

## **God In Flesh: The Wonder of Christmas**

### **The Divinity of Christ**

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*December 9, 2009*

We're looking at the source of the power for all that is made and all that is sustained and all that will ever be, right in that manger. It's because in Christ, there is the nature of Christ - is God, deity, and man-humanity, and the mystery of that is enfolded for us in this doctrine, the deity of Christ. As Paul writes the letter of Colossians, he writes it like a shepherd to sheep. He takes his pen in hand, and it's almost as if it's a rod and a staff for him because he's writing to those who are straying, those who are listening to messages, to philosophies as he describes them in verse 8, that are contrary and are not according to Christ, essentially not according to Christ's deity, the fullness of all that there is in the person of Christ. He writes to warn them in many ways about these wolfish philosophies, these wolf-like philosophies that make their way into the church and seek to destroy the sheep. And so he writes taking out the rod, he writes taking out the staff, and he wants them to know that these philosophies — literally in the Greek, these “sophistries”, these type of teachings that sound good to the ear, that actually are very important in terms of the way that they sound, in terms of their convincedness, are actually nothing short of tricks of the trade. He refers to them as those things which are empty deceit.

Now we know that in order for something to be deceptive it needs a couple of qualities. First of all, for something to be deceptive, for something to be empty, to have nothing in it, in order for it to really pull of its power and its trick it must look like it is something that it really is not. It must look like it is something that it really is not. It's the nature of every good Ponzi scheme — it looks like the real thing; it looks exactly like what you have always hoped and dreamed, and yet as the layers begin to pull back, as the questions begin to be asked, you realize that it's a bunch of hot air. It's a bunch of empty deceit. It's something like what Edmund had to learn the hard way in *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, wasn't it? When he climbed up into the sleigh with the White Witch, who Lewis tells us, she looks “ravishingly beautiful and as innocent as one could ever be,” who grants to him tremendous promises, feeds him the thing in which he loves the most — Turkish delight — and promises him that if he will just do what she says to do that more will be in store for him. It's the nature of all true deception - to talk the big talk, to play a big game, to look like there's something real of tremendous

substance but in the end for it to be full of empty deceit, to make promises, to talk big and then to never cash in. We can almost all look back over the course of our lives and see where we bit down on something that we thought was real only to find that it was nothing and it was fruitless - that we gave time and energy and resources toward it and then we got to the end of it and it was a waste of our time.

As Paul writes here to the church at Colossae, he wants them to know that the vain philosophies, these good sounding words that appear convincing to the mind and sound tantalizing to the ear, actually at their core have nothing to offer. He says that the source, at the end of verse 8, that the source of this philosophy and empty deceit comes from the fact that it's a mere human tradition, that it's given over to the elemental spirits of the world.

Now this is the way a movement always works. It starts out with someone who is convincing, who can tell the philosophy just the way it needs to be said, who can make the promises, who can give the guidelines, and that if you follow through with them this will be your sure reward. That philosophy begins to develop — it develops into a full range of a tradition. Ideas begin to spur, books begin to be published, agents begin to be hired, disciples begin to be gathered together, models and formulas and rules and protocols and manners and mannerisms begin to be developed. A school begins to sort of rise; a tradition is birthed. You see, as the apostle Paul writes to the church at Colossae he wants them to remember that they have crossed over a threshold, they have come into a saving relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and though other philosophies may be tantalizing to the ear, there may be a sense of rigorous reasoning within them that would convince most anyone — underneath them it's a mere human tradition, it's a mere facade, it's a mere form, it's a mere shell, with nothing to offer.

