

THE FORMATION AND FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

Taught by Don Maurer

Session: December 23, 2011

Our Father and our God, you are the one who has created us and continues to sustain us every nanosecond of every day. Father, you also, in the fullness of time, sent your only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Father, how often we ever thank you enough for your incredible gift. Father in heaven, we pray that you would just help us in this study, this very brief study of these individuals who are part of what we call the Christmas account, Father, that we may be instructed in your word this morning. Father in heaven, thank you for your Word; it is a life unto our path. We praise you and thank you in the Name of and for sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sig asked me to do this. I had something on my mind I wanted to share. Notice the title of your handout is Cons, Pros and Wise Men. It's kind of an odd way of [UNCLEAR] usually its pros and cons is how we usually say it. I'll be talking, you'll see, hopefully why I named it that in a minute.

Well, Christmas is here, folks, to the delight of some and the chagrin of others. If I hear one more time, "Last Christmas, I gave you my heart," {LAUGHTER} I'll scream! I hate that song! Nothing to do with Christmas whatsoever. [UNCLEAR] no offense to anyone here. The fact is that I really do enjoy Christmas, especially the music. I have tapes. I have music on the Internet. I love the hymns. I have a tradition of 36 hours, which I'm going to have to split this here and listen to some on Monday because the family is coming over on Sunday, of nothing but the necessities and everything like that, but listening to music is just a wonderful time of worship for me.

I just wanted to make a few comments...I won't spend a whole lot of time on it, but the question is, has been throughout church history, to celebrate or not to celebrate. We know that Christmas is rather ancient, but it's also relatively modern. The prevailing view as to why we have Christmas is because Constantine, in the 4th century, decided that while all these Pagans are celebrating all this stuff, the Saturnalia and all of this pagan revelry going on, so we're going to, at the same time, have a celebration of the Nativity, the Feast of the Nativity, the birth of Christ.

Not everyone agrees with that assessment. James White, the Reformed Baptist scholar, believes that what happened is that the belief that Christ was born in December or January is very ancient going back to the supposition that Zacharias may have...the high priest that year, usually they were on duty in the Spring. So if it was March or April and then nine months later, the birth of Christ...we just don't know. We don't know the exact date.

It may be interesting and shocking to you to realize that some Christians throughout the centuries have not celebrated Christmas. The Puritans, for example, Bruce talks about a lot. They did not observe it. And let me just open it up to all of you, and of course, Bishop Rogers, you're probably the expert on a lot of these things. Why would the Puritans not celebrate Christmas? What was their reasoning?

Bill: *Romish Rags.*

Yes, that's what they called—Romish Rags.

Audience Member: *What was the answer?*

Bill said that the Puritans called Christmas Romish Rags. It might be a little shocking to us, but that's what they called it. But why? Why would they come up with that kind of designation? Why would they say that?

Ted: *I would say that the Christian purpose, the reason for the holiday, had been lost amongst Pagan understanding.*

Okay, that's part of it.

Ted: *[UNCLEAR] attach themselves to the holiday.*

Yeah, boy, tell me about it, huh, about all the debris and everything. That's part of it. It's not all of it.

Audience Member: *I'd say part of it is an overreaction to anything that Rome did.*

Yes. Anything that smelled like Rome had to be discarded. Don't forget, I mean, it was mandatory, in those days. It wasn't voluntary. It was a holy day of obligation. Rome still teaches that it is. If you don't attend mass on Christmas, you're guilty of a mortal sin. If you were to die at that moment, you'd go straight to hell. That's still in the books. There was another even more core reason that has something to do with that.

Audience Member: *Was it more of a celebration of Mary than Christ?*

No. Their reasoning is this. Nowhere in Scripture are we, by command from Christ or the apostles, or example, do we have any command to celebrate, annually, the birth of Christ. I put a lot of Scriptures there for you. We won't look them up for the sake of time, but you can look them up at your leisure. They would say that there is no holy day for man to institute a holy day for whatever good intentions there may be, is sin, they would say. The only holy day Christ has instituted, they said, is the Lord's Day.

They said, for example, Christ said, "You make the Word of God void for the sake of your traditions, teaching as commandments of God the traditions of men." They would have considered Christmas a tradition of man. The book of Colossians 2:16-23, at the end there it says that "these things have an appearance of good intentions." The old King James calls it will worship. In other words, the Puritans said, "We're not doing it for Christ; we're doing it for ourselves because it makes us feel good." I think, ironically though, in that same passage, it says that we're not to judge one another on those matters. I think perhaps the Puritans maybe went a little bit too far in that direction. That was their view.

