

CHRISTMAS *INCARNATUS* (becoming “enfleshed”)

If someone were to ask you what Christmas means, you probably would explain that it is the *celebration of the birth of Jesus*; and most people would likely agree with you. But (fasten your seat belts!), according to the gospel of John, neither you nor most people would be precisely “on target.” More accurately, Christmas is the *celebration of the incarnation of God into a human life*: especially the life of Jesus, thereby making him a source of light and guidance for the world. But when Jesus told us that we, *also*, are the light of the world, he seems to be referring to the fact that incarnation (God’s living in and working through a person) is a reality that is not limited only to *himself*. Incarnation is a possibility for every one of *us*!

I once fidgeted through a tedious Christmas sermon that the minister had entitled “Light from the Manger.” The essence of the message was that Jesus, from the moment of conception, was fully and completely God instead of his *becoming* godly; Jesus had nothing to do with it, nothing to learn, no decisions to make, no process of development to experience. Is that what the writer of the gospel of John said? No. The text states simply that “the Word *became* flesh and lived among us.” It doesn’t say *when* godliness became a part of Jesus, and it doesn’t explain *how*. It doesn’t indicate whether his “becoming” godly was immediate and instantaneous or whether it was a process of *development*. However, one of the *other* gospel writers does. He indicated that the way in which Jesus became godly was the result of a developmental process: Jesus “*grew* in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and with people.” Don’t miss the emphasis here: Jesus GREW...in favor with God!” That gospel writer’s assessment of the *way* in which Jesus became godly, the *manner* in which the incarnation occurred, is an extremely important insight.

If *Jesus* needed to grow into spiritual maturity, then, presumably, so do we. So the message of Christmas is not just the good news of God’s entering and working through the life of Jesus; it’s the marvelous possibility of God’s entering the lives of people such as *ourselves* throughout human history! But the *realization* of that possibility depends upon our *openness* to its happening, our willingness and desire for it to take place. Jesus seemed to indicate that his growth process was the result of his own openness and

desire for it to happen. Remember the words he is reported to have said: It is my meat (my very nourishment) to do the will of the Father.”

So the Christmas message of incarnation—God’s entering and working through the life of Jesus—places the spotlight first on him, but then the spotlight is turned in *our* direction! “Follow me,” he seems to have said repeatedly: follow me with a spirit of openness and a keen desire to let that same miracle that we associate with Christmas happen within *you!*

But what *specifically* does it mean to “follow” Jesus and progressively to grow and develop spiritually as did he? How *specifically* does the metaphor of God’s incarnation, God’s becoming enfleshed in our humanity, take place? I understand Jesus’ invitation to “follow” him to mean our adopting the *values* that he lived and taught, allowing those values to osmose into the totality of our being, to become the very essence of who and what we are. And that, of course, is a transformative process marked by continual, meaningful development toward maturity. Ultimately, *all* of the values that Jesus taught were simply expressions of love—seeking the highest good of one’s self *and* others, a lifestyle that Jesus said was the fulfillment of every law and every prophetic teaching. That, basically, is what it means for God to become incarnated in us, to “live” in us.

So, this Christmas season, let us remember that it is *not* just a *birth* that we celebrate! Births are occurring everywhere, all the time, and those births may or may not ultimately make a positive difference as did the birth of Jesus and that of the founders of the other great religions of the world. That which does make a huge positive difference is when the reality of incarnation *also* progressively happens, not just in Jesus, but in us, as well.

The testimony of the Christmas message is that the incarnation *did* happen in Jesus, and that it is something wonderful to contemplate. But if it is not happening in us as *well*, of what value is the incarnation of Jesus to us *or* anyone else? An ancient poet answered:

If Jesus in *Bethlehem* a thousand times
be born, but not in us,
it avails us nothing.

That which we call Christmas has indeed happened in Jesus; but the important, more personal question is: Is incarnation in the process of happening in *us*? And, if so, in what ways? And, finally, what spiritual values need *still* to be incarnated in our lives for the Christmas reality to come more *fully* in us? As that marvelous, transformative process occurs progressively, the joy of a truly authentic Christmas *really* comes!

Warmly, your pastor and friend,

John

This article was written by John in 2012 and was published in our Christmas newsletter three years ago. It is being reprinted this year as a helpful introduction to John's special message for our upcoming Christmas worship gathering on Sunday, December 20th, 2015, at 10:00 a.m. He will develop this theme more fully at that time.

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT CCM?

Sunday, December 13 (2nd Sunday of the Month)

11:45 a.m. ANNUAL CHRISTMAS BANQUET

This year, our annual Christmas Brunch will be held in the private Party Room at the locally popular Blue Fin Restaurant, located in Sandhills Shopping Center (461-4 Town Center Place). You will be able to order whatever you wish from their enticing menu. After we eat, Dr. Carl Evans, former Chair of the Department of Religious Studies, at the University of South Carolina, will share a Christmas message with us.

If you haven't made your reservations yet, there are only two spaces left, so you will need to act quickly if you want to be a part of this festive Christmas celebration with the rest of your CCM friends. We'll look forward to seeing you!

Sunday, December 20th (3rd Sunday of the Month)

10:00 a.m. ANNUAL CHRISTMAS WORSHIP AND CANDLE-LIGHTING CEREMONY (The Church Meeting Place)

One of our most meaningful times together is always our annual Christmas worship service. This service will be our last worship gathering in 2015. The thought provoking title of John's sermon will be "THE NEW OLD WAY ACTUALLY TO *EXPERIENCE* CHRISTMAS." Since our Christmas worship will be an extended service, we will not have our usual discussion afterward. (Consequently, we will be out by about 11:30 a.m.)