

December 24, 2014

The Christian Message in the Christmas Season

As Christmas day - the day in which we celebrate our Savior's birth - nears I would like to extend our heartfelt greetings from The Unity of the Spirit to all of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ from anywhere in the world who may read this online message. As a lifelong Christian believer who grew up within the institutional Protestant church but who has been involved primarily with the house-church movement for most of my adult life I've come to appreciate Christmas in its many dimensions amongst various Christian traditions. What unites us all and what always must remain primary during this Christmas season is the Christian message itself. That is ultimately what Christmas is about if it is to remain true to the biblical accounts that set forth the events and significance of our Savior's birth. As many other Christians through the years - especially those who are children of the Reformation - I confess that I even use the word "Christmas" itself with some reserve. It is not of course a word that is used in the Bible itself and its post-biblical designation as a "holy-day" to be celebrated once a year near the end of our December goes beyond the biblical witness and, indeed, involves a good deal of pagan notions and traditions mixed in with its more biblical aspects regarding the birth of Christ. The much later additions of Santa Claus, etc. to the Christmas tradition have, of course, just pushed it even farther away from the true significance of the birth of Christ as explained in the Bible. Nevertheless, the word Christmas is a part of the language, thinking and culture of the world, especially the Western world, that grew out of medieval Christendom. Therefore, I use the word but, unless speaking in a wider secular context, I use the word to refer primarily to the event and significance of the birth of Christ. Fortunately, this significance has continued to shine through in varying greater or lesser degrees in both the institutional church - Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox - and in the non-institutional church through the last two thousand years of Christian history. Thankfully, since the Christian message - including the significance of the birth of Christ - is a simple message it is hard to totally obscure its meaning.

From its simple beginnings some two thousand years ago up until today the "glad tidings of great joy" of Christ's birth and its significance for the world as recorded in New Testament has continued to be proclaimed to the world. God's word is not bound and its liberating truth shines through the darkness that has tried to dispel it. Centuries and centuries of tradition and the often mishandling of the New Testament scriptures have not completely covered over the simple truths of God's plan of salvation accomplished through his Son. Thus, for most Christians around the world, enough of the light of the truth shines through that the Christmas season is a time of joy and blessing often accompanied by special, and often beautiful, church services and warm family gatherings. However, for quite a number of other Christians Christmas can actually be a time of stress or even more difficulties or loneliness than usual because of the circumstances they face in the world. As with so many things in life it is perhaps better to not allow ourselves to get too high or too low emotionally in the midst of Christmas holidays. Instead, we should focus our lives on the Christian message itself; that is, the purpose for which God sent his Son. This, of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with festivities, parties, or material gifts. In fact, it doesn't even have to do with "family", unless, of course, we are speaking of the family of God. All of those other things may or may not be well and good depending on how they are done. However, the true Christmas message is simply the Christian message: that God sent his Son into the world to bring salvation, meaning, and hope to a world in desperate need. It is this Christian message that is intended for every individual person in the world no matter what their family, nation, race, ethnicity, or station in life - high or low - may be.

As I so often do at this time of year I will summarize this Christian message with the liberating truths of Paul from his Letter to the Galatians:

"But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. Because you are his sons, God

sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir." (Gal. 4:4-7). Let us as God's children rejoice in this joyful and liberating Christian message in this Christmas season of the year!

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September 28, 2014

Romans and the "Obedience of Faith"

Paul's Letter to The Romans is preeminently the New Testament Letter that deals with faith in God and in his Son Jesus Christ, as the foundation of the Christian's life. Interestingly, it is coupled with the concept of obedience at various places throughout the Letter including two places where the words appear together as "obedience of faith". In fact, this phrase is at both the beginning and ending of the Letter emphasizing it as a central concept of the Letter. Chapter 1 highlights this truth as it builds towards and climaxes in the great theme verses of Romans 1:16-17:

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Romans 1:16-17).

