

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.

Truth You Can Sing About: 5 Christmas Carols

When was the last time you thought about the great truth found in Christmas hymns and carols? Probe Radio producer Steven Davis focuses on the theology of five Christmas carols. The podcast features new music for each carol written by Steven's son and Probe's Mind Games Camp alumnus Jon Clive Davis.



Hark the Herald Angels Sing

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

Charles Wesley penned these words in the early 1700's. And this hymn is filled with inspiration and insight.

The 1st line tells us who delivers this great message: the angels.

The 2nd line reveals Who is the content: the Christ child.

The 3rd line shows results of this miraculous birth: peace and mercy incarnate came to earth.

But the 4th line exclaims what has happened—that which mankind had been incapable of doing, and centuries of sacrifices could not accomplish: God and sinners were finally and fully reconciled.

Reconciliation literally means "according to change." The situation between God and man had to be changed; both parties were at enmity with one another, and we needed to be reconciled.

"This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body." (Colossians 1:21-22)

"We were God's enemies, but he made us his friends through the death of his Son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life!" (Romans 5:10)

On that angel-filled night, we became witnesses to the first step of this reconciliation: the Son had come in the flesh to

earth! And that's the point of the Incarnation—God became man so that He could reconcile us to Himself, and that was the miraculous, wondrous Christmas Change.

Don't miss what the Apostle Paul and Wesley were saying about our condition: we were sinners and we were enemies. But now, because of Christ, we are reconciled.

When you consider His birth this Christmas season, may you be wondrously changed.

0 Come, 0 Come Emmanuel

**0 come, 0 come, Emmanuel
And ransom captive Israel,
That mourns in lonely exile here
Until the Son of God appear.
Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, 0 Israel.**

Emmanuel: *God with us*. This was not a new concept, for Israel knew and saw on numerous occasions that God was “with” them:

“Praise the Lord who has given rest to his people Israel, just as he promised. Not one word has failed of all the wonderful promises he gave through his servant Moses. May the Lord our God **be with us** as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us or abandon us.” (1 Kings 8)

“Be strong and courageous, do not fear or be dismayed because of the king of Assyria nor because of all the horde that is with him; for the one **with us** is greater than the one with him. With him is only an arm of flesh, but **us** is the Lord our God to help us and to fight our battles.” (2 Chronicles 32)

“The LORD of hosts is **with us**; the God of Jacob is our stronghold.” (Psalm 46)

During the exodus God was with them as seen in a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day. His presence was with them in the Holy of holies. And at times His presence was with them in battle.

But Emmanuel being *with us* is different.

John tells us in his gospel, "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14)

And Paul continues in his letter to Timothy: "Here is the great mystery of our religion: Christ came as a human. The Spirit proved that he pleased God, and he was seen by angels. Christ was preached to the nations. People in this world put their faith in him, and he was taken up to glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

The Son of God has appeared, and that is a reason for Israel—and us—to rejoice.

Joy to the World

**Joy to the world! The Lord is come
Let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare Him room
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven and nature sing
And heaven, and heaven and nature sing!**

I love this carol. It is indeed joyous, and is rightfully sung as such. But is the world joyous? Will Earth receive her king? Will every heart prepare Him room?

No.

And that greatly saddens me. There are those who worship other gods, and will find no joy in His coming. There are those who think Him a myth and will not receive Him. There are those who think Him irrelevant or undeserving, and will not make room

for Him. For these . . . there is no joy.

Part of the reason there is no joy is our fault—the Church’s fault. Do we judge instead of love? Are we inconsistent? Do we preach legalism rather than forgiveness? And though we understand the Truth, do we wield it as a weapon rather than share it with grace?

For those who may have ended up on the receiving end of our hypocrisy, I am sorry. But don’t let our failings get in the way of you seeing a loving heavenly Father, and His Son, dying for your sins.

Scripture tells us that “at the name of Jesus every knee will bow of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:10-11) So we **will** kneel and confess Christ, either because we love Him and find our joy in Him, or because we have to, and we find only fear.

Listen to the music; listen to the words; and discover The One who loves you this Christmas. He came for you; and He brings you joy!

What Child Is This?

**So bring him incense, gold, and myrrh,
Come, peasant, king, to own him.
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone him.
Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The babe, the Son of Mary.**

In the verse preceding this one, there’s a question asked, which has to do more with you and me, than the shepherds and wise men who are part of this story: *Why lies He in such mean*

estate, where ox and ass are feeding? That's a 19th century way of saying, "Why was Jesus born in a barn?" So then comes my question: "Why was the King of Kings born in a barn?" The answer comes in this last verse: *Come peasant, king, to own Him.*

The Apostle Paul had an opportunity to speak with the philosophers in Athens on Mars Hill, and his speech explains this invitation to all:

"As I was going through your city and looking at the things you worship, I found an altar with the words, "To an Unknown God." You worship this God, but you don't really know him. So I want to tell you about him. This God made the world and everything in it. He is Lord of heaven and earth, and he doesn't live in temples built by human hands. He doesn't need help from anyone. He gives life, breath, and everything else to all people. God has done all this, so that we will look for him and reach out and find him." (Acts 17)

Peter, after having a vision from God, said, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him." (Acts 10:34)

A barn would give access to everyone; a palace—where a king *should* be born—would have guards and ministers and red tape and bureaucracy to negotiate; and those who would have seen and heard the angels would have never been able to see the One of Whom the Angels sang.

The angels sang the song for you. Don't miss seeing Him.

Il Est Né Le Divin Enfant

Chorus:

He is born, the divine Christ child.

Play on the oboe and bagpipes merrily.

He is born, the divine Christ child.

Sing we all of the Savior's birth.

**Through long ages of the past,
Prophets have foretold his coming;
Through long ages of the past,
Now the time has come at last.**

You probably noticed this was a French carol by the title. The above is but one of a multitude of translations, which bespeaks of its long and celebrated life in English performances.