At the end, Paul is actually saying it's a type of idolatry. That's really what he means in that phrase, “the elemental spirits of the world” — that it's a philosophy that sounds convincing, that looks good, that has a strong tradition, that has hoards of followers that would sway the crowds, but actually it's nothing more than pagan worship, nothing more than deception given over in the wrong direction, a belief that's gone far afield of the truth. When Paul writes this to the church at Colossae, there seems to be a church that is being swayed by the thoughts of their day. They're paying attention to the ideas that are hot and happening now, to the ways and the forms and the shapes of the world that would litter the front cover of the newspaper. And Paul is pulling them back. He's warning them like a good shepherd, that the things you taste are like the Turkish delight. They seem to have a short satisfaction, and something that has promise for the long haul, but the things in which you're believing end up in a place where all of your eggs are in a basket that's been spent, that the bottom falls out of.

Now this is the nature of all pagan worship, it's the nature of all self idolatry.

Whenever we begin to give our hearts away to the things of this world we begin to expect things out of them that they can never give us. We thought that marriage would be more than it was when we stood on the altar that day, and now ten years in, fifteen, thirty and thirty five, forty and fifty, it's not quite what we thought it would be. We thought that job and we thought that promotion, we thought moving to that neighborhood, we thought making that dollar figure, would ultimately get at the contentment and the satisfaction which our heart craves. It's a vein philosophy. It's a philosophy of the world indeed and it has lots of followers. There's a strong human tradition, but it's nothing short than sacrificing your soul to the gods, to the pagan gods, to the things that the world is giving themselves away to. As Paul writes to these sheep in Colossae, he has the sheep of the 21st century in Jackson, Mississippi in mind because the struggles of this church are the struggles of every church. They're the struggles of the heart of the human soul — to have looked for a pot of gold on the other side of the rainbow and to have pursued it with one's all energy, and to think that in some form satisfaction and contentment will be found apart from the arms of our Savior, apart from the grip of our Lord, apart from the gift of the love of His Son.

So what are we to do? Well Paul tells us in verse 9, "I want you to wake up to this truth — for in Him, that is Christ, the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily." Now as Paul writes that, you do understand that the apostle Paul understands that this has been the human longing since Genesis chapter 3, that the whole of the human race has been estranged from God, they've been cut off from He who made them, from the One in whose image they bare and the One in whom identity that they find and share. It's even as we were reminded on Sunday night in Genesis chapter 3, that Christmas is from afar. It is in mind from Genesis chapter 3 — that the estrangement which takes place because of sin is ultimately going to need to have a redemption that will require the closest of presence of God, a presence even in a bodily form, in a human and incarnational form — that God Himself would take on human flesh and would as all of the Old Testament longs, that God would dwell with us, that God would dwell with us. He was the hope, wasn't it?

In the book of Deuteronomy Moses is preparing the people of Israel to cross over Jordan and enter into the land of Canaan. That God would go with them and that He would walk with them in that land and they would experience as it were a kind of taste of a new Eden, a land that was flowing with milk and honey. And it would be there, that like we read in Genesis 3, that God walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, that He might once again walk with His people in the land of Canaan in the cool of the day. Joshua knew not to go into that land without God. It was the shadows that we see in the Old Testament as Moses makes his way in the wilderness, all the way through the book of Numbers, as God goes with His people as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, isn't it — that this God is going with His people. He wants to be beside them. He wants to walk in the cool of the day with them like He did in the Garden of Eden. He's moving towards that kind of relationship with them again. It's why in the land of Canaan

the tabernacle and the temple are built — that God's shekinah glory, that cloud that led them in the wilderness actually comes down and it dwells in the midst of His people, and it's why the glory and the beauty of the temple is established — that God would have a fitting home. As we gather tonight, as we gather together, we call this the “house of God.” It's the place where God's presence dwells with His people as His Word is discussed, as people's hearts are given over to the Lord, where the prayers and the songs of the saints are ushered forth. It's exactly what the people of Israel are longing for in the building of the temple — a place where the presence of God would dwell with them. His house would be among their houses.

As Paul writes this to the church at Colossae, he wants them to know that “God has made His house among you, that He came such a long distance, and that His house — yes you wouldn't have recognized it because it really didn't look much like your house. It was a stable. And His dwelling place didn't look much like yours and it could be passed over and missed in a moment because it was a manger.” But this has been the heartbeat of God's people, that the relationship they once had, the relationship that's been estranged for thousands of years, would be recovered. How would it be recovered? When God becomes like us to make us like Him.

