

The Sinfulness of Humanity

Over the last couple of years we have witnessed some incredible events in our world. In Europe, communism has become a thing of the past. In South Africa, apartheid finally appears to be on the way out. The former Soviet Union is in the throes of reorganization as it moves toward democracy and free enterprise.

Such events, coupled with recent successes on the battlefield, have caused many Americans to feel tremendously optimistic about the future. It has become fashionable to appeal to a new world order in which nations will cooperate with one another in a spirit of peace, and some have even suggested that we are on the edge of the millennial kingdom.

Don't get your hopes up.

It's easy to be optimistic when looking at the trend of world events, but it's a little more difficult when one takes human nature into consideration. The sinfulness of humanity may be an uncomfortable subject, but it is absolutely necessary to understand sin in order to understand both ourselves and the world in which we live.

Many people like to focus on our tremendous potential as a society, maintaining that the only thing preventing us from fulfilling that potential is inadequate education. For example, consider the following statement from the second Humanist Manifesto:

Using technology wisely, we can control our environment, conquer poverty, markedly reduce disease, extend our life-span, significantly modify our behavior, alter the course of human evolution and cultural development, unlock vast new powers, and provide humankind with unparalleled opportunity for achieving an abundant and meaningful life.

Humanists recognize the fact that such utopian dreams are not guaranteed, but they believe our potential for progress is essentially unlimited. If we as a society decide that we really want to achieve something, we are capable of achieving it.

The Bible presents a very different view of humankind and our future. From a biblical perspective, we have all violated God's laws, and our continuing tendency is not to seek the well-being of others but to seek our own satisfaction. Consider the following words from Romans chapter 3:

There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; There is none who does good, there is not even one.

These words may sound pretty pessimistic, especially when compared with modern humanism, but they are true. We all know our own failings. God says that we are to be holy just as He is holy (1 Peter 1:15, 16), and we cannot honestly say that we meet that standard. You and I recognize that we have selfish desires, that we rebel against God, that we often find it easier to cheat people than to love them. The Bible tells us that everyone else has the same problem. As Paul put it, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23).

Forgiveness for Sin

Thinking about the sinfulness of humanity is unpleasant at best, but we must first understand that all humankind has sinned if we are to realize that, even so, all is not lost. The most important thing to realize about human sinfulness is that forgiveness is available!

The Bible says that we have all broken God's laws, and we all deserve punishment as a result. Jesus Christ, however, came to take that punishment on our behalf. Let me explain it this

way. We have been sentenced to death because of our sin. God's justice demands that the sentence be carried out. If He were to simply lay the sentence aside, then He wouldn't be a very fair judge, and He is always fair.

At the same time, God's love demanded that He provide a way of forgiveness. He provided that forgiveness through Jesus Christ. By dying on the cross for our sins, Jesus paid the penalty that we should have had to pay. He took the punishment for our sins.

Since God's justice has been satisfied in the person of Jesus Christ, we are able to have peace with God through Jesus (Rom. 5:1). All we have to do to experience that peace is to place our trust in Jesus, believing that He died to take the punishment that we deserved (John 3:16). When we trust in Christ, our sins are forgiven. We no longer need to be afraid of death or of God's future judgment. We have been declared righteous in Christ, and we are at peace with God.

The idea that someone would or could take our punishment seems very strange to many in today's culture. The film *Flatliners* provides an excellent illustration of the way our world thinks about sin and life after death. In the film, several medical students take turns killing and then reviving one another, hoping to learn something about life after death. In their near-death experiences, they are confronted with past sins, in which they have offended not God but other human beings. They themselves must atone for their sins by making peace with the people they have wronged. There is no mediator to take their place. In addition, the sins for which they suffer are much less grievous than one might expect. What could a person do to obtain forgiveness for actions much worse than teasing another child or even causing another person's accidental death? Apparently nothing. Reflecting the perspective of many in our culture, *Flatliners* seems to say that there is no God to offend, no Christ to bear our punishment, and no hope for those who have committed grievous sin. What a sad perspective!

The Continuing Presence of Sin

When we accept God's forgiveness by placing our trust in Christ, we are completely freed from the penalty of sin. At the same time, however, we continue to experience the presence of sin. We still have the capacity, even the tendency, to rebel against God and to act independently of Him (Gal. 5:16-17). God's goal for us as Christians is that we would consistently obey Him, and the indwelling Holy Spirit works to change us from the inside out, but the process won't be completed until we are in the presence of God in heaven (Rom. 8:12-25; 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:7-18). In the meantime, we continue to struggle with the fact that we are sinful people.