Now, how would you respond to that? That sounds like a pretty formidable argument, I mean, after all, [UNCLEAR] Scripture doesn't say that we're to celebrate Christmas. It was not commanded in Scripture as forbidden, the regular principle, I don't know if all of you are familiar with that, but anyway, how would you respond to that? Why then have the majority of Christians throughout the centuries celebrated Christmas? Is there anything that we can say in favor of it?

Audience Member: *Well why not? You know, you celebrate your birthday.*

Well, they would say that's Pagan, too, but go ahead.

Audience Member: *I would say look at the example of Jesus. Why do you see in John 10:22...*

Ah ha! I was going to brought that up. Go ahead.

Audience Member: *...in Jerusalem where the Feast of Dedication is commonly which is commonly called Hanukah.*

Yeah. He didn't condemn it, did he? He didn't say, "Ah, there you Pharisees go again with those man made feasts." He was there, wasn't he?" We also have Purine, the Old Testament Feast, not commanded by God. Now the Puritan's answer, "Well that wasn't worship," but we don't know that for sure. Okay, worship isn't mentioned, but I find it hard to believe that they didn't have some kind of...any more than Thanksgiving, by the Pilgrims, was commanded in Scripture, but yet they did it, seasons of thanksgiving, that kind of thing.

***Audience Member:** I wonder if the Puritans thought that gifts would become the dominant interest.*

Oh, I'm sure that they criticized the debauchery of that day, so to speak, they'd roll over in their graves if they saw what happens, what it has become for us today, that's for sure. That was part of their reason for not celebrating it. But we know that the angels celebrated it, didn't they. They were the ones who appeared to the shepherds, and it isn't angels whom God is concerned about; it's people. Now granted, they didn't do it every year. Nevertheless, I think that it's important that we can celebrate; I think it's a great thing that we can celebrate.

***Audience Member:** I guess you got me to thinking. The whole idea of us gathering to worship on a regular basis, it was started as a tradition of the early church. It's a lot of, seems to me, what we do was started with how the early church formed itself. Some of the things in the church calendar were formed as a [UNCLEAR] to Roman feasts, [UNCLEAR] pagan feast days that were around also, if I'm not mistaken. So the idea that there would be a Christmas service to commemorate the birth of Christ and there would be an Easter service to commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ seems to me to fall in the line...I guess I don't understand where the Puritans quite were coming from, but that's how I've reasoned it out.*

They were coming from, and I don't want to beat a dead horse, but where they're coming from is that if something in Scripture is not commanded, it's forbidden.

***Audience Member:** Yeah, but I guess this is where, it's just worth pondering for a second. This is where we get splits in churches...*

Well, I know.

***Audience Member:** This is where we get splits in denominations.*

I know.

***Audience Member:** It's really, you know, you can just go overboard with this stuff, but anyway...*

I agree. Let me just say, too that Romans 14:5-6...now I know that some people will have an answer, "Well, that's not talking about Christmas and Easter," well no, not in the context, but in the, certainly the principle. Right? One person esteems one day as holy and another says every day is the same. He who gives thanks and sets aside the day does so for the Lord. So if I want to set aside, or the church wants to set aside December 25th or any other day to commemorate the birth of Christ or whatever, feel free. It's the biblical pattern. God set Passover and other days in the Old Testament as remembrances, so why not celebrate for fulfillment of those things, the Lord Jesus Christ and everything that he has done, any excuse to get together and worship is a good thing, I think.

***Audience Member:** How could you not want to celebrate the wonderful things that our God has done? I mean, it's like Jesus has this processional into Jerusalem and the Pharisees say you've got to calm these*

people down, they're getting a little too rowdy. So if they weren't shouting the very stones would cry out.

Well that's right. Now, their answer would be, "Those who do not choose to celebrate Christmas...we do it every day, not just one day a year." My answer to that is, "Well, do you love your wife every day? You take her out for her anniversary? Remember that?" The important thing to remember is the thing that we have to remember is that it is voluntary. It's not mandatory. It's not a holy day of obligation. It's not a sin if you don't, and it's not a sin if you do. If we have no further questions or comments on that...

