

Proposition: When we take a fresh look at Christmas from the perspective of 1 John 1:1-4, we discover three truths about the message of Christmas.

- I. The message of Christmas is historical (1).
 - A. Jesus is the One from the beginning.
 - B. Jesus is the Word of life.
 1. He is the true God.
 2. He is the true man.
- II. The message of Christmas is personal (2).
 - A. A real person appeared.
 1. He left the Father.
 2. He revealed Himself to us.
 - B. A real person appeared to real people.
 1. We have seen Him.
 2. We testify concerning Him.
- III. The message of Christmas is practical (3-4).
 - A. It produces fellowship.
 1. It makes us partners with each other.
 2. It makes us partners with God.
 - B. It produces joy.

Implication: If you don't believe in *this* Jesus, you've settled for a Jesus that can't save you.

I remember when I was a freshman in college. It was the Christmas season. My roommate had an 8-track player of Christmas songs that he played in our room. One of the songs was "Here Comes Santa Claus." I can still hear the words of this particular rendition, "So let's give thanks to the Lord above, 'cause Santa Claus's coming tonight."

Obviously, the singer was a "little" confused about the meaning of Christmas. He's not alone. George Barna reports that in the United States over 90 percent of the population believes in a God or gods that have power over the universe.¹ Consequently, religious tolerance is commonplace. When asked if all of the world's religions essentially prayed to the same God, 64 percent of the adult public agreed. In the Christian church, among those who called themselves evangelicals, 46 percent agreed, and among those who labeled themselves "born again," 48 percent agreed. And consider this. Among adults who simply called themselves "regular church attenders," fully 62 percent said that they believed all religions essentially prayed to the same God.

That's astonishing! In churches this morning all across this country, two-thirds of the people do not believe in the *exclusive* nature of the Christian gospel. They may be singing, "Silent Night! Holy Night! Christ the Savior is born," but two-thirds don't believe He's the *only* Savior.

I don't know what that says to you, but it screams to me that we need to take a fresh look at Christmas. A whole bunch of people are in churches today who are so familiar with the story that they've lost its significance. We may be in that number.

In previous years, I've preached the Christmas story from a variety of perspectives. We've looked at the event from Luke's perspective in Luke 2, and Matthew's perspective in Matthew 1. One year we examined Christmas through the eyes of Joseph, another year

***Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹G. Barna, *What Americans Believe...*, in Burge, *The Letters of John*, p. 57.

through the eyes of Simeon, and still another through the eyes of the magi. Last year we did a series on Christ from the viewpoint of the Old Testament prophets.

But this year I want to take you to what at first may not seem like a "Christmas" text, but indeed is a powerful one. This year, we want to take a fresh look at Christmas from the perspective of one of Jesus' followers, the apostle John.

"Why John?" you ask. For several reasons. John was one of Jesus' closest followers. He was an eyewitness of Jesus' life. He may even have been a first cousin to Jesus (based on the assumption that his mother was Salome, possibly a sister of Mary).

Ironically, though John wrote a gospel, he didn't give us the birth story. He didn't need to, since Matthew and Luke already had. Instead, John began his biography of Jesus by focusing on the theological significance of Jesus' incarnation: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14)."

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, John penned those words around the year 85 A.D., the year he wrote his gospel. But it's not his gospel we want to consider this morning. It's a letter he wrote *after* his gospel--1 John.

You see, our generation isn't the first one to struggle with confusion about Jesus. There were deceptive critics of the true Jesus in John's day, and somewhere between the years 85-95, John wrote a letter to help Christians deal with the problem.

John was an old man when he wrote 1 John. He'd lived through some sixty "Christmases" since he saw Jesus return to heaven. And in his letter, John offers us the fresh perspective on Christmas we so desperately need today. When we look at Christmas from the perspective of John in 1 John 1:1-4, we discover three truths about the message of Christmas.

I. The message of Christmas is historical (1).

John begins his letter (1), "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."

