

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Incarnation

As we approach the celebration of Christmas, it seems appropriate to seek to unwrap the mystery and the meaning of the manger.

From the perspective of reasoned thought or a rational mind, the Bible's claim that the God of the universe, the Maker of Heaven and Earth, took on human flesh by being born of a virgin some 2,000 years ago in Judea may seem preposterous. Certainly from a naturalistic or humanistic worldview, what is claimed in the birth narratives of the New Testament gospels is regarded as impossible.

However, from a super-naturalistic worldview and from the perspective of faith in a personal God, the Christmas proclamation is truest truth.

Indeed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, very God of very God was conceived in the womb of a willing servant named Mary and born in a town called Bethlehem. That one event changed the course of human history.

To deny the truth of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ is to deny one of the foundational claims of the Christian faith. Without the Incarnation there is no redemption, without the manger there is no cross, without Christmas there is no Easter, without the God-Man there is no hope of heaven.

The oldest of our creeds, the Nicene Creed, affirms that:

“We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation He came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.”

Presbyterian Church (USA)
Book of Confessions, 1.2.

That declaration of faith in the Incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is echoed throughout the PCUSA's *Book of Confessions*. In The Apostles' Creed (2.2), The Scots Confession (3.06), The Heidelberg Catechism (4.035-.036), The Second Helvetic Confession (5.062-069), The Westminster Confession of Faith (6.044-.045), The Shorter Catechism (7.021-.022), The Larger Catechism (7.146-150 and 7.156-.157) and The Confession of 1967 (9.07).

Long ago, at many times and in many ways,
God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,
but in these last days He has spoken to us
by His Son, whom He appointed the heir
of all things, through whom also He created
the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God
and the exact imprint of His nature, and
He upholds the universe by the word of His power.
After making purification for sins, He sat down
at the right hand of the Majesty on high ...

Hebrews 1:1-3 ESV

Prophets foretold it, Elizabeth anticipated it, Mary and Joseph experienced it, angels announced it, shepherds witnessed it, Simeon and Anna confirmed it and wise men from the East followed the natal star to acknowledge it. So threatened was the Roman procurator by it that he had all the Jewish boys under the age of two in the city of Bethlehem exterminated.

But God's plan would not be thwarted. It is the Incarnation, literally God *in carne* (God in flesh).

The Messiah had been born, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. The Kingdom of God drew near as the God of the universe became

flesh to dwell among humankind, full of grace and truth. The essence of the Incarnation is that God literally became a man, at the same time fully human and fully divine.

Many Christian churches now prepare for Christmas following a liturgical calendar that begins with a season called Advent. Although not expressly Reformed, Advent (which means “coming”) is a time to consciously attend to the magnitude of the Biblical claim that God finds people to be so precious that He would sacrifice His own glory to condescend to our lowly estate and then humble Himself unto death on a cross that we might be reconciled to God.

Litanies like Hebrews 1:1-3 and Philippians 2:5-11 amplify the reality that the Incarnation is inextricably connected to the crucifixion, resurrection and glorification of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Christmas cannot be cut off from the realities of Good Friday, Easter, Christ's ascension, nor His now awaited second coming.

Jesus' birth is both the advent of a “who” and a “what.” Christmas is the celebration of the reality of God with us and the celebration of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God among us.

John the Baptist cried out that the Kingdom of God was drawing near. With the advent of Christ, it did. With His coming again the Kingdom of God will be fully present and the will of God will be fully accomplished on earth as it is even now in heaven. For that advent we now wait.

In reference to the extraordinary circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus, Luke 2:19 says, “Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”

With her, let us then ponder the advent of Jesus Christ and prepare our hearts and minds to be discerning of the truth as we approach the manger throne.

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Week I: The Incarnation of the living God

Question 47 of the Larger Catechism asks, “How did Christ humble Himself in His conception and birth?” Reflecting both John 1:18 and Philippians 2, the answer confesses that “Christ humbled Himself in His conception and birth, in that, being from all eternity the Son of God in the bosom of the Father, He was pleased in the fullness of time to become the Son of man, made of a woman of low estate, and to be born to her, with diverse circumstances of more than ordinary abasement” (PCUSA *Book of Confessions*, 7.157).

It is false to think that Jesus sprang into being at Christmas. Jesus has always been, is now and always will be. Jesus is fully and eternally God, the second member of the Trinity.