Audience Member: *Don, if I may, in the Old Testament and New Testament, Isaiah 7 and 14 says, "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us." Matthew 1:23 reiterates that. It says, "Behold, a virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is God with us." The Daily Bread this morning talks about, Joe Stowell wrote about God pursuing us, and he pursued us.*

Amen!

Audience Member: [UNCLEAR] [OVERLAPPING]...

Amen! Amen!

Audience Member: [UNCLEAR] *I know that the came.*

Yes. That is, just think about it. It sends shivers up your spine. The God of the Universe!! The One who created us, who could banish us and incinerate us in an instant, and deservedly so, because of our sin, invaded this planet on midnight, December 25th...whenever...whatever day it was. Amen! Hallelujah! Let's rejoice! Let's celebrate! Forever!

Audience Member: *Another factor, I think, was that the church year became an instrument to call to our mind these great events in the life of Christ, so it was kind of a way for the church to teach. A lot of people couldn't read in those days, so these high point celebrations, which are both natural, but also were needed. Think of not having any of these things...you'd lose touch with them. We need these events celebrated to keep them before our hearts and our eyes, particularly in times when people couldn't read.*

Right. Of course, the Reformers would say, "Well, we need to teach people to read so that we can read the Word of God." I'm not a big, big, big church calendar fan. I don't do like Ascension Day and Trinity Sunday and all that. But I do enjoy Christmas. I do enjoy...

Audience Member: *Easter? Good Friday?*

Yeah, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday. Yes.

Ted: *Don, you're halfway there. {LAUGHTER} [UNCLEAR] headed in the right direction.*

Not everybody would agree with you on that, Ted. So that's the introduction.

Ted: *Let me just...I think that Puritanism, in part, is based on the belief that the church can be purified. That's why they're called Puritans. If you start purifying the church, where do you stop?*

Good point.

Ted: *And the result, ultimately, is you're like Jehovah's Witnesses—we don't celebrate Christmas because it's not in the Bible. There's got to be a belief that God continued to direct and guide his church beyond what the Scripture states. He did not add to it, but he continued to guide it.*

Audience Member: *And it's not contrary to Scripture.*

Ted: *It's not contrary. Right. The Scripture says, "I will lead you into all truth." Too many of us think, when he says, "I'll lead you into all truth," we're talking about you, individually, and you, and we all kind of go off on our own truths. I think that, as it was in the Greek, it's plural—you, plural—all of you, I'm going to lead into all truth.*

Yeah, the question is was he speaking to the apostles or...

Ted: *Well that's fine, but [UNCLEAR] successors.*

Well...alright. {LAUGHTER} Okay.

Audience Member: *Why don't you get on with it because we'll be here all morning.*

I did want to talk about these friends of ours, the wise men, literally magi, from which we obviously get the English word what?

Audience Member: [UNCLEAR]

Yeah. They were sorcerers. They may have believed in one God and that we should pray to him or whatever, but they were engaged in activities that Scripture condemns. Perhaps from Persia—a lot of people believe that they were from there—maybe Babylon. With the influence of Esther, in Persia, and the four men in the book of Daniel. I can never remember their original names; I remember their Pagan name—Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego and Daniel. They would, these people would have known about the true God, and they would have known about the expectation of a Messiah, a King. I have the questions on there—how many were there?

Audience Member: *Many.*

Nobody knows. That's right. What were their names?

Audience Member: *Nobody knows.*

That's right. Very interesting how we have all these traditions. We three Kings of Orient are, smoking on a rubber cigar... {LAUGHTER}, it [UNCLEAR] and exploded, we two Kings. No, actually, that's a very {LAUGHTER}...actually, that hymn is a very good hymn. It really is. If you listen to the whole thing and all the verses, it's a very good hymn. I'll talk about that a little bit later.

Their names—Melchior, Caspar, Balthazar—no [UNCLEAR] for it, whatever. There's probably no biblical warrant for them being kings. Now I do have a couple of Scriptures there that people who, the writer of We Three Kings may have gotten it from these Scriptures. For example, oh let's see, I believe it's Psalm 72:10, that says that the Kings of Seba and Sheba shall come before you and bow before you and present gifts. Also we have Isaiah 60:3, that kings shall enter...I can't remember...I'm doing it off of the top of my head here...I should have written it down...but kings will rejoice at your rising. There might be a little bit of truth there, but I don't think these people were kings.

