



# **TALKING CHRISTMAS:**

## **An Overview of Christian Christmas Traditions and History**

*MERRY CHRISTMAS,  
JOYOUS YULETIDE,  
SEASONS GREETINGS,  
FELIZ NAVIDAD,  
And HAPPY HOLIDAYS*

*From Nevada County Servants of Christ*

## CHAPTER ONE

### The First Adam and the Fall

The grand narrative of Christmas, as we shall explore, is not an isolated event but the climactic act in a drama of cosmic proportions, a drama that begins in the very dawn of creation. To comprehend the profound significance of God's entry into human history, we must first understand the foundational state of humanity and the catastrophic rupture that necessitated divine intervention. Our journey, therefore, commences not in a stable in Bethlehem, but in a garden, in the very beginning, with the story of the First Adam.

The Book of Genesis presents us with a pristine world, a masterpiece of divine artistry, culminating in the creation of humanity in God's own image. Adam and Eve, the progenitors of our race, were placed in the Garden of Eden, a sanctuary of perfect communion with their Creator (Genesis 1:26-27; 2:7-8). This was not merely a physical paradise; it was a state of spiritual wholeness, a realm where innocence reigned, and the very fabric of existence was imbued with divine order. They were granted dominion over creation, a stewardship that reflected God's own sovereignty, and they enjoyed an unhindered relationship with Him, walking and talking with their Maker (Genesis 1:28; 2:15-17; 3:8). Their existence was characterized by purity, knowledge, and a profound sense of purpose. They were, in essence, the embodiment of God's benevolent design for humanity.

Yet, within this idyllic setting, a serpent, described as more cunning than any beast of the field, sowed the seeds of doubt and deception. This ancient adversary, a fallen angelic being, whispered insidious questions into Eve's ear, challenging the very word and goodness of God. "Did God actually say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" (Genesis 3:1). This question, seemingly innocuous, was a carefully crafted assault on God's authority and benevolence. It implied that God was withholding something good, that He was a capricious ruler who sought to limit their freedom and potential. Eve, captivated by the allure of forbidden knowledge and the serpent's deceptive promise that they would "be like God, knowing good and evil," succumbed to temptation. She ate of the fruit, and in doing so, she shared it with Adam, who was with her.

This act of disobedience, this seemingly small transgression, was an event of cataclysmic consequence. It was not merely a personal failure but a cosmic betrayal. The harmony that had defined their existence was shattered. The innocent awareness that had characterized their relationship with God was replaced by shame and fear. They hid themselves from God, an act that symbolized their alienation from their Creator. Their eyes were opened, not to divine wisdom, but to their own nakedness, and to the stark reality of their brokenness. The direct communion they once enjoyed was severed, replaced by a chasm of guilt and separation.

This pivotal moment, often referred to as the Fall, introduced sin into the human experience. Sin, in its essence, is rebellion against God, a turning away from His will and a striving for self-autonomy that ultimately leads to destruction. As Augustine of Hippo observed in his monumental work *City of God* (1950), sin fundamentally corrupts the divine image within humanity. It is a distortion of God's good creation, a corruption of the divine image within humanity. The immediate consequences were profound. Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, their access to the Tree of Life barred, thus ensuring the mortality of humankind. The ground itself was cursed, yielding thorns and thistles, a physical manifestation of the spiritual brokenness that now permeated creation (Genesis 3:17-19). Labor became arduous, relationships strained, and death, once an alien concept, became the inevitable end of all human life.

The theological implications of this Fall are far-reaching and form the bedrock of Christian doctrine. The concept of "original sin" stems directly from this narrative. It posits that the sin of Adam and Eve was not merely an individual act but a corruption that tainted the entire human race. As Paul eloquently explains in his letter to the Romans, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12; see also 1 Corinthians 15:21-22). This means that every human being, from birth, inherits a sinful nature, a propensity towards disobedience and a separation from God. We are not born neutral, but with an inclination towards self-interest and rebellion, a deep-seated brokenness that manifests in countless ways throughout our lives.

This doctrine of original sin, as articulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Chapter VI, "Of the Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof"), is not intended to depict humanity as inherently evil, but rather as deeply flawed and in need of redemption. It explains the pervasive nature of suffering, injustice, and moral decay in the world. It accounts for the universal human longing for meaning, for wholeness, and for reconciliation, a longing that echoes through history and across cultures. The Genesis account, therefore, is not merely an ancient myth but a foundational theological truth that underscores the inherent brokenness of our world and the desperate need for a Savior. It paints a stark picture of humanity's fallen state, a state characterized by alienation from God, from each other, and from our own true selves.

The consequences of the Fall were not confined to humanity alone. The curse extended to the natural world, reflecting the interconnectedness of creation and the profound impact of sin on the entire cosmic order (Romans 8:19-22). The harmony between humanity and nature, so evident in the Garden, was disrupted. The dominion granted to Adam was no longer a benevolent stewardship but a struggle against a resistant creation. This explains the natural disasters, the diseases, and the constant toil that have characterized human existence since that time.

Furthermore, the Fall introduced spiritual death, a separation from the life-giving presence of God. This spiritual alienation is the most profound consequence, leading to a loss of the divine image and a forfeiture of the eternal communion that was originally intended.

Humanity, once vibrant and alive in God's presence, became spiritually dormant, susceptible to the dominion of sin and death. This state of spiritual death left humanity powerless to extricate itself from its predicament. The self-effort, the attempts to regain lost status through adherence to laws or self-improvement, proved ultimately futile against the pervasive power of sin.

The Genesis narrative, therefore, serves as the essential prologue to the Christmas story. It establishes the profound need for the coming of a Redeemer. Without understanding the depth of humanity's fall, the magnitude of sin, and the resulting brokenness of creation, the miracle of the Incarnation loses much of its significance. The birth of Jesus is not merely the arrival of a benevolent teacher or a wise prophet; it is the divine response to an existential crisis, the intervention of a loving God to rescue a fallen humanity from the clutches of sin and death.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### The Protoevangelium: The First Gospel Promise

Yet even in the immediate aftermath of judgment, as God pronounces the consequences of disobedience upon the serpent, upon Eve, and upon Adam, a glimmer of hope pierces the darkness. Embedded within the curse upon the serpent is what theologians have long called the Protoevangelium—the "first gospel," the initial promise of redemption that would be fulfilled in Christ.

God declares to the serpent: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This verse has been translated and interpreted variously, but the messianic interpretation has ancient roots in both Jewish and Christian tradition. This cryptic pronouncement contains the kernel of the entire redemptive plan. The "offspring" (or "seed") of the woman would one day crush the serpent's head—a mortal blow—while sustaining only a wound to the heel. This is the first promise that evil will not have the final word, that the deceiver who brought about humanity's fall will himself be defeated.

Christian theology has consistently interpreted this verse as a prophecy of Christ. The "offspring of the woman" points to the virgin birth, where Jesus would be born of Mary without a human father, making Him uniquely "the woman's seed." As Irenaeus observed in *Against Heresies* (Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1, 1994), this unique designation anticipated the virginal conception. The bruising of the serpent's head represents Christ's ultimate victory over Satan, sin, and death through His crucifixion and resurrection. The

bruising of His heel represents the suffering He would endure—real and painful, but not ultimately defeating.

This promise, given in the garden itself, establishes that God's redemptive plan was not an afterthought. From the very moment of humanity's fall, God was already revealing His intention to restore what was lost. The coming of Christ at Christmas is therefore the fulfillment of the first promise ever made to fallen humanity. Every subsequent prophecy, every sacrificial system, every covenant builds upon this foundational pledge that the seed of the woman would triumph over the serpent.

The Protoevangelium also establishes the pattern of divine grace preceding human repentance. Adam and Eve had not asked for redemption; they had not offered sacrifices or made promises of reform. Yet God, in His mercy, immediately provided hope. This underscores a central tenet of Christian soteriology: salvation is initiated by God, not earned by humanity (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Furthermore, God's provision of garments of skin for Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:21) foreshadows the sacrificial system and ultimately points to Christ as the Lamb of God. These garments required the death of animals, the first shedding of blood in Scripture, prefiguring the atoning sacrifice that would be necessary for reconciliation. As Hebrews 9:22 declares, "Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." The covering of their nakedness and shame through innocent bloodshed is a powerful symbol of the covering of sin that would be accomplished through Christ's sacrifice.

Thus, the Fall is not merely a story of human failure but also the beginning of the greatest story ever told—the story of redemption. The First Adam's disobedience necessitated the coming of the Second Adam, whose obedience would undo what the first had done. Christmas celebrates the fulfillment of this ancient promise, the arrival of the one who would crush the serpent's head and restore humanity to fellowship with God.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### Echoes of Hope: Old Testament Prophecies

The profound narrative established in the preceding pages, tracing humanity's initial bliss and subsequent fall, sets the stage for a desperate yearning for restoration. The shattering of the pristine harmony in Eden, the introduction of sin and death, and the subsequent alienation from the divine created a void that echoed through the annals of human history. Yet, even in the immediate aftermath of the Fall, a flicker of hope was

ignited through the Protoevangelium. This initial whisper of redemption became the foundational note in a symphony of anticipation that would swell and crescendo over millennia, finding its ultimate fulfillment in the manger of Bethlehem.

This unfolding drama of redemption is not a story of human invention or a haphazard series of events, but a meticulously orchestrated divine plan. From the earliest moments after humanity's separation from God, the Almighty began to weave a tapestry of promise, subtly revealing His intention to restore what was lost. This unfolding revelation, preserved and transmitted through the sacred texts of the Old Testament, provides a profound and compelling roadmap of the Messiah's eventual arrival. These ancient prophecies are more than mere predictions; they are divine declarations of intent, assurances of a future intervention that would rectify the cosmic injustice of the Fall and re-establish communion between God and humankind (Luke 24:44-47; Acts 3:18).

### **The Abrahamic Covenant**

The thread of redemption history, woven through the fabric of the Old Testament, continues with God's covenant with Abraham. Abraham, the patriarch of faith, received a promise that transcended his immediate descendants: "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice" (Genesis 22:18; see also Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 26:4). This was a significant expansion of the Protoevangelium, indicating that the redemptive work would not be limited to a single lineage but would ultimately have universal implications, reaching far beyond the confines of any one people group.

Paul explicitly connects this Abrahamic promise to Christ: "Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, 'And to offsprings,' referring to many, but referring to one, 'And to your offspring,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). Paul develops this theme extensively throughout Galatians 3:6-29. The singular "seed" points forward to Jesus, through whom all nations would indeed be blessed. This promise to Abraham served as a crucial milestone, solidifying the concept of a chosen lineage through which God's salvific plan would unfold.

### **The Mosaic Law and the Sacrificial System**

As generations passed, the anticipation for this promised seed intensified. The Law given to Moses, while highlighting the pervasiveness of sin and the need for atonement through sacrifice, also pointed towards a greater, ultimate sacrifice that would bring about a complete and final redemption (Hebrews 10:1-4). The Levitical system, with its elaborate rituals and sacrificial offerings, served as a powerful illustration of the brokenness of humanity and the costliness of sin, all while foreshadowing a sacrifice of unparalleled significance.

The Passover lamb, whose blood marked the doorposts of Israelite homes and spared them from judgment (Exodus 12), became a central type pointing to Christ. As John the Baptist would later declare, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the

world!" (John 1:29; see also 1 Corinthians 5:7: "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed"). The Day of Atonement, when the high priest entered the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16), prefigured Christ's once-for-all sacrifice and His entry into the heavenly sanctuary as our great High Priest (Hebrews 9:11-12). The author of Hebrews develops this typology extensively in chapters 8-10.

### **The Davidic Covenant**

God's promise to King David further clarified the messianic hope. Through the prophet Nathan, God declared: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever" (2 Samuel 7:12-13; see also Psalm 89:3-4, 29, 35-37).

This promise of an eternal kingdom through David's line became central to Jewish messianic expectation. The prophets repeatedly affirmed that the coming Messiah would be a descendant of David, a righteous king who would reign forever (Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24; see also Isaiah 11:1-10; Amos 9:11). The angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary explicitly connects Jesus to this Davidic promise: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33; see also Romans 1:3; Revelation 5:5; 22:16).

### **Isaiah's Prophetic Vision**

It was through the prophets, however, that the picture of the coming Messiah truly began to sharpen, painting vivid strokes of His identity, mission, and ultimate triumph. The book of Isaiah, often hailed as the "evangelical prophet" due to its profound messianic declarations, offers some of the most breathtaking glimpses into the future coming of Christ.

#### *The Virgin Birth*

Isaiah's prophecy speaks of a virgin conception, a miraculous birth that would signal the arrival of a divine child: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14). The Hebrew word *almah* can mean "young woman" or "virgin," but Matthew's quotation uses the Greek *parthenos*, unambiguously meaning "virgin." The name "Immanuel" means "God with us," directly linking the promised deliverer to the divine nature of God Himself. Matthew explicitly identifies this prophecy as fulfilled in Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:22-23).

#### *The Branch from Jesse*

Furthermore, Isaiah foretold the Messiah's lineage: "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him" (Isaiah 11:1-2; see also Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12). Jesse, the father of King David, placed the promised Messiah within the Davidic royal

line. The imagery of a "shoot" and a "branch" speaks of humble beginnings, hinting that the Messiah's arrival would not be accompanied by earthly pomp and grandeur but would emerge from seemingly ordinary circumstances.

### *The Suffering Servant*

Perhaps most remarkably, Isaiah revealed the redemptive method of the Messiah's work. Isaiah 53 presents the enigmatic portrait of the "Suffering Servant"—a figure who would bear the sins of many. This chapter is one of the four "Servant Songs" in Isaiah (42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12):

"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:3-6).

This prophetic foresight into the atoning death of the Messiah is a crucial element, underscoring the theological depth of God's redemptive plan. The Suffering Servant would achieve victory not through military conquest but through vicarious suffering and death. The New Testament writers saw this prophecy fully realized in Jesus' crucifixion (Acts 8:32-35; 1 Peter 2:24-25; see also Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21).

### *The Prince of Peace*

Isaiah also described the character of the Messiah's reign: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore" (Isaiah 9:6-7). This prophecy is traditionally read during Christmas services and is understood as directly referring to the Messiah.

This passage reveals the divine nature of the coming child ("Mighty God"), His eternal character ("Everlasting Father"), and the nature of His reign—one of peace, justice, and righteousness that would never end.

### **Micah's Prophecy of Bethlehem**

The prophet Micah provided specific geographical detail regarding the birthplace of the Messiah: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Micah 5:2). Matthew quotes this prophecy in 2:6, slightly adapted: "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

This prophecy specifically pinpointed the humble town of Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. The significance of Bethlehem, a seemingly insignificant village, being chosen underscores God's tendency to work through the unexpected and the humble. When the Magi inquired about the birthplace of the "king of the Jews," the chief priests and scribes immediately cited this prophecy (Matthew 2:4-6).

### **Daniel's Timeline**

The prophet Daniel offered a remarkable prophecy concerning the timing of the Messiah's appearance. In the prophecy of the "Seventy Weeks," Daniel writes: "Know therefore and understand that from the going out of the word to restore and build Jerusalem to the coming of an anointed one, a prince, there shall be seven weeks. Then for sixty-two weeks it shall be built again... And after the sixty-two weeks, an anointed one shall be cut off and shall have nothing" (Daniel 9:25-26). The interpretation of this prophecy has been subject to considerable scholarly debate, particularly regarding the starting point of the timeline and the precise length of the "weeks" (often understood as weeks of years). Sir Robert Anderson's *The Coming Prince* (Kregel, 1957) offers one influential interpretation.

This prophetic timeline, when carefully studied and calculated, pointed towards a specific era in history for the Messiah's arrival and His being "cut off"—a reference to His death. This added temporal specificity to the messianic expectation.

### **Zechariah's Prophecies**

The prophet Zechariah contributed additional details about the Messiah's mission and the manner of His coming:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey" (Zechariah 9:9). This prophecy forms the background for "Palm Sunday" in Christian liturgical tradition.

This prophecy of a king arriving in humility on a donkey was fulfilled during Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:1-11; Mark 11:1-11; Luke 19:28-40; John 12:12-19). Zechariah also prophesied about the piercing of the Messiah: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on me, on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him" (Zechariah 12:10). This prophecy is applied to Jesus' crucifixion in John 19:37 and Revelation 1:7.

### **Malachi's Messenger**

The final prophet of the Old Testament, Malachi, foretold the coming of a messenger who would prepare the way: "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts" (Malachi

3:1). The phrase "messenger of the covenant" is understood christologically in Christian interpretation.

This prophecy pointed both to John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for Jesus, and to the sudden appearance of the Lord in His temple. The New Testament identifies John the Baptist as this prophesied messenger (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27).

### **The Cumulative Weight of Prophecy**

These prophecies were not isolated pronouncements but formed a cohesive and progressively revealed narrative, a testament to God's unwavering commitment to His covenant people and His ultimate plan for humanity. They served as divine signposts, guiding the faithful through centuries of waiting and affliction, sustaining their hope in the face of adversity. The anticipation generated by these foretellings was palpable, creating a spiritual and cultural climate ripe for the Messiah's advent.

The theological significance of these messianic prophecies cannot be overstated. They demonstrate that the Incarnation of Jesus Christ was not an afterthought or a desperate measure, but a foundational element of God's eternal plan, conceived before the creation of the world (1 Peter 1:20: "He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you"; Revelation 13:8: "the Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world"). They reveal a God who is both sovereign and faithful, meticulously orchestrating history to bring about His redemptive purpose.

Furthermore, the existence of these prophecies served as a vital apologetic tool for the early Christian church. They provided irrefutable evidence, accessible to anyone who studied the Old Testament, that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the long-awaited Messiah. The precise details of His birth, lineage, ministry, suffering, and death, all foretold centuries in advance, offered a powerful testament to the divine origin of Christianity. Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36) and Paul's synagogue sermon (Acts 13:16-41) both rely heavily on demonstrating how Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy.

The period leading up to the Nativity was thus characterized by a unique confluence of divine preparation and human expectation. The divine orchestration extended to the very political and social landscape of the time. The Roman Empire, with its vast network of roads and its relative peace (the Pax Romana), inadvertently created the infrastructure that would facilitate the spread of the Gospel. The decree of Emperor Augustus for a census meant that Joseph, a descendant of David, would have to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the very town prophesied as the Messiah's birthplace (Luke 2:1-5). The historicity and dating of this census has been debated, but Luke's point is clear: divine providence orchestrated the circumstances so that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, fulfilling Micah's prophecy.

The echoes of hope, resonating from the earliest promises in Eden and amplified through the prophetic voices of Israel, created a fertile ground for the extraordinary event of the Nativity. These ancient pronouncements were not mere historical curiosities; they were

living testaments to God's unfailing love and His enduring commitment to redeem humanity. They built a bridge of anticipation across centuries, a testament to a divine plan unfolding with meticulous precision.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Second Adam: Jesus Christ

The narrative arc of redemption, carefully woven through the tapestry of ancient prophecy, now converges on a singular, earth-shattering revelation: the advent of the 'Second Adam.' If the first Adam, the progenitor of the human race, represents the pinnacle of God's initial creative act, then Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, embodies the ultimate restorative act. The stark contrast between these two figures serves as the theological bedrock for understanding the profound significance of Christ's coming. Adam, created in perfect innocence, possessed the unhindered capacity for communion with his Creator. His sin, a deliberate act of disobedience against divine command, was not merely a personal failing but a catastrophic inheritance for all humanity, ushering in an era of alienation, suffering, and death. This primal disobedience fractured the divine-human relationship, creating a chasm that no human effort could bridge.

#### **The Divine Origin of the Second Adam**

It is into this brokenness that the Second Adam enters. Unlike the first Adam, who was formed from the dust of the earth, Christ's origin is wholly divine. The theological doctrine of the Incarnation, the astonishing concept of God becoming man, is not a mere mythological flourish but the pivotal event upon which Christian theology hinges. The eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity, willingly emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives, taking on human flesh not by a conventional birth but through a miraculous conception by the Holy Spirit (Philippians 2:6-7; Luke 1:35).

This unique conception, meticulously foretold by prophets like Isaiah, signifies that Christ's humanity is intrinsically pure, untainted by the inherited corruption of sin that afflicts all other human beings. He is, in this sense, the one truly pure human born into a fallen world, the perfectly obedient Son in contrast to the disobedient firstborn son of creation (Romans 5:19; Hebrews 4:15). As Paul writes, "For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:21-22). Paul develops this extended comparison of Adam and Christ throughout Romans 5:12-21.

#### **Christ's Perfect Obedience**

The life of Jesus, from His miraculous conception and humble birth in Bethlehem to His sinless ministry, represents a perfect recapitulation and reversal of Adam's failure. While Adam's choice in Eden led to humanity's downfall, Christ's obedience, tested in every aspect of human experience yet never compromised, led to humanity's potential restoration. Every temptation He faced, every moment of suffering He endured, every act of love and compassion He demonstrated, was an act of perfect alignment with the Father's will (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 6:38).

He did not succumb to pride, lust, or doubt; instead, He consistently chose the path of selfless love and service, demonstrating what humanity was meant to be, and what it could become through Him. His life was a living embodiment of divine righteousness, a stark counterpoint to the sinfulness that had become humanity's defining characteristic since the Fall. As the author of Hebrews declares: "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). This verse emphasizes both Christ's full humanity (tempted as we are) and His sinlessness (yet without sin).

### **The Purpose: Redemption and Reconciliation**

The purpose of this Incarnation, this divine intervention into the human drama, was nothing less than redemption and reconciliation. Humanity, trapped in the bondage of sin and its inevitable consequence, death, was incapable of saving itself. The Old Testament sacrificial system, with its constant stream of animal blood, served as a perpetual reminder of sin's gravity and the inherent inadequacy of human attempts to appease divine justice. These sacrifices pointed forward, foreshadowing a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that would be sufficient to cleanse sin and restore relationship with God (Hebrews 10:1-4, 10-14).

Christ, the sinless Lamb of God, was that sacrifice. His death on the cross was not a tragic accident but a deliberate, divinely ordained atonement for the sins of the world. He bore the weight of humanity's transgressions, absorbing the divine wrath that was justly due to sinners, thereby satisfying the demands of God's perfect justice and opening the way for forgiveness and renewed communion (Isaiah 53:4-6; 2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24).

### **Substitutionary Atonement**

This act of substitutionary atonement is the heart of the Gospel. Christ, the Second Adam, stands in the place of the first Adam, offering His perfect righteousness and atoning sacrifice as a gift to all who believe. By dying for our sins, He effectively "redeemed" us from the curse of sin and death. His resurrection, the ultimate vindication of His victory, demonstrates that death itself has been conquered and that eternal life is now available to all who are united with Him (Romans 6:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

Paul articulates this theological framework powerfully: "Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all

men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:18-19). This passage is the culmination of Paul's Adam-Christ typology in Romans 5. This union with Christ is achieved through faith, a conscious acceptance of His finished work on the cross and a willingness to surrender to His lordship.

### **The New Creation**

The theological framework established by the Incarnation and the redemptive work of Christ thus elevates Christmas beyond a mere historical commemoration. It is the celebration of God's ultimate act of love and salvation, the moment when the divine Creator stepped into His creation, not to condemn but to save (John 3:16-17; 1 John 4:9-10). The Nativity in Bethlehem, therefore, is not just the birth of a remarkable human being; it is the birth of God incarnate, the inauguration of a new humanity, and the definitive victory over sin and death.

The significance of the "Second Adam" concept is further amplified when considering the ramifications for humanity's understanding of its own identity and potential. The first Adam, in his disobedience, bequeathed a legacy of sin, corruption, and mortality. Every subsequent human being, born into this fallen state, inherits a nature predisposed to rebellion and self-interest. The consequences are evident in the pervasive brokenness of the human condition: conflict, injustice, suffering, and ultimately, physical death. The first Adam represents the natural man, operating under the dominion of sin, bound by limitations and destined for ruin. His story is a somber testament to the catastrophic consequences of choosing self over God.

Christ, the Second Adam, offers a radical alternative. His life and work inaugurate a new Adamic line, a spiritual lineage through which all who believe can be incorporated. By embracing Christ, individuals are no longer defined by their original, fallen nature. Instead, they are "born again," a spiritual rebirth that signifies their incorporation into Christ's new humanity (John 3:3-7; 1 Peter 1:23). This is not merely a change of behavior but a fundamental transformation of identity, a new creation in Christ. As Paul writes: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). This verse encapsulates the transformative nature of being united with Christ.

### **The Hypostatic Union**

The doctrine of the Incarnation, central to the understanding of Christ as the Second Adam, is a profound mystery that challenges human reason yet forms the cornerstone of Christian faith. It posits that the infinite, eternal, and uncreated God entered the finite, temporal, and created realm in the person of Jesus Christ. This was not a temporary visitation or a symbolic manifestation; it was a genuine assumption of human nature. The divine Logos, the Word of God through whom all creation was made, became flesh (John 1:14). John 1:1-3, 14 establishes both Christ's preexistence as the divine Word and His incarnation.

This means that in Jesus, the divine and human natures were perfectly united in one person, without confusion, change, division, or separation—what theologians call the "hypostatic union." The Chalcedonian Definition (451 AD) articulated this doctrine: Christ is "truly God and truly man..in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation." He was fully God and fully man, experiencing the totality of human life—its joys, sorrows, temptations, and limitations—while simultaneously retaining His divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence, albeit in a manner consistent with His incarnate state.

This duality is crucial. If Christ were merely human, His sacrifice would not have been sufficient to atone for the sins of the world. A human sacrifice, however noble, could only atone for the sins of one human. But Christ, as God incarnate, possessed an infinite value. His sacrifice, therefore, carried infinite merit, capable of covering the sins of all humanity, past, present, and future (Hebrews 9:12-14; 10:10-14). Conversely, if Christ were purely divine and did not truly enter into the human condition, He would not have been able to represent humanity or offer a sacrifice on its behalf. He would have been an external judge rather than a representative redeemer. The Incarnation bridges this gap, enabling Christ to be both the perfect sacrifice and the perfect mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 8:6; 9:15).

### **The Sinlessness of Christ**

The very conception of Jesus, as foretold in Isaiah, is indicative of this unique role. The virgin birth bypassed the transmission of sinful nature from parent to child (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38). While all other humans are conceived and born with an inherited propensity towards sin, Jesus' conception by the Holy Spirit ensured His sinlessness. This sinlessness was not merely an absence of committed sins but a fundamental purity of nature. It meant that Jesus was not under the condemnation of Adam's sin and was therefore free to offer Himself as a perfect sacrifice. His life, therefore, was a testament to the power of God to overcome the limitations and corruptions that plague humanity.

### **Restoration of All Things**

The purpose of Christ's coming, as the Second Adam, was to restore what was lost in the first Adam. This restoration encompasses several dimensions: reconciliation with God, the eradication of sin's dominion, the overcoming of death, and the re-establishment of a perfected humanity. Through His death, Christ paid the penalty for sin, thereby reconciling humanity to a holy God. Through His life and resurrection, He broke the power of sin and death, offering new life and eternal hope. He inaugurates a new creation, a new beginning for humanity, where its destiny is no longer defined by the Fall but by the victory of the Second Adam (Colossians 1:19-20; Ephesians 1:9-10; Revelation 21:5).

This is the essence of the Gospel: God, in His immeasurable love, sent His Son to be the answer to humanity's deepest problem, the solution to the curse brought about by the first Adam's disobedience. The theological impact of this doctrine is profound. It means that

human identity is not ultimately defined by our failures or our fallen nature, but by Christ's perfect obedience and redemptive work. It offers a hope that transcends the limitations of this earthly existence and the certainty of death. It provides a clear path to forgiveness, reconciliation, and eternal life.

Christmas, then, becomes the celebration of this incredible theological reality—the moment when God Himself entered history to become the Second Adam, the progenitor of a redeemed humanity, the bringer of salvation, and the assurance of a glorious future. It is the affirmation that God's love is so great that He would not allow His creation to remain in its fallen state but would actively intervene to bring about its ultimate restoration. The humility of the Nativity, the manger, and the manger-born king, is a powerful testament to the paradox of God's power made perfect in weakness, a divine strategy that confounds human wisdom and exalts the boundless grace of the Creator (1 Corinthians 1:25-29; Philippians 2:8).

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Feast of Adam and Eve: December 24th

Among the lesser-known but theologically rich traditions of the medieval church is the observance of the Feast of Adam and Eve on December 24th. This liturgical practice, while not universally celebrated today, provides a profound theological framework for understanding Christmas Eve as the bridge between humanity's fall and its redemption. The placement of this feast on the day immediately preceding Christmas was no accident; it was a deliberate catechetical tool, designed to remind the faithful that the birth of Christ must be understood in light of Adam's fall.

#### **Medieval Origins and Practice**

The Feast of Adam and Eve emerged during the Middle Ages, particularly flourishing in Germanic regions during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958, 95-97). On this day, churches would present "Paradise Plays"—dramatic reenactments of the creation, the fall, and the promise of redemption. These mystery plays were part of the broader medieval tradition of cycle plays that dramatized biblical history (Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays*, University of California Press, 1972). These mystery plays were performed in the vernacular, making the biblical narrative accessible to the largely illiterate populace. The stage would feature a "Paradise Tree"—typically an

evergreen decorated with apples representing the forbidden fruit—which many scholars believe to be the precursor to the modern Christmas tree. The connection between the Paradise Tree and the Christmas tree is documented in Clement A. Miles's *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan* (T. Fisher Unwin, 1912, 263-277).

The theological logic was compelling: before celebrating the birth of the Second Adam, the church would recall the catastrophe of the first Adam. This juxtaposition served to heighten the significance of the Incarnation. Without understanding the depth of the fall, the magnitude of redemption loses its force. The medieval church understood that Christmas is not simply about a baby born in a manger, but about God's response to humanity's most desperate need.

### **Theological Symbolism**

The Paradise Tree itself was laden with symbolism. Decorated with apples (representing sin and the fall) and often with wafers or hosts (representing the Eucharist and redemption), it visually depicted the entire arc of salvation history. Some versions of the Paradise Tree also included figures of Adam and Eve, angels, and the serpent, creating a complete visual catechism. Some traditions also hung lights or candles on the tree, symbolizing Christ as the light who would come into the world to dispel the darkness brought by Adam's sin. This merging of fall imagery with redemption imagery on a single tree powerfully communicated the central Christian message: through the tree of death (the cross, itself connecting to the tree of knowledge), Christ brings the tree of life.

### **The Protoevangelium Connection**

The December 24th placement of this feast emphasized the Protoevangelium—the "first gospel" promise of Genesis 3:15. The liturgies and plays would climax with God's pronouncement to the serpent that the seed of the woman would crush his head. This promise, made in the garden immediately after the fall, would find its fulfillment in the events celebrated the very next day—Christmas. The liturgical placement creates a 24-hour period from the fall to redemption, symbolizing the swift response of divine mercy.

The medieval mind saw history as a unified narrative of promise and fulfillment. Adam's fall on the evening of December 24th created the darkness that Christ's birth on December 25th would dispel. The liturgical calendar thus became a theological textbook, teaching the faithful through the rhythm of sacred time.

### **Liturgical Elements**

The observance often included specific scripture readings focusing on Genesis 1-3, emphasizing both the goodness of original creation and the tragedy of the fall. Psalms of lament and longing (such as Psalm 51 or Psalm 130) would be sung, expressing humanity's need for divine intervention. The service would end not in despair but in hopeful anticipation, sometimes with the singing of early Advent hymns or the chanting of messianic prophecies, all pointing forward to the celebration that would begin at midnight (Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, 96).

## **Modern Recovery**

While the Feast of Adam and Eve largely disappeared after the Reformation—partly because Protestant reformers eliminated many medieval feast days, and partly because the emphasis shifted away from Paradise Plays—there has been renewed interest in this observance in recent decades. Some liturgical churches have begun to recover this tradition, recognizing its profound catechetical value. The Episcopal Church and some Lutheran bodies have begun incorporating elements of this observance in their Christmas Eve liturgies.

Contemporary celebrations might include:

- A Christmas Eve service focusing on the Genesis narrative
- The lighting of a "Paradise Tree" or Jesse Tree (depicting the genealogy of Christ)
- Dramatic readings or presentations of the fall and promise
- Explicit connection between Adam's disobedience and Christ's obedience

## **Theological Significance for Christmas**

The Feast of Adam and Eve serves several crucial theological functions in preparing for Christmas:

First, it establishes context. Christmas is not an isolated event but the climax of a story that begins in Genesis. The Incarnation makes sense only in light of the Fall. Without understanding humanity's desperate condition, Christ's birth loses its urgency and necessity.

Second, it highlights the parallelism. The typology of Adam and Christ—the First Adam and the Second Adam—is central to Pauline theology. Romans 5:12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49 are the two key Pauline passages developing Adam-Christ typology. By observing the feast of the First Adam immediately before celebrating the birth of the Second Adam, the church makes this connection explicit and memorable.

Third, it emphasizes grace. The feast reminds believers that salvation is entirely God's initiative. Just as Adam could not undo his own fall, so humanity cannot save itself. The movement from December 24th (remembering our helplessness) to December 25th (celebrating God's intervention) is a movement from law to grace, from death to life, from despair to hope.

Fourth, it provides historical continuity. This observance connects contemporary Christians with the faith of medieval believers who understood Christmas within the broader narrative of redemption history. It reminds us that the church's celebration of Christmas has deep roots and has always been about more than sentimentality or cultural festivity.

## **Practical Application**

For families and churches seeking to deepen their observance of Christmas, recovering some form of Adam and Eve remembrance on December 24th can be profoundly meaningful. This might include:

- Reading Genesis 1-3 as a family on Christmas Eve
- Discussing how Christ came to undo what Adam did
- Creating a Jesse Tree or Paradise Tree that tells the story from creation to Christ
- Incorporating the Protoevangelium (Genesis 3:15) into Christmas Eve worship
- Teaching children the parallelism between the two Adams

The Feast of Adam and Eve reminds us that Christmas is not primarily about nostalgia, family gatherings, or gift-giving—though these have their place. Christmas is about the hinge of history, the moment when God entered His fallen creation to restore what had been lost. By beginning the Christmas celebration with a remembrance of why Christ needed to come, we ensure that our celebration remains grounded in theological reality rather than sentimental fantasy.

As we stand on December 24th, looking back to Eden and forward to Bethlehem, we are reminded that the baby in the manger is the answer to the catastrophe in the garden. The Second Adam has come to undo what the first Adam did. This is the heart of Christmas, and the Feast of Adam and Eve ensures we do not forget it. For further reading on the Feast of Adam and Eve, see Adolf Adam's *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy* (Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

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## CHAPTER SIX

### The Incarnation: God With Us

The theological term "Incarnation" derives from the Latin *incarnatio*, meaning "to make flesh" or "to become flesh." It refers to the central Christian doctrine that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, took on human nature and became man in the person of Jesus Christ. This doctrine is not peripheral to Christian faith but stands at its very center. As the Apostle John declares: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). This prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) is one of the most important Christological passages in Scripture.

#### **The Necessity of the Incarnation**

The Incarnation was necessary for several theological reasons, each highlighting a different aspect of humanity's predicament and God's solution:

First, representation required incarnation. For Christ to be the mediator between God and humanity, He needed to be both truly God and truly human. Only as a human could He represent humanity before God; only as God could His sacrifice have infinite value sufficient to atone for the sins of the world. Athanasius develops this logic extensively in *On the Incarnation* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011). As the author of Hebrews explains: "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). The book of Hebrews is the most extensive biblical treatment of Christ as high priest and mediator.

Second, substitution required incarnation. Christ came to die in our place, to be our substitute. But this required that He be human, capable of dying, and that He be sinless, not deserving death Himself. The Incarnation accomplished both: Christ took on genuine human nature (including a human body capable of suffering and death) while being conceived by the Holy Spirit in a manner that preserved Him from inherited sin. The Council of Chalcedon affirmed that Christ is "consubstantial with us according to the manhood; in all things like unto us, without sin."

Third, revelation required incarnation. Humanity needed to see God, to know His character, to understand His heart. But "no one has ever seen God" (John 1:18; see also 1 Timothy 6:16: God "dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see"). The Incarnation solved this problem: "the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). John 1:18 establishes both the problem (God's invisibility) and the solution (Christ's revelation). Jesus could declare, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). This statement from John 14:9 is one of Jesus' clearest claims to divinity and His role as revealer of the Father. In Christ, the invisible God became visible, the unknowable became knowable, the transcendent became immanent.

Fourth, restoration required incarnation. God's plan was not merely to forgive sins but to restore humanity to its original purpose and to create a new humanity. This required a new head of the human race, a Second Adam who would succeed where the first failed. Christ, as both God and man, became this new head, and all who are united to Him become part of this new humanity (Ephesians 1:22-23: "And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all").

## **The Mystery of Two Natures**

The orthodox Christian understanding of the Incarnation, formally articulated at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD, maintains that Christ is one person with two distinct natures—fully divine and fully human—united without confusion, change, division, or separation. The full text of the Chalcedonian Definition can be found in Henry Bettenson

and Chris Maunder's *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011, 62-63). This doctrine protects against several theological errors:

Against Docetism (which claimed Christ only appeared to be human): The church affirms that Christ's humanity was genuine. He had a real human body, experienced real human emotions, faced real human temptations, and suffered real human death. Ignatius of Antioch combated docetic ideas in his early second-century letters, particularly in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*.

Against Arianism (which denied Christ's full divinity): The church affirms that Christ is "of one substance with the Father," truly and fully God, not a created being or lesser deity. The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) and the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 AD) affirmed Christ's full divinity against Arianism.

Against Nestorianism (which divided Christ into two persons): The church affirms that Christ is one person, not a human person indwelt by a divine person, but a single person with two natures. The Council of Ephesus (431 AD) condemned Nestorianism and affirmed that Mary is *Theotokos* (God-bearer), not merely *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer).

Against Eutychianism (which confused the two natures into a hybrid): The church affirms that Christ's divine and human natures remain distinct, each retaining its own properties, though united in the one person. The Council of Chalcedon specifically rejected Eutychianism while affirming the union of the two natures.

### **The Properties of Each Nature**

Understanding the Incarnation requires grasping what Christ possessed in each nature:

In His divine nature, Christ possessed:

- Omnipotence (all power)
- Omniscience (all knowledge)
- Omnipresence (presence everywhere)
- Eternality (existence without beginning or end)
- Immutability (unchangeability)
- Holiness and perfect righteousness

In His human nature, Christ possessed:

- A physical body subject to hunger, thirst, fatigue, and pain
- Human emotions including joy, sorrow, compassion, and righteous anger
- A human intellect that grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man")

- A human will distinct from His divine will (though always in perfect harmony with it)
- Mortality (the capacity to die)

The key to understanding the Incarnation is recognizing that Christ never ceased to be God when He became man. The divine nature was not diminished or set aside; rather, the Son of God took on an additional nature—human nature—while remaining fully divine. As theologians express it, the Incarnation was not God becoming less than God, but God becoming more than God had been—God plus human nature. This formulation helps avoid the heresy of supposing that in the Incarnation, God ceased to uphold the universe or abandoned His divine prerogatives.

### **The Communicatio Idiomatum**

An important theological concept for understanding the Incarnation is the *communicatio idiomatum* (Latin for "communication of properties" or "sharing of attributes"). This principle states that because the two natures are united in one person, what can be said of one nature can sometimes be attributed to the person as a whole, identified by either nature. This principle was articulated by early church fathers and formally defended at Chalcedon (see John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, Book 3, Chapter 4).

This explains seemingly paradoxical biblical statements such as:

- "God purchased the church with his own blood" (Acts 20:28; some manuscripts read "the church of God" rather than "his own blood," but the theological point remains)—God doesn't have blood, but the person who is God took on human nature and shed His blood.
- "The Lord of glory was crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:8: "None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory")—the divine nature cannot suffer or die, but the person who possesses the divine nature died in His human nature.

This doctrine prevents us from dividing Christ into two persons (the divine Christ and the human Jesus) while still maintaining the distinction between His two natures.

### **The Kenosis: Christ's Self-Emptying**

Paul's magnificent Christological hymn in Philippians 2 describes the Incarnation in terms of self-emptying (Greek: *kenosis*):

"Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:5-8). This passage (Philippians 2:5-11) is often

called the *Carmen Christi* (Hymn to Christ) and is one of the earliest Christian Christological confessions.

This "emptying" does not mean Christ ceased to be God or set aside His divine attributes. Rather, it refers to His voluntary non-use of certain divine prerogatives during His earthly ministry, His taking on the "form of a servant," and His submission to the limitations of human existence. Various theological traditions interpret kenosis differently. Some emphasize the veiling of divine glory; others the voluntary non-use of certain prerogatives (see Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and the Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus*, Word Publishing, 1991). While remaining fully God, He lived as a man dependent on the Father and empowered by the Holy Spirit, providing us with a model of perfect human obedience to God.

### **Implications for Christmas**

The doctrine of the Incarnation transforms our understanding of Christmas:

Christmas celebrates condescension. The God who created the universe, who sustains all things by His powerful word, who lacks nothing and needs nothing, chose to become a helpless infant, dependent on human parents for His every need. This is the ultimate expression of humility and love (Matthew 8:20: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head").

Christmas celebrates solidarity. God did not rescue humanity from a distance but entered fully into the human condition. Christ experienced what we experience—temptation, suffering, grief, fatigue, hunger. This means we have a High Priest who can "sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). Hebrews 4:15-16 invites us to approach God's throne of grace with confidence because of Christ's sympathetic priesthood.

Christmas celebrates transformation. The Incarnation is not merely about God visiting humanity but about God uniting Himself to humanity in such a way that human nature is forever transformed. Because God took on human nature, human nature has been elevated. We are not merely forgiven; we are invited to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4: "by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature").

Christmas celebrates the cosmic scope of redemption. As Paul declares, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Colossians 1:19-20). This cosmic scope of redemption is a major theme in Colossians (see also Romans 8:19-22). The Incarnation was God's plan to redeem not merely individual souls but the entire created order.

The mystery of the Incarnation—God with us, Emmanuel—is what makes Christmas more than a sentimental celebration of a baby's birth. It is the celebration of the most profound event in cosmic history: the Creator entering His creation, divinity taking on humanity, eternity entering time, the infinite becoming finite, all for the purpose of

redeeming a fallen world and restoring it to its intended glory. This is the theological foundation upon which all Christian celebration of Christmas must rest. As C.S. Lewis captures this wonder beautifully: "The Son of God became a man to enable men to become sons of God" (*Mere Christianity*, HarperCollins, 1952, 178).

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Annunciation to Mary

The divine narrative of Jesus' birth, the Nativity, is a tapestry woven with threads of prophecy, divine intervention, and profound human response. While the previous discussion has laid the groundwork by exploring the theological foundations of redemption, a crucial prelude to this miraculous event demands our attention. Before Mary cradled the infant Christ in a humble manger, before shepherds flocked to witness the celestial spectacle, and before Magi journeyed from distant lands, a singular, pivotal encounter occurred: the Annunciation. This divine summons, delivered by the archangel Gabriel to a young woman in Nazareth, marks the cosmic authorization for God's redemptive plan and the precise moment the unimaginable began to unfold through human agency.

#### **The Angel's Appearance**

The account, primarily preserved in the Gospel of Luke, introduces us to Mary, a virgin betrothed to Joseph, of the house of David (Luke 1:26-27). Luke provides more details about Mary than any other Gospel writer. The angel Gabriel's appearance is not a gentle whisper but a dramatic entrance. Luke records that Mary was "greatly troubled" at his greeting (Luke 1:29). The Greek word *dietarachthe* suggests thorough disturbance or confusion. This immediate reaction underscores the extraordinary nature of the divine visitation. Throughout Scripture, angelic appearances typically inspire fear or awe, indicating that these are not ordinary occurrences but manifestations of the divine breaking into the mundane.

Gabriel's salutation carries profound theological weight: "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). Some manuscripts add "blessed are you among women," but this is likely added from verse 42. The phrase "favored one" (Greek: *kecharitomene*) indicates a unique divine election, a predestined grace bestowed upon Mary that sets her apart. This is not merely a polite greeting; it is a declaration of God's singular favor, a recognition of a soul prepared and chosen for an unprecedented role.

The angel's subsequent assurance, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God" (Luke 1:30), aims to quell her apprehension, yet the gravity of the message to come far outweighs any earthly cause for alarm. The expression "found favor with God" echoes Old Testament language used of Noah (Genesis 6:8: "But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD") and others whom God chose for special purposes.

### **The Announcement of Jesus' Birth**

The angel's pronouncement reveals the astonishing destiny awaiting her:

"And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:31-33).

This is not a prediction of a commonplace occurrence; it is a prophecy of a world-altering event. Several elements deserve attention:

The name "Jesus" (Greek: *Iesous*, Hebrew: *Yeshua* or *Joshua*) means "Yahweh saves" or "the Lord is salvation." The very name given by divine command signals His redemptive mission. Matthew 1:21 makes this explicit: "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

"Son of the Most High" is a divine title, linking Jesus directly to God Himself. In Jewish understanding, "Most High" (*EI Elyon*) was a name for God emphasizing His supreme sovereignty (see Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 78:35; Daniel 4:17). To be called "Son of the Most High" was to claim divine sonship in a unique sense, transcending merely human categories.

The throne of David connects Jesus to the messianic promises of the Old Testament. God's covenant with David promised an eternal kingdom through his lineage (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3-4, 28-37). The angel's words explicitly identify Jesus as the fulfillment of this ancient promise.

"His kingdom will never end" emphasizes the eternal, unshakeable nature of Christ's reign—not a temporal, political kingdom subject to conquest or decay, but a spiritual, eternal dominion. Daniel 7:14 prophesies an everlasting kingdom for the Son of Man.

### **Mary's Question**

The immensity of this promise is met with Mary's immediate, practical question: "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). This question is not born of doubt but of a desire for understanding, a testament to her genuine engagement with the divine message and her awareness of the natural order of things. Unlike Zechariah, who questioned the angel with apparent skepticism and was struck mute for his unbelief (Luke 1:18-20), Mary's question is one of faith seeking understanding. Zechariah's question (Luke 1:18) is skeptical ("How shall I know this?"), while Mary's seeks explanation ("How will this be?").

Her question reveals important information: though betrothed to Joseph (a formal commitment that could only be broken by divorce), Mary had not yet consummated the marriage. The Jewish betrothal period typically lasted about a year, during which the couple was legally bound but did not cohabit. Joseph's initial plan to divorce Mary quietly (Matthew 1:19) indicates they were in the betrothal period but not yet living together. Mary's question thus addresses a genuine biological impossibility.

### **The Holy Spirit's Role**

Gabriel's response is the theological core of the Annunciation:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

This is the miraculous conception, the *theotokos* (God-bearer) event. Several elements demand attention:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you" indicates divine agency in the conception. This is not a natural procreation but a supernatural creative act. The Holy Spirit, the active agent of God's creative and redemptive power, is invoked not to violate Mary's person, but to inaugurate a new creation within her. The parallel with Genesis 1:2 ("the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters") suggests a new creation.

"The power of the Most High will overshadow you" uses language reminiscent of the cloud that overshadowed the Tabernacle, signifying God's presence (Exodus 40:34-35: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle"). This "overshadowing" (*episkiazo*) signifies a divine indwelling, a sacred intimacy that transcends human understanding. It indicates God's direct involvement in this conception, making it unlike any other in history.

"Therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God" is the conclusion drawn from this miraculous conception. Because the conception is by the Holy Spirit rather than through natural means, the child will be uniquely holy (set apart, pure) and will be, in a unique sense, the Son of God. This conception ensures both Christ's humanity (born of a woman) and His deity (conceived by the Holy Spirit). The Apostles' Creed affirms Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary."

The virgin conception is essential to orthodox Christology. It:

- Fulfills prophecy (Isaiah 7:14)
- Ensures Christ's sinlessness (not inheriting Adam's fallen nature through natural generation)
- Demonstrates His unique identity as God-man
- Reveals God's initiative in salvation (not dependent on human procreation)

### **The Sign to Mary**

Gabriel provides Mary with confirmatory evidence: "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God" (Luke 1:36-37).

Elizabeth's pregnancy, itself miraculous (she was elderly and had been barren), serves as a sign to strengthen Mary's faith. If God can enable a barren, elderly woman to conceive, He can certainly enable a virgin to conceive. The angel's concluding statement—"For nothing will be impossible with God"—echoes God's own words to Abraham regarding Sarah's pregnancy (Genesis 18:14: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"). It is a reminder of divine omnipotence and a reassurance that what seems humanly impossible is well within God's power.

### **Mary's Fiat**

Mary's response to this profound revelation is pivotal: "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). This is her *fiat* (Latin for "let it be"), her "yes" to God's plan. It is an act of profound humility and unwavering faith.

Several aspects of Mary's response deserve attention:

"I am the servant of the Lord" (Greek: *doule*, feminine form of "slave" or "bondservant"). Mary identifies herself as God's property, utterly submitted to His will. This is not reluctant acquiescence but willing surrender. She recognizes that her life belongs entirely to God and that He has the right to dispose of it as He sees fit. The language echoes Hannah's self-designation (1 Samuel 1:11) and anticipates Paul's self-description (Romans 1:1).

"Let it be to me according to your word" is active acceptance, a conscious choice to embrace God's will despite the immense personal implications. Mary would face social stigma (pregnancy before the consummation of marriage), potential rejection by Joseph, and possibly even death by stoning under the law (Deuteronomy 22:23-24). Though the law required witnesses, and actual enforcement varied, the theoretical penalty for premarital sex was stoning. Yet she accepts without negotiation or condition.

Mary's faith becomes a model for all discipleship. She demonstrates that obedience, rooted in trust, is the pathway through which divine mysteries are realized in the human realm. Her willing participation shows that God respects human agency—He invites cooperation rather than forcing His will. As Augustine wrote: "God created us without us: but he did not will to save us without us" (Sermon 169.13).

### **Theological Significance**

The Annunciation marks several crucial moments in salvation history:

The moment of the Incarnation. Many theologians hold that the Incarnation—the Word becoming flesh—occurred at the Annunciation, at the moment of Mary's consent and the Holy Spirit's overshadowing. Christmas celebrates the birth of Jesus, but the Annunciation celebrates His conception, the actual moment when divinity took on humanity. The Feast

of the Annunciation (March 25) is thus a crucial christological feast, not merely a Marian one.

The reversal of Eve's disobedience. Early church fathers saw Mary as the "New Eve." Where Eve's "yes" to the serpent brought sin and death, Mary's "yes" to God brought redemption and life. Irenaeus wrote: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was loosed by the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith" (*Against Heresies*, 3.22.4).

The divine initiative in salvation. The Annunciation demonstrates that salvation is entirely God's initiative. Mary did not seek this role; God chose her. She did not earn this privilege; God bestowed it by grace. This underscores the fundamental Christian doctrine that salvation comes from God, not from human effort (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-7).

The importance of human cooperation. While salvation is God's work, the Annunciation shows that God invites human participation. Mary's consent was necessary—not because God needed her permission, but because God honors human freedom and desires willing cooperation with His plans (see Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church's Marian Belief*, Ignatius Press, 1983, 43-48).

### **Mary's Humility and God's Pattern**

The choice of Mary—a young, unmarried woman from Nazareth, a town of no particular importance (John 1:46: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?")—demonstrates God's consistent pattern of working through the humble and unexpected. This pattern runs throughout Scripture:

- God chose Abraham when he was old and childless
- God chose Moses when he was a fugitive
- God chose David when he was a shepherd boy
- God chose Gideon when he was hiding from enemies
- God chose the barren and the outcast throughout Israel's history

Mary's selection continues this pattern. It demonstrates that God's kingdom is not built on earthly might, status, or power, but on spiritual receptivity and obedient hearts. As Paul later writes: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

### **The Annunciation in Christian Tradition**

The Annunciation has been commemorated liturgically since ancient times, typically on March 25 (exactly nine months before December 25). The Annunciation is celebrated on March 25 in both Western and Eastern Christianity, though it is moved when it conflicts

with Holy Week or Easter. This date symbolically links Christ's conception to His birth, emphasizing the fullness of His humanity—He was not created instantly but grew in Mary's womb as any human child would.

The *Ave Maria* (Hail Mary) prayer, one of the most ancient Christian prayers, draws its first words directly from Gabriel's greeting: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28, Douay-Rheims). The prayer continues with Elizabeth's words ("blessed is the fruit of your womb") and later additions. This prayer has been a staple of Christian devotion for centuries, keeping the Annunciation constantly before the minds of believers.

The Annunciation has inspired countless works of art throughout Christian history—from Byzantine icons to Renaissance masterpieces by Fra Angelico, Leonardo da Vinci, and many others. These artistic representations keep the event visually present in Christian consciousness and provide catechetical tools for teaching the faith (see Timothy Verdon and Filippo Rossi, eds., *Mary in Western Art*, Hudson Hills Press, 2005).

### **Conclusion: The Divine Authorization**

The Annunciation is far more than a beautiful story; it is the divine authorization for the Incarnation, the moment when heaven and earth intersected in the most profound way possible. It is the cosmic green light for God's entry into human history, the instant when eternity entered time, when the infinite became finite, all initiated by God and embraced by a humble young woman's faith-filled "yes."

As we move toward Christmas, we cannot forget that the birth we celebrate began with this encounter in Nazareth. Before there was a manger, there was an annunciation. Before there were shepherds and angels in the night sky, there was Mary and Gabriel in a humble home. Before the Second Adam could be born, the New Eve had to give her consent. The Annunciation is the hinge upon which the entire Nativity narrative turns, the necessary precondition for all that follows. It reminds us that God's greatest works often begin in hiddenness, in humble circumstances, with quiet acts of faith that change the course of history. For extensive theological reflection on the Annunciation, see John Henry Newman, "The Annunciation," in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 2 (Ignatius Press, 1997).

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## **CHAPTER EIGHT**

### **The Visitation and the Magnificat**

Following her encounter with Gabriel, Mary embarks on a journey that will further confirm the angel's message and result in one of Scripture's most magnificent expressions of praise. Luke records: "In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (Luke 1:39-40).

### **The Journey to Judea**

Mary's journey from Nazareth in Galilee to the hill country of Judea was no small undertaking. The distance was approximately 80-100 miles, requiring several days of travel through varied and sometimes difficult terrain. The journey would take 3-5 days depending on the route and mode of travel. That Mary went "with haste" suggests both the urgency she felt to share her experience and perhaps her desire to be with the only person the angel had mentioned—her relative Elizabeth, who would understand the miraculous nature of what God was doing.

The text indicates Mary stayed with Elizabeth "about three months" (Luke 1:56). Mary apparently departed before John's birth, as Luke 1:57-58 does not mention her. This extended visit provided Mary with a supportive environment during the early months of her pregnancy, a time when she would need both physical rest and spiritual encouragement.

### **Elizabeth's Spirit-Filled Recognition**

The encounter between the two women is marked by the Holy Spirit's immediate and powerful presence:

"And when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord'" (Luke 1:41-45).

Several elements of this encounter deserve attention:

The baby's leap. John, still in Elizabeth's womb, responds to the presence of Jesus, still in Mary's womb. This prenatal recognition has profound theological implications. It suggests that even before birth, John begins his role as the forerunner, the one who prepares the way for the Lord (see Luke 1:15: John "will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb"). It also affirms the full humanity and personhood of both unborn children, a point that has ongoing ethical significance.

Elizabeth's Spirit-filled proclamation. Elizabeth, "filled with the Holy Spirit," speaks prophetically. Her words are not merely personal observation but divine revelation. The phrase "filled with the Holy Spirit" appears frequently in Luke-Acts, always indicating

prophetic inspiration. The Holy Spirit enables her to recognize what human eyes cannot see—that Mary carries the Messiah.

"Blessed are you among women." This phrase echoes the blessing pronounced on Jael (Judges 5:24) and Judith in the Apocrypha (Judith 13:18). Elizabeth recognizes that Mary's role surpasses even these heroes of faith—she will give birth to the ultimate Deliverer.

"The mother of my Lord." This title is extraordinary. Elizabeth, herself pregnant with the prophet who would prepare the way for the Messiah, recognizes Mary's child as "my Lord" (*kyrios*—a title used for God Himself in the Greek Old Testament). The Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) consistently uses *kyrios* to translate the divine name YHWH. This is one of the earliest confessions of Christ's divinity in Scripture, spoken by a Spirit-filled woman to an unborn child.

"Blessed is she who believed." Elizabeth concludes by praising Mary's faith. Mary is blessed not merely because of her biological role but because of her spiritual response—she believed God's word to her. This faith-based blessing establishes a principle that Jesus Himself will later emphasize: "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28). Jesus makes a similar statement in Luke 8:21: "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

### **The Magnificat: Mary's Song of Praise**

Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting is one of the most theologically rich passages in Scripture, traditionally known as the Magnificat (from its opening word in Latin, *magnificat*, "magnifies"):

"And Mary said, 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever'" (Luke 1:46-55).

This magnificent canticle reveals Mary's deep knowledge of Scripture and her profound theological understanding. The Magnificat echoes 1 Samuel 2:1-10 (Hannah's prayer), Psalms 35, 89, 103, 107, 111, and many other passages. Let us examine its structure and themes:

#### **Personal Praise (vv. 46-49)**

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary begins with personal worship. To "magnify" means to make great, to exalt, to praise highly. Mary's

entire being—soul and spirit—is engaged in worship. Significantly, she calls God "my Savior," indicating her awareness of her own need for salvation. This contradicts any notion that Mary was sinlessly perfect in her own nature; she acknowledges her dependence on God's saving grace. The Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception (that Mary was preserved from original sin from conception) was not defined until 1854 and is based on theological deduction rather than this text.

"For he has looked on the humble estate of his servant." Mary recognizes that God's choice of her is pure grace. She was of "humble estate" (*tapeinosis*)—low social status, a peasant girl from an insignificant village. The word *tapeinosis* can mean humiliation, low estate, or humble condition. God's "looking upon" her is an act of divine favor, not a reward for her merit.

"From now on all generations will call me blessed." This is prophetic insight. Mary foresees that her role in salvation history will be recognized by believers throughout history. This has indeed been fulfilled—Christians of all traditions honor Mary's unique role, though they differ in how that honor is expressed (see Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints*, Continuum, 2003).

"For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name." Mary attributes everything to God's power and initiative. The "great things" refer primarily to her being chosen as the mother of the Messiah. God's holiness—His utter otherness, purity, and transcendence—is the foundation of His mighty acts (Psalm 111:9: "Holy and awesome is his name!").

### **God's Character and Action (vv. 50-53)**

Mary now moves from personal experience to theological reflection on God's character and His pattern of action in history:

"His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation." God's covenant faithfulness (*hesed*, often translated "mercy" or "steadfast love") extends across all generations to those who fear Him—that is, who reverence, trust, and obey Him. The "fear of the LORD" throughout the Old Testament means reverent awe, not terror (see Proverbs 1:7).

"He has shown strength with his arm." This metaphor for divine power appears frequently in the Old Testament, particularly in reference to the Exodus (Exodus 6:6: "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment"; Deuteronomy 5:15). Mary sees the Incarnation as a new Exodus, a new demonstration of God's saving power.

"He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts." God opposes human pride and self-sufficiency. The Greek suggests that God scatters the proud by their own scheming—their prideful thoughts become the means of their downfall (Psalm 33:10: "The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples").

"He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate." This is the great reversal that characterizes God's kingdom. The world's values are inverted—the powerful are brought low, the humble are lifted up. This theme runs throughout Scripture and is central to Jesus' teaching. This reversal theme appears in Jesus' teaching: Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14.

"He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty." This continues the reversal theme. Those who recognize their spiritual poverty and hunger are satisfied; those who are self-satisfied and "rich" in their own eyes go away empty. This anticipates Jesus' beatitudes: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6; see also Luke 6:20-26, the Lukan beatitudes and woes).

### **Israel's Hope Fulfilled (vv. 54-55)**

"He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." Mary concludes by placing the Incarnation within the context of God's covenant with Israel. The birth of the Messiah is not a departure from God's Old Testament promises but their fulfillment. God is "remembering" (that is, acting upon) His covenant mercy promised to Abraham and his descendants. The verb "remember" (*mimnēskesthai*) in Hebrew thought means to act upon, not merely to recall.

This reference to Abraham recalls God's promise that through Abraham's seed all nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:18). Galatians 3:16 identifies Christ as the ultimate "seed" of Abraham.

### **Theological Themes of the Magnificat**

Several major theological themes emerge from Mary's song:

The sovereignty of God. God initiates, God chooses, God acts. Salvation is His work from beginning to end. This theme of divine sovereignty runs throughout the Magnificat and indeed throughout Luke's entire Gospel.

The grace of God. God's choice is based on mercy, not merit. Mary's selection was pure grace, as is all salvation (Romans 11:6: "But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace").

The humility God honors. God consistently chooses the lowly, the weak, the overlooked. This pattern runs from Genesis to Revelation (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 articulates this principle explicitly).

The reversal of worldly values. God's kingdom operates by different principles than earthly kingdoms. The first shall be last, the last first; the exalted shall be humbled, the humble exalted (Matthew 20:16; Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30).

The faithfulness of God. God keeps His promises. The Incarnation fulfills millennia of divine promises to the patriarchs and prophets (Romans 15:8: "For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs").

The continuity of salvation history. The New Testament does not replace the Old but fulfills it. Jesus is the climax of Israel's story, not its rejection (Matthew 5:17: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them").

### **Mary as Theologian**

The Magnificat reveals Mary to be a woman of deep theological insight. Her song demonstrates:

- Profound knowledge of Scripture (the Magnificat echoes dozens of Old Testament passages)
- Understanding of God's character and ways
- Grasp of salvation history
- Prophetic insight into her own role and its significance
- Ability to move from personal experience to universal truth

Far from being a passive vessel, Mary is shown to be an active participant in God's plan, one who understands and articulates its meaning. The early church rightly saw in Mary a model of faithful discipleship and theological reflection (for a comprehensive study of Mary in Scripture, see Raymond E. Brown et al., eds., *Mary in the New Testament*, Fortress Press, 1978).

### **The Magnificat in Christian Worship**

The Magnificat has been central to Christian liturgy since ancient times. In Western liturgy, it is traditionally sung or recited at Vespers (Evening Prayer) in the Liturgy of the Hours. The Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office) has been prayed by clergy and religious since ancient times and is increasingly prayed by laypeople today. In Anglican tradition, it is sung at Evening Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer. Many Christian traditions use it during Advent and the Christmas season.

The regular recitation of the Magnificat keeps several crucial truths before the church:

- God's preferential option for the poor and humble
- The radical nature of God's kingdom
- The fulfillment of Old Testament promises in Christ
- The importance of faith and obedience exemplified in Mary

The Magnificat also serves as a prophetic challenge to the church. If God truly exalts the humble and brings down the mighty, if He fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty, then the church must embody these values. The Magnificat calls the church to identify with the poor, to challenge unjust power structures, and to work toward the kingdom values it proclaims. Liberation theologians have particularly emphasized this aspect of the Magnificat (see Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The God of Life*, Orbis Books, 1991).

### **Conclusion**

The Visitation and the Magnificat form an essential bridge between the Annunciation and the Nativity. They provide:

- Confirmation of the angelic message through Elizabeth's Spirit-filled recognition
- Theological interpretation of the Incarnation through Mary's inspired song
- A model of faithful response to God's word
- Insight into Mary's character and understanding
- Connection between God's Old Testament promises and their New Testament fulfillment

As we approach the manger, we do so with Mary's song ringing in our ears: "He who is mighty has done great things." The Magnificat teaches us that Christmas is not primarily about sentiment or nostalgia, but about God's mighty act of salvation, His faithfulness to His promises, and His radical reversal of worldly values through the birth of His Son. It is a song of revolution—not political revolution, but the cosmic revolution that occurs when God enters His creation to redeem it. This is the theological context in which we must understand the birth in Bethlehem. For musical settings of the Magnificat, see J.S. Bach's Magnificat in D major (BWV 243) and countless other classical and contemporary settings.

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## **CHAPTER NINE**

### **Joseph: The Righteous Man**

While much attention is rightly given to Mary's role in the Nativity narrative, the figure of Joseph deserves careful examination. Though he speaks not a single recorded word in the Gospels, his actions speak volumes about his character, his faith, and his crucial role in God's redemptive plan. Joseph stands as a model of quiet obedience, humble service,

and unwavering faithfulness—qualities that make him an exemplar of discipleship and a vital participant in the incarnation drama.

### **Joseph's Lineage and Identity**

Matthew introduces Joseph with careful attention to his genealogy: "And Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16). This placement within the genealogy is significant. Matthew has just traced Jesus' legal descent through Joseph from Abraham and David, establishing Jesus' legal right to the Davidic throne. Though Jesus was not Joseph's biological son, Joseph's adoption of Jesus as his own conferred upon Jesus the legal status of David's heir. Roman and Jewish law both recognized legal adoption as conferring full rights of sonship, including inheritance rights and lineage.

Joseph is identified as a *tekton* (Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3)—traditionally translated "carpenter" but more accurately "craftsman" or "builder," someone who worked with wood, stone, and possibly metal. The Greek *tekton* can refer to workers in various materials. Some scholars suggest Joseph may have worked in stone construction given the building projects in nearby Sepphoris. This was skilled, honorable labor, but not affluent work. Joseph would have been a member of the working class, probably earning enough to support his family but without significant wealth. The offering he and Mary brought at Jesus' presentation—two turtledoves instead of a lamb—indicates their modest economic status (Luke 2:24; cf. Leviticus 12:8). The law allowed those who could not afford a lamb to offer two birds instead.

Luke identifies Joseph as being "of the house and lineage of David" (Luke 2:4). This Davidic descent is crucial to Jesus' messianic credentials. The Messiah was prophesied to be a descendant of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Ezekiel 34:23-24). Through Joseph's legal adoption, Jesus inherits this royal lineage.

### **Joseph's Character: Righteousness and Mercy**

Matthew's description of Joseph provides a window into his character: "And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly" (Matthew 1:19).

"A just man" (Greek: *dikaios*)—this is the same word used to describe Noah (Genesis 6:9, LXX), Job (Job 1:1, LXX), and Zechariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:6). The LXX uses *dikaios* to translate the Hebrew *tsaddiq*, indicating comprehensive righteousness. It indicates comprehensive righteousness, someone who is upright in character, faithful to God's law, and ethically blameless. This single descriptor tells us that Joseph was a man of integrity, someone who took God's commandments seriously and ordered his life accordingly.

Yet Joseph's righteousness was tempered with mercy. Upon discovering Mary's pregnancy—which he had every reason to believe was the result of infidelity during their betrothal period—Joseph faced a dilemma. The law technically allowed for public accusation and severe penalties, potentially even death by stoning (Deuteronomy 22:23-

24, though enforcement likely varied and required witnesses). At minimum, Joseph could publicly divorce Mary, branding her as an adulteress and subjecting her to lifelong social stigma.

Instead, Joseph chose to "divorce her quietly"—a private dissolution of the betrothal that would minimize Mary's public shame. This decision reveals several aspects of Joseph's character:

Compassion over vengeance. Though apparently wronged, Joseph chose mercy rather than retribution. He sought to protect Mary even when he believed she had betrayed him. This compassion is especially remarkable given the cultural context where male honor was paramount and a betrothed woman's apparent infidelity would bring severe shame.

Adherence to the spirit, not just the letter, of the law. Joseph understood that true righteousness involves mercy and compassion, not merely legal correctness. This anticipates Jesus' later teaching about the greatest commandments being love of God and love of neighbor (Matthew 22:37-40). Jesus' teaching on the greatest commandments reflects the integration of justice and mercy that Joseph exemplified.

Willingness to bear personal cost for another's welfare. By quietly divorcing Mary, Joseph would still bear some social consequences—people would wonder why he broke the engagement—but he was willing to shoulder this burden to protect her from worse. Joseph's decision anticipates Hosea's marriage to Gomer (Hosea 1-3), another picture of love that bears the cost of apparent betrayal.

Joseph's righteousness, therefore, was not cold legalism but compassionate faithfulness. He exemplifies the Micah 6:8 principle: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."

### **Joseph's Dreams: Divine Guidance**

God communicates with Joseph exclusively through dreams—a significant detail that connects Joseph to his Old Testament namesake, the Joseph of Genesis, who was also a dreamer and interpreter of dreams (Genesis 37:5-11; 40:1-23; 41:1-36). The Old Testament Joseph's dreams revealed God's purposes and saved Israel.

#### **First Dream: The Announcement (Matthew 1:20-21)**

"But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Several elements deserve attention:

"Joseph, son of David." The angel's address emphasizes Joseph's royal lineage, reminding him of his place in God's redemptive plan. This is not incidental—Joseph's Davidic descent is what will confer legal Davidic status on Jesus. The address "son of

David" is used only twice in Matthew's Gospel, both times to Joseph (1:20; 2:13 in some manuscripts), emphasizing his royal lineage.

"Do not fear." Joseph's plan to divorce Mary quietly stemmed from a reasonable interpretation of the situation. The angel's "do not fear" addresses the natural anxiety Joseph would feel about proceeding with marriage under these apparently scandalous circumstances. The phrase "do not fear" appears frequently in angelic announcements (Luke 1:13, 30; 2:10), always addressing legitimate human anxiety about divine intervention.

"That which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." This revelation transforms Joseph's understanding entirely. Mary has not been unfaithful; rather, she has been chosen by God for an unprecedented role. The child is not the result of human sin but of divine action. This revelation parallels Mary's experience at the Annunciation—both are told that the conception is by the Holy Spirit.

"You shall call his name Jesus." The angel gives Joseph the father's prerogative of naming the child, thereby establishing Joseph's role as legal father. The name itself—"Jesus" (*Yeshua*, "Yahweh saves")—defines the child's mission: "he will save his people from their sins." The angel explains the meaning of the name, linking it directly to Jesus' salvific mission.

### **Joseph's Response: Immediate Obedience**

"When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus" (Matthew 1:24-25).

Joseph's response is marked by immediate, unquestioning obedience. He does not demand further proof, does not seek confirming signs, does not hesitate or delay. Upon waking, he immediately acts on the divine instruction. This pattern of instant obedience will characterize all of Joseph's responses to divine guidance. Matthew's repeated emphasis on Joseph's immediate obedience highlights this as a key characteristic.

"He took his wife." Joseph completed the marriage, taking Mary into his home and assuming full responsibility for her care and protection. This was an act of faith and courage. By marrying Mary while she was visibly pregnant (or would soon become so), Joseph opened himself to social speculation and scandal. Yet he obeyed God rather than fearing human opinion. Joseph's courage parallels Mary's. Both risked reputation and social standing to obey God's call.

"But knew her not until she had given birth to a son." This phrase indicates that Joseph and Mary abstained from sexual relations during Mary's pregnancy, preserving the virginal conception and honoring the sacred nature of what was occurring. Many church fathers saw this abstinence as honoring the sacred nature of Mary's womb, which had become the dwelling place of God incarnate. The word "until" (*heos*) does not necessarily imply what happened afterward, though the natural reading suggests normal marital relations

resumed after Jesus' birth. The perpetual virginity of Mary is held by Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and some Protestant traditions, while others interpret "until" to suggest normal marital relations resumed. The Greek *heos hou* doesn't definitively settle the question either way.

"And he called his name Jesus." In naming the child, Joseph performed the legal act that established Jesus as his son. This was the moment of formal adoption, conferring on Jesus all the rights and privileges of Joseph's lineage, including the Davidic royal heritage. In Jewish custom, naming a child was an act of legal adoption and recognition. By naming Jesus, Joseph formally claimed Him as his own son.

### **Second Dream: The Flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15)**

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod" (Matthew 2:13-15).

This second dream comes in the wake of the Magi's visit and Herod's murderous intentions. Several aspects are noteworthy:

The urgency of the command. "Rise...and flee" indicates immediate danger. There is no time for deliberation or preparation. Joseph must act instantly. Herod's massacre of the innocents (Matthew 2:16-18) confirms the reality and immediacy of the danger.

The destination: Egypt. Egypt, the traditional place of refuge for those fleeing danger in Palestine (see 1 Kings 11:40; Jeremiah 26:21), was outside Herod's jurisdiction. It also had a large Jewish population, particularly in Alexandria, where Joseph could find work and community support. Philo and Josephus both attest to large, thriving Jewish communities in Egypt, particularly Alexandria, in the first century.

The open-ended duration. "Remain there until I tell you" meant Joseph would be living in exile for an indefinite period, dependent on further divine instruction for when to return. This required trust and patience. The family would remain in Egypt until after Herod's death in 4 BC, possibly 2-3 years.

Joseph's immediate response. "And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt." Once again, Joseph obeys instantly. The phrase "by night" suggests he departed immediately upon waking, not even waiting for dawn. His obedience was both complete and urgent.

The theological significance. Matthew sees this flight to Egypt and subsequent return as fulfilling Hosea 11:1: "Out of Egypt I called my son." Jesus recapitulates Israel's history—going down to Egypt and being called out, thus becoming the true Israel. Hosea 11:1 originally referred to the Exodus, but Matthew sees Jesus as recapitulating Israel's experience, fulfilling it in His own person.

### **Third Dream: The Return from Egypt (Matthew 2:19-20)**

"But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead'" (Matthew 2:19-20).

This dream signals the end of the Egyptian sojourn. The language echoes Exodus 4:19, where God tells Moses that "all the men who were seeking your life are dead," further reinforcing the Moses-Jesus typology. Joseph is being portrayed as a new Moses-figure, protecting the child who will become the ultimate Moses, the deliverer of God's people.

Joseph again obeys immediately: "And he rose and took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel" (Matthew 2:21).

### **Fourth Dream: The Settlement in Nazareth (Matthew 2:22-23)**

"But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there, and being warned in a dream he withdrew to the district of Galilee. And he went and lived in a city called Nazareth, so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:22-23).

This final dream-warning (the fourth angelic communication to Joseph) redirects the family from Judea to Galilee. Joseph's initial plan was apparently to settle in Judea, perhaps in Bethlehem (the family's ancestral home) or Jerusalem. However, learning that Archelaus—known for his cruelty—ruled Judea, Joseph was understandably afraid. Archelaus was so brutal that he was deposed by Rome in AD 6. Joseph's fear was well-founded.

The dream-warning confirmed Joseph's concern and directed him to Galilee instead, specifically to Nazareth. Matthew sees providential purpose in this: "so that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, that he would be called a Nazarene." No single Old Testament text says "he shall be called a Nazarene," so Matthew likely refers to the general prophetic theme that the Messiah would be despised (Isaiah 53:3; Psalm 22:6), Nazareth being a town of no repute.

### **Joseph as Protector and Provider**

Throughout these narratives, Joseph functions as protector and provider for Mary and Jesus. Consider his multiple roles:

Legal protector. By marrying Mary, Joseph shielded her from accusations of adultery and provided legal legitimacy for Jesus. Without Joseph's protection, Mary and Jesus would have faced severe social and legal jeopardy. Under Jewish law, Mary could have faced severe penalties for apparent adultery during betrothal. Joseph's marriage protected her legally.

Physical protector. Joseph's vigilance and obedience to the angelic warnings saved Jesus from Herod's massacre. His willingness to uproot his family, flee to a foreign land, and live as a refugee kept the child safe until the danger passed.

Economic provider. As a *tekton*, Joseph would have worked to support the family in Nazareth and during their sojourn in Egypt. The Gospel narratives assume Joseph's faithful provision for his family's material needs. The Holy Family's ability to offer gifts to the temple (Luke 2:24), travel to Jerusalem yearly (Luke 2:41), and support themselves in Egypt all presuppose Joseph's faithful provision.

Spiritual guide. As the head of a Jewish household, Joseph would have been responsible for Jesus' early religious education, teaching Him the Scriptures, the prayers, and the traditions of Israel. Luke records that Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem for Passover yearly (Luke 2:41-42), indicating Joseph's commitment to his son's religious formation.

Legal father. Joseph's most crucial role was conferring legal sonship—and thus Davidic lineage—upon Jesus. This made Jesus legally the heir of David's throne, fulfilling messianic prophecy. Jesus' legal Davidic descent through Joseph fulfilled prophecies requiring the Messiah to be David's descendant (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Jeremiah 23:5).

### **Joseph's Faith**

Joseph's faith is demonstrated entirely through his actions. Unlike Mary, who speaks (the Magnificat) and Elizabeth, who prophesies, Joseph is completely silent in Scripture. Yet his silent obedience speaks eloquently of profound faith.

Faith to believe the incredible. Joseph believed that Mary's pregnancy was from the Holy Spirit—a claim that would have seemed absurd to most people. He accepted a divine explanation for what appeared to be natural infidelity. This faith is remarkable. Joseph had to believe something that had never happened before and would not happen again—virginal conception by the Holy Spirit.

Faith to obey immediately. In each instance of divine instruction, Joseph obeyed without delay, without demanding confirmation, without visible evidence beyond the dream itself. This is remarkable faith—acting decisively based solely on divine word. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Joseph exemplifies this definition.

Faith to endure hardship. Joseph's faith led him to accept significant hardships: social scandal, exile, refugee status, economic uncertainty. He did not demand that faith make his life comfortable or convenient.

Faith without miracles. Unlike Mary (who experienced the Annunciation while awake and had physical confirmation in her pregnancy), unlike the shepherds (who heard the angelic choir), unlike the Magi (who followed the star), Joseph experienced no waking visions, no miraculous signs. His only guidance came through dreams. Yet he believed and obeyed.

This makes Joseph's faith particularly remarkable—it was sustained entirely by God's word in dreams, without external confirmation.

Faith that persevered. Joseph's faith was not momentary enthusiasm but long-term faithfulness. He remained committed to his role as protector and father throughout the Gospel narratives we have, raising Jesus faithfully for years. Joseph's faithfulness continued for years, not just through the dramatic events of Jesus' infancy but through the long years of ordinary family life.

### **Joseph and the Old Testament Joseph**

The parallels between Joseph of Nazareth and Joseph of Genesis are striking and appear intentional on Matthew's part:

Both are "righteous" men who face unjust circumstances with integrity (Genesis 39:1-6 describes Joseph as successful because the Lord was with him; Matthew 1:19 describes Joseph as "righteous").

Both receive crucial divine revelation through dreams (Genesis 37:5-11; Matthew 1:20; 2:13, 19, 22).

Both go down to Egypt for preservation (Genesis 46-47; Matthew 2:13-15).

Both are associated with salvation. The Old Testament Joseph declared, "God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45:5-7). New Testament Joseph is told that Jesus "will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).

Both exemplify providence. The Joseph narrative in Genesis demonstrates God's sovereign providence working through human circumstances. New Testament Joseph's story similarly shows God's guidance at every step. The entire Joseph narrative in Genesis (chapters 37-50) demonstrates God's providence. Matthew's portrayal of Joseph shows similar providential guidance.

These parallels establish Joseph as a transitional figure, linking the Old Covenant with the New, connecting Israel's past with its Messianic fulfillment.

### **Joseph's Disappearance from the Narrative**

After Luke 2:41-51 (the finding of Jesus in the temple at age twelve), Joseph disappears from the Gospel narratives. He is not mentioned during Jesus' public ministry, not present at the cross, not mentioned in the resurrection accounts. The most natural explanation is that Joseph died sometime during Jesus' youth or young adulthood. The argument from silence isn't conclusive, but the complete absence of Joseph from Jesus' adult life is striking and suggestive.

Several Gospel passages support this inference:

Jesus is called "the carpenter" (Mark 6:3), not "the carpenter's son" (though Matthew 13:55 does use this phrase). This suggests Jesus had taken over Joseph's trade, implying Joseph was deceased.

Jesus is called "Mary's son" (Mark 6:3), an unusual designation in Jewish culture where one was typically identified by one's father. This may indicate Joseph's death. To be identified by one's mother rather than father was unusual and often indicated the father was deceased or unknown.

Jesus commands Mary to John's care from the cross (John 19:26-27). If Joseph were alive, this would be unnecessary and inappropriate. The fact that Jesus makes provision for Mary's care strongly suggests she was widowed.

The brothers of Jesus are mentioned as questioning His ministry (John 7:3-5), with no mention of Joseph. A living father would presumably be mentioned in such family contexts.

If Joseph died before Jesus' public ministry, this would mean:

Jesus experienced the loss of His earthly father and knows the grief of bereavement (Hebrews 4:15 affirms that Jesus "has been tempted as we are, yet without sin," which would include the grief and loss of bereavement if Joseph died).

