

The Theological Location of Christmas – A Christmas Reflection 2018 (III)

Most of us have been taught that Christmas is joyous because it is about the birth of our savior Jesus Christ. But why is it joyous? Because we know that Christ is God's solution to the fundamental problem of humanity. But what is the problem of humanity? Well, sin of course! But is it really the fundamental problem, though?

In Genesis, man was created to dwell with God in Eden. Man was made to live in the presence of God, and it is written that God "walked in the garden" with Adam. But we're all familiar with the Fall of man, when sin entered creation and man was cast out of Eden and more significantly, away from God's presence. Eden was a special place not because it was some magical utopia by its own right. Eden was special because *God* was there. God's own presence is what made Eden special and desirable. With the entrance of sin into creation, **man could no longer dwell in God's presence**. Let me suggest that *this* is the fundamental problem of humanity.

Even after the Fall, God does not leave man to his own devices. He graciously institutes a way to be with his people – the sacrificial system. The entire sacrificial system was given out of pure grace. In fact, it was given almost simultaneously with the giving of the Law, as if when God gave us his law, he knew we weren't going to be able to keep it. Hence, with the Law he also provided means for reparation when we broke it. Instructions were given for the construction of the tabernacle, the tent of *meeting* (note the category of presence). Rules have to be followed, sacrifices have to be made, purification has to take place *so that* God can dwell in the midst of his people. We misunderstand the Levitical system when we think that the ritual sacrifice was primarily to deal with the moral purity of the people. It was first and foremost oriented toward "keeping" the presence of God in the camp. Yet even with the Levitical system, with God's presence in the midst of his people, it was only specific people who could enter it, and only at specific times of the year. For the children of Israel, God was both present and absent from them at the same time. Present because they could see the tent glowing with the glory of God when he descended upon it, absent because they knew they could never step in that place and be with God. Thus even the Levitical system was a temporary solution to the fundamental problem. The sacrificial system remained through the construction of the temple by Solomon, all the way until the first century as the means by which God could be with his people (through a representative high priest).

So in the giving of the sacrificial system, we observe God's first major "move" down towards mankind. Post-Eden, God pursues his children and still desires to dwell with them. In the coming of Christ then, we observe God's second major "move." It is as though God decided that no more shall one high priest represent his children, and no more shall communion with him be only for certain times of the year. Nor shall communion with him be restricted to those of a certain degree of purity. In the coming of Christ, God reveals just how radically close he wants to be with his people. Pre-Christ, people might be forgiven for thinking that the God of Israel was just like any other pagan God in the sense of his distance and remoteness from his people. God still required mediums (temple, high priest, rituals) in order to be with his people. But in the incarnation, God "shows his hand." He reveals to creation that he desires to be so intimately related to humanity that the savior is called Emmanuel, God *with* us (presence language again). In the birth of this child, we hear God's declaration that the fundamental problem is surmountable by him. He alone is able to be with humanity in a way that sin cannot obstruct. God is able to assume fallen humanity and redeem it from within. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ lie in service of this more basic goal – God with us. I think that the significance of Christ's sacrifice actually pales in comparison to the event of the incarnation. Why? Because in the incarnation, God reveals the true nature of humanity. Humanity is made to be indwelt by God's own presence. Like the bush that burns but is not consumed, humanity was created to be united with God. God is able to be united with his children without destroying their integrity i.e. it is because of his transcendence that he is able to be utterly immanent to us. The work of Christ was then meant to "break open" access to all mankind, to all who would will to return to be in God's presence. Sin had to be dealt with for the sake of presence. If we over-emphasize Easter (and I think theologically Evangelicals have done so), we make the fundamental problem to be about sin rather than presence. This leads inevitably to a moralistic/legalistic life because sin is the main problem. But if the problem is presence, then the emphasis should fall on the incarnation, and the Christian life becomes primarily about what it means to dwell in the presence of God daily.

But even with the incarnation and atonement of Christ, Christians know that it was still a temporary measure of sorts. Why? Because we are told in Revelation that God has a third "move" towards creation. In the descending of the New Jerusalem, God himself will dwell in the city with his people, and there will be no need for sun and moon because his own glory will be the light. This is the consummation of the entire cosmic drama. In the eschaton, God will once again dwell in the

midst of his people as he did in Eden, but in an infinitely more glorious manner. Thus we have a consistent narrative running through the entire scripture, linking Genesis all the way to Revelation. The Christian story is really a cosmic drama about how God accomplishes his purposes of dwelling with his people.

Christmas then, is the hinge upon which all of human history turns in this cosmic drama. It is the point at which God himself enters into fallen creation so that he can be with his people. So we are able to be with God because God himself came to be with us in the incarnation. Thus the call of the Christian life is the call to respond to God's invitation to life *with* him.