

CHRISTMAS TIME

"ONLY A MATTER OF TIME"

LUKE 2:1-7

This Week's Core Competency

Trinity – I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 13:14, *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with your all.*

This week's Core Competency might be expressed more specifically: **Trinity/Jesus Christ** – I believe that Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior, is God's only Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified under Pontius Pilate, and raised on the third day. Luke 1:35, *The angel answered Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*

The birth narrative in Luke 2:1-7 focuses on the humanity of Jesus Christ, the God-man. After all, it tells of his *birth!* Luke says while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem registering to be taxed, "the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son" (vv. 6-7a)—a truly historic event that fulfilled the angel's earlier words to Mary, "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus" (1:31).

On the humanity of Jesus, one theologian writes: "The topic of the humanity of Jesus Christ does not, in some ways, arouse quite the attention and controversy that his deity does. It seems on first

For whatever Jesus was, he most surely must have been human.

– Millard J. Erickson

glance to be something of a self-evident matter, for whatever Jesus was, he most surely must have been human" (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2:705).

This means that contrary to Docetism, which held that Jesus only appeared to be human, the man Jesus had a fully functioning physical body or *material* part. His body was no hollow shell; like every human body, it was made up of trillions of cells, creating different types of tissues, forming the typical collection of vital organs and their interrelated circulatory, respiratory, digestive, immune, and nervous systems. And although his conception was unique, the process of gestation that followed was identical to that experienced by every human fetus. And although his birth in Bethlehem occurred under somewhat unusual circumstances, his was nonetheless a normal delivery. The same theologian above adds: "Jesus also had a typical family tree, as is indicated by the genealogies in Matthew and Luke. He had ancestors and presumably received genes from them, just as every other human being receives genes from his or her forebears" (707). He developed physically like other humans do, nourished by food and water. What's more, he was subject to the same physical limitations as other men seeing that he had the same physiology. At times he was hungry (Mt 4:2), fatigued (Jn 4:6), needed to sleep (Mk 4:38); he felt pain, suffered, and died (Jn 19:28-30). Hear the words of the apostle John, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1Jn 1:1).

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It also means that contrary to Apollinarianism, which held that Jesus had a human body but not a human soul, the man Jesus had a rational soul and mind or *immaterial* part. Another theologian writes: "We see several indications that Jesus had a human soul (or spirit). Just before his crucifixion, Jesus said, 'Now is my soul troubled' (John 12:27). John writes just a little later, 'When Jesus had thus spoken, he was troubled in spirit' (John 13:21). In both verses the word troubled represents the Greek term *tarasso*, a word that is often used of people when they are anxious or suddenly very surprised by danger. Moreover, before Jesus' crucifixion, as he realized the suffering he would face, he said, 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death' (Matt. 26:38) . . . Jesus had a full range of emotions. He 'marveled' at the faith of the centurion (Matt 8:10). He wept with sorrow at the death of Lazarus (John 11:35). And he prayed with a heart full of emotion, for 'in the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear' (Heb. 5:7)" (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 533-34). What's more, he demonstrated remarkable intellectual capabilities. He knew the thoughts of friends and foes alike (Lk 9:47; 6:8 respectively). He perceived the character of Nathanael (Jn 1:47-48) and knew the marital history of the Samaritan woman (Jn 4:18). Even more remarkably, he knew that Judas would betray him (Mt 26:25) and that Peter would deny him three times (Mt 26:34). And yet his knowledge was not without limits. It seems clear from the Gospels that he asked questions because he did not know (Mk 5:31; 9:21), and in one case expressly declared that he did not know when the Son of man would return (Mt 24:35; Mk 13:32). Apparently the exercise of his omniscience was subject to the will of his Heavenly Father.

day **1** ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Luke 2:1-7

1 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to

be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

- * Underline "Caesar Augustus" in v. 1.
- * Underline "Quirinius" in v. 2.
- * Box "so" indicating *result* in v. 4.
- * Bracket "of David" in v. 4.
- * Circle "house" in v. 4.

