

# 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.”<sup>{5}</sup> 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.<sup>{6}</sup> The time period of English Puritanism spans roughly the years between 1550 and 1700.<sup>{7}</sup>

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.”<sup>{8}</sup>

## 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.”<sup>{9}</sup> 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.”<sup>{10}</sup> Of course, like Packer, they regard this view as “a monstrous misrepresentation.”<sup>{11}</sup> 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,<sup>{12}</sup> 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."[\[13\]](#)

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."[\[14\]](#) 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!"[\[15\]](#) 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."[\[16\]](#) 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.{17}

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.”{18}

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.”{19}

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 . . .”{20}

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.”{30}

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.{31} 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.”{32}

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.{33} 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](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=1146).



2. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, 11.
3. Bruce C. Daniels, *New England Nation: The Country the Puritans Built* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 230.
4. Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 1-15.
5. John Spurr, *English Puritanism, 1603-1689*, ed. Jeremy Black, *Social History in Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 3-8.
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.
10. Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory: 1492-1793*. Revised and expanded edition (Grand Rapids: Revell, 2009), 211.
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.
13. This catechism can be found many places on the internet. See, for example, "The Westminster Shorter Catechism," The Westminster Presbyterian, accessed February 15, 2015, [www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php](http://www.westminsterconfession.org/confessional-standards/the-westminster-shorter-catechism.php).



14. For a philosophical defense of this view, please see the chapter entitled, "The Absurdity of Life without God," in William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics*, 3rd ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2008), 65-90.

15. William Perkins, *A Golden Chain, or The Description of Theology* (1592). In *The Work of William Perkins*, ed. Ian Breward. Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 3 (Appleford, England: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1970), 177; cited in *Reformed Reader*, ed. William Stacy Johnson and John H. Leith (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 7.

16. Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 7.

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.

19. *The Works of John Bunyan: Allegorical, Figurative, and Symbolical*, ed. George Offor, vol. 3 (London: Blackie and Son, 1859), 396.

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.

25. Richard Sibbes, “The Church’s Visitation” (London, 1634), cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 133.

26. Robert Coachman (or Cushman), *The Cry of a Stone* (London, 1642), cited in Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 133.

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 (Puritan Reprints, 2006), 158.

30. Ryken, *Worldly Saints*, 74.

31. Ryken provides numerous examples of this view from the writings of *Puritans in Worldly Saints*, 74-5; 84-7.

32. *Ibid.*, 73.

33. See Ryken’s chapter, “Learning from Negative Example: Some Puritan Faults,” in *Worldly Saints*, 187-203.

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## 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?"<sup>{1}</sup> 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.<sup>{8}</sup> 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."<sup>{9}</sup> 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."<sup>{10}</sup> 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."[\[11\]](#) 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."[\[12\]](#)

## 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.[\[13\]](#) 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.<sup>{14}</sup> 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."<sup>{15}</sup> 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."<sup>{16}</sup>

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."<sup>{17}</sup> 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

1. Erwin W. Lutzer, *Is God On America's Side* (Moody Publishers, 2008), 75.
2. David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford, 2006), 39.
3. Ibid., 47.
4. Ibid., 39.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. [books.google.com/books?id=IHMAAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA1#PPA1,M1](http://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

1. a. Mary (Matt. 1:16; Luke 1:31, 2:6-7).
- b. God (Luke 1:32, 35).
- c. Joseph (by adoption) (Matt 1:16, 19-20, 24-25).

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2. a. Mary—In Nazareth (Luke 1:26-27).
- b. Joseph—In Nazareth, presumably (Luke 2:4).

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3. Gabriel (Luke 1:26).

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4. Nazareth (Luke 2:4-5, 39).

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

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6. Elizabeth, her relative (Luke 1:36).

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7. Six months (Luke 1:26, 36).

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8. About three months (Luke 1:56).

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9. Probably fear of stoning, since she was pregnant and beginning to “show.”

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10. At least three months (Luke 1:38-39, 56).

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11. To be enrolled for the taxes (Luke 2:1-3).

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12. a. A practical reason (she was well along in her pregnancy).  
b. A biblical-prophetical reason (Micah 5:2).

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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).

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14. a. Joseph’s relatives—descendants of David (Luke 2:3-4).  
b. Possibly Mary’s relatives also (Luke 3:31-32).

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15. Probably in a caravan (cf. Luke 10:30-37, esp. 30). The Scripture doesn’t say anything about their journey to Bethlehem.

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16. Probably because Joseph’s relatives rejected them and wouldn’t give up their space (Luke 2:5; cf. Luke 1:61, 2:5; John 8:41).

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17. Shepherds (Luke 2:8, 15-16).

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18. None. They said “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good will” (Luke 2:14).

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19. The baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12, 16-17).

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20. A feeding trough made of stone.

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21. a. Bethlehem means “house of bread,” which correlates with

Jesus' Bread of Life discourse (John 6:22-65).

b. Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes—the same kind of clothes He would be buried in (John 19:40).

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22. His circumcision (Luke 2:21).

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23. Mary's ceremonial purification and Jesus' redemption (Luke 2:22-24).

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24. a. To fulfill the Law—Jesus' redemption and Mary's purification (Luke 2:22-23).

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

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25. Nazareth (Luke 2:39).

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26. Politically powerful scholars and astronomers ("king-makers").

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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).

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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).

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

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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.

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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).

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32. Two months to two years.

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

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34. From one month to over one year.

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35. Probably with the gifts of the magi.

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36. Nazareth (Matt 2:23).

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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.

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

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# Christmas SHINY!

I love shiny.

I love sparkly, glittery, light-filled, dazzling *anything*.



My motto is, “If it don’t shine, it ain’t mine.” And I’m not alone. When women visit Dallas, one of the most popular places for friends to take them is to a huge [store](#) that sells thousands of pieces of costume jewelry with more bling than you can imagine.

Why do so many of us like shiny? I think it’s because we are hard-wired for worship and we long for heaven where even the streets gleam with gold, and beautiful jewels and pearls abound. Heaven is a shiny, glorious place that radiates the beauty of a shiny, glorious Savior.

But our early “shiny” is a poor, sad imitation of the true glory of God. I especially love how God reveals Himself in the Bible through His *Shekinah glory*, where the invisible God makes His glory visible and weighty with importance and value.

We see more instances of the Shekinah glory in the book of Exodus than any other book in the Bible:

**Moses and the Burning Bush:** God appears to Moses as a fire within a bush that doesn’t consume the bush, revealing Himself as the great I AM, calling Moses to lead His people out of slavery into the Promised Land.

**In the cloud by day, pillar of fire by night.** God led His people for forty years in their wilderness wanderings by a visible manifestation of His presence.

**The cloud on Mt. Sinai** where Moses met with God, and He gave Moses His rules for relationship in the Ten Commandments.

**Moses asks God to show him His glory.** While up on the mountain, Moses asks to see God's glory; God basically replies, "You can't see My face and live. While My glory passes by I will hide you in a cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand. Then I'll let you see My backside. That will be safe for you."

After seeing God's Shekinah glory, **Moses' face shone so brightly** that it hurt to look at him. It was reflected glory, the way the moon reflects the sun's light. Still, it was so powerful that his face literally shone when he came down off the mountain to speak to the people.

**The cloud of Shekinah glory covered the Tent of Meeting and filled the Tabernacle** when they dedicated it. The glory was so intense Moses couldn't go inside.

We see the Shekinah glory one more time in the Old Testament, when Solomon's temple was dedicated, and God's glory fills the temple like it had filled the Tabernacle. Then we don't see it again for hundreds of years.

The next time in scripture we see the Shekinah glory is the night Jesus was born!

And while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for the government's census, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields

nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory [*the Shekinah glory*] surrounded them. They were terrified, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." (Luke 2:6-18)

But wait! But that's not all!

Matthew 2 tells us about the magi, the wise men from the east, who traveled to Jerusalem in search of the baby King of the Jews. They followed a star that moved until it stopped right over the house where the toddler Jesus and his family were living.

My husband Ray says it wasn't a natural conjunction of planets or stars, since they don't move like that and certainly don't stop over a house. In his Probe article "[The Star of Bethlehem](#)," he suggests it was the Shekinah glory leading the Magi to Jesus.

The same Shekinah glory we see in Exodus appears in the Christmas story. So much of the Old Testament points to Jesus, and we get to see it start to unfold in the Christmas story.

God is all about connecting the dots so we understand how things fit together. Not so we can enjoy the intellectual satisfaction of puzzle pieces interlocking, but so we can truly grasp that He made us for Himself, He made us for relationship with Him.



The Shekinah glory in Exodus points to the glory revealed in the Christmas story, where the Son leaves heaven and comes to earth as a perfect, sinless human, fully God and fully man. He lives a perfect, sinless life then dies on the cross to take the punishment for our sin onto Himself. Three days later He rises from the dead and He is alive today.

Little Baby Jesus isn't still in the manger: He is now seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven in glory!

Shiny, resplendent, luminous glory. And that is the *real* reason I love shiny. It reminds me of Jesus, of heaven, of what lies ahead for those of us who have trusted Christ.

This blog post originally appeared at [blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/christmas\\_shiny](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/christmas_shiny) on Dec. 15, 2015.

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## Is Christmas Necessary?

*Christians have had to respond to the customs of the surrounding culture since the beginning of the church. In the end, though, Jerry Solomon wrote that Christmas is necessary only in terms of its historical and theological content.*

This article is also available in [Spanish](#).



