

IN RESPONSE – CELEBRATE THE BIRTH OF JESUS

by Dennis Prutow
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Several years ago a fellow pastor told me he did not like the holiday season we call Christmas because he did not like the preaching he was required to do. "I've run out of texts to preach on," he said. I was amazed. The whole Bible is full of texts appropriate for the celebration of the birth of Christ. In fact the whole Bible is the story of God's intervention in a lost world through Jesus Christ.

Others think we should refrain from such a celebration. A gospel tract I put together some years ago bears the name of this article, Celebrate the Birth of Christ. When another fellow pastor saw this tract in my office, his response caught me off guard. "Some of us think we shouldn't do that," he exclaimed while pointing to the tract. Well if it's celebration by putting too much emphasis on the materialism of the age, if it's celebration by exalting the icon of Santa Claus, I agree. But what dedicated Christian soul can help but celebrate the most wondrous event in human history, the birth of the Savior?

The tract just mentioned is based upon the words of God delivered by an angel to Joseph, "And you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Yes, the name of the Child was to be Jesus. This is the New Testament rendering of that wonderful Old Testament name Joshua. It means Savior or salvation. It is the salvation of God which enters the world in human form in the presence of Jesus Christ. It is Jehovah acting to bring about the salvation of His people through Jesus Christ, the Son.

The problem is the problem of sin. "He will save His people from their sins." Every human being is entrapped in a sinful condition. Every person on the face of the earth sins. And because this sin is against the infinite perfection of the most holy God, each and every sin takes on infinite magnitude. It is sin which is the problem despite the protestations of psychologists seeking the good in humankind. It is sin which is the problem despite the objections of psychiatrists who claim the excuses that the most horrid of perversions are diseases and illnesses for which their clients cannot be held responsible.

The most forceful arguments are being made to persuade us that homosexuality is genetically caused. Sexual orientation is an inherited characteristic. We cannot call those living in these lifestyle deviants. They are victims.

But the Bible declares homosexual activity to be sin. And Jesus Christ came into the world to save His people from their sins. Paul sees the absolute deliverance and salvation of Christ at work in Corinth.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul could not be more forthright. Persons consumed by these sins will never enter heaven. They must be utterly separated from these sins. But this is exactly what Christ does. Paul goes on to describe the Corinthians.

And such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

These words are a divine commentary on Matthew 1:21. What was the work of Jesus Christ to be? He was to save His people from their sins. The word from denotes separation. Those saved by Christ would be separated from their sins. This separation would occur on two levels.

First, the guilt of their sins would be removed. Christ would take upon His own shoulders the penalty of death for the sins of His people. He would die in their place and suffer all the torments of hell itself in their place. As mentioned above, every sin takes on infinite proportions as it is sin against the infinite holiness of God. An infinite sacrifice is therefore the only acceptable sacrifice. Only God could offer such a sacrifice. And that sacrifice would have to be Himself. This was only possible as the infinitely holy God condescended to become flesh. He did so in Jesus Christ. And as a body was

prepared for Him through His introduction into this world via the womb of the virgin Mary, Christ became the ultimate sacrifice for sin.

Then, on the cross, Christ experienced hell itself. He was separated from all the love, mercy, and grace of the Father. He cried in torment, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matthew 27:46). He was forsaken and desolate bearing the sins of others so that those others might sing in antiphonal response, Nothing "shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:39).

Second, the death of Christ would purchase new life through resurrection. Peter sums it up.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who, according to His great mercy, has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Peter 1:3).

New birth, new life from above, a disposition to follow God, would be the phenomenal death benefit received from Christ. The result would be washing from the effects of sin and separation from former lifestyles.

The angel declared the power of this salvation would come with full resolution to the people of Jesus Christ. "He shall save His people from their sins." Those for whom Christ dies are infallibly saved, washed, separated from sin, and guaranteed glory to come (Romans 8:30). This is confirmed in the translation by the power of the little word shall. There is no simple future tense here. Rather we find an affirmation of truth guaranteed by the voice of God. This being the case, how can we help but celebrate the birth of Jesus?

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IN RESPONSE - ENLIGHTENED SELF INTEREST, PART ONE OF THREE

by Dennis Prutow

The question is a simple one. How is it possible for unbelievers to be illumined by the Holy Spirit, see the beauty of Christ and the gospel, and yet their hearts remain biased toward evil and against God? To put it another way, how can genuine illumination from the Holy Spirit be experienced by an individual and yet the disposition of the heart against God remain antagonistic toward God? Doesn't such an idea undermine the doctrines of depravity and inability? If there is genuine illumination of the heart and mind without regeneration, this question becomes all the more pressing.

First of all, that unbelievers can and are illumined or enlightened by the Holy Spirit and yet remain in an unregenerate state is undeniable. Hebrews 6:4-6 is a chief example.

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame (Hebrews 6:4-6).

Here we find enlightenment, illumination, without the new birth. Were there new birth, there would be no turning away to destruction.