This theme of "salvation to everyone who believes" (in Christ) - the central gospel message - is then expounded upon throughout the rest of this magnificent NT Letter. Paul, inspired by God's revelation to him on the road to Damascus and through the Spirit of God living within him, is at pains to express the liberating good news of the gospel message as fully as he can to these Roman believers who are living in the capitol city of Rome, the center of the greatest empire ever. What follows then through the body of the letter is the universal plight of mankind, created by God to worship and live for him, and yet, captivated by sin - both Jew and Gentile - and in need of God's saving grace. Through his Son, Jesus Christ, God displays his righteousness towards the entire world in making redemption and salvation available to all through the redemptive work of his Son. In expounding this, God's plan of salvation, Paul emphasizes over and over that the benefits and blessings of God's love and grace are received not by merit - since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God - but only by grace through faith. This central theme of the gospel - and of Romans - is expounded most fully in Romans 3:21-26:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [sacrifice of atonement] by his blood to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:21-26 ESV).

Over and over throughout his letter Paul emphasizes various aspects of this message with the emphasis always coming back to the central theme that mankind is powerless to save himself and that salvation is only a result of God's grace - received through faith in Christ.

Faith - in response to God's grace in Christ - thus becomes the foundation upon which everything else in Romans and in the corresponding Christian life is built. Biblical NT faith - a simple trust in God and his Son - is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. It is the means by which we are justified - acquitted of our sins and made legally righteous and acceptable before and to God. And, it is the sure ground of hope in the ultimate fulfillment of all of God's promises which will reach their final fulfillment at Christ's glorious return. This is all summarized in magnificent Pauline declaration of Romans 5:1-2:

"Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God." (Romans 5:1-2 ESV).

The Christian believer can rest in peace even within this unpeaceful world because, as a justified believer, he has "peace with God" and "access into God's grace" even now through faith in God and his Son. This faith also provides a sure foundation for joyful hope in the revelation of God's glory to come at Christ's future return as expounded both in Romans 8:19ff and throughout the NT Letters.

Paul thus leaves no doubt that the central message of the gospel is salvation by grace through faith in Christ and he expounds this fully with illustration after illustration and example after example throughout the Book of Romans. In doing so he is expounding the central theme of the entire Bible - God's plan of salvation - which is built on God's grace and received only by faith.

Two verses (Romans 1:5 and 16:26 and context of both) emphasize and tie this whole central theme of faith together in Romans and are expressed in the powerful, yet somewhat ambiguous, term "obedience of faith". The concept is a thoroughly biblical one and is found, in principle, throughout the New Testament and specifically, for instance in Acts 8:7 where many of Jewish priests are said to become "obedient to the faith." That is, they became faithful Christian believers by believing the gospel message. The entire Book of Hebrews is also an illustration of this NT concept of "obedience of faith" and commends, not only NT believers who are Christians, but also those in the Old Testament who were faithful believers in the promises of God available to them at that time - through thick and then - and thus become examples for Christian believers today. But each of these examples above offers a somewhat different aspect of what "obedience of faith" could mean.

The Greek words in the original Greek text of Romans that lie behind the literally translated English words "obedience of faith" (ESV, etc.) are precise, yet ambiguous. Fortunately, the rest of the New Testament confirms every angle of the ambiguity as being true. Therefore, though we may never be totally sure of the exact, precise sense that Paul intended, we can instead be sure that every possible sense that is allowed by the Greek words is true and confirmed by both Paul and the rest of New Testament. Thus, the phrase "obedience of faith" allows us to stop and consider all of the possible senses of the words which, fortunately, are also captured by various translations. The main possibilities are:

1. obedience, which is, faith in the gospel message
2. obedience, which is, obedient Christian living springing from faith in Christ
3. obedience, which is, faith in and fidelity to the body of truths of the Christian faith

Obviously, all of these possibilities are closely related to each other, are true in themselves, and are confirmed elsewhere in Paul's Letters as well as the wider New Testament as being in accord with the gospel message. However, it is almost impossible to be totally sure of Paul's precise meaning here. Because of this, these words afford us the opportunity to consider all of the possible implications - all of which Paul would have agreed with in one context or another - and thus to see the greatest possible range of meaning of the combination of "obedience" and "faith" in both the doctrinal and practical aspects of the Christian life. That is my invitation to the readers of this blog and I suggest that one do so by studying the NT usages themselves, reading good commentaries that explain these verses, and discussing them with fellow believers in both formal and informal study sessions.