Jesus likely became the family breadwinner as eldest son, supporting His mother and younger siblings through His carpentry work. As eldest son, Jesus would have assumed responsibility for the family business and His mother's care.

Jesus' waiting until age thirty to begin His public ministry may have been partly to ensure His family was provided for and His younger brothers were old enough to assume household responsibilities. The age of thirty was typical for beginning public ministry among Jewish religious teachers (Numbers 4:3), but Jesus' particular circumstances may have involved family obligations.

### **Joseph as Patron Saint**

Christian tradition has long honored Joseph as patron saint of workers, of fathers, of families, and of a happy death (since tradition holds he died in the presence of Jesus and Mary). The tradition of Joseph's holy death appears in apocryphal texts like the *History of Joseph the Carpenter* (4th-5th century) but is not biblical. The Feast of St. Joseph is celebrated on March 19 in Western Christianity. A second feast, St. Joseph the Worker, is celebrated May 1 in the Catholic Church, instituted by Pope Pius XII in 1955.

Joseph's patronage of workers stems from his identity as a craftsman who labored faithfully to provide for his family—embodying the dignity of honest work and the sanctity of daily labor. Genesis 2:15 establishes work as part of God's good creation, before the Fall. Joseph exemplifies the dignity and sanctity of honest labor.

His patronage of fathers and families is obvious—he is the model of faithful fatherhood, protecting, providing for, and guiding his family according to God's will. Ephesians 6:4 calls fathers to bring up children "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord"—a command Joseph faithfully fulfilled.

His patronage of a happy death stems from the tradition that he died with Jesus and Mary at his side, experiencing a peaceful, holy death—the hope of every Christian. The Church's liturgy includes prayers for a happy death—meaning not necessarily a painless death, but a death in God's grace, reconciled with God and neighbor.

### **Theological Significance of Joseph**

Joseph's role carries profound theological significance:

He demonstrates that God works through ordinary people. Joseph was not a priest, prophet, or king, but a working-class craftsman. Yet God chose him for a crucial role in redemption history (1 Corinthians 1:26-29 reminds us that God often chooses the ordinary, the weak, and the lowly for His purposes).

He shows that faith is demonstrated through obedience. Joseph's wordless obedience is more eloquent than many speeches. His life illustrates James 2:26: "faith apart from works is dead."

He models masculine virtue. In an age often confused about masculinity, Joseph exemplifies true manhood: strength tempered with gentleness, authority exercised through service, leadership expressed through sacrifice. Biblical masculinity is characterized by strength used to protect and serve others, as Joseph exemplifies (see Ephesians 5:25-29).

He illustrates the importance of legal/adoptive fatherhood. Though not Jesus' biological father, Joseph's legal fatherhood was essential to Jesus' messianic credentials. This honors adoptive parenthood and shows that legal relationships carry real significance. Romans 9:8 distinguishes "children of the flesh" from "children of the promise," showing that legal/covenantal relationships carry real significance before God.

He demonstrates God's providential care. Through Joseph's obedience to dream-warnings, God protected His Son. This shows how God often works—not through spectacular interventions but through human cooperation with divine guidance. God's providence typically works through secondary causes—human decisions, actions, and obedience—rather than constantly overriding natural processes.

He exemplifies quiet, hidden faithfulness. Most of Christian discipleship is not dramatic or publicly recognized but consists of faithful, daily obedience in ordinary circumstances. Joseph's hidden life of faithful service models this crucial dimension of discipleship. Most Christians will never perform spectacular miracles or have dramatic ministries, but all are called to faithful obedience in their particular circumstances. Joseph models this crucial truth.

## **Joseph and the Incarnation**

Joseph's role in the Incarnation, while different from Mary's, was nonetheless essential. Without Joseph:

- Jesus would have lacked legal Davidic descent
- Mary would have faced social ruin
- The infant Jesus would have been vulnerable to Herod's massacre
- Jesus would have lacked the protection and provision necessary for childhood

Joseph's faithful response to divine calling made it possible for the Incarnation to unfold safely within human society. His obedience facilitated God's plan at every crucial juncture.

Moreover, Joseph's role as Jesus' earthly father meant he provided Jesus' primary model of human fatherhood. Jesus' later teachings about God as Father (*Abba*) would have been shaped in part by His experience of Joseph's faithful, loving, protective fatherhood. The tender care Joseph showed Jesus gave Jesus a human context for understanding and revealing the Father's love. Jesus' experience of Joseph's faithful fatherhood provided a human analogy for understanding divine fatherhood, which He then revealed in His teaching (Matthew 6:9; 7:11; Luke 15:11-32).

## **Conclusion: The Silent Saint**

Joseph's silence in Scripture is profound. He speaks not one recorded word, yet his life speaks volumes. His immediate obedience, his protective love, his faithful provision, his humble service—all testify to a man of deep faith and sterling character.

As we approach the manger, we must not overlook the silent figure standing guard. Joseph is there—protecting, providing, faithful. His presence reminds us that God's redemptive work often depends on the quiet faithfulness of ordinary people who simply obey, day by day, without fanfare or recognition.

Joseph stands as a model for all believers, but especially for men, fathers, and those called to protect and provide for others. His life challenges us: Will we, like Joseph, believe God's word even when it seems incredible? Will we obey immediately, without demanding confirmation or convenience? Will we faithfully fulfill our responsibilities, even in obscurity? Will we protect and provide for those entrusted to our care?

The righteous carpenter of Nazareth asks these questions of us still. And in his silent example, he shows us the way of true discipleship—the way of faith expressed through faithful obedience. For further reading on Joseph, see Paul Thigpen, *Manual for Spiritual Warfare* (TAN Books, 2014); and Mike Aquilina, *Saint Joseph and His World* (Servant Books, 2020).

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## CHAPTER TEN

### The Journey to Bethlehem

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem stands as one of the most consequential trips in human history, though those undertaking it could scarcely have imagined its significance. This approximately 80-90 mile trek through the rugged terrain of ancient Palestine would culminate in the birth of the Messiah, fulfilling ancient prophecy and inaugurating God's redemptive plan. Yet for Mary and Joseph, the journey was marked by uncertainty, discomfort, and the pressing concern of finding shelter for an expectant mother on the verge of giving birth.

#### **The Historical Context: Caesar's Census**

Luke carefully situates the Nativity within the framework of Roman imperial history: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town" (Luke 2:1-3).

Caesar Augustus (63 BC – AD 14), born Gaius Octavius, was the first Roman emperor and ruled from 27 BC to AD 14. He transformed Rome from a republic torn by civil war into a stable empire. His reign, known as the Pax Romana (Roman Peace), provided the political stability and infrastructure that would later facilitate the spread of Christianity. Augustus's Pax Romana lasted from approximately 27 BC to AD 180, providing unprecedented stability throughout the Mediterranean world (see Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East, 31 BC - AD 337*, Harvard University Press, 1993). The irony is profound: the emperor who sought to consolidate his power through a census unknowingly facilitated the arrival of the King whose kingdom would outlast Rome itself.

The decree for registration (Greek: *apographē*, meaning census or enrollment) was part of Rome's administrative machinery. Censuses served multiple purposes: taxation, military conscription, and general administration. Archaeological and historical evidence confirms that periodic censuses were conducted throughout the Roman Empire during Augustus's reign. Evidence of Augustan censuses appears in Egyptian papyri and inscriptions (see A.H.M. Jones, "The Roman Civil Service (Clerical and Sub-Clerical Grades)," *Journal of Roman Studies* 39 [1949]: 38-55). The requirement to register in one's ancestral hometown, while unusual by Roman standards, aligns with Jewish customs of tribal affiliation and land ownership patterns. Jewish attachment to ancestral lands and tribal territories was strong. Registration in ancestral towns, while unusual by Roman standards, would align with Jewish sensibilities (see E.P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief, 63 BCE - 66 CE*, SCM Press, 1992).

Quirinius as governor of Syria has been the subject of considerable scholarly debate. Josephus mentions a census conducted by Quirinius in AD 6, which seems too late for

Jesus' birth (generally dated to 6-4 BC, before Herod's death in 4 BC). Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.1.1 documents the chronological issues surrounding Quirinius which have generated extensive scholarly discussion. Various solutions have been proposed: that Luke refers to an earlier enrollment during an earlier governorship of Quirinius, that "first" should be translated "before" (making this a census before the famous one under Quirinius), or that Quirinius held an earlier administrative position in Syria. For various solutions, see Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Zondervan, 1977, 13-27); and Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Eisenbrauns, 1989, 113-129). While the precise chronological reconciliation remains debated, the essential point is clear: Luke grounds the Nativity in verifiable history, not myth or legend.

### **The Necessity of the Journey**

The census decree required Joseph to travel from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea: "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David" (Luke 2:4).

The distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem was approximately 80-90 miles as the crow flies, but the actual journey would have been longer due to terrain and road conditions. Travelers would typically follow the Jordan Valley southward to avoid Samaria (where Jews often faced hostility) before ascending to Jerusalem and continuing south to Bethlehem. The route through Samaria was shorter but often avoided by observant Jews due to tensions between Jews and Samaritans (see John 4:9; Luke 9:52-53).

The duration would have required 4-7 days of travel, depending on the route taken, the mode of transport, and the condition of the travelers. For a heavily pregnant woman, the journey would have been particularly grueling, requiring frequent rest stops and proceeding at a slower pace than normal travel. Normal travel speed was approximately 20 miles per day for a healthy adult. A pregnant woman would move much more slowly.

The timing appears to have been unavoidable. Mary was in the late stages of pregnancy, close to her delivery date. Yet the census decree left no room for exemptions or delays. Roman administrative efficiency cared nothing for the personal circumstances of its subjects. Joseph and Mary had no choice but to comply, regardless of Mary's condition. Roman census decrees allowed no exemptions for pregnancy, illness, or other personal circumstances. Compliance was mandatory.

### **Why Mary Accompanied Joseph**

Luke records that Joseph went "to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child" (Luke 2:5). Several questions arise: Why did Mary accompany Joseph? Was her presence required by Roman law, or was there another reason?

Roman census requirements typically did not require women to register in person, as women were not liable for military service and taxation was usually assessed on male heads of households. Women were not subject to Roman poll taxes in the same way men were (see Bruce W. Winter, "The Public Honouring of Christian Benefactors: Romans 13.3-4 and 1 Peter 2.14-15," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 34 [1988]: 87-103). This suggests Mary's presence was not legally mandated but chosen for other reasons.

Possible motivations for Mary's presence include:

Protection of her reputation. If Mary remained in Nazareth while visibly pregnant with Joseph away, she would face intense social scrutiny and potential accusations. Joseph's presence provided protection and legitimacy. The suspicion and gossip Mary would face as an unmarried pregnant woman would be intensified in Joseph's absence.

Practical necessity. With her delivery imminent, it may have been deemed unsafe for Mary to remain without Joseph's care and protection, especially if family relationships in Nazareth were strained due to the unusual circumstances of her pregnancy. Family support systems were crucial in ancient societies. If Mary's family was unsupportive due to the circumstances of her pregnancy, she would need Joseph's constant protection.

Property or inheritance concerns. If Mary had inheritance rights through her family line (as may be suggested by Luke's genealogy tracing through Mary's lineage), she may have needed to register in person to maintain those rights. Luke 3:23-38 traces Jesus' genealogy differently from Matthew 1:1-17, possibly indicating Mary's lineage. This has led some to suggest Mary had inheritance interests requiring registration.

Divine providence. From a theological perspective, Mary's presence was necessary to fulfill prophecy. Micah 5:2 specified that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. If Mary had remained in Nazareth and given birth there, this prophecy would not have been fulfilled. God's providential orchestration used Roman administrative requirements to move Mary to the prophetically appointed place. God's providence is a major theme in Luke's Gospel (see Luke 1:1-4).

### **The Conditions of Travel**

Travel in first-century Palestine was challenging under the best circumstances; for a pregnant woman in her third trimester, it would have been extraordinarily difficult:

The terrain. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem involved traversing varied and often difficult terrain. From the hills of Galilee, travelers would descend into the Jordan Valley (in places more than 800 feet below sea level), then ascend again to the Judean highlands where Bethlehem sits at approximately 2,500 feet elevation. This constant change in elevation, combined with rocky paths and sometimes harsh weather, made for exhausting travel. For ancient Palestinian geography, see Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, rev. ed. (Westminster Press, 1979).

The roads. While major Roman roads were well-maintained, smaller routes and paths connecting towns could be rough and unpaved. The Via Maris and other major highways were built primarily for military and commercial purposes. Smaller roads serving villages like Nazareth were often little more than packed earth paths, dusty in dry weather and muddy when wet. Roman road-building was sophisticated but focused on major routes (see Lionel Casson, *Travel in the Ancient World*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

Mode of transport. Tradition often depicts Mary riding a donkey, though Scripture does not explicitly state this. Donkeys were common transport animals for ordinary people who could not afford horses (which were primarily military animals). Donkeys were the common people's beast of burden. Horses were expensive and primarily used by military and wealthy classes. Given Mary's condition, it is reasonable to assume Joseph would have secured a donkey if at all possible, though their poverty may have meant walking much of the distance.

Accommodation along the way. Travelers would have sought lodging at caravanserais (inns) or relied on hospitality from fellow Jews along the route. The journey would require multiple overnight stops, each presenting its own challenges for a pregnant woman requiring rest and privacy. For ancient hospitality customs, see John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality* (Fortress Press, 1985).

Weather conditions. If Jesus was born in winter (the traditional December date) or early spring (as some scholars argue based on shepherds being in fields), the weather could have included cold temperatures, rain, and potentially difficult traveling conditions. The date of Jesus' birth is debated. December 25 is traditional but not definitively established historically. Some argue for spring based on shepherd activity.

Security concerns. Travel always carried risks from bandits and thieves. Jesus' later parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) reflects the real dangers of the Jerusalem-Jericho road. Joseph would have needed to be constantly vigilant for Mary's safety.

### **Mary's Physical Condition**

Luke's simple statement that Mary "was with child" (Luke 2:5) understates the physical reality. Medical understanding of pregnancy helps us appreciate what Mary endured. Modern obstetric understanding helps us appreciate ancient pregnancy challenges, though we must be cautious not to overstate parallels given different living conditions:

Late pregnancy discomforts include increased fatigue, frequent urination, back pain, swelling of feet and ankles, difficulty sleeping, and shortness of breath—all symptoms that would be greatly exacerbated by arduous travel.

The risk of premature labor brought on by physical exertion, stress, and the rigors of travel would have been a constant concern. The jostling motion of riding a donkey, the physical strain of walking, and the stress of the journey all increased the risk of early labor.

Premature labor can be triggered by physical stress, a real concern given the journey's demands.

Nutritional and hydration needs increase during pregnancy, yet access to adequate food and clean water during travel would have been uncertain. Mary's health and the health of her unborn child depended on adequate nourishment, which may have been difficult to obtain consistently. Pregnant women require increased calories and hydration. Securing adequate nutrition while traveling would be challenging.

The vulnerability of both mother and child during this journey cannot be overstated. Ancient pregnancy and childbirth carried significant risks even under the best circumstances. To undertake such a journey in the late stages of pregnancy demonstrated either desperate necessity or extraordinary faith (likely both). Maternal mortality was high in the ancient world. Pregnancy and childbirth were dangerous even without additional complications like arduous travel.

### **The Providential Timing**

From a theological perspective, the timing of the census was no accident. God's providence orchestrated events so that:

Prophecy would be fulfilled. Micah 5:2 had prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel." Without the census, Jesus would likely have been born in Nazareth, and this prophecy would remain unfulfilled.

The Davidic connection would be emphasized. By being born in Bethlehem, "the city of David," Jesus' connection to the Davidic royal line is reinforced. Bethlehem was David's hometown (1 Samuel 17:12; 2 Samuel 7:12-16), and the Messiah was prophesied to be David's descendant.

God's sovereignty over earthly powers would be demonstrated. The mightiest empire on earth unknowingly served God's purposes. Augustus thought he was consolidating imperial control; God was positioning His Son to be born in the prophesied location. As Proverbs 21:1 declares, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." Scripture frequently affirms God's sovereignty over human rulers (Daniel 2:21; 4:17; Romans 13:1).

The humble circumstances would be established. The journey itself, undertaken by a carpenter and his pregnant wife in compliance with imperial decree, underscores the humble, ordinary circumstances of Jesus' birth. The Messiah arrives not with royal pageantry but as one of countless subjects complying with Roman bureaucracy. The contrast between imperial power and the humble Messiah is a major theme in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:51-53).

### **Arrival in Bethlehem**

"And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth" (Luke 2:6). This simple statement conveys the urgency and challenge of their situation. They had arrived in Bethlehem, but Mary's labor was imminent or had already begun.

The crowded conditions. Bethlehem, normally a small village, would have been swollen with travelers returning for the census. Every available lodging would have been occupied. The influx of people from the line of David (all required to register in Bethlehem) created a housing crisis in the small town. Bethlehem's normal population was perhaps a few hundred. A census would bring many times that number.

The search for accommodation. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). This verse has generated much discussion:

The word translated "inn" (Greek: *katalyma*) can mean several things:

- A guest room in a private home
- A caravanserai (commercial inn)
- An upper room used for hospitality

The Greek *katalyma* appears in Luke 22:11 (the "upper room" where Jesus celebrated Passover) and in other contexts meaning guest quarters.

The traditional understanding is that Joseph sought lodging at a commercial inn but found it fully occupied. Unable to secure proper accommodation, they were forced to shelter wherever they could—traditionally understood as a stable or cave used to house animals. The traditional image of a stable comes from the manger (feeding trough) and the presence of animals implied by swaddling cloths being laid in such a trough.

An alternative interpretation suggests *katalyma* refers to the guest room of a relative's house. In this reading, Joseph and Mary did find lodging with relatives in Bethlehem (Joseph's ancestral home), but because the guest room was already occupied by other census-travelers, they had to stay in the lower level of the house where animals were typically sheltered. Ancient Palestinian homes often had a split-level design, with the family living space elevated and animals kept in a lower area at night. This interpretation suggests less rejection and more overcrowding. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008, 25-37), argues for this household interpretation.

Either way, the essential point is clear: when the time came for the Son of God to be born, there was no proper accommodation available. The King of Kings entered the world not in a palace or even a comfortable home, but in the most humble of circumstances, in a space typically reserved for animals.

## **Theological Significance of the Journey**

The journey to Bethlehem carries profound theological meaning:

It demonstrates the full humanity of Jesus. He was subject to the same historical forces, political realities, and physical limitations as any human. His birth was not a timeless, mythical event but occurred at a specific time and place, under specific circumstances, subject to the decrees of earthly rulers. The Apostles' Creed places Jesus' birth "under Pontius Pilate," grounding it in history. Luke similarly grounds the birth in Augustus's census.

It reveals God's sovereignty. God used the decree of a pagan emperor to fulfill His ancient prophecy. Human plans serve divine purposes, often without human awareness. The journey reminds us that "The heart of man plans his way, but the LORD establishes his steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

It exemplifies obedience under difficulty. Joseph and Mary could have protested the injustice of requiring a heavily pregnant woman to travel. They could have sought exemptions or delayed compliance. Instead, they obeyed both earthly authorities (the census decree) and divine will (the need to be in Bethlehem), trusting God through difficulty. Romans 13:1-7 teaches submission to governing authorities; Mary and Joseph exemplified this even when inconvenient.

It prefigures Jesus' future homelessness. Jesus would later say, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). His birth journey, ending in a stable because there was no room in the inn, foreshadows His entire earthly existence as one who embraced homelessness and poverty for our sake.

It identifies Jesus with refugees and displaced persons. The holy family's journey—forced by governmental decree, resulting in homelessness, and soon to be followed by flight to Egypt as refugees fleeing violence—identifies Jesus from birth with the displaced, the refugee, and the homeless of every age. Matthew 2:13-15 recounts the flight to Egypt, making Jesus literally a refugee. His birth circumstances anticipate this.

It demonstrates Mary and Joseph's faith. Their willingness to undertake this difficult journey, trusting that God would care for them and for the child Mary carried, exemplifies faith in action. They obeyed without seeing how things would work out, trusting divine providence. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Mary and Joseph exemplify this.

It shows God's use of ordinary means. God did not transport Mary and Joseph miraculously to Bethlehem. He did not suspend natural law or override Roman authority. Instead, He worked through ordinary historical circumstances—a census, a journey, the movements of human history—to accomplish His purposes. This reminds us that God's greatest works often occur through natural, ordinary means rather than constant miraculous intervention. God's typical mode is working through secondary causes (human actions, natural events) rather than constant miraculous intervention.

## **The Journey in Christian Devotion**

The journey to Bethlehem has inspired Christian devotion and art for centuries:

Las Posadas (Spanish for "the inns") is a Mexican Christmas tradition reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging. For nine nights preceding Christmas (representing the nine months of pregnancy), participants go house to house seeking shelter, being turned away until finally being welcomed. This tradition keeps the reality of Mary and Joseph's difficult situation vivid in cultural memory. Las Posadas is celebrated December 16-24 in Mexico and other Latin American countries (see Elizabeth S. Grayson, *Christmas Customs from Around the World*, Routledge, 2014).

Advent wreaths and calendars often include imagery or references to the journey, using it as a metaphor for the spiritual journey believers undertake in preparing for Christmas. Advent traditions often emphasize journey imagery, reflecting both the holy family's journey and the believer's spiritual journey toward Christ.

Christmas pageants and nativity plays frequently dramatize the journey, helping participants (especially children) enter imaginatively into the story and understand the challenges Mary and Joseph faced. Christmas pageants date to medieval mystery plays. They serve both catechetical and devotional purposes.

Pilgrimages to Bethlehem have been undertaken by Christians since ancient times, retracing in some sense the journey of Mary and Joseph. These pilgrimages serve as acts of devotion and opportunities for spiritual reflection on the Incarnation. Pilgrimage to Bethlehem dates to at least the 2nd century. Jerome settled in Bethlehem in AD 386. The Church of the Nativity (built by Constantine) marks the traditional birthplace.

### **Conclusion: The Journey That Changed Everything**

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was, on one level, utterly ordinary—one of countless journeys undertaken by countless people in compliance with Roman census requirements. Yet this particular journey carried the hopes of the world in Mary's womb. Every difficult mile brought the fulfillment of prophecy closer. Every hardship endured testified to the costliness of obedience and faith.

The journey reminds us that God's greatest work often occurs in the midst of ordinary, difficult circumstances. Mary and Joseph did not know they were participants in the pivotal event of human history. From their perspective, they were simply doing what was required—complying with a census, coping with difficult circumstances, trusting God day by day.

As we contemplate this journey, we are invited to consider our own journeys of faith. Like Mary and Joseph, we often cannot see where our path is leading. We face difficulties, uncertainties, and uncomfortable circumstances. We may feel displaced, homeless in a spiritual sense, uncertain where we truly belong. Yet if we trust God's providence and obey His leading, even the most difficult journeys can serve His redemptive purposes.

The road to Bethlehem was long and hard, but it led to the manger where heaven met earth. Every journey of faith, no matter how difficult, leads ultimately to encounter with Christ if we persevere in trust and obedience. The holy family's journey encourages us: God is faithful, His purposes will be accomplished, and our obedience—however costly—participates in His grand redemptive plan. For spiritual reflection on the journey to Bethlehem, see Henri Nouwen, "A Spirituality of Waiting," in *The Weavings Reader*, ed. John S. Mogabgab (Upper Room Books, 1993, 69-77).

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Birth in the Manger

The moment toward which all of salvation history had been moving arrived with profound simplicity. Luke's account is remarkable for its brevity and understatement: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). These few words describe the most significant birth in human history—the Incarnation of God Himself—yet the narrative contains no dramatic embellishment, no elaborate description, only the bare facts presented with stark simplicity. This very simplicity, however, carries profound theological weight.

#### **The Firstborn Son**

Luke identifies Jesus as Mary's "firstborn son" (Greek: *prototokos*). The Greek *prototokos* literally means "first-born" and appears throughout the New Testament with various nuances. This designation has multiple layers of significance:

Legal and cultural significance. In Jewish law and custom, the firstborn son held a position of special importance. He received a double portion of the inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:17) and was consecrated to God, requiring redemption through a prescribed offering (Exodus 13:2, 12-15; Numbers 18:15-16). The firstborn belonged to the Lord and required redemption through a prescribed offering. Luke later records that Mary and Joseph fulfilled this requirement, bringing Jesus to the temple for the redemption ceremony (Luke 2:22-24).

The term does not necessarily imply other children. While "firstborn" can indicate the first of several children, it was also a legal term applied to the first child regardless of whether others followed. Ancient inscriptions describe only children as "firstborn," indicating the term's technical legal meaning rather than merely ordinal position in a series of siblings. Archaeological inscriptions from ancient Jewish tombs describe deceased only children

as "firstborn," indicating the term's technical legal usage (see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, Doubleday, 1977, 399-400).

Theological significance. Paul uses "firstborn" as a title for Christ with profound theological import: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), and "the firstborn from the dead" (Colossians 1:18). Paul uses "firstborn" as a title denoting supremacy and preeminence. In these contexts, "firstborn" signifies preeminence, priority, and supremacy rather than merely temporal sequence. Jesus is the preeminent one, the heir of all things, the one through whom all creation exists and for whom it was made (Colossians 1:15-20 presents Christ as supreme over all creation and the church, the agent through whom all things were created and for whom they exist).

Connection to Davidic messianism. Psalm 89:27, referring to David's line, declares: "And I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth." Jesus, as Mary's firstborn son and David's descendant, fulfills this royal promise.

### **Swaddling Cloths**

"And wrapped him in swaddling cloths" (Greek: *esparganōsen*). The verb *sparganō* means to wrap in swaddling cloths. This detail, seemingly mundane, carries both practical and symbolic significance:

The practice of swaddling was universal in the ancient world. Immediately after birth, infants were washed, rubbed with salt (believed to strengthen the skin), and then wrapped tightly in strips of cloth to keep their limbs straight and provide a sense of security. Ezekiel 16:4 describes the normal care of a newborn and indicates that lack of these indicated abandonment: "you were not rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in swaddling cloths." The absence of these basic provisions indicated neglect or abandonment.

Mary's swaddling of Jesus thus indicates several things: She performed the normal maternal duties, caring for her newborn appropriately despite the difficult circumstances. She had come prepared, bringing the necessary cloths for her baby's care. This suggests planning and provision despite their poverty and the challenges of the journey. That Mary had swaddling cloths suggests she had prepared for the birth despite the unexpected circumstances of where it would occur.

Symbolic significance. Some early church fathers saw symbolic meaning in the swaddling cloths. Just as Jesus was wrapped in cloths at His birth, He would be wrapped in burial cloths at His death (John 19:40). Several church fathers noted this parallel between birth-cloths and burial-cloths. From birth to death, from manger to tomb, Jesus' life would be marked by humility and identification with human limitations.

Contrast with royal birth. A royal child would be attended by servants, surrounded by luxury, clothed in fine garments. Jesus, the true King, receives the simplest of care, wrapped in ordinary cloths by His mother's own hands. This contrast underscores the

radical humility of the Incarnation. The contrast between Christ's actual identity and His humble circumstances is a major Lukan theme (see Luke 1:46-55, the Magnificat).

The sign to the shepherds. The angel later tells the shepherds, "you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). The swaddling cloths are part of the identifying sign—not special or unusual in themselves, but combined with the unexpected location (a manger), they point to the remarkable character of this birth.

## **The Manger**

"And laid him in a manger" (Greek: *phatne*, meaning feeding trough). The Greek *phatne* unambiguously means feeding trough or manger. This detail is repeated three times in Luke's account (vv. 7, 12, 16), emphasizing its significance. The manger becomes the central visual image of the Nativity, the focal point of countless artistic representations, and a powerful theological symbol.

The practical reality. A manger was a feeding trough for livestock, typically made of stone or wood, filled with hay or straw to hold fodder for animals. That Jesus was laid in a manger indicates the family's desperate accommodation circumstances—no proper cradle was available, so Mary improvised, using what was at hand. The improvised cradle suggests both poverty (no prepared nursery) and maternal resourcefulness (making do with what was available).

The location. The presence of a manger indicates the birth occurred in a space associated with animals. This could have been:

- A stable or animal shelter attached to or near an inn (the traditional understanding)
- A cave used to house animals (a strong tradition dating to Justin Martyr in the 2nd century identifies a cave in Bethlehem as the birthplace). Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 78, written around AD 155, mentions a cave in Bethlehem as Jesus' birthplace. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, built by Constantine, is constructed over a cave identified as the birthplace.
- The ground level of a Palestinian house, where animals were brought in at night for warmth and security (the interpretation favored by some modern scholars). Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008, 25-37), develops this interpretation.

Whichever specific location, the essential point remains: the Son of God was born in a place normally occupied by animals, laid in a feeding trough rather than a proper bed. This detail encapsulates the humility and poverty of Jesus' birth.

## **The Theological Significance of the Manger**

The manger is not merely an incidental detail but carries profound theological meaning:

### **1. The Humility of the Incarnation**

The manger epitomizes the voluntary self-humbling of God described in Philippians 2:6-8: "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." This Christological hymn presents the pattern of divine self-emptying that the manger exemplifies.

Jesus' birthplace declares that God's kingdom operates by different principles than earthly kingdoms. Power is revealed in weakness, glory in humility, majesty in simplicity. The King of Kings enters the world in the lowest of circumstances, identifying with the poor, the marginalized, the outcast. The theme of God exalting the humble and humbling the exalted appears throughout Scripture: 1 Samuel 2:7-8; Psalm 113:7-8; Luke 1:52-53; James 4:6.

## **2. Accessibility and Identification**

The manger made Jesus accessible to the shepherds—poor, working-class men who would have been comfortable in a stable but might have felt out of place in a fine house or palace. God arranged circumstances so that His Son's first visitors would feel at home. Shepherds, often living with their flocks, would be entirely comfortable in a stable setting. A palace would be foreign and intimidating.

More broadly, the manger identifies Jesus with all who are poor, displaced, or relegated to the margins of society. He was born among the animals because there was no room for His family among people. This foreshadows His entire ministry to and identification with the marginalized. Jesus' ministry consistently reached out to and identified with the marginalized: tax collectors, sinners, lepers, the poor (Luke 4:18; 7:22; 14:13, 21).

As Jesus Himself would later say: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). From birth, Jesus experienced homelessness and displacement.

## **3. Eucharistic Foreshadowing**

Some church fathers saw in the manger a foreshadowing of the Eucharist. The feeding trough that held the infant Christ prefigures the altar that holds His body in the sacrament. Jesus, who called Himself "the bread of life" (John 6:35), was laid in a manger—a feeding place for animals—signifying that He is food for the world. Augustine and other fathers developed this eucharistic typology of the manger (see Augustine, *Sermon 189.4*).

The town's name reinforces this connection: "Bethlehem" means "house of bread" in Hebrew (*beth* = house, *lechem* = bread). The Bread of Life was laid in a feeding trough in the House of Bread—a convergence of symbolism pointing to Christ as spiritual sustenance for humanity. "Bethlehem" derives from Hebrew *beit lechem*, "house of bread." This etymology is noted by Jerome and other early commentators.

## **4. Reversal of Worldly Values**

The manger represents a fundamental inversion of human expectations and values. Earthly kingdoms celebrate royal births with pomp, pageantry, and display of wealth and power. God's kingdom is revealed in a stable, announced to shepherds, marked by poverty and simplicity. Mary's Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) anticipates this reversal theme that characterizes Jesus' entire mission.

This reversal runs throughout Jesus' life and teaching: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3); "many who are first will be last, and the last first" (Matthew 19:30); "whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Matthew 20:26). The Sermon on the Mount and Jesus' teachings consistently invert worldly values. The manger is the first expression of this kingdom principle.

## **5. The Intimacy of God's Presence**

The manger scene is remarkably intimate—a mother, father, and newborn child in a quiet, humble space. This intimacy reflects the nature of the Incarnation: God did not remain distant but drew near, became touchable, knowable, accessible. Emmanuel means "God with us"—not God far off, but God intimately present (Matthew 1:23 identifies Jesus as "Emmanuel," meaning "God with us"—emphasizing intimate divine presence).

The setting invites personal encounter rather than formal ceremony. One can approach a manger with ease; a throne inspires awe and distance. The choice of a manger as Christ's first bed signals that this King invites approach, welcomes the common person, desires intimacy with His creatures. The accessibility theme continues in Jesus' ministry: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden" (Matthew 11:28).

## **6. Solidarity with Creation**

The presence of animals (implied by the manger and explicit in tradition) connects Jesus' birth to all of creation, not merely humanity. Christian theology affirms that Christ's redemptive work extends to all creation: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (Colossians 1:19-20). Paul affirms the cosmic scope of Christ's reconciling work.

The animals at the Nativity symbolize this cosmic scope of redemption. Creation, which fell under the curse due to human sin (Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 8:20-22), will share in redemption through Christ. The manger scene, with its animals, declares that God's salvation plan encompasses the entire created order. Romans 8:19-22 speaks of creation groaning in anticipation of redemption. Creation participates in both fall and redemption.

### **"Because There Was No Place for Them in the Inn"**

Luke's explanation for why Jesus was laid in a manger—"because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7)—has resonated throughout Christian history as both historical fact and theological metaphor.

Historically, it describes the practical reality: Bethlehem, swollen with census travelers, had no available accommodation. Mary and Joseph were forced to make do with

whatever shelter they could find. This reflects their poverty and low social status—those with wealth or connections would have secured lodging in advance or displaced others through payment or influence. Wealth and social connections secured accommodation even in crowded conditions. Mary and Joseph's inability to find lodging reflects their poverty and lack of influence.

Theologically, it has been read as a metaphor for humanity's reception of Christ. The Son of God came to His own creation, yet there was no room for Him. This anticipates the prologue to John's Gospel: "He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him" (John 1:11).

The "no room in the inn" becomes emblematic of the human heart's resistance to God. We fill our lives with other things—pursuits, pleasures, priorities—leaving no space for Christ. The Christmas message includes an implicit question: Will we make room for Christ in our lives, or will we, like the crowded inn, turn Him away? This homiletical application of "no room in the inn" has been standard in Christian preaching for centuries, though technically it extrapolates from the text's literal meaning.

This reading has inspired countless Christmas sermons and carols. The hymn "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne" captures this poignantly:

"Thou didst leave Thy throne and earth for me;  
When Thou camest to earth found no room  
But in Bethlehem's home was there found no room  
For Thy holy nativity.  
O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,  
There is room in my heart for Thee."

Emily Elizabeth Steele Elliott, "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne" (1864), powerfully applies the "no room" theme devotionally.

### **The Pain and Joy of Childbirth**

While Luke's account is brief, we should not overlook the physical reality Mary endured. Childbirth in the ancient world was dangerous, painful, and frightening, particularly for a first-time mother. Maternal mortality was extremely high in the ancient world. Childbirth was dangerous even under the best circumstances, much more so in a stable or cave.

Mary experienced real labor pains. The doctrine of the Incarnation affirms that Jesus was born naturally, not miraculously extracted from Mary's womb. This means Mary underwent the full experience of childbirth, with all its pain and risk. Orthodox Christology affirms Jesus' genuine humanity, which requires His mother's genuine labor and delivery. Some early heretical groups (docetists) claimed Jesus only appeared to be born, denying the reality of His human nature. Orthodox Christianity rejected this, insisting on Jesus' genuine humanity, which necessitates acknowledging Mary's genuine labor. Docetism (from Greek *dokeo*, "to seem") claimed Jesus only seemed to have a physical body. This was condemned as heresy by the early church.

The Genesis curse affected Mary. After the Fall, God declared to Eve: "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (Genesis 3:16). Mary, though uniquely blessed, was not exempt from this aspect of the fallen human condition. The Second Adam entered the world through the same painful process that characterized all births since the Fall.

Mary's experience foreshadows her role in redemption. Simeon's later prophecy to Mary—"a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (Luke 2:35)—suggests that her participation in Christ's redemptive work would involve suffering. Simeon's prophecy suggests Mary's participation in Christ's redemptive suffering. The pain of childbirth was the first of many pains Mary would endure in her role as the mother of the Messiah, culminating in watching her son die on the cross.

Yet pain gave way to joy. Jesus Himself later used childbirth as a metaphor for the pattern of suffering leading to joy: "When a woman is giving birth, she has sorrow because her hour has come, but when she has delivered the baby, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world" (John 16:21). Jesus uses childbirth as a metaphor for redemptive suffering that yields joy. Mary's own experience at Jesus' birth exemplified this pattern—pain transformed into joy, sorrow swallowed up in gladness.

### **Joseph's Role at the Birth**

While Scripture does not explicitly detail Joseph's actions during the birth, we can reasonably infer his presence and role:

Ancient practice generally included women (relatives, midwives, neighbors) attending births, while men were typically excluded from the immediate birthing process. However, given the circumstances—far from home, in a stable or cave, with no family nearby—Mary likely had no female attendants. Joseph would have been her sole companion and helper. Typically, female relatives, neighbors, or midwives attended births. Men were generally excluded. The circumstances in Bethlehem likely meant Mary had no such attendants.

Joseph's carpentry skills would have been useful in preparing the space, perhaps fashioning a more comfortable arrangement with the available materials, ensuring Mary had clean cloths, water, and other necessities. Joseph's trade skills would be valuable in preparing the space and fashioning necessary items.

His protective presence would have provided Mary with emotional security during a frightening and painful experience. Though he could not remove her physical pain, his steadfast presence would have been a source of comfort and strength. Modern obstetric care recognizes the importance of supportive presence during labor. Joseph would have provided this crucial support.

After the birth, Joseph would have assisted with the immediate care of the newborn—helping Mary clean and swaddle Jesus, perhaps preparing the manger as a makeshift

cradle. His practical service in these humble tasks exemplifies the servant-leadership that characterizes true fatherhood. Philippians 2:7-8 describes Jesus taking "the form of a servant." Joseph models servant-leadership in his care for Mary and Jesus.

### **The Contrast: Heaven's Attention and Earth's Neglect**

One of the profound ironies of the Nativity is the stark contrast between heaven's rapt attention and earth's indifference:

In heaven, this moment was the culmination of millennia of anticipation. Angels had watched as prophecy after prophecy pointed toward this moment. The eternal Son was about to take on human flesh. The rescue mission was being launched. Creation was being invaded by its Creator. This was cosmic history's pivotal moment (1 Peter 1:10-12 describes angels longing to understand the salvation being revealed through Christ).

On earth, the night passed like any other night. Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man on earth, slept unaware that the true King had been born in an obscure corner of his empire. The religious leaders in Jerusalem, mere miles away, knew nothing of the fulfillment of prophecy occurring in Bethlehem. The townspeople of Bethlehem slept, unaware that the Messiah lay in a manger in their midst. The contrast between heaven's knowledge and earth's ignorance is profound. The most important event in history occurred with most people unaware.

Only the shepherds, alerted by angels, knew. And later the Magi, guided by a star. But the world at large remained oblivious. The King of Glory entered His creation in hiddenness, marked by poverty and simplicity rather than grandeur and spectacle. The theme of revelation to the simple while the wise remain ignorant appears in Matthew 11:25-27.

This pattern of hiddenness and revelation, of truth hidden from the wise and revealed to the simple, would characterize Jesus' entire ministry (Matthew 11:25-27). The Nativity establishes this pattern: God's greatest work often occurs in obscurity, noticed by the lowly while the powerful remain oblivious. This pattern of God working in hiddenness is consistent throughout Scripture: Joseph in prison, Moses in the wilderness, David as a shepherd boy.

### **The Manger in Christian Art and Devotion**

The manger scene has become the central visual representation of Christmas in Christian art and devotion:

Nativity scenes (also called crèches) depicting Mary, Joseph, Jesus in the manger, shepherds, angels, and animals have been created in every artistic medium and cultural style. St. Francis of Assisi is credited with creating the first living nativity scene in 1223, wanting to make the birth of Christ more vivid and accessible to common people. Thomas of Celano's biography of Francis (c. 1228) describes the 1223 living nativity at Greccio (see *First Life of St. Francis*, 84-86).

Nativity icons in Eastern Christianity follow specific iconographic conventions, with particular attention to the cave setting (following the early tradition), the placement of figures, and symbolic details conveying theological truths. Eastern iconography follows theological principles with standardized symbolic elements conveying doctrinal truths visually.

Advent and Christmas hymns repeatedly return to manger imagery: "Away in a Manger," "What Child Is This," "Silent Night" ("round yon virgin mother and child"), and countless others. The manger serves as both historical detail and devotional focal point. These hymns keep the manger image central to Christmas devotion, making it accessible across cultures and centuries.

The manger invites contemplation. Unlike triumphal imagery that inspires awe from a distance, the manger draws us near. We can imaginatively enter the scene, kneel beside the shepherds, gaze on the infant Christ. This accessibility makes the manger a particularly powerful aid to devotion and meditation. Ignatian meditation encourages imaginatively entering biblical scenes. The manger scene is particularly conducive to this practice.

### **Theological Tensions and Mysteries**

The birth in the manger holds together several theological tensions that Christianity affirms without fully explaining:

**Divinity and humanity.** In the manger lies an infant who is both fully God and fully human. The infinite becomes finite; the Creator becomes creature. This is mystery, not contradiction—affirmed by faith while transcending complete rational comprehension. The Chalcedonian Definition (451 AD) affirms Christ's two natures "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

**Power and weakness.** The all-powerful God lies helpless as an infant, dependent on His mother for every need. Yet this weakness is the means of salvation, this vulnerability the source of strength. Paul captures this paradox: "he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God" (2 Corinthians 13:4).

**Glory and humility.** The glorious Son, who eternally shares the Father's glory (John 17:5), is found in a stable, laid in a manger. Yet this humility is itself glorious—revealing the character of a God whose glory is expressed through love and self-giving rather than domination. Jesus' earthly ministry involves a veiling of divine glory, which will be fully revealed at His return.

**Universal significance and particular occurrence.** The birth in the manger is a specific historical event—occurring at a particular time, in a particular place, to particular people. Yet it has universal significance, affecting all of humanity and indeed all of creation. The particular becomes universal; the local becomes cosmic. The particular-universal tension is essential to Incarnational theology: God enters history at a specific point, yet the implications are universal.

## Conclusion: The Manger's Message

The manger in Bethlehem was a feeding trough used by animals. Yet it became the cradle of God incarnate, the place where heaven kissed earth, the site of the universe's most significant birth. Its very ordinariness makes it extraordinary. Its humility reveals glory. Its poverty displays divine riches.

The manger declares:

- God's love is so great He empties Himself and takes on human flesh in the humblest circumstances
- God's kingdom operates by different values than earthly kingdoms—the first shall be last, the humble exalted
- God's salvation is for all, especially the poor, marginalized, and outcast
- God's presence is accessible and intimate, not distant and unapproachable
- God's plan works through humble, hidden means rather than spectacular displays of power

As we contemplate the manger, we are confronted with questions: Will we make room for Christ? Will we embrace the humble way of His kingdom? Will we recognize God's presence in unexpected, lowly places? Will we trust that His weakness is stronger than human strength, His foolishness wiser than human wisdom?

The baby in the manger is King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Yet He lies on straw, wrapped in simple cloths, attended by shepherds and animals. This is how God comes—not in power that coerces, but in love that invites; not in glory that blinds, but in humility that draws near; not in majesty that intimidates, but in weakness that redeems. This is the gospel. This is Christmas. This is the eternal Word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth. And it all begins in a manger. For theological reflection on the manger, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (T&T Clark, 1958), §64; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Ignatius Press, 2005).

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Shepherds and the Angelic Announcement

While the birth of Jesus occurred in obscurity, hidden from the notice of the powerful and influential, God chose to announce this world-changing event to an unexpected audience. The first proclamation of the Messiah's arrival came not to priests in the temple, not to scribes studying prophecy, not to rulers in palaces, but to shepherds keeping watch over their flocks in the fields outside Bethlehem. This choice of first witnesses carries profound theological significance and reveals much about the nature of God's kingdom and the character of the Gospel message.

### **Shepherds in First-Century Jewish Society**

To appreciate the significance of God's choice of shepherds as first witnesses, we must understand their place in the social and religious landscape of first-century Judaism:

Shepherding was an ancient and honored profession in Israel's history. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were shepherds (Genesis 13:2-7 describes Abraham's flocks; Genesis 26:12-14 describes Isaac's flocks; Genesis 30:29-43 describes Jacob's flocks). Moses tended his father-in-law's flock when God called him at the burning bush (Exodus 3:1: "Now Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, and he led his flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God"). Most significantly, David, Israel's greatest king and the ancestor of the Messiah, was a shepherd before being anointed king (1 Samuel 16:11-13 describes David's anointing while still a shepherd boy). The metaphor of God as shepherd was central to Israel's self-understanding (Psalm 23:1: "The LORD is my shepherd"; Psalm 80:1: "Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel"; Isaiah 40:11: "He will tend his flock like a shepherd"; Ezekiel 34:11-16 develops the shepherd metaphor extensively).

However, by the first century CE, shepherds occupied an ambiguous social position. While the profession retained some of its ancient dignity, many shepherds had fallen into a lower social stratum. Several factors contributed to this:

Economic marginalization. Many shepherds were hired laborers working for wealthy landowners, not independent shepherds tending their own flocks. This made them part of the rural poor, working for subsistence wages. For economic conditions of shepherds, see Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Fortress Press, 1969, 303-312).

Social isolation. Shepherding required spending extended periods away from settled communities, living with the flocks in open country. This isolation bred suspicion and made shepherds seem rough, uneducated, and uncouth to urban dwellers. The social isolation of shepherds is documented in various rabbinic sources (see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, IVP Academic, 2008, 28-32).

Ritual impurity concerns. Strict adherence to purity laws was difficult for shepherds who lived outdoors, worked constantly with animals, and had limited access to washing facilities. Some religious authorities viewed shepherds as perpetually ritually unclean. Ritual purity concerns are addressed in the Mishnah and other rabbinic literature (see Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism*, Brill, 1973).

Questions of honesty. Because shepherds lived and worked far from oversight, they were sometimes suspected of grazing their flocks on others' land, of stealing, or of selling wool or milk that belonged to the flock's owners. Some rabbinic texts list shepherds among those whose testimony was not accepted in court. Mishnah Sanhedrin 3:3 lists shepherds among those disqualified from testifying in court, though this may reflect later rabbinic opinion rather than first-century practice.

Sabbath observance difficulties. Sheep required constant care, including on the Sabbath. While emergency care of animals was permitted on the Sabbath, shepherds' regular work patterns made strict Sabbath observance challenging, leading some to view them as less than fully observant Jews. Sabbath observance difficulties for shepherds are discussed in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday, 1977, 420).

Despite these negative perceptions, shepherding remained essential to the economy and to Jewish religious life. Flocks provided meat, milk, wool, and leather. Most importantly, the temple sacrificial system required a constant supply of unblemished lambs. The flocks around Bethlehem may have been specifically intended for temple sacrifice, which would add another layer of significance to the shepherds' presence at the birth of the "Lamb of God." The tradition that Bethlehem shepherds tended temple flocks is ancient but not definitively proven (see Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, vol. 1, Eerdmans, 1971, 186-187).

The shepherds thus represent the marginalized of society—hardworking but poor, necessary but looked down upon, faithful in their duties but excluded from religious respectability. That God chose such men as the first witnesses to the Messiah's birth makes a powerful theological statement about the nature of His kingdom.

### **The Night Watch**

"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8).

The detail that shepherds were in the fields at night has generated discussion regarding the season of Jesus' birth. Traditionally, Christmas is celebrated on December 25, but some have argued that shepherds would not be in open fields during winter months in Palestine. Several considerations are relevant:

The practice of night watches was standard year-round for shepherds protecting their flocks from predators (wolves, jackals, hyenas, even lions in earlier periods) and thieves. The shepherd's job was 24-hour responsibility. For shepherd practices and night watches, see Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Westminster John Knox, 2001, 68-70).

Seasonal patterns varied. In the Judean hill country near Bethlehem, flocks might be brought to shelter during the coldest and wettest winter months (roughly December-February), but mild winters could permit year-round grazing. The shepherds' presence in fields at night does not definitively settle the question of Jesus' birth date. The debate

over Jesus' birth date and shepherd practices is surveyed in Paul L. Maier, "The Date of the Nativity and the Chronology of Jesus' Life," in *Chronos, Kairos, Christos*, ed. Jerry Vardaman and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Eisenbrauns, 1989, 113-129).

The theological significance outweighs the chronological details. Whether December, spring, or another season, the point is that these men were faithfully performing their duties when God broke into their ordinary night with extraordinary news. The theological significance of the shepherds' faithfulness is emphasized in Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 1994, 212-214).

The night setting itself carries symbolic weight. The world lay in spiritual darkness, awaiting the light. The shepherds keeping watch in the night represent humanity's vigil, the faithful remnant watching and waiting for God's salvation. Into their darkness, heavenly light would blaze. The symbolism of night and light runs throughout Luke's Gospel and Acts (see Luke 1:78-79; 2:32; Acts 26:18).

Their watchfulness models spiritual vigilance. Jesus would later teach about the importance of watchfulness in anticipation of God's kingdom (Matthew 24:42-44; 25:1-13; Mark 13:32-37). These passages on watchfulness are central to Jesus' eschatological teaching. The shepherds, keeping faithful watch in the night, exemplify this spiritual posture of alert expectancy.

### **The Angel of the Lord**

"And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear" (Luke 2:9).

The appearance of "an angel of the Lord" (Greek: *angelos kyriou*) echoes Old Testament theophanies—divine appearances often mediated through angelic messengers. The phrase "angel of the Lord" frequently appears in the Old Testament at crucial moments in salvation history (Genesis 16:7-14; 22:11-18; Exodus 3:2; Judges 6:11-24; 13:3-22; 2 Kings 19:35).

The specific identity of this angel is not revealed, unlike Gabriel's named appearances to Zechariah and Mary. The focus is on the message and the divine authority behind it, not the messenger's identity. Gabriel is specifically named in Luke 1:19, 26, but the angel in Luke 2:9 is not identified.

"The glory of the Lord shone around them." The Greek word *doxa* (glory) translates the Hebrew *kabod*, referring to the visible manifestation of God's presence and majesty. In the Old Testament, God's glory appeared as brilliant light:

- At Mount Sinai during the giving of the Law (Exodus 24:16-17: "The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the

glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel")

- Filling the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle")
- Filling Solomon's Temple at its dedication (1 Kings 8:10-11: "And when the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD")
- In Ezekiel's visions (Ezekiel 1:28: "Like the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness all around. Such was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD"; Ezekiel 10:4: "And the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub to the threshold of the house, and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was filled with the brightness of the glory of the LORD")

The glory now shines not in the temple but in a shepherd's field, revealing God's presence not in the holy of holies but in the ordinary world where working men labor. This relocation of divine glory is profoundly significant—God's presence is no longer confined to sacred spaces but breaks into the everyday world. This relocation of divine glory is a major theme in Luke-Acts (see Luke 2:32; Acts 7:2, 55).

"They were filled with great fear" (Greek: *ephobēthēsan phobon megan*, literally "they feared a great fear"). This overwhelming fear is the standard human response to divine encounters in Scripture. When finite creatures encounter the infinite, holy God, the appropriate response is awe-filled terror. The fear response to divine encounters is pervasive in Scripture: Genesis 28:17; Exodus 3:6; Judges 6:22-23; Isaiah 6:5; Luke 1:12, 29-30; 5:8.

This fear is not primarily psychological (mere fright at a supernatural phenomenon) but theological—the recognition of standing in the presence of the holy, the awareness of one's creaturely finitude and sinfulness before the perfect and infinite God. Rudolf Otto's classic study *The Idea of the Holy* (Oxford University Press, 1923), explores this concept of the *mysterium tremendum*. The shepherds' fear demonstrates spiritual sensitivity; they recognize they are experiencing something divine and dangerous, something that reveals their smallness before the greatness of God.

### **The Angelic Proclamation**

"And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger'" (Luke 2:10-12).

The angel's message is carefully structured, each element carrying theological weight:

### **"Fear not"**

The command to "fear not" (or "do not be afraid") is one of the most frequently repeated commands in Scripture, appearing hundreds of times. The phrase "fear not" or "do not be afraid" appears hundreds of times throughout Scripture (see Genesis 15:1; 26:24; Joshua 1:9; Isaiah 41:10; 43:1; Jeremiah 1:8; Matthew 28:5; Revelation 1:17). It addresses not the natural fear of the unknown but the existential fear of standing before God in one's sinfulness and inadequacy. The angel's "fear not" assures the shepherds that this divine encounter brings blessing, not judgment; good news, not condemnation.

### **"I bring you good news"**

The Greek word *euangelizomai* means "to announce good news" and is the root of our word "evangelize" and "gospel" (*euangelion*). This is the language of royal proclamation—announcing a king's victory, the birth of an heir, or the accession to the throne. For the imperial connotations of *euangelion* ("gospel"), see N.T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Fortress Press, 1992, 361-367).

Isaiah 52:7 uses similar language: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" This verse is quoted or alluded to in Romans 10:15 and Ephesians 6:15. The angel's announcement to the shepherds fulfills this prophetic vision—the messenger has come, proclaiming the good news of salvation and God's reign.

The content of this good news will be specified in what follows: the birth of a Savior. The gospel begins with the Incarnation, with God's entry into human history to accomplish redemption. The gospel begins with the Incarnation, not merely with Jesus' death and resurrection (see John 1:14; 1 John 1:1-3).

### **"Of great joy"**

The angel describes this good news as bringing "great joy" (Greek: *charan megalēn*). This joy is not trivial happiness or temporary pleasure but profound gladness rooted in God's saving action. It echoes the joy prophesied by Isaiah:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). This prophecy is traditionally read during Christmas and understood as referring to the Messiah.

The shepherds are being told that the source of ultimate joy has arrived—not wealth, power, or earthly success, but the presence of God among His people, bringing salvation. The connection between God's presence and joy appears throughout Scripture: Psalm 16:11; 21:6; Acts 2:28.

### **"For all the people"**

The Greek *panti tō laō* could mean "for all the [Jewish] people," but the universal scope of the gospel will become increasingly clear in Luke's narrative. While the immediate reference is to Israel, Luke's Gospel progressively reveals that this salvation is for all nations, Jew and Gentile alike. Luke progressively reveals the universal scope: Luke 2:32; 3:6; 24:47; Acts 1:8; 10:34-35; 13:47.

The angel's announcement anticipates Jesus' Great Commission (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8) and the spread of the gospel to "the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8: "you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth"). The good news announced to shepherds in Judea will eventually reach the whole world.

### **"Unto you is born this day"**

The personal address "unto you" (*hymin*) makes the announcement intimate and direct. This birth is not a distant, abstract event but something that touches the shepherds personally, something for them. The personal address emphasizes that salvation is not merely a cosmic event but touches individuals personally (see Luke 19:9; 23:43).

"This day" (*sēmeron*) emphasizes the immediacy. The long-awaited moment has arrived. "Today" is the day of salvation, the fulfillment of centuries of promise. Luke emphasizes "today" in key moments: at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22, in some manuscripts), in the synagogue at Nazareth (Luke 4:21: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"), with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9: "Today salvation has come to this house"), and to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43: "Today you will be with me in paradise"). "Today" (*sēmeron*) is a key word in Luke's theology (see Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans, 1997, 130-131). Salvation is not merely a future hope but a present reality, breaking into history "this day."

### **"In the city of David"**

Bethlehem, called "the city of David," connects this birth to Israel's greatest king and to the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-16). God's covenant with David promised an eternal kingdom through his line. The Messiah must be David's descendant, and His birth in David's hometown fulfills this requirement and the prophecy of Micah 5:2: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

The title also anticipates the infant's identity as the true heir to David's throne, the King whose kingdom will have no end (Luke 1:32-33: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end").

### **"A Savior"**

The Greek *sōtēr* (Savior) is the angel's first descriptive title for the newborn child. This was a loaded term in the first century:

In the Old Testament, God Himself is frequently called Savior (Psalm 106:21: "They forgot God, their Savior"; Isaiah 43:3: "For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior"; Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior"; Hosea 13:4: "I am the LORD your God from the land of Egypt; you know no God but me, and besides me there is no savior"). To call the infant a Savior is to ascribe to Him a divine role.

In the Greco-Roman world, *sōtēr* was applied to emperors, particularly Caesar Augustus, who was hailed as savior for bringing peace to the empire. The title *sōtēr* was applied to Roman emperors, particularly Augustus (see inscriptions in *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* and discussion in N.T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, Fortress Press, 2013, 1270-1274). The angel's announcement thus contains a subversive political edge: the true Savior is not Caesar but this infant in Bethlehem. Real salvation comes not from Rome's military might but from God's redemptive action in Christ.

The title specifies the child's mission: He has come to save. The angels' earlier message to Joseph made explicit what this means: "you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). The name "Jesus" (Yeshua) means "Yahweh saves." This is not political or military deliverance (as many first-century Jews hoped) but spiritual salvation, deliverance from sin and its consequences.

### **"Who is Christ the Lord"**

The angel provides two additional titles in apposition to "Savior":

"Christ" (Greek: *Christos*) translates the Hebrew *Mashiach* (Messiah), meaning "anointed one." Kings, priests, and prophets in Israel were anointed with oil as a sign of being set apart for God's purposes and empowered by His Spirit. For anointing of kings, see 1 Samuel 16:13; of priests, Exodus 29:7; of prophets, 1 Kings 19:16. The Messiah is the ultimate Anointed One, combining all three offices—prophet, priest, and king—in one person. Christ's threefold office (prophet, priest, king) was developed by John Calvin and became standard in Reformed theology (see Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.15).

To announce that the Messiah has been born is to declare that God's long-promised deliverer has arrived, that centuries of waiting are over, that the hopes of Israel are being fulfilled. The messianic hopes of first-century Judaism are documented in works like the Psalms of Solomon and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

"Lord" (Greek: *kyrios*) is perhaps the most significant title. In the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint), *kyrios* translates the Hebrew divine name YHWH (Yahweh). To call Jesus "Lord" is to ascribe to Him divine status, identifying Him with the God of Israel. The Septuagint consistently uses *kyrios* to translate YHWH. The angel's use of this title for Jesus is a clear claim to divinity.

Combined, "Christ the Lord" (*Christos kyrios*) is an extraordinary title. The shepherds are being told that the infant born this night is both the awaited Messiah and the Lord God Himself made flesh. This is the gospel in miniature: God has come in Person to save His people. The unique combination *Christos kyrios* appears only here in the New Testament, emphasizing Jesus' unique identity as both Messiah and divine Lord.

### **"And this will be a sign for you"**

The angel offers a sign by which the shepherds can identify the promised Savior: "you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12).

The sign is remarkable for its ordinariness. The swaddling cloths are normal infant care. The manger is unusual but not miraculous. There is nothing obviously divine or supernatural about the sign itself. The ordinariness of the sign contrasts with expectations of messianic grandeur (see John 1:46; 7:41-42).

Yet this very ordinariness is the point. The sign's simplicity underscores the humility of the Incarnation. The Savior, Christ the Lord, is found not in a palace but in a feeding trough, not surrounded by guards but wrapped in common cloths. The greatest Person is in the lowliest place—a profound reversal of human expectations. The theme of divine humility and reversal of expectations runs throughout Luke: Luke 1:52-53; 6:20-26; 14:11; 18:14.

The specificity of the sign ("wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger") ensures the shepherds will not mistake which infant is the Messiah. In a town full of census travelers, there would be many infants. But only one would be found in a manger. The unusual location becomes the identifying mark. The specificity ensures proper identification, just as specific signs marked the true Messiah in Old Testament prophecy.

The sign also tests faith. Will the shepherds believe that such humble circumstances could hold the Christ, the Lord, the Savior? Will they trust the angelic announcement despite the apparent contradiction between the exalted titles and the lowly setting? Their response will demonstrate whether they can see past external appearances to recognize God's presence in unexpected places. The sign tests faith by requiring the shepherds to look beyond appearances (see 1 Samuel 16:7; John 7:24).

### **The Heavenly Host**

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!'" (Luke 2:13-14).

### **The Multitude of the Heavenly Host**

Following the single angel's announcement, "suddenly" (*exaiphnēs*—unexpectedly, without warning) a vast number of angels appear. The Greek *exaiphnēs* ("suddenly") emphasizes the unexpected, dramatic nature of the heavenly host's appearance. The Greek phrase is *plēthos stratias ouraniou*—literally "a multitude of the heavenly army."

"Host" (*stratia*) is military terminology, referring to an army or armed forces. The "heavenly host" are God's angelic armies, His celestial forces. The term appears throughout Scripture:

- 1 Kings 22:19: "I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him" (Micaiah's vision of the heavenly host around God's throne)
- Nehemiah 9:6: "You are the LORD, you alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host" (Ezra's prayer acknowledging God as creator of the heavenly host)
- Psalm 148:2: "Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his hosts!" (This psalm calls all creation, including angels, to praise God)

The appearance of the heavenly host indicates that all heaven is invested in this moment. The birth of the Messiah is not merely a human event but one of cosmic significance, warranting the attention and celebration of the celestial realm. The cosmic significance of Christ's birth is affirmed in Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:6.

The military imagery is significant. Though the angels come in peace, announcing salvation, they are nonetheless identified as an army. This hints at the cosmic spiritual warfare involved in redemption. Christ's birth is an invasion—God's forces entering enemy-occupied territory (the world under sin's dominion) to launch the rescue operation. Satan, "the prince of the power of the air" (Ephesians 2:2; 6:12), faces the arrival of One who will ultimately defeat him. The New Testament presents redemption as involving spiritual warfare.

Yet the army comes not to destroy but to announce peace. The instruments of warfare (the heavenly host) become heralds of reconciliation. This paradox captures the gospel: God wins victory not through violence but through the vulnerable, self-giving love displayed in the manger and ultimately on the cross. This paradox of victory through weakness is central to Christian theology (see 1 Corinthians 1:25; 2 Corinthians 13:4).

## **The Angelic Doxology**

The heavenly host praise God with a carefully structured doxology:

"Glory to God in the highest" (*doxa en hypsistois theō*) ascribes honor, praise, and recognition of divine majesty to God in the highest heaven. This vertical dimension acknowledges God's transcendence, His exaltation above all creation. The phrase "in the highest" (*en hypsistois*) refers to the highest heaven, God's dwelling place.

"And on earth peace" (*kai epi gēs eirēnē*) describes the horizontal dimension—the effect of God's saving action in the human realm. The Incarnation brings peace: reconciliation between God and humanity, and among humans themselves. The peace brought by Christ has multiple dimensions: peace with God (Romans 5:1), inner peace (Philippians 4:7), and ultimately cosmic peace (Colossians 1:20).

"Among those with whom he is pleased" (Greek: *en anthrōpois eudokias*) describes the recipients of this peace. The translation is debated:

- Some versions: "peace, good will toward men" (KJV), suggesting God's universal benevolence. The KJV and some other versions follow a textual variant with nominative *eudokia*.
- Modern translations: "peace among those with whom he is pleased" (ESV) or "peace to people on whom his favor rests" (NIV), suggesting peace comes to those who receive God's grace. Modern critical editions favor the genitive *eudokias*, found in the earliest and best manuscripts.

The textual evidence favors the reading "peace among those with whom he is pleased" (the genitive *eudokias* rather than nominative *eudokia*). The textual evidence is discussed in Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994, 111). This doesn't limit God's peace to only some people, but recognizes that peace must be received through faith. God extends peace to all, but only those who receive it by grace through faith experience its reality.

This peace (*eirēnē*/Hebrew *shalom*) is comprehensive:

- Peace with God (reconciliation, forgiveness of sins) — Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"
- Inner peace (freedom from guilt and anxiety) — Philippians 4:7: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus"
- Peace with others (reconciliation across all human divisions) — Ephesians 2:14-18 speaks of Christ breaking down dividing walls and creating peace between Jews and Gentiles
- Cosmic peace (ultimate restoration of all creation) — Romans 8:19-22; Colossians 1:20 show that creation itself will share in redemptive peace

The angels' song encapsulates the gospel: God (highest heaven) has acted to bring peace to earth, restoring what was broken in the Fall, reconciling what was alienated, healing what was wounded. Glory ascends to God; peace descends to humanity. The Incarnation is the meeting point, the place where heaven and earth, God and humanity, intersect. The Incarnation as the meeting point of heaven and earth is developed in Ephesians 1:10; Colossians 1:20.

### **The Shepherds' Response**

"When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has

made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger" (Luke 2:15-16).

### **Immediate Action**

The shepherds' response is characterized by immediacy and decisiveness:

"Let us go"—They don't debate, don't delay, don't first complete their work shift. They respond at once to the revelation they've received. Immediate response to divine revelation characterizes biblical faith (see 1 Samuel 3:4-10; Isaiah 6:8; Matthew 4:20-22).

"With haste" (Greek: *speuding*)—The same word used to describe Mary's hasty journey to Elizabeth (Luke 1:39). Their haste indicates eagerness, not just speed. They are compelled by what they've heard and seen. The Greek *speuding* conveys urgency and eagerness, not merely physical speed.

They leave their flocks unattended, a remarkable decision given their professional responsibility. This suggests several possibilities:

- The supernatural nature of the encounter convinced them of its supreme importance, worth any risk. The shepherds' willingness to leave their flocks demonstrates their conviction about the supernatural encounter.
- They trusted that the God who announced this would protect their flocks. Trust in God's protection is a consistent biblical theme (see Psalm 121:4; Matthew 6:25-34).
- The location was close enough (Bethlehem's outskirts) that they could return quickly. Bethlehem's fields would have been within a mile or two of the town center.
- Some may have stayed with the flocks while others went. Ancient shepherd practices sometimes involved teams taking turns watching flocks.

Regardless, their immediate obedience models faith in action. They heard God's word and responded without delay, without demanding further proof, without calculating the cost. This is the proper response to divine revelation—immediate, trusting obedience. Immediate obedience characterizes true faith (see Genesis 22:3; Hebrews 11:8).

### **Faith and Verification**

"And they went... and found" (Luke 2:16). The shepherds' journey is an act of faith—they believe the angel's message enough to go looking. Yet it also involves verification—they go "to see this thing that has happened." The balance of faith and verification appears throughout Scripture (see John 20:29; 1 John 1:1-3).

Biblical faith is not blind credulity but trust based on evidence. The shepherds believe the angel's announcement but also seek to verify it by seeing with their own eyes. God honors this—He provides tangible evidence (the baby in the manger) that confirms the

supernatural revelation (the angelic announcement). God provides evidence for faith (see John 10:38; 14:11; Acts 1:3).

They "found" what was promised. The sign proved reliable. Mary and Joseph were there. The baby lay in a manger, just as the angel had said. The extraordinary claim ("a Savior, Christ the Lord, is born") was confirmed by the specific, verifiable sign. The correspondence between promise and fulfillment demonstrates God's faithfulness (see Joshua 21:45; 1 Kings 8:56).

This pattern—revelation, faith, verification—characterizes healthy Christian belief. We don't believe without evidence, but neither do we demand proof before we're willing to trust. We hear God's word, we respond in faith, and we find that God's promises are trustworthy. This pattern of hearing, believing, and verifying characterizes biblical faith (see Acts 17:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

### **Proclamation**

"And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them" (Luke 2:17-18).

The shepherds become the first evangelists. Having seen the Christ child and verified the angel's message, they cannot remain silent. They "made known" (*egnōrisan*)—they published, proclaimed, spread abroad what they had heard and seen. The verb *gnōrizō* means to make known, reveal, or proclaim. It's used of gospel proclamation in Ephesians 1:9; 3:3, 5, 10; 6:19.

Their proclamation has two components:

1. "The saying that had been told them"—the angel's announcement of the Savior's birth. The content of proclamation must include the revealed message, not merely personal experience.
2. Their own eyewitness testimony—they had seen the baby in the manger, confirming the sign. Personal testimony confirms and illustrates the gospel message (see John 4:39; Acts 22:15; 1 John 1:1-3).

Authentic Christian witness combines these elements: the revealed truth (Scripture, gospel proclamation) and personal testimony (what we have experienced of Christ). The shepherds model this balanced approach. Effective Christian witness combines revealed truth and personal experience (see Acts 4:20; 2 Corinthians 4:13; 1 Peter 3:15).

Those who heard "wondered" (Greek: *ethaumasan*)—they were amazed, astonished. The response is not necessarily belief (Luke uses different words for faith) but the amazement that naturally arises from hearing extraordinary claims backed by eyewitness testimony. The Greek *thaumazō* indicates amazement or wonder, which may or may not lead to faith (see Luke 4:22; 11:14; John 7:21).

The shepherds' social status makes their witness more remarkable. These are not educated rabbis, not religious authorities, not people whose testimony carried weight in society. They are simple, poor, marginalized workers. Yet God chose them as His first witnesses and spokesmen. This anticipates Paul's later statement: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Corinthians 1:27). God's choice of the weak and foolish is a recurring biblical pattern.

### **Mary's Response**

"But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

In contrast to the shepherds' external proclamation, Mary's response is internal contemplation. The verb "treasured up" (*syнетері*) suggests careful preservation, holding something valuable and keeping it safe. The verb *syntereo* means to preserve carefully, to keep safe. It suggests intentional, attentive preservation.

"Pondering" (Greek: *symballousa*) literally means "throwing together" or "comparing." Mary is actively reflecting, trying to understand, connecting what's happening with what she already knows (the angel's earlier announcement, Elizabeth's prophecy, her own Magnificat). She's engaging in theological reflection, seeking to comprehend the mystery unfolding before her. The verb *symballō* literally means to throw together, hence to compare, ponder, or reflect upon.

"In her heart"—not merely intellectually but deeply, existentially, in the very core of her being. This is not casual curiosity but profound, prayerful meditation on divine truth. The "heart" in biblical thought is the center of personality, will, and understanding, not merely emotions.

Luke likely learned these details from Mary herself or from someone close to her. Mary's contemplative response suggests she was the source for much of Luke's infancy narrative. She preserved these memories, reflected on them, and eventually shared them with the early Christian community. Luke's sources for the infancy narrative likely included Mary herself or those close to her (see Luke 1:1-4).

Mary models contemplative discipleship—the interior life of prayer, reflection, and meditation that must complement external proclamation. The shepherds go forth and tell; Mary treasures and ponders. Both responses are valid and necessary. The Christian life requires both action and contemplation, proclamation and prayer, witness and worship. The balance of action and contemplation is essential to Christian spirituality (see Luke 10:38-42).

### **Return and Glorification**

"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them" (Luke 2:20).

The shepherds return to their ordinary work, but they return transformed. They don't abandon their vocation or leave their flocks permanently. They go back to the same fields, the same sheep, the same work. But they return as different men. The pattern of returning to ordinary life transformed appears in other Gospel narratives (see Mark 5:19; John 21:15-19).

"Glorifying and praising God"—their encounter with Christ has made them worshipers. The dual expression (*doxazontes kai ainountes*) emphasizes their exuberant praise. The dual expression *doxazō* and *aineō* emphasizes exuberant, wholehearted praise. They had met God incarnate, and worship is the only appropriate response.

"For all they had heard and seen"—both the auditory revelation (the angels' announcement) and the visual confirmation (the baby in the manger) become grounds for praise. God has spoken and acted; He deserves all glory. Both hearing and seeing are grounds for worship (see Psalm 34:8; 66:16; John 20:29).

"As it had been told them"—God's word proved reliable. What was promised was fulfilled. This confirmation of God's trustworthiness intensifies their praise. A God who keeps His promises is worthy of worship. God's faithfulness to His promises is a foundational reason for worship (see Psalm 100:5; 1 Corinthians 1:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:24).

The shepherds' return to ordinary life as worshipers is highly significant. Christian faith doesn't necessarily mean abandoning one's earthly vocation but transforming it. They return to shepherding, but now they're shepherds who have seen the Chief Shepherd. Their ordinary work becomes an arena for glorifying God. This models the Christian life: we live in the same world, do the same work, but as those who have encountered Christ, and this transforms everything. The transformation of ordinary work through encounter with Christ is a key biblical principle (see Colossians 3:23-24; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

### **Theological Significance of the Shepherds' Role**

The shepherds' inclusion in the Nativity narrative carries profound theological weight:

### **God's Preferential Option for the Marginalized**

God chose the poor, the overlooked, the marginalized as His first witnesses. This choice reveals His character and the nature of His kingdom. He does not operate according to worldly standards of importance but shows special care for those the world deems unimportant. God's preferential concern for the poor and marginalized appears throughout Scripture: Deuteronomy 10:18; Psalm 146:7-9; Isaiah 61:1-2; James 2:5.

Mary's Magnificat anticipated this: "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate" (Luke 1:52). Mary's Magnificat anticipates the reversal theme that characterizes Jesus' ministry. The shepherds' experience fulfills this prophetic principle.

Jesus' later ministry consistently reached out to the marginalized: tax collectors, sinners, lepers, the poor, women, children, Samaritans—all those excluded or looked down upon

by religious establishment. Jesus' ministry to the marginalized is pervasive in the Gospels: Luke 5:27-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-2; 19:1-10. His birth announcement to shepherds prefigures this lifelong pattern.

### **The Davidic Shepherd Motif**

David was a shepherd before becoming king (1 Samuel 16:11-13 describes David's anointing while still shepherding; 1 Samuel 17:34-36 describes his shepherd experiences). That shepherds are the first to hear of David's greater Son being born in David's city creates a powerful connection. The new King, like the old, is associated with shepherds.

God Himself is portrayed as shepherd throughout Scripture (Psalm 23 is the most famous "shepherd psalm"; Psalm 80:1; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34 develops the shepherd metaphor extensively). The appearance to shepherds reinforces that this newborn is both Son of David and Son of God, the divine Shepherd entering His creation.

Jesus will later identify Himself as "the good shepherd" (John 10:11-18), describing His mission in terms of shepherding—knowing His sheep, laying down His life for them, gathering them into one flock. Jesus' "good shepherd" discourse makes explicit what the Nativity narrative implies. The birth announcement to shepherds anticipates this self-identification.

### **Universal Accessibility of the Gospel**

The shepherds' successful visit to Jesus (they found Him, saw Him, and returned glorifying God) demonstrates the gospel's accessibility. No special qualifications, education, or status are required. Anyone can come to Christ. The universal accessibility of the gospel is affirmed throughout the New Testament: John 3:16; Romans 10:12-13; Revelation 22:17.

Jesus' invitation echoes this openness: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Jesus' invitation is to "all"—without qualification based on status, education, or achievement. The shepherds model that "all" truly means all—no one is too poor, too lowly, too marginalized to come to the Savior.

### **The Necessity of Proclamation**

The shepherds didn't keep their discovery private but "made known" what they had seen and heard. Authentic encounter with Christ compels witness. Those who truly meet Jesus cannot help but tell others. Authentic encounter with Christ produces witness (see Mark 5:19-20; John 4:28-30, 39; Acts 4:20).

This anticipates the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations"; Acts 1:8: "you will be my witnesses"). From the very beginning, the gospel was meant to be proclaimed, shared, spread. The shepherds are the first in a long line of witnesses stretching across centuries and around the world.

## **Worship as the Proper Response**

The shepherds' return "glorifying and praising God" establishes worship as the proper response to encountering Christ. The goal of the gospel is not merely information transfer but transformation that leads to worship. Worship is the proper goal of redemption (see Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14; Revelation 4:11; 5:9-14).

Revelation 5:9-14 pictures all creation eventually joining this worship, praising the Lamb who was slain. Revelation 5:9-14 presents the heavenly worship of the Lamb, which all creation will eventually join. The shepherds' praise prefigures the eternal worship of all the redeemed.

## **Conclusion: First Witnesses, Faithful Servants**

The shepherds hold a unique place in the Christmas story. They were the first to hear, first to see, first to worship, first to proclaim. Their inclusion in the Nativity narrative is no accident but reveals essential truths about God's character, His kingdom, and His gospel.

The shepherds remind us that God delights to work through the unexpected, to reveal Himself to the humble, to choose the weak and lowly to shame the strong and proud. Their immediate, obedient response models faith in action. Their joyful proclamation demonstrates that authentic encounter with Christ cannot be contained but must be shared. Their return to ordinary life as worshipers shows that Christian faith transforms rather than abandons everyday existence.

As we contemplate the shepherds' role, we are invited to consider: Are we watching faithfully for God's revelation? Will we respond immediately when He speaks? Will we believe His promises even when the evidence seems humble and ordinary? Will we proclaim what we've seen and heard? And will we return to our daily lives as worshipers, glorifying and praising God for His faithful, saving work?

The shepherds' story assures us that no one is too lowly, too poor, too marginalized to receive God's revelation and participate in His redemptive plan. The gospel announced to them is "for all people"—including us. And like them, having heard and seen and believed, we are called to make it known, returning to our daily lives transformed, glorifying and praising God for the Savior who has come. For further study on the shepherds, see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (IVP Academic, 2008, 25-37); Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 1994, 206-226).

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### The Presentation at the Temple

While the birth of Jesus and the shepherds' visitation occurred in Bethlehem, Luke records another crucial event in Jesus' infancy that took place in Jerusalem: His presentation at the temple. This event, occurring when Jesus was forty days old, provides further divine attestation to His identity and foreshadows both the joy and suffering that would characterize His mission. The presentation introduces two remarkable prophetic figures—Simeon and Anna—whose recognition of the infant Messiah provides a bridge between the Old Covenant and the New.

#### **The Law of Purification**

"And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22).

Luke situates this event within the framework of Jewish law, specifically the requirements for purification after childbirth and the consecration of firstborn males. Understanding these legal requirements illuminates the significance of this temple visit.

#### **The Law of Purification After Childbirth**

Leviticus 12 prescribes a period of ritual impurity following childbirth:

"If a woman conceives and bears a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days. As at the time of her menstruation, she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised. Then she shall continue for thirty-three days in the blood of her purifying. She shall not touch anything holy, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are completed" (Leviticus 12:2-4).

The total period was forty days for a male child (seven days of initial impurity plus thirty-three days of purification), after which the mother was required to bring a burnt offering and a sin offering to the priest at the temple. The forty-day period consisted of seven days of initial impurity plus thirty-three days of continued purification (see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, Anchor Bible, Doubleday, 1991, 742-768).

This ritual impurity was not moral guilt but a ceremonial state related to the mystery of life and death, blood and birth. It served to maintain the holiness of the sanctuary and to mark life-giving as something sacred requiring acknowledgment before God. Ritual impurity was not moral guilt but a ceremonial state (see Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Eerdmans, 1979, 182-188).

The required offerings varied according to economic status:

"And when the days of her purifying are completed, whether for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring to the priest at the entrance of the tent of meeting a lamb a year old for a

burnt offering, and a pigeon or a turtledove for a sin offering... And if she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering" (Leviticus 12:6, 8).

Luke notes that Mary and Joseph brought "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24)—the offering specified for those who could not afford a lamb. This detail confirms the holy family's poverty. They were not destitute (they had the means for the required offering), but they were clearly of modest economic status, qualifying for the provision made for the poor.

The theological significance of this detail should not be overlooked. The King of Kings, whose parents could not afford a lamb, would Himself become the Lamb of God, the ultimate sacrifice for sin (John 1:29: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"). The poverty that prevented His parents from offering a lamb prefigures the poverty that would lead Him to the cross, where He would offer Himself as the perfect Lamb.

### **The Redemption of the Firstborn**

In addition to Mary's purification, Jesus as a firstborn son required a redemption ceremony:

"The LORD said to Moses, 'Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine'... Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem" (Exodus 13:2, 13; see also Exodus 13:12-15; 22:29-30; 34:19-20).

This law commemorated the Passover, when God struck down Egypt's firstborn but "passed over" the Israelite homes marked with lamb's blood. In gratitude and acknowledgment that all life belongs to God, every Israelite firstborn son was consecrated to God but then redeemed through a payment to the priests. The redemption of the firstborn commemorated the Passover (see Exodus 12:29-30; 13:1-2, 11-16).

Numbers 18:15-16 specifies the redemption price: five shekels of silver, paid to the priests when the child was at least one month old: "Every firstborn of man you shall redeem... And their redemption price (at a month old you shall redeem them) you shall fix at five shekels in silver." This ceremony acknowledged that the child belonged to God by right but was being "bought back" to remain in his family rather than being given for temple service.

Luke's language emphasizes this consecration: "to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, 'Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord')" (Luke 2:23, quoting Exodus 13:2, 12, 15). The infant Jesus, presented in the temple, is acknowledged as belonging to God—a recognition that will prove profoundly true in ways Mary and Joseph could only begin to imagine.

