

“Conversations with Harry Reeder and Bruce Stallings”

Part Thirty-six

December 6, 2020 • Sunday Evening

In this Q&A Jim Alexander will be filling in for Bruce Stallings who is a part of our pastoral staff at Briarwood. Jim is the pastor over a number of our congregational communities and also gives leadership to all of our board-directed ministries, but Jim was a senior pastor in Colorado before he came to Briarwood. Jim is going to start by giving us a Scripture during our Advent Season and then I'll pick up on it in our devotional.

Jim: One of the things I learned as a senior pastor is keeping things fresh during the Advent Season and meaningful. The passage I want to share about is from Galatians 4:4–5 which says *[4] But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, [5] to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.* What I love about this passage personally is that God at just the right time and just the right place sent His Son to be God with us. What a difference that makes!

Harry: Also He used just the right woman, who was the one who fulfilled the Scriptures, appointed by the Lord, Mary of the line of David, just as Joseph, the adopted father is of the line of David. I'm going to use the passage you shared to navigate back to the series I'm doing this Advent Season called the Kings of Christmas where we are looking at the kings mentioned in the Scripture during the time of Jesus. There is Herod the Great. There is the Emperor of Rome – Gaius Octavius, also known as Caesar Augustus – and then we have the regal court that comes from the East. We call them three Kings but we really don't know how many there were, we just know it was two or more (plural). Most assume it was three due to the fact that three gifts were brought to Jesus from them. I'm also going to bring out why they were recorded in Scripture.

Remember all Scripture is profitable (II Timothy 3:16) so if they are in Scripture then they are there for a reason. In this series all the kings end with Christ Sunday who is the King of Kings, our Lord and Savior, the Messiah, as Prophet, Priest and King. The Galatians 4 passage shows us that Jesus came at the right time to redeem His people from their sins and the result is that we become adopted into the family of God as the redeemed of the Lord so I can see why you would have chosen that text for an Advent Series of your own as a senior pastor.

Galatians 4 is affirming the historicity of Jesus. A real Jesus, the Son of God, became the Son of Man, maintaining His deity, laying aside His privileges, taking upon Himself humanity so that by a man, Adam, came death now by a Man, Second Adam, the Messiah, Jesus, would come the redemption of His people. In Adam all of his seed is lost, in Christ, the elect of God will all be saved. Jesus came at the right time to the right woman and all of that converged at a place called Bethlehem which has been prophesied centuries before, as in Micah 5:2, as the place of the birth of this Messiah.

How did they get there? They got there through a decree that came from Caesar Augustus. Augustus doesn't know this but freely in his humanity as king by the appointment of God for there is no king apart from God's appointment, he decides to institute what I believe is a system of registration or census that also has a financial component of taxation that would end up happening every 14 years. This would be where people would go back to their hometown to register their family and taxation purposes. This is what Joseph does as he brings Mary with him.

Why is Joseph in Bethlehem? He is there because an edict went out that he had to go and be registered for the census for the purpose of taxation. It was done under a military governor, Quirinius, who was over the region of Syria and he was the one responsible to carry it out in concert with Herod the Great. This is probably around 6 or 5 B.C., a real year. This has been done by historian, Luke, who has done his research and is putting all this together. All of this is under a real emperor, who really makes a decree, all under the sovereignty of God who prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem and because of that decree it gets these two from the line of David, Joseph and Mary, all the way to Bethlehem. The timing of the decree is such that Joseph can't leave Mary because she is with Child and so he takes her with him and the Child is then born in Bethlehem as we see from Micah 5:2. You can see the hand of a sovereign God.

So the next time you think the wrong person is in control in the office, where you might not have voted for Caesar Augustus, but God did and God had him there for a purpose. That purpose of course brings blessing to you who are adopted as the redeemed through the family of God, because Jesus is the Messiah born under the law and fulfilling Scripture as all of that is accomplished by the decrees of a pagan king that God is using to bring the King of Kings to redeem us.

Luke 2:7 says [7] *And she (Mary) gave birth to **her firstborn son** and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.* Notice that Jesus is not Joseph's firstborn child but the next child they have will be his firstborn child and her second born child. Jesus is Mary's firstborn and we see affirmations in ten other Scriptures that tell us that Jesus had brothers and sisters. So here is this absolutely, amazing, wonderful, accurate, intimate passage and when someone reads this writing of Luke's it can be verified in the history of Rome. People will see these governor and emperors names plus the census that was put into place. Then there was a second census and when another census takes place a riot will occur in Jerusalem.

