

The Building- Blocks *of*

c h r i s t m a s

by Jim Fowler

Many young children receive wooden blocks at Christmas time. These blocks often have alphabetical letters, or numbers, or other forms etched or painted on them. They can be arranged to create words, stacked up like towers, or otherwise constructed in creative coordination.

Utilizing the illustration of wooden toy blocks, we can construct a pictorial representation of the essential Christian understanding of Christmas. Blocks with three letters of the alphabet will be stacked atop

each other to represent what we will call “the building-blocks of Christmas.”

Now, a stack of wooden blocks must necessarily begin with the bottom block that serves as a foundation for the others. Our stack of building-blocks will begin with the letter “H” to represent the “historical foundation of Christmas.”

Historical Foundation of Christmas

The Christmas message is not based on mere mythological fantasy. It does not commence with creative conjuring to construct a god of

one’s own making. Nor does it attempt to construct a hypothetical myth-story. The reality of Christianity is rooted in verifiable and documented history. Jewish, Roman and Greek historians, with no subjective biases favorable toward Christian thought, can be cited to document the historical events on which the Christian faith is founded.

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“The Lord will give you a sign:



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His flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord His God...." (Micah 5:2-5).

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The "historical foundation" of Christmas is sufficiently attested, and the veracity of the historical data is necessary and sufficient to disallow any skepticism that the Christian faith is founded merely on subjective speculation.

Let me suggest, however, that if this is the only block we have to play with, the "H" block of the "historical foundation of Christmas," then Christianity could become nothing more than a boring history lesson, repetitively recalling the details of Jesus' birth and life. Constructing nativity scenes of the baby Jesus in a manger, and demanding that they be allowed in public places, can mislead the world into thinking that Jesus has



remained in a neo-natal state for almost two millennia. Lighting a few candles and giving a few gifts while singing, "Happy Birthday, Jesus," can give the impression of a historical observance, not all that different than celebrating George Washington's birthday or the birthday of Martin Luther King. An annual call to "remember

Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call His name, Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14, NASB throughout).

"For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us; ...His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

"'But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.' ...And He will arise and shepherd



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This birth had cosmic and eternal significance that is difficult to portray in a nativity scene. The Christian faith has always explained the uniqueness of the historical event of Jesus' birth as that occasion when eternity entered time, when the infinite became finite, when the Son of God became a man.

Even within the gospels of Matthew and Luke, there are theological factors woven into the historical narrative.

- The child had been conceived within Mary *by the Holy Spirit of God*.
- He would be called *Immanuel*, "*God with us*."
- His name would be *Jesus*, "*Jehovah saves*," for He would save people from their sins.
- The angels referred to Him as the "*Savior, who is Christ the Lord*."
- The wise men and shepherds *worshipped Him as God*.

The divine and eternal significance of that baby who was born

in a manger in Bethlehem is present in the birth narratives.

The theological formulations concerning the birth of Jesus are more clearly articulated in the Gospel of John, when he begins with the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

Thirteen verses later John explains, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The birth of Jesus constituted the incarnation, the enfleshment of the Son of God in human form.

The apostle Paul gives additional theological explanation in his letter to the Philippian Christians: "Christ Jesus, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, being made in the *likeness of men*. And being found in appearance *as a man*, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8, emphasis mine).

By the inspiration of God's Spirit, Paul provides the "theologically formulated explanation" that the One who was born as a baby was the pre-existent Son of God who became a man in the person of Jesus Christ. The second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, took on human form as the God-man, the "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2:5).

Human attempts to fully explain the theological formulations of the Christmas event of the advent of the God-man are always inadequate. Theologians through the centuries have devised many incarnational theories and engaged in many Christological controversies, but the paradox of deity and humanity being joined in one Person is ultimately beyond human comprehension and explanation. Yet we must confess God's self-revelation by his Son as the essential core of Christian theology, nonetheless.

Bethlehem" and "keep Christ in Christmas" can soon be drowned out amidst the other calls to "Remember Pearl Harbor," and "keep the flag flying."