As fallen creatures, we will always want to say no when God says yes and yes when He says no. All too often, we seek to please ourselves rather than to please God.

This thought doesn't sound very encouraging, and some have maintained that talking about the sinfulness (or depravity) of humanity causes Christians to have a pessimistic attitude about life. I disagree. Understanding that everyone is sinful gives us a realistic appraisal of life, one that explains the headlines we see in each morning's paper. If our natural tendency as sinful people is to seek power and control for ourselves or to lie, cheat, and steal, then we should expect people to act that way. Expecting these actions doesn't make them right, but it makes them understandable. Recognizing the sinfulness of humanity doesn't excuse crime, but it does protect us from the disillusionment that so many experience when their optimistic ideals eventually fall apart.

The belief that all persons are sinful can actually be a very liberating concept. We no longer place expectations on ourselves or others that no one could fulfill. We no longer demand perfection, for we expect a degree of failure. With regard to current events, we do not join those who continually hope for some kind of global transformation apart from divine

intervention. We recognize that sinful people will continue to govern every nation, even our own, and that they will always seek their own interests.

The founders of this country believed in the sinfulness of humanity; indeed, this view of human sinfulness is central to the United States Constitution. We do not believe in giving any single individual limitless power, because we do not trust anyone enough to put him or her in that position. We regard a system of checks and balances, through which each person's decisions must ultimately be approved by others, as safer than a government in which unlimited power is entrusted to one individual.

I am not saying that humanity should simply accept its lot; we must certainly work to improve our society. A proper understanding of human nature, however, prevents us from seeking to fulfill impossible goals through unrealistic means and keeps us from placing too much faith in humanity. We need to be involved in the political and social arenas, but we should not place too much hope in our involvement. Human sinfulness will keep us from doing all that we would like, but we must continue to do all that we can.

The Politics of Sin

Many people believe that humanity is basically good and that all we need to do to improve our society is provide a healthy psychological and physical environment. This belief is appealing because it makes us feel like we are in control of our own destiny, but unfortunately it isn't true. Humans are not good creatures in a bad environment. If anything, we are sinful creatures in a relatively good environment.

In this country we elect representatives who promise to uphold our interests in the public realm. Yet year after year we are disappointed when they break their promises. They may institute some helpful programs and make a few choices that we

agree with, but often the entire exercise seems futile. One reason behind this sense of futility is that politics is built upon compromise, but another reason is that political programs are unable to deal with humanity's real problem—sin. Barry Goldwater, who served many years in the United States Senate, said it this way:

We have conjured up all manner of devils responsible for our present discontent. It is the unchecked bureaucracy in government, it is the selfishness of multinational corporate giants, it is the failure of the schools to teach and the students to learn, it is overpopulation, it is wasteful extravagance, it is squandering our national resources, it is racism, it is capitalism, it is our material affluence, or if we want a convenient foreign devil, we can say it is communism. But when we scrape away the varnish of wealth, education, class, ethnic origin, parochial loyalties, we discover that however much we've changed the shape of man's physical environment, man himself is still sinful, vain, greedy, ambitious, lustful, self-centered, unrepentant, and requiring of restraint.

That is a pretty profound statement, and it is one with which the Bible would agree. Political programs have no effect on society's real problem, the fact that we are all sinful and self-centered.

When we look at the seeming hopelessness of the situation, it is easy to see why some Christians have grown apathetic. They say, We try as hard as we can and it doesn't do any good. Why bother to keep trying? Theirs is a good question. Many Christian activists felt the same way at the end of the 1980s. Christians had been more involved in this country's politics than ever before, and there were several events in which they seemed to pull out all the stops. Many Christians lobbied intensively for the confirmation of Robert Bork to the U.S. Supreme Court, seeing him as a vital tool in their aim to

bring an end to the abortion industry in this country. Their efforts failed. The troops were marshalled several more times during legislative battles on Capitol Hill, but they fell short more times than they succeeded. Many grew weary in the fight. I know I did.

Looking back on that decade, we have to ask, What did we expect? Did we expect our politicians to abandon the appeal of special-interest groups in favor of altruistic ideals and biblical ethics? We should not have been so naive. The sinfulness of humanity means that people will always tend to enhance their own power and seek their own interests. When they do otherwise, we take their actions as grace, but we do not expect them to act in accordance with anything but their own interests.