Why would the Israelites not want a census? Go read II Samuel 24 and what happened when David took a census. It cost 70,000 Israelites their lives from the judgment of God. All of this is beautifully historic. Why am I saying all this? It is because Jesus is real and we celebrate the Advent Season because there was a real mother, a real adopted father, a real decree from a real emperor who brought them into fulfillment into a real prophecy at a real time in Bethlehem. It was at the right time, by the right people by the decree of a sovereign God at work through kings who have direct control over their subjects but they are not in final control.

King or pawn? The tendency is for people to see a king is a king and if he's king then whatever happens, happens – no, there is a God who is at work, but God doesn't use the king as a pawn. He uses the king as a king and then through that He brings His own King. So don't see him as a king who cannot be dealt with because God is dealing with him for He has the heart of the king in His hands, turning it where He wishes as He does the rivers to the sea (Proverbs 21:1). But he is not a pawn, for he is a real person acting as a real king and through that comes the King of Kings. So let's celebrate Advent.

Jim: I so appreciate these comments. It's so refreshing to me to hear through your mind how God works through you of how fresh, personal and the historical reality matters. We do have some questions about Advent so let's get started with them. I can identify with this first question so easily. The question is, growing up in church our church celebrated Christmas but not an

Advent Season which I love and prefer so could you share with us a little bit about the history of an Advent Season and also why we embrace it as a church?

Harry: Before I answer that I want to go back to a question we didn't get to in the last session. The question was that I said when Abraham Lincoln made Thanksgiving a National holiday he made it the fourth Thursday of the month and then FDR to make a bigger impact on the Christmas holiday shopping moved it to the third Thursday of the month, then if he did that why do we celebrate it on the fourth Thursday of the month? It was because FDR was overruled even by a congress dominated by the Democratic party who received so much pressure by the states, they by law moved Thanksgiving from what FDR instituted to the fourth Thursday which was what the law originally stated and should therefore not be overturned.

Many don't know this, but when the Congress decided to override FDR's executive order and move it back to the fourth Thursday of the month, it was just a few weeks after that vote that Pearl Harbor occurred. So they got the right day for Thanksgiving in place and it would be only a few weeks later he would be in that same hall of Congress asking for the prayers of the people as we entered into a three front war in World War II.

I also want to address from a recent sermon that I mentioned the word Amen is used after the first book of the Psalms and I said it was after all four books of the Psalms but I meant to say that Amen came at the end of the next four books of the Psalms where there is actually five in total, not four. So after having addressed those issues I will now answer this Advent question.

I'm like this questioner where the church I grew up in would celebrate Christmas but we didn't have an Advent Season. As I did study on this I became convinced that this is a great opportunity particularly when you do Sunday morning and Sunday evening services, for being able to focus on certain theological things and make clear what the doctrine of Incarnation (Son of God) is. There are many who teach a lot of errors around that doctrine like they will say Jesus gave up His deity but we don't have 33 years without a Trinity. What does it mean that He humbled Himself? Jesus humbled Himself by addition and not by subtraction so there is so many things to teach about the Incarnation. Why was Jesus born? When you look at the Advent you now look at the purpose of His coming – to save His people from their sins. The result of His coming is that we could be born again, right with God, justified, adopted into the family of God and in a culture that has been impacted by the Gospel it also gives us a bridge for outreach using events that not only equip, encourage and facilitate worship but you can also bring people who you are sharing Christ with to those events as you do follow up with them afterwards. So I began to love Advent for those purposes.

I do want to say something very cautionary. We believe in Reformed Theology. We believe in the priority of worship and we don't do in worship what we want to do as long as it doesn't go against the Bible, we can only do in worship what God commands. So in the Advent Season it has to be framed within Biblical commands, not our imagination. We're not allowed to bind people's conscience because nowhere in the Bible does it say to have an Advent Season but it's also fine to be able to focus. For instance, the Lord's Supper assumes the Incarnation as it focuses on the crucifixion, affirms the resurrection and anticipates the second coming. We believe by taking an Advent Season we are able to take advantage of these Biblical themes from the Incarnation that move into all the areas to enhance discipleship and to create a bridge for people during this season that need to hear what Christmas really is and what Christ came to do. So our Sunday morning is framed around this Advent Season to bring out Biblical doctrine and

our Sunday evening services are free to then do things like concerts, testimonials and things like that to bring outreach events.