Verse 1 talks about prophets and prophecy, and now is the time. That is a rather famous phrase in the New Testament. For He says, "At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you." Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.' (1 Corinthians 6)

This salvation is quite literally Jesus Christ, and we see this truth beginning in the above lyric, and concluded by the writer of Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. And now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he created the universe. The Son radiates God's own glory and expresses the very character of God, and he sustains everything by the mighty power of his command. When he had cleansed us from our sins, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God in heaven. This shows that the Son is far greater than the angels, just as the name God gave him is greater than their names." (Hebrews 1:1-4)

Do you understand what an awesome privilege it is for you to be born in this time? No waiting for many days and many prophecies to be fulfilled. This song is a celebration: the Savior has come into the world, and now is the time. So what

are you doing “Now”?

May your Christmas be filled with praise.

The music for this program was composed and performed by my son and Probe Mind Games Camp alumnus, Jon Clive Davis.

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Is Christmas Necessary?

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

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



What do you think of when you hear the word “Christmas”? Frantic shopping? Family traditions? A commemoration of the birth of Jesus? Or a combination of all these responses and more? If you’ve been living in the United States long, you probably find it difficult to focus on just one without the others. And if you’re a Christian you probably want to focus on the birth of Jesus, but you spend a great deal of your December on shopping and traditions. Then you may finish “The Season,” as it has come to be known, feeling guilty because you didn’t focus on Jesus as the “Reason for the Season.” You may even want to ask if the season is really necessary, because you’re exhausted, broke, and relieved when it’s over for another year.



So we want to ask, “Is Christmas necessary?”

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

A Brief History of Christmas

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

In the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost. In the second place, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be certainly determined. Again: the church lingered first of all about the death and resurrection of Christ, the completed fact of redemption, and made this the center of the weekly worship and the church year. Finally: the earlier feast of Epiphany...afforded a substitute. The artistic religious impulse, however, which produced the whole church year, must sooner or later have called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ.[\[1\]](#)

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

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

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

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

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

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

Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidity of opposition

between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen. Besides, there lurked in those pagan festivals themselves, in spite of all their sensual abuses, a deep meaning and an adaptation to a real want; they might be called unconscious prophecies of the Christmas feast.[{5}](#)

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

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

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he sanctioned the “Christianizing” of various pagan emphases. So he was probably influential “in the institution of a Christian feast of the birthday of the Sun of Righteousness’ (Malachi 4:2) as a rival to the popular pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) at the winter solstice.”[{7}](#) But it is helpful to know that his understanding of Christian doctrine was such that he “was not aware of any mutual exclusiveness between Christianity and his faith in the Unconquered Sun.”[{8}](#)

So from the era of Constantine (306-337) onward, Christmas (from the Old English Cristes Maesse, “Christ’s Mass”) was gradually included in Western culture. By the time of the Reformation most leaders, including Martin Luther, “were for the abolition of all feast days, except Sunday; but the...long habits of the people were against such a radical reform.”[{9}](#) “During Cromwell’s time in seventeenth-century England

[Christmas] was banned by Parliament, and in old New England the celebration of Christmas was officially forbidden.”[{10}](#) Now, of course, almost a quarter of each year is devoted to the celebration of Christmas in American culture. And as we will see, a variety of customs emphasize many facets of the season.

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

Customs

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

Merriment and Gifts

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

Greenery and Lights

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

Christmas Trees

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

Manger Scene

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

Christmas Carols

“The first Christmas hymns were written in the fifth century.

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

The Yule Log

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

Mistletoe

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

Holly

The holly plant was sacred to the Roman god Saturn. Romans gave one another holly wreaths and decked images of Saturn with it. Christians decked their homes with it. Druids believed that holly remained green so the world would be beautiful when the sacred grove lost its leaves.

Poinsettia

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

Christmas Cards

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

Santa Claus

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

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

Is Christmas Necessary Economically?

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

Three things go by the name of Christmas. One is a religious festival. This is important and obligatory for Christians;

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

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

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

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

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

Such reflection leaves us with a challenge. If we want to de-emphasize the commercial side of Christmas, how do we do it without upsetting the economy? Perhaps the economic gain that comes from the Christmas season can be supplanted by some other holiday or emphasis. But what would it be? Perhaps it would be overtly pagan, which would not leave us content. There seems to be no immediate answer to the dilemma the Christian faces while living in this country. I'm reminded of the slow eradication of slavery from the early church. If

slavery had been eliminated immediately, it would have created chaos in the social and economic fabric. Thus there was a patient change as the church influenced the culture around it. Maybe that process can serve as a model for us.

Is Christmas Necessary Traditionally?

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

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

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

construct our traditions will either lead us towards or away from this truth.

Is Christmas Necessary Historically or Theologically?

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

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

These profound comments lead me to consider what probably is the major fallacy of the Christmas season when Christ is not considered. That is, we attempt to "concoct" happiness and meaning without substance. As Muggeridge states, "I find myself more and more strongly aware that this is the true situation: that the hope of man, that he can create through human agency either a happy life as an individual or a satisfactory life as a collectivity, is the ultimate fantasy." [{24}](#) Christmas without the historical birth of Jesus in space and time and the theological implications of that birth leave us grasping for something that cannot be obtained.

But some level of the implications of that birth can be grasped. Let's reawaken to the awesome presence of God in

human flesh! To pass through the Christmas season without thoughtful contemplation of the wonder that "God with us" is shameful. "The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab." [{25}](#) Consider these beautiful, penetrating phrases from the pen of Augustine:

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

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

In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity...But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in midair, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and

cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too. [\[27\]](#)

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

Conclusion

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

Notes

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3. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Macropaedia, 4:552.
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25. C. S. Lewis, "The Incarnation," *The Joyful Christian* (N.Y.: Macmillan, 1977), 51.
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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-prophetical 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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Thanksgiving Quiz

Kerby Anderson offers a quiz concerning the origins of American Thanksgiving.

