

Fully God

Incarnate: Why the Manger Matters

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Santa or Jesus?

What is Christmas all about? Some would say it's about Santa Claus and all he represents; you know philanthropy and all the presents! Movies like *Elf*, or the recent movie on Netflix, *The Christmas Chronicles* seem to say that we need to keep on believing in Jolly Old St. Nick to keep Christmas spirit high so people will live good lives. When people stop believing in Santa, Christmas needs saved.

Christians generally give a big N-O to this view. They say the reason for the season is Jesus. God the Son became a man to save us from our sins. Christmas isn't about living good lives. It's about God saving us because we don't live good lives. We don't need to recover Christmas spirit. We need to recover Christ in Christmas.

But what if I told you that Christmas is both about the story of Santa Claus and the story of Jesus being born in a manger? Did you know that the story of Santa Claus and the incarnation of the Son of God have a point of intersection?

In the early fourth century, there were thousands of people who were questioning the traditional truths of Christmas. There were people questioning that Jesus was the eternal Son of God who took on flesh and dwelt among us. There was a man from North Africa named Arius. And he was teaching that Jesus did not always exist and he certainly wasn't God. Arius taught that God the Father could not share his essence with anyone. Sure, Jesus was special. He was the first and best of all of God's creation, but he wasn't God.¹

His teaching spread like wildfire. The true meaning of Christmas was being threatened. And so in AD 325 the emperor Constantine called together a meeting of hundreds of bishops throughout the empire to decide the issue. This was called the Council of Nicaea.

Legend has it that during the council, as Arius was arguing for his view, the bishop from Myra became more and more agitated. This bishop was Nicholas, later called St. Nicholas or, in Dutch, Santa Claus. St. Nick wasn't very jolly as he listened to Arius. He couldn't take it anymore. So in the middle of his speech Nicholas got up, crossed the room, and slapped Arius in the face.

Why was Nicholas so mad? What's the big deal with denying Jesus is God? What's the big deal with saying Jesus was created and not eternally pre-existent? Well guys like Nicholas and others at the council (like Athanasius) believed that if Jesus isn't God then he's not able to save us from our sins. A denial of the divine person of Jesus negates the work of Jesus.²

So do you see why I say Christmas is about Santa Claus and the incarnation of Jesus? St. Nicholas was one of the first defenders of the incarnation of the Son of God. In AD 325 the Council of Nicaea, and later in AD 381 the Council of Constantinople, condemned Arius' teaching and

¹ Greg Allison, *Historical Theology*, 369-370.

² Stephen J. Wellum, *God The Son Incarnate*, 27.

affirmed the full deity of Jesus. The Nicene Creed also links the person of Christ with the salvation he brings. It says it this way:

[I believe] in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man...

Is this affirmation still important for us today? I certainly think it is.

Back in October Christianity Today released research done by Ligonier Ministries and Lifeway Research. They surveyed over 3,000 evangelicals in 2014 and 2016 about their beliefs. The results, as you can imagine, were a bit discouraging. One of the questions they asked was a true-false question. It reads “True or false: Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God the Father?” How would you answer that question—true or false? Can you believe that 78% of those surveyed said “True”?

Regardless of what you make of the statistics, this shows us that a large number of evangelicals today either wittingly or unwittingly affirm the Arian heresy repeatedly renounced over 1,700 years ago.³

Is this a big deal? Yes, it’s a big deal! Why is it a big deal? As John Stott said, “If Jesus isn’t who the apostles say that he is then he isn’t able to do for us what they say he’s done for us.”⁴ If Jesus is created, then he’s not fully God. And if he’s not fully God, then he isn’t able to save us from our sins!

We have to understand who Jesus is if we want to understand what Jesus has done for us. And so over the next five weeks we’re going to study what our Statement of Faith says about who Jesus is. Our statement says:

We believe that Jesus Christ is God incarnate, fully God and fully man, one Person in two natures. Jesus—Israel’s promised Messiah—was conceived through the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary. He lived a sinless life...

Today, we’ll talk about Jesus being fully God. Next week we’ll talk about him being fully man. The third week we’ll deal with how these two truths fit together. We’ll deal with the fact that Jesus is one Person in two natures. The Sunday before Christmas we’ll look at Jesus as Israel’s promised Messiah. And finally, we’ll consider how he lived a sinless life.

We’re not going to have one main text to analyze this morning. Rather, I’m going to attempt to synthesize the New Testament’s teaching on the deity of Christ. I’ll be drawing mainly from Murray Harris’ book *Three Crucial Questions about Jesus*. I wrote a blog post about this series that gives a number of resources on the incarnation. You can find it on our website. That’s one of the resources I recommend.

