

## I. Introduction

A. When I was eight or nine, my great Aunt Ruth gave me a billfold for Christmas. As gifts go, it was better than a sweater, but not much. I was an eight-year-old boy. I was hoping for a shot gun, a mini bike, a tank or a chain saw – none of which I got. After I opened the billfold I said “thanks,” and set it down to wait until it was my turn to open another present, hoping that it would be something cool.

B. But my Dad asked to see it, and he looked at it for a moment and then called me over and pointed out that the billfold had a \$20 bill in it - which significantly increased my net worth. As it turned out, the billfold was a much better gift than I first thought.

C. And in that way, it's a lot like Jesus. He is a much bigger and much better gift than you think.

D. If you have been around, you may have heard me whine about Christmas. It's a very selfish complaint: I feel some pressure to say something fresh and new and that is really hard to do when Christmas keeps circling back around. Well this year, no complaints from me. I'm actually excited about the next four weeks, and have been since this summer, when I had a great time thinking about Jesus – who is a better gift than previously thought.

E. One of the things I've noted is that many of the people I've respected a lot – seemed most fascinated with the most basic Christian doctrines. I'd ask “what are you reading? What are you learning? What are you doing in your devotions? And I'd hear things like, “I've been thinking about grace, or the love of God or the cross.” And I'd think, “Really? I already know about those things.” And I eventually started hearing about this new space, a simplicity on the other side of complexity space. Stage four.

1. I lead a study group for skeptics. It's by invitation only and mostly – not exclusively, but mostly – it focuses on guys on the fringe. They get a letter saying, “I've seen you around. Don't really know you. My guess is, you're a good guy, here because your wife wants you to be here, but you're “auditing the class.” You don't really believe. It's not that you actively disbelieve, it's just not a high priority. But if you were honest, you'd admit that you haven't taken a real grown up look at the Christian faith.

2. Of course it would be a bit embarrassing to admit that now. And you do not want to be in a small group because, well who knows what happens there. Nothing good. People are going to ask you to share your feelings or pray. And somebody next to you may cry. And you are going to stay far from any of that.

3. So I offer a six week class for skeptics in which I promise that no one is going to ask you to pray, share your heart or cry. Where you can ask any question. It's a grown up, college level, fly over of Christianity and Jesus.

F. And one of the things that often comes up is the idea that faith moves through stages but not a lot of people move past stage two.

1. Phase one is where you believe because your parents say to believe. They tell you that your name is Bob and this color is blue, and that you need to go to bed and you believe them. And they tell you that there is a god and you believe that.

2. At some point you slide out of phase one and into phase two – where you replace your parents with some other authority and own things a bit, but haven't necessarily given a lot of thought to the opposing view. You hold your views with some passion. You are forceful in your beliefs. Not necessarily more thoughtful, but you take a position and think it's right.

a) I am a Packer because the Packers are great and Bears fans are stupid. I'm for Coke. People who like Pepsi are stupid. I'm for – well, you get the point.

3. Some people move on from there – but not all. I am making this very simple. Davie Weil – who used to be an Executive Pastor on staff here, and now runs ReNew Communities (our work in North Chicago) – he did his PhD on this topic. There are lots of studies and theories about this. Let me just say:

a) Not everyone moves on from stage two. But some do – often at college. And that process of unhooking yourself can be unsettling. It's unsettling to examine your own beliefs and assumptions.

b) However, not everyone who leaves stage two makes it to stage three. Some stay in between.

(1) Some are intentional about stopping. Many are not intentional about it, they are just lazy. They hear a hard question and think, "Yeah what about that?" but never actually bother to think about it. In my class of skepticism I say, "Look, this is too important for you to not push for answers about life, God and eternity. You've got graduate degrees in this field and you have learned a lot about XYZ, but on these very critical topic, you stopped asking thoughtful questions and you spend all your time on lesser matters! You need to push on."

c) Some people stay at two, some stay in this sort of no-man's land between two and three.

4. Level three for a Christ follower – Fowler talks about moving out of the synthetic-conventional phase and into the mythic-literal phase – is often a fairly complicated place. There is belief and significant effort to sort things out.

