



The Christmas Spirit Is the Christian Spirit!

~ John 1:14

Christmas is God's way of saying, "You're not getting it; I'm going to have to come down, live with you, and show you the way." "You're going farther in debt everyday; I'm going to have to come down and pay it off." Thus, begins the New Testament. Much needed. For, much of the story of the Old Testament is: "Man not getting it."

The realities surrounding the life and person of Jesus Christ are beyond the range of man's understanding. Yet, we do make faith in Christ harder than it needs to be by finding difficulties in the wrong place. For example, we ask, "How can we believe that the death of Jesus of Nazareth, one man, paid for the world's sins?" And, "How can that death have any bearing on God's forgiveness of our sins today?"

Or, take the resurrection, which is a stumbling-block for many people. "How," they ask, "can we believe that Jesus rose physically from the dead?" Or, again, take the virgin birth, which early in the last century was denied by many Protestants. How, people ask, can one believe? Or, take the gospel miracles, many find a source of difficulty here. Granted, they say, that Jesus healed. It is hard, based on the evidence, to ignore that he did --certainly the Jews could not ignore it; because of his miracles, they determined to kill him --to shut him up --to stop him. But, how can one believe that he walked on the water, fed the 5,000, and raised the dead?

The story of his life is surely an incredible one. However, the real difficulty does not lie here at all. It does not lie in the Good Friday message of atonement, or in the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of the incarnation.

The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man. The second person of the Godhead became the *second man*, determining human destiny. So Wesley wrote in his hymn, "Second Adam from above, reinstate us in Thy love." The second representative head of the race took on humanity without loss of deity, so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as he was human. "The Word was made flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). The Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless baby, unable to do more than lay and stare, and wiggle and make noises --needing to be fed and changed, and taught to walk like any other child. And, there was no illusion or deception about it --the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality.

The more you think about it, the more staggering it is. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the incarnation.

Christmas --that is, the incarnation, is the real stumbling-block in Christianity. It is from misbelief, or at least inadequate belief, about the incarnation that difficulties at other points in the gospel story usually spring. However, once Christmas is grasped as a reality, these other difficulties evaporate.

If Jesus had been no more than a very remarkable godly man, then the difficulties in believing the report of his life and work would be truly mountainous. *But, if Jesus is God on earth*, then, it is more startling that he should die

than that he should rise again. If the *immortal Son of God* did really submit to taste death, then it is not strange that such a death should have a saving significance for an entire race.

Once we grant that Jesus was God, it becomes unreasonable to find difficulty in anything else. The incarnation is in itself an unfathomable mystery; but, it makes sense of everything else that the New Testament contains. Both Matthew and Luke detail his birth, which was in a barn/cave. The reason why Jesus was born outside the hotel is that it was full, and nobody happened to offer a bed to a woman in labor, so that she had to have her baby in the stables, and cradle him in a feedbox. It was not to draw moral lessons, that this story was told, by these gospel writers. The circumstances of his birth were the subject of prophecy; so, the story was told to identify the baby.

And who was the baby?

First of all, the baby born at Bethlehem was God. He was *the* Son of God, not a Son of God (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18). Not only was he *the* Son of God, he was the *only* Son of God. John wanted to make certain that when he wrote about Jesus as the Son of God, that he would not be misunderstood --that people would not think him to be a Son of God, as the Greeks might have. So he wrote, "the only Son."

To make certain there would be no misunderstanding, John gave us his famous prologue to his gospel in John 1:1-18. "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God, and the Word was with God. All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made." "And the Word became flesh and lived among us. And we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." In the Old testament, God affects his purpose with words --he speaks, and "it is so." In creation God said, "Let there be... Let there be... Let there be...; And it was... And it was... And it was." The New Testament picks up on that, "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1).

So it is, that Christmas is the beginning for us. Yet, Jesus, in the sense that he is God, had no beginning. When other things began, he was --"In the beginning was... the Word." "And the Word was God."

"All things were made by him" (John 1:3). Make no mistake, the Jesus /Savior we believe in is God the Creator of all things, come to earth. No other Jesus can save or help --just the one who is God the Creator. It is illogical and futile to believe in any other Jesus.

"In him was life" (John 1:4). Life originally came from the creator. The one who created physical life in the beginning, has also created spiritual life. In all its forms, life originated and is maintained by the Voice of God, which is Jesus. "And the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). In giving life, he also gives light --that is to say, every person receives intimations of God from the very fact of his or her being alive in God's world. Life itself, is a sort of light.

Finally, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). And here is the incarnation --the baby in a feed-box --God living among us --God, "speaking to us in these last days," not by a prophet, but "by his Son Jesus Christ." His words will overrule and supercede all other words ever spoken. **He will become the basis for the New Testament.** Old Testament --Jewish; New Testament --Christian. If you think there is no difference, then why don't we each have 3, or 4, or 300 wives like the Old Testament Patriarchs? It is easy to see that the New Testament and the coming of Jesus was a new age for women. The New Testament is the beginning of the end of owning women, collecting them, or giving them in family deals, or having as many as you wanted --so long as you could afford to *take care of them*, much like children. Jesus was the messenger, who by the cross, would take us

all back to *pre-fall* creation, lifting the curse from both women and men by his own sacrificial death.