The central argument I want to make this morning is this—Jesus is fully God; therefore, he’s able to save us from our sins.

But how do we know Jesus is really God? Murray Harris uses an example to show us.

³ [Ligonier Survey](#)

⁴ Wellum, 27.

How are we sure that a certain person really is, for example, the President of the United States and not an imposter? Basically, in three ways. First, he enjoys a status and prerogatives that are reserved for presidents, such as living in the White House or [flying] on Air Force One. Second, he exercises various functions that belong exclusively to the presidency, such as delivering the State of the Union address or assuming the role of Commander-in-Chief. Third, he is addressed as “Mr. President” or referred to as “the President” by his fellow Americans.⁵

The same is true of Jesus. We know Jesus is truly and fully God for three reasons—his divine status, his divine works, and his divine titles.

So we will divide our time around these three categories.

JESUS HAS DIVINE STATUS.

Let’s begin with Jesus’ divine status. I want to consider three things that establish his divine status.

Divine Attributes

First, he possesses divine attributes. Colossians 2:9 says, “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily.” Paul doesn’t say some of God’s attributes dwell in Jesus. He says the whole fullness of deity dwells in Jesus.

The most important attribute for combating the Arian heresy is his pre-existence or his eternity. Only God is eternal. And the New Testament presents Jesus as eternal. So he must be God.

John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” So before anything was created, Jesus was with God. He shared God’s glory with the Father before the world was created (Jn. 17:5). And he said to the religious leaders, “Before Abraham was, I am” (Jn. 8:58).

Not only is Jesus eternal, he’s also omnipotent. Jesus is referred to as the power of God (1 Cor. 1:24). He’s also omniscient. He knew what was in man (Jn. 2:25), he knew all things (Jn. 21:17). He’s also omnipresent. He fills all things (Eph. 4:10). And he is with us till the end of the age (Matt. 28:20).

We can know Jesus has the status of God because in him the fullness of deity dwells. He has all of God’s attributes.

Object Of Faith

We can also know that Jesus has the status of God because he is the object of people’s saving faith. Jesus commanded his disciples to “believe in God; believe also in me” (Jn. 14:1). When Peter preached the gospel he said, “To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

In the Old Testament we’re told over and over again that “salvation belongs to the LORD” (Jon. 2:9). In Isaiah God says, “I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior” (43:11). But the New Testament calls us to put our faith in Christ for salvation. That must mean that Jesus has divine status.

⁵ Murray J. Harris, *Three Crucial Questions About Jesus*, 65-66.

Worshipped

Jesus was also the object of people's worship. The Old Testament teaches us that there is only one God (Deut. 6:4). And that we are only to worship the one true God (Deut. 5:7-8). But throughout the New Testament, people worship Jesus. When he performs miracles, people fall down at his feet and worship him (Matt. 14:33). When he rises from the dead, people fall down at his feet and worship him (Matt. 28:9, 17). And never once did Jesus rebuke them.

Paul and Barnabas rebuke people when they worship them (Acts 14:14-15). The angels rebuked John when he fell at their feet (Rev. 19:10). But Jesus never rebukes those who seek to worship him.

That's because he has the status of God. There's only one God, but that God eternally exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is worthy of our faith and worship.

Have you placed your trust in him? He alone is able to save you, because he is God. And only God can save! Have you fallen at his feet in worship? O, come let us adore him, for he has the status of God—very God of very God.

JESUS DOES DIVINE WORKS.

Not only does Jesus have divine status. He also does divine works—works that only God can do. I want to look at two broad categories of Jesus' divine works.

Creator

First, Jesus is the creator and sustainer of the universe. The Old Testament presents God as the one who creates and sustains the universe. Psalm 102:25 says, "Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands." Psalm 104:24 says, "O LORD how manifold are your works. In wisdom have you made them all; the earth is full of your creatures." Verse 30 says, "When you send forth your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the ground."

God alone creates and sustains the universe. But in the New Testament it's clear that Jesus is involved in all creation. John 1:3 says, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Colossians 1:16 says, "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible...all things were created through him and for him." Colossians 1:17 says, "In him all things hold together." Hebrews 1:3 says, "He upholds the universe by the word of his power."

So in the New Testament, Jesus is the creator and sustainer of the universe. Jesus does the works of God, because he is really and fully God.