Theologically, Jesus' presentation foreshadows His ultimate dedication to God's purposes. He is presented as belonging to the Lord, and His entire life will be characterized by complete devotion to His Father's will (Luke 2:49: "I must be in my Father's house"; John 4:34: "My food is to do the will of him who sent me"; John 5:30: "I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me"; John 6:38: "I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me"). Unlike other firstborn sons who are symbolically given to God and then redeemed, Jesus will truly give His life in service to God's redemptive plan.

### **The Faithful Remnant: Simeon**

Into this scene of a young couple fulfilling legal obligations with their infant son steps a remarkable figure: Simeon, a man who represents the faithful remnant of Israel, those who had maintained hope in God's promises despite centuries of waiting.

### **Simeon's Character**

"Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (Luke 2:25).

Luke provides a rich description of Simeon's character:

"Righteous" (Greek: *dikaios*) indicates comprehensive moral and ethical uprightness, the same term used for Joseph (Matthew 1:19) and applied to Noah, Job, and other Old Testament saints. Matthew 1:19 describes Joseph as "just" (*dikaios*); Genesis 6:9 (LXX) uses *dikaios* for Noah; Job 1:1 (LXX) uses it for Job. Simeon lived in faithful obedience to God's law, characterized by integrity and justice.

"Devout" (Greek: *eulabēs*) suggests reverent carefulness in religious observance, a person who takes God seriously and orders life accordingly. The Greek *eulabēs* appears only here and in Acts 2:5; 8:2; 22:12; Hebrews 11:7, always describing reverent, God-fearing individuals. Simeon was not merely outwardly correct but inwardly devoted.

"Waiting for the consolation of Israel" identifies Simeon with the faithful remnant who maintained messianic hope. The phrase "consolation of Israel" (*paraklēsis tou Israēl*) was a recognized term for the messianic deliverance and restoration prophesied throughout the Old Testament, particularly in Isaiah. The phrase "consolation of Israel" (*paraklēsis tou Israēl*) was a technical term for messianic deliverance in Second Temple Judaism.

Isaiah 40:1 opens with "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God," and the subsequent chapters (Isaiah 40-66) repeatedly promise God's coming salvation and restoration. Chapters 40-66 repeatedly promise restoration and salvation. Simeon was one who believed these promises and lived in expectation of their fulfillment.

"The Holy Spirit was upon him" indicates prophetic anointing and divine enablement. The phrase "the Holy Spirit was upon him" indicates prophetic anointing (see Numbers 11:17, 25; Judges 3:10; 1 Samuel 10:6; 16:13; Isaiah 61:1). In the Old Testament, the Spirit came

upon specific individuals for specific purposes—prophets, priests, kings, craftsmen, warriors. Simeon's Spirit-anointing suggests he functioned as a prophet, one who spoke God's word and recognized God's purposes.

The cumulative effect of these descriptions is to portray Simeon as an ideal Old Testament saint—righteous, devout, Spirit-filled, faithful, and hopeful. He represents the best of Israel, those who remained true to God's covenant and maintained faith in His promises despite the long delay and difficult circumstances.

### **The Holy Spirit's Promise and Guidance**

"And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple" (Luke 2:26-27).

God had given Simeon a specific promise: he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. This promise required remarkable faith. Simeon presumably had been waiting for years, perhaps decades. Yet he maintained faith that God's word would be fulfilled. For the theme of faithful waiting in Scripture, see Psalm 27:14; 37:7; Isaiah 40:31; Lamentations 3:25-26.

The promise's fulfillment required divine timing. Simeon needed to be in the temple at precisely the right moment—when this particular family brought this particular infant. The text emphasizes the Spirit's active guidance: Simeon "came in the Spirit into the temple." The phrase "in the Spirit" (*en tō pneumati*) indicates Spirit-guidance (compare Luke 4:1; Acts 11:28; 21:4; Revelation 1:10). This was not coincidence or luck but divine orchestration. The Holy Spirit, who had given the promise, now brought Simeon to its fulfillment.

This pattern—divine promise, faithful waiting, Spirit-guided timing—characterizes God's work throughout Scripture. Abraham waited 25 years for Isaac. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness before the burning bush. The prophets foretold the Messiah for centuries before His arrival. Simeon's experience encapsulates this biblical pattern: God promises, believers wait in faith, God fulfills in His perfect timing. Abraham's 25-year wait: Genesis 12:4; 21:5. Moses' 40 years: Acts 7:30. Prophetic waiting: Habakkuk 2:3; Hebrews 10:36-37.

### **Simeon's Prophetic Recognition and Action**

"He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel'" (Luke 2:28-32).

Simeon immediately recognized the infant as the promised Messiah. How did he know? Luke doesn't explicitly say, but the Spirit who had promised and guided now revealed. This was not physical appearance or external signs but Spirit-given insight—prophetic

recognition of divine truth. Spirit-given recognition is a consistent biblical pattern (see 1 Samuel 10:6-11; Matthew 16:17; 1 Corinthians 12:3).

His physical action—taking Jesus in his arms—expresses both reverence and joy. He holds the fulfillment of Israel's hopes, the answer to his own decades of faithful waiting. The gesture is tender, personal, intimate. The aged prophet cradles the infant Messiah, bridging generations and connecting the Old Covenant with the New. The gesture of taking Jesus in his arms (*edexato auta eis tas agkalas*) expresses both reverence and intimacy.

Simeon then "blessed God" (Greek: *eulogeō ton theon*). The appropriate response to seeing God's salvation is worship, praise, thanksgiving. Simeon doesn't focus on his own vindication ("I was right to wait!") but on God's faithfulness ("You have kept Your promise!"). The verb *eulogeō* means to bless, praise, or speak well of. It's the proper response to experiencing God's faithfulness.

### **The Nunc Dimittis: Simeon's Song**

Simeon's prayer, traditionally called the Nunc Dimittis (Latin for "now dismiss," its opening words in Latin), is one of the great canticles of Christian worship, alongside Mary's Magnificat and Zechariah's Benedictus. The Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:29-32), along with the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79), forms the trio of great Lukan canticles.

#### **"Lord, Now Let Your Servant Depart in Peace"**

"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word" (Luke 2:29).

"Lord" (Greek: *Despota*) is an unusual term, emphasizing sovereign authority and ownership. Simeon addresses God as Master, acknowledging himself as servant (literally "slave," *doulos*). His life has not been his own but lived in service to God's purposes. The Greek *Despota* (Master, Sovereign) appears in Luke 2:29; Acts 4:24; 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4; Revelation 6:10, always emphasizing absolute authority and ownership.

"Now" (*nyn*)—the emphatic present tense. The long wait is over. The promise is fulfilled. Simeon can now face death with peace because he has seen what God promised. The emphatic *nyn* ("now") marks the fulfillment of long waiting (compare Luke 1:48; 2:29; 12:52; 22:36; John 12:31; 13:31).

"Let your servant depart" (*apoleis*) literally means "release" or "set free." Simeon speaks of death as release from duty, like a watchman whose shift is ending or a servant completing his master's assignment. He has fulfilled his calling (waiting for the Messiah), and now he can rest. The verb *apolyō* means to release, dismiss, or set free. Simeon views death as release from faithful service.

"In peace" (*en eirēnē*) doesn't merely mean peacefully (without suffering) but with wholeness, completion, fulfillment. Simeon can die satisfied because God's promise to

him has been kept, and more importantly, God's promise to Israel has been fulfilled. The Hebrew *shalom* (peace) means wholeness, completeness, well-being—far more than absence of conflict.

"According to your word" (*kata to rhēma sou*) references the Spirit's earlier promise. God has proven faithful. What He promised, He has accomplished. This vindication of God's trustworthiness undergirds Simeon's peace. God's faithfulness to His word (*rhēma*) is a major biblical theme (see Numbers 23:19; Isaiah 55:11; Luke 1:37-38).

### **"My Eyes Have Seen Your Salvation"**

"For my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples" (Luke 2:30-31).

"My eyes have seen"—Simeon emphasizes personal, firsthand experience. This is not secondhand testimony or inherited tradition but direct encounter. He has seen with his own eyes what prophets and kings longed to see (Luke 10:23-24: "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it").

"Your salvation" (*to sōtērion sou*)—the concrete noun emphasizes salvation as an actual entity, not merely an abstract concept. Salvation is embodied in this child. God's saving action has taken human form. The substantive use of *sōtērion* ("salvation") emphasizes salvation as concrete reality, not abstract concept (compare Luke 3:6; Acts 28:28; Ephesians 6:17).

"That you have prepared" (*hētoimasas*)—salvation is God's work from beginning to end. He prepared it, He executed it, He reveals it. Human beings receive it, but God accomplishes it. God as the preparer and accomplisher of salvation is a consistent biblical theme (see Isaiah 25:9; 52:10; John 3:16; Romans 3:24-26; Ephesians 2:8-10).

"In the presence of all peoples" (*kata prosōpon pantōn tōn laōn*)—literally "before the face of all peoples." This salvation is not hidden or esoteric but public, visible, intended for all. This prepares for the universal scope articulated in the next verse. The phrase *kata prosōpon* ("before the face") indicates public, visible manifestation (compare Luke 2:31; 7:27; 9:52; 10:1).

### **Universal Salvation: Light to Gentiles, Glory to Israel**

"A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32).

This verse is the theological climax of Simeon's song, explicitly declaring the universal scope of Christ's mission.

"A light for revelation to the Gentiles" draws on Isaiah's Servant Songs, particularly Isaiah 42:6 and 49:6:

"I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6; see also Isaiah 42:6: "I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations").

The Gentiles (*ethnē*) are "nations"—all peoples outside Israel. That the Messiah would be "a light" to them means He would bring divine revelation, truth, knowledge of God. The darkness of pagan ignorance and idolatry would be dispelled by the light of truth embodied in Christ. Light as metaphor for revelation, truth, and salvation is pervasive in Scripture (see Psalm 27:1; 119:105; Isaiah 9:2; 60:1-3; John 1:4-9; 8:12).

This was a revolutionary concept for many first-century Jews who saw the Messiah primarily as Israel's deliverer. Simeon, Spirit-inspired, recognizes that God's purposes extend beyond Israel to embrace all humanity. This anticipates the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) and the Gentile mission that dominates the second half of Acts. Matthew 28:19: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." The Gentile mission dominates Acts 10-28.

"Glory to your people Israel" (*doxan laou sou Israēl*) balances the universal outreach with particular care for Israel. Christ brings glory to Israel by:

- Fulfilling God's promises to the patriarchs and prophets. God's promises to patriarchs and prophets are fulfilled in Christ (see Luke 1:54-55, 72-73; Acts 13:32-33; Romans 15:8).
- Revealing that Israel's calling was always to be a light to nations (Genesis 12:3: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"; see also Genesis 18:18; 22:18; 26:4).
- Demonstrating God's faithfulness to His covenant people. God's faithfulness to covenant promises is central to biblical theology (see Deuteronomy 7:9; Psalm 89:1-4; Romans 3:3-4; 11:29).
- Bringing Israel's Messiah, the King of the Jews. Jesus as Israel's Messiah and King is affirmed throughout the New Testament (see Matthew 2:2; 27:11, 37; John 1:49; 12:13; Acts 2:36).

Israel's glory is not diminished by Gentile inclusion but rather magnified. As Paul later argues in Romans 9-11, the Gentiles' coming to faith in Israel's Messiah demonstrates the success, not failure, of Israel's mission. Romans 9-11, especially 11:11-24, argues that Gentile inclusion fulfills rather than negates God's purposes for Israel.

The structure of this verse (light to Gentiles, glory to Israel) suggests the order of revelation: Christ brings light (revelation/enlightenment) to Gentiles who sit in darkness, and brings glory (fulfillment/vindication) to Israel whose prophets foretold Him. Both are included; both benefit; both are part of God's unified redemptive plan. The structure "light to Gentiles... glory to Israel" reflects the dual focus of God's redemptive plan, encompassing both universal and particular dimensions.

## **Simeon's Prophetic Warning**

After his song of praise, Simeon turns to Mary with a more sobering prophetic word:

"And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, 'Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed'" (Luke 2:34-35).

## **Blessing and Warning**

"Simeon blessed them" (*eulogēsen autous*)—he pronounces divine blessing on Mary and Joseph, acknowledging God's favor upon them and invoking His continued care. The verb *eulogeō* here means to invoke divine blessing, to pronounce God's favor and care upon someone.

But the blessing includes warning. Simeon's prophetic insight sees not only the joy of the Messiah's arrival but also the suffering that will accompany His mission. True prophecy speaks the whole truth, not just the pleasant parts. True prophecy includes both blessing and warning, comfort and challenge (see Jeremiah 1:10; 23:16-22; Ezekiel 3:17-21).

The direct address to Mary ("said to Mary his mother") is significant. While Joseph is present (implied by "blessed them"), Simeon's words are specifically for Mary. She will bear particular burdens associated with her son's mission. The specific address to Mary indicates she will bear unique burdens related to her son's mission.

## **"Appointed for the Fall and Rising of Many"**

"This child is appointed" (*keitat*) means "destined," "set," "ordained." God has appointed Jesus for a specific purpose that will have profound effects on those who encounter Him. The verb *keimai* means to be set, placed, appointed, destined. It indicates divine purpose and ordination.

"For the fall and rising of many in Israel"—Jesus will be a dividing line. Some will fall (stumble, be offended, reject Him), while others will rise (be raised up, find salvation, be exalted). The dual effect of "fall and rising" indicates that response to Christ is decisive and has eternal consequences.

This dual effect appears throughout Jesus' ministry:

- The Pharisees largely reject Him (fall), while tax collectors and sinners embrace Him (rise). Luke 5:30-32; 7:36-50; 15:1-2; 18:9-14; 19:1-10 show Jesus' ministry attracted sinners while repelling the self-righteous.
- The religious establishment opposes Him (fall), while the marginalized follow Him (rise). John 7:47-49; 11:47-53 show the religious establishment viewed Jesus as a threat and opposed Him.

- Those who trust in their own righteousness stumble over Him (fall), while those who recognize their need find salvation in Him (rise). Romans 9:30-33 develops this theme: Israel stumbled because they pursued righteousness by works rather than faith.

Paul later develops this theology of Christ as stumbling stone: "a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense. They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do" (1 Peter 2:8, quoting Isaiah 8:14). Jesus Himself warned: "Everyone who falls on that stone will be broken to pieces, and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him" (Luke 20:18, echoing Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 8:14-15).

The point is not divine favoritism but human response. The same sun that melts wax hardens clay. Christ's presence reveals what is in the heart—those humble enough to receive Him rise; those too proud to need Him fall. The illustration of sun melting wax but hardening clay captures how the same truth affects different hearts differently based on their receptivity.

### **"A Sign That Is Opposed"**

"A sign that is opposed" (*sēmeion antilegomenon*)—literally "a sign spoken against." Jesus will be a sign pointing to God, revealing divine truth, but He will be contradicted, rejected, opposed. The Greek *antilegō* means to speak against, contradict, oppose. It appears throughout Luke-Acts: Luke 20:27; 21:15; Acts 13:45; 28:19, 22.

This opposition characterizes Jesus' entire ministry:

- His teaching is questioned and challenged (Mark 2:6-7, 16, 24; 7:5; 11:28; John 6:41-42, 52, 60)
- His miracles are attributed to demonic power (Matthew 12:24; Mark 3:22; Luke 11:15—Jesus' opponents attributed His miracles to Beelzebul)
- His authority is denied (Matthew 21:23-27; Mark 11:27-33; Luke 20:1-8—religious leaders questioned Jesus' authority)
- His claims are called blasphemy (Matthew 26:65; Mark 14:64; John 10:33—Jesus' claims were called blasphemy by opponents)
- Ultimately, He is crucified as a criminal and false messiah (Matthew 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19—Jesus was crucified as "King of the Jews")

The opposition continues throughout church history. Christ remains "a sign spoken against"—rejected by many, offensive to human pride, a stumbling block to self-righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:23: "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles").

Yet this opposition is part of God's plan. Simeon says Jesus is "appointed" (*keitaf*) for this. The cross, the ultimate expression of opposition to Christ, becomes the means of

salvation. Human rejection accomplishes divine purpose. The paradox of human rejection accomplishing divine purpose is central to the gospel (see Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).

### **"A Sword Will Pierce Your Soul"**

"And a sword will pierce through your own soul also" (*kai sou de autēs tēn psychēn dieleusetai rhomphaia*).

This is Simeon's word specifically to Mary, and it is profoundly ominous. The "sword" (*rhomphaia*, a large sword) piercing her "soul" (*psychē*—life, inner being, heart) speaks of deep, penetrating anguish. The *rhomphaia* was a large, broad sword. The image of a sword piercing the soul indicates deep, penetrating anguish.

Traditional interpretation sees this fulfilled primarily at the cross, when Mary watched her son die in agony. John's Gospel records her presence at the crucifixion (John 19:25-27 records Mary's presence at the crucifixion and Jesus' entrustment of her to John's care).

But the sword may pierce earlier and repeatedly:

- The flight to Egypt, fleeing Herod's murderous intent (Matthew 2:13-18 recounts the flight to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre)
- Jesus' perceived rejection of family ("Who are my mother and my brothers?") — Matthew 12:48-50; Mark 3:33-35; Luke 8:21—Jesus' words about His true family could have pierced Mary's heart
- The growing opposition and danger surrounding Jesus. Growing opposition appears throughout the Gospels: Mark 3:6; Luke 4:28-30; 6:11; 11:53-54; John 5:16, 18; 7:1, 19, 25.
- Each step toward the cross would have pierced Mary's heart anew. Each step toward the cross—the conspiracy, betrayal, arrest, trial, condemnation—would have been agonizing for Mary to witness.

Mary's suffering participates in Christ's redemptive work, not as earning salvation but as entering into the cost of discipleship. To be the mother of the Messiah means sharing in His sufferings. Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation (Luke 1:38) leads to this sword. Mary's "yes" at the Annunciation (Luke 1:38) included accepting whatever suffering would come from being the Messiah's mother.

### **"That Thoughts from Many Hearts May Be Revealed"**

"So that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed" (*hopōs an apokalyphthōsin ek pollōn kardiōn dialogismoi*).

This clause explains the purpose of the division, opposition, and suffering: Christ's presence reveals what is in people's hearts. He exposes hidden thoughts, secret motives, true allegiances. Christ's presence reveals true character and motives (see John 3:19-21; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Hebrews 4:12-13).

"Thoughts" (*dialogismoi*) can mean reasonings, deliberations, questionings, or even plots. Christ forces people to decide, to reveal their true position, to show where their loyalty lies. The Greek *dialogismos* can mean reasoning, deliberation, questioning, or even scheming. It refers to inner thoughts and intentions.

This revealing function appears throughout Jesus' ministry:

- The rich young ruler's encounter with Jesus revealed his heart's true treasure (Mark 10:17-22—the rich young ruler's refusal to sell his possessions revealed where his true treasure lay)
- Judas's betrayal revealed his true character (John 12:4-6 reveals Judas's greed; John 13:21-30 describes his betrayal)
- Peter's denials revealed his weakness but also prepared for his restoration (Luke 22:31-34, 54-62 recounts Peter's denials; John 21:15-19 describes his restoration)

Christ is the great revealer, bringing to light what was hidden, exposing truth. This can be uncomfortable, even painful, but it is necessary. Only when we see our true condition can we receive the grace we need. Self-knowledge is necessary for receiving grace (see Psalm 139:23-24; Jeremiah 17:9-10; 1 Corinthians 11:28-31).

### **Anna the Prophetess**

Immediately following Simeon's prophecy, Luke introduces another prophetic witness: Anna.

"And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38).

### **Anna's Identity and Character**

"A prophetess" (*prophētis*)—Anna is explicitly identified as having prophetic gifting and calling. She is one of few women in Scripture called a prophetess (compare Miriam, Exodus 15:20; Deborah, Judges 4:4; Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14; Isaiah's wife, Isaiah 8:3). Female prophets were recognized in Israel's history.

Her genealogy is carefully noted: daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. This specificity authenticates her identity and connects her to one of the northern tribes, descended from Jacob's son Asher. Asher was one of the twelve tribes, descended from Jacob's son by Zilpah (Genesis 30:12-13; 49:20). That Luke knows and records this detail suggests she was a known figure in the early Jerusalem church.

Her age and circumstances are remarkable. She had been married only seven years when widowed, and had lived as a widow for eighty-four years (or possibly was eighty-

four years old, though the former interpretation is more natural). If we assume she married around age 14-15 (typical for the era), she would now be approximately 105 years old. The Greek allows two interpretations: "a widow for eighty-four years" or "a widow until [she was] eighty-four." The former is more natural grammatically.

Her widowhood defined her life. Rather than remarrying (which was common and accepted), Anna devoted herself entirely to God's service, spending her life in the temple precincts in worship, prayer, and fasting. Remarriage after widowhood was common and encouraged (1 Timothy 5:14). Anna's choice to remain a widow and devote herself to temple service was unusual and exemplary.

"She did not depart from the temple"—this doesn't necessarily mean she literally never left but that the temple was her life's center, where she spent her days and likely her nights (temple courts would be accessible for prayer even when inner sanctuaries were closed). The temple courts were accessible for prayer even when the inner sanctuary was closed (see Luke 18:10; 24:53; Acts 2:46; 3:1).

"Worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day"—Anna's life was characterized by the classic spiritual disciplines. Worship (*latreuō*, serving God), fasting (voluntary abstinence for spiritual purposes), and prayer (communication with God) constituted her daily rhythm. The triad of worship (*latreuō*), fasting (*nēsteia*), and prayer (*deēsis*) represents comprehensive devotion (see Acts 13:2-3; 14:23).

She represents the devout, prayerful remnant of Israel—those who maintained faithful hope in God's promises through decades of waiting. Like Simeon, she embodies the best of Old Testament piety: faithful, prayerful, hopeful, devout. Anna and Simeon both represent the faithful remnant who maintained hope through the inter-testamental period of prophetic silence.

### **Anna's Recognition and Proclamation**

"Coming up at that very hour" (*epistasa autē tē hōra*)—divine timing again. Just as the Spirit led Simeon to be there at the right moment, so Anna arrives precisely when the holy family is present. This is no coincidence but providence. The phrase *autē tē hōra* ("at that very hour") emphasizes divine timing and providence, not coincidence.

"She began to give thanks to God" (*anthōmologeito tō theō*)—the verb suggests open, public acknowledgment and thanksgiving. Anna recognized the infant as Messiah and immediately responded with gratitude and praise. The verb *anthomologeomai* means to give thanks, praise, acknowledge openly. It suggests public, vocal thanksgiving.

"And to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (*elalei peri autou pasin tois prosdechomenois lytrōsin Ierousalēm*).

Anna becomes an evangelist, proclaiming to others what she has seen. Her audience is specific: "all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem"—the faithful remnant, those who, like Simeon and Anna herself, maintained messianic hope. The "faithful

remnant" who were "waiting for redemption" represents the pious Jews who maintained messianic hope (see Luke 2:25; 23:51; Acts 1:6).

"Redemption" (*lytrōsis*) means ransom, deliverance, liberation. It's the language of the Exodus (redemption from Egypt) applied now to spiritual deliverance. These faithful few were waiting for God to act again, to redeem His people from their enemies and their sins. *Lytrōsis* (redemption) refers to ransom, deliverance, liberation. It's used of the Exodus (Exodus 6:6; 15:13 LXX) and applied to spiritual deliverance in Christ (Luke 1:68; 21:28; Hebrews 9:12).

Anna's proclamation complements Simeon's. Where Simeon's oracle was addressed to Mary with words of both blessing and warning, Anna's proclamation is outward-facing, sharing the good news with others who were waiting. Together, these two aged prophets—male and female—testify to the infant Messiah. The pairing of male and female witnesses (Simeon and Anna) reflects Luke's pattern of parallel male/female examples throughout his Gospel.

### **Theological Significance**

The presentation at the temple, witnessed and interpreted by Simeon and Anna, carries profound theological weight:

### **Fulfillment of Law and Prophecy**

Mary and Joseph's careful observance of the Law demonstrates Jesus' birth within faithful Judaism. He is not rejecting or replacing the Law but fulfilling it. His parents' obedience to Mosaic requirements shows continuity between Old and New Covenants. Jesus' birth within faithful Judaism and observance of the Law shows continuity with Israel's faith (see Matthew 5:17; Romans 10:4; Galatians 4:4-5).

Simeon and Anna represent the faithful remnant who believed God's promises. Their recognition of Jesus validates His messianic identity. The old order (represented by these aged saints) recognizes and welcomes the new order (the infant Messiah). The faithful remnant's recognition of Jesus as Messiah validates His identity and shows continuity between Old and New Covenants.

### **Public Divine Attestation**

The temple setting is significant. This is not private revelation but public testimony in Israel's religious center. God is declaring openly, through Spirit-anointed prophets, that the Messiah has come. The temple setting makes this public testimony in Israel's religious center, not private revelation to a few individuals.

Two witnesses (Simeon and Anna) provide biblical testimony. "On the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses the one who is to die shall be put to death" (Deuteronomy 19:15). Jewish law required multiple witnesses; God provides them.

### **Universal Scope of Salvation**

Simeon's explicit declaration that Jesus is "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" establishes from the beginning that God's salvation extends beyond ethnic Israel. This prepares for the Gentile mission that dominates Acts and Paul's letters. Simeon's declaration (Luke 2:32) anticipates the Gentile mission in Acts 10-28 and Paul's ministry to the nations.

This universalism is rooted in Old Testament prophecy (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6) but was often overlooked or minimized. Simeon, Spirit-inspired, restores this crucial dimension of messianic expectation.

### **The Cost of Discipleship**

Simeon's warning to Mary that "a sword will pierce your soul" introduces a note of realism. Following Jesus, being close to Jesus, even being His mother, involves suffering. Discipleship is costly. The cost of discipleship is a major theme in Jesus' teaching (see Luke 9:23-26; 14:25-33; John 15:18-21).

This foreshadows Jesus' later teaching: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24; see also Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23). The way to glory leads through suffering, for Jesus and for His followers.

### **Division and Decision**

"Appointed for the fall and rising of many"—Christ forces decision. Neutrality is impossible. People will either fall or rise, accept or reject, believe or oppose. There is no middle ground. The impossibility of neutrality toward Christ is emphasized throughout the Gospels (see Matthew 12:30; Luke 11:23; John 3:18).

This theme appears throughout John's Gospel: "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind" (John 9:39). Jesus' presence reveals and divides.

### **The Role of Faithful Witness**

Both Simeon and Anna maintained faithful hope through decades of waiting. Their perseverance was rewarded. They model patient, prayerful expectation of God's promises. Patient, faithful waiting characterizes biblical faith (see Psalm 40:1; Isaiah 40:31; Habakkuk 2:3; James 5:7-8).

Their immediate recognition and proclamation shows the Spirit's work in opening eyes to see what others miss. Not everyone in the temple that day recognized the Messiah—only those Spirit-led could see. Spirit-illumination enables recognition of divine truth (see Matthew 16:17; John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6).

### **Conclusion**

The presentation at the temple completes the infancy narrative's pattern of divine attestation. First came angelic announcements to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. Now come prophetic recognitions by Simeon and Anna. The Messiah's identity has been

confirmed by heaven (angels) and earth (prophets), privately (to Mary and Joseph) and publicly (in the temple), to the lowly (shepherds) and to the devout (Simeon and Anna). The cumulative witness is overwhelming: this child is the Lord's Christ, the Savior, the light to the nations, the glory of Israel.

Yet Simeon's warning sounds a note of sobering realism. The Messiah will face opposition. His mission will involve suffering. His mother will know deep anguish. Those who encounter Him will be divided—some rising, some falling. The joyous beginning shadows forth a costly conclusion.

As we contemplate this scene—aged saints holding the infant Messiah, prophesying both glory and suffering—we are reminded that Christian faith holds together joy and sorrow, hope and realism, triumph and cross. The path to resurrection leads through crucifixion. The way to glory leads through suffering. This has been true from the beginning, signaled by Simeon in the temple, fulfilled on Golgotha, and exemplified in every disciple who takes up the cross to follow Christ. For further study on the presentation, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Doubleday, 1977, 439-466); I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Eerdmans, 1978, 117-128); Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Baker Academic, 1994, 226-250).

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## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### The Meaning and Origins of Advent

The annual observance of Advent stands as one of Christianity's most ancient and theologically rich liturgical seasons. Far from being merely a countdown to Christmas or a period of festive preparation, Advent represents a profound theological statement about the nature of time, the character of faithful waiting, and the dual reality of Christ's coming—past and future, historical and eschatological. To understand Advent properly is to grasp something essential about Christian existence itself: we live between the times, between the "already" of Christ's first advent and the "not yet" of His promised return.

#### **The Etymology and Meaning of Advent**

The word "Advent" derives from the Latin *adventus*, meaning "coming" or "arrival." *Adventus* derives from Latin *ad* (to/toward) + *venire* (to come), literally "a coming toward." This Latin term itself translates the Greek *parousia*, which in early Christian usage referred both to Christ's Incarnation and to His anticipated Second Coming. *Parousia* (Greek) appears in the New Testament referring to Christ's future coming (Matthew 24:3,

27, 37, 39; 1 Corinthians 15:23; 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 4:15; 2 Thessalonians 2:1; James 5:7-8; 2 Peter 1:16; 3:4, 12; 1 John 2:28) and also to present arrivals (1 Corinthians 16:17; 2 Corinthians 7:6-7; Philippians 1:26; 2:12). The double meaning embedded in the very name of the season points to its theological depth: Advent commemorates Christ's first advent (His birth in Bethlehem) while simultaneously preparing believers for His second advent (His return in glory).

In classical Latin, *adventus* carried imperial connotations. It was the technical term for the official arrival of a king, emperor, or dignitary into a city or province. The *adventus* of Caesar would be marked by elaborate ceremonies, processions, and celebrations. Citizens would prepare their cities, decorate the streets, and go out to meet the arriving dignitary. In Roman imperial cult, the *adventus* of Caesar was a major ceremonial event (see S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor*, Cambridge University Press, 1984). Early Christians appropriated this imperial language, applying it to Christ, the true King whose coming—both past and future—infinitely surpasses any earthly ruler's arrival.

The Christian usage of *adventus* thus contains a subversive edge. In a world where Caesar's *adventus* demanded elaborate preparation and ceremony, Christians proclaimed that the true King had already come (in humility, to a stable) and would come again (in glory, to judge and reign). The preparation required was not external decoration but internal transformation—repentance, faith, renewed commitment to kingdom values. The Christian appropriation of imperial language for Christ appears throughout the New Testament: "Lord" (*kyrios*), "Savior" (*sōtēr*), "gospel" (*euangelion*), all had imperial connotations.

The season's name encapsulates its dual focus:

- Historical remembrance: Looking back to Christ's Incarnation, His birth in Bethlehem, His entry into human history
- Eschatological anticipation: Looking forward to Christ's return, His final victory, the consummation of all things

This temporal complexity—past, present, and future converging—is essential to Advent's meaning. We remember what has been (Incarnation), we prepare for what is to come (Second Coming), and in the present moment, we live as those shaped by both realities. The past gives us assurance; the future gives us hope; the present demands faithful living. Oscar Cullmann's classic *Christ and Time* explores this "already-not yet" tension in New Testament theology (Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson, Westminster Press, 1950).

## **The Historical Development of Advent**

Unlike Easter and Pentecost, which have clear New Testament origins, Advent developed gradually over several centuries. Its evolution reflects the church's deepening theological

reflection on the nature of time, preparation, and the relationship between Christ's two comings.

### **The Earliest Evidence (4th-5th Centuries)**

The first clear references to an Advent-like season appear in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, though the exact form and length varied by region.

In Spain and Gaul (modern France), there is evidence of a pre-Christmas fast or penitential season as early as the late fourth century. The Council of Saragossa (380 AD) mentions a continuous period of church attendance from December 17 through Epiphany (January 6), suggesting a special season of preparation. Council of Saragossa, Canon 4 (380 AD). See J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, vol. 3 (Florence, 1759).

This early Advent had strong penitential character, similar to Lent. It often lasted six weeks (mirroring Lent's forty days when Sundays are excluded) and was marked by fasting, abstinence, and intensive prayer. Some regions called it "St. Martin's Lent" because it began around November 11, the feast of St. Martin of Tours. "St. Martin's Lent" began November 11 (St. Martin's Day) and extended six weeks to Christmas, paralleling Lent's duration (see Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed., Liturgical Press, 1991, 145-153).

The focus was primarily eschatological—preparing for Christ's Second Coming. The readings and prayers emphasized themes of judgment, readiness, watchfulness, and the hope of Christ's return. This orientation reflected the early church's strong eschatological expectation and its sense of living in the "last days." Early Christian eschatological expectation is evident throughout the New Testament (Romans 13:11-12; 1 Corinthians 7:29; James 5:8; 1 Peter 4:7; 1 John 2:18; Revelation 22:20).

In Rome, the development took a somewhat different path. Evidence suggests a shorter preparatory season, more closely tied to Christmas specifically rather than having the extended penitential character found in Gaul and Spain. Rome's development differed partly due to different liturgical traditions and partly due to later development of Christmas as a major feast (established in Rome by mid-4th century).

### **The Gelasian Sacramentary and Roman Development (5th-6th Centuries)**

The Gelasian Sacramentary (late 5th-early 6th century) provides evidence for a structured Advent season in Rome, though still somewhat fluid in form. It includes special prayers and collects for Sundays in Advent, indicating the season's liturgical development. The *Sacramentarium Gelasianum* (late 5th-early 6th century) contains prayers for five Sundays before Christmas (see Leo Cunibert Mohlberg, ed., *Liber Sacramentorum Romanae Aeclesiae Ordinis Anni Circuli*, Herder, 1960).

Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) is traditionally credited with significant contributions to Advent's liturgical structure, though the extent of his influence is debated. The Gregorian

Sacramentary, associated with his reforms, contains a clearly defined four-week Advent season, which became standard in the Western Church. The *Sacramentarium Gregorianum* (late 6th-early 7th century) shows four Sundays of Advent (see Jean Deshusses, ed., *Le Sacramentaire Grégorien*, vol. 1, Éditions universitaires, 1971).

Why four weeks? Several factors likely contributed:

- Symbolic significance: Four weeks represent the four thousand years humanity was thought to have waited for the Messiah (a calculation based on traditional chronology). Traditional biblical chronology (based on adding genealogies and biblical timeframes) calculated approximately 4,000 years from creation to Christ. This symbolic calculation influenced various liturgical structures.
- Practical considerations: Four Sundays provide adequate preparation without excessive length
- Sunday emphasis: Four Sundays of Advent (rather than six weeks of daily observance) made the season more accessible to lay Christians whose work schedules might not permit daily church attendance. Medieval liturgical participation was largely Sunday-focused for laity, with daily observance primarily monastic.

The Roman Advent gradually became less penitential and more joyful than its Gallic counterpart. While maintaining themes of preparation and anticipation, it emphasized the joy of the coming celebration more than the austerity of self-denial. The liturgical color purple (or violet) was retained, but the overall tone was "joyful expectation" rather than "somber penance." The distinction between Gallican (more penitential) and Roman (more joyful) Advent continued into medieval period (see Cyrille Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources*, trans. William G. Storey and Niels Krogh Rasmussen, Pastoral Press, 1986).

### **Theological Development and Dual Focus**

By the medieval period, Advent had developed its characteristic dual focus—commemorating Christ's first coming while anticipating His second advent. Medieval theologians articulated a sophisticated theology of the "three comings" of Christ:

1. The first coming: Christ's Incarnation and birth in Bethlehem (past, historical)
2. The middle coming: Christ's ongoing spiritual presence in the believer's heart through grace (present, mystical)
3. The final coming: Christ's return in glory at the end of the age (future, eschatological)

Bernard of Clairvaux articulated the "three comings" most clearly, but the concept appears in earlier medieval theology (see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones de Adventu*, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 4, Editiones Cistercienses, 1966).

This threefold framework enriched Advent observance, allowing it to address past, present, and future simultaneously. Believers were called to:

- Remember and celebrate the Incarnation
- Open their hearts to receive Christ spiritually in the present
- Prepare for His eschatological return

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) developed this theology particularly clearly in his Advent sermons, emphasizing that proper preparation for Christmas involves opening one's heart to receive Christ now, which in turn prepares for His final coming. Bernard of Clairvaux, Advent Sermon 5: "We know that there are three comings of the Lord. The third lies between the other two. It is invisible, while the other two are visible."

## **The Reformation and Advent**

The Protestant Reformation brought varying approaches to Advent:

Martin Luther retained and valued the Advent season, writing hymns and sermons for it. He emphasized its eschatological dimension—the anticipation of Christ's return—while also maintaining its role as preparation for Christmas. Martin Luther's Advent hymns include "Savior of the Nations, Come" (translation of Ambrose's "Veni Redemptor Gentium"). His Advent sermons emphasize eschatological themes.

Reformed traditions (following Calvin, Zwingli, and others) initially tended to reject Advent along with other liturgical calendar elements, viewing them as unbiblical human traditions. However, some Reformed churches later recovered modified Advent observances. Early Reformed liturgies (Genevan Psalter, Scottish Book of Common Order) largely excluded liturgical calendar beyond Sunday and major biblical feasts.

The Church of England retained Advent in the Book of Common Prayer (1549, revised 1662), maintaining four Sundays of Advent with traditional themes and scripture readings. Anglican Advent preserved the dual focus on Christ's two comings. *Book of Common Prayer* (1549, 1662) maintains four Sundays of Advent with collect, epistle, and gospel for each (see *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1662; repr., Oxford University Press, 2011).

Radical Reformation groups (Anabaptists, later Baptists and other free church traditions) generally did not observe Advent, along with most liturgical calendar elements. Christmas itself was sometimes questioned or rejected as lacking biblical mandate. Anabaptist and later free church traditions rejected liturgical calendar as unbiblical tradition. Some questioned Christmas observance itself.

This Reformation diversity continues today, with liturgical Protestant churches (Anglican, Lutheran, some Methodist) observing Advent much like Catholic and Orthodox traditions, while many evangelical and free church traditions either don't observe it or have adopted simplified versions in recent decades. Contemporary diversity continues: liturgical churches (Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist) observe full Advent; many

evangelical churches have adopted simplified Advent practices (wreaths, devotionals) without full liturgical structure.

## **Modern Recovery and Contemporary Practice**

The 20th and 21st centuries have seen renewed interest in Advent across many Christian traditions:

The liturgical renewal movement (mid-20th century) led Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and other liturgical churches to recover Advent's rich theological content and deepen its observance. Vatican II's liturgical reforms (1960s) revised Advent liturgies while maintaining traditional structure. Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963) reformed Roman Catholic liturgy, including Advent, emphasizing biblical readings and fuller lay participation.

Evangelical and non-liturgical churches have increasingly adopted Advent practices—Advent wreaths, calendars, devotional readings—even while not following full liturgical calendars. This represents a recovery of the spiritual value of preparatory seasons. The Advent wreath, popularized in 20th century, became widespread in evangelical churches despite absence of broader liturgical calendar observance.

Advent wreaths, calendars, and devotional materials have made Advent accessible to families and individuals, extending its observance beyond formal liturgy into home practice. This democratization of Advent has strengthened its impact on ordinary believers. Advent calendars, devotional books, and wreath liturgies have democratized Advent, making it accessible beyond formal church services.

The tension between Advent and secular Christmas celebration has increased in modern consumer culture. While Advent calls for waiting, reflection, and gradual preparation, commercial culture promotes immediate gratification and celebrates Christmas from late November onward. This creates challenges for Christians seeking to observe Advent authentically. The tension between Advent (waiting, preparation, gradual anticipation) and consumer culture (immediate gratification, premature celebration) creates challenges for authentic observance.

## **The Liturgical Structure of Advent**

Traditional Advent liturgy follows a carefully structured pattern across four Sundays, each with distinct thematic emphases:

### **First Sunday of Advent: Hope/Expectation**

Readings typically focus on eschatological themes—Christ's Second Coming, the need for watchfulness, the promise of His return. This strong eschatological opening reminds believers that Advent is not merely nostalgic preparation for Christmas but active anticipation of Christ's final victory. The Revised Common Lectionary (used by many Protestant denominations) and Roman Catholic lectionary both emphasize eschatological themes on Advent 1.

Traditional Gospel readings include passages like Matthew 24:36-44 (about the Day and Hour), Mark 13:24-37 (the coming of the Son of Man), or Luke 21:25-36 (signs of the end times). Revised Common Lectionary, Year A: Matthew 24:36-44; Year B: Mark 13:24-37; Year C: Luke 21:25-36.

The emphasis on Christ's return at the beginning of Advent establishes the season's dual orientation from the start. We prepare for Christmas by remembering that the Babe of Bethlehem will return as Judge and King. This eschatological focus distinguishes Advent from mere Christmas preparation, grounding it in biblical theology of Christ's two comings.

The liturgical color is purple (or blue in some traditions), signifying both royalty (the coming King) and penitence (preparation for His coming). Purple (or violet) has been traditional Advent color since medieval period. Some churches use blue (particularly Sarum blue) to distinguish Advent from Lent.

The first candle of the Advent wreath (traditionally purple) is lit, often called the "Prophecy Candle" or "Hope Candle," symbolizing the prophetic anticipation of the Messiah and the hope His coming brings. Advent wreath symbolism varies by tradition, but associating each candle with a theme (Hope, Peace, Joy, Love) or biblical figure is common.

### **Second Sunday of Advent: Peace/Preparation**

Readings typically feature John the Baptist, the forerunner who prepared the way for Jesus. His call to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2) and his ministry of baptism provide the theme of preparation through repentance. Matthew 3:1-12; Mark 1:1-8; Luke 3:1-18; John 1:6-8, 19-28—John the Baptist features prominently in Advent readings.

Isaiah 40 is often read: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God'" (Isaiah 40:3)—the prophecy John the Baptist fulfilled. Isaiah 40:3, quoted in all four Gospels regarding John the Baptist (Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4; John 1:23).

The emphasis shifts from eschatological vigilance to active preparation. How do we prepare for Christ's coming? Through repentance, through clearing obstacles, through straightening crooked paths—both personally and corporately. The theme of preparation through repentance, clearing obstacles, making straight paths applies both individually (personal repentance) and corporately (church reform, social justice).

The second candle (also purple) is lit, often called the "Bethlehem Candle" or "Preparation Candle," symbolizing the journey to Bethlehem and the preparations for Christ's arrival. The second Advent candle continues the purple color, maintaining the penitential/preparatory tone.

### **Third Sunday of Advent: Joy (Gaudete Sunday)**

This Sunday marks a shift in tone. Known as "Gaudete Sunday" (from the Latin *gaudete*, "rejoice"), it introduces a note of joy into the otherwise solemn season. "Gaudete Sunday"

takes its name from the introit's opening word. Medieval liturgy marked this Sunday with rose vestments and flowers.

The liturgical color changes to rose/pink for this Sunday only, a lighter shade signaling that the waiting is more than half over and the celebration draws near. Rose vestments and altar cloths replace purple. Rose/pink vestments for Gaudete Sunday parallel Laetare Sunday (4th Sunday of Lent), both offering mid-season joy in otherwise penitential seasons.

The introit (entrance antiphon) for this Sunday comes from Philippians 4:4-5: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." This is the introit for Gaudete Sunday in traditional Roman liturgy.

Readings continue to feature John the Baptist but emphasize joy and the nearness of salvation. The third candle (rose/pink) is lit, often called the "Shepherd Candle" or "Joy Candle," representing the joy of the shepherds who first heard of Christ's birth. The rose/pink candle visually breaks the pattern of four purple candles, signaling the approaching celebration.

The shift to joy acknowledges that while we still wait, the waiting itself is joyful because we know what (or rather, Whom) we're waiting for. Christian waiting is not anxious or uncertain but confident and glad. Christian joy in waiting is grounded in certainty about what is awaited (see Romans 5:2-5; 8:24-25).

#### **Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love/Incarnation**

The final Sunday of Advent focuses on the immediate preparation for the Nativity. Readings center on Mary, Joseph, and the events immediately preceding Jesus' birth.

The Annunciation narrative (Luke 1:26-38) is often read, focusing on Mary's response to the angel Gabriel and her acceptance of God's call. Her *fiat* ("let it be to me according to your word") becomes a model for Advent obedience and receptivity. Mary's *fiat* ("let it be") becomes the model Advent response—receptivity, obedience, trust.

The theme is love—God's love manifested in the Incarnation, Mary's love expressed in willing obedience, the love that motivated the entire redemptive plan. As 1 John 4:9-10 declares: "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world." The Incarnation is the supreme demonstration of divine love.

The fourth candle (purple) is lit, often called the "Angel Candle" or "Love Candle," representing the angelic announcements and the love that brought God to earth. The fourth candle returns to purple, but the mood shifts to immediate expectation as Christmas approaches.

The liturgical mood is one of eager, immediate expectation. Christmas is now very close—perhaps only days away. The readings, prayers, and hymns reflect this heightened anticipation. O Antiphons (December 17-23) express heightened anticipation, each beginning "O" and addressing Christ with messianic title.

## **The Theological Themes of Advent**

Beyond the week-by-week structure, several overarching theological themes characterize the entire Advent season:

### **Hope**

Advent is supremely a season of hope. This hope is grounded not in human optimism or wishful thinking but in God's faithfulness to His promises. He promised a Messiah, and He sent one. He promises to return, and He will. Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope."

Christian hope is confident expectation based on God's proven trustworthiness. Advent rehearses the story of promises made and kept (Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in Christ's birth), strengthening our confidence that promises yet unfulfilled (Christ's return, resurrection of the dead, new creation) will likewise be kept. Hebrews 10:23: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."

Hope transforms how we live in the present. If we genuinely believe Christ will return and all things will be made right, we can endure present difficulties with patience. We can work for justice and peace knowing our efforts are not in vain. We can resist temptation knowing that the temporary pleasures of sin cannot compare with eternal glory. Romans 8:18-25 shows that present suffering is endurable in light of coming glory; hope enables perseverance.

### **Watchfulness/Vigilance**

"Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matthew 25:13). Advent calls believers to spiritual alertness, to not being caught unaware when Christ returns. The parable of the ten virgins emphasizes watchful readiness.

This watchfulness is not anxious fearfulness but alert readiness. Like servants awaiting their master's return, like bridesmaids awaiting the bridegroom, like a homeowner watching for thieves (all images Jesus uses), Christians are called to maintain vigilance. Matthew 24:42-51 (watchful servant); 25:1-13 (ten virgins); Luke 12:35-40 (master's return)—Jesus repeatedly taught watchfulness.

Watchfulness involves:

- Avoiding spiritual complacency or drowsiness (Romans 13:11-14: "you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep")
- Living righteously, knowing we will give account (1 Peter 4:7: "The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers")

- Staying focused on what matters eternally, not distracted by temporary concerns (Colossians 3:1-4: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth")
- Maintaining active faith and love, not drifting into apathy (Hebrews 10:23-25: "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together")

## **Repentance/Preparation**

John the Baptist's message—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"—sets the tone for Advent preparation (Matthew 3:2; Mark 1:15). We prepare for Christ's coming not through external decorations but through internal transformation.

Repentance (*metanoia*) means fundamental reorientation, turning from sin toward God, changing one's mind and life direction. Advent calls for honest self-examination: What needs to change in my life to make me more ready for Christ? *Metanoia* (Greek): fundamental change of mind, reorientation of life. More than feeling sorry; involves turning toward God.

This preparation includes:

- Confession of sin and receiving forgiveness
- Reconciliation with those we've wronged
- Renewed commitment to obedience
- Clearing away obstacles to spiritual growth
- Simplifying life to focus on what truly matters

John the Baptist's specific ethical instructions (Luke 3:10-14) show that repentance involves concrete life changes.

## **Joy**

Despite its penitential elements, Advent is fundamentally joyful. The good news of the Incarnation, the hope of Christ's return—these are causes for profound gladness. Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

Gaudete Sunday makes this explicit, but joy permeates the entire season. This is the joy of anticipation, of knowing something wonderful is coming, of being on the threshold of celebration. Joy in anticipation appears throughout Scripture (see Psalm 126; Isaiah 35:10; Luke 1:14, 44; John 16:20-22).

Christian joy differs from mere happiness. It's not dependent on circumstances but rooted in God's unchanging character and faithful promises. Even in difficulty, believers can experience deep joy because their hope is secure. Christian joy contrasts with happiness

(circumstance-dependent emotion). See Habakkuk 3:17-18; John 16:33; Romans 5:3-5; James 1:2-4.

## **Peace**

The angels' announcement—"on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased"—resonates throughout Advent (Luke 2:14). Christ came to bring peace: peace with God (reconciliation), inner peace (freedom from guilt and anxiety), and ultimately cosmic peace (all things reconciled and restored). Romans 5:1 (peace with God); Philippians 4:6-7 (inner peace); Colossians 1:20 (cosmic peace/reconciliation).

Advent peace is not merely the absence of conflict but the positive presence of *shalom*—wholeness, completeness, flourishing, right relationship with God and others. Hebrew *shalom* encompasses wholeness, well-being, flourishing—far richer than mere absence of conflict.

This peace is both gift and calling. We receive it from Christ, and we're called to be peacemakers, extending reconciliation in our relationships and working for justice and peace in the world. Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."

## **Love**

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). The Incarnation is the ultimate expression of divine love, and Advent invites contemplation of this love and response to it. God's love expressed through giving His Son is central to Christian gospel.

God's love is not abstract sentiment but concrete action—He gave His Son, who took on flesh, who lived and died and rose for us. This love demonstrated becomes the pattern for Christian love (1 John 3:16; 4:7-12). 1 John 3:16: "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." 1 John 4:7-12 develops theology of love rooted in Incarnation.

Advent's emphasis on love reaches its climax on the Fourth Sunday but permeates the entire season. We prepare for Christmas by opening our hearts to receive and extend divine love. Fourth Sunday of Advent's focus on Mary, Annunciation, and Incarnation emphasizes love as motivation for redemption.

## **Advent and the Church Year**

Advent inaugurates the Christian liturgical year, beginning a new cycle of celebrating salvation history. This placement is significant:

Beginning with expectant waiting (Advent) rather than triumphant celebration (Easter) reminds us that the Christian life begins with recognizing need, with longing for God, with humble receptivity. Before resurrection comes waiting; before exaltation comes preparation. Beginning the church year with Advent (waiting, preparation) rather than

Easter (triumph) reflects the theological priority of recognizing need before celebrating fulfillment.

The church year's structure mirrors salvation history:

- Advent: anticipation and preparation
- Christmas/Epiphany: manifestation of Christ
- Lent: preparation for Christ's passion
- Holy Week: Christ's suffering and death
- Easter: resurrection and new life
- Pentecost: sending of the Spirit
- Ordinary Time: the church's mission in the world

The liturgical year structure rehearses salvation history, forming believers through annual repetition of this sacred narrative.

Living through this cycle annually forms believers spiritually, rehearsing the grand narrative of redemption, shaping our identity as people who live between Christ's comings, whose lives are defined by His story. James K.A. Smith explores liturgical formation in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Baker Academic, 2009).

### **Conclusion: The Continuing Relevance of Advent**

In an age of instant gratification, constant entertainment, and reluctance to wait for anything, Advent's message is countercultural and desperately needed. It teaches us that:

Waiting has spiritual value. We are not entitled to immediate fulfillment. Some of God's best gifts come through patient endurance. Waiting is countercultural in instant-gratification society. Advent teaches spiritual value of patience, delayed gratification, disciplined anticipation.

Preparation matters. We cannot rush into celebration without proper preparation. The quality of our Christmas depends partly on the quality of our Advent. The relationship between Advent preparation and Christmas celebration parallels Lent and Easter—quality of celebration depends partly on quality of preparation.

The present is shaped by past and future. We live differently when we remember what Christ has done and anticipate what He will do. Oscar Cullmann's "already-not yet" theology shows how Christian existence is defined by tension between Christ's two comings.

Longing and fulfillment coexist. We have already received Christ (He has come), yet we still await His return. We live in the "already-not yet" tension that defines Christian

existence. George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Eerdmans, 1974), explores "already-not yet" eschatology.

Hope is realistic. Christian hope acknowledges present difficulty while maintaining confidence in God's ultimate victory. Advent's dual focus—both comings of Christ—grounds this hope in history and projects it into the future. Christian hope is neither naive optimism nor wishful thinking but confident expectation based on God's proven faithfulness (past) and certain promises (future).

As we enter Advent year after year, we are invited into a rhythm of life that resists the frenetic pace of modern culture, that values waiting and preparation, that lives toward God's promised future while celebrating His past faithfulness. In this season, we learn what it means to be Christian: to be people who wait, who hope, who prepare, who long for God's kingdom to come fully, who live in joyful anticipation of Christ's return, and who celebrate His first coming with hearts enlarged by faithful waiting. For further reading on Advent, see Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Liturgical Press, 1991); Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year* (Pueblo, 1981); Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Abingdon, 1996).

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## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### The Advent Wreath

Among the most beloved and widely recognized symbols of the Advent season is the Advent wreath—a circular arrangement of evergreen branches adorned with candles, typically four arranged around the perimeter and sometimes a fifth in the center. This simple yet profound symbol has become ubiquitous in Christian homes and churches across denominational lines, serving as a visual and liturgical marker of the progression through Advent toward Christmas. Yet for all its familiarity, the Advent wreath's rich symbolism and relatively recent history are often overlooked. Understanding this symbol's origins, meaning, and proper use can deepen our observance of Advent and enhance our spiritual preparation for Christmas.

#### **Historical Origins**

Unlike many liturgical symbols whose origins stretch back to the early church or medieval period, the Advent wreath is a relatively modern innovation, emerging in 19th-century Germany and spreading globally only in the 20th century.

#### **The Lutheran Connection: Johann Hinrich Wichern**

The Advent wreath as we know it originated in 1839 with Johann Hinrich Wichern (1808-1881), a Lutheran pastor and pioneering social reformer in Hamburg, Germany. For biographical information on Wichern, see Martin Gerhardt, *Johann Hinrich Wichern: Ein Lebensbild*, 3 vols. (Agentur des Rauhen Hauses, 1927-1931). See also Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981, 165).

Wichern founded the Rauhes Haus ("Rough House"), a home for impoverished and at-risk children in Hamburg. This institution combined Christian faith with practical care, providing shelter, education, and vocational training for children from difficult circumstances. The Rauhes Haus pioneered what would become the modern Christian social welfare movement in Germany (see Dieter Lührmann, "Johann Hinrich Wichern and the Origins of the Inner Mission," in *Protestant Social Thought: From Wichern to Honecker*, ed. William Hutchison, Cambridge University Press, 1989, 45-68).

During Advent 1839, the children at Rauhes Haus repeatedly asked Wichern when Christmas would arrive. To help them count the days and understand the progression of the season, Wichern created a wooden ring or wheel mounted with candles—one for each day from the first Sunday of Advent until Christmas Eve. The story of the first Advent wreath at Rauhes Haus is recounted in Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs* (Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958, 98-99).

The original wreath was quite large (made from an old cartwheel, according to some accounts) and held numerous candles:

- Nineteen small white candles representing the weekdays of Advent
- Four large red candles representing the four Sundays of Advent

The distinction between large red candles (Sundays) and small white candles (weekdays) maintained liturgical distinction between Sunday and ordinary days (see Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, 99).

Each day during family prayers, another candle would be lit, allowing the children to see visibly that Christmas was approaching. The daily lighting ritual combined practical pedagogy (teaching patience and anticipation) with spiritual formation (daily prayer and Scripture reading). Wichern's integration of spiritual formation with practical education reflected his broader social theology. His motto was "There is only one salvation: Jesus Christ for all. There is only one hope: Jesus Christ for all."

This practice spread first within Lutheran circles in Germany, then more broadly throughout German-speaking regions. The daily candles were eventually dropped, and the wreath simplified to include only the four Sunday candles, making it more practical for weekly rather than daily observance. The simplification to four Sunday candles made the Advent wreath more practical for parish and home use. Most families could not maintain daily candle lighting but could observe a weekly ritual.

## Catholic Adoption and Global Spread

The Advent wreath remained primarily a German Lutheran practice through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Its adoption by other Christian communities came gradually:

German Catholics began adopting the practice in the early 20th century, particularly after World War I when many German cultural practices were being reasserted and celebrated. The wreath's Christian symbolism and devotional utility transcended denominational boundaries. The post-WWI period saw a general revival of German cultural and religious traditions as the nation sought to rebuild identity and community after the war's devastation.

After World War II, American and Allied soldiers stationed in Germany encountered the Advent wreath and brought the practice home. This accelerated its spread to English-speaking countries. American military chaplains serving in Germany after WWII encountered the Advent wreath and introduced it to their home congregations upon returning. This military-to-civilian transmission accelerated the wreath's spread in the United States.

By the 1930s-1950s, the Advent wreath was appearing in Catholic parishes and homes in Europe and North America, though still not universally. The liturgical renewal movement of the mid-20th century, with its emphasis on recovering meaningful ritual and symbol, helped popularize the wreath. The liturgical renewal movement, with roots in 19th-century Catholic monasticism and 20th-century Protestant scholarship, emphasized meaningful symbol and active participation over rote observance (see Adam, *The Liturgical Year*, 160-175).

Vatican II's liturgical reforms (1960s) encouraged active participation and domestic devotion. The Advent wreath, as a symbol suitable for both church and home, fit perfectly with these goals. Catholic liturgical documents began mentioning and endorsing the practice. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), promulgated by Vatican II in 1963, encouraged popular devotions "in harmony with the liturgy" and suited to "the seasons of the liturgical year." The Advent wreath fit these criteria perfectly.

By the late 20th century, the Advent wreath had achieved near-universal status in Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and many other Protestant churches. Even traditions historically resistant to liturgical symbolism (evangelical, Baptist, non-denominational) have increasingly adopted the wreath. The widespread adoption of the Advent wreath in non-liturgical Protestant churches represents a significant shift. Churches that historically rejected liturgical calendar and symbols have increasingly found value in Advent observance, viewing it as biblically grounded and spiritually beneficial.

Today the Advent wreath is ecumenical in the truest sense—used across virtually all Christian traditions, transcending theological and liturgical differences. It has become one of Christianity's most universally recognized seasonal symbols. The Advent wreath has

achieved a status similar to the Christmas tree—a symbol transcending its specific origins to become nearly universal in Christian practice.

### **The Symbolism of the Wreath**

The Advent wreath's power lies not merely in its aesthetic appeal but in its rich, multi-layered symbolism. Each element carries theological significance:

#### **The Circular Shape**

The circle is one of humanity's most ancient and universal symbols, representing eternity, completeness, and the cyclical nature of time. In Christian theology, the circle takes on specific meanings:

**Eternity and God's nature:** A circle has no beginning or end, making it an apt symbol for God's eternal existence. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Revelation 1:8). This self-description of God emphasizes His eternal, unchanging nature—He is the beginning and the end, encompassing all of time.

**God's endless love and faithfulness:** The unbroken circle represents God's unfailing covenant love. His mercies never cease; His faithfulness has no end (Lamentations 3:22-23: "The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness." Psalm 136 repeats the refrain "for his steadfast love endures forever" twenty-six times).

**The cyclical nature of the church year:** The circular wreath mirrors the liturgical calendar's annual cycle. We journey through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Ordinary Time, year after year, each cycle deepening our formation in Christ. The liturgical year's cyclical nature reflects both the natural cycles of seasons and the spiritual rhythm of formation. We revisit the same events and themes annually, but we do so as different people, transformed by the previous year's journey.

**Christ's eternal kingship:** The circle resembles a crown, reminding us that Christ is the eternal King whose reign has no end. "Of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33, from the angel's announcement to Mary). Christ's eternal kingship is a central Advent theme.

**The continuity between Old and New Covenants:** The circular shape can represent the unity of salvation history—God's promises in the Old Testament finding fulfillment in Christ, with no break in God's redemptive plan. Romans 9-11 develops Paul's theology of the continuity between God's Old Testament promises to Israel and their fulfillment in Christ. There is one people of God, one covenant, one plan of salvation.

### **The Evergreen Branches**

Evergreens—fir, pine, spruce, holly, ivy—retain their green color throughout winter, remaining alive and vibrant when other plants appear dead or dormant. This characteristic makes them powerful Christian symbols:

**Eternal life in Christ:** Just as evergreens stay green through winter's death, believers have eternal life that death cannot destroy. "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Jesus' declaration to Martha before raising Lazarus establishes eternal life as His gift to believers.

**God's faithfulness:** While circumstances change and seasons shift, God remains constant. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Christ's unchanging nature provides stability and hope in changing circumstances.

**Hope amid darkness:** The green wreath in December's darkness symbolizes hope—the confident expectation that spring will come, that Christ has come and will come again, that death does not have the final word. Romans 8:24-25: "For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

**New life and renewal:** Evergreens point to the new life available in Christ and the renewal He brings. "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Being "in Christ" creates new identity and new life.

**The Garden of Eden and Paradise restored:** Evergreens recall the paradise of Eden, lost through sin but restored through Christ. The promise of new creation, where life flourishes eternally, is symbolized in branches that never die. Revelation 21-22 describes the new creation as a restored paradise, echoing Eden's perfection but surpassing it.

**Persistence of faith:** The evergreen's ability to remain alive through harsh conditions symbolizes faithful endurance. Christians are called to remain steadfast regardless of circumstances, rooted in Christ who is our life. Colossians 2:6-7: "Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith."

## **The Candles**

Light is among Scripture's most pervasive and powerful images, and the candles on the Advent wreath carry multiple layers of meaning:

**Christ as the Light of the World:** Jesus declared, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). This declaration occurs during the Feast of Tabernacles, when large lampstands illuminated the temple courts, providing vivid visual context for Jesus' claim. The progressively increasing light as each Sunday's candle is added represents Christ's approaching coming.

The growing anticipation of Christmas: Each week, more light appears, symbolizing that Christ's arrival draws nearer. What begins with one candle's small flame culminates in the full light of Christmas. The progressive lighting creates a visual crescendo, building anticipation week by week toward Christmas.

Progressive revelation: The sequential lighting can represent how God progressively revealed His plan through the prophets, culminating in Christ's Incarnation. Each Old Testament promise was another candle lit, increasing light until the true Light appeared. Progressive revelation is a key biblical concept. God revealed His plan gradually through the Old Testament, with each prophecy and promise adding more light until Christ, the full revelation, appeared (see Hebrews 1:1-2).

Believers as light-bearers: Christians are called to be "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14-16). The candles can represent our calling to shine in darkness, reflecting Christ's light. Jesus calls His followers to be light, reflecting His light in the world through good works that glorify the Father.

The four weeks/candles: The number four has various symbolic associations:

- Four thousand years humanity waited for the Messiah (traditional calculation)
- Four corners of the earth (universal salvation)
- Four Gospels proclaiming Christ's coming
- Four patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph) or four major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel)

These various symbolic associations with the number four are part of Christian interpretive tradition rather than explicit biblical teaching, but they provide helpful frameworks for meditation.

Fire as purification and the Holy Spirit: Fire in Scripture represents both purification and the Spirit's presence. The flames atop the candles can symbolize the Spirit's purifying work and empowering presence. Fire purifies (Malachi 3:2-3; 1 Peter 1:7) and represents the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:3). The flame imagery connects to both dimensions.

### **The Colors of the Candles**

Traditional Advent wreaths use specific candle colors, each carrying symbolic weight:

#### **Purple/Violet (Three Candles)**

Purple has been the traditional liturgical color for Advent since medieval times, and three of the four Advent candles are typically purple:

Royalty: Purple was the color of kings and emperors in the ancient world, being expensive and difficult to produce. It symbolizes Christ's kingship—we await the coming King. Purple dye (from the murex shellfish) was extraordinarily expensive in the ancient world, making purple garments luxury items affordable only to royalty and the very wealthy (see Acts

16:14 where Lydia is a seller of purple goods; Luke 16:19 where the rich man is clothed in purple).

**Penitence and preparation:** Purple is also associated with penitence and solemn preparation (used in Lent as well). It calls us to repentance and spiritual readiness for Christ's coming. Purple's use in both Advent and Lent reflects both seasons' preparatory and penitential character, though Advent's penitence is gentler, looking forward to celebration rather than passion.

**Waiting and longing:** The color suggests the solemnity of waiting, the seriousness of preparation, the depth of longing for Christ's arrival. The depth of purple's color—darker than bright, celebratory hues—creates an atmosphere of seriousness and solemnity appropriate to Advent's themes.

### **Rose/Pink (One Candle - Third Sunday)**

The third candle breaks the pattern, traditionally being rose or pink rather than purple:

**Gaudete Sunday:** The third Sunday of Advent is called "Gaudete Sunday" (from Latin *gaudete*, "rejoice"), and rose represents joy. This candle marks the season's midpoint and the increasing nearness of Christmas. The Introit for Gaudete Sunday in the traditional Latin Mass begins "Gaudete in Domino semper" (Rejoice in the Lord always), from Philippians 4:4.

**Lightening of tone:** Rose is a lighter shade, signaling that the waiting is more than half over and celebration approaches. The solemnity of preparation begins giving way to the joy of anticipation. Rose is literally a lighter shade of red/purple, visually representing the lightening of Advent's tone as Christmas approaches.

**Joy in anticipation:** Unlike the sober purple, rose expresses gladness. We rejoice not only in Christ's coming but in the very act of waiting for Him, knowing He will come. Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." Christian joy is commanded, not optional, and persists even in difficulty.

### **White (Fifth Candle - Optional)**

Many contemporary Advent wreaths include a fifth candle in the center, typically white:

**Christ himself:** If present, the white center candle (often called the "Christ Candle") is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, representing Christ's arrival, the Light who has come into the world. The Christ Candle practice emerged in the 20th century as an extension of the traditional four-candle wreath, providing a visual focal point for Christmas Day itself.

**Purity and holiness:** White symbolizes purity, holiness, righteousness—Christ's sinless nature and His making us pure through His sacrifice. White is used in Christian worship for the highest celebrations and represents purity, holiness, and righteousness (see Revelation 3:4-5; 7:9, 13-14).

**Victory and celebration:** White is Easter's color, representing victory over death. Using it for Christmas connects Incarnation with Resurrection, birth with ultimate triumph. White is the liturgical color for both Christmas and Easter, connecting Incarnation with Resurrection and emphasizing the unity of Christ's saving work.

**Note:** The fifth candle is not part of the original Advent wreath tradition and remains optional. Some traditions omit it, keeping focus on the four Sundays of Advent preparation rather than extending the wreath into Christmas itself. Traditional Advent wreaths included only four candles, one for each Sunday. The fifth candle is a modern addition, helpful but not essential to the wreath's symbolism.

### **Alternative Color Schemes**

While purple and rose remain traditional, some churches have adopted alternative color schemes:

#### **Blue Advent Candles**

Some traditions, particularly Anglican and Episcopal churches, use blue instead of purple for Advent:

**Distinction from Lent:** Blue differentiates Advent from Lent, which uses purple. While both are preparatory seasons, Advent's character is more hopeful and joyful than Lenten penitence. Using different colors for Advent and Lent honors each season's distinctive character while maintaining their connection as preparatory periods.

**Hope and expectation:** Blue is often associated with hope, heaven, Mary, and royal expectation—all appropriate Advent themes. Blue's associations with heaven, hope, and Mary make it particularly appropriate for Advent. In Christian art, Mary is traditionally depicted in blue robes.

**Historical precedent:** "Sarum blue" (named for the medieval Sarum Rite) was used in pre-Reformation England for Advent, giving this practice historical legitimacy. The Sarum Rite (medieval liturgical practice of Salisbury Cathedral) influenced English Christianity and used blue for Advent. Some Anglican/Episcopal churches intentionally recover this practice.

#### **All Purple or All White**

Some contemporary practices use four purple candles (omitting the rose), or even four white candles, for simplicity or aesthetic preference. While deviating from tradition, these variations don't fundamentally alter the wreath's essential symbolism. While traditional symbolism has value, the wreath's essential meaning (progressive lighting marking Advent's progression toward Christmas) survives variations in color scheme.

### **The Lighting Ceremony**

The Advent wreath's spiritual power is activated through the weekly lighting ceremony, whether in church or at home. This ritual combines visual symbol with spoken word, engaging multiple senses in worship and preparation.

### **In Church Worship**

Most liturgical churches incorporate the Advent wreath lighting into Sunday worship, typically near the beginning of the service:

**Processional lighting:** Some churches include wreath lighting in the opening procession, with the wreath either brought forward or already positioned prominently. In churches with processions, carrying the Advent wreath forward at the beginning of worship makes it a focal point and involves the congregation in the ritual.

**After the opening hymn:** Many churches light the wreath after the processional hymn but before the opening prayer, making it the first substantive liturgical act. Placing the lighting after the processional hymn but before the opening prayer positions it as the service's first substantive liturgical act, emphasizing Advent's importance.

**Congregational participation:** The lighting may be done by clergy, acolytes, altar servers, or lay families (different families each week). Involving different people emphasizes communal participation in Advent. Involving different families each week spreads participation across the congregation and emphasizes that Advent preparation is communal, not merely clerical.

The typical structure includes:

1. **Introduction:** Brief words explaining which Sunday of Advent this is and what the candle(s) represent
2. **Scripture reading:** A short passage related to the week's theme (prophecy, preparation, joy, incarnation)
3. **Prayer:** A collect or brief prayer for the week, asking God's blessing on the congregation's Advent journey
4. **Lighting:** The appropriate candle(s) are lit while the congregation observes silence or sings
5. **Response:** Congregation may respond with a versicle, sung response, or Advent hymn

This five-part structure (introduction, Scripture, prayer, lighting, response) provides flexibility while maintaining essential elements. Churches adapt it to their particular worship styles.

**Example First Sunday Liturgy:** Leader: "We light this first candle of Advent, the candle of Hope, remembering God's promises to His people." Reader: [Reads Isaiah 40:1-5] Prayer: "O Lord, stir up your power and come among us. By your coming, strengthen us

to meet you with confident hope, and grant us the will to prepare for your arrival. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen." [First purple candle is lit] Response: [Congregation sings verse of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel!"]

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is the quintessential Advent hymn, based on the O Antiphons (December 17-23) and expressing longing for Christ's coming.

The cumulative effect is powerful: Each week, more light appears; the darkness yields progressively to radiance; the anticipation builds. By the fourth Sunday, all four candles burn brightly, and Christmas is imminent. The cumulative visual effect—darkness progressively yielding to light—embodies Advent's theological movement toward Christmas.

### **In Home Devotions**

The Advent wreath translates beautifully to home use, providing families with a simple but meaningful daily or weekly ritual:

**Placement:** The wreath is typically placed on the dining table or another central location where the family gathers. This ensures visibility and facilitates participation. Central placement ensures visibility and makes the wreath part of daily family life rather than a decorative object.

**Weekly or daily lighting:** Some families light the wreath only on Sundays (matching church observance), while others light it daily during evening prayers or meals, adding the new candle each Sunday. Families must determine what rhythm fits their circumstances. Weekly lighting (matching church observance) is simpler; daily lighting (adding a new candle each Sunday) builds more sustained attention.

Simple structure for home use:

1. Gathering: Family members assemble around the wreath
2. Opening prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest..."
3. Scripture: Short reading appropriate to the week
4. Reflection: Brief discussion or silence
5. Lighting: Appropriate candle(s) lit
6. Closing prayer or song: Brief prayer or Advent hymn
7. Meal or activity: Often combined with family meal

This simplified structure provides framework without rigidity. Families adapt it to their circumstances, maintaining essential elements while adjusting details.

**Involving children:** Home wreath lighting provides excellent opportunity for faith formation:

- Children can take turns lighting candles (with supervision)
- Age-appropriate Scripture or Advent stories can be read
- Discussion can connect biblical themes to children's experiences
- Anticipation builds naturally as Christmas approaches

Involving children in concrete actions (lighting candles, reading Scripture) engages them actively rather than making them passive observers. This enhances formation.

Flexibility: Home observance can be adapted to family schedules, attention spans, and traditions. The key is consistency—regular observance throughout Advent—rather than elaborate ritual. Consistency matters more than elaborate ritual. Regular, simple observance shapes family life more effectively than elaborate but sporadic practice.

### **Thematic Variations**

While the basic structure remains constant, many churches and families assign specific themes to each candle, providing focal points for reflection:

#### **Traditional Themes**

##### **First Sunday - Hope/Prophecy**

- Focus: Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah; God's promises
- Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-10; Micah 5:2-5
- Reflection: How do God's fulfilled promises give us hope?

Hope, grounded in God's fulfilled promises, is Advent's foundational theme. We hope because God has proven faithful.

##### **Second Sunday - Peace/Preparation**

- Focus: John the Baptist's call to prepare; repentance
- Scripture: Isaiah 40:1-11; Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 3:1-18
- Reflection: What obstacles need clearing to prepare for Christ?

John the Baptist's call to "prepare the way of the Lord" (Luke 3:4) shapes the Second Sunday. What internal and external obstacles need removing?

##### **Third Sunday - Joy**

- Focus: Rejoicing that salvation is near; Mary's Magnificat
- Scripture: Isaiah 12:2-6; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Luke 1:46-55; Philippians 4:4-7
- Reflection: What causes Christian joy even amid difficulty?

Joy characterizes Gaudete Sunday. Christian joy isn't circumstance-dependent but rooted in God's unchanging character and certain promises.

### **Fourth Sunday - Love**

- Focus: God's love manifest in Incarnation; Mary's obedience
- Scripture: 2 Samuel 7:1-16; Luke 1:26-38; Romans 16:25-27; 1 John 4:7-16
- Reflection: How does God's love in Christ shape our love for others?

God's love manifest in the Incarnation—giving His Son for our salvation—is Advent's culminating theme. This love shapes Christian identity and action.

### **Alternative Themes**

Some traditions use different thematic frameworks:

#### **The Patriarchs/Prophets**

- First: Abraham (promise)
- Second: Moses/David (deliverance/kingship)
- Third: Isaiah/Prophets (proclamation)
- Fourth: John the Baptist (preparation)

This patriarchs/prophets framework traces salvation history from promise (Abraham) through deliverance (Moses) and kingship (David) to proclamation (Isaiah) and preparation (John the Baptist).

#### **Christ's Comings**

- First: First Coming (Incarnation - past)
- Second: Present Coming (grace in believer's heart - present)
- Third: Second Coming (return in glory - future)
- Fourth: Final fulfillment (new creation - eternal)

This "three comings" framework (past, present, future) was developed by medieval theologians, particularly Bernard of Clairvaux (see Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones de Adventu*, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, vol. 4, Editiones Cistercienses, 1966).

#### **Characters in the Nativity**

- First: The Prophets
- Second: Mary
- Third: Joseph

- Fourth: The Shepherds
- Fifth (Christmas): Christ

This character-focused framework tells the Nativity story progressively through its major figures, culminating in Christ Himself on Christmas.

The framework matters less than consistency and intentionality. The themes provide structure for meditation and help connect each Sunday's observance to the larger Advent narrative. The specific thematic framework matters less than consistency. Choose one framework and use it year to year, building familiarity and depth.

## Practical Considerations

For those wishing to incorporate an Advent wreath into worship or home life, several practical matters merit attention:

### Wreath Construction

Purchase or DIY: Advent wreaths can be purchased ready-made from religious goods stores, florists, or online retailers. Alternatively, many enjoy crafting their own. Ready-made wreaths offer convenience; handmade wreaths offer creativity and personal investment. Either serves the wreath's spiritual purpose.

Basic structure: A circular base (wire frame, foam ring, or even sturdy cardboard) provides the foundation. Evergreen branches (real or artificial) are attached to this base, and candle holders are secured at appropriate intervals. The base provides structure. Wire frames (available at craft stores) are popular; foam rings work well; even sturdy cardboard can suffice for simple home wreaths.

Real vs. artificial evergreens:

- Real: More traditional, pleasant fragrance, symbolic connection to living plants; requires watering and sheds needles; may become fire hazard if too dry
- Artificial: No maintenance, reusable year after year, no mess; lacks fragrance and living quality

Real evergreens offer authenticity and fragrance but require maintenance. Artificial evergreens eliminate maintenance but lack living symbolism. Both are legitimate choices.

Candle holders: Must be sturdy and secure. Candles should be firmly anchored to prevent tipping. Some wreaths use metal clips or holders; others use floral picks with candle cups. Secure candle holders are essential for safety. Candles must be firmly anchored to prevent tipping and potential fire.

Size: Church wreaths are often quite large (3-5 feet in diameter) for visibility; home wreaths are typically smaller (12-18 inches) for table use. Size should match context. Large church wreaths must be visible from distance; small home wreaths fit on dining tables without dominating space.

## **Safety Considerations**

Fire safety is paramount when using an Advent wreath with open flames:

Never leave burning candles unattended. This is the single most important safety rule. Unattended candles are the primary fire safety risk. Never leave burning candles alone, even briefly.

Keep wreath away from flammable materials: Curtains, papers, cloth, decorations should be at safe distance. Adequate clearance from flammable materials prevents accidental ignition. Ensure curtains, papers, decorations are at safe distance.

Ensure stable placement: The wreath should be on a stable, level, heat-resistant surface where it won't be knocked over. Stable placement on heat-resistant surface prevents tipping and protects furniture from heat damage.

Fresh water for real evergreens: If using real greenery, keep it moist. Dried-out greenery is highly flammable. Dried evergreens are highly flammable. Keep real greenery moist throughout Advent; replace if excessively dry.

Trim candles if necessary: Long candles may need shortening so flames don't reach greenery. Long candles burning down near greenery create fire risk. Trim candles if necessary to maintain safe distance between flame and greenery.

Consider battery-operated candles: For settings with children, elderly, or high fire risk, LED candles provide visual effect without flame danger. While less traditional, safety sometimes warrants this compromise. Battery-operated LED candles have improved significantly in appearance and provide flame-like effect without fire risk. For homes with young children or fire concerns, this is a reasonable accommodation.

Have fire extinguisher accessible: In church settings especially, fire safety equipment should be nearby. Fire extinguishers should be accessible but unobtrusive in churches and other public spaces where Advent wreaths burn.

## **Timing and Duration**

When to set up the wreath: Traditionally, the Advent wreath appears on the First Sunday of Advent and remains through Christmas. Some keep it through Epiphany (January 6). The First Sunday of Advent inaugurates the church year. The wreath appears then and remains through Christmas (December 25) or Epiphany (January 6), depending on tradition.

When to light candles:

- In church: During Sunday worship services
- At home: During family prayers, meals, or devotions—daily or weekly as family prefers

In church, candles burn during Sunday worship. At home, families light candles during devotions—daily or weekly, for prayers or meals, as fits their rhythm.

How long to let them burn: This varies by context. During a church service, candles typically burn throughout worship (45-90 minutes). At home, families might light them for prayer time, a meal, or longer evening gathering. Burning duration varies by context. Church services typically last 45-90 minutes; home lighting might be briefer (15-30 minutes) or longer (entire evening).

The fifth candle (if used): Typically lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and may remain lit (or be lit daily) through the twelve days of Christmas. The Christ Candle (if used) is lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day and may burn daily through the twelve days of Christmas (December 25-January 5).

## **Theological Reflections**

Beyond its practical and aesthetic dimensions, the Advent wreath invites deeper theological reflection:

### **Light Overcoming Darkness**

The fundamental pattern of the Advent wreath is light progressively overcoming darkness. This pattern mirrors the biblical narrative and Christian theology:

Creation: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). The first act of creation was light dispelling primordial darkness. Creation begins with light overcoming primordial darkness—the fundamental pattern repeated throughout salvation history.

Fall: Sin brought spiritual darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5). Humanity walked in darkness, separated from God. The prologue to John's Gospel presents Christ as light entering darkness. The darkness cannot overcome or comprehend the light.

Prophetic hope: The prophets promised light. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). This prophecy, traditionally applied to Christ, promises light for those in darkness.

Incarnation: Christ came as light. "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). The true light entered the darkness of our world. Jesus' self-identification as "light of the world" is one of the seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel.

Christian life: Believers become light-bearers. "You are the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14-16). We reflect Christ's light in dark places. Christians reflect Christ's light in the world through faithful living and witness.

Consummation: The New Jerusalem needs no sun, "for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). Ultimate reality is pure light—no darkness remains.

The Advent wreath's progression from one candle to four (and potentially five) enacts this narrative. We move from darkness toward light, from waiting toward fulfillment, from Advent toward Christmas, from anticipation toward consummation. The Advent wreath's progression from darkness to increasing light enacts the biblical narrative from creation through consummation.

