

Rejoice

By Brad Allison on 12/18/2005

Scripture Reference *1 John 1:1-4*

Is it possible that there might be some hypocrisy in the way we celebrate Christmas? Hypocrisy is usually noticed more quickly by others than by the hypocrite himself. I read in the latest issue of *Newsweek* magazine that a labor union in Las Vegas hired some temporary workers to picket a non-union Walmart. The union paid their workers \$6 per hour for this work. Walmart's wages for starting positions is \$6.75 per hour.

There has been a great deal of controversy this year over the exclusion of the word "Christmas" in the greeting commonly given at this time of year. Several large department stores instructed their sales force to wish shoppers "Happy Holidays!" instead of "Merry Christmas!" Many church leaders responded forcefully, some even urging boycotts against some of those stores. And then the news came out several weeks ago that some of the largest churches in our country are canceling their regular Sunday services on Christmas day, due to the inconvenient fact that Christmas falls this year on a Sunday. When choosing between gathering to worship Jesus or staying home to open presents, many Christians who will defend Christmas choose not to celebrate it themselves.

We need God's help in being delivered from such hypocrisy ourselves. I am convinced that our biggest need is to celebrate Christmas vigorously. The best way to celebrate Christmas is to be filled with joy, to be filled with amazement at the fact that the Son of God, the second member of the Trinity, took on flesh, was born of a virgin, and came to deliver God's people from their sins. The first four verses of John's first letter can help us in this. John speaks here of the incarnation of Christ and then says in verse 4 that he is writing about this in order that we may have "complete joy." The word 'complete' has the sense of fullness, of a joy that is completely filled up. John tells us that such joy can come from only one place, from knowing Jesus and particularly from knowing of his incarnation.

I. Two Errors Corrected by the Incarnation

Sometimes small errors can have large consequences. Several days ago, a Japanese brokerage firm by the name of Mizuho Securities Co. made a very small error that proved costly. One of their traders intended to sell one share of a company for 610,000 yen. But he made a small typing error and instead offered 610,000 shares of that company for one yen each. At that price, there were so many eager buyers that in the next two minutes the company lost \$224 million. Errors about the nature of Jesus' incarnation are even more damaging. If the second member of the trinity has really taken on flesh, then two ideas that have plagued mankind since the beginning of time are shown to be false. The two ideas are what we can call spiritualism and materialism. Spiritualism says that only the spiritual is truly real, while materialism says that only the material is truly real. Do you see that the incarnation refutes both of these? If God took on flesh, then the material is not bad and therefore spiritualism is wrong. And if God took on flesh, that means that he existed prior to taking on flesh, and therefore materialism is also wrong. Let's look more carefully at these two errors.

Spiritualism says that the material is bad and only the spiritual is truly real. This seems to be the error against which John was writing. There was a teaching the church battled in the second century called Gnosticism, a teaching that seemed to be present in an early form at the time John wrote these words. Gnosticism says that the spiritual is divine and good, while the material was evil. As Christians in John's day came under the sway of this teaching, they

had to alter their view of Jesus. If material things are evil, then clearly God could not take on evil flesh. So the Gnostics taught that the Son of God only *seemed* to take on flesh. Do you see how John is answering this error? He piles up words that indicate that Jesus was fully material. John and the other disciples heard him, they saw him with their eyes, and they touched him with their hands. He was fully material.

Spiritualism is growing stronger in our day. Its proponents say that it doesn't so much matter what you do with your body. The important thing is to realize your latent divinity and to nourish your spiritual side. It is a "sour grapes" approach to life that seeks to deal with the pain of living in a fallen, material world by means of denial. It's dishonest, saying that what happens with the material part of our lives doesn't really matter. True Christianity goes in the opposite direction. It says that your material side is full of meaning because the Son of God took on material. The Son of God continues to have a material body and he will have one forever. Material things do matter.

The second error is more common in our day than the first. Materialism teaches that only the material is real. But the incarnation teaches that Jesus existed prior to taking on flesh. There is a spiritual reality, and recognizing this fact has very large implications. The Bible says that Jesus was born of a virgin. Obviously, that doesn't happen in a world that is only material. Either he was or he wasn't. If he was, everything is changed. Possibilities open up that would not be possible in a purely material world.

With the recent release of the movie *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, there have been several articles written about the original author of the Narnia Chronicles, C. S. Lewis. *Christianity Today* featured Lewis in its most recent issue, and there was a very interesting article by Alan Jacobs, in which he described the circumstances in which this first of the seven books was written. Lewis lived with his brother, Warnie, and an elderly woman named Mrs. Moore whom he cared for. Jacobs writes,

At the beginning of March 1949, Warnie was in Oxford's Acland Hospital, having drunk himself into insensibility. After his release, Warnie wrote in his diary that his brother's "kindness remains unabated," but C. S. Lewis's resources were failing. In early April, he wrote to a friend who had reproached him for not replying promptly to a letter, "Dog's stools and human vomit have made my day today: one of those days when you feel at 11 A.M. that it really must be 3 P.M." Two months later, he collapsed at his home and had to be taken to the hospital. He was diagnosed with strep throat, but his deeper complaint was simply exhaustion (Dec, 2005, p. 37-38).