Though scholars believe John sent this epistle to Christians living in the province of Asia (modern Turkey), John doesn't identify himself nor his readers. He gets down to business from the very first word. He wants to talk about the historical Jesus.

Remember, John is writing to people like us, people who had never personally seen Jesus as he had. He teaches us two things about Jesus in verse 1.

A. Jesus is the One from the beginning. "That which was from the beginning." If you are familiar at all with the Bible, you'll notice this phrase parallels the beginning of two other books. "In the *beginning*, God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1)." And, "In the *beginning* was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1)."

John begins this letter, "That which was from the beginning," indicating he has in mind the same person Moses did in Genesis, and he did when he penned his gospel--Jesus. Jesus is the one from the beginning.

But notice he says "that which," not "the One who" was from the beginning. It's a neuter pronoun. Commentator Gary Burge observes (53), "Neuter pronouns can function 'comprehensively to cover the person, words and works.'" John is going to lay before us the significance of the whole sweep of Jesus' life.

"What qualified John to do that?" you may wonder. Listen to the four credentials he gives: "Which we have *heard*, which we have *seen* with our eyes, which we have *looked* at and our hands have *touched*."

Don't miss that. Christianity has a historical, objective, documented foundation. There were real people who heard, saw, looked at, and even touched Jesus. And John was just one of them. He says "we" did, a reference to the apostles who spent three years observing the Lord, the One who was from the beginning.

B. Jesus is the Word of life. Verse 1 concludes, "This we proclaim concerning the Word of life." Actually, there is no main verb in the Greek text until verse 3. One commentator (C. H. Dodd) calls these four verses a "grammatical tangle," for John piles phrase upon phrase about Jesus, which he will later unpack in his letter.

John refers to Jesus "the Word of life." Why? You might answer, "Because that's the way John referred to Jesus when he began his gospel in John 1. 'In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1).'" True, but why doesn't John just call Him "Jesus"? Why does he refer to Him as the "Word of life"? Actually, the title teaches us two things about Jesus.

1. *He is the true God.* He is "the Word," the One who created all things. And...

2. *He is the true man.* If you had pinched baby Jesus, He would have cried.

Don't be misled by the artist's renditions of baby Jesus with a halo over His head.

What do we communicate with? *Words.* "Word" speaks of revelation. When God wanted to communicate with this world, how did He do it? What language did He use? He did it with *The Word*.

Jesus is the Word of life. He is the Living One who has life in Himself. He is life and He gives life. He's the true God and the true man.

But not everyone believed that in John's day, nor in ours. One of the most dangerous heresies in the first two centuries of the Church was Gnosticism.² People who believed in gnosticism assumed that the body was evil, and only the spirit is good. For them, salvation is the escape from the body, achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).

Follow carefully. Since the gnostics believed the body was evil, they denied the humanity of Jesus. Some said Jesus only *seemed* to have a body (later called *Docetism*, from the Greek word "to seem"). Others said that the divine Christ joined the human Jesus at his baptism and left him before he died (called *Cerinthianism*, named after its most prominent spokesman, Cerinthus). Gnosticism denied the Incarnation.

Is that a problem? It sure is! That kind of teaching is what prompted John to write this letter. Perhaps you're thinking, "Oh, what difference does it make, as long as you believe in Jesus?" The issue is, *what* Jesus? There's only one Jesus that can save us. It's the historical, God-man that changed John's life.

Beloved, the message of Christmas is *historical*. Ponder the evidence! John says, "We *heard* Him!" But that's not enough, since lots of people have claimed to hear messages from God. "We've *seen* Him." That's more compelling. But to have *touched* Jesus was conclusive proof of the Incarnation, that God really had become a man.

The verb "touched" ("handled" in KJV) indicates more than a momentary contact. It means "to grope or feel after in order to find." It's what you do when you're in your dark basement feeling the wall for the light-switch. It's the idea of "examining closely."

