Loving God Through Xmas Music?

From Thanksgiving to Christmas Day, the sounds of Christmas music are everywhere: stores, TV specials, many radio stations. Every year, the biggest oldies station in Dallas becomes “The Christmas Station,” this year starting in mid-November.

There are two ways to respond to Christmas music, I think. One way is to let it stream unfiltered into our hearts and minds as the background noise of our December lives. The other is to be intentional about categorizing what we hear, letting it all remind us of “the reason for the season.”

I suggest that Christmas music falls into four categories, and we can mentally tag each song with the appropriate category as we listen:

**Songs About Weather**
What do sleigh rides have to do with Jesus’ birthday? Nothing. But a number of songs we only hear in December are focused on northern-hemisphere weather. Key words are snow, cold, frosty, winter, and jingle bells (because they belong on sleighs, apparently).

**Songs About Fantasy**
All songs about Santa Claus, the Grinch, elves, and Frosty the Snowman belong in this category. Make-believe characters have nothing to do with the birth of the Savior, but we only hear them at Christmas.

**Songs About “Xmas Feelings”**
There are lots of songs invoking warm and fuzzy feelings about Christmas, and being together, and good cheer. It’s “the hap-happiest season of all,” right? Other songs highlight what the singer wants for Christmas, ranging from a kid’s two front teeth to the not-TOO-greedy “Santa Baby” song: a fur coat, a car, a yacht and a ring. Be sure to hang some mistletoe so you can score a kiss from somebody. (Except that given the current movement to expose sexual harassment and crimes, that might not be the best move right now.) I call these “Xmas Feelings” because although the songs are played at Christmastime, none of them have anything to do with the reason we celebrate Christmas in the first place. It’s a totally secular feel-good holiday, so we can just X out the Christ of Christmas.

**Songs About the Birth of Christ**
Aaaah . . . now we’re talking! Most songs about Jesus’ birth are either Christmas carols, long venerated for the very good reason that they proclaim truth. We call them carols, but they’re really hymns that celebrate the Incarnation, God leaving heaven to become man. Most carols show deep insight into the glorious mystery of the Incarnation. “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” proclaims, “Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity.” My favorite Christmas carol, “Joy to the World,” exhorts us—and the whole world—to embrace the Savior: “Let earth receive her King, Let every heart prepare Him room, And heaven and nature sing. . .”

In addition to Christmas carols, some more modern songs teach biblical doctrine. “Mary Did You Know,” written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene in 1991, elevates Jesus in a most worshipful way. “Mary did you know . . . when you kiss your little Baby you kiss the face of God? . . . This sleeping Child you’re holding is the Great I AM?” Still gives me goosebumps. Every time I hear it.

The continual presence of Christmas music is a good opportunity to practice discernment with every song by asking, “Which category does this song go in?” Using biblical wisdom to think intentionally is one way we can love God with our minds, as Jesus said is part of the greatest commandment (Luke
10:27). But then we can go on to a second step, which is to connect the dots between the songs and the Lord behind “the reason for the season.”

When we hear a song about weather: “Lord, I praise You for being the creator of winter—and spring, summer and fall.”

When we hear a song about fantasy characters: “Lord, I praise You for being real and true, and not make-believe like Santa or Frosty.”

When we hear a song about Xmas feelings: “Lord, the longings of the heart for love and for home and for belonging are all met in You. Thank You for drawing me into relationship with You as the giver of these good things.”

When we hear a song about Jesus’ birth: “Lord, Happy Birthday! Thank You for leaving heaven and coming to earth to reconcile us with the Father. Thank You for this wonderful song that reminds us that You are Lord.”

Bonus points for identifying “category error” songs that mix fantasy and truth. Examples: “Here Comes Santa Claus” mixes the made-up Santa and the True God:

“Peace on earth will come to all, if we just follow the light
So let’s give thanks to the Lord above ’cause Santa Claus comes tonight.”

Then there’s “Up on the Rooftop”:

Up on the rooftop
Click, click, click
Down through the chimney with
Good Saint Nick

Santa is not Saint Nicholas, a 4th-century Christ-follower in modern-day Turkey. St. Nicholas didn’t come down chimneys with toys for good little girls and boys! Santa is fantasy; “St. Nick” is real.

Happy singing . . . and thinking!

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on December 12, 2017.

3 Points About Christmas: Evidence for Biblical Truth

Paul Rutherford suggests using three fulfilled biblical prophecies as an apologetic for biblical truth: Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His birth.

Pine scent inside my home, the quick defensive tightening of my skin as I walk outside into the cold brisk air, and then the reflexive opposite – the slow relaxation of my whole body as I stand in front of
As we look toward Christmas and hear the nativity story this season, I want to share with you one conversation starter I use to defend my faith.

Let me share it with you. It’s rather simple. It’s easy to remember because it comes entirely out of Matthew’s second chapter. It’s not long and involved either—just three points.

Skeptics ridicule the Bible for its many supposed “errors,” “holes,” and “inconsistencies.” They conclude that it’s unreliable. Sharing this quick three-point apologetic can assure them that the Bible is reliable and can be trusted.

If the Bible makes three prophecies and then records the fulfillments of those prophecies, don’t you think that makes the book at least a little bit credible? That’s what you can do citing just the Christmas story from Matthew 2.

You might be tempted to dismiss this, saying it doesn’t matter. But here’s why the reliability of Scripture matters. If Scripture can be trusted, AND what it is says is true, then some of the recorded teachings of Jesus could radically alter your life.

In Matthew 10:13 Jesus said, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” Or Luke 14:27, “Whoever does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.”

Does that mean the disciple of Jesus has to lose his life?!! In a sense, yes.

How’s that for radical?! If the Bible is reliable, then that means your life is at stake. Literally. That’s not exaggeration: your physical life and your spiritual life. Both.

So there’s a lot at stake then, if what the Bible says is true. Let’s take a look, then, shall we?

Matthew’s account of the Christmas story records three distinct fulfillments of prophecy: Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, Jesus being taken to Egypt, and genocide surrounding His birth. We’ll consider these one at a time.

**Jesus Born in Bethlehem**

Your life hangs in the balance of the Bible’s reliability. That’s why this discussion matters—whether or not the Bible is reliable. The Christmas story from Matthew 2 offers strong evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we get into the first of three instances in the Christmas story that point to the miraculous fulfillment of prophecy strictly surrounding Jesus’ birth—namely the location of His birth, Bethlehem.

The gospel writer, Matthew, begins chapter two telling the story of the Magi—the fabled wise men
from the East who came to worship the King of the Jews. They arrive in Jerusalem, the Jewish capital city, expecting to find the baby King. They are disappointed, but redirected to Bethlehem by King Herod’s chief priests. Why? Because those priests had read the prophet Micah who foretold the Messiah, the coming King, would come out of Bethlehem.

In Matthew 2:6, the writer is quoting the prophet Micah 5:2.

You may have known Jesus was born in Bethlehem. That’s a pretty widely known fact, which is also why it’s a great place to start this conversation to make a case for the Bible’s reliability. It might sound like this.

“You know Jesus was born in Bethlehem, right?” you could begin. “Well, did you know that was prophesied hundreds of years prior?” Don’t worry about trying to remember the citation. Just focus on it being fulfilled prophecy. You can always look up the reference later if you want to. If you want extra credit, go for the prophet’s name, Micah.

Some skeptics may grant that Jesus indeed fulfilled prophecy, but that he did so intentionally. That is, skeptics basically charge Jesus with reading the Hebrew prophets, and then deliberately fulfilling as many as he possibly could in order to win favor, influence, and gain a following.

However, this is difficult to achieve when you haven’t been born yet! How could he possibly have deliberately fulfilled anything when he wasn’t deliberating anything at all? He wasn’t conscious, and didn’t even exist yet in the flesh.

So no, Jesus could not have fulfilled this prophecy by Himself in order to deceive and manipulate. What are the chances Jesus’ birthplace would fulfill prophecy? Not likely!

**Jesus’ Flight to Egypt**

The second fulfillment of prophecy recorded in Matthew 2 (the Christmas story), is Jesus’ flight to Egypt. Practically overnight Jesus’ father, Joseph, moves his family out of the country—out of Israel and into Egypt. Here’s the text. Matthew 2:14-15.

“So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “OUT OF EGYPT I CALLED MY SON.”

International travel back then was not what it is today. Modern conveniences ease travel today and increase comfort, yet it still remains difficult for us. Joseph and Mary, however, risked their very lives in order to relocate internationally. This effort was not undertaken lightly. Joseph was, after all, under orders from an angel.

Question: what do you think are the chances an ancient near-eastern middle-class laborer would embark upon world travel with only a moment’s notice? He risked the life of his fiancée. He risked the life of his (adoptive) child, not to mention his own. This kind of journey was highly unusual. So it seems unlikely this scenario would have played out under other circumstances—that it was mere coincidence to fulfill prophecy.

When compared to non-biblical prophecy, this one seems awfully specific. It names the country out of which he is called—Egypt—not something vague like “foreign country.” No. The prophet Hosea mentions Egypt specifically in chapter 11:1. Further it mentions the gender of the child—a male child, a son.
The specificity of the prophecy and the unlikely nature of the event occurring on its own both point to divine orchestration. This was no accident. The fulfillment of prophecy in Jesus’ birth make the Bible seem a lot more reliable.

Your life is in the balance of the Bible’s reliability. The teachings recorded in this book can save your life. The bigger question is, will you believe them? Do you want to be saved? Do you believe Jesus is Lord and accept His sacrifice on the cross to save you from sin? (If so, please email me at paul@probe.org.) I want to hear from you.

Jesus, Genocide Survivor

Three fulfilled prophecies recorded by Matthew chapter two—in the Christmas story—underscore the reliability of this controversial ancient text. The Christmas story is evidence that the Bible is true.

Today we consider the third prophecy Jesus’ birth story fulfills: namely, that there would be a genocide killing babies. Here’s the text from Matthew 2:16-18.

“Then when Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he became very enraged, and sent and slew all the male children who were in Bethlehem and all its vicinity, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the magi. Then what had been spoken through Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children; and she refused to be comforted, because they were no more.’”

