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Incarnation and Ecclesia

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During confirmation instruction, it is not unusual for a confirmand to ask: “Why do we [meaning Christians] have so many strange words for things? Isn’t there an easier way of explaining it?” Usually, the correct answer to these questions is “no, there’s not”—in fact, there’s a great deal of meaning packed in to the language of the Church. As we grow in our knowledge of the faith, and study of the history of Christ’s Church, one is repeatedly struck by the lesson: “Words matter.” Of course, this simple lesson shouldn’t really surprise us, for we are a people gathered around the unchanging Word of God. Indeed, St. John wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

It is this action of the second Person of the Holy Trinity—“the Word became flesh”—which we speak of in the word “Incarnation.” “Incarnation” comes from the Latin words *in carnis*—in flesh—and confesses that which is taught in John 1: that the Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, “became flesh”; the eternal Son of God joined Himself to a human nature and thus He is “God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man of the substance of His mother, born in the world; perfect God and perfect Man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.” (Athanasian Creed) Thus He is one Person with two Natures; “One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking the manhood into God; one altogether; not by confusion of Substance, but by unity of Person.” (Athanasian Creed) To speak of Jesus as “God Incarnate” is to confess this reality: that Jesus Christ is truly God and truly Man, and this blessed mystery is one foundational article of

the one holy catholic and apostolic faith.

The Feast of the Nativity (popularly “ChristMass” after the divine service celebrated on the feast day) is, above all else, a celebration of the Incarnation. Thus the Church sings, “Not by human flesh and blood, by the Spirit of our God, was the Word of God made flesh—Woman’s Offspring, pure and fresh.” (TLH 95:2)

But what about the word “Ecclesia”? This word is nothing other than that which we translate as “Church.” (Those who have been around the Church for a while have heard the term “ecclesiastical,” which simply means ‘of, or relating to, the Church’ or “ecclesiology” which refers to the doctrine concerning the nature of Church.) But the ‘root’ of this word “Ecclesia” is fascinating, conveying the sense in its Greek roots of an assembly which has been ‘called out.’ The Church is the Remnant—those whom the Holy Trinity has called out from among the nations to be His people. Thus Martin Luther wrote in the Smalcald Articles: “For, thank God, today a child seven years old knows what the Church is, viz. saints, believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” (III, XII:2)

Saints who hear the voice of their Shepherd. Thus we read in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “Thus

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Christ's Mass on the Nativity of our Lord

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1. Are you in the Christmas spirit? Yes, I've got the tree decorated, the ham purchased, and only one more present to buy. And it finally snowed!
2. What are you doing on Christmas? We have church at 9:00 A.M. and then we're driving to my mother's.
3. When are you having Christmas? We usually open presents in the morning and then we have our meal in the afternoon.

In popular usage the word "Christmas" has many different meanings. (1) Sometimes it refers to certain "necessary" activities, which can include hanging lights, making cookies, humming along with Bing Crosby's "White Christmas," and purchasing gifts. (2) Other times the word "Christmas" defines a 24 hour period of time corresponding to December 25. (3) Finally, "Christmas" can specifically mean a family meal or the ritual of opening presents.

It should be quite obvious to Christians that the Gospel message of Jesus Christ appears to be missing completely from the first two paragraphs. I know I'm not the first one to notice this, because I have watched as others have tried to keep "Christ" in Christmas. A lawn in my town has a large light display on their roof which says, "Happy Birthday Jesus," while another display is in the shape of a cross. I've seen yard signs and bumper stickers which say, "Jesus is the Reason for the Season." Even the incidental lecture to a child that Christmas is about Jesus' birth sure doesn't seem to hold up the importance of Jesus' Incarnation (meaning "*taking on human flesh*"). I don't necessarily think that these attempts are wrong; I just think that as Christians we could do much better.

Before I can explain, we will need a quick lesson in "Christmas" liturgics.

- There is a **twelve-day season of "Christmas"** which begins on December 25 and ends on January 5. Thus it would be most appropriate to refer to these twelve days as "holy days," not holidays. In Article XXIV of

the Apology {*defense of the Augsburg Confession*} it states, "At the outset we must again make the preliminary statement that we do not abolish the Mass, but religiously maintain and defend it. For among us masses are celebrated every Lord's Day and on the other festivals, in which the Sacrament is offered to those who wish to use it, after they have been examined and absolved. And the usual public ceremonies are observed, the series of lessons, of prayers, vestments, and other like things."

- The proper designation for the first day in the season, **December 25, is "The Nativity of our Lord."** Nativity comes from the Latin and means "birth." You may have a Nativity scene (or *creche*, meaning "crib" or "manger" in French) in your home, which depicts the place of Christ's birth.
- Within the Nativity of our Lord, the Church provides a wealth of Divine Services in order to sanctify the holy day. The Church's great holy days (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost) all include **three services of Holy Communion or the Mass**. I don't usually make a practice of referring to the service of Holy Communion as the Mass. However, the term "Mass" is a perfectly fine word to refer to the Service of Holy Communion. The term "Mass" is used in our Lutheran Confessions and within the Western Church for centuries.
- The three services within the Nativity of our Lord are called, "**Christ's Mass at Midnight**," "**Christ's Mass of the Aurora**" ("Aurora" meaning "*sunrise*"), and "**Christ's Mass Day**," (with "day" short for "at day-time"). In addition to these three masses, high holy days are often anticipated by celebrating their eve day. The "adorable birthday" of Christ is no exception, having its own beautiful "**Vigil of the Nativity**" on December 24 (also called, "**Christ's Mass Eve**"). If you have a book of Luther's sermons, you will notice three sermons: "Christmas Day," "Second Christmas Day," and "Third Christmas Day." In *The Lutheran Hymnal* (1941), there are three sets of propers on page

55-56 for “Christmas Night,” “Christmas Day” and “Second Christmas Day.” In *Lutheran Worship*, there are also three services listed on pages 14-17. The new LC-MS hymnal, *Lutheran Service Book*, includes propers for all four services of the eve and day (p. x).