This nation was founded by Christians, and Thanksgiving is a time when we can reflect upon this rich, Christian heritage. But many of us are often ignorant of our country’s origins, so we have put together a Thanksgiving quiz to test your knowledge about this nation’s biblical foundations. We hope that you will not only take this test and pass it on to others, but we also hope that you will be encouraged to study more about the Christian foundations of this country.

1. What group began the tradition of Thanksgiving?



A day of thanksgiving was set aside by the Pilgrims who

founded Plymouth Colony. This colony was the first permanent settlement in New England. The Pilgrims were originally known as the Forefathers or Founders. The term *Pilgrim* was first used in the writings of colonist William Bradford and is now used to designate them.

2. Why did they celebrate Thanksgiving?

Life was hard in the New World. Out of 103 Pilgrims, 51 of these died in the first terrible winter. After the first harvest was completed, Governor William Bradford proclaimed a day of thanksgiving and prayer. By 1623, a day of fasting and prayer during a period of drought was changed to one of thanksgiving because the rain came during their prayers. The custom prevailed in New England and eventually became a national holiday.

3. When did Thanksgiving become a national holiday?

The state of New York adopted Thanksgiving Day as an annual custom in 1817. By the time of the Civil War, many other states had done the same. In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln appointed a day of thanksgiving. Since then, each president has issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation for the fourth Thursday of November.

4. Why did the Pilgrims leave Europe?

Among the early Pilgrims was a group of Separatists who were members of a religious movement that broke from the Church of England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1606 William Brewster led a group of Separatists to Leiden (in the Netherlands) to escape religious persecution in England. After living in Leiden for more than ten years, some members of the group voted to emigrate to America. The voyage was financed by a group of London investors who were promised produce from America in exchange for their assistance.

5. How did the Pilgrims emigrate to the New World?

On September 16, 1620, a group numbering 102 men, women, and children left Plymouth, England, for America on the Mayflower. Having been blown off course from their intended landing in Virginia by a terrible storm, the Pilgrims landed at Cape Cod on November 11. On December 21, they landed on the site of Plymouth Colony. While still on the ship, the Pilgrims signed the Mayflower Compact.

6. What is the Mayflower Compact?

On November 11, 1620, Governor William Bradford and the leaders on the Mayflower signed the Mayflower Compact before setting foot on land. They wanted to acknowledge God's sovereignty in their lives and their need to obey Him. The Mayflower Compact was America's first great constitutional document and is often called "The American Covenant."

7. What is the significance of the Mayflower Compact?

After suffering years of persecution in England and spending difficult years of exile in the Netherlands, the Pilgrims wanted to establish their colony on the biblical principles they suffered for in Europe. Before they set foot on land, they drew up this covenant with God. They feared launching their colony until there was a recognition of God's sovereignty and their collective need to obey Him.

8. What does the Mayflower Compact say?

"In the name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyal subjects of our dread sovereign Lord, King James, by the grace of God, of Great Britain, France, and Ireland king, defender of the faith, etc., Having undertaken, for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and honor of our king and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the Northern parts of Virginia, do by these present solemnly and mutually in the presence of God, and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for better ordering and preservation and furtherance of the ends

foresaid, and by virtue hereof to enact, constitute, and frame such just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meet and convenient for the general good of the Colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cape Cod the 11th of November, in the year of the reign of our sovereign Lord, King James, of England, France, and Ireland.”

9. Why didn't the pilgrims sail to the original destination in Virginia?

The Pilgrims were blown off course and landed at Cape Cod in what now appears to be God's providence. Because their patent did not include this territory, they consulted with the Captain of the Mayflower and resolved to sail southward. But the weather and geography did not allow them to do so. They encountered “dangerous shoals and roaring breakers” and were quickly forced to return to Cape Cod. From there they began scouting expeditions and finally discovered what is now Plymouth. Had they arrived just a few years earlier, they would have been attacked and destroyed by one of the fiercest tribes in the region. However, three years earlier (in 1617), the Patuxet tribe had been wiped out by a plague. The Pilgrims thus landed in one of the few places where they could survive.[{1}](#)

10. What role did the lone surviving Indian play in the lives of the Pilgrims?

There was one survivor of the Patuxet tribe: Squanto. He was kidnapped in 1605 by Captain Weymouth and taken to England where he learned English and was eventually able to return to New England.[{2}](#) When he found his tribe had been wiped out by the plague, he lived with a neighboring tribe. When Squanto learned that the Pilgrims were at Plymouth, he came to them and showed them how to plant corn and fertilize with fish. He later converted to Christianity. William Bradford said that

Squanto “was a special instrument sent of God for their good beyond their expectation.”[{3}](#)

11. Were the colonists dedicated to Christian principles in their lives on days other than Thanksgiving?

The Pilgrims were, and so were the other colonists. Consider this sermon by John Winthrop given while aboard the Arabella in 1630. This is what he said about the Puritans who formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony: “For the persons, we are a Company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ. . . . For the work we have in hand, it is by a mutual consent through a special overruling providence, and a more than an ordinary approbation of the Churches of Christ to seek out a place of Cohabitation and Consortship under a due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical.” They established a Christian Commonwealth in which every area of their lives both civil and ecclesiastical fell under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

12. How did the Pilgrims organize their economic activities?

After the first year, the colony foundered because of the collective economic system forced upon them by the merchants in London. All the settlers worked only for the joint partnership and were fed out of the common stores. The land and the houses built on it were the joint property of the merchants and colonists for seven years and then divided equally.[{4}](#)

When Deacon Carver died, William Bradford became governor. Seeing the failure of communal farming, he instituted what today would be called free enterprise innovations. Bradford assigned plots of land to each family to work, and the colony began to flourish. Each colonist was challenged to better themselves and their land by working to their fullest capacity. Many Christian historians and economists today point to this fundamental economic change as one of the key reasons

for the success of the Pilgrims at Plymouth.