That's why we as believers must continue to be active in political and social causes. True, we do struggle with our own sinfulness, but we are being transformed by the person of Jesus Christ, transformed to the extent that we should no longer fit comfortably into our culture (Rom. 12:1-2). Jesus said that we are the salt of the earth and the light of the world, and what He meant by that is that we are to be distinctive representatives of God in a world that is trying to forget Him (Matt. 5:13-16; cf. Phil. 2:15). If we abandon our culture, we abandon that duty. We realize that we won't necessarily win the day, but we might. In any case, we'll have done the right thing.

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The New Age Movement

Former Probe staffer Dr. Robert Pyne provides an orthodox Christian perspective on the concepts underpinning the New Age philosophy.

The New Age Movement. You've probably heard the phrase, and chances are you've heard it applied to everything from cartoon shows to environmental protection groups. Today we have "new age" radio stations, "new age" bookstores, and even "new age" churches, but a great deal of confusion remains about the New Age Movement. To begin with, the New Age Movement is not a conspiracy or a cult. It is a loose collection of very diverse people and groups. It is a religious trend, not a religious organization. Its broadness makes it rather difficult to define, but there are several beliefs that are distinctively "New Age."

One of these beliefs is monism, the idea that all of reality is essentially one. You and I usually recognize differences between ourselves and between different objects in our world, but the monist sees everything as a single organic whole. From the monistic perspective, we are all part of one another; and, if God exists, we are all part of God.

Monism sounds very much like Eastern pantheism, and this similarity has caused many observers to describe the New Age Movement as the invasion of Eastern mysticism into Western culture. In fact, the New Age Movement has its historical roots in European philosophy. What we're seeing is not the adoption of Eastern religion, but the bankruptcy of our own culture.

Let me explain. For centuries Christian theologians maintained that there were three sources of truth: revelation, tradition, and reason. One by one, the philosophers discarded revelation, ignored tradition, and concluded that reason was inadequate.

The situation thus became a little scary. There weren't any sources of authority left!

Humans don't function very well without some source of authority, some source of hope. With no other place to turn, Western philosophers began to place their hopes in irrational ideas like monism, believing that the problems and inconsistencies of life were more apparent than real and that these problems could be resolved at some deep level that we really can't comprehend. These ideas provided the real foundation for the New Age Movement. It came about because Western philosophy had run out of answers.

All of that is simply to say this: The New Age Movement teaches some things that don't make much sense. Its teachings violate Scripture, tradition, and reason. Its proponents are people who are desperately looking for hope and security in a world that seems very confusing. They have bought into the idea that we have no sure source of authority, and they are attempting to find answers in experience and in irrational ideals.

Monism and Pantheism

One of the most distinctive beliefs of the New Age Movement is monism, the belief that all of reality is essentially one. From this perspective, everything that exists is part of a single organic whole. There are no real differences between people, between objects, or between people and objects.

Monism seems very odd to most of us because our experience points to distinctions between ourselves and other people or between persons and objects. The New Age Movement, however, perceives logic and reason as limitations. Its adherents see commonly observed distinctions as illusions, and they believe we are led astray by what we would call "common sense." For the New Age follower, we are all one with one another and, for that matter, with everything. When individuals come to the

belief that they are one with the universe, a kind of conversion takes place. Shirley MacLaine's experience in an Andean mineral bath illustrates the point. She writes,

Slowly, slowly, I became the water I was the air, the water, the darkness, the walls, the bubbles, the candle, the wet rocks under the water, and even the sound of the rushing river outside.

Shirley MacLaine came to the conclusion that she was not herself a distinct entity, but that she was instead completely identified with all that surrounded her. This belief that everything is essentially one leads New Age followers to believe in pantheism, the idea that all is God. The unity of all reality tells them that everything is divine, including themselves. If all is one, then there are no distinctions, and all is God. Again, Shirley MacLaine writes, "I am God, because all energy is plugged into the same source. We are all individualized reflections of the God source. God is in us and we are God."

From a New Age perspective, this concept is the key to unlocking one's true potential, for to realize that you are God is to realize that you have no finite limitations. But there's a problem with this claim. If God does not have limited knowledge or abilities, why would we have to grow in knowledge if we are God? Why would we even have to come to the conclusion that we are divine? If we are unlimited, why are we so limited that we do not always realize we are unlimited?