We're not told about the star. We're just not told much detail...about all kinds of fanciful imaginations have risen about that, whether it's a supernatural phenomenon, which I tend to believe, or whether it was a normal occurrence, a normal star, or a conjunction of the planets. I believe Jupiter, that something happened perhaps I don't know 5, 6, 7 BC, somewhere around there. It always shocks people when I tell them that Christ was probably born in 4 or 5 BC because of the discrepancy in the calendars they we have.

We're not told, interestingly enough, how these men knew that it was His star, God's star, and how they knew that it was somehow connected to the birth of Christ. We know that they saw the star and that they had come to worship Him. Now that's very, very important. They knew, somehow, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit, I believe it was a work of grace in their hearts that God was doing, even in the midst of their sin. That shouldn't surprise us. What did he do for us? What did he do for the Apostle Paul when he was about to kill Christians, or in the midst of killing Christians? They'd come to worship Him. They knew that He was God. That's extremely important and extremely significant.

Tom: *The amazing thing is just what you're saying, that they're Gentiles who have Scriptures and believe them.*

Ah ha! I was just going to bring that up. Yeah.

Tom: *And they knew them [UNCLEAR].*

And isn't that a prophecy, as it were, the fact that the Gospel was not going to be just for the Jews, but it was for Gentiles as well, which of course, is something that the Jews of Jesus' day just couldn't fathom. They couldn't stomach it, that the Gospel was to go to those heathen Gentiles. Here we have a foretaste of that with these wise men.

Sig: *Can you elaborate on that just for a second. How do you know what they were? [UNCLEAR] they were Gentile. You knew they weren't Jews is what you're saying.*

Yes.

Sig: *But I mean, what were they, though? They would have had some religion wouldn't they?*

Well they would have had some religion, but they probably would have been kind of like the Samaritans, Sig. They were from Persia or whatever. They wouldn't have been of Jewish origin, but they were from the East, as the Bible says. They would have certainly known the influence of Judaism, but they probably would not have been Jewish themselves.

Sig: *So their sense of a coming king was maybe more of a universal anticipation?*

No, I wouldn't say that. I would say that it's of...I think that God had something to do with this, obviously, in the work of grace in their hearts, that he revealed it to them. Like I said, they would have had knowledge of Judaism, and they would have not had knowledge of the fact that Christ was going to come from...they may have had a familiarity with some parts of the Bible, some Scripture. They may have had familiarity with people that they had bumped into, so to speak, and that had told them these things and informed them of these things.

Tom: *Another conjection is that they knew the pattern of the stars, because you can imagine there were not a lot of lights at night in those days over there. The presence of the stars was just phenomenal. They knew the patterns, they knew the movements, so something new happens that, out of the ordinary, they*

have the Scripture, two and two [UNCLEAR]...

Yeah. Put two and two together. Exactly. Good point, Tom. Good point.

Audience Member: *When you add God's grace, it brings it all together.*

Amen! Oh absolutely. That's the quintessential ingredient, isn't it, if it can call it an ingredient. Could someone, please, if anybody has a Bible, could someone read Matthew 2:3-8, ³"When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. ⁵They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: ⁶"And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. ⁸And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him.'" (ESV)

It says Herod was troubled. That is an understatement. He was furious. He was terrified. He was beside himself. Herod the Great, and there's a whole bunch of history here, and I'm not going to go into it for the sake of time, but Herod the Great is who is being referred to; the first Herod. The Jews were used to oppression. They had it from Syria. They had it from Antiochus Epiphanes, who sacrificed pigs in the temple, etc., wanted to rid the universe of Judaism. There was victory with the Judas Maccabeus in 165 from which we get, of course, the Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah, which is, I guess, in progress now with the Jews. The temple was cleansed and rededicated, but things went downhill.

To make a long story short, in 63 AD, [UNCLEAR] and I forget now who else, but they took over, Rome took over. Imagine what it would be like in our country. Of course, people, that's why a lot of people hate us today because we go into their countries and start wars, take things over. I don't want to get into...we can fight afterwards about that. {LAUGHTER} The Jews felt that Rome was taking them over. Herod was not a Jew, although he pretended to be one. He was the politician's politician, to please whoever was there and to impress other people. He was an Edomite. He died probably around 5 or 6 BC. He was 69 years old or so when Jesus was born.