13. What has been the significance of the Pilgrims and their legacy of Thanksgiving?

On the bicentennial celebration of the landing of the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock, Daniel Webster on December 22, 1820, declared the following: "Let us not forget the religious character of our origin. Our fathers were brought hither by their high veneration for the Christian religion. They journeyed by its light, and labored in its hope. They sought to incorporate its principles with the elements of their society, and to diffuse its influence through all their institutions, civil, political, or literary."

The legacy of the Pilgrims and Thanksgiving is the legacy of godly men and women who sought to bring Christian principles to this nation. These spread throughout the nation for centuries.

14. How were Christian principles brought to the founding of this republic?

Most historians will acknowledge that America was born in the midst of a revival. This occurred from approximately 1740-1770 and was known as the First Great Awakening. Two prominent preachers during that time were Jonathan Edwards (best known for his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God") and George Whitfield. They preached up and down the East Coast and saw revival break out. Churches were planted, schools were built, and lives were changed.

15. How influential were Christian ideas in the Constitution?

While the Constitution does not specifically mention God or the Bible, the influence of Christianity can plainly be seen. Professor M.E. Bradford shows in his book *A Worthy Company*, that fifty of the fifty-five men who signed the Constitution were church members who endorsed the Christian faith.

16. Weren't many of the founders non-Christians?

Yes, some were. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are good examples of men involved in the drafting of the Declaration of Independence who were influenced by ideas from the Enlightenment. Yet revisionists have attempted to make these men more secular than they really were. Jefferson, for example, wrote to Benjamin Rush that "I am a Christian . . . sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others." Franklin called for prayer at the Constitutional Convention saying, "God governs the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his notice?" While they were hardly examples of biblical Christianity, they nevertheless believed in God and believed in absolute standards which should be a part of the civil order.

17. How important was Christianity in colonial education in America?

Young colonists' education usually came from the Bible, the Hornbook, and the New England Primer. The Hornbook consisted of a single piece of parchment attached to a paddle of wood. Usually the alphabet, the Lord's Prayer, and religious doctrines were written on it. The New England Primer taught a number of lessons and included such things as the names of the Old and New Testament books, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and John Cotton's "Spiritual Milk for American Babies." Even when teaching the alphabet, biblical themes were used: "A is for Adam's fall, we sinned all. B is for Heaven to find, the Bible mind. C is for Christ crucified, for sinners died."

18. How important was Christianity in colonial higher education?

Most of the major universities were established by Christian

denominations. Harvard was a Puritan school. William and Mary was an Anglican school. Yale was Congregational, Princeton was Presbyterian, and Brown was Baptist. The first motto for Harvard was *Veritas Christo et Ecclesiae* (Truth for Christ and the Church). Students gathered for prayer and readings from the Scriptures every day. Yale was established by Increase Mather and Cotton Mather because Harvard was moving away from its original Calvinist philosophy and eventually drifted to Unitarianism. The founders of Yale said that “every student shall consider the main end of his study to wit to know God in Jesus Christ and answerably to lead a Godly, sober life.”

19. If Christianity was so important in colonial America, why does the Constitution establish a wall of separation between church and state?

Contrary to what many Americans may think, the phrase “separation of church and state” does not appear anywhere in the Constitution. In fact, there is no mention of the words church, state, or separation in the First Amendment or anywhere within the Constitution. The First Amendment does guarantee freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and freedom of religion.

The phrase is found in a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to Baptist pastors in Danbury, Connecticut in 1802 in which he gave his opinion of the establishment clause of the First Amendment and then felt that this was “building a wall of separation between church and state.” At best this was a commentary on the First Amendment, from an individual who was in France when the Constitution and Bill of Rights were drafted.

Notes

1. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: The Modern Library, 1967), Chapter XI.
2. Bradford Smith, *Bradford of Plymouth* (Philadelphia and New

York: J.B. Lippincott, 1951), 189.

3. Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation*, 81.

4. Marshall Foster, *The American Covenant* (Thousand Oaks, CA: The Mayflower Institute, 1992), 86-87.

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A Probe Mom Looks at Halloween from a Christian Perspective

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

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

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

It seems that the costume manufacturers have really cranked up production of all sorts of costumes to a degree we've never

seen before. Gone are the days of burning a cork to blacken a face, put on some thrift-shop oversized clothes and dressing up as a hobo. (There's probably some politically-correct term for "hobo" these days anyway. . .)

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

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

Halloween Don'ts

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

So stay away from anything that glorifies:

- **The occult.** Witches, warlocks, sorcerers and sorcery, casting spells, mediums, magic, ouija boards, crystal balls, tarot cards, and astrology are doors to the kingdom of

darkness. Satan/Beelzebub masks and costumes have no place on a Christian or in a Christian family—not even “adorable”(??) little baby devil costumes complete with horns and pitchfork.

- **Darkness.** Satan and the demons are the rulers of darkness (Eph. 6:12). There’s a reason so many people are afraid of the dark; it is a fearful thing both physically and spiritually.

- **Death.** Satan has had the power of death over people (Heb. 2:14) ever since the Fall, and he uses it to control people through fear. Death is an enemy of God (1 Cor. 15:26), not something to flirt with. Vampires, ghosts, goblins and gargoyles (concepts rooted in the reality of demons) are all figures of death.

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

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

Note: there are a number of churches that use the legitimate fear of an eternity in hell, separated from God, as a platform for drawing people into a creative presentation of the gospel.

Many young people have been saved as a result. This is a God-honoring use of fear, not glorifying fear for fear's sake.

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

Halloween Do's

- If your church sponsors a Halloween alternative event such as a fall festival, that's a great idea to allow kids to have fun within pre-set boundaries. (Note: it's important to specify what kind of costumes are NOT welcome!)

