



## Thoughts from the Bible and Books

A Newsletter for University Reformed Church  
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January 2005

### The Good News You May Have Forgotten

There is a flip side to everything I am about to say. Of course, we must not be uncaring, unfeeling, unthinking, lazy Christians (can one be lazy, unthinking, unfeeling, uncaring and still Christian?). But after we put all our caveats in place, we need to hear the Christmas good news again: Jesus is the Christ, so we don't have to be.

John the Baptist makes a remarkable confession in the first chapter of John's Gospel. With the religious big-wigs from Jerusalem in town just to see him, John had a captive audience. The priests and Levites were eager to hear who he really was. And so, John told them in no uncertain terms, "I am not the Christ" (1:20). His words are emphatic; literally, "He confessed and he did not deny and he confessed." John wanted to make one thing abundantly clear: he was not the One.

Clearly, this was a humbling thing to say. The Jews were anxious for a deliver—a prophet, Elijah maybe, perhaps even the Messiah. And the first thing that comes out of John's mouth is, "I'm not the guy you're looking for." How different from the way most of us posture and position ourselves. We would have probably said, "Well, technically I am not *the* Anointed One, but I am a prophet. I have quite a following don't you think? By the way, did you know we're cousins?" Yet, John is anything but self serving, answering each of their questions with a resounding negative. "I am not him (20)...I am not (21a)...No (21b)."

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John's confession was probably as freeing as it was humbling. Some of us type A, hyper-driven, super-motivated people think of ourselves as mini-Messiahs. We want to right all the wrongs in the world and live a flawless Christian life and be all things to all people at all times. If only God had made us omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscience, we'd be able to help him out more often. The weight of the world seems to rest on our shoulders, and in a perverse way, we like the feeling of that weight. We need to add John's words to our confession of faith: "I confess freely, I am not the Christ."

John denied he was Elijah or even a prophet (though in one sense he was both). All he claimed to be was a voice. No resume, no curriculum vitae, no dust jacket, no titles. It's as if John was saying, "First and foremost you need to know who I am *not*." John

knew his place. He wasn't the Word, just a voice. He wasn't the groom; just the best man. Too many of us (pastors included) like to pretend that we are the church's spouse, meeting

all her needs. But that's Jesus role alone. Surely, we won't be more than John, and he was simply part of the wedding party, preparing the way for the groom to come for his bride.

Allow me to borrow an illustration from Gordon Hugenberger, Pastor of Boston's historic Park Street Church. Imagine yourself standing in the front of church, with candles at your back and the ornately decorated center aisle before you. The door opens and there

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she is—your radiant, spotless, beautiful bride! But something is not right. You notice her eyes are fixed just to left of yours. Then you look over your shoulder...and the best man is winking. They're making goo-goo eyes at each other! This is not the way it's supposed to be. The bride is for the groom, not the best man. Likewise, the church is waiting for Jesus, not for us. Which is why John confessed freely: "I am not the Christ."

This church is not about your minister or your ministries. It is about Jesus. And the measure of our faithfulness, and the degree to which ministry will be freedom instead of burden, is the degree to which we say, "Look at him! I am just a voice. Listen to the Word. I am part of the bridal party. Don't look to me to give your life purpose and satisfaction. Fall in love with the groom. Fix your eyes on Jesus."

That would be for us humility and freedom—humility to admit who we really are, and freedom to let Jesus do for others what we cannot. Because one of the best things about Christmas is that as you worship the little babe in the straw, you can whisper a soft "Hallelujah!" and freely confess "Jesus is the Christ, so I don't have to be."

## **The Incarnation of the Word of God**

By now you know that I strongly encourage having dead friends. And yes, you are most welcome at URC even if Calvin is not your best dead friend (although I hope the two of you are on speaking terms). There are so many wonderful heroes and heroines to choose from. Christian history is a true embarrassment of riches.

You may recall earlier this fall hearing about Athanasius on Sunday night. The "Black Dwarf" was truly one of the giants of the church. A scrappy and stubborn defender of the faith, Athanasius has been lauded as a kind of theological street fighter. He lived and died and was exiled five times over a dispute about a single vowel. According to Athanasius, and seventeen centuries of Christians after him, Jesus is not merely *homoiousias* with the Father (of similar substance), he is *homoousias* (of the same substance). Jesus, the Son, is very God of very God.

I recently finished one of Athanasius' first works, *On the Incarnation*. In this short book, Athanasius argues for the divinity of Jesus Christ and his bodily resurrection. His chapter on the resurrection contains this striking argument.

A very strong proof of this destruction of death and its conquest by the cross is supplied by a present fact, namely this. All the disciples of Christ despise death; they take offense against it and, instead of fearing it, by the sign of the cross and by faith in Christ trample on it as on something dead. Before the divine sojourn of the Saviour, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Saviour has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing, and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die they do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible through the resurrection (57).

What a bold claim: we know Jesus conquered death because his followers no longer find it terrifying. Would Athanasius be able to say the same thing today? If he spoke on campus and argued for the bodily resurrection of Jesus based on the fearlessness of Christ's followers, would anyone be compelled to listen? Do we show forth the conquest of the cross by the despising of death and treading it underfoot as nothing? Do we live knowing full well that when we die we do not perish, but live indeed, and become incorruptible?

One of the purposes of the incarnation, according to Hebrews, was that through his death, Jesus might "free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (2:15). In other words, Jesus came to deliver us not only from spiritual and eternal death, but also from the fear of dying. Of course, we still mourn and grieve, but not like those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The worst that can happen is now the best that can happen. For when we die, we gain Christ, glory, eternity, and, one day, an incorruptible body. Death is still our enemy, but it has lost its sting (1 Corinthians 15:55). Thanks to Athanasius for the reminder.