Now I realize that not all congregations may be able, or even find it appropriate for their congregation, to celebrate four services of the Lord’s Supper in two days. Some congregation are small; some are larger. Situations vary; even the individual pastor may only have so much “voice,” before he wilts. The rubrics I cite are not divine requirements; they are only churchly guidelines. Nevertheless, most of our congregations’ present practices are some kind of approximation of the services I describe.

This history of “Christmas” liturgical observations can help us to speak clearly and then act in accordance with our belief in the importance of our Lord’s incarnation. It seems to me that whenever we try to stick Christ into our present practice, He appears to be an out-of-place addition. I’m not trying to say that we should banish all secular observances. I enjoy singing “Jingle Bells,” as well as anyone. Let’s do it. However, I don’t want to sing an extra stanza tacked on with the words, “Christ is Born,” used instead of “Jingle Bells.” It just doesn’t do it justice. We may decorate our house with lights, without needing to spell out John 3:16.

The birth of Jesus Christ in the flesh is already at the heart of our Christian observance. Instead of using the word, “Christmas,” let us use the original words, “Christ’s Mass,” to refer to Divine Service on December 25. While the Protestants desire to keep Christ in Christmas, let us desire to keep the Mass in Christ’s Mass. At the heart and center of the holy day observance is attendance at the congregation’s Divine Services. And the high point of the Word at those Divine Services directs us to the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

On the Nativity of our Lord, at the service called Christ’s Mass Day, the appointed Holy Gospel is from St. John, chapter one. The words ring out with clarity,

“The Word was made flesh” (v.14). It is from the Latin rendering of those words, *ET VERUM CARO FACTUS EST*, that we get the word, “Incarnation.” Jesus was incarnated, enfleshed. The Son of God, the eternal Word, entered our time and took on human flesh being born of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Though it is Jesus’ birthday, it is so much more than candles and cake. Jesus took on our body and blood so that He could be our Mediator and Redeemer. Without human flesh, the Christ could not have died to “redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works” (Titus 2:11-14, Epistle for Christ’s Mass at Midnight). “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2:14).

At the heart and center of the holy day observance is attendance at the congregation’s Divine Services. And the high point of the Word at those Divine Services directs us to the reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Friend: “John, are you ready for Christmas?”

John: “Yes, I can’t wait to receive Christ’s Body and Blood for the forgiveness of sins on December 25. That is one of the high points of my year.”

Friend: “What?”

John: “I thought you were asking about Christ’s Mass, the service of Lord’s Supper on December 25. That’s where the word, ‘Christmas,’ comes from—“Christ’s Mass.” It’s not really Christ’s Mass without hearing the Word of God and receiving Jesus’ Body and Blood.”

Friend: “I never really thought about it that way. I was just thinking of turkey and presents.”

John: “Oh yeah, my family gets together in the afternoon to eat and exchange gifts, but Christ’s Mass is where I receive the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh to take away my sins.”

Friend: “Thanks, I never knew that. Have a merry Christmas—er, I mean—Christ’s Mass.”

A “Miracle on 34th Street” or at Bethlehem?

Rev. C. D. Hudson
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We are now well into another Christmas season and so once again we see and hear many of the colors and sounds that mark this time of year. There are the colored lights and other traditional things which decorate many homes and business. There is the “seasonal” music, some of which is new and some as old as most of us can remember, songs such as “Here comes Santa Claus, here comes Santa Claus...” And so it is on television and in the theater as well. There are movies scheduled for showing for the first time this month, and there are those that have become a cultural tradition, as they have been shown year after year, as long as some of us can remember. A *Christmas Carol*, in its original version as well as updated versions, has and will be shown yet again, and hearts will be moved as multitudes watch Jimmy Stewart figure out, after many challenges, the “true meaning” of Christmas.

And yet, amidst all the cultural traditions that seems to be repeated year after year, the one question that is not addressed this time of year is: What is the “true meaning” of Christmas? I have already had an opportunity to watch several seasonal movies on television and in essence all of them assured me, in one form or another, that Christmas is about “family and friends.” It’s also about learning to be friendly and kind, being willing to forgive, and thinking of, and thereby providing for, the needs of others.

As children of the only true God, the Holy Trinity, we must confess that these concerns are to be a part of the sanctified life into which we have been baptized. But are they really why the celebration of Christmas was started? Is the true reason for Christmas really about that which is presented to

us in the movie a “Miracle on 34th Street” (an act of human kindness), or another event which is hardly ever mentioned in the movies this time of year—a birth which came to pass long ago in a stable in a little known and at that time largely insignificant village called Bethlehem?

I suggest that God the Holy Ghost has revealed the fact that a miracle that is far greater and without a doubt far more important than the one which is depicted as happening in a movie on 34th Street.

As “historic” Lutherans, and thus biblical Christians, we have been given the ability to recognize, by divine grace at work in our life, that the cause of the special joy in our life, most especially this time of year, is definitely not the same as that which gives joy to those who are still spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. Yes, they see the same colored lights, they hear the same music, and they watch the same movies as you, but what they see, hear, and understand is profoundly different from that which you do. Those who remain spiritually unregenerate, who have not yet received the forgiveness of their sins, and thus know not the one true and eternal God, are indeed joyful this time of year, but for a far different reason. For them, this is the Christmas season, a time that is set aside for—as the movies keep reaffirming to them—“family and friends.” To a very large degree, it is a time to demonstrate one’s love and forgiveness toward others, and they are encouraged to do this by our culture and the sinful human nature, and by the number and cost of the gifts, both given and received.