Louis Berkof has the following to say with regard to unbelievers in such situations. Notice that Berkof follows Jonathan Edwards in speaking of the blessings of *common grace*.

Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and enriches them with

the blessings of common grace. Gen 6:3; Matt. 13:18-22; Heb. 6:4-6.¹

Now *how* can such a situation exist? According to the Bible, the human heart consists of the mind or thinking, the emotions or feelings, and the volition or will.² Proverbs 23:7 (KJV) says as a person thinks in his heart, so is he.

Luke 9:47 says, "But Jesus, knowing what they were thinking in their heart...." The thinking of a person is therefore an operation of heart.

The Bible also speaks of grief of heart (Proverbs 14:13, Romans 9:2) and joy of heart (Proverbs 14:10, John 16:10). The heart is the seat of the emotions. Finally, the heart is the center of our decision making capabilities. It is the seat of the will. The Bible shows us people who have a change of heart (Exodus 14:5). This is a determination of heart, an act of the will. Jesus admonishes the disciples, "So make up your minds... (Luke 21:14). The word translated *minds* is actually the word *hearts* in the original language. Here we find Jesus exhorting a decision which involves the will.

There is an important point to be grasped. To be born again, *all three* elements of the human heart must be deeply affected by God. It is possible for a person to have an intellectual grasp of the gospel, to actually receive light from the Spirit in his or her mind, and yet the will remain bent against God.

It is possible for a person to be under deep convictions from the Holy Spirit (John 16:8), sense his or her own guilt before God, and yet reject that convicting work because the will remains bent against God.

Furthermore, it is possible for a person to be under conviction by the Spirit *and also* experience the illuminating work of the Spirit and yet remain disposed to hate God.

The parable of the soils confirms this.

And the one on whom seed was sown on the rocky places, this is the man who hears the word, and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no *firm* root in himself, but is *only* temporary, and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away" (Matthew 13:20-21, italics indicates words not in original language).

Note how Jesus actually describes such a person. This person has no root. We may legitimately eliminate the word *firm*. There is no root reaching down into the will, the depth of the heart. As a result, there is no lasting fruit. This person is not regenerate, not born again. See the attached diagram.

It remains to show how the existence of such a situation manifests itself in human lives.

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¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965), p. 289.

² William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 404.

IN RESPONSE - ENLIGHTENED SELF INTEREST, PART TWO OF THREE

by Dennis Prutow

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Answer 31,

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel.

To truly come to Christ, the mind, emotions, and will must be deeply affected by God. When a person is illumined and only the mind is affected, how does this situation manifest itself? For an answer we look at 2 Timothy 3:1-5.

But realize this, in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God; holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power.

First, we see an outward form of godliness. This is outward form without inner power from the Spirit changing the disposition of the heart (verse 5). Second, this lack of inner change in the disposition is manifested in various types of love, primarily self love (verse 2).

The Pharisees in the gospels of the New Testament are classic examples of what Paul is talking about. Matthew 23:23 helps us in our analysis.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others.

There were certain things in the word of God the Pharisees loved. They really saw God required the tithe. They saw the beauty in that law. In a sense they could say to God, "Oh how I love your Law." *To this extent they had light.* No people on the face of the earth spent more time in the study of the word of God than the Pharisees. By the time Paul was in his early twenties he had the equivalent of

two Ph.d.'s. Not only so, the Pharisees really did have a *form* of godliness. But it was without the benefit of regenerate hearts.

Jesus reveals their true motive for scrupulously keeping God's commandments in Matthew 23:1-7.

Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying, 'The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things, and do not do them. And they tie up heavy loads, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi.'

Notice how Jesus commands the people. "Therefore all that they tell you, do and observe" (verse 3). Remember, *these are the words of Jesus.* The problem of the Pharisees was not so much what they demanded. The problem was their hearts. They were hypocrites. *They had outward form without proper motive of heart.*

Their real motive of heart is given in verse 5-7.

But they do all their deeds *to be noticed by men*; for they broaden their phylacteries, and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And *they love the place of honor at banquets*, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi (italics added).

The Pharisees were consumed with love of self. They followed what is written in order to be noticed. Their love was turned inward, toward themselves, and away from God. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:2, "Men will be lovers of self."

At the same time, Jesus does not tone down the duty to live righteously. His

desire is for righteous living which grows out of a heart filled with love for Him.

The problem in many evangelical circles is just the opposite of the Pharisees but the result is the same. The claim is made that we can have Christ but live any way we please. For example, a former campus pastor at Sterling College was criticized by a young man for saying Christianity requires the righteousness of *not* sleeping with your girl friend. The young man took exception. He said the campus pastor lacked mercy. The campus pastor did not lack mercy; the young man lacked Christ. The Bible is clear, "[T]hose who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God" (Galatians 5:21). The problem is that of self love manifested in self indulgence.

In either case, that of the Pharisees or that of misinformed professing Christians, the problem is the same. It is the problem of self love.