The gospel writer, Matthew, is quoting a prophecy of Jeremiah. To decode this passage, first keep in mind that Rachel, Jacob’s wife, was mother to Israel’s twelve tribes, and here she is a kind of symbolic mother for all of Israel. The second point to note is that Ramah is located in Bethlehem. With that in mind, the prophecy foretells of Israel’s mothers crying in Bethlehem, mourning the loss of their children. The author draws our attention to the amazing accuracy of this prophecy. Not only does he get right the who and the what—the moms and their weeping because of the lost babies, but he also correctly prophesies the small village! Incredible.

What are the chances Jesus would fulfill this prophecy this specifically? And as we discussed before, if Jesus were no more than a charlatan attempting to self-fulfill these prophecies, how could a man orchestrate something as large-scale as the death of all the baby boys in a village? Plus the Bible records that was Herod’s idea. And remember, Herod didn’t want Jesus around. Herod was attempting to eliminate potential competition for his throne.

The genocide ordered by the Jewish king, an event that is part of the Christmas story of Jesus’ birth, fulfills prophecy. In so doing it shows the Bible is reliable. That’s a big deal because the Bible records the story of a very important man—one whom you need to know: Jesus.

Conclusion

We’ve been discussing how the Christmas story indicates the Bible is true. We’ve done that by considering three instances recorded in Matthew 2 that fulfill Old Testament prophecy.

First, the prophet Micah prophesied the coming Ruler would come out of Bethlehem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Matthew 2:1 records that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Second, the prophet Hosea prophesied that the Messiah would be called out of Egypt. Jesus’ father Joseph moved infant Jesus to Egypt to flee the coming baby genocide. When it was safe, Joseph was
instructed in a dream to return. So Jesus was called out of Egypt. (Matthew 2:14)

Then thirdly, the prophet Jeremiah prophesied all the mothers in Bethlehem would mourn the loss of their children. Matthew 2:16 records that after King Herod learns the news of Jesus’ birth, he orders all infant boys in Bethlehem killed.

What are the chances of one man fulfilling ALL of those prophecies? Not likely! If you want more, read Josh McDowell’s book The New Evidence That Demands A Verdict. He records 61 prophecies fulfilled by Jesus. In it he quotes professor Peter Stoner who calculated the probability of Jesus fulfilling just eight prophecies. He illustrates the likelihood this way. Cover the state of Texas in two feet of silver dollars. Mark just one silver dollar. Now choose one silver dollar at random from anywhere in the state. The chances of picking up the marked silver dollar on the first try are the same as Jesus fulfilling just eight Old Testament prophecies. Not happening!

We have good evidence that what the Bible records is accurate. It will stand up to criticism that Jesus attempted to fulfill prophecy on his own, to position himself as a teacher with authority, influence, or to gain a following. But the fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy we discussed cannot be intentionally self-fulfilled. They either occurred before He was born, or were entirely out of His control.

Do you now believe in Jesus because you listened to this? Email me. I’d love to hear from you (paul@probe.org). Are you already His disciple? God has a unique purpose for your life, only you can fulfill. You are his ambassador. Share the good news. Your life is not the only one at stake. Your neighbor’s is too. Have you shared with him or her yet? Take your next step of faithfulness today, whatever that is. I am praying you do.

You now have a great conversation starter to help you get there. The Christmas story is tremendous evidence for biblical truth.

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The Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? - A Real Historical Event

Dr. Pat Zukeran presents strong evidence discounting the most common theories given against a historical resurrection. The biblical account and other evidence clearly discount these attempts to cast doubt on the resurrection. Any strong apologetic argument is anchored on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ as an historical event.

Introduction

The most significant event in history is the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the strongest evidence that Jesus is the Son of God. This event gives men and women the sure hope of eternal life a hope that not only gives us joy as we look to the future but also provides us with powerful reasons to live today.
Throughout the centuries, however, there have been scholars who have attempted to deny the account of the Resurrection. Our schools are filled with history books which give alternative explanations for the Resurrection or in some cases, fail even to mention this unique event.

In this essay we will take a look at the evidence for the Resurrection and see if this event is historical fact or fiction. But, first, we must establish the fact that Jesus Christ was a historical figure and not a legend. There are several highly accurate historical documents that attest to Jesus. First, let's look at the four Gospels themselves. The authors Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John recorded very specific facts of the events surrounding the life of Jesus, and archaeology has verified the accuracy of the New Testament. Hundreds of facts such as the names of officials, geographical sites, financial currencies, and times of events have been confirmed. Sir William Ramsay, one of the greatest geographers of the 19th century, became firmly convinced of the accuracy of the New Testament as a result of the overwhelming evidence he discovered during his research. As a result, he completely reversed his antagonism against Christianity.

The textual evidence decisively shows that the Gospels were written and circulated during the lifetime of those who witnessed the events. Since there are so many specific names and places mentioned, eyewitnesses could have easily discredited the writings. The New Testament would have never survived had the facts been inaccurate. These facts indicate that the Gospels are historically reliable and show Jesus to be a historical figure. For more information on the accuracy of the Bible, see the essay from Probe entitled Authority of the Bible.

Another document that supports the historicity of Jesus is the work of Josephus, a potentially hostile Jewish historian. He recorded Antiquities, a history of the Jews, for the Romans during the lifetime of Jesus. He wrote, “Now there was about that time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man.”(1) Josephus goes on to relate other specific details about Jesus’ life and death that correspond with the New Testament. Roman historians such as Suetonius, Tacitus, and Pliny the Younger also refer to Jesus as a historically real individual.

Skeptics often challenge Christians to prove the Resurrection scientifically. We must understand, the scientific method is based on showing that something is fact by repeated observations of the object or event. Therefore, the method is limited to repeatable events or observable objects. Historical events cannot be repeated. For example, can we repeatedly observe the creation of our solar system? The obvious answer is no, but that does not mean the creation of the solar system did not happen.

In proving a historical event like the Resurrection, we must look at the historical evidence. Thus far in our discussion we have shown that belief in the historical Jesus of the New Testament is certainly reasonable and that the scientific method cannot be applied to proving a historical event. For the reminder of this essay, we will examine the historical facts concerning the Resurrection and see what the evidence reveals.

**Examining the Evidence**

Three facts must be reckoned with when investigating the Resurrection: the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the preaching of the Resurrection originating in Jerusalem.

Let us first examine the case of the empty tomb. Jesus was a well-known figure in Israel. His burial site was known by many people. In fact Matthew records the exact location of Jesus’ tomb. He states, “And Joseph of Arimathea took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen cloth and laid it in his own new tomb” (Matt. 27:59). Mark asserts that Joseph was “a prominent member of the Council” (Mark 15:43).
It would have been destructive for the writers to invent a man of such prominence, name him specifically, and designate the tomb site, since eyewitnesses would have easily discredited the author’s fallacious claims.

Jewish and Roman sources both testify to an empty tomb. Matthew 28:12 13 specifically states that the chief priests invented the story that the disciples stole the body. There would be no need for this fabrication if the tomb had not been empty. Opponents of the Resurrection must account for this. If the tomb had not been empty, the preaching of the Apostles would not have lasted one day. All the Jewish authorities needed to do to put an end to Christianity was to produce the body of Jesus.

Along with the empty tomb is the fact that the corpse of Jesus was never found. Not one historical record from the first or second century is written attacking the factuality of the empty tomb or claiming discovery of the corpse. Tom Anderson, former president of the California Trial Lawyers Association states,

Let’s assume that the written accounts of His appearances to hundreds of people are false. I want to pose a question. With an event so well publicized, don’t you think that it’s reasonable that one historian, one eye witness, one antagonist would record for all time that he had seen Christ’s body? . . . The silence of history is deafening when it comes to the testimony against the resurrection.(2)

Second, we have the changed lives of the Apostles. It is recorded in the Gospels that while Jesus was on trial, the Apostles deserted Him in fear. Yet 10 out of the 11 Apostles died as martyrs believing Christ rose from the dead. What accounts for their transformation into men willing to die for their message? It must have been a very compelling event to account for this.

Third, the Apostles began preaching the Resurrection in Jerusalem. This is significant since this is the very city in which Jesus was crucified. This was the most hostile city in which to preach. Furthermore, all the evidence was there for everyone to investigate. Legends take root in foreign lands or centuries after the event. Discrediting such legends is difficult since the facts are hard to verify. However, in this case the preaching occurs in the city of the event immediately after it occurred. Every possible fact could have been investigated thoroughly.

Anyone studying the Resurrection must somehow explain these three facts.

**Five Common Explanations**

Over the years five explanations have been used to argue against the Resurrection. We will examine these explanations to see whether they are valid.

*The Wrong Tomb Theory*

Proponents of this first argument state that according to the Gospel accounts, the women visited the grave early in the morning while it was dark. Due to their emotional condition and the darkness, they visited the wrong tomb. Overjoyed to see that it was empty, they rushed back to tell the disciples Jesus had risen. The disciples in turn ran into Jerusalem to proclaim the Resurrection.

There are several major flaws with this explanation. First, it is extremely doubtful that the Apostles would not have corrected the women’s error. The Gospel of John gives a very detailed account of them doing just that. Second, the tomb site was known not only by the followers of Christ but also by their opponents. The Gospels make it clear the body was buried in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council. If the body still remained in the tomb while the Apostles began
preaching, the authorities simply would have to go to the right tomb, produce the body, and march it down the streets. This would have ended the Christian faith once and for all. Remember, the preaching of the Resurrection began in Jerusalem, fifteen minutes away from the crucifixion site and the tomb. These factors make this theory extremely weak.

