plans for the universe and for the earth and for our lives, knowing far better than anyone else. He has the resources of being God and the experiences of being human and brings them together in the shaping of the plans for each one of us.

That's a wonderful truth as we try to figure out life and put the pieces together. As we take out yellow pads and pencils and try to plan out the next year,

setting our goals and budgets, we need to realize that the Christmas Christ who is the wonderful counselor has all of the information and resources we need but also understands us as we are. You know the bumper sticker that says, “Wise men still seek him.” It's true. Smart people, wise men and women, still seek the wonderful counselor for the writing of the script of their lives.

Then he is called mighty God, making it clear even seven centuries before Bethlehem that he was no mere mortal. Not just a mortal messiah who would come and break the yoke of whatever happened to be the empire that was occupying Palestine at that particular time. From the beginning it was made clear that he is God and that all of the attributes of God are resident in him. He is not limited in humanity but he is also divine. He is magnificent.

Next he is called everlasting father which, if you are a quick thinker, seems to be something of a contradiction. After all, did we not say that in the Trinity there is father, son and spirit? Aren't we talking about a prophecy that describes the extraordinary union of son and humanity? So why is he then called everlasting father? Perhaps a clearer translation of the words Isaiah first spoke and wrote would help, instead rendering it “father of everlasting.” As God, he was before time and in that regard became the author of time and of eternity, so when you talk about eternity and everlasting, he was before it, the father of it, the originator of it. He is magnificent.

Add to that a fourth description: he is the prince of peace. I think in some ways I like that the best of all. You, as I, know that we live in a world that has anything but peace. Historical analysts have found in the record of human history that there have been only a rela-

tively few years when nations have not been at war with each other. Almost continuously for all of history there's been a war going on. To this day we have raging a war in Lebanon that nobody can figure out how to solve. When a new head of state is established he is quickly assassinated. We have a war in Afghanistan where even when all of the peace treaties are signed and the troops are pulled out, the flames will not die. Our country is struggling again over the question of our involvement in Central America, especially in El Salvador and what we should be doing.

But you know, for most of us, we don't give a great deal of thought about Afghanistan or Beirut or El Salvador and that's because we have our own wars and our own struggles. We have our own conflicts

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that take place at work and at home and in our marriages. We have conflicts with finances and with our neighborhood and all the relationships that are ours, conflicts that many times so consume us that we cannot get beyond them to living ordinary life.

And so we come to the Christmas Christ who is presented to us as the Prince of Peace, understanding that he has a completely different approach than all the rest of the world offers. The normal approach of humanity is to change the circumstances on the outside, thinking that peace will then arrive on the inside. But the Christmas Christ comes at it with the opposite approach. He brings peace on the inside that is ours regardless of the conflict that is on the outside. It is a peace not to be defined simply as the absence of war. Rather, it is a peace that has a definition all of itself for it is stability and strength, assurance and confidence and a knowledge that all is good and right because God is there. He is the Prince of Peace. He is magnificent and that's only a starting of the list. Take all the positive superlatives that you can think of and apply them to him. He's magnificent; he's wonderful; he's fantastic; he's beautiful; he's loving; he's good; he's kind; he's generous; he's right. The list goes on and on until you start to imagine all the terrific people you know and add them together and all their best of virtues and he's far greater than all of them. Take your very best of friends, all that they are and all that you want them to be, and he's better than all of them combined.

Those who come to know the magnificence of this Christmas Christ begin to wonder how anybody could ever reject him. Why do hungry people choose to reject food or thirsty people say no to a drink? Why do lonely people disregard the opportunity for friendship? It's sad and it's hard to understand that anyone could ever reject this Christmas Christ because I'll tell you he is magnificent.

The prophet tells us he is great, he is a king. "Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing it and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this." He is the king of kings, the Lord of lords and he reigns with justice and righteousness, with fairness and equity, with no favoritism or partiality. He is great in power and great in rule. He is good in all that he does.

When he came, he offered his reign, his kingdom, to all of the world of his time and there were some who accepted. There were some who said, "Yes, the Christmas Christ Jesus will be my king and I will pledge my loyalty to him, not to Caesar, not to my boss at work, not to my family or anyone else but he

will be the king of my life." First there were a dozen, then there were hundreds and then thousands and eventually as the years sped by, millions who were called Christians, Christians being those who see themselves first and foremost as citizens of the kingdom of Jesus Christ, those who have pledged their absolute loyalty and fidelity to him. He is their king.

Let me tell you more. The Christ of Christmas who came in such humbleness so long ago is going to come again. Not to be laid in a manger, but to wear the regal robes of the king that he is. When he comes, he will fulfill his own prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. When he comes, he will rule the universe and will rule this world with justice and righteousness. When he comes, those who, up until that time, have pledged their allegiance to him will reign with him and those who have rejected him, will experience his judgment and wrath.

All of which comes to a double invitation. First, I invite you to pledge your allegiance to this Christ — man, God, magnificent, great. Accept him as savior from sin and pledge allegiance to him as king of life. It's a transaction of faith, and I encourage you to do it now. What better time than Christmas to make that transaction of faith, to become a citizen of his kingdom? And then I invite you to join with me in the very old words, almost 1700 years old, of the Nicene Creed, words shared in common by orthodox Christians from Protestantism to Catholicism to Orthodoxy, as an expression of our answer of who is the Christmas Christ.

We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father, and cometh again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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