²NIV Study Bible, p. 1905.

A few years ago we were visiting my parents, when two people knocked at the front door. They handed us a pamphlet entitled, "Why You Can Believe the Bible." I scanned it and discovered a 20th century version of gnosticism, for in essence the tract said, "Jesus was not God, and don't believe anyone who says He was."

That includes John, I suppose, since John clearly taught that Jesus is 100% God and 100% man. From John's perspective, the message of Christmas is historical. Secondly...

II. The message of Christmas is personal (2).

How so? In two ways, according to John.

A. A real person appeared. "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 (2)." John says, "The life appeared," or as the AV puts it, "The life was manifested." In the AV, verse 2 is a parentheses, explaining how "that which was from the beginning" could have been "heard, seen, and touched." Verse 2 tells us a real person appeared. How?

1. *He left the Father.* The text says, "The life (that's Jesus) appeared (that's a reference to the Incarnation)." Then at the end of the verse John specifically states that the One who appeared was "with the Father" before He came. In heaven.

Can you imagine that? Jesus chose to leave the intimate, loving company of His Father to come to this fragmented, sin-infested world (see Phil. 2:5-8). The next time you look at a manger scene, remember what Jesus *left* to come here. He left the Father. Then,

2. *He revealed Himself to us.* This is mind-boggling. John says "the One who was with the Father has appeared to us." Wow! The eternal invaded the temporal. God showed up! The King of the universe paid a visit.

He came in splendor, right? He arrived in majesty, right? When He appeared, the world applauded, right? Wrong, wrong, wrong.

Hardly anyone even knew. Only Mary and Joseph, a few shepherds, and later the magi. There was no fanfare, no V.I.P. welcome, no red-carpet treatment. If I may say so, this world didn't give Jesus the welcome He deserved when He came.

You say, "Well, if I'd have lived then, and I had known, I would have welcomed Him." Really? You live now, and you know now. What kind of welcome are you giving Him now? Are you giving Him the place He deserves in your life?

You see, the message of Christmas is historical, yes, but it's also personal. A real person appeared. Someone who loves us more than we'll ever know. Someone who knew our plight as sinners under the sentence of God's wrath. A real person appeared. That's not all.

B. A real person appeared to real people. Listen to John again, "The life appeared, and 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*."

If you think Christianity is merely a matter of going through some religious motions (like coming to church, reading your Bible, and being kind to your neighbor), you've missed it. Christianity is personal. It's a relationship between the Person of Jesus and real people--*us*. Do you know Jesus *personally*?

John did. Notice how he describes his involvement with "The Life" that appeared.

1. *We have seen Him.* You say, "But we can't see Jesus." True, but John did, and so did others. And do you know what God led these eye-witnesses to do? John tells us. First, we have *seen* Him, and secondly...

2. *We testify concerning Him.* At first, they spread the message by word of mouth. Then later the Holy Spirit guided them to write it down. And today, we have the written record of their testimony of Jesus' life.

Let this sink in. John says if we know Christ we have a responsibility to *proclaim* Christ. The fact that God has come to this world is a message we must herald. If you know Jesus, you have an obligation. You are a privileged person. Many in this world don't know what the Incarnation is all about. But you do. We do. It's our job to spread the word about the Word!

I must warn you. If you do, it will cost you. John was boiled in a cauldron of oil and placed in exile because he proclaimed Christ. And he's the only apostle that died a "natural" death. The other eleven were martyred. It will cost us.

But what cost can compare with what Jesus paid for us? The Life appeared. And then the Life died the death we deserved. Yes, the message of Christmas is personal. Thirdly...

III. The message of Christmas is practical (3-4).

This is no mere *child's* story. When properly understood, the message of Christmas produces two practical by-products.

A. It produces fellowship. "We proclaim [there's the main verb of verses 1-3] to you what we have seen and heard, so that [here's are the by-products] you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Here's the first by-product of the message of Christ. Fellowship. What's fellowship? Our English word means "friendly, social interaction." A group of people get together for pizza, play a game together, and say as they're leaving, "What a great time of fellowship!"