As one who believes, teaches and confesses the ancient, Catholic and Apostolic faith, you also see the colored lights, hear the music, and perhaps

watch some of the movies, and yet your heart is filled with joy for a far different reason! What you celebrate and commemorate this time of year is a mystery, a truly great mystery that has come to pass in space and time and in a very real way in your own life as well. You are among those who have been so blessed by the one true God, the Holy Trinity, to be able to celebrate not Christmas, but Christ's Mass. That which quickens your heart and lightens your soul, and marks your life every day—but most especially this time of year—is that miracle that came to pass in Bethlehem so long ago, the birth of an infant male child to a virgin named Mary and a step-father named Joseph, a child that was given the name "Jesus."

The saints of every passing generation of sin-afflicted mankind have

struggled to comprehend that miraculous event which truly came to pass in Bethlehem on that momentous day long ago. This is the mystery and the true miracle of Christ-Mass, for it was established, by Christians, as an annual commemoration and celebration of the birth of a male child, an event that had been prophesied repeatedly generations before, a child who would redeem people from the terrible consequences of sin which marks every human beings life since the fall. What this holy season was intended to mark and celebrate is the fact that the Redeemer has come! It was the arrival of the second Adam, come to undo that which the first Adam had done.

And so this time of year, with special joy, and with just cause, we join our hearts and voices and sing the praises of this mystery enacted for our salvation, and revealed to us only by the divine grace of the most holy and divine Trinity. I submit that the true and proper focus of this holy season is not the giving of gifts, but the receiving of the greatest gift any sinful human being shall ever receive: the grace, the divine and saving grace of the Holy Trin-

ity, freely given to each one of us through *the Word preached in its truth, and the Sacraments distributed according to the institution of the Christ*. In essence, what we commemorate and celebrate is God not only coming to us, but becoming one of us!

But, what of this Christ Child we see represented on the seasonal cards, hear about in some of the music and perhaps, just perhaps, see in a manger scene—if we can manage to find one on public display anymore? If we want to understand what this festival is truly about, there is where we must turn.

It is not to the colorful tree, but the tree should direct us to Him; it's not the music in itself, but to the Christ Child that the music should direct our attention; and it's not to the presents, no matter the cost or number, but of

the Christ Child Himself, who is the supreme gift given to us, by God the Holy Trinity. I suggest that the more we focus upon the Christ Child, the more meaningful the Christ-Mass season will become, and of necessity the more humble and thankful we will become in turn.

Our struggle to understand what has come to pass is not new, for faithful members of the Bride of the Christ have wrestled with this divine truth divinely revealed for several millennia. St. John, the bishop of Damascus in the early 700's, wrote the following in reference to why the Nativity came to pass (after explaining the fall into sin and corruption): *For by the good pleasure of God the Father the only-begotten Son and Word of God and God, who is in the bosom of God the Father, consubstantial with the Father and with the Holy Ghost, existing before the ages, without beginning, who was in the beginning and was with God the Father and was God, He, being in the form of God, bowed down the heavens and descended—that is, without lowering it, He brought down His exulted sublimity and condescended to His servants with an ineffable and incomprehensible condescension, for such is the meaning of the*

In His incomprehensible love for mankind, God became one of mankind. This was of necessity, for as Gregory, the bishop of Nazianzus, put it: "the unassumed is the unhealed, it is that which is united to the Godhead that is saved" (ep.101).

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the worship and divine service of the Gospel, is to receive from God gifts; on the contrary, the worship of the Law, is to offer and present our gifts to God. We can, however, offer nothing to God, unless first we have been reconciled and born again." (VI:188) The fallen world imagines it will offer something to God, so as to gain something from God in return. The Church hears the voice of the Shepherd through the preaching of the Word and receives His Holy Sacraments, and the Holy Spirit works through the Word to create and sustain faith.

Incarnation and Ecclesia: St. John wrote: "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." (John 1:12-13) Christ Jesus is the only begotten Son of God, but those who are of the Church, who are 'called out' from the nations, are adopted as sons of God. "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." (Gal. 3:26-27) Our Baptism joins us to Christ: "Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been used together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin." (Rom. 6:3-6)

In the Gospel lection for the Third Sunday in Advent, Jesus said to the disciples of St. John the Baptist: "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me." (Matt. 11:4-6)

Sadly, there are many who were, and are, offended by Christ and His Gospel. Certainly in His time of humiliation, there were many who took offense. Thus when Jesus preached at Nazareth, we read in Matthew 13: "... they became astonished, and said, 'Where did this

Congregations served by Pastors of the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA)

Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church

4H Building
Ray County Fairgrounds
Richmond, Missouri 64085
Pastor C. D. Hudson
Phone: (660) 259-2728
Sunday: Divine Service 9:30 a.m.; Christian Ed. 10:45 a.m.

Saint Boniface Evangelical Lutheran Church

meeting at:
104 N. 3rd Street
Niles, Michigan
Pastor John Rutowicz
Phone: (269) 683-5169
Sunday: Bible Study 9:30 a.m.; Divine Service 10:45 a.m.

Saint Laurence Evangelical Lutheran Church

meeting at:
16079 Via Harriet
San Lorenzo, California 94580-1919
Pastor Michael Totten, Ph.D.
Phone: (510) 481-7018
Sunday: Bible Study 9:00 a.m.; Divine Service 10:15 a.m.

Saint Paul Lutheran Church, UAC

323 First Avenue SW
P.O. Box 535 (mailing address)
Taylorsville, North Carolina 28681
Pastor Donald R. Hunter
Phone: (828) 632-2695
Sunday: Sunday School 9:45 a.m.; Divine Service 11 a.m.

Salem Lutheran Church

718 HCR 3424 E
Malone, Texas 76660
Pastor James D. Heiser
Phone: (254) 533-2330
Sunday: Sunday School 9:30 a.m.; Divine Service 10:30 a.m.

