

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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WHAT CHILD IS THIS: THE NAME ABOVE ALL NAMES

In the December 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*, there was a very interesting editorial by Agnieszka Tennant about a fast growing trend of making women *visualize* Jesus as their “boyfriend.” In one popular book, we learn of women who set up date nights with Jesus. Christie enjoys her Friday nights by going to Barnes & Noble “to drink coffee with the Lord and to read whatever book from the Christian living section he guides me to” or by cooking a wonderful meal and setting the table for two, then “talking to God as if he is actually sitting there at my table with me, because I know that he is.” The author of this book calls women to “prayer, praise, and pampering” retreats: “Although God certainly loves us even with unshaven legs, no makeup, and a bed head hairdo, he also deserves to occasionally have his princess sit at his feet while she is looking and feeling her best.” She casts these retreats as exciting dates. “You are running away with your Lover, not confining yourself to a convent.” In another book, the author assures her readers that “you are the one that overwhelms his heart with just ‘one glance of your eyes,’” quoting from the Song of Solomon. “His gaze is fixed on you,” she writes. “He is captivated by your beauty.” These teachings have spread into churches. My friend’s mother took part in a “tea with the Lord,” during which she and the other women wore their wedding gowns – those, at least, who managed to squeeze into them—and fancied themselves as brides of Christ. An influential Kansas City church teaches thousands of people the so-called Bridal Paradigm, which encourages a quasi-romantic relationship with Christ. And who among us hasn’t detected an eerie resemblance between a contemporary Christian song and a pop diva’s breathy rendition of a sensual love ballad? I don’t question, says Tennant, the devotion of anyone who says she loves Christ intensely, whatever language she uses to express it. But I have little patience for taking biblical metaphors too far and giving one’s relationship with God an air of irreverent chumminess. Somehow, the scenario in which “his princess” shaves her legs for a date with Jesus seems to leave little room for fear of God. And consider how unhelpful this misreading must be to single women who are hormonally awake. The cruel message they get is: If Jesus is *really* your husband, what’s your problem? Be satisfied! The Bible is replete with breathtaking metaphors that hint at God’s love for us. Thank God, we don’t always take them to illogical ends: I’ve never heard a preacher take the Good Shepherd image to mean that God raises his children to ultimately kill and eat them. So, yes, in addition to being the Shepherd, the Bread of Life, and the Vine, Jesus is, poetically speaking, the Bridegroom. And we (not individuals) –the church—are his bride.¹ This kind of absurd approach to interpreting the Bible is particularly appealing to the postmodern mindset that typifies the group known as the Emergent church. They say that a person is entitled to their own perspective on Jesus, since in the final analysis, truth comes down to a matter of personal preference. The leading voice for this group, Brian McLaren is fairly representative of this approach. McLaren and the “Emergent mystique” was the cover story in *Christianity Today* not long ago. The article highlighted the way those involved in Emergent rely heavily on the notion of “mystical” understanding of Christianity. Atmosphere is imported in their meetings with candles, incense and the use of icons and other religious symbols (statues of saints), yoga-type exercises accompanied by the practice of contemplative prayer. All in all, the accent on the sensory experience is prominent. Visualization is stressed to the point that the imagination becomes the key to