In addition, if all is essentially one, no real difference exists between good and evil. With no legitimate distinction between good and evil, New Age religious activity becomes an exercise in futility. What you do or don't do doesn't matter at all!

Finally, New Age pantheism stands in sharp contrast to the biblical doctrine of creation. Genesis 1 tells us that, in the

beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. God is not the same as His creation, but is utterly distinct from it as the Creator. Our place is not to ascend to His throne, but to bow down before it.

The Political Agenda of the New Age Movement

A consequence of New Age monism is a strong emphasis on the unity of our planet. This belief that everything is one was reinforced when astronauts photographed the Earth from outer space. The pictures didn't look anything like our rapidly changing political maps. The barriers we had erected between nations were invisible, as were the wars taking place at the time. Only what we had in common was visible: a single planet and a fragile ecosystem. Peter Russell writes,

[This] picture has become a spiritual symbol for our times. It stands for the growing awareness that we and the planet are all part of a single system, that we can no longer divorce ourselves from the whole.

These pictures of the Earth from outer space are on New Age posters, bumper stickers, and T-shirts to remind us that we are all essentially one. We see this same idea in popular music as well—the Grammy award-winning song “From a Distance” emphasizes the idea that when one stands back and looks at our planet “from a distance,” there is harmony, peace, and hope. There is global oneness.

This emphasis on globalism reflects the New Age desire to see the essential oneness of all reality manifested in our experience. The followers of the New Age want humanity to function as a “superorganism,” similar to a school of fish or a flock of birds, reacting to danger within a fraction of a second and behaving in such cooperation that we seem to have a common brain. Peter Russell writes,

No longer will we perceive ourselves as isolated individuals; we will know ourselves to be part of a rapidly integrating global network, the nerve cells of an awakened global brain.

This vision doesn't stop with the Earth, for New Age followers believe that our world will network with other planets, then other galaxies, until the entire universe is in complete harmony as a single organism.

From this perspective, the interests of humanity are subordinated to those of the Earth as a whole. The important thing is not whether we ourselves survive, or even whether or not our Earth survives, but whether or not this evolutionary process continues to go forward. Particularly in light of the fact that many people become a part of the New Age Movement because they desire a positive message of hope, their expectation is ultimately a very sad and impersonal one. The individual is lost in the whole process, like a drop of water blending into a cosmic ocean.

Achieving Oneness

While all New Age followers look forward to global and universal oneness, they do not all agree on the means by which they expect that oneness to be achieved. Some focus on humanity's technological potential for harmony, emphasizing advances in telecommunications and the sciences. Others pay more attention to the somewhat mystical idea that all things share the same essential energy. If we can tap into that energy we can use it to our advantage. Just as Luke Skywalker used "the Force" in the Star Wars movies to levitate objects and win battles, many New Age adherents believe they can control events around them through visualization and meditation. This belief goes far beyond using one's perceived powers for personal gain. Their commitment to global and universal harmony causes New Age followers to focus their attention on transforming the world. Here their belief that we

share the same essential energy means that we can share the same consciousness.

One of the best illustrations of this concept is in the New Age fable of the "One-Hundredth Monkey." As the story goes, a group of scientists taught an island monkey to wash his food in the water before he ate. Several other monkeys eventually mimicked his behavior, and before long nearly a hundred of the monkeys on that island had learned this same lesson. At that point, however, a strange thing happened. When the one-hundredth monkey began to wash his food, suddenly all of the monkeys of that species began doing the same thing, even those who had no contact with the monkeys in the experiment. The idea is that the one-hundredth monkey was enough to push this practice "over the edge" into a kind of cosmic consciousness.

New Age followers use this fable as a way of illustrating what they believe we can achieve with the human race. They maintain that they need only to reach this "critical mass" of enlightened individuals in order for their enlightenment to become the common consciousness of all humanity. The Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, for example, has said that if just 1 percent of the population were to practice the technique of Transcendental Meditation, the "Age of Enlightenment" could dawn.

This critical mass is what New Age followers were trying to achieve with the event they called the "Harmonic Convergence." The Harmonic Convergence provided an opportunity for New Age adherents to channel their collective powers toward the common goal of world peace and harmony. The attempt to achieve this critical mass is also why so many cars have bumper stickers that read "Visualize World Peace." The proponents of the New Age believe that world peace will actually be realized if enough people visualize it.

