

THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTMAS

THE APOSTLE'S CREED: GETTING A VOCABULARY FOR THE FAITH

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER | Sermon transcript, 19 December 1999]

1 John 1:1-4 – 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. 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. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.

Christmas is about the word “incarnation.” We sing it every year in our Christmas carols, especially in “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing.” Charles Wesley wrote that, and one line says, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; Hail the incarnate Deity!”

If you understand the word “incarnation,” you’ll understand what Christmas is about. The Apostles’ Creed doesn’t use the word “incarnation,” but it teaches the doctrine of the incarnation when it says, “conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.”

Where do we go to understand what Christmas is? The first two verses of our text give us the teaching of Christmas, and the second two give us the purpose of Christmas.

Let’s take a look at the first two verses. We see here the teaching of Christmas is two things. It’s frankly doctrinal, and it’s boldly historical. We have to grasp this before we move on to how it changes our lives.

CHRISTMAS IS FRANKLY DOCTRINAL.

What do I mean by “frankly doctrinal”? I used the word “doctrinal” on purpose. I know it’s a negative word. It’s part of a family of words that have negative connotations. “Doctrine” or “dogma” connotes being narrow, being rigid or closed. The word “doctrinaire” gets that across well.

“Doctrinaire” is bad. It is bad to be narrow. It is bad to be closed. It is bad to be haughty. It is bad to not be open to reason. It is bad not to listen to others.

But in our fear of being doctrinaire, we are not frank—we are not honest—about the fact that we are all doctrinal. A doctrine is a belief we base our lives on, and it’s something we contend for, we insist on. In other words, a doctrine first of all is a faith position. It’s not something we can prove scientifically. It’s not something we prove empirically. Secondly, it’s something we live on, we commit ourselves to, we base our lives on. And thirdly, it’s something we push, we contend with other people over. That’s a doctrine. And even though we shouldn’t be doctrinaire, we are all doctrinal.

I'll give you an example. Mr. A is a Christian. His friend, Mr. B, is not. Mr. A one day sits down with Mr. B and says, "I wish you could believe that Jesus is Savior and Lord. Let me try to convince you." Mr. B says, "Nobody can know anything definite about God. And secondly, you should not try to persuade other people to see things your way. That's not right."

When Mr. B says, "You can't know anything definite about God," what is that? That is a faith position. That's not scientific. That's not empirical. It's a belief. And secondly, when he says you mustn't try to convince other people that your take on spiritual reality is the right one, he at that moment is trying to say to Mr. A, "You ought to see it my way." In other words, he's saying, "I have a relativistic take on spiritual reality, and you ought to take it." He's doing the very thing he's forbidding as he's forbidding it.

Both Mr. A and Mr. B are being doctrinal. They have a non-empirical faith position. They've bet their lives on it. Mr. B has bet his eternal destiny on the idea that nobody can know anything definite about God. And they're both contending for it. Here's the difference. Mr. A is being openly doctrinal. He's being frank about his doctrine. Mr. B is not. Mr. B is in denial.

Let's try not to be doctrinaire. But we cannot avoid being doctrinal. Everybody has faith assumptions about God, about eternity, about human nature, about moral truth. We bet our lives on them and press for them, and there's no way to avoid being doctrinal.

Christmas is frankly doctrinal. The text says the invisible has become visible. The incorporeal has become corporeal. In other words, God has become human. The absolute has become particular. The ideal has become real. The divine has taken up a human nature.

This is not only a very specific doctrine, but it's also unique. Doctrine always distinguishes you. One of the reasons we're afraid to talk about doctrine is because it distinguishes us from others. Here's why the doctrine of Christmas is unique.

On the one hand, you've got many religions that say God is so imminent in all things that incarnation is normal. If you're a Buddhist or Hindu, for instance, God is imminent in everything. God is the divine spark in everything, and therefore incarnation is normal. God is incarnate in all sorts of people and things. Christians say Jesus is the God-man, and people from that family say, "Sure." On the other hand, the family of religions like Islam and Judaism says God is so transcendent over all things that incarnation is impossible. Jesus as God-man is blasphemous.