5. My point is, there is a fourth stage. (There are more stages than I am talking about – and lots of different theories about all of this - but almost every theory has a final stage where people get to a simplicity on the other side of complexity). And it tends to be a bit more settled and more loving and mysterious – there tends to be more awe and my observation is, it tends to be around the basic truths.

a) Karl Barth – one of the more learned theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – who wrote lots of books. When asked what was the most profound idea he'd ever heard: Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

G. I'm not sure that is what I've been dabbling in, but I am finding greater joy and interest and wonder looking at the basics. My devotional times have focused on more simple things like: grace, love, the incarnation, Jesus.

- H. Please do not hear me thinking I am arrived at some final level. But I think I got a glimpse of it. And it has come mostly around Jesus: looking more at his names, his titles and his nature. And it got me excited about this series.
- I. As you may know, there are lots of different names and titles for Jesus and also different metaphors used to describe who He is and what He has done.
1. There are the basics. He is: the Christ, the Savior, the Son of God – these reside in the top tier. They made it into the FISH emblem. They are huge and there is a lot to think about here. For instance – the angel told Mary that Jesus would be the Son of God. Well, that was the title of Caesar Augustus. Being told she was going to give birth to a rival was a call to revolution.
  2. Then there is a second category: Son of Man, Lamb of God, Lion of Judah, Prince of Peace, the Nazarene, the Logos
  3. Down in the more obscure ranks are titles like: first born of the dead, the Second Adam, the seed of woman.
- J. Part of the reason there are so many is because He is so big and amazing and there are so many amazing aspects to who He is. We need to think about his: deity, sonship, pre-existence, the incarnation.
- K. Today – on this communion weekend – as we start this new series “And He Shall Be Called,” I am doing the overview that sets up Christmas with a focus on the Christmas doctrine: the incarnation.
- II. If you want to sound – I don’t know, “spiritual” or “refined,” you don’t talk about Christmas, you talk about Advent, which is the term for the four weeks leading up to Christmas.
- A. This isn’t really the way our world is organized today. The rules that govern the holiday season are based more on shopping hours, football schedules, final exams and airline travel than on Advent. But Advent is the term that comes into English from the Latin word *adventus*, which was the translation for the Greek word *parousia*, and it is all about expectant waiting for the Messiah.
  - B. It’s the four weeks (in some traditions, forty days in others) in which we await the arrival of Christ.
  - C. It’s been in place for a long time – at least since the 500s.
  - D. The term also reminds us that we are waiting for his return – his second coming, which will not be as a baby but as a king.
  - E. Advent marks the beginning of the Christian year – in which you rehearse the entire life of Christ in 52 weeks. So, Mary’s pregnancy is 4 weeks.
  - F. And there are traditions – not stuff from the Bible, but that people have done over and over and we still do. Advent wreaths and advent calendars and more.
  - G. So, if you want to lean into all of that, you can talk about Advent.
- III. Now, full disclosure: even if you do, it’s not the biggest part of the story.
- A. That would be Easter. The Bible is about Jesus. The Old Testament sets it all up.
  - B. We have Creation, Fall, Promise – the promise being about a messiah, a savior, someone who will right the wrongs, defeat evil, win us back. That is about Jesus and we are reading through the Old Testament waiting for the fulfillment of the promise – which doesn’t come. So it leads us into the New Testament, where it does.

C. The New Testament opens with the Gospels, which are all about his life. He is the fulfillment of the Promise. The Old Testament points to the New. The New Testament is all about Jesus so it points to the Gospels. The Gospels themselves all lead up to his death and resurrection. So, Christmas is exciting. If you started at the beginning and have been paying attention to what has been happening, then you get that when Jesus arrives it's a big deal. The hero has now shown up in a big way. But it's not the climax of the story.

D. Our story starts with our birth (or we can back up to conception), but Jesus story is very different. Before he became one of us he existed as God in heaven.

1. In the beginning was the word (the logos) and the word was with God and the word was God.

2. This is a reference to Jesus before he became a person.

E. So Christmas is when God the Son – the Logos, who was fully God and has existed from eternity past – shows up. Christmas is when He becomes one of us, via a Virgin Birth. And He does all of this as the promised Messiah and Savior.

IV. Our text is Phil. 2:5-11 – which is a hymn that Paul dropped into his letter. It's perhaps the oldest hymn ever, and it's called the *Carmen Christi*.