What do you think of when you hear the word “Christmas”? Frantic shopping? Family traditions? A commemoration of the birth of Jesus? Or a combination of all these responses and more? If you’ve been living in the United States long, you probably find it difficult to focus on just one without the

others. And if you're a Christian you probably want to focus on the birth of Jesus, but you spend a great deal of your December on shopping and traditions. Then you may finish "The Season," as it has come to be known, feeling guilty because you didn't focus on Jesus as the "Reason for the Season." You may even want to ask if the season is really necessary, because you're exhausted, broke, and relieved when it's over for another year.



So we want to ask, "Is Christmas necessary?"

In order to address this question we will focus first on a history of the celebration and its accompanying customs. Then we will concentrate on whether economics, traditions, or theology make it necessary.

## **A Brief History of Christmas**

The very early church has not left us with any indication that Christmas was a part of their yearly calendar. Certainly the New Testament doesn't include such an emphasis. Philip Schaff, a church historian, offers three reasons for this.

In the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost. In the second place, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be certainly determined. Again: the church lingered first of all about the death and resurrection of Christ, the completed fact of redemption, and made this the center of the weekly worship and the church year. Finally: the earlier feast of Epiphany...afforded a substitute. The artistic religious impulse, however, which produced the whole church year, must sooner or later have called into

existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ.{1}

So the Christmas celebration appeared comparatively late in church history. And it appeared as the result of a change in the ways Christians dealt with their surrounding culture. In order to see the progression of this change, it will be helpful if we consider early pagan festivals that were eventually transformed by the church.

Some scholars assert that the earliest precursor of the Christmas celebration can be found within a Persian religion that influenced Roman life.

One of the great festivals of ancient Rome was related to the winter solstice, celebrated on December 25 as the Natal Day of the Unconquerable Sun and tied to the Persian religion of Mithraism, one of Christianity's early rivals. The church took over this day to turn the attention of Christians from the old heathen festival to the celebration of the "sun of righteousness." {2}

It is especially interesting to note that the mythological god Mithra, for whom Mithraism was named, "is described as being born from a rock, the birth being witnessed by shepherds on a day (December 25) that was later claimed by Christians as the nativity of Christ." {3}

Actually "the Christmas festival was probably the Christian transformation or regeneration of a series of kindred heathen festivals...which were kept in Rome in the month of December, in commemoration of the golden age of universal freedom and equality, and in honor of the unconquered sun, and which were great holidays, especially for slaves and children." {4} Our contemporary struggle with how to react to Halloween may be similar to the struggle the early church had with Christmas. In particular, they had to decide if they should and would celebrate the birth of Christ. Then the question was, when

would this celebration take place? Their answers are instructive for us today.

Schaff describes this regeneration of heathen festivals in light of the cultural changes that began to affect the church:

Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidity of opposition between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen. Besides, there lurked in those pagan festivals themselves, in spite of all their sensual abuses, a deep meaning and an adaptation to a real want; they might be called unconscious prophecies of the Christmas feast.[\[5\]](#)

Frank Gaebelein informs us that before Christmas was recognized in the West another festival was prominent among Christians in the East.

The earliest reference to December 25 as the date for the Nativity occurs in the Philocalian calendar, which refers to its Roman observance in A.D. 336. But recognition of December 25 [in the West] had been preceded by that of another date—January 6 [in the East], when Epiphany was celebrated first in relation to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and later in relation to the coming of the wise men, or Magi, to worship the infant Jesus.[\[6\]](#)

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he sanctioned the “Christianizing” of various pagan emphases. So he was probably influential “in the institution of a Christian feast of the birthday of the Sun of Righteousness’ (Malachi 4:2) as a rival to the popular pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) at the winter solstice.”[\[7\]](#) But it is helpful to know that his understanding of Christian doctrine was such that he “was not aware of any mutual

exclusiveness between Christianity and his faith in the Unconquered Sun.”[\[8\]](#)

So from the era of Constantine (306-337) onward, Christmas (from the Old English Cristes Maesse, “Christ’s Mass”) was gradually included in Western culture. By the time of the Reformation most leaders, including Martin Luther, “were for the abolition of all feast days, except Sunday; but the...long habits of the people were against such a radical reform.”[\[9\]](#) “During Cromwell’s time in seventeenth-century England [Christmas] was banned by Parliament, and in old New England the celebration of Christmas was officially forbidden.”[\[10\]](#) Now, of course, almost a quarter of each year is devoted to the celebration of Christmas in American culture. And as we will see, a variety of customs emphasize many facets of the season.

Should this history make us uneasy? Should we consider disbanding the Christmas season? Obviously some have answered, “Yes!” to these questions in the past and present. But perhaps the wiser response is to give heed to the long traditions of the church and decide if those traditions have a legitimate end. Then we are challenged to decide if we are to isolate ourselves from our culture, become like our culture, or transform our culture. At the present time it appears that we should reevaluate what it may mean to transform the Christmas season for the glory of God.

## **Customs**

The Christmas season includes many customs we take for granted. Where, when, and how did these customs come to have a place in the Christmas celebration? Their origination probably will surprise you.

## **Merriment and Gifts**

“The merriment and giving of gifts, especially to children,

may reflect the Roman Saturnalia.”{11} During this festival the Romans honored “the god of agriculture by engaging in much eating, drinking, visiting, masked reveling and notorious celebrations on the streets. Courts closed, and no one was convicted of a crime. Gambling was legal. Slaves dressed as their masters and were served by them. A mock king was chosen. Gifts were exchanged, at first simple wax candles or clay dolls.”{12}

## **Greenery and Lights**

“As for the use of greenery and lights, this goes back to the celebration of the Kalends of January in ancient Rome.”{13} Kalends was a celebration of the Roman new year. People gave each other gifts of green boughs, “honeyed things,” lamps for light and warmth, and silver and gold objects. “Christians used candles symbolizing Christ as the Light of the World, seemingly a combination of Roman and Hebrew customs.”{14} Druids set lighted candles on tree branches. People in the Middle Ages put lighted candles in their windows on Christmas Eve to guide the Christ child on His way. No stranger was turned away, because it could have been Christ in disguise.

## **Christmas Trees**

“Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and toys during the Saturnalia, and put candles on them to indicate the sun’s return to earth.”{15} “Druids honored Odin by tying golden apples and other offerings to tree branches.”{16} In the eighth century, St. Boniface purportedly dedicated the fir tree to the Holy Child as a counter to the sacred oak of Odin. However, Martin Luther gets credit for the tree we are more familiar with.”{17} The Germans placed fruit, gilded nuts, gingerbread, paper roses, and glass balls on their trees. The Poles placed stars and angels. The Czechs made ornaments of painted egg shells.

## **Manger Scene**

During the Middle Ages the manger scene was used to tell the story of Christ's birth. St. Francis of Assisi set up a nativity outside a cave with live animals and people. In France children gather moss, stones, and greens for a nativity scene which is called a creche.

## **Christmas Carols**

"The first Christmas hymns were written in the fifth century. Originally composed in Latin, they contained primarily theological topics. Carols (noels), songs with more human personal subjects, appeared in the 1200s. During the Middle Ages people incorporated drama and plays into the celebration of Christmas. Carols became an integral part of these reenactments. After the plays, carolers strolled down the street singing thus the birth of street caroling."[\[18\]](#)

## **The Yule Log**

The word yule refers to the feast of the nativity. Yule log refers to a large log formerly put on the hearth on Christmas eve as the foundation of the fire. Sometimes the Druids burned a Yule log to symbolically represent the removal of evil spirits and dissention in the family at Christmas.

## **Mistletoe**

For the Norsemen mistletoe was sacred to Frigga, goddess of love and mother of the sun god. Balder, her son, was killed by an arrow tip dipped in mistletoe. Frigga shed tears which became the mistletoe berries. Frigga would kiss everyone who passed beneath the tree. The Druids' high priest used a golden sickle to cut sacred mistletoe.

## **Holly**

The holly plant was sacred to the Roman god Saturn. Romans gave one another holly wreaths and decked images of Saturn



with it. Christians decked their homes with it. Druids believed that holly remained green so the world would be beautiful when the sacred grove lost its leaves.

## **Poinsettia**

The poinsettia was brought to this country over one hundred years ago by Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico.

## **Christmas Cards**

The first painted Christmas card was designed by John C. Horseley in 1846. The giving of cards became a tradition in Victorian England due to the queen and Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol."

## **Santa Claus**

"A popular medieval feast was that of St. Nicholas of Myra (c. 340) on December 6, when the saint was believed to visit children with admonitions and gifts, in preparation for the gift of the Christ child at Christmas. Through the Dutch, the tradition of St. Nicholas (Sinter Klass, hence 'Santa Claus') was brought to America in their colony of New Amsterdam, now New York."[\[19\]](#) "Over the years the American Santa developed many of the secular characteristics of the British Santa, 'Father Christmas,' including entering a house through the chimney and stuffing stockings hung near the chimney. This idea came from an old Norse (Scandinavian) legend. But the American Santa became better defined in the 1800s. Clement Moore in 1822 first described Santa in a fur-trimmed suit leading a sleigh pulled by reindeer in his poem, 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.'"[\[20\]](#)

Now that we have scanned the history and customs of Christmas, can we conclude that any of it is necessary in our time? We will consider economics, traditions, and history/theology as we attempt to answer this question.