Jim: That is very helpful to know the difference between the Sunday morning and evening services in the Advent Season.

Harry: During the Advent Season we call the morning worship service the Divine service of worship and the evening service we call the fellowship of worship service. We use that for various uses of equipping, encouragement and evangelism. Normally it's a type of discipleship as I do topical expository sermons on Sunday night with small worship taking place, but we can also use it for evangelism which we love to do.

Jim: Advent has become so meaningful in my own family after we were introduced to it which happened back in the early 1990s. For us as a family, we use Advent during our dinner meal to be instilled in our hearts and actively waiting as they did so for the coming of the Lord. We use it as a time to teach our daughters and help them understand what it means to wait on Him to seek, a deeper, peaceful relationship with Him so in light of that we have the next question. What are some good resources to use personally or as a family and what practices other than weekly worship can we embrace that help us enhance our celebration of Advent this year?

Harry: I think a good thing to do is to have an Advent project to do as a family. Some of the ones we have available are the Christmas shoeboxes with the Samaritan Purse Ministry. We also provide presents through the Prison Fellowship Outreach as we take the gifts to the children of incarcerated individuals on behalf of their parents and then we have an opportunity to share the Gospel. Jesus intentionally came among us to save us and intentionally means we have something to go on to go among people to talk about the Savior and do deeds that open up Gospel words because people need to hear them to be saved. This gives us a season to do that in.

Another thing I like to do is pick an Advent book that people can use for readings in their home as an Advent devotional during the Advent Season leading up to Christ Sunday. This year I have recommended Dr. Sinclair Ferguson Love Came Down. This book is not only good at Christmas but it's one I'd recommend for your library. It is wonderfully put together for your own edification and discipleship. I'd like for you Jim to share at the end of this time with people some of the events we are doing for the Advent Season, not only during Sunday nights but during the week. We have already had one which was Christmas at the Caroline House. That was used of the Lord to invite people to hear about Christ.

Finally use this time to engage yourself with the family of God to enhance your own family's focus so that Christ continues to be as one person says 'the reason for the season.' Take full advantage of this because the world is going to try and make Christmas something else for you. People can also take advantage of lighting the Advent candles in their own homes and use that as a part of family devotions.

Jim: Yes it was good for our daughters to learn about the Prophecy candle, the Bethlehem candle, the Shephard's candle, the Angel's candle followed by the Christ candle and how increasingly it reveals how the Light came into the world.

Harry: Take advantage of our Christmas Eve service where we light from the Christ candle to the rest of the people attending to symbolize how the light of the Gospel goes out into the world.

Jim: That is one of my favorite moments during that service. Another question that came to us is how did the early New Testament church formally celebrated Advent or Christmas?

Harry: Clearly, they preached on the Incarnation. Clearly, the Gospel writers want us to understand about the Incarnation and I think by about 62 A.D. we had this collection of the first three Gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. All these put together give us the Joseph focus on the Incarnation which is from Matthew, the Mary focus which is from Luke and then Mark just jumps us off and moves us forward but I'm very grateful how Luke goes back and picks up the forerunner which is John the Baptist. So we have this emphasis on the Incarnation in the Scripture and then passages throughout the epistles like the one from Galatians earlier and how the Incarnation is in place.

I John 4:2–3 says [2] *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, [3] and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.* This shows us there are false teachers. The affirmation of the humanity of the Incarnate Christ is shown in I John where it says they touched Him, felt Him and saw Him which bring out the sensory dynamics. So the Incarnation was clearly emphasized.

Now did they do an Advent Season? No, but I think this is really what happened because if you go back to the Old Testament there were six feasts outlined. Three of them were major feasts, like the Passover, the Feast of Booths etc., and they have all been fulfilled in Jesus. So it seems as if the New Testament church seeing how God had used fasts but feasts to celebrate what He had promised to do in Jesus and we have our conscience binding feast – the Lord's Supper – which replaces the Passover. The sense of the use of festive seasons seems to have taken hold in the church. So they had an Advent Season where they celebrated the birth of Christ. They had holy week which was a season of celebrating the death, burial and resurrection of Christ and thirdly, the celebration of the outpouring of the Spirit of God. There were these three feasts with the ordained feast of the Passover that was fulfilled in Christ and then the Divinely ordained feast of the Lord's Supper but festive occasions for the church to build community and outreach, following that pattern from the Old Testament with an Advent Season early on in the church. It looks like it was there in the second and third century. Then it just kept building.

