

I. Introduction

A. Today I have a chance to ask a few questions of Charles Tillman about his daughter, Tiana. Many of you may recognize Charles – or you would if he had his football uniform on. Charles has been a standout cornerback for the Chicago Bears since he was drafted in 2003. In the last couple years he has gone to the Pro Bowl. Last year he was frequently mentioned as a contender for Defensive Player of the Year and he set the record for the most touchdowns scored by any defensive player in Bears' history. (All of this has much to do with his habit of knocking the ball out of other people's hands.) But we are not going to talk football right now. I spent some time with Charles and his wife Jackie a few years ago when their daughter, Tiana, developed serious medical problems. Charles offered to talk about that. We scheduled him to share his Faith Story but he said, "I'm a defensive player. I don't initiate, I react." So, we turned this into an interview instead. Charles, before I ask you about your family – and particularly your daughter – tell us a bit about yourself.

B. CT: I was born in Chicago but grew up all over because my Dad was in the Army. I attended The University of Louisiana in Lafayette, graduated in 2003 and was drafted by the Bears. I put my faith in Christ in my sophomore year of college after the chaplain of the team took an interest in my life. Jackie and I have been married for 8 blessed years and we have 4 children: Talya 7, Tiana 5, Tysen 3 and Tessa 5 months.

C. MJW: Some people think that the life of a professional athlete is all glamour and success. It sounds like you've enjoyed pretty consistent success. Had you faced any major setbacks in life that compare to the challenges you and Jackie faced with Tiana?

D. CT: I have never, ever meet a challenge that was as difficult as Tiana's sickness. My faith was put to the ultimate test over a series of months. I believe we did ok in the end.

E. MJW: When did you first learn that she had health problems?

F. CT: In May of 2008 we realized that something was wrong. It was eventually diagnosed as cardiomyopathy, which means the heart becomes weakened and enlarged and cannot pump blood efficiently. The decreased heart function can affect the lungs, liver, and other body systems.

G. MJW: I remember praying for a heart and that for a while she was on an experimental heart machine that had never been used in the US before. For a while there it was hour by hour. This is a parent's worst nightmare. How did you handle this?

H. CT: I believe that God gives parents a little gift of energy to get them that extra boost to maintain and function. Looking back on it now, my wife and I ask ourselves that all the time now. We had a great support system that started with faith, family, and friends.

I. MJW: How did her illness impact your faith?

J. CT: It definitely shook me up a little bit. I remember my wife asking "Why are you doing this? This is not fair." This was the first time I saw her buckle and it had a domino effect. I started to ask God why myself. A few days later I received a call from my head coach from college and he expressed his thoughts and concerns. He compared God to football and basically told me that the defensive coordinator has trust in you to shut down a teams' best receiver, so I should be the coordinator and have trust in God to shut down Tiana's cardiomyopathy. After he put it like that, I was back on the path to Christ.

K. MJW: How is she now?

L. CT: She goes to the doctor every so often but overall, she is healthy.

M. MJW: One final question. Is there anything you wouldn't do for her? Anything at all?

N. CT: I would do anything at all for any of my kids. Anything. I'd lay down in front of a car, bus, train or plane. That's what parents do.

II. Today we return to our study of the Gospel of Luke, but in some ways we are picking up right where we left off last week.

A. I closed my Easter sermon by telling the story about a failed effort to rescue a man who was drowning in Lake Michigan a few years ago, and the fact that during the many, many times I rehearsed what I might have done differently, it never occurred to me to send my son into the water, even though he is a far better swimmer than I am. A parent's instincts are to protect their children, not send them into harm's way. You heard that again from Charles. All of this makes the Father's decision to send his Son to die in your place all the more unthinkable. We need to remind ourselves of this from time to time – to think about how great the Father's love for us is. Not because we are great but because He is. He does not love us because we are so adorable and good. He loves us in spite of who we are. He loves us because He is so great and loving.

B. Today's text makes the same point in a different way. It comes at the beginning of Christ's life not the end - it's focused on the incarnation not the crucifixion. But it put's God's great love on display. And we see just how unthinkable what he did really was.

C. This is a passage we normally read in December. In fact, between this text and the weather lately, I feel like I should wish you a Merry Christmas. But we can focus on Luke 2 at other times as well. In fact, we do not know when Christ was born, but given that the shepherds were in the fields at night it's unlikely that it was December.¹

III. You heard the passage already. We are going to watch a clip in a few minutes. There are three things I want to point out before we do.