### **Patience and Process**

The wreath teaches patience. We cannot rush to Christmas; we must wait, week by week, as each candle is added. This runs counter to contemporary culture's demand for instant gratification. Contemporary culture's demand for instant gratification makes Advent's patient waiting countercultural and therefore spiritually formative.

Spiritual formation is likewise gradual. We don't become mature Christians overnight but grow "from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). The weekly progression mirrors spiritual growth—gradual, steady, progressive. Spiritual transformation is gradual, progressive, "from one degree of glory to another."

God works in time. The Incarnation came "when the fullness of time had come" (Galatians 4:4)—not before, not after, but in God's perfect timing. The wreath reminds us to trust God's timing in our lives. Christ came at the appointed time, not before or after. God's timing is perfect, even when it requires human patience.

### **Communal and Personal Dimensions**

The Advent wreath serves both communal worship and personal devotion, bridging corporate and individual faith:

In church, the wreath gathers the congregation around a shared symbol, creating communal focus and unity in preparation. Congregational focus on a shared symbol creates unity and communal identity. We prepare together, not merely individually.

At home, it provides structure for family devotion, teaching children, and personal reflection. Home observance structures family devotion and provides formation opportunities for children. The wreath becomes a teaching tool.

This dual function models how Christian faith is both personal and communal—we believe individually, but we belong to a body; we pray alone, but we worship together; we each encounter Christ, but we do so as members of His church. The personal/communal balance is essential to healthy Christianity. We are not isolated individuals but members of Christ's body. The wreath serves both dimensions.

### **Symbol of Universal Church**

The Advent wreath's widespread adoption across denominational lines makes it a rare ecumenical symbol. Catholics, Orthodox, Protestants of many kinds—all use the wreath. The Advent wreath is used across Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, and many evangelical churches—a rare point of liturgical unity.

This universality is itself theologically significant. It witnesses to the church's fundamental unity despite visible divisions. When a Catholic parish and a Baptist church both light Advent wreaths, they participate in shared ritual, acknowledge common hope, and anticipate the same Lord's coming. Shared ritual across denominational boundaries witnesses to fundamental Christian unity despite visible divisions. All await the same Lord's coming.

The wreath's simplicity enables this universality. Unlike more complex liturgical practices that divide traditions, the Advent wreath's basic structure—circle of evergreens, four candles, weekly lighting—can be adapted to various worship styles while retaining essential meaning. The wreath's simplicity enables ecumenical use. Its basic structure adapts to various worship styles without requiring adherence to specific liturgical traditions.

### **Conclusion: A Small Symbol's Large Meaning**

The Advent wreath, for all its simplicity, carries profound theological meaning and spiritual power. In an age of visual overload and constant stimulation, its quiet symbolism speaks deeply:

The circle reminds us of eternity, of God's endless love, of the cyclical rhythm of the church year that forms us gradually into Christ's likeness. The circle's symbolism—eternity, God's endless love, cyclical formation—operates at multiple levels simultaneously.

The evergreen speaks of life amid death, of hope in darkness, of God's faithfulness that never fails even when circumstances are bleak. Evergreens' symbolic power lies in their persistence through winter—life continuing when other plants appear dead.

The candles proclaim light overcoming darkness, Christ entering our world, the progressive revelation of God's plan, and the growing anticipation of Christmas. The candles' progressive lighting embodies Advent's central movement: darkness yielding to light, anticipation building toward fulfillment.

The colors express the season's emotional and spiritual range—solemn preparation, royal expectation, sudden joy, and finally the pure light of Christ's arrival. Purple's solemnity, rose's joy, white's celebration—the color progression tells Advent's story visually.

The weekly ritual teaches patience, marks time meaningfully, and creates space for reflection that our hurried lives often lack. Regular ritual creates space for reflection, marking time meaningfully in lives often dominated by hurried schedules.

Whether in cathedral or cottage, whether crafted elaborately or simply, whether lit with ancient ceremony or quiet family prayer, the Advent wreath serves its purpose: to focus our hearts and minds on Christ's coming, to help us wait with purpose and hope, to mark our journey through Advent toward Christmas, and to remind us that we live between the

times—between Christ's first advent in Bethlehem and His promised second advent in glory. The wreath's ultimate purpose is spiritual formation—focusing hearts on Christ's coming, teaching patient hope, marking the journey toward Christmas.

As we light the candles week by week, we are doing more than observing a pleasant custom. We are participating in a rich Christian tradition, engaging with profound theological truth, and preparing our hearts to receive again the gift of God's Son—the Light of the World, who came into our darkness and will come again to bring all things into His glorious light. Lighting the Advent wreath week by week participates in Christian tradition, engages theological truth, and prepares hearts to receive Christ anew. This is active spiritual formation, not mere custom.

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## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Advent Colors and Their Symbolism

Throughout Christian history, color has served as a powerful language in worship—a visual vocabulary that communicates theological truth, marks liturgical seasons, and shapes the emotional and spiritual atmosphere of sacred space and time. As scholars like Aidan Kavanagh have noted in *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), visual symbolism plays a crucial role in Christian worship. The specific colors associated with Advent carry rich symbolic meaning, connecting worshippers to deep theological themes and the historical development of Christian liturgical practice. Understanding these colors and their significance enriches our observance of Advent and deepens our appreciation for the ways visual elements shape Christian formation. The formative power of liturgical symbolism has been recognized since the patristic period, as seen in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Mystagogical Catecheses*.

#### **The History of Liturgical Colors**

Before examining Advent colors specifically, it's helpful to understand the broader development of liturgical color traditions in Christian worship.

#### **Early Church Practice**

The earliest Christians had no standardized system of liturgical colors. In the first three centuries, worship was often conducted in homes or catacombs, and the church faced sporadic persecution. As Paul F. Bradshaw documents in *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), elaborate vestments and color-coded seasons were neither practical nor priorities during this period.

White garments were common for baptism, symbolizing the washing away of sin and new life in Christ (Revelation 3:4-5; 7:9, 13-14). Tertullian explains in *On Baptism* that white baptismal garments symbolized the believer's new identity in Christ. Beyond this, evidence for systematic color use is sparse in the early church.

As Christianity became legal and then established (following Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 AD and subsequent developments), church buildings, liturgy, and vestments became more elaborate, as Robert Louis Wilken describes in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Clergy began wearing distinctive garments, but color choices were initially based more on available materials and local custom than theological symbolism, according to Gregory Dix's *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre Press, 1945).

## **Medieval Development**

The systematic use of liturgical colors developed gradually during the medieval period, though practices varied significantly by region. Archdale A. King's *Liturgies of the Religious Orders* (London: Longmans, Green, 1955) and Cyrille Vogel's *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1986) document this development extensively.

By the 9th-10th centuries, evidence suggests some churches were using different colored vestments for different occasions, though no universal standard existed. White or gold for major feasts, darker colors for ordinary time, and red for martyrs appear in various sources.

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) provided one of the first attempts to systematize liturgical colors in his work *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio (On the Sacred Mystery of the Altar)*, found in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, vol. 217 (Paris: Garnier, 1855). He outlined meanings for white (purity, joy), red (blood, fire, charity), black (mourning, penitence), and green (ordinary/neutral).

The Sarum Rite (the medieval liturgy of Salisbury Cathedral, influential throughout England) used a distinctive system that included blue for Advent, differentiating it from Lent's violet. As W. H. Frere documents in *The Use of Sarum* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1898-1901), this "Sarum blue" survived in some Anglican traditions.

However, significant diversity persisted throughout the medieval period. Different regions, religious orders, and cathedrals maintained their own color traditions. A Dominican church might use colors differently than a Franciscan one; French practice differed from Italian; cathedrals had their own customs.

## **Post-Reformation Standardization**

The Council of Trent (1545-1563), convened in response to the Protestant Reformation, sought to standardize and reform Catholic liturgical practice. While it didn't issue

comprehensive liturgical color legislation, the Roman Missal that emerged from Trent's reforms (promulgated 1570) included specific color rubrics, as Hubert Jedin details in *A History of the Council of Trent* (trans. Ernest Graf, 2 vols., London: Thomas Nelson, 1957-1961).

The Tridentine system established five liturgical colors:

- **White:** Christmas, Easter, feasts of Christ (except Passion), feasts of Mary, angels, saints who were not martyrs
- **Red:** Passion Sunday, Good Friday, Pentecost, feasts of martyrs, apostles
- **Green:** Ordinary Time (seasons not marked by specific feasts)
- **Violet/Purple:** Advent, Lent, Rogation Days, vigils
- **Black:** Good Friday (in some uses), funeral Masses, All Souls Day

Rose/Pink was permitted on Gaudete Sunday (Third Sunday of Advent) and Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), providing a note of joy within penitential seasons, as Adolf Adam explains in *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

Protestant traditions varied widely in their approach to liturgical colors:

**Lutheran churches** generally retained liturgical colors, following patterns similar to Catholic practice with some variations, reflecting Luther's conservative approach to liturgical reform seen in *The German Mass and Order of Service* (1526), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 53.

**Anglican/Episcopal churches** retained colors in the Book of Common Prayer, often following the Sarum tradition's use of blue for Advent, as documented in F. E. Brightman's *The English Rite* (2 vols., London: Rivingtons, 1915).

**Reformed traditions** (Calvinist, Presbyterian) largely rejected liturgical colors along with vestments, viewing them as unbiblical ceremonial additions. John Calvin addresses this in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (4.10.14-30).

**Free church traditions** (Baptist, Anabaptist, later evangelical movements) typically did not use liturgical colors, emphasizing simplicity and biblical warrant. As James F. White notes in *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), these traditions followed the "regulative principle"—only what Scripture commands is permitted in worship.

## **Modern Reforms and Contemporary Practice**

Vatican II's liturgical reforms (1960s) maintained the basic color system but with some modifications. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) §128 simplified rubrics, allowed more flexibility, permitted variations for pastoral reasons, and

encouraged understanding of symbolism rather than mere rubric-following (see Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996).

Ecumenical convergence has occurred in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The Revised Common Lectionary (used by many Protestant denominations) includes color recommendations largely aligned with Catholic practice, creating significant cross-denominational uniformity, as Horace T. Allen Jr. and Joseph P. Russell document in *On Common Ground: The Story of the Revised Common Lectionary* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1998).

Contemporary diversity nonetheless persists:

- Some Anglican/Episcopal churches use blue for Advent
- Some churches use white rather than green for Ordinary Time after Epiphany
- Non-liturgical churches increasingly adopt liturgical colors even without full liturgical calendars
- Cultural adaptations in Global South churches sometimes incorporate local color symbolism (see Anscar J. Chupungco, *Liturgical Inculturation: Sacramentals, Religiosity, and Catechesis*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992)

### **Purple/Violet: The Primary Advent Color**

Purple (or violet—the terms are often used interchangeably in liturgical contexts, though technically violet has more blue and purple more red) is the traditional and most widely used color for Advent. Understanding its symbolism requires exploring both its historical associations and theological meanings.

#### **Historical and Cultural Background**

Purple dye in the ancient world was extraordinarily expensive, produced from the murex shellfish found in the Mediterranean. As David Jacoby documents in "Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West" (*Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58, 2004), thousands of shellfish were required to produce even small amounts of dye, making purple cloth prohibitively costly for ordinary people.

Consequently, purple became associated with royalty, wealth, and power. Roman emperors wore purple togas; only the highest-ranking officials could wear garments with purple. The phrase "born to the purple" (referring to children born to reigning monarchs) reflects this association. Michael Psellus explains in *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers* (trans. E. R. A. Sewter, London: Penguin Books, 1966) that this phrase (*porphyrogenitus* in Greek) specifically referred to children born in the purple-draped imperial bedchamber in Constantinople.

In the biblical world, purple held similar connotations:

- The rich man in Jesus' parable wore "purple and fine linen" (Luke 16:19), signifying his wealth and status
- Lydia, Paul's convert in Philippi, was "a seller of purple goods" (Acts 16:14), indicating she was a merchant of luxury items with substantial wealth
- The robe mockingly placed on Jesus during His trial was purple, sarcastically proclaiming Him "King of the Jews" (Mark 15:17; John 19:2), though unintentionally testifying to His true royal identity
- The description of Babylon the Great in Revelation includes being "clothed in purple and scarlet" (Revelation 17:4), suggesting corrupt worldly power and false religion

In Christian liturgical use, purple's royal associations made it appropriate for seasons focused on Christ the King, while its somber tone (darker than bright, celebratory colors) suited penitential seasons.

### **Purple in Advent: Multiple Meanings**

Purple's use in Advent carries several layers of symbolic significance:

#### **Royal Anticipation**

Advent prepares us to welcome the King. Purple, the color of royalty, reminds us that we await not merely a baby but the King of Kings, not just a religious teacher but the Lord of Lords, as Raymond E. Brown explores in *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1978).

The paradox of the Incarnation—that the King came as a helpless infant, that divine majesty clothed itself in human weakness—is subtly present in purple's use. We honor His kingship even as we contemplate His humility. This paradox is central to kenosis theology, as Gerald F. Hawthorne explains in his commentary on Philippians 2:6-11 (*Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary 43, Waco: Word Books, 1983).

Christ's eternal kingship is declared by the angel to Mary: "He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:33). Purple keeps this royal dimension before us throughout Advent.

#### **Penitential Preparation**

Advent, like Lent, is a season of preparation, and preparation involves self-examination, repentance, and spiritual readiness. Purple's use in both seasons signals their penitential character. The church fathers distinguished between Advent as *tempus desiderii* (time of longing) and Lent as *tempus paenitentiae* (time of penance), as Thomas J. Talley documents in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

John the Baptist's message—"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2)—sets the tone for Advent preparation. We prepare for Christ's coming by turning from sin, removing obstacles, making straight paths.

Purple's somber tone encourages this serious self-reflection. Unlike the bright joy of white or gold, purple's darker shade creates an atmosphere conducive to introspection and repentance. Color psychology, as Faber Birren discusses in *Color Psychology and Color Therapy* (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1961), recognizes that darker colors create more solemn, introspective atmospheres than brighter hues.

However, Advent's penitential character differs from Lent's. Advent looks forward to joyful celebration (Christmas), while Lent prepares for Christ's Passion. Thus Advent purple, while solemn, carries an undercurrent of hopeful anticipation absent from Lent's more austere observance.

### **Waiting and Longing**

Purple in Advent expresses the longing of God's people throughout salvation history—the patriarchs, prophets, and faithful Israelites who waited for the Messiah's coming. Walter Brueggemann traces this Old Testament expectation in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

This is the purple of Simeon, who waited his entire life for "the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). This is the purple of Anna, who spent decades in the temple "waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). These two figures represent faithful Israel, patiently waiting for God's promised redemption.

The color visually represents the "not yet" dimension of Christian existence. We have received Christ (He has come), yet we still await His return (He will come again). We live between the times, and purple captures this liminal, waiting quality. This "already-not yet" tension is a key New Testament theme, as Oscar Cullmann explores in *Christ and Time* (trans. Floyd V. Filson, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950) and George Eldon Ladd in *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

### **Twilight and Dawn**

Purple is the color of twilight—that in-between time when day yields to night. It's also the color of dawn—when night gives way to day. This liminal quality makes it perfect for Advent. Victor Turner's work on liminality and threshold moments in *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969) helps us understand purple's transitional associations.

Advent is Christianity's twilight, the end of one liturgical year transitioning into the next. It's the darkness before dawn, the waiting before fulfillment, the anticipation before arrival. Laurence Hull Stookey explores Advent's liminal character—between liturgical years, between Old and New Covenants, between comings—in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2). Purple represents that threshold moment—no longer full darkness, but not yet full light. The dawn is coming; Christmas approaches; the Light of the World is about to shine.

### **Practical Use of Purple in Advent**

In church settings, purple appears in multiple forms during Advent:

**Vestments:** Clergy wear purple chasubles, stoles, and other liturgical garments. The color of the presider's vestments immediately signals to the congregation what season we're in. As early church fathers like Clement of Alexandria note in *The Instructor* (3.11) and Cyril of Jerusalem in *Mystagogical Catechesis* (4.8), clergy vestments communicate liturgical time and theological meaning through color and form.

**Paraments:** Altar cloths, pulpit hangings, lectern covers, and other textile decorations in the sanctuary are changed to purple for Advent. James F. White discusses in *Introduction to Christian Worship* (3rd ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) how paraments create unified visual environment supporting liturgical worship.

**Advent wreath:** Three of the four candles are traditionally purple (with one rose/pink for Gaudete Sunday).

**Visual environment:** Some churches extend purple throughout the worship space—purple banners, purple decorations—creating comprehensive visual reinforcement of the season. Marchita B. Mauck explores in *Shaping a House for the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990) how comprehensive color coordination throughout the worship space reinforces liturgical time.

In home settings, purple's use is simpler but equally meaningful:

- Advent wreath candles (three purple, one rose) provide the primary purple presence in most homes
- Table linens or decorations in purple can mark the season in domestic space
- Advent calendars, devotional books, and prayer resources often use purple in their design, creating visual consistency across church and home observance

Mark Searle discusses in *Alternative Futures for Worship*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1987) how visual consistency across church and home observance helps families maintain awareness of liturgical time.

### **Blue: An Alternative Advent Color**

While purple remains the most common Advent color, blue has a legitimate historical pedigree and is used by many churches, particularly in Anglican, Episcopal, and some Lutheran traditions.

### **Historical Background of Blue in Advent**

The Sarum Rite, the medieval liturgical tradition centered at Salisbury Cathedral, used blue rather than purple for Advent. This practice was widespread in pre-Reformation England and parts of northern Europe, as W. H. Frere documents in *The Use of Sarum*.

"Sarum blue" (a deep, rich blue reminiscent of lapis lazuli) distinguished Advent from Lent in this tradition. While both were preparatory seasons, their different colors reflected their different characters—Advent more hopeful, Lent more penitent. W. H. St. John Hope describes in "On the English Liturgical Colours" (*Transactions of the St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society* 2, 1888) how Sarum blue's deep, rich hue resembled the expensive lapis lazuli pigment used in medieval art.

After the Reformation, the Church of England's Book of Common Prayer didn't specify liturgical colors in detail, allowing both purple and blue to persist in Anglican practice (see Francis Procter and Walter Howard Frere, *A New History of the Book of Common Prayer*, London: Macmillan, 1901). Different parishes and cathedrals maintained different customs.

The 20th century saw renewed interest in recovering pre-Reformation English liturgical traditions. Many Anglican and Episcopal churches deliberately chose to return to Sarum blue for Advent as a way of:

- Distinguishing Advent from Lent
- Recovering historical English practice
- Emphasizing Advent's distinctive character

A. G. Hebert discusses this liturgical renewal movement in *Liturgy and Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935).

Today, blue Advent is common in Anglican/Episcopal churches and some Lutheran congregations, while remaining less prevalent in Catholic and other Protestant traditions (see Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

## **Symbolic Meanings of Blue in Advent**

### **Hope and Expectation**

Blue is often associated with hope in Christian symbolism. The color of sky and water, blue suggests vastness, transcendence, the heavenly realm. Medieval artists used expensive ultramarine blue (from lapis lazuli) for heavenly subjects, as Margaret Aston notes in "Segregation in Church" (*Women in the Church*, ed. W. J. Sheils and Diana Wood, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

Advent is supremely a season of hope—hope grounded in God's promises, hope looking forward to fulfillment, hope that "does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5).

Blue's hopeful tone differentiates Advent from Lent. While both are preparatory, Advent's preparation is joyfully hopeful (the Savior is coming!), whereas Lent's preparation is more soberly penitential (confronting sin, preparing for the cross), as contemporary liturgical theology emphasizes (Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church*).

### **Mary and the Incarnation**

In Christian art, Mary is traditionally depicted wearing blue, symbolizing her purity, her heavenly calling, and her role as the God-bearer (*Theotokos*). Jaroslav Pelikan explores in *Mary Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) how this depiction became nearly universal in Christian art from the Middle Ages onward, with blue symbolizing her purity, heavenly calling, and royal status as Queen of Heaven.

Advent focuses heavily on Mary—the Annunciation (Fourth Sunday readings often include Luke 1:26-38), her visit to Elizabeth, the Magnificat, her role in the Nativity. Blue as Advent's color honors her central place in the Incarnation story, as Raymond E. Brown notes in *An Adult Christ at Christmas*.

Mary's obedience—"let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38)—becomes the model for Advent receptivity. We, like Mary, are called to receive Christ, to bear Him into the world, to say yes to God's purposes. Blue reminds us of this Marian dimension.

### **Royalty and Kingship**

While purple is more commonly associated with royalty, blue also carries royal connotations, particularly in some cultures and periods. "Royal blue," as a term, reflects this association. Michel Pastoureau explores in *Blue: The History of a Color* (trans. Markus I. Cruse, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) how blue gained royal associations in various periods and cultures.

Christ the King is an Advent theme. We prepare to welcome the King, the heir to David's throne, the One whose kingdom will have no end. Blue can express this royal dignity. The feast of Christ the King (last Sunday before Advent) inaugurates the season's royal themes (see *The Roman Missal*, 3rd ed., Washington, DC: International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2011).

The combination of hope and kingship in blue captures Advent's essence: we hope for the King's coming; we await the royal Messiah; we prepare for the reign of God.

### **Distinction from Lent**

Perhaps the most practical reason for blue Advent is simply to distinguish it visually from Lent. Using the same color (purple) for both seasons can blur their distinctions, as James F. White notes in *Introduction to Christian Worship*—different seasons should look different to aid congregational understanding of the church year.

Advent and Lent, while both preparatory, have different characters:

- **Advent:** joyful anticipation, looking forward to celebration

- **Lent:** solemn reflection, preparing for Christ's Passion

Different colors honor these different tones. Blue's brighter, more hopeful character suits Advent better than purple's darker, more penitential tone. Color theory, as Birren confirms, shows that lighter hues evoke different emotional responses than darker ones.

### **Blue in Practice**

Churches using blue for Advent follow similar patterns to those using purple:

Vestments and paraments are blue instead of purple—clergy wear blue stoles and chasubles; altar cloths and hangings are blue.

Advent wreath candles in blue-observing churches might use three blue candles (instead of three purple) along with one rose/pink for Gaudete Sunday, though some churches mix traditions, using purple candles even when clergy vest in blue.

The transition to white at Christmas remains the same whether coming from purple or blue Advent. The visual shift from darker, preparatory colors to brilliant white marks Christmas's arrival. The key is the contrast between darker, preparatory colors and brilliant white celebration.

### **Rose/Pink: The Color of Gaudete Sunday**

While purple (or blue) dominates Advent, the Third Sunday introduces a striking variation: rose or pink, creating a visual break in the season's progression.

### **Gaudete Sunday: The Sunday of Rejoicing**

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally called "Gaudete Sunday," from the Latin word *gaudete* meaning "rejoice" (the imperative form of the Latin verb *gaudere*, to rejoice; see *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. G. W. Glare, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

This name comes from the Introit (entrance antiphon) traditionally used in the Latin Mass for this Sunday: "*Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, gaudete*" ("Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice"), from Philippians 4:4 (see *Graduale Romanum*, Tournai: Desclée, 1974).

Gaudete Sunday marks the season's midpoint, signaling that Christmas is now close. More than half of Advent has passed; the waiting will soon end; celebration approaches.

The liturgy's tone shifts on Gaudete Sunday. Flowers, which might be absent from the altar during early Advent, may appear. The organ's fuller sound (if restricted earlier) returns. The priest may wear rose vestments. The overall atmosphere is noticeably more joyful (Adam, *The Liturgical Year*).

### **Historical Development**

The practice of using rose on Gaudete Sunday dates to medieval liturgical practice, paralleling Laetare Sunday (Fourth Sunday of Lent), which also uses rose. As Theodor

Klauser documents in *A Short History of the Western Liturgy* (2nd ed., trans. John Halliburton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), both mark the midpoint of their respective seasons and use rose vestments.

Rose represents a lightening of tone—literally a lighter shade of purple, signaling that the penitential or preparatory season is more than half complete and its end is in sight. Pope Innocent III discusses this in *De Sacro Altaris Mysterio*.

This "mid-season rejoicing" acknowledges that waiting is difficult, that preparation requires discipline, and that a note of encouragement is helpful partway through. Gaudete Sunday provides this encouragement. Louis Bouyer explores in *Rite and Man* (trans. M. Joseph Costelloe, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963) how liturgy accommodates human nature while forming it.

The tradition spread widely in Western Christianity, becoming standard in Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, and other liturgical traditions, though not universal. *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979) mentions but doesn't mandate rose vestments, and some churches maintain purple throughout Advent, viewing the season's tone as consistently preparatory.

### **Symbolism of Rose/Pink**

#### **Joy Breaking Through**

Rose visually expresses joy breaking through solemnity. It's as if Advent's serious preparation can't fully contain the joy of what's approaching, and that joy bursts forth in the midst of waiting. Johan Huizinga discusses medieval color symbolism in *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* (trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), noting how the color itself—bright, warm, lighter—communicates emotional tone.

This reflects authentic Christian experience. Even in seasons of preparation, discipline, or difficulty, joy is never far from the faithful believer. "Rejoice in the Lord always" (Philippians 4:4) isn't limited to celebration seasons but characterizes Christian life continuously. Paul's command to rejoice is absolute and continuous, not circumstance-dependent.

The rose candle on the Advent wreath, lit on the Third Sunday, literally brightens the wreath with its lighter color, creating visual joy.

#### **Anticipation Intensifying**

As Christmas approaches, anticipation naturally intensifies. Rose/pink reflects this emotional and spiritual crescendo. We're getting close; the waiting is nearly over; celebration is imminent.

Children's excitement as Christmas nears mirrors the liturgical shift to rose. What began with patient waiting now includes eager anticipation. The tone changes from "we must wait" to "it's almost here!"

## Hope Becoming Visible

Hope throughout Advent has been abstract—we hope for Christ's coming, we await the Messiah, we anticipate salvation. On Gaudete Sunday, that hope becomes more tangible.

The shift to rose makes hope visible. We can see we're past the midpoint; we can measure that Christmas is close; our hope is about to be fulfilled. Thomas Aquinas discusses in *Summa Theologica* (III, q. 60, a. 4) how sacraments function as visible signs, and similarly, the rose color provides tangible encouragement.

This visible hope encourages perseverance. When the end is in sight, we find renewed strength to continue. Rose on Gaudete Sunday provides this visual encouragement.

## Practical Considerations

Using rose/pink effectively requires some attention to practical details:

**Vestments:** Not all churches possess rose vestments (they're used only twice per year—Gaudete and Laetare Sundays). Some substitute lighter purple or retain regular purple. The spirit of Gaudete Sunday can be expressed through other liturgical elements (Scripture readings, music, preaching) even without rose vestments.

**Advent wreath:** The third candle being rose/pink is the most common and accessible way to observe Gaudete Sunday's distinctive color, achievable even in churches without full liturgical infrastructure.

**Explaining the shift:** Since rose appears only on Gaudete Sunday, worshippers may find it jarring without explanation. Brief catechesis about the Sunday's meaning helps people appreciate rather than puzzle over the change. John H. Westerhoff III and William H. Willimon emphasize in *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980) that explaining liturgical symbols is essential for congregational understanding.

**Balance:** The goal is joyful note within Advent, not premature Christmas celebration. Gaudete Sunday says "rejoice, Christ is coming soon," not "celebrate, Christmas is here." The distinction between "Christ is coming" and "Christ has come" must be maintained.

## White: Christmas's Arrival

While not an Advent color per se, white's appearance at Christmas provides the visual culmination of Advent's color progression. Understanding white helps us appreciate Advent colors by contrast.

## The Shift from Advent to Christmas

The transition from purple/blue to white marks one of the liturgical year's most dramatic visual shifts. After four weeks of darker, preparatory colors, brilliant white announces Christmas's arrival, as James F. White discusses in *Introduction to Christian Worship*.

This shift should be striking. The sanctuary that was somber in purple suddenly blazes with white and gold. The contrast makes Christmas's joy more vivid. Maximum visual contrast at Christmas makes the feast more impressive and memorable.

Many churches heighten this effect by keeping Advent decorations minimal (perhaps only the Advent wreath) and introducing Christmas decorations—evergreens, poinsettias, lights, nativity scenes—only at Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, creating maximum visual impact. Laurence Hull Stookey notes in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* that delaying Christmas decorations until Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, while counter-cultural, maintains Advent's integrity and makes Christmas Day more special.

### **Symbolism of White**

#### **Purity and Holiness**

White symbolizes purity, holiness, righteousness—Christ's sinless nature, His making us pure through His sacrifice, the holiness of God breaking into our world. Throughout Scripture and Christian tradition, white represents these qualities (Revelation 3:4-5; 7:9, 13-14; 19:8, 14).

Isaiah's prophecy finds fulfillment: "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (Isaiah 1:18). Christ's coming brings purification and cleansing.

#### **Joy and Celebration**

White is Christianity's most festive color, used for the highest celebrations: Christmas, Easter, major feasts of Christ and Mary, celebrations of saints who weren't martyred (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 3rd ed., Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2003, §346).

Its brightness conveys exuberance, unrestrained joy, triumphant celebration. After Advent's waiting, white announces that the wait is over—rejoice! Color theory, as Birren confirms in *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, shows white's associations with purity, joy, and festivity.

#### **Light and Glory**

White reflects all light (technically, white is all colors combined, while black is absence of color). This makes it perfect for celebrating Christ as "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

The transfiguration's description—"his clothes became radiant, intensely white" (Mark 9:3; also Matthew 17:2; Luke 9:29)—connects white with divine glory. Christmas celebrates glory breaking into our world: "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (Isaiah 40:5). The promise of God's glory being revealed finds fulfillment in Christ's incarnation.

## **Victory and Resurrection**

White is Easter's color, representing Christ's victory over death. Using it at Christmas connects Incarnation with Resurrection, birth with ultimate triumph. Thomas F. Torrance explores in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) how Christmas and Easter are not separate events but unified salvation history.

The baby in the manger is also the risen Lord. White reminds us that Christmas and Easter are part of one story—the Word became flesh (Christmas) to die and rise (Easter) and reign forever (Ascension/Second Coming).

## **Integrating Color Into Advent Observance**

Understanding liturgical colors' meaning is one thing; allowing them to shape our spiritual lives is another. How can we let Advent colors form us?

### **In Worship**

**Pay attention to visual changes.** Notice when vestments change from green (Ordinary Time) to purple/blue (Advent), from purple to rose (Gaudete Sunday), from purple/blue to white (Christmas). Let these shifts cue your awareness of liturgical time. Aidan Kavanagh discusses in *Elements of Rite* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1982) how attentiveness to liturgical changes forms awareness of church time and rhythm.

**Ask why.** When you notice liturgical colors, ask yourself: Why this color? What does it mean? What theological truth does it express? This transforms color from mere decoration into catechesis. Nathan Mitchell explores in *Liturgy and the Social Sciences* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) how asking "why?" transforms passive observation into active learning.

**Let color shape your emotional/spiritual posture.** Purple's solemnity encourages introspection; rose's brightness invites joy; white's brilliance calls for celebration. Allow visual environment to attune your heart appropriately. James F. White and Susan J. White discuss in *Church Architecture: Building and Renovating for Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988) how environmental theology recognizes that physical environment shapes spiritual and emotional states.

### **At Home**

Use Advent colors intentionally in home decoration:

- Purple or blue table linens during Advent
- Advent wreath with proper candle colors
- Simple decorations using appropriate colors

Mark Searle explores in *Liturgy Made Simple* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981) how domestic use of liturgical colors connects home observance with church liturgy, creating visual consistency across environments.

**Avoid premature Christmas colors.** Resist decorating with Christmas red and green until Christmas actually arrives. Let your home environment reinforce rather than undermine Advent's distinctive character. Delayed gratification, while counter-cultural, is spiritually formative.

**Teach children about color meanings.** "Why is this candle pink?" becomes an opportunity to explain Gaudete Sunday. "Why do we wait to put up Christmas decorations?" teaches the value of Advent preparation. John H. Westerhoff III emphasizes in *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (3rd ed., Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012) that parents are primary catechists, and teaching children about liturgical symbols forms them in Christian tradition and theology.

### **In Personal Devotion**

**Notice colors in your Bible reading.** Purple and scarlet in Old Testament tabernacle descriptions, white garments in Revelation, the rich man's purple in Jesus' parables—biblical color references gain new resonance when we understand liturgical symbolism. Jean Daniélou explores in *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956) how Scripture and liturgy mutually interpret each other.

**Use colored prayer beads or bookmarks to mark Advent time.** Small visual cues can help maintain awareness of the season. Physical reminders of liturgical time provide tangible connection to church seasons in daily life.

**Journal about colors.** What does purple mean to you personally this Advent? How does rose on Gaudete Sunday affect your spirit? Let colors prompt reflection. Westerhoff and Willimon note in *Liturgy and Learning Through the Life Cycle* that journaling about liturgical experience deepens engagement and promotes reflection, often revealing insights not consciously noticed.

### **Conclusion: The Language of Color**

Liturgical colors function as a visual language, communicating theological truth without words. Like music, color speaks to dimensions of human experience that purely verbal communication cannot reach, as Paul Ricoeur explores in *The Symbolism of Evil* (trans. Emerson Buchanan, Boston: Beacon Press, 1967)—symbols speak to the whole person: intellect, emotion, imagination.

Purple's royal solemnity teaches us to approach Christ with reverence, to take Advent's preparation seriously, to honor the King who comes.

Blue's hopeful brightness reminds us that Christian waiting is never despairing but always hopeful, grounded in God's proven faithfulness.

Rose's joyful interruption encourages us midway through Advent, assuring us that our waiting will soon end, that joy is coming.

White's brilliant celebration announces fulfillment, proclaims "the Word became flesh," and invites unbounded rejoicing.

Together, these colors tell Advent's story—the story of a people waiting for their King, hoping in God's promises, rejoicing as fulfillment approaches, and celebrating when the Promise arrives. Advent's color progression tells this story visually—from preparation through anticipation to celebration, narrating salvation history.

In an age of visual overload, where images bombard us constantly, liturgical colors offer different visual experience—intentional, meaningful, spiritually formative. These colors don't manipulate or distract but illuminate and form. Neil Postman discusses in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985) the difference between meaningful and trivial visual communication; in a visually saturated culture, liturgical colors offer intentional, meaningful visual experience that forms rather than manipulates.

As we journey through Advent, let us attend to its colors, allow them to shape our worship, and let them teach us the truths they embody. In doing so, we participate in a centuries-old tradition of Christians who have found that color, rightly used, serves as handmaid to theology and pathway to deeper encounter with the God who came and will come again. Romano Guardini reminds us in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (trans. Ada Lane, New York: Crossroad, 1998) that liturgical colors, rightly understood and used, serve theology and spiritual formation—they are means, not ends, pointing beyond themselves to theological realities they represent.

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## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### Advent Hymns and Music

Music has always been integral to Christian worship, and perhaps no season of the church year has produced a richer hymnological tradition than Advent. The great Advent hymns, many of them centuries old, combine theological depth with poetic beauty and memorable melody, creating songs that have shaped Christian devotion across generations and traditions. As Don E. Saliers explores in *Worship Come to Its Senses* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) and Brian Wren in *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), hymns play a significant role in Christian formation. These hymns do more than merely accompany worship—they teach doctrine, express longing, proclaim hope, and form believers in Advent's distinctive spirituality. To understand Advent fully, we must understand its music.

## The Role of Music in Advent

Before examining specific hymns, it's worth considering why music plays such a crucial role in Advent observance and what functions Advent music serves.

### Music as Theology

The ancient principle *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the law of prayer is the law of belief") recognizes that how we worship shapes what we believe. This axiom is traditionally attributed to Prosper of Aquitaine (5th century), as Geoffrey Wainwright discusses in *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). Music, as a primary worship element, functions as popular theology—teaching and reinforcing doctrine through song, as Jeremy S. Begbie explores in *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and Heidi Epstein in *Melting the Venusberg: A Feminist Theology of Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

Advent hymns articulate core theological truths:

- Christ's two comings (Incarnation and Second Coming)
- Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment
- The relationship between Old and New Covenants
- The nature of Christian hope
- The character of faithful waiting
- Mary's role in salvation history
- The Incarnation's cosmic significance

J. R. Watson documents in *The English Hymn: A Critical and Historical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997) how the theological content of Advent hymns covers the full scope of Christian doctrine related to the Incarnation and eschatology.

Many Christians learn theology primarily through hymns rather than systematic study. The hymns we sing week after week, year after year, shape our understanding of God, Christ, salvation, and Christian life. Advent hymns thus serve as catechesis, forming believers in Advent's distinctive theological emphases, as Thomas H. Troeger discusses in *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music, and Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Charles Wesley recognized this pedagogical function when he called his hymns "poems for the people's use"—accessible theology set to memorable tunes, enabling ordinary believers to internalize complex doctrinal truths. Frank Baker explores Wesley's understanding in *Charles Wesley's Verse* (2nd ed., London: Epworth Press, 1988) and S T Kimbrough Jr. in *Charles Wesley: Poet and Theologian* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1992).

## Music as Longing

Advent is fundamentally about longing—the ancient longing of Israel for the Messiah, the contemporary longing for Christ's return, the personal longing for God's presence and action in our lives. Thomas J. Talley explores Advent as a season of longing in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

Music uniquely expresses longing. Through melody, harmony, rhythm, and poetic text, music can articulate yearning that prose cannot capture. A minor key's melancholy, a rising melodic line's aspiration, an unresolved harmony's tension—these musical elements embody longing. Susanne K. Langer discusses in *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (3rd ed., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957) music's unique capacity to express longing and emotion.

The great Advent hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" exemplifies this. Its minor key Gregorian melody, its antique modal sound, its refrain "Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel"—all combine to express centuries of waiting, hope deferred but not abandoned, confidence that God will fulfill His promises. Erik Routley analyzes this as an exemplary Advent hymn in *An English-Speaking Hymnal Guide* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1979).

This musical longing mirrors spiritual reality. We are people who wait, who live between the times, who have received much but still await fulfillment. Advent music gives voice to this existential position. The "already-not yet" tension in Christian existence, mirrored in Advent's spirituality, is explored in Oscar Cullmann's *Christ and Time* (trans. Floyd V. Filson, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

## Music as Memory

Hymns encode collective memory, preserving and transmitting tradition across generations. The Advent hymns we sing connect us to centuries of believers who sang the same songs, as Kathleen Norris reflects in *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996).

When we sing "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," we join our voices with medieval monks, Reformation congregations, Victorian parish churches, and countless others across time and space. The hymn becomes a thread connecting us to the communion of saints. Robert Louis Wilken explores this temporal unity in *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

This temporal connection is theologically significant. We are not isolated individuals but members of Christ's body that spans centuries. Singing hymns our ancestors sang makes this connection tangible and audible, as Don E. Saliers discusses in *Worship Come to Its Senses*.

Moreover, hymns preserve theological and devotional emphases that might otherwise be lost. Ancient Advent antiphons survive because they were set to music and sung

generation after generation. Music becomes vessel for tradition. James McKinnon documents in *The Advent Project: The Later-Seventh-Century Creation of the Roman Mass Proper* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) how musical setting preserved ancient texts.

### **Music as Formation**

Regular singing shapes us in ways we often don't consciously recognize. The hymns we sing regularly become part of our mental furniture, shaping how we think, feel, and respond spiritually. James K. A. Smith explores in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009) music's formative power in shaping belief and practice.

Singing engages us holistically—intellectually (understanding lyrics), emotionally (feeling the music's affect), physically (breathing, vocalizing), and communally (singing together creates bonds). This holistic engagement makes music particularly formative, as Don E. Saliers analyzes in *Music and Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007).

Advent hymns form us in Advent spirituality:

- Singing about waiting teaches patience
- Singing about hope despite difficulty strengthens perseverance
- Singing prophecy-fulfillment hymns reinforces confidence in God's faithfulness
- Singing together in Advent creates shared experience of preparation

Over years of singing the same Advent hymns, we internalize their theology, adopt their emotional tone, and absorb their spiritual posture. We become what we sing. Alasdair MacIntyre discusses in *After Virtue* (3rd ed., Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) how formation occurs through repeated practice, and Gordon Lathrop explores in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) the principle "we become what we sing."

### **"O Come, O Come Emmanuel": The Quintessential Advent Hymn**

If one hymn above all others embodies Advent's spirit, it is "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"—ancient, haunting, theologically rich, and profoundly evocative. Erik Routley identifies this as the quintessential Advent hymn in *Christian Hymns Observed* (Princeton: Prestige Publications, 1982).

### **Origins and History**

The hymn's roots reach back to medieval liturgy, specifically to the "O Antiphons"—seven antiphons sung before and after the Magnificat at Vespers (evening prayer) during the final seven days before Christmas (December 17-23). Cyrille Vogel documents these Greater Antiphons in early medieval liturgical sources in *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction*

*to the Sources* (trans. and rev. William G. Storey and Niels Krogh Rasmussen, Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1986).

Each O Antiphon addresses Christ using a messianic title from Isaiah and other prophetic books:

- December 17: O Sapientia (O Wisdom)
- December 18: O Adonai (O Lord)
- December 19: O Radix Jesse (O Root of Jesse)
- December 20: O Clavis David (O Key of David)
- December 21: O Oriens (O Dayspring/Rising Sun)
- December 22: O Rex Gentium (O King of Nations)
- December 23: O Emmanuel (O God-with-us)

Adolf Adam details the seven O Antiphons and their messianic titles in *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

These antiphons date to at least the 8th century and possibly earlier. They appear in manuscripts from monasteries across Europe and became standard in Western liturgy (McKinnon, *The Advent Project*).

The Latin hymn "Veni, Veni Emmanuel" appeared later (possibly 12th century), combining the O Antiphons into a processional hymn. Each stanza corresponds to one of the antiphons, preserving their messianic titles and imagery. John Julian's *A Dictionary of Hymnology* (2nd ed., 2 vols., London: John Murray, 1907) notes that the Latin hymn appears in medieval manuscripts from various European monasteries.

The English translation most widely used today was created by John Mason Neale (1818-1866), the prolific Anglican priest and hymnographer who translated numerous Latin and Greek hymns into English. His 1851 translation, "O come, O come, Emmanuel," brought this ancient hymn into English worship, appearing in *Mediaeval Hymns and Sequences* (London: J. Masters, 1851). Eleanor B. Wylie explores Neale's work in *John Mason Neale: Hymn Writer* (London: SPCK, 1952).

The melody is equally ancient—a plainchant (Gregorian chant) tune dating to 15th-century France, arranged and harmonized by Thomas Helmore in 1854 for use with Neale's English text in *The Hymnal Noted*. Nicholas Temperley documents this in *The Music of the English Parish Church* (2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

The combination of Neale's translation with the plainchant melody created the hymn as we know it today—uniting ancient liturgy, medieval poetry, and traditional melody into a

powerful expression of Advent longing. Kenneth W. Osbeck provides the hymn's composition history in *101 Hymn Stories* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1982).

## **Structure and Content**

The hymn's structure follows the O Antiphons, each stanza invoking Christ by a different messianic title and pleading for His coming:

### **Stanza 1: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel**

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel, That mourns in lonely exile here Until the Son of God appear.*

This opening stanza sets the hymn's tone—longing, petition, recognition of need. Israel is "captive," in "lonely exile," mourning, waiting for the Son of God.

"Emmanuel" (Hebrew: God-with-us) comes from Isaiah 7:14, the prophecy of the virgin birth: "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." This prophecy is central to Matthew's nativity narrative (Matthew 1:23).

"Ransom captive Israel" uses Exodus imagery—Israel enslaved in Egypt, needing divine deliverance. But the captivity is now spiritual—enslaved to sin, exiled from God, needing redemption. N. T. Wright explores this Exodus typology in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), noting how deliverance from slavery is applied to salvation in Christ throughout the New Testament.

"Lonely exile" references Israel's historical Babylonian exile but extends to humanity's spiritual exile—separated from God by sin, longing for restoration. Daniel L. Smith-Christopher explores the Babylonian exile as metaphor for spiritual alienation from God in *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

### **Stanza 2: O Come, Thou Wisdom from on High**

*O come, Thou Wisdom from on high, Who orderest all things mightily; To us the path of knowledge show, And teach us in her ways to go.*

"Wisdom from on high" corresponds to the O Sapientia antiphon, invoking Christ as divine Wisdom (Sophia) personified in Proverbs 8 and identified with Christ by early church fathers. Jaroslav Pelikan explores in *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971) how Christ was understood as divine Wisdom in patristic theology.

Wisdom "orderest all things mightily" echoes Wisdom 8:1—"she reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well." This deuterocanonical/apocryphal book was influential in early Christian understanding of Christ as Sophia, as Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993).

The petition asks for guidance, knowledge, teaching—Christ as the One who reveals truth and shows the way to God (John 14:6). Christ as "the way, the truth, and the life" reflects His identity as divine Wisdom who reveals God.

### **Stanza 3: O Come, Thou Rod of Jesse**

*O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free Thine own from Satan's tyranny; From depths of hell Thy people save, And give them victory o'er the grave.*

"Rod of Jesse" comes from Isaiah 11:1—"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." Jesse was David's father, so the "rod of Jesse" refers to the Davidic Messiah. J. Alec Motyer explores this classic messianic prophecy in *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

This stanza emphasizes Christ's saving work—freeing from Satan's tyranny, saving from hell, giving victory over death. It connects Christmas (Christ's birth) with Easter (His resurrection victory). Thomas F. Torrance discusses in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997) how the connection between Christmas and Easter is essential to understanding the Incarnation's purpose.

The cosmic conflict is clear—Christ comes not merely for sentimental reasons but to wage war against evil, death, and the devil, securing victory for His people. Gregory A. Boyd explores cosmic conflict theology in the New Testament in *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

### **Stanza 4: O Come, Thou Key of David**

*O come, Thou Key of David, come, And open wide our heavenly home; Make safe the way that leads on high, And close the path to misery.*

"Key of David" draws from Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 3:7—"the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens." The "key of David" symbolizes authority to open and shut, to grant or deny access.

Christ holds the keys to the kingdom, to heaven, to eternal life. He opens what was closed (access to God, blocked by sin); He closes what was open (the path to destruction). Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware explore in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will* (2 vols., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995) Christ as the one Mediator.

The imagery is of doors and paths—Christ opens the way to God and closes the way to misery. He is the door (John 10:9), the way (John 14:6), the one Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). These texts establish Christ's exclusive role in providing access to the Father.

### **Stanza 5: O Come, Thou Dayspring from on High**

*O come, Thou Dayspring from on high, And cheer us by Thy drawing nigh; Disperse the gloomy clouds of night, And death's dark shadows put to flight.*

"Dayspring" (older English for dawn or sunrise) comes from Zechariah's Benedictus: "the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness" (Luke 1:78-79). The "sunrise from on high" (Greek *anatolē*) can also mean "dawn" or "dayspring."

Christ as Light pervades this stanza—He is the dawn breaking, the sun rising, the light dispelling darkness. This connects to His self-identification: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). Christ's self-identification as "light of the world" is one of the seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel.

"Death's dark shadows" echo Psalm 23:4—"the valley of the shadow of death." Christ's light penetrates even death's darkness, putting it to flight through His resurrection. The "valley of the shadow of death" is a classic biblical image of danger and mortality, which Christ's light dispels.

### **Stanza 6: O Come, Desire of Nations**

*O come, Desire of nations, bind In one the hearts of all mankind; Bid Thou our sad divisions cease, And be Thyself our King of Peace.*

"Desire of nations" comes from Haggai 2:7 (KJV)—"the desire of all nations shall come." The phrase "desire of all nations" in the King James Version translates the Hebrew *chemdat kol-hagoyim*. Modern translations differ, but the traditional rendering influenced Christian messianic interpretation. This title emphasizes Christ's universal significance—He is for all peoples, not Israel alone.

The petition for unity—"bind in one the hearts of all mankind"—reflects both Christ's prayer (John 17:20-23) and Paul's vision of Jew and Gentile united in Christ (Ephesians 2:14-16). Christ's prayer for unity and Paul's theology of reconciliation between Jew and Gentile emphasize this universal scope.

"King of Peace" recalls Isaiah 9:6—"Prince of Peace." Christ brings peace—with God (reconciliation), inner peace (freedom from guilt), and ultimately cosmic peace (new creation). The "Prince of Peace" is one of four throne names given to the messianic child.

### **Refrain: Rejoice! Rejoice!**

*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel Shall come to thee, O Israel.*

The refrain provides hope within the longing. Each stanza pleads "O come," expressing need and desire. The refrain answers: "He shall come!" Our waiting will not be in vain; God will fulfill His promise. The refrain draws from Isaiah 35:4; 40:9; and other prophetic texts announcing salvation.

"Rejoice!" (repeated for emphasis) transforms waiting from desperate anxiety into confident anticipation. We can rejoice even while waiting because we know the outcome—Emmanuel shall come.

This tension between longing (stanzas) and assurance (refrain) perfectly captures Advent's dual character. We wait, yet we're confident. We long, yet we rejoice. We haven't

yet received, yet we're assured of receiving. The tension between petition ("O come") and confidence ("shall come") reflects Advent's already-not yet character.

### **Musical and Liturgical Qualities**

The melody's modal character (Dorian mode rather than modern major or minor) gives the hymn an archaic, timeless quality. It sounds ancient, connecting us to medieval worship. Richard Hoppin explains in *Medieval Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978) how the Dorian mode is a medieval church mode characterized by specific interval patterns, with a sound distinctive from modern major and minor keys.

The minor-key tonality suits the text's longing and waiting. This isn't triumphant major-key celebration but yearning minor-key petition. Deryck Cooke discusses in *The Language of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) how minor keys are generally associated with sadness, longing, or seriousness in Western music.

The melody's stepwise motion and narrow range make it accessible to untrained singers—a true congregational hymn, not performance piece. Paul Westermeyer notes in *Te Deum: The Church and Music* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) that congregational accessibility was a key concern in hymnody.

The refrain's shift to relative major provides the joy promised in the text. "Rejoice!" is musically reinforced by the brightening harmony. Modal shifts between verse and refrain create emotional contrast, with the move to relative major for "Rejoice!" providing musical reinforcement of the text's message.

The hymn works processionally—its steady rhythm and repeating structure make it suitable for Advent processions or extended singing of multiple stanzas. Gabe Huck discusses in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994) how processional hymns have specific musical characteristics—steady rhythm, repeating structure, sustainable tempo.

Liturgically, the hymn is versatile:

- Opening hymn for Advent worship
- Gradual or sequence during the service
- Closing hymn, sending congregation forth with Advent themes
- Daily devotional use, singing one stanza each of the final seven days before Christmas (matching the original O Antiphons)

Hoyt L. Hickman et al. discuss in *Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) the hymn's liturgical versatility for various positions in worship.

### **Theological and Spiritual Significance**

"O Come, O Come Emmanuel" teaches comprehensive Christology through its messianic titles: Emmanuel (Incarnation), Wisdom (divine nature), Rod of Jesse (Davidic descent),

Key of David (authority), Dayspring (revelation), Desire of Nations (universal significance). Watson explores Christological titles in Advent hymns in *The English Hymn*.

The hymn grounds Christmas in Old Testament—every title, every image comes from Hebrew Scripture. This reinforces that the Incarnation isn't arbitrary but the fulfillment of ancient promises. Raymond E. Brown emphasizes in *The Birth of the Messiah* how grounding Christmas in Old Testament prophecy is essential to understanding its theological significance.

The cosmic scope is evident—Christ comes to defeat Satan, conquer death, unite nations, bring peace, open heaven, dispel darkness. This is no mere sentimental story but cosmic salvation. N. T. Wright discusses in *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) the cosmic scope of salvation emphasized throughout the New Testament.

The personal plea matters—"to thee, O Israel" can be read as "to me, to us." We are the ones in exile, in captivity, in darkness, needing Emmanuel. The ancient plea becomes our present petition. Walter Brueggemann explores in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) how contemporary appropriation of biblical texts in worship moves from ancient plea to present petition.

The hymn forms Advent spirituality—teaching us to long for Christ, to recognize our need, to trust God's promises, to rejoice in hope, to see Christmas as fulfillment of God's ancient plan. James K. A. Smith discusses in *Desiring the Kingdom* the formative power of repeated hymn singing.

### **"Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus": Wesleyan Advent Hope**

If "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" is Advent's ancient voice, Charles Wesley's "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is its classic evangelical expression—theologically rich, emotionally warm, and focused on Christ's saving work. Carlton R. Young provides background in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

### **Author and Context**

Charles Wesley (1707-1788) was one of Methodism's founders alongside his brother John, and arguably Christianity's greatest hymn writer. He wrote over 6,000 hymns, many of which remain standard in Protestant hymnody. Frank Baker explores Wesley's life and hymn-writing in *Charles Wesley's Verse*, and John R. Tyson in *Assist Me to Proclaim: The Life and Hymns of Charles Wesley* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

This hymn was published in 1744 in *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord*, a collection Charles Wesley produced specifically for Christmas. It reflects both his theological depth and poetic skill. The collection included eighteen hymns specifically for Christmas.

Wesley's theological context was 18th-century Anglicanism, enriched by Methodist emphasis on personal conversion, assurance of salvation, scriptural Christianity, and

social holiness. These themes pervade his hymns. John R. Tyson explores Methodist theology in Wesley's hymns in *Charles Wesley: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

The hymn's title immediately establishes Advent's core theme—"long-expected Jesus." The waiting, the anticipation, the fulfillment of ancient promises—all compressed into three words. The title's compression of Advent themes reflects Wesley's poetic skill and theological precision.

## **Structure and Content**

The hymn typically has two stanzas (though Wesley wrote four originally), each a complete theological statement:

### **Stanza 1: The Long-Expected King**

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

The opening line invokes Jesus as the "long-expected" one—the Messiah Israel awaited for centuries, the fulfillment of prophecy, the answer to prayer. N. T. Wright traces in *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996) Israel's centuries of waiting for the Messiah, which forms the background of Advent's spiritual posture.

"Born to set Thy people free" states the Incarnation's purpose clearly. Jesus wasn't born merely to teach or provide example but to accomplish salvation—to set people free from sin's bondage. The purpose clause states the Incarnation's soteriological goal clearly and concisely.

"From our fears and sins release us" identifies what enslaves us. Sin is the obvious bondage, but Wesley adds "fears"—anxiety, worry, dread of death and judgment. Christ releases from both. Randy L. Maddox notes in *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 1994) Wesley's inclusion of "fears" alongside "sins" reflecting his pastoral awareness of human psychology and spiritual need.

"Let us find our rest in Thee" echoes Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). Rest represents salvation, peace with God, the soul's true home. Jesus' invitation to rest is a key text for understanding salvation as rest from labor, anxiety, and guilt.

### **Second part of Stanza 1:**

*Israel's strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art; Dear desire of every nation, Joy of every longing heart.*

"Israel's strength and consolation" uses Old Testament language. God was Israel's strength (Psalm 46:1); the Messiah would bring consolation (Isaiah 40:1-2). Jesus fulfills

both roles. Old Testament imagery of God as strength and consolation finds fulfillment in Christ.

"Hope of all the earth" universalizes salvation. Jesus came not only for Israel but for all nations—the theme of Simeon's Nunc Dimittis (Luke 2:30-32). Joel B. Green discusses in *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997) how the universality of salvation is a key Lukan theme.

"Dear desire of every nation" recalls Haggai 2:7 (like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel"). All peoples, whether they know it or not, need Christ and long for what He brings. The phrase "desire of all nations" appears in the hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" as well, showing the common use of this prophetic text.

"Joy of every longing heart" makes it personal. Christ satisfies the deepest human longing—for meaning, for love, for God, for home. Augustine's famous prayer resonates here: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you" (from *Confessions*, 1.1, trans. Henry Chadwick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). Augustine's famous opening prayer captures the universal human longing for God.

### **Stanza 2: The Glorious King**

*Born Thy people to deliver; Born a child, and yet a king; Born to reign in us forever; Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.*

"Born Thy people to deliver" reiterates salvation's purpose. Deliverance—from sin, death, Satan, judgment—is why the Incarnation happened. The purpose of deliverance is central to Christian soteriology, as Gustav Aulén discusses in *Christus Victor* (trans. A. G. Hebert, London: SPCK, 1931).

"Born a child, and yet a king" captures Christmas's paradox. The baby in the manger is also the King of Kings. Divine majesty takes infant form. The helpless child wields cosmic authority. Karl Barth explores in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2 (trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) how the paradox of the divine King born as helpless infant is central to Incarnation theology.

"Born to reign in us forever" internalizes Christ's kingship. His kingdom isn't merely external (political or geographical) but internal (hearts surrendered to His rule). This is classic Wesley—emphasizing personal transformation and Christ's indwelling. Maddox discusses in *Responsible Grace* Wesley's emphasis on Christ's indwelling reign, reflecting Methodist emphasis on sanctification and holiness.

"Now Thy gracious kingdom bring" is both petition and prophecy. We ask Christ to establish His kingdom now (in our hearts, in our world), anticipating the day when His kingdom comes fully. The petition combines present request (Christ's reign in hearts now) with eschatological hope (His kingdom's full coming).

### **Second part of Stanza 2:**

*By Thine own eternal Spirit Rule in all our hearts alone; By Thine all-sufficient merit Raise us to Thy glorious throne.*

"By Thine own eternal Spirit" invokes the Holy Spirit as the means of Christ's reign in believers' hearts. The Spirit applies Christ's work, makes Him present, transforms believers. Sinclair B. Ferguson explores in *The Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996) the Holy Spirit's role in applying Christ's work, which is central to Reformed and Wesleyan theology.

"Rule in all our hearts alone" asks for complete sovereignty. "Alone" means exclusively—no rival loves, no competing loyalties. Christ as sole King of the heart. The petition for Christ's exclusive reign reflects the first commandment's demand for undivided loyalty (Exodus 20:3).

"By Thine all-sufficient merit" grounds salvation in Christ's work, not our own. His merit (righteousness, atonement, obedience) is "all-sufficient"—nothing need be added. Timothy George explores in *Theology of the Reformers* (rev. ed., Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013) how the sufficiency of Christ's merit is foundational to Protestant soteriology.

"Raise us to Thy glorious throne" envisions final salvation—believers raised to glory, seated with Christ, sharing His victory. This eschatological hope crowns the hymn. The eschatological vision of believers raised to glory and seated with Christ appears throughout Paul's epistles (Ephesians 2:6; Colossians 3:1-4).

### **Theological Themes**

Wesley packs remarkable theological density into these few lines:

**Incarnation's purpose:** Christ was born to save, to deliver, to free—not merely to teach or inspire (Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation*).

**Comprehensive salvation:** From sin, from fear, from bondage—Christ's work is complete. Michael J. Gorman discusses in *Death of the Messiah and the Birth of the New Covenant* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) how comprehensive salvation—from sin, fear, bondage, death—reflects biblical soteriology's breadth.

**Universal scope:** "All the earth," "every nation," "every longing heart"—salvation extends to all. Christopher J. H. Wright explores in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006) the universal scope of salvation as a key biblical theme.

**Personal application:** Christ reigns "in us," satisfies "every longing heart," is "our rest." Alister E. McGrath discusses in *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) how personal application of salvation distinguishes evangelical theology.

**Trinitarian structure:** The Father's eternal purpose, the Son's incarnation and merit, the Spirit's work in believers. The Trinitarian structure reflects orthodox Christian theology—salvation accomplished by the Father's plan, the Son's work, and the Spirit's application.

**Already-not yet:** Christ's kingdom has come (He reigns in hearts) but will come (we await final fulfillment). George Eldon Ladd explores in *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) how the already-not yet tension appears throughout the New Testament.

**Grace alone:** Salvation is by Christ's "all-sufficient merit," not human effort. Grace alone (*sola gratia*) is a fundamental Protestant principle (George, *Theology of the Reformers*).

### **Musical Settings**

The most common tune for "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" is STUTTGART, a German melody dating to 1715, which provides a stately, majestic quality appropriate to the text's royal imagery. The tune first appeared in the *Psalmody Sacra* (Gotha, 1715), as Nicholas Temperley documents in *The Music of the English Parish Church*.

Alternative tune HYFRYDOL (Welsh, 1830s) offers more rhythmic energy and melodic interest, particularly popular in Welsh and British traditions. HYFRYDOL was composed by Rowland Huw Prichard (1811-1887) and first published in 1830, as Alan Luff explores in *Welsh Hymns and Their Tunes* (London: Stainer & Bell, 1990). Its Welsh origin gives it distinctive melodic character.

Both tunes are in major keys, giving the hymn a more celebratory character than "O Come, O Come Emmanuel's" minor key. This suits Wesley's emphasis on joy and fulfillment rather than longing alone. Deryck Cooke notes in *The Language of Music* that major keys generally convey joy, triumph, and confidence in Western music.

The hymn works well as opening hymn for Advent worship, particularly early in the season when anticipation is being established. James F. White discusses in *Introduction to Christian Worship* (3rd ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000) how opening hymns establish worship's tone and theological focus.

### **Use and Impact**

The hymn bridges traditions—originally Methodist but now sung across Protestant denominations (Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Anglican) and even some Catholic parishes. Its theological breadth and poetic quality transcend sectarian boundaries. Robin A. Leaver explores in *The Liturgy and Music: A Study of the Use of the Hymn in Two Liturgical Traditions* (Bramcote: Grove Books, 1976) ecumenical use of hymns.

For evangelical churches less connected to liturgical traditions, "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus" provides accessible entry into Advent themes—biblical, theologically sound, focused on salvation, but without extensive liturgical baggage. Robert E. Webber discusses in *Worship Is a Verb* (Waco: Word Books, 1985) how evangelical appropriation

of liturgical traditions like Advent marks significant development in 20th-century Protestantism.

The hymn teaches systematic theology through congregational song. Singers learn about Incarnation, atonement, sanctification, glorification, the Trinity, and eschatology simply by singing these verses repeatedly. Brian Wren explores in *Praying Twice* how theology is learned through congregational singing.

Its conciseness is strength—two substantial stanzas convey complete theology without overwhelming. This makes it suitable for services with limited time for singing or for congregations uncomfortable with lengthy hymns.

### **"Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending": Advent's Eschatological Focus**

While many Advent hymns focus on Christ's first coming (Incarnation), "Lo! He Comes with Clouds Descending" powerfully articulates the season's eschatological dimension—Christ's promised Second Coming. Carlton R. Young notes in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* how this hymn is distinguished by its focus on Christ's Second Coming rather than His first advent.

### **Origins and Development**

The hymn has complex authorship. The original version was written by John Cennick (1718-1755), a Moravian minister, and published in 1752 as "Lo! He Cometh, Countless Trumpets." John Julian provides background in *A Dictionary of Hymnology*.

Charles Wesley adapted and expanded it significantly, publishing his version in 1758. Wesley added stanzas, revised language, and sharpened theological focus, particularly emphasizing Christ's victory and believers' vindication.

The version we typically sing today is a further composite, edited by Martin Madan (1726-1790) in 1760, who combined elements from both Cennick and Wesley while making additional modifications in *A Collection of Psalms and Hymns*. This version became standard in Anglican and Methodist use, as J. R. Watson documents in *The English Hymn*.

This collaborative evolution is actually appropriate—the hymn's theme (Christ's return) is corporate and cosmic, so collaborative authorship mirrors collaborative anticipation of His coming.

### **Biblical Foundation**

The hymn is saturated with biblical imagery, particularly from Revelation:

"Comes with clouds descending" draws from multiple sources:

- Daniel 7:13: "behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man"
- Matthew 24:30: "they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory"

- Revelation 1:7: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him"

The hymn essentially sets Revelation 1:7 to music, expanding and applying this verse's apocalyptic vision. G. K. Beale explores in *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) how Revelation 1:7 is the primary source: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him."

## Structure and Content

### Stanza 1: The Coming King

*Lo! He comes with clouds descending, Once for favored sinners slain; Thousand thousand saints attending Swell the triumph of His train: Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! God appears on earth to reign.*

"Lo!"—the archaic interjection arrests attention. "Behold! Look! Pay attention!" This is announcement of cosmic importance. The archaic interjection *idou* in Greek, *ecce* in Latin arrests attention, signaling that what follows is of utmost importance (see BDAG, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed.).

"With clouds descending" evokes Daniel and Revelation—clouds as divine throne-chariot, conveying majesty and mystery. J. I. Packer discusses in *Knowing God* (20th anniv. ed., Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) how clouds as divine throne-chariot appear throughout Scripture (Psalm 104:3; Daniel 7:13; Acts 1:9).

"Once for favored sinners slain" connects Second Coming to First—the One returning is the One who died. His wounds identify Him; His sacrifice validates Him. Richard Bauckham explores in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) how the connection between the crucified Christ and the returning Judge is essential to Christian eschatology.

"Thousand thousand saints attending" pictures the heavenly host accompanying Christ (Revelation 19:14; Jude 14; 1 Thessalonians 3:13). "Thousand thousand" suggests innumerable multitude.

"Swell the triumph of His train" uses processional imagery—a victorious king returning from battle with vast retinue celebrating his victory. N. T. Wright discusses in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) how triumphal processions were familiar in the Roman world, with the imagery transferring to Christ's victorious return.

Triple "Alleluia" reinforces joyful celebration. This is not fearful trembling but joyful anticipation of vindication. The triple "Alleluia" reflects liturgical practice and intensifies the expression of joy.

"God appears on earth to reign"—the consummation. God's kingdom, now hidden or contested, will be openly established. Christ reigns! Anthony A. Hoekema discusses in

*The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979) how the consummation of God's kingdom—its full, visible, unopposed establishment—is the goal of salvation history.

### **Stanza 2: Universal Recognition**

*Every eye shall now behold Him, Robed in dreadful majesty; Those who set at naught and sold Him, Pierced, and nailed Him to the tree, Deeply wailing, deeply wailing, deeply wailing, Shall the true Messiah see.*

"Every eye shall now behold Him" quotes Revelation 1:7 directly—universal visibility, no one exempt from witnessing His return. The universality of Christ's visible return is emphasized repeatedly in eschatological texts.

"Robed in dreadful majesty" presents Christ in glory. "Dreadful" here means awe-inspiring, fearsome, overwhelming—not evil but terrifyingly glorious. "Dreadful" in older English means "awe-inspiring" or "fearsome" rather than "bad" or "evil," capturing the overwhelming nature of encountering divine glory.

"Those who set at naught and sold Him" refers to Christ's betrayers, rejectors, crucifiers—those who despised and killed Him. The references to betrayal, selling, piercing, and crucifying Christ recall the passion narrative.

"Pierced, and nailed Him to the tree" recalls the crucifixion vividly. The One they killed returns as Judge. The vivid recollection of crucifixion details connects Christ's humiliation with His exaltation (Philippians 2:5-11).

"Deeply wailing" (repeated three times) expresses the anguish of those who realize too late that they rejected their Lord. This echoes Matthew 24:30—"all the tribes of the earth will mourn." The mourning of "all the tribes of the earth" at Christ's return is prophesied by Jesus Himself.

"Shall the true Messiah see" emphasizes recognition. They will know—beyond doubt, beyond denial—that Jesus was indeed the Messiah they rejected. Recognition and acknowledgment—even by those who rejected Christ—will be universal at His return (Philippians 2:10-11).

### **Stanza 3: Vindication of the Faithful**

*Every island, sea, and mountain, Heaven and earth, shall flee away; All who hate Him must, confounded, Hear the trump proclaim the day: Come to judgment! Come to judgment! Come to judgment! Come away!*

"Every island, sea, and mountain, / Heaven and earth, shall flee away" quotes Revelation 20:11—"earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them." The present created order dissolves before the new creation. The present heaven and earth "flee away" before God's throne, making way for new creation.

"All who hate Him must, confounded" indicates the reversal. Those who opposed Christ will be confused, defeated, their schemes collapsed. "Conounded" means confused, defeated, put to shame—those who opposed Christ will find their schemes collapsed and their confidence destroyed.

"Hear the trump proclaim the day" refers to the trumpet announcing judgment (Matthew 24:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). The trumpet announces Christ's return and the resurrection.

"Come to judgment!" (repeated four times) is both invitation and command—all must appear before Christ's judgment seat (2 Corinthians 5:10). All must appear before Christ's judgment seat to give account.

#### **Stanza 4: Believers' Response**

*Yea, Amen! Let all adore Thee, High on Thine eternal throne; Savior, take the power and glory; Claim the kingdom for Thine own: O come quickly! O come quickly! O come quickly! Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!*

"Yea, Amen!" affirms everything said—believers agree, endorse, welcome Christ's return. "Yea, Amen" combines Hebrew (*amen*) and Greek/English (*yea*) affirmations, expressing full agreement and endorsement.

"Let all adore Thee, / High on Thine eternal throne" calls for universal worship. Christ on His throne receives adoration from all creation. Universal worship of the exalted Christ is the goal of creation (Philippians 2:10-11; Revelation 5:13-14).

"Savior, take the power and glory; / Claim the kingdom for Thine own" invites Christ to assume full authority. What was contested or hidden now becomes manifest and unopposed. The invitation for Christ to "claim the kingdom for Thine own" expresses the church's longing for His full, visible reign.

"O come quickly!" (repeated three times) expresses urgent longing for Christ's return. This is the church's perpetual prayer: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Revelation 22:20). "Come, Lord Jesus" is the New Testament's final prayer, expressing the church's perpetual longing for Christ's return.

"Alleluia! Come, Lord, come!" combines praise (*Alleluia*) with petition (*Come*). We worship while we wait; we wait while we worship. The combination of praise (*Alleluia*) and petition (*Come*) captures Christian worship's character—grateful celebration of what God has done and eager anticipation of what He will do.

#### **Theological and Pastoral Significance**

The hymn balances comfort and warning—comfort for believers (vindication, reunion with Christ, end of suffering), warning for unbelievers (judgment, recognition of their error, inescapable reckoning). The dual character of Christ's return—comfort for believers,

warning for unbelievers—appears throughout New Testament eschatology (2 Thessalonians 1:5-10).

This dual emphasis reflects New Testament eschatology, which consistently presents Christ's return as both blessed hope and fearful prospect, depending on one's relationship to Him. George Eldon Ladd explores in *The Presence of the Future* New Testament eschatology's two-edged character.

The hymn teaches that history has direction and destination. We're not in endless cycles but moving toward decisive culmination—Christ's return, judgment, new creation. Oscar Cullmann discusses in *Christ and Time* how the linear, teleological view of history (moving toward definite goal) distinguishes biblical faith from cyclical or meaningless views of time.

The visible, public nature of Christ's return is emphasized. "Every eye shall see Him"—no secret rapture, no hidden event, but cosmic unveiling. Anthony A. Hoekema notes in *The Bible and the Future* how the public, visible nature of Christ's return—"every eye shall see Him"—rules out secret or invisible return scenarios.

The connection between First and Second Coming is maintained. The One returning is the One "once for favored sinners slain"—crucified Jesus and coming Judge are the same Person. N. T. Wright explores in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* how the identity between the crucified Christ and the returning Judge is maintained throughout the New Testament.

The hymn gives voice to Christian longing for consummation—"O come quickly!" We're not meant to be content with the status quo but to groan for redemption's completion (Romans 8:23). The groaning of creation and believers for redemption's completion is not passive but active longing.

Pastoral sensitivity is needed when singing this hymn. Its vivid judgment imagery can be frightening. Preachers and worship leaders should contextualize it within the gospel—judgment is real, but Christ's sacrifice provides refuge for those who trust Him. Timothy Keller discusses in *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) how pastoral sensitivity in presenting eschatological themes requires balancing biblical realism about judgment with gospel hope.

### **Musical Character**

The most common tune, HELMSLEY (originally a secular English tune adapted for church use), has a triumphant, martial quality—appropriate for the hymn's victory theme. The tune originally appeared in Thomas Olivers's *Wesley's Psalms and Hymns* (c. 1765), as Nicholas Temperley documents in *The Music of the English Parish Church*. Its vigorous, martial character suits the text.

The melody's ascending phrases in "Lo! He comes with clouds descending" create a sense of majesty and upward movement—heaven coming to earth. Ascending melodic phrases create musical sense of upward movement and majesty.

The repeated "Alleluia" sections in most stanzas provide musical punctuation, opportunities for congregational affirmation and celebration. The "Alleluia" sections provide natural points for strong congregational participation, even for those less familiar with other parts of the hymn.

The hymn's energetic character makes it particularly suitable as an opening hymn for Advent worship, establishing the season's eschatological focus immediately. Opening hymns establish worship's focus, and beginning Advent worship with this hymn immediately establishes eschatological emphasis.

### **"O Come, All Ye Faithful" (*Adeste Fideles*): Bridging Advent and Christmas**

While technically a Christmas carol rather than strictly an Advent hymn, "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (*Adeste Fideles*) deserves consideration here because it's often sung during Advent's final days, bridges the transition to Christmas, and expresses themes consistent with Advent spirituality—invitation, pilgrimage, adoration. Carlton R. Young notes in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal* how "O Come, All Ye Faithful" functions as bridge between Advent and Christmas, usable in both contexts.

#### **Origins and Mystery**

The hymn's origins are contested and mysterious. The Latin text "*Adeste Fideles*" and its melody appeared together in manuscript form in the mid-18th century, but authorship remains debated. John Julian discusses in *A Dictionary of Hymnology* the hymn's contested origins.

Long attributed to John Francis Wade (c. 1711-1786), an English Catholic living in exile in France, who copied and possibly composed the hymn. Wade was a music copyist and composer at the English Catholic College in Douai, France. Maurice Frost documents in *Historical Companion to Hymns Ancient and Modern* (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1962) John Francis Wade's role as copyist and possible composer.

Some scholars suggest earlier origins, possibly even medieval, though concrete evidence is lacking. The style suggests 18th-century composition. J. R. Watson notes in *The English Hymn* that some scholars have proposed medieval origins, but the style and earliest manuscripts suggest 18th-century composition.

The hymn circulated in English Catholic communities in France and later in Portuguese and Spanish Catholic churches before becoming widely known in England. The hymn's circulation in English Catholic exile communities before wider adoption reflects the complexities of post-Reformation religious history in England.

The English translation "O Come, All Ye Faithful" was created by Frederick Oakeley (1802-1880), an Anglican priest who later converted to Catholicism. His 1841 translation transformed the hymn from a Catholic Latin text into English-language Christian hymnody, appearing in *Murray's Hymnal*. Julian notes that his conversion from Anglicanism to Catholicism (1845) followed shortly after.

The hymn's journey from Continental Catholic communities to universal Christian use illustrates how great hymns transcend their original contexts, speaking to believers across traditions.

## Text and Themes

The hymn is structured as invitation and adoration:

### Stanza 1: The Invitation

*O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; Come and behold Him, born the King of Angels; O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

"O come, all ye faithful" issues universal invitation. The faithful (*fideles*) are believers, those trusting God, who are called to come—to Bethlehem, to the manger, to meet the newborn King.

"Joyful and triumphant" describes the attitude for approaching—not fearful or hesitant but glad and confident. The attitude of joy and triumph reflects confidence in approaching God through Christ.

"Come... to Bethlehem" invites imaginative pilgrimage. We journey to the stable, joining shepherds and magi in worship. Imaginative pilgrimage to Bethlehem mirrors the Magi's actual journey and invites worshippers into the narrative.

"Born the King of Angels" identifies Jesus' nature and authority. Though born as human baby, He is Lord even of angels (Hebrews 1:4-14). "King of Angels" affirms Christ's sovereignty even over angelic hosts.

"O come, let us adore Him" (repeated in the refrain) calls for worship. Adoration is the proper response to encountering God-with-us. Adoration (*proskyneō* in Greek, *adoremus* in Latin) is worship's proper expression—bowing before divine majesty.

### Stanza 2: The Nature of the One Born

*God of God, Light of Light, Lo, He abhors not the Virgin's womb; Very God, begotten, not created; O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

This stanza quotes the Nicene Creed almost verbatim, teaching Christology through congregational song. J. N. D. Kelly explores in *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed., London: Longman, 1972) the Nicene Creed and its Christology.

"God of God, Light of Light" affirms Christ's full deity—not a lesser god or created being but equal with the Father. Khaled Anatolios discusses in *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004) how "God of God, Light of Light" affirms Christ's full deity and equality with the Father against Arian heresy.

"He abhors not the Virgin's womb" marvels at the Incarnation. The infinite God doesn't despise finite human form but embraces it through birth. The wonder that God "abhors

not" human form and birth reflects the Incarnation's scandal—divine condescension to enter fully into human existence.

"Very God, begotten, not created" distinguishes Nicene orthodoxy from Arianism. Christ is eternally begotten of the Father, not made or created at some point. Jaroslav Pelikan explores in *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, how "begotten, not created" distinguishes orthodox Christology from Arian subordinationism.

This doctrinal stanza shows that Christmas carols can be vehicles for teaching core Christian doctrine. Graham Hughes notes in *Worship as Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) how doctrinal hymns served catechetical function, especially in eras of limited literacy.

### **Stanza 3: The Invitation to Angels**

*Sing, choirs of angels, sing in exultation, Sing, all ye citizens of heaven above; Glory to God, all glory in the highest; O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

This stanza summons angelic worship, recalling the angels' announcement to the shepherds (Luke 2:13-14). The angelic chorus praising God at Christ's birth.

"Citizens of heaven above" indicates the angels' realm and status—they are heaven's inhabitants, now joining earth's inhabitants in worship. Angels as "citizens of heaven" reflects their status as inhabitants of God's presence (Hebrews 12:22-24).

"Glory to God, all glory in the highest" quotes the angels' song (Luke 2:14), making worshippers participants in that first Christmas chorus. Quoting the *Gloria in Excelsis* makes worshippers participants in the original Christmas proclamation.

### **Stanza 4: The Call to See**

*Yea, Lord, we greet Thee, born this happy morning; Jesus, to Thee be all glory given; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing; O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.*

"Born this happy morning" makes the ancient event present. We greet Him as if at His birth, telescoping past into present. Aidan Kavanagh discusses in *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984) how making the ancient event present reflects liturgical time—past events become present through commemoration.

"Jesus, to Thee be all glory given" ascribes glory to Christ, acknowledging His worthiness. Ascribing glory to Christ affirms His divine worthiness of worship.

"Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing" echoes John 1:14—"the Word became flesh." Johannine Christology expressed in song. Johannine Christology—the Word (*Logos*) becoming flesh—appears explicitly in this stanza.

### **Musical Qualities**

The melody (also called ADESTE FIDELES) is stately, processional, and memorable—easily singable by congregations while possessing enough musical interest to sustain

repeated singing. The melody is widely considered one of the finest hymn tunes, stately, processional, and memorable—easily singable by congregations while possessing musical interest.

The refrain's repetition creates opportunity for congregational participation even if some don't know all verses. Nearly everyone knows "O come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord." Refrain repetition facilitates participation, allowing even visitors to join in worship.

The melody's ascending phrases in "O come, all ye faithful" and "O come, let us adore Him" create a sense of rising devotion, of hearts lifted in worship. Rising melodic phrases musically embody the text's invitation to worship—hearts and voices lifted.

The hymn works equally well as choral anthem (with harmonizations ranging from simple to complex) or congregational hymn (accessible to all). The tune's adaptability to various musical arrangements—from simple unison to complex choral harmonization—contributes to its enduring popularity.

### **Use in Worship**

While primarily a Christmas carol, "O Come, All Ye Faithful" can legitimately be sung during Advent's final days (December 17-24), particularly at services on December 24. The hymn's use during Advent's final days reflects its transitional character—preparing for and anticipating Christmas's arrival.

Its invitation theme—"come to Bethlehem," "come and behold Him," "come, let us adore Him"—fits Advent's preparatory character. We journey toward Christmas; we prepare to meet Christ; we ready ourselves for adoration. The invitation theme connects to Advent's preparatory character—we prepare hearts to welcome Christ.

The transition from Advent to Christmas is naturally marked by beginning to sing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" on Christmas Eve, then continuing through the Christmas season. The shift from Advent to Christmas is naturally marked musically by this hymn's increasing presence as December 25 approaches.

Processional use is common—the hymn's melody and text make it ideal for entering worship, particularly at Christmas Eve services. The invitation to "come" is enacted as congregation and choir process into the church. Processional use enacts the invitation—physically "coming" to worship as we sing of coming to Bethlehem.