- [Child Evangelism Fellowship](http://www.cefonline.com) (www.cefonline.com) has reported that Halloween has been the best time of year for children to trust Christ, simply because the spirit of fear that pervades our culture at this time makes them more open than usual to hearing a good news of the gospel. Halloween is a great time to sponsor Good News Clubs and invite kids in your neighborhood to hear stories that will comfort, rather than terrorize, them.

- [American Tract Society](http://www.crossway.org/group/ats) (www.crossway.org/group/ats) has some terrific kid-friendly tracts to include with the candy you give out. This year, ATS has introduced the most practical Halloween evangelism resource yet! The Halloween Rescue Kit includes candy, bags, stickers and tracts – everything you need to reach 31 kids this Halloween. They suggest (and I think it's a great idea!) that if you expect kids to actually read the tracts once they get home from Trick-or-Treating (instead of tossing them out unread with the empty candy

wrappers), that you tape them to popular candy bars that kids actually want. (Find out what kids in your area consider “cool” candy.) Or make your own tract kit by putting a tract plus quality candy inside sandwich bags. Either way, it forces kids to handle the tract in order to get to the candy. Sounds like following the Lord Jesus’ command to be “shrewd as serpents, and innocent as doves” (Matt. 10:16) to me!

I know several families who have purchased tracts for the neighborhood ADULTS, and when their kids go trick-or-treating, when the adults give them candy the kids will hand them a tract (aimed at adults) and say, “Thank you for the candy. Here’s a treat for you!” How often do people open their doors and make themselves open to this kind of opportunity?

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

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

Talk to your kids about [“God’s no-no list”](#) in Deuteronomy 18 and have them help you identify those things when they see them advertised or used as decorations. (You might keep a running total of all the witches you’ll see just to quantify

this concept.) This is probably the best way to prevent your children from getting desensitized to things of the occult. Help them identify all the Halloween items that strike fear in them, and encourage them to take a stand against their power by saying out loud, "God has not given me a spirit of fear!" Show them this verse in their Bibles (2 Timothy 1:7) so they know they are using the sword of the Spirit against one of the wiles of the enemy.

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

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

The co-worker asked her to explain that one.

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

Sue Bohlin

Probe Ministries Mom

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Are You Listening? Do You Hear What I Hear?

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

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

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

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



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

tragedy that would have been.”

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

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

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

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Birth

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

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

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

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

Matthew recorded this about Jesus' birth:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prophecies Fulfilled in Jesus' Life and Death

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

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

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

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

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

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

Prophecies Fulfilled by Chance?

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

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

then it happened, that would be successful prediction. But if someone evaluated the Duke *football* team and announced they would win the national championship, that would be prophecy!

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

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

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

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

What does all this mean for us this Christmas?

Today's Good News

Jesus' “good news” offers a chance to hook into God's unchanging love, to be forgiven of all wrong and to live forever with Him. He can help you accept yourself, replace

anxiety with peace and provide the best friends you've ever had.

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

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

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

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

Life hasn't been perfect. I've had my share of domestic strife, job conflicts, and minor health struggles. God never promised perfection, painlessness, or complete prosperity in this life. But He does offer unusual peace, pardon from guilt, ultimate purpose, and the inner power to cope with any

struggle. He promises to cause “all things to work together for good” to those who love Him.[{35}](#) He is a friend who will never leave.[{36}](#)

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

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

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

Notes

1. Names and some details in certain stories in this article have been altered for privacy while preserving the points of the stories. Details of stories that name me personally have not been changed.
2. Luke 2:10 NLT.
3. Adapted from Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict* (San Bernardino, Calif: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1972) 147-157 ff.
4. Micah 5:2 NLT.
5. Matthew 2:1 NASB.
6. Isaiah 7:14 NIV.
7. Matthew 1:18, 24, 25 NLT.
8. Genesis 22:18 NLT.

9. Genesis 21:12 NLT.
10. McDowell, op. cit., 154.
11. Numbers 24:17 NLT.
12. Luke 3:23, 34 NASB.
13. Matthew 27:46 NIV.
14. Psalm 22.
15. Psalm 22:7 NIV.
16. Psalm 22:16 NIV.
17. Psalm 22:18 NIV.
18. Matthew 27:39-44, 35; John 20:25.
19. Malachi 3:1; Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:1,2.
20. Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; Matthew 21:1-9.
21. Zechariah 11:12; Matthew 26:15, 27:3.
22. Zechariah 12:10; John 19:34, 37.
23. Isaiah 53:12; Matthew 27:38.
24. Isaiah 53:5; Zechariah 13:6; Matthew 27:26.
25. Psalm 34:20; John 19:33, 36.
26. Psalm 16:10; Acts 2:31-32.
27. See McDowell, op. cit., 185-273.
28. John 14:27.
29. Colossians 1:14.
30. Matthew 28: 18-20.

31. Galatians 5:22-23.

32. Bob Prall, *The Master Plot of the Bible* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 1997) 56; Bob Prall, *As You Are Going... Make Disciples* (Houston: Emmaus Books Trust, 2001) 108-109.

33. Peter W. Stoner, *Science Speaks* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969) 99-112.

34. Ephesians 2:8-9 NASB.

35. Romans 8:28 NASB.

36. Hebrews 13:5.

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Reincarnation: The Christmas Counterfeit

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



irth, over and over again. This has spawned a fad of “past lives regression,” discovering aspects of previous incarnations. Wiki-how even offers instructions on “[How to Remember Your Past Lives](#).” There’s a book called *Past Lives of the Rich and Famous*. Supposedly, Whitney Houston’s strong attachment to the gospel came from a moment in a previous life

where she saw Jesus hanging on the cross. Liz Taylor used to be a Benedictine abbess in medieval Switzerland. Michael Jackson was the son of a royal courtesan in 100 B.C. Burma. And Marilyn Monroe was captured by a band of gypsies in the 1600s.

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

With one notable exception.

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

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

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

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

it was to be dependent on His mother to be fed.