A. First: Please understand – this is history.

1. Luke's Gospel is a report about real events that happened to real people. Today it's popular to divide faith and reason – to make faith into a feeling or suggest that it's something we believe in on the basis of nothing or, perhaps even in spite of evidence to the contrary. The assumptions that are common in our culture right now – the ideas that we take in with the air we breathe – suggest that reason is true but faith is subjective. Reason is based on facts while faith is based on feelings and intuitions. Consequently, what is true for me may not be true for you. We are each allowed to believe whatever we want to believe on matters of faith – affirm whatever makes us happy – as long as we don't presume that it's true for anyone else or evaluate anyone else's beliefs. The first thing you need to understand about today's text is – it rejects that approach altogether. Luke is reporting on his investigation of real events. He interviewed eye-witnesses. He is reporting their account – real life, real people, real history.

2. If you met someone who said, "It doesn't feel to me like Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States. I don't think that's part of my story. It can be true for you but not for me." You'd ask, "What are you smoking? What do you mean, it doesn't feel to you like Lincoln was president? You can't pick and choose 'your history' based on your feelings. Lincoln was either president or he wasn't. You don't look inside yourself to see if these things are true."

¹ The church landed on December 25th in an odd, meandering way. For the first 300 years no one celebrated Christ's birth because it was illegal to be a Christian. Then no one celebrated Christ's birth because several early church leaders noted that there were only two birthdays mentioned in the Bible - Pharaoh and Herod, and at both of the parties people died. But after a while Christians began to celebrate their martyrs. At first they did this on the day they died – as was Roman custom. But over time they transitioned to the day they were born, arguing somehow that for a Christ follower, death was the new birth. At some point it became obvious that if they were going to celebrate the birth days of famous Christian martyrs, they needed to celebrate Christ's birth. Constantine positioned it on Dec. 25th in order to co-opt a popular pagan holiday tied to Winter Solstice. We've been celebrating it at that time ever since.

3. I'm starting by stressing that this is history because there are a lot of people who are looking inside for truth in ways that are harmful and foolish. We are alive at a very odd time. Worldviews – the way people understand life – are trendy. In the last twenty years we have moved away from tradition, reason and revelation and towards experience, what feels right. Well, your feelings are important, but they do not change facts. They do not change history. There is a lot of nonsense out there. Don't drink the Kool-Aide. Jesus was either God-who-became-man or he wasn't. Luke presents the incarnation as a historical event.

B. Second: This is the fulfillment of prophecy.

1. Remember, the birth of Christ unfolds as the fulfillment of a promise God made thousands of years earlier to send a rescuer. God being God – knowing all things, the beginning from the end, having a plan – provided his people with descriptions of the future. He did this in many areas, for instance, he would give the outcome of battles or describe the future of families. One of the main areas of prophecy focused on the coming Messiah. On a couple hundred occasions He spoke through the prophets, promising them that He would send someone to rescue us, and describing what he would be like, what he would do, and the like. These were made hundreds – sometimes thousands – of years in advance. Today's passage fulfills two of them.

a) Seven hundred years before Christ was born the prophet Isaiah said that Immanuel – God with us – will be born to a virgin.²

b) Three hundred years later – still four hundred years before he was born – Micah said that the Messiah's birth would take place in Bethlehem.³ Which was small. If you read my letter this week you know that MJ (our middle school pastor for the last 8 years, MJ and his family are leaving us. He is going to be the solo pastor of a church in Wilmot, South Dakota. You've likely never heard of Wilmot. The population is 600 people. Bethlehem was better known by the Jews than Wilmot, SD because it's where David was born. But at the time these prophecies were made, it was smaller than Wilmot. It was a little village. It's not like someone saying, "I think a significant leader will emerge out of China or India." This was remarkable.

² Isaiah 7:14 reads: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. (Immanuel is a title. It means "God with us.")

³ Micah 5:2 reads, "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." In Hebrew the phrase "ancient of days" means, "from eternity." So, the origin of the one who is born is from eternity.

2. Please remember: God gave these prophecies in part to encourage people – to keep them going. But he also gave them to prove that He is God and that this Book is divine. We (you and I) cannot accurately predict what is going to happen next week. (Anyone here call every game in the NCAA right so far?) We can't predict what is going to happen next week let alone things that will happen seven hundred years from now. The fulfillment of prophecies is one of the ways our faith is given a foundation. It is one of the ways our faith is based on external factors not internal ones, real events not feelings.