Christianity was never intended to be a historical society (like the "Daughters of the American Revolution"), to perpetuate the remembrance of the historical details of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. As Christians, we believe and appreciate the authentic and accurate historical foundation of the historic life of Jesus that provides objectivity to our faith, but we must proceed to build upon that historical foundation.

What really happened when Jesus was born? What was unique about that birth, apart from any other birth? What was the significance of that historical event?

Here is where we must add the second building-block of Christmas—a letter "T" stacked atop the historical foundation block. The letter "T" will represent the "theological formulation of Christmas."

Theological Formulation of Christmas

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What happened that night in Bethlehem was not just another typical birth of a Jewish baby boy. This birth had cosmic and eternal significance that is difficult to portray in a nativity scene.

Turning our attention back to our stack of blocks, we must explain again, that even when the "T" block of "theological formulation" is added atop the "H" block of "historical foundation," it can still result in a religious game that is but a monotonous realignment of wooden blocks.

The sad situation is that much of what is called "Christianity" today is like a bunch of "block-heads" playing with a couple of wooden blocks, thinking that the Christian faith is an objective belief-system of historical and theological factual data.

Oh, the childish games Christians play. If you believe like we believe, then you can join our "play-group," and we will let you "play blocks" with us. We will even instruct you in apologetics—how to defend the way we stack our blocks. We will also train you in evangelism—how to convince others to come and stack their blocks like we do. Meanwhile, the world suggests that we just go over into our corner (the one with pretty stained-glass windows) and play with our wooden blocks of "reli-

gion," while many of them play with the wooden block of "cultural ornamentation" during the Christmas season.

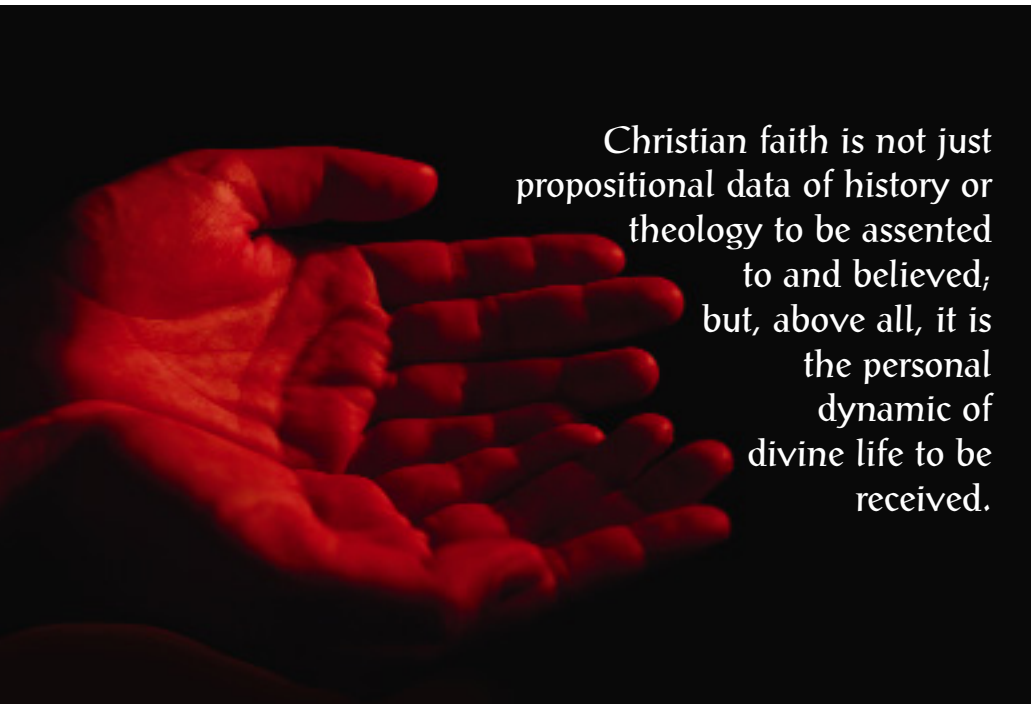
Christianity was never intended to be a historical society for the remembrance of historical details about the baby Jesus. Neither was Christianity ever intended to be a theological society gathered to endlessly formulate a doctrinal belief-system, and defend such as if it were of utmost importance.