- * In the margin of v. 4 write: "See 2Sa 7:11, 16."
- * Box "because" indicating *reason* in vv. 4, 7.
- * Circle "pledged" in v. 5.
- * Underline "baby," "born," "birth," "firstborn," and "son" in vv. 6-7.

day 2

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. Explain the relationship of Luke 2:1-7 to 1:30-35.
2. Nowadays the nativity narrative has a sentimental, rather romantic, not the least bit scandalous air about it. What do you think?
3. You're Mary; how does traveling more than 70 miles just before your first child is born strike you? Why would you do such a thing?
4. Identify the characters in Luke's story of Jesus' birth.
5. Describe the setting, the *when* and *where*, of the story.
6. How come the repeated reference to "the town of David;" wouldn't a simple "Bethlehem" do?
7. What do you make of the fact that the nativity narrative is *all setting* and no plot?
8. What evidence of divine providence do you see in the story?
9. Luke zeros in on the humanity of Jesus. How so?
10. **Discussion:** Talk about Luke's purpose. What was he trying to accomplish by telling the story Jesus' birth the way he did?

EXAMINE – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

First, regarding the yuletide holiday in general, contemporary images of Christmas and today's traditions surrounding the season retain only a faint semblance of the historic event—too bad. What's more, that semblance grows dimmer with every passing celebration—again, too bad. Philip Yancey writes: "Christmas art depicts Jesus' family as icons stamped in gold foil, with a calm Mary receiving the tidings of the Annunciation as a kind of benediction. But that is not at all how Luke tells the story. Mary was 'greatly troubled' and 'afraid' at the angel's appearance, and when the angel pronounced the sublime words about the Son of the Most High whose kingdom will never end, Mary had something far more mundane on her mind: But I'm a virgin!"

"In the modern United States, where each year a million teenage girls get pregnant out of wedlock, Mary's predicament has undoubtedly lost some of its force, but in a closely knit Jewish community in the first century, the news an angel brought could not have been entirely welcome. The law regarded a betrothed woman who became pregnant as an adulteress, subject to death by stoning.

"Matthew tells of Joseph magnanimously agreeing to divorce Mary in private rather than press charges, until an angel shows up to correct his perception of betrayal. Luke tells of a tremulous Mary hurrying off to the one person who could possibly understand what she was going through: her relative Elizabeth, who miraculously got pregnant in old age after another angelic annunciation. Elizabeth believes Mary and shares her joy, and yet the scene poignantly highlights the contrast between the two women: the whole countryside is talking about Elizabeth's healed womb even as Mary must hide the shame of her own miracle.

"In a few months, the birth of John the Baptist took place amid great fanfare, complete with midwives, doting relatives, and the traditional village chorus celebrating the birth of a Jewish male. Six months later, Jesus was born far from home, with no midwife, extended family, or village chorus present. A male head of household would have sufficed for the Roman census; did Joseph drag his pregnant wife along to Bethlehem in order to spare her the ignominy of childbirth in her home village?" (*The Jesus I Never Knew*, 30, 31). The nativity event was a scandal in its day. We've sanitized it and miss the point entirely.

Second, regarding the Christmas story in general, plot, characters, and setting are the building blocks of narrative. Put differently, something happens to

someone somewhere in every story. Luke's story of the birth of Jesus told in Luke 2:1-7 is surprisingly all about setting. Apart from the baby Jesus, only two characters are mentioned, Joseph and Mary (vv. 4-5). And the plot is reduced to a single clause, "she gave birth to her firstborn, a son" (v. 7). Contrariwise, the first paragraph devotes three verses to the *temporal* setting and the second paragraph four verses to the *physical* setting. By the way, "physical setting is the environment in which the characters move and the action occurs. Temporal setting is the time in which action takes place, either the time of day or year or the historical era" (Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 54). Clearly, Luke zeros in on when and where Mary gave birth to the baby Jesus. It appears that Luke is following the *documentary* impulse he alluded to in his introduction to his Gospel. "Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (1:1-4). So what are readers to make of Luke's emphasis on historical and physical setting?

According to verses 1-3, Jesus was born when Caesar Augustus was emperor of Rome between 27 B.C. and A.D. 14, at the time Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem to register for tax purposes. According to one writer, "Roman law states that the property owner had to register for taxation in the district in which his land was situated. But there is a papyrus of A.D. 104 where the prefect of Egypt ordered Egyptians to return to their home so that the census might be carried out. Since the Jews' property was the property of the fathers' estates the Romans would comply to the custom of laying claim to one's family estate in order to assess it for taxation. Every person needed to appear to be questioned so as to make a proper assessment of his property. Because of this Mary would have needed to go" (Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 15). Luke tells us this registration occurred before the census taken in A.D. 6 when Quirinius was governor of Syria (v. 2). This would narrow the time of Jesus' birth to between 27 B.C. and A.D. 6. However, we know that Jesus was born before Herod's death in 5/4 B.C., so it appears that "although the exact date of Christ's birth

cannot be know, either December, 5 B.C., or January, 4 B.C. is most reasonable" (Hoehner, 27).

