

Christmas: So What!

By Dr. Timothy Keller

Christmas is the church's annual observance of the miracle of the incarnation, that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. So what? What practical difference does it make that Jesus is not just a human being, but God himself? What practical difference does it make that Jesus was not simply a divine figure, but a real human being?

Jesus is God himself. First, if Jesus is God, it is not enough to simply believe in him or even to obey him. He is to be worshipped (2 Corinthians 3:18), reveled in, savored, and rejoiced in. The purpose of our lives is to behold his glory and beauty (John 17:24.)

Jesus is God—and therefore he should be the ultimate beauty and satisfaction for our heart.

Second, if Jesus is God, he must be given the central priority of our lives. Jesus' claim to be God is a polarizing statement. If he is not who he said he is, he should be mocked or utterly ignored. If he is who he said he is he should be adored completely—we should center our lives entirely around him. Jesus is God—and therefore he should be the pre-eminent concern of our choices, the ultimate Lord of over our wills.

Third, if Jesus is God, his salvation is of infinite value. His blood was shed as a 'ransom' (Mark 10:45) to pay for our sins. But his blood was the blood of God (Acts 20:28)! Imagine how valuable that is! He is able to save '*to the uttermost*' (Heb. 7:25-King James Version.) No sin is too great to be forgiven; no corruption is too great to be healed. Jesus is God— and therefore he should bring complete rest and assurance to our consciences.

Fourth, if Jesus is God, then salvation is by grace. In every other religion the founder is a human being sent *by* God to show us what to do to be saved. But Jesus is God come himself. If we could save ourselves by our performance, God would have only needed to inform us what to do for salvation, and he could have sent a prophet. His personal coming, however, means he did not just tell us what we had to do to be saved, but he did *for* us all that we could not do ourselves.

Jesus is a real, fully human being. First, if God became truly human, we have a remarkable resource to face pain and suffering.

The incarnation means that for whatever reason God chose to let us fall into a condition of being limited, to suffer, to be subject to sorrows and death—he has nonetheless had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine... He himself has gone through the whole of human experience—from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of

money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death... He was born in poverty and... suffered infinite pain—all for us—and thought it well worth his while.—Dorothy Sayers

The Bible never gives an exhaustive answer to the big question of “why?” But the doctrine of the incarnation gives us a resource in our suffering that is perhaps more valuable than an explanation. God descended into the world and became vulnerable and suffered and died himself. He is God-with-us (Matt 1:23)—he gives us his personal presence in our suffering. Only Christianity adds “courage” to God’s list of attributes. He knows what its like to experience hunger, danger, injustice, rejection, torture, suffering, and death.

Second, if God became truly human, then Christians should not be too impressed with glitz, physical beauty, status, and power. The incarnation means that God was willing to empty himself of his glory and power and live humbly as a servant. That means, among other things, that he became extremely ordinary in appearance. The incarnation should mean that Christians do not go on appearances; it should mean the end of our snobbery.

Third, if God became truly human, then ‘matter *matters*.’ The incarnation means God assumed a physical body and entered the material world. Many philosophies see the material world either as an illusion (like eastern religions) or as polluted and intrinsically evil (like the Greeks) or as the product of random chance and doomed to final extinction in the death of the universe (like modern secularists.) But the incarnation means that God believes the material world to be a good thing. And the resurrection shows us that he intends to redeem the physical world as well as the spiritual. This means that fighting disease, injustice, and hunger is on God’s agenda along with saving souls and forgiving sins. This also means that the material world is a good thing and it is God’s will for us to enjoy it.

Finally, if Jesus is God himself, become human, we live with an irrepressible, infallible hope. Some day all deformity, decay, sin, disease, imperfection will be wiped away (Romans 8:18-25.) Whatever problem we face—whether disease or injustice or some other suffering—eventually God’s power will triumph over it. Weeping may remain for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Ps 30:5.) Jesus is God— and that means ‘God has landed’! Jesus is man—and that means God cares for us. God has become human; the ideal has penetrated the real and is transforming it into his likeness. The world is destined for joy sooner or later, and so are all those who ‘love and long for his appearing.’

Timothy Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He was first a pastor in Hopewell, Virginia. In 1989 he started Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan with his wife, Kathy and their three sons. Today, Redeemer has more than five thousand regular Sunday attendees and has helped to start nearly two hundred new churches around the world. Also, the author of Generous Justice, Counterfeit Gods, The Prodigal God, and the New York Times bestseller, The Reason for God, he lives in New York City with his family.