# Is Christmas Necessary Economically?

First, is Christmas necessary economically? C.S. Lewis, in his brusque, reasonable manner, gives us reasons to consider the question of the economic necessity of Christmas. He wrote:

Three things go by the name of Christmas. One is a religious festival. This is important and obligatory for Christians; but as it can be of no interest to anyone else, I shall naturally say no more about it here. The second (it has complex historical connections with the first, but we needn't go into them) is a popular holiday, an occasion for merry-making and hospitality. But the third thing called Christmas is unfortunately everyone's business...I mean of course the commercial racket.

Lewis then goes on to make the following statements about the "commercial racket":

1. It gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure.
2. Most of it is involuntary.
3. Things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself.
4. The nuisance.[{21}](#)

Such comments probably "ring true" for many of us. But is it realistic to attempt to eradicate what has become a major element of the economic system in this country? Helen Dunn Frame offers insights into this question:

As to economics, we might not be "less in debt" without Christmas purchases, because...over one quarter of the year's retail business is transacted [during the Christmas season] in everything from department stores to grocery stores. Without this holiday volume, year-round prices could be higher, and fewer jobs might be available.[{22}](#)

Such reflection leaves us with a challenge. If we want to de-emphasize the commercial side of Christmas, how do we do it

without upsetting the economy? Perhaps the economic gain that comes from the Christmas season can be supplanted by some other holiday or emphasis. But what would it be? Perhaps it would be overtly pagan, which would not leave us content. There seems to be no immediate answer to the dilemma the Christian faces while living in this country. I'm reminded of the slow eradication of slavery from the early church. If slavery had been eliminated immediately, it would have created chaos in the social and economic fabric. Thus there was a patient change as the church influenced the culture around it. Maybe that process can serve as a model for us.

## **Is Christmas Necessary Traditionally?**

Second, is Christmas necessary traditionally? Most of us live with traditions. There are national traditions, family traditions, religious traditions, sports traditions, military traditions, etc., that affect our lives. Some are good; others are not-so-good. Some are stifling; others provide stability and continuity. It seems that traditions are very much a part of what it means to be human.

The Christmas season is full of traditions. When we begin to focus on Christmas at the end of each year it usually means that we begin to give attention to the reestablishment of things passed from the previous generation to ours. A tree is put in the same place; the same decorations, most of which have a story of their own, are extracted from storage; cards are written; gifts are purchased; and we devote a great deal of energy to one particular day with the renewed hope that a sense of peace and joy will infuse us. Even if those feelings don't characterize us when the celebration is over, we still strive for them the following year. And of course it is sad that many dread Christmas because the traditions that were a part of their past cannot be restored since those who shared the traditions are no longer here to share them.

So is Christmas necessary traditionally? In order to answer

this, I want to offer three comments. First, Christmas traditions can be life-enhancing or stifling portions of our lives. It is up to us to decide which they will be. Second, traditions that bring family and friends together should be positive events. The positive nature of them is up to us. Third, traditions that point to the truth of the Incarnation are reminders of God's glorious provision for us. The way we construct our traditions will either lead us towards or away from this truth.

## **Is Christmas Necessary Historically or Theologically?**

Third, is Christmas necessary historically or theologically? Of our three questions, this is the only one that has a definite affirmative answer. Without the Incarnation there is no hope, and Christmas would be given over completely to economics and traditions devoid of Christ. Malcolm Muggeridge has written poignant phrases to describe the importance of the birth of Christ:

Thanks to the great mercy and marvel of the Incarnation, the cosmic scene is resolved into a human drama. A human drama in which God reached down to relate Himself to man and man reaches up to relate himself to God. Time looks into eternity and eternity into time, making now always and always now. Everything is transformed by this sublime drama of the Incarnation, God's special parable for man in a fallen world.[{23}](#)

These profound comments lead me to consider what probably is the major fallacy of the Christmas season when Christ is not considered. That is, we attempt to "concoct" happiness and meaning without substance. As Muggeridge states, "I find myself more and more strongly aware that this is the true situation: that the hope of man, that he can create through human agency either a happy life as an individual or a

satisfactory life as a collectivity, is the ultimate fantasy.”{24} Christmas without the historical birth of Jesus in space and time and the theological implications of that birth leave us grasping for something that cannot be obtained.

But some level of the implications of that birth can be grasped. Let’s reawaken to the awesome presence of God in human flesh! To pass through the Christmas season without thoughtful contemplation of the wonder that “God with us” is shameful. “The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a Woman’s body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab.”{25} Consider these beautiful, penetrating phrases from the pen of Augustine:

He it is by whom all things were made, and who was made one of all things; who is the revealer of the Father, the creator of the Mother; the Son of God by the Father without a mother, the Son of man by the Mother without a father; the Word who is God before all time, the Word made flesh at a fitting time, the maker of the sun, made under the sun; ordering all the ages from the bosom of the Father, hallowing a day of today from the womb of the Mother; remaining in the former, coming forth from the latter; author of the heaven and the earth, sprung under the heaven out of the earth; unutterably wise, in His wisdom a babe without utterance; filling the world, lying in a manger.{26}

C.S. Lewis contributes two memorable illustrations of the Incarnation as he considers what it means to assert that God descended to us:

In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity...But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get

himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in midair, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too.[\[27\]](#)

May we “break the surface” of our views of Christmas so that we can recover the precious thing that truly is Christmas: celebration of the birth of Jesus the Savior.

## Conclusion

No aspect of the contemporary celebration of Christmas is necessary in an absolute sense. But there is an economic necessity; this can be changed with great effort. Another economic emphasis could be devised at another time of the year for different reasons. There is a traditional necessity; but this can be met through other celebrations. Indeed, this need is met presently by many through other means. There is a historical/theological necessity that cannot be altered. If God had not become flesh, there would be no hope for mankind. There would be no birth of Christ, no death on our behalf, and no resurrection from death to life. Praise God He did humble Himself and become as a man!

## Notes

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  24. Ibid., 1615.
  25. C. S. Lewis, "The Incarnation," *The Joyful Christian* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1977), 51.
  26. Walter Elwell, "When God Came Down," *Christianity Today* (7 December 1979), 17.
  27. Lewis, "The Incarnation," 54-55.

# The Federalist Papers

*Kerby Anderson takes through a summary of the Federalist Papers as seen from a biblical worldview perspective. Does a Christian view of man and government undergird these foundational documents? Kerby considers this question.*

## Introduction

*The Federalist Papers* are a collection of eighty-five essays written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay between October 1787 and May 1788. They were written at the time to convince New York State to ratify the U.S. Constitution.



They are perhaps the most famous newspaper columns ever written, and today constitute one of the most important documents of America's founding period. They provide the justification for the Constitution and address some of the most important political issues associated with popular self-government.

Clinton Rossiter says that "*The Federalist* is the most important work in political science that has ever been written, or is likely ever to be written, in the United States. . . . It would not be stretching the truth more than a few inches to say that *The Federalist* stands third only to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution itself among all the sacred writings of American political history."[\[1\]](#) Jacob Cooke agrees. He believes that "The United States has produced three historic documents of major importance: The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and *The*



*Federalist.*" {2}

All the essays were signed "Publius" even though they were written by three different authors (Hamilton wrote fifty-two, Madison wrote twenty-eight, and Jay wrote five). Political leaders in New York opposed the new government because the state had become an independent nation under the Articles of Confederation and was becoming rich through tariffs on trade with other states. When it became apparent that New York would not ratify the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton enlisted the aid of James Madison (who was available because the Continental Congress was sitting in New York) and John Jay. Unfortunately, Jay was injured and was only able to complete a few essays.

There are many reasons for the importance of *The Federalist Papers*. First, the authors were significant figures during the founding era. James Madison is considered the architect of the Constitution and later served as President of the United States. Alexander Hamilton served in George Washington's cabinet and was a major force in setting U.S. economic policy. John Jay became the first Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. Each of these men was present at the constitutional convention and was respected by their peers.

Second, *The Federalist Papers* provide the most systematic and comprehensive analysis of the constitution. Not only do the authors explain the structure of the constitution, but they also defend their decisions against the critics of their day. They were, after all, writing to convince New York to ratify the constitution.

Third, *The Federalist Papers* explain the motives of the Founding Fathers. Often when Supreme Court justices are trying to discern the founder's intentions, they appeal to these writings.{3} *The Federalist Papers* are the most important interpretative source of constitutional interpretation and give important insight into the framers' intent and purpose

for the Constitution.

## Human Nature

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* were concerned about the relationship between popular government and human nature. They were well aware that human beings have the propensity to pursue short-term self-interest often at the expense of long-term benefits. The writers were also concerned that factions that formed around these areas of immediate self-interest could ultimately destroy the moral foundations of civil government.

James Madison argued in *Federalist Paper #51* that government must be based upon a realistic view of human nature:

But what is government itself but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.[\[4\]](#)

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* certainly believed that there was a positive aspect to human nature. They often talk about reason, virtue, and morality. But they also recognized there was a negative aspect to human nature. They believed that framing a republic required a balance of power that liberates human dignity and rationality and controls human sin and depravity.

As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust, so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government

presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form.[\[5\]](#)

As we will discuss in more detail later, James Madison concluded from his study of governments that they were destroyed by factions. He believed this factionalism was due to “the propensity of mankind, to fall into mutual animosities” (*Federalist Paper #10*) which he believed were “sown in the nature of man.” Constitutional scholars have concluded that “the fallen nature of man influenced Madison’s view of law and government.”[\[6\]](#) He therefore concluded that government must be based upon a more realistic view which also accounts for this sinful side of human nature.