Yes, of all those affected by the curse, women suffered the most. It is no wonder that it was Eve who was looking for the redeemer with every child she bore. It is no small wonder that the redeemer came by the seed of the woman, Mary. It is no small wonder that Mary and Elizabeth, in particular, welcomed God to earth in a baby. Things would be different for them, and all women, from that time onward. Wherever Jesus was accepted, the curse would be largely lifted for woman. Old Testament sociology never did that; look at the middle east today –and you know, without doubt, it still doesn't. There is no New Testament in the middle east. It takes New Testament theology; it takes Christ to lift the curse. In the middle east today, I don't see people treating each other in such a way –as will ever bring peace. "Christmas" is where all things turn. Hear Jesus saying, "Moses said this –But, I say...." Jesus is the word to pay attention to, if you want peace.

"And we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." That God's final, complete, and comprehensive Word, spoken by the life of Christ **is the message of Christmas**. The Christian message rests on the Christmas message. The child in the manger was God. Once we see that, everything else is easy.

Secondly, the baby born at Bethlehem was God made Man. In the first case, "the Word was God". In this case, "the Word *became* flesh." It became something that it wasn't before --a real human baby. He had not stopped being God; he was no less God than he was before. He was not now, God *minus* some elements of his deity; but, God *plus* all that he had made man to be. He who made man was now learning what it *felt like* to be a man himself.

"In all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren... For in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he is able to help them that are tempted" (Hebrews 2:17). "We do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, but one who in all points was tempted like we are, yet without sin. Let us, therefore, come confidently unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help us in our times of need" (Hebrews 4:15).

We will float one final question: "How are we to think of the incarnation?" The New Testament does not encourage us to puzzle our heads over the physical and psychological questions that it raises, but to worship God for the love that was shown in it. It was an act of condescension and humility. "He, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God's equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as a mortal man. And having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal" (Philippians 2:6).

The crucial significance of the cradle at Bethlehem lies in the sequence of steps downward from heaven --at last, leading the Son of God to the Cross of Calvary. We do not understand anything Christian until we understand that the baby in the feed-box was God --when we do, we understand everything. There is a comprehensive summary given in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet, for your sakes he became poor, that you, through his poverty, might become rich."

Here, is stated not only the fact of the incarnation, but the meaning of the incarnation. It is not only a *marvel of nature*, but a *wonder of grace*. He became poor so that we might become rich in the things that count. Often times, the way up is down for us also.

Jesus was more than a man. He knew the Samaritan woman's rocky past; he knew that when Peter went fishing, the first fish he would catch would have a coin in its mouth to pay taxes. He knew, without being told, that Lazarus

was dead. From time to time, he displayed supernatural power in miracles of healing, feeding five thousand with seven loaves and two fishes, walking on water, and raising the dead.

The impression of Jesus, given by the Gospels, is not that he was entirely bereft of divine knowledge and power, but that he did draw on both his divine power and knowledge, while being content for much of the time not to do so --and never in behalf of his own person. We see this, in that, he refused to turn stones into bread when he was starving in the wilderness; rather than call 12 legions of near-by angels, he died on a cross. The impression, in other words, is not so much of deity reduced, but of divine capacities restrained. What Paul had in mind when he wrote, was not the *giving up* of divine powers and attributes to become man, but the *laying aside* of divine glory and dignity --"the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17), as Jesus said it.

There is no Biblical support for the idea of Jesus shedding any aspects of his deity. He had them all, and he used them enough so that we would know who he was. How can we say that the man Christ Jesus was fully God, if he lacked some of the qualities of God? How can we say that he perfectly revealed the Father, if some of the Father's powers and attributes were not in him?

So, here is a picture of the first Christmas:

God, in Jesus, emptied himself to become poor. He voluntarily restrained his power, accepted hardship, isolation, ill-treatment, malice, misunderstanding and a death that involved humiliation & agony, spiritual agony even more than physical. We can believe that his heart nearly broke under the prospect of it.

This is "becoming poor, that we might become rich." The Christian message is that there is hope for ruined humanity. There is hope of pardon, hope of peace, hope of glory, because Jesus Christ became poor, was born in a stable, so that, thirty-three years later he could die on a cross.

This is the Christian spirit; it carries tremendous meaning. It means the reproducing, in human lives, the temperament of him, who for our sakes became poor on the first Christmas. Christmas is ministering to human need. Christmas is joining hands with the hand of God to lift fallen humanity. When we see human need and pass by on the other side of the road, like the priest and the Levite, wishing them well or offering a pious prayer, then we neither have the Christmas spirit nor the Christian spirit.

God did not do that with us. He did not take the safe, cheap route with a wide swing to the other side of the road.

The Christian spirit can never shine out of Christian elitism; it can never shine from the Christian snob. It cannot shine out of pious acting; it cannot shine out of the new (yet, so very old) brand of the Christian as a bully. It shines only from those, who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor (spending and being spent), to enrich others, and to save them, and to heal them, and to identify with them.

It is giving time, trouble, care, and concern, to do good to others, and not just our friends, in whatever way we can. If we want a spiritual renewal this Christmas, then we must take steps to cultivate this spirit. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet, for your sakes he became poor, that you, through his poverty might be rich."

Jim Elliott once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." The only thing you can take with you is what you give away while you are here. It is part of what Jesus meant when he said, "Give and it shall be given unto you." We cannot be truly Christian, if we forget the meaning of Christmas. God came down so that we may go up. In doing that, he showed us all that the way up is down. Come down, come down, come down; it is the way of Christ. It is the "way of the cross." It leads home. Home for Christmas.