Now when we talk about Christmas, we talk about the fullness of the deity of God dwelling bodily in Christ, you realize these are the reflections that our hearts are to be given to. And this is where Christmas becomes a little bit of a trap for us. It's strange that we are drawn into such a reflection of Christ in this season and yet it's often so hard to really reflect on Him. Do you sense that? It almost, the more attention we give to the needing to reflect on Christ during the season, it's almost as if there is a greater distance that we feel. We talk about it, we discuss it, we mull over it, we put up symbols and signs and do special services to remind us of it and oftentimes our heart just is not engaged. It's as if we have listened so long to the vein philosophies and given so much away, that we feel the emptiness of the deceit and we can know that we sold our soul away in worship to the elemental spirits of the world and we've given them away to the human traditions that are around us. And it takes us such a long time to wake up to the beauty of the incarnation and the dwelling of the deity of Christ in bodily form. It's a trap.

For some of us we've noticed it to be a trap. In some of the reasons we don't feel a particular longing and closeness towards Christ during this particular season is because we've given up on it all together. We've seen the commercialization, we've witnessed the ornamentation that goes along, we've seen the manufactured warm and fuzzies that go along with the season and it does nothing but leave a terrible taste in our mouths. And we, in a sense, kind of look at this season cynically. We kind of walk around in a smug sort of, “Oh yes, this is for those who can't see through the piffle and the drivel and the swill of this time. But it's not that our hearts are turned to Christ, it's just that our hearts are

turned away from Christmas.

Others of us are so unaware that we have so bought into the vein philosophies, to the empty deceits, to the human traditions, are so unaware that we've sacrificed for so long to the elemental spirits of the world, we just see it as another opportunity to give ourselves away to the world. We think, "One more party. One more strand of lights on the tree. One more selfish indulgence. Oh, it's all for Christ. I love Christ, but I really love Christmas." We want to recover at such a feverish pace, something of some longing of memory, of some nostalgic thought, that stands way back there in the recesses of the heart that we've never quite gotten over. So we grab our hot chocolate, we sit on the couch, we watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, we listen to Perry Como. We never listen to Perry Como except at Christmas, but we listen to him a lot at Christmas. Why do we do that? Well, we're actually in bondage to Christmas, we're actually being drawn away from Christ.

Paul sees these as traps. He sees these as things in which for those who have cynically and smugly rejected Christmas and didn't turn towards Christ, are doomed to their self-righteousness. And those who have feverishly given themselves over to the hoop-la and the hullabaloo of Christmas and have never turned towards Christmas, to the heart of it and to Christ, actually will wake up the day after Christmas in a pretty deep depression. You know who you are. Paul is telling us here in the book of Colossians and in this passage, that whatever you do for Christmas really doesn't matter unless the divine human person of Christ is the face that you behold in every moment of every December, in every tradition that you take up, and every tradition that you reject, in every meal that you have, in every party that you throw, and every "Merry Christmas" that you say — is the person and work of Christ at the core of your heart? If it is, then you know something of the true spirit of Christmas. You know something of its wonder, something of its mystery. But if it's not, this is a charade and it's paper thin and it will leave you depressed on December the 26th. Tonight Paul calls us to reflection on this deity who loved you and loved me enough to become like us and then committed to make us like Him. I pray that this is the spirit of Christmas for us.

*Father, we need this. We need Your grace and we need Your mercy. We are so distant and so distracted and are given to so much of this world that we have very little in and of ourselves to give to You. So we ask that You would, like a good shepherd, bring Your rod and bring Your staff, and warn us and awaken us, and then fill us with the wonder that is the incarnation. Do this we pray, for Christ's sake. Amen.*

Let's stand to receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in Christ during this Christmastime and always. Amen.

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