A Christian view of government is based upon a balanced view of human nature. It recognizes both human dignity (we are created in God’s image) and human depravity (we are sinful individuals). Because both grace and sin operate in government, we should neither be too optimistic nor too pessimistic. We should view governmental affairs with a deep sense of biblical realism.

## Factions and the Republic

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* were concerned about the previous history of republics. Alexander Hamilton writes that “the history of the petty republics of Greece and Italy” can only evoke “horror and disgust” since they rocked back and forth from “the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.”

James Madison focused on the problem of factions. “By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of the citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.”[\[7\]](#)

Madison believed there were only two ways to cure the problem

of factions: remove the causes or control the effects. He quickly dismisses the first since it would either destroy liberty or require everyone to have “the same opinions, the same passions, and the same interests.”

He further acknowledges that “causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man.” So he rejects the idea of changing human nature. And he also rejects the idea that a political leader will be able to deal with the problem of factions: “It is vain to say that enlightened statesmen will be able to adjust these clashing interests and render them all subservient to the public good. Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.”[\[8\]](#)

Madison believed the solution could be found in the extended republic that the framers created. While a small republic might be shattered by factions, the larger number of representatives that would be chosen would “guard against the cabals of a few.”

Also, since “each representative will be chosen by a greater number of citizens, it will be more difficult for unworthy candidates to practice with success the vicious arts by which elections are too often carried.” Also, the voters are “more likely to center on men who possess the most attractive merit and the most diffusive and established characters.”[\[9\]](#)

Madison also believed that this extended republic would minimize the possibility of one faction pushing forward its agenda to the exclusion of others. This was due to the “greater number of citizens and extent of territory.” A smaller society would most likely have fewer distinct parties. But if you extend the sphere, you increase the variety and interests of the parties. And it is less likely any one faction could dominate the political arena.

Madison realized the futility of trying to remove passions or human sinfulness, and instead designed a system that minimized

the influence of factions and still provided the greatest amount of liberty for its citizens.

## Separation of Powers

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* were concerned with the potential abuse of power, and set forth their rationale for separating the powers of the various branches of government. James Madison summarizes their fear of the centralization of political power in a famous quote in *Federalist Paper* #47.

No political truth is certainly of greater intrinsic value, or is stamped with the authority of more enlightened patrons of liberty, than that on which the objection is founded. The accumulation of all powers, legislative, executive, and judiciary, in the same hands, whether of one, a few or many, and whether hereditary, self-appointed, or elective, may justly be pronounced the very definition of tyranny.[{10}](#)

Madison quickly dismisses the idea that constitutional provisions alone will prevent an abuse of political power. He argues that mere “parchment barriers” are not adequate “against the encroaching spirit of power.”[{11}](#)

He also believed that the legislature posed the greatest threat to the separation of powers. “The legislative department is everywhere extending the sphere of its activity and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex.”[{12}](#) The framers therefore divided Congress into a bicameral legislature and hoped that the Senate would play a role in checking the passions of popular majorities (*Federalist Paper* #63).

His solution was to give each branch separate but rival powers. This prevented the possibility of concentrating power into the hands of a few. Each branch had certain checks over the other branches so there was a distribution and balance of power.

The effect of this system was to allow ambition and power to control itself. Each branch is given power, and as ambitious men and women seek to extend their sphere of influence, they provide a check on the other branch.

Madison said, "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government."[{13}](#) This policy of supplying "opposite and rival interests" has been known as the concept of countervailing ambitions.

In addition to this, the people were given certain means of redress. Elections and an amendment process have kept power from being concentrated in the hands of governmental officials. Each of these checks was motivated by a healthy fear of human nature. The founders believed in human responsibility and human dignity, but they did not trust human nature too much. Their solution was to separate powers and invest each branch with rival powers.

## Limited Government

The writers of *The Federalist Papers* realized the futility of trying to remove passions and ambition from the population. They instead divided power and allowed "ambition to counteract ambition." By separating various institutional power structures, they limited the expansion of power.

This not only included a horizontal distribution of powers (separation of powers), but also a vertical distribution of powers (federalism). The federal government was delegated certain powers while the rest of the powers were reserved to the states and the people.

James Madison rightly called this new government a republic which he defined as "a government which derives all its powers

directly or indirectly from the great body of people, and is administered by persons holding their offices during pleasure for a limited period, or during good behavior.”{14}

He also argued that “the proposed government cannot be deemed a national one; since its jurisdiction extends to certain enumerated objects only, and leaves to the several states a residuary and inviolable sovereignty over all other objects.”{15}

Governmental power was limited by the Constitution and its interpretation was delegated to the judicial branch. As Alexander Hamilton explained, the Constitution was to be the supreme law of the land.

A constitution is, in fact, and must be regarded by the judges as, a fundamental law. It therefore belongs to them to ascertain its meaning as well as the meaning of any particular act proceeding from the legislative body. If there should happen to be an irreconcilable variance between the two, that which has the superior obligation and validity ought, of course, to be preferred; or, in other words, the Constitution ought to be preferred to the statute, the intention of the people to the intention of their agents.{16}

Although Hamilton referred to the judiciary as the weakest of the three branches of government, some of the critics of the Constitution warned that the Supreme Court “would be exalted above all power in the government, and subject to no control.”{17} Unfortunately, that assessment certainly has proved correct over the last few decades.

*The Federalist Papers* provide an overview of the political theory that undergirds the U.S. Constitution and provide important insight into the intentions of the framers in constructing a new government. As we have also seen, it shows us where the current governmental structure strays from the original intent of the framers.

The framers fashioned a government that was based upon a realistic view of human nature. The success of this government in large part is due to separating power structures because of their desire to limit the impact of human sinfulness.

## Notes

1. Clinton Rossiter, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: New American Library, 1961), vii.
2. Jacob E. Cooke, *The Federalist* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), ix.
3. James G. Wilson, "The Most Sacred Text: The Supreme Court's Use of The Federalist Papers," *Brigham Young University Law Review* I (1985).
4. James Madison, *Federalist Papers*, #51 (New York: New American Library, 1961), 322.
5. Madison, *Federalist Papers* #55, 346.
6. John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1987), 101.
7. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, #10, 78.
8. Ibid., 80.
9. Ibid., 82-3.
10. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, #47, 301.
11. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, #48, 308.
12. Ibid., 309.
13. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, #51, 322.
14. Madison, *The Federalist Papers*, #39, 241.
15. Ibid, 245.
16. Alexander Hamilton, *The Federalist Papers*, #78, 467.
- 17 Herbert Storing and Murray Day, eds. *The Complete Anti-Federalist* (University of Chicago Press, 1981) II, 420.



# A Probe Mom Looks at Halloween from a Christian Perspective

*Sue Bohlin takes a hard look at Halloween celebrations, applying a biblical worldview. As Christians, we cannot shield our children from this popular cultural event, but Sue provides some ideas on bringing a Christian perspective to this time of year.*

A number of articles are available advising Christians to have nothing to do with Halloween. And I do agree that Christians have no business *celebrating* a holiday that glorifies something that delights the enemy of our souls. And potentially opens us up to demonic harassment, to boot!

But if we've got kids, especially kids in public school or who hang around other kids in the neighborhood, it's entirely possible that parents can feel pressured to do *something* about Halloween. After all, it's pretty hard to hide under a rock for the whole month of October. A number of houses on our street are more decorated for Halloween than for Christmas!

It seems that the costume manufacturers have really cranked up production of all sorts of costumes to a degree we've never seen before. Gone are the days of burning a cork to blacken a face, put on some thrift-shop oversized clothes and dressing up as a hobo. (There's probably some politically-correct term for "hobo" these days anyway. . .)

Is there anything intrinsically wrong with dressing up in a costume and getting a bunch of candy from consenting adults? I don't think so; hey, the Bible tells us that God instructed the children of Israel to ask their neighbors for silver and gold their last night in Egypt in a VERY early version of "Trick or Treat" (Exodus 11:2). But we can cooperate with the

forces of darkness, however unwittingly, by participating unwisely in Halloween festivities.

It is essential to exercise discernment in how we handle Halloween. If you can get away with ignoring it, wonderful! That would be the best solution. But you may find yourself in a place where you want to provide some way for your kids to have fun in a Halloween-immersed culture without compromising on our Christian values and beliefs. For instance, your child's school may invite all the students to dress up in a costume on October 31. I know a number of Christian schools that do this. May I make these suggestions:

## Halloween Don'ts

God gave us some very strict guidelines for our own protection, commanding us to stay away from items and practices of witchcraft and divination in Deuteronomy 18. These "doorways to the occult" make us wide open to the influence of Satan and the demons. For more information on this, click [here](#).

So stay away from anything that glorifies:

- **The occult.** Witches, warlocks, sorcerers and sorcery, casting spells, mediums, magic, ouija boards, crystal balls, tarot cards, and astrology are doors to the kingdom of darkness. Satan/Beelzebub masks and costumes have no place on a Christian or in a Christian family—not even "adorable"(??) little baby devil costumes complete with horns and pitchfork.
- **Darkness.** Satan and the demons are the rulers of darkness (Eph. 6:12). There's a reason so many people are afraid of the dark; it is a fearful thing both physically and spiritually.
- **Death.** Satan has had the power of death over people (Heb. 2:14) ever since the Fall, and he uses it to control people through fear. Death is an enemy of God (1 Cor. 15:26), not something to flirt with. Vampires, ghosts, goblins and

gargoyles (concepts rooted in the reality of demons) are all figures of death.