The "H" block of "historical foundation of Christmas" represents the historical life of a child born in Bethlehem. The "T" block of "theological formulation of Christmas" illustrates that the life

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The entire Christmas story is intended to lead up to the divine life being birthed in human beings— in us!



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born in that child was the pre-existent life of the Son of God being formed in a human being to identify with and redeem the fallen human race.

But if those are the only building-blocks you have, then I am going to suggest that Christmas will never “stack up” for you. Unless you add the third building-block of Christmas (what we are going to refer to as the “P” block of “personal formation of Christmas”) then Christmas is but a wooden ideological exercise of plastic nativity scenes and Christological controversies.

Personal Formation of Christmas

The life that was born in the baby of Bethlehem was the life of the God-man, Jesus, whose life was later given as a sinless sacrifice on the cross of Calvary to take the death-consequences of our sin. That life was raised victorious over death in the resurrection, ascended to the Father in heaven, and was made available to all men by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. That is the basis for the unique Christian belief in the *living*

Lord Jesus—the very life that was incarnated in that baby on the first Christmas is eternally alive, and is now available to be born in us and lived out through us.

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received. The very divine life that took human form in the Christ-child of Bethlehem (and was lived out in obedience unto death on the cross) is the divine life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit that can be personally *formed in us* when we experience a spiritual birth analogous to the physical birth of Jesus that we celebrate at Christmas.

The objective of the entire Christmas story is that the Christ-life, the life of the living Lord Jesus, can be “brought into being,” can be *birthed in us*, and lived out through us.

Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, explained, “There must really take place in us something corresponding to what once happened in Bethlehem, a *birth* through the Holy Spirit.”

The birth of Jesus was a “type” of the spiritual birth God was to make available to all men through His Son. In spiritual regeneration, when we receive the life of Jesus by faith, we are “born from above,” “born of the Spirit,” as Jesus told Nicodemus (John 3:7,8); “born, not of perishable seed, but imperishable...” as Peter explained (1 Peter 1:23).

God’s life is conceived in us by the Holy Spirit (similarly as it was conceived in Mary); and we are “born of the Spirit” (John 3:8) with the very life of the living Spirit of Jesus (Romans 8:9) becoming our life (Colossians 3:4) that we might participate in His life (John 14:6) more abundantly (John 10:10). That is why we are called “Christians,” Christ-ones, because Christ has been born in us, and lives in us!

The connection of Jesus’ historical birth and the spiritual new birth of Christians has long been noted in Christian poetry. Poet Angelus Silesius (1624-1677), whose real name was John Scheffler, wrote these words:

*Though Christ a thousand times,
In Bethlehem be born,
If He’s not born in you,
Your soul is still forlorn.*

In 1739 John Wesley wrote the

words of the Christmas carol, "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing."

*Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace,
Hail the sun of righteousness.*

*Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings;*

*Mild He lays His glory by, Born that
man no more may die;*

*Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.*

What is Wesley trying to say in this hymn? Jesus was born in Bethlehem that we might be "born again." His birth, which we celebrate at Christmas, only comes to its intended fruition when we allow for the "personal formation" of the life of Jesus in us in spiritual "new birth."

Our understanding and witness of the Christmas message must not stop at the historical event (H), or with the theological explanation (T), but we must always top it off with the personal experience (P) whereby the life of Jesus is Personally formed in us, both in regeneration and sanctification.

Although I draw an analogy between the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus in our

spirit in regeneration—our new birth—I would be remiss if I did not point out that these are not exact equivalents. When Jesus was born physically in Bethlehem, "the Word became flesh" (John 1:14); He became the God-man, incarnat-

1:26, 27). The very life that was enfolded in the historical Jesus is "brought into being" in us, to the point that we can say with Paul, "Christ is our life" (Colossians 3:4)—"for me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21).

