

“Some Hifalutin Christmas Theology”

John 1:1-18

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The word *hifalutin*, spelled *h...i...f...* is apparently short for *highfalutin*, spelled *high....* No one knows for sure its origin. *Falutin*, it is thought, may come from “fluting,” that is, the playing of a flute, in this case playing high notes on the flute. Or *falutin* may have been a grandiose equivalent of “flying,” in which case *hifalutin* would be a slang term for “high-flying.” Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* isn’t sure. But, whatever its etymology, everyone is agreed that *hifalutin* is a pejorative term. It refers to something or someone that is pretentious or pompous. It’s a great word is it not? But what does it have to do with Christmas?

Well, I certainly don’t want to make you pompous or pretentious, but I do very much want you to know certain things that may very well make some other people, even Christian people, *think* you are pretentious, at least if you talk about them. Such knowledge shouldn’t be thought to be *hifalutin*, but alas nowadays it is likely to be.

The superficiality or mediocrity of the thinking of the typical American Christian is, alas, one of its distinctive or defining features. Christians, as a class, do not think deeply about their faith nowadays; at least do not as they once did. They do not know their Bibles very well; indeed, virtually every survey has demonstrated that Christians don’t know their Bibles as well as *unbelievers* knew the Bible several generations ago! And they know even less theology, that careful, painstaking thinking about biblical teaching that the church’s great teachers over the past two millennia have bequeathed to Christendom. Though we might naturally suppose that there are few things more endlessly fascinating than theology, the knowledge of the living God and his works, and few things more practically important to the children of God, Christians today, as a class, are not theologically minded; indeed, are less theologically minded than virtually any generation of Protestant believers before them. It was not always this way and you and I ought to be among those trying to change the situation to make it more like it once was when even ordinary Christians like you and I were both deeply interested in and thoughtful about the doctrines of their faith.

A great many Christian men know a great deal more about their fantasy football players than they do about the doctrines of the Christian faith. Now don’t take this as simply another harangue. The lack of theological depth has, as it must, led to a lack of spiritual depth, to shallowness in life as well as in thought. And no one contests *that* fact. The world knows it and the observers of the church in the church know it as well. Everyone knows that American Christianity is worldly and that the marginalization of Christian faith in American culture is the index of its worldliness. A compromised faith will never produce a robust and impressive and influential Christian presence in society. And a compromised faith always begins with a faith that is superficially understood and has not been made a true fascination of the mind. And I’m not talking about others in this respect. You and I have been influenced more than we know by the spirit of our age.

It was the Greek philosopher Socrates in the 5th century B.C, if you remember, who said that an unexamined life was not worth living. We might say that an unexamined faith is not worth believing. According to Cicero, Socrates was the first to call philosophy down from the sky and establish her in the towns, and bring her into homes, and force her to investigate the life of men and women..." [Cited in P. Johnson, *Socrates*, 192] Well, I don't know so much about Athens in the 5th century B.C. or about Socrates, but I do know that the effect of the Christian faith upon her loyal subjects has been through the ages to make even the simplest of men and women deep thinkers about God and man, about life and salvation, and about the mysteries of existence.

And at Christmas the evidence for a lack of this deep thinking is all around us all the time. I happened to be listening to the *Hallelujah Chorus* on the car radio the other day, and when it was over the DJ came on to say that they had more of Santa's songs to play right after the next commercial! This explains to some degree why no one pays much attention to the Christian faith in our day in the West. Our faith is a fabulous, wondrous knowledge, but it has been domesticated and reduced to much less than it really is. It no longer fascinates because it no longer excites and entrances the mind, or, at least, it does not seem to. If the Almighty and his works do not amaze and astound and startle and bewilder the mind, if they do not provoke wonder and bafflement, if they do not offend the minds of others and provoke controversy why should anyone take our message seriously or imagine that it concerns the greatest conceivable things and a God who is impossibly glorious and wonderful. If Christians' view of God is akin to the culture's idea of Santa Claus and if Christmas for Christians is little more than the charming family holiday the world takes it to be, we have no one to blame but ourselves for our loss of status and influence in our society. We are not presenting the culture with a message that compels their attention; it hardly seems to compel our own attention.

So this Christmas morning let's engage in the time-honored custom of thinking hard for a short while about that Christmas message that lies at the heart of our Christian faith, a beautiful summary of which John has given us in the immortal language of the prologue of his Gospel. The Word was with God and was God. The Son *is not* the Father but he is as much God *as* the Father. He is so much God and so completely and truly God that he was and is the creator of heaven and earth. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..." *That is God the Son the Bible is talking about, the same Son who came into the world that first Christmas!* All things that have ever been, including you and me and every other human being are Jesus' doing, the fruit of his creative mind and power. *That* God, God the Son, the second person of the triune God, then at a point in time, in the middle of human history, "became flesh and dwelt among us." That is, he became a man, a human being, and lived in the world *the life of a true man*, like all other men apart from sin. He didn't *appear to become flesh, or seem to become flesh, he became flesh. He who had not been a man was now a man.* And then John adds at the end, after everything else, "No one can see God! Jesus is God, and people saw him, but no one can see God."