Colossians 1:15-20 affirms that “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in Him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church; He is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything He might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all His fullness dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through His blood, shed on the cross.”

In this one succinct passage God reveals Christ’s eternal and incarnate nature. Indeed, all things were made by Christ and for Christ. Further, it is important to receive the revelation that Jesus is not merely a good or even great representative human being. According to the Scripture, the fullness of God was personally and fully present in Jesus. Jesus is the God-Man. Believe it or not, that’s the reality of the Christmas claim.

It should not surprise us that many people do not believe that Jesus is God. Even in His own day, many people did not believe that Jesus was who He said He was. John 10:30-39 reveals that Jesus’ claim to be God was an offense to the Jews. The Christian claim that Jesus is God born in human flesh is offensive to many people today. Convincing people to believe is the responsibility of the Holy Spirit, our part is to bear witness to the One who came, the Word made flesh to dwell among us, to testify to His glory, and to demonstrate His grace and truth.

Ponder these things and discuss in your small group:

1. Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” John 10:30. (Read in context, John 10:30-39)
2. Read and discuss John 1:1-14.
3. What does this passage say about the eternal nature of Jesus?
4. Place John 1:1 in conversation with Gen. 1:1 and Rev. 21:1-5.
5. Read John 1:4 in conversation with John 10:10.
6. Read John 1:3 and 10 in conversation with Col. 1:15-20 and Heb. 1:1-3.
7. Reflecting on John 1:5 and 11, what prevents people from accepting the Biblical revelation that Jesus is God incarnate? (*Hint: A naturalistic vs. super-naturalistic worldview; and elevating reason and rationalism over revelation*)

EDITOR’S NOTE:

Carmen Fowler is the author of the equipping section that appears in the center of each issue of *The Layman*. Your feedback is greatly appreciated as future studies are planned.

Share your comments with Carmen via e-mail at cfowler@layman.org, call 1-800-368-0110 or write her at P.O. 2210, Lenoir, NC 28645.

EQUIPPING FOR MINISTRY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Week II: The Incarnation is imperative for redemption

Hebrews 1:1-3 reads “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, and through whom He made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being, sustaining all things by His powerful word. After He had provided purification for sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.”

The writer of Hebrews affirms the eternal nature of Jesus as well as affirming that as God incarnate, Jesus is both the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being. Then the writer speaks of the “why” of the Incarnation: God incarnate, the One named Jesus, was born as the God-Man to die as the only sacrifice sufficiently holy to atone for sin and conquer death. Having accomplished that mission, Jesus has returned to His rightful place at the right hand of the Father. It is impossible to disentangle, get free from or undo the Incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension and glorification of Christ. Indeed, in Him all things hold together.

Again, the prophets foretold it, the angel Gabriel announced it, Mary knew it, Simeon and Anna affirmed it, the gifts of the Magi honored it, Herod feared it, and Jesus revealed it frequently to those who had ears to hear. The Messiah of God, the Christ, was born to die to save His people from their sins.

Indeed, the Incarnation is imperative for redemption. To help us understand why, let us turn to the historic confessions of the Reformed faith. Consider three questions and answers from the Larger Catechism.

Q. 38. Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God?

A. It was requisite that the Mediator should be God; that He might sustain and keep the human nature from sinking under the infinite wrath of God, and the power of death; give worth and efficacy to His sufferings, obedience and intercession; and to satisfy God’s justice, procure His favor, purchase a peculiar people, give His Spirit to them, conquer all their enemies, and bring them to everlasting salvation.

Q. 39. Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be man?

A. It was requisite that the Mediator should be man; that He might advance our nature, perform obedience to the law, suffer and make intercession for us in our nature, have a fellow feeling of our infirmities; that we might receive the adoption of sons, and have comfort and access with boldness unto the throne of grace.

Q. 40. Why was it requisite that the Mediator should be God and man in one person?

A: It was requisite that the Mediator who was to reconcile God and man, should Himself be both God and man, and this in one person; that the proper works of each nature might be accepted of God for us, and relied on by us, as the works of the whole person.

Ponder these things and discuss in your small group:

1. Read Gal. 4:4-5. What do these verses reveal about the connection between the Incarnation and redemption?
2. Read Mat. 1:18-25. According to the angel who appeared to Joseph in a dream, why was Mary’s son to be named Jesus? What does that tell you about the connection between the Incarnation and God’s redemptive plan?
3. Read Luke 2:25-40. Knowing what you now know about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, what were Simeon and Anna forecasting?