May God bless you in your studies!

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Summer Reading

Another excellent school year has come to a close and summer has actually begun. As much as I will miss my students it's time for all of us to have some time to rest, refresh and re-energize over the

summer. Among other things summer is a time to spend more time with people whom you haven't been able to see for a while or for as much time as you'd like. For teachers, in particular, summer means that we can now read primarily what we want to read and what we've been waiting for months to read-- rather than our textbooks, essays we grade, school forms we fill out, etc. In a word, how nice! Of course, a teacher's work is never done, but at least our focus can shift for a couple of months. For me, personally, this means shifting my focus to biblical studies and to historical studies that are of particular interest to me. Since I tend to do a lot of traveling over the summers, my reading also usually includes some travel guides or other travel-related materials about the places that I, or preferably, Dorota and I, will be visiting. The more historically and culturally oriented these materials are the better as far as I'm concerned because it deepens the travel experience. Being a history teacher, I'm usually reading about ten to fifteen different history books and/or biographies at any given time. Some of those I'll finish this summer and others I'll start.

As for biblical studies, this summer for me will be spent primarily reading and studying Paul's Letter to the Romans in all of its dimensions since next school year our Adult Bible Study will be studying it in depth. In addition, I will be studying a great deal about the entire new covenant era that began with the day of Pentecost in Acts 2. With the giving of God's gift of holy Spirit in Acts 2 the new covenant era of salvation began and it is in this era that all Christian believers live. The Book of Acts and the NT Letters should, therefore, be our primary focus of study since they set forth the early history of the Christian Church and also expound its fundamental beliefs and practices. In fact, the Book of Romans is a foundational document in understanding the truths of the new covenant era and there is no better NT book to build one's understanding of the Christian life around. Christians often focus on the Gospels; however, the Gospels are preparatory to the new covenant era of salvation and set forth the fulfillment of all that was required for the new covenant to begin. The words and deeds of Jesus Christ as recorded in the Gospels are, of course, of great importance; however, even he spoke of his own mission of fulfillment and looked forward to the new covenant era that would come into force through his sacrificial death, resurrection and then the giving of the Spirit on Pentecost. Focusing on the Book of Acts and the NT Letters shows how the NT Church of the body of Christ understood and applied the teachings of Christ in the light of his entire life, death, resurrection and the giving of the Spirit - which Christ himself promised and looked forward to. Thus, we no longer live in the era of the Gospels but rather in the new covenant era as set forth in the Book of Acts and the NT Letters. This is why they should be our primary focus in understanding new covenant truths and in practical living within this new covenant era of salvation. That is why the "But now's" of Romans are so important. They set forth the present realities of new covenant truths in relationship to the old covenant era and frame the entire Book of Romans in this context. I will end with a couple of examples:

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it - the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 3:21-24).

"But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of Spirit and not in the old way of the written code." (Rom. 7:6).

These are new covenant truths contrasting the new with the old. The Book of Romans is framed by these truths and as new covenant Christian believers our whole lives are framed by these truths as well.

May God be with you all this summer as you live in the light of all that God has done for us his children through the gift of salvation in Christ and through our new covenant life in the Spirit.

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March 28, 2014

Living in Newness of Life

Spring is finally breaking out in the South and the newness of life that it brings reminds me of the life-giving power of the gospel message that is set forth so vividly in Paul's Letter to the Romans. As Paul states in Romans 1:16-17 and then in Romans 6:1-4:

"For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes - the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life." (Rom. 1:16-17 NLT).

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:1-4 ESV).

Our Adult Bible Study Fellowship which meets weekly in our home has been studying the New Testament Book of Romans during the course of this year; this will continue over the course of the next year as well. Romans is a book of the Bible that changed the lives of many of the giants of the Christian faith and sparked great liberating movements for God thereafter. Augustine, Luther, Wesley, Barth, et al., are a few examples; however, the lives affected for good and known only to God certainly number in the many millions. We, of course, are amongst those less famous names whose lives have been liberated by the power of God and who seek to grow in our knowledge and understanding of Paul's Letter to the Romans. As with almost all topics that we study in our own local Bible-study fellowship we use a variety of good Bible versions and translations for comparative purposes and also consult some of the best commentaries and research works (usually for "homework" in between our regular fellowships) to help us in our study. Currently, we're focusing on some of the major topics that Paul deals with in Romans and then, after a summer break, we will go through the entire Book of Romans from start to finish.