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Jesus Christ and Santa Claus

Rev. Donald R. Hunter
Pastor, Saint Paul Lutheran Church
Taylorsville, NC

This past week while driving a school bus for one of the local grade schools here in our area, a first grade student asked me, “Rev. Hunter, do you believe in Santa Claus?” I asked him, “What do you mean?” His response was, “You know, do you believe Santa Claus is real?” I replied, “No, I don’t believe he’s real! I believe in real people, like Jesus Christ.” I went on to explain why by saying, “as Christians, we don’t place the importance of Christmas on Santa Claus, but on the person, Jesus Christ.” I then ask him, “Do you believe Jesus Christ is real?” “Sure,” he said, “Everybody does! But in our Church we don’t just talk about Jesus, we talk also about Santa Claus because he teaches us to give presents to people.”

It is truly sad enough that our culture has totally de-emphasized the Christmas Season to the point of merely greeting one another with a “Happy Holidays” or “Merry Christmas, Ho! Ho! Ho!,” or purchasing that perfect present for that significant other person in your life, to making sure you watch the movie *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* for the up-teenth time, just to make your Christmas celebration complete. Of course we should expect this sort of de-emphasizing from the world around us, for God very plainly tells us through St Paul in the words, “*But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Cor. 2:14). With the world’s rejection of Jesus Christ’s birth, life and resurrection, we should expect it! But what’s really tough to deal with is all the flagrantly false speaking and teaching done in the name of Jesus Christ.

How sad it is when those who identify themselves as a part of Christendom, and place Santa

Claus and Jesus Christ on the same plateau in receiving honor and glory or, worse yet, teaching a little one (like that first grade student) that Santa Claus is the one who inspires us to love one another and the giving of gifts at Christmas.

Yes, I suppose, a person could put the best construction on this school bus event, as we are encouraged to do in the Small Catechism, where Martin Luther emphasizes the meaning of the Eighth Commandment, “*Thou shall not bear false*

Oh sure, Jesus, God, and Christmas were talked about, but the main emphasis was never on the merit and suffering of Christ as the promised Messiah.

witness against thy neighbor”: “*We should so fear and love God as not deceitfully to belie, betray, slander, nor raise injurious reports against our neighbor, but apologize for him, speak well of him, and put the most charitable construction on all his actions*”. We could just say this child wasn’t paying attention to what the minister of the church he attended was teaching. However, knowing the background of this first grade student and the church he attends, such as one of the local 115 Reformed denominations in a 11 by 17 miles area (the size of our county), a person who knows anything about different beliefs, knows immediately that the main emphasis on the person of Jesus Christ is not stressed any more deeply than, yes, Jesus was God’s Son, that Jesus was born of a virgin, that He died for the sins of those who believe in Him, and that a person must make a personal decision to ask Jesus to come into your heart before he can receive God’s love and forgiveness. In other words, in the majority of Reformed theology, the person and the nature of Jesus Christ is rarely emphasized, if ever.

Several years ago, I remember asking a man who was studying to become a minister in a

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God With Us: 1st Century Incarnation And 21st Century Ministry

Rev. Jeffrey A. Ahonen
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It is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe faithfully the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is, that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man.

—Athanasian Creed

That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted.

—Augsburg Confession V

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man"? Simply add the appropriate punctuation mark to the end of this quotation from the Nicene Creed, and we have a great question for the category of "Biblical Truth" in a Trivial Pursuit game.

Yet the question of the incarnation of the Son of God is far from trivial. It is a fundamental teaching of the faith. As the Athanasian Creed teaches, it is "necessary to everlasting salvation" to believe and confess correctly the doctrine of the Incarnation. "For this is the right faith," and the only faith that leads to eternal salvation.

How we acquire this faith is another fundamental question of Christian doctrine. We find a clear and succinct statement of the answer in Article V of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession: "That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted." Through the Word rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered, the Holy Spirit creates and sustains the right faith. To achieve this, God has created and sustained the Office of the Holy Ministry for His Holy People, the Church.

By linking the Athanasian Creed and the Augsburg Confession in this way, we see the clear

connection between Christ's Incarnation in the 1st Century AD and His continuing ministry in this 21st Century. The very purpose of the Incarnation is for Christ to undertake His ministry of salvation, both then and now. The Eternal Word of God became flesh (St. John 1:1-14) in the days of Caesar Augustus (St. Luke 2:1-7) for us men of every generation and for our salvation in every era. He who remains eternally God and eternally man united in one person (Formula of Concord, VIII) carries out His ministry through a man whom He Himself calls and ordains and gives authority to baptize and absolve and feed His disciples (St. Matthew 28:18-20).

He who was born of the Virgin Mary willingly suffered even crucifixion under the reign of Pontius Pilate (St. Mark 15:1-15) so that men today might be born again of water and the Spirit and enter the kingdom of God (St. John 3:1-8) through the holy washing that He gives by the hand of His disciples (St. John 13:1-15). The Incarnate Son of God has reconciled us to the Father through His death for our sins, and He who rose on the third day has given to men His ministry of reconciliation so that He Himself might make His plea to sinners of our day, "Be reconciled to God!" (2 Corinthians 5:18-20). He Who gave His flesh and poured out His blood for the life of the world in that day (St. John 6:48-58) now administers through His called and ordained servants in our day that same flesh and blood, under the bread and wine, for us Christians to eat and drink and obtain forgiveness of sins and life and salvation (Small Catechism, The Sacrament of the Altar).

Because of this connection, the doctrine of the Incarnation is essential to the doctrine of the ministry, and vice versa. What the Scriptures reveal to us about the Incarnation of Christ flows out into pastoral practice of the called ministers of Christ. Similarly, what the Bible teaches about the Office of the Holy Ministry informs us further about the Holy Office of Christ. Accordingly, these are far from trivial matters.

Therefore, all the more attention ought to be paid

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NEW MISSION IN BULL SHOALS, ARKANSAS—Pastor Stefanski and the members of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (Harrison, AR) have started a new mission in Bull Shoals. The first Divine Service was on December 3rd.