- **Fear.** Fear is both a feeling and a reality where Satan dwells. It is one of his most effective means of spiritual warfare against us. When we use Halloween events, decorations and costumes to cause and build fear in other people, we are cooperating with the sworn enemy of God and of God's people. This would include anything spooky, such as cemeteries, haunted houses, and scary stories. You can now buy "The Scream" masks that are as disturbing as Edvard Munch's original painting; their purpose is to make people afraid, even if they don't know why.

Anything gruesome falls in this category as well; you can buy special effects like fake slash wounds, hanging eyeballs, and stakes through the forehead. Blood and gore are neither funny nor godly. Needless to say, slasher movies and horror films that deliberately terrorize and stir up fear are a tool in Satan's hand. Scripture tells us that God does not give us a spirit of fear (2 Tim. 1:7), nor does He want us to be a slave again to fear (Rom. 8:15). That's Satan's arena.

Note: there are a number of churches that use the legitimate fear of an eternity in hell, separated from God, as a platform for drawing people into a creative presentation of the gospel. Many young people have been saved as a result. This is a God-honoring use of fear, not glorifying fear for fear's sake.

- **Worldliness.** Costumes that glorify some of the world's heroes and heroines can shape our values in ungodly, unchristian ways. Little girls dressing like female pop stars, exposing their midriffs and looking as sexy as possible, is completely against biblical values. God calls girls and women to dress and act modestly, decently and with propriety (1 Tim. 2:9). Costumes of movie and TV characters that represent anti-biblical values are inappropriate for believers (and believers' children).

# Halloween Do's

- If your church sponsors a Halloween alternative event such as a fall festival, that's a great idea to allow kids to have fun within pre-set boundaries. (Note: it's important to specify what kind of costumes are NOT welcome!)
- [Child Evangelism Fellowship](http://www.cefonline.com) (www.cefonline.com) has reported that Halloween has been the best time of year for children to trust Christ, simply because the spirit of fear that pervades our culture at this time makes them more open than usual to hearing a good news of the gospel. Halloween is a great time to sponsor Good News Clubs and invite kids in your neighborhood to hear stories that will comfort, rather than terrorize, them.
- [American Tract Society](http://www.crossway.org/group/ats) (www.crossway.org/group/ats) has some terrific kid-friendly tracts to include with the candy you give out. This year, ATS has introduced the most practical Halloween evangelism resource yet! The Halloween Rescue Kit includes candy, bags, stickers and tracts – everything you need to reach 31 kids this Halloween. They suggest (and I think it's a great idea!) that if you expect kids to actually read the tracts once they get home from Trick-or-Treating (instead of tossing them out unread with the empty candy wrappers), that you tape them to popular candy bars that kids actually want. (Find out what kids in your area consider "cool" candy.) Or make your own tract kit by putting a tract plus quality candy inside sandwich bags. Either way, it forces kids to handle the tract in order to get to the candy. Sounds like following the Lord Jesus' command to be "shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves" (Matt. 10:16) to me!

I know several families who have purchased tracts for the neighborhood ADULTS, and when their kids go trick-or-treating, when the adults give them candy the kids will hand them a tract (aimed at adults) and say, "Thank you for the candy. Here's a treat for you!" How often do people open their doors

and make themselves open to this kind of opportunity?

- [Let the Little Children Come](http://www.letthelittlechildrencome.com) (www.letthelittlechildrencome.com) has a wonderful “Is anything better than candy?” Box-tract. Give out more than just candy this Halloween! This attractive pumpkin shaped Box-Tract is designed to contain children’s favorite candies. More importantly, the pumpkin opens up to answer the question, “Is There Anything Better Than Candy?” Yes, there is something much, much better than candy. It’s being God’s friend!

- Look for teachable moments to relate the things of Halloween to spiritual truth. Talk to your kids about the way fear is glorified at Halloween, and teach them what Jesus said about it: “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27), and “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33).

Talk to your kids about [“God’s no-no list”](#) in Deuteronomy 18 and have them help you identify those things when they see them advertised or used as decorations. (You might keep a running total of all the witches you’ll see just to quantify this concept.) This is probably the best way to prevent your children from getting desensitized to things of the occult. Help them identify all the Halloween items that strike fear in them, and encourage them to take a stand against their power by saying out loud, “God has not given me a spirit of fear!” Show them this verse in their Bibles (2 Timothy 1:7) so they know they are using the sword of the Spirit against one of the wiles of the enemy.

This story making its rounds on the internet is a good pumpkin-carving object lesson:

A lady had recently been baptized. One of her co-workers

asked her what it was like to be a Christian. She was caught off guard and didn't know how to answer, but when she looked up she saw a jack-o-lantern on the desk and answered, "It's like being a pumpkin."

The co-worker asked her to explain that one.

"Well, God picks you from the patch and brings you in and washes off all the dirt on the outside that you got from being around all the other pumpkins. Then he cuts off the top and takes all the yucky stuff out from inside. He removes all those seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc. Then he carves you a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you to shine for all to see. It is our choice to either stay outside and rot on the vine or come inside and be something new and bright."

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries Mom

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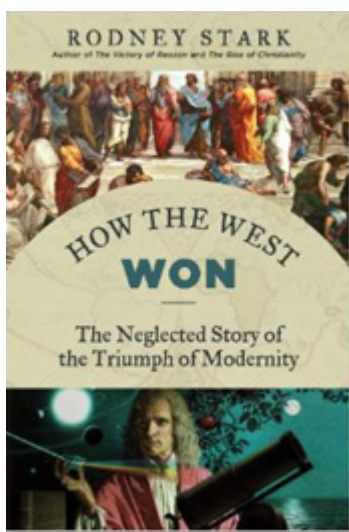
## **The Development of Modern Culture – Critical Role of Christianity Downplayed**

*Steve Cable explodes 5 myths about history, showing Christianity's true critical role in the progress and development of culture.*

Is our history really what you have been taught in school? For at least the last five decades in schools across this nation, most of us have digested a similar litany of facts about the development of the Western world. Among these commonly accepted facts are these five:



1. The Roman Empire introduced and maintained a period of relative peace in which innovation and free thought could flourish.
2. The Dark Ages, coming after the fall of the Roman Empire, was a period of over 500 years during which the European world languished in feudalism and ignorance.
3. The Protestant Reformation, fueled by the invention of the printing press, introduced a new era of religious freedom.
4. The Scientific Revolution was the result of Europe casting aside religious “superstitions” during the so-called Enlightenment.
5. Protestant missionaries were a negative, colonizing influence on the non-Western world.



In his recent book, entitled *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*, Rodney Stark, Distinguished Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, questions these “historical facts” from our childhood along with many others. His premise, based on the current state of historical data and analysis, is that the conventional wisdom about the history of the western world was tainted by the prejudices and lack of knowledge of the early historical writers. His view is backed up by the research and writings of many contemporary scholars. He

clearly points out that what is taught in our schools lags far behind the common knowledge held by top researchers in the field. It is interesting to note that this phenomenon is very similar to the difference between high school textbooks on the evolution of man and the current state of research into the origins of life.

Stark concludes that contrary to the conventional wisdom of high school textbooks, the worldview that developed as a result of following after the God revealed in Christian scripture was critical to the advent of our modern age. Only a society steeped in the message of an all-powerful, loving, creator of this universe was postured to take on the scientific and societal endeavors which are crucial to our society today. According to Stark, our modern world is not the result of key people freeing themselves from the chains of religious intolerance to pursue knowledge and truth, but rather the result of people seeking to better understand this universe created out of nothing into an orderly something by our Lord and God.

In the remainder of this article, we will look at these five key concepts of our history still taught to our students today and see how contemporary research has significantly modified or completely discredited them.

## **The Impact of Greece, Judaism, and Rome**

Apart from periods of Jewish history, most of the world before 600 B.C. was controlled by systems of government that awarded the elite few at the expense of the rest of society. In China, India and Egypt societies had this common theme: "Wealth is subject to devastating taxes and the constant threat of usurpation; the challenge is to keep one's wealth, not to make it productive."[\[1\]](#) Their rulers strived to make it so. Stark pointed this out: "As Ricardo Caminos put it about the ancient Egyptians, 'Peasant families always wavered between abject poverty and utter destitution.' If the elite seizes all



production above the minimum needed for survival, people have no motivation to produce more.”{2}

Beginning around 600 B.C., the Greek city-states prior to the reigns of Phillip of Macedonia and his son, Alexander the Great, were the first to offer a different economic model on a large scale. “The major benefit of Greek democracy was sufficient freedom so that individuals could benefit from innovations making them more productive, with the collective result of economic progress.”{3} This unprecedented freedom was partly the result of Greece having an unfavorable geography with an abundance of mountains, no abundance of natural resources, and no large navigable river. This geography helped to promote the large number of small, independent city states. “Thus, having an unfavorable geography contributed to the greatness of Greece, for disunity and competition were fundamental to everything else.”{4} Once Greece was under the rule of the Macedonians and later the Romans, the scale of innovation in the areas of democracy, economic progress, the arts, and technology slowed dramatically.