This particular study is a great joy for me personally because Romans has always been one of the favorite books of the Bible for me going all the way back to my teenage years when I first began to study it seriously. Though I began reading and memorizing it in the King James Version in my earlier childhood, I found this pretty rough going - certainly, the KJV was beautiful with memorable phrases, but the often archaic English was often difficult to understand. When my church switched to the Revised Standard Version as its main text I did too. This helped a good deal but the newly published and vivid translations of the New English Bible and the Good News Bible both really opened it up for me even more so and helped make reading and studying Romans an exciting adventure for me as a teenager in high school. Today I generally use the English Standard Version (ESV), which is a revision of the Revised Standard Version, as my main text and also rely heavily on both the NIV and NLT - both of which are excellent and are often more vivid than the ESV, especially in certain passages. As with our fellowship, I generally recommend using one main text and using many others for comparative purposes. Of course, the Greek text is ultimately authoritative and here it is necessary to consult both a good interlinear and the best commentaries that explain the text. Most importantly, however, the most

important key to understanding Romans well is to read it over and over as a whole so as to understand its entire scope and message. The details will always fit within this overall scope. In addition, some of the most helpful verses for the day-to-day life of the Christian believer are found in Romans and it is recommended that they be committed to memory so as to be called upon at any time in every-day life. Today, I own probably 15 - 20 excellent commentaries on Romans. I treasure them all because they were written by highly educated men who were gravely concerned about truth and also equally concerned about practical godly living on behalf of Christ. Interestingly, they span the spectrum of denominational affiliation. My personal favorite of these is "Romans" in the Tyndale NT Commentary Series by F.F. Bruce. It is loaded with truth, written by one of the 20th centuries greatest NT scholars, and is easily accessible to the educated reader. However, there are so many excellent commentaries on Romans that one could spend almost a lifetime studying these in depth. The integrity, character and erudition of these great scholars far surpasses what generally passes for "scholarship" in much of the academic world today. When I hear the names of these scholars - Barrett, Bruce, Dunn, Fitzmyer, Moo, et al - my heart jumps and my ears perk up because here are serious scholars with much that is important still to share with present generations.

As I think back to my past, the first significant book that I ever read about Romans - instead of just reading the text of Romans itself - was a book that my mother gave me called "How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious". It was a very popular book amongst young Christians in the 1960s and 70s and eventually sold millions of copies. I would still recommend it today for most anyone, especially its main points. This book was, more or less, a popular-level commentary that both explained the text of Paul's Letter to the Romans emphasizing its liberating and life-giving message and was also loaded with practical real-life applications for people of my age at that time. For someone looking for an alternative to both the stodginess of mainstream protestantism and the superficiality of the then current counter-culture movement, this book and its life-giving message from Paul's Letter to the Romans, was like a natural spring of cool water to anyone thirsty for the truth. This, after all, was a period of great turmoil in the midst of the Cold War, Watergate, and a growing counter-culture movement promoting the "freedom" of drugs, free sex, and anti-most-everything. On the other hand, many, including myself, were hungry for much more solid truth that surpassed that of both staid organized religion and counter-culture "truth". Having read the Bible a great deal growing up, and also having heard a great deal of it in my church in my earlier years, it was evident to me that the truth of the Bible as set forth in this case in Romans gave solid answers that were true for every generation and that the counter-culture ideas of the times were little more than the latest irresponsible, superficial, and romantic expressions of a desire to live a "if-it-feels-good-do-it" existence - usually, with others paying the way.