He built an amphitheater and he built, or rebuilt, the temple, which had been destroyed many centuries earlier. He didn't complete it, but he built it. Remember in Matthew 24, he probably did a very, very good job and it was very elaborately done. Remember in Matthew 24 when Jesus was talking to the apostles about the destruction of Jerusalem and the apostles said, "Look Lord, all these magnificent stones and everything," and he said, "It's all going to be torn down. It's all going to be torn down." So apparently Herod did a good job at building the temple. But he was cruel. He was the devil incarnate. He made his brother-in-law a high priest that year, about 9 BC or something. But when people began to like him better than Herod, he became envious and had him put to death in the Jordan River by drowning, making it look like something that was done in jest. Other people did it so that they wouldn't accuse him of doing it. At the funeral he cries these crocodile tears.

He had people put to death. He had his two sons put to death. He had his wife put to death. At the end of his life, when he realized that people would be glad when he was gone, and that nobody would mourn his death, he had a lot of other people put to death. He was a cruel, cruel man. When he was troubled or terrified, he was paranoid, already thinking of how he might do away with Jesus.

Isn't Satan's hand in this? Yeah. Satan has been called the supreme blockhead. He knows that he is going to be defeated. He knows that, and yet he does everything to try to thwart the plan of God and God's purposes. He used Herod to try to destroy the Lord as a baby. He tempts Jesus in the wilderness,

“You don’t have to go to the cross.” He uses Peter as a scapegoat, if you will, Peter’s denial, etc. But yet we know, Judas’ betrayal, all of this we know is in the hand of a sovereign God. Never forget that. Luther said, “The devil is God’s devil.” It might be shocking, but it’s true.

Now we go to the next point, which is that Herod inquires of the Scribes and Pharisees and the Chief Priests where Christ is to be born. They paraphrase Micah 5:2 which says, “You Bethlehem Ephrata, you are by no means least among the tribes of Judah. For out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” Now is there something a little bit strange about this to you? There’s something very strange to me about this. You would have thought that it would have been these leaders who would have been trying to go to Bethlehem to worship him. Right? I mean, if they knew this, and they knew the Scriptures, you would have that it was these people and not these Pagans who would have wanted to worship God, who wanted to worship the Christ child.

It shows the state of the Old Testament people of God, doesn’t it, at that time. They didn’t apparently, it didn’t apparently matter much to them. We have this idea, “Oh, people were so anticipating the birth of Christ,” and we have our carol, Silent Night Holy Night. Now come on, it’s a nice sentiment, but things, business went on as usual. There was nothing...people didn’t stop and pause and reflect. Not at all. Life went on just as it always has been that night.

Audience Member: *Why would that be?*

Why would that be?

Audience Member: *[UNCLEAR]...I mean, come on, and then later on, [UNCLEAR] says, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth? We want a king.” They wanted Saul all over again.*

That’s right. Yeah. A conquering king that would get rid of all their enemies. A babe born in a manger. Yeah. Right.

Audience Member: *But it’s interesting the way God works, though, because, you’re right, this didn’t affect anybody. Life went on as every day, except for a small group of shepherds. Their lives were completely changed.*

Lowly, despised shepherds.

Audience Member: *Bottom of the ladder.*

Couldn’t testify in court, despised by the people, and yet, who is it that God, the angels make the announcement to first? The shepherds. Yes, absolutely.

Audience Member: *The least of these my brethren. I thought of this last Sunday in Sunday school. The least, so get yourself down and lowly and humbled and watch what God will do.*

Yes. God will humble you. He’ll humble us alright. He will. Humility. Definitely. Let me ask you...can we be that way, too? Is there a danger that we can kind of be ho hum about all of this? We certainly can. Familiarity breeds contempt, doesn’t it. Let us never lose the wonder, whether it’s Christmas or any other time of year, of what God did for us in Jesus Christ. Isn’t that what we talk about every Friday morning with Bruce? The wonder of the Gospel—let us never lose that.

Jesus, of course, chided the church of revelation, Laodicea. You’re neither cold nor hot, but lukewarm. We don’t want to be that way. We don’t want to forget our first love, either.

What does Herod do? He meets secretly with the wise men. He's crafty. He's not going to make his deceitful and horrible plot known. He sends them to Bethlehem, "Bring me word that I, too, may worship him." Jesus rightly called, I believe it was, I don't know if it was his son or uncle "that fox." The first Herod was a fox, too, that's for sure.