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

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

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

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

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

counterfeit to the miracle of Christmas: the Incarnation of the Son of God.

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

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

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

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on December 17, 2013

The Star of Bethlehem from a Christian View

Dr. Ray Bohlin looks at the familiar story of the star of Bethlehem and provides several possible ways that God created this sign announcing the birth of the Christ. From a Christian worldview perspective, we know a bright light in the sky was able to lead the magi to the Christ child. Dr. Bohlin considers several ways God may have chosen to announce the coming of the Christ.

The Magi and the Star of Bethlehem

*O, Star of wonder, star of night
Star of royal beauty bright
Westward leading, still proceeding,*

Guide us to thy perfect light.

This familiar and haunting chorus from the Christmas carol, “We Three Kings of Orient Are,” introduces us to what seems to be the only ubiquitous biblical symbol during the Christmas season, the star of Bethlehem.



This Christmas, as you look over the Christmas cards in the stores or in your own burgeoning collection from family and friends, you will see one very constant element. Whether the scene depicts the nativity, a backyard nature scene, a Christmas tree, or just Santa making deliveries, if the nighttime sky is included, somewhere in the picture, eliciting warm and happy emotions, is a star. The star dominates the nighttime sky with its size and brightness and its long tail pointing to the earth. The star has almost become the signature which says, “This scene reflects a Christmas theme.”

At first, this may seem quite unusual for something which doesn't even get mentioned in Luke 2, the more familiar account of our Lord's birth. The star is featured only in Matthew's brief description of the visit by the magi shortly after Jesus' birth. I think the prevalence of the star stems from its mysteriousness. For example, what kind of star convinces a group of Gentile wise men to search for the new King of the Jews and actually leads them to Him? Before we explore this puzzle, let's look at Matthew's account beginning in Chapter 2 verse 1:

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying, “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east, and have come to worship Him” (Matt. 2:1-2, NASB).

A couple of things to note: first, these events take place after Jesus' birth; second, this was in the days of Herod the

king; third, the magi arrived from an area east of Jerusalem (probably in the vicinity of Babylon or Persia); fourth, they already knew they were looking for the newborn King of the Jews, but the exact location eluded them; and fifth, it was viewing His star from their home in the east that led them on this journey.

After consulting with King Herod and finding out from chief priests and teachers that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, the magi set out for the 5 mile trip south to Bethlehem. We pick up Matthew's narrative in verse 9:

And having heard the king, they went their way; and lo, the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them, until it came and stood over where the Child was. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And they came into the house and saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him; and opening their treasures they presented to Him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh (Matt. 2:9-11, NASB).

Here we see that Matthew appears to describe the star as moving, as leading the magi to Jesus. There is clearly more than one magi, but only tradition holds that there were three—presumably because of the three gifts. These Gentile wise men worship the King whom the star has led them to. In the rest of this essay, we will explore the nature of this strange star and what it could have been.

What Was the Star of Bethlehem?

The Gospel of Matthew states that the star informed the magi of the birth of the King of the Jews and actually led them to Bethlehem once they had arrived in Jerusalem. The star of Bethlehem has been the subject of scholarly discussion ever since the first centuries after Jesus' birth. Some believed it was a supernova explosion, others a comet or a conjunction of

planets associated with specific constellations that would herald the birth of a king in Israel. Some have suggested that none of these astronomical events can adequately account for all that Matthew tells us within the context of his worldview. In this discussion, I will be investigating the more common explanations to see if we can come to some understanding as to just what the magi saw 2,000 years ago.

When Matthew quotes the magi as telling Herod that they observed the new King's star rising in the east, this can be interpreted as a new star, something never observed before. This has led some scholars to believe that the star of Bethlehem was a nova or supernova. A nova is a white dwarf star that literally explodes. The explosion may increase the brightness of the star a thousand to a million times its previous brightness, making a previously invisible star, visible. A nova, however, does not last very long. The initial blast of the explosion may only be observed for a few months before the star shrinks to a remnant of its previous brightness and disappears altogether.

There are numerous problems with this view. First, although there was a "new star" recorded by the Chinese in the constellation Capricorn in March-April of 5 B.C. that lasted only 70 days, there is nothing to connect this event with the birth of a King in Israel. Second, and perhaps most troublesome, nova do not move.

This leads to a discussion of a different astronomical event that may be associated with the "new star" (a comet) recorded by the Chinese in 5 B.C. The Chinese would not have distinguished a comet from a nova since all they recorded was something new in the sky that was temporary. A comet has the advantage of a tail that can appear to be pointing in a direction which may have guided the magi. In addition, a comet moves! A comet can even disappear as it moves behind the sun and reappear as it comes out from behind the sun. A major objection is that the Chinese make no mention of the "new

star" moving. Another problem is that comets are cyclical with a predictable periodicity. For instance, Halley's comet appears every 76 years. If the star of Bethlehem were a comet, we would most likely have observed it again and been able to extrapolate back to the time of Christ to see if there is a match. Unfortunately, the only one to come close is Halley's comet which appeared in 12 B.C., a date that is impossibly early.

One could always claim that the comet was one with a very long periodicity or one that has since disappeared from our solar system. This is certainly possible, but it does not really help the discussion. One might as well appeal to a purely supernatural occurrence that cannot be verified scientifically. There is no difference. And though comets were usually interpreted as heralding sweeping changes, the changes were usually for the worse and there is no way, once again, to connect these events to the birth of a king in Israel. Next, I will look at planetary conjunction, the most popular suggestion at planetarium shows during the Christmas season.

Did the Star of Bethlehem Result from a Triple Conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter?