spiritual realization.² Phil Johnson, in a series of articles on the Emergent Church made these observations: McLaren portrays *faith* and certainty as opposing concepts. He says he prefers the idea of *confidence* rather than “certainty,” but he carefully qualifies himself to make clear that he will only tolerate a *relative* kind of confidence. He himself is not “absolutely certain” about *anything*. I should add that McLaren wants it made clear that he is not saying no absolutes exist. He’s only saying that *if* they exist, we *can’t* know them with any kind of absolute certainty. And therefore, he says, we should never proclaim anything unequivocally. Brian McLaren says, “Certainty is overrated . . . History teaches us that a lot of people thought they were certain and we found out they weren’t.” In a different interview, he said, “When we talk about the word ‘faith’ and the word ‘certainty,’ we’ve got a whole lot of problems there. What do we mean by ‘certainty’? . . . Certainty can be dangerous. What we need is a proper confidence that’s always *seeking* the truth and that’s *seeking* to live in the way God wants us to live, but that also has the proper degree of self-critical and self-questioning passion.” . . . He even has the audacity to ask for a universal moratorium on preaching about the sin of sodomy. Apparently he thinks the rest of us should be silent about the matter until he makes up his own mind about it. (And he clearly even hints that he might never actually form a settled opinion on the matter. In fact, I can already tell you that if he follows his own epistemological convictions, he won’t. He *can’t*.) So when Brian McLaren claims adherence to the ancient ecumenical creeds, that claim, by Brian McLaren’s own admission, is dubious. He’s not really sure about anything he believes. By any historic evangelical standard, McLaren’s religion is not authentic Christianity at all. And it does frankly raise major questions about the whole “emerging church movement,” when he is given so much credence by people in that movement.³ McLaren recently spoke at a Gay Church which declared in its doctrinal belief that Jesus as they see him was accepting of people regardless of their lifestyle and celebrated diversity for diversity sake!⁴ How different is the Bible’s presentation of the Son of God! We are not told to “visualize” in our imagination what we would *like* Him to be like; rather we are told very clearly who He is! “When we hear of some great undertaking to be performed, we inquire, of course, about the person who is chiefly concerned in it; so, when we are told of the mighty works Jesus Christ engaged to perform, to redeem a lost world, to satisfy Divine justice, to make an end of sin, to abolish death, and to bring life and immortality to light; the first question that occurs is, ‘Who is he?’” so inquired good old John Newton, the 18th century hymn-writer who gave us “Amazing Grace.”⁵ Newton directs us to Isaiah 9:6-7 and says: “This text, if it stood alone in the Bible (supposing the Scriptures to be a revelation from God), would be a full warrant and firm foundation, for that great point of Christian faith and doctrine, that Jesus Christ is very God and very man.”⁶ The context of the passage from Isaiah must not be ignored. Beginning in 9:1, the prophet’s words describe darkness and gloom all about! It is a time of great distress. All around the prophet were clouds of darkness. “He heard,” says Spurgeon, “prophetic thunders roaring, and he saw flashes of the lightning of divine vengeance; clouds and darkness, for many a league, were scattered through history; but he saw far away a bright spot – one place where the clear shining came down from heaven.”⁷ Isaiah calls this “a great light.” The darkness of sin can only be dispelled by light and light is the gift of God (Genesis 1:3). “It cannot be produced from a human heart which itself is in darkness. The whole work of Christ and all the blessings which He brings may be characterized by the one word *light*.”⁸ In Isaiah 7:14 (cited in Matthew 1:23), the virgin born son called “Immanuel” is announced. Now the child who brings light and rejoicing (9:3) is introduced in greater detail.

I. THE NAMES OF THE IMMANUEL CHILD

The word “child” appears first in the Hebrew text, for all the weight and emphasis fall upon it—and it is *for us* that He is to be born.⁹ The child is worthy to bear these names. They are accurate descriptions and designations of His being and character. In the Bible, the name indicates the character, essence or nature of a person or object. As Young correctly points out, “When, therefore, it is stated that He shall be called, we are to understand that the following names are descriptive of the Child and deserve to be borne by Him.”¹⁰ The translation of the KJV gives the impression that there are five names, but actually there are four (as rendered in the NIV). These are double-membered names.

A. WONDERFUL COUNSELOR *PELE YOETZ*

The word “wonderful” is not an adjective but a noun, so literally this expression is “Wonder-Counselor.” As a *Counselor*, He is a *Wonder*. There is none like Him. The word PELE is used in Exodus 15:11 and Psalm 77:15 to describe the acts of God. In Judges 13:18 the Angel reveals the fact that He is deity by stating: “Why do you ask my name? It is Wonderful.” This, as Hengstenberg observes, “means my whole nature is wonderful, of unfathomable depth, and cannot therefore be expressed by any human name.”¹¹ Such counseling is only given by God (cf. Psalm 16:7; 32:8 and especially Isaiah 28:29). To designate this child with such a title is to make the clearest affirmation that He is deity.¹²

B. MIGHTY GOD ‘*EL GIBBOR*

In prose the word ‘EL usually appears with other words such as ‘EL SHADDAI, ‘EL ‘ELYON. Liberal scholars have argued that ‘EL GIBBOR does not refer to deity since ‘EL in the plural (ELOHIM) may have reference to men (as in Psalm 82:1, 6). But ‘EL, especially in Isaiah, is always used in reference to God alone (cf. 10:21). Furthermore, it is used as a personal name (Isaiah 31:3 cf. also Jeremiah 32:18 and Deuteronomy 10:17). The Gospels repeatedly stress the power of Christ (Matthew 28:18. Jesus declares that He has overcome the world (John 16:33); we may be of good cheer because our Savior is the “mighty God.”

C. THE EVERLASTING FATHER *ABSHI ‘AD*

“The word ‘AD,” says Young, “signified perpetuity or duration. It may have the sense of eternity, as when Isaiah speaks of the ‘high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity . . .’ (57:15).”¹³ This again signifies that character of the child. Elsewhere we read of God described as Father (Isaiah 63:16; Psalm 103:13). Why is the Son called the Father? It is in relation to His people. He is a King who cares for His subjects the way a father cares for his children (cf. Isaiah 22:21; II Kings 13:14; Psalm 68:5). The quality of this fatherhood is defined by the word eternity. Again, this can only have reference to deity.¹⁴ “The name means that the Messiah is eternal and paternal in relation to His people.”¹⁵

D. THE PRINCE OF PEACE *SAR SHALOM*

This stands purposely at the end and is very emphatic. He establishes Peace. In as much as the peace to be made is eternal, it becomes obvious that more than a temporary cessation of earthly hostilities is in view here. The *cause* of all strife and misery must be addressed, namely, human sin. Peace can only be established when sin is addressed—this first and foremost—has reference to the enmity which existed between God and humanity. The Prince of Peace must make peace by dealing with sin--and this is exactly what the Lord Jesus did do (cf. Romans 5:1).

CONCLUSION: Taken together, the four names given to this child are an extension of the name IMMANUEL. He does only what God can do because of who He is, “God-with-us.” At this time of the year when our minds are so easily distracted by the season (!), let us heed the words of the Puritan Thomas Manton on this passage: “To increase our reverence, and that the ignominy of his cross may not obscure his glory, nor lessen his respect in our hearts, but that we may have high and honourable thoughts of our humbled Lord in his lowest estate. Let us give much thought to Isaiah 9:6, 7 and why so?...When we are meditating only upon his humiliation, the natural atheism which is in our hearts is apt to turn those thoughts into a snare, and our respects to the majesty of Christ are abated. Therefore we ought again and again to consider his divine nature, and that glorious estate wherein he was from the beginning, so to balance our thoughts of his humiliation.”¹⁶ **What child is this? He is Jesus, the One who saves His people from their sin. He is Immanuel.** The Emergent crowd promotes contemplative prayer viz. mysticism. This type of visual imagination caters to the vain-imagination of our hearts. One very high-profile Emergent pastor, Erwin McManus, openly endorses a New-Age form of spirituality that encourages people to visualize the mystical Jesus in ways that are personally appealing. McManus’ website declares, “Erwin is the catalyst behind Awaken, a collaboration of dreamers committed to

creating environments that expand imagination and unleash creativity. Convinced that the world is changed by dreamers and visionaries, Awaken serves the purpose of history by maximizing the divine potential in every human being.”¹⁷ This is sheer paganism. This Jesus is *another* Jesus (II Cor. 11:4). He is not the Christ of Scripture, the one we met in the Gospels and in Isaiah. 9:6-7.

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ “Dating Jesus,” *Christianity Today* (Dec. 2006), p. 56.
- ² *Christianity Today* (Nov. 2004) p. 37-41
- ³ *Pulpit Magazine: The Online Magazine of The Shepherd's Fellowship*. “Introducing the ECM,” (Nov./Dec. 2006).
- ⁴ <http://www.sherwoodopendoor.org/index2.html>
- ⁵ *The Works of John Newton II* (Rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), p. 340.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ C.H. Spurgeon, *A Treasure of Spurgeon on the Life and Work of Our Lord: The Messiah* (Rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 107.
- ⁸ E. J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-18* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 325.
- ⁹ Young writes: “Isaiah had already pointed out (7:14) that the Messiah would be with us (IMMANUEL) to bring us blessing; here He is to be for us (LANU). At the same time this LANU is to be contrasted with the LAKEM (to you) of Isaiah 7:14.” Ibid. p. 330.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. p. 331.
- ¹¹ E. W. Hengstenberg, *Christology of the Old Testament I* (Rpt. MacDonald Publishing Co., N.D.), p. 449. “Revelation 19:12 is to be compared, where Christ has a name written that no man knows but He himself to intimate the immeasurable glory of His nature. That which is here, in the first instance, said to all others, holds true of His whole nature; the King is a Wonder as a Counselor, because His whole person is wonderful,” Ibid.
- ¹² This is an example of what is known as “prophetic paradoxes.” A prophetic paradox is made up of two or more prophecies each of which contains a seeming contradiction with no real absurdity involved and present an enigma which, without a clue to its fulfillment, seems impossible to solve. Consider some of these impossible contrasts: God will come to earth to be born as a child. The Messiah will be begotten by God, yet He will be God. He will be “a son” in time, yet He is “The Everlasting Father.” Note further the way they are providentially, even miraculously, fulfilled in the life of Jesus of Nazareth in the New Testament. Cf. F. John Meldau, *The Prophets Still Speak: Messiah in Both Testaments*, (Rpt. Christian Victory Publishing, 1988), p. 37.
- ¹³ Young, op. cit., p. 338.
- ¹⁴ Note the remarks of the Puritan giant, John Owen: “And this may be added to the other names of God that are attributed to Christ: as *Adonai*, Psalm 110:1; -- *Elohim*, Psalm 45:6; Hebrews 1:8; -- *Jehovah*, Jeremiah 23:6, 33:16; Malachi 3:1; Psalm 83:18; -- *God*, John 1:1; -- *The true God*, (I John 5:20; -- *The great God*, Titus 2:1.” *The Works of John Owen*, XII (Rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, p. 315.
- ¹⁵ Victor Buksbazen, *The Prophet Isaiah: A New Translation and Commentary*, The Spearhead Press, 1971), p. 165.
- ¹⁶ *The Works of Thomas Manton XX* (Rpt. Maranatha, N.D.), p. 403.
- ¹⁷ cf. www.AwakenHumanity.org