The astounding thing that John so simply and beautifully reports here became the source of unending reflection and argument in early Christianity and has been controversial ever since. Godly men, deeply spiritual and learned men struggled to find a way to express the truth taught in Holy Scripture, the truth that was expressed by all Christians in their worship and their prayers. Our fathers in the faith were certain that there could be no sure believing without

thinking and thinking hard about what was believed and without reaching a right understanding, however limited that understanding may be in the face of such mysteries.

So many questions rise to the surface as soon as one begins to think seriously about the Word becoming flesh, about what happened and about what it means. In the late fourth century, had you walked through the market in Constantinople, you would have overheard one argument after another – between shopkeepers and customers, slaves and masters, men and women – concerning the right way to describe the effect of the incarnation and about its true meaning. When was the last time you found yourself at the mall listening to fellow shoppers as they discussed the incarnation?

Perhaps you remember the settlement of this doctrinal controversy proposed by the Council of Chalcedon in the year 451 and accepted by all orthodox Christianity ever since. When the Scriptures teach us that God became flesh and dwelt among us, when other Scriptures teach us that Jesus lived as a human being among us, that he was beset with all the limitations of our human life except for sin – that is, he was weak in the ways in which we are weak (he grew tired, he got sick, he felt the pain of both body and soul); that there was much more that he did not know than that he knew, when Scripture teaches us that he had to learn things the way we learn them, that he suffered and grew as a person through his experience of pain, disappointment, and sorrow; that he could be killed and was killed – I say when the entirety of the biblical teaching about Jesus is taken together we are left having to say that Jesus Christ must, so said the Council of Chalcedon,

“...be acknowledged in two natures [that is a divine nature and a human nature] inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; [the four most important adverbs in Christian theology] the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved and concurring in one person...”

To be sure, that is not an explanation of anything; it is rather a confession of the truth about Jesus Christ that the Bible reveals to us in the most careful, chaste language the church could conceive of. No one was claiming to understand this! They only wanted to confess it. At the time it was drafted it was designed to repudiate two distinct errors in thinking about the Lord Jesus; errors so inevitable that they continue to be committed today. One was that his divine and human natures were merged into one; the other that he was in fact two persons, not one. No; according to Chalcedon and every major statement of Christology since, including our Westminster Standards, the Bible teaches us to believe that in the incarnation God the Son took to himself, to his person, a true and authentic human nature, so that he was then and is now one person with two natures. Do you have any idea what a stupendous, ineffable, and utterly mysterious thing it is that I just said?

Other people certainly realize how preposterous John’s prologue seems to be, how absurd, even how offensive. Early critics of the Christian faith immediately latched onto the claim that the Son of God was incarnate in Jesus Christ. They realized how it was to the Christian message and the Christian faith and they ridiculed it. Here is Celsus, a second century Greek philosopher, who wrote a book about Christianity entitled *True Doctrine*.

“What is the purpose of such a descent on the part of God? Was it in order to learn what was going on among men? Doesn’t God know everything?”

And do you remember reading, perhaps some of you have seen, the words that encircle the inside of the dome in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, one of the most sacred shrines of Islam?

“Far be it from God that he should have a son...”

The incarnation assumes the triune nature of God which is itself an affront to reason and to monotheism in many religious minds and then compounds that terrible error by adding the assertion that one person of the high Majesty became or even could have become a lowly human being, have walked about the earth getting his feet dirty, eating food, going to the bathroom, chatting with friends, getting sick and then well again, growing up from childhood like any other human being. To many this is blasphemy, to others it is simply ridiculous! But is that not what John has told us and the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament confirm? Have you carefully considered why other people, even religious people, find our central affirmation about Jesus so outrageous? Perhaps we have not because we have taken a good bit of the outrageous, the utterly phenomenal out of our understanding of Jesus.

But let’s consider this. God cannot cease to be God. If he can, he is not God. Surely we all accept that. The infinite, unchangeable God cannot cease to be what he is. The perfection and eternity of his being is what makes him God in the first place, is it not? So if God the Son became a man what became of the Divine Son? Or as the devout Anglican archbishop William Temple once put the question: “What was happening to the rest of the universe during the period of our Lord’s life?” Was the world set free from the control of its Creator; did God the Son take a holiday from his duties as the Maker and Ruler of heaven and earth? [D. Macleod, *Jesus is Lord: Christology Yesterday and Today*, 115] When God the Son became flesh and walked among men, what happened to his divine nature?