Witnessing to the New Age Follower

It is absolutely essential that Christians be sensitive to the philosophical perspective of New Age followers. We have seen that the New Age Movement reflects our culture's rejection of revelation, tradition, and reason as authentic sources of truth. New Age followers will be completely turned off if we use reason with them to show them the error of their beliefs. From their point of view, such dependence on logic and reason does nothing more than demonstrate a profound lack of enlightenment on our part. In the same way, an appeal to the truth of Scripture or to the teachings of your church will seem rigid and insensitive. I'm not saying that we must avoid Scripture or logic; I'm simply saying that we need to be extremely cautious in the way we minister to the New Age follower.

Since the New Age Movement values experience so highly, it may well be that your personal testimony is the most helpful thing you can communicate to adherents of the New Age. They will usually dismiss your logic and your books, but their own beliefs prevent them from dismissing your experience. By demonstrating the reality of your Christianity and the transformation that the gospel has brought into your life, you appeal to them on their own terms.

Naturally, there's something a little disconcerting about a testimonial approach. It means that you must have a more consistent testimony than their peers in the New Age. New Age seminars, for example, provide a great deal of personal support for those in attendance. Visitors feel welcome, they feel loved, and they want to come back just because the people are so friendly and attentive. Do we treat visitors that way in our churches? Do we treat our New Age friends with love and respect even though we disagree with their theology? If we give them rejection instead of encouragement, we're driving them deeper into the New Age.

The greatest thing we can offer New Age followers is a secure sense of hope. I believe hope is what they are looking for in the New Age Movement, but their thirst won't be satisfied there. The New Age hope is insecure and impersonal, and the individual is ultimately not valued at all. Compare that "hope" to the promise of the Savior that nothing can separate us from His love, that nobody will ever snatch us from the hand of the Father, that one day He will wipe away every tear from our eyes (Rom. 8:31-39; John 10:27-29; Rev. 21:4). What a difference! We need to demonstrate the reality of our hope and be prepared to explain how we have been made to feel so secure (1 Pet. 3:15).

The New Age Movement is very diverse, and it blends in easily with many other religions. One thing that it does not take in very well, however, is the cross of Jesus Christ. Your New Age friends will have a very difficult time accepting the idea that salvation can only come through Jesus Christ. That concept stands against everything they believe. Understand that they will probably not embrace the gospel quickly, but speak the truth in love. Through your words and through your lifestyle point them to Christ, who is our hope.

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The Theology of Christmas Carols – A Godly View of This Sacred Holiday

Dr. Robert Pyne looks at the theological message found in five different popular Christmas carols. For the most part, these carols, when listened to for their content, help us remember a

biblical worldview perspective of this popular holiday.

Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus

Most radio stations play some type of Christmas music during the holiday season, but many of the songs have become so familiar to us that we no longer consider their content. In between the secular songs like “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” and “Up on a Housetop,” you may hear the strains of an old hymn by Charles Wesley called “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” It was written in 1744, and it reads,

**Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, born to set Thy people free;
from our fears and sins release us; let us find our rest in
Thee.**

**Israel’s strength and consolation, hope of all the earth
Thou art;**

dear desire of every nation, joy of every longing heart.

**Born Thy people to deliver, born a child, and yet a King,
born to reign in us forever, now Thy gracious kingdom bring.
By Thine own eternal Spirit rule in all our hearts alone;
by Thine own sufficient merit, raise us to Thy glorious
throne.**

“Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” is a little heavier than most of the music we are used to hearing today, and if we are not careful we will miss much of the meaning. The first verse focuses on the fact that the coming of Jesus Christ fulfilled Israel’s longing for the Messiah. As the one whose coming was prophesied in the Old Testament, He is the “long-expected Jesus.”

A few of the prophecies that Jesus fulfilled are Isaiah 7:14, which spoke of a virgin giving birth to a child whose name would mean “God with us;” Isaiah 9:6, which told of a child whose name would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, eternal Father, the Prince of Peace;” and Micah 5:2, which said that from Bethlehem would come a ruler whose

“goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.”

These and many similar prophecies looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and many devout Jews prayed earnestly for the day when He would arrive. Luke 2 tells of Simeon, a man of faith who was “looking for the consolation of Israel” (v. 25). When he saw Jesus as an infant, Simeon knew that this Child was the fulfillment of his messianic hope. Charles Wesley was borrowing from this passage when he described Jesus in this song as “Israel’s strength and consolation.”

