

What is the real meaning of Christmas?

Scripture: Colossians 1:15–20; 1 John 4:2

Code: QA70

The answer may just surprise you.

For many, Christmas is the time to think of Jesus Christ as a baby in a manger. While the birth of Christ is a special and miraculous event, it isn't the primary focus. The central truth of the Christmas story is this: the Child of Christmas is God.

God in a Manger

Christmas is not about the Savior's infancy; it is about His deity. The humble birth of Jesus Christ was never intended to conceal the reality that God was being born into the world.

But the modern world's version of Christmas does just that. And consequently for the greater part of humanity, Christmas has no legitimate meaning at all.

I don't suppose anyone can ever fathom what it means for God to be born in a manger. How does one explain the Almighty stooping to become a tiny infant? Our minds cannot begin to understand what was involved in God's becoming man.

Nor can anyone explain how God could become a baby. Yet He did. Without forsaking His divine nature or diminishing His deity, He was born into our world as a tiny infant.

He was fully human, with all the needs and emotions that are common to us all. Yet He was also fully God—all wise and all powerful.

For nearly 2,000 years, debate has been raging about who Jesus really is. Cults and skeptics have offered various explanations. They'll say He is one of many gods, a created being, a high angel, a good teacher, a prophet, and so on. The common thread of all such theories is that they make Jesus less than God. But the biblical evidence is overwhelming that this child in the manger was the incarnation of God.

One passage in particular, written by the apostle Paul, captures the essence of Jesus' divine nature and underscores the truths that make Christmas truly wonderful.

Colossians 1:15-20 says,

He is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For . . . all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head

of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross.

A Ghostly Illusion?

Paul was writing to the Christians at Colossae. The city was under the influence of what came to be known as gnosticism. Its adherents fancied themselves the only ones who had access to the truth, which they believed was so complex that common people couldn't know it. Among other things, they taught philosophical dualism--the idea that matter is evil and spirit is good. They believed that because God is spirit, He is good, but He could never touch matter, which is evil.

Therefore they also concluded that God couldn't be the creator of the physical universe, because if God made matter, He would be responsible for evil. And they taught that God could never become a man, because as a man He would have to dwell in a body made of evil matter.

Those pre-agnostics explained away the incarnation by saying that Jesus was a good angel whose body was only an illusion. That teaching and others like it pervaded the early church; many of the New Testament epistles specifically refute pre-gnostic ideas. In fact, the apostle John attacked the foundation of gnostic teaching when he wrote "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2).

The apostle Paul refuted that same heresy when he wrote, "By Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created by Him and for Him" (1:16). He specifically affirmed that Jesus is God in the flesh--the Creator of everything.

Like Father, Like Son

Ironically, some of the cults that deny Jesus' deity try to use Colossians 1:15-20 to support their view. They suggest, for example, that the phrase "the image of the invisible God" (v. 15) hints that Jesus was merely a created being who bore the image of God in the same sense as all humanity. But the truth is though we were created in God's likeness, we only resemble Him. Jesus, on the other hand, is God's exact image.

The Greek word translated "image" means a perfect replica, a precise copy, a duplicate. Paul was saying that God Himself is fully manifest in the Person of His Son, who is none other than Jesus Christ. He is the exact image of God. Jesus Himself said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Hebrews 1 parallels Colossians 1:15-20 at a number of key points. Regarding the statement that Christ is the image of God, for example, Hebrews 1:3 makes an identical affirmation: "He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature." Christ is to God as the warm brilliance of light is to the sun. He brings God from a cosmic location to the very hearts of men and women. He gives light and life. He reveals God's very essence. They cannot be divided, and neither has ever existed without the other--they are one (John 10:30).

Scripture repeatedly says that God is invisible (John 1:18; 5:37; 1 Timothy 1:17; and Colossians 1:15). But through Christ the invisible God has been made visible. God's full likeness is revealed in Him. Colossians 1:19 takes the truth a step further: "It was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him." He is not just an outline of God; He is fully God. Colossians 2:9 is even more explicit: "In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." Nothing is lacking. No attribute is absent. He is God in the fullest possible sense, the perfect image.

The Rightful Heir

In Colossians 1:15 Paul says Jesus is "the first born of all creation." Those who reject the deity of Christ have made much of that phrase, assuming it means Jesus was a created being. But the word translated "first born" describes Jesus' rank, not His origin. The first-born in a Hebrew family was the heir, the ranking one, the one who had the right of inheritance. And in a royal family, he had the right to rule.

So Christ is the One who inherits all creation and the right to rule over it. It doesn't mean He was born first in order, for He wasn't.

In Psalm 89:27 God says of David, "I also shall make him My first born, the highest of the kings of the earth." There the meaning of "first born" is given in plain language: "the highest of the kings of the earth." That's what first-born means--Christ is "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Revelation 17:16).

Hebrews 1 again has a parallel statement. Verse two says God has appointed His Son "heir of all things." He is the primary One, the Son who has the right to the inheritance, the ranking Person, the Lord of all, heir of all creation.

Creator and King

The claim that "first born" means Christ is a created being completely ignores the context of Colossians 1:15. Remember, you've already seen verses 16 17 explicitly name Him as Creator of everything. Christ is not part of creation; He is the Creator, the very arm of God, active from the beginning in calling the universe and all creatures into existence. John 1:3 says, "All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being." That could not be true if He were Himself a created being.

Hebrews 1:2 also identifies Christ as the Creator. Christ was the Person of the Trinity through whom the world was made and for whom it was fashioned.

The size of the universe is incomprehensible.

Who made all that? Some scientists say there was this big explosion that eventually formed a primordial swamp, and ... Science cannot explain it. God created it all.

Who?

The babe in Bethlehem. He made everything.

For further study on the wonderful meaning of Christmas, take a look at these excellent resources (see below):

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