But Christianity is unique. It doesn't say incarnation is normal, but it doesn't say it's impossible. It says God is so imminent that it is possible, but he is so transcendent that the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is a universe-sundering, history-altering, life-transforming, paradigm-shattering event. Christianity has an absolutely unique view on this that sets it apart from everything else.

CHRISTMAS IS BOLDLY HISTORICAL.

Christmas is not just frankly doctrinal; it's also boldly historical. Look at what John says about Jesus: "We saw it. We heard it. Our own eyes, our own ears. We felt it, this eternal Life."

Here's what he's saying: "When we give you these accounts of Jesus walking on the water, of Jesus rising from the dead, of Jesus speaking these words, these are not legends. These are not things we made up. These are not wonderful spiritual parables. These are things we saw. We saw him do this. We heard him do this. We felt him do this."

In other words, the doctrine of Christmas is that God entered history in the person of Jesus. The manger, the resurrection, the story of Jesus is not just a story. It's true. It actually happened in history.

This goes completely against what the average person believes. The average person says, “These are wonderful stories, but they’re like parables. They’re legends. They didn’t really happen.”

Here’s the one thing Christmas presses us on. First John 1:1–2 is saying these are either lies you’re reading in the New Testament, or they’re eyewitness accounts, but they can’t be legends. Many scholars of ancient literature have told us that modern fiction throws in details that give a realistic sense, but ancient legends were never written like that.

For example, the story of Jesus walking on the water in John 6 says, “When they had rowed three or three and a half miles, they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water” (v. 19). You may not be an expert in ancient literature, but think of *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. Can you imagine Homer saying, “And Achilles met Hector in one-on-one combat, and they were either three or three and a half miles from the wall of Troy”? He wouldn’t have said that, because in ancient legends they didn’t put in details that didn’t help the plot or develop the character. Therefore, when a man back then was writing a legend, he wouldn’t say, “They were three or three and a half miles out.” It wouldn’t have occurred to him, unless he was writing an eyewitness account.

When John says, “I saw him, I felt him, I heard him with my own ears, I saw him with my own eyes,” everyone would know immediately he was claiming to be an eyewitness. Therefore, every reader of the New Testament knew either these were deliberately fabricated lies, or they were true eyewitness accounts, but they couldn’t be legends.

If they are lies, they’re some of the stupidest lies ever made. Here’s why. These accounts were written down within the lifetime of the people who were there. If you’re going to write that 500 people saw Jesus risen from the dead in the Kidron Valley, you wouldn’t write it forty or fifty years later, like the Gospels were written. You would write it 100 years later, when everybody who lived in the Kidron Valley at the time was dead. If you falsely write that 500 people saw Jesus in the Kidron Valley, and lots of people are still living the Kidron Valley who were there at that time, you’re never going to have a religion that gets off the ground. But it did get off the ground, because they wrote these accounts and they weren’t contradicted.

The point of Christmas is that Jesus Christ really lived, and he really died. It happened in history. He did these things. He said these things.

You may think, “What’s the big deal? You’re being doctrinaire here.” No. People say, “I like the teachings of Jesus. I like the meaning of these stories. The meaning of these stories is to love one another, serve one another. I like that. But it doesn’t matter if these things really happened. Doctrine doesn’t matter. What matters is you’re a good person.”

The great irony is, *that* is a doctrine, but they’re not being frank about it. It’s called the doctrine of justification by works. When somebody says that, they’re saying it doesn’t matter that Jesus actually lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. All that matters is we can follow his teaching. That is a doctrine that says, “I’m not so bad that I need someone to come and be good for me. I can be good. I’m not so cut off from God and God is not so holy that there has to be punishment for sin. That doesn’t matter.”

The gospel is not that Jesus Christ comes to earth, tells us how to live, we live a good life, and then God owes us blessing. The gospel is that Jesus Christ came to earth, lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died, so when we believe in him, we are accepted and live a life of grateful joy for him.