COLLOQUY BOARD MEETING AT SALEM—On November 17th and 18th, Dr. Kent Heimigner (Charity-Burleson), Bp. Heiser and Pr. C.D. Hudson (Christ-Richmond, MO) met with Mr. David Noe of Plano to consider Mr. Noe's application for service in the ordained diaconate of The Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America. Following the meeting, the members of the board were pleased with Mr. Noe's abilities as a teacher, and his knowledge of Christian doctrine and Church history. At present, the board members are evaluating areas where Mr. Noe still needs further instruction before granting him "Candidate" status (in which he would be eligible for call and ordination). Please continue to keep the diocese and Mr. Noe in your prayers.

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Reformed denomination if he knew why the Incarnation of Jesus was so vital to understanding not only the genuine meaning of Christmas, but about mankind's salvation? Being in his 3rd year of studies, he was not able to give an answer, but only sat there with a puzzled look on his face. I broke the question down into another question, and asked if he knew why Jesus had to be born of a virgin. Again there was a blank look on his face. I felt sad for him, but then I remembered how being raised as a preacher's kid in a Reformed parsonage, I was never catechized regarding the teaching about why the Incarnation of Jesus was so vital to understanding the genuine meaning of Christmas; nor why Jesus Christ needed to be born of a virgin, or about the two natures of Jesus Christ, or about God revealing Himself in the flesh of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ.

Oh sure, Jesus, God, and Christmas were talked about, but the main emphasis was never on the merit and suffering of Christ as the promised Messiah. The emphasis was always placed on how I needed to turn my life around and live for Jesus; I needed to get saved and get sanctified; I needed to do this, and stop that, before God would ever consider me as one who was worthy to love. Years later, I've come to the conclusion, one could almost have believed I was raised in the Roman Catholic faith, and needed to buy an indulgence or two for my salvation!

Today, being Lutheran, where Christ is not just sung and talked about occasionally, but is the very Cornerstone of the One Holy Church Catholic, Christmas has especially become a very blessed time for me, as it must be for all followers of Christ. For Christmas is a special time to remember how we have been blessed with not having to search for the meaning of this joyous season any further than to recall what we believe, teach, and confess according to the Small Catechism regarding the person and the natures of Jesus Christ.

Stop and recall your catechetical days and

how you learned that Jesus is true God, begotten of the Father from eternity. That means Christ born in a manger is true God (**Rom. 9:5**), just as the Father is God (**John 5:23, John 20:28, John 8:58, Matt. 16:16**). Recall how Jesus is the Son of God—no, just not as a good or great man who has been received or adopted as God's Son, but He is in His very nature the Son of God, begotten by His Father (**John 3:16**) from all eternity (**John 1:1, John 17:5**). Recall how you learned and how we confess in the Nicene Creed each Sunday that Jesus is God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father (**John 10:30**). The Holy Scriptures show this by ascribing to Him divine names, attributes, power, honor, and works. In fact, do you remember at Jesus' Baptism and His Transfiguration when the Father spoke from heaven saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (**Matt. 3:17, Matt. 17:5**). We also learned that Jesus' divine nature is proved by His teaching, His miracles, His holy life, and especially by His resurrection from the dead (**Luther's Small Catechism, edited by Joseph Stump [1910] pg. 85**).

Yes, Christmas is about giving, but not without Jesus Christ as the main emphasis. Keeping the real meaning of Christmas intact, we recall how Jesus is God's gift to the world, who comes to us as true man, born of the virgin Mary. That means Christ is in all respects a human being such as we are, except that He was without sin (**I Pet. 2:22**). We remember that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Ghost, and thus had God alone for His Father (**Luke 1:35**), but He was born of the Virgin Mary (**Luke 2:7**), with a human body (**Heb. 2:14**) and soul (**Matt. 26:38**). He grew, increased in wisdom and stature (**Luke 2:52**), and reached the age of

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term condescension. And He, while being perfect God, became perfect man and accomplished the newest of all new things, the only new thing under the sun, by which the infinite power of God was clearly shown. For what is greater than for God to become man? So, without suffering change, the Word was made flesh of the Holy Ghost..." This is the truth and the miracle that the songs of this holy day season should celebrate and point all listeners to: that He who created all things became as one of His own creation, while yet remaining what He has forever been, and shall forever remain—fully God!

In His incomprehensible love for mankind, God became one of mankind. This was of necessity, for as Gregory, the bishop of Nazianzus, put

it: "the unassumed is the unhealed, it is that which is united to the Godhead that is saved" (ep.101).

Atticus, the bishop of Constantinople (A.D. 406–425) declared: Today Christ the Lord has underdone the generation due to love of mankind, for in respect of the generation of the divine dignity he preexisted.

He continued: *The Word in his love for mankind is emptied, while remaining unemptied in his nature, for 'he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant.' The one without flesh takes on flesh for your sake, for 'the Word became flesh'. The one who does not submit to touching because of the incorporeal character of his nature is touched, the one without beginning submits to a bodily beginning, the perfect one increases, the changeless one progresses, the rich one is in an inn, the one who encircles the sky with clouds is wrapped in swaddling cloths, the king is placed in a manger.*

This is BOTH the heart and essence, the truth of this "holy day" season, God become Man, and that for our salvation. The Christ Child, Jesus of Nazareth, was God, and remained God, even after He underwent the Nativity.

It is not about God "in man," but God "as Man"! It's about the entrance into space and time of a Man who while remaining fully God, came into the world He Himself had created to atone for the sins which marked the life of every one who had or shall live in this world.

What we struggle to understand, and rightly so, is a mystery divinely enacted, divinely revealed, and by the gift of divine grace, recognized, but not truly "understood" for there is no accurate analogy for what came to pass in the Incarnation which resulted in the Nativity. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria in the theologically tumultuous 4th century, observed the following about the challenge of the Jews, asking a sign of Jesus: "why do you, as a man, make your self equal to God?" Athanasius contended what they should have been asking was:

"Why have you, being God, become Man?" Glory be to God the Holy Trinity, that same God has revealed the proper answer to that question, to each one of us.