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Week III: Christ was incarnate and Christ is incarnate, now and forevermore

Jesus was always with the Father. We have established that as the second member of the Trinity, Jesus was present at Creation and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. He is pre-existent, the Alpha and Omega, the Living One. But at a specific point in history, in what the Bible calls “the fullness of time,” God the Father ordained that the eternal Son be born in human flesh by the power of the Holy Spirit. And at that time, Jesus became God incarnate.

Jesus was God incarnate when He was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary. Jesus was God incarnate when He was born in Bethlehem and throughout His life on earth. Jesus was God incarnate when He died on the cross and when He rose from the dead. Jesus was God incarnate when He ascended into heaven. He is God incarnate as He sits at the right hand of the Father. Jesus will be God incarnate when He comes again to judge the living and the dead and He will be God incarnate when He reigns in the New Heaven on the New Earth.

Jesus did not become other than God incarnate during the temptation, trials or crucifixion. He was really God and really human, really suffering and really dying. Nor did Jesus become something other than God incarnate after the resurrection. He was not a ghost nor a spirit but really flesh, risen from real death to real life to real glory.

The Larger Catechism asks (Q 36), “Who is the Mediator of the covenant of grace?” The answer: “The only Mediator of the covenant of grace is the Lord Jesus Christ, who being the eternal Son of God, of one substance and equal with the Father, in the fullness of time became man, and so was, and continues to be, God and man, in two entire distinct natures, and one person, forever.”

Don’t miss the power of the final word in that answer. Jesus is the God-Man forever. “In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form” (Colossians 2:9). Again, the Scripture does not say lived, but lives, forever; even now. Hebrews 7:24-26 echoes saying, “because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. Such a high priest meets our need – one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”

Jesus didn’t start being God at the Incarnation and Jesus didn’t stop being the incarnate God when He ascended into heaven. He is at this very moment seated as the God-Man next to the Father, interceding for the saints, preparing a place for us, waiting to return. He is coming again, *in carne*, to judge and reign and rule.

Ponder these things and discuss in your small group:

1. 700 years prior to the birth of Jesus, Isaiah wrote his prophecies. Read Isaiah 9:1-7.
2. Read Isaiah 9:2 in conversation with John 1:4-5, 9 and John 8:12.
3. How do you understand the prophecy of Isaiah to have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ?
4. What of Isaiah’s prophetic word is yet to be fulfilled?

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Week IV: The first coming of Christ prefigures the second coming

Philippians 2 reminds us that after His humiliation, Jesus experiences exultation. “God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

God promises that one day, in the context of human history, every knee of every human being will bow to the incarnate God, Jesus the Christ. Maybe not today, but God promises that one day it will be so. Just as the Jews in the days of John the Baptist were awaiting the advent of a Messiah, Jesus promises His disciples that He is coming again. Another advent is yet on the horizon of human history.

“Ready or not, here I come” is the joyous proclamation of the one who seeks those hidden in a game of Hide-and-Seek. So too, the eternal One who came to seek and to save the lost is coming again whether we are ready or not. Acknowledging that only God the Father knows the day and time (Matthew 24:36), Jesus counseled His followers to not be afraid, not be deceived, and to stay alert and keep watch (Matthew 24:42, 25:13).

This watching is active, hopeful and motivating. Upon His ascension into heaven the disciples were simply standing, gazing in the direction Jesus had ascended. The angel confronted them and got them going on the mission of bearing witness to Christ. As we wait, expectantly, we also live the abundant life Jesus died to give us. This is an active, moment-by-moment life of discipleship. The disciples of Jesus are to actively yield to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, growing in grace, producing good fruit, serving as faithful stewards and sharing the good news. The fact that we do not and cannot know the day nor the time is a significant motivation for Christian evangelism, recognizing that today might be the last opportunity to share with those we encounter the good news of the grace of God in Jesus Christ the Lord.

The second coming of Christ is not a re-Incarnation. The second person of the Trinity, the only Son of God, the same Jesus who was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary, the same God-Man who died to atone for our sins and was raised from death in *carne*, the self-same Jesus who ascended bodily into heaven, is coming again. Same Incarnation, same Christ, different advent.