In other words, if these things didn’t happen, we can’t be saved utterly by grace. If these things didn’t happen—if they’re just parables—what you are saying is you believe the doctrine of salvation by works: that if you try hard enough, God will accept you. See, you cannot avoid doctrine.

The doctrine of Christmas is that Jesus really came. If he didn't come, the story of Christmas is one more moral paradigm to crush you. If Jesus didn't come, I wouldn't want to be anywhere around these Christmas stories that say we need to be sacrificing, we need to be humble, we need to be loving. All that will do is crush you into the ground, because if it isn't true that John saw him, heard him, felt him—that Jesus really came to do these things—then Christmas is depressing. Every year I see stories in newspapers saying Christmas is the time of year for depression. It is, but not if you believe these first two verses. Christmas is more than an inspiring story—it's frankly doctrinal and boldly historical.

CHRISTMAS MAKES YOU DEEPLY MYSTICAL.

Verses 3 and 4 tell us that if you grasp this idea—not that Christmas is a sweet story but that Jesus Christ came to earth, God became flesh and lived the life you should have lived, died the death you should have died, as a Savior, not just as a teacher or an example—then Christmas will do four things to you. It will make you deeply mystical, happily material, fiercely relational, and free to be emotional.

First of all, Christmas will make you deeply mystical. First John 1:3 says, “Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son.” This word “fellowship,” which is *koinonia*, means that if Jesus Christ has come—if Christmas is true—then we've got a basis for a personal relationship with God. God is no longer a remote idea or just a force we cower before, but we can know him personally. He's become graspable.

Let me give you an example. Scholar A and Scholar B are both trying to write a biography of Sir John Doe. Sir John Doe lived in East Anglia and died in 1721. Both Scholar A and Scholar B believe Sir John Doe wrote five letters to his wife, and they can learn a lot from that. But then there's a 500-page autobiography, and it says it's written by Sir John Doe. Scholar A says, “I believe that's genuine.” Scholar B says, “I don't.” So they sit down to write their biographies. Those biographies are going to be different. Scholar A's biography of Sir John Doe is going to be much more detailed, much more personal. When you're done reading you're going to feel you know this guy. But Scholar B's biography is going to be much more remote, much more general, much more speculative. You're going to feel you hardly know him at all. It all comes down to whether the autobiography is genuine.

Here's the point. If Jesus Christ is actually God come in the flesh, you're going to know so much more about God. He's going to be graspable. He's going to be somebody you can relate to. You're seeing him weep. You're seeing him upset. You're seeing him cast down. You're seeing him exalted. If Jesus is who he says he is, we have a 500-page autobiography from God, in a sense. And our understanding will be vastly more personal and specific than any philosophy or religion could give us.

Look at what God has done to get you to know him personally. If the Son would come all this way to become a real person to you, don't you think the Holy Spirit will do anything in his power to make Jesus a real person to you in your heart? Christmas is an invitation to become mystical. Christmas is an invitation to know Christ personally. Christmas is an invitation by God to say, “Look what I've done to come near to you. Now draw near to me. I don't want to be a concept; I want to be a friend.”

CHRISTMAS MAKES YOU HAPPILY MATERIAL.

Greek and Roman readers of this verse would have been astonished when John said he felt the eternal; he saw the eternal. Greeks and Romans and even traditional religious people today believe matter is bad; the divine is good.

Traditional religion says salvation is escaping out of this world into the kingdom of God, but the gospel of Christmas is that salvation is the kingdom of God coming into this world. Traditional religion says the world is bad. Let's get away from cancer. Let's get away from inner-city poverty. No, the gospel is that salvation is the

kingdom of God coming down into this world. The body is important. Matter is important. This world is important. He took on physical flesh; therefore, Christians know in the name of Christ we share our faith, but in the name of Christ we also help a poor person get a decent house. That's part of testifying to the gospel of Christmas. The kingdom of God is here to rehabilitate this world, not to save us out into some kind of ethereal paradise. The future of traditional religion is paradise. The future of the gospel is a new heaven, a new earth.