Amazingly enough, our children are being inundated with the message of self love through the self esteem movement. Those pushing self esteem in the midst of the church are actually leading men and women, young people and children away from Christ. Self love is not a proper motive for following Christ. Paul tells the Christian point blank to "regard [*esteem*, KJV] one another as more important than himself" (Philippians 2:3).

The problem is we love ourselves too much. We are motivated too thoroughly by self love. Unregenerate minds and emotions glory in self love. Those under conviction by the Spirit and illumined by Him may very well *express* interest in Christ. But why? Will it be out of a *love for Christ*. No! It will be out of a love for self, perhaps a desire for self preservation, but nevertheless a love for self no different from the unregenerate Pharisees.

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IN RESPONSE - SEEING IS BELIEVING, RIGHT? - 2 Corinthians 5:7

by Dennis Prutow

Christianity, it is said, does not rest upon historical facts, proofs, or argumentation. "For we walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). This fits the popular view of religion:

If one analyzes the character of religious experience (I would again refer to Rudolph Otto), its innermost core has nothing to do with morality at all. All morality is directed toward the reality of everyday life; religious experience transcends that reality radically, is directed toward another reality in which, by definition, moral principles and rules are irrelevant.¹

Religious experience, it is said, has little or nothing to do with the phenomenal world. Science exists and is relevant in this world of quantifiable phenomena. Religion has to do with a world totally other.

Interestingly enough, the same author just quoted places knowledge opposite faith rather than unbelief opposite faith.

God has not made it easy for human beings to believe, and the world provides good grounds for unbelief. I would prefer to pair belief with another, very conventional term--namely, *knowledge*. Some things I know, and some things I believe; generally speaking I don't believe what I know. Thus I know that $2 + 2 = 4$. It makes little sense to say that I believe this. But if I have before me a closed box containing apples, I may say that I believe it contains *four*; I'm not sure, but I have some reason to think this is the number.²

Knowledge and faith are juxtaposed. They are viewed as contradictory. As a result, faith cannot be under girded with knowledge. Evidences cannot be used to support or, Heaven actually forbid, prove the validity of Christianity.

But this is not the meaning of 2 Corinthians 5:7. "The word [translated sight] does not mean the sense of sight, but the thing seen, form, appearance, that which is the object of sight."³ This word "is not intended here as specifically opposed to faith, but is rather, in Hodge's words, 'the object of faith, the form and fashion of the thing believed.'"⁴

The object of our faith is now removed from our view. Christ is in

heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father. But, although we do not see Him with our physical eyes, there is every reason, there is all proper evidence, to make the One removed from our view, a plausible object of faith.

Oddly, we think *seeing is believing* is the basis for science. This is definitely *not* the case. Take the atom as an example. We cannot see atoms with the naked eye. Various types of evidence are used to draw conclusions about the reality of this unseen world. This evidence is drawn from experimentation which demonstrates the existence and character of differing types of atoms and sub-atomic particles. Seeing is believing if the seeing is done through the spectacles of evidences.

In like manner, *seeing is believing* is *not* the basis for education. Take the teaching of evolution as an example. We cannot view a process like evolution. Nor can we view creation. Evidence is used to draw conclusions about the unseen. When certain evidence, such as the fossil record, is examined, this is said to substantiate the theory of evolution. Others argue the same evidence confirms creation. Whether or not you happen to accept evolution or creation is immaterial to this discussion. The point is, evidences, properly evaluated, are used to ascertain the reality of the unseen. Seeing is believing if we talk about evidence.

In the same way, Christianity is *not* opposed to reason or some how above reason. Romans 12:1,

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

The words translated "spiritual service" are rendered, "reasonable service" (Authorized Version) and "rational service" (New American Standard Version, marginal note). The first word may be transliterated "logical". The logical, rational, and therefore supremely spiritual thing for Christians to do is present themselves to God.

This means faith is not opposed to *knowledge* in Christianity. Romans 1:20 is an example. "For since the creation of

the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made."

We must not tone down the teaching of the apostle in this passage. It is a clear declaration to the effect that the visible creation as God's handiwork makes manifest the invisible perfections of God as its creator, that from the things which are perceptible to the senses cognition of these invisible perfections is derived, and that thus a clear apprehension of God's perfections may be gained from His observable handiwork.⁵

As individuals view evidences given in creation, that which is perceptible, visible, gives rise to cognition, knowledge, of the unseen God. Belief in God is therefore not opposed to knowledge gained through evidences.

Neither is faith opposed to *sight* in Christianity. There is solid evidence that Christ is indeed the Son of God. As Jesus said, "Believe Me that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me; otherwise believe on account of the works themselves" (John 14:11). The works evidence the Sonship of Christ. Seeing is believing if understood in this latter sense.

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¹ Peter L. Berger, *A Far Glory* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), p. 193.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.

³ Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 122.

⁴ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 176, n. 52.

⁵ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1973), p. 40.