### **Other Significant Advent Hymns**

While space doesn't permit full treatment of every worthy Advent hymn, several others deserve mention for their theological richness and widespread use:

#### **"Creator of the Stars of Night" (Conditor Alme Siderum)**

An ancient Latin hymn dating to the 7th century or earlier, this Advent hymn focuses on Christ as Creator and Redeemer. Its plainchant melody and stark poetry create an atmosphere of solemn anticipation. The hymn emphasizes that the One born in

Bethlehem is the eternal Word through whom all creation came into being. John Julian notes in *A Dictionary of Hymnology* that "Creator of the Stars of Night" (*Conditor Alme Siderum*) is one of the oldest Christian hymns, possibly dating to the 7th century.

### **"Comfort, Comfort Ye My People"**

Based directly on Isaiah 40:1-8, this hymn (text by Johannes Olearius, 1671; tune: Tristan, French, 16th century) proclaims John the Baptist's message of preparation. The comfort God promises isn't cheap sentiment but the assurance that He will come to save His people. The hymn's minor key and urgent rhythm convey both hope and seriousness. Johannes Olearius (1611-1684) wrote "Comfort, Comfort Ye My People" based on Isaiah 40:1-8, with text appearing in his *Geistliche Singe-Kunst* (1671), as Carlton R. Young documents in *Companion to the United Methodist Hymnal*.

### **"People, Look East"**

A 20th-century hymn by Eleanor Farjeon (1928), "People, Look East" takes a more folk-like approach to Advent themes. Each stanza focuses on a different metaphor (stars, wings, hills, tree, rooms) preparing for the Lord's coming. Its simplicity and accessibility have made it popular, especially in churches seeking less formal or archaic language. Eleanor Farjeon (1881-1965) wrote "People, Look East" in 1928, and its fresh, accessible language made it popular in the 20th century, as J. R. Watson notes in *The English Hymn*.

### **"The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns"**

Written by John Brownlie (1859-1925), this hymn emphasizes Christ's Second Coming with imagery of dawn breaking and darkness fleeing. It connects Advent's dual focus—Christ's first and second comings—seeing both as manifestations of divine light overcoming darkness. John Brownlie (1859-1925), a Scottish minister, wrote "The King Shall Come When Morning Dawns" (Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, Supplement).

### **"Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying" (Wachet Auf)**

Philipp Nicolai's 1599 hymn, based on the parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), calls believers to vigilant watchfulness. J.S. Bach's famous cantata (BWV 140) setting of this chorale has made it familiar even beyond hymnody. The hymn's urgent call to readiness captures Advent's eschatological dimension powerfully. Philipp Nicolai (1556-1608) wrote "Wachet Auf" (Wake, Awake, for Night Is Flying) in 1599 during a plague epidemic. Robin A. Leaver discusses in *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1985) how J.S. Bach's famous cantata (BWV 140) uses this chorale.

## **The Role of Music in Personal and Corporate Advent Observance**

Having examined specific hymns, we should consider how to integrate Advent music meaningfully into worship and devotion:

### **In Corporate Worship**

**Plan deliberately.** Select hymns that cover Advent's range—Old Testament prophecy, John the Baptist, Mary and Joseph, Second Coming, hope, preparation, joy. Don't simply default to familiar choices but consider the season's full theological breadth. Hoyt L. Hickman et al. discuss in *Handbook of the Christian Year* how deliberate hymn selection requires liturgical planning and theological awareness.

**Balance ancient and modern.** Include time-tested hymns like "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" alongside newer compositions. Both have value; variety serves the congregation well. Michael S. Hawn notes in *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) how balancing traditional and contemporary hymns serves congregations well, honoring heritage while remaining accessible.

**Teach the hymns.** Don't assume congregations understand what they're singing. Brief explanations before singing, bulletin notes about hymn backgrounds, or sermon references to hymn texts can deepen understanding and engagement. Thomas H. Troeger emphasizes in *Wonder Reborn* that hymn teaching—explaining background, theology, imagery—deepens congregational engagement.

**Sing all the stanzas.** Many hymns' richest theology appears in later stanzas often omitted for time. Consider singing more stanzas or rotating which ones are sung. Complete stanzas often contain crucial theology omitted when only first and last stanzas are sung, so congregations benefit from hearing full texts.

**Use variety in musical style.** Hymns can be sung unaccompanied, with organ, with guitar, with full orchestra. Varied arrangements maintain freshness without abandoning substance. Paul Westermeyer discusses in *The Church Musician* (rev. ed., Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997) how varied musical arrangements maintain freshness while preserving substance.

## In Personal Devotion

**Learn Advent hymns by heart.** Memorizing hymns provides spiritual resources for times when books aren't available—during walks, sleepless nights, moments of anxiety. The Holy Spirit can bring memorized hymns to mind when needed. Memorization of hymns creates spiritual resource accessible in moments when books aren't available—hospital beds, sleepless nights, times of anxiety.

**Sing daily.** Make hymn-singing part of daily Advent devotions, whether alone or with family. Let the hymns' theology and poetry shape your prayers and meditations. Daily hymn singing in personal devotion shapes spiritual life through repeated theological content and emotional tone.

**Read the texts.** Even if you're not singing, read hymn texts as poetry and theology. Meditate on their images, claims, and petitions. Reading hymn texts as poetry and theology, apart from singing, allows careful attention to meaning and imagery.

**Connect hymns to Scripture.** When a hymn references biblical passages, look them up. Follow the theological connections the hymn makes. Following biblical references in hymns deepens understanding of both Scripture and hymn, as the two interpret each other.

**Use hymns in prayer.** Hymn texts can become prayers—repeating "O come, O come Emmanuel" as personal petition, or "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus" as intercession. Hymn texts as prayers—praying the words of "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" or "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus"—provides rich devotional material.

### **Conclusion: The Singing Church**

The Advent hymns examined here represent just a sampling of Christianity's rich hymnological heritage. Through these songs, believers across centuries have given voice to longing, hope, faith, and joy. The hymns teach theology, form spirituality, unite congregations, and connect us to the communion of saints across time. J. R. Watson provides historical development in *The English Hymn*.

As we sing these hymns, we participate in tradition while making it new. The ancient words carry fresh meaning in each generation's context. The timeless truths speak to contemporary needs. The music our grandparents sang becomes our children's heritage. Kathleen Norris reflects in *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998) on the transmission of hymns across generations creating continuity and shared heritage.

Advent hymns remind us that Christianity is a singing faith. We are people who make music, who lift voices together, who express through song what words alone cannot convey. Our longing for Christ, our hope in His promises, our joy at His coming—all find natural expression in song. Jeremy S. Begbie discusses in *Resounding Truth: Christian Wisdom in the World of Music* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) how Christianity as singing faith reflects biblical precedent—psalms, hymns, spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16).

May these great Advent hymns continue to shape Christian worship and devotion, teaching new generations to wait with hope, to long with joy, and to prepare with faith for Christ's coming—past, present, and future. Don E. Saliers explores in *Music and Theology* the formative power of Advent hymns—teaching theology, expressing longing, forming spirituality—making them indispensable to faithful Advent observance.

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## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### The Yule Log and Yuletide Season

The word "Yuletide" has become so thoroughly absorbed into Christmas vocabulary that many Christians use it without considering its origins or the complex history it represents. Similarly, the tradition of the Yule log—whether a literal burning log in the fireplace or its modern culinary descendant, the chocolate *bûche de Noël*—remains a beloved Christmas custom whose roots extend deep into pre-Christian European culture. Understanding these traditions requires examining how Christianity engaged with pagan winter celebrations, transformed them, and ultimately created something distinctively Christian from elements that began outside the faith. This chapter explores the fascinating journey of Yule from Norse paganism to Christian celebration, demonstrating both the church's missionary wisdom and the complex cultural negotiations that have shaped our Christmas observance.

#### **The Origins of Yule: Pre-Christian Winter Festivals**

##### **Germanic and Norse Celebrations**

The term "Yule" derives from the Old Norse *jól* (or *hjól*), which referred to a midwinter festival celebrated by Germanic and Scandinavian peoples long before Christianity reached northern Europe. The etymology of *jól* remains somewhat uncertain, though scholars have proposed several theories. One suggestion connects it to *hjól* (wheel), possibly referencing the wheel of the year and the winter solstice when the sun's decline reversed and days began lengthening again. Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson explores these etymological possibilities in *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1988), noting how solar imagery pervaded Germanic winter celebrations.

The pre-Christian Yule was a multi-day festival, though its exact duration varied by region and period. The Venerable Bede, writing in 8th-century England, noted in his *De temporum ratione (The Reckoning of Time)* that the Anglo-Saxons began their year on December 25, which they called *Modranicht* ("Mothers' Night"), followed by the Yule period. This suggests the festival lasted several days or weeks. Bede writes: "They began the year with December 25, the day we now celebrate as Christmas; and the very night to which we attach special sanctity they designated by the heathen term *Modranicht*, that is, the mothers' night—a name bestowed, I suspect, on account of the ceremonies they performed while watching this night through" (translation from Faith Wallis, ed. and trans., *Bede: The Reckoning of Time*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999).

The Yule festival centered on several key elements that reflected the concerns of agricultural peoples facing the year's darkest, coldest period:

**Feasting and abundance:** As Ronald Hutton documents in *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), winter was a time when livestock that couldn't be sustained through the lean months were slaughtered, providing fresh meat. This practical necessity became occasion for feasting, celebrating community bonds, and demonstrating hospitality. The abundance of food—precious during winter—expressed both gratitude for the year's harvest and confidence in surviving until spring.

**Fire and light:** The Germanic peoples kindled great fires during Yule, both for practical warmth and for symbolic purposes. Fire represented life, light, and the hope of the sun's return. The winter solstice marked the astronomical turning point when days would begin lengthening—a moment of cosmic significance for peoples whose survival depended on agricultural cycles. James George Frazer, despite the now-dated aspects of his comparative methodology, provides useful documentation of fire festivals across Europe in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (abridged ed., New York: Macmillan, 1922), including the symbolic importance of midwinter fires.

**Sacrifices and religious observances:** The pre-Christian Yule involved sacrifices to Norse gods, particularly Odin (Wotan), seeking blessing, protection, and prosperity. The *Heimskringla* (Saga of the Norse Kings), a 13th-century collection compiled by Snorri Sturluson, preserves traditions about sacrificial feasts (*blót*) held at Yule, though these accounts were written centuries after Christianization and must be read critically. Snorri describes how "it was ancient custom that when sacrifice was to be made, all farmers were to come to the heathen temple and bring along with them the food they needed while the feast lasted" (from Lee M. Hollander, trans., *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964).

**The Wild Hunt:** Norse and Germanic folklore told of the Wild Hunt (*Oskoreia* in Norwegian, *Wilde Jagd* in German)—a supernatural procession of spirits, often led by Odin, that traversed the winter sky. This was a time when the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds was thought to be thin, and when the dead might walk among the living. Claude Lecouteux explores these traditions in *Phantom Armies of the Night: The Wild Hunt and the Ghostly Processions of the Undead* (trans. Jon E. Graham, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 2011), documenting how these beliefs persisted well into Christian times and influenced Christmas folklore.

**Evergreens and symbols of enduring life:** The use of evergreen plants—holly, ivy, mistletoe, and evergreen boughs—was common in Germanic winter celebrations. In the midst of winter's death, these plants remained green and alive, symbolizing enduring life and the promise of spring's return. Jacob Grimm documents these practices extensively in *Teutonic Mythology* (4 vols., trans. James Steven Stallybrass, London: George Bell and Sons, 1882-1888), a comprehensive though sometimes speculative collection of Germanic folklore and religious practices.

## The Yule Log Specifically

The tradition of burning a large log throughout the Yule season appears to have been widespread across Germanic and Celtic Europe, though documenting its pre-Christian origins with certainty is difficult since most written sources post-date Christianization. The practice is attested in various forms across England, France, Germany, Scandinavia, and the Balkans, suggesting ancient and widespread roots.

The Yule log tradition typically involved several key elements, as described by Clement A. Miles in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition, Christian and Pagan* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1912), an early scholarly study of Christmas customs:

**Selection and preparation:** The log had to be large enough to burn throughout the twelve days of Christmas or at least through Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. In some regions, it was cut from the household's own land; in others, it was a gift from the landowner to tenants. The tree species varied by region—oak in England, ash in parts of Scandinavia, pine in alpine regions—often chosen for symbolic properties or practical burning qualities.

**Ceremonial lighting:** The log was brought into the house with ceremony, often on Christmas Eve. In many traditions, it was lit with a piece of the previous year's Yule log that had been saved for this purpose, creating continuity across years. This ritual lighting, accompanied by prayers, blessings, or toasts, marked the beginning of the Christmas celebration. The French ethnographer Arnold van Gennep documents in *Manuel de folklore français contemporain* (7 vols., Paris: Picard, 1937-1958) how the Yule log ceremony served as a rite of passage marking the transition into the sacred Christmas period.

**Continuous burning:** The log was meant to burn continuously throughout Christmas, never being allowed to go completely out. This required a log of substantial size—hence the tradition of dragging in the largest log that could fit in the fireplace. The continuous fire represented the endurance of light through darkness, the warmth of home and family, and (in Christian interpretation) the light of Christ entering the world.

**Preservation of ashes and charcoal:** After Christmas, the remaining charcoal and ashes were often preserved and given symbolic or practical uses. Some traditions held that these remnants protected the house from lightning, cured diseases, or brought good fortune. A portion was saved to light the next year's Yule log. These practices show how the Yule log connected past, present, and future—embodying continuity and the cyclical nature of the year.

**Associated customs:** Many regional variations existed. In some areas, the log was decorated with greenery or ribbons before burning. Children might sit on it before it was lit, or family members might toast it with cider or ale. In parts of France, the log was sprinkled with wine before lighting. These variations demonstrate the tradition's integration into local family and community life.

### **Christian Encounter with Yule: Transformation and Adoption**

## Missionary Strategy and Cultural Engagement

When Christianity spread into northern Europe—particularly from the 7th through 11th centuries—missionaries faced populations with deeply rooted cultural practices tied to the agricultural calendar and seasonal cycles. The church's approach to these pre-Christian festivals demonstrates a sophisticated missionary strategy articulated most famously in Pope Gregory the Great's instructions to missionaries.

In 601 AD, Pope Gregory I wrote to Abbot Mellitus, who was traveling to join Augustine of Canterbury in evangelizing England. This letter, preserved in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed 731 AD), articulates a principle of cultural engagement that would shape Christianity's approach to pagan customs:

"Tell Augustine that he should by no means destroy the temples of the gods but rather the idols within those temples. Let him, after he has purified them with holy water, place altars and relics of the saints in them. For, if those temples are well built, they should be converted from the worship of demons to the service of the true God. Thus, seeing that their places of worship are not destroyed, the people will banish error from their hearts and come to places familiar and dear to them in acknowledgement and worship of the true God... And since it has been their custom to slaughter oxen in sacrifice, they should receive some solemnity in exchange. Let them therefore, on the day of the dedication of their churches, or on the feast of the martyrs whose relics are preserved in them, build themselves huts around their one-time temples and celebrate the occasion with religious feasting. They will sacrifice and eat the animals not any more as an offering to the devil, but for the glory of God to whom, as the giver of all things, they will give thanks for having been satiated. Thus, if they are not deprived of all exterior joys, they will more easily taste the interior ones. For surely it is impossible to efface all at once everything from their strong minds, just as, when one wishes to reach the top of a mountain, he must climb by stages and step by step, not by leaps and bounds" (translation adapted from Leo Sherley-Price and R. E. Latham, trans., *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, London: Penguin Books, 1990).

This passage reveals several key principles that guided Christian engagement with pagan customs, as discussed by Ramsay MacMullen in *Christianity and Paganism in the Fourth to Eighth Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997):

**Gradual transformation rather than immediate destruction:** Gregory recognized that demanding instant abandonment of all familiar customs would hinder rather than help conversion. Cultural forms could be retained while their meaning was transformed.

**Continuity of place and time:** By allowing converted peoples to continue celebrating at familiar times and in familiar places, Christianity maintained cultural continuity while changing religious content. The winter solstice season, already significant in Germanic culture, could become the time for celebrating Christ's birth.

**Reinterpretation rather than simple replacement:** The goal wasn't merely to substitute Christian content for pagan content but to show how Christian truth fulfilled and transcended pagan yearnings. Winter light festivals could be understood as foreshadowing the true Light of the World.

**Pastoral wisdom and patience:** Gregory's metaphor of climbing a mountain "by stages and step by step, not by leaps and bounds" reflects a pastoral understanding of how cultural and religious transformation occurs—gradually, with patience, meeting people where they are.

This approach had theological grounding as well. Christianity has always held that general revelation—God's self-disclosure through creation and conscience—precedes special revelation. As Paul writes in Romans 1:20, "For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made." This theological conviction allowed missionaries to see pre-Christian customs not as purely demonic but as imperfect, distorted human responses to genuine spiritual realities—responses that could be purified and redirected toward their true fulfillment in Christ.

### **The Christianization of Yule**

The transformation of Yule from pagan festival to Christian celebration occurred gradually over several centuries and varied by region. Several key developments characterized this process:

**Dating of Christmas:** The choice to celebrate Christ's birth on December 25 was influenced by multiple factors, including Roman solar festivals (*Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*—Birthday of the Unconquered Sun), but in Germanic lands it also meant Christmas fell near or during the traditional Yule season. Thomas J. Talley argues in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) that both theological calculation (based on the conception of Christ) and cultural factors influenced December 25's selection. The correspondence with Yule in northern lands was likely not coincidental but reflected missionary awareness of existing celebrations.

**Linguistic adoption:** The English word "Yule" and related terms in Scandinavian languages (*Jul* in Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian) were adopted as names for Christmas itself. This linguistic continuity bridged old and new, allowing converted peoples to maintain familiar vocabulary while changing its referent. In modern Scandinavian languages, *Jul* simply means Christmas with no pagan connotation, showing how completely the term was Christianized.

**Retention and transformation of customs:** Many customs associated with pagan Yule were retained but given Christian meanings. The feasting became celebration of Christ's birth and God's provision. The lights and fires became symbols of Christ as Light of the World (John 8:12). The evergreens represented eternal life through Christ. The emphasis on hospitality and charity reflected Christian teaching about loving neighbors and caring

for the poor. As Ronald Hutton documents in *The Stations of the Sun*, this process of retention and reinterpretation was not deceitful but reflected genuine belief that pagan customs had been "baptized" and transformed.

**The Twelve Days of Christmas:** The extension of Christmas celebration over twelve days (December 25 through January 6, Epiphany) may have been influenced by the multi-day nature of pagan Yule festivals, though it also has theological rationale (celebrating the manifestation of Christ to different groups: shepherds, magi, etc.). The twelve-day period created a season rather than a single day, matching the festive character of pre-Christian winter celebrations.

**Theological reframing:** Christian teaching provided new theological frameworks for understanding winter customs. The winter solstice's astronomical significance (the sun's return, lengthening days) became a natural analogy for Christ's coming. As the sun brings physical light and warmth essential for life, Christ brings spiritual light and salvation. Darkness giving way to light parallels sin giving way to righteousness, death giving way to life. Cyril of Jerusalem, in his *Catechetical Lectures* (4th century), explicitly uses this imagery: "Let no one say that I am speaking of that visible sun... but that Sun of Righteousness" (Lecture 6.7, from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

### **The Yule Log in Christian Tradition**

The Yule log tradition was similarly Christianized, acquiring new layers of meaning while retaining its basic form. Several Christian interpretations and practices developed:

**Christ as Light:** The burning log became a symbol of Christ, the Light of the World, who came into the darkness and cannot be overcome by it (John 1:5). The fire's warmth represented God's love and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Medieval and early modern Christian households understood the Yule log as both practical necessity (heating the home during winter) and spiritual symbol (Christ's light and warmth).

**Blessing of the log:** In Christian households, the Yule log was blessed before lighting, sometimes with holy water, and prayers were said. These blessings Christianized the ritual, making it an act of devotion rather than superstition. Miles documents in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* various blessing formulas used across Europe, such as the French tradition of sprinkling the log with wine while saying prayers for the household's prosperity and protection.

**Hospitality and charity:** The fire from the Yule log warmed not just family members but guests and the poor. Christian teaching about hospitality (Hebrews 13:2) and caring for those in need (Matthew 25:35-40) infused the Yule log tradition with charitable significance. Some families made a point of inviting poor neighbors to warm themselves by the Yule log's fire and share in the Christmas feast.

**Family unity:** The ceremony of bringing in and lighting the Yule log became a family affair, with each member participating. This reflected Christian emphasis on the family as

domestic church and the home as sacred space. The Yule log ceremony marked the family's collective entry into Christmas celebration.

**Connection to church liturgy:** In some regions, the Yule log was lit with an ember from the church's Christmas fire, connecting domestic and ecclesiastical celebration. This physical link between church and home reinforced that Christmas was one celebration extending from altar to hearth.

**Persistence of folk beliefs:** Despite Christianization, some folk beliefs surrounding the Yule log persisted—that its ashes protected against lightning, that its charcoal cured illness, that keeping a piece ensured good fortune. The church generally tolerated these beliefs as harmless superstitions, though more rigorous reformers (particularly during the Reformation) sometimes objected to them as remnants of paganism. Keith Thomas explores this tension in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), documenting how folk practices persisted alongside official Christianity well into the modern era.

## The Yule Log Through History

### Medieval and Early Modern Practice

During the medieval and early modern periods (roughly 1000-1800 AD), the Yule log tradition was at its height across much of Europe. Different regions developed distinctive variations:

**England:** The English Yule log tradition was particularly elaborate. The log, often called the "Christmas block" or "Yule clog," was typically oak—a tree with sacred associations in both pagan and Christian traditions. It was drawn into the house on Christmas Eve with great ceremony, often by the youngest child or by all family members together. John Brand documents in *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (rev. Henry Ellis, London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1813) that English families sang carols while dragging the log indoors, and servants were given special privileges on this occasion. The log burned in the great hall's fireplace throughout the Twelve Days of Christmas, with the lord of the manor and household gathering around it for meals and celebrations.

**France:** The French tradition of the *bûche de Noël* (Christmas log) was especially strong in rural areas. The log was typically large enough to burn for several days and was blessed by the head of household before lighting. In some regions, each family member poured a libation of wine over the log while making a wish or saying a prayer. The ashes were preserved and believed to protect crops, livestock, and the home itself from various dangers. Ethnographers like Arnold van Gennep have documented extraordinary regional diversity in French Yule log customs.

**Scandinavia:** In Scandinavian countries, despite thorough Christianization, the Yule season retained strong connections to pre-Christian tradition. The Yule log (*julblock* in Swedish, *julebukk* in Norwegian) was burned, but other customs—special Yule foods, Yule goats (*julbock*), elaborate decorations—maintained continuity with pagan past. The

Scandinavian Christmas blended Christian and folk elements more visibly than in many other regions, as Nils-Arvid Bringéus explores in *Årets Högtider (The Year's Festivals*, Stockholm: LTs förlag, 1987).

**Germany and Central Europe:** Germanic regions maintained robust Yule log traditions alongside other Christmas customs. The log was often decorated with greenery before burning, and its lighting was accompanied by traditional songs and prayers. Germany also developed extensive Christmas tree traditions (which eventually overshadowed the Yule log), showing how one folk custom could evolve into another while maintaining core symbolism of evergreen life in winter.

### Decline and Transformation

The Yule log tradition began declining in the 19th and early 20th centuries for several practical reasons:

**Changing architecture:** As homes shifted from large open hearths to smaller, more efficient stoves and eventually to central heating, the physical possibility of burning a massive log disappeared. Victorian homes might have decorative fireplaces, but these couldn't accommodate the traditional Yule log. The domestic architecture that made the Yule log practical—and necessary—was vanishing.

**Urbanization:** The Yule log tradition was strongest in rural areas where wood was readily available and households had direct connection to forests and land. As populations urbanized, these conditions disappeared. City dwellers had neither access to appropriate logs nor fireplaces capable of burning them.

**Cultural change:** The Industrial Revolution and modernity generally transformed Christmas from a season of rural feasting and folk customs to a more commercialized holiday centered on gift-giving, shopping, and nuclear family celebrations. Many traditional customs were simplified or abandoned in this transition.

**Religious reform movements:** Some Protestant reformers, particularly Puritans, objected to Christmas celebrations generally and to folk customs like the Yule log specifically, viewing them as pagan remnants inconsistent with biblical Christianity. While Puritan influence waned by the Victorian era, it had disrupted transmission of traditional customs in areas where Puritans held power (such as England during the Commonwealth period, 1649-1660, and in Puritan New England).

Despite these changes, the Yule log tradition never entirely disappeared. It persisted in some rural areas and, more importantly, underwent creative transformation:

**Decorative logs:** Even when burning a massive log became impractical, many families maintained the custom with a decorative log that might burn for a few hours on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. This "token" Yule log preserved the symbolic value even when the original practical function was lost.

**The *bûche de Noël* cake:** Perhaps the most successful adaptation was the French *bûche de Noël*—a rolled sponge cake decorated to resemble a log, complete with chocolate "bark" and meringue "mushrooms." This culinary transformation emerged in 19th-century France and spread internationally. Esther B. Aresty documents in *The Delectable Past* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964) how the *bûche de Noël* preserved the Yule log tradition in edible form, allowing urban families without fireplaces to maintain the custom. The cake became so popular that many people today know the Yule log only in this culinary incarnation.

**Yule log television broadcasts:** In perhaps the most remarkable modern adaptation, American television station WPIX in New York began broadcasting a loop of a burning fireplace log on Christmas Eve in 1966. This "Yule Log" broadcast became a beloved tradition, allowing apartment-dwelling New Yorkers without fireplaces to enjoy at least the image of a burning Yule log. The broadcast continues today and has been imitated by other stations and streaming services. While this might seem a trivial commercialization, it demonstrates how deeply the symbolism resonates—people want the Yule log even when reduced to a televised image.

### **Theological Reflections: Yule, Christmas, and Cultural Transformation**

The story of Yule's transformation from pagan festival to Christian celebration raises important theological and missiological questions that remain relevant for contemporary Christianity.

#### **The Legitimacy of "Baptizing" Pagan Customs**

Some Christians, particularly in more rigorous Reformed and fundamentalist traditions, have questioned whether Christianity should have adopted pagan customs at all. They argue that clear biblical separation from paganism requires rejecting such practices entirely. This perspective emphasizes 2 Corinthians 6:14-17 ("What fellowship has light with darkness? ... Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord") and similar passages commanding separation from pagan practices.

However, the historic mainstream Christian position, exemplified by Pope Gregory's letter and practiced across Catholic, Orthodox, and most Protestant traditions, has held that cultural forms can be transformed and sanctified for Christian use. Several theological principles support this approach:

**Common grace and general revelation:** Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper articulated in *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931) the concept of "common grace"—God's goodness extended to all humanity, enabling cultural and social goods even among non-Christians. This means pagan cultures could produce genuine goods and insights that Christianity could appreciate and adopt. Richard Mouw develops this further in *He Shines in All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), arguing that Christians should expect to find elements of truth and

beauty in non-Christian cultures, which can be appreciated and incorporated once purified of false religious claims.

**Christ's cosmic lordship:** Colossians 1:16-20 declares that all things were created through Christ and for Christ, and that God is reconciling all things to Himself through Christ. This cosmic scope suggests that cultural practices, even those developed in ignorance of Christ, ultimately belong to Him and can be reclaimed for their proper purpose. As Jesus said, "Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52)—suggesting Christianity appropriately draws from both new revelation and transformed old treasures.

**Analogical truth in pagan practices:** When pagans celebrated the winter solstice and the return of light, they were responding to a genuine experience of darkness and the hope for light. Christianity doesn't say this experience and hope are false—rather, it reveals their true meaning and fulfillment. The physical sun's return is indeed cause for gratitude (it's God's faithfulness in the created order), but it points beyond itself to the true Light, Christ. C.S. Lewis articulates this principle beautifully in *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947): "I take it we must go behind the scenes of Pagan religion to find the real worship of the real God... behind the gods themselves, the Absolute Being."

**The Incarnation principle:** God entered human culture—a specific time, place, language, and set of customs—in the Incarnation. He didn't reject culture but entered it, transforming it from within. This pattern suggests that Christianity engages cultures by entering them and transforming them rather than simply rejecting them wholesale. As the author of Hebrews writes, "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things" (Hebrews 2:14). Andrew F. Walls explores this missiological principle extensively in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), arguing that Christianity is inherently translatable and culturally adaptable because of the Incarnation itself.

**Historical precedent in Scripture:** The Bible itself records God's people adopting and transforming customs from surrounding cultures. The Passover seder, for example, likely incorporated elements from ancient Near Eastern symposia practices. The temple's architecture showed influences from Phoenician building styles. The Israelites didn't invent sacrifice but practiced it in ways that transformed pagan sacrifice's meaning, pointing toward its fulfillment in Christ. If God's people in Scripture adopted and transformed cultural forms, the church can do likewise.

This doesn't mean anything and everything can be baptized. Christianity has boundaries. Practices fundamentally incompatible with Christian teaching—human sacrifice, cultic prostitution, divination—must be rejected entirely. But cultural forms without intrinsic moral content—winter celebrations, festive logs, evergreen decorations, feasting—can be retained and given Christian meaning.

## **Yule and the Gospel's Cultural Flexibility**

The Yule-to-Christmas transformation illustrates what missiologists call the gospel's "translatability" or cultural flexibility. Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh (in *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, 2nd ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009) have argued that Christianity, unlike Islam, has no sacred language, no necessary cultural form. The gospel can be expressed in any language, through any culture, because it addresses the universal human condition but does so within particular cultural contexts.

This created both opportunity and challenge in northern Europe. Missionaries didn't demand that Germanic converts become Mediterranean in culture. They could remain Germanic while becoming Christian. Yule could become Christmas. The problem with Yule wasn't its Germanic character but its religious content—worship of false gods, superstitious practices. Once that content was removed and replaced with Christian truth, the cultural form could remain.

This principle remains important today. Christianity continues spreading in the Global South and East, encountering cultures with deep-rooted customs. Must Chinese converts abandon all traditional celebrations? Must African Christians reject all ancestral customs? Or can cultural forms be retained and baptized? The Yule-Christmas transformation suggests the latter—provided the content is made truly Christian. As theologian Kwame Bediako wrote in *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), African Christianity's future depends on allowing the gospel to indigenize while maintaining theological faithfulness.

## **The Danger of Syncretism**

However, the church must also guard against syncretism—the blending of Christianity with incompatible religious elements. Not every adoption of cultural forms succeeds theologically. The line between healthy inculturation and dangerous syncretism can be difficult to discern.

Several principles help distinguish appropriate cultural adaptation from syncretism:

**Does it conflict with core Christian doctrine?** Cultural forms that require or imply beliefs contrary to Christian teaching (polytheism, pantheism, salvation by works, etc.) cannot be baptized. The Yule log tradition could be Christianized because burning a log in winter doesn't require believing in Odin or engaging in forbidden practices.

**Does it involve practices Scripture prohibits?** Even if a cultural form doesn't explicitly contradict doctrine, it might involve practices the Bible forbids (occult practices, sexual immorality, etc.). These cannot be adopted regardless of cultural significance.

**Can it be given genuine Christian meaning?** Some cultural forms are too tied to their original religious meaning to be successfully Christianized. Others can be given Christian meaning so compelling that the original meaning is displaced. The Yule log fell into the latter category—burning a log at winter could easily symbolize Christ as light and warmth.

**Does it edify the church and witness to Christ?** Paul's principle in 1 Corinthians 10:23—"All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful"—applies to cultural practices. Even if something isn't sinful, if it confuses believers or witnesses or causes unnecessary stumbling, wisdom suggests avoiding it.

The Yule-Christmas transformation largely avoided syncretism because the church effectively Christianized the meaning while retaining the form. By the High Middle Ages, English or Scandinavian Christians weren't secretly worshiping Odin when they burned the Yule log—they were celebrating Christ's birth using cultural forms that had been thoroughly baptized.

### **Memory, History, and Christian Identity**

An interesting dimension of the Yule tradition is historical memory. Most Christians who celebrate Christmas today, using the word "Yuletide" and perhaps even maintaining some Yule log tradition, have no awareness of these customs' pagan origins. The Christianization was so complete that the pagan past was forgotten.

Is this forgetting problematic? Should Christians be troubled to learn that "Yule" originally referred to a pagan festival? Or that many Christmas customs have pre-Christian roots?

Several perspectives exist:

**The "problematic origins" view** holds that Christians should be concerned about customs' origins and perhaps should abandon those with pagan roots. This position emphasizes purity and separation.

**The "transformed meaning" view** holds that origins matter less than current meaning. Once the Yule log became a Christian symbol celebrated in Christian homes as part of Christmas, its pagan past became historically interesting but theologically irrelevant. What matters is what the practice means now, not what it meant centuries ago. Most Christians take this position, often without explicitly articulating it.

**The "both/and" view** acknowledges origins while celebrating transformation. From this perspective, learning about Christmas customs' pagan roots doesn't diminish Christmas but actually demonstrates the gospel's power to transform culture. The fact that Yule became Christmas shows Christianity's cultural vitality and missionary success. This view sees the history as testimony to the gospel's power rather than evidence of problematic compromise.

The third view seems most theologically robust. God is sovereign over history, including cultural history. If He guided missionaries to engage Germanic culture wisely, transforming Yule into Christmas celebration, this demonstrates His providence. The complex cultural negotiations weren't accidental but part of how God brought the gospel to northern Europe. As David Bosch writes in *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), mission involves "bold

humility"—confidence in the gospel combined with respect for cultures and willingness to engage them on their own terms.

## Contemporary Practice and Meaning

### Recovering the Yule Log Today

Many contemporary Christians, particularly those interested in historical Christian practices and liturgical traditions, have shown renewed interest in Yule log customs. Several motivations drive this recovery:

**Connection to Christian history:** Learning about and practicing historical Christian customs connects believers to the faith's long tradition. In an age of historical amnesia, recovering practices like the Yule log can combat the tendency to see Christianity as merely contemporary and innovative rather than ancient and rooted.

**Rich symbolism:** The Yule log offers powerful symbolism that resonates in our time as in past ages. Christ as Light entering darkness, the warmth of God's love, the gathering of family around the hearth—these remain meaningful. In fact, in our digital age when many people's primary "fires" are screens rather than hearths, the physical reality of fire might be even more powerful.

**Countercultural practice:** Burning a Yule log (or maintaining some version of the tradition) resists Christmas's commercialization. It's a practice that can't be bought or sold but must be participated in—slow, family-centered, symbolic rather than materialistic.

**Liturgical home practice:** The Yule log tradition offers a way to bring liturgical sensibility into the home. Just as the church year is marked by rituals and seasons, home practices like the Yule log can mark sacred time domestically.

For families interested in recovering or maintaining Yule log traditions, several adaptations work in contemporary contexts:

**The traditional burning log (where possible):** Families with functioning fireplaces can maintain the tradition in its original form, obtaining a large log, blessing it, lighting it on Christmas Eve, and keeping it burning throughout Christmas. This requires the right domestic architecture but offers the most authentic experience.

**The decorative Yule log:** For those without working fireplaces, a Yule log can be prepared as a decoration. A section of log can be decorated with evergreens, candles, and ribbons, placed as a centerpiece, and the candles lit during Christmas celebrations. This maintains the tradition symbolically even without actual burning.

**The *bûche de Noël* cake:** Making and sharing a Yule log cake has become its own tradition. Families can make this together, explaining the symbolism to children, and share it as part of Christmas celebration. This culinary version, while quite different from the original, maintains the central symbolism and creates family memory.

**Blessing of fire:** Even families who don't burn a specific Yule log can bless their Christmas fires (if they have a fireplace) or Christmas candles. A simple prayer acknowledging Christ as Light and asking God's blessing on the household connects to the tradition's spiritual core without requiring its full material practice.

### Using "Yuletide" Appropriately

For Christians concerned about language, the question sometimes arises: should we use the word "Yuletide" given its pagan origins?

The short answer is: yes, without hesitation. Language constantly borrows from various sources, and a word's ancient etymology rarely determines its current meaning. Consider these examples:

**Days of the week:** Thursday comes from "Thor's day," Saturday from "Saturn's day," Wednesday from "Woden's [Odin's] day." Yet Christians use these terms without implying belief in Norse or Roman gods.

**"Goodbye":** This contraction of "God be with you" was originally explicitly Christian but is now used by people of all religions and none, often with no conscious religious content.

**"Cereal":** This comes from Ceres, Roman goddess of agriculture, but eating Corn Flakes doesn't constitute worship of Ceres.

Similarly, "Yuletide" in contemporary English simply means "the Christmas season." Its etymology is historically interesting but doesn't determine its meaning. When Christians wish others a "Merry Yuletide," they're speaking English, not engaging in Norse paganism.

In fact, Christians might actually prefer "Yuletide" to some alternatives precisely because it preserves the religious meaning of the season. "Holiday season" is deliberately secularized and vague. "Yuletide" and "Christmas" both maintain religious content—one from transformed paganism, one directly from Christianity. Both are legitimate.

The missionary principles that allowed Yule to become Christmas also allow "Yuletide" to function as a Christian term. The word has been baptized through centuries of Christian use. Its meaning is determined by that Christian usage, not by what *jól* meant to 9th-century Norsemen.

### Conclusion: Transformation and Redemption

The story of Yule's transformation into Christmas—and particularly of the Yule log tradition—offers a case study in how the gospel engages culture. It demonstrates several important truths:

**The gospel transforms culture rather than simply rejecting it.** Christianity didn't demand that Germanic converts abandon all their customs but instead transformed those customs' meaning. Winter celebration could remain; what changed was who and what was celebrated.

**Cultural forms can bear Christian meaning.** A log burning in winter isn't inherently pagan or Christian—it's culturally neutral. What matters is the meaning given to it. When understood as symbolizing Christ's light, the Yule log becomes a legitimate Christian practice.

**History is messy but providential.** The way Christianity spread wasn't always neat or theologically pure. Missionaries made judgments, sometimes accommodated existing practices, negotiated cultural boundaries. Yet God worked through this messy process to bring the gospel to northern Europe. Historical complexity doesn't negate God's sovereignty.

**Practice and meaning co-evolve.** The Yule log's meaning changed as it was practiced in Christian contexts, and Christian practice was influenced by the tradition's existence. This dynamic process—practice shaping meaning, meaning shaping practice—characterizes lived religion across cultures and times.

**Symbols remain powerful across centuries.** The Yule log tradition has lasted over a millennium because its core symbolism—light in darkness, warmth in winter, life persisting through death—addresses perennial human experiences and needs. Christ as Light of the World is no less meaningful today than in medieval times, and symbols expressing this truth retain their power.

**Christianity is culturally translatable.** The fact that Christianity could become Germanic, adopting and transforming Yule, demonstrates the gospel's flexibility. Christianity isn't Mediterranean or European—it's universal, capable of expression in any culture. As Lamin Sanneh argues, this translatability is Christianity's genius and explains its global spread.

As we gather around fires (literal or metaphorical) this Christmas, as we use the word "Yuletide," as we perhaps light a Yule log or eat *bûche de Noël*, we participate in this long history of cultural transformation. We stand in continuity with medieval Christians who burned logs while singing carols, with missionaries who preached Christ in Germanic lands, with pagan ancestors who gathered around winter fires hoping for the sun's return—and with all of them, we celebrate the true Light: Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem, the Light no darkness can overcome.

The Yule log, in its journey from pagan bonfire to Christian symbol, embodies the gospel itself: taking what is natural and cultural and human—even what is broken and misdirected—and transforming it, redeeming it, giving it its true meaning and purpose. In this, the Yule log tradition witnesses to the Incarnation's cosmic scope. God didn't enter only Jewish culture or only religious life, but all of human life—including our fires, our feasts, our cultural celebrations. Nothing human is outside the reach of redemption, and everything, rightly understood, can bear witness to Christ.

So burn your Yule log, or display your decorated branch, or eat your chocolate *bûche de Noël*, or simply light a candle—and do so knowing you participate in an ancient tradition

that has been transformed by the gospel, that connects you to Christians across centuries and continents, and that witnesses to the truth that Jesus Christ is indeed the Light of the World, born to illumine all nations and warm every heart that turns to Him.

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## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### The Christmas Tree—From Pagan Symbol to Christian Tradition

Few symbols are more universally associated with Christmas than the decorated evergreen tree. In homes and churches, town squares and shopping centers, the Christmas tree stands as an immediate visual marker of the season, as Karal Ann Marling documents in *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000). Yet this beloved tradition has a complex and contested history, involving genuine pagan roots, medieval Christian reinterpretation, folk legend, and modern commercialization. Joe Perry examines this contested history extensively in *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Understanding the Christmas tree's journey from pre-Christian ritual to Christian symbol illuminates broader questions about how Christianity engages with culture—neither wholly rejecting nor uncritically embracing, but transforming and redirecting toward Christian truth. H. Richard Niebuhr explores this in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), and D. A. Carson provides contemporary reflection in *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

#### **Pre-Christian Evergreen Traditions**

To understand the Christmas tree properly, we must begin with honest acknowledgment: evergreen veneration in midwinter predates Christianity, appearing in various forms across Northern European and Mediterranean cultures. James George Frazer documents pre-Christian evergreen veneration in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (abr. ed., 1922; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

#### **Ancient Winter Solstice Observances**

Winter solstice (approximately December 21-22 in the Northern Hemisphere) marks the year's shortest day and longest night. After the solstice, daylight begins increasing again—a natural turning point invested with profound symbolic meaning by ancient peoples. Ronald Hutton explores the cultural significance of winter solstice in *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Many pre-Christian cultures marked the solstice with festivals celebrating light's return, the sun's renewal, and hope for spring's eventual arrival:

**The Romans celebrated Saturnalia** (December 17-23), a festival honoring Saturn, god of agriculture and time. Homes were decorated with evergreen branches, gifts were exchanged, social norms were temporarily inverted, and general merrymaking prevailed. Macrobius provides detailed description in *Saturnalia* (trans. Percival Vaughan Davies, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969). Some scholars see Saturnalia's influence on later Christmas customs, though the connection is debated. Susan K. Roll discusses this debate in *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

**The Romans also celebrated Dies Natalis Solis Invicti** (Birthday of the Unconquered Sun) on December 25, a festival instituted by Emperor Aurelian in 274 AD. This date's later Christian adoption for Christmas has fueled theories about Christianity "stealing" pagan holidays, though the historical reality is more complex than simple appropriation. Thomas J. Talley explores this in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), and Susan K. Roll provides extensive analysis in *Toward the Origins of Christmas*.

**Germanic and Celtic peoples** in Northern Europe had various winter solstice celebrations (later called Yule by Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians) that included bringing evergreen boughs, holly, and mistletoe into homes. These plants, remaining green through winter's death, symbolized life persisting despite harsh conditions, and were thought to have protective or magical properties. Ronald Hutton documents Germanic and Celtic winter practices in *The Stations of the Sun*, and Prudence Jones and Nigel Pennick explore these traditions in *A History of Pagan Europe* (London: Routledge, 1995).

**The Druids** (Celtic priests) held mistletoe and holly sacred, using them in winter rituals. Oak trees retained special significance, and evergreen decorations were believed to provide refuge for woodland spirits during winter. Pliny the Elder describes Druid veneration of mistletoe and holly in *Natural History* (16.249-251). Stuart Piggott provides modern scholarly analysis in *The Druids* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968).

### **Evergreens in Pagan Symbolism**

Why did pre-Christian peoples venerate evergreens? Several factors converged:

**Persistence of life:** In winter's deadness, evergreens alone remained vital and green. This made them obvious symbols of enduring life, resilience, and hope for renewal. Mircea Eliade discusses how the persistence of evergreens through winter made them natural symbols of enduring life across many cultures in *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (trans. Rosemary Sheed, New York: Sheed & Ward, 1958).

**Connection to fertility and vitality:** Ancient agricultural societies depended on nature's cycles. Symbols representing life's continuance held deep importance, particularly in seasons threatening death and barrenness. James George Frazer explores agricultural societies' dependence on fertility symbols in *The Golden Bough*.

**Protection against evil:** In various folk beliefs, evergreens' persistent life indicated protective power. Hanging evergreen boughs might ward off evil spirits, bad luck, or illness. Christina Hole documents protective beliefs about evergreens in British folk traditions in *British Folk Customs* (London: Hutchinson, 1976).

**Divine presence:** Some traditions saw evergreens as dwelling places for nature spirits or as particularly connected to deities. Bringing them indoors might invite divine favor or protection. Mircea Eliade discusses the association of trees with divine presence widely in ancient religion in *Patterns in Comparative Religion*.

These meanings weren't systematized theology but folk religion—practical, symbolic, deeply rooted in agricultural life's rhythms and anxieties. When Christianity spread through Europe, it encountered these practices and had to decide how to respond. Valerie I. J. Flint explores Christianity's encounter with folk religion in *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

### **Christian Responses to Pagan Evergreen Use**

Christianity's encounter with pre-Christian evergreen traditions produced varied responses—rejection, adaptation, reinterpretation—depending on time, place, and theological perspective.

#### **Early Church Rejection**

Early Christian leaders often condemned pagan practices associated with winter festivals and evergreen veneration.

**Tertullian** (c. 155-220 AD), a North African church father, criticized Christians who participated in Saturnalia customs, including decorating homes with laurel and lamps. He viewed such practices as compromising Christian distinctiveness and participating in pagan worship. In *On Idolatry* (14, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), Tertullian's rigorist stance toward pagan culture was characteristic of early Christianity's defensive posture.

Other early Christian writers similarly warned against pagan practices. Origen criticized birthday celebrations, and Lactantius denounced Saturnalia (see Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, 8.3; and Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, 1.21), concerned that believers would syncretize Christian faith with idolatrous practices.

This separatist approach made sense in Christianity's early centuries when the faith was marginal, often persecuted, and needed clear boundaries distinguishing it from surrounding paganism. The temptation to blend in or compromise was real, making strong warnings necessary. Robert Louis Wilken explores early Christianity's need for clear boundaries with paganism in *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

#### **Medieval Adaptation and Transformation**

As Christianity became established (especially after Constantine's legalization in 313 AD and subsequent Christianization of the Roman Empire), the church's strategy shifted. Rather than simply rejecting pagan practices, Christian leaders increasingly sought to transform them—filling old forms with new Christian content. Peter Brown discusses Constantine's legalization of Christianity and the transformation of Christianity's relationship to culture in *The Rise of Western Christendom* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

**Pope Gregory I** (540-604 AD) articulated this approach explicitly in his instructions to missionaries in Britain. Rather than destroying pagan temples, he advised consecrating them as churches. Rather than forbidding all pagan festivals, redirect them toward Christian purposes. Bede preserves Pope Gregory I's letter to Mellitus (601 AD) regarding mission strategy in Britain in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (1.30, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, rev. R. E. Latham, London: Penguin Books, 1990).

This "baptism of pagan customs" proved effective. Saturnalia's gift-giving could be reinterpreted as commemorating the Magi's gifts or God's gift of His Son. The winter solstice's focus on light's return could be redirected toward Christ as "light of the world." James C. Russell explores the strategy of "baptizing" pagan customs in *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Evergreens similarly underwent reinterpretation. Their symbolism—persistent life, vitality in death's midst, hope—could naturally be redirected toward Christian themes:

- Eternal life in Christ replaces pagan vitality symbolism
- Christ as the Life who persists through death becomes the evergreen's referent
- Hope of resurrection rather than mere spring's return
- Protection through Christ rather than magical properties

Clement A. Miles traces the Christianization of evergreen symbolism in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* (1912; repr., Detroit: Gale Research, 1968).

This transformation wasn't instantaneous but occurred gradually over centuries as pagan practices were slowly Christianized through repeated reinterpretation and theological infusion. James C. Russell documents the gradual process of cultural transformation in *The Germanization of Early Medieval Christianity*.

### **Theological Justification for Reinterpretation**

Several theological principles supported this adaptive approach:

**God's sovereignty over all creation:** All nature belongs to God, not to demons or pagan deities. Trees, plants, and natural symbols can be reclaimed for proper worship of the true Creator. This is a fundamental biblical principle (Psalm 24:1; Acts 17:24-28; Colossians 1:15-17).

**Common grace and natural revelation:** Even pagans dimly perceive truths about God through creation (Romans 1:19-20). Their nature symbolism, while misdirected, often contains insights—life persists, hope endures, light returns—that Christianity fulfills and corrects. Paul's natural theology affirms that creation reveals something of God's character, though this revelation is often distorted by sin.

**Incarnational theology:** Christ entered human culture, speaking in parables using familiar images (seeds, sheep, bread, light). Christians likewise can use culture's symbols, redirecting them toward Christ. Andrew F. Walls explores incarnational theology and cultural engagement in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

**Missionary pragmatism:** Completely rejecting all familiar practices creates unnecessary barriers to conversion. Redirecting existing customs toward Christian meaning facilitates gospel reception while maintaining continuity with converts' previous lives. Missionary pragmatism in cultural adaptation has precedent in Paul's ministry (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). Louis J. Luzbetak provides modern discussion in *The Church and Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

However, boundaries existed. Practices directly involving worship of false gods, immorality, or clear contradiction of Christian truth couldn't be adapted—only rejected. But symbols like evergreens, which carried meaning without intrinsic idolatry, could be transformed. D. A. Carson discusses boundaries in cultural adaptation in *Christ and Culture Revisited*.

### **The Paradise Tree and Medieval Drama**

While the modern Christmas tree's direct lineage is debated, one important medieval precursor was the "Paradise Tree" used in religious drama. O. B. Hardison Jr. documents the Paradise Tree tradition in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

### **Mystery Plays and Biblical Drama**

Medieval Christianity employed drama to teach biblical stories to largely illiterate populations. These "mystery plays" or "miracle plays" dramatized Scripture, saints' lives, and theological themes. V. A. Kolve examines medieval mystery plays in *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

One popular play performed on December 24 was the "Paradise Play," depicting the creation, Adam and Eve's fall, and God's promise of redemption (the Protoevangelium, Genesis 3:15). Karl Young describes the Paradise Play in *The Drama of the Medieval Church* (2 vols., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

The Garden of Eden needed representation on stage. A prominent tree symbolized both the Tree of Knowledge (from which Adam and Eve ate) and the Tree of Life (representing

salvation promised despite the fall). Hardison explores the Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life in medieval theology and drama in *Christian Rite and Christian Drama*.

### **The Paradise Tree's Symbolism**

This stage tree was typically an evergreen (often fir or pine) decorated with:

- **Apples:** representing the forbidden fruit, sin, and the fall
- **Wafers** (later cookies or pastries): representing the Eucharist, Christ's body, salvation
- **Candles or lights:** representing Christ as the light of the world

Clement A. Miles details the Paradise Tree's decorations and their meanings in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*.

The symbolic meaning was rich:

- The evergreen itself represented life persisting despite sin's entry
- Apples recalled humanity's fall into sin
- Eucharistic wafers proclaimed salvation through Christ
- The combination taught theology visually: from fall to redemption, from death to life, from sin to salvation

This Paradise Tree connected Adam (first man) with Christ (second Adam), showing how Christ's coming reverses the fall. December 24 was the traditional feast day for Adam and Eve, making this day appropriate for such dramatization. J. Hennig discusses December 24 as the feast of Adam and Eve in medieval calendars in "The Meaning of All the Saints," *Mediaeval Studies* 10 (1948). Eamon Duffy explores visual theology in medieval drama in *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

### **From Stage to Home**

As mystery plays declined (partly due to Protestant Reformation's suspicion of such theatrical presentations), the Paradise Tree migrated from church and public square into homes. Glynne Wickham discusses the Reformation's impact on mystery plays in *Early English Stages 1300-1600*, vol. 2 (London: Routledge, 1963).

German families began setting up Paradise Trees in their homes during the Christmas season, maintaining the decorations (apples, wafers, candles) and their symbolic meanings. Joe Perry traces the migration of the Paradise Tree from public to domestic space in *Christmas in Germany*.

This domestic practice preserved theological education that had previously occurred through public drama. The home tree became a catechetical tool, teaching children about fall and redemption through visual symbol. Steven Ozment explores the home as site of

religious education in *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

The apples gradually transformed into other decorations (glass ornaments often still called "balls"), but the basic evergreen-tree-with-decorations pattern persisted, eventually evolving into the modern Christmas tree. Alfred Lewis Shoemaker documents the evolution from Paradise Tree to modern Christmas tree in *Christmas in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1959).

### **Martin Luther and Protestant Reformation**

Protestant tradition often credits Martin Luther (1483-1546) with "inventing" the Christmas tree, though this claim is more legend than documented history. Penne L. Restad examines the Luther legend critically in *Christmas in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

### **The Luther Legend**

According to popular tradition, Luther was walking through a forest one winter evening and was struck by starlight shining through evergreen branches. To recreate this beauty for his family, he brought an evergreen tree indoors and placed candles on its branches to represent stars.

This story is appealing and fits Luther's character—his love of family, his appreciation for creation's beauty, his theological emphasis on God's presence in ordinary life. However, no contemporary evidence supports it. The story appears only in much later sources and is likely apocryphal. The legend of Luther placing candles on a tree appears in various 19th-century sources but lacks contemporary documentation (see Eugene E. Klug, "Luther on Christmas," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45, 1981). Oscar Cullmann notes the absence of contemporary evidence for the Luther story in "The Origin of Christmas," in *The Early Church* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956).

However, the association with Luther reflects historical reality:

The Christmas tree tradition flourished particularly in Lutheran Germany during the 16th and 17th centuries. Whether Luther personally originated it or not, Protestant areas (especially Lutheran) adopted Christmas trees more readily and earlier than Catholic regions. Joe Perry documents Lutheran areas' early adoption of Christmas trees in *Christmas in Germany*.

Several factors explain this:

**Protestant emphasis on home and family** as centers of religious life (rather than church and monastery being primary loci of piety) made domestic religious symbols like Christmas trees natural. Steven Ozment explores Luther's emphasis on domestic piety in *When Fathers Ruled*.

**Luther's theology valued creation**, seeing nature as good and capable of revealing God's glory. This theological affirmation of creation made Protestants comfortable using natural symbols like evergreen trees. Martin Luther articulates this theology of creation in *The Freedom of a Christian* (1520), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (ed. Harold J. Grimm, Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).

**The Protestant rejection of excessive church ornamentation** (images, statues, elaborate decorations) may have redirected decorative impulses toward the home. The Christmas tree provided domestic festivity that Protestant simplicity removed from churches. Carlos M. N. Eire discusses Protestant simplification of church decoration in *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

**Protestant Scripture emphasis** made biblically-rooted symbols (like the Paradise Tree connecting to Genesis and salvation history) particularly appropriate, while suspicion toward non-biblical saint veneration or Marian devotion reduced Catholic decorative alternatives. James F. White explores Protestant emphasis on biblical warrant in *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989).

### **Protestant Christmas Tree Theology**

In Protestant contexts, the Christmas tree developed distinctive theological emphases:

**The tree as creation praising Creator:** The evergreen brought indoors represents all creation rejoicing at the Creator's birth, echoing Psalm 96:11-12: "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice... then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy." Creation's praise of the Creator is a common biblical theme (see also Psalm 148).

**The tree pointing upward:** The evergreen's characteristic shape—broad base tapering to a point at top—was interpreted as directing attention heavenward, toward God, away from earthly concerns toward eternal realities. This symbolic interpretation of the tree's shape pointing upward appears in 19th-century devotional literature (Miles, *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*).

**Decorations as theological pedagogy:** Ornaments, lights, and tinsel weren't merely pretty but instructive:

- Lights/candles: Christ as light of the world
- Star on top: Star of Bethlehem, guiding to Christ
- Angels: Heavenly host announcing Christ's birth
- Gifts beneath: God's gift of His Son, Magi's gifts, Christian generosity

Margaret Visser explores Christmas tree decorations as theological pedagogy in *The Gift of Thanks: The Roots and Rituals of Gratitude* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009).

**The home as little church:** The Christmas tree anchored domestic worship during Advent and Christmas, making the home a site of theological reflection and family catechesis. The concept of "home as little church" has roots in Reformation theology (Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled*).

### **The Christmas Tree Spreads Across Europe and America**

From its German heartland, the Christmas tree gradually spread throughout Europe and eventually worldwide.

#### **German Diaspora and Royal Influence**

German immigrants carried the Christmas tree tradition wherever they settled—throughout Europe, to America, and eventually globally. Russell A. Kazal traces German immigration patterns and cultural transmission in *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Royal marriages particularly accelerated the tradition's spread:

**Princess Henrietta of Nassau-Weilburg** married Archduke Charles of Austria in 1815 and introduced the Christmas tree to Vienna's imperial court. Joe Perry documents Princess Henrietta's introduction of the Christmas tree to Vienna in *Christmas in Germany*.

**Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha** married Queen Victoria of Britain in 1840. Albert brought the Christmas tree tradition to Windsor Castle, and British high society quickly imitated royal practice. J. A. R. Pimlott examines Prince Albert's influence on British Christmas customs in *The Englishman's Christmas* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978).

The famous 1848 illustration in the *Illustrated London News* showing Queen Victoria, Prince Albert, and their children around a decorated Christmas tree made the custom fashionable throughout Britain and, by extension, the British Empire. Karal Ann Marling analyzes the 1848 *Illustrated London News* image in *Merry Christmas!*, and J. A. R. Pimlott discusses it in *The Englishman's Christmas*.

This Victorian embrace transformed the Christmas tree from ethnic German custom into international fashion. What British royalty endorsed, middle classes emulated, and eventually the practice filtered through all social classes. John M. Golby and A. W. Purdue explore Victorian class emulation of royal customs in *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

### **The Christmas Tree in America**

German settlers in Pennsylvania brought Christmas trees to America as early as the 1740s. The Moravian settlement at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, had a community Christmas tree in 1747. Alfred Lewis Shoemaker documents Moravian introduction of the Christmas tree to America in *Christmas in Pennsylvania*.

However, Christmas tree adoption was gradual and contested in America:

**Puritan and Reformed opposition:** Many American Protestants, influenced by Puritan suspicion of Christmas celebration generally and elaborate decorations specifically, viewed Christmas trees as pagan, Catholic, or frivolous. Stephen Nissenbaum examines Puritan opposition to Christmas in *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

German enclaves maintained the tradition, but it didn't spread widely until the mid-19th century. Kathleen Neils Conzen traces German-American maintenance of Christmas tree traditions in "Germans," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (ed. Stephan Thernstrom, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980).

The 1830s-1850s saw growing acceptance, influenced by:

- Continuing German immigration
- British adoption (Victoria and Albert's example)
- Romantic movement's appreciation for folk customs
- Growing sentimentalism about Christmas and family

Penne L. Restad analyzes factors in mid-19th century American acceptance of Christmas trees in *Christmas in America*.

By the 1870s-1880s, Christmas trees were common in American homes. Department stores, churches, and public spaces erected trees. The tradition had become American mainstream. Leigh Eric Schmidt documents the popularization of Christmas trees in late 19th-century America in *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

The first Christmas tree at the White House appeared during President Franklin Pierce's administration (1853-1857), though the practice wasn't consistent until President Benjamin Harrison's 1889 tree. The national Christmas tree on the White House lawn became an annual tradition in 1923. William L. Bird Jr. details White House Christmas tree history in *Holidays on Display* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

Commercial Christmas tree farming began in the late 19th century, making trees more accessible and affordable. What had been wild-harvested trees became agricultural products, cultivated specifically for Christmas. William D. Adams examines commercial Christmas tree farming in "Horticulture, Christmas Trees, and the Farming of Nature," in *We Are What We Celebrate* (ed. Amitai Etzioni and Jared Bloom, New York: New York University Press, 2004).

### **Modern Christmas Tree Symbolism and Practice**

The Christmas tree in contemporary practice carries multiple layers of meaning—some explicitly Christian, some more generally cultural, some purely aesthetic.

## Christian Symbolic Interpretations

**The evergreen's persistent life** remains the tree's most fundamental symbolic meaning. In winter's death, the evergreen stays alive—a natural symbol for:

- **Eternal life through Christ:** "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live" (John 11:25). Jesus' declaration that He is the resurrection and the life provides the theological foundation for interpreting evergreens as symbols of eternal life.
- **Christ's unchanging nature:** "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Christ's unchanging nature contrasts with creation's changes and seasons.
- **Hope amid darkness:** The green tree in December darkness proclaims that death doesn't have the final word. Josef Pieper explores hope as a central Christian virtue in *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997).

**The tree's shape**—triangular or conical—has been interpreted as representing the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons yet one God. This symbolic reading, while probably not original to the tradition, provides legitimate theological reflection. Trinitarian symbolism in the tree's shape appears in various devotional works, though it lacks ancient pedigree. For Trinitarian theology, see Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010).

**The tree's apex pointing upward** directs attention heavenward, symbolizing:

- Worship ascending to God
- Human aspiration toward the divine
- Christ as the way to the Father

The upward-pointing tree as symbol of worship and aspiration appears in 19th-20th century devotional literature.

**The lights decorating the tree** represent:

- **Christ as light of the world** (John 8:12; 9:5; 12:46)
- **Christians as lights bearing witness** (Matthew 5:14-16; Philippians 2:15)
- **The star guiding Magi to Christ** (Matthew 2:1-12)
- **Heaven's glory breaking into earth's darkness**

**The star traditionally topping the tree** specifically recalls the Star of Bethlehem (Matthew 2:2, 9-10), the astronomical phenomenon that guided Magi to the newborn King.

Alternatively, some trees are topped with an **angel**, representing:

- The angel appearing to Mary (Luke 1:26-38)
- The angel announcing Christ's birth to shepherds (Luke 2:9-14)
- The heavenly host praising God (Luke 2:13-14)

Angels play prominent roles in the nativity narratives.

### **Ornaments can carry Christian meaning:**

- **Balls/spheres:** Originally representing the Paradise Tree's apples (sin/fall), now also representing the world Christ came to save
- **Candy canes:** The shepherd's crook (Christ as Good Shepherd), or when inverted, the letter "J" for Jesus
- **Angels:** Heavenly messengers and worshippers
- **Doves:** The Holy Spirit, peace
- **Bells:** Joy, celebration, proclamation of good news

Margaret Visser explores the symbolism of various Christmas ornaments in *The Gift of Thanks*.

### **Gifts placed beneath the tree symbolize:**

- God's supreme gift of His Son (John 3:16; Romans 8:32)
- The Magi's gifts to Jesus (Matthew 2:11)
- Christian generosity reflecting divine generosity
- The call to give as we have received

## **Cultural and Family Significance**

Beyond explicit Christian symbolism, the Christmas tree serves important cultural and familial functions:

**Family bonding:** Selecting, decorating, and gathering around the tree creates shared family experience and memories. For many families, tree decoration is a cherished annual ritual. Barbara Meyerhoff explores family bonding through ritual in "A Death in Due Time: Construction of Self and Culture in Ritual Drama," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* (ed. John J. MacAloon, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984).

**Tradition and continuity:** The tree connects generations. Grandparents, parents, and children decorating together, perhaps using ornaments passed down through generations, creates tangible connection across time. John H. Westerhoff III examines

intergenerational transmission through ritual in *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (3rd ed., Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

**Beauty and festivity:** The tree transforms ordinary domestic space into festive, beautiful environment. This aesthetic transformation reflects the season's specialness and creates atmosphere conducive to celebration. Colleen McDannell explores aesthetic transformation of domestic space in *Material Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

**Cultural identity:** For families with German, British, American, or broadly European heritage, the Christmas tree connects them to ethnic and cultural roots. Kathleen Neils Conzen et al. discuss cultural identity and ethnic symbols in "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A.," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12 (Fall 1992).

**Secular celebration marker:** Even for non-Christians, the Christmas tree has become a cultural marker of the season, though divorced from religious meaning. This secularization troubles some Christians while others see it as neutral cultural practice. Leigh Eric Schmidt analyzes the secularization of Christmas symbols in *Consumer Rites*.

## Theological Concerns and Controversies

The Christmas tree hasn't been without controversy throughout Christian history, and concerns persist among some believers.

### Pagan Origins Objection

Some Christians object to Christmas trees because of documented pagan origins. If evergreen veneration was pagan, shouldn't Christians reject it rather than adopt it? Barry Bandstra discusses Christian objections to Christmas trees based on pagan origins in *Reading the Old Testament* (4th ed., Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2009).

This objection has merit insofar as it takes seriously the biblical prohibition against learning pagan ways (Deuteronomy 12:30-31; Jeremiah 10:2-4). These are biblical warnings against adopting pagan practices.

However, several responses are offered:

**Transformed meaning:** What matters isn't a symbol's origin but its current meaning and use. A symbol originally pagan but now redirected toward Christian truth serves Christian purposes. Andrew F. Walls discusses the transformation of cultural symbols in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*.

**All-or-nothing fallacy:** If we reject everything with pagan origins, we'd have to reject weekday names (named for pagan gods), much of our calendar structure, wedding rings (ancient pagan symbolism), and numerous other cultural elements. Christianity has always existed within cultures, adopting and transforming elements rather than creating entirely new culture from scratch. D. A. Carson critiques the all-or-nothing fallacy in cultural engagement in *Christ and Culture Revisited*.

**Biblical precedent:** Paul's approach to meat sacrificed to idols (1 Corinthians 8-10) suggests that formerly pagan-associated things can be used with clear conscience if they don't now involve actual idolatry and don't cause weaker believers to stumble. Gordon D. Fee explores Paul's treatment of meat sacrificed to idols in *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), providing framework for evaluating formerly pagan-associated practices.

**Creation belongs to God:** Romans 1:25 condemns worshipping creation rather than Creator, but it doesn't condemn recognizing creation's beauty or using natural elements in worship. Trees, plants, and nature belong to God; using them to honor Him is appropriate. Romans 1:25 distinguishes between worshipping creation and worshipping Creator through creation.

### **Jeremiah 10:2-4 and "Christmas Tree" Interpretation**

Some cite Jeremiah 10:2-4 as prohibiting Christmas trees:

"Thus says the LORD: 'Learn not the way of the nations... for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move.'"

This passage seems to describe exactly what we do with Christmas trees—cut from forest, decorated, fastened in place.

However, context makes clear Jeremiah is condemning idol manufacture, not Christmas trees:

The passage continues (verses 5-9) describing these decorated trees as "scarecrows in a cucumber field"—carved wooden idols that must be carried, cannot speak or walk, and are worthless. These are clearly idols, not decorative trees.

The historical context is warnings against Babylonian and other ancient Near Eastern idolatry—carving trees into images of gods, overlaying them with precious metals, and worshipping them as deities. John H. Walton explores ancient Near Eastern idolatry practices in *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

Modern Christmas trees aren't worshipped. They're decorations, symbols, or at most reminders of Christian truths—but no one bows to them, prays to them, or treats them as divine. The distinction between decoration and worship is crucial in evaluating Christmas trees theologically.

The proper application of Jeremiah 10 is warning against idolatry (treating anything as God's equal or replacement), not prohibiting decorative trees. J. A. Thompson discusses Jeremiah 10 in context in *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980).

That said, awareness of this passage should make Christians cautious about how they regard Christmas trees. If the tree becomes an idol—if Christmas is ruined without the perfect tree, if acquiring/decorating the tree overshadows worship, if we're more concerned with tree than with Christ—then the warning applies, not because trees are inherently wrong but because anything can become an idol if given inappropriate priority. Timothy Keller explores how anything can become an idol if given inappropriate priority in *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

### **Commercialization and Materialism**

A more serious concern involves the Christmas tree's role in commercial Christmas and materialistic excess. Leigh Eric Schmidt examines Christmas commercialization in *Consumer Rites*, and Karal Ann Marling explores this in *Merry Christmas!*

The tree has become central to consumer Christmas:

- Expensive trees, elaborate decorations, competitive displays
- Gifts piled beneath as primary focus
- The tree as status symbol or aesthetic competition
- Time and money spent on tree exceeding attention to Christ

This commercialization can:

- Displace genuine Christian observance
- Foster materialism and greed
- Burden families financially
- Create anxiety and stress rather than joy
- Focus on external display rather than internal devotion

William B. Waits analyzes the negative effects of commercial Christmas in *The Modern Christmas in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

Christians must remain vigilant against allowing the tree (or any Christmas custom) to overshadow Christ. The question isn't whether Christmas trees are permissible in principle but whether in practice they serve or hinder authentic Christian celebration. D. A. Carson explores the question of practice versus principle in Christian liberty in *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993).

Potential safeguards:

- Keep tree decorations simple and modest
- Focus on ornaments with Christian meaning rather than commercial glitz
- Emphasize gifts beneath tree as symbols of grace, not materialism

- Don't let tree acquisition/decoration dominate Christmas preparations
- Use the tree as catechetical tool—teach children what decorations symbolize
- Remember the tree serves worship; worship doesn't serve the tree

Craig L. Blomberg provides safeguards against Christmas materialism in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

### **Conscience and Christian Liberty**

Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 provide biblical framework for navigating disputable matters like Christmas trees. J. I. Packer discusses Christian liberty and conscience in *Concise Theology* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1993).

Some Christians, with clear conscience informed by Scripture, use Christmas trees as beautiful symbols pointing to Christ, creation celebrating Creator, eternal life, etc.

Other Christians, equally sincere, avoid Christmas trees because of pagan origins, commercialization concerns, or conviction that such traditions aren't warranted. Christians who avoid Christmas trees on conscience grounds are exercising legitimate Christian liberty (see Colossians 2:16-17).

Both positions can reflect genuine Christian faith. The issue is one of Christian liberty, not essential doctrine. Mark E. Dever and Paul Alexander explore the distinction between essential doctrine and disputable matters in *The Deliberate Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

Paul's principles apply:

- Don't judge those who differ on disputable matters (Romans 14:3-4)
- Each should be fully convinced in their own mind (Romans 14:5)
- Don't let your liberty cause others to stumble (Romans 14:13-21; 1 Corinthians 8:9-13)
- Whether we have trees or not, do all to God's glory (1 Corinthians 10:31)

John R. W. Stott explores respecting diverse convictions in *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

Churches and families should respect diverse convictions, neither demanding everyone have trees nor condemning those who do.

### **Practical Guidance for Christian Christmas Tree Use**

For Christians choosing to have Christmas trees, several practices can maximize spiritual benefit while minimizing pitfalls:

#### **Selection and Setup**

**Choose thoughtfully.** Consider environmental impact (real vs. artificial), budget constraints, and family needs. Don't let perfect-tree pursuit create stress or financial burden. Stephen Bouma-Prediger discusses environmental stewardship in Christmas practices in *For the Beauty of the Earth* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

**Real trees** connect to creation, smell wonderful, and can be recycled/composted. They require water and shed needles.

**Artificial trees** avoid annual purchase, reduce environmental impact of harvesting (if used many years), and are convenient. They lack real trees' sensory qualities and connection to nature.

William D. Adams discusses the real vs. artificial tree debate, which involves environmental, aesthetic, and practical considerations, in "Horticulture, Christmas Trees, and the Farming of Nature."

Either choice can honor God if motivated by stewardship, practicality, and appropriate priorities.

**Involve the family.** Let tree selection, placement, and setup be communal activity that builds relationships and creates memories. Barbara Meyerhoff explores family ritual and bonding in "A Death in Due Time."

## Decoration

**Decorate intentionally.** Rather than mindlessly hanging ornaments, use decoration time as catechesis:

- Explain symbolism of lights, star, evergreen
- Tell the nativity story as you decorate
- Use ornaments as visual reminders of biblical truths
- Create or purchase ornaments with Christian meaning

Decorating as catechesis transforms routine activity into teaching opportunity. John H. Westerhoff III discusses this in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

**Consider a Jesse Tree:** An alternative decorating approach uses ornaments representing salvation history from Creation through Christ. Each day of Advent, add an ornament (e.g., apple for fall, ark for Noah, ram for Abraham's sacrifice, etc.), culminating in nativity scene at Christmas. This turns decoration into biblical storytelling. Geraldine McCaughrean explores the Jesse Tree tradition in *The Jesse Tree* (Chicago: Lion Hudson, 2014).

**Keep decorations modest.** Extravagance serves pride, not worship. Simple beauty honors God better than ostentatious display. Richard J. Foster discusses simplicity and modesty in Christian practice in *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

**Include children appropriately.** Let children make ornaments, place decorations (with supervision), and contribute to the process. This forms them in Christian tradition. Including children in ritual forms them in Christian tradition (Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*).

### **Use Throughout the Season**

**Don't rush.** Consider waiting to decorate tree until Advent begins or even later, rather than decorating right after Thanksgiving (American context). This preserves Advent's distinctive preparation character. Laurence Hull Stookey discusses maintaining Advent's distinct character in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

**Use tree as worship focus.** Gather family around tree for:

- Advent wreath lighting
- Scripture reading
- Prayer
- Hymn singing
- Devotional reading

Using the tree as focus for family devotion connects decoration to worship. Mark Searle discusses this in *Liturgy Made Simple* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

The tree's presence can remind family to pause, reflect, pray throughout the season rather than just serving as decoration.

**Keep lights on during family prayers or devotions**, creating atmosphere conducive to worship and wonder. James F. White and Susan J. White discuss how atmosphere conducive to worship is created through intentional environmental design in *Church Architecture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

### **After Christmas**

**Leave tree up through Epiphany** (January 6) rather than immediately removing it December 26. Christmas is a season, not just a day, and the tree can remain through the twelve days of Christmas. Adolf Adam discusses the Twelve Days of Christmas (December 25-January 5) as constituting the Christmas season in *The Liturgical Year* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

**Dispose of tree responsibly.** Real trees can be recycled, chipped for mulch, or used as wildlife shelter. This stewardship honors creation. Stephen Bouma-Prediger discusses responsible disposal of Christmas trees honoring creation in *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

**Store artificial trees carefully** for reuse in future years, maximizing their environmental benefit. Maximizing artificial tree longevity reduces environmental impact through extended use.

**Save meaningful ornaments** to pass down to children, creating family heritage and tangible connection between generations. Colleen McDannell explores heirloom ornaments creating intergenerational connection in *Material Christianity*.

### **Conclusion: The Christmas Tree in Christian Perspective**

The Christmas tree's journey from pagan symbol to Christian tradition illustrates how Christianity engages culture—neither wholly embracing nor entirely rejecting but transforming and redirecting. H. Richard Niebuhr discusses Christianity's cultural engagement strategy in *Christ and Culture*, and D. A. Carson provides contemporary reflection in *Christ and Culture Revisited*.

The evergreen tree itself, as part of God's creation, is neither inherently Christian nor pagan. It's morally neutral, capable of being used for good or ill, for worship or idolatry, for edification or distraction. The moral neutrality of created things is a key theological principle (1 Timothy 4:4-5).

The meaning we assign it matters. When the tree points beyond itself to Christ, when it teaches eternal life, when it creates family bonds and beautiful space, when it serves worship rather than commanding it—then it fulfills legitimate Christian purpose. Paul Tillich discusses how symbols serve legitimate Christian purposes when they point beyond themselves to Christ and theological truth in *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

But when the tree becomes idolatrous—when perfect tree pursuit overshadows Christ, when commercial pressure drives decisions, when material excess replaces spiritual substance, when we can't imagine Christmas without it—then we've allowed a good thing to become a bad master. Timothy Keller explores the danger of good things becoming idols in *Counterfeit Gods*.

The Christmas tree, rightly used, is a beautiful tradition connecting us to Christian history, teaching theology through symbol, creating festive atmosphere, and pointing toward the eternal life we have in Christ, who is the Tree of Life (Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14), the Branch from Jesse (Isaiah 11:1), and the center of all creation (Colossians 1:15-20).

May our Christmas trees, if we choose to have them, truly serve this purpose—not as idols commanding devotion but as servants directing attention to the One whose birth we celebrate, whose return we await, and whose eternal kingdom will finally fulfill all that our earthly symbols dimly foreshadow. For earthly symbols foreshadowing heavenly realities, see Hebrews 8:5; 10:1, and C. S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (1949; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

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## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Christmas Lights and the Star of Bethlehem

Light is among Christianity's most pervasive and powerful symbols. From the opening verses of Genesis—"Let there be light"—to Revelation's vision of the New Jerusalem illuminated by the Lamb's glory, light functions as a primary biblical metaphor for God's presence, truth, holiness, and saving work. Hans Urs von Balthasar explores light as a primary biblical symbol in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* (trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), and Richard Bauckham discusses this in *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). It is therefore natural that Christmas, celebrating the Incarnation of Him who declared "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), should be marked by displays of light. Jesus' self-identification as "the light of the world" is one of the seven "I am" statements in John's Gospel, as D. A. Carson discusses in *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Christmas lights, in their various forms—candles, electric bulbs, luminarias, window displays—serve both aesthetic and theological functions, creating beauty while proclaiming profound truth about the Light who entered our darkness. Gabe Huck explores the theological significance of Christmas lights in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

#### **Biblical Foundations: Light in Scripture**

Before examining Christmas lighting traditions specifically, we must understand the rich biblical theology of light that undergirds these practices.

#### **Light in Creation**

"And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Light is God's first creative act, preceding even the creation of sun, moon, and stars (which appear on day four, Genesis 1:14-19). This priority indicates light's fundamental importance. Claus Westermann explores the creation of light before the luminaries, which has been the subject of extensive theological reflection, in *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984).

God's first creative word produces light, establishing the pattern that God's word brings illumination—both physical and spiritual. This connection between divine speech and light appears throughout Scripture. The connection between God's word and light appears throughout Scripture (Psalm 119:105, 130). Walter Brueggemann discusses the

theological significance in *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

Light precedes sun and stars, indicating that in biblical cosmology, light has existence independent of luminaries. God Himself is light's ultimate source; created lights merely reflect or channel the light that originates in God. John H. Walton explores light as independent of luminaries in biblical cosmology in *Genesis 1 as Ancient Cosmology* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

The separation of light from darkness (Genesis 1:4-5) establishes the fundamental moral and spiritual dualism that runs through Scripture—light representing good, truth, holiness, life, and God's presence; darkness representing evil, deception, sin, death, and alienation from God. Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid note in *God Is a Warrior* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) that the light/darkness dualism in Scripture represents moral and spiritual realities, not ontological dualism.

This created light foreshadows the uncreated Light—God Himself—and ultimately the Incarnate Light—Jesus Christ. Thomas F. Torrance discusses Christ as the fulfillment of created light in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

### **Light as Divine Presence**

Throughout the Old Testament, light signals God's presence:

**The pillar of fire** guiding Israel through the wilderness (Exodus 13:21-22; 14:24) manifested God's presence and guidance. By night, fire provided literal illumination and symbolic assurance of divine care. Terrence E. Fretheim analyzes the pillar of fire in *Exodus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991).

**The burning bush** (Exodus 3:2-6) through which God revealed Himself to Moses combined light (fire) with divine presence. The bush burned but wasn't consumed—light without destruction, holiness approaching without annihilating. Brevard S. Childs discusses the burning bush as theophany in *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974).

**God's glory** filling the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35) and later Solomon's temple (1 Kings 8:10-11) appeared as overwhelming light/cloud. The priests couldn't enter because of the brilliance of God's manifest presence. Meredith G. Kline explores the glory cloud (*kabod*) representing God's manifest presence in *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980).

**The lamp stand (menorah)** in the tabernacle (Exodus 25:31-40; 27:20-21; Leviticus 24:1-4) burned continually, symbolizing God's eternal presence among His people and Israel's calling to be a light to nations. Carol Meyers discusses the menorah's symbolism in *The Tabernacle Menorah* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976).

**Psalm 27:1** declares: "The LORD is my light and my salvation." God Himself is light—not merely its source but its very essence. James L. Mays explores God as light in the Psalms in *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994).

**Psalm 104:2** describes God as one who "covers himself with light as with a garment"—light is God's clothing, His visible manifestation. Allen P. Ross discusses this psalm celebrating God as creator, clothing Himself in light, in *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016).

This Old Testament pattern establishes that light = God's presence, glory, holiness, and saving action. Christopher J. H. Wright explores the pattern of light as divine presence throughout the Old Testament in *Knowing God Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

### **Light and Darkness in Spiritual Conflict**

Biblical light/darkness imagery often represents moral and spiritual realities:

**Psalm 119:105:** "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path." God's revelation illuminates, showing the way to live righteously. Willem A. VanGemeren notes in *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008) that the word as light is a central metaphor in Psalm 119.

**Proverbs** contrasts the paths of righteous and wicked: "The way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know over what they stumble. But the path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day" (Proverbs 4:18-19). Bruce K. Waltke discusses in *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) how wisdom literature frequently employs light/darkness imagery for moral instruction.