Matthew 2:9-12, "⁹After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. ¹¹And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. ¹²And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way."

They departed. Now notice the wise men in contrast to the religious leaders of that day. They had to travel probably a thousand miles, at least that's what William Hendrickson says, from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. It's not like they airplanes in those days, or cars. They probably had to do a lot of it on foot or on a beast of some kind. Who knows what kind of weather they encountered. Undoubtedly it took a long time to get there, perhaps a few months. We know that Herod killed the babies two years old and under. It could have been that they were there a couple of years afterward. Or it could have been that Herod was just so bloodthirsty that he was going to make sure that, he thought that he'd done the dastardly deed.

Is there any application for us in this? They went to a great deal of trouble to find Christ. I know people, even Christians, who don't really want to take a lot of time to study the Scripture, "Oh yeah, that doctrine. That's just for theologians. I'm not a theologian. I just love Jesus." Well, yeah, you love Jesus, but we are commanded to crave the milk of the Word, and we're also commanded to grow in maturity, aren't we. The writer of Hebrews chides the people that he knew because he said, "by this time, you ought to be teachers, and yet you need someone to teach you the elementary truths all over again." But these wise men went to a great deal of trouble to try to find the Christ child. What did Christ say, "Seek and you shall find." It's only Christians without seek the Lord, and of course, we don't even do that very well. I just thought that that was a very interesting thing.

The New King James version says, "Behold!" Wow! Look at this! They see the star, which doesn't apparently behave like other stars, and it goes before them, guiding them, until they see where the young child was. What's their reaction? Exceedingly great joy. Right? A lot of times in Scripture, it's fear, isn't it? I'm sure there was probably some for that, but there's exceedingly great joy, too. Just like the shepherds, when they found the baby Jesus in the manger. Both, I think, are a part of our Christian life. Godly fear, not terror, but fear and trembling, coming into the presence of an awesome and holy God. But joy! Rejoicing. Paul says, "Again, I rejoice in the Lord. Again I say rejoice."

Audience Member: *If the star attracted the so-called wise men, why weren't other people attracted to it?*

Don't know. Don't know if they even saw it.

Audience Member: They say that [UNCLEAR]...people probably didn't [UNCLEAR]...

I really can't answer that question. It's the same with Jesus' resurrection. He apparently just appeared to the disciples and 500 brethren at the same time. Why didn't everyone know this and believe it?

Audience Member: *Scripture answers that. We see without seeing. We don't pay attention. If you drive*

from Neville Island to Cranberry five days a week, describe to me what's along the road.

I can't. {LAUGHTER}

Audience Member: *[UNCLEAR]...describe what you saw on the road. People don't know. [UNCLEAR]...paying attention, these wise men had studied up because it's proclaimed in the Word that the prophet [UNCLEAR]...so they knew about that. They practiced faith and obedience like Abram who became Abraham and then Simeon saw the Christ child at eight days old. [UNCLEAR]...*

Very interesting. Good point. Let's contrast what the Bible says with what our traditions say in this next section. It says when they saw the young child, they came into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother. They fell down and worshipped him. But what do our traditions say? Our traditions say that they came to the stable. The most delicious little stable you ever did see. Smelled so sweet. Stuart Brisco has that insight; I think that's a very good thing. They see the baby in the manger with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshipped her. That last part, okay, is probably, a lot of people don't believe that. But nevertheless, it's interesting how we adjust things, isn't it. And then, of course, we've added a little drummer boy. Right? Talking animals and a king that asked the people to pray for peace. The only king that I know of in Scripture is Herod who wants to kill him. It's interesting how we have our traditions there that influence us.

The wise men certainly were not at the manger. As I said before, it took maybe six months or even year or more, or maybe two years. Nevertheless, they do worship him. God, I mean, obviously, Jesus is a baby at that time, but he is worshipped. Apparently there's nothing in the text that indicates that God did not accept or was not pleased with their worship. Don't forget, all throughout the Gospels, all throughout the Scriptures, we have the fact that Christ is worshipped. If he is not God it is gross idolatry to worship Jesus Christ. Very, very important to remember that.