The bright star usually seen hovering over Nativity scenes depicted on numerous Christmas cards actually dominates nearly every nighttime Christmas panorama. As I stated earlier, the Star of Bethlehem is just about the only ubiquitous biblical symbol associated with Christmas. The reason probably has to do with the mystery surrounding what this star was. Earlier, I showed the unreasonableness of the star being a comet or supernova explosion. If you were to attend a planetarium show concerning the star of Bethlehem, they would most likely present the idea that the star was a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the year 7 B.C. followed by a massing of Jupiter, Saturn, and Mars in 6 B.C. Realizing that

planetarium shows view Scripture as something less than historically accurate, it is still necessary to ask if this indeed could have been the Star of Bethlehem.

In the early 17th century the great astronomer and Christian, Johannes Kepler, calculated that a triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn had occurred in 7 B.C. While Kepler did not believe this to be the actual Star of Bethlehem, it may have alerted the magi to the coming star. 7-4 B.C. have become the usual dates for fixing the birth of Christ since Herod the Great's death, the Herod mentioned by both Matthew and Luke in their birth narratives, is well established in 4 B.C. Therefore, Jesus had to have been born in the few years prior to 4 B.C. since He started his three-year public ministry around the age of 30 (Luke 3:23) and His death is usually fixed between 27-30 A.D.

So just what is a triple conjunction, and why would it be significant to the birth of a King in Israel? A planetary conjunction is what happens when two planets come in close proximity to one another. A triple conjunction refers to when three separate conjunctions of the same two planets occur within a one year period. Triple conjunctions can be predicted, but they do not occur with regularity. There have been only 11 such triple conjunctions since 7 B.C. and the interval between them varies between 40 and 338 years.

The triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C. was seen in the constellation Pisces in the months of May, September, and December. This provides sufficient time for the magi to see the first conjunction, begin their trip west to Judea, visit Herod by the second conjunction or at least soon afterwards, and perhaps not reach Bethlehem until the third conjunction when it is said to have appeared in the southern sky, and Bethlehem is just south of Jerusalem. Remember how the magi rejoiced to see the star again as they departed Jerusalem for Bethlehem. Ancient astrologers associated Jupiter with royalty or even a ruler of the universe. Saturn

was associated with Palestine or even with the deity who protected Israel. And Pisces was associated with the nation of Israel. Later a massing of Jupiter, Mars, and Saturn occurred again in Pisces in 6 B.C. It seems feasible then that this triple conjunction followed by the massing of the three planets in Pisces could indicate to the magi that a King of Israel and a Ruler of the Universe was about to be born in Israel.

While this seems to wrap things up rather nicely, there are significant problems. First, Jupiter and Saturn never were close enough to be confused as a single object. Matthew definitely describes a singular star. Perhaps more importantly, the use of astrology is necessary to interpret these astronomical signs properly. The Old Testament, particularly, mocks astrologers in Isaiah 47:13-15 and several times in Daniel (1:20, 2:27, 4:7, and 5:7). Jeremiah 10:1-2 seems to forbid astrology outright. The use of astrology is clearly outside the worldview of Matthew as he penned his gospel. It seems woefully inconsistent for the Lord to use astrology to herald the incarnation and birth of His Son into the world.

Was the Star of Bethlehem the Planet Jupiter?

In this discussion, I have considered a nova, a comet, and a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn as the Star of Bethlehem between 7 and 4 B.C., and none have seemed to be satisfactory. In 1991, Ernest Martin published a book titled, *The Star That Astonished the World*. His major thesis is that Herod died in 1 B.C. and not 4 B.C. If 4 B.C. is the wrong date for Herod's death, then everything must be reevaluated.

While there are many lines of evidence that Martin uses to make his point, a critical issue is a lunar eclipse that

occurred just prior to Herod's death. According to the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, on the night of a lunar eclipse, Herod executed two rabbis. Herod himself died soon afterwards, just before Passover. Martin points out that the lunar eclipse of March 13, 4 B.C., was only a 40% partial eclipse and barely visible. Also he reconstructs the events between the eclipse and Herod's death, about 4 weeks, and determines there was not enough time for all these things to take place. However, Martin has located a total lunar eclipse on January 10, 1 B.C., twelve and a half weeks prior to Passover.

If we assume that Martin's date for the death of Herod is correct, then the years 3 and 2 B.C. can be added to the search parameters for the Star of Bethlehem. Martin points out that the planet Jupiter passes through a series of conjunctions over the course of these two years indicating that Jupiter is the star of Bethlehem.

Remember that Jupiter is considered the royal star. Well, in 3 B.C., Jupiter came into conjunction with Regulus, the star of kingship, the brightest star in the constellation of Leo, the first of several such conjunctions over the next year. Leo was the constellation of kings, and it was also closely associated by some with the Lion of Judah. This is beginning to look interesting. "The royal planet approached the royal star in the royal constellation representing Israel."⁽¹⁾ In addition, on September 11, 3 B.C., Jupiter was not only very close to Regulus, but the sun was in the constellation Virgo. Hmmm, the royal planet in conjunction with the royal star while the sun is in a virgin. September 11, 3 B.C., is also the beginning of the Jewish New Year. There seems to be an awful lot coming together here.

But what about the star appearing to stop over Bethlehem? Planets will actually appear to do just that as they reach the opposite point in the sky from the sun as they travel east across the sky. They will stop, reverse directions for a few weeks, stop again, and head east once again. It's called a

retrograde loop. Jupiter performed a retrograde loop in 2 B.C. and was stationary on December 25, during Hanukkah, the season of giving presents.

Just in case you are ready to proclaim the mystery of the Star of Bethlehem solved, remember that this whole scenario rests on Herod dying in 1 B.C. rather than in 4 B.C. The majority of historians and biblical historians can't accept this critical revision. If Herod indeed died in 4 B.C., all of these coincidences I just reviewed are just that, coincidences. Also, as I mentioned earlier, the use of astrological meanings is contrary to the worldview of Matthew. There is another option that has become very popular, and I'll discuss it next.