Unlike other peoples near the cities of Greece, the Jews were greatly impacted by the Greek philosophers. Why? The God the Jews worshipped was “conscious, concerned and rational”{5} and as such the Jewish theologians were committed to reasoning about God from the things God revealed through Scripture. At this time the vast majority of Jews lived in the Diaspora outside of Palestine. And so, like the Apostle Paul, these Jews were exposed to Greek thought filtered through their understanding of Scripture.

Of course, the early Christians accepted this view of God but also added the idea that our knowledge of God and of his creation is progressive.{6} Understand that our early Christian fathers did not wholeheartedly embrace Greek ideas, choosing to show how Christian doctrines were much more rational. But they did embrace the ideas of reason and logic

which were behind Greek philosophy. This train of thought by our Christian fathers set the stage for the development and advances of science. As Stark notes, "The truth is that science arose only because the doctrine of the rational creator of a rational universe made scientific inquiry plausible."[\[7\]](#)

The rule of the Roman Empire provided centuries of relative peace and free travel throughout the Mediterranean area. This *pax Romana* facilitated the spread of Christianity across the Mediterranean world and thus played an important role in the growth of Christianity. However, Stark suggests that "the Roman Empire as at best a pause in the rise of the West, and more plausibly a setback."[\[8\]](#)

Most of us probably view the Roman Empire as an expanded version of the great age of Greece where advancements were common in philosophy, commerce and technology. Stark points out that as a large, centrally controlled empire, Rome had plenty of labor and a large distance between the privileged few and the laboring masses. Consequently, the art and literature of the Roman period was fundamentally Greek. There were very few technological innovations developed during this period. In fact, "the Romans made little or no use of some known technologies, e.g. water power."[\[9\]](#) They preferred to use manual labor rather than employ labor saving devices.

Stark suggests that two events during the period of Roman control were important to the development of our modern culture: the Christianization of the empire and the fall of Rome. "It was Rome that fell, not civilization. . . the millions of residents of the former empire did not suddenly forget everything they knew. To the contrary, with the stultifying effects of Roman repression now ended, the glorious journey toward modernity resumed."[\[10\]](#)

# The Not-So-Dark Ages

My understanding of the Dark Ages as a student from the 1970's is probably similar to yours. It was pictured as a time in which European culture took a step backward from the advances of the Roman Empire and made little or no progress in advancing culture, economics, philosophy, or technology. It was a time characterized by wars and the stultifying oppression of the Catholic Church. Many historians of the past wrote that the fall of Rome cast Europe into this dismal age, aided by Christianity which celebrated poverty and urged contentment.

Stark, along with most modern historians, take a far different view of this period of Western history. Stark puts it this way: "The fall of Rome was, in fact, the most beneficial event in the rise of Western civilization, precisely because it unleashed creative competition among the hundreds of independent political units, which, in turn resulted in rapid and profound progress."[\[11\]](#)

In this culture of independent political units, trade developed and expanded rapidly, the average person ate better and grew larger than in the past because the people could now put to personal use the wealth Rome had previously squeezed from them. "Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Dark Ages myth is that it was imposed on what was actually 'one of the great innovative eras of mankind.'" [\[12\]](#) During this period technology was developed and put into use "on a scale no civilization had previously known."[\[13\]](#)

One of the strongest influences during this period came from the Scandinavians, the Vikings. "The Viking merchants traveled a complex network of trade routes extending as far as Persia. . . (The) Vikings had excellent arms, remarkable ships, and superb navigational skills . . . Their boats were far superior to anything found elsewhere on earth at that time."[\[14\]](#) Our history lessons, however, placed an emphasis on great empires

rather than movements impacting our way of life. “Not only have they continued to regret the fall of Rome, but they remember Charlemagne as the man who almost ‘saved’ Europe. In fact, the Scandinavians were as civilized as the Franks, while William the Conqueror was certainly as able as Charlemagne, and considerably more tolerant.”[\[15\]](#)

One of the major events during this period was the rise of capitalism as an economic driver. Capitalism can only exist in societies with free markets, secure property rights and the right of individuals to work where they wish. The Christian West, out from under the yoke of the Roman Empire, was the only society where this move was possible. As Stark explains, “Of the major world faiths, only Judaism and Christianity have devoted serious and sustained attention to human rights, as opposed to human duties. Put another way, the other great faiths minimize individualism and stress collective obligations. They are . . . cultures of shame rather than cultures of guilt. There is not even a word for freedom in the languages in which their scriptures are written.”[\[16\]](#) Counter to the position of earlier historians who put the advent of capitalism much later in history, capitalism not only thrived during this period but had been fully debated by theologians who on the whole gave it general approval.

You may remember being taught that during these Dark Ages that Islamic scholarship and technological innovation kept society moving forward in the areas of science and technology. In fact, Stark points out, “The ‘Golden Era’ of Islamic science and learning is a myth. Some Muslim-occupied societies gave the appearance of sophistication only because of the culture sustained by their subject peoples – Jews and various brands of Christianity.”[\[17\]](#) In fact when they later cleansed their society of these other people, they soon fell back into a state where any technology was bought from the West and in many cases had to be operated by Westerners. One area where this was revealed on multiple occasions was in the area of

military strategy and technology. In numerous battles between A.D. 1200 and 1600, Western forces on land and on the oceans typically inflicted casualties upon their Muslim foes at a rate ranging from 10 to 1,000 Muslim casualties for every casualty among the Western forces.

“Despite the record of Muslim failure against Western military forces, far too many recent Western historians promulgate politically correct illusions about Islamic might, as well as spurious claims that once upon a time Islamic science and technology were far superior to that of a backward and intolerant Europe.”[\[18\]](#)

“In 1148 all Christians and Jews were ordered to convert to Islam or leave Moorish Spain immediately, on pain of death. . . . And as (they) disappeared, they took the “advanced” Muslim culture with them. What they left behind was a culture so backward that it couldn’t even copy Western technology but had to buy it and often even had to hire Westerners to use it.”[\[19\]](#)

What we had been taught were Dark Ages of no progress were actually a period of great progress in the development of individual freedom and the concept of capitalism.

## **The Reformation and Religious Freedom**

Martin Luther, the catalytic figure of the Reformation, asserted that salvation is God’s gift, freely given, and gained entirely by faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Each person must establish his or her own personal relationship with God. This new emphasis on individual freedom and responsibility was certainly consistent with the key aspects of Western modernity. But the way these ideas played out in society were a different matter.

The popular view promulgated by English and German historians was that the Protestant Reformation, which roughly occurred

between A.D. 1515 and 1685, was facilitated by the printing press and the spread of literacy, resulting in a “remarkable revival of popular piety and the spread of religious liberty.” You were probably taught that this new view of piety, placing the responsibility of a relationship with God squarely on the shoulders of the individual rather than on the intervening work of the Church, created a new environment of religious tolerance and personal piety. This environment was invigorating to the concepts of scientific and economic progress. However, the real situation was far different from this idealistic view promulgated by English and German historians. Far from introducing religious liberty to the masses, the Protestant Reformation was more about switching one monopoly religion for another.

Stark points out three ways in which earlier historians and sociologists have misrepresented what went on in the spread of the Protestant Reformation. These historians and probably your high school history textbook, taught the following about the Reformation:

1. The Reformation introduced an era of religious freedom in Europe
2. The Reformation was able to spread rapidly because of the newly invented printing press
3. The Reformation’s spread was partially a result of its attractiveness to the common man.

On the first point, rather than introducing an era of religious freedom, the Reformation produced competing monopoly religions. Depending upon the area in which one lived, the pressure to conform to the religion adopted by that region was immense. So what determined whether your region would be Catholic or Protestant? If the area’s current Catholic hierarchy was not operating under the rule of local rulers or councils, the rulers were very likely to convert to a

Protestant view, thereby removing the influence of the Catholic Church in their domain. Importantly, it allowed them to loot church property in the name of religion. As Stark point out, "It is all well and good to note the widespread appeal of the doctrine that we are saved by faith alone, but it also must be recognized that Protestantism prevailed only where the local rulers or councils had not already imposed their rule over the Church. Pocketbook issues prevailed." {20}

Was it the printing press that allowed the Reformation to spread rapidly? If so, one would expect that cities with printing presses producing Luther's pamphlets and his Bible, would be most likely to align with Protestantism. Yet what we find is a negative correlation between towns with printers who had published Luther's Bible and those towns which had converted to Protestantism. The printing press was certainly a factor in spreading Luther's theology, but if it was the dominant factor we should see a strongly positive correlation, not a negative one. "Indeed, assessments of the impact of printed materials on the success of the Lutheran Reformation too often overlook a critical factor: no more than five percent of Germans in this era could read." {21}

Finally, a widely held belief is that the Lutheran Reformation touched the hearts of the masses, resulting in a huge revival in personal faith and piety. However, most people were not personally impacted by the theological arguments between Catholicism and Protestantism. The common man in Germany at that time was, at best, semi-Christian. As Stark points out, "Eventually even Martin Luther admitted that neither the tidal wave of publications nor all the Lutheran preachers in Germany had made the slightest dent in the ignorance, irreverence, and alienation of the masses. Luther complained in 1529, "Dear God, help us! . . . The common man, especially in the villages, knows absolutely nothing about Christian doctrine; and indeed many pastors are in effect unfit and incompetent to teach. Yet they all are called Christians, are baptized, and

enjoy the holy sacraments – even though they cannot recite either the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed or the Commandments. They live just like animals.”