Although He fulfilled Israel’s prophecies, Jesus came to bring salvation to the entire world, which is what Wesley was referring to when he described Christ as the “hope of all the earth” and the “dear desire of every nation.” More than that, He is the “joy of every longing heart.” He alone is the one who can satisfy every soul.

The second verse tells us why Jesus can meet our expectations: He was “born a child and yet a King.” As the One who is both God and man, Jesus was able to satisfy God’s wrath completely by dying on the cross for our sins. When Wesley wrote about Jesus’ “all sufficient merit,” he was referring to Christ’s ability to bring us to salvation.

“Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus” is a great song for Christmas, focusing on the “long-expected Jesus” who was born to set us free from sin and to bring us salvation by His death.

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Charles Wesley’s best-known song is probably “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing.” It has been altered slightly by editors, but most of it remains just as Wesley intended when he wrote it over 250 years ago.

As we generally hear it today, the song begins with a triumphant proclamation of Jesus’ birth, describes the fact

that He is both God and man, and then praises Him for the salvation He was born to provide.

The first verse reads, in part,

**Hark! the herald angels sing, "Glory to the newborn King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled."**

Talking about peace on earth is popular at Christmas time, and appropriately so, for Jesus did come to bring peace. Primarily, however, He came to bring us peace with God, which is what Wesley meant when he wrote, "God and sinners reconciled." We have all sinned against God; we have broken His commandments and thus made ourselves His enemies. When people become enemies, they cannot go back to being friends until their differences are set aside. Sometimes reconciliation involves the payment of reparations, and which is essentially what Jesus did when He died on the cross. He paid the price necessary to reconcile us to God. The price was really ours to pay, not God's, but Jesus was able to pay it because, though He was God, He became also a man, being born as a baby on that first Christmas day.

Charles Wesley described Jesus' birth in the second verse of this song. He wrote,

**Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's
womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.**

Though He was the everlasting Lord, the second person of the Trinity (which is described in the song as "the Godhead"), fully equal in nature with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, Jesus became the "offspring of the Virgin's womb." He was "veiled in flesh," the "incarnate Deity." He was God, having become also a man. The name Emmanuel means "God with us," which is what Wesley was referring to when he wrote that Jesus was "pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel." He

became a man, but in the process did not lose His deity. He was "God with us."

The idea that Jesus would lay aside His divine privileges for any reason is nothing short of incredible, but He did so in order to provide us with salvation. Wesley focused on this amazing occurrence in the third verse, where he wrote,

**Mild He lays His glory by, born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second
birth.**

Jesus laid aside His own rights, coming to this earth and dying for our sins, that those who trust in Him might have eternal life. He was born that we might be born again, and that is good reason to sing "glory to the newborn King."

0 Little Town of Bethlehem

"0 Little Town of Bethlehem" was written in 1867 by Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal pastor from Philadelphia. He had been in Israel two years earlier and had celebrated Christmas in Bethlehem. This song describes the city not so much as it was when Brooks observed it, but as he thought it might have appeared on the night of Jesus' birth.

The first verse reads,

**0 little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee
tonight.**

The streets of our own cities are quiet on Christmas day; stores are closed and most people are at home. It is possible that Bethlehem was quiet on the night that Jesus was born, but we know that the place was full of people from out of town,

and chances are that there were even more people on the streets than usual. But this song does not say as much about the level of activity in Bethlehem as it does about the fact that very few people even noticed the Baby who was born. One line from the second verse reads, "While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love"—a situation that is true even today. The world goes on about its business, working, eating, sleeping, and playing, utterly oblivious to the spiritual realities around it. As Brooks wrote in the third verse of the song,

**How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ
enters in.**

When Christ came into this world, He came quietly. The angelic announcement to the shepherds was the only publicity that accompanied Him. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough; He did not arrive with the pomp that one would expect of a King. For the most part, He still does not. When people today place their faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible tells us that He comes to live inside them through the indwelling Holy Spirit (John 14:16-23; Rom. 8:9-11). There is not a lot of flash associated with an entrance like that, and some of your friends might not even notice the difference at first, but when you trust in Jesus Christ an incredibly significant event takes place. Your sins are forgiven and you are made a new person (John 5:24; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Jesus' coming means that Christmas does not have to be the lonely time that it is for so many people. We can experience His salvation and enjoy His presence as individuals, even though the world around us does not understand what is really going on. As the last verse of the song reads,

