

A Call to Worship
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What I'm going to do instead of running through all my normal Powerpoint slides I had set for this one, I'm gonna leave just one up there and I'm gonna condense what I have to say because I can get to the final point without having to say everything. And the final thing I want to do today, the thing I'm most passionate about making sure we accomplish this morning, is that you hear and I give an effective and extended call to worship this Christmas season.

To get there I'm gonna take you back to 451...451 AD in Chalcedon. Five hundred bishops, leaders from all over Christendom, had come. You had the militants from the south; you had the mystic, contemplative theologians from the east; and you had from the west those masters of logic and systematic theology. And they all gathered in Chalcedon for a grand conference. And there also was the Empress and her husband, the imperial couple. In fact, they are the ones who called the council. And they had a demand they put in front of the Church at that time, all the leaders gathered in this place called Chalcedon; and they gave 'em a demand. They said, 'You must agree. When this council is done there can be no more division.'

You see, the teaching of scripture had been very simple, simple to the point of mystery. We're told that the Spirit of the angel came to the woman, Mary the virgin, that said, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, God's power will be upon you; and as a result, the child that will be born will be called the Son of God.' And for the centuries following the birth of that wondrous child, Church and theologians and Christians had discussed 'how do we explain that? What sort of person is this, that is Son of God/Son of Man?' And they had discussed 'What is that? Does it mean that God just came down and put on a human skin like we put on a set of clothes? Does it mean that we had a man that suddenly was empowered with supernatural powers?' And they discussed that. In fact, they discussed it so much that it became debates. And after a while it not only became a debate, it became a divisive argument that threatened the Roman Empire. It was ready to splinter apart over a theological debate.

In fact, the last conference to distribute...or to debate this issue had ended up in near-riot. The theologians from the south had arrived, and they declared the conference opened. And when nobody else was there on time they took their position and said, 'This is it.' When the theologians from the east arrived, they were upset and so they convened their own conference; and they declared their position to be the accurate one. Finally the theologians from the west arrived, and they mediated some sort of agreement at great cost, because when one of their theologians said something wrong the others beat him up, and he died. The Empress said, 'Enough of that.' And so she gathered them back together in 451 at Chalcedon and said, 'You are gonna settle this, and you are gonna come to agreement.' It's like taking fighting, quarreling kids and putting them in a room and saying, 'Settle it!'

And settle it they did. They debated and they discussed for almost seventeen days. And when they were done they had a statement. It became the classic statement of Christian teaching with respect to the nature of this One that was born that Christmas day. Let me read for you the statement. It's a rather complicated one. It will sound a little different to our ears. It says

In agreement therefore with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one in the same; the same perfect in Godhead, the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man.

It goes on from there, but it's printed out...the rest of it's on the Powerpoint, and I didn't put that up. It goes on to talk about this person, "truly God, truly man, being one person, coalescing in one person," it says, "of one hypostasis." We can condense it very simply with this phrase we have up on the board, the one thing that I do have up on the Powerpoint; summarize it the way one modern theologian, looking back at that conference, says: "You know, what they said was, 'Jesus, remaining what He was, God, He became what He was not, man.'"

Modern theologians look back at that conference, that statement, look at that summary, and they sit there and they say, 'You know, that's not much of an explanation. It really doesn't explain a whole lot. All that does is tell us what scripture says.' And they're correct. As one historian put it, he said, "Those theologians at Chalcedon simply expressed and protected the mystery."

See, I'm convinced we need to appreciate those ancient, contentious theologians, 'cause they did something very special at Chalcedon. What they decided among themselves, led by, I believe, the Spirit of God...they decided that Christian teaching would not become speculative, religious philosophy. They decided that day that they were not gonna take Christian teaching, they were not gonna take scripture, and try to package it and condense it into what our human thinking thinks what should be or could be. They were not gonna take what scripture said, no matter how confusing it might be, not matter how paradoxical it might be, no matter how mysterious it might be—the Christian church would not take that mystery and put it into our categories to make it fit our understanding.

And so they looked at Jesus—truly God, truly man, one person—and they said 'There is mystery here. We will mark that mystery, and beyond that we will say we don't know how it fits together.' They looked at that One who was asleep, exhausted and tired, in the boat in the middle of a storm—exhausted like any man would be after the ministry and the schedule that He was keeping—and had to be awakened in the midst of the storm, and then stood up, looked at the storm, rubbed His eyes clear, and then said "Be quiet!" and it went quiet. Truly God, truly man. The disciples couldn't explain it, but in that boat and in His presence they were more afraid *after* the storm than they were *during* the storm. 'Who *is* this we're dealing with?' That person who could say, 'I, as a man...', that person who could say, 'I can and will lay my life down; I will die for you,' and at the same time say, '...and I will pick it back up. I will come alive again. I have the power to do that.' That is God; that is man...in one person.

For the mystery that Christmas calls us to—a little child barely learning to verbalize, can't even put a sentence together; the mother needs to translate for you what that child just meant ("Ogurt!" "Yogurt"); and at that moment, that exact moment in time, that child—that can't even pronounce a word straight and put together a sentence—the Bible tells us that at that moment, at that precise time, is holding the entire universe together by the word of His power. God...man...one person.