C. It's Reality – and it's upside down. What we are reading is history and prophecy and, number three, it's Reality. Only it's different than we think. As with so much of what will follow, Jesus redefines things.

1. The clip I'm about to play doesn't include the contrast I am after – the movie does develop this a bit but I'm only showing a very short clip. But the text juxtaposes the powerful and the powerless.

2. Luke 2 opens: In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.⁴ This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

3. Luke includes this information in part to date the events. Remember, he's a historian. He is interviewing eye-witnesses and filing an orderly report on what happened. It's never, "a long time ago in a faraway land." He does his best to give names and dates. Tying things to rulers is one of the ways people dated things back then.

4. So, part of the reason he mentions Caesar and Quirinius is to date things. But he is also contrasting the strong and the weak, only it's not what you think. The first couple times you read through the Gospel you think: we have Caesar and Quirinius up here and Mary and Joseph down here.

⁴ The word "Roman" is not included in the Greek. We include it in our text to clarify what was actually happening. The Romans ignored – perhaps we could say, dis-believed – that there were parts of the world they didn't control. In some ways Caesar thought that he controlled everything and everyone. We know this wasn't true so we add the word "Roman" to the text.

a) We have Caesar, whose name means “majestic and highly revered,” who most everyone recognized as the most powerful and important person on the planet.⁵ Alongside him is Quirinius, who though not as high – no one was – also had enormous power.⁶ On the other hand we have Mary and Joseph, who are: rural, not urban; poor, not rich; powerless, not powerful.⁷ And we have Jesus – who is a helpless infant.

5. The first few times through Luke you see it one way. But at point the light goes on and you realize, “Wait a minute. Caesar doesn’t have the power, Jesus does. Caesar isn’t the impressive one, Jesus is. Caesar isn’t an All Powerful King, Jesus is. Caesar doesn’t change the world – today we name dogs and pizza parlors after him. Jesus is the one who changes everything. The truly impressive one wasn’t self-important at all. He humbled himself and showed up as an infant. Real power stooped. Real power was wrapped in rags and lying in smelly stable.

D. Let’s watch the clip. (The Nativity Story, Mary and Joseph entering Bethlehem and heading to the stable).

IV. A few years ago I made the journey from Nazareth up to Bethlehem in the back of a cab. It’s about 100 miles. It took a couple hours.

A. The two things I remember are that the terrain was very harsh – hot, desolate, rocky and unpleasant – and it’s all uphill.

1. Bethlehem is just a couple miles from Jerusalem.⁸ (I’ve jogged between them a few times. It takes fifteen minutes assuming you are not slowed down at the checkpoints.) So, in order to get to Bethlehem from Nazareth you first climb up to Jerusalem, which means you climb up Mt. Zion. (Jerusalem is located on the top of Mt. Zion because mountain tops are easier to defend). Then, after you climb up, you make the trek over to Bethlehem.

⁵ Unlike his great uncle, Julius Caesar, Caesar Augustus did not demand to be worshipped as a god. However, this was a political calculation not an act of humility. Instead he had himself declared “highest priest.” This gave him all the religious power he needed – indeed, it meant that in Rome he held ultimate political and religious power.

⁶ Their political system was different than ours, so he was more like a cabinet member than a governor. He was charged with enforcing Caesar’s policies and decisions.

⁷ Remember, it’s likely that they were teenagers. Mary is probably barely that. Joseph was a carpenter. Their life was hard before her scandalous pregnancy.

⁸ It would have taken longer 2,000 years ago both because the road was not as well paved and the cities were smaller and thus further apart.

2. The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem is 100 hard miles, with much of it being up hill. I heard that a few years ago a young couple set out to recreate the journey just to see how long it would take. But on the trip the donkey died.⁹

B. It's a hard trip on a good day. And I think we can agree that you don't have many good days on a donkey when you're nine months pregnant. And, if you show up in labor and discover that all of NorthShore University Health System Birthing Centers are taken and you're going to deliver this child next to the donkey, you're probably not happy. (Some of you are thinking, "Maybe I shouldn't be complaining about my two hour delay I had flying back from Naples last week or the 45 minutes I spent going through security.")

C. Now, full disclosure: we are not sure the film gets it right. And that's not just because Hollywood adds some drama,¹⁰ that's because we are not sure that the way the story is told today every December is very accurate.