**The Hallucination Theory**

This second theory holds that the Resurrection of Christ just occurred in the minds’ of the disciples. Dr. William McNeil articulates this position in his book, *A World History*. He writes,

> The Roman authorities in Jerusalem arrested and crucified Jesus. . . . But soon afterwards the dispirited Apostles gathered in an upstairs room’ and suddenly felt again the heartwarming presence of their master. This seemed absolutely convincing evidence that Jesus’ death on the cross had not been the end but the beginning. . . . The Apostles bubbled over with excitement and tried to explain to all who would listen all that had happened.(3)

This position is unrealistic for several reasons. In order for hallucinations of this type to occur, psychiatrists agree that several conditions must exist. However, this situation was not conducive for hallucinations. Here are several reasons. Hallucinations generally occur to people who are imaginative and of a nervous make up. However, the appearances of Jesus occurred to a variety of people. Hallucinations are subjective and individual. No two people have the same experience. In this case, over five hundred people (Corinthians 15) have the same account. Hallucinations occur only at particular times and places and are associated with the events. The Resurrection appearances occur in many different environments and at different times. Finally, hallucinations of this nature occur to those who intensely want to believe. However, several such as Thomas and James, the half brother of Jesus were hostile to the news of the Resurrection.

If some continue to argue for this position, they still must account for the empty tomb. If the Apostles dreamed up the Resurrection at their preaching, all the authorities needed to do was produce the body and that would have ended the Apostles’ dream. These facts make these two theories extremely unlikely.

**The Swoon Theory**

A third theory espouses that Jesus never died on the cross but merely passed out and was mistakenly considered dead. After three days He revived, exited the tomb, and appeared to His disciples who believed He had risen from the dead. This theory was developed in the early nineteenth century, but today it has been completely given up for several reasons.

First, it is a physical impossibility that Jesus could have survived the tortures of the crucifixion. Second, the soldiers who crucified Jesus were experts in executing this type of death penalty. Furthermore, they took several precautions to make sure He was actually dead. They thrust a spear in His side. When blood and water come out separately, this indicates the blood cells had begun to separate from the plasma which will only happen when the blood stops circulating. Upon deciding to break the legs of the criminals (in order to speed up the process of dying), they carefully examined the body of Jesus and found that He was already dead.

After being taken down from the cross, Jesus was covered with eighty pounds of spices and embalmed. It is unreasonable to believe that after three days with no food or water, Jesus would revive. Even harder to believe is that Jesus could roll a two-ton stone up an incline, overpower the guards, and then walk several miles to Emmaeus. Even if Jesus had done this, His appearing to the disciples half-dead and desperately in need of medical attention would not have prompted their
worship of Him as God.

In the 19th century, David F. Strauss, an opponent of Christianity, put an end to any hope in this theory. Although he did not believe in the Resurrection, he concluded this to be a very outlandish theory. He stated,

It is impossible that a being who had stolen half-dead out of the sepulchre, who crept about weak and ill, wanting medical treatment, who required bandaging, strengthening, and indulgence, and who still at last yielded to his sufferings, could have given the disciples the impression that he was a Conqueror over death and the grave, the Prince of life, an impression that would lay at the bottom of their future ministry.(4)

The Stolen Body Theory

This fourth argument holds that Jewish and Roman authorities stole the body or moved it for safekeeping. It is inconceivable to think this a possibility. If they had the body, why did they need to accuse the disciples of stealing it? (Matt. 28:11-15). In Acts 4, the Jewish authorities were angered and did everything they could to prevent the spread of Christianity. Why would the disciples deceive their own people into believing in a false Messiah when they knew that this deception would mean the deaths of hundreds of their believing friends? If they really knew where the body was, they could have exposed it and ended the faith that caused them so much trouble and embarrassment. Throughout the preaching of the Apostles, the authorities never attempted to refute the Resurrection by producing a body. This theory has little merit.

The Soldiers Fell Asleep Theory

Thus far we have been studying the evidence for the Resurrection. We examined four theories used in attempts to invalidate this miracle. Careful analysis revealed the theories were inadequate to refute the Resurrection. The fifth and most popular theory has existed since the day of the Resurrection and is still believed by many opponents of Christianity. Matthew 28:12-13 articulates this position.

When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money telling them, “You are to say, his disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.”

Many have wondered why Matthew records this and then does not refute it. Perhaps it is because this explanation was so preposterous, he did not see the need to do so.

This explanation remains an impossibility for several reasons. First, if the soldiers were sleeping, how did they know it was the disciples who stole the body? Second, it seems physically impossible for the disciples to sneak past the soldiers and then move a two-ton stone up an incline in absolute silence. Certainly the guards would have heard something.

Third, the tomb was secured with a Roman seal. Anyone who moved the stone would break the seal, an offense punishable by death. The depression and cowardice of the disciples makes it difficult to believe that they would suddenly become so brave as to face a detachment of soldiers, steal the body, and then lie about the Resurrection when they would ultimately face a life of suffering and death for their contrived message.

Fourth, Roman guards were not likely to fall asleep with such an important duty. There were penalties for doing so. The disciples would have needed to overpower them. A very unlikely scenario.
Finally, in the Gospel of John the grave clothes were found “lying there as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus’ head. The cloth was folded up by itself separate from the linen” (20:6 7). There was not enough time for the disciples to sneak past the guards, roll away the stone, unwrap the body, rewrap it in their wrappings, and fold the head piece neatly next to the linen. In a robbery, the men would have flung the garments down in disorder and fled in fear of detection.

**Conclusion: Monumental Implications**

These five theories inadequately account for the empty tomb, the transformation of the Apostles, and the birth of Christianity in the city of the crucifixion. The conclusion we must seriously consider is that Jesus rose from the grave. The implications of this are monumental.

First, if Jesus rose from the dead, then what He said about Himself is true. He stated, “I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25). He also stated, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no man comes to the father, but through me” (John 14:6). Eternal life is found through Jesus Christ alone. Any religious belief that contradicts this must be false. Every religious leader has been buried in a grave. Their tombs have become places of worship. The location of Jesus’ tomb is unknown because it was empty; his body is not there. There was no need to enshrine an empty tomb.

Second, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:54, “Death has been swallowed up in victory.” Physical death is not the end; eternal life with our Lord awaits all who trust in Him because Jesus has conquered death.

**Notes**


**For Further Reading**


Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or Fiction? - A Clear Christian Perspective

Rusty Wright presents a compelling case for the historicity of Jesus’ resurrection. Looking at four outcomes of the resurrection, he presents a brief case supporting a Christian worldview understanding that Jesus actually died and was resurrected from the tomb.

At Easter, some might wonder what all the fuss is about. Who cares? What difference does it make if Jesus rose from the dead?

It makes all the difference in the world. If Christ did not rise, then thousands of believers have died as martyrs for a hoax.

If he did rise, then he is still alive and can offer peace to troubled, hurting lives.

Countless scholars—among them the apostle Paul, Augustine, Sir Isaac Newton and C.S. Lewis—believed in the resurrection. We need not fear committing intellectual suicide by believing it also. Where do the facts lead?

Paul, a first-century skeptic-turned believer, wrote that “Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised on the third day...he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve (Disciples). After that, he appeared to more than five hundred...at the same time, most of whom are still living.” Consider four pieces of evidence:

1. The explosive growth of the Christian movement. Within a few weeks after Jesus was crucified, a movement arose which, by the later admission of its enemies, “upset the world.” What happened to ignite this movement shortly after its leader had been executed?

2. The Disciples’ changed lives. After Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion, most of the Disciples fled in fear. Peter denied three times that he was a follower of Jesus. (The women were braver and stayed to the end.) Yet ten out of the eleven Disciples (Judas committed suicide) were martyred for their faith. According to traditions, Peter was crucified upside down; Thomas was skewered; John was boiled in oil but survived. What turned these cowards into heroes? Each believed he had seen Jesus alive again.

3. The empty tomb. Jesus’ corpse was removed from the cross, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A one-and-a-half to two-ton stone was rolled into a slightly depressed groove to seal the tomb’s entrance.
A “Green Beret”-like unit of Roman soldiers guarded the grave. Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone but the graveclothes were still in place. What happened?

Did Christ’s friends steal the body? Perhaps one of the women sweet-talked (karate-chopped?) the guards while the others moved the stone and tiptoed off with the body. Or maybe Peter (remember his bravery) or Thomas (Doubting Thomas) overpowered the guards, stole the body, then fabricated—and died for—a resurrection myth.

These theories hardly seem plausible. The guard was too powerful, the stone too heavy and the disciples too spineless to attempt such a feat.

Did Christ’s enemies steal the body? If Romans or Jewish religious leaders had the body, surely they would have exposed it publicly and Christianity would have died out. They didn’t, and it didn’t.

The “Swoon Theory” supposes that Jesus didn’t really die but was only unconscious. The expert Roman executioners merely thought he was dead. After a few days in the tomb without food or medicine, the cool air revived him.

He burst from the 100 pounds of graveclothes, rolled away the stone with his nail-pierced hands, scared the daylights out of the Roman soldiers, walked miles on wounded feet and convinced his Disciples he’d been raised from the dead. This one is harder to believe than the resurrection itself.

4. The appearances of the risen Christ. For 40 days after his death, many different people said they saw Jesus alive. Witnesses included a woman, a shrewd tax collector, several fishermen and over 500 people at once. These claims provide further eyewitness testimony for the resurrection.

As a skeptic, I realized that attempts to explain away the evidences run into a brick wall of facts that point to one conclusion: Christ is risen.

The above does not constitute an exhaustive proof, rather a reasoned examination of the evidence. Each interested person should evaluate the evidence and decide if it makes sense. Of course, the truth or falsity of the resurrection is a matter of historical fact and is not dependent on anyone’s belief. If the facts support the claim, one can conclude that he arose. In any case, mere intellectual assent to the facts does little for one’s life.

A major evidence comes experientially, in personally receiving Jesus’ free gift of forgiveness. He said, “I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him (or her).”

Worth considering?

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Truth You Can Sing About - Part 2

When was the last time you thought about the great truth found in Christmas hymns and carols? In this program we focus on the truth of five Christmas carols. Be sure to listen to the podcast to hear
the music for each carol, written just for us, playing underneath the content! Part 1, produced in 2015, featured five different Christmas carols.

The First Noel

And by the light of that same star
Three wise men came from country far;
To seek for a King was their intent,
And to follow the star wherever it went.

The first two verses speak about angels and shepherds; the remaining verses speak of three Wise Men.

Tradition gives us their names, but not only do we not know their names (because the Bible doesn’t mention them), we don’t even know if there were three. We assume three because of the number of gifts mentioned.

But the point of this carol is not about a number, or gifts; it’s about the commitment of these Magi: “To seek for a King was their intent, and to follow the star wherever it went.”

