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College Baptist Church

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God the Son Lives, Loves, and Leads

1 Peter 2:19-25

"We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only begotten Son, conceived by the Holy Spirit. We believe in His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles and teachings. We believe in His substitutionary atoning death, bodily resurrection, ascension into heaven, perpetual intercession for His people and personal visible return to earth."

From January until about the middle of April we are studying our way through the 12 Affirmations that make up the basic doctrinal statement of the Baptist General Conference with which we have recently voted to affiliate. These core beliefs lay the foundation for everything we do and everything we hold dear as a church. They're the same essential affirmations on which this church has stood for the 150 years of its history.

We exist and have our purpose as a church because there is a God worthy of our worship. We know about this God who inhabits eternity, far above our earthly experience, because he reveals himself to us through his Word. And so we began with the Word of God because it reveals to us everything we need to know about God, whose glory we crave, even when we seek after it in such meager substitutes.

Today, as we continue to unfold the three persons of the trinity, we come back to the Word of God. Because in the Son of God, the second person of the trinity, the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God the Son, as the Gospel of John tells us, is that person of the triune God who expresses and explains the immortal, invisible person who is God the Father. He is God with skin on him.

Probably in the 2000-year history of the church more theology has been devoted to Jesus Christ, the Son of God, than to any of the persons of the Godhead because the person of Christ is so central to the identity of the church as a Christian church. The divinity of Jesus Christ sets the church apart from every other monotheistic faith, from Judaism, from Islam, from Unitarianism. This was the church's first definitive affirmation: Jesus is the Christ, Jesus is Lord!

More church councils have been devoted to defining the doctrine of the Son than to any other question. Is he divine or just a special man who was adopted by God to be a Son the way Adam was called a 'son of God'? Is he just half-God because he had a divine Father but a human mother? Or is he fully God? Is he different from God the Father in essence (or substance), or are they just alike in their essence? Or is he "of one substance with the Father" by whom all things were made? Did he have one nature or two? Did he have one will or a divine and a human will? Councils in the 4th and 5th centuries settled the orthodox answers to those questions and we confess our agreement with their answers each time we affirm these creeds, like the Apostles Creed and the Nicene Creed, that summarize the beliefs of the earliest church.

So if the infinity and invisibility and majesty of God the Father make it difficult to sum up the first person of the trinity in a brief half an hour, the long history of theology make it challenging again to sum up the second in just one sermon. But the Nicene Creed summarizes its priorities in a couple of minutes. And the BGC Affirmation summarizes its priorities in about 3 sentences. So we'll focus on these most important priorities, too, and recognize again that this is a selective look at rich and deep component of our faith that still leaves an inexhaustible supply of material for plenty of more sermons.

This fourth Affirmation in the BGC statement concentrates on three main truths about Jesus Christ: (1) he was conceived, born, and **lived** sinlessly in the flesh -- he lives! (2) his life, death, and resurrection accomplished our salvation -- because he **loves** us! and (3) his ascension and anticipated return in the future means that he is the Lord who **leads** us into the future and, as Peter says in our scriptural text this morning, he leads us also by leaving us an example. He lives. He loves. He leads. Jesus is Lord, the Son of God in all of these senses.

The first sentence of the affirmation there in the bulletin uses two key words about Jesus. He was begotten of God the Father. He was conceived by God the Holy Spirit. In our own human experience, we think of being conceived as the first moment of our being begotten. All those "begat" chapters tell us which fathers had which sons. And all those begettings began with a moment of conception.

In the case of God the Son, though, the order is the other way around. He was begotten before all time, as the creed says. That doesn't mean there was a moment before human history when God the Son didn't exist and then all at once the Father begot the Son. God is the same. Yesterday, today, and forever. Begotten before all time, means begotten outside of time. Eternally begotten. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

There was never a moment at which God didn't exist in three persons. God the Son has always, eternally, been in a son-to-father relationship with God the Father. He always will be. Begotten means that his role is subordinate and dependent upon God the Father, the way a son's role is dependent upon a father's. That doesn't make their being unequal. My son is my equal in everything that has to do with our being human, and he has been since the first moment he was a human. His value, his right to life, his membership in the species homo sapiens: all the same as mine, because he was begotten of human parents.

CS Lewis put the important point this way: "When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds." (*Beyond Personality*, NY, 1948), p.5. So when God the Father begets a Son, he begets God. Fully, 100% God. As Paul says in Col 2:9, "In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily."