The theologians of the church answered that question in the first place with a Latin adage: *finitum non capax infiniti*: the finite is incapable of the infinite; it cannot grasp it or receive it. There was, in other words, no possible way in which the divine Christ could be comprehended in or limited to his human nature, the human nature of Jesus of Nazareth. This is sometimes also described as the *extra calvinisticum* because it was a point of emphasis for the Reformed after the Reformation. The “extra” or “outside” refers to the fact that God the Son was never contained within the human nature and, therefore, even in the incarnation he must be conceived as being beyond or outside of the human nature. So when Jesus was sitting by the well in Samaria, or in animated conversation with guests at the wedding in Cana, or weeping over the death of the widow of Cana’s son, or urging the rich young ruler to follow him, he remained the living God. The entire universe was immediately present to him, he held infinite power in his hand, every molecule in the universe was under his active control.

But wait a minute. There is but one person. We don’t read in the Gospels of two Christs: one divine, one human. There is no evidence of a dual personality in the Lord Christ, no “you and I” within the inner life of the Savior. He never uses the plural in speaking of himself as if there were two of him, not one. The Bible refers to two natures, it refers to Jesus in ways that are

appropriate only for a human being, and in ways that are appropriate only for one who is God, but it never refers to him as if he were two, not one. There is but one Son of God, one Jesus Christ, who is represented in the Bible as being at one and the same time eternal God and true **and mortal** man.

Theologians attempt to describe this mystery – describe but not explain – by saying that the human nature of Jesus was *impersonal* or, sometimes, *in-personal*. That is, it was a nature that was added to the eternal person of the Word, the Son of God. There was never a second human person, only a human nature added to the eternal divine person of the Word. The Greek word for what we call a person was *hypostasis*, so Christ's human nature was described as *anhypostasis*, nonpersonal, or *enhypostasis*, either impersonal, that is without a person, or in-personal, that is a nature that had its personality in the person of another. The person of the Son of God is eternal, but at a point in time he added to himself another nature, a second nature, a fully human nature. The Son of God took upon himself the form of a servant, but he did not take a servant **to** himself! [Phil. 2:7] Jesus was certainly an individual human being. He was not Peter or John or Paul. He had his own personality and appearance, his own individual characteristics. He was unique in the ways every human being is unique, but he was also unique in the extraordinary life that he lived, that no one else had ever lived before him or would ever live after. But his human nature never existed independently. Do you understand what I am talking about? I don't! And you don't either. When God became a man, he did not become a person for the first time; he had always been a person, but now he was a person who was both God and man. Do you see, we are piling mystery upon mystery, and with each step in our description it transcends our understanding still further.

How did Jesus not know things if he were omniscient God? Why did he have to walk over to the fig tree to find out if there were any fruit on it? Why did he have to ask who it was who touched him? Why did he not know when he was to return to earth? Omniscience cannot learn. Omnipotence is never tired. Omnipresence does not have to walk from one place to another. And yet we find these opposites confessed of the one and the same Jesus Christ. We also find two wills in the Lord, two powers of decision making; the will by which he made decisions as God and the will by which he made decisions as man. You perhaps remember that the monothelite view, the "one will" view of Jesus Christ was declared a heresy in the fourth century. Jesus has a divine will and a human will, the divine will by which he came into the world and continued to rule it, and the human will by which he lived in the world as a man. He made his decisions as a man, as men must make decisions, with what knowledge one has and for reasons sufficient to a righteous mind. His decisions as a man, that is, were unencumbered by and, as it were, independent of his eternal will and counsel as God. He decided in Gethsemane to go forward to the cross because as a righteous man he knew it was the right thing to do, because it was his heavenly Father's will, and because he knew it was necessary for the salvation of his people. But he made that decision as a man in the fear and uncertainty of any man who was facing a cruel and unjust death.

How was his omniscience kept separate from his ignorance in his single person? He was, as we would say today, an individual. In his individual life he was both the Son of God and the child of Mary, divine and human, but the two natures were not mixed. How within his individuality was his divine will kept from overwhelming his human will so that in the matter of making decisions

he was not truly a man and was not really tempted as we are? We have no idea how omniscience and ignorance were kept separate in the same person! The Bible never reflects on the inner psychology of his person, of an inner life both divine and human and completely divine and completely human at the same time. It never opens to us a window on the personal existence of the Savior who was both God and man, but whose divine natures were never mixed or mingled or confused, even as they were never separated in his single person.