Is there something in your life you’ve pursued, wherever it went? A person? Stuff? Wealth? Position? Power? The Magi were accustomed to wealth, position and power. But who did they pursue? A foreign King. A Jewish King. Why? Well, if they knew about the birth of this Jewish King, then they knew about the Jewish God. And I believe they understood that this Jewish God, was The One True God.

To choose to follow the King was and is counter-cultural, and oftentimes is perceived as foolish. But the WISE men didn’t care. They chose to follow the star wherever it went, until they found . . . Him. Do you know who to follow? Are you willing to look for Him with that same kind of commitment?

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

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 all sufficient merit,
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.

“You will have a son. His name will be Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of God Most High. The Lord God will make him king, as his ancestor David was. He will rule the people of Israel forever, and his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:31-33)

It’s been about 400 years since Israel had heard from the Lord, and within six months, the angel
Gabriel came down twice to speak of Messiah’s birth. When Mary heard those words, Scripture mentions how she treasured them in her heart. The big thing: she’s going to be pregnant! (Well, and that He was a King.) But the first thing Gabriel told Mary was to name Him Jesus; and we learn from another angelic vision that Jesus would live up to His name: “[F]or He will save His people from their sins.” (Matthew 1:21)

Mr. Wesley got it right; the first line of this verse is, “Born Thy people to deliver.” The advent we celebrate now is for the One Who has delivered us from our sins. The advent we still expect is when He will rule as King of Kings and Lord of Lords, forever.

May Christ rule in your heart . . . forever.

**Come, All Ye Faithful**

_Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning;_
_Jesus, to Thee be all glory given;_
_Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing._
_O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord._

Singer/Songwriter Michael Card was explaining how it was difficult for the disciples to see Christ as God. Seeing Him as man—standing five-foot something, walking, eating and drinking with them everyday—was easy. But for us, the opposite is true—seeing Him as God is easier; but Christ as man, is a bit more difficult.

One of the reasons to celebrate His birth, is to give us a tangible and “In Time” beginning of One who is everlasting. And so like the hymn, we can come before Him in our hearts and minds, see Him lying in a manger in a barn. We can rejoice how the Word became flesh, and, we can rejoice that He laid down that life, to save us.

John 1 reveals the author’s inspiration: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14) But how is it we come to adore Him? John tells us in a few verses earlier: “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12)

Will you receive that right, and greet Christ the Lord today?

**Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silent**

_Rank on rank the host of heaven spreads its vanguard on the way, as the Light of light descendeth from the realms of endless day, that the powers of hell may vanish as the shadows clear away._

When the author of the hymn composed this verse he must have had Isaiah 9:2 in mind: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” He must have visualized the host of heaven in a vanguard invading the earth, and leading the Son of God to His incarnation in a glorious, dazzling, and blinding display. All who worshiped darkness were put on notice: the light of the world had come into the world.
And the light is still here, which is why the shadows are being cleared away and the powers of hell will vanish: “You are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14, 16)

“But you are the chosen race, the King’s priests, the holy nation, God’s own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light.” (1 Peter 2:9)

Will you come out of your darkness and into His light?

**Good Christian Men Rejoice (In Dulci Jubilo)**

Good Christian men, rejoice,
With heart, and soul, and voice;
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy!
Jesus Christ was born for this!
He hath opened the heavenly door,
And man is blessed for evermore.
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

So what was Christ born for? Or as the hymn goes: What’s the “this?”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep . . . If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.” (John 10:7,9)

Christ not only opened the door, He IS the door. He’s the only door to Heaven, and to our Father in Heaven: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.” (John 14:6)

When Christ died upon the cross, He did it for you, so that you would have a way into heaven, and experience endless, eternal bliss. “Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God’s throne.”(Hebrews 11:3) He was willing to die for the joy that was awaiting Him; of accomplishing His Father’s will, and making a way for you, to the Father.

The door is open. Listen, you could be hearing the songs of Heaven.

May your Christmas be filled with praise.

*This program was written by Probe Radio producer, Steven Davis, whose blog is Singing With the King. The music was composed and performed by his son and Mind Games Camp graduate, Jon Clive Davis.*

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Those Admirable English Puritans

Michael Gleghorn corrects a number of misunderstandings and stereotypes about the Puritans, suggesting there is much about them to admire.

Introducing the Puritans

J. I. Packer begins his book, _A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life_, by comparing the English Puritans to the California Redwoods. He writes, “On . . . the northern California coastline grow the giant Redwoods, the biggest living things on earth. Some are over 360 feet tall, and some trunks are more than 60 feet round.”{1} A bit later he draws this comparison: “As Redwoods attract the eye, because they overtop other trees, so the mature holiness and seasoned fortitude of the great Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light, overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras.”{2}

Of course, in our day, if people think of the Puritans at all, it’s usually only for the purpose of making a joke of one kind or another. As one author notes, “the Puritans are the only collective stock-in-trade that virtually every cartoonist feels free to use to lampoon society’s ills.”{3}

But who were the Puritans really? When did they live? And, most importantly, why should we care?

Many scholarly studies of English Puritanism begin by noting the variety of ways in which the term “Puritanism” has been used and defined. Christopher Hill begins his book, _Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England_, with a chapter entitled, “The Definition of a Puritan.”{4} And John Spurr, in his book on English Puritanism, has an introductory section on “Defining Puritans.”{5} But we’ll leave it to the scholars to haggle over details. For our purposes, it’s good enough to say that the Puritans were English Protestants who were influenced by the theology of the Reformation. They were zealous to “purify” not only the Church of England, but also their society, and even themselves, from all doctrinal, ceremonial, and moral impurity—and to do so for the glory of God.{6} The time period of English Puritanism spans roughly the years between 1550 and 1700.{7}

So that’s who the Puritans were, but why on earth should we care? Personally, I think it’s because the Puritans can offer us a great deal of wisdom, wisdom that could really benefit the church and society of our own day. As Packer reminds us, “The great Puritans, though dead, still speak to us through their writings, and say things . . . that we badly need to hear at the present time.”{8}

The Puritans and God

Before going any further, we need to come right out and admit that, at least on the popular level, the Puritans really seem to suffer from an “image problem.” According to J. I. Packer, “Pillorying the Puritans . . . has long been a popular pastime.”{9} Likewise, Peter Marshall and David Manuel observe that “Nearly everyone today seems to believe that the Puritans were bluenosed killjoys in tall black hats, a somber group of sin-obsessed, witch-hunting bigots.”{10} Of course, like Packer, they regard this view as “a monstrous misrepresentation.”{11} But when a view is so widely held, we seem to be in for an uphill battle if we want to suggest some ways in which the Puritans were
admirable!

So where do we begin? Let’s briefly consider the way in which Puritans sought to live their lives before God. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, a teaching device highly esteemed by many Puritans, begins by asking, “What is the chief end of man?” That’s a great question, isn’t it? They answered it this way: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Now what follows if this answer is correct? Well first, it would mean that human life is objectively full of meaning, value, and purpose, for God exists and (as General Maximus asserted in the hit movie, Gladiator) “what we do in life echoes in eternity.” But second, in claiming that “man’s chief end” consists not only in glorifying God in the here and now, but also in enjoying Him forever, we see the potential for the complete and eternal fulfillment of human existence. For what could be better than enjoying God, the greatest good, forever and ever?

It is doubtless for reasons such as this that the Puritan theologian, William Perkins, defined theology as “the science of living blessedly forever”! He understood that theology is not some dry, academic discipline, with no relationship to the rest of one’s life. Rather, theology is all about knowing God personally. And this, according to Jesus, is eternal life, the life of supreme blessedness (John 17:3). So the first reason for seeing the Puritans as admirable is that they sought to live their lives in such a way that they would glorify God and enjoy Him forever—and what could ultimately be wiser, more fulfilling—or more admirable—than that?

The Puritans and Books

Now some may have thought of the Puritans as ignorant, or anti-intellectual—people who either feared or hated learning. But this, claims Leland Ryken, is “absolutely untrue.” Indeed, he says, “No Christian movement in history has been more zealous for education than the Puritans.” Many leaders of the Puritan movement were university educated and saw great value in the life of the mind. One can list individual Puritans who were interested in things like astronomy, botany, medicine, and still other subjects from the book of nature.

Above all, however, Puritanism was a movement which prized that greatest of all books, the Bible. Puritans loved their Bibles—and deemed it both their joy and duty to study, teach, believe and live out its promises and commandments. According to Packer, “Intense veneration for Scripture . . . and a devoted concern to know and do all that it prescribes, was Puritanism’s hallmark.”

Indeed, so great was this Puritan veneration for Scripture that even those without much formal education often knew their English Bible exceedingly well. A great example of this can be seen in John Bunyan, the famed author of The Pilgrim’s Progress. Although he did not have much in the way of formal education, one of his later editors declared (doubtless with some exaggeration) that “No man ever possessed a more intimate knowledge of the Bible, nor greater aptitude in quoting it than Bunyan.”

For Puritans like Bunyan, the Bible was the inspired word of God. It was thus the highest court of appeal in all matters of Christian faith and practice. Indeed, since the Bible came from God, it was viewed as having the same divine authority as God himself. It was therefore worth one’s time to know the Bible well, and to be intimately familiar with its contents. As two contemporary scholars of Puritanism remind us, the Bible was both “the mirror before which each person could see the . . . status of one’s soul before God, and the guidebook for all human behavior . . .”

The Puritan stress on knowing, believing, and obeying God’s inspired word is refreshing. What might the church in America look like if it really recaptured this Puritan vision for the importance of
Scripture? Here the writings of the Puritans can still be a valuable resource for the church today, which is yet another reason for seeing them as admirable.\[21\]

The Puritans and the Church

Even in our own day, the Puritans remain fairly well-known for their desire to “purify” the Church of England from anything which, in their estimation, smacked of doctrinal, moral, or ceremonial impurity.\[22\] The Puritans were passionate about the purity of the church. But how were they to determine if a particular doctrine or practice was suspect?