Jacobs goes on to explore what is central to Lewis's writings, and says that it is an openness to delight, "to the sense that there's more to the world than meets the jaundiced eye, to the possibility that anything could happen to someone who's ready to meet anything" (p. 38). Christmas teaches us that anything can happen, even if your life is filled with those days when you feel at 11 A.M. that it must be 3:00 in the afternoon. With the incarnation of Jesus, the spiritual has invaded our world. So repent of cynicism, because anything can happen. Jesus has come down to earth. He really has.

II. Two Applications Springing from the Incarnation

The first application springing from the fact that God in Jesus has taken on flesh and become man is fellowship, both with one another and with God. John said he proclaimed Jesus, "so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (v. 3). Fellowship in the biblical sense is not just drinking coffee and chatting with one another about sports or the latest news. It refers to

having a relationship because of sharing things in common. There is something about the incarnation that helps us to enter into relationships. What is it? There are a number of things we could say in answer to this. I want to mention only one. Jesus' incarnation shows us that relationships are inefficient. An efficiency expert would never have come up with the incarnation. It was so limiting for Jesus to become man and to be born to a poor family in a remote district of a remote country. There was not e-mail in Jesus' day. There wasn't even snail mail or telephones or television. Wouldn't it have been far more efficient to wait for our modern technologies so that Jesus' time could be better used? But relationships have never been about efficiency.

Illustration: Someone in our church told me recently about a custom in his family by which Saturday mornings have been designated pancake mornings. On these days, he and his young children get up and make pancakes together. As every parent knows, to be helped by young children in such a task reduces efficiency by at least 300%. But he has convinced his children that he just can't make pancakes without them. He needs their help, and they gladly give it. This father understands what we all know is true, but sometimes forget—it's not about efficiency, but about loving others. And love is necessarily inefficient.

I like what John Stott says about this:

... the Son of God did not stay in the safe immunity of his heaven, remote from human sin and tragedy. He actually entered our world. He emptied himself of his glory and humbled himself to serve. He took our nature, lived our life, endured our temptations, experienced our sorrows, felt our hurts, and died our death. He penetrated deeply into our humanness. He never stayed aloof from the people he might have been expected to avoid. He made friends with the dropouts of society. He even touched untouchables. He could not have become more one with us than he did. It was the total identification of love (*The Contemporary Christian*, p. 357).

Jesus shows us what it is to love. It means to pour yourself out to others, not being concerned with such things as efficiency. It means that loving others will feel like limiting yourself in some ways. The application is this: since God has become man, give yourself to others. Start with those closest to you. Don't ask, How can I maximize my time? Ask instead, What do I need to do to be like Jesus in loving this person?

The second application John mentions stemming from the incarnation is complete joy. Jesus has come that we might have joy. The best way to celebrate Christmas is to do what so many of our Christmas hymns tell us to do—rejoice. How is that we rejoice like this? Notice what John says. The main verb of these first four verses is the verb proclaim. Complete joy comes as we come to see Jesus and focus on him. John goes on to state the basic truths of the gospel. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin, and therefore we ought to confess our sins. We have been liberated from sin by Jesus' blood.

Illustration: A preacher of the early 1900s said that when he was 12 years old he had killed one of the family geese by throwing a stone and hitting it squarely on the head. Figuring his parents wouldn't notice that one of the 24 birds was missing, he buried the dead fowl. But that evening his sister called him aside and said, "I saw what you did. If you don't offer to do the dishes tonight, I'll tell Mother." The next morning she gave him the same warning. All that day and the next the frightened boy felt bound to do the dishes. The following morning, however, he surprised his sister by telling her it was her turn. When she quietly reminded him of what she could do, he replied, "I've already told Mother, and she has forgiven me. Now you do the dishes. I'm free again!"

Every religion that believes in a heaven believes that man must strive to get to God. Christmas tells us otherwise. We don't strive to get to God; he has emptied himself and come to us to give us freedom and a life of joy in him. We don't go up; he comes down.

I believe the great need of Christmas is to cultivate this joy. George Muller was a 19th century Christian philanthropist who devoted his life to caring for orphans. The daily burdens upon him were immense as he undertook to care for a large number of the orphaned. After forty years of trials, he tells us in his autobiography something he discovered. "I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was to have my soul happy in the Lord." Remember that these words were spoken by a man who had taken responsibility to provide for the food, shelter and clothing of hundreds of orphans. Yet his first order of business wasn't to secure what they needed, but to have his soul happy in the Lord. I think Muller is right. Jesus has been born of a virgin. God has come to earth to save his people. Surely everything must take a back seat to that.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus is the source of all our joy. But we are often like the newspaper editor I read about several years ago. In December of 1903 the Wright brothers were successful in getting their "flying machine" off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: "We have actually flown 120 feet. Will be home for Christmas." Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas." He totally missed the big news—man had flown! Don't we do the same? The Son of God has become man, and we get absorbed in trivialities. Will it snow this year? Will I complete my gift-buying in time? John proclaims Jesus that we might have complete joy. May he give you complete joy this year as you look to Jesus!