Dear saints, the basis and foundation of this holy day season is not about "family and friends," nor the colored lights and bright wrapping paper. It is not about the number of gifts purchased or received, nor the cost. It's not about movies old and new! It is about the birth of a male child in a place named Bethlehem about two thousand years ago! It is not about God "in man," but God "as Man"! It's about the entrance into space and time of a Man who while remaining fully God, came into the world He Himself had created to atone for the sins which marked the life of every one who had or shall live in this world. *Born of an earthly mother.*

I urge you this holy day season to not let the Christ be removed from you heart and mind by the increasingly not anti-Christian but anti-biblical Christian culture in which we are now living. That which I saw recently (already) this season speaks volumes of what those who are still the children of this passing world hold to even during these festival days, "happy x-mas". For them, this is a season which has no place for the Christ. The joy that marks the

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life of the saints every day, but most especially during this holy day season (both Advent and Christ-Mass) is from the unchanging truth divinely revealed by the Holy Trinity in His own infallible word, the Bible. The question: *what does this mean?* should be repeated often, especially this time of year! In regard to the Nativity this question has been wrestled with by the faithful almost continuously since the day it came to pass, not to deny it, but to try and understand it. Again St. Athanasius speaks to us in what is one of the most important and concise explanations of the Incarnation and Nativity, his letter to Epictetus, the bishop of Corinth: *And this took place, not by a fiction, as some have thought, God forbid! But the Savior having really and in truth become man, salvation was affected for the whole of man. ... But indeed our salvation is no imagination; nor is it the body only, but the whole man, soul and body in truth, that has attained to salvation in the Word Himself.*

Leo the Great, the bishop of Rome (died A.D. 461) another determined defender of the Nicene faith and yet another voice of the ancient, Catholic and Apostolic faith, which we have subscribe to, preached these most appropriate words on the festival of the Nativity of the Christ: *On all days and at all times, dearly beloved, does the birth of our Lord and Savior from the Virgin-mother occur to the thought of the faithful, who meditate on divine things, that the mind may be aroused to the acknowledgment of its Maker, and whether it be occupied in the groans of supplications, or in the shouting of praise, or in the offering of sacrifice, may employ its spiritual insight on nothing more frequently and more trustingly than on the fact that God the Son of God, begotten of the co-eternal Father, was also born by a human birth. But this Nativity which is to be adored in heaven and on earth is suggested to us by no day more than this when, with the early light still shedding its rays on nature, there is born in upon our senses the brightness of this wondrous mystery. For the angel Gabriel's converse with the astonished Mary and her conception by the Holy Ghost as wondrously promised as believed, seem to recur not only to the memory by to the very eyes. For today the Maker of the*

world was born of a Virgin's womb, and He, who made all natures, became Son of her, whom He created. Today the Word of God appeared clothed in flesh, and that which had never been visible to human eyes began to be tangible to our hands as well. Today the shepherds learned from the angels' voice that the Savior was born in the substance of our flesh and soul; and today the form of the Gospel message was prearranged by the leaders of the Lord's flocks, so that we too may say with the army of the heavenly host: "Glory in the highest to God, and on earth peace to men of good will." (Sermon On the Feast of the Nativity, VI).

As you sing the festival hymns this year, do so with a joy and conviction born out of the divine truth divinely revealed to you, that the Messiah has come, and that He came for you. The eternally existing, only-begotten Son of God was born, so that He could grow to Manhood, and after not sinning once, in thought, word and deed, suffer and die on a cross and be raised again, for your salvation, to atone for all of your sins! He who was born in Bethlehem in a stable and laid in a manger truly is that which the faithful Irenaeus declared Him to be: Salvation, Savior and Saving Act.

Where then did a true miracle come to pass, on "34th Street," or in stable at Bethlehem?



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Hanukkah and the Celebration of God's Grace

Dr. Michael Totten
Pastor, St. Laurence Lutheran Church
San Lorenzo, California

You don't need a calendar to know what season it is when you enter a Lutheran church in December. A wreath of purple or blue candles, and a prayer before the Scripture readings which begins "Stir up, O Lord," immediately identify the occasion as Advent—except for today, the third Sunday of the season. The lack of that distinctive Advent introduction in today's prayer, coupled with the lighting of a rose-colored candle in the Advent wreath, herald a slight departure from the themes which otherwise dominate this season. So also in today's sermon, we consider neither John the Baptist's call to repentance, nor our modern response, nor the preparations for Christ's first or second coming, but ... Hanukkah!

You're hardly alone if you're thinking that this Jewish festival period which began yesterday has little relevance for Christians. Our former church body has a pastor on its national board of directors who is a convert from Orthodox Judaism. In a radio interview several years ago, after some light-hearted comments about playing with *dredls* and eating chocolate candy wrapped up like coins, even he could find no basis for including this in the Christian calendar. It's perfectly understandable that most Christians today should agree with him. We're tired of hearing that Christmas (meaning the birth of Christ, not merely the festival of the reindeer) is controversial, while every other religion's ceremonies are increasingly promoted: Ramadan (despite the fact that we are at war with some of its observers), Kwanza (a celebration invented in recent years by an avowed communist for persons of African descent), Diwali (a Hindu festival which even some Indian immigrants ignore).

Hanukkah might appear to belong in the latter group, except for one little fact: Jesus celebrated it. Specifically in John 10, when Jesus delivered the "I am the good shepherd" speech at the temple in Jerusalem, we are told that the occasion was the Feast of the Dedication, and that it was winter. Hanukkah (the Hebrew term for "dedication") is thus like Passover, a festival which many of God's people throughout the centuries observed in thanksgiving for his gracious assistance dur-

ing a crisis, which like any other festival (including even Christmas, which is a rather late addition to Christian observance) is in no way mandatory for us. We observe such festivals because we find them to be helpful reminders of the truths of our faith, not to mention the fact that they are also just plain fun.