Some took it to a place it shouldn't be taken with the binding of conscience, etc, but the use of the Advent Season, holy week and then the feast of Pentecost, celebrating the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of God after the ascension. Those three seasons tended to be at work in the life of the church. Some reformers did away with all of them and some of them reformed them to use them Biblically in worship and evangelism. So we have used that in how to follow those in the reformed faith within Biblical theology.

Jim: Is the Advent Season primarily benefit Christians or can we also use it in our outreach to unbelievers?

Harry: Yes, it can be a wonderful time because of all the Biblical themes that can be traced out from the Incarnation. It can be a glorious time in worship and discipleship in the life of a believer. It can become an occasion for joyful celebration of the Gospel promises fulfilled in the

birth of Christ – 60 plus prophetic words from the Old Testament. These are wonderful occasions to invite people to our drive thru nativity and they can see the Gospel message verbally and visually. There is the Christmas choir concert, and the Christmas Eve candle light services. I would not bring an unbeliever to the Christmas Eve Communion service because there we fence the Table, meaning it's only for the believer. When you do invite them to one of those events then figure out a way to do a follow up and give them a chance to share their reaction.

Jim: Perhaps we have time to address one last question briefly. We have several Christmas icons or imagery associated with Christmas like the Christmas tree, colors, lights etc., what can you share about the origins of some of these?

Harry: I get very diligent theologically of what we ought not do and what we can do but I also don't want to become a Christian version of Scrooge – bah hum bug so to speak. I want to affirm that some of the things that are seen are evidences of the power of the Gospel. Yes Christmas is taking place at a time of a pagan festival when the church was spreading throughout the Roman Empire, known as the Mithras festival. Notice this season though is not referred to as "Mithrasmas" for it's known as Christmas. In other words, the Christians said 'we're not going to do that but we're going to do something we want to do' and guess what happened? The Light drove out the darkness. Children were being abused throughout Europe and then there comes this notion of this very Godly man known as Saint Nicholas. Does this go off into versions it shouldn't go into with Kris Kringle, etc? Yes, sure it does but it actually had a historic root of Christianity saying they were not going to abuse children and this man who would do everything he could to take care of children, provide for them and loved to use the Advent Season to do it, that's where that whole concept was built.

The Christmas tree comes right back to the tree of life. It is the evergreen. It goes back to Psalm 1 and what is said about the believer in Psalm 1:3; *[3] He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.* The Christian is bearing seasonal fruit and they are always in season and that's because of Jesus who is our Tree of Life.

I like to fight for the colors – red, green, white, gold. There is the white color that represents the purity of Christ. The gold color represents the King who has come to save us from our sins. The color green is because Jesus brings life. Why so much red? There are the poinsettias with the vibrant red which symbolizes the blood of Christ for He was born to die. Jesus was born to die but not a martyr's death and not even just a model death. He was born to die an atoning death in our place for our sins. I always fight for red to be dominant during this season. I want the reddest possible red you can possibly see because I want to tell people that Jesus came to shed His blood. Oh how blessed is the crimson flow that makes me white as snow! That is why those things are used.

They are the evidence of the power of the Gospel. Many of these things were being wrongly used for wrong celebrations, perverted celebrations and Christianity just rooted it right out and brought something whereby we could bring a Christological focus upon the Advent Christ who came to die for our sins and who is coming again. Joy to the World the Lord has come and joy to the world the One who has come is coming again.

Jim: That's all the time we have for this session. Our prayer is that the Lord would continue to draw lost souls to Himself and that He would be so gracious to use us. Continue to look for

ways to share the Gospel and take advantage of outreach event opportunities this December to share the love of Christ with others. You can find out more about our Christmas events at briarwood.org/events/. Please continue to send your questions to askthepastor@briarwood.org and Lord willing we'll answer them in upcoming Q&A times. May God bless you.