D. If you go to Bethlehem today to see where this all took place you visit The Church of the Holy Nativity. (Show pictures). And if you wait in what is often a long line you can touch the very spot that many believe Christ was born. But this doesn't look anything like it looked 2,000 years ago and we're not even sure this is the spot.¹¹ Christians have been worshipping here since the fourth century – since Constantine's mother had this church built. But for most of the first 300 years it was illegal to be a Christian, so no one was building any museums. We do not know for sure.

E. And the way the story is often told may add some unrealistic drama. It might not have been as bad as we suggest.

⁹ There were two main reasons a leader took a census: wealth and power. If you can get a record of everyone then you can make sure to tax everyone and get as much money as possible. You also then know how many adult males you have who can fight in your army.

¹⁰ If you watch The Nativity you'll see that they have Mary almost drowning crossing the Jordan River. I don't remember reading that in the Gospels, maybe I missed it. But I suspect that's a director's desire to amp things up just a bit.

¹¹ In the days when Christianity was legalized under the Roman Emperor Constantine, his mother oversaw the construction of a church at that site so that today there is still a church that meets and has been meeting on that site for over a millennium and a half. This is a very amazing thing-that Christians have been worshipping there since about 300 or 400 A.D. The church was at one point damaged. A larger church was built over it. Multiple denominations meet in that building. And what is curious is that at one point the Persians came and they destroyed all the Christian churches in that region, but when they got to this particular church that was built over the alleged birthplace of Jesus, they saw markings and drawings out front of the three wise men and they thought, "Oh, it must be a pagan temple. We won't destroy it." And so it still remains to this day. And it is a cave and it is under the church, and that is, by all accounts, in as much as we are able to ascertain, likely the place that Jesus was born.

1. Most hold that the village was so overrun with people returning for the census that the only place for the birth was a stable. Some contend that the shame of Mary's pregnancy was so great that no one wanted to rent them a room. It seems more likely that what is being described looked more like this: (Show Picture)

2. The Greek word for Inn does not refer to a hotel, it refers to a guest room. Manger does not refer to a stable but to a feeding trough. And in simple homes – and Bethlehem was a simple place – people brought the animals in at night to help provide heat and to keep them safe. It seems more likely that Jesus was born in a simple home next to the animals and that Christ was laid in the feeding trough because the guest room was already rented out. I find this more likely in part because I find it really hard to believe that someone wouldn't give up their room for a woman in labor!

F. So, things may not have been quite as bad as we have thought. But, they were still hard! Don't forget the four day uphill trip on a donkey. Don't forget that Mary is 13 or 14 years old and cut off from family and friends.

G. And, don't focus on the trip and the barn and the crowded village – because those are not the main point. At best they only add a half a percent to the drama and humiliation.

V. What we need to marvel at is the incarnation itself.

A. It is both unthinkable. It's a profound mystery. It should provoke great awe. In fact, if you read the early commentaries on Luke you see that the writers – the early Church Fathers, the Medieval Scholars – when it comes to talking about the birth of Christ they shift into poetry. It's a concession to the idea that regular words, normal terms don't work. They are not big enough to capture what is going on here. We lack the vocabulary – the capacity – to describe the mystery and the humiliation of the incarnation.

B. There is much to think about here. The implications of the incarnation go in lots of different directions. It is a huge and hugely important doctrine. I want to drill down on just two things here. Two questions: how and why. How does the incarnation work, and why would God do this?

C. The first question is: How? How is this possible? How could one person be both God and Man at the same time? Let me review the claim here. It that:

1. Jesus was God. That from before anything else ever was, Jesus existed as God. “In the beginning was the Word (the Logos). And the Word was with God and was God.” In the beginning was Jesus. And He was with God (the Father) and He was God himself. Jesus existed before his birth as God. In the fullness of time, at the incarnation, he added humanity to deity. He became part of the world He made. Somehow, while remaining fully God He became fully Man. And from that point on – even up to this moment – Jesus exists as the God-Man. He is both. One person with two natures. It is not that He is: 1) half-man and half God; 2) a God who looks like a man; 3) a man who acts like God; 4) a being who is sometimes God and sometimes man. He is both fully God and fully Man. God became the God-Man.