CHRISTMAS MAKES YOU FIERCELY RELATIONAL.

Thirdly, not only does the gospel of Christmas make us deeply mystical and happily material, but it makes us fiercely relational. The incarnation imprints on us an attitude toward relationships. John says, "I want fellowship with you." The test that you know what Christmas is about is that you become more desirous of intimate personal relationships with other people and better at getting them, because the incarnation is the secret of good personal relationships.

When two people are different culturally and linguistically, how are they going to have a relationship? One must learn the other's language, speak in a broken dialect, and become vulnerable and weak. If you enter into another person's world, you become weak; the other person keeps the power. But then you have a relationship.

If you follow the way of Jesus you say, "I will not work so much on being understood but on understanding. I will not work so much on getting my needs met but on meeting needs. I will work on entering into her or his world and giving that person what they consider love, not what I consider love." Incarnation, if it's imprinted in you—if you see what Jesus Christ has done—is going to make you unbelievably good at personal relationships.

CHRISTMAS MAKES YOU FREE TO BE EMOTIONAL.

Look at verse 4. John says, "I want you to have fellowship with us. I want you to believe what we are saying. I want you to understand the doctrine of Christmas. I want us to be united in a community. I want us to be united in belief."

And then he says, "I'm doing all this"—why?—"so my joy will be complete."

He doesn't say, "I need your lives to be okay so I can have any joy at all." He's already got joy. He says, "You need to get your act together for my joy to be *complete*." There's a balance there. He's got a joy no matter what they do. Christmas gives you a subterranean joy.

Kathy and I used to own a house in Philadelphia. It was always damp in that basement, and always mucky in the backyard. Somebody said, "Didn't you know before you bought the house? There's a subterranean river that goes underneath all the homes on this street. It's always flowing, even in a drought."

On the one hand, Christmas gives you a subterranean river of joy, and no matter how bad it is on the surface, no matter how bad circumstances are, the joy is always there. It keeps you green. It keeps you fresh. After all, Jesus Christ has landed. The Lord has opened a cleft in the pitiless walls of the world, and the kingdom of God is coming, come hell or high water. That's subterranean joy.

But on the other hand, John says, "I can't have complete joy unless you believe." That means this. Many of us are afraid to enmesh ourselves in the lives of other people, because we can't stand the idea of tying our hearts to other people. If they're unhappy, we're unhappy. So we pull back. We withdraw. We don't get involved in the lives of people. But the incarnation means that Jesus Christ, God himself, got enmeshed in our brokenness. He got involved in a major way. He was weeping. He came in, and he fell, and he had nails in his hands.

But here's what's great. It's a subterranean joy. It's a joy that cannot go out, and it will give you the freedom to get involved in the lives of other people. Christmas makes you free to be emotional. It makes you realize the emotion of grief, of hurt, is not going to take you all the way down, because you have a subterranean joy.

If you believe the doctrine of Christmas, it makes you deeply mystical. It makes you happily material. It makes you fiercely relational. It makes you free to be emotional. What else could you want? Think about that the next time you say to somebody, "Have a Merry Christmas."

Let's pray.

Father, we do want the joy that comes from the doctrine of Christmas. It's not a sentimental joy; it's not a giddy joy. It's not a general feeling of inspiration. It's certainly not just another story that we have to live up to. This is a boldly historical statement—that Jesus Christ has come to be our Savior. And we ask, therefore, that all of the great theology of the doctrine of Christmas that we sing about every year in Christmas carols would come home to us—so that we would wrestle like crazy to get near you; so that we would be deeply engaged in the needs of the poor and the sick and the dying; so that we would pattern our own relationships after the Incarnation and find ourselves breaking through and forming friendships that we never had before; and so that we can be free to be emotionally involved, because underneath it all, we have nothing to fear. We ask that we would be totally changed by the great doctrine of Christmas. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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