The Shekinah Glory as the Star of Bethlehem

So far in this essay, I have discussed several naturalistic explanations for the Star of Bethlehem: a nova or exploding star, a comet, a triple conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C., and the planet Jupiter as it traveled in the constellation Leo in 3-2 B.C. Each of these astronomical events represents a natural occurrence that God used to announce the birth of His Son. One of the major problems has been that in order to interpret any of these signs, one would have to use astrological meanings for these events and their locations in the night sky to reach the conclusion that a new King of the Jews has been born—something that is foreign to the biblical worldview. Perhaps there was a physical “star” that gave off real light but indeed was new but not reflected by any astronomical event.

Remember that Jesus' birth was the ultimate coming of the presence of God in the midst of His people. How was God's presence manifested elsewhere in the Bible? Moses saw a burning bush that was not consumed and God spoke to him from the bush. Again in Exodus, Moses was allowed to see God's

backside and afterwards his face shone with light so bright that the other Israelites could not look on his face. The Israelites were led through the desert by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. When Jesus was transfigured He shone with a light as bright as the sun. When Jesus appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul was blinded by the light which the others with him saw as well. When God was imminently present, a bright light was associated with His presence.

The Shekinah Glory denotes the visible presence of God. This presence was real, and the physical manifestation was real. Remember that Saul was blinded by the light. The Lord often announces His presence by a very physical manifestation of bright light. What better way to announce the coming of Jesus, God's Son, the second Person of the Trinity than by a special light that is not some mere improbable astronomical event, rather an expression of the Shekinah glory, God's divine presence among men?

Astronomer Sherm Kanagy and theologian Ken Boa advance this thesis in their as yet unpublished manuscript, *Star of the Magi*. One of their strong emphases is the necessity to try to interpret the text of Matthew from first century Jewish perspective. They reject the idea that any astrological meaning could have been on Matthew's mind concerning this star. It is certainly fair to wonder, therefore, what this star was and how the magi interpreted it as a star signifying the birth of the King of the Jews. Kanagy and Boa reveal that Kepler concluded that the star was not some astronomical event and was a light that appeared in the lower atmosphere and therefore was not visible to everyone. But how did the magi interpret the star? This admittedly is the weakest part of the interpretation. The text gives no real hints. Magi were simply wise men of the east, not necessarily astrologers. They were Gentiles whose presence in the context of Matthew's Messianic gospel hints at the eventual spread of the gospel beyond the Jews. But how did they know what the star meant? We can only

assume there was selective revelation. Only Paul understood the voice from the light, though all who were with him saw the light. Only Moses was allowed up on Mt. Sinai to receive the Law. Only Peter, James, and John were present at the transfiguration, and they were told to keep it to themselves until Jesus rose from the dead. Manifestations of God's presence with men often were accompanied by selective revelation. Perhaps the meaning of the "star" was only revealed to the magi though others could actually see the "star."

Well, what was it, an astronomical event or the Shekinah Glory, manifesting God's presence among men? In my mind the mystery remains. Perhaps that is how God intends it to be.

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Turning Thanksgiving Inside Out

Time to be thinking about the holidays. Next one up, Thanksgiving.

Oh joy.

It's not too hard to come up with a list of reasons to grump about the Thanksgiving holiday:

- Lots of work in the kitchen
- Lots of cleaning to do
- Lots of cooking to do
- Lots of buying food to do
- Crowds in the stores as we prepare

- The stores already have their Christmas decorations out—like since Halloween
- Spending time with family where the worst in people easily spills out
- Too much football on TV
- Too much food

But to cultivate a biblical mindset, we can take this list and turn it inside out to reveal the embarrassment of riches and lavishness of blessings that are attached to each item by invoking our own personal thanksgiving:

Lots of work in the kitchen: Thank You, Lord, that I have a fully functioning kitchen! Thank You for my stove and my oven and my refrigerator and my sink and my counters and my storage of my many many kitchen items.

Lots of cleaning to do: Thank You, Lord, for running water that is safe and tastes good. Thank you for a sink that drains. Thank You for buckets. Thank You for dusting cloths and my vacuum. Thank You for the energy to clean!

Lots of cooking to do: Thank You, Lord, for recipes. Thank You that my stove and oven work! Thank You for the various pots and pans that enable me to cook more than one item at a time. Thank You that I can store cooked things in my fridge until it's time to bring them out, and thank You for the microwave to zap them to serving temperature.

Lots of buying food to do: Oh Lord! Thank You for money to buy our Thanksgiving meal! Thank You for well-stocked grocery stores with a dazzling number of choices. Thank You for 24/7 electricity that powers refrigerators and freezers, both in my home and in the stores, which means I don't have to go to a market every single day for provisions. Thank You that I have the luxury of making a list, driving to the store, and getting everything on my list because it will all be there and I don't even have to think about it.

Crowds in the stores as we prepare: Thank You, Lord, that all those people also have the money to be able to make our purchases. Thank You for a culture where people will wait in line instead of all demanding to be served first. Thank You for stores to go to in the first place.

The stores already have their Christmas decorations out—like since Halloween: Thank You, Lord, that we live in a place that still celebrates Your birth even if many forget YOU. Thank You for Christmas decorations period. It means we are in a country that understands the importance of Your impact on our culture.

Spending time with family where the worst in people easily spills out: Thank You, Lord, for giving us families. Thank You for people to love, even if sometimes it needs to be in Your strength because we don't like them right then. Thank You for these people You chose to be in our lives. Thank You that being with family, even if it's church family and not bio-family, means we are not alone and isolated.

Too much football on TV: Thank You, Lord, that we even have a television. Thank You for a culture and a lifestyle with the luxury of offering entertainment instead of constant, unrelenting survival mode. Thank You for living room furniture to sit in or lie on while we watch TV. Thank You that the football is only for a few days and not every day!

Too much food: Thank You, Lord! Thank You! Thank You! Millions of people are starving and cannot even imagine the abundance of food at our meal. We are so blessed for every single dish and every single item we get to prepare and serve and then eat. You have lavished blessing and honor on us, and we don't deserve any of it. Thank You. Thank You.

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