O holy Child of Bethlehem! Descend to us we pray,

**Cast out our sin, and enter in; be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, Our Lord Emmanuel.**

O Holy Night

The carol “O Holy Night” by John Dwight begins by describing the night Jesus was born. It reads,

**O holy night! The stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of the dear Savior’s birth.
Long lay the world in sin and error pining,
Till He appeared and the soul felt its worth.**

The coming of Jesus Christ should make us feel valuable, and it should make us feel loved. John 3:16 tells us that Jesus came because “God so loved the world.” First Peter 1 reminds us that God has actually purchased us out of our slavery to sin, not with something perishable and comparatively worthless like silver and gold, “but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (vv. 18,19). The fact that Jesus gave Himself for us should cause our souls to feel their worth to God.

The second verse of “O Holy Night” calls us to consider the incredible fact that the King of kings was born as a human infant and placed in a manger. Most of us cannot relate to that kind of birth—our children are usually born in hospitals and nurtured in the most sterile of environments. Jesus was not. He was born in a stable. More than that, He lived a life of poverty, experienced severe temptation and persecution, and died a brutal death, abandoned by His friends and wrongly condemned by His enemies. Thus, although we cannot always relate to His experiences, He can relate to ours. This empathy is what Dwight was describing when he wrote,

**The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our Friend.**

**He knows our need, to our weakness is no stranger.
Behold your King, before Him lowly bend.**

It must have seemed ironic for grown men to bow down before a baby, but no act of worship was ever more appropriate.

Considering our Lord's birth should cause us to worship Him, and it should cause us to respond to one another with humility. The third verse of "O Holy Night" reads,

**Truly He taught us to love one another;
His law is love and His gospel is peace.
Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother,
And in His name all oppression shall cease.**

We no longer have slavery in this country, but we have many other forms of oppression, and Dwight was correct in writing that the oppression of human beings is inconsistent with the worship of Christ.

The Bible tells us that we are to model the humility that Jesus demonstrated when He voluntarily laid aside His rights as God and became also a man in order to suffer for our salvation. Based on Christ's example, Paul writes,

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4).

Paul tells us that we are wrong when we put our own interests ahead of someone else's, whether through the slavery that John Dwight spoke against or simply through insensitivity toward others. Because He loved us, Jesus chose not to exercise all of His rights. May we follow that pattern of humility as we love one another, even after Christmas.

Joy to the World

“Joy to the World” was written by Isaac Watts and published for the first time in 1719. The song is a paraphrase of the 98th Psalm, and it has become one of the most popular Christmas carols of all time. The popularity of “Joy to the World” has resulted in a number of revisions designed to fit the theology of those singing it. For example, in 1838 the song was revised by a group of religious skeptics, who apparently liked the song but did not want to sing about the coming of the Lord. They changed the words from

“Joy to the world! The Lord is come. Let earth receive her King.

Let every heart prepare Him room, and heaven and nature sing,”

to

“Joy to the world! The light has come [a reference to reason], the only lawful King. Let every heart prepare it room, and moral nature sing.”

Several years ago the song was used by a marching choir in a major televised parade. But the choir only sang the first four words, “Joy to the world,” and then just hummed the rest of the song!

People who do not believe in Jesus often do not mind singing about a baby born in a manger, but it is a little more awkward for them to sing about Him being the Lord of heaven and earth. And this song makes it very clear that Jesus did not just come to be an inspiring infant or a gentle teacher. He came as the Lord, the King of kings, fully deserving our praise.

“Joy to the World” continues with the words,

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.

He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found.

This verse alludes to Genesis 3, where God told the first man that the ground itself would be cursed as a consequence of his sin. Instead of abundant crops, the ground would now produce thorns and thistles—weeds that would cause humankind to labor intensively in order to survive. With this verse of the song, Watts anticipates the day when the blessings of salvation in Christ will overturn sin's consequences "as far as the curse is found."

That day has not come yet, but someday Christ will return to reign in His glory and judge the nations. As the last verse of "Joy to the World" reads,

**He rules the world with truth and grace, And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness and wonders of His love.**

When Jesus came to this earth, He did not remain in the manger, where He might have been easily controlled. He did not even remain on the cross, where He might have been honored as a martyr. He rose from the dead, that He might reign over all creation. Whether people enjoy singing the words or not, Isaac Watts was right. "Joy to the world! The Lord is come."

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