For the Puritans, it was only natural that God’s inspired word, the Bible, should serve as the final authority in all such matters. If a doctrine was taught in Scripture, then it should also be taught in the church. And if not, then it shouldn’t. The same standard would apply to all moral and ceremonial issues as well. Scripture was to have the final word about whether any particular doctrine or practice was, or was not, to be taught or permitted in the church of God.\[23\] Of course, this is right in line with what we said above about the Puritan devotion to Scripture.

But once one is committed to judging everything within the church according to the standard of Scripture, it probably won’t be long before one’s view of the church undergoes a similar biblical scrutiny. Such scrutiny soon led Puritans to “the notion that the church is a spiritual reality.” The church is not the building in which the redeemed gather to meet, it is rather “the company of the redeemed” themselves.\[24\] Doubtless this was one of the reasons why the Puritans were eager to purify not only the church, understood in a corporate sense, but themselves as individuals as well.

It also helps explain the Puritans’ devotion to both the fellowship of the saints and the discipline of an erring brother or sister in the faith. The Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes urged God’s people “to strengthen and encourage one another in the ways of holiness.”\[25\] And Robert Coachman reminded his readers that “it is no small privilege . . . to live in . . . a society” where one’s brothers and sisters in Christ “will not suffer them to go on in sin.”\[26\]

But isn’t it all too easy to allow Christian fellowship to lapse into something that is superficial, boring, and sometimes even frankly unspiritual? Yes; and this is why the great English Puritans are quick to remind us (sometimes in the most forceful of ways) that we must continually seek, in our fellowship together, to promote both faith and holiness, along with a deep love and reverent fear of the Lord our God. And isn’t that an admirable reminder?

The Puritans on Marriage and the Family

If there’s one thing that almost everyone thinks they know about the Puritans it’s that they “were sexually inhibited and repressive,” right?\[27\] But just how accurate is our knowledge about the Puritans on this score? Well according to some scholars, it’s wide of the mark indeed.\[28\]

Of course, it’s certainly true that the Puritans believed, just as the New Testament teaches, that human sexual behavior should be enjoyed only within the marriage relationship between a husband and wife. And naturally enough, they disapproved of any sexual behavior outside of this relationship. But within the union of heterosexual marriage, the Puritans were actually quite vocal proponents of a rich and vibrant sex life. Indeed, one Puritan author described sex as “one of the most proper and essential acts of marriage” and encouraged married couples to engage in it “with good will and delight, willingly, readily and cheerfully.”\[29\] And need I add that the Puritans thought it important to practice what they preached?!

But with Puritan couples so “readily and cheerfully” enjoying their sexual relationships within
marriage, they naturally had to give some serious thought to the raising of children and the purpose of the family! So what did they have to say about such matters?

For the Puritans, the family ultimately had the same purpose as the individual; namely, “the glory of God.” The reason this is important, notes Ryken, is that “it determines what goes on in a family,” by setting “priorities in a spiritual rather than material direction.”

The Puritans rightly saw that if one wants a spiritually healthy church and a morally healthy society, one must first have spiritually and morally healthy individuals and families—for the former are inevitably composed of the latter. Hence, if we want healthy churches and societies, we must also prize healthy individuals. And such individuals are best produced within spiritually and morally healthy families.

Now I personally find it difficult to argue with the Puritan logic on this point. And although they lived in a different era, Puritan views on the purpose of the family really seem to offer “some attractive possibilities for our own age.”

And now we’ve reached the end of our discussion of English Puritanism. Of course, the Puritans also had their faults—and I’ve no desire to pretend otherwise. But I hope you’d agree that there’s much to admire about these oft-maligned and misrepresented giants of the past. And I also hope this might encourage you to read (and profit from) these giants for yourself!

Notes

1. J. I. Packer, A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 11. I should probably note that the California Department of Parks and Recreation gives figures slightly different from those in Packer’s book, but this is really immaterial for my purposes in this article. See, for example, “How Big are Big Trees,” California Department of Parks and Recreation, accessed February 12, 2015, www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1146.

2. Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 11.


6. Definitional help was gathered from the sources cited above, as well as the article by Mark A Noll, “Puritanism,” in Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 897-900.

7. Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 11.

8. Ibid., 16.

9. Ibid., 21.

11. Ibid.

12. According to Packer, the Puritan Richard Baxter used this catechism to help instruct (and encourage) his parishioners in the truths of the Christian faith. See Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 45.


17. See the brief discussion in Charles Pastoor and Galen Johnson, The A to Z of the Puritans (Lanham, MY: Scarecrow Press, 2009), s.v. “Science.”

18. Packer, A Quest for Godliness, 98.


20. See Pastoor and Johnson, The A to Z of the Puritans, s.v. “Scripture.”

21. Packer says much the same thing. See A Quest for Godliness, 16.

22. For the Puritans, of course, this was typically some vestige of Roman Catholicism. I purposefully chose not to mention this on the radio, however, because I did not want any of our listeners to somehow get the mistaken idea that this was an anti-Catholic program. It’s not. My purpose in this program is to extol the virtues of the Puritans—not to vilify some other segment of the Christian community.

23. Leland Ryken has an excellent discussion of this issue in his chapter on “Church and Worship” in Worldly Saints, 111-135. See particularly pp. 112-115.

24. This, and the previous quotation, are both taken from Ryken, Worldly Saints, 115.


27. Ryken, Worldly Saints, 39.

28. See, for example, Ryken’s chapter on “Marriage and Sex” in Worldly Saints, 39-55.

29. William Gouge, Of Domestical Duties (London, 1622), edited, updated and revised by Greg Fox
George Washington and Religion

Kerby Anderson presents a compelling argument for the view that George Washington was a devoted Christian rather than a deist. He points to Washington’s insistence on the importance of services for his soldiers, his personal church attendance, his prayer life and his commitment to the spiritual upbringing of his godchildren.

Background

What was George Washington’s view of religion and in particular of Christianity? The historical perspective used to be that Washington was a Christian and orthodox in most of his beliefs. But the modern view has been that he was a either a lukewarm Anglican or more likely a Deist.

I want to look at some new research that argues for the traditional view and against the modern view of George Washington’s religion. One book is Washington’s God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country. It is written by Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute and winner of the Templeton Award) and Jana Novak. Another book, written by Peter Lillback with Jerry Newcombe, is George Washington’s Sacred Fire.

George Washington was born into a Virginia family of moderate wealth and was exposed to various religious activities: lessons in religion, regular prayer, Sunday school attendance, and reverence for God. His mother had a daily ritual of retiring with a book of religious readings.

By the time he was a teenager, Washington had already assumed serious responsibilities as a professional surveyor and then as a major in the Virginia militia. His adventures in the wild lands gave him invaluable lessons about the military, Indians, and the British. Years later in a speech to the Delaware chiefs, Washington said, “You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are.”
He studied the Bible as well as the writings of ancient heroes. The busts and portraits at Mount Vernon demonstrate this. There are busts of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, and Frederick II of Prussia. In the dining room are portraits of the Virgin Mary and St. John.

Washington’s own stepgranddaughter “Nelly” Custis saw him as a religious man. She wrote this to one of Washington’s early biographers:

> It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o’clock, where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun, and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, “that they may be seen of men.” He communed with his God in secret.\(^4\)

In what follows we will look at the evidence for George Washington’s faith as it surfaced in his letters and actions as general and president.

**Deism vs. Christianity**

Pick up a book about George Washington written during the nineteenth century, and you will probably see that he is described as being a Christian. However, if you pick up a book written in the last seventy years, it will describe him as a Deist. Why the change?

The turning point seems to be a study by historian Paul F. Boller, Jr. entitled *George Washington and Religion*. His conclusion can be summarized in a single sentence: To the “unbiased observer” George Washington appears as a Deist, not a devout Christian.\(^5\) Most historians since Boller accepted this idea and were less likely to assert that Washington was a Christian.

What do we mean by “Deism”? Deism is the belief that God is merely a watchmaker God who started the universe but is not involved in the affairs of humans and human history. One definition of Deism is that “There is no special providence; no miracles or other divine interventions intrude upon the lawful natural order.”\(^6\)

Was George Washington a Deist? He was not. It is worth noting that even historian Paul Boller admitted that religion was important to Washington as a leader. Boller writes, “he saw to it that divine services were performed by the chaplains as regularly as possible on the Sabbath for the soldiers under his command.”\(^7\) We might reasonably ask, Why would chaplains be important to a Deist?

Boller even admits there are testimonials of Washington’s church attendance. This is important since many historians even go further than Boller and assert that Washington did not even attend church as a mature adult.

Michael Novak admits that some of the names Washington often used for God sound Deist, but that does not mean that he was a Deist. In fact, his prayers for God’s action were just the opposite of what you might hear from a Deist. Washington believed God favored the cause of liberty and should be beseeched to “interpose” his action on behalf of the Americans. He called for public thanksgiving for the many ways in which Americans experienced God’s hand in key events in our history.
Washington used more than eighty terms to refer to God, among them: Almighty God, Creator, Divine Goodness, Father of all mercies, and Lord of Hosts. The most common term he used in his writings and speeches was “Providence.” When he did so, he used the masculine personal pronoun “he.” Washington never refers directly to God as an “it,” as he does occasionally with Providence. God is personal.  

If we look at the history of the eighteenth century, there were many with orthodox religious beliefs who sometimes used the philosophical language of the enlightenment. Washington was a Christian, even though he often used terms for God associated with Deists.

**A Religious Nation Goes to War**

There has been some dispute about how religious America was during the Revolutionary War. There was a shortage of churches and clergy (especially along the paths of westward migration). But we should also remember that this War of Independence followed the First Great Awakening.

At the first meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia (September 1774), the first motion from the floor was for prayer to seek guidance from God. But there was resistance, not because of the prayer, but because of the theological disagreements among the members (Anabaptist, Quakers, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians). Sam Adams settled the dispute by saying he was no bigot and could pray along with any minister as long as he was a patriot. I have in my office a picture of a painting showing George Washington praying with men like Patrick Henry, John Jay, and Richard Henry Lee.

At the second meeting, they proposed that Washington be appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army. He did not think he was equal to the command but accepted it. He wrote his wife, “I shall rely, therefore, confidently on that Providence, which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall.” At the time, Washington was the only man on the continent in uniform since no Continental Army yet existed. To the British, he was the supreme traitor, in open rebellion to the King. His neck was at risk, and the American independence depended on him.