When we are born-again spiritually, we do not become the incarnated God-man or Messiah-Savior as Jesus did, but we do receive the very life of God that was in Jesus.

ed as the singular Messianic mediator and Savior of mankind. When we are born-again spiritually, we do not become the incarnated God-man or Messiah-Savior as Jesus did, but we do receive the very life of God that was in Jesus.

We become indwelt by the life of God (I John 4:15). We become "sons of God" (Galatians 3:26), and "children of God" (John 1:12). We become "partakers of the divine nature" (II Peter 1:4), "partakers of Christ" (Heb. 3:14), in whom the Spirit of God dwells (Romans 8:16), and we participate in the "mystery which is Christ in us, the hope of glory" (Colossians

Another poet, Harry Webb Farington, has expressed it like this:

I know not how that Bethlehem's Babe

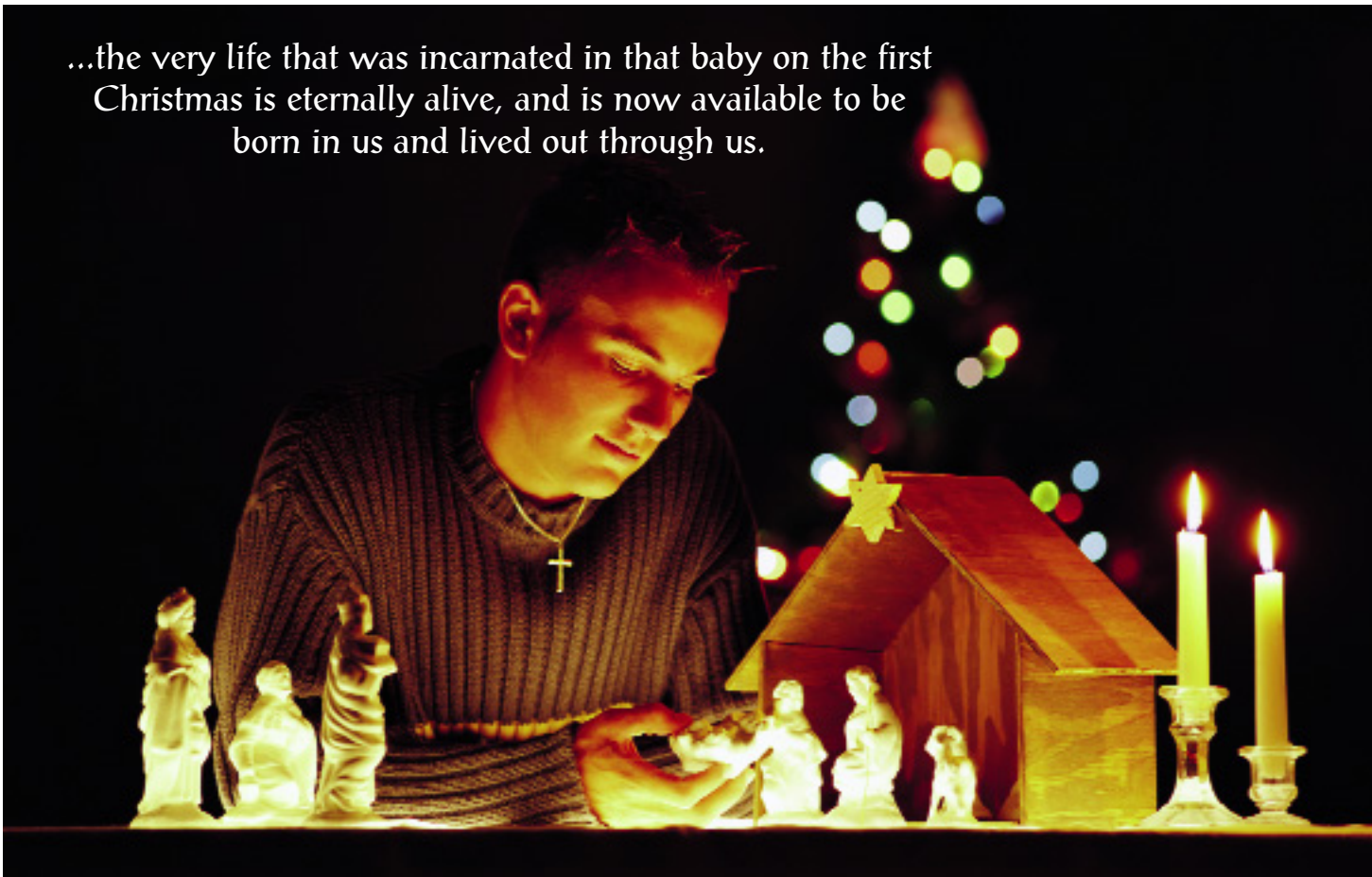
Could in the Godhead be;