A. Verse 1-4 make it clear that Paul drops this wonderful, powerful and deeply theological passage – one of the deepest explanations of Christ's nature we get – into his letter less to make wonderful points about Christ and more to call us to love and serve others. It's shocking. He says: **Th<sup>4</sup>, if U have any encouragement from be- united with Christ if any comfort from his love, if any common shar- in t Sp, if any tenderness & compassion, then make my joy complete by be- likeminded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, hav the same mindset as Christ Jesus.**

V. **Who, be- in very nature God, before he showed up as a baby, Jesus existed in heaven as God, with all the Shekinah glory and majestic splendor – all the unapproachable brilliance of God. But he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage (grasped); rather, he made himself nothing**

A. The NASB says He emptied himself; the KJV: he made himself of no reputation; some say "veiled" – which is term Wesley uses in his great hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" – "veiled in flesh the godhead see; hail the incarnate deity."

VI. **by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!**

A. No one started higher or went lower.

VII. **<sup>9</sup>Th<sup>4</sup> G exalted him 2 t highest place & gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in H & on E & under t earth,<sup>11</sup> and every tongue acknowledge that JX is L, 2 t glory of God the Father.**

VIII. There is a lot in Phil. 2:5-11. When I was preaching through Philippians we spent three weeks here. There is the descent. There is also the exaltation and glorification of Christ by the Father. There is a lot here. I want us to focus on the incarnation.

A. This is a Latin word. The root is *carnas* – which means meat, thus a carnivore is a meat eater.

B. The big, bold, crazy, unthinkable, mysterious idea that unfolds at Christmas is that God takes on flesh. While remaining fully God He becomes fully man. He adds humanity to deity.

1. It's not that he is half God and half man;
2. Or that he alternates between being God and man;
3. Or that He is God in a man's shell. It wasn't just a photo-op.

C. These and a half-dozen others all got ruled out in the Chalcedonian Definition – which is the third major creed in the Christian faith. (After the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, the next big document crafted by the church was the Chalcedonian Definition).

1. It doesn't try to tell us how Jesus could be fully God and fully human at the same time, it just tells how not to talk about it.<sup>1</sup> The hypostatic union is a mystery. And even more than that, it's a marvel. How He did it – and what He did – is above our labor grade. It's also amazing that He did it.

IX. There are numerous aspects of the incarnation to ponder.

A. Writing about this JI Packer said: God became man; the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby; unable to do more than lie and stare and wiggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child... The babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets. Nothing in fiction is so fantastic as is this truth of the Incarnation.

X. Let me end noting five things:

A. It changes everything. If you accept the incarnation then all of the other stories in the Gospels become easy. People say, "you don't really believe... that Jesus walked on water, healed people, multiplied food." Yes, and those are easy to believe. The miracle to trip over is the incarnation. If you sign up for that, the rest is easy. If God is walking around on earth, of course he is doing miracles.

B. It's a beacon of hope. It means that there is more than this world – there is more than life and death. If Jesus was God – as He claimed – then God exists and we live forever.

1. I was with a man this afternoon who does not have long to live. He is dying of ALS. But he is full of hope.

C. It suggests that this life matters. There is no sacred / secular divide. Everything matters to God. One of the reasons the incarnation was denied – was viewed as a scandal – was because it elevated the physical world. It means we should never think, there are some aspects of life that are spiritual – like prayer and church – and these are really important and matter to God, but the other things - normal life, like food and sleep – do not. No. Remember, God is not particularly interested in your spiritual life. I hate to break it to you but he's not. That is because he is completely focused on your entire life. By showing up as one of us, Jesus shows how important everything is.

D. It suggests that God is both holy and loving. A God who was holy but not loving would not have shown up in this broken world. He would have judged sin. Demanded we get our act together. A God who is loving but not holy would not have shown up in this world. He would have just overlooked the sin and evil and gone on. What is he rescuing us from?

E. It suggests that we can approach God. In the Old Testament you could not. God appears to Abraham as a smoking furnace, to Israel as a pillar of fire, to Job as a storm. Moses could not see him. Can you imagine how crazy it would have sounded to Moses that God was showing up to be with us. But John tells us that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us as a baby. And babies are the definition of approachable. The incarnation not only tells us that God exists, it tells us that he comes near.

F. It also means that we can be forgiven. As man he is our perfect representative in death and as God his death is of infinite value.

## XI.

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<sup>1</sup> We get the four fences. We are told that the two natures exist in perfect unity without mixture, division, confusion or separation.