Hanukkah's reputation among Protestant Christians hasn't been helped by the fact that its full description comes from those Old Testament books called deuterocanonical or apocryphal, which Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox accept, Jews and most Protestants reject, and Lutherans have never quite made up their minds about. The rejection of these books by the Jews explains why Hanukkah has historically been a rather superficial observance for them, a kind of 'Hebrew Halloween,' and only very recently has it been expanded into what some regard as a Christmas for those who don't believe in Christ.

My goal is certainly not to minimize Christmas, much less to get anyone to place a menorah in their living room window. Rather, I see this as an opportunity for yet another consideration of how God once showered his gifts upon his ancient people, which is part of the pattern for his grace and mercy toward us today, and how God's ancient people responded in faith and perseverance to his gifts, which foreshadows how we today react to the advent of his Son, both 2,000 years ago and in the age to come.

"Under the Lord's guidance, Judas Maccabeus and his followers recovered the temple and the city. They tore down the altars erected by the heathen in the public square, as well as the sacred precincts. They purified the sanctuary and made another altar; they struck fire with flint and offered sacrifices for the first time in two years; they offered incense, lighted lamps, and set out the bread of the Presence. When they had done this, they fell prostrate and implored the Lord that he would never again allow them to fall into such disasters, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by him with clemency, and not be handed over to blasphemous and

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manhood. He suffered all our human wants (**Matt. 4:2. John 4:6,7**), such as hunger, thirst, weariness, and pain. He was moved by human emotions (**Luke 10:21. Matt. 26:38**) such as joy, sorrow, and indignation. He wept (**John 11:35**), prayed (**Matt. 26:39**), suffered and died (**I Pet. 2:23, 24**). The importance of all these facts is that Jesus could not have done these things if He had not been true man. Christ is therefore both true God and true man in one Person (**Rom. 1:3, 4, John 1:14**). Consequently He is the God-Man, and, for a most vital reason. The truth is, it was absolutely necessary that Jesus Christ, the Redeemer should be both God and man (**I Tim. 1:15**), for if He had not been God, but only man, He could not have paid a sufficient ransom for our deliverance from sin, nor have acquired any merit to bestow upon us. On the other hand, if Christ had not become man, but remained God only, He could not have put Himself in our place under the Law, nor have suffered and died in our stead. But as the God-Man, Christ was able to accomplish, and did perfectly accomplish, our redemption from sin, death and the power of the devil (**Rom. 3:24**). (**Luther's Small Catechism, Stump ed. [1910] pg. 86**).

So, what is the true meaning of Christmas? It is all about our salvation as a gift from God, wrapped up for us in the flesh of God the Father's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who, as true God and true Man, came for our salvation. Hence, the words spoken by the angel to the frightened shepherds as they watched their sheep by night, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this *will be* the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!" (**Luke 2:10-14**). In this Holy Gospel proclamation are words that give us an ever-present and lasting hope of knowing that Jesus

was born to overcome our sin, our death, and to destroy the power of the devil, once and for all. Only this Holy Gospel proclamation can change a selfish heart of mankind into one who is giving (**Romans 1:16-17**)!

It is because of this powerful Gospel, this good news of Jesus Christ, that every time one of the kids on the bus starts up one of their diddies about Santa Claus, or Rudolph, for Frosty, I always follow up with one of the blessed Christmas hymns that proclaim the Christ; all in hope, that if only one child would hear and believe that blessed Gospel announcement, it would be all worth it!

May the Christmas Season be a joyful time for each of you this year as you remember your days of catechetical instruction as a youth, or as an adult, and thank God that your not celebrating just a myth, but a genuine fact: the birth of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

***Confessional Lutheran Mission
Fund Prepares to Assist
Congregations***

Salem Lutheran Church (Malone) began its Confessional Lutheran Mission Fund as part of the congregation's 120th anniversary celebrations. The Initial goal of \$5,000 by July 1st was met and surpassed, and the congregation set a new target of \$10,000 for the end of 2006. Nearly \$9,200 has been raised to date, and the Mission Board is beginning to purchase items which we be needed by mission congregations. The intention is to prepare assistance packages which will include hymnals, altar books, communion ware and other items to suit the needs of particular mission congregations.

Those individuals or congregations which wish to contribute to the Mission Fund may send donations to:

Salem Lutheran Church
718 HCR 3424 E
Malone, TX 76660

Checks should be made payable to Salem.

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barbarous nations. The sanctuary was purified on the twenty-fifth of Kislev, the same day of the same month as that on which the foreigners had profaned it. They celebrated for eight days with rejoicing like the Feast of Tabernacles, remembering how not long before they had observed that feast while living like wild animals in the mountains and caves. Carrying wreathed wands, flowering branches, and palm fronds, they chanted hymns to the One who had given success to the purification of his own holy place. A decree was passed by the public assembly that every year the entire Jewish nation should keep these days holy." (2 Macc. 10:1-8)

At the conclusion of the Protestant version of the Old Testament, the Jewish people were conquered by the Babylonians, their temple was destroyed, and many people were carried into exile. Then the Babylonians were themselves conquered by the Persians, who allowed the Jews to return and rebuild the temple. The so-called apocryphal books, such as 2 Maccabees, provide the further account of how Alexander the Great conquered the Persians, how four of his generals, as predicted by the prophet Daniel, set up four different Greek empires, and how one of these based in Syria came to oppress Israel about two centuries before Christ. One particular king, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (he gave himself the latter name because he thought of himself as a divine epiphany), decided that the Jews should be forced to worship him and the other pagan Greek gods. He converted the temple in Jerusalem into a shrine for Zeus, and had pigs slaughtered on its altar. Some Jews were tortured or executed when they refused to eat the sacrificed pork. So just as God had previously raised up Moses against a slave-driving Pharaoh, and Elijah against the murderous Ahab and Jezebel, he found a champion for Israel in one Judas Maccabeus, who led a successful revolt against Antiochus, which restored both the temple and the nation to Israel.