As I said at the beginning, most Christians today have not been trained to think and think deeply about these things. Such biblical assertions lie unexamined at the foundation of our faith and our hope; we assume all is relatively obvious and take our Savior's person largely for granted. Indeed, I think most Christians today are soft heretics and don't know it. They are what Christian theologians call *Eutychians*. Eutyches was a fourth and fifth century churchman who taught that by the incarnation the Lord Jesus had not two natures but one, a mingling of natures that created a third nature composed of elements both divine and human. That obviously is much easier to understand. We can make sense of that. Christ's nature was a third thing, neither precisely divine nor precisely human, though the divine had the major share, the humanity being merged with the divine as it was said, as a drop of honey mingled in the ocean. We can get our minds around this. The Greeks and the Romans had their idea of manlike gods and we have our ideas today of supermen and superheroes, human beings with divine powers and characteristics. And that is the way most of us learn to think about Jesus, as much more God than man, and as a mixture of the two, not both equally God and man and separately God and man at one and the same time in his single person. That is why most of us really struggle to take the Lord's humanity as seriously as the Bible teaches us to do or to believe that he really was tempted in the same way we are tempted.

So much of every temptation in our experience is our lack of knowledge. If we knew ahead of time the trouble our sin would cause, or could see ahead of time having to answer for it on the Great Day; if we could know ahead of time when and how the trial through which we are passing would end, if we could see ourselves happy in heaven because at that moment we had made a righteous decision and had honored the Lord with our lives, why all would be so much easier. And we imagine that such must have been the case with Jesus because, after all, he is God! But it was not the case. The incarnation is more mysterious but also much more wonderful than that. The Lord's achievement was so much more stupendous than that because his righteousness was the righteousness of a man with all the limitations of humanity. He loved his heavenly father and served him, he resisted the devil and defeated him, he obeyed the law of God in every instance *with no other resources than are available to you and me*. True enough, he was not sinful as we are, but then Adam wasn't sinful either and the first temptation he faced completely undid him. Jesus had to face temptations for those thirty-some years without once failing to do the right thing. Jesus was a man and lived the life of a man; and it was *that* life, that man's life that he lived for us and in our place. He died the death of a man; God cannot die. And it was that man's death, not God's, in every way the death of a human being, that secured our entrance to everlasting life.

Martin Luther is said once to have sat for an hour pondering the Lord's cry on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me." He finally gave up defeated: "God forsaken by God; who can understand this?" he said. Well, Christmas perhaps presents us with even greater

mysteries, with deeper depths and higher heights, than even Good Friday or Easter. A true man, the living God in a single personality, neither the godhead absorbing or overwhelming the manhood with all of its creaturely limitations, nor the manhood in any way diminishing the divine infinity of being, power, or knowledge.

We live in an age that indulges the conceit that the mysterious is only that which is temporarily unknown, something that will soon enough be figured out and explained. We tend to recoil from what we cannot understand. Truth that is too far above us we tend to domesticate and seek to bring under our control. But there is too much truth that is beyond us and will always be beyond us. We are tiny specks in God's immense creation; we have but the smallest and vaguest idea of the majesty on high. Our mind can comprehend so little of who God is and what he has done. The proper state of mind for a Christian is that of wonder, of bewilderment, and amazement even as we rejoice in the knowledge of God and his salvation that we have been given. How little of even that wonderful truth do we really know or understand? Christ is our Savior, we know that; but when it comes to explaining just who and what this Savior is, we are left having to hold our hands over our mouths and confess ourselves utterly incapable of grasping even the beginning of the greatness of his life.

Have you ever been struck dumb by something so great, so wonderful, or so beautiful that you were literally overwhelmed; silenced by what you felt and what you saw? I can think of experiences in my life when something like that happened. As a newly minted college graduate I entered for the first time the cathedral at Chartres and felt in my soul the power and exquisite beauty of that beautiful sanctuary, a few hours when I was a young man when I was literally overcome by the love of God; just a few other experiences like that. We have the capacity as human beings to be awestruck, to be struck dumb by something great and marvelous. It is, when you think of it, an amazing capacity that human beings have. Evolution didn't give it to us. It isn't useful for survival. Why should it be given to us to be overwhelmed, struck dumb, silenced by something so much greater than ourselves?

Because there is in this universe something so grand, so impossibly high and deep, so far beyond our grasp or understanding, and yet so important that we should feel its mystery and wonder. So our creator gave us the capacity to appreciate, to know, and to feel at least something of the greatness of those things. It is our highest privilege as human beings to realize and experience the greatness of God and of what he has done, to enter into his glory and to feel it in our hearts. Christmas is one such high mystery before which we should stand stunned, amazed, thrilled, cast down, and lifted up. Only God himself could do such a thing; only our God would do it and do it for us: become flesh and dwell among us while never once becoming anything less than he had always been and always shall be. Christmas *is* fun, beautiful, a time for family, feasting, and happy celebration. But Christmas is also stunning, amazing, mysterious, and breathtaking.

And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a child on earth for me?

No love that in a family dwells,
No caroling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare –
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in bread and wine.

John Betjeman, *Christmas*