So Jesus was begotten first. Later, in time, he was conceived in his mother Mary by the Holy Spirit, and born of her as a virgin. That is his conception in the flesh, the beginning of a brief, 30-year time in which the Son of God, who is eternally God and eternally human also emptied himself of his divine privileges and took on human flesh. That's what the word "incarnation" means. Carne in Latin and in Spanish means meat. God took shape in flesh and meat and bones. The greatest mystery of all history. Majesty in meekness.

Look with me for a moment at Lk 1:30ff. "The angel spoke to Mary and said 'Do not be afraid, Mary for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'" Mary replies, "How will this be, since I'm a virgin?" And the angel answers: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy--'the Son of God.'"

It's that word "therefore" that makes the virgin birth such a key element of this affirmation about the Son of God. Some might say that the virgin birth isn't essential to the doctrine of the Son of God. God could have brought his Son into the world any way he wanted to. It may be true that God can do whatever he wanted to, but the message of the angel in the authoritative Word is that God was pleased to make it clear that this was his own, uniquely begotten, divine Son by working this miracle. A miracle that makes it unmistakable that the father of Jesus was not Joseph. The father of Jesus is God.

Theoretically God the Son could have become incarnate on earth any way he pleased. It's the angel Gabriel's declaration that makes the virgin birth essential to the doctrine of the Son of God because Gabriel said God chose to demonstrate Jesus divine identity this way.

Mary asks the reasonable question, how can I, a virgin, have a child. How can this human child you've promised be the divine Son whose kingdom has no end? Gabriel answers very simply: God the Holy Spirit will come upon you ... Therefore the child to be born will be called the Son of God. For Gabriel, for Luke, for God in revealing his Word, the divine sonship of Jesus Christ can't be separated from the virgin birth.

The nature of his birth tells us something indispensable about the nature of his life. He lives eternally. On earth he lived as God: sinlessly (achieving all righteousness, powerfully (able to work divine miracles), and authoritatively (teaching the infallible message of the omniscient, eternal God).

In the words of Peter (v.22), Christ "committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." He lived by faith and God reckons faith as righteousness.

In the words of the Affirmation, "we believe that God the Son lives. We believe in His virgin birth, sinless life, miracles, and teachings."

But God the Son didn't come to earth just to live righteously. He came because of the deepest motive we discovered in the character of God the Father last week. He came out of a heart of mercy. He came from a motive of love.

What do we know about love? How do we recognize it? (1 Cor 13:4ff) "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things."

Jesus loved the most deeply of any human because he endured more suffering than any human ever bore. And as Peter says, he suffered in a praiseworthy and gracious way -- the truly loving way: not because he got caught doing something wrong but because doing what is right and beneficial for someone else very often requires sacrifice and suffering to get it done.

In his case the suffering was excruciating. Anyone who saw the Passion this past year got a look at the ends to which God the Son was willing to go because of the depth of his love.

He didn't die on a cross for the reasons the Romans thought they put him up there, because he had committed a crime and should be punished for it. There wouldn't be any credit in that, Peter says, and it wouldn't have done anyone any good. He was on the cross (v.24) bearing our sins in his body, dying our death to sin.

This is what the Affirmation means by calling his death substitutionary and atoning. We have all sinned, every one of us. We have trusted ourselves, and we have trusted promises the world makes and cannot keep. We have offended the most precious and reliable object of hope in the universe by treating him as unimportant and untrustworthy. And the wages of sin is death. We deserve to die for the gravity of our offenses. Worse, our own judicial sentiments wouldn't settle for anything less than a punishment of unending suffering if we really owned up to the heinousness of our atrocities in offending such a holy God. But Christ, in his infinitely great love for us, took that penalty for us, and took it while we were yet sinners. Suffered before we ever even came to the point of saying, I'm sorry.

That's love. Substituting for us before we ever loved him. Atoning for us -- making us literally "at one" with God by letting God's righteous wrath pour out on him, instead of on us. By his wounds we have been healed.

The Son of God doesn't just (1) live. He lives to love (2).

But, third, His bodily resurrection, his ascension, the example of his life, his perpetual intercession for us, the promise of his return in glory -- what is all that for in Scripture, and in our Affirmation, and in the life and works of the Son of God?

Peter gives the same answer to that question three times in this passage we're looking at in ch.2. In v.21, he says Christ suffered to leave you an example so that you could follow in his steps. In v.24, he says Christ bore our sins on the cross so we would die to sin and live to righteousness. At the end of that same verse he says by his wounds he aimed to heal us. Following his example, living to righteousness, healed.