## **The Scientific Revolution and Christianity**

The term “Scientific Revolution” was coined, referring to the period in the sixteenth and seventeenth century beginning with Copernicus and ending with Newton, when the rate of scientific advancement was thought to have increased dramatically. However, modern historians say that no such revolution occurred, although the role of science definitely matured during that period of time. Many of us remember being taught three aspects of this so-called revolution that we want to consider:

1. Most key scientific contributors had freed themselves from the rigid dogmas of faith.
2. The Protestant Reformation had freed society from “the dead hand of the Catholic Church,” thereby making real scientific thinking possible.
3. Real science could not occur in universities controlled by the churches.

However, Rodney Stark points out that current evidence indicates that all of these claims are false, stating, “Indeed, Christianity was essential to the rise of science, which is why science was a purely Western phenomenon.”[\[22\]](#)

Of the 52 most prominent contributors to scientific advancement during this period, we find that 60% of them were devout believers in Christianity. Only one of them was a skeptic toward the message of Christianity. And the rest were classified as conventionally religious. So, the idea promoted by contemporary philosophers that scientific advancement was



the result of freeing themselves from belief in the dogmas of the faith could not be further from the truth.

Of these 52 leaders of the scientific community, 26 were Protestant and 26 were Catholic. This equal distribution belies the common wisdom that the Protestant revolution allowed real scientific thinking to begin to take root. It appears that prior advances in scientific thought had prepared the minds of these individuals to advance the frontiers even further, regardless of whether they were Protestant or Catholic. Both faiths believed in God as the Intelligent Designer of a rational universe, and a rational universe was one that could be understood through the application of the scientific method.

As noted earlier, most modern historians sided with the statement, "Not only were the universities of Europe not the foci of scientific activity . . . but the universities were the principal centers of opposition for the new conceptions of nature which modern science constructed."[{23}](#) Actually, 92% of these leaders in scientific research spent an extended period of time of ten years or more in the universities. Nearly half of them served as university professors during their careers. In fact, the distinguished historian of science Edward Grant stated, "The medieval university laid far greater emphasis on science than does its modern counterpart."[{24}](#)

Stark wrote, "Science only arose in Christian Europe because only medieval Europeans believed that science was possible and desirable. And the basis of their belief was their image of God and his creation."[{25}](#) As the distinguished mathematician and scientist, Johannes Kepler stated, "The chief aim of all investigations of the external world should be to discover the rational order and harmony imposed on it by God and which he revealed to us in the language of mathematics."[{26}](#) Thus, the so-called scientific revolution occurred not in spite of Christianity but rather directly because a Christian worldview beckoned them to study the nature of our world more closely.

# Protestant Missionaries and the Rise of Western Democracies

Protestant missionaries are often portrayed as the villains of imperialistic expansion. They have often been portrayed as having a greater interest in converting their charges to Western culture than introducing them to eternal life through Jesus Christ. However, their personal and public publications do not support this negative view. On the contrary, "Missionaries undertook many aggressive actions to defend local peoples against undue exploitation by colonial officials."[{27}](#)

Beyond correcting this distorted view of missionary purpose, modern historians have discovered an interesting impact. A recent study has shown that the rise and spread of stable democracies in the non-Western world can be attributed primarily to the impact of Protestant missionaries. According to a study by sociologist Robert Woodberry,[{28}](#) the impact of these missionaries far exceeds that of fifty other control variables such as gross domestic product and whether or not a nation was a British colony. One would think that having a healthy amount of production per individual would be one of the biggest factors leading to a stable democratic government. But the data shows that it has been much more important to have the teaching and leadership development provided by Protestant missionaries.

In addition, the greater number of Protestant missionaries per capita in a nation in 1923, the lower that nation's infant-mortality rate in 2000. In this case, the effect of having Protestant missionaries was more than nine times as large as the effect of current GDP per capita. In other words, having a history of Protestant missionaries is much more important than having a large amount of money in determining a low infant-mortality rate.

## Conclusion

Many of us have been given the impression by educators that the scientific, governmental, and societal advances we enjoy are the result of enlightened people taking off their religious blinders and thinking more clearly about these topics. Sociologist Rodney Stark presents compelling data, arguing that in fact it was the unique worldview of Christianity that created societies in which new ideas could foment and flourish. This Christian worldview was fundamental to the advances in economics, science and government common in our current world. Understanding the worldview that fueled the advances making up our modern world is important if we are to continue to move ahead responsibly.

## Notes

1. Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity*. Wilmington DE: ISI Books, 2014. 12.
2. Stark, 11.
3. Stark, 19.
4. Stark, 15.
5. Stark, 33.
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25. Stark, p. 315.
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27. Stark, 366.
28. Woodberry, Robert D. "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, 2012. 106:1-30.

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## Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?

*Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully? Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. Fascinating prophecies of Jesus' birth and life bring revealing insights into your own life today.*

Have you ever missed a great opportunity because you weren't listening carefully?

If Mark{1} hadn't been willing to listen, he might have missed some great news. He enjoyed an adequate income, fulfilling work, a comfortable home, and many close friends. Then his employer offered a promotion requiring a move to another state. At first resistant, he eventually decided to listen to the offer and make the move.

Mark's job responsibilities expanded, his growing reputation opened doors for wider influence, and he met and married Gail. Reflecting twenty-five years later, he was glad he had carefully listened to news of the offer.



At a business convention Joan heard a brief announcement of an advanced degree program. Distracted by current concerns, she dismissed it. When the announcement was repeated the next day, Joan caught something she had missed. The degree would be from one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Her company was encouraging managers to participate, promising them time to study, and offering to help pay for it. Joan investigated, enrolled, and her career was greatly enhanced. "To think that I almost missed the good news about this program because I was distracted," Joan reflected. "What a tragedy that would have been."

Perhaps you, too, have encountered news that first seemed insignificant but later became momentous. Great news isn't always trumpeted by headlines or television broadcasts. Sometimes the best news could slip right by if you're not attuned to its importance.

Twenty centuries ago some clues to impending good news of monumental import eluded most folks. A baby born in relative obscurity in the Middle East was hailed by a few as a future king who would rescue people from their troubles. "Good news of great joy for everyone!" said one announcement of Jesus' birth.{2}

Relatively few contemporaries acknowledged His importance. His followers later showed numerous clues to His identity, prophecies written many years before His birth. You may not share the faith of those early believers, but perhaps you'll find it interesting to eavesdrop on some of the clues, the prophecies. Consider just a few.[{3}](#)

## Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

The Hebrew writer Micah told around 700 B.C. of deliverance through a coming Messiah or "Anointed One." He indicated this deliverer would be from Bethlehem. He wrote, "But you . . . Bethlehem . . . are only a small village in Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past." [{4}](#)

Matthew, a first-century biographer, noted that ". . . Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea. . . ." [{5}](#)

Isaiah, writing around 700 B.C., foretold an unusual aspect of the Messiah's birth, that He would be *born of a virgin*. He wrote, "The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." [{6}](#)

The name "Immanuel" means "God is with us." The indication—to all who were listening—was that God Himself would be physically present with humans through this child. What a promise! What good news to people who often felt abandoned by God.

Matthew recorded this about Jesus' birth:

Now this is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. . . . Joseph . . . brought Mary home to be his wife, but she remained a virgin until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus. [{7}](#)

Jewish prophets mentioned several clues about the Messiah's lineage. He was to be a *descendant of Abraham*. Moses, a famous Jewish leader writing fourteen hundred years before Jesus' birth, recorded a prophecy about the Jewish patriarch Abraham. He wrote, "Through your [Abraham's] descendants, all the nations of the earth will be blessed."[{8}](#)

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Isaac*. Moses recorded another promise. He said, "God told Abraham, ' . . . Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted'."[{9}](#) In other words, something important was going to come through the descendants of Abraham and specifically through the line of Isaac, one of Abraham's two sons.

The Messiah was also to be a *descendant of Jacob*. Abraham's son Isaac himself had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Some ancient Jewish scholars[{10}](#) believed that another prophecy that Moses recorded prefigured the Messiah. Moses wrote, "A star will rise from Jacob; a scepter will emerge from Israel."[{11}](#)

Luke, a first-century physician, traced Jesus' lineage through these three Jewish leaders. He wrote of "Jesus . . . the son of Jacob, the son of Isaac, the son of Abraham. . . ."[{12}](#)

Jesus was born in Bethlehem, of a virgin, and from the line of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The pieces of the prophetic puzzle were starting to become clearer. The details of His life would fulfill the prophecies further.

## **Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Life and Death**

Though Jesus was born in humble circumstances, learned leaders traveled great distances to hail the child as a king. In His youth, scholars marveled at His wisdom. In His thirties He began to publicly offer peace, freedom, purpose and hope to the masses. His message caught on.

His enemies plotted His demise and paid one of his followers to betray Him. His closest friends deserted Him. He was tried, convicted, sentenced and executed. In agony during His execution He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[{13}](#)

Many hurting people feel forsaken by God. But Jesus' cry of desperation carried added significance because of its historical allusion. The words had appeared about a thousand years earlier in a song written by Israel's King David.[{14}](#) It said, "All who see me mock me; they hurl insults, shaking their heads."[{15}](#) "They have pierced my hands and my feet."[{16}](#) "They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing."[{17}](#) Historians record precisely this behavior during Jesus' execution.[{18}](#) It was as if a divine drama were unfolding as Jesus slipped into death.