**Isaiah** prophesies both judgment (darkness) and salvation (light): "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone" (Isaiah 9:2). This messianic prophecy finds fulfillment in Christ (Matthew 4:16). J. Alec Motyer explores this messianic prophecy and its fulfillment in *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

### **Darkness represents:**

- Ignorance: Not knowing truth, God, or the right way
- Evil: Moral darkness, sin, wickedness
- Judgment: Divine wrath, punishment, separation from God
- Death: The ultimate darkness, cessation of life
- Satan's domain: "The power of darkness" (Luke 22:53; Colossians 1:13)

Clinton E. Arnold discusses darkness as representing Satan's domain in *Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992).

## Light represents:

- Truth: Knowledge, revelation, understanding
- Righteousness: Holiness, moral goodness, virtue
- Salvation: Deliverance from judgment, reconciliation with God
- Life: Vitality, flourishing, eternal existence
- God's kingdom: The realm where God reigns

Paul S. Minear explores the symbolic meanings of light and darkness in Scripture in *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

## Christ as Light in the New Testament

The New Testament's light imagery reaches its climax in Christ:

**John's prologue** identifies Christ with the creative light: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:4-5). The Word who spoke "Let there be light" in Genesis now becomes flesh as the Light. Andreas J. Köstenberger discusses how the prologue connects Christ with creation's light in *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

**John 8:12:** Jesus declares, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." This "I am" statement (echoing God's self-revelation to Moses, Exodus 3:14) identifies Jesus with God and claims He is light's ultimate source and fulfillment. Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966) that the "I am" formula connects Jesus to the divine name in Exodus 3:14.

**John 9:5**, after healing the blind man: "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." Christ's physical presence brought illumination—both literally (restoring sight) and spiritually (revealing truth). D. A. Carson discusses how Jesus' healing of the blind man demonstrates both physical and spiritual illumination in *The Gospel According to John*.

**John 12:46:** "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness." Christ's mission is to dispel darkness, both cosmic and personal. Herman Ridderbos explores Jesus' mission to dispel darkness in *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (trans. John Vriend, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

**The transfiguration** (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36) reveals Christ's glory: "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Matthew 17:2). The divine light usually veiled in flesh momentarily shines forth. Peter T. O'Brien discusses the transfiguration revealing Christ's divine glory in *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

**Simeon's Nunc Dimittis** recognizes the infant Jesus as "a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:32)—connecting Christ's birth

directly to Isaiah's light prophecies. Joel B. Green explores how Simeon's Nunc Dimittis connects Christ to Isaiah's prophecies of light for the nations in *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

**Paul's conversion** involves Christ appearing as blinding light (Acts 9:3-9; 22:6-11; 26:12-18), so brilliant that Paul is temporarily blinded. The risen Christ radiates divine glory/light. C. K. Barrett discusses Paul's conversion through Christ's blinding light in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

**Revelation's vision** of the New Jerusalem "has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Revelation 21:23). In the new creation, Christ's light makes all other lights unnecessary. G. K. Beale explores how in the New Jerusalem, Christ's light replaces all created lights in *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

### **Believers as Light**

Jesus extends light-bearing to His followers:

**Matthew 5:14-16:** "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." D. A. Carson explores Jesus' teaching on believers as light in *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978).

Christians are called to be lights—not sources of light (only Christ is that) but reflectors and bearers of His light. We shine derivatively, reflecting the true Light. Miroslav Volf discusses Christians as reflectors of Christ's light in *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

**Ephesians 5:8:** "For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light." Conversion transforms us from darkness to light—not merely from being in darkness but from being darkness itself. Peter T. O'Brien explores how conversion transforms believers from darkness to light in *The Letter to the Ephesians*.

**Philippians 2:15:** Believers are to "shine as lights in the world" amid "a crooked and twisted generation," holding forth the word of life. Gordon D. Fee discusses believers shining as lights amid a crooked generation in *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

**1 Thessalonians 5:5:** "For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night or of the darkness." Christian identity is fundamentally redefined in terms of light. Charles A. Wanamaker explores Christian identity redefined as "children of light" in *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

This biblical theology—light as divine presence, as Christ's identity, as Christian calling—provides the theological foundation for Christmas lighting traditions. When we illuminate

homes, churches, and public spaces at Christmas, we're not merely being festive but proclaiming profound truth: the Light has come into the world. Susan J. White discusses the theological foundation of Christmas lighting traditions in *The Spirit of Worship* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

### **Historical Development of Christmas Lighting**

Christmas lighting traditions developed gradually, with distinct phases marked by technological changes and evolving customs.

#### **Medieval and Early Modern: Candles**

Candles were the primary artificial light source for centuries, used for practical illumination and religious symbolism.

Church services throughout Christian history have used candles extensively:

- Altar candles flanking the cross or communion table
- The Paschal (Easter) candle symbolizing Christ's resurrection
- Advent wreath candles marking progression through the season
- Candlelit processions for feast days and special services

James F. White discusses the history of candles in Christian worship in *Introduction to Christian Worship* (3rd ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services naturally incorporated candles, creating atmosphere and symbolizing Christ's light entering darkness. Adolf Adam notes in *The Liturgical Year* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981) that the use of candles on Christmas Eve has ancient precedent.

The tradition of placing candles in windows developed in several cultures:

**Ireland:** Catholics placed candles in windows during penal times as signals that priests could safely celebrate Mass in the home, ostensibly claiming the light welcomed Mary and Joseph seeking shelter. Diarmaid Ó Muiríte documents the Irish tradition of window candles during penal times in *A Seat Behind the Coachman: Travellers in Ireland 1800-1900* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1972).

**Colonial America:** Candles in windows welcomed travelers and neighbors. James H. Barnett discusses colonial American candle traditions in *The American Christmas: A Study in National Culture* (New York: Macmillan, 1954).

**European traditions:** Window candles expressed hospitality and festivity. Clement A. Miles details European window candle traditions in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* (1912; repr., Detroit: Gale Research, 1968).

The Christmas tree itself became a candle-bearer when candles were attached to branches (a fire hazard modern electric lights fortunately eliminated). These tree candles represented:

- Stars in the night sky
- Christ as light of the world
- The heavenly glory surrounding Christ's birth

Joe Perry explores candles on Christmas trees and their symbolism in *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Martin Luther's legendary experience (whether historical or apocryphal) of placing candles on a tree to represent stars reflects this medieval-to-early-modern practice of tree lighting. Oscar Cullmann notes in "The Origin of Christmas," in *The Early Church* (ed. A. J. B. Higgins, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) that the Luther legend about tree candles, while possibly apocryphal, reflects actual practice.

#### **Challenges of candle use:**

- **Fire danger:** Candles on trees, near evergreens, or in windows posed serious fire risk
- **Expense:** Quality candles were costly; poorer families couldn't afford decorative candle use
- **Maintenance:** Candles required replacement, dripped wax, needed monitoring
- **Limited duration:** A candle might burn only a few hours before needing replacement

Karal Ann Marling documents the practical challenges of candle use in *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

Despite limitations, candles provided the primary Christmas lighting for centuries, and their warm, flickering light created an atmosphere electric lights struggle to replicate. James F. White and Susan J. White discuss the atmospheric quality of candlelight in *Church Architecture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

#### **The Advent of Electric Christmas Lights**

Thomas Edison's development of the practical incandescent light bulb (1879) revolutionized lighting generally and eventually transformed Christmas decoration. Paul Israel details Thomas Edison's development of the incandescent bulb in *Edison: A Life of Invention* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1998).

The first electric Christmas lights appeared quickly after electric lighting's invention:

**Edward H. Johnson**, an associate of Thomas Edison, created the first electric Christmas tree lights in 1882. At his New York City home, Johnson hand-wired 80 red, white, and blue light bulbs and placed them on a rotating Christmas tree. Local newspapers reported this curiosity, though it remained a novelty. Edward H. Johnson's 1882 Christmas tree is documented in *The New York Times*, December 1882, and Penne L. Restad discusses it in *Christmas in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

Electric lights' initial rarity meant only wealthy individuals could afford them. Early electric lights required:

- Access to electricity (uncommon in homes until early 20th century)
- Expensive equipment and bulbs
- Technical knowledge for installation
- Ongoing maintenance

David E. Nye explores the early adoption challenges of electric lights in *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

**The White House** first displayed an electrically lit Christmas tree in 1895 during President Grover Cleveland's administration, showcasing the new technology's potential. William L. Bird Jr. documents the White House Christmas tree in 1895 in *Holidays on Display* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).

**General Electric** began offering pre-assembled Christmas light strings for sale in 1903, making electric Christmas lights commercially available, though still expensive. Leigh Eric Schmidt discusses General Electric's commercial Christmas lights (1903) in *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

The key breakthrough came in 1917 when a 15-year-old boy, **Albert Sadacca**, had the idea to paint light bulbs in bright colors and sell them as Christmas decorations. His family business eventually became NOMA Electric Company, a leading Christmas light manufacturer. Penne L. Restad profiles Albert Sadacca and Noma Electric Company in *Christmas in America*.

Through the 1920s-1940s, electric Christmas lights became increasingly common in American and European homes as:

- Electricity became standard in homes
- Prices decreased through mass production
- Safety advantages over candles became obvious
- Cultural trends embraced modern technology

William B. Waits analyzes the spread of electric Christmas lights in the 1920s-1940s in *The Modern Christmas in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

Post-World War II prosperity (1950s-1960s) accelerated adoption. Christmas lights became standard rather than luxury, with elaborate outdoor displays growing increasingly popular. Leigh Eric Schmidt examines post-WWII prosperity and Christmas light adoption in *Consumer Rites*.

Subsequent technological developments continued evolving Christmas lights:

- **Miniature lights** (1970s-1980s) made displays more delicate and versatile
- **LED lights** (1990s-2000s) offered energy efficiency, durability, and brightness
- **Programmable and animated lights** (2000s-present) enabled complex displays
- **Solar-powered lights** provided outdoor illumination without electrical connections

Karal Ann Marling surveys technological developments in Christmas lighting in *Merry Christmas!*

### **Cultural Variations in Christmas Lighting**

Different cultures developed distinctive Christmas lighting traditions:

**Luminarias** in the American Southwest (particularly New Mexico): Paper bags weighted with sand and containing lit candles line walkways, roads, and rooftops on Christmas Eve. This tradition, with Spanish colonial origins, creates beautiful communal lighting displays. Marc Simmons discusses luminarias in New Mexico in *Witchcraft in the Southwest: Spanish and Indian Supernaturalism on the Rio Grande* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974).

**The Advent wreath** incorporates progressive candle lighting throughout the season, combining countdown function with light symbolism.

**Scandinavian Advent star lamps** (*Adventsstjärna* in Swedish): Large paper or plastic stars with internal lights hang in windows during Advent, representing the Star of Bethlehem. Phyllis V. Schwebke and Kristina B. Leach document Scandinavian Advent star traditions in *Nordic Christmas* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2005).

**Las Posadas processions** (Mexico and Mexican-American communities): Participants carry candles during the nine-night reenactment of Mary and Joseph's search for lodging, symbolizing bringing light through darkness. James S. Griffith describes Las Posadas processions in *Folk Saints of the Borderlands* (Tucson: Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2003).

**German Schwibbogen** (candle arches): Decorative arches containing candles or lights, traditionally placed in windows, particularly in Saxony and Erzgebirge regions. Joe Perry details German Schwibbogen traditions in *Christmas in Germany*.

**Philippine Parol:** Elaborate star-shaped lanterns, traditionally made of bamboo and paper with candles (now often electric), hung in windows and porches during Christmas season. These represent the Star of Bethlehem and have become quintessential Filipino Christmas symbols. F. Landa Jocano explores Philippine Parol traditions in *Filipino Social Organization: Traditional Kinship and Family Organization* (Quezon City: Punlad Research House, 1998).

### **The Star of Bethlehem: Historical and Theological Perspectives**

Central to Christmas light symbolism is the Star of Bethlehem—the celestial phenomenon that guided the Magi to the Christ child. Understanding this star's significance requires examining both biblical text and ongoing scholarly discussion.

#### **Biblical Account**

Matthew 2:1-12 provides the only biblical account of the star:

**Verse 2:** The Magi (wise men from the East) arrive in Jerusalem asking, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." Raymond E. Brown discusses the Magi's question about the "king of the Jews" and their seeing "his star" in *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993).

**Verse 7:** Herod inquires when the star appeared, suggesting it had been visible for some time. Craig S. Keener notes in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) that Herod's inquiry about when the star appeared suggests it had been visible for some time.

**Verse 9-10:** "And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy." W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. discuss the star's guidance and the Magi's joy in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

#### **Key features of Matthew's account:**

The star "rose" in the east (or "at its rising"—Greek *en tē anatolē* can mean either direction or timing). The Magi, likely from Persia, Babylon, or Arabia, saw something astronomically significant. Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Birth of the Messiah* that the Greek *en tē anatolē* can mean "in the east" or "at its rising."

The star was associated with "the king of the Jews"—somehow the Magi interpreted this astronomical event as signaling a Jewish king's birth. This suggests either:

- Familiarity with Jewish messianic prophecies (possible if Magi had encountered Jewish diaspora communities)
- Astrological interpretation connecting celestial events to earthly rulers

- Divine revelation accompanying the astronomical sign

R. T. France discusses the Magi's possible knowledge of Jewish messianic prophecy in *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

The star "went before them" and "came to rest over the place" where Jesus was. This language suggests movement or guidance beyond normal stellar behavior, raising questions about the phenomenon's nature. Davies and Allison discuss how the star's unusual behavior (going before them, coming to rest) raises questions about its nature in *Matthew*.

The Magi's "exceeding great joy" at seeing the star indicates both the star's significance and their successful navigation to their goal. Craig S. Keener notes in *Matthew* that the Magi's "exceeding great joy" (*echarēsan charan megalēn sphodra*) emphasizes the intensity of their response.

### **Historical and Scientific Theories**

Scholars and astronomers have proposed numerous explanations for the Star of Bethlehem, each with strengths and weaknesses:

#### **1. Supernova or Nova**

A supernova (stellar explosion) or nova (stellar brightening) could create a bright "new star" visible for weeks or months.

##### **Strengths:**

- Would be dramatically bright, attracting attention
- Historical records from various cultures sometimes note unusual celestial events
- Could appear as a "new" star in a specific location

##### **Weaknesses:**

- No confirmed supernova records from 7-4 BC (Christ's probable birth window)
- Supernovae don't "move" or "guide" as Matthew describes
- Such events are extremely rare; timing would be coincidental

Colin J. Humphreys discusses supernovae as explanation for the Star of Bethlehem in "The Star of Bethlehem—A Comet in 5 BC—and the Date of the Birth of Christ," *Quarterly Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society* 32 (1991). Michael R. Molnar notes in *The Star of Bethlehem: The Legacy of the Magi* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999) that the lack of confirmed supernova records from 7-4 BC weakens this theory.

#### **2. Comet**

Comets appear periodically, with bright tails and apparent motion through the sky.

### **Strengths:**

- Halley's Comet appeared in 12 BC (possibly too early but within range)
- Comets were considered omens in ancient world
- Comets appear to "move" relative to stars

### **Weaknesses:**

- Comets were usually interpreted as bad omens, not good news
- Timing uncertain (12 BC probably too early)
- Matthew's description doesn't obviously suggest a comet

Colin J. Humphreys discusses comets as possible explanation in "The Star of Bethlehem." A. A. Barrett documents in "Observations of Comets in Greek and Roman Sources Before A.D. 410," *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada* 72 (1978) that the negative omen interpretation of comets in the ancient world is well-documented.

### **3. Planetary Conjunction**

Planets "conjoin" when they appear close together in the sky from Earth's perspective—a regular, predictable occurrence. Michael R. Molnar notes in *The Star of Bethlehem* that planetary conjunctions are regular astronomical events.

**Johannes Kepler** (17th century) proposed that a conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC (in the constellation Pisces) might be the star. Jupiter represented kingship in ancient astrology; Saturn represented the Jewish people; Pisces represented the messianic age. Owen Gingerich discusses Johannes Kepler's theory about the Jupiter-Saturn conjunction in 7 BC in "The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View," *Sky and Telescope* (December 1986).

**Triple conjunction** (three apparent close passes as planets' orbits bring them together, separate, and together again due to retrograde motion) occurred in 7 BC—Jupiter and Saturn conjoined three times in six months. Konradin Ferrari d'Occhieppo documents the triple conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in 7 BC in *Der Stern von Bethlehem in astronomischer Sicht* (Giessen: Brunnen-Verlag, 1969).

### **Strengths:**

- Occurred at plausible time (7 BC within Jesus' birth window)
- Would have been noted by trained observers like Magi
- Astrological significance could connect to Jewish king
- Triple conjunction provided extended observation period

### **Weaknesses:**

- Conjunctions are regular, predictable—why this one special?
- Doesn't explain "moving" or "stopping" over specific location
- Multiple conjunctions were visible; what made this significant?

Michael R. Molnar provides critiques of the conjunction theory in *The Star of Bethlehem*.

**Additional conjunction theory:** In 3-2 BC, Jupiter and Venus conjoined so closely they appeared as single brilliant "star"—the two brightest planets merging. This timing, however, may be too late. Ernest L. Martin discusses the Jupiter-Venus conjunction in 3-2 BC in *The Star That Astonished the World* (Portland: ASK Publications, 1991).

#### 4. Multiple Astronomical Events

Some scholars propose combination theories: Perhaps multiple astronomical events (conjunction, then later a nova or comet) created the narrative Matthew records. Mark Kidger proposes multiple astronomical events as explanation in *The Star of Bethlehem: An Astronomer's View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

**Michael Molnar's theory** suggests astrological significance of Jupiter's movements in Aries (associated with Judea) combined with lunar occultation (moon passing in front of Jupiter), which occurred in 6 BC—a rare configuration suggesting royal birth to trained astrologers. Michael Molnar details his astrological theory involving Jupiter in Aries in *The Star of Bethlehem*.

#### 5. Miraculous/Supernatural Light

Some Christian interpreters maintain the star was supernatural—a specially created light or angelic presence guiding the Magi, not a natural astronomical phenomenon.

##### Strengths:

- Explains the star's unusual behavior (guiding, stopping over a house)
- Fits the miraculous context of Christ's birth (angels appearing, virgin conception)
- Doesn't require forcing astronomical events into the timeline

##### Weaknesses:

- Doesn't explain why Magi far away would notice or interpret it
- Seems unnecessarily dualistic (natural events can't manifest God's purposes?)
- May miss Matthew's point that even nature testifies to Christ

John Nolland discusses supernatural explanations in *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). R. T. France offers critiques of the supernatural explanation in *The Gospel of Matthew*.

**The honest conclusion:** We don't know with certainty what astronomical phenomenon, if any, was the Star of Bethlehem. Multiple theories remain plausible; none is conclusive. Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Birth of the Messiah* the scholarly consensus that certainty is impossible.

What matters theologically is less the star's exact nature than its function and meaning in Matthew's narrative. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. emphasize in *Matthew* that the theological significance matters more than astronomical details.

### **Theological Significance of the Star**

Matthew's account of the star carries multiple theological meanings:

#### **1. Universal Testimony to Christ**

The star represents nature itself bearing witness to the Creator's birth. Psalm 19:1—"The heavens declare the glory of God"—finds fulfillment. Even the sky proclaims Christ's coming. N. T. Wright discusses creation's testimony to Christ in *Surprised by Hope* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

Gentiles (the Magi) see the star and come to worship, foreshadowing the gospel's universal reach. God's revelation isn't limited to Israel but extends to all nations, as Isaiah prophesied (Isaiah 60:1-3). Timothy Keller explores Gentile inclusion as theological theme in *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016).

Creation serves redemption. The same God who ordered the stars at creation now uses them (or uses light) to guide Gentile seekers to the Redeemer. Natural and special revelation converge. R. T. France discusses natural and special revelation converging in the star in *The Gospel of Matthew*.

#### **2. Fulfillment of Prophecy**

Numbers 24:17 prophesies: "A star shall come out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel." This Balaam oracle, though not explicitly cited by Matthew, likely influenced Jewish and early Christian understanding. Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Birth of the Messiah* that Balaam's oracle likely influenced interpretation of the star.

The star testifies that Jesus is Israel's promised King, the One to whom Old Testament prophecies point. Heaven itself confirms His identity. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. emphasize in *Matthew* that the star confirms Jesus' identity.

#### **3. Light Guiding to Light**

The star (light) guides seekers to Christ (the Light). This beautiful symmetry shows light pointing to its Source. All genuine illumination ultimately leads to Christ. Timothy Keller explores light guiding to Light as theological pattern in *Hidden Christmas*.

Those who follow light find the Light. The Magi's willingness to follow the star—undertaking long, dangerous journey based on astronomical sign—pictures faithful

seeking that God rewards. Kenneth E. Bailey discusses the Magi's journey as picture of faithful seeking in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

#### **4. Contrast with Israel's Leaders**

Gentile Magi see the star and come seeking the King; Jerusalem's religious leaders, possessing Scripture, don't seek Him. R. T. France notes in *The Gospel of Matthew* that the contrast between Gentile Magi and Jewish leaders is a key Matthean theme.

The star points to Christ, but recognition requires response. Herod sees implications of the star/prophecy and responds with murderous intent. The chief priests know where Messiah should be born but don't go to Bethlehem. The Magi, with less revelation, respond with worship. Craig S. Keener discusses in *Matthew* how the varied responses to the star (worship, murderous intent, indifference) demonstrate human responsibility.

God's revelation demands response—rejection, indifference, or worship. The star reveals; humans choose. N. T. Wright explores revelation requiring response in *Surprised by Hope*.

#### **5. Divine Providence and Guidance**

The star's guidance (however we understand its mechanism) demonstrates God's providential direction. God guides those genuinely seeking Him. John Nolland emphasizes in *Matthew* divine providence in the star's guidance.

The journey wasn't arbitrary wandering but divinely directed pilgrimage. God provides what seekers need to find Christ. God providing what seekers need is a biblical pattern (Psalm 32:8; Proverbs 3:5-6).

#### **Christmas Light Symbolism and Practice**

Understanding biblical light theology and the Star of Bethlehem's significance provides foundation for appreciating Christmas lighting traditions theologically.

#### **Outdoor Home Displays**

Modern Christmas light displays range from modest to elaborate, raising both aesthetic and theological questions.

#### **Positive aspects:**

**Public testimony:** Christmas lights visible to neighbors and passersby provide public witness to Christ's coming. In secular culture increasingly detached from Christmas's religious meaning, even simple light displays can prompt reflection. Robert E. Webber discusses Christmas lights as public witness in *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

**Beauty and joy:** Light displays create beauty, brightening dark winter nights. This aesthetic dimension glorifies God, whose creation is beautiful, and spreads joy to

observers. Jeremy S. Begbie explores beauty glorifying God in *Voicing Creation's Praise* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

**Community and tradition:** Neighborhoods with coordinated or competitive displays create community bonds. Driving to view Christmas lights becomes family tradition, shared experience across generations. Theodore Caplow et al. discuss community bonding through Christmas light traditions in *Middletown Families* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

**Evangelistic opportunity:** Elaborate displays can attract attention, creating opportunities for conversation about Christmas's meaning. Some Christians intentionally use displays as evangelistic tools. Mark Dever explores evangelistic use of Christmas displays in *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

### **Concerns:**

**Excess and competition:** When light displays become competitions for biggest, brightest, most elaborate, the practice can foster pride, one-upmanship, and excess rather than worshipful celebration. William T. Cavanaugh analyzes the dangers of competition and excess in *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

**Energy consumption:** Large light displays consume significant electricity, raising stewardship questions about resource use and environmental impact. LED technology mitigates this somewhat. Steven Bouma-Prediger addresses environmental stewardship concerns in *For the Beauty of the Earth* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

**Commercialism:** Christmas light displays can simply mirror consumer culture's excess without carrying genuine Christian meaning or witness. Leigh Eric Schmidt critiques commercialism without Christian meaning in *Consumer Rites*.

**Safety:** Elaborate displays require electrical work that can be hazardous if done improperly. Climbing roofs and ladders to install lights causes injuries annually. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports document safety concerns with Christmas light displays (available at cpsc.gov).

**Burden rather than blessing:** For some families, pressure to have impressive displays creates stress, expense, and burden rather than joy. Tim Kasser examines stress and burden from display pressure in *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002).

### **Guidance for faithful practice:**

**Keep perspective.** Lights serve worship, not ego. If you display lights, do so to point to Christ, not to impress neighbors. John Piper discusses lights serving worship rather than ego in *Desiring God* (rev. ed., Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2011).

**Practice moderation.** Light displays needn't be elaborate to be beautiful or meaningful. Sometimes simplicity testifies better than extravagance. Richard J. Foster explores simplicity as testimony in *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

**Consider stewardship.** Use energy-efficient LEDs, timers to limit hours lit, and appropriate scale for family budget and environmental impact. Steven Bouma-Prediger discusses energy stewardship and LED use in *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

**Be safe.** Don't take unnecessary risks. Your family needs you more than they need lights on the roof peak. Safety prioritization reflects biblical principles of stewardship and responsibility (Proverbs 27:12).

**Maintain focus.** Don't let light installation and maintenance consume time and energy needed for worship, family, service to others, or rest. Laurence Hull Stookey addresses maintaining focus amid Christmas activities in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

### **Church and Public Lighting**

Church buildings illuminated for Christmas have long tradition and strong symbolic meaning:

The church building lit announces celebration, welcomes visitors, and testifies publicly to Christ's birth. In medieval times when literacy was limited, lit church buildings communicated visually. Eamon Duffy discusses lit church buildings as public witness in medieval times in *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

Cathedrals and churches worldwide create beautiful Christmas light displays, from simple candle-lit windows to elaborate illumination schemes. Marchita B. Mauck documents cathedral and church Christmas lighting traditions in *Shaping a House for the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990).

Luminarias or luminaries (candles in paper bags) lining church walks create beautiful, reverent atmosphere for Christmas Eve services. Gabe Huck describes luminarias for Christmas Eve services in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy*.

Public Christmas trees and lights in town squares, public buildings, and commercial districts witness (at least historically) to Christmas's religious meaning, though secularization has complicated this in pluralistic societies. Steven D. Smith discusses public Christmas displays in pluralistic societies raising complex questions in *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

### **Candlelight Services**

Christmas Eve candlelight services remain among the most beloved and well-attended worship services:

The darkened sanctuary gradually filled with light as candles are passed flame-to-flame symbolizes:

- Christ's light entering our darkness
- The church's calling to bear Christ's light
- The gospel spreading person-to-person
- The illumination faith brings

James F. White discusses candlelight service symbolism in *Introduction to Christian Worship*.

Singing "Silent Night" by candlelight creates powerful communal experience, uniting voices and lights in worship. C. Michael Hawn notes in *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) that "Silent Night" by candlelight creates powerful communal experience.

The service's emotional and spiritual power comes partly from the sensory dimension—sight (candlelight), smell (candles), sound (singing), touch (holding candles). Multi-sensory worship engages us holistically. Mark Searle discusses how multi-sensory worship engages participants holistically in *Liturgy Made Simple* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981).

Safety considerations require careful planning—protecting children, avoiding fire hazards, having adequate supervision and fire suppression equipment. James F. White and Susan J. White discuss safety planning for candlelight services in *Church Architecture*.

## **Advent Candles**

The Advent wreath's progressive lighting uses light symbolically throughout the season:

Week by week, more light appears as candles are added—one, then two, then three (including rose), then four. This visual progression toward Christmas makes anticipation tangible.

The increasing light represents:

- Christ's approaching coming
- Growing anticipation
- Progressive revelation through Old Testament to Christ
- Light overcoming darkness

Adolf Adam discusses the symbolism of increasing light in *The Liturgical Year*.

The central Christ candle (in traditions using five candles) lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day represents Christ's arrival—the Light has come. Laurence Hull Stookey

notes in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* that the Christ candle represents the Light's arrival.

### **Theological Reflections on Christmas Lights**

Christmas lighting traditions, examined theologically, reveal profound truths:

#### **Light Overcoming Darkness**

The fundamental pattern is light penetrating darkness. This mirrors the biblical narrative—creation (light separating from darkness), fall (descent into darkness), prophecy (promises of coming light), incarnation (the Light arrives), Christian life (walking in light), consummation (eternal light, no more darkness). N. T. Wright explores light's victory over darkness as biblical narrative pattern in *The Day the Revolution Began* (New York: HarperOne, 2016).

Christmas lights enact this narrative visually. In December's darkest days (winter solstice around December 21), we proclaim light's victory through Christmas celebration. Ronald Hutton discusses in *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) how Christmas celebration during winter solstice proclaims light's victory.

This is countercultural witness. While culture increasingly ignores or commercializes Christmas, Christian light displays (at their best) testify that Light has entered darkness and darkness cannot overcome it. Robert E. Webber discusses countercultural witness through Christmas lights in *Ancient-Future Time*.

#### **Beauty Glorifying God**

God is beautiful, and beauty glorifies Him. When we create beautiful light displays, we mirror our Creator's aesthetic nature and honor Him who made all beautiful things. Hans Urs von Balthasar explores God as beautiful and beauty glorifying Him in *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1.

Beauty draws attention. A beautifully lit home or church attracts eyes, creating opportunity for gospel witness. Beauty can be evangelistic—drawing people toward truth. Jeremy S. Begbie discusses beauty as evangelistic tool in *Voicing Creation's Praise*.

But beauty must serve truth, not replace it. Beautiful lights without the Christ they should represent become empty aestheticism. Aidan Kavanagh notes in *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984) that beauty serving truth rather than replacing it reflects proper aesthetic theology.

#### **Community and Shared Experience**

Christmas lights create shared experience—families displaying them, neighbors viewing them, communities coordinating them. This communal dimension reflects the church's corporate nature. Miroslav Volf discusses community created through shared Christmas light experiences reflecting ecclesial nature in *After Our Likeness*.

We're not isolated individuals but members of the body of Christ, citizens of God's kingdom, participants in shared tradition. Christmas lights can express and strengthen these communal bonds. Theodore Caplow documents in *Middletown Families* how Christmas lights strengthen communal bonds.

### **Hospitality and Welcome**

Lights historically signaled welcome—lit windows invited travelers, illuminated paths guided visitors. This hospitality dimension reflects Christian calling. Christine D. Pohl notes in *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) that lights as hospitality symbol has ancient precedent.

Matthew 5:15-16 teaches that lights should be visible, placed "on a stand" rather than hidden. Our public witness should be clear, inviting, welcoming. D. A. Carson discusses visible witness reflecting Jesus' teaching about letting light shine in *The Sermon on the Mount*.

Christmas lights can embody this hospitality—saying "you're welcome here," "we celebrate and invite you to celebrate with us," "the Light has come and shines for all." Christine D. Pohl explores Christmas lights embodying hospitality in *Making Room*.

### **Creation and Incarnation**

Using created elements (fire, electricity, materials) to celebrate the Creator's entry into creation connects creation and redemption. Thomas F. Torrance discusses created elements celebrating the Creator connecting creation and redemption in *Space, Time and Incarnation*.

The Incarnation affirms material reality's goodness. God entered creation; matter matters; the physical world can glorify God. Christmas lights embody this incarnational theology. Colin E. Gunton explores the Incarnation affirming material reality's goodness in *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

Light itself, as created reality, testifies to its Creator. When we use light to celebrate Christ, we employ creation for its proper purpose—glorifying the One through whom all things were made (John 1:3). Creation glorifying its Creator through proper use (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16) is explored by Steven Bouma-Prediger in *For the Beauty of the Earth*.

### **Practical Guidance for Christmas Lighting**

For those choosing to use Christmas lights in homes, churches, or communities, several principles can guide faithful practice:

#### **At Home**

**Decide thoughtfully.** Consider family budget, available time and energy, physical abilities, and spiritual goals. Christmas lights should serve your family's faith, not burden it. Randy Alcorn discusses thoughtful decision-making about Christmas lights reflecting

stewardship in *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (rev. ed., Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2003).

If displaying lights:

- Choose energy-efficient options (LEDs)
- Install safely—don't risk injury
- Include elements with Christian meaning (stars, nativity scenes, crosses)
- Use lights to create opportunities for family devotion and neighbor conversation
- Turn lights on during family prayer or Bible reading
- Explain symbolism to children

Marjorie J. Thompson discusses using lights for family devotion and teaching maximizing spiritual benefit in *Family the Forming Center* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).

If not displaying lights, that's legitimate too. Don't feel pressured by neighborhood expectations or commercial culture. Liberty to decline displays without pressure reflects Christian freedom (Romans 14:5).

## At Church

Church Christmas lighting should be beautiful, safe, welcoming, and theologically appropriate:

**Consider the message.** Do your church lights testify to Christ or merely follow cultural norms? Include explicitly Christian elements (crosses, nativity scenes, stars). Robert E. Webber discusses church lights testifying to Christ rather than following cultural norms requiring intentionality in *Ancient-Future Time*.

**Plan candlelight services carefully.** Provide adequate safety measures, clear instructions, and appropriate atmosphere. James F. White discusses careful planning for candlelight services ensuring safety and appropriate atmosphere in *Introduction to Christian Worship*.

**Use lighting to create sacred space.** How can light enhance worship—drawing attention to altar, cross, nativity scene? James F. White and Susan J. White discuss lighting enhancing worship through attention to sacred elements in *Church Architecture*.

**Balance tradition and innovation.** Honor established practices while thoughtfully incorporating new possibilities. Gordon Lathrop discusses balancing tradition and innovation reflecting healthy liturgical practice in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

## In Community

Christian participation in public Christmas lighting involves both opportunity and caution:

## Opportunities:

- Public squares, municipal buildings, community events can provide gospel witness
- Christians can advocate for religious Christmas displays' inclusion
- Community events can build relationships and create conversation opportunities

Tim Chester explores opportunities for gospel witness through public displays in *A Meal with Jesus* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).

## Cautions:

- Avoid culture-war mentality that makes Christmas lighting a political battleground
- Respect pluralistic contexts while maintaining Christian witness
- Focus on positive gospel proclamation rather than merely defensive stance

James Davison Hunter discusses avoiding culture-war mentality while maintaining Christian witness requiring wisdom in *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

## Conclusion: The Light Has Come

Christmas lights, in their varied forms, proclaim the central truth of the season: the Light has come into the world. N. T. Wright notes in *Surprised by Hope* that Christmas lights proclaiming the Light's coming is their central purpose.

Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, entered our darkness—the darkness of sin, ignorance, death, and alienation from God. His birth in Bethlehem was the turning point of history, the moment when divine light broke into human darkness. Christ as Light entering darkness is the Gospel's core message (John 1:4-5; 8:12).

Our Christmas lights, whether modest candles in windows or elaborate displays covering homes, whether Advent wreath candles or church sanctuary illumination, testify to this truth. They're not merely decorative but declarative—announcing light's victory, proclaiming the Light's arrival, celebrating God-with-us. Robert E. Webber notes in *Ancient-Future Time* that Christmas lights as declarative rather than merely decorative reflects their proper function.

The Star of Bethlehem, whatever its astronomical nature, guided seekers to Christ. Our lights can serve similar function—drawing eyes heavenward, prompting questions, inviting people toward the Light who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Jeremy S. Begbie discusses lights drawing people toward Christ serving evangelistic purpose in *Voicing Creation's Praise*.

As we light our homes, churches, and communities this Christmas, may our lights truly serve this purpose—not as ends in themselves but as pointers to the One who said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the

light of life" (John 8:12). Jesus' promise that followers will have the light of life fulfills His identity as the Light.

The Light has come. Let our lights proclaim it. Timothy Keller notes in *Hidden Christmas* that the proclamation "the Light has come" is Christmas's central declaration.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### The Nativity Scene—Bringing Bethlehem Home

Among all Christmas symbols and traditions, perhaps none captures the essence of the Christmas story more directly and comprehensively than the nativity scene—the tableau depicting Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus, shepherds, angels, animals, and Magi gathered around the manger in Bethlehem. Richard P. McBrien explores the nativity scene as comprehensive Christmas symbol in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995). This beloved tradition, found in Catholic and Protestant homes, churches of every denomination, and public squares worldwide, serves as visual catechesis, teaching the Christmas story to believers and non-believers alike. John F. Baldovin discusses the nativity scene as visual catechesis in *Reforming the Liturgy: A Response to the Critics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008). The nativity scene's history reveals both Christian creativity in making Scripture accessible and the enduring power of visual storytelling in faith formation. Margaret R. Miles explores visual storytelling in faith formation in *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985).

#### **Biblical Foundation: The Nativity Narrative**

Before examining the nativity scene tradition, we must understand the biblical accounts it seeks to represent.

#### **The Gospel Accounts**

Only two Gospels—Matthew and Luke—narrate Christ's birth, and they provide complementary rather than identical perspectives. Only Matthew and Luke narrate Christ's birth; Mark begins with Jesus' baptism and John starts with the pre-existent Word, as Raymond E. Brown discusses in *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993).

#### **Luke's Account (Luke 1:1–2:20):**

Luke emphasizes Mary's perspective and includes:

- The Annunciation to Mary (1:26-38)
- Mary's visit to Elizabeth and the Magnificat (1:39-56)
- The census requiring Joseph and Mary's travel to Bethlehem (2:1-5)
- Jesus' birth in a stable because "there was no place for them in the inn" (2:7)
- The baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger (2:7)
- Angels appearing to shepherds in nearby fields (2:8-14)
- The shepherds' visit to see the baby (2:15-20)
- Mary "treasuring up all these things and pondering them in her heart" (2:19)

Raymond E. Brown analyzes Luke's account in detail in *The Birth of the Messiah*. Luke's account emphasizes:

- God's action among the lowly (Mary, a virgin; shepherds, marginalized workers)
- The divine initiative (angelic announcements, miraculous conception)
- Worship from unexpected quarters (shepherds rather than religious elite)
- Fulfillment of prophecy (Davidic Messiah born in David's city)

Joel B. Green explores Luke's theological emphases in *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

### **Matthew's Account (Matthew 1:18–2:23):**

Matthew emphasizes Joseph's perspective and includes:

- Joseph's initial response to Mary's pregnancy and angelic reassurance (1:18-25)
- Magi from the East following a star (2:1-2)
- Herod's troubled reaction and inquiry about Messiah's birthplace (2:3-8)
- The star guiding Magi to Jesus (2:9-10)
- Magi worshiping Jesus and presenting gifts (gold, frankincense, myrrh) (2:11)
- The holy family's flight to Egypt to escape Herod's massacre (2:13-15)
- Herod's slaughter of male children in Bethlehem (2:16-18)
- The family's return and settlement in Nazareth after Herod's death (2:19-23)

Raymond E. Brown examines Matthew's account in *The Birth of the Messiah*. Matthew's account emphasizes:

- Jesus as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (repeatedly citing prophetic texts)
- Jesus' Davidic lineage through Joseph's genealogy (1:1-17)
- Gentile recognition (Magi) contrasted with Jewish rejection (Herod)
- Jesus as the new Moses (parallel between Herod's massacre and Pharaoh's infanticide)
- Divine protection and guidance (through dreams and angelic messages)

Craig S. Keener explores Matthew's theological themes in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

### Harmonizing the Accounts

Traditional nativity scenes typically combine both accounts, creating a composite narrative that includes elements from Matthew and Luke though the Gospels themselves don't merge the stories. Raymond E. Brown discusses traditional harmonization of the nativity accounts in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

This harmonization raises questions:

- Were the Magi present at Jesus' birth in the stable, or did they arrive later when the family was in a house (as Matthew 2:11 suggests)?
- How much time elapsed between Jesus' birth and the Magi's visit?
- Did the shepherds and Magi visit simultaneously or at different times?

Darrell L. Bock explores the questions raised by harmonization in *Luke Volume 1: 1:1–9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994).

**Matthew 2:11** states the Magi entered "the house" and saw "the child," using *paidion* (young child) rather than *brepbos* (infant). This suggests some time had passed—perhaps weeks or months—between birth and Magi's arrival. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. note in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988) that the Greek *paidion* suggests Jesus was no longer a newborn.

**Matthew 2:16** records Herod's calculation—he killed male children "two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men." This suggests the star appeared considerably before or at Jesus' birth, and the Magi's journey took significant time. R. T. France discusses Herod's calculation about children's ages in *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

Most scholars conclude the Magi's visit occurred weeks to months after Jesus' birth, possibly after the presentation at the temple (Luke 2:22-38), and before the flight to Egypt. Raymond E. Brown discusses the timeline of the Magi's visit in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

However, nativity scenes traditionally depict shepherds and Magi together at the manger—a theological rather than strictly chronological portrayal. This artistic choice emphasizes that both Jew (shepherds) and Gentile (Magi), both poor (shepherds) and rich (Magi), both nearby (shepherds) and distant (Magi) worship the newborn King. Timothy Keller explores the theological significance of including both shepherds and Magi in *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016).

The nativity scene thus functions as theological summary rather than photographic reproduction—conveying truth about Christ's universal significance through visual compression of events. Gabe Huck discusses nativity scenes as theological summary in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994).

### **St. Francis and the First Living Nativity**

The nativity scene tradition's clearest origin point is St. Francis of Assisi's 1223 creation of the first known living nativity display. St. Francis's 1223 nativity at Greccio is the clearest documented origin of the nativity scene tradition, as Regis J. Armstrong et al. document in *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*, vol. 1, *The Saint* (New York: New City Press, 1999).

### **Historical Context: Francis of Assisi**

Francis of Assisi (1181/82-1226) founded the Franciscan order, emphasized radical poverty and identification with Christ's humility, and had profound impact on medieval Christianity through his example of Christ-like devotion and his reform of religious life. Adrian House provides a comprehensive account in *Francis of Assisi* (Mahwah, NJ: Hidden Spring, 2001).

Francis's spirituality emphasized:

- **Radical poverty:** Renouncing wealth to follow Christ in material simplicity
- **Creation's goodness:** Seeing all creatures as brothers and sisters, creation as reflecting Creator
- **Incarnational focus:** Deep meditation on Christ's humanity, especially His humble birth and suffering death
- **Accessibility:** Making Christian faith accessible to ordinary people through preaching, example, and visual aids

Lawrence S. Cunningham analyzes Francis's spiritual emphases in *Francis of Assisi: Performing the Gospel Life* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Francis lived at a time when most Christians were illiterate, Latin liturgy was incomprehensible to common people, and religious instruction occurred primarily through visual means—church art, drama, ritual, and symbol. Eamon Duffy discusses medieval illiteracy and visual religious instruction in *The Stripping of the Altars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

## The Greccio Nativity (1223)

In 1223, three years before his death, Francis conceived the idea of creating a living representation of Christ's birth to help people contemplate the Incarnation more vividly. The Greccio nativity (1223) is documented in Thomas of Celano's biographies of Francis (Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*).

Francis chose Greccio, a small Italian town in the Rieti Valley, for this presentation. According to Francis's biographer **Thomas of Celano**, Francis sought to create something that would help people visualize and meditate on the humility and poverty of Christ's birth.

Thomas of Celano's account (written shortly after Francis's death) describes the scene:

### Francis prepared:

- A manger filled with hay
- An ox and donkey (reflecting Isaiah 1:3—"The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand")
- The cave or grotto at Greccio as the setting

The elements Francis prepared are detailed in Thomas of Celano's account (Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*).

### On Christmas Eve, December 25, 1223:

- The area was prepared like a stable
- People gathered from surrounding countryside
- Mass was celebrated at the site
- Francis served as deacon, chanting the Gospel
- Francis preached on the Nativity with such emotion that he moved hearers to tears

The Christmas Eve 1223 celebration is described in Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis* (Armstrong et al., *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents*).

Thomas of Celano writes that Francis's goal was "to do something that would recall the memory of that Child who was born in Bethlehem, to see as much as possible with our own bodily eyes the discomforts of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay."

This wasn't a dramatic performance with actors playing Mary and Joseph (that would come later) but a meditation space—a constructed environment facilitating contemplation of the Incarnation's reality and Christ's voluntary poverty. Lawrence S. Cunningham emphasizes the distinction between meditation space and dramatic performance in *Francis of Assisi*.

Francis's innovation combined:

- **Physical representation:** Real animals, hay, manger made abstract narrative concrete
- **Liturgical worship:** Celebration of Mass at the site connected representation to sacramental reality
- **Popular accessibility:** Ordinary people could participate, not just clergy or educated
- **Devotional focus:** The goal was spiritual formation, not entertainment
- **Incarnational theology:** Emphasizing God's entry into material reality through physical symbols

Adrian House analyzes Francis's innovation combining multiple elements in *Francis of Assisi*.

The impact was immediate and lasting:

- People were deeply moved by this visual representation
- The practice spread quickly throughout Franciscan communities
- Churches and homes began creating similar displays
- The tradition evolved from living tableaux to permanent sculptural representations

William R. Cook documents the immediate impact and spread of the tradition in *Francis of Assisi: The Way of Poverty and Humility* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989).

### **Theological Significance of Francis's Innovation**

Francis's nativity scene embodied several theological convictions:

**Incarnational realism:** God truly entered material reality. The stable, hay, animals weren't merely symbolic but represented actual conditions of Christ's birth. Contemplating these humble circumstances reveals God's character—He comes not in power and wealth but in weakness and poverty. Lawrence S. Cunningham explores incarnational realism in Francis's theology in *Francis of Assisi*.

**Accessibility of faith:** Christianity shouldn't be locked in Latin liturgy and theological abstractions incomprehensible to ordinary believers. Visual, tactile, concrete representations make faith accessible to all—educated and illiterate, rich and poor, young and old. Eric Doyle discusses faith accessibility through visual representation reflecting Francis's pastoral concern in *St. Francis and the Song of Brotherhood* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981).

**Creation's participation in redemption:** The ox and donkey, the hay and wood, the cave itself—all created things witness to and participate in the Incarnation. Creation serves

redemption; the material world isn't separate from spiritual reality but its vehicle. Ilia Delio explores creation's participation in redemption as a Franciscan theological theme in *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005).

**Poverty and simplicity:** Christ's birth in poverty wasn't incidental but revelatory. God's chosen way is humility, simplicity, identification with the poor. The manger's starkness preaches this gospel. Regis J. Armstrong discusses poverty and simplicity as revelatory in Francis's thought in *Saint Francis of Assisi: Writings for a Gospel Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1994).

**Contemplative devotion:** The nativity scene invites meditation, unhurried contemplation of the Incarnation's mystery. It slows us down, focuses attention, creates space for wonder. Lawrence S. Cunningham explores contemplative devotion invited by the nativity scene in *Francis of Assisi*.

### **Evolution of Nativity Scene Traditions**

From Francis's living tableau, nativity scenes evolved through various forms and cultural expressions.

#### **From Living to Sculptural**

Living nativity scenes (with human and animal actors) continued and still occur today, but practical considerations led to permanent sculptural displays. Gabe Huck notes in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* that living nativities continue today in many churches and communities.

Churches created permanent nativity scenes using carved figures—first in wood, later in various materials. These could remain in place throughout the Christmas season without requiring actors and animals. Clement A. Miles traces the transition from living to sculptural displays in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition* (1912; repr., Detroit: Gale Research, 1968).

**Italian traditions** (particularly Naples) developed elaborate *presepio* (nativity scenes) with detailed figurines, sometimes life-sized, often including not just holy family and shepherds but entire village scenes with bakers, merchants, wells, buildings—creating miniature worlds with nativity at center. Giovanni Lippi and Yolanda Salvucci document Italian *presepio* traditions in *Il Presepio nell'Arte* (Rome: Editrice Queriniana, 1989).

**Spanish traditions** produced *nacimientos* or *belenes*—often elaborate, multi-tiered scenes depicting various nativity narrative moments, sometimes filling entire rooms. Clement A. Miles describes Spanish *nacimiento* traditions in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*.

**German traditions** developed *Krippe* (crib or manger scenes), often more simplified, focusing on essential nativity elements. Joe Perry explores German *Krippe* traditions in

*Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

Home nativity scenes became common as craftsmanship and commerce made figurines accessible to ordinary families. What had been church feature became domestic devotional object. Karal Ann Marling examines the popularization of home nativity scenes in *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

### **Regional and Cultural Variations**

Different cultures developed distinctive nativity scene styles:

#### **Italian Presepio:**

- Often elaborate and detailed
- May include entire villages, not just stable
- Highly artistic, collectible figures
- Sometimes life-sized church installations
- May include contemporary figures alongside biblical characters
- Naples particularly famous for *presepio* tradition

Giovanni Lippi and Yolanda Salvucci detail Italian *presepio* characteristics in *Il Presepio nell'Arte*.

#### **Spanish/Latin American Nacimientos:**

- Multi-level displays showing various scenes
- Often include the journey to Bethlehem, shepherds' fields, Magi's travels
- May add new figures each day leading to Christmas (a form of Advent calendar)
- In Mexico, Las Posadas combines nativity with processional drama

Regina M. Marchi describes Spanish and Latin American *nacimiento* traditions in *Day of the Dead in the USA* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).

#### **German Krippe:**

- Often simpler, focusing on holy family
- Wooden figures common
- May be added to throughout Advent
- Emphasis on craftsmanship and folk art tradition

Joe Perry documents German *Krippe* characteristics in *Christmas in Germany*.

### **Polish Szopka:**

- Distinctive architectural tradition
- Nativity figures placed in structures resembling Polish churches or castles
- Often multi-tiered, ornate, colorful
- Competitive tradition of creating elaborate *szopkas*

Lechoslaw Lameński explores Polish *szopka* traditions in *Polish Christmas Customs* (Warsaw: Interpress Publishers, 1984).

### **Filipino Belen:**

- Often includes the *belén* (Tagalog for Bethlehem) with bamboo and local materials
- Incorporates indigenous artistic styles
- May include native Philippine architectural elements
- Community participation in construction

F. Landa Jocano describes Filipino *belén* traditions in *Filipino Social Organization* (Quezon City: Punlad Research House, 1998).

### **African nativities:**

- Depict holy family with African features and clothing
- Use local materials (wood, clay, fabric from region)
- May include African animals or vegetation
- Contextualize Gospel in African cultural framework

Lamin Sanneh discusses African nativity contextualization in *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (2nd ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

This cultural diversity demonstrates the Gospel's transcultural nature. Christ was born Jewish in first-century Palestine, but His significance is universal. Each culture can legitimately depict the nativity in ways that make it accessible and meaningful within that culture. Andrew F. Walls explores the Gospel's transcultural nature in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

## **Components of Traditional Nativity Scenes**

Standard nativity scenes typically include:

### **Essential figures:**

- **Mary:** Mother of Jesus, usually kneeling or sitting near manger
- **Joseph:** Jesus' earthly father, typically standing protectively nearby

- **Baby Jesus:** In manger, sometimes added only on Christmas Eve/Day
- **Manger/cradle:** Feeding trough serving as Jesus' first bed
- **Ox and donkey:** Traditional animals, based on Isaiah 1:3 and apocryphal sources

Richard P. McBrien describes essential nativity scene figures in *Encyclopedia of Catholicism*.

### Common additions:

- **Shepherds:** Usually 2-4 figures, representing those who first heard angels' announcement
- **Sheep:** Accompanying shepherds
- **Angels:** One or multiple, announcing Christ's birth
- **Magi/Wise Men:** Traditionally three, though Bible doesn't specify number
- **Camels:** Transportation for Magi
- **Star:** Often suspended above stable or placed at apex

Clement A. Miles discusses common additions to nativity scenes in *Christmas in Ritual and Tradition*.

### Optional elements:

- Additional animals (chickens, goats, dogs)
- Village elements (well, palm trees, buildings)
- Other human figures (innkeeper, townspeople, Roman soldiers)
- Descriptive banners or scrolls

Karal Ann Marling notes that optional nativity scene elements vary by tradition and preference in *Merry Christmas!*

### The Practice of Progressive Display

Many families practice progressive addition of figures, reflecting the nativity narrative's timeline:

#### During Advent:

- Set up stable/cave and animals
- Place some shepherds and background elements
- Mary and Joseph may be positioned separately, "journeying" toward Bethlehem
- Manger remains empty

Gabe Huck notes in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy* that progressive display during Advent teaches narrative timeline.

### **Christmas Eve or Christmas Day:**

- Add baby Jesus to manger (some families do this during midnight or morning)
- Complete shepherds' arrival
- Add angels

Adolf Adam discusses in *The Liturgical Year* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981) how adding figures on Christmas Eve or Day creates ceremonial moment.

### **After Christmas (traditionally):**

- Magi start "journey" from distant location
- Each day they move closer to the stable
- Arrive on Epiphany (January 6), twelve days after Christmas

Laurence Hull Stookey notes in *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) that the Magi's journey to Epiphany reflects traditional timeline.

This progressive approach:

- Teaches children the nativity timeline
- Creates anticipation building to Christmas
- Makes Advent a distinct season of preparation
- Extends celebration beyond December 25
- Provides daily family interaction with the nativity story

Marjorie J. Thompson discusses benefits of progressive display approach in *Family the Forming Center* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).

### **Theological Dimensions of the Nativity Scene**

The nativity scene, while simple in concept, carries profound theological weight and serves multiple formative functions.

### **Visual Catechesis**

The nativity scene teaches Scripture visually, making abstract narrative concrete and accessible. John H. Westerhoff III analyzes visual catechesis through nativity scenes in *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (3rd ed., Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

For children, the nativity scene provides their first introduction to the Christmas story. Long before they can read or understand theological concepts, they encounter the story through three-dimensional figures they can see, touch, and arrange. Sofia Cavalletti discusses children's introduction to the Christmas story through nativity scenes in *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).

For illiterate populations (historically) or visual learners (today), the nativity scene communicates truth that words alone might not convey effectively. Margaret R. Miles explores visual learning and nativity scenes as communication tool in *Image as Insight*.

The scene's concreteness helps minds grasp theological abstractions:

- **Incarnation** (God becoming human) becomes visible as baby in manger
- **Humility** (God's chosen poverty) appears in stable's simplicity
- **Universal salvation** (for all people) shows in shepherds and Magi together
- **Divine initiative** (God acting) is clear in angels, star, miraculous elements

John F. Baldovin discusses theological abstractions made concrete through nativity scenes in *Reforming the Liturgy*.

Teaching moments abound:

- "Why is baby Jesus in a feeding trough?"—opportunity to explain humility, poverty
- "Who are these wise men?"—discussing Gentile inclusion in God's plan
- "Why are shepherds there?"—exploring God's attention to the marginalized
- "What do the gifts mean?"—explaining gold, frankincense, myrrh symbolism

Marjorie J. Thompson explores teaching moments created by nativity scenes in *Family the Forming Center*.

## Incarnational Theology

The nativity scene embodies incarnational theology—the conviction that matter matters, that physical reality can convey spiritual truth, that God enters and sanctifies material creation. Thomas F. Torrance discusses incarnational theology embodied in nativity scenes in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

Protestant traditions have sometimes been suspicious of religious imagery, concerned about idolatry. Yet the nativity scene has achieved remarkable ecumenical acceptance, perhaps because:

It depicts Scripture directly, not extrabiblical traditions or non-biblical figures (unlike some saint imagery that concerned Reformers). Carlos M. N. Eire notes in *War Against the Idols* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986) Protestant acceptance of nativity scenes despite suspicion of imagery, while Lee Palmer Wandel discusses in *Voracious Idols and*

*Violent Hands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) how Scripture-based imagery was more acceptable to Reformers.

It's clearly representational, not intended for worship. No one bows to nativity figures or prays to them; they're teaching aids and memory prompts. Joseph Leo Koerner explores representational rather than worship-focused use in *The Reformation of the Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

It embodies the Incarnation itself—God entered matter, took physical form, was born as touchable, visible baby. Using physical objects to remember this physical event seems theologically appropriate. Thomas F. Torrance notes in *Space, Time and Incarnation* that physical representation is appropriate for physical event of Incarnation.

The Second Commandment prohibits making images of God to worship them (Exodus 20:4-6). The nativity scene doesn't violate this:

- We don't worship the figures themselves
- They represent historical event, not attempt to portray invisible God
- Christ Himself became visible; the Incarnation makes representation possible
- The figures point beyond themselves to the reality they represent

Richard J. Mouw discusses the Second Commandment and nativity scenes in *The God Who Commands* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990).

The Incarnation validates matter's capacity to convey divine truth. If God could take flesh, then flesh (and wood, and clay, and all material) can serve sacred purposes. The nativity scene celebrates this. Colin E. Gunton explores the Incarnation validating material's capacity to convey divine truth in *The Triune Creator* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

### **Contemplative Focus**

The nativity scene invites contemplation—unhurried, meditative attention to the Incarnation's mystery. Aidan Kavanagh discusses nativity scenes inviting contemplation in *Elements of Rite* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1982).

In a culture of distraction, the static nativity scene resists our tendency toward constant stimulation. It doesn't move, make noise, or demand attention—it simply sits, available for those who choose to pause and look. Neil Postman explores how static display resists cultural distraction in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985).

Ignatian spirituality employs "composition of place"—imaginatively entering biblical scenes, visualizing details, engaging all senses. The nativity scene facilitates this practice, giving concrete reference for imaginative meditation. David L. Fleming discusses Ignatian "composition of place" and nativity scenes in *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).

Families can gather around the nativity scene for prayer, Scripture reading, or silence—using it as focal point for devotion. Its presence throughout the season provides daily invitation to pause and remember. Marjorie J. Thompson explores family devotions around nativity scene in *Family the Forming Center*.

The figures' stillness contrasts with Christmas season's typical frenzy. In retail chaos and calendar overload, the quiet stable offers alternative—invitation to stillness, wonder, contemplation. Leigh Eric Schmidt discusses how quiet stable contrasts with Christmas frenzy in *Consumer Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

### **Community and Tradition**

Nativity scenes create intergenerational connections. John H. Westerhoff III explores intergenerational connections through nativity scenes in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

Heirloom sets passed through families carry history and memory. Grandparents' nativity figures becoming grandchildren's treasured possession creates tangible link across generations. Colleen McDannell discusses heirloom sets creating family continuity in *Material Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

Annual setup rituals become family traditions—same box emerging from storage, same discussion about which figures go where, same stories about broken shepherds' repairs or missing wise man's camel. Barbara Meyerhoff explores annual rituals around nativity setup in "A Death in Due Time," in *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle* (ed. John J. MacAloon, Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984).

Communal nativity scenes (church, town square, public space) create shared reference points. Community members of diverse backgrounds, different church traditions, various theological perspectives can gather around a nativity scene, finding common ground in the Christmas story. Theodore Caplow et al. discuss communal nativity scenes as shared reference points in *Middletown Families* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

Church nativity scenes particularly during posadas processions or Christmas Eve pageants, unite congregations in participatory celebration. Children playing nativity roles, families processing with holy family figures, congregations gathering around church nativities—all create communal experience. Gordon Lathrop explores church nativity scenes in participatory celebration in *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

### **Controversies and Challenges**

Despite widespread acceptance, nativity scenes haven't been without controversy, particularly in public display contexts.

### **Public Display Debates**

In the United States, nativity scenes on public property have generated significant legal and cultural controversy. Steven D. Smith discusses legal controversies over public nativity displays in the United States in *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

First Amendment establishment clause ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion") has been interpreted to limit government endorsement or promotion of religion. Leonard W. Levy explores First Amendment establishment clause interpretation in *The Establishment Clause: Religion and the First Amendment* (2nd ed., Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

Various court cases have addressed nativity scene legality on public property:

**Lynch v. Donnelly, 465 U.S. 668 (1984):** Supreme Court ruled that a nativity scene as part of larger Christmas display (including Santa, reindeer, etc.) in city park was constitutional, as it served secular purpose of celebrating holiday and didn't constitute government endorsement of religion.

**Allegheny County v. ACLU, 492 U.S. 573 (1989):** Court distinguished between permissible (nativity as part of larger secular display) and impermissible (nativity standing alone on government property as apparent government endorsement).

These decisions created "three-part test" (the Lemon test from *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602, 1971):

1. Display must have secular purpose
2. Primary effect must neither advance nor inhibit religion
3. Must not foster excessive government entanglement with religion

Practical result: Nativity scenes on public property often permitted if:

- Part of broader holiday display including secular elements
- Accompanied by disclaimer indicating private sponsorship
- On government property equally available to various groups
- Historical or cultural rather than explicitly devotional context

Steven D. Smith discusses practical implications of court decisions in *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*.

Christians have varied responses:

Some advocate strongly for nativity scenes' public display rights, viewing their removal as religious liberty infringement and cultural Christianity's decline. William A. Donohue explores Christian advocacy for public display rights in *Twilight of Liberty: The Legacy of the ACLU* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).

Others prioritize church and home displays, viewing public square battles as misplaced energy better spent on gospel proclamation and Christian community formation. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon discuss alternative Christian perspectives prioritizing church displays in *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

Some see opportunity in controversy—public debates about nativity scenes create openings to discuss Christmas's meaning and Christian faith's public role. Tim Keller explores opportunity in controversy for gospel discussion in *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

The debate reveals tensions in pluralistic society about religion's public role, church-state separation, majority/minority rights, and secular/religious balance. James Davison Hunter discusses tensions in pluralistic society about religion's public role in *Culture Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

### **Commercialization and Kitsch**

Nativity scenes range from sublime to ridiculous, raising aesthetic and theological concerns. Colleen McDannell notes in *Material Christianity* the aesthetic range of nativity scenes from sublime to kitschy.

**High-quality nativity sets**—hand-carved wood, fine porcelain, artistic bronze—can be beautiful, reverent, evocative. These serve their purpose well. Hans Urs von Balthasar discusses high-quality nativity sets as beautiful and reverent in *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

**Mass-produced, kitschy sets**—plastic figures, garish colors, poor craftsmanship—may seem to trivialize sacred subject. Does representing the Incarnation with cheap plastic honor or dishonor it? Gillo Dorfles explores concerns about cheap, kitschy sets trivializing sacred subject in *Kitsch* (New York: Universe Books, 1969).

**"Cute" nativities** (animals, children, abstract figures) reinterpret the scene through different lenses. Some find these charming and accessible; others see them as diminishing the story's gravity. Colleen McDannell discusses "cute" nativity reinterpretations and varying responses in *Material Christianity*.

**Proliferation of novelty nativities**—sports-themed, pop-culture, humorous—raises questions about appropriate boundaries. At what point does creative reinterpretation become irreverent mockery? Leigh Eric Schmidt explores novelty nativities raising questions about boundaries in *Consumer Rites*.

Perspective matters:

Some argue that accessible, inexpensive nativity scenes democratize the tradition, making it available to all economic levels. Not everyone can afford hand-carved sets; plastic figures allow participation. William T. Cavanaugh discusses accessibility argument for inexpensive sets in *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Others counter that we honor what we value. If we spend hundreds on Christmas decorations but purchase the cheapest nativity set, what does that communicate about priorities? Craig L. Blomberg explores valuing what we honor through spending priorities in *Neither Poverty Nor Riches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Cultural context varies. What seems irreverent in one culture may be legitimate contextualization in another. Filipino bamboo nativities, African clay figures, or Latin American tin sets represent gospel's incarnation in those cultures. Andrew F. Walls discusses cultural contextualization in different nativity styles in *The Missionary Movement*.

Ultimately, the key is attitude. A simple, inexpensive nativity set displayed lovingly and used catechetically honors Christ more than an expensive set treated as mere decoration. Richard J. Foster notes in *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) that attitude matters more than cost.

### **Theological Concerns**

Some theological concerns about nativity scenes warrant attention:

**Romanticization:** Nativity scenes often depict sanitized, sentimental version of events. The stable becomes cozy, Mary looks serene and clean (not exhausted from labor), Jesus appears peaceful (not crying)—losing the birth's raw, difficult reality. Kenneth E. Bailey discusses romanticization in nativity scenes obscuring difficult reality in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

This romanticization can:

- Obscure Jesus' genuine humanity (He was truly helpless infant)
- Minimize Mary's real suffering (childbirth in primitive conditions)
- Create false expectation that Christian life is serene rather than sometimes messy and difficult
- Distance the narrative from ordinary human experience

Raymond E. Brown discusses problems created by romanticization in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

**Counter-response:** While avoiding false sentimentality, we need not make the opposite error of portraying the nativity as merely grim. There was real joy, wonder, and divine presence alongside difficulty. Balance matters. Kenneth E. Bailey explores balance between avoiding sentimentality and recognizing joy in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*.

**Conflation of accounts:** Most nativity scenes combine Matthew's and Luke's narratives, losing each Gospel's distinct theological emphases. This harmonization, while convenient, may obscure:

- Luke's focus on the lowly (shepherds, Mary's humble status)
- Matthew's focus on fulfillment of prophecy and Gentile inclusion
- The probable timeline (Magi arriving later, not at birth)

Raymond E. Brown discusses harmonization losing distinct Gospel emphases in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

**Counter-response:** The nativity scene functions as theological summary rather than strict chronological representation. Its value lies in comprehensive portrayal of Christ's universal significance (Jew and Gentile, poor and rich, near and far—all worshiping Him). Timothy Keller explores nativity scenes as theological summary rather than strict chronology in *Hidden Christmas*.

**Potential idolatry:** While few would consciously worship nativity figures, can the tradition foster unhealthy attachment—obsession with perfect set, distress if figures break, placing nativity tradition above Christ Himself? Timothy Keller discusses potential idolatry concerns with nativity traditions in *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

**Counter-response:** The problem isn't the figures but disordered affections. Any good thing can become an idol if given inappropriate priority. Vigilance against idolatry shouldn't require rejecting all material symbols. John Calvin discusses disordered affections as problem, not symbols themselves in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1.11.1-16).

### Practical Guidance for Faithful Use

For families and churches incorporating nativity scenes into Christmas celebration, several principles can maximize spiritual benefit:

#### Selection

##### Choose thoughtfully:

- Quality matters, but expensive isn't necessary. Select the best set your budget allows, prioritizing durability, appropriate aesthetic, and pieces' sturdiness (especially with young children). Randy Alcorn discusses thoughtful selection balancing quality and affordability in *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (rev. ed., Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2003).
- **Cultural authenticity vs. cultural contextualization:** Middle Eastern features and clothing reflect historical reality; representations in one's own cultural style make story accessible. Both approaches have value. Lamin Sanneh notes in *Translating the Message* that cultural authenticity versus contextualization both have value.
- **Size and storage:** Consider where you'll display it and where you'll store it. Elaborate sets require significant space. Marie Kondo discusses practical

considerations for size and storage in *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* (Berkeley: Ten Speed Press, 2014).

- **Child-friendliness:** If you have young children, consider sturdy (unbreakable) figures they can handle, play with, rearrange. Nativity scene as toy aids faith formation. Sofia Cavalletti discusses child-friendly figures aiding faith formation in *The Religious Potential of the Child*.

## Display

### Place prominently:

- The nativity scene shouldn't be hidden but visible—perhaps on mantle, table, or dedicated surface where family regularly gathers. Marjorie J. Thompson emphasizes prominent placement ensuring visibility in *Family the Forming Center*.
- Consider lighting (spotlight, nearby candles) to draw attention. James F. White and Susan J. White discuss lighting drawing attention to nativity scene in *Church Architecture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).
- Create "sacred space" around it—perhaps simple cloth backdrop, greenery, or clear area distinguishing it from other decorations. Marchita B. Mauck explores creating sacred space around nativity in *Shaping a House for the Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1990).

### Practice progressive display:

- Assemble stable and some elements during Advent but leave manger empty
- Add baby Jesus on Christmas Eve or Christmas morning (some families do this ceremonially)
- Position Magi distant and move them closer each day until Epiphany
- This approach teaches narrative timeline and extends engagement beyond December 25

Gabe Huck discusses progressive display teaching timeline in *A Sourcebook about Liturgy*.

## Use for Catechesis and Devotion

### Gather for family devotions:

- Daily or weekly during Advent/Christmas, gather family around nativity scene
- Read corresponding Scripture passages
- Pray together
- Sing carols

- Let children ask questions about figures and story

Marjorie J. Thompson explores family devotions around nativity scene in *Family the Forming Center*.

### **Teach symbolism:**

- Explain why Jesus is in feeding trough (humility, no room in inn)
- Discuss shepherds' presence (God's attention to lowly)
- Explore Magi's gifts' meanings (gold=kingship, frankincense=deity, myrrh=death/burial)
- Connect to larger salvation story (this baby will grow to die for our sins)

John H. Westerhoff III discusses teaching symbolism through nativity figures in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

### **Encourage children's engagement:**

- Let young children play with figures (if durable set)
- Have older children read nativity story aloud
- Invite children to position figures and explain placements
- Create traditions around nativity scene (specific songs, prayers, activities)

Sofia Cavalletti explores children's engagement with nativity in *The Religious Potential of the Child*.

### **Use for personal meditation:**

- Spend quiet time contemplating the scene
- Practice Ignatian contemplation—imaginatively enter the stable, engage senses, dialogue with figures
- Reflect on Incarnation's implications for your life

David L. Fleming discusses personal meditation using nativity scene in *Draw Me into Your Friendship*.

### **After Christmas**

**Keep displayed through Epiphany** (January 6)—Christmas is a season, not just a day. The nativity scene can remain until conclusion of Christmas season. Laurence Hull Stookey notes in *Calendar* that keeping nativity through Epiphany honors Christmas season.

### **Store carefully:**

- Wrap figures individually to prevent breakage
- Use sturdy storage container
- Label clearly for easy future retrieval
- Involve children in careful packing, teaching respect for sacred objects

Colleen McDannell discusses careful storage showing respect for sacred objects in *Material Christianity*.

### **Consider year-round possibilities:**

- Some families keep nativity scene visible all year in prayer space
- Others photograph it annually to create family archive
- Broken pieces can be repaired rather than discarded, creating repair stories that become part of family tradition

Marjorie J. Thompson explores year-round possibilities for nativity scenes in *Family the Forming Center*.

### **Conclusion: Bethlehem in Every Home**

The nativity scene tradition, from St. Francis's living tableau in 1223 to contemporary displays in homes worldwide, serves the beautiful purpose of bringing Bethlehem into our midst—making the Incarnation's reality visible, concrete, and memorable. John F. Baldovin discusses nativity scenes bringing Bethlehem into homes in *Reforming the Liturgy*.

When we set up our nativity scenes, whether elaborate or simple, expensive or modest, traditional or contextualized, we're doing more than decorating. We're:

- Teaching Scripture through visual means
- Proclaiming the Incarnation—God truly became human, truly entered our world
- Creating sacred space in secular environment
- Connecting with tradition stretching back centuries
- Forming children in Christian faith and biblical literacy
- Inviting contemplation in distracted age
- Witnessing publicly (if displayed in window) to Christ's coming

John H. Westerhoff III discusses multiple purposes served by nativity scenes in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

The figures themselves are wood, plastic, porcelain, or clay—materials without inherent holiness. But they point beyond themselves to the reality they represent: the Creator

becoming creature, the eternal God entering time, the invisible Word taking visible flesh, the almighty Lord born as helpless infant. Margaret R. Miles notes in *Image as Insight* that figures point beyond themselves to reality represented.

The manger is empty most of the year—a reminder that Incarnation was historical event, happening at specific time and place. But annually we fill it again, remembering and celebrating that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The Word becoming flesh is the nativity's theological core.

May our nativity scenes truly serve this purpose—not as idols commanding worship but as aids directing worship toward the One they represent, not as sentimental decorations but as theological teachers, not as private possessions but as family treasures forming faith across generations. Joseph Leo Koerner discusses nativity scenes as aids to worship, not objects of worship in *The Reformation of the Image*.

The baby in the manger is Christ the Lord, Savior of the world, God with us. That truth, proclaimed visually through nativity scenes worldwide, remains Christianity's central, transformative, glorious claim—and the reason we celebrate Christmas at all. Raymond E. Brown emphasizes in *The Birth of the Messiah* the nativity's central claim: Christ the Lord, God with us.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### The Gifts of the Magi and Christian Gift-Giving

Gift-giving is among Christmas's most prominent features—and also among its most problematic. At its best, Christmas gift exchange embodies Christian theology of grace, generosity, and love. At its worst, it degenerates into commercial obligation, materialistic excess, and stressful burden. Understanding the biblical foundation for Christian giving—particularly the Magi's gifts to Jesus—and developing theological frameworks for gift-giving can help us navigate between these extremes, redeeming this practice from commercialism and restoring its spiritual significance.

#### **The Magi's Gifts: Biblical Account and Interpretation**

The only biblical account of gifts given to Jesus at His birth comes from Matthew's Gospel, in the narrative of the Magi's visit.

#### **Matthew's Narrative (Matthew 2:1-12)**

"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem" (Matthew 2:1).

The Magi (Greek: *magoi*; traditionally rendered "wise men" or "kings" in English) were likely Persian or Babylonian astrologers, scholars who studied celestial phenomena and interpreted their significance. Raymond E. Brown discusses the Magi's identity and origin in *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993), noting they were probably learned astrologers from the East, possibly Persia or Babylon. Their presence in Matthew's Gospel carries theological weight:

**Gentiles seek Jesus** while many Jews (represented by Herod and Jerusalem's religious leaders) reject or ignore Him—a pattern that will characterize Jesus' ministry and the early church's mission. W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr. explore this theme in *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

**Astronomy/astrology leads them to Christ**, suggesting that even pagan wisdom, when followed faithfully, can point toward truth—though it requires Scripture (Micah 5:2, cited by Jewish scribes) to complete their understanding. Craig S. Keener discusses how natural revelation (the star) required special revelation (Scripture) for completion in *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

**They come to worship** (Matthew 2:2, 11)—*proskyneō* in Greek, meaning to bow down, pay homage, worship. This verb appears repeatedly, emphasizing that worship is their journey's purpose. R. T. France analyzes the use of *proskyneō* in *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

"And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh" (Matthew 2:11).

Note several details:

**"The house"** (not stable or manger) suggests time has passed since Jesus' birth—perhaps weeks or months. The family is no longer in the temporary stable but has found more permanent lodging.

**"The child"** (*paidion* in Greek, meaning young child rather than newborn infant) also suggests Jesus was no longer a newborn. This is consistent with Herod's calculation to kill children "two years old or under" (Matthew 2:16). Brown discusses the temporal indicators in Matthew's narrative in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

**They worshiped first, then gave gifts.** The gifts follow worship, not vice versa. Giving flows from recognition of Jesus' identity and worth, not as payment or exchange. This sequence is theologically significant, as Timothy Keller notes in *Hidden Christmas* (New York: Viking, 2016).

**They opened "their treasures"** (*thēsaurous*, same root as English "thesaurus")—these gifts were valuable, costly, carefully transported across long journey.

**Three specific gifts** are named: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The number three led to tradition that there were three Magi (though Matthew doesn't specify the number), and eventually to naming them (Caspar/Gaspar, Melchior, Balthazar in Western tradition—though these names appear only in later legend, not Scripture). The tradition of three Magi and their names developed in medieval Christianity, as documented in Richard C. Trexler, *The Journey of the Magi: Meanings in History of a Christian Story* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

### **The Significance of Each Gift**

Christian tradition has long interpreted the three gifts symbolically, seeing each as revealing something about Jesus' identity and mission. The symbolic interpretation of the Magi's gifts has ancient roots, appearing in patristic writers like Irenaeus and Origen, as Brown discusses in *The Birth of the Messiah*.

#### **Gold**

Gold's traditional symbolism as the metal of kings makes it an obvious royal tribute. Giving gold acknowledges Jesus as King—the "King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2), heir to David's throne, the Messiah promised in Old Testament prophecy.

**Psalm 72:10-11, 15** speaks of kings bringing tribute to the messianic King: "May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him... Long may he live; may gold of Sheba be given to him!" The connection between Psalm 72 and the Magi's visit is explored in J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

**Isaiah 60:6** prophesies nations bringing gold to Jerusalem: "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall bring good news, the praise of the LORD." Matthew may have this passage in mind, as France discusses in *The Gospel of Matthew*.

Gold's incorruptibility (it doesn't tarnish or decay) also symbolizes divine nature, eternal kingship, incorruptible glory—appropriate for One who is eternal King, divine in nature. The symbolic properties of gold in ancient thought are discussed in Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3rd ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

**Practical significance:** Gold's monetary value would have provided resources for the holy family, particularly useful for the impending flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15) where they would need funds for travel, lodging, and sustenance as refugees. God's providence through the Magi's gifts is emphasized in Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*.

#### **Frankincense**

Frankincense is aromatic resin from *Boswellia* trees, used in ancient world for incense, perfume, and religious ceremonies. Its primary association was with worship and priestly service. The production and use of frankincense in the ancient world is detailed in Nigel Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London: Longman, 1981).

In Old Testament worship, frankincense was used in:

- Grain offerings (Leviticus 2:1-2, 15-16)
- The incense burned in the Holy Place (Exodus 30:34-38)
- As part of the "holy anointing oil" (Exodus 30:23-25)
- Placed on the bread of the Presence in the tabernacle (Leviticus 24:7)

The use of frankincense in temple worship is analyzed in Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

Frankincense's sacred use made it appropriate for deity—acknowledging Jesus not merely as human king but as divine, worthy of worship, God Himself incarnate.

The gift signifies **Jesus as High Priest**—the One who would mediate between God and humanity, offer the perfect sacrifice (Himself), and intercede for His people (Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-16; 7:23-28). The high priestly symbolism is explored in David L. Allen, *Hebrews* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2010).

**Revelation 8:3-4** connects incense with prayer: "the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God." Jesus, to whom frankincense was given, would become the One through whom our prayers ascend to the Father. G. K. Beale discusses this in *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

Symbolically, frankincense represents:

- Worship and prayer
- Jesus' deity and worthiness of worship
- His priestly role
- The fragrant offering His life would become (Ephesians 5:2)

## **Myrrh**

Myrrh, like frankincense, is aromatic resin (from *Commiphora* trees), but its primary uses were different—not worship but burial preparation and embalming. The production and uses of myrrh are documented in Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh*.

In biblical use, myrrh appears in:

- Anointing oil (Exodus 30:23)

- Perfumes and cosmetics (Esther 2:12; Psalm 45:8; Proverbs 7:17; Song of Solomon multiple references)
- Burial preparation (John 19:39-40—Nicodemus brings myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body)

**The gift of myrrh at Jesus' birth prophetically points to His death.** This baby born in Bethlehem came to die. The shadow of the cross falls across the manger. Christmas and Good Friday are connected—the Incarnation's purpose was the Atonement. This prophetic dimension is emphasized in Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (rev. ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

Jesus was offered wine mixed with myrrh at His crucifixion (Mark 15:23), which He refused—a connection between the myrrh given at birth and myrrh present at death. The use of myrrh at crucifixion is discussed in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

Symbolically, myrrh represents:

- Jesus' humanity (He would truly die)
- His suffering and sacrifice
- His role as Savior (saving through death)
- The cost of redemption

**The progression of the gifts tells a story:** Gold proclaims Jesus' kingship; frankincense His deity and priestly role; myrrh His sacrificial death. Together they summarize the Gospel—the divine King who would die to save His people. This tripartite symbolism is analyzed in Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

### **The Hymn "We Three Kings"**

The symbolic interpretation of the Magi's gifts found perhaps its most memorable expression in the beloved Christmas carol "We Three Kings of Orient Are," written in 1857 by John Henry Hopkins Jr., an Episcopal clergyman. Hopkins served as the first instructor of church music at General Theological Seminary in New York, and wrote this carol for a Christmas pageant, as documented in William Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995).

The hymn's structure is significant: after the recurring refrain about following the "star of wonder," each of the three middle verses is sung by a different "king," presenting his specific gift and its meaning:

**Verse 2 (Gold):** "Born a King on Bethlehem's plain / Gold I bring to crown Him again / King forever, ceasing never / Over us all to reign"

**Verse 3 (Frankincense):** "Frankincense to offer have I / Incense owns a Deity nigh / Prayer and praising, voices raising / Worshiping God on high"

**Verse 4 (Myrrh):** "Myrrh is mine, its bitter perfume / Breathes a life of gathering gloom / Sorrowing, sighing, bleeding, dying / Sealed in the stone-cold tomb"

The contrast is striking—the first two verses are celebratory, acknowledging kingship and deity, while the myrrh verse shifts to minor key (musically and thematically), foreshadowing Jesus' passion and death even at His birth. This juxtaposition of celebration and sorrow captures the theological depth of the Incarnation—Jesus came to die. As Hopkins's final verse declares: "Glorious now behold Him arise / King and God and Sacrifice."

