

A Christmas Quiz

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

Take the quiz yourself: click [here](#) for a format with the questions and answers separated.

1. Can you name the parents of Jesus?

- 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).

2. Where did Joseph and Mary live before they were married?

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

3. What was the name of the angel who appeared to Mary?

Gabriel (Luke 1:26).

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

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

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

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

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

Elizabeth, her relative (Luke 1:36).

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

Six months (Luke 1:26, 36).

8. How long did Mary stay with Elizabeth?



About three months (Luke 1:56).

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

Probably fear of stoning, since she was pregnant and beginning "to show."

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

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

11. Why were Joseph and Mary going to Bethlehem?

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

12. Why did Mary accompany Joseph?

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

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

Lineage. Joseph had to go to the city of David since he was of "the house and family of David." (Luke 2:3-4).

14. Who, then, would be in Bethlehem?

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

15. How did they travel?

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

16. Why couldn't Joseph and Mary find space in the inn?

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).

17. Who were the first people to come to see Jesus according to Scripture?

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

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

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

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

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

20. What was the manger?

A feeding trough made of stone.

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?

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).

22. What happened eight days after Jesus' birth?

His circumcision (Luke 2:21).

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

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

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

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).

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

Nazareth (Luke 2:39).

26. What are magi?

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

27. How many wise men came to see Jesus?

Scripture does not say, but Augustine and Chrysostom say twelve. Another tradition names three: Melchior (Shem's descendant), Caspar (Hem's descendant), and Balthasar (Jopheth's descendant).

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

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).

29. What was curious about the star?

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

30. How did Herod use the star?

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.

31. Where were Jesus, Mary, and Joseph when the wise men reached them?

- 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).

32. How old was Jesus at this time?

Two months to two years.

33. In what year was Jesus born?

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

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

From one month to over one year.

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

Probably with the gifts of the magi.

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

Nazareth (Matt 2:23).

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

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

38. How old was Jesus when He died?

Thirty-seven to thirty-eight years old, depending on whether His ministry was three or four years in length.

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Why I Won't Apologize For Watching Hallmark Christmas Movies

I've decided to take the "guilty" out of "guilty pleasure" when it comes to watching Hallmark Christmas movies.

This cultural icon has become fodder for endless jokes and even sermon illustrations. Yes, they are completely formulaic and the always-happy endings are entirely predictable. What keeps us watching are the "getting there" details of maneuvering the journey through falling in love and overcoming obstacles and the inevitable misunderstandings that are shortly and inevitably resolved. ("Whew! That was a close one!" said no one ever.)

But there is such a deeply satisfying resolution in every

movie that makes the obligatory happy ending seem not obligatory at all. Just . . . *right*.

I found myself thinking about the sweet satisfaction of every movie that makes my spirit hum with joy, looking for the “something deeper” that I sensed was waiting to be discovered.

Then I remembered the Really Big Picture about the true nature of reality that God has presented to us in His word. The story of God rescuing man winds its way from Genesis to Revelation with lots of plot twists along the way, but there is an unimaginably Ultimate Happy Ending in the final book. The true story of the battle of good and evil ends with justice and rightness. Evil is finally contained and punished in the Lake of Fire, and True Love—God’s love for His beloved people—Wins.

There’s even a wedding! The Lamb of God, Jesus, takes His bride, the Church, as His wife.

The reason Hallmark Christmas movies are so satisfying is that they resonate with the Big Story where there is such a happy ending we can’t even begin to imagine it.

Here’s the ending, from Revelation 21:

Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!”

The real Happy Ending means no more death or mourning or crying or pain. One final wiping away of our tears, and then an eternity in new bodies where tear ducts will only be useful for tears of overwhelming joy.

It's always a secular Christmas in Hallmark movies, where Jesus is never mentioned. It's always about "the Christmas spirit" and "Christmas magic." But the happy endings are still legitimate because, like all good stories, they point to ultimate reality where Jesus is King and He will make all things right.

And now, if you'll excuse me, there are more movies to watch.

This post originally appeared at

blogs.bible.org/2019/12/18/why-i-wont-apologize-for-watching-hallmark-christmas-movies/ on December 17, 2019

Loving God Through Xmas Music?

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

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

remind us of “the reason for the season.”

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

Songs About Weather

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

Songs About Fantasy

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

Songs About “Xmas Feelings”

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

Songs About the Birth of Christ

Aaaah . . . now we’re talking! Most songs about Jesus’ birth are either Christmas carols, long venerated for the very good reason that they proclaim truth. We call them carols, but

they're really hymns that celebrate the Incarnation, God leaving heaven to become man. Most carols show deep insight into the glorious mystery of the Incarnation. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" proclaims, "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail the incarnate Deity." My favorite Christmas carol, "Joy to the World," exhorts us—and the whole world—to embrace the Savior: "Let earth receive her King, Let every heart prepare Him room, And heaven and nature sing. . ."

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

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

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

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

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

When we hear a song about Jesus' birth: "Lord, Happy Birthday!"

Thank You for leaving heaven and coming to earth to reconcile us with the Father. Thank You for this wonderful song that reminds us that You are Lord.”