We have the gifts. The nature of these treasures. People get the idea that there were three men because three gifts were given. Possible, but not necessarily. Origin, one of the early church fathers, one of the original church fathers, no pun intended, says that Christ was given gold because he was a king, he was given frankincense because he is God, and myrrh foreshadowing his death. Now that may be reading into it a little bit. There's no indication of that from the text. But you know what; it's not completely unreasonable either. I like the verses of We Three Kings. Born a king on Bethlehem's plain, gold I bring to crown him again, king forever, ceasing never, over us all to reign. Gold is mentioned much in Scripture, in connection with royalty, or a head of state, like Solomon. His palace had lots of gold. Or Joseph—he had a gold chain put around his neck. Or Daniel, in Daniel 5, after...I forget the name of the king now.

Audience Member: *Nebuchadnezzar.*

No, his son. Darius. No, not Darius. I forget.

Audience Member: *Belshazzar.*

Yes, Belshazzar. He received this message and Daniel is given gold. Psalm 45:9 portrays Christ, and that is a Messianic Psalm, as being presented gold from [UNCLEAR]. So we have gold.

Frankincense to offer have I, incense owns a Diety nigh, prayer and praising, all men raising, worship Him God most high. Frankincense, in the Old Testament, and in the New, incense, is always referred to with connection in service and worship to God, in offering, etc. So it may have been that they were thinking of this when they offered incense.

Myrrh, I have, is bitter perfume, speaks of the gathering gloom, sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying, sealed in a stone cold tomb. Myrrh was used as a perfume. It was used in the incense for worship in the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, God strictly forbade the people of Israel to make some of themselves, and myrrh was part of that perfume. It was an analgesic. We know that it was an analgesic for pain relief. We know that myrrh and aloes were used—spices—at the tomb of Christ. Again, did they know these things and perceive these things? I doubt it, but nevertheless, it's quite interesting that those things, that they cannot be out of the realm of possibility either, can't totally be discounted.

I think the important part of this is that these wise men gave of the best of their treasures. These things were expensive. They would have had to have been. Do we do this when we approach God in worship? Or do we just come casually? That's something for us to think about, isn't it? We must worship God in spirit and in truth, according to the words of our Lord. That's apparently what these wise men did.

Of course, last but not least, we have the divine warning given in a dream. We have several instances of this in the Old Testament. We know Pharaoh's chief butler and chief baker, we have Joseph with his brothers, we have Jacob, Solomon—God appears to him in a dream. We know Gabriel's message to Joseph, the foster father of Jesus, was in a dream. Now I know that I'll ruffle a few fathers here, but I believe that today we have the Word of God, and we have the Son of God, and those are sufficient. Don't try to get messages from God in dreams today. It just won't work. It's probably because you had too much pizza to eat last night. Right, too many anchovies, yes.

What can we learn from this account? What can we learn to apply to our lives? Anybody have any thoughts before we close?

Sig: *Hey Don, is there any reason to believe that these kings, however many they were, were coming to just honor another king of their equal or are they thinking it was a superior king, a greater king?*

Well, I would tend to believe the latter, Sig, I mean, again, Scripture doesn't...I don't believe these people were kings. I think that they were astrologers, they were sorcerers. I don't think, despite our traditions, and the Scriptures that I quoted earlier, they probably weren't kings. I would think that they were looking to someone much greater. I mean, why would they worship him? You don't worship an equal. Of course, you know, in our mad state of sin, we worship things that are beneath us or below us. That would be my answer, Sig, that it was probably the latter. They probably did, I would think, believe that they were worshipping someone much, much greater.

What can we learn from this? Let me just say what I believe we can learn. God has his elect from every race and tribe and people and nation. It doesn't matter how gross the sin is. God has a lot of very strict things to say about sorcery doesn't he? In the New Testament it says that sorcerers will not inherit the kingdom of heaven, and yet, whether it be then whether it be a maniac like the Apostle Paul before he was saved, who killed Christians, whatever sin that we're involved in, Christ can save us, and that's glorious. It's been said that Christ saves from the guttermost to the uttermost, and that is wonderful. I hope you guys have a blessed Christmas and meditate upon these things now and every day.

Let's pray. Our Father, we thank you. We praise you. Lord, only you could have come up with such a plan of salvation, such a generous, all-encompassing plan. Father, we are just moved, we are awestruck, by your goodness and grace to us. Father, we pray that this weekend, as we worship, as we get together with family, Lord, that we will be able to take time to meditate upon the greatness of your salvation, for we pray it in Christ's name, and all the Brave Men said...Amen!!