I only know the Manger Child

Has brought God's life to me!

The apostle Paul even says, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). And then later in that same epistle, Paul agonizingly tells the Galatian Christians that he is like a

...the very life that was incarnated in that baby on the first Christmas is eternally alive, and is now available to be born in us and lived out through us.





For Christmas, and Christianity, to “stack up” and make sense, we must have all three boxes.

mother “in labor, until Christ is *formed* in you” (Galatians 4:19, emphasis mine). The “personal formation” of the Christ-life in us begins at our spiritual new birth, but then there is the continuing “personal formation” of Christ’s life in us as his character is lived out in our daily behavior. There is the “personal formation” of the life of Jesus in us at regeneration, and the continuing “personal formation” of Jesus’ life in us in our ongoing sanctification—the holy expression of our Christian lives.

Essential Building Blocks of Life in Christ

What I have called “the building-blocks of Christmas” are the essential boxes of all Christian thought. There are the (H) “historical events” that provide the “historical foundation” to the Christian faith. To that we must add the (T) “theological explanations” of the “theological formulation” of the Christian faith. But unless we add the (P) “personal experience” of the “personal formation” of the life of Jesus Christ in us by “new birth” and the life of holiness, then the Christmas message—the entire message of Christianity—just doesn’t “stack up.”

If we started with the (P) “personal experience” box—if that was all we had, and it was just levitating up here without the “historical foundation” and the “theological formulation,” then the Christian message would be mere mysticism, subjectivism, experientialism, existentialism (as some have charged it with being).

But, on the other hand, if we just emphasize the (H) “historical events” and the (T) “theological explanations” of the Christian faith (as so much of the church has often done), then all we have is an objective data-driven belief-system that ends up being nothing more than a theological or historical society, without ever allowing the living Lord Jesus Christ to inhabit individuals in a “new birth” and live out his life in us today, individually and collectively as His Body, the church. For Christmas, and Chris-

tianity, to “stack up” and make sense, we must have all three boxes.

I do hope that at this Christmas season you have accepted the “historical event” of Jesus’ birth, and the “theological explanation” that the pre-existent Son of God became a man to be our Savior.

But, most of all, I hope that you have received the life of the living Lord Jesus in the “personal experience” of a spiritual new birth, whereby Jesus has “come alive” in you and you experience Christmas every day of your life—the “personal formation” of his life in you.

That is what it means to be a Christian! That is what it takes to appreciate Christmas!

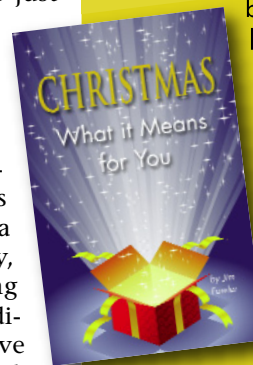
Allow me to close with the words of another Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem” by Phillips Brooks:

*O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend on us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today. □*

Jim Fowler is a husband, father, grandfather, theologian, author and former pastor whose Christ In You ministry can be found at www.christinyou.com. Jim serves PTM as our theological consultant and author of our “Parodies of Piety” column.

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