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

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

Then there’s “Up on the Rooftop”:

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

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

Happy singing . . . and thinking!

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Jesus’ Resurrection: Fact or

Fiction? – A Clear Christian Perspective

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. The empty tomb. Jesus' corpse was removed from the cross, wrapped like a mummy and placed in a solid-rock tomb. A one-and-a-half to two-ton stone was rolled into a slightly depressed groove to seal the tomb's entrance.

A "Green Beret"-like unit of Roman soldiers guarded the grave. Sunday morning, the stone was found rolled away, the body was gone but the graveclothes were still in place. What happened?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Worth considering?

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Those Admirable English Puritans

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

Introducing the Puritans

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

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



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

Many scholarly studies of English Puritanism begin by noting the variety of ways in which the term “Puritanism” has been used and defined. Christopher Hill begins his book, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, with a chapter entitled, “The Definition of a Puritan.”^{[{4}](#)} And John Spurr, in

his book on English Puritanism, has an introductory section on “Defining Puritans.”^{5} But we’ll leave it to the scholars to haggle over details. For our purposes, it’s good enough to say that the Puritans were English Protestants who were influenced by the theology of the Reformation. They were zealous to “purify” not only the Church of England, but also their society, and even themselves, from all doctrinal, ceremonial, and moral impurity—and to do so for the glory of God.^{6} The time period of English Puritanism spans roughly the years between 1550 and 1700.^{7}

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

The Puritans and God

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

So where do we begin? Let’s briefly consider the way in which Puritans sought to live their lives before God. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a teaching device highly esteemed by many Puritans,^{12} 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.

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.

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 Beward. 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, MD: 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?"^{[\[1\]](#)} If our national dream fails, does it necessarily follow that our Christian dream also dies? Lutzer's book makes the point that it's dangerous to see the goals of the state and the purpose of the church as one and the same. It's dangerous to equate the "city of man" with the "city of God."



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

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

For all those involved in this debate, the specific beliefs of our Founders are very important. Those who argue that America was founded by godless men who established a godless Constitution are, for the most part, wrong. Belief in God was practically universal among our Founding Fathers. On the other hand, those who argue that our Founders were mostly

devoted Christians who sought to establish a Christian nation devoted to the gospel of Jesus Christ are not giving us the full picture either. Because both sides in this debate tend to define America by the religious faith of our Founders, both sides tend to over-simplify the religious beliefs of those early patriots.

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

Deism

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

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

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

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

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

Anti-Christian Deism

The impact of Deism on Americans in the 1700s is complicated because the word itself represents a spectrum of religious positions held at that time. One extreme represents a group that might be called the non-Christian Deists. This faction was openly hostile to the Christian faith. Thomas Paine, of *Common Sense* fame, and a leading advocate of this position, wrote that Deism "is free from all those invented and torturing articles that shock our reason . . . with which the

Christian religion abounds. Its creed is pure and sublimely simple. It believes in God, and there it rests. It honors Reason as the choicest gift of God to man and the faculty by which he is enabled to contemplate the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator displayed in the creation; . . . it avoids all presumptuous beliefs and rejects, as the fabulous inventions of men, all books pretending to be revelation."[{5}](#) This quote clearly expresses the complaints and disdain that some Deists held against the Christian faith.

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

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

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

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

Church-Going Deists

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

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

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

The faith of George Washington is a more controversial matter. Washington consistently used Deistic language to describe God in both public and private communications, rarely referring to Jesus Christ in any setting. Comments made by his contemporaries also point to Deistic beliefs. Washington's bishop and pastor while he was in Philadelphia admitted that "Truth requires me to say, that General Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am parochial minister."[{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 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.^{14} Even when thinking of his future passing Adams looked to Christ; his will spoke of his "relying on the merits of Jesus Christ for a pardon of all my sins."^{15} Although many leaders of the day left their orthodox upbringing, Adams "was a New England Congregationalist who remained staunchly loyal to the Calvinist orthodoxy in which he had been raised."^{16}

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

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

from every nation, tribe, people and language.

Notes

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
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.

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-prophetic 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 on Dec. 15, 2015.

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 rigidness 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}](#)

Greener 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

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III

(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1910), 395.

2. Frank Gaebelein, "The Most Beautiful Story Ever Told," *Christianity Today* (7 December 1979):19.
3. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, 4:552.
4. Schaff, 396.
5. Ibid.
6. Gaebelein, 19.
7. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 603.
8. Owen Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1967), 126.
9. Schaff, 393.
10. Gaebelein, 19.
11. Ibid.
12. Helen Dunn Frame, "Life Without Christmas: What if they gave our holiday back to the heathens?" *The Dallas Morning News: Scene Magazine* (9 December 1979), 42.
13. Gaebelein, 19.
14. Frame, 42.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Bill Perry, *American Holidays* (Ephrata, Penn.: Multi-Language Media, 1995), 21-22.
19. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 604.
20. Perry, 20.
21. C.S. Lewis, "What Christmas Means to Me," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 304-305.
22. Frame, 42.
23. Malcolm Muggeridge, "Nature is a Parable," *National Review* (24 December 1982), 1614.
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 certain 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

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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.