We note how this victory was credited as the Lord's work of redemption; Judas and his followers, as so many faithful before them, were but humble instruments of divine power. Whether it was stammering Moses before the Pharaoh, or little David facing Goliath, God always delivered his people from seemingly invincible foes by the appearance of weakness. Of course, his people have not always reacted to this with faith; just as the Israelites turned to the golden calf after the Exodus,

some of Judas Maccabeus' troops secretly carried pagan amulets as they went out to fight for the Lord. So today some of God's people panic at the first sign of trouble, having learned from our culture to expect a fast food version of religion, a "McChurch" full of clownish entertainment and gimmicky promotions, but not much meat. They're getting scared in our former denomination now that they only have 2.4 million members instead of 2.6 just a while back. The continuing Mideast war creates the same panic in our society; an illness or death, a family or career crisis will do the same for any individual. Has God's Spirit taken a vacation? Has he handed us over to blasphemous and barbarous nations? Temporarily he may well lead us through various deprivations, but that doesn't mean he has hidden his face. Those once living like wild animals in the mountains and caves were soon marching triumphantly into the temple; those once oppressed were soon waving palm branches and singing hymns.

Though weak and inconsistent, Judas and his followers nevertheless worked together with the Lord to accomplish these things. They did indeed wait upon the Lord, expecting his will to be revealed rather than imposing their own, and his power and method to be followed rather than their own devices, yet they also expected the Lord to use them as his vehicles rather than bypass them. They did indeed demand something fast and instant, but of themselves, not God; a fast repentance of their sins, an instant destruction of what contradicted and confused God's program of salvation. They prayed in order to get themselves to change rather than to change God, to be the instruments of a miracle as well as the recipients.

Our similar bravery in opposing evil, patience in receiving good, repentance of our sin against God and faith in God's defense of us, would be possible if all we had was Hanukkah. But of course, this was a mere prelude of a grander dedication for a longer lasting temple. God's people would later find the Roman Empire's political rule unpleasant, but this was nothing compared to the intolerable burden of Pharisaic legalism, and the universal fear of brief and meaningless life. So when Christ was born, we do not read, "He will save his people from the Romans," but rather, "from their sins," both the real kind of which the thief on the cross partook and the false kind of which Jesus himself was accused. He over-

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came not only the pagan structures of his day, but the very gates of hell; he restored no temple made with hands, but the bodies of men, ultimately including his very own. Now if the renewal of Jerusalem and its temple could so excite ancient Israel, what sort of reaction may we have to the renewal of the entire creation in Christ? What sort of clemency may we expect from the One who shared our sentence of death? What worship will we enjoy giving to the One who has purified everything from perishable foodstuffs to the imperishable and eternal Gospel? Something much greater than the 8 days of Hanukkah, or even the 12 days of Christmas: a Feast of Dedication lasting our entire lives, a constant celebration of the One who has given success to the purification of his own holy people.

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man get this wisdom, and these miraculous powers? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary, and His brothers, James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offense at Him." (v. 54–57)

The humility of the *Ecclesia Militans*—the Church Militant, the Church in this fallen world—suffers the jeers of the ungodly, who mock her worldly poverty, mock her reliance on a Word which the world considers to be 'antiquated' at best and 'dangerous' at worst; a world which mocks the Church's rite and her traditions. In this season, we witness that the world even attempts to steal the holy Feast of the Nativity and leave a changing—a bacchanalia of Mammon—in its place.

But the saints of God are still those who hear the voice of the Shepherd; Christ's Church consists of those who have been washed clean through water and the Word, elect sons of God who have received mercy through Baptism into Christ. Because of the Incarnation there is an Ecclesia: because the Word became flesh, there are those among men who have been called out by the Word, and they have become God's people, His baptized children. They are His saints, for the righteousness of Christ is credited to them, and they hear the voice of the Shepherd, as His servants proclaim His Gospel, and administer His Sacraments.

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to the one little word that fells many and causes them to fall away from the teaching of Christ and the confession of His Church: "He." The disregard for this little pronoun is seen in the pronouncement that makes it acceptable for women to be pastors in the Church, contrary to the doctrine of the Church Catholic that no one shall publicly teach in the Church or administer the Sacraments unless he be "a he." This doctrine is not a mere relic from a Christian past in which supposedly-unenlightened men, under the influence of a male-dominant language and culture, could never have conceived the idea of a "she" serving as a "female pastor." Rather, this doctrine is the clear Word of Christ, spoken to the Church through His Apostle Paul: "I do not permit a woman to teach" (1 Timothy 2:12). "She" is not permitted; only "he" is. Again, this is no trivial quibbling over little words, but is fundamental to the correct teaching on the doctrine of the ministry—and, consequently, the doctrine of the incarnation—and vice versa.

For He is the Son—not the daughter—whom the virgin was to conceive and bear (Isaiah 7:14), and he who stands in His stead is likewise a male. Immanuel—God with us—is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation (Colossians 1:15), and so His representative in the Church is the image of the one who was formed first, the man (1 Timothy 2:13). He is the Second Adam who was not deceived by the temptations of the devil (St. Matthew 4:1–11), and so He chooses not to be portrayed in His Church by the one who was deceived first—Eve (1 Timothy 2:14). He who has seen Christ has seen the Father (St. John 14:9)—not the mother—and so His minister is likewise a father—not a mother—who rules well over his household and his children (1 Timothy 3:4). He is the loving Husband to His Bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:25–32), and so His ordained servants do not manifest themselves as faithful wives, but as faithful husbands of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2 and 12, Titus 1:6). Through these depictions by His male ministers, pictures worth a thousand words accompany the faithful preaching and teaching of His Word about His glorious incarnation, for our salvation.

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from Heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man—and continues to dwell among us even today? The answer, of course, is "Jesus!"