According to verses 4-7, Jesus was born in humble circumstances either in a stable or a cave exactly where the prophet predicted. Luke makes it clear that God providentially arranged for him to be born in "the town of David" because Joseph "belonged to the house and line of David" (v. 4); God did this by using the decree of a pagan king to compel Joseph and Mary to "go up" from Nazareth to Bethlehem some eight-five to ninety miles away—and that shortly before Mary delivered. After all, it was only appropriate that David's messianic descendant be born in David's city in fulfillment of

the words the prophet: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from old, from ancient times" (Mic 5:2). Luke's emphasis on the when and where of Jesus' birth underscores its historicity. Luke is telling his readers that the birth of Jesus is no myth; it's fact, not fiction! Not only does his account stress the historicity of Jesus' birth, it also stresses his humanity. Note the words in verse 6: "baby," "born," "birth," "firstborn," and "son." Surely, Jesus was a fully human being who came to earth in the usual way.

The Message of the Passage

Jesus Christ, the fully human son of Mary, was born in Bethlehem in the usual way.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22. Reflect on 3 *living questions* to apply what you have learned this week.

- **Journal your answers to the following *living questions*:**

–How is God making himself known to you?

–How does God want to change you?

–How is God calling you to change your world?

notes STUDY – the commentaries to answer the questions.

v. 1 **Caesar Augustus** Caesar Augustus ruled the empire from 27 B.C. to A.D.14. "After he had, by political astuteness and military strength, put an end to the terrible civil wars which had raged for many years throughout the Roman world and to all resistance that was offered to him, he reigned for forty-four years as absolute monarch over the Roman Empire. Through a peaceful and mild rule he gave to the world a period of unprecedented outward calm and to his huge empire a permanent organisation [sic] which afterward facilitated the spread of Christianity" (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, NICNT, 99-100). "It was Augustus, in fact, who first borrowed the Greek word for 'Gospel' or 'Good News' and applied it as a label for the new world order represented by his reign. The empire declared him a god and established rites of worship. His enlightened and stable regime, many believed, would last forever, a final solution to the problem of government" (Yancey, 33). Augustus was followed by Tiberius who ruled Rome from A.D.14-37. In his fifteenth year, John began preaching in the desert (Lk 3:1).

v. 1 **decree** "Just as the edict of the Persian king Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple accomplished God's plans (see 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; Isa. 44:28-45:1), so Augustus' order that a census should be taken played an important part in God's redemptive plan" (Craig A. Evans, *Luke*, NIBC, 35). It prepared the way for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem as the prophet had predicted (see Mic 5:2).

v. 2 **census** "The census was to ascertain the income, property, and wealth of the inhabitants for purposes of taxation. Since everyone was to register in his own town (v. 3), Joseph went to Bethlehem (v. 4)" (Evans, 35). We register to vote; they registered to pay taxes! "There is sufficient evidence of a census being taken periodically under the Republic and by Augustus in 28 B.C. and on subsequent occasions . . . What is meant is that censuses were taken at different times in different provinces—Augustus being the first on in history to order a census or tax assessment of the whole provincial empire" (Hoehner, 14, 15).

v. 2 **Quirinius** Luke's timing of the census is problematic since Quirinius was not governor until after Herod died and Jesus was born before Herod died. The best possible solution to the problem, which involves the meaning of the Greek word translated "first," is mentioned by many commentators. Since the word can also be translated "before" (cf. Jn 15:18), verse 2 means that this census took place "before" Quirinius was governor of Syria (Hoehner, 11-23; I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC, 104). "The exact date of the census cannot be determined with precision. However, it is reasonable to think that the census would have been after Herod came into disfavor with Augustus in 8/7 B.C. More specifically it was probably after Herod's execution of his sons Alexander and Aristobulus in 7 B.C. when there was an intense struggle for the throne by his other sons which resulted in Herod's changing his will three times before his death in the spring of 4 B.C. With such instability and such a bad state of health, it would have been an opportune time for Augustus to have had a census taken in order to assess the situation before Herod's death. The exact year of this census, which would mark the *terminus a quo* of Christ's birth, is difficult to pinpoint but it was probably taken sometime between 6 and 4 B.C." (Hoehner, 22-23). Another possibility is that the word "first" (v. 2, Gr. *prote*) means "prior" or "former" here (cf. John 15:18).¹⁴⁸ Luke's meaning would then be that the census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was the one Augustus made prior to the one he took when Quirinius was governor of Syria (in A.D. 6). This seems to be the best solution. All the evidence points to the birth of Jesus in late 5 or early 4 B.C." (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Luke," 2017 ed., 43, www.soniclight.com).

