

Theology of Christmas

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One of the most widely read Christian magazines in America today is *Christianity Today*. If you are interested in keeping a finger on the pulse of what's happening in the world from a Christian perspective, this magazine would be a good place to turn. I don't always agree with some of the articles I read, but that's pretty par for the course for me; even from respected sources, we always have to have a discerning eye and mind.

They published a poll about what evangelical Christians believe. Now, the term evangelical gets a lot of play in the media as a political voting block. That's not how I use the term. Evangelical is a theological word meant to describe a set of beliefs. From a theological point of view, an evangelical is someone who strongly believes the Bible is God's word, that only Jesus' death and resurrection removes our sins, and that it's important to tell others about Jesus (that's kind of where we're at, too).

The poll was titled *Our Favorite Heresies*; a heresy is a wrong belief; it's a belief that's contrary to God's word and the teachings of the church. Here are a couple of examples.

- 53% of evangelicals agreed that everyone sins a little, but most people are good by nature. Now, that's not what the scriptures say; the belief that all people are good is a heresy. Eph. 2:3 says that humans are "by nature children of wrath." David says in Psalm 51:5, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me." David is saying, "from the very beginning of my existence, while I was still in my mother's womb, I was a sinner." Even though we are created in the image of God, even though we bear his likeness, our nature is sinful, broken, and rebellious. We're not good by nature; we're evil by nature, which highlights again just how amazing, how glorious, how merciful is God's love for us in Christ. So it's a wrong to believe we are good by nature.
- 46% of evangelicals agreed that God accepts the worship of all religions, including Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Again, that's not what the Scriptures say. In John 14:6-7 Jesus said, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." And also, Jesus said earlier in John (4:24), "God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." There's only way to worship, praise, and glorify God and that's in the name of Jesus Christ. There is no other worship to God unless it's by Jesus.

There's one more I want to draw your attention to and spend a little more time talking about with you. The reason I'm bringing this up to you today is because we find the answer to our last question in the Christmas story. Christmas is more than a heart-warming story during a cold time of the year. The Christmas story reveals something truthful about God. And that truthful information is some of the most important stuff to get right.

The most popular heresy evangelicals believe according to the survey is this: *Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God*. 77% of evangelicals polled for this survey agreed with that statement. At first glance, it sounds rather complimentary. He's the first and best! That's pretty good. He in first place. But in reality, it's a very dishonoring and blasphemous statement. The key word there is created - Jesus is the first and greatest being *created* by God. That's where this statement is so wrong. Jesus is not a created being; Jesus is not like you and me (a creature), but only better. He is unlike you and me in that we are created and he is the Creator!

Why is this mistake so commonly made? What gets people so confused to think of Jesus as a created being? I think part of the challenge is the Bible's reference to Jesus as a *son*. Let's turn to Luke 1 and read vs. 26-33 (READ). 3 times we see this allusion to Jesus being a son. In vs. 30 Mary is told the Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive and give birth to a son. In vs. 32 she's told that he will be called the Son of the Most High and will sit on his father David's throne. Sons are created. There wasn't a baby and then there was. Pretty straight forward, right? Since Jesus is a son he's created, too.

You might make that conclusion if you only read these few verses about Jesus being a son. When you take into consideration other things the scriptures teach about Jesus, you come to the conclusion that Jesus wasn't created, but was the Creator - God himself.

But another Christmas passage clears this up for us. The passage is John 1; let's read vs. 1-5 (READ). So, this Word is pretty important, isn't he (I call the Word a he because the Bible does... vs. 2, "He was in the beginning"). All things were made through this Word and by this Word. Life is found in the Word. He is a light that shines in the darkness.

Maybe the most important thing mentioned here by this Word is in vs. 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." What an interesting thing to say. He was with God; he was God. How can you be both at the same time/ With God and be God? Look, don't get too wrapped up in figuring out how it works before you accept it as true. You can believe something to be true without knowing how it works. We do that all the time.

But here's the crucial move; look down at vs. 14. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." So, this eternal, heavenly Word came down from heaven and dwelt among us. He took on flesh and became a human being like you and me. This Word is the only Son of from the Father. Who is this Word? It's Jesus! Jesus is the one who is the Son of God; he's the one who came down from Heaven. That's exactly what the Christmas story says; we just read it from Luke 1. The Holy Spirit will come upon her and she will conceive and bear a son. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

John 1 makes it clear to us who Jesus. He is the incarnate word of God (incarnate means embodied in the flesh; you might hear that word in some of the songs we sing. It simply means Jesus became a human) who dwelled in everlasting light with the Father and the Spirit. He is the Creator of all of life. Everything made was made by him. Everything that receives new life receives it in his name. Jesus is not the greatest and the first created beings; he is the Creator of everything that has been made.

Why does the Bible talk about Jesus as God's son? That seems to be part of the confusion. The term son is meant to be understood as a position of honor. It doesn't have to mean a biologically born individual. For example, back in Exodus when God was getting Moses ready to save the people of Israel from the oppressive grip of Pharaoh God says to Moses (Ex. 4:22-23a), "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the Lord, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me."'" Think of it: Israel isn't a son; it's a nation, it's a collection of people. In fact, Israel (Jacob), the father of every Israelite, wasn't even the first born in his family; Esau was the firstborn. So, a literal understanding of Israel being God's firstborn son will complicate things. Israel is God's firstborn in the sense that Israel is God's prized nation, his favored people.