The death and resurrection of Christ don't just leave us forgiven and wondering what to do next, let alone forgiven and then left to go about our lives the way they were when we wound up under the sentence of death. Christ loves us too much just to say I forgive you and then leave us on our own from there.

Imagine the marriage counselor who manages after months of painful counseling to get an estranged couple to reconcile with each other. Finally both husband and wife say, I forgive you, and the counselor says, ok, my work is done. And the couple go back to their separate apartments and very amicably continue the visitation agreement with the kids, and otherwise they seldom talk to each other again.

That reconciliation isn't complete yet. This couple isn't experiencing the joy and fulfillment of marriage. All they've done is forgive. It's a wonderful and hard-fought first step. But it's only back to the starting gate. We aren't really satisfied until it's a step toward something better.

Christ didn't die and rise again just so we could be forgiven and then simply get back to our old lives with a get-out-of-hell free card in our pocket. He wants our lives to prosper. He wants us to go on from being free from guilt to being free for eternity's greatest joys.

An example to follow of enduring the cross because of the joy set before us; righteousness to live out; healing to experience. That's what his ascension as Lord into heaven and his ongoing intercession for us and the promise of his return are all about. He wants to lead us somewhere, and he doesn't just tell us which way to head. He provides us an example so that we can follow him in his steps.

Now for a lot of people that doesn't sound like good news. It doesn't sound like gospel, because living to righteousness sounds like going back to the demands of the law that we're a big chore, and one that turned out to be impossible to live up to. No sooner has the burden been lifted at Calvary than another burden of living to righteousness is getting put right back in its place.

So now that I'm a forgiven sinner, a Christian, I've got to start living by a bunch of puritanical rules that take all my old fun away? I've got to give up my old pleasures and give up my leisurely Sunday mornings to go to church and my Wed night poker games to go to prayer meeting, and I've got to start carrying a Bible to work and say goodbye to all the sinners I used to be friends with, and stop mowing the grass on Sunday? and oh the list of Christian rules goes on! And this is the good news of the gospel that God the Son died to give me?

But when we feel like that, we are missing the point of Peter's argument and, worse, missing the point of Jesus' substitutionary atoning death, bodily resurrection, and all the rest of his redemptive acts that our Affirmation lists. The aim of Christ, the Son of God, on the cross was not just to liberate us from the guilt of sin. The good news is that it was loving enough to liberate us from the enslaving power of sin, too. The purpose of Christ to lead us in his steps to lives of righteousness was not to diminish the good news; his purpose was to double it.

Would it really be good news if the Bible taught that the death of Christ took away the guilt of sin and left us enslaved to its power? If that sounds like good news to you, that you could go on living the way the world does, only without punishment, then what that shows is that you love sin and not God.

But if you deeply desire for Christ's substitutionary atoning death to set you free not just from the guilt of sin but also from its enslaving power, then the promise of Christ to be our leader, our shepherd, the guardian of our souls, doesn't return us from the gospel back to a new legal demand; it makes the gospel even better news. By his wounds we aren't loaded up with new responsibilities. By his wounds we are healed. The shepherd of our souls leads us beside still waters and makes us lie down in green pastures. Christ died to restore our souls with righteousness, not to burden them with rules.

The fact that Christ died to be our shepherd and not our slavemaster doesn't mean that there won't be any further suffering in our lives. Sometimes the shepherd has to employ the rod and the staff to keep us from straying from the richest pastures and becoming lost sheep again. Sometimes the one who heals and restores us has to do difficult surgery and painful therapy to restore us to good health. But no patient who trusts his doctor and no sheep who trusts his shepherd thinks of these painful measures as nothing but a chore.

We are glad that we have a good doctor to point us in the direction of help, no matter how painful it is. We are glad with the joy of the gospel that Christ left us his own example of suffering to follow so that we can endure our own crosses and despise our own shames for the joy he leads us to. Faith, trust, means that we follow where the Son of God leads, confident that he is interceding for us at every moment (just like he did for Peter and his faith in Lk 22:32, when Satan demanded to have him), confident that goodness and mercy are following us all the days of our lives, and confident that we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

The Son of God lives. The Son of God lives to love us. And he loves us enough to lead us in paths of righteousness for his own great name's sake. Let's express our love to such a great savior.