

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

IN THE NICK OF TIME

Occasional Essays and Other Stuff for Christian Students Presented by the President of
Central Baptist Theological Seminary of Minneapolis

American Christianity needs leaders. American Christianity needs Christian leaders. Christian leaders explain the Scriptures, bringing them to bear upon life's urgent questions. Christian leaders exemplify the life of faith, finding their ultimate satisfaction in God alone. They unite intellectual discipline with ordinate affection, turning their entire being toward the love of God. These essays are dedicated to the task of inviting Christian students to become tomorrow's Christian leaders.

—Kevin T. Bauder

"...Be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine."

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The Completeness of the Incarnation

Kevin T. Bauder

Leo Steinberg, writing for *Harper's Magazine* in March of 1984, offered a series of fascinating observations about Domenico Ghirlandaio's *The Adoration of the Magi*. The work depicts the Christ child, held by the Virgin, being examined by the wise men. They are gazing in rapt astonishment at the undraped Christ. What Steinberg points out—and what is obvious once noticed—is that the gaze of the Magi is directed toward the child's genitalia.

Ghirlandaio's painting is anything but unique. Botticelli conceals the child's genitals from the viewer and permits him to be examined only by one Magus, but the object of the wise man's gaze is still obvious. Filippino Lippi has the child partially exposed to the viewer as well as to the Magi. Paolo Veronese shows the virgin lifting aside the child's wrap and presenting him nether-end first to an amazed Magus. In Pieter Aertsen's rendition, the Christ, hand raised in a gesture of blessing, is fully exposed to the viewer while a basket of folded diapers sits by Mary's side. Sebastiano Ricci chooses the moment immediately following the inspection: Mary is replacing the cover over the child, while the aged Magus still peers so closely that the Christ places a hand upon his head.

To be sure, not all paintings of the Magi portray the scene in the same way. Some show the Magi presenting their gifts to the child. Others show one Magus kissing the Savior's foot. Yet others simply depict the Magi in some other act of obeisance. Nevertheless, enough of these paintings (certainly more than I have listed) show the wise men gazing at the baby's genitalia that there can be no mistake—these artists had a lesson they wanted to emphasize.

As a matter of fact, their point is a doctrinal one. Their paintings constitute a theological reflection on the nature and significance of the incarnation. They are telling us something about who the Christ is and what He does.

Christmas is all about the incarnation. By the *incarnation* we mean that the second person of the Godhead, without ceasing to be God, adds to His Deity a complete human nature. He takes humanity into Himself in such a way that His person is not divided, but also in such a way that the natures are never confounded or converted. The incarnation tells us who Christ is.

Who Christ is relates directly to what Christ does. The Christmas narrative is not an end in itself but an introduction to the great story of sacrifice and redemption. In Christ, God became incarnate not simply to prove that He could, but rather to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins. He came as our redeemer, our savior. Christians understand that the incarnation is necessary for our redemption.

The ancient dictum is that Christ can only redeem that in which He participates. He did not take on Him the nature of angels, and therefore He does not redeem angels. He did, however, take the seed of Abraham. Since those whom He wished to redeem were flesh and blood, He had to partake of flesh and blood (Heb. 2:14-17). He had to be made like His brothers in order to save them. He had to share their nature.

The question is, How much of human nature does Christ share? In how much humanity does He participate? Gnosticism answered this question by denying that Christ participated in human nature at all. For Gnostics, anything material was evil, and human nature was material, so Christ could not have participated in human nature. Docetists insisted that the human body of Christ was a mere phantom. Cerinthians argued that the divine Christ temporarily came upon the body of the human Jesus. On either account, materiality and humanity were denied.

For Gnostics, the most offensive aspect of human nature was sexual reproduction. Most Gnostics tended to be severe ascetics in many ways, but they were especially ascetic in their view of sexuality. For the average Gnostic, nothing was more degrading to humanity.

While Christianity rejected Gnosticism, certain Gnostic elements occasionally spilled over into Christian sensibility. One of those elements was the distrust of sexuality and especially of sexual pleasure. Formally, medieval theologians such as Thomas Aquinas defended the goodness of sexual pleasure within marriage. Nevertheless, Catholicism displayed a sense that marriage and the bearing of children were somehow inferior to celibacy and virginity.

The paintings of Ghirlandaio and others are offering a rebuttal to this perspective. The paintings are not about the wise men but about the incarnation. In these paintings, the Magi are astonished at the completeness of the human nature that the Savior has adopted—a nature so entire that it includes reproductive organs. In the incarnation, God did not simply dip His toe into the pool of humanity. On the contrary, He plunged Himself into the fullness of human nature, becoming everything that is naturally human.

The implication is that Christ intended to redeem the entire human nature. Since our humanity includes our sexuality, and since He took up sexuality in the human nature that He assumed, then He must have meant to redeem it. There is a message here, not only about the incarnation, but about God's intention for humanity. God means for humans to "be fruitful and multiply," in accordance with which He created our sexual natures. What God made is good, and what Christ redeems is good. To view marriage and childbearing as inferior to singleness and virginity is to wander into heresy.

There is also a secondary lesson in these paintings, and it is one that needs to be learned by Twenty-First Century evangelicals. The paintings are addressing the misperception of human sexuality.

Indeed, they are pointing out the sexuality of Jesus. But they do so in an extremely careful and reverent manner.

This reverence is directed not merely toward Christ, but toward sexuality itself. While sex is a good part of God's creation, it is both powerful and easily twisted. Sexuality can be debased more thoroughly and destructively than almost any other aspect of our humanity. Therefore, it is a subject that must be treated with care.

We find it easy to criticize those Victorians who, out of prudishness, put stockings over the legs of pianos. It is always easy to criticize the sins that we are not being tempted to commit. We evangelicals are no longer prudes. Quite the opposite. We have begun to speak of sexual matters with the contemptuous familiarity and coarse ribaldry that once typified junior high locker rooms. One cringes to think how Mark Driscoll might handle the topic of Jesus' sexuality.

These artists addressed it with decorum. They employed their skills to make a necessary but sensitive point. They took pains to avoid dishonoring or debasing either the Christ child or the human sexuality that He took into Himself. Their message, subtly conveyed, was nevertheless clear and powerful. Christ became one of us in the most utter and complete sense. Because He identified with us completely, He is able to redeem us completely. These are powerful themes, and we owe a debt to Ghirlandaio and other artists for reminding us of them.

God rest ye merry. ✕

This essay is by [Kevin T. Bauder](#), president of [Central Baptist Theological Seminary](#). Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses. New subscriptions to this electronic newsletter can be requested at inthenickoftime@centralseminary.edu.

Hymns for Christmas-Day. I.

Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667)

Mysterious truth! that the self same should be
A Lamb, a Shepherd, and a Lion too!
Yet such was he
Whom first the shepherds knew,
When they themselves became
Sheep to the Shepherd Lambe.
Shepherd of Men and Angels, Lamb of God,
Lion of Judah, by these Titles keep
The Wolf from thy indangered Sheep.

Bring all the world unto thy Fold,
Let Jews and Gentiles hither come
In numbers great that can't be told,
And call thy Lambs that wander, home.
Glory be to God on high,
All glories be to th' glorious Deity. ✕