I know I'm going back in the movie archives, but this is illustrated well in Rocky 5. (PIC) If you remember, Rocky pours his best into the young Tommy Gunn, a new boxer he's training to be the best in the world. But the whole time, Rocky ignores his own son. And as the movie progresses, Rocky treats Tommy like his firstborn while ignoring all the needs of his own son. And resentment builds more and more in Rocky's boy because he feels like he's been replaced as his father's firstborn son.

Jesus being the only Son of God is a way God is telling us of the special and privileged place Jesus has in relationship to God. Jesus is the perfect, the prized, the honored, the greatest in all the universe. No one is higher; no one is better. Jesus is the the firstborn son of his Father; the one and only Son of God. But he's not created; he is the Creator.

Now, why does all of this matter? Isn't this just a bunch of theological snobbery that won't make any difference in our lives? I think one of the reasons we are tempted to think that these kinds of theological points are irrelevant to our lives is because we've replaced thinking rightly with feelings. Rather than letting objective truth and theological convictions guide our lives we let our feelings grab us by the ear and pull us around. Take a look at this picture (PIC). This is how our lives should look; The reindeer guiding and pulling the sleigh of our lives and emotions is truth; it's right thinking and right belief. Truth guides; feelings follow. That's the way it's supposed to work. That's why the Bible says things like, "Set your mind on the things that are above." Our minds, what we think, is critical to a life well lived.

Instead, many of us us live like this (PIC). Completely backwards. Letting our emotions guide our thinking; letting our feelings determine what's true. When we live like this, nothing works the way it's supposed to. Do you know what Satan does? Satan lies to us about the truth

and then lures us with desire. For example, nobody ever has an affair because they think it's going to be a great idea. No, what happens is Satan stokes the flames of desire while lying to us and tearing down what is true. "Your husband is a jerk. You can find someone better. There's a better life waiting for you." All lies. And then, he tugs on our desires. "Wouldn't this feel better? Don't you want someone who can relate to you? You deserve better."

So, right thinking is important. When theology is boring that's just a sign you have a bad teacher who doesn't help you see how critically important this truth is. Or, it's a sign you have an appetite for the wrong thing. If you're happy to be led by your feelings, none of God's truth will feel very significant to you. Pinch yourself, FBC. Tell yourself, "Satan is trying to destroy me through lying to me about the truth and fanning into flame my desires. God, help me love and desire your truth."

What difference does this Christmas truth make; that Jesus is actually God in the flesh instead of a first and greatest being created by God? I think we get a clue from the wise men in Matthew 2. In a short little verse we read this (vs. 10), "When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." Could you possibly find a more redundant verse? They rejoiced. No, they rejoiced exceedingly. What's the difference between those two. How happy do you have to be where the word "rejoiced" doesn't quite capture your happiness? And then, if that's not enough, it says the wise man rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. Now, I would love for someone to draw a picture of that for me; in fact, maybe you could draw a picture of what it would look like for someone to rejoice; and then rejoice exceedingly. And then, finally, what would the picture look like of someone who rejoiced exceedingly with great joy?

You all have heard the expression, "he puts his pants on one leg at a time just like us." That's a way of saying, "He's just like me; don't get too excited, or nervous, or scared." If Jesus is the first and greatest being created by God, then ultimately he's just like you and me; he puts his pants on one leg at a time. He's just another creature with cells and proteins, with a mommy and a daddy, just like me... who will eventually die just like me. And stand before God and give an account just like me.

But Jesus isn't just like me. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the bright Morning Star. He is the Ancient of Days. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is the one who made all the galaxies and the stars that fill them.

So, here's what I'm getting at. The difference this theological point makes is that it elevates our wonder, our praise, our joy in hearing about and knowing Jesus Christ. But when you hear "elevates our wonder, praise, joy in Jesus" don't merely think, "Oh, I guess I'll be happier singing worship songs on Sunday mornings." No! You'll be happy to go to your job and work as unto the Lord because by doing so you'll be serving the Lord Christ. You'll be happy to lay down your life for your wife every single day because that's what Jesus, your Creator, has commanded you to do. You'll be happy to reach out to that classmate at school who looks like she could use a friend because Jesus wants you to care about other people. Do you see what

I'm saying? Worship doesn't only impact how loud we sing, it changes the way we live our lives! So, do you see how relevant seeing Jesus rightly is? The more you see Jesus well the more your very life is changed.

Isa. 9:6 says, "For to us a child is born, to us a son given." Jesus was born on Christmas morning; on that morning God gave his son to the world. But he wasn't created; the Creator of the universe was given to us as the glorious present we needed.

Key vs. Isaiah 9:6

Questions for the week

- On a scale from 1 to 5, how concerned are you about heresy (believing the wrong thing about God)?
- How do you understand Jesus' title as the Son of God? How would you explain that to someone/your child?
- What was the most impactful word you heard today? Why? Share that with someone.