Researchers have uncovered more than 300 prophecies that were literally fulfilled in Jesus' life and death. He would be preceded by a messenger who would prepare the way for His work.[{19}](#) He would enter the capital city as a king, but riding on a donkey's back.[{20}](#) He would be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver,[{21}](#) pierced,[{22}](#) executed with thieves[{23}](#) and yet, though wounded,[{24}](#) would suffer no broken bones.[{25}](#)

In His dying cry from the cross, He reminded His hearers that His life and death were in precise fulfillment of a previously stated plan. According to a biblical perspective, at the moment of death He experienced the equivalent of eternal separation from God in our place. He suffered the divine penalty due all the shortcomings, injustice, evil, and sin of the world, including yours and mine. Then—again in fulfillment of prophecy[{26}](#) and contrary to natural law—He returned to life. As somewhat of a skeptic I investigated the evidence for Christ's resurrection and found it to be one of the best-attested facts in history.[{27}](#) To the seeker He offers true inner peace,[{28}](#) forgiveness,[{29}](#) purpose,[{30}](#) and strength for fulfilling living.[{31}](#)



Jesus' birth, life, and death fulfilled many prophecies. Many of these fulfillments involved details that were beyond His human control. But could this be coincidence? Could the prophecies have been fulfilled by chance?

## Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

My good friend and mentor, Bob Prall, likes to make a distinction between prediction and prophecy<sup>[32]</sup> and uses a sports analogy to illustrate that distinction. I got to know Bob when I was a student at Duke University and he was the Campus Crusade for Christ director. Now, sports fans will know that Duke's men's basketball team often has contended for the national title. Alas, the Duke football team has suffered many losing seasons.

Bob notes that prediction can involve careful analysis of current events to make an educated guess about the future. Stock market analysts, political pollsters, social scientists, and CBS *Survivor* fans all seek to predict outcomes. But prophecy often involves events and situations hundreds of years apart or without apparent human connection. Bob explains that if someone were to study the Duke men's basketball team and announce they would win the national championship, and then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if someone evaluated the Duke *football* team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

Could the 300 prophecies Jesus fulfilled have been fulfilled merely by chance? Peter Stoner, a California mathematician, once calculated the probability of just eight of these 300 prophecies coming true in one person due to chance alone. Using estimates that both he and classes of college students considered reasonable and conservative, Stoner concluded there was one chance in  $10^{17}$  that those eight were fulfilled by fluke.

He says  $10^{17}$  silver dollars would cover the state of Texas two feet deep. Mark one coin with red fingernail polish. Stir the whole batch thoroughly. What chance would a blindfolded person have of picking the marked coin on the first try? One in  $10^{17}$ , the same chance that just eight of the 300 prophecies “just happened” to come true in this man, Jesus. [\[33\]](#)

With all these signs, why wasn't more attention paid to Jesus' birth? No reporters with microphones and cameras waited outside the stable to interview the new mom. (Maybe if she'd had quintts?)

Some back then were looking for a conquering king promised by Hebrew prophets and did not anticipate a lowly birth. Others were perhaps too entangled in their own self-importance or preoccupied with the details of life: working, families, relationships, emotions. Maybe they were a bit like us.

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

## Today's Good News

Jesus' “good news” offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever had.

If His news is so good, why do people still miss it today? Some are enmeshed in careers or relationships that offer little time for reflection. Chasing dollars blinds some. Family strife can make life a blur: teens experimenting with sex or drugs, a spouse wanting out. Western life itself can be exhausting: media overload, the rush to taxi kids or complete shopping, cellphones, beepers, PTA, soccer practice, e-mail, laundry, Web surfing . . . Help! Maybe you could use some time to reflect.

I suspect you've had hints of God's good news. Maybe you've admired the majesty of the universe and wondered Who was behind it. Perhaps a friend told you their story of faith. Maybe a magazine article got you thinking.

For eighteen years I heard the story of Jesus but did not understand it. The summer before entering university, I wrestled with concern over my own afterlife but gave up because it seemed too complicated. That fall I met some vibrant Christians whose love, joy, and enthusiasm attracted me.

They told me I could not earn eternal life. Rather I needed to receive Christ's free gift of forgiveness accomplished by His death for my sins and His resurrection. They told me all this would be a "gift of God; not . . . a result of works, so that no one . . . [could] boast" about it.[{34}](#) That was good news to me. I accepted His gift of forgiveness and have found Him to be a wonderful friend.

Life hasn't been perfect. I've had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any struggle. He promises to cause "all things to work together for good" to those who love Him.[{35}](#) He is a friend who will never leave.[{36}](#)

Might this Christmas season be a good time for you to ask God to forgive you and become your friend? It's a decision that only you can make for yourself. You can simply talk to Him right now, ask Him to forgive you and become your friend forever. Then contact this station or visit the Web site [Probe.org](http://Probe.org) to learn more about a relationship with God.

Maybe there's some good news for you in the story of Jesus. Do you hear what I hear? Are you listening?

\*This article is adapted from Rusty Wright, "Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?" *Pursuit* VII: 3, 1998, pp.12-15. Copyright © 1998 Rusty Wright. Used By Permission.

## Notes

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.

2. Luke 2:10 NLT.

3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) 147-157 ff.

4. Micah 5:2 NLT.

5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.

6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.

7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.

8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.

9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.

10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.

11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.

12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.

13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.

14. Psalm 22.

15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.

16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.

17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.
18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.
19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.
20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.
21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.
22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.
24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.
26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.
27. See McDowell, *op. cit.*, 185-273.
28. John 14:27.
29. Colossians 1:14.
30. Matthew 28: 18-20.
31. Galatians 5:22-23.
32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going... Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.
33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.
34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.
35. Romans 8:28 NASB.
36. Hebrews 13:5.

# Reincarnation: The Christmas Counterfeit

24% of American Christians believe in reincarnation, the idea from Eastern religions that there is a merry-go-round of birth/life/death/reb



irth, over and over again. This has spawned a fad of “past lives regression,” discovering aspects of previous incarnations. Wiki-how even offers instructions on “[How to Remember Your Past Lives](#).” There’s a book called *Past Lives of the Rich and Famous*. Supposedly, Whitney Houston’s strong attachment to the gospel came from a moment in a previous life where she saw Jesus hanging on the cross. Liz Taylor used to be a Benedictine abbess in medieval Switzerland. Michael Jackson was the son of a royal courtesan in 100 B.C. Burma. And Marilyn Monroe was captured by a band of gypsies in the 1600s.

Not so fast. The Bible swats down the possibility of reincarnation: “It is appointed for man to die once, and then comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). That means that there are no past lives (but lots of opportunity for self- or demonic deception).

With one notable exception.

Jesus truly did have a past life, a life with no beginning, before He was born as a human being.

Philippians 2 tells us that "He emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men." I cannot begin to imagine what it was like to leave behind aspects of being God when He became one of us. Instead of enjoying omniscience (all-knowing), He limited Himself to only what He would learn experientially and by listening to the Holy Spirit. Instead of enjoying omnipresence (being all places at once), He limited Himself to one place at one time. Instead of enjoying omnipotence (all-powerful), He limited Himself to expressing the Father's will through dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus lived out, and showed us, what perfect, sinless Adam was like before the Fall.

Recently I've been meditating on the unthinkable sacrifice of leaving behind omniscience and becoming an embryo in Mary's womb. He experienced life as every other baby ever has, first through the muffled filter of His mother's body. Then the shock of emerging from the warm cozy darkness and drawing His first breath of air. For the first time in eternity, God breathed air! He learned what hunger was, and He learned what it was to be dependent on His mother to be fed.

He experienced life as a baby, learning language. He learned to recognize His mother's voice and His earthly father's voice. That prepared Him to learn to recognize His heavenly Father's voice. He grew into a toddler, and the very God who designed the human body to walk, had to learn how to walk Himself. He grew into a boy, and learned to read. The very God who had splintered the language of man at Babel had to learn Hebrew letters and words so He could read the Scriptures that He Himself had breathed through the minds and pens of men hundreds of years before. He learned spiritual truth with a human mind, reading the scrolls with human eyes. He learned

the history of mankind and of His own people through the Scriptures.

He submitted Himself to His earthly parents, who had the unimaginable task of teaching Jesus His true identity: "Child, you are the Son of God, born of a virgin birth. Your heavenly Father is Your actual Father. You are the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Anointed One. You are the Savior of the world."

When He hung out in the temple at age twelve, amazing the teachers by His teachable spirit and the questions He asked, He had clearly owned the truth about His true identity: "Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" (Luke 2:49)

By the time He was an adult, He had grown in understanding about His previous life in heaven: "And now, Father, glorify Me in Your own presence with the glory that I had with You before the world existed" (John 17:5).

Part of the glory of Christmas is remembering that Jesus truly did have a "past life," which He left behind for a time because He thought we were worth the sacrifice. And reincarnation—that false teaching of false religion—is the counterfeit to the miracle of Christmas: the Incarnation of the Son of God.

Christ by highest heaven adored; Christ, the everlasting Lord!

Late in time behold Him come, offspring of the Virgin's womb.

Veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity,  
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel.

This blog post originally appeared at  
[blogs.bible.org/engage/sue\\_bohlin/reincarnation\\_the\\_christmas\\_](https://blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/reincarnation_the_christmas_)



[counterfeit](#)

on December 17, 2013