Fortunately, there were many others hungering and thirsting for the solid truth of God's word during that time period and, as so often in the past, the liberating truths of the gospel that Paul sets out in his Letter to the Romans became a springboard and a foundation for helping thousands and thousands of those who desired to live for God to live meaningful lives in the light of his Word, not only then, but also up until this day. And thankfully, that same message of Romans continues to offer not only "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" but also the solid spiritual foundation for living and walking "in newness of life" day by day in this equally confusing day and time as well (Rom. 6:1-4).

Let us, therefore, as Christian believers who are united "in Christ" above and beyond worldly and denominational distinctions hold fast to the liberating and foundational truths of Romans and build upon them for a life-time of service to our God.

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The New Year for The Unity of the Spirit

The new year has begun and we are having one of our more harsh winters here in the American South, though not of course to be compared with the very low temperatures and difficult conditions of the American North. In the South, however, life comes to a standstill over even small amounts of snow and ice since it is not cost effective to have the machinery necessary for the infrequent harsh winter weather that we only occasionally have. At any rate, I'm sure Americans in both the North and South are looking forward to the coming of spring. I also, of course, hope that our fellow-believers in Europe and other parts of the world are having a good and safe winter - even those in the southern hemisphere whose winter is like our summer!

This new year also begins the twentieth year of The Unity of the Spirit newsletter and/or web-site. Our first publication was in the spring of 1995 and from that point we have published consecutively either in hardcopy newsletter form or via our web-site up until today. Hopefully, we can continue to do so well into the future as long as this forum is helpful to God's people or for those searching for an understanding of biblical truth. It has always been the purpose of our publications to present the truth of the God's word as found in the Bible to the best of our understanding - unfettered by post-biblical traditions, interpretations and divisions within Christianity since New Testament times. Our desire is for Christians to be united on the simple truths of God's word as set forth in the New Testament in fulfillment of Old Testament themes. Though the Bible is loaded with truths about every practical subject of life, it is primarily a "book of books" that are tied together by the overarching theme of God's plan of salvation. This plan actually begins in the mind and purposes of God long before the creation account of Genesis 1 and it works its way through the creation of the heavens and earth all the way up to its initial fulfillment in Christ. Indeed, this plan is still at work in the world today and will continue until its ultimate fulfillment at Christ's second coming. At that time evil will be destroyed, God's faithful people will be vindicated and glorified, and the whole creation will be renewed as God's glorious kingdom finally comes. This is what the whole Bible points to, is moving towards, and is built around.

All of our articles, blog-posts, and publications associated with The Unity of the Spirit also revolve around these themes. My own book in e-form in the upper right hand column "God's Plan of Salvation" was first written about twenty years ago and has only been slightly edited since that time. I still recommend it as one of the best means of grasping the big picture of the Bible while focusing on the spiritual and practical aspects of the fulfillment of new covenant themes for Christian believers today. In short, it deals primarily with the "already, but not yet" life of Christians who have "already" been saved, but are still awaiting the fullness of that salvation "yet" to be received at Christ's second coming. In my blog-posts I have summarized the simplicity of this Christian perspective in what I often tell my students is Christianity 101:

1. Believe in Christ,
2. Live a Christ-like Life,
3. Until Christ's return.

This simple perspective offers a framework that is easy for Christians to understand, easy to remember, and easy to build an even fuller picture of the Christian life upon (I Cor. 3:11). Most of the articles from our newsletter The Unity of the Spirit which are now listed by categories in our "Articles" section in the heading above deal with aspects of this perspective and with similar subjects as well. I think many of these articles are gems and are amongst the best that I know of anywhere on these subjects. Of course, the uniqueness of our own web-site - in contrast to many other excellent Christian web-sites which we also recommend - comes from our own articles, publications and recommendations as mentioned above. I highly recommend them and hope that interested Christian believers will take advantage of the work we have done through the years - most of it, by the way, being based upon both

the simplicity of the scriptures themselves as well as the work of some of the foremost biblical scholars in the world.

Finally, I've updated some of our recommendations for web-sites, blogs, books, etc. done by other Christian believers that we list on our web-site and, though not always agreeing with all that is said in these, generally find much that is helpful and a blessing. We hope that they can be a blessing to our readers as well as we continue together as fellow-Christians in "the unity of the Spirit, in the bond of peace."

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