The Greek word for the second coming is *parousia*. Read Matthew 24-25 and Revelation 22:12-17 to begin cultivating a Biblical understanding of Jesus’ promise to come again. The second coming is about reconciling accounts (aka: judgment) and the advent of the Kingdom of God in its fullness upon the earth. For this the Church prays “Maranatha!” come, Lord Jesus. And all God’s people said, “Amen.”

Ponder these things and discuss in your small group:

1. Are you living with an honest and watchful expectation of Christ’s return? If not, why not? If so, how so?
2. Read and discuss Matthew 25. What feelings, thoughts, insights or responses are provoked by Jesus’ words in this chapter?
3. Are you hopeful or fearful about the prospect of Jesus’ return? Why? (Make the group’s answers to this question the subject of prayer and close with Maranatha!)

For further study: Truly the Son of God: What the Bible Teaches about Jesus, by Robert Mills. Call 1-800-368-0110 or visit www.layman.org to order.

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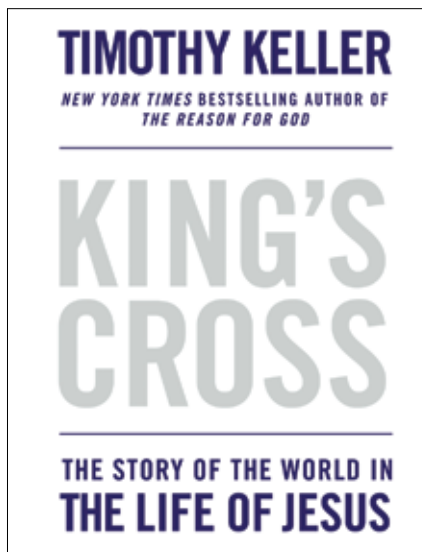
Book review

Keller reflects on and teaches text

By Walter L. Taylor
Special to The Layman

Inspired in part by scholarly developments in the modern “quest for the historical Jesus,” Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) in New York City, has written a theologically solid yet generally accessible work, *King’s Cross*. As a pastor living and working at the crossroads of the world, Keller has applied his abilities as a Biblical expositor, cultural critic and compassionate pastor to produce a reflection on the Gospel of Mark that should be in the personal libraries of pastors, elders and serious Christians everywhere. Opening his work with a discussion of modern critical rejections of the Gospels as nothing more than the life of Jesus recreated, Keller argues that recent scholarly developments have shown that these hyper-critical rejections need no longer to be taken seriously.

But rather than get bogged down in endless debates over the veracity of the Gospel, Keller does what every Reformed pastor should do; he engages in serious reflection and teaching of the text. Keller’s application of the Gospel of Mark to real life draws from examples and illustrations as varied as Homer’s *Iliad*, Harry Potter and the *New York Times*, yet always illuminates the message of the Biblical text itself. What also makes *King’s Cross* a joy to read is that while Keller views critically the increasingly secular culture of American society, he does not write in the way of an angry diatribe, a temptation many of us face when engaging critically with the cul-



Keller, Timothy
**King's Cross: The Story of the
World in the Life of Jesus.**
New York: Dutton, 2011.
238 pages.

ture. Rather, he writes as one who shows complete confidence in the power of the Gospel to find its own following simply by its being presented to the world. Keller summarizes this confidence when he writes:

“If secularism, psychology and relativism on the one hand and religion and moralism on the other don’t actually give us what we need to be unselfish, what does? The answer is, we need to look somewhere else besides ourselves. We need to look to at Jesus. If He is indeed a substitutionary sacrifice, if He has paid for our sins, if He has proved to our insecure, skittish little hearts that we are worth everything to Him, then we have everything we need in Him. It’s all a gift to us by grace” (p. 151).

Keller’s exposition and application of the Gospel of Mark does for the reader what it should do (at least it did it for me): it makes the reader want to pick up the Bible and study it all the more. What Keller reminds us of in this work is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ continues to be good news to the world, the wisdom of God that need not fear anything from the wisdom of the world.

Keller’s work is careful. He has done his homework on the text. He has also done his homework on the world. Keller knows the Word, but he also knows the world he is addressing. In this, *King’s Cross* serves as a fine example to pastors and teachers everywhere that we must know both the text of Scrip-

ture as well as the people we want to address with its message. Keller has given us a wonderful example of how to do this.

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