One event that George Washington believed showed God’s providence was the Battle of Long Island in 1776. Washington and his men were trapped on Brooklyn Heights, Long Island. The British were poised to crush the American army the next day and that would have been the end of the rebellion. Washington planned a bold move and began evacuating his troops under the cover of darkness using everything from fishing vessels to rowboats. But there was not enough time to accomplish the task. When morning came, the fog of night remained and only lifted in time for the British to see the last American boat crossing the East River beyond the reach of their guns. You can read more about this miraculous event in Michael Novak’s book, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding.*

Washington also required chaplains for the Continental Army, and personally took time for prayer. He forbade his troops under pain of death from uttering blasphemies, even profanity. He called upon them to conduct themselves as Christian soldiers because the people demanded it.

Washington’s actions during the Revolutionary War demonstrate his Christian character.
First in War and First in Peace

In his eulogy for George Washington, Henry Lee said he was “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” We could also say the Washington demonstrated Christian character both in war and in peace.

While fulfilling his duties as general, he came to be known as a “nursing father.” This is a biblical phrase (Num. 11:12, Is. 49:23 KJV) that appears in many of the tributes to Washington after his death. He brought together very diverse groups to fight the Revolutionary War by bridging ethnic and social divisions. This ranged from the regiment from Marblehead, Massachusetts (that included men of mixed race, blacks, and Indians), to the Virginian and southern aristocrats to the yeomen in hunting shirts from western Virginia.

One of his orders stated that “All chaplains are to perform divine service tomorrow, and on every succeeding Sunday. . . . The commander in chief expects an exact compliance with this order, and that it be observed in future as an invariable rule of practice—and every neglect will be considered not only a breach of orders, but a disregard to decency, virtue and religion.”{13}

Washington grew even more explicit as the war dragged on: “While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of a Christian.”{14}

Washington lost a great deal of money during the war by paying for things out of his own pocket and by refusing a salary. He happily returned to Mount Vernon and spent happy years with his wife. But the constitutional convention in 1787 brought him to elective office. He was elected as president by unanimous vote in 1789.

In his inaugural address, Washington said, “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

He issued a thanksgiving proclamation in 1789 in which he asserted “the duty of all nations” in regard to God. His thanksgiving proclamation of 1795 proclaims there are signs of “Divine beneficence” in the world. And in his farewell address, he reminded Americans that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.”

Washington demonstrated Christian character in war and in peace.

Washington as Christian: Pro and Con

Let’s summarize the arguments historians make about Washington’s religious faith. Those who believe that George Washington was a Deist and not a Christian usually make the following observations.

First, Washington never took communion at Sunday services. Second, he refused to declare his specific beliefs in public. Third, he rarely used the name of Jesus Christ in private correspondence and in public utterances. Finally, while he believed in God and had an awareness of Providence in his life, it all seems more like a Greek or Roman view of fate.
Michael Novak’s response to these observations is helpful. “All these objections have a grain of truth in them. Still, they are consistent with Washington’s being a serious Christian who believed that he had a public vocation that required some tact regarding his private confessional life.” Novak adds:

It is not at all unusual for public men in pluralistic American life to maintain a notable reserve about their private convictions. They do not burden the public with declarations of their deepest beliefs, whose general force they trust their actions will sufficiently reveal. In the public forum, they happily give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and in the private forum, to God what is God’s.

What are some of the reasons to believe Washington was a Christian? First, he religiously observed the Sabbath as a day of rest and frequently attended church services on that day. Second, many report that Washington reserved time for private prayer. Third, Washington saved many of the dozens of sermons sent to him by clergymen, and read some of them aloud to his wife.

Fourth, Washington hung paintings of the Virgin Mary and St. John in places of honor in his dining room in Mount Vernon. Fifth, the chaplains who served under him during the long years of the Revolutionary War believed Washington was a Christian. Sixth, Washington (unlike Thomas Jefferson) was never accused by the press or his opponents of not being a Christian.

It is also worth noting that, unlike Jefferson, Washington agreed to be a godparent for at least eight children. This was far from a casual commitment since it required the godparents to agree to help insure that a child was raised in the Christian faith. Washington not only agreed to be a godparent, but presented his godsons and goddaughters with Bibles and prayer books.

George Washington was not a Deist who believed in a “watchmaker God.” He was a Christian and demonstrated that Christian character throughout his life.

Notes

4. Ibid., 136.
5. Lillback, Sacred Fire, 28.
7. Lillback, Sacred Fire, 28.
8. Ibid., 577.
10. Ibid, 64.
13. Ibid., 90.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 219.
16. Ibid., 219-220.
The Causes of War

Meic Pearse’s book The Gods of War gives great insight into the charge that religion is the cause of most war. History shows this is not true: the cause of most war is the sinful human heart, even when religion is invoked as a reason.

The Accusation

Sam Harris, the popular author and atheist, says that “for everyone with eyes to see, there can be no doubt that religious faith remains a perpetual source of human conflict.”{1} Writing for the Freedom from Religion Foundation, fellow atheist Richard Dawkins adds, “Only the willfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today.”{2} Speaking more bluntly, one British government official has said, “theocrats, religious leaders or fanatics citing holy texts . . . constitutes the greatest threat to world peace today.”{3}

War is the ultimate act of intolerance, and since intolerance is seen as the only unforgivable sin in our postmodern times, it’s not surprising that those hostile to religion would charge people holding religious convictions with the guilt for causing war.

This view is held by many others, not just despisers of religion. A 2006 opinion poll taken in Great Britain found that 82% of adults “see religion as a cause of division and tension between people. Only 16% disagree.”{4}

To be honest, religion has been, and remains, a source of conflict in the world; but to what degree? Is it the only source of war, as its critics argue? Is it even the primary source? And if we agree that religion is a source of war, how do we define what qualifies as a religion? This leads to another question. Are all religions equally responsible for war or are some more prone to instigate conflict than others? Once these issues are decided, we are still left with one of the most difficult questions: How does a religious person, especially a Christian, respond to the question of war?

When confronted with the accusation that religion, and more importantly, Christianity, has been the central cause of war down through history, most Christians respond by ceding the point. We will argue that the issue is far too complex to merely blame war on religious strife. A more nuanced response is needed. Religion is sometimes the direct cause of war, but other times it plays a more ambiguous role. It can also be argued, as Karl Marx did, that religion can actually restrain the warring instinct.

In his provocative new book, The Gods of War, Meic Pearse argues that modern atheists greatly overstate their case regarding religion as a cause for war, and that all religions are not equal when it comes to the tendency to resort to violence. He believes that the greatest source for conflict in the world today is the universalizing tendencies of modern secular nations that are pressing their materialism and moral relativism on more traditional cultures.
The Connection Between Religion and War

When someone suggests a simple answer to something as complex as war, it probably is too simple. History is usually more complicated than we would like it to be.

How then should Christians respond when someone claims religion is the cause of all wars? First, we must admit that religion can be and sometimes is the cause of war. Although it can be difficult to separate political, cultural, and religious motivations, there have been instances when men went off to war specifically because they believed that God wanted them to. That being said, in the last one hundred years the modern era with its secular ideologies has generated death and destruction on a scale never seen before in history. Not during the Crusades, the Inquisition, nor even during the Thirty Years War in Europe.

The total warfare of the twentieth century combined powerful advances in war-making technologies with highly structured societies to devastating effect. WWI cost close to eight and a half million lives. The more geographically limited Russian Civil War that followed the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917 resulted in nine million deaths. WWII cost sixty million deaths, as well as the destruction of whole cities by fire bombing and nuclear devices.

Both Nazi fascism and communism rejected the Christian belief that humanity holds a unique role in creation and replaced it with the necessity of conflict and strife. By the end of the nineteenth century, Darwin’s ideas regarding natural selection and survival of the fittest had begun to affect philosophy, the social sciences, and even theology. Darwin had left us with a brutal universe devoid of meaning. The communist and fascist worldviews were both firmly grounded in Darwin’s universe.

Hitler’s obsession with violence is well known, but the communists were just as vocal about their attachment to it. Russian revolution leader Leon Trotsky wrote, “We must put an end once and for all to the papist-Quaker babble about the sanctity of human life.” Lenin argued that the socialist state was to be “a system of organized violence against the bourgeoisie” or middle class. While critics of the Russian Tsar and his ties with the Orthodox Russian Church could point to examples of oppression and cruelty, one historian has noted that when the communists had come to power “more prisoners were shot at just one soviet camp in a single year than had been executed by the tsars during the entire nineteenth century.”

So, religion is not the primary cause of warfare and cruelty, at least not during the last one hundred years. But what about wars fought in the more distant past; surely most of them were religiously motivated. Not really.

Meic Pearce argues that “most wars, even before the rise of twentieth century’s secularist creeds, owed little or nothing to religious causation.” Considering the great empires of antiquity, Pearce writes that “neither the Persians nor the Greeks nor the Romans fought either to protect or to advance the worship of their gods.” Far more ordinary motives were involved like the desire for booty, the extension of the empire, glory in battle, and the desire to create buffer zones with their enemies. Each of these empires had their gods which would be called upon for aid in battle, but the primary cause of these military endeavors was not the advancement of religious beliefs.

Invasions by the Goths, Huns, Franks, and others against the Roman Empire, attacks by the Vikings in the North and the Mongols in Asia were motivated by material gain as well and not religious belief. The fourteenth century conquests of Timur Leng (or Tamerlane) in the Middle East and India resulted in the deaths of millions. He was a Muslim, but he conquered Muslim and pagan alike. At one point he had seventy thousand Muslims beheaded in Baghdad so that towers could be built with
their skulls.\{8\}

More recently, the Hundred Years War between the French and English, the American Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars were secular conflicts. Religious beliefs might have been used to wrap the conflicts with a Christian veneer, but promoting the cause of Christ was not at the heart of the conflicts.

Pearce argues that down through the millennia, humanity has gone to war for two main reasons: greed expressed by the competition for limited resources, and the need for security from other predatory cultures. The use of religion as a legitimating device for conflict has become a recent trend as it became less likely that a single individual could take a country to war without the broad support of the population.