Authority

His divine works are also seen in his authority. His ministry of teaching and healing are done with divine authority. Sure, his disciples did similar works, but their authority was derived from Jesus. And Jesus did many things they would never do. For example, in Jesus' ministry he claimed to have the authority to forgive sins. And we know that only God can forgive sins (Mk. 2:5-11). We also know that Jesus has the authority to raise the dead. Jesus raises the widow's son (Lk. 7:11-17), the daughter of Jairus (Mk. 5:21-43), and Lazarus (Jn. 11:1-44).

In John 5, Jesus makes a bold claim. He says that “as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will” (v. 21). “An hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear [the Son’s] voice and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment” (vv. 28-29).

Friends, Jesus was no ordinary man. He was the Son of God incarnate. By his authoritative word, he created and sustains the universe. He alone has the authority to forgive sins and to raise the dead. And only those who look on the Son and believe in him will have eternal life; only those who trust in him will he raise up on the last day (Jn. 6:40).

Only he can save! Have you placed your trust in him today?

Yahweh and Jesus

We know the Old Testament teaches us that there is only one God. But the New Testament begins to show us that this one God exists in three persons, blessed Trinity. Clearly Jesus is seen to be Yahweh, or the LORD who revealed himself in the Old Testament. Think about it!

In Exodus 3:14, the LORD says to Moses, that he is the God of Abraham, “I AM WHO I AM.” In John 8:58 Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I am!” In Isaiah the LORD says, “I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god (44:6). In Revelation Jesus says, “I am the first and the last” (1:17). Psalm 102:26-27 says of the LORD, “You remain the same, and your years have no end.” The author of Hebrews says the same thing about Jesus (1:11-12). Isaiah 45:23 says, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear allegiance.” Paul says “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:10-11). Joel 2:32 says, “And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved.” And Romans 10:13 applies this to Jesus (cf. v. 9)!

Only the LORD saves. And Jesus is Lord. These examples make it plain. So let us call on his name for salvation.

JESUS HAS THE DIVINE TITLE—GOD!

Not only does Jesus have divine status. Not only are his works divine. He is also given the divine title. The title of God! There are at least seven passages where Jesus is called God.⁶ I’m simply going to draw your attention to the three in the Gospel of John.

The prologue of John emphasizes the deity of Christ. It begins with an unequivocal statement that Jesus is God. Look at verse 1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). The prologue also ends with a similar statement. That’s how we know John’s emphasizing the deity of Christ. In verse 18 we read, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, [Jesus] has made him known.”

These verses make it clear that Jesus existed before his incarnation. They also quite explicitly make it clear that although Jesus is God, he’s also distinct from God the Father. He was not only God, he was with God, he is at the Father’s side. So, Jesus has an eternal relationship with God the Father (and God the Spirit). There is one God, who eternally exists in three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

⁶ Murray Harris, 92 (cf. Rom9:5; Titus 2:134; 2 Peter 1:1).

So the beginning of John's gospel emphasizes that Jesus is God by actually referring to him as God.

And so does the end of his gospel. In John 20:28, right before the official conclusion to the book, Thomas makes an announcement: "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'"

Thomas, who originally doubted that Jesus even rose from the dead, came to the conclusion that John wants all of his readers, including us, to come to. Thomas saw Jesus and worshiped and believed that he was Lord and God.

John wants us to respond in the same way. Listen to what he says as a conclusion to his gospel: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30-31).

So, he's saying what I've been saying all along—Jesus' person and work are inextricably linked.

Do you want to have forgiveness of sins and eternal life? Do you want to be saved? Then you have to believe what the Bible teaches about Jesus. He's the Savior. And because only God can save, he's Lord and God. Do you believe this?

I know we've covered a lot of ground today. I've been praying that it wouldn't feel too academic, because the question of Jesus' deity is not academic. It's a matter of eternal urgency for each one of us here this morning. It's a matter of life and death.⁷

We live in a day of rampant pluralism. Our culture presents Jesus as one option among many religious options out there. And there are many different views on Jesus. Some think he's merely a good moral teacher. Others think it's outright ludicrous that anyone would believe that Jesus is God in the flesh.

And I'll admit that the New Testament's teaching on Jesus and his claims to be God are very audacious. But if they are true, if Jesus is the eternal creator—God become man—then you have to admit that it's difficult to treat Jesus as being on the same level as the other religious traditions.⁸

And if he is who he says that he is, if he's fully God, then he demands our complete devotion. He demands our faith, our worship, and our trust.

⁷ Wellum, 27-28.

⁸ Harold Netland, in Wellum, 27-28.