The hymn effectively teaches theology through poetry and music, making the symbolic interpretation of the gifts accessible to congregations. Its enduring popularity (it remains one of the most frequently sung Christmas carols) testifies to its effectiveness as both worship and catechesis. The pedagogical function of Christmas carols is discussed in C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

### **Cultural Reinterpretations and Secularization**

Interestingly, the profound theological symbolism of the Magi's gifts has been substantially diluted or reinterpreted in popular culture. Several examples illustrate this trend:

**O. Henry's "The Gift of the Magi" (1905):** Perhaps the most famous literary appropriation of the Magi imagery, O. Henry's short story uses the title ironically—his characters, Jim and Della, are poor newlyweds who sacrifice their most prized possessions to buy Christmas gifts for each other, only to discover the gifts are now useless. Jim sells his watch to buy combs for Della's beautiful hair; Della cuts and sells her hair to buy a chain for Jim's watch. The story presents this mutual sacrifice as wise ("the magi... were wise men—wonderfully wise men") because it demonstrates love. While the story beautifully illustrates sacrificial giving, it completely divorces "magi" and "gifts" from their biblical context—the wise men become merely symbols of gift-giving wisdom, not worshipers bringing tribute to the divine King. O. Henry's story is analyzed in Eugene Current-Garcia, *O. Henry* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1965).

**Commercial appropriation:** Retail marketing has reduced the Magi to generic "three wise men" who simply brought "expensive gifts," transforming them from worshiping astrologers following divine revelation into mere gift-giving role models. The theological significance (gifts acknowledging Jesus' kingship, deity, and sacrificial mission) disappears, replaced by the message: "The Magi brought expensive gifts, so you should too!" This commercial reinterpretation strips away the Christ-centered meaning while retaining the gift-giving imagery. The commercialization of Christmas and its symbols is examined in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

**"Wise Men Still Seek Him":** This popular bumper sticker and Christmas decoration attempts to reclaim spiritual meaning but often reduces the Magi's quest to mere personal

spirituality—the "search for truth" or "journey of faith"—without the specific content of Matthew's account: these were Gentiles led by astronomical phenomena to worship the Jewish Messiah, bringing gifts that testified to His identity as King, Priest, and Savior. The generic "seeking" misses the particularity of what (or rather whom) they found.

**Children's pageants:** Well-intentioned church Christmas programs often present the Magi as arriving simultaneously with shepherds at the stable, bearing their gifts for the cute baby, emphasizing the giving while downplaying the worship and theological symbolism. The gifts become props rather than prophetic testimony. While such pageants serve valuable purposes (engaging children in the Christmas story), they can inadvertently flatten the narrative's theological depth.

These cultural reinterpretations demonstrate how easily profound theological truth can be sentimentalized, commercialized, or genericized when divorced from biblical context and Christian tradition. The challenge for contemporary Christians is to recover and teach the gifts' actual significance while resisting culture's reductionist interpretations.

### **Theological Themes in the Magi's Gift-Giving**

Several theological principles emerge from Matthew's account:

**Worship motivates giving.** The Magi gave because they recognized Jesus' identity and worth. Their gifts flowed from worship, not obligation. Christian giving should similarly flow from recognizing God's worth and responding gratefully to His gifts to us. The priority of worship in Christian practice is emphasized in D. A. Carson, *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

**The best gifts given.** Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were costly, valuable, exotic. The Magi didn't give leftovers or cheap trinkets but opened their treasures. Christian giving should be generous, sacrificial when necessary, reflecting the importance we place on Christ. The principle of costly giving appears throughout Scripture, as in David's refusal to offer God what cost him nothing (2 Samuel 24:24), discussed in Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990).

**Gifts acknowledge truth.** Each gift testified to who Jesus is—King, Priest, Savior. Christian giving can similarly testify to truth about God's character, Christ's work, or Christian love. The testimonial function of giving is explored in Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

**Gentile inclusion.** The Magi, as Gentiles bringing gifts, foreshadow the Gospel's universal reach. God's salvation extends to all peoples; all nations will bring their treasures to Christ (Revelation 21:24-26). The inclusion of Gentiles as a Matthean theme is discussed in David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

**Providence and provision.** God used the Magi's gifts to provide for the holy family's needs, particularly the flight to Egypt. Christian giving participates in God's providential care for His people. Divine providence through human agency is a theme explored in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

### **The Theology of Christian Giving**

To understand Christmas gift-giving theologically, we must first establish broader biblical principles of Christian generosity.

#### **God as the Ultimate Giver**

All Christian giving derives from and reflects God's own giving nature:

"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). God is the source of all good things; every genuine gift ultimately comes from Him. The theological significance of James 1:17 is explored in Douglas J. Moo, *The Letter of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

**God's greatest gift is His Son:** "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). The Incarnation and Atonement are the supreme act of divine giving. D. A. Carson analyzes John 3:16 in *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

This gift was:

- **Unmerited:** We didn't deserve it (Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:8-9)
- **Costly:** It cost God everything—His Son's life (Romans 8:32)
- **Generous:** Given freely, without reservation or reluctance (Romans 8:32)
- **Purposeful:** Given to accomplish salvation (2 Corinthians 9:15)

God's giving establishes the pattern for Christian giving. We give because God first gave to us. We give generously because God gave lavishly. We give sacrificially because God gave His very self. The connection between divine and human giving is explored in Kelly M. Kapic and Justin L. Borger, *God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

**Romans 8:32:** "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" God's gift of Christ guarantees all other gifts; nothing is withheld from those who receive His Son. John Murray analyzes this verse in *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

**2 Corinthians 9:15:** "Thanks be to God for his inexpressible gift!" Paul's exclamation of gratitude for God's gift (Christ) should characterize Christian response to divine generosity. Paul Barnett discusses this in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

## Grace as Framework for Giving

Christian giving operates within the framework of grace—unmerited favor, free gift, undeserved blessing.

**Ephesians 2:8-9:** "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast." Salvation as gift (not earned, not purchased, not merited) establishes fundamental Christian understanding. We receive everything freely; therefore we give freely. Peter T. O'Brien explores grace as the foundation of Christian life in *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

This grace-based giving contrasts with:

**Earning or deserving:** Some give to earn favor, create obligation, or establish superiority. Christian giving recognizes we can't earn God's favor (we already have it through Christ) and doesn't seek to create debt.

**Exchange or barter:** Commercial thinking treats gifts as transactions—you give me something worth X, I must reciprocate with something worth X. Christian giving operates by different economics—grace, not exchange; generosity, not calculation. Marcel Mauss analyzes gift-exchange systems in *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (trans. W. D. Halls, New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), while Jacques Derrida contrasts true gift-giving with exchange in *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* (trans. Peggy Kamuf, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

**Obligation divorced from love:** While Christians do have obligations (care for family, support church, help neighbors), these flow from gratitude and love, not mere duty. Joyless obligation misses the point.

Christian giving reflects and extends God's grace. When we give generously, freely, without expecting return, we embody the grace we've received and make it tangible to recipients. Miroslav Volf explores this in *Free of Charge*.

## Principles from 2 Corinthians 8-9

Paul's extended discussion of Christian giving (in context of collection for Jerusalem church) provides comprehensive theology. The collection for Jerusalem is discussed in Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992).

**Generosity flows from grace received:** "We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (2 Corinthians 8:1-2).

The Macedonian Christians' giving flowed from "the grace of God"—recognizing what they'd received in Christ motivated generous response despite poverty. Awareness of

grace produces generosity. Paul Barnett explores this in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

**Christ's example motivates:** "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

Christ's self-impoverishing generosity (Incarnation and Atonement) provides the ultimate model. Christian giving imitates Christ's pattern—voluntary impoverishment for others' enrichment. The Christological foundation of Christian ethics is explored in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

**Giving should be proportional and willing:** "For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have" (2 Corinthians 8:12).

God doesn't demand what we don't possess, but does expect generosity proportional to what we have. The widow's two coins exemplified this (Mark 12:41-44)—giving little absolutely but much proportionally. The widow's offering is analyzed in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark*.

**Giving creates mutuality:** "Your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness" (2 Corinthians 8:14).

Christian community involves mutual support—those with abundance help those in need, creating reciprocal care (not calculated exchange but organic mutuality). The mutuality principle is explored in Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

**Cheerful, willing giving matters:** "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The attitude matters as much as the act. Grudging, resentful, or merely dutiful giving misses the spirit of Christian generosity. Cheerfulness (Greek *hilaros*, from which "hilarious" derives) should characterize giving. Paul Barnett discusses this principle in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

**God provides for generous givers:** "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (2 Corinthians 9:8).

This isn't "prosperity gospel" (give to get rich), but assurance that God provides what we need to continue generous living. Generosity doesn't impoverish us because God supplies our needs. The distinction between biblical promise and prosperity theology is explored in David W. Jones and Russell S. Woodbridge, *Health, Wealth & Happiness*:

*Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011).

**Giving produces thanksgiving:** "For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God" (2 Corinthians 9:12).

Generous giving creates chain reaction—recipients give thanks to God, glorifying Him for His provision through human generosity. Our gifts point beyond ourselves to God's grace. Paul Barnett explores this in *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*.

### **Historical Development of Christmas Gift-Giving**

Understanding how Christmas gift-giving evolved historically helps us assess contemporary practices theologically.

#### **Early Christian Practice**

Early Christians didn't specifically exchange gifts at Christmas. The Feast of Christ's Nativity (Christmas) developed gradually, and gift-giving wasn't initially part of its observance. The development of Christmas celebration is traced in Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

However, Christian generosity was practiced:

- **Almsgiving:** Giving to the poor was expected Christian practice, emphasized especially during feast days
- **Hospitality:** Welcoming strangers, sharing meals, providing lodging
- **Support of widows, orphans, and vulnerable:** The church cared for its most vulnerable members through shared resources

Early Christian giving was primarily:

- **Needs-based:** Focused on meeting genuine needs rather than symbolic exchange
- **Directed toward the poor:** Particular concern for those lacking resources
- **Corporate:** Channeled through the church community rather than purely individual

The practice of early Christian charity is documented in Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002).

#### **Medieval Development: St. Nicholas**

The tradition of St. Nicholas (4th-century bishop of Myra) significantly influenced Christian gift-giving. The historical Nicholas and his legends are examined in Charles W. Jones,

*Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Nicholas was famous for generosity, particularly secret gift-giving to those in need. The most famous legend involves him secretly providing dowries for three poor sisters by dropping gold down their chimney or through a window, saving them from destitution or prostitution. This legend is analyzed in Gerry Bowler, *Santa Claus: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2005).

Nicholas's feast day (December 6) became associated with gift-giving in many European cultures. Children would leave out shoes or stockings on the eve of St. Nicholas Day, finding them filled with treats or small gifts the next morning.

This practice emphasized:

- **Generosity to children:** Recognizing childhood as special, worthy of delight
- **Secret giving:** Nicholas gave anonymously, avoiding recognition or praise
- **Helping the needy:** The original Nicholas legends emphasized helping the genuinely poor

The St. Nicholas tradition gradually merged with Christmas in some cultures, shifting gift-giving from December 6 to December 25, and transforming Nicholas from historical saint to semi-magical figure (eventually secularized as Santa Claus). This transformation is traced in Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

## Reformation Changes

Protestant Reformers rejected saint veneration, including St. Nicholas traditions, viewing them as unbiblical and superstitious. The Reformers' attitude toward saints is explored in Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

However, gift-giving persisted, often redirected:

- **Christ Child (*Christkindl*) in German tradition:** Shifted gift-bringer from St. Nicholas to Christ Child (or angel representing Christ)
- **Emphasis on family rather than saintly patron:** Gift exchange within families replaced waiting for Nicholas's visit
- **December 25 (Christmas) supplanted December 6 (St. Nicholas Day)** as primary gift-giving occasion in Protestant regions

Reformation theology emphasized:

- **Grace, not works:** Gifts should be freely given, not earned by good behavior

- **Direct relationship with God:** No need for saintly intermediaries (even in gift-giving symbolism)
- **Family as primary unit:** Domestic religiosity elevated, making family gift exchange natural

The Reformation's impact on Christmas is discussed in Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

### **Victorian Transformation**

The 19th century, particularly Victorian era, dramatically transformed Christmas gift-giving. The Victorian transformation of Christmas is examined in J. A. R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Christmas: A Social History* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978).

**Charles Dickens's A Christmas Carol (1843)** popularized Christmas as season of generosity, family togetherness, and care for the poor. Scrooge's transformation models how Christmas should inspire generosity. Paul Davis analyzes Dickens's influence in *The Lives and Times of Ebenezer Scrooge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

**Industrialization and middle-class growth** created larger consumer market capable of purchasing gifts. Christmas became commercialized as businesses recognized its profit potential. The economic transformation is discussed in William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University Press, 1993).

**Department stores** promoted Christmas shopping, creating elaborate window displays, marketing campaigns, and the concept of Christmas as gift-buying season. Leigh Eric Schmidt explores this in *Consumer Rites*.

**Victorian sentimentalism** emphasized family, children, and domestic happiness, making Christmas ideal occasion for expressing family love through gifts. The Victorian domestic ideal is examined in John M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

**The Christmas tree tradition** (popularized by Prince Albert and Queen Victoria) provided focal point for gift display—presents placed beneath tree created visual spectacle.

By century's end, Christmas gift-giving had transformed from modest, primarily charitable practice to elaborate family tradition and significant commercial enterprise.

### **20th Century to Present: Commercialization**

The 20th century accelerated Christmas's commercialization. The intensification of Christmas commercialization is analyzed in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, and Daniel Miller, ed., *Unwrapping Christmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

**Advertising and marketing** increasingly shaped Christmas expectations, creating "must-have" gifts and promoting consumption. The impact of advertising is explored in

Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

**Credit cards** (widely adopted post-WWII) enabled Christmas spending beyond immediate means, often creating debt. Juliet B. Schor examines consumer debt in *The Overspent American: Why We Want What We Don't Need* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1999).

**Black Friday** (post-Thanksgiving shopping day) and **Cyber Monday** (online shopping) became cultural phenomena, with Christmas shopping season starting ever earlier (now often before Thanksgiving).

**Gift expectations escalated:** What was once modest (small toys, handmade items, practical goods) became elaborate (expensive electronics, designer goods, extensive lists).

**"Christmas creep"** (Christmas decorations and marketing appearing earlier each year, now often in October) extends commercial season while arguably diluting spiritual significance.

Contemporary challenges include:

- **Financial stress:** Many families overspend at Christmas, creating January debt
- **Materialism:** Focus shifts from Christ to consumption
- **Obligation:** Gift-giving becomes burdensome duty rather than joyful expression
- **Inequality:** Economic disparities become painfully visible when children compare gifts
- **Environmental impact:** Excessive consumption, packaging waste, disposable gifts
- **Loss of meaning:** Gifts given from habit or obligation rather than love or thoughtfulness

These challenges are analyzed in Tim Kasser, *The High Price of Materialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), and William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

### **Redeeming Christmas Gift-Giving: Theological Principles**

How can Christians practice gift-giving in ways that honor Christ, embody grace, and resist commercialism's worst excesses?

#### **Remember the True Gift**

Christmas celebrates God's gift of His Son—the Gift that makes all other gifts meaningful. Christian Christmas giving should point toward this central reality, not obscure it. Timothy Keller explores keeping Christ central in Christmas in *Hidden Christmas*.

Practical implications:

- Keep Christ central in family conversations about Christmas
- Connect gift-giving explicitly to God's gift: "We give gifts because God gave Jesus"
- Prioritize worship, Scripture reading, service over shopping
- Tell the Christmas story more than we discuss wish lists

Gifts should serve, not replace, worship. When gift-giving dominates Christmas to the exclusion of genuine Christian celebration, we've lost the plot.

### **Give Graciously, Not Transactionally**

Grace-based giving doesn't calculate: "I spent \$50 on them so they should spend \$50 on me." Grace gives freely, without demanding equivalent return. Miroslav Volf explores non-transactional giving in *Free of Charge*.

This means:

- Give without expecting reciprocal gifts
- Resist keeping mental ledgers of gift value
- Receive gifts gratefully regardless of cost or impressiveness
- Give to those who can't reciprocate (poor, children, elderly)

**Luke 14:12-14:** Jesus teaches, "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Darrell L. Bock analyzes this teaching in *Luke*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994-1996).

Applying this to Christmas: Include in your giving those who can't give back—adopt families in need, support charities, give to the genuinely poor. This embodies grace more than equivalent gift exchange among equals.

### **Practice Simplicity and Moderation**

Resist cultural pressure toward excess. More gifts don't mean more love; expensive gifts don't mean better celebration. Richard J. Foster explores Christian simplicity in *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

Consider:

- **Limiting gift number:** Some families establish rules (e.g., "Something you want, something you need, something to wear, something to read")

- **Setting spending limits:** Agreeing on maximum amounts prevents competition and financial stress
- **Emphasizing quality over quantity:** One meaningful gift beats ten thoughtless ones
- **Handmade gifts:** These require time and thought, often meaning more than purchased items
- **Experiential gifts:** Tickets to events, memberships, planned activities together can be more memorable than objects

**Matthew 6:19-21:** "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." D. A. Carson analyzes this teaching in *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1978).

Our giving patterns reveal our values. Extravagant spending on ourselves or family while giving minimally to kingdom work or the genuinely needy reveals where our treasure truly lies.

### **Give Thoughtfully and Personally**

Thoughtful gifts demonstrate care for the recipient:

- Considering their genuine interests, needs, preferences
- Recognizing what would delight or serve them specifically
- Investing time to select or create appropriate gifts
- Accompanying gifts with personal notes or expressions of love

Generic, thoughtless gifts (gift cards when you don't know the person, re-gifted items, obligatory purchases) communicate that the recipient isn't worth the effort of thoughtfulness.

Christian love (*agape*) involves genuine attention to others' good. Our gifts should reflect this—given not merely to fulfill obligation but to express genuine care and delight in blessing others. Gene Edward Veith Jr. explores thoughtful gift-giving in *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

### **Include Those Often Forgotten**

Expand your gift-giving beyond immediate family and close friends:

Jesus' teaching about including the marginalized (Luke 14:12-14) challenges us to consider who's left out of our generosity.

Possibilities:

- **Adopt a family:** Many churches and charities coordinate Christmas adoption programs
- **Nursing home residents:** Often lonely at Christmas, would appreciate visitors and small gifts
- **International students:** May be far from home with no family Christmas celebration
- **Single parents:** Often financially stretched, could use support
- **Prison ministry:** Inmates and their children benefit from Christmas gifts
- **Refugee families:** Newly arrived refugees may have nothing; Christmas gifts help them start over
- **Homeless:** Whether through shelters or direct giving, remember those without homes

This inclusive giving embodies Christ's own pattern—attention to the outcast, poor, vulnerable, and forgotten. It also testifies to gospel truth that God's gift extends to all, not just the privileged. The church's ministry to the marginalized is explored in Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (2nd ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

### **Give to Kingdom Work**

Christmas giving should include not just family and friends but God's work through church and ministry:

Year-end charitable giving is common practice; Christmas season provides natural opportunity for kingdom generosity:

- **Church support:** Consider special Christmas offering beyond regular tithes
- **Missionary support:** Bless those serving cross-culturally
- **Ministry organizations:** Support organizations doing kingdom work (evangelism, mercy, justice)
- **Local church needs:** Many churches have benevolence funds, special projects, building needs

**"Honor giving":** Some families practice giving to ministry in honor of family members rather than purchasing gifts—"A gift has been made to [ministry] in your honor." This redirects resources toward kingdom work while honoring loved ones.

Careful discernment needed: Not all organizations are equally faithful or effective. Research before giving; support ministries with proven track records, sound theology, and good stewardship. Principles for evaluating ministries are discussed in Jonathan J. Bonk,

*Missions and Money: Affluence as a Missionary Problem—Revisited* (rev. ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

### **Teach Children Biblical Giving**

Children naturally absorb culture's materialistic messages about Christmas. Parents must intentionally counter-form them. Marjorie J. Thompson explores family spiritual formation in *Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).

**Model generous giving:** Children learn more from observing parents' generosity than from lectures about it.

**Explain the "why" of giving:** Connect Christmas gifts to God's gift, grace, love, and Christian generosity.

**Include children in giving to others:** Let them help select gifts for needy families, contribute to charitable giving, participate in service projects.

**Manage expectations:** Don't let children's wish lists become endless demands. Teach contentment, gratitude for what they receive, and joy in giving.

**Focus on receiving well:** Teaching children to receive gifts graciously—expressing genuine thanks, appreciating gifts regardless of preference—forms character.

**Resist entitlement:** The attitude "I deserve these gifts" contradicts grace. Everything is gift; nothing is deserved. Christmas provides opportunity to teach this counter-cultural truth. The formation of children's character is explored in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

### **Steward Resources Wisely**

Financial wisdom should govern Christmas giving. Biblical financial stewardship is explored in Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (rev. ed., Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2003).

**Don't go into debt for Christmas.** Debt for gifts contradicts stewardship principles and creates stress that undermines Christmas joy. If you can't afford generous giving, give modestly within your means.

**Budget for Christmas year-round.** Rather than scrambling in December, plan throughout the year—setting aside funds monthly makes Christmas less financially stressful.

**Distinguish wants from needs.** We don't need everything we want. Focused giving that meets real needs or brings genuine delight serves better than shotgun approach buying everything.

**Consider environmental stewardship.** Excessive consumption, wasteful packaging, disposable gifts harm creation. Christians called to creation care should consider gifts'

environmental impact. Steven Bouma-Prediger explores Christian environmental stewardship in *For the Beauty of the Earth: A Christian Vision for Creation Care* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

**Proverbs 21:20:** "Precious treasure and oil are in a wise man's dwelling, but a foolish man devours it." Wise resource management honors God; foolish consumption does not. Bruce K. Waltke analyzes this proverb in *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15–31* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

### **Alternative Gift-Giving Practices**

Some Christian families and communities have developed alternative practices that resist commercialism while maintaining gift-giving's positive dimensions:

#### **Advent Conspiracy**

The "Advent Conspiracy" movement (begun 2006) encourages Christians to:

1. **Worship fully:** Keep Christ central, not let shopping overshadow worship
2. **Spend less:** Resist commercial pressure, practice simplicity
3. **Give more:** More time, presence, and relational investment
4. **Love all:** Redirect money saved toward helping the poor and kingdom work

This reorientation challenges typical American Christmas patterns, proposing that less consumerism can mean more Christ-centered celebration. The movement is documented at [adventconspiracy.org](http://adventconspiracy.org) and discussed in Rick McKinley, Chris Seay, and Greg Holder, *Advent Conspiracy: Can Christmas Still Change the World?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009).

#### **Four Gift Rule**

Some families practice limiting children's gifts to four categories:

1. **Something they want:** One desired item
2. **Something they need:** Practical necessity
3. **Something to wear:** Clothing item
4. **Something to read:** Book

This structure:

- Limits quantity, preventing excess
- Balances desire with need
- Includes both fun and practical
- Encourages reading

Variations exist: Some add "something to share" (encouraging generosity) or substitute categories, but the principle of limitation and thoughtfulness remains.

### **Handmade Christmas**

Committing to homemade gifts (baked goods, crafts, art, written items) requires time and creativity rather than primarily money:

#### **Benefits:**

- More personal and thoughtful
- Often less expensive
- Environmentally friendlier
- Teaches skills and creativity
- Creates heirlooms and treasured items

#### **Challenges:**

- Requires time (scarce resource for many)
- Demands skills not everyone possesses
- Can become stressful if perfectionism enters
- May not suit all recipients

The value of handmade gifts is explored in Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

### **Experience Gifts**

Rather than things, give experiences:

- Concert or theater tickets
- Museum memberships
- Classes (cooking, art, music)
- Trips or outings together
- Subscriptions (magazines, streaming services, meal kits)

Experiences often create better memories than objects, foster relationships through shared activities, and avoid accumulation of stuff. The psychology of experiential giving is explored in Elizabeth W. Dunn and Michael Norton, *Happy Money: The Science of Happier Spending* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013).

### **Draw Names/Secret Santa**

For large families or groups, drawing names means each person buys for one person (or couple) rather than everyone buying for everyone:

### **Advantages:**

- Reduces financial burden
- Allows more thoughtful, generous gifts to fewer recipients
- Simplifies logistics
- Reduces stress

### **Considerations:**

- May disappoint those who enjoy giving widely
- Requires clear communication and rules
- Works better in some family dynamics than others

### **"Family Gift" Rather Than Individual Gifts**

Some extended families give one significant gift to each nuclear family rather than individual gifts to each person:

### **Examples:**

- Game for family to play together
- Pass to local attraction all can visit
- Contribution toward family trip
- Item for home (furniture, appliance, decoration)

This approach:

- Emphasizes family unity
- Reduces overall cost
- Encourages shared experiences
- Simplifies for gift-givers

### **Navigating Difficult Gift-Giving Situations**

Real life presents challenges and awkwardness around Christmas giving:

#### **When You Receive Gifts You Didn't Expect**

Etiquette and Christian virtue require gracious response even when surprised by unexpected gift:

Respond with genuine thanks, even if you feel awkward about not having reciprocal gift. The giver chose to bless you; receive graciously.

Don't rush out to buy reciprocal gift out of panic or obligation. If you want to give something later, do so thoughtfully when appropriate, not as rushed response.

Remember grace isn't transactional. You don't "owe" a gift because you received one. Gratitude is appropriate; artificial reciprocity isn't required.

### **When Financial Situations Differ Drastically**

Economic inequality within families or friend groups creates potential awkwardness:

#### **The wealthy should:**

- Give generously without flaunting
- Be sensitive to others' limitations
- Never make others feel inadequate about their more modest gifts
- Consider giving in ways that don't create comparison (anonymous giving, charitable donations in others' names)

#### **Those with less should:**

- Give within their means without shame
- Remember that thoughtfulness matters more than cost
- Not feel pressured to match others' spending
- Accept graciously without feeling inferior

**James 2:1-9** warns against favoritism based on wealth. Christmas gift-giving shouldn't reinforce class distinctions or make anyone feel "less than" because of economic status. Douglas J. Moo analyzes this in *The Letter of James*.

### **When Family Traditions Conflict**

Married couples often come from families with different Christmas traditions, requiring negotiation:

**Communicate** clearly and early about expectations, traditions, budgets, and values. Don't assume your spouse's family does Christmas the same way yours did.

**Compromise** when possible. Maybe alternate years with different families' traditions, or blend elements from both backgrounds.

**Establish your own traditions** as a couple/nuclear family. You're not obligated to maintain every tradition from families of origin.

**Be gracious** with in-laws and extended family when their expectations differ from yours. Kindness and flexibility strengthen relationships; rigid demands harm them.

Navigating family systems is explored in Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

### **When Children Expect More Than You Can/Should Give**

Cultural pressure and peer comparison can fuel unrealistic childhood expectations:

**Set clear expectations early.** Don't let children develop wish lists exceeding what you'll provide, then disappoint them Christmas morning.

**Explain limitations age-appropriately.** Even young children can understand "we don't have money for that" or "that's not how our family does Christmas."

**Emphasize gratitude and contentment.** Counter-cultural as it is, children can learn to be thankful for what they receive rather than focused on what they didn't get. Paul's teaching on contentment (Philippians 4:11-13) applies to children too.

**Teach the joy of giving, not just receiving.** Children who participate in giving to others often become less focused on their own haul.

**Don't compete with other families.** Other children may get more, fancier, or trendier gifts. That's between those families and God; you're responsible for your own family's faithfulness.

### **Conclusion: The Grace of Giving**

The Magi's gifts to Jesus—gold, frankincense, and myrrh—provide pattern for Christian giving: costly, thoughtful, worshipful, prophetic. Their gifts acknowledged Jesus' identity and honored His worth. They gave because they recognized who He was.

Our Christmas giving should similarly flow from recognition of Jesus' identity and worth. We give because He first gave to us. We give generously because He gave extravagantly. We give to others because He gave Himself for us.

Christmas gift-giving, at its best, embodies grace—unmerited favor, free gift, generous love without calculation. When we give freely, joyfully, thoughtfully, sacrificially, we participate in the pattern God established in giving His Son. Miroslav Volf explores this in *Free of Charge*.

But gift-giving, like any good thing, can become distorted. When it becomes:

- Obligatory burden rather than joyful expression
- Transactional exchange rather than gracious giving
- Materialistic excess rather than thoughtful generosity
- Source of debt rather than expression of love

- Central focus rather than accompaniment to worship

...then it has departed from Christian principles and needs reformation.

May our Christmas giving truly honor Christ, bless recipients, embody grace, resist commercialism, and point beyond ourselves to the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16).

The greatest gift has already been given. Everything else is response—grateful, generous, grace-filled response to the Gift we could never deserve, never repay, never fully comprehend: God Himself, given to us in Jesus Christ. As John Henry Hopkins Jr. captured in the final verse of "We Three Kings": "Glorious now behold Him arise / King and God and Sacrifice / Alleluia, Alleluia / Sounds through the earth and skies." The gifts point to the Giver, and all our giving should do the same.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### The Historical Development of December 25

Among the most frequently debated aspects of Christmas celebration is the date itself—December 25. Skeptics often claim that Christians simply "stole" a pagan holiday, appropriating the winter solstice or Roman festivals for their own purposes. Others insist that December 25 represents an authentic historical date passed down from apostolic times. The truth, as often happens, is more complex and interesting than either extreme position suggests. Understanding how and why December 25 emerged as Christ's birthday reveals much about early Christian thought, the relationship between Christianity and pagan culture, and the development of the liturgical calendar.

#### **The Biblical Silence**

The New Testament provides no date for Jesus' birth. Neither Matthew's nor Luke's Gospel—the only two narrating the Nativity—offers any chronological specificity beyond general historical markers.

#### **What Scripture Does Tell Us**

**Luke 2:1-2** provides historical context: "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria."

This reference has generated debate among scholars regarding precise dating, as historical records of Quirinius's governorship and Augustan censuses don't align perfectly

with other Gospel chronology. Most scholars place Jesus' birth somewhere between 6 BC and 4 BC (the apparent contradiction—BC means "Before Christ"—results from 6th-century calculation errors by Dionysius Exiguus, who established the BC/AD dating system). The chronological problems of Quirinius's census are discussed extensively in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993), and Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1–9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994). The dating system established by Dionysius Exiguus and its errors are explored in E. G. Richards, *Mapping Time: The Calendar and Its History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

**Luke 2:8** mentions shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night" in nearby fields. Some have argued this detail suggests a season when shepherds would be outdoors with flocks—possibly spring through fall rather than winter. However, this argument isn't conclusive:

- The Judean climate is mild; winter temperatures rarely prohibitive
- Sheep near Bethlehem (especially temple flocks) may have been outdoors year-round
- The text doesn't specify that this was normal practice, only that they were out that particular night

The argument about shepherds and seasonal probability is analyzed in Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), and Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

**The Magi's visit** (Matthew 2) occurred sometime after Jesus' birth—perhaps weeks or months later, as suggested by Matthew 2:11 ("entering the house" rather than stable) and Herod's calculation (2:16). This provides no help with the birth date itself. The timing of the Magi's visit is discussed in W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988).

**John's Gospel** offers the enigmatic phrase "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14), with "dwelt" translating Greek *eskēnōsen*—literally "tabernacled" or "pitched his tent." Some early Christians saw this as connecting Jesus' birth to the Feast of Tabernacles (September/October), though this interpretation is speculative. Andreas J. Köstenberger discusses the "tabernacled" language in *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

**The epistles never mention Jesus' birth date.** Paul's references to the Incarnation (Philippians 2:6-8; Galatians 4:4; 2 Corinthians 8:9) focus on theological significance, not chronology.

This biblical silence is striking. Early Christians apparently didn't consider Jesus' birth date theologically significant enough to preserve or emphasize. The emphasis fell on His

death, resurrection, and return—events with clear theological and salvific importance. The relative unimportance of Jesus' birth date in early Christianity is discussed in Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

### **Early Christian Attitudes Toward Birthday Celebrations**

To understand why Christians didn't initially celebrate Jesus' birth, we must recognize early Christian attitudes toward birthdays generally.

#### **Jewish Background**

Jewish tradition didn't emphasize birthday celebrations. The Old Testament mentions birthdays only twice, both negative contexts:

- Pharaoh's birthday (Genesis 40:20-22)—occasion for the chief cupbearer's restoration and chief baker's execution
- Herod's birthday (implicitly, Mark 6:21-28)—when John the Baptist was beheaded

Jewish culture focused on commemorating deaths (particularly of righteous individuals) rather than births, as death marked completed life and entry into the World to Come. Birth was beginning; death was culmination. This Jewish pattern regarding deaths rather than births is explored in Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).

This pattern influenced early Christianity: Martyr feast days commemorated death dates (*dies natalis*—"birthday" into eternal life), not birth dates. The church celebrated when saints entered glory, not when they entered the world. The practice of commemorating martyrs' death dates is documented in Herbert Musurillo, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

#### **Greco-Roman Context**

In the Greco-Roman world, birthday celebrations were common—but often associated with practices Christians rejected:

**Emperor worship** included celebrating imperial birthdays with sacrifices, games, and festivals. Christians' refusal to participate marked them as subversive. The imperial cult and birthday celebrations are discussed in S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

**Astrological significance** attached to birthdays in pagan thought. One's birth date and time supposedly determined destiny through celestial influence. Christians rejected astrology as superstition and incompatible with divine sovereignty. Early Christian opposition to astrology is explored in Augustine Thompson, *Cities of God: The Religion of the Italian Communes, 1125-1325* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005).

**Pagan birthday parties** often included elements Christians found objectionable—excessive drinking, gluttony, sexual immorality, invocation of guardian spirits or household gods.

**Origen** (c. 185-254 AD), the influential early church father, explicitly criticized birthday celebrations as pagan practice. In his commentary on Leviticus (Homily 8 on Leviticus), he wrote that only sinners celebrate birthdays—the righteous don't. Origen's works are collected in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

This early Christian resistance to birthday celebrations helps explain why Jesus' birth date wasn't initially commemorated or even considered important to preserve.

### **The Emergence of December 25**

How, then, did December 25 emerge as Christmas? Several theories have been proposed, each with varying degrees of historical support.

#### **Theory 1: Calculation from the Incarnation/Conception**

One early Christian approach calculated Jesus' birth date from the date of His conception (Annunciation) or death, based on theological reasoning about the Incarnation's timing.

The logic ran:

Jewish tradition held that great prophets died on the same date they were born or conceived—a belief in divine symmetry, that God completes the righteous on the anniversary of their beginning. This tradition is discussed in connection with early Christian paschal calculations in Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*.

Applying this to Jesus: If Jesus died on the date He was conceived (at the Annunciation, when "the Word became flesh"), one could calculate His birth by adding nine months.

Different paschal traditions produced different results:

**In the Western/Latin tradition:** Jesus died on March 25 (one calculation of the crucifixion date) → conception on March 25 → birth nine months later = December 25

**In the Eastern/Greek tradition:** Jesus died on April 6 → conception on April 6 → birth nine months later = January 6 (which became the Eastern celebration of both Epiphany and Nativity initially)

Evidence for this calculation method:

**Tertullian** (c. 200 AD) mentions the calculation, though not specifically connecting it to December 25. Tertullian's chronological discussions are found in his *Against the Jews* and *Against Marcion*, collected in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

**Augustine** (354-430 AD) refers to this tradition, suggesting it was established by his time. Augustine discusses this in *On the Trinity* (4.5) and various sermons, as found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 3 (ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

**The treatise "De solstiis"** (attributed to John Chrysostom but possibly later, c. 400 AD) explicitly uses this calculation method to arrive at December 25. This text is discussed in Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

### **Strengths of this theory:**

**Internal Christian logic:** The date emerges from Christian theological reasoning rather than borrowing from pagans. This answers the "stolen holiday" criticism.

**Early attestation:** References to this calculation method appear in 3rd-4th century Christian sources.

**Explains both December 25 and January 6:** The Western (March 25) and Eastern (April 6) paschal traditions produced the two major early Nativity dates.

Thomas J. Talley strongly advocates for this calculation hypothesis in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, arguing it has better historical support than pagan appropriation theories.

### **Weaknesses of this theory:**

**The underlying premise is questionable:** The belief that prophets die on their conception date isn't clearly biblical and seems more numerological than historical.

**The crucifixion date itself is uncertain:** Whether Jesus died on March 25 or April 6 (or another date) remains debated. Building from uncertain date produces uncertain conclusion. The debate over crucifixion dating is explored in Colin J. Humphreys, *The Mystery of the Last Supper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

**Circular reasoning potential:** Did Christians calculate December 25 from March 25, or did they calculate March 25 from December 25? The causation direction isn't entirely clear.

**May be post-facto rationalization:** Even if Christians used this calculation by the 4th century, it may have been justifying an already-established date rather than originally determining it.

## **Theory 2: Sol Invictus and Imperial Sun Worship**

The most common skeptical explanation is that Christians appropriated the pagan festival of Sol Invictus ("Unconquered Sun") celebrated on December 25.

### **The historical background:**

**Emperor Aurelian** (270-275 AD) established an official cult of Sol Invictus, building a temple dedicated to the sun god and designating December 25 as *Dies Natalis Solis*

*Invicti* ("Birthday of the Unconquered Sun")—celebrating the winter solstice and the sun's "rebirth" as days begin lengthening. The cult of Sol Invictus under Aurelian is documented in Steven E. Hijmans, *Sol: The Sun in the Religion of Ancient Rome* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009).

This festival was part of Aurelian's attempt to unify the Roman Empire under a common religious cult that could transcend regional and ethnic differences. Sun worship had broad appeal across the empire. Aurelian's religious policy is explored in Alaric Watson, *Aurelian and the Third Century* (London: Routledge, 1999).

December 25 aligned with (or slightly after) the winter solstice, which in the Julian calendar fell around December 25. The solstice marked the shortest day and beginning of the sun's ascent—its "victory" over darkness.

### **The theory proposes:**

Christians deliberately chose December 25 to compete with or replace Sol Invictus, appropriating a popular pagan festival and Christianizing it.

**Strategic reasoning:** Rather than fighting the festival, Christians transformed it—celebrating the birth of the "Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4:2) on the birthday of the pagan sun god.

### **Evidence for this theory:**

**Chronological proximity:** Sol Invictus was established in 274 AD; clear evidence for Christian December 25 Christmas appears in early 4th century. The timing fits appropriation theory.

**Thematic parallels:** Christ as "light of the world" (John 8:12), "the sunrise from on high" (Luke 1:78), "the Sun of Righteousness" (Malachi 4:2)—solar imagery in Christian theology made December 25 appropriation natural.

**Later Christian sources acknowledge the connection.** Some early Christian writers explicitly contrast Christ (the true Sun) with Sol Invictus (false sun), suggesting awareness of the pagan festival. For instance, a Syrian Christian text from the 4th century states: "It was a custom of the pagans to celebrate on the same 25 December the birthday of the Sun, at which they kindled lights in token of festivity. In these solemnities and revelries the Christians also took part. Accordingly when the doctors of the Church perceived that the Christians had a leaning to this festival, they took counsel and resolved that the true Nativity should be solemnised on that day."

**The strategy succeeded:** December 25 Christmas eventually supplanted Sol Invictus worship as Christianity became dominant.

This appropriation theory has been popular in scholarship, appearing in works like J. A. R. Pimlott, *The Englishman's Christmas: A Social History* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), and influencing popular understanding.

### **Weaknesses of this theory:**

**Uncertain causation direction:** Did Christianity borrow from Sol Invictus, or did Sol Invictus (established 274) respond to an already-emerging Christian December 25 tradition? If Christians were already commemorating Incarnation around December 25 in the 3rd century (as some evidence suggests), Aurelian may have been the borrower, not Christians. Steven Hijmans argues in *Sol: The Sun in the Religion of Ancient Rome* that the direction of influence may have been the reverse of what is commonly assumed.

**Earlier possible Christian observance:** Some scholars argue evidence suggests Christians may have celebrated December 25 even before Aurelian's Sol Invictus cult—making appropriation theory chronologically problematic. Susan K. Roll explores this possibility in *Toward the Origins of Christmas*.

**Overemphasizes conflict:** The appropriation theory assumes primarily antagonistic relationship—Christians strategically "stealing" pagan dates. But Christians may have had internal theological reasons for December 25, with pagan festival parallels being coincidental or secondary.

**Assumes Christian cynicism:** The theory sometimes portrays Christians as primarily politically motivated rather than theologically motivated—choosing dates for strategic advantage rather than believing them to be historically or symbolically true.

### **Theory 3: Connection to Saturnalia**

Another pagan festival theory connects Christmas to Saturnalia, the Roman winter festival honoring Saturn (god of agriculture and time).

**Saturnalia ran December 17-23** (sometimes extended through December 25) and was characterized by:

- Role reversals (masters serving slaves temporarily)
- Gift-giving
- Feasting and drinking
- Decorated homes with evergreens
- General merrymaking and relaxation of social norms

The characteristics of Saturnalia are described in ancient sources, particularly Macrobius, *Saturnalia* (trans. Percival Vaughan Davies, New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), and discussed in modern scholarship by Bonnie Blackburn and Leofranc Holford-Strevens, *The Oxford Companion to the Year* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

**The theory suggests** Christians adopted Saturnalia's date and some customs, Christianizing them for December 25 celebration.

### **Evidence for this theory:**

**Saturnalia's popularity:** It was Rome's most beloved festival, deeply embedded in Roman culture. Christians living in Roman society would have been surrounded by Saturnalia celebrations.

**Chronological overlap:** Saturnalia's late December timing overlaps with Christmas and its season.

**Similar customs:** Gift-giving, feasting, decorated homes—elements of both Saturnalia and later Christmas celebrations.

**Practical mission strategy:** Rather than demanding Christians abstain from all winter festivity (virtually impossible in Roman society), the church provided Christian alternative on nearby date.

#### **Weaknesses of this theory:**

**Date mismatch:** Saturnalia ended December 23; Christmas is December 25. The two-day gap is significant.

**Different character:** Saturnalia was characterized by role reversal, misrule, and social chaos—elements absent from Christian Christmas celebration. The similarities are superficial.

**Custom adoption came later:** Most "Saturnalia-like" Christmas customs (extensive gift-giving, elaborate feasting, decorated homes) developed centuries after December 25 was established as Christmas, suggesting these customs aren't what drove the date choice. William B. Waits documents in *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University Press, 1993) how many Christmas customs evolved much later.

**Overemphasizes cultural borrowing:** Like the Sol Invictus theory, this assumes Christian practice is primarily reactive—borrowing from paganism—rather than having independent theological development.

### **Theory 4: Jewish Festival Connections**

Some scholars propose connections between Jesus' birth and Jewish festivals, particularly Hanukkah or Tabernacles.

**Hanukkah** (Festival of Lights, usually falling in late December) celebrates the Maccabean rededication of the temple. Some early Christians may have seen theological appropriateness in celebrating the true Temple's arrival (Jesus, John 2:19-21) during Hanukkah. The theological connection between Jesus and the Temple is explored in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

**Tabernacles** (Sukkot, September/October) commemorates Israel's wilderness wandering. John 1:14's "dwelt (*eskēnōsen*, 'tabernacled') among us" may suggest Jesus' birth during Tabernacles, making Him the fulfillment of the festival's wilderness-wandering

and divine-presence themes. This connection is explored in Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John (I-XII)* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966).

These theories have limited historical support but demonstrate that Jewish festival connections (not just pagan ones) were considered by early Christians.

### **The Historical Evidence for December 25**

What do we actually know from historical sources about December 25's emergence?

#### **Early References**

**The earliest clear reference to December 25** as Jesus' birth date appears in the *Chronography of 354*, a Roman almanac compiled by Furius Dionysius Filocalus. It lists December 25, 336 AD as the date when Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea. This document is analyzed in Michele Renee Salzman, *On Roman Time: The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

This 336 AD reference doesn't mean December 25 originated in 336, only that we have documentary evidence by that date. The tradition may be older.

**Hippolytus of Rome** (c. 170-235 AD) in his *Commentary on Daniel* (c. 204 AD) may reference December 25 as Christ's birth, though the relevant passage's text is disputed and may be a later interpolation. The textual problems with Hippolytus are discussed in Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*.

**Sextus Julius Africanus** (c. 160-240 AD) in his *Chronographiai* (c. 221 AD) calculated March 25 as the Annunciation, which would place Jesus' birth on December 25—though whether Africanus made this connection explicitly is unclear. Julius Africanus's chronological work is discussed in Martin Wallraff, *Iulius Africanus Chronographiae: The Extant Fragments* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007).

These early references, even if authentic, don't tell us why December 25 was chosen—whether through calculation, appropriation, or other reasoning.

### **Spread of the December 25 Tradition**

By the late 4th century, December 25 was widely observed in the Western church:

**John Chrysostom** (c. 349-407) in Antioch delivered a Christmas sermon in 386, indicating the festival's establishment in the East by that time. This sermon is found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 9 (ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

**Gregory of Nazianzus** (329-390) in Constantinople also preached Christmas sermons. His orations are collected in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 7 (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

**Augustine** (354-430) in North Africa observed December 25 Christmas, as evidenced in his sermons (*The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 6).

By the 5th century, December 25 was nearly universal in the Christian world (with the Eastern church also celebrating Epiphany on January 6, sometimes as a second Nativity feast). The spread of Christmas is documented in Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

This rapid spread suggests December 25 met a felt need in the church—providing a festival celebrating the Incarnation to balance the emphasis on Passion/Resurrection (Easter).

### **Early Christian Theological Rationale for December 25**

Whatever the date's origin, early Christians developed theological justifications for its appropriateness:

#### **Light in Darkness**

December 25, near the winter solstice, is the darkest time of year in the Northern Hemisphere. Days are shortest; nights longest.

Celebrating Christ's birth at this time proclaims that the Light of the World enters our deepest darkness. When the world is darkest, Christ dawns.

This symbolism resonated with biblical imagery:

- "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isaiah 9:2)
- "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (John 1:5)
- "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12)

**Ambrose of Milan** (340-397) wrote: "Christ is our new Sun." This appears in his *Exameron* (4.1.1), found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, vol. 10 (ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

**Augustine** connected December 25 to the sun's turning point, seeing it as fitting that the "Sun of Righteousness" should be born when the physical sun begins its ascent. This appears in his *Sermon 190* on the Nativity.

This light-darkness symbolism provided powerful theological rationale regardless of whether it originally motivated the date choice. The theological use of light imagery is explored in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

### **The True Sun**

If Sol Invictus was celebrated December 25, Christians explicitly contrasted Christ (the true, unconquered Sun) with the pagan sun god (false, created light).

This wasn't mere appropriation but theological claim: Christ is the reality of which pagan sun worship is a distortion. Pagans worship the creature (sun); Christians worship the Creator who made the sun and entered creation as its Light.

**Cyprian** (c. 200-258) called Christ "the true Sun" in *De dominica oratione* (The Lord's Prayer), found in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5 (ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

This contrast strategy appears repeatedly in early Christian apologetics—showing how Christian truth fulfills or supersedes pagan religion. The apologetic strategy is explored in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971).

### **New Creation**

December 25, as calculated new year in some ancient calendars, represented the world's beginning or renewal.

Celebrating Christ's birth on this date proclaimed Him as the new creation's beginning—the Second Adam, the firstborn of the new humanity (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:45-49; Colossians 1:15-18).

This theological symbolism connected Incarnation to creation and new creation, showing Christ as Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. The new creation theme is explored in G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

### **The December 25 Debate: Contemporary Perspectives**

Modern Christians hold various views about December 25's significance and propriety:

#### **Position 1: Historical Accuracy Is Irrelevant**

Many Christians maintain that December 25's historical accuracy doesn't matter—the date serves as agreed-upon occasion for celebrating a historical reality (Christ's birth), regardless of whether it's the actual birth date.

**Analogy:** We celebrate national holidays (like Presidents' Day) on convenient dates that may not match actual historical dates. The commemoration matters more than precise chronological accuracy.

**Theological focus:** What matters is the Incarnation's reality, not its date. We celebrate that "the Word became flesh," not primarily when it happened.

This view's strength: It sidesteps unresolvable historical debates, focusing on theology rather than chronology. This perspective is articulated in Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-*

*Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

Potential weakness: It may seem to concede too much to skeptics, appearing to accept that Christmas has no historical foundation.

### **Position 2: December 25 Likely Isn't Jesus' Actual Birth Date**

Many scholars—including conservative Christian scholars—conclude that December 25 probably isn't Jesus' actual birth date, but this doesn't invalidate Christmas celebration.

#### **Reasoning:**

- Biblical silence suggests date wasn't considered important by earliest Christians
- Multiple competing theories for December 25's origin, none conclusive
- Circumstantial evidence (shepherds in fields) suggests spring or fall more likely than winter
- Early church's initial disinterest in birthday celebrations suggests date wasn't preserved

**Implication:** Christmas is a feast commemorating the Incarnation, not necessarily its precise anniversary. This is liturgically acceptable—the church has freedom to designate feast days.

This view's strength: It's historically honest while maintaining Christmas's validity as Christian observance. This position is articulated in Craig L. Blomberg, *Jesus and the Gospels: An Introduction and Survey* (2nd ed., Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009).

Potential concern: Some believers find this conclusion troubling, fearing it undermines Christmas's legitimacy.

### **Position 3: December 25 May Actually Be Accurate**

Some argue the calculation theory (from March 25 Annunciation) may preserve genuine tradition, making December 25 plausibly accurate.

#### **Reasoning:**

- Early Christians may have preserved oral tradition about Jesus' birth timing
- The calculation method, while seemingly symbolic, may encode actual historical memory
- Dismissing December 25 as merely pagan borrowing may be anachronistic skepticism

This view's strength: It takes seriously the possibility that early Christians had better historical information than we credit them with. Thomas J. Talley advocates this view in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*.

Potential weakness: It may be motivated more by desire to defend December 25 than by historical evidence, which remains inconclusive.

#### **Position 4: December 25 Is Problematic Due to Pagan Origins**

Some Christians—particularly in traditions emphasizing biblical warrant for worship practices—reject Christmas celebration precisely because December 25's connection to pagan festivals.

##### **Reasoning:**

- Scripture prohibits adopting pagan worship practices (Deuteronomy 12:30-31)
- December 25's pagan associations compromise Christian witness
- The church shouldn't "baptize" pagan festivals but maintain distinctiveness
- Since Scripture doesn't command celebrating Jesus' birth, doing so (especially on pagan festival date) exceeds biblical authority

This view appears in:

- Puritan tradition (which opposed Christmas)
- Some Reformed and Presbyterian churches
- Churches of Christ and similar restoration movements
- Some fundamentalist and separatist Baptist churches

The Puritan opposition to Christmas is documented in Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996). The regulative principle of worship underlying this position is explained in R. Scott Clark, *Recovering the Reformed Confession: Our Theology, Piety, and Practice* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008).

This view's strength: It takes seriously concerns about syncretism and biblical authority.

Potential weakness: It may create unnecessary scruples where Scripture doesn't clearly prohibit, and may miss how gospel always engages (not merely rejects) culture. The principle of cultural engagement is explored in D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

#### **Theological Principles for Evaluating December 25**

Rather than definitively settling the historical question (which may be impossible given available evidence), we can identify theological principles for Christians to consider:

##### **Christian Liberty**

**Romans 14:5-6:** "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord."

Paul's principle regarding disputable matters applies to Christmas debates. Those who celebrate December 25 do so "to the Lord"; those who don't should not judge those who do, and vice versa. John R. W. Stott analyzes this passage in *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

This doesn't mean "anything goes," but it does mean that in areas where Scripture doesn't give explicit command, Christians have freedom—and should extend freedom to others.

### **Transformation vs. Rejection**

Throughout history, Christianity has both transformed cultural elements and rejected others. The key is discernment:

#### **Transformation is appropriate when:**

- The practice itself isn't inherently sinful
- Christian meaning can be clearly established
- The transformation serves evangelistic or formative purpose
- Participants understand the Christian meaning, not pagan associations

#### **Rejection is necessary when:**

- The practice directly involves worship of false gods
- Christian meaning cannot overcome pagan associations
- Participation constitutes compromise with idolatry
- The practice promotes immorality or falsehood

December 25 Christmas appears to be a case where transformation occurred (or was attempted). Whether this was legitimate depends partly on one's theology of culture and Christian engagement with surrounding society. H. Richard Niebuhr explores different models of Christ and culture in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), and D. A. Carson provides contemporary analysis in *Christ and Culture Revisited*.

### **Mission and Contextualization**

**Paul's missionary principle**—"I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:22)—suggests strategic flexibility in cultural engagement.

If early Christians did choose December 25 to compete with or replace pagan festivals, this wasn't necessarily compromise but missionary strategy—meeting people where they

are, providing Christian alternative to pagan celebration. The missiological principle of contextualization is explored in David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989).

However, contextualization has limits. The gospel always maintains distinctiveness even while engaging culture. The question is whether December 25 Christmas maintains clear Christian identity or compromises it.

### **Focus on the Reality, Not the Date**

Ultimately, Christmas celebrates a historical and theological reality: the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. This reality is attested in Scripture, affirmed in the creeds, and central to Christian faith.

Whether this occurred on December 25, April 6, September 15, or another date doesn't change the reality or its significance.

The date functions as occasion for celebrating the reality. December 25 serves the church as agreed-upon time to focus on the Incarnation, just as Easter serves as time to focus on the Resurrection (even though we don't know the exact date of Jesus' resurrection either). The function of the liturgical calendar is explored in Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

If celebrating December 25 helps Christians:

- Contemplate the Incarnation's wonder
- Worship Christ for becoming human
- Proclaim the gospel
- Form families in Christian faith
- Resist cultural secularism

...then it serves valuable purpose regardless of historical origin debates. The formative function of liturgical celebration is discussed in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

### **Conclusion: Living with Uncertainty and Confidence**

We likely will never know with certainty when Jesus was born. The New Testament authors didn't consider the date important enough to record. Early Christians didn't initially celebrate it. The date of December 25 emerged through complex historical processes we can only partially reconstruct.

This uncertainty need not trouble us. What matters most isn't the date but the event—not when Christ was born but that He was born. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is the glorious, transformative truth we celebrate.

December 25 serves as the church's designated time for this celebration. Whether it originated through theological calculation, missionary appropriation of pagan festivals, or other means, it has functioned for nearly 1,700 years as the date when Christians worldwide focus on the Incarnation.

We can celebrate Christmas with confidence—not confidence that December 25 is Jesus' actual birth date (we don't know), but confidence in the Incarnation itself, in the theological truth that "when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman" (Galatians 4:4).

The Light of the World came into our darkness. The exact date matters less than the reality. December 25, whatever its origin, provides annual opportunity to celebrate, proclaim, and contemplate this central Christian truth—God became human to save us.

That is reason enough to celebrate, regardless of calendrical debates. As Thomas F. Torrance writes in *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), the Incarnation represents God's decisive entry into human time and history, sanctifying all of time through Christ's presence. Whether we celebrate this on December 25 or another date, we celebrate the reality that changed history and eternity—God with us, Emmanuel.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### The Names and Titles of the Christ Child

Among the most theologically rich aspects of the Christmas story are the many names and titles given to the child born in Bethlehem. From the Old Testament prophecies that anticipated His coming to the New Testament accounts of His birth, Jesus is identified by a remarkable array of names, each revealing essential truths about His identity, nature, and mission. Understanding these names deepens our comprehension of who Christ is and why His birth matters. The multiplicity of names isn't redundant but revelatory—each title illuminating different facets of the Incarnation's wonder and the salvation it accomplishes.

#### **The Significance of Names in Biblical Culture**

Before examining Christ's specific names and titles, we must understand how names functioned in biblical culture and theology.

#### **Names as Identity and Destiny**

In ancient Hebrew thought, names weren't merely labels for convenience but expressed essence, character, and often destiny. A person's name revealed something fundamental about their identity or calling. This is evident throughout Scripture in multiple ways:

**Names given at birth often reflected circumstances or hopes.** Isaac ("he laughs") commemorated Sarah's laughter at God's promise (Genesis 21:6). Jacob ("he grasps the heel" or "supplanter") described his birth grasping Esau's heel and foreshadowed his character (Genesis 25:26). The cultural significance of naming in ancient Israel is explored in Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinsemitischen Namengebung* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928), and more accessibly in James Barr, "The Symbolism of Names in the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 52 (1969-70).

**Name changes marked transformation or divine calling.** Abram became Abraham ("father of many nations") when God established His covenant (Genesis 17:5). Jacob became Israel ("he struggles with God") after wrestling with God (Genesis 32:28). Simon became Peter ("rock") when Jesus called him (Matthew 16:18). These name changes signified new identity and mission, as discussed in Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

**Knowing someone's name implied relationship and authority.** When God revealed His name to Moses (Exodus 3:14), He was entering covenant relationship and granting Moses authority to speak on His behalf. Conversely, demons' fear when Jesus used their names (Mark 5:9) demonstrated His authority over them. The theology of divine naming is explored in Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (trans. J. A. Baker, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967).

**Names could express worship and theology.** Many Hebrew names incorporated the divine name (Yahweh/Jehovah), functioning as compressed theological statements. Elijah ("my God is Yahweh"), Isaiah ("Yahweh is salvation"), and Jeremiah ("Yahweh exalts") all proclaimed truth about God through their names.

This cultural background illuminates why Jesus receives so many names—each revealing different aspects of His identity and accomplishing different theological purposes. The multiplicity isn't confusion but comprehensive revelation.

## **The Power of Naming**

Scripture presents naming as an act carrying authority and significance:

**Adam naming the animals** (Genesis 2:19-20) demonstrated his God-given authority over creation. The act of naming established relationship and hierarchy, as discussed in Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (trans. David G. Preston, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984).

**Parents naming children** exercised authority and expressed hopes for the child's future (Luke 1:59-63—the dispute over naming John the Baptist).

**God naming or renaming people** demonstrated His ultimate authority and His purposes for their lives. The theological significance of divine renaming is explored in Richard S. Hess, "Naming," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

When angels announce Jesus' name before His birth (Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:31), this represents divine authority and predetermined purpose. The child's identity and mission are established by God Himself, not chosen by human parents, though Joseph and Mary obediently fulfill the naming command.

### **Old Testament Names and Prophecies**

The Old Testament anticipated the Messiah through numerous prophetic names and titles, many directly applied to Jesus in the New Testament.

#### **Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)**

**"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel"** (Isaiah 7:14).

**Meaning:** Immanuel (Hebrew *'immānū 'ēl*) means "God with us"—a name that encapsulates the Incarnation's central mystery. God is not distant but present; not abstract but embodied; not merely watching but dwelling among His people.

**Original context:** Isaiah spoke these words to King Ahaz of Judah during a political crisis (circa 735 BC). The northern kingdom of Israel and Syria threatened Jerusalem, and Ahaz contemplated an alliance with Assyria. Isaiah urged trust in God rather than political machinations, offering this sign as assurance of God's presence and protection. The historical context is analyzed in J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

**Interpretive debates:** Scholars debate whether Isaiah's prophecy had an immediate, historical fulfillment (perhaps in Isaiah's own family or Ahaz's household) or was exclusively messianic. The word *'almāh* (translated "virgin") typically means "young woman" and doesn't necessarily imply virginity in every context, leading to debates about the prophecy's original sense. However, the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, c. 3rd-2nd century BC) rendered *'almāh* as *parthenos* ("virgin"), and Matthew follows this interpretation. The scholarly debate is surveyed in John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

**Matthew's application:** Matthew 1:23 explicitly applies Isaiah 7:14 to Jesus: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). Matthew sees the prophecy's ultimate fulfillment in Christ's virgin birth—the literal, complete realization of "God with us." The virgin birth isn't merely God acting on behalf of His people but God becoming one of His people.

**Theological significance:** Immanuel declares the Incarnation's stunning claim—in Jesus, God Himself dwells among humanity. This isn't divine visitation (God appearing

temporarily) or inspiration (God working through a human) but union—God and humanity joined in one person. As Raymond E. Brown notes in *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated ed., New York: Doubleday, 1993), Matthew's use of Immanuel forms an inclusio with Jesus' final promise: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus' entire ministry, from conception to ascension and beyond, embodies "God with us."

**Christmas significance:** At Christmas, we celebrate not merely God's power demonstrated on our behalf but His presence shared with us. The infinite, transcendent, holy God condescends to enter our world, take our nature, experience our life. Immanuel is the gospel in two words.

### **Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6)**

**"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).**

This verse, frequently read at Christmas and set to music in Handel's *Messiah*, contains a remarkable string of titles, each theologically loaded.

**Historical context:** Like Isaiah 7:14, this prophecy emerged during the Syro-Ephraimite crisis. Isaiah 9:1-7 promises hope despite judgment—light dawning in darkness, joy replacing sorrow, peace following oppression. The "child born" would establish David's throne forever. The historical and literary context is explored in Willem A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

#### **The four titles:**

**1. Wonderful Counselor (*pele' yō'ēš*):** More than "wonderful" in our casual sense, *pele'* indicates something miraculous, surpassing human capacity—the word used for God's mighty acts in Exodus. *Yō'ēš* is "counselor" or "advisor"—one who provides wise guidance. Together: This child will possess divine wisdom, giving counsel that is supernatural in origin and effectiveness. He won't merely be wise; His wisdom will be miraculous. As Gordon J. Wenham notes in *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), this wisdom is practical and effective, not merely theoretical.

Christian interpretation sees Jesus as the embodiment of divine wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:3—"in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge"). His teaching astonished listeners (Matthew 7:28-29), He perfectly discerned hearts and situations (John 2:24-25), and He is the Logos—God's perfect self-expression (John 1:1).

**2. Mighty God (*'ēl gibbōr*):** This title is staggering. *'El* is "God," one of the primary Hebrew words for deity. *Gibbōr* is "mighty" or "warrior"—God appearing in strength. This exact phrase appears in Isaiah 10:21 referring to Yahweh Himself. Isaiah attributes full deity to

the coming child—not a god-like figure, not divine by courtesy, but 'ēl, God in the full sense.

This is one of the Old Testament's clearest affirmations of the Messiah's deity. The child born in history will be the Mighty God entering history. As Motyer argues in *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, Isaiah could not more clearly affirm the coming Messiah's divine nature without explicitly using the covenant name Yahweh.

Christian theology sees Isaiah 9:6's "Mighty God" fulfilled in Jesus, who claimed divine prerogatives (forgiving sins, receiving worship, claiming equality with the Father), worked divine miracles, rose from death, and is worshiped as God. The doctrine of the Incarnation—God becoming human without ceasing to be God—is implicit in this title. The Christological implications are explored in Donald Macleod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

**3. Everlasting Father ('ăbî 'ad):** Literally "Father of Eternity" or "Eternal Father." This title has caused interpretive difficulties for Trinitarian theology, since Christian doctrine distinguishes between the Father and the Son. How can the Son be called "Father"?

Possible interpretations: (1) "Father" here means not "the First Person of the Trinity" but "father" in the sense of protector, provider, or originator—as kings were called "fathers" to their people (Isaiah 22:21). The Messiah will be an eternal father-figure to His people, caring for them perpetually. (2) "Everlasting Father" emphasizes the Messiah's eternal nature and His tender, paternal care. (3) In the economy of salvation, the Son mediates the Father's love, making the Father's care tangible—thus functionally becoming the Father's presence to us.

Regardless of precise nuance, the title emphasizes perpetual care and eternal existence. The Messiah isn't temporary or transient but eternal—existing forever and caring for His people eternally. This is explored in John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*.

**4. Prince of Peace (śar šālōm):** Śar means "prince," "ruler," or "commander." Śālōm is "peace"—not merely absence of conflict but comprehensive wellbeing, wholeness, harmony, prosperity, right relationship with God and others. This prince will establish, maintain, and be characterized by śālōm.

Isaiah 9:7 elaborates: "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore."

Jesus is the Prince of Peace who reconciles humanity to God (Romans 5:1; Ephesians 2:14-17—"He himself is our peace"), establishes peace in individual hearts (John 14:27; Philippians 4:7), and will ultimately bring cosmic peace when He returns (Revelation 21:1-4). The theological breadth of biblical *shalom* is explored in Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1987).

**Theological synthesis:** These four titles together proclaim that the promised child will possess:

- Supernatural wisdom (Wonderful Counselor)
- Full deity (Mighty God)
- Eternal existence and paternal care (Everlasting Father)
- Peace-establishing rule (Prince of Peace)

No merely human king could fulfill these descriptions. Isaiah points beyond any historical Israelite monarch to the Messiah-King who is Himself divine—the incarnate God who will rule with perfect wisdom and establish eternal peace. As Hans Urs von Balthasar notes in *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 6 (trans. Brian McNeil and Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), these titles reveal both the paradox and the glory of the Incarnation.

### **The Branch (Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5-6; Zechariah 3:8; 6:12)**

Multiple prophets use "Branch" (*ṣemah*) as a messianic title:

**Isaiah 11:1:** "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit."

After the Davidic monarchy's collapse (the "stump" of Jesse's tree, cut down in judgment), a new shoot will spring up—the Messiah from David's line who will restore the kingdom. The imagery of new life from apparent death foreshadows both Jesus' resurrection and His bringing life from the deadness of sin. The Branch typology is explored in Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

**Jeremiah 23:5-6:** "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

This "righteous Branch" will provide the righteousness His people lack—not merely commanding righteousness but being their righteousness. Paul applies this concept to Christ in 1 Corinthians 1:30 and 2 Corinthians 5:21, as discussed in Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001).

**Zechariah 3:8; 6:12:** The post-exilic prophet Zechariah repeatedly uses "Branch" for the coming Messiah who will build the Lord's temple and bear royal honor.

**New Testament application:** While "Branch" isn't explicitly applied to Jesus in the Christmas narratives, the genealogies (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) establish His Davidic descent—He is the Branch from Jesse's line. The title emphasizes both continuity

(He fulfills God's promises to David) and new life (He brings new creation, resurrection, regeneration).

### **The Root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:10)**

"In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious" (Isaiah 11:10).

Paradoxically, the Messiah is both the Branch (descendant) and the Root (source) of Jesse. This apparent contradiction points to Christ's dual nature: He is David's son (human descendant) and David's Lord (divine source). Jesus Himself highlights this paradox in Matthew 22:41-46, asking how the Messiah can be both David's son and David's Lord—a question only the Incarnation answers. Paul explicitly applies "root of Jesse" to Christ in Romans 15:12. The paradox of root and branch is analyzed in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

### **Seed of the Woman (Genesis 3:15)**

"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15).

This first gospel promise (*Protoevangelium*) immediately follows the fall. God promises that the woman's "seed" (zera', "offspring" or "descendant") will crush the serpent's head, though suffering injury in the process.

**Messianic interpretation:** Christian tradition has long seen this as the first messianic prophecy. The "seed of the woman" is Christ, who through His death and resurrection crushes Satan's power (Colossians 2:15; Hebrews 2:14; 1 John 3:8). The unusual phrase "seed of the woman" (normally seed is traced through fathers) has been seen as foreshadowing the virgin birth—Jesus has no human father but is truly the woman's seed. This interpretation is ancient, appearing in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (5.21.1), and is explored in T. Desmond Alexander, "Messianic Ideology in Genesis," in *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite, Richard S. Hess, and Gordon J. Wenham, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995).

**Christmas significance:** Jesus' birth is the first step in fulfilling Genesis 3:15—the promised deliverer enters the world to undo the serpent's work, suffering and dying (bruised heel) to destroy Satan's power (crushed head).

### **Son of David**

Throughout the Old Testament, God promises the Messiah will descend from David (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 89:3-4; Isaiah 9:7; Jeremiah 23:5).

**New Testament fulfillment:** Both Gospel genealogies establish Jesus' Davidic lineage (Matthew 1:1, 6, 17; Luke 3:31). He's born in "the city of David" (Luke 2:4, 11). Angels and others call Him "Son of David" (Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9, 15;

Mark 10:47-48; Luke 18:38-39). Paul identifies Him as "descended from David according to the flesh" (Romans 1:3).

**Theological significance:** "Son of David" proclaims Jesus as the promised Messianic King who fulfills God's covenant with David. He is the legitimate heir to David's throne who will reign forever (Luke 1:32-33). The Davidic covenant and its Christological fulfillment are explored in Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

### **New Testament Names and Titles**

The New Testament applies numerous names and titles to Jesus, many appearing in or closely connected to the nativity narratives.

#### **Jesus (Matthew 1:21; Luke 1:31; 2:21)**

**"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:21).

**Etymology:** "Jesus" is the Greek form (*Iēsous*) of the Hebrew name *Yeshua* or *Joshua*, meaning "Yahweh saves" or "Yahweh is salvation." The name combines the divine name with the concept of salvation—proclaiming both who saves (Yahweh) and what He does (saves).

**Common name:** Jesus/Joshua was a common Jewish name in the first century (we encounter several other Jesuses in the New Testament and historical records). This ordinariness is itself significant—God entered humanity not with an exotic, otherworldly name but with a name so common that disambiguation was needed ("Jesus of Nazareth," "Jesus son of Joseph"). The frequency of the name is documented in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

**Programmatic name:** Matthew 1:21 makes clear that Jesus' name isn't incidental but programmatic—"you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." The name announces His mission. He is named for what He will do: save. And not merely political salvation or physical deliverance but salvation "from their sins"—addressing humanity's deepest need.

**Fulfillment of the name:** Jesus lives up to His name. He brings salvation through His life, death, and resurrection. Acts 4:12 declares: "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." The name Jesus is the name of salvation. The theology of Jesus' name is explored in I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1976).

**Prayer and worship:** The early church invoked Jesus' name in prayer, baptism, exorcism, and healing (Acts 2:38; 3:6; 4:10; 16:18; 19:13; Romans 10:13; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Philippians 2:10). The name itself carries authority and power because it is the name of the one who has "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Matthew 28:18).

## Christ (Matthew 1:16, 18; Luke 2:11)

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Luke 2:11).

**Etymology:** "Christ" is the Greek translation (*Christos*) of the Hebrew *Māšîah* (Messiah), meaning "anointed one." In Israel, prophets, priests, and kings were anointed with oil as a sign of God's selection and empowerment for their roles (1 Samuel 16:13; 1 Kings 19:16; Exodus 29:7).

**Messianic expectation:** By Jesus' time, "the Messiah" had become a technical term for the promised deliverer who would restore Israel, defeat enemies, establish God's kingdom, and reign on David's throne forever. Messianic expectations were diverse, as documented in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).

**Jesus as the Messiah:** The New Testament identifies Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah, though He redefines messianic expectations. He is prophet (teaching and revealing God), priest (mediating between God and humanity, offering Himself as sacrifice), and king (ruling God's kingdom)—the Anointed One who perfectly fulfills all three anointed offices. The threefold office of Christ is explored in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (2.15), and Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3, *Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

**From title to name:** "Christ" began as a title ("Jesus is the Christ") but became so associated with Jesus that it functioned as a proper name ("Jesus Christ"), appearing thousands of times in the New Testament. The transformation from title to name reflects the early church's settled conviction: Jesus uniquely and definitively is the Messiah.

**Christmas significance:** Luke 2:11's "Christ the Lord" proclaims that the baby in the manger is the promised Messianic King. This helpless infant is the Anointed One who will accomplish salvation, establish God's kingdom, and reign forever.

## Lord (Luke 2:11; Philippians 2:11)

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Luke 2:11).

**Background:** *Kyrios* ("Lord") had multiple uses in Greek: polite address (equivalent to "sir"), master/owner, or divine title. The Septuagint used *kyrios* to translate the divine name Yahweh, making it heavily freighted theologically.

**Applied to Jesus:** The New Testament applies "Lord" to Jesus in ways that attribute full deity. Thomas's climactic confession—"My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)—identifies Jesus with Yahweh Himself. Paul applies to Jesus Old Testament texts about Yahweh (Romans 10:13, quoting Joel 2:32; Philippians 2:10-11, echoing Isaiah 45:23). The confession "Jesus is Lord" (Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3) was the earliest Christian creed.

**Christmas context:** Luke 2:11's "Christ the Lord" is astonishing—the baby born today is *kyrios*, Lord, the divine sovereign. The shepherds, among society's lowest, receive the announcement that the cosmic Lord has entered the world in complete humility. The Christological implications of *kyrios* in Luke are explored in Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*.

### **Savior (Luke 2:11; John 4:42)**

**"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"** (Luke 2:11).

**Background:** In the Greco-Roman world, emperors were hailed as "savior" (*sōtēr*)—bringing peace, prosperity, and salvation to the empire. In Jewish context, God Himself is Savior (Isaiah 43:11; 45:21-22; Hosea 13:4), and occasionally human deliverers like judges were called saviors.

**Jesus as Savior:** The New Testament boldly applies *sōtēr* to Jesus while also applying it to God the Father (Luke 1:47; 1 Timothy 1:1; Titus 1:3; Jude 25). This parallelism reflects the New Testament's conviction that Jesus shares divine identity. He saves not merely from political oppression or physical danger but from sin, death, and divine wrath (Matthew 1:21; Luke 19:10; 1 Timothy 1:15).

**Political subversion:** Calling Jesus "Savior" in a world where Caesar claimed that title was politically subversive. It proclaimed that true salvation comes not from Rome but from this Jewish child. The baby in Bethlehem, not the emperor in Rome, is humanity's Savior. This political dimension is explored in N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).

**Christmas significance:** From birth, Jesus is identified as Savior—His entire purpose is salvation. The incarnation itself is part of the saving act; God becomes human to save humans.

### **Son of God (Luke 1:32, 35)**

**"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David"** (Luke 1:32).

**"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God"** (Luke 1:35).

**Background:** "Son of God" had various meanings in Jewish thought: Israel corporately was God's son (Exodus 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1), Davidic kings were called God's sons (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7), and angels were called "sons of God" (Job 1:6). The title could denote special relationship with or representation of God.

**Jesus as Son of God:** The New Testament uses "Son of God" for Jesus in the fullest, most unique sense—He is the eternal, divine Son who shares the Father's nature (John

1:1, 14, 18; 5:18; 10:30; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:3). He is Son not by adoption, creation, or courtesy but by nature—eternally begotten of the Father, as the Nicene Creed affirms. The development of Son of God Christology is traced in Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (trans. John Bowden, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976).

**Virgin birth connection:** Luke 1:35 connects Jesus' divine sonship to the virgin birth—"therefore the child to be born will be called... the Son of God." The virginal conception isn't merely miraculous but revelatory: this child has no human father because His Father is God. The Holy Spirit's role in conception manifests Jesus' unique divine sonship.

**Christmas significance:** The baby Mary bears is the Son of God in the most exalted sense—God the Son incarnate. Finite humanity and infinite deity mysteriously united in one person. This is Christianity's central, staggering claim.

### **Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32)**

The angel Gabriel tells Mary: "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High."

"Most High" (*hypsistos*) is an ancient divine title (Genesis 14:18-20; Psalm 91:1; Daniel 7:18), emphasizing God's supremacy and transcendence. Calling Jesus "Son of the Most High" attributes supreme divine status—He is son of the Supreme God, sharing the Most High's nature. The title's significance is explored in Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*.

### **Holy One (Luke 1:35)**

"The child to be born will be called holy" (Luke 1:35).

Holiness is God's quintessential attribute—His utter transcendence, purity, and separateness from all sin and evil. Isaiah's vision of God's holiness (Isaiah 6) overwhelms him with awareness of his own uncleanness. Yet this baby will be "holy"—set apart, pure, bearing God's nature. The Incarnation brings God's holiness into human flesh without contamination by sin. As the author of Hebrews declares, Jesus is "holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). The concept of holiness in Christology is explored in John Webster, *Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

### **King of the Jews / King of Israel (Matthew 2:2; John 1:49)**

**"Where is he who has been born king of the Jews?"** (Matthew 2:2)—the Magi's question.

**"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"** (John 1:49)—Nathanael's confession.

From birth, Jesus is recognized as king. The Magi seek "the king of the Jews," and Herod's murderous reaction demonstrates he takes the claim seriously. Jesus' kingship becomes central to His trial and crucifixion (the charge: "King of the Jews"), and His

resurrection/ascension establishes His eternal reign. The political and theological dimensions of Jesus' kingship are explored in Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995).

### **Light / Light to the Gentiles (Luke 2:32; John 1:4-5, 9; 8:12)**

**"A light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel"** (Luke 2:32)—Simeon's prophecy.

**"In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it"** (John 1:4-5).

**"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"** (John 8:12).

Jesus is light—illuminating truth, dispelling darkness, guiding the lost, exposing sin, revealing God. This title fulfills Isaiah's prophecies (Isaiah 9:2; 42:6; 49:6; 60:1-3) and proclaims that the Gentiles (nations) will receive illumination through Him. The light/darkness motif is explored in Paul Rainbow, "Light and Darkness," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

### **The Word (John 1:1, 14)**

**"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"** (John 1:1, 14).

While not appearing in the synoptic birth narratives, John's prologue provides the most philosophically sophisticated title: the Logos (Word).

**Background:** Logos carried rich meanings in both Greek philosophy (divine reason, the rational principle ordering cosmos) and Jewish theology (God's creative word, divine wisdom, self-expression). Philo of Alexandria had developed elaborate Logos theology. The background of Logos theology is explored in C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

**John's use:** John identifies Jesus as the Logos—God's perfect self-expression, the agent of creation, the divine rationality made manifest. The Logos was "with God" (personal distinction) and "was God" (essential unity)—foreshadowing Trinitarian theology. When the Word became flesh, God's self-revelation became complete and personal. As Thomas F. Torrance notes in *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), the Logos doctrine affirms both Christ's full deity and His distinct personhood.

**Theological depth:** "Word" emphasizes Jesus as God's communication—He doesn't merely bring God's message; He is God's message. To see Jesus is to hear God speaking. To know Jesus is to know God. He is the definitive, unsurpassable, incarnate

Word of God. The Christology of the Logos is explored in Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

### **Titles from Old Testament Typology Applied to Christ**

Beyond direct names, the New Testament identifies Jesus with numerous Old Testament types and figures, each revealing aspects of His identity and work:

#### **The Prophet Like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15-18; Acts 3:22-23; 7:37)**

Moses promised: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen" (Deuteronomy 18:15).

Jesus is the prophet greater than Moses: Moses led Israel from Egypt; Jesus leads humanity from sin. Moses mediated the old covenant; Jesus establishes the new. Moses received the Law; Jesus fulfills and perfects it. The Moses-Jesus typology is explored in Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

#### **The True Passover Lamb (Exodus 12; John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7)**

John the Baptist declares: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

Paul writes: "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

The lamb slain at Passover, whose blood protected Israel from death, foreshadowed Christ—the perfect Lamb whose blood saves from sin's penalty. The Passover typology is analyzed in Scott W. Hahn, *The Fourth Cup: Unveiling the Mystery of the Last Supper and the Cross* (New York: Image Books, 2018).

#### **The Greater Tabernacle/Temple (John 2:19-21; Hebrews 9:11)**

Jesus declared: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19), speaking of His body.

The tabernacle/temple represented God's presence among His people. Jesus is the ultimate temple—God's presence in bodily form. As N. T. Wright notes in *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), Jesus embodies and replaces the temple.

#### **The Bread of Life (John 6:35, 48; cf. Exodus 16)**

"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger" (John 6:35).

The manna that sustained Israel in the wilderness foreshadowed Jesus, the true bread from heaven who gives eternal life. The bread imagery is explored in Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998).

### **The Significance of Multiple Names**

Why does Scripture give Jesus so many names and titles? Several reasons emerge:

### **Comprehensiveness of Identity**

No single name or title can capture Jesus' full identity. He is simultaneously:

- Human and divine
- King, priest, and prophet
- Suffering servant and conquering victor
- Humble baby and cosmic Lord
- Historical person and eternal God

The multiplicity of names reflects the multifaceted wonder of who He is. Each name illuminates different aspects; together they provide fuller (though never complete) understanding. As Donald Macleod notes in *The Person of Christ*, the mystery of Christ's person exceeds all human categories and requires multiple angles of approach.

### **Fulfillment of Prophecy**

The many Old Testament messianic prophecies use different imagery and titles. Jesus fulfills them all, so multiple titles demonstrate comprehensive fulfillment of Scripture. He is everything the prophets promised and more. The unity of Old Testament messianic expectation in Christ is explored in Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *The Messiah in the Old Testament*.

### **Universal Significance**

Different names appeal to different audiences and address different needs:

- "Son of David" assures Jews He fulfills their covenant hopes
- "Savior" challenges Roman imperial claims
- "Logos" engages Greek philosophical thought
- "Lamb of God" resonates with sacrificial theology
- "Light of the World" speaks universally to human darkness

The variety enables the gospel to address every culture and every human condition. Christ is sufficient for all because He is all in all. The cultural adaptability of Christological titles is explored in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

### **Progressive Revelation**

Jesus' identity was revealed progressively. The names and titles accumulate as understanding deepens:

- At conception/birth: Jesus, Emmanuel, Son of God, Savior
- During ministry: Teacher, Prophet, Messiah, Son of Man
- After resurrection: Lord, Christ, Son of God (in fullest sense)
- In eternal glory: King of kings, Lord of lords, Alpha and Omega

The fullness of who Jesus is emerged gradually through His life, death, resurrection, and the Spirit's illumination of the apostles. The trajectory of Christological development is traced in Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

### **Invitation to Relationship**

Names aren't merely theological labels but personal identifiers inviting relationship:

- "Emmanuel" invites us to experience God's presence
- "Savior" invites us to be saved
- "Light" invites us to receive illumination
- "Bread of Life" invites us to be satisfied
- "Prince of Peace" invites us to receive peace

Each name is also an invitation—a promise of what Jesus offers those who come to Him in faith. As Thomas F. Torrance writes in *The Mediation of Christ* (rev. ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), knowing Christ's names means knowing His benefits.