2. How does this work? I mean, how do two natures go together in one person? If He’s God then He’s infinite. If He is a person He is finite. If He’s God He is all knowing. If He’s a man he is limited. How did He do this? We do not know. We cannot grasp how this works. The finite cannot comprehend the infinite. Theologians use the term mystery to describe something that is beyond comprehension. The nature of Jesus is beyond our comprehension. The incarnation is beyond our grasp.¹²

3. In Philippians 2 Paul says Jesus, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” The “made himself nothing” is an effort to translate the Greek word *kenosis*, which is sometimes translated “emptied himself.” We don’t really know how to talk about this. The dual nature of Christ – which theologians refer to as the hypo-static union – is as much of a mind-bending truth as the Trinity, or Divine Sovereignty and human free will.

4. If you study the creeds – the early church’s efforts to spell out the basic, non-negotiable truths – you see that on this issue they simply say how it doesn’t work. This is the focus of the Chalcedonian Creed. (The Nicene Creed is where they talk about his divine nature.) In the Chalcedonian Creed – or Definition, as it’s often called – they talk about the fact that Jesus is one person with two natures and they state that these two natures exist: without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.

¹² There are a lot of ways to get this wrong and not a lot of ways to get it right. A lot of heresy is the result of people trying to simplify something so that it can be understood. We cannot fully understand this. It is a mystery. Somehow the child born to Mary has two natures – one human and one divine.

5. The first thing that should happen is that we should be amazed at who Christ is. How he exists as God and Man.

D. But the real question is actually not “how.” The important question is not “how” but “why?” Why did God do it? Why did Jesus stoop? Why was he willing to become a man?

1. Please understand, the humiliation we are talking about is not that Jesus was born next to the animals and set in a food trough. Had Jesus been born in Jerusalem as the Son of a King and placed in a solid gold basinet and everyone on the planet had fallen on their faces and worshipped him – that would have still been an unthinkable down-sizing for the King of Kings. In order to show up among us He has stepped down from Heaven. He has given up his glory. He has taken on limitations. He has stooped to being needy. The Creator became part of the creation. It’s unthinkable. Why did he do it?

2. Why? To save you. He did it out of his love for you.

3. No one, no one, no one else – let alone God himself – will do more for you than Christ did. We live in a world where men are trying to become gods. What we see here is that God became a man – he stooped, he humiliated himself for you and then went lower by dying for your sins. No one has nor will anyone ever do for you what Christ has done. And He did it because He is that amazing and good and loving. Christ climbed down the ladder of success for you.

VI. So what is our response? What do we do with this information?

A. We worship. We follow. We love and adore. We thank. We obey. What else can we do? If you understand this, you follow.

B. That means all kinds of things generally. It means we serve tell others about Christ. It means we worship, connect, grow, serve and share.

C. It means we work to see the world in the upside down way He explains it.

D. What do we do if we get what God has done for us in Christ? Well, one of the things is that we come to this table – to take his body and blood into ourselves in order to grow stronger and in order to proclaim yet again that his death is the hinge point upon which we find forgiveness and eternal life.

VII. Communion

VIII. Quotes

A. The idea that God, if there is a force of Love and Logic in the universe, that it would seek to explain itself is amazing enough. That it would seek to explain itself by becoming a child born in poverty ... and straw, a child, I just thought, "Wow!" Just the poetry ... I saw the genius of picking a particular point in time and deciding to turn on this ... Love needs to find a form, intimacy needs to be whispered ... Love has to become an action or something concrete. It would have to happen. There must be an incarnation. Love must be made flesh. Bono

B. ... without the incarnation, Christianity isn't even a very good story, and most sadly, it means nothing. "Be nice to one another" is not a message that can give my life meaning, assure me of love beyond brokenness, and break open the dark doors of death with the key of hope. Michael Spencer

C. "The nativity mystery "conceived from the Holy Spirit and born from the Virgin Mary", means, that God became human, truly human out of his own grace. The miracle of the existence of Jesus , his "climbing down of God" is: Holy Spirit and Virgin Mary! Here is a human being, the Virgin Mary, and as he comes from God, Jesus comes also from this human being. Born of the Virgin Mary means a human origin for God. Jesus Christ is not only truly God, he is human like every one of us. He is human without limitation. He is not only similar to us, he is like us." Karl Barth

D. For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified." Flannery O'Connor

E. The incarnation is "a kind of vast joke whereby the Creator of the ends of the earth comes among us in diapers... Until we too have taken the idea of the God-man seriously enough to be scandalized by it, we have not taken it as seriously as it demands to be taken." Frederick Buechner