It can be argued that religion was, without ambiguity, at the center of armed conflict during two periods in history. The first was during the birth and expansion of Islam which resulted in an ongoing struggle with Christianity, including the Crusades during the Middle Ages. The second was the result of the Reformation in Europe and was fought between Protestant and Catholic states. Even here, political motivations were part of the blend of causes that resulted in armed conflict.

**Islam and Christianity**

Do all religions have the same propensity to cause war? The two world religions with the largest followings are Christianity and Islam. While it is true that people have used both belief systems to justify armed conflict, are they equally likely to cause war? Do their founder’s teachings, their holy books, and examples from the earliest believers encourage their followers to do violence against others?

Although Christianity has been used to justify forced conversions and violence against unbelievers, the connection between what Christianity actually teaches and these acts of violence has been ambiguous at best and often contradictory. Nowhere in the New Testament are Christians told to use violence to further the Kingdom of God. Our model is Christ who is the perfect picture of humility and servant leadership, the one who came to lay down his life for others. Meic Pearce writes, “For the first three centuries of its history, Christianity was spread exclusively by persuasion and was persecuted for its pains, initially by the Jews but later, from 63, by the Romans.”\{9\} It wasn’t until Christianity became the de facto state religion of the Roman Empire around AD 400 that others were persecuted in the name of Christ.

The history of Islam is quite different. Warfare and conflict are found at its very beginning and is embodied in Muhammad’s actions and words. Islam was initially spread through military conquest and maintained by threat of violence. As one pair of scholars puts it, there can be no doubt that “Islam was cradled in violence, and that Muhammad himself, through the twenty-six or twenty-seven raids in which he personally participated, came to serve for some Muslims as a role model for violence.”\{10\}

Much evidence can be corralled to make this point. Muhammad himself spoke of the necessity of warfare on behalf of Allah. He said to his followers, “I was ordered to fight all men until they say, ‘There is no God but Allah.’”\{11\} Prior to conquering Mecca, he supported his small band of believers by raiding caravans and sharing the booty. Soon after Muhammad’s death, a war broke out over the future of the religion. Three civil wars were fought between Muslims during the first fifty years of the religion’s history, and three of the four leaders of Islam after Muhammad were assassinated by other Muslims. The Quran and Hadith, the two most important writings in Islam,
make explicit the expectation that all Muslim men will fight to defend the faith. Perhaps the most
telling aspect of Islamic belief is that there is no separation between religious and political authority
in the Islamic world. A threat to one is considered a threat to the other and almost guarantees
religiously motivated warfare.

**Pacifism or Just Wars?**

Although most Christians advocate either pacifism or a “just war” view when it comes to warfare
and violence, Pearse argues that there are difficulties with both. Pacifism works at a personal level,
but “there cannot be a pacifist state, merely a state that depends on others possessed of more force
or of the willingness to use it.”{12} Some pacifists argue that humans are basically good and that
violence stems from misunderstandings or social injustice. This is hardly a traditional Christian
teaching. Pearse argues that “a repudiation of force in all circumstances . . . is an abandonment of
victims—real people—to their fate.”{13}

Just war theory as advocated by Augustine in the early fifth century teaches that war is moral if it is
fought for a just cause and carried out in a just fashion. A just cause bars wars of aggression or
revenge, and is fought only as a last resort. It also must have a reasonable chance of success and be
fought under the direction of a ruler in an attitude of love for the enemy. It seeks to reestablish
peace, not total destruction of the vanquished, and to insure that noncombatants are not targeted.

However, even WWII, what many believe to be our most justified use of force, failed to measure up
to this standard. Massive air raids against civilian populations by the Allies were just one of many
violations that disallow its qualification as a just war. As Pearse argues, “war has an appalling
dynamic of its own: it drags down the participants . . . into ever more savage actions.”{14}

How then are Christians to think about war and violence? Let’s consider two examples. In the face of
much violent opposition in his battle for social justice, Martin Luther King said, “be ye assured that
we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. . . . We shall so appeal to your heart and conscience
that we shall win you in the process.”{15} Reform was achieved, although at the cost of his life, and
many hearts and minds have been changed.

However, another martyr, German minister Dietrich Bonhoeffer, rejected pacifism and chose to
participate in an attempt on the life of Adolf Hitler, mainly because he despaired that an appeal to
the hearts and minds of the Nazis would be effective.

Neither King nor Bonhoeffer were killed specifically for their faith. They were killed for defending
the weak from slaughter, as Pearse puts it. Perhaps Pearse is correct when he argues, “If Christians
can . . . legitimately fight . . ., then that fighting clearly cannot be for the faith. It can only be for
secular causes . . . faith in Christ is something for which we can only die—not kill. . . . To fight under
the delusion that one is thereby promoting Christianity is to lose sight of what Christianity is.”{16}

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 15.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 14.
5. Ibid., 31.
6. Ibid., 53.
7. Ibid., 54.
Deism and America’s Founders

The views and beliefs of our country’s founders were as diverse and complicated as today. Don Closson focuses on the role of deism.

In his book *Is God on America’s Side*, Erwin Lutzer asks the important question, “Is the American dream and the Christian dream one and the same?" {1} If our national dream fails, does it necessarily follow that our Christian dream also dies? Lutzer’s book makes the point that it’s dangerous to see the goals of the state and the purpose of the church as one and the same. It’s dangerous to equate the “city of man” with the “city of God.”

However, there are those who argue that because our Founding Fathers were devoted Christians who held to an orthodox Christian faith, the state and the church in America are already linked together, and that if America as a nation loses its uniquely Christian flavor, the church will fail in its task as well. They see America as a unique country that holds a special place in God’s plan for reaching the world. Additionally, they argue that we enjoy God’s special protection and blessings because of this Christian founding, blessings which will be lost if Christians lose control of the nation.

At the other end of the religious and political spectrum is the group who portray America and its founding as a thoroughly secular project. They argue that by the time the Revolution had occurred in the colonies, Enlightenment rationalism had won the day in the minds and hearts of the young nation’s leaders. They often add that the drive towards religious tolerance was the result of a decline in belief in God and an attempt to remove religious influence from America’s future.

For all those involved in this debate, the specific beliefs of our Founders are very important. Those who argue that America was founded by godless men who established a godless Constitution are, for the most part, wrong. Belief in God was practically universal among our Founding Founders. On the other hand, those who argue that our Founders were mostly devoted Christians who sought to establish a Christian nation devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ are not giving us the full picture.
either. Because both sides in this debate tend to define America by the religious faith of our Founders, both sides tend to over-simplify the religious beliefs of those early patriots.

It’s important, therefore, to consider the specific beliefs of some of our Founding Fathers so that we might get a clearer picture of religion in that era and avoid either of the two extremes usually presented. As we look into the actions and words of specific Revolutionary era leaders we will find that their beliefs represent a mixture of viewpoints that are every bit as complicated as those of America’s leaders today.

Deism

The issue centers on how much influence Deism had on our Founders. So a good place to begin is with a definition of the movement while remembering that Deists “were never organized into a sect, had no [official] creed or form of worship, recognized no leader, and were constantly shifting their ground.”{2} That said, Edward Herbert is often given credit for being the father of Deism in the seventeenth century. His five-point system is a good starting point for understanding the religious beliefs that affected many of our nation’s leaders nearly one hundred years later.

Herbert’s Deism begins with the fact that there is a God. However, Deists did not equate this God with the one who revealed himself to Moses or as having a special relationship with the Jews. Instead of being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Deists referred to him with terms like “the First Cause,” “the Divine Artist,” the Grand Architect,” “the God of Nature,” or “Divine Providence.”{3} Many Deists argued that more could be learned about God by studying nature and science than by seeking knowledge about him in the Bible.

Deists also thought that it naturally follows to worship this God, which is Herbert’s second point. This belief is arrived at by reason alone and not revelation; it is a common sense response to the fact that “the God of Nature” exists. The nature of this worship is Herbert’s third point. Deists worshipped their God by living ethically. Some acknowledged the superior example of an ethical life as lived by Jesus; others felt that Christianity itself was a barrier to an ethical life.

Interestingly, Deists included repentance as part of their system. What is not a surprise is that this repentance consists of agreeing with the Creator God that living an ethical life is better than to not live such a life. Herbert’s last point may also be a surprise to many. Deists believed in an afterlife, and that in it there will be rewards and punishments based on our success or failure to live ethically now.

What should be obvious by now is that Deism was derivative of Christianity. As one cleric of the day wrote, “Deism is what is left of Christianity after casting off everything that is peculiar to it. The deist is one who denies the Divinity, the Incarnation, and the Atonement of Christ, and the work of the Holy Ghost; who denies the God of Israel, and believes in the God of Nature.”{4}

Anti-Christian Deism

The impact of Deism on Americans in the 1700s is complicated because the word itself represents a spectrum of religious positions held at that time. One extreme represents a group that might be called the non-Christian Deists. This faction was openly hostile to the Christian faith. Thomas Paine, of Common Sense fame, and a leading advocate of this position, wrote that Deism “is free from all those invented and torturing articles that shock our reason . . . with which the Christian religion abounds. Its creed is pure and sublimely simple. It believes in God, and there it rests. It honors
Reason as the choicest gift of God to man and the faculty by which he is enabled to contemplate the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator displayed in the creation; . . . it avoids all presumptuous beliefs and rejects, as the fabulous inventions of men, all books pretending to be revelation.”{5} This quote clearly expresses the complaints and disdain that some Deists held against the Christian faith.

Although often accused of being godless pagans, it was not unusual for Thomas Paine and others in this group to see themselves as God’s defenders. Paine says that he wrote *The Age of Reason* in France during the French Revolution to defend belief in God against the growing atheism in that country. But he agreed with the French that the power and influence of the Roman Catholic Church had to be removed. There was little love lost on the monarchy or the priesthood; one French philosopher wrote, “let us strangle the last king with the guts of the last priest.”

Deists were very confident in the power of human reason. Reason informed them that miracles were impossible and that the Bible is a man-made book of mythical narratives. This faction of Deists also saw Christianity as a barrier to moral improvement and social justice. And since for them, living an ethical life is itself true worship, Christianity was seen as an impediment to worshipping God as well.