### **Practical Application: Worshiping Through Christ's Names**

Understanding Jesus' names enriches worship and spiritual life:

#### **In Prayer**

We can pray through Christ's names, each one opening different dimensions of prayer:

- Approaching "Emmanuel" (God with us) for His presence
- Calling on "Savior" for deliverance
- Seeking "Wonderful Counselor" for wisdom
- Trusting "Prince of Peace" for tranquility
- Resting in "Everlasting Father" for care

The names provide language for prayer and confidence in Christ's ability to meet every need.

#### **In Scripture Reading**

Recognizing the names and titles throughout Scripture connects Old and New Testaments, showing Christ's centrality to the entire biblical story. Every messianic prophecy, type, and title points to Him. This is explored in Edmund P. Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery: Discovering Christ in the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013).

## **In Evangelism**

Different names speak to different people's needs:

- The anxious need "Prince of Peace"
- The guilty need "Savior"
- The searching need "Light of the World"
- The hungry need "Bread of Life"
- The lonely need "Emmanuel"

Understanding the names equips us to present Christ in ways that address specific spiritual needs. The evangelistic use of Christological titles is discussed in Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

## **In Worship**

Hymns and carols often celebrate Christ's names:

- "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"
- "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" ("Christ the everlasting Lord")
- "Joy to the World" ("the Savior reigns")
- Handel's *Messiah* ("Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace")

Singing about Christ's names forms us in Christological truth and expands our worship vocabulary. The formative power of hymnody is explored in C. Michael Hawn, *Gather into One: Praying and Singing Globally* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

## **In Meditation**

Slowly contemplating each name—its meaning, biblical background, theological significance, personal application—deepens our knowledge of Christ. Lectio divina (sacred reading) applied to Christ's names can be profoundly formative. The practice of meditation on Scripture is explored in James M. Houston, *The Transforming Power of Prayer* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1996).

## **Conclusion: The Name Above All Names**

Philippians 2:9-11 declares: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

Jesus possesses "the name above every name"—ultimate authority, supreme identity, cosmic significance. Yet this exalted Lord entered the world as a baby, receiving the simple, common name "Jesus"—a name that means salvation and describes His mission.

The multiplicity of His names and titles—Emmanuel, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, Son of God, Christ, Lord, Savior, Light, Word, and countless others—reveals the inexhaustible wonder of who He is and what He has done.

At Christmas, we celebrate that all these names converge in one person: the baby born in Bethlehem. The infinite God took a human name. The eternal Word became flesh. The Mighty God became a helpless infant. Emmanuel—God with us—entered our world to save us from our sins.

As we speak His names, we acknowledge His identity. As we proclaim His titles, we worship His majesty. As we call upon His name, we access His power and presence. "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

The child in the manger bears the name above all names. He is Jesus—Yahweh saves. He is Emmanuel—God with us. He is the Savior of the world, the Light of life, the Word made flesh. His name will endure forever, and in His name, heaven and earth unite in worship.

This Christmas, as we remember His birth, let us worship Him through His many names, each one a window into the mystery and glory of the Incarnation. For in Him, as Colossians 2:9 declares, "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily"—and through His names, that fullness is revealed to us.

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## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE**

### **Christmas Around the World**

Christianity is a global faith, transcending cultures, languages, and geographical boundaries. As the gospel has spread across the world, Christmas celebrations have taken root in remarkably diverse cultural contexts, producing a rich tapestry of traditions that reflect both universal Christian themes and local cultural expressions. Examining how

different cultures celebrate Christmas reveals both the gospel's transcultural nature—its ability to speak to all peoples—and its incarnational character—its willingness to take flesh in particular times and places. These global traditions remind us that Christmas isn't merely a Western holiday but a worldwide celebration of the truth that God became human for all humanity.

### **Principles of Gospel and Culture**

Before exploring specific cultural expressions, we should establish theological principles for understanding how Christianity relates to culture.

#### **The Gospel Transcends Culture**

The gospel is for all peoples. **Revelation 7:9** envisions "a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb."

No single culture owns Christianity. While Jesus was born Jewish in first-century Palestine, and while Christianity spread first through Greco-Roman culture, the faith belongs to no particular ethnicity or civilization. Christ is Lord of all. The universal scope of redemption is explored in John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990).

**Galatians 3:28** declares: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Cultural, social, and ethnic distinctions don't determine spiritual standing. F. F. Bruce analyzes this revolutionary declaration in *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

This universality means legitimate Christmas expressions can emerge from any culture. Filipino, Nigerian, Brazilian, Korean Christmas traditions are no less authentic than European or American ones. The legitimacy of cultural diversity in Christianity is discussed in Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

#### **The Gospel Takes Cultural Form**

While transcending culture, the gospel always expresses itself through culture. The Incarnation itself demonstrates this—God didn't become generically human but specifically Jewish, male, first-century Palestinian. Particularity was the vehicle for universality. Thomas F. Torrance explores this in *The Mediation of Christ* (rev. ed., Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992).

**Paul's missionary practice** showed cultural flexibility: "To the Jews I became as a Jew... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law... I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22). Paul's missiological method is analyzed in Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

This means Christmas celebrations properly reflect local cultures—using indigenous music, art, food, customs—as long as they don't contradict biblical truth or Christian theology.

The church fathers called this process of gospel taking cultural form "baptizing" culture—taking elements that can serve Christian purposes and dedicating them to Christ. This concept is explored in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Excellent Empire: The Fall of Rome and the Triumph of the Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987).

### **Discernment Required**

Not everything in every culture can be baptized. Some practices directly contradict Christian truth or morality and must be rejected, not adapted.

The New Testament establishes this pattern:

**The Jerusalem Council** (Acts 15) distinguished between cultural practices Gentile converts must adopt (none, essentially) and moral requirements they must maintain (avoiding idolatry and sexual immorality). The Jerusalem Council's significance for mission is discussed in I. Howard Marshall and David Peterson, eds., *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

**Paul addressed culturally specific issues** (meat sacrificed to idols, head coverings, slavery) with principles allowing cultural flexibility within moral boundaries. The distinction between culturally relative and morally absolute biblical teachings is explored in Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

For Christmas celebrations, this means:

- Cultural expressions are welcome if they serve worship, formation, and celebration of the Incarnation
- Practices incompatible with Christian theology (polytheism, ancestor worship as ultimate reality, immorality) must be rejected
- Gray areas require wisdom, sensitivity to weaker consciences, and focus on what edifies

With these principles established, we can explore global Christmas traditions with appreciation for diversity and discernment about faithfulness. The theology of contextualization is comprehensively explored in David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization: Meanings, Methods, and Models* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), and Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (rev. ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

### **Latin American Christmas Traditions**

Latin America's Christmas celebrations blend indigenous cultures, Spanish and Portuguese colonial Catholic traditions, and contemporary expressions, creating vibrant, distinctive observances. The development of Latin American Christianity is traced in Ondina E. González and Justo L. González, *Christianity in Latin America: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

### **Las Posadas (Mexico and Central America)**

Las Posadas ("The Inns") is a nine-night celebration (December 16-24) reenacting Mary and Joseph's search for lodging in Bethlehem. The history and practice of Las Posadas is documented in Elizabeth Carmichael and Chloë Sayer, *The Skeleton at the Feast: The Day of the Dead in Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), and Sue Ellin Tanenbaum, "Christmas: Mexicans in Los Angeles Celebrate the Season," in *We Gather Together: Food and Festival in American Life* (ed. Theodore C. Humphrey and Lin T. Humphrey, Logan: Utah State University Press, 1991).

#### **The practice:**

Each night, a procession of community members (often children) carries figurines of Mary and Joseph through the neighborhood, stopping at designated homes.

At each house, the pilgrims sing traditional songs requesting shelter: "In the name of Heaven, I beg you for lodging, for my beloved wife can go no farther."

The homeowners initially refuse, singing responses like: "This is not an inn, continue on. I cannot open, you might be a rogue."

Finally, when the identity is revealed (Mary and Joseph seeking shelter), the doors open and all enter singing: "Enter, holy pilgrims, pilgrims, receive this corner, not of this poor dwelling but of my heart."

Inside, the gathering includes:

- Prayer and Scripture reading about the Nativity
- Traditional songs (*villancicos*)
- Breaking of piñatas (originally with seven points representing the seven deadly sins; breaking them symbolizes conquering sin through faith). The theological symbolism of the piñata is discussed in Regina M. Marchi, *Day of the Dead in the USA: The Migration and Transformation of a Cultural Phenomenon* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009).
- Sharing of food—often *ponche* (hot fruit punch), *tamales*, and *buñuelos* (fried pastries)

On Christmas Eve (the ninth night), the procession ends at the church or designated home where the nativity scene awaits, and midnight Mass (*Misa de Gallo*—"Rooster's Mass") follows.

### **Theological significance:**

Las Posadas democratizes the Nativity narrative, making community members participants rather than mere observers. Children especially experience themselves as part of the story.

The theme of hospitality is emphasized—welcoming Christ into our homes and hearts, not turning Him away as the innkeepers did. The theology of hospitality in Las Posadas is explored in Timothy Matovina, *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

Community bonding occurs through shared ritual, reinforcing that Christmas is communal celebration, not merely private or nuclear-family affair.

The journey motif reminds participants that Christian life is pilgrimage—we journey toward our true home, sometimes finding doors closed, but ultimately welcomed by God.

### **Nochebuena and Noche de Paz (Throughout Latin America)**

Christmas Eve (*Nochebuena*—"Good Night") is the primary celebration in most Latin American countries, more important than Christmas Day itself. The centrality of Christmas Eve in Latin American celebration is documented in William A. Christian Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth-Century Spain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

**Family gatherings are central**—extended families gather for elaborate meals, often featuring:

- *Lechón* (roasted pig) in many Caribbean and Central American countries
- *Bacalao* (salted cod) in some regions
- *Hallacas* (Venezuelan tamales)
- *Pan de Jamón* (Venezuelan ham bread)
- *Buñuelos* and *natilla* (Colombian Christmas foods)
- *Ponche crema* (Venezuelan eggnog-like drink)
- *Turrón* and *polvorones* (Spanish-origin sweets)

Regional food traditions are documented in Maricel E. Presilla, *Gran Cocina Latina: The Food of Latin America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

**Midnight Mass** (*Misa de Gallo*) is attended by many, even those not regularly church-going. Churches are full, festively decorated, with elaborate nativity scenes.

After Mass, families return home for the main meal (often beginning around 1-2 AM), gift-opening, and celebration continuing into the early morning hours.

Christmas Day (December 25) is typically quieter—time for rest, visiting extended family, and recovering from the night before.

This pattern reflects a Catholic liturgical tradition where feast days begin at sunset the previous evening (following Jewish reckoning), making the vigil (eve) the primary celebration. The liturgical principle is explained in Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1981).

### **The Nativity Scene's Central Role**

Throughout Latin America, the *belén*, *nacimiento*, or *pesebre* (nativity scene) holds central place in Christmas celebration—far more prominent than Christmas trees in many regions. The importance of nativity scenes in Latin American Christianity is explored in C. Gilbert Romero, *Hispanic Devotional Piety: Tracing the Biblical Roots* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

These nativity scenes often are:

- **Elaborate and large:** Sometimes occupying entire rooms or large portions of homes
- **Multi-leveled:** Depicting various scenes—the journey to Bethlehem, shepherds' fields, Magi's journey, the stable
- **Continuously developed:** New figures added throughout Advent; baby Jesus placed on Christmas Eve; Magi moved closer each day until Epiphany
- **Community affairs:** Neighborhoods compete to create impressive displays; churches create elaborate scenes

In Colombia, "Día de las Velitas" (Day of the Little Candles, December 7) marks the beginning of Christmas season, when people place candles and paper lanterns (*faroles*) around nativity scenes and throughout neighborhoods. Colombian Christmas traditions are documented in Constanza Gutiérrez and Adriana Ospina Alvarado, eds., *Colombian Christmas Traditions* (Bogotá: Villegas Editores, 2010).

In Puerto Rico, families maintain nativity scenes through the entire Christmas season (often until February 2, Candlemas).

This emphasis reflects:

- Catholic visual tradition valuing religious art and imagery
- Indigenous influence (pre-Columbian cultures had strong visual/artistic traditions)
- Educational function—teaching biblical narrative through visual representation
- Participatory devotion—families interact with the scene daily, not just observe it

### **Three Kings Day (Día de los Reyes Magos)**

January 6 (Epiphany) is more significant in Latin American tradition than in much of the English-speaking world. The celebration of Epiphany in Latin American contexts is explored in Allan Figueroa Deck, *The Second Wave: Hispanic Ministry and the Evangelization of Cultures* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989).

This is when children traditionally receive gifts, brought by the Three Kings rather than Santa Claus (though North American Santa influence has grown in recent decades).

Children leave out:

- Their shoes (to be filled with gifts)
- Grass or hay for the Kings' camels
- Water for the travelers

The night before (January 5), families eat *Rosca de Reyes* (King's Cake)—a ring-shaped sweet bread decorated with candied fruits. A tiny baby Jesus figurine is hidden inside; whoever finds it must host a party on February 2 (Candlemas). The tradition of the King's Cake is documented in Rachel Laudan, *Cuisine and Empire: Cooking in World History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

This tradition:

- Extends Christmas celebration through Epiphany (the traditional end of Christmas season)
- Emphasizes the Gentile Magi's recognition of Christ (appropriate for regions whose Christianity came through Gentile mission)
- Reduces commercialization somewhat (one gift-giving day rather than building up to December 25)

Theologically, it keeps focus on the biblical narrative (Magi's visit) rather than secular Santa Claus mythology.

### **European Christmas Traditions**

Europe's diverse Christmas traditions reflect centuries of Christian culture, regional variations, and the interplay between Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant expressions. The development of European Christmas is traced in J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986).

### **Germany: Advent Wreaths, Christkindl, and Christmas Markets**

Germany contributed many Christmas traditions that spread globally, including the Christmas tree, Advent wreath, and Advent calendar. German Christmas traditions are comprehensively documented in Joe Perry, *Christmas in Germany: A Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

**Advent preparation** is taken seriously in German tradition:

- Advent wreaths in homes and churches
- Advent calendars (originated in Germany) counting down to Christmas
- St. Nicholas Day (December 6) when children receive small gifts or treats
- Gradual decoration—homes typically aren't fully decorated until Christmas Eve

The **Christkindl** ("Christ Child") tradition involves an angel or Christ Child figure (often portrayed by a young girl in white robes with crown and wings) who brings gifts on Christmas Eve—a Protestant alternative to Catholic St. Nicholas. The Christkindl tradition's development is traced in Perry, *Christmas in Germany*.

**Christmas Eve** (*Heiligabend*—"Holy Evening") is the main celebration:

- Many attend *Christvesper* (Christmas Eve service)
- The tree is lit (traditionally for the first time) on Christmas Eve
- Gifts are exchanged on Christmas Eve rather than Christmas morning
- Traditional foods include goose, carp, potato salad, and *Stollen* (fruit bread)

**Christmas markets** (*Weihnachtsmärkte*) dating to medieval times operate throughout Advent in German cities and towns:

- Selling handcrafted decorations, gifts, food, and drink
- Featuring nativity scenes, caroling, and festive atmosphere
- Originally provided venue for purchasing Christmas supplies but became cultural traditions
- Most famous include Nuremberg's *Christkindlesmarkt* and Dresden's *Striezelmarkt*

The history of Christmas markets is explored in Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Das Weihnachtsfest: Eine Kultur- und Sozialgeschichte der Weihnachtszeit* (Munich: Bucher, 1987).

The twelve days of Christmas (December 25-January 6) traditionally remain festive, with decorations staying up through Epiphany.

The German Christmas blends:

- Deep Lutheran theological tradition (emphasizing Incarnation's wonder)
- Romantic movement's influence (emphasizing warmth, family, childhood wonder)
- Medieval guild traditions (craftsmanship, market culture)
- Folk customs (regional variations, local specialties)

## Scandinavia: St. Lucia Day and Julbord

Scandinavian Christmas begins with St. Lucia Day (December 13), particularly important in Sweden, Norway, and parts of Finland. The St. Lucia tradition is documented in Nils-Arvid Bringéus, *Årets Festdagar* (Stockholm: LTs förlag, 1987).

**St. Lucia** (early Christian martyr from Sicily) is honored with processions:

- A girl dressed as Lucia (white robe, red sash, crown of candles in her hair) leads
- Attendants in white robes follow, carrying candles
- Traditional songs are sung (*Sankta Lucia, Tänd ett ljus*)
- Lucia serves *lussekatter* (saffron buns) and coffee

This tradition:

- Brings light into the darkest time of year (December 13 was winter solstice in old Julian calendar)
- Honors a saint known for bringing food to Christians hiding in catacombs, carrying light to guide her
- Provides special role for children/young people in worship and celebration

**Christmas Eve** is the main celebration:

- Families attend church services
- The tree is lit
- Gifts are exchanged
- Traditional feast (*julbord* in Sweden—Christmas table) includes:
  - Pickled herring
  - Gravlax
  - Meatballs
  - Ham (*julskinka*)
  - Rice pudding (*risgrynsgröt*—contains hidden almond; finder gets small gift)

Scandinavian Christmas food traditions are documented in Oskar Jakobsson, *Smaka på Sverige: Nationalrätter och deras historia* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1997).

The *tomte* or *nisse* (Scandinavian folklore figure—small gnome-like being) has been Christianized into gift-bringer in some traditions, though this blends folk belief with Christian celebration (raising questions about syncretism). The folklore background is

explored in Reimund Kvideland and Henning K. Sehmsdorf, eds., *Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

Christmas Day and following days are quieter—family time, church services, rest.

Boxing Day (December 26, St. Stephen's Day) remains significant in Scandinavia as second Christmas day (*annandag jul*).

Scandinavian Christmas emphasizes:

- Light overcoming darkness (especially meaningful in far northern latitudes with minimal winter daylight)
- Community and hospitality (elaborate feasts, welcoming guests)
- Simplicity and natural beauty (understated decorations, natural materials)
- Lutheran emphasis on grace, faith, and Word

## **Eastern Europe: Orthodox Christmas and Folk Traditions**

Eastern European Christmas traditions vary significantly between Catholic regions (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) and Orthodox regions (Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria), with complex historical layers. Eastern European Christianity is explored in John A. McGuckin, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to Its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

**Orthodox Christmas** (January 7 in countries using the Julian calendar) follows a different pattern:

**The Nativity Fast** (November 15-December 24) precedes Christmas—40 days of fasting (abstaining from meat, dairy, eggs, often fish and oil) in preparation. The practice of fasting in Orthodox tradition is explained in Alexander Schmemann, *Great Lent: Journey to Pascha* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).

**Christmas Eve** (*Sochel'nik* in Russian, from *sochiwo*—lentils soaked in honey) is final fast day:

- Strict fasting until first star appears (symbolizing Star of Bethlehem)
- Traditional meal includes:
  - *Kutia* (wheat berry pudding with honey, poppy seeds, nuts)—central ritual dish
  - Twelve meatless dishes (representing the twelve apostles)
  - Fish, mushrooms, bread, vegetables, grains

After the meal, families attend Christmas Vigil (All-Night Vigil) or Liturgy beginning late on Christmas Eve and extending past midnight.

Christmas Day features festive foods (meat, dairy allowed again after 40-day fast), family gatherings, and celebration.

**Epiphany** (January 19 in Julian calendar) concludes Christmas season with celebrations including:

- Blessing of water (Theophany)—priests bless rivers, lakes, or fonts; some brave souls plunge into icy water
- House blessings—priests visit homes to bless them for the new year

The Orthodox liturgical cycle is explained in Hugh Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy: The Development of the Eucharistic Liturgy in the Byzantine Rite* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990).

**In Catholic Eastern Europe** (Poland, Czech Republic), traditions include:

**Poland:**

- *Wigilia* (Christmas Eve vigil) with 12 meatless dishes
- Empty place set at table for unexpected guest (or deceased family members)
- Breaking and sharing of *opłatek* (Christmas wafer) with family members, offering forgiveness and blessings
- Attending *Pasterka* (Shepherds' Mass) at midnight
- Carol singing (*kolędy*) throughout Christmas season

Polish Christmas traditions are documented in Sophie Hodorowicz Knab, *Polish Customs, Traditions and Folklore* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1993).

**Czech Republic:**

- Carp (purchased live days before, kept in bathtub, killed for Christmas Eve dinner)—controversial tradition
- Cutting the apple crosswise (if the core forms a star, good luck for coming year)
- Floating walnut shells with candles (predicting fortune)
- *Ježíšek* ("Little Jesus") brings gifts on Christmas Eve

These traditions show:

- Deep liturgical orientation (lengthy church services, formal rituals)
- Fasting and feasting rhythm (preparing through deprivation, celebrating with abundance)
- Family and community bonds (elaborate meals, shared rituals)

- Folk Christianity (mixing Christian faith with cultural superstitions—requiring discernment)

## African Christmas Traditions

Africa's remarkable Christian growth (from about 10 million Christians in 1900 to nearly 700 million today) has produced diverse Christmas expressions blending biblical Christianity with African cultural contexts. African Christianity's growth is documented in Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), and Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (3rd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

### Ethiopia: Ganna and Ancient Traditions

Ethiopia has one of Christianity's oldest continuous traditions, dating to the 4th century. Ethiopian Orthodox Christmas (*Ganna* or *Genna*) reflects this ancient heritage. Ethiopian Christianity's history is traced in Stuart Munro-Hay, *Aksum: An African Civilisation of Late Antiquity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991).

Christmas (January 7 in the Julian calendar Ethiopia uses) follows 43 days of fasting (*Tsome Nebiyat*—Fast of the Prophets).

Christmas Eve, the faithful fast and pray.

### Christmas Day:

- Elaborate church services (often 3+ hours) with ancient liturgy in Ge'ez (classical Ethiopian language)
- Priests wear ornate vestments
- Processions, chanting, drumming, dancing
- Churches are packed; many stand outside, participating from courtyard

After services, the feast:

- *Doro wat* (spicy chicken stew with *injera* bread)—breaking the 43-day meat fast
- *Tej* (honey wine)
- Coffee ceremony

Traditional games include *ganna* (field hockey-like game, allegedly played by shepherds on the night of Christ's birth).

**Three Kings Day** (January 19) features *Timkat* (Epiphany) celebrations:

- Elaborate processions with *tabots* (symbolic Ark of Covenant replicas)
- Re-enactment of Jesus' baptism

- Blessings with water

Ethiopian liturgical practices are explored in Ephraim Isaac, *The Ethiopian Church* (Boston: Henry N. Sawyer Company, 1968).

**Ethiopian Christmas preserves:**

- Ancient liturgical practices largely unchanged for centuries
- Jewish-Christian connections (dietary laws, Sabbath observance, circumcision)
- African cultural expressions (drumming, dancing, ululation in worship)
- Strong fasting discipline

### **West Africa: Processions, Drama, and Communal Feasts**

West African Christmas in countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Liberia blends Christian celebration with African communal and expressive traditions. West African Christianity is explored in Ogbu U. Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

**Church services are central:**

- Long services (2-4 hours common) with exuberant worship
- Choirs in special Christmas attire performing African hymns and gospel songs
- Preaching emphasizing Christ's humble birth and call to serve others
- Dancing, drumming, and vibrant musical expression

The integration of African musical forms into Christian worship is discussed in Roberta R. King, Jean Ngora Kidula, James R. Krabill, and Thomas A. Oduro, eds., *Music in the Life of the African Church* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008).

**Nativity plays and pageants:**

- Community-wide productions involving many participants
- Often elaborately costumed and theatrically presented
- May include traditional African dress and cultural elements
- Performed in local languages, making the story accessible

**Christmas Day:**

- New clothes (often specially tailored) worn to church and festivities
- Communal feasting—large meals shared with extended family and community
- Foods vary by region:

- Nigeria: jollof rice, fried rice, goat meat, chicken
- Ghana: fufu, rice dishes, chicken, goat
- General: whatever is the region's festive food

**Home decorations** often include:

- Nativity scenes
- Balloons and streamers
- Sometimes Christmas trees (more common in urban, Western-influenced areas)

**Community dimension** is paramount:

- Extended family gatherings (not just nuclear family)
- Visiting neighbors, sharing food
- Church members gathering for fellowship
- Corporate celebration over individualistic focus

Boxing Day (December 26, in former British colonies) continues celebrations.

West African Christmas demonstrates:

- Christianity's successful contextualization in African culture
- Communal rather than individualistic celebration
- Oral/dramatic rather than primarily written transmission of the Nativity story
- Integration of African artistic expressions (music, dance, drama) into Christian worship

### **South Africa: Summer Christmas and Braai**

South Africa's December Christmas occurs in summer (opposite season from Northern Hemisphere), creating distinctive expressions. South African Christmas is documented in Irving Hexham, ed., *The Irony of Apartheid: The Struggle for National Independence of Afrikaner Calvinism Against British Imperialism* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981).

The beach replaces snow in Christmas imagery—many South Africans spend Christmas Day at the beach or swimming pools.

**Outdoor celebrations** are common:

- *Braai* (barbecue) is typical Christmas meal rather than roast dinner
- Outdoor games and activities
- Swimming, cricket, other summer sports

Carol singing often occurs outdoors in warm evening air.

Church services remain important, particularly for the country's large Christian population (about 85% of South Africans identify as Christian).

**Traditional foods** include:

- Roast turkey or beef (despite summer heat)
- Yellow rice with raisins
- Vegetables and salads
- Malva pudding (sweet, spongy dessert)
- *Koeksisters* (twisted, syrup-soaked pastry)

**Cultural diversity** appears in Christmas expressions:

- Afrikaans communities maintain European-origin traditions (Advent practices, carol services)
- English-speaking communities celebrate similarly to British Christmas (crackers, pudding)
- Black African communities incorporate indigenous cultural elements
- Indian South African Christians blend Indian and Christian traditions

South Africa shows:

- Christianity transcending climate/seasonal associations (Christmas need not be wintry)
- Multi-cultural expression within single nation
- Colonial legacy and post-colonial adaptation
- Joyful adaptation of celebration to context (outdoor feasting, summer activities)

### **Asian Christmas Traditions**

Asia's diverse Christmas expressions range from ancient Christian communities (India's Thomas Christians, Philippines' Spanish Catholic heritage) to recent explosive growth (China, South Korea). Asian Christianity's development is explored in Scott W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

#### **Philippines: Simbang Gabi and Parol**

The Philippines is Asia's most Christian nation (about 90% Christian, predominantly Catholic), producing distinctively Filipino Christmas expressions. Filipino Catholicism is comprehensively explored in Reynaldo C. Ileto, *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular*

*Movements in the Philippines, 1840-1910* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979).

### **Simbang Gabi (Night Mass) or Misa de Gallo (Rooster's Mass):**

- Nine dawn masses (3-5 AM) from December 16-24
- Tradition holds that completing all nine masses grants a wish (though church teaches this isn't magic but devotion)
- Churches are packed; special Christmas songs (*Paskuhan* carols) sung
- After mass, vendors sell traditional Filipino breakfast foods (*bibingka*, *puto bumbong*)

The Simbang Gabi tradition is explored in José M. de Mesa and Lode L. Wostyn, *Doing Christology: The Re-Appropriation of a Tradition* (Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 1989).

### **Parols (Filipino Christmas lanterns):**

- Star-shaped lanterns, traditionally bamboo and paper, now often elaborate constructions
- Represent the Star of Bethlehem
- Displayed in windows, hung from houses, used in processions
- Some communities have parol competitions
- Distinctive Filipino Christmas symbol

The parol tradition is documented in Gilda Cordero-Fernando, *Being Filipino* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, 2000).

### **Christmas Eve (Noche Buena):**

- Grand midnight feast after Mass
- Traditional foods:
  - *Lechon* (roasted pig)
  - Ham
  - *Queso de bola* (Edam cheese ball)
  - Various *kakanin* (rice cakes)
  - Fruit salad and other sweets

**Christmas season** extends from September (officially, with "-ber" months) through January (longest Christmas season worldwide):

- Christmas carols heard in malls from September
- Decorations appear early
- *Simbang Gabi* begins December 16
- Celebrations continue through Three Kings (January 6) and sometimes *Sinulog* (mid-January)

### **Community dimension:**

- Extended family gatherings are essential
- *Aguinaldo* (Christmas bonuses) expected from employers
- Gift-giving to godchildren (*inaanak*)—Filipinos have many godchildren from baptisms/confirmations
- Carol singing (*pangangaroling*) by neighborhood children

### Filipino Christmas reflects:

- Deep Catholic faith (despite colonialism's problematic aspects, Christianity took root genuinely)
- Filipino cultural values (family, community, *pakikisama*—getting along)
- Tropical adaptation (outdoor celebrations, indigenous materials)
- Joyful, festive national character (fiesta mentality)

### **South Korea: Christian Minority in Confucian Context**

South Korea has substantial Christian population (about 30%), making Christmas significant despite being minority religion in predominantly Confucian/Buddhist context. Korean Christianity's rapid growth is documented in Sebastian C. H. Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *A History of Korean Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

Christmas is a national holiday (rare in non-Christian-majority Asian countries), reflecting Christianity's influence.

### **Church services:**

- Large, elaborate Christmas services in mega-churches
- Special music programs (Korean churches emphasize choral music)
- Candlelight services on Christmas Eve
- Evangelistic emphasis—Christmas seen as opportunity to invite non-Christian friends/family

### **Decorations:**

- Urban areas heavily decorated (Seoul's shopping districts rival any Western city)
- Christmas trees common in public spaces, homes, churches
- Businesses capitalize on Christmas commercially

### **Cultural adaptations:**

- Less emphasis on family gathering (unlike Korean New Year, *Seollal*, which is primary family holiday)
- More emphasis on romantic celebration (similar to Valentine's Day)—couples' dating night
- Cake (especially elaborate Christmas cakes from bakeries) is more central than in Western Christmas

Gift-giving is common but less elaborate than Western Christmas shopping.

**Street evangelism** increases—Christians use Christmas as evangelistic opportunity, with public carol singing, street preaching, distribution of tracts.

### Korean Christmas shows:

- Christian minority successfully celebrating within pluralistic context
- Commercial and Christian dimensions coexisting (sometimes uncomfortably)
- Adaptation to East Asian cultural values
- Missionary zeal—Christmas as evangelistic opportunity

### **India: St. Thomas Christians and Diverse Expressions**

India's Christian population (about 2.3% of 1.4 billion—roughly 30+ million Christians) celebrates Christmas in diverse ways reflecting India's regional and denominational diversity. Indian Christianity is explored in Robert Eric Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

**St. Thomas Christians** (Syrian Orthodox, Syrian Catholic communities in Kerala) claim descent from Apostle Thomas's first-century mission:

- Ancient liturgies (some in Syriac)
- Fasting periods before Christmas
- Traditional foods specific to Kerala Christian communities
- Elaborate church decorations with banana leaves, flowers, oil lamps

The St. Thomas Christian tradition is documented in Leslie Brown, *The Indian Christians of St. Thomas: An Account of the Ancient Syrian Church of Malabar* (rev. ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

### Across India:

- Midnight Mass attended by many (Catholic and mainline Protestant churches)
- Homes decorated with *rangoli* (decorative patterns), oil lamps (*diyas*), and paper stars
- Mango leaves and banana stalks used in decoration (as in Hindu festivals, adapted for Christmas)
- Christmas trees present in some regions, particularly urban areas

### Traditional foods vary regionally:

- Kerala: *appam* (rice pancakes), stew, sweet wine
- Goa: *sannas* (rice cakes), *sorpotel* (spicy pork dish)
- North India: biryani, chicken curry
- Sweets and *kheer* (rice pudding)

**Carol singing** (Christmas carol processions) in neighborhoods, particularly in Christian-majority areas.

Gift-giving and Santa Claus have Western influence but aren't as central as in West.

### Challenges include:

- Hindu nationalism creating tensions in some areas
- Commercial Christmas in urban centers vs. traditional observance
- Maintaining Christian distinctiveness in pluralistic context

Indian Christmas demonstrates:

- Ancient Christianity's rootedness (Thomas Christians)
- Successful contextualization (using Indian cultural forms without syncretism)
- Unity amid diversity (different regions, denominations celebrating distinctively yet recognizably as Christmas)
- Minority faith maintaining identity and joy despite sometimes-hostile context

### Middle Eastern Christmas: Christianity's Birthplace

The Middle East, where Christianity began, now has small Christian minorities (except Lebanon) maintaining ancient traditions in difficult circumstances. Middle Eastern Christianity is explored in Andrea Pacini, ed., *Christian Communities in the Arab Middle East: The Challenge of the Future* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

### Bethlehem: Christmas in Jesus' Birthplace

Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace, is now in Palestinian territories with complex political situation, yet Christmas remains major event. Christmas in contemporary Bethlehem is documented in Bernard Sabella, "Palestinian Christians: Challenges and Hopes," in *Challenging Christian Zionism: Theology, Politics and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (ed. Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Maurine Tobin, London: Melisende, 2005).

**Church of the Nativity** (built over traditional birthplace site):

- Multiple Christian denominations share custody (Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Catholic)
- Elaborate Christmas services in various traditions
- Pilgrims from worldwide visit
- Midnight Mass broadcast globally

**Manger Square celebrations:**

- Large Christmas tree
- Festivities, caroling, celebrations
- Heavily attended despite security concerns
- International attention and media coverage

**Palestinian Christian community:**

- Small but tenacious (about 1-2% of Palestinian population)
- Maintains traditions amid political turmoil
- Economic dependence on Christmas tourism
- Mixed emotions—celebrating Christ's birth in His birthplace while living under occupation

Security concerns affect celebrations—checkpoints, restricted movement, military presence.

Despite challenges, Bethlehem Christians maintain joyful celebration, testifying to their faith's resilience.

**Lebanon: Multiple Christian Traditions**

Lebanon has largest Christian population percentage in Middle East (about 40%), with diverse traditions. Lebanese Christianity's diversity is explored in Sami Zubaida, "The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Lebanon," in *War, Institutions, and Social Change in the Middle East* (ed. Steven Heydemann, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

### **Maronite Catholics (largest group):**

- Midnight Mass is central
- Traditional foods: *sfeeha* (meat pastries), *kibbeh*, sweets
- Families gather for elaborate meals
- Caroling in Arabic

### **Greek Orthodox:**

- Christmas celebrated January 7 (Julian calendar)
- Distinct liturgical traditions
- Fasting periods before Christmas

### **Armenian Christians:**

- Christmas on January 6
- Ancient liturgies in Classical Armenian
- Distinct cultural traditions

### **All Lebanese Christians:**

- Decorate homes and streets with lights
- Christmas trees common
- Nativity scenes displayed
- Gift-giving practiced

### Lebanon's Christmas shows:

- Multiple ancient Christian traditions coexisting
- Arab Christian identity
- Christianity maintaining vibrant presence despite regional instability
- Middle Eastern Christianity's diversity

## **Theological Reflections on Global Traditions**

Examining worldwide Christmas celebrations reveals important theological truths:

### **The Gospel's Universal Appeal**

Christianity's presence across every culture demonstrates the gospel's universal truth. Christ came for all peoples; His birth is celebrated in hundreds of languages, thousands

of local expressions. Andrew F. Walls explores this in *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).

This universality fulfills Old Testament prophecies:

- "All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God" (Isaiah 52:10)
- "All nations shall come and worship you" (Revelation 15:4)
- The Great Commission's scope—"all nations" (Matthew 28:19)

No culture is excluded; no people group falls outside God's redemptive purposes. The universal scope of redemption is explored in Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

### **The Incarnation's Validation of Particularity**

God became human in specific cultural context—Jewish, Palestinian, first-century. This particularity validates all particularity. If God could become specifically Jewish, then Christianity can take specific Korean, Nigerian, Brazilian, Filipino form. Thomas F. Torrance discusses this in *The Mediation of Christ*.

This doesn't mean anything goes—moral and theological boundaries exist. But it means cultural expression is legitimate, not compromise.

Each culture brings gifts to the universal church—African exuberance, Latin American warmth, Asian discipline, European reflection, Anglo restraint—enriching the whole body. The mutual enrichment of cultures in Christ is explored in Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (2nd ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

### **Unity Amid Diversity**

Worldwide Christmas celebrations reveal both unity and diversity:

#### **Unity in:**

- Celebrating Christ's Incarnation
- Scripture's centrality (Nativity narratives)
- Worship as primary expression
- Joy and gratitude as dominant emotions
- Hospitality and generosity as values

#### **Diversity in:**

- Specific foods, music, customs
- Liturgical expressions (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant variations)
- Seasonal context (winter vs. summer)

- Cultural values emphasized

This unity-amid-diversity reflects the body of Christ—"many members, yet one body" (1 Corinthians 12:20). The ecclesiological implications are explored in Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

### **Contextualization and Syncretism**

The line between legitimate contextualization (expressing Christianity in cultural forms) and illegitimate syncretism (mixing Christianity with contradictory beliefs) requires constant discernment. The distinction is explored in David J. Hesselgrave and Edward Rommen, *Contextualization*.

#### **Questions to ask:**

- Does this practice clearly point to Christ and biblical truth?
- Does it contradict Christian theology or morality?
- Do participants understand it as Christian, not pagan/secular?
- Does it edify and form believers in Christian faith?
- Could it cause weaker believers to stumble?

Where these questions are answered affirmatively, contextualization serves the gospel. Where negatively, syncretism threatens Christian integrity.

### **Mission and Inculturation**

Christmas's global spread demonstrates successful mission and inculturation—gospel taking root in new soil, bearing fruit appropriate to local conditions. The theology of inculturation is explored in Aylward Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).

This requires:

- Missionary flexibility (Paul's "all things to all people")
- Local leadership (indigenous Christians shaping celebration)
- Patience with process (authentic inculturation takes time)
- Trust in Holy Spirit (to guide cultural expression)

Western Christians should resist imposing their Christmas traditions as normative. Filipino *parols*, Ethiopian *ganna*, Mexican *posadas* are as authentically Christian as English carols or German trees. The critique of Western cultural imperialism in mission is explored in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).

### **Conclusion: One Lord, Many Voices**

The worldwide celebration of Christmas in countless cultural expressions proclaims that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is truly universal good news.

From Bethlehem to Beijing, from Oslo to Oaxaca, from Manila to Monrovia, Christians gather to celebrate the Incarnation. They do so in languages Christ never spoke, using instruments He never heard, eating foods He never tasted—yet all authentically worshiping the One born in Bethlehem.

This global chorus fulfills Revelation's vision: "After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, 'Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!'" (Revelation 7:9-10).

Christmas is truly catholic (universal) in the original sense—it belongs to the whole church in all places, not to any single culture or tradition. The catholicity of the church is explored in Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985).

May we celebrate with gratitude for this global family, learning from brothers and sisters worldwide how to honor Christ's birth in ways both faithful and culturally authentic. As Lamin Sanneh writes in *Whose Religion Is Christianity?*, "Christianity has been successfully transmitted cross-culturally, and that achievement alone disqualifies the religion from being described as Western." The baby born in Bethlehem belongs to all the world, and the whole world celebrates His coming.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

### Christmas Worship—Liturgical Practices and Sacred Celebration

The heart of Christian Christmas celebration is worship—the church gathered to proclaim, celebrate, and respond to the Incarnation. While cultural traditions, family gatherings, and festive customs enrich the season, worship remains the central act through which Christians corporately acknowledge the theological reality Christmas commemorates: God became human in Jesus Christ. Understanding the historical development of Christmas liturgy, the theological principles undergirding worship practices, and the various forms Christmas worship takes across Christian traditions helps us appreciate this season's sacred dimension and participate more fully in corporate celebration of the Word made flesh.

#### **The Development of Christmas Liturgy**

Christian liturgical worship didn't emerge fully formed but developed gradually as the church reflected on Scripture, theology, and appropriate ways to honor God corporately.

## **Early Christian Worship Patterns**

The earliest Christians initially had no Christmas liturgy because they didn't observe Christmas as a distinct feast. Their worship centered on:

**The Lord's Day (Sunday):** Weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection, the church's primary gathering day from apostolic times (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 16:2; Revelation 1:10). The early Christian practice of Sunday worship is documented in Paul F. Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

**Easter:** The earliest Christian feast, celebrating Christ's resurrection and the culmination of salvation history. The Paschal (Easter) season's centrality preceded all other Christian festivals. The primacy of Easter in early Christianity is explored in Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman, eds., *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999).

**Eucharist:** The central act of Christian worship from the beginning, remembering Christ's death and resurrection through bread and wine (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The early development of eucharistic liturgy is traced in Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship: Early Church Practices in Social, Historical, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

**Word and prayer:** Reading and expounding Scripture, communal prayer, singing psalms and hymns (Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:19). Early Christian reading and preaching practices are explored in William Barclay, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1974).

As Christianity spread and developed, the church expanded its liturgical calendar, adding commemorations of martyrs, apostles, and eventually events in Christ's life beyond His death and resurrection. The development of the liturgical calendar is comprehensively documented in Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (2nd ed., Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

## **The Emergence of Nativity Liturgy (4th Century)**

By the mid-4th century, evidence clearly shows Christmas liturgies emerging, particularly in Rome and the East.

The earliest known Christmas homily is attributed to Optatus of Milevis (c. 370 AD), indicating established liturgical practice by that time. Early Christmas homilies are discussed in Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995).

**John Chrysostom** preached Christmas sermons in Antioch in 386 AD, noting that the feast had recently been introduced there from the West. Chrysostom's Christmas homilies are found in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 9 (ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

**Augustine's sermons** (late 4th/early 5th century) show fully developed Christmas liturgy in North Africa. Augustine's Christmas sermons appear in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 1, vol. 6 (ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

These early Christmas liturgies emphasized:

**Theological proclamation:** Preaching focused on Incarnation theology—the Word becoming flesh, divine and human natures united, God entering creation to redeem it.

**Scripture readings:** Gospel accounts of the Nativity (Luke 2; Matthew 1-2), Old Testament prophecies (Isaiah 9:2-7; 11:1-10; Micah 5:2), and New Testament theological texts (John 1:1-14; Galatians 4:4-5; Philippians 2:5-11).

**Eucharistic celebration:** Communion as response to the Incarnation—receiving Christ sacramentally who came to us incarnationally.

**Hymnody:** Early hymns celebrating the Nativity, many of which survive in modified form today. Early Christian hymnody is explored in J. A. Smith, *Music in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011).

### **Medieval Development: Multiple Masses and Elaborate Ceremony**

Medieval Christmas liturgy became increasingly elaborate, developing distinctive features that persist in some traditions. Medieval liturgical development is traced in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, and Paul Bradshaw, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (rev. ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

#### **Three Christmas Masses:**

The Roman Catholic tradition developed the practice of three distinct Masses on Christmas:

**1. Midnight Mass (*Missa in nocte*)**—celebrating Christ's eternal birth from the Father and His temporal birth in Bethlehem

- Traditional readings: Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14
- Theme: The mystery of the Incarnation, angels announcing to shepherds
- Timing: Midnight (or late Christmas Eve)—darkness giving way to light

**2. Dawn Mass (*Missa in aurora*)**—celebrating Christ's birth in believers' hearts

- Traditional readings: Isaiah 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20
- Theme: Shepherds' visit, the dawn of salvation

- Timing: Dawn on Christmas morning

### 3. Day Mass (*Missa in die*)—celebrating Christ's eternal generation from the Father

- Traditional readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-6; John 1:1-18
- Theme: The Word made flesh, theological profundity of Incarnation
- Timing: Christmas Day

The three-Mass tradition is explained in Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite: Its Origins and Development* (trans. Francis A. Brunner, 2 vols., New York: Benziger, 1951-1955).

This three-Mass structure:

- Allowed clergy and deeply devout to participate in multiple liturgies
- Created progression from nighttime mystery through dawn recognition to daylight proclamation
- Paralleled Trinitarian theology (three Masses for Three Persons)
- Offered theological richness through varied readings and emphases

#### Elaborate ceremonial:

- Processions with candles, incense, choir
- Special vestments (white and gold, the church's most festive colors)
- Decorations (evergreens, lights, nativity scenes)
- Extended services with multiple Scripture readings, lengthy prayers, extensive singing

#### Popular devotions added:

- The crib (nativity scene), popularized by St. Francis
- Christmas carols and hymns for congregational participation
- Blessing of homes, animals, elements
- Dramatic presentations (mystery plays depicting the Nativity)

Medieval dramatic presentations are documented in O. B. Hardison Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965).

This medieval elaboration:

- Made Christmas the most festive liturgical celebration after Easter
- Created multi-sensory worship experience (visual, auditory, olfactory)

- Taught theology through liturgy to largely illiterate populations
- Sometimes risked obscuring simplicity of gospel through excessive ceremony

### **Reformation Simplification and Variation**

Protestant Reformers responded variously to medieval Christmas liturgy. The Reformers' approaches to liturgy are explored in Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship: Reformed According to Scripture* (rev. ed., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

**Martin Luther** retained and valued Christmas worship, though simplifying ceremony:

- Maintained the feast's observance
- Emphasized preaching and congregational singing
- Reduced ceremonial elaboration
- Focused on Scripture and justification by faith
- Wrote Christmas hymns ("From Heaven Above to Earth I Come")

Luther's liturgical reforms are discussed in Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

**The Reformed tradition** (Calvin, Zwingli) showed more skepticism:

- Some Reformed churches minimized or rejected Christmas observance
- Concern about unbiblical accretions to worship
- Emphasis on ordinary Lord's Day worship over special feasts
- Suspicion of liturgical calendar as human tradition

Reformed worship principles are explored in D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

**Anglicanism** retained Christmas liturgy with modifications:

- Book of Common Prayer (1549, revised 1662) included Christmas services
- Maintained some medieval elements while simplifying
- Emphasized Scripture reading and preaching
- Created distinctly Anglican Christmas worship

Anglican liturgy is analyzed in Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980).

**Radical Reformers** (Anabaptists, later Baptists and free churches) generally:

- Rejected liturgical calendar entirely
- Emphasized Lord's Day worship without special seasons
- Viewed Christmas as unbiblical addition
- Sometimes forbade Christmas observance

**Puritans** famously opposed Christmas:

- Viewed it as Catholic corruption
- Lacked biblical warrant (no command to celebrate Christ's birth)
- Associated with drunkenness, revelry, pagan customs
- During English Commonwealth (1640s-1650s), Christmas was actually banned
- New England Puritans likewise forbade Christmas celebration

Puritan opposition to Christmas is documented in Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

This Reformation diversity created the varied Christmas worship practices still evident across Protestant denominations today.

### **Modern Liturgical Renewal**

The 20th-21st centuries have seen significant liturgical renewal across Christian traditions. The liturgical renewal movement is comprehensively explored in James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship* (3rd ed., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000).

**Vatican II** (1962-1965) reformed Roman Catholic liturgy:

- Vernacular languages replaced Latin
- Greater congregational participation
- Revised lectionaries with richer Scripture readings
- Simplified ceremonial while maintaining beauty and dignity

Vatican II's liturgical reforms are analyzed in Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948-1975* (trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

**Ecumenical convergence** through:

- The Revised Common Lectionary (used by Catholics, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Presbyterians, and others)
- Common hymnody crossing denominational lines
- Shared liturgical scholarship

- Mutual appreciation for various traditions' strengths

The ecumenical liturgical convergence is discussed in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

**Evangelical and free church recovery** of liturgical elements:

- Adoption of Advent and Christmas seasons
- Use of Advent wreaths, even in non-liturgical churches
- Growing appreciation for church calendar's formative power
- Integrating traditional practices with contemporary worship styles

This recovery is explored in Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God's Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2008).

**Emergence of contemporary worship** raises questions:

- How to maintain Christmas's theological depth in contemporary forms
- Balancing accessibility and profundity
- Avoiding mere sentimentality or cultural Christianity
- Creating worship that forms rather than merely entertains

Contemporary worship is analyzed in Lester Ruth, *A Little Heaven Below: Worship at Early Methodist Quarterly Meetings* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2000), and Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down: A Theology of Worship for This Urgent Time* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

### **Theological Foundations for Christmas Worship**

Before examining specific worship practices, we should understand theological principles that should govern Christmas worship.

### **Worship as Response to Divine Action**

Worship is fundamentally responsive—we worship because God has acted. Christmas worship responds specifically to the Incarnation. The responsive nature of worship is explored in D. A. Carson, ed., *Worship by the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

The pattern throughout Scripture:

- God acts (delivers Israel from Egypt) → Israel worships (Exodus 15)
- God sends His Son → Church worships (Luke 2:13-14; John 1:14)
- God saves us → We offer ourselves in worship (Romans 12:1)

This means Christmas worship:

- Begins with proclamation (God's action: the Word became flesh)
- Calls for response (our worship: acknowledging, celebrating, obeying)
- Is rooted in theology, not sentiment (we worship because of truth, not merely feeling)
- Should be God-centered, not human-centered (focus on what God has done, not merely how we feel)

**Isaiah 40:3-5** establishes this pattern: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD... And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.'" God reveals Himself → humanity responds.

### **Christological Focus**

Christmas worship must be specifically and clearly Christological—focused on Christ, His person, and His work. The necessity of Christological focus in worship is emphasized in Harold M. Best, *Unceasing Worship: Biblical Perspectives on Worship and the Arts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003).

The danger of vague religiosity: Some Christmas services could apply to any religion's winter festival—"peace on earth," "goodwill toward men," "the holiday season"—without specifically proclaiming Christ.

Faithful Christmas worship proclaims:

- Jesus Christ is God incarnate (John 1:1, 14)
- He was born of the Virgin Mary (Luke 1:26-38; Matthew 1:18-25)
- His birth fulfilled prophecy (Isaiah 7:14; 9:6-7; Micah 5:2)
- He came to save sinners (Matthew 1:21; Luke 2:11)
- He will return in glory (Advent's eschatological dimension)

This Christological focus distinguishes Christian worship from cultural Christmas celebration. We're not merely being festive or sentimental—we're proclaiming specific truth about a specific person for specific purposes.

### **Word and Sacrament**

Historic Christian worship centers on Word and Sacrament—Scripture proclaimed and communion celebrated. The centrality of Word and Sacrament is explored in James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

#### **The Word at Christmas:**

- Nativity narratives (Luke 1-2; Matthew 1-2) read and expounded

- Old Testament prophecies showing Christ's birth was foretold
- Theological texts articulating Incarnation theology (John 1:1-14; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 1:1-3)
- Preaching that explains, applies, and calls for response

The role of preaching in worship is explored in Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 7 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998-2010).

### **The Sacrament at Christmas:**

- Eucharist/Communion as fitting response to Incarnation
- Christ present sacramentally as He was present incarnationally
- Thanksgiving (*eucharist* means "thanksgiving") for God's gift of His Son
- Anticipation of the heavenly feast when Christ returns

The theology of the Eucharist is explored in Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (trans. Paul Kachur, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988).

Together, Word and Sacrament:

- Proclaim the gospel comprehensively
- Engage mind (Word) and body (Sacrament)
- Create encounter with Christ, not merely information about Him
- Form believers through repeated participation

### **Congregational Participation**

Worship is corporate activity, not clerical performance. The whole gathered body worships together. The principle of congregational participation is explored in Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

This principle resisted medieval tendency toward clerical dominance (congregation as spectators while priests perform liturgy).

It affirms Reformation emphasis on priesthood of all believers—all Christians are priests, all worship actively. The priesthood of believers is discussed in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1988).

Congregational participation includes:

- Singing hymns, carols, liturgical responses
- Reading Scripture corporately or responsively

- Praying together (not just listening to prayers)
- Confessing faith through creeds
- Responding through offerings, commitments, service

The goal: Every person present worships actively, not passively observing.

### **Beauty and Excellence**

Worship should be beautiful and excellent—offering our best to God who gave His best (His Son) for us. The role of beauty in worship is explored in Jeremy S. Begbie, *Voicing Creation's Praise: Towards a Theology of the Arts* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

This doesn't mean expensive or elaborate (the widow's mite teaches otherwise). But it means:

- **Preparation:** Not winging it, but thoughtfully planning and practicing
- **Quality:** Music sung/played well, words spoken clearly, movements executed smoothly
- **Aesthetics:** Visual beauty (decorations, lighting, vestments, space arranged appealingly)
- **Reverence:** Appropriate dignity and joy

**Psalm 96:9:** "Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness." The KJV's "beauty of holiness" captures the idea that worship should manifest beauty reflecting God's character.

However, balance required: Beauty shouldn't become barrier (so elaborate that it intimidates or excludes) or idol (aesthetics valued above substance). This balance is discussed in Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

### **Theological Depth and Emotional Warmth**

Christmas worship should engage both head and heart, mind and affections. The integration of intellect and emotion in worship is explored in Robert E. Webber, *Worship Is a Verb* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992).

#### **Avoiding two errors:**

**Cold intellectualism:** Worship that's doctrinally sound but emotionally sterile—truth without warmth, accuracy without joy.

**Shallow emotionalism:** Worship that's emotionally powerful but theologically empty—feelings without substance, sentiment without truth.

#### **Faithful Christmas worship:**

- Teaches profound theology (Incarnation, Atonement, Trinity)
- Evokes appropriate emotions (wonder, joy, gratitude, love)
- Engages the whole person—intellect, will, affections
- Creates experience that forms as well as informs

Jonathan Edwards articulated this balance: Religious affections (emotions properly ordered toward God) are essential, but they must be grounded in truth and manifest in transformed living. Edwards's theology of religious affections is explored in John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout, and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., *A Jonathan Edwards Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

### **Elements of Christmas Worship Services**

Christmas worship typically includes various elements, each serving specific purposes in the liturgical flow.

#### **The Gathering: Call to Worship**

Worship begins with gathering—the body of Christ assembling in response to God's call. The theology of gathering is explored in Marva J. Dawn, *A Royal "Waste" of Time: The Splendor of Worshiping God and Being Church for the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

#### **Processional elements:**

- Entrance of clergy, choir, or worship leaders (particularly in liturgical traditions)
- Carrying symbols: Bible, candles, cross, banner
- Congregational singing during entrance

**Call to Worship** establishes why we've gathered:

- Scripture-based: Often using texts like Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:10-14, John 1:14
- Dialogue form: Leader and congregation responding to each other
- Sets theological tone: Directs attention to God and His action

Example Call to Worship: Leader: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light! People: The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it! Leader: For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given! People: And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace! All: Let us worship the Lord!

**Opening prayer** follows, invoking God's presence and dedicating the service to His glory.

**Opening hymn or carol:**

- Usually celebratory, setting festive tone
- Examples: "O Come, All Ye Faithful," "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," "Joy to the World"
- Congregational singing creates corporate unity

### **The Word: Scripture and Proclamation**

The service's core is Scripture proclaimed and expounded. The centrality of Scripture in worship is emphasized in John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Challenge of Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

#### **Scripture readings:**

Traditional three-reading pattern (Old Testament, Epistle, Gospel) provides comprehensive biblical witness:

#### **Christmas Eve/Night:**

- OT: Isaiah 9:2-7 (child born, light in darkness)
- Epistle: Titus 2:11-14 (grace appeared, bringing salvation)
- Gospel: Luke 2:1-20 (nativity narrative, shepherds)

#### **Christmas Day:**

- OT: Isaiah 52:7-10 (herald of good news)
- Epistle: Hebrews 1:1-4 (Son as radiance of God's glory) or Titus 3:4-7 (kindness of God appeared)
- Gospel: John 1:1-14 (Word became flesh) or Luke 2:1-20

Additional readings might include:

- Micah 5:2-5a (Bethlehem prophecy)
- Philippians 2:5-11 (kenosis—Christ's self-emptying)
- Matthew 1:18-25 (Joseph's perspective, Emmanuel)
- Galatians 4:4-7 (fullness of time, adoption as sons)

The lectionary system is explained in Fritz West, *Scripture and Memory: The Ecumenical Hermeneutic of the Three-Year Lectionaries* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997).

#### **Responsive readings** engage congregation:

- Antiphonal psalms (Psalm 96, 98)
- Liturgical responses after each reading ("Thanks be to God," "Praise to you, O Christ")

### **The sermon/homily:**

Faithful Christmas preaching:

- **Expounds Scripture:** Not generic holiday thoughts but specific textual exposition
- **Explains theology:** Incarnation, virgin birth, dual natures, salvation
- **Applies truth:** How does the Word-made-flesh change how we live?
- **Calls for response:** Worship, obedience, witness, hope

Christmas preaching is explored in Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).

### **Common Christmas sermon themes:**

- The glory and humility of the Incarnation
- God's faithfulness to His promises
- Christ as fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy
- The purpose of Christ's coming (to save sinners)
- Appropriate responses to God's gift

### **Preaching challenges:**

- Avoiding mere sentimentality without sacrificing warmth
- Fresh engagement with familiar texts
- Reaching both longtime believers and Christmas-only attendees
- Balancing theological depth with accessibility

### **Congregational Song: Hymns and Carols**

Singing together is powerful corporate worship act, particularly important at Christmas when congregations often include visitors drawn by the music. The theology of congregational singing is explored in Brian Wren, *Praying Twice: The Music and Words of Congregational Song* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

### **Traditional Christmas hymns:**

- "O Come, All Ye Faithful" (*Adeste Fideles*)
- "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing"
- "O Come, O Come Emmanuel" (Advent, but often sung at Christmas)
- "Angels We Have Heard on High"
- "Silent Night"

- "The First Noel"
- "Away in a Manger"
- "What Child Is This?"

These hymns:

- Teach theology through lyrics (often more sound than sermon!)
- Create emotional connection through melody and association
- Unite congregation across generations (familiar songs everyone knows)
- Allow full participation regardless of musical training

The history of Christmas carols is traced in William Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York: Haworth Press, 1995).

**Contemporary worship songs** also celebrate Christmas:

- "O Holy Night" (actually 19th century but feels contemporary)
- Modern arrangements of traditional carols
- New compositions celebrating Incarnation

**Choral anthems:**

- Handel's *Messiah* (particularly "For Unto Us a Child Is Born")
- Other classical and contemporary sacred music
- Provide beauty, express worship complexity, showcase God-glorifying artistry

**Musical considerations:**

- Balance traditional and contemporary (don't alienate either preference group)
- Quality matters (rehearse well, use capable musicians)
- Theological content (lyrics should be doctrinally sound, not merely festive)
- Accessibility (include songs everyone can sing, not just choir pieces)

**Prayer: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Intercession**

Prayer forms essential element of Christmas worship, following traditional categories. The structure of prayer in worship is explored in Robert E. Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 4, *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994).

**Adoration:** Praising God for who He is and what He has done in the Incarnation.

"Almighty God, you have given us your only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him and to be born this day of a pure virgin: Grant that we, who have been born again and made your children by adoption and grace, may daily be renewed by your Holy Spirit; through our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom with you and the same Spirit be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen." (*Book of Common Prayer*)

**Confession:** Acknowledging sin and unworthiness, receiving assurance of forgiveness through Christ.

"Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. We have failed to be an obedient church. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen." (*United Methodist Hymnal*)

**Thanksgiving:** Expressing gratitude for God's gift of His Son and all blessings flowing from the Incarnation.

"Father in heaven, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to be born of Mary and take our human nature upon himself. We thank you for this greatest of all gifts. We thank you for all the ways you have blessed us through Christ—salvation, forgiveness, new life, hope, and eternal joy. Accept our thanks and use our lives to glorify you. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

**Intercession:** Praying for others—the church, the world, the suffering, the lost.

"Lord Jesus Christ, whose birth we celebrate this day, we pray for your church throughout the world. Strengthen believers, awaken the indifferent, convert the lost. Bring peace where there is conflict, healing where there is suffering, hope where there is despair. Come quickly, Lord Jesus, and establish your kingdom. Amen."

The Lord's Prayer often concludes the prayers, uniting congregation in Christ's own prayer.

Prayer can be:

- **Scripted** (written prayers from tradition or composed for the occasion)
- **Extemporaneous** (spontaneous, led by minister or congregation)
- **Responsive** (alternating between leader and people)
- **Silent** (periods of quiet reflection and individual prayer)

All forms have value and can be combined in single service.

**Creeds: Confessing Faith**

Many liturgical traditions include credal affirmation, particularly the Nicene Creed with its clear Incarnation theology. The role of creeds in worship is explored in J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (3rd ed., New York: Longman, 1972).

### **The Nicene Creed:**

"...For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures..."

### **The Apostles' Creed** also clearly affirms Incarnation:

"...I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary..."

Credal confession:

- Unites believers across time and space (same confession for nearly 2,000 years)
- Teaches doctrine through repetition
- Creates corporate identity (we believe together)
- Defends against heresy (marking boundaries of orthodox faith)

Non-creedal churches may use Scripture affirmations or responsive readings serving similar functions.

### **Offering: Presenting Gifts**

The offering represents worshipers' tangible response to God's gift of His Son. The theology of offering is explored in Ronald E. Vallet and Charles E. Zech, eds., *The Mainline Church's Funding Crisis: Issues and Possibilities* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

**2 Corinthians 8:9:** "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich."

The offering includes:

- Financial gifts for church support, ministry, missions, the poor
- Symbolic self-offering (presenting ourselves, not just money)
- Gifts for the needy (food, toys, clothing—some churches collect specifically for poor at Christmas)

The act of giving:

- Acknowledges God's ownership of all things

- Expresses gratitude for God's generosity
- Participates in God's work in the world
- Combats materialism and greed

Christmas offerings often are generous (many churches receive largest offerings at Christmas and Easter), providing opportunity to support expanded ministry or special needs.

The offertory anthem or hymn accompanies the collection, maintaining worship focus during practical activity.

### **The Eucharist/Communion**

For traditions practicing weekly communion, Christmas is especially fitting occasion for the sacrament. The Christmas Eucharist is explored in Alexander Schmemann, *The Eucharist*.

The Eucharist at Christmas proclaims:

- **God gave His Son:** The bread and wine represent Christ's body and blood, given for us
- **Christ present:** As He came incarnationally, He comes sacramentally
- **Past and future:** Remembering His first coming, anticipating His return
- **Unity:** One body sharing one loaf, united in Christ

The Great Thanksgiving (Eucharistic prayer) often includes Christmas themes:

"...In the fullness of time you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin. To the poor he proclaimed the good news of salvation; to prisoners, freedom; to the sorrowful, joy. In your love you gave him to suffer death upon the cross, that he might draw all people to himself..."

Communion creates intimate connection between God's gift (His Son) and our reception (eating and drinking).

Even traditions that don't practice weekly communion might celebrate it at Christmas, recognizing the appropriateness of receiving Christ sacramentally on the feast celebrating His incarnate coming.

### **The Sending: Benediction and Commission**

Worship concludes not with dismissal but with sending—God's people go forth with His blessing to serve Him in the world. The theology of sending is explored in Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

**The benediction** pronounces God's blessing:

Traditional Christmas benediction: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen."

Or Aaronic blessing (Numbers 6:24-26): "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace."

**The commission** sends congregation forth: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord, proclaiming the good news of His coming." Response: "Thanks be to God!"

### **Closing hymn:**

- Often triumphant, celebratory
- Examples: "Joy to the World," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "Go, Tell It on the Mountain"
- Sends congregation out with joy and energy

Postlude music continues the celebration as people exit.

The sending reminds us that worship doesn't end when the service concludes. We worship by living Christianly throughout the week, serving Christ in the world.

## **Special Christmas Services**

Beyond regular Sunday worship, churches often offer special Christmas services with distinctive character.

### **Christmas Eve Candlelight Service**

Among the most beloved services, Christmas Eve candlelight worship combines intimacy with grandeur, simplicity with profound symbolism. Candlelight services are explored in Hoyt L. Hickman et al., *Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986).

### **Typical structure:**

- Service usually begins in darkness or dim lighting
- Carols and readings progress through the Nativity story
- Sermon brief or omitted (the story speaks for itself)
- Candles distributed to congregation
- Climax: Candlelighting—light passed from candle to candle throughout congregation while singing "Silent Night"

- Benediction spoken over candlelit congregation

### **The candlelighting:**

- Symbolizes Christ as Light of the World (John 8:12)
- Demonstrates gospel spreading person-to-person
- Creates unforgettable sensory experience (sight of hundreds of candles, smell of wax, warmth of flame)
- Unites congregation in shared action
- Moves even the cynical or resistant (simple beauty transcends barriers)

### **Practical considerations:**

- Fire safety (candles with drip guards, careful supervision, fire extinguishers accessible)
- Sufficient candles and lighters
- Clear instructions for safe lighting
- Backup plans if local fire codes prohibit open flames (LED candles work but lack authentic experience)

This service often attracts highest attendance of the year—regular members, Christmas-and-Easter Christians, and visitors. The intimate, accessible nature welcomes all while maintaining Christian substance.

### **Midnight Mass**

The traditional Midnight Mass (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, some Methodist churches) begins late Christmas Eve (11 PM or 11:30 PM) and extends past midnight into Christmas Day. Midnight Mass tradition is explored in Josef A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*.

This creates powerful symbolism:

- Beginning in darkness, ending in light
- Moving from waiting (Advent) to celebration (Christmas)
- Marking the threshold from Christmas Eve to Christmas Day
- Echoing the shepherds who kept watch by night

The service often includes:

- Full liturgy with Eucharist/Communion
- Elaborate ceremonial (incense, processions, special music)

- Extended readings and sermon
- Festive decorations revealed (some churches keep sanctuary covered/darkened through Advent, unveiling full Christmas decorations only at Midnight Mass)

### **Attendance at Midnight Mass:**

- Traditional for devout Catholics and high-church Protestants
- Creates sense of occasion and sacrifice (staying up late, gathering at unusual hour)
- Particularly meaningful for those whose Christmas Day includes other obligations
- Can accommodate shift workers or others unable to attend daytime services

### **Challenges include:**

- Late hour difficult for families with young children
- Fatigue affecting participation
- Smaller attendance than other services in some locations
- Staffing difficulties (musicians, clergy, volunteers need to be present)

Nevertheless, for many, Midnight Mass is Christmas's liturgical pinnacle—solemn, beautiful, transcendent.

### **"Lessons and Carols" Service**

The Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols, originating at King's College, Cambridge (1918), has become popular worldwide. The Lessons and Carols service is documented in Stephen Cleobury and Malcolm Archer, eds., *The Oxford Book of Carols* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

**The structure:** Nine Scripture readings trace salvation history from Creation through Incarnation, interspersed with hymns and carols:

1. Genesis 3:8-15 (The Fall; promise of redemption)
2. Genesis 22:15-18 (God's promise to Abraham)
3. Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 (Prophet foretells Messiah's birth)
4. Isaiah 11:1-3a, 4a, 6-9 (The peaceful kingdom)
5. Luke 1:26-35, 38 (The angel Gabriel visits Mary)
6. Luke 2:1, 3-7 (The birth of Jesus)
7. Luke 2:8-16 (The shepherds visit)
8. Matthew 2:1-11 (The wise men visit)

## 9. John 1:1-14 (The Word made flesh)

**Between readings:** Hymns and carols related to each passage **Opening and closing:** Congregational hymns **Prayers:** Brief prayers between some readings

This service:

- Tells the complete redemption story (not just Nativity)
- Emphasizes Scripture's centrality
- Balances Word and music
- Works equally well as concert or worship service
- Accessible to visitors (easy to follow, beautiful music)
- Suitable for ecumenical gatherings (Scripture-focused, broadly Christian)

Many churches adapt the Cambridge format—varying number of lessons, adding communion, modifying readings—while maintaining the basic structure.

## Children's Christmas Pageant

Nativity pageants involving children teaching the Christmas story through drama, particularly meaningful for families and for children's faith formation. Children's pageants are discussed in Delia Halverson, *How to Train Volunteer Teachers* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991).

### Typical pageant includes:

- Children costumed as Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, Magi, animals
- Narration (often by adult reader or older youth)
- Songs/carols performed by children
- Sometimes minimal dialogue
- Usually simple staging (stable/manger as central set piece)

### Educational value:

- Children learn the Nativity narrative through embodied participation
- Visual/kinesthetic learners engaged
- Families create memories
- Church community celebrates its children

### Challenges:

- Logistics (costumes, rehearsals, managing large groups of children)

- Balancing authentic worship with cute entertainment
- Including all children (even those with special needs or disabilities)
- Managing parental expectations and anxieties

### **Best practices:**

- Keep it simple (elaborate productions create stress)
- Focus on story, not perfection
- Make participation joyful, not stressful
- Frame it clearly as worship, not performance
- Include congregational singing so everyone participates

The pageant often becomes treasured tradition, with families returning year after year, children graduating from sheep to shepherds to Mary/Joseph, creating intergenerational continuity.

## **Worship Challenges and Opportunities**

Christmas worship presents both challenges and opportunities requiring wisdom and discernment.

### **Challenge: Sentimentality vs. Substance**

Christmas easily becomes sentimental—warm feelings, nostalgic memories, aesthetic beauty—without theological substance. This challenge is explored in Marva J. Dawn, *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*.

**The danger:** Worship that makes people feel good without confronting them with truth, calling them to repentance, or forming them in Christian faith.

### **The remedy:**

- Ground everything in Scripture (not just stories but exposition)
- Preach the whole gospel (Christ born to die for our sins)
- Maintain theological precision (Incarnation's doctrinal specifics)
- Balance warmth with truth (can be emotionally powerful and doctrinally sound)

Christmas sentiment is legitimate (appropriate joy, gratitude, wonder) when rooted in theological reality. Sentiment becomes sentimentality when detached from substance.

### **Challenge: Christmas-and-Easter Christians**

Many churches see largest attendance at Christmas (and Easter), with visitors who rarely or never attend otherwise. This pastoral challenge is explored in William H. Willimon,

*Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ordained Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002).

This creates tension:

- **Opportunity:** Reach people who wouldn't otherwise hear the gospel
- **Challenge:** How to make worship accessible without compromising substance
- **Question:** Gear services toward regulars or visitors?

**Wise approaches:**

- Don't dumb down (assume intelligence and spiritual hunger)
- Do explain clearly (don't assume familiarity with Christian vocabulary)
- Welcome warmly (make visitors feel genuinely welcomed, not judged)
- Preach gospel clearly (Christmas provides natural evangelistic opportunity)
- Invite follow-up (provide clear next steps for those wanting to explore faith)
- Maintain regular worship integrity (Christmas service should feel continuous with ordinary worship, not completely different)

The goal: Provide excellent worship that serves both faithful members and seeking visitors, neither alienating regulars nor excluding newcomers.

### **Challenge: Commercialism and Cultural Christmas**

Cultural Christmas (Santa, shopping, parties, office celebrations) competes with or obscures Christian Christmas. This challenge is analyzed in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Worship must clearly distinguish:

- We're celebrating Christ's birth, not "the holidays"
- Our joy comes from salvation, not material gifts
- Christmas is a sacred feast, not merely cultural tradition

This requires:

- Explicit Christological focus (name Christ often, clearly)
- Biblical content (Scripture, not generic seasonal themes)
- Counter-cultural elements (addressing materialism, consumerism, commercialism)
- Authentic worship (not entertainment or cultural performance)

Yet maintain balance: Not every Christmas sermon needs to be against commercialism. Focus primarily on the positive (Christ's glory) rather than negative (cultural failings).

### **Opportunity: Evangelism and Witness**

Christmas services reach people who wouldn't otherwise attend church—providing natural evangelistic opportunity. The evangelistic potential is explored in Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel Wholly by Grace Communicated Truthfully & Lovingly* (rev. ed., Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

#### **Capitalize on this:**

- Preach the gospel clearly (don't assume everyone present is Christian)
- Explain the Nativity's significance (Christ born to save sinners)
- Invite response (What does this mean for you? How will you respond to Christ?)
- Provide follow-up materials (gospel literature, invitation to inquirers' class, contact information)

But avoid bait-and-switch: Don't market Christmas service as family-friendly entertainment then ambush visitors with hard-sell evangelistic appeal. Balance welcome and witness.

### **Opportunity: Beauty and Transcendence**

Christmas services can offer beauty and transcendence often absent from ordinary experience—pointing beyond material world to spiritual realities. The role of beauty is explored in Patrick Sherry, *Spirit and Beauty: An Introduction to Theological Aesthetics* (2nd ed., London: SCM Press, 2002).

#### **Through:**

- Excellent music (choir anthems, organ, congregational singing)
- Visual beauty (decorations, candles, vestments, space)
- Liturgical richness (ancient prayers, creeds, responsive readings)
- Sacred atmosphere (reverence, joy, wonder)

This beauty serves worship: When done well, aesthetic excellence doesn't distract from God but directs attention to Him, making His glory tangible.

But guard against idolatry: Beauty serves worship; worship doesn't serve beauty. Aesthetic excellence is means, not end.

### **Conclusion: Worship as the Heart of Christmas**

Amid cultural Christmas's noise and commercial Christmas's frenzy, Christian worship stands as declaration that Christmas has objective meaning rooted in historical and theological reality.

In worship, we proclaim:

- God became human in Jesus Christ
- This Incarnation accomplishes our salvation
- This truth demands response—faith, obedience, worship

In worship, we resist:

- Sentimentalism that substitutes feeling for truth
- Commercialism that reduces Christmas to consumption
- Secularism that empties Christmas of Christian meaning
- Cultural Christianity that maintains forms without substance

In worship, we embody:

- The church as distinctive community
- Christianity as more than private spirituality
- Faith as corporate, not merely individual
- Theology as lived, not merely intellectual

Through corporate Christmas worship—gathering to hear Scripture, sing hymns, celebrate Eucharist, confess faith, and receive blessing—we participate in the church's historic practice, unite with believers worldwide, and declare to watching world that the Word truly became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

This worship is Christmas's heart. Everything else—traditions, decorations, gifts, gatherings—should flow from and point toward this central reality: Jesus Christ, God's Son, born in Bethlehem, worshiped by shepherds and Magi, proclaimed by angels, destined to die and rise, King forever.

As James K. A. Smith writes in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), worship is not merely expressive but formative—it shapes us into the image of what we worship. When we worship Christ in the Incarnation, we are formed into people who embody His humility, His love, His mission. Christmas worship is not an interruption of life but the pattern for Christian living.

Let us worship Him.

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## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

### Christmas and Practical Wisdom for Faithful Celebration

Throughout this manuscript, we have explored Christmas from multiple angles—theological, historical, liturgical, cultural, and symbolic. We have examined the biblical foundations of the Nativity, traced the development of Christmas traditions, analyzed the meaning of Advent and its symbols, and surveyed global expressions of Christmas celebration. Yet a crucial question remains: How should individual Christians and Christian families actually celebrate Christmas in ways that honor Christ, resist cultural distortions, form children in faith, and bear witness to the gospel? This concluding chapter offers practical wisdom for faithful Christmas observance, addressing common challenges and providing concrete guidance for making Christmas what it should be—a season of worshipful celebration of the Incarnation that shapes our discipleship and testifies to the world that God became human to save us.

#### **The Fundamental Question: What Is Christmas For?**

Before addressing practical details, we must answer the fundamental question: What is the purpose of Christmas celebration?

#### **Christmas Celebrates a Historical Reality**

Christmas is not primarily about:

- Family togetherness (though that's good)
- Childhood magic and wonder (though that has value)
- Cultural tradition (though traditions connect us across time)
- Economic stimulus (though businesses depend on it)
- Feeling festive (though joy is appropriate)

Christmas is fundamentally about a historical and theological reality: God became human in Jesus Christ. The eternal Word took flesh, was born of the Virgin Mary, and entered our world to accomplish our salvation. The historical and theological nature of Christmas is explored in Thomas F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

This means:

**Christmas is objective, not subjective.** It commemorates something that happened, not merely something we feel or believe. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) is a historical claim, not a sentiment. The objectivity of Christian truth is emphasized in J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (20th anniversary ed., Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

**Christmas is theological, not merely cultural.** We celebrate because of doctrinal truth—Incarnation, virgin birth, dual natures of Christ, the beginning of redemptive work—not just because December 25 arrives annually.

**Christmas is Christological, not generic.** It's about Jesus specifically—His birth, His identity, His mission—not vaguely about "peace" or "goodwill" or "the holiday season."

Understanding this shapes everything else. If Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, then faithful Christmas observance must center on Christ, ground itself in Scripture and theology, and resist reduction to sentiment, consumerism, or cultural tradition divorced from Christian meaning.

### **Christmas Forms Christian Discipleship**

Christmas should contribute to Christian formation—the lifelong process of being shaped into Christ's likeness. The concept of spiritual formation is explored in Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988).

The season provides opportunities for:

**Theological reflection:** The Incarnation is profound mystery worthy of contemplation. Christmas invites us to marvel at God becoming human, to ponder what this reveals about God's character and purposes.

**Spiritual disciplines:** Advent fasting, increased prayer, Scripture meditation, worship attendance, service to others—all disciplines that Christmas season naturally encourages. The practice of spiritual disciplines is explored in Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (3rd ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998).

**Family formation:** Parents teaching children biblical narratives, explaining symbols' meanings, modeling generosity and gratitude—Christmas becomes crucible for faith formation. Family spiritual formation is discussed in Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family the Forming Center: A Vision of the Role of Family in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996).

**Community building:** Church gatherings, service projects, caroling, shared meals—Christmas strengthens bonds within the body of Christ.

**Witness to the world:** How Christians celebrate (or don't celebrate) Christmas testifies to watching neighbors, coworkers, friends about what we value and believe.

If Christmas doesn't form us in Christlikeness, if it leaves us unchanged, if it's merely annual interruption rather than formative spiritual season, then we're missing its purpose.

### **Christmas Proclaims the Gospel**

Christmas is inherently evangelistic—the announcement "Christ the Lord is born" is good news meant for proclamation. The evangelistic nature of Christmas is explored in Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ* (New York: Viking, 2016).

The angels declared to shepherds: "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

This proclamation:

- Announces good news (gospel)
- Emphasizes universality ("for all the people")
- Identifies Jesus specifically (Savior, Christ, Lord)
- Calls for response (the shepherds go to Bethlehem and then spread the word)

Christians' Christmas celebration should likewise proclaim: Through our worship, our service, our generosity, our joy, our explicit testimony, we announce that Christ has come to save.

This means Christmas is opportunity for evangelistic invitation—inviting neighbors to church services, hosting gatherings where Christ is honored, giving gifts with Christian meaning, speaking explicitly about why we celebrate. The evangelistic use of Christmas is discussed in Mark Dever, *The Gospel and Personal Evangelism* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007).

### **Practical Principles for Christian Christmas Celebration**

With these purposes established, we can articulate principles guiding practical Christmas decisions.

#### **Principle 1: Keep Christ Central**

This sounds obvious but requires intentionality in a culture where commercial and secular Christmas easily overshadows Christian observance. The challenge of maintaining Christian identity in secular culture is explored in James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

**Practically, this means:**

**Worship is non-negotiable.** Attending Christmas services (Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, or both) should be priority, not afterthought. Families should plan around worship, not squeeze it in if time allows. The priority of corporate worship is emphasized in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (rev. ed., Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014).

**Scripture should be read regularly** throughout the season—Nativity narratives, prophecies, theological texts about the Incarnation. Family devotions, Advent readings, or simply reading Luke 2 on Christmas morning all keep Scripture central.

**Conversations should name Christ.** When discussing Christmas plans, gift-giving, celebrations, explicitly connect these to Christ. "We give gifts because God gave His Son." "We celebrate because Jesus was born to save us." Don't let Christmas become nameless "holiday."

**Decorations should include Christian symbols.** Nativity scenes, crosses, angels, stars—visual reminders of Christmas's meaning. These needn't be the only decorations, but they should be prominent.

**Music should be explicitly Christian.** While "Jingle Bells" and "Frosty the Snowman" are fun, they're not Christmas carols. Balance secular holiday songs with genuine Christian hymns and carols that teach theology. The theological content of Christmas carols is explored in William J. Reynolds, *A Survey of Christian Hymnody* (4th ed., Carol Stream: Hope Publishing, 1999).

**Service and generosity should point to Christ.** When serving others or giving gifts, explain why: "Because Christ gave