v. 5 **pledged** The relationship of Mary to Joseph is somewhat different from either wife or fiancée. The Greek term has been variously translated "engaged" (NASB, NRSV), "betrothed" (RSV, NEB, cf. "betrothed wife" NKJV), "espoused wife" (KJV), and "fiancee" (*The Message*). "This is an unusual way of expressing a journey made by a husband and wife. Luke may have been suggesting here what Matt 1:25 states explicitly, that the marriage had not yet been consummated, although Mary was living as a wife with Joseph (as her going to Bethlehem with him suggests)" (Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, NAC, 107). "Even if Luke meant that Mary was now married to Joseph, the advancement of her pregnancy far beyond the time that had elapsed since their marriage would have been obvious to all in Nazareth and possibly, if not probably, would have led to harsh criticisms and insults. (That such may have been the case in the years following his birth may be in view in the critical remarks found in John 8:41). Whether Mary was married or still engaged, it is not difficult to understand why she, despite being near to giving birth, would have preferred to accompany Joseph" (Evans, 44).

v. 5 **expecting** Eugene Peterson exposes the scandal of the incarnation in contemporary terms. "He went with Mary, his fiancee, who was pregnant" (*The Message*).

v. 7 **firstborn** "Firstborn son' implies that Mary had other children (cf. Matt. 1:25; 13:55; Mark 3:31-35)" (Constable, 44).

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

The account of Jesus' birth recorded in our passage today is simple. On the appointed day in the appointed place to the appointed parents, Jesus was born. His mother lovingly wrapped him in strips of cloth and placed him in a humble feeding trough. The promise given to Mary and Joseph by the angel was fulfilled. The Hope of the world lay sleeping in the hay. I wonder what they thought as they watched him sleep. Surely they didn't comprehend that they were now the parents of the God-man. Unknown to them, their son was fully human and fully God. How can that be? As we celebrate the Savior this Christmas let's remember that He is our "blessed hope" and our "great God and Savior" (Titus 2:13). John described Him as the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). God Himself declared Him His Son, a part of Himself, with whom He was well pleased (Luke 3:22). But He was also like us. He was born as a baby. His body experienced weariness (John 4:6). He was thirsty (John 19:28) and hungry (Matthew 4:2) and had emotions. He was tempted but unlike us, He never sinned. What an amazing Savior! As you talk about the birth of Jesus with your kids this season, don't forget to talk about His life, and death and resurrection! December is the perfect time to tell the Christmas story all the way through to redemption.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Luke 2:1-7

1. Why did Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem?
2. What happened when they arrived?
3. What did Mary do with Baby Jesus?

What Do You Think

1. Describe what you think the place looked like where Jesus was born.
2. How do you think Mary and Joseph felt?
3. What do you think about Jesus being born in such humble circumstances?

What R U Going To Do

Draw a picture of what you think that night looked like when Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Hang it on or near your Christmas tree to remind you that He is the reason we celebrate!

Core Comp

Trinity - I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Memory Verse

Ecclesiastes 3:11 - *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

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30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

Tom Bulick (M.A. in Educational Leadership, Eastern Michigan University, Th.M. in Old Testament, and Ph.D. in Bible Exposition, Dallas Theological Seminary). For more than forty years, Tom has served as pastor, faculty member, and administrator. Tom was Vice President for Student Life and Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Trinity Western University (Vancouver, B.C.) for twelve years before accepting the position of Spiritual Formation Pastor at Pantego Bible Church in 1998. He and his wife Ruth have one son, Zach.

Wendy Hollabaugh (B.S.W. University of Texas at Arlington) is the Children's Minister at Pantego Bible Church. Wendy has over ten years of experience in Children's Ministry. She has a passion for leading families to connect with God and each other. She enjoys creating compelling environments where kids fall in love with God and His Truth. Wendy and her husband, Greg, are also involved in their own personal youth ministry as they are training their three teenagers, Hannah, Aaron and Noah.



8001 Anderson Blvd.
Ft. Worth, TX 76120
1-866-PANTEGO
Fax 817-275-6403
www.pantego.org

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