That's not what John has in mind when he uses the term. The Greek word is *koinonia*. It means "partnership." Do you know how powerful the message of the Incarnation is? It's so powerful that when it's received, it produces a partnership on two levels.

1. *It makes us partners with each other.* John writes, "That ye also may have fellowship with us." We live in a broken world. People are isolated and alienated. We can sing about "Peace on Earth," but the facts scream at us.

What is it that can bring people together? What can reunite broken families? What can restore marriages that have gone sour? The gospel can. What can change people who've hated each other for centuries just because their skin-color is different? The gospel can. What can bring together people who've lived off the system and people who *despise* people who live off the system? The gospel can.

Don't miss this. John says a direct result of belief in Jesus is fellowship with others who believe in Him. The gospel brings us together. It makes us partners with each other.

That's what makes Church so important. You may be thinking, "But I don't need the Church. All I need is Christ." That's true. But so is this. John says if you have made a commitment to Christ, you need to be in fellowship with a local church. Why? Because you can't see Christ, but you can see His Body. It's the Church. You need His Body, and His Body needs you. We're partners. The message of Incarnation produces a fellowship on a second level.

2. *It makes us partners with God.* "And truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

Scholars talk about the "Pre-incarnate" Christ. I think we need to give more attention to the "Post-incarnate" Christ. Some people these days are offended by baby-Jesus in a manger scene. Wait until they see the Post-incarnate Jesus! John had a vision of the Post-incarnate Jesus, and recorded this description in Revelation 1:14-15:

"His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters."

Do you know what happened to John after he saw the Post-incarnate Christ? He fell at His feet as though dead (17). Do you think it would change the way we observe Christmas if we could put *that* picture of Jesus in our nativity scenes?

What's amazing is that when we believe in this Jesus, we who were once God's enemies become God's partners! Earlier this year I was with a man when he called out to God. He got on his knees in my study, and cried out, "Dear God, There's a gulf between You and me. I can't reach You. I need You to reach me." And that's exactly what God did for that man, and for you, if you've trusted Christ. The message of Christmas produces fellowship. There's a second by-product.

B. It produces joy. "We write this to make our joy complete." Please don't confuse the order here. *Proclamation* leads to *fellowship* which leads to *joy*. There can be no real joy until we experience fellowship with God and His Son, and then with His children.

Perhaps you're wondering, "How can I have joy in my life, real joy?" John's answer is quite simple: Make sure you have fellowship with God, and God's people, and you will have joy. "We write *this* to make our joy complete."

In his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*, Philip Yancey tells about a British conference on comparative religions. Experts from all over the world came together to debate whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith.

Yancey writes,³ "They began eliminating the possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room.

'What's the rumpus about?' he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner Lewis responded, 'Oh, that's easy. It's grace.'

After some discussion, the conferees had to agree. The notion of God's love coming to us free of charge, no strings attached, seems to go against every instinct of humanity. The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of *karma*, the Jewish covenant, and Muslim code of law--each of these offers a way to earn approval. Only Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."

All because of the Christ of Christmas. You see, through Jesus we enjoy fellowship and joy. It's our because of what He did for us, *without* any contribution from us.

That, my friend, is what John says Christmas is all about. It's historical--Jesus is the One from the beginning; He's the Word of life. It's personal--a real person appeared, and He appeared to real people. And it's practical--it produces fellowship and joy.

One final word of implication.

Implication: If you don't believe in this Jesus, you've settled for a Jesus that can't save you. If you have any other "Jesus" in mind as you sing the Christmas carols and

³taken from promotional pamphlet of the book by Yancey, p. 3.

open your Christmas presents, you have opted for a false Jesus, a Jesus which cannot save you. Don't be short-changed. Worship the true Christ this Christmas.