Those theologians looked at that and they said, 'We can not put this into our definitions and explanations. We cannot make Jesus fit our categories.' And they marked the mystery and they said, 'We will not go beyond this.' They were true to our calling as a church.

It intrigues me that in 1 Timothy, when the Apostle Paul is explaining the Church, and he's giving instructions to a younger pastor how to order the Church in Ephesus, and what kind of things the Church should be doing and not doing...as he's in the middle of his letter he makes this statement. 'I'm not gonna be there for a while. I wanna get there, but I'm writing this letter so you will know how the Church ought to conduct itself.' And then he describes; he says 'The Church, the family, the household of God...' and he adds this phrase, 'the pillar and the foundation of the truth, the church that undergirds the truth and holds it up for those around to see.' And you're sittin' there saying, 'Ok, what is the truth we proclaim? What is the truth we're the foundation and the pillar of?' And Paul goes on in the next statement; he says, 'Great is the mystery of godliness. Great is the wonder that produces a God-ward life.' He says, 'Great is the mystery of godliness, great is the truth that we are the foundation of and the pillar of.' And then he defines what that 'truth of' is, and he says it is

He who was manifest in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, beheld by the angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on upon the earth, and taken up into heaven.

Our calling is to give witness to a mystery named Jesus. Sometimes we're not very good at it. We give answers—authoritative, articulate—and amazingly we give those answers with such assurity that no one hears a hint of astounding awe in our voice. We give explanations—endless, intricate, precise explanations—and somehow we're able to do it with no sense of wonder. We give principles—practical, profound... 'Do this, do that, and your life will be a success; you'll connect with God.' We give principles that guarantee your life will go well, and we do it without ever indicating the perplexity and confusion of life. And as we give those answers, and as we give those explanations, and as we give those principles with no astonishment, with no awe, with no wonder, we are failing our calling! We are called to give witness to a mystery named Jesus—truly God, truly man—in the presence of whom there can only be awe, reverence, astonishment, and worship.

I'm convinced the only way we fulfill our calling to witness is to answer the call to worship...individually, personally, congregationally we need to consider, and to contemplate, and to confess someone bigger than us, someone beyond our comprehension, beyond our imagination. We need to worship.

I was in the...what we call the Operations Room at the church right now. The smell of smoke...we've got fans whirling as you try to dry out the carpets. There's the buzz of voices and construction workers, clean-up crew, and the staff is trying to sort stuff out. In the middle of that I'm standing by a whiteboard with Joel, our worship pastor. And we're looking at the next three worship services that he's got plotted out on the whiteboard. It's amazing what you can do without computers, people! These whiteboards are really fun...you can use colors, you can wipe 'em off, you can just...it is really great. ☺ Then you gotta teach the staff 'These are three-by-five cards. Dinosaurs used to eat them,' you know.

Anyway, we're sitting in front of this whiteboard and we're lookin' at it, and Joel's showing the services, and I look at the next Sunday's service. I look at the service plan for December 28th, next Sunday morning. And I look at Joel, and I go "Oh." And he goes "What's wrong?" And I go "Can't we be done with the Christmas songs? Joel, they started before Thanksgiving and I've been hearing them every day since; and Joel, I get tired of 'em. Joel, when we hit Christmas I wanna be done with the Christmas songs."

Joel went home and wrote me.

"On the Singing of Christmas Songs After Christmas"

Traditionally Christmas season began four Sundays prior with Advent, but Christmas songs were not generally sung until Christmas. Christmas was then celebrated for twelve days, ending with Epiphany on January 6. Epiphany is the celebration of the visit of the magi [the wise men], the revealing of Christ to the gentiles.

Joel goes on. He says

"One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike."

...a quote from Romans; and he says

The celebration of certain holidays can help be helpful in shaping our spirituality, but it is clearly not necessary. What troubles me...

...Joel says,

...is when we discard the church calendar and, instead of treating every day alike, we let ourselves be shaped by the secular calendar. We regard Valentine's Day above Pentecost, for example.

He goes on; he says

The secular calendar revolves around commerce. For Christmas this means pre-Christmas sales, Christmas sales, and post-Christmas sales. Carols become the accompaniment track to the Christmas sales. And when the holiday comes and the money is spent, the music changes.

I don't propose that we try to change or even ignore the calendar of contemporary America. Rather I think we should maintain a healthy independence from it—acknowledge it, but not be bound to it. My heart is that we have a fresh wonder at the mystery of the incarnation this Christmas. It is a mystery for which it is worth enduring hardship, scorn, or even death.

He goes on; he says

I enjoy singing Christmas songs after Christmas not because I'm partial to Christmas music (I actually own hardly any Christmas CDs), but because I need the reminder to continue in the wonder of the incarnation.

That's appropriate. We're not gonna let the music change. In fact, I am committed—every day for the twelve days after Christmas I am gonna start the day by listening to a Christmas CD; 'cause people we'll never give witness to the mystery, the wonder, and the glory of Jesus if we, ourselves, don't stop and be astounded at the wonder, and the glory, and the mystery of all that He is—the one, the only, God/man—Jesus Christ. I call you to worship.