Reason is highlighted by the writings of these influential colonists. The former Presbyterian minister Elihu Palmer wrote a paper titled *Reason, the Glory of Our Nature*, and the well known patriot Ethan Allen published the Deistic piece *Reason: the Only Oracle of Man*.{6} In the preface of his book, Allen wrote, “I have generally been denominated a Deist, the reality of which I never disputed, being conscious I am no Christian, except mere infant baptism make me one.”{7}

It is not surprising that this focus on reason led Deists to reject the Trinity. Unitarianism was making great inroads into American colleges by the 1750s, and America’s best and brightest were now subject to this view at Yale, Harvard, and other prominent schools.

**Church-Going Deists**

It can be argued that there was a form of Deism in the late 1700s that was comfortable with parts of Christianity but was not entirely orthodox. Some of our most cherished and famous early American patriots fit into this category.

A good argument can be made that Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe were all significantly influenced by Deism and Unitarianism. Let’s take a look at the actions and comments of two of these revolutionary era leaders who can justifiably be called church-going Deists.

Hearing that Benjamin Franklin was a Deist will probably not shock too many Americans. By some accounts he embraced Deism at the young age of fifteen.{8} As an adult he was asked by a minister to express his personal creed, and Franklin replied, “I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe: That he governs the World by his Providence. That he ought to be worshiped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another life, respecting its Conduct in this.”{9} Franklin’s faith was focused on personal behavior rather than faith in Christ’s work on the cross. When asked about Jesus, Franklin said, “I have . . . some Doubts as to his Divinity, tho’ it is a Question I do not dogmatize upon.”{10} Rather than being openly hostile to Christianity, Franklin contributed to every church building project in Philadelphia, as well as its one synagogue.

The faith of George Washington is a more controversial matter. Washington consistently used Deistic
language to describe God in both public and private communications, rarely referring to Jesus Christ in any setting. Comments made by his contemporaries also point to Deistic beliefs. Washington’s bishop and pastor while he was in Philadelphia admitted that “Truth requires me to say, that General Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am parochial minister.”\textsuperscript{11} Another pastor added, “Sir, he was a Deist,” when questions about his faith arose shortly after his death. The fact that Washington was never confirmed in the Episcopal Church and ceased to take communion after the war adds to the case for him being a Deist. The controversy will continue, but much evidence points to his less than orthodox beliefs.

It must be remembered that, while Washington and Deists in general were quite willing to speak about the “God of Providence” or the “Grand Architect,” rarely are they found them referring to God as “Father,” “Lord,” “Redeemer,” or “Savior.”\textsuperscript{12}

**Orthodox Christians**

Samuel Adams is often called the father of the American Revolution, but he is also known as “the Last of the Puritans,” a title that speaks to his commitment to orthodox Christianity.\textsuperscript{13} His orthodoxy is confirmed by both his actions and comments. Adams was opposed to Freemasonry, which taught a belief system that was consistent with Deism. Neither ideology focused on Jesus or the Bible, and both accepted Jews, Muslims, Christians, or anyone else who believed in a divine being. In fact, the phrase “the Grand Architect,” often used by Deists as a title for God, came from Freemasonry, not the Bible.

Adams maintained a religious household by personally practicing grace before meals, Bible readings, and morning and evening devotions. More important, Adams’ religious language revealed an orthodox belief system. He referred to God as “our Divine Redeemer,” and the one “who has given us his Son to purchase for us the reward of eternal life,” phrases that a Deist would most likely not employ.\textsuperscript{14} Even when thinking of his future passing Adams looked to Christ; his will spoke of his “relying on the merits of Jesus Christ for a pardon of all my sins.”\textsuperscript{15} Although many leaders of the day left their orthodox upbringing, Adams “was a New England Congregationalist who remained staunchly loyal to the Calvinist orthodoxy in which he had been raised.”\textsuperscript{16}

John Jay was president of the Continental Congress and the first chief justice of the Supreme Court; he also exhibited leadership in spreading the Word of God among the new country’s citizens. As president of the American Bible Society, Jay used his annual address to stress the authority of the Bible. He spoke of the events in its pages as events in history, not as religious mythology. He also employed the language of the church in his speeches and writings including “Saviour,” “King of Heaven,” and “Captain of our Salvation.”\textsuperscript{17} Although Jay had many friends among the Deists of the day, he differed greatly with them concerning the relationship of reason and revelation. Jay wrote that the truths of Christianity were “revealed to our faith, to be believed on the credit of Divine testimony” rather than a product of human reason.

Just as today, the religious landscape of early America was varied and complex. Those complexities should neither hinder nor determine our efforts to build God’s kingdom in the twenty-first century. America has been blessed by God, but to argue that it is privileged over all other nations is presumptuous. Other nations have believed that their country would be used uniquely by God as well. Perhaps we stand on firmer ground when we look to the church as God’s vehicle for accomplishing His purposes, a body of believers that will draw from every nation, tribe, people and language.

**Notes**


3. Ibid., 47.

4. Ibid., 39.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. books.google.com/books?id=IHMAAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA1#PPA1,M1 accessed on 9/15/2008.

8. Holmes, 54.

9. Ibid., 56.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 63.

12. Ibid., 65.

13. Ibid., 144.

14. Ibid., 146.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p. 150.

17. Ibid., p. 158.

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**A Christmas Quiz: Separated Version**

*Dr. Dale Taliaferro’s 38-question quiz concerning the Christmas story from a biblical perspective.*

The quiz with questions and answers together can be found here.

1. *Can you name the parents of Jesus?*
   
   **Answer**

2. *Where did Joseph and Mary live before they were married?*
   
   **Answer**
3. What was the name of the angel who appeared to Mary?
   Answer

4. Where did Joseph and Mary live after their marriage?
   Answer

5. Where was Mary when the angel appeared to her?
   Answer

6. Whom did Mary visit immediately after Gabriel appeared to her?
   Answer

7. How far along in her pregnancy was Elizabeth when Gabriel appeared to Mary?
   Answer

8. How long did Mary stay with Elizabeth?
   Answer

9. Why didn’t Mary stay to celebrate the birth of John?
   Answer

10. How far along in her pregnancy was Mary when she broke the news to Joseph?
    Answer

11. Why were Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem?
    Answer

12. Why did Mary accompany Joseph?
    Answer

13. What determined the city to which each Jew had to travel in order to be taxed?
    Answer

14. Who, then, would be in Bethlehem?
    Answer

15. How did they travel?
    Answer

16. Why couldn’t Joseph and Mary find space in the inn?
    Answer
17. Who were the first people to come to see Jesus according to Scripture?
Answer

18. What chorus did the angels sing to the shepherds?
Answer

19. What sign did the angels tell the shepherds to look for?
Answer

20. What was the manger?
Answer

21. In what way do the meaning of the Hebrew term for Bethlehem and the sign given by the angels prepare us for Jesus’ later ministry?
Answer

22. What happened eight days after Jesus’ birth?
Answer

23. What happened 32 days after Jesus’ circumcision (40 days after Jesus’ birth)?
Answer

24. What are two reasons that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem?
Answer

25. Where did Joseph and Mary go after the purification ceremony?
Answer

26. What are magi?
Answer

27. How many wise men came to see Jesus?
Answer

28. How many gifts did the wise men bring and to whom did they present their gifts?
Answer

29. What was curious about the star?
Answer

30. How did Herod use the star?
Answer
31. Where were Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when the wise men reached them?
Answer

32. How old was Jesus at this time?
Answer

33. In what year was Jesus born?
Answer

34. How long was Jesus in Egypt with His parents?
Answer

35. How did Joseph and Mary finance the trip to Egypt?
Answer

36. Where was Jesus raised upon His return to Israel?
Answer

37. How old was Jesus when He began His ministry?
Answer

38. How old was Jesus when He died?
Answer

Answers

   Back

   Back

   Back

   Back

5. In Nazareth, inside some structure or building (Luke 1:26, 28).
   Back

   Back
9. Probably fear of stoning, since she was pregnant and beginning to “show.”
10. At least three months (Luke 1:38-39, 56).
11. To be enrolled for the taxes (Luke 2:1-3).
12. a. A practical reason (she was well along in her pregnancy).
   b. A biblical-prophetical reason (Micah 5:2).
13. Lineage. Joseph had to go to the city of David since he was of “the house and family of David.” (Luke 2:3-4).
   b. Possibly Mary’s relatives also (Luke 3:31-32).
18. None. They said “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will” (Luke 2:14).
20. A feeding trough made of stone.
   b. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes—the same kind of clothes He would be buried in (John 19:40).
Back

Back

b. To fulfill prophecy (the personal prophetic revelation given to Simeon) (Luke 2:25-32, esp. 26).
Back

Back

26. Politically powerful scholars and astronomers (“king-makers”).
Back

27. Scripture does not say, but Augustine and Chrysostom say twelve. Another tradition names three: Melchior (Shem’s descendant), Caspar (Ham’s descendant), and Balthasar (Japheth’s descendant).
Back

28. At least one gift from each wise man. They presented the gifts—plural in number—to Jesus. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh designate appositionally the kinds of gifts, not the number (Matt. 2:1-2, 11).
Back

29. It was not constant (Matt. 2:2, 10).
Back

30. He calculated the age of the child by the length of time it had been appearing and reappearing (Matt 2:7, 16). The wise men did not discourage this thinking.
Back

31. a. In a house, not the stable (Matt 2:11).
b. In Nazareth. The impression given in Matthew 2 is that of a hurried, immediate escape for all (Luke 2:39). Thus there was no time to fulfill the law or the prophetic utterance (cf. no. 24).
Back

32. Two months to two years.
Back

33. Five or four B.C. (Herod died in March or April of 4 B.C.)
Back

34. From one month to over one year.
Back

35. Probably with the gifts of the magi.
Back

Back

37. 33 to 34 years old (born 5 to 4 B.C., began ministry A.D. 29). Luke 3:23 tells us he was “about
thirty”; the Greek indicates a rough (rather than close) estimate.

38. 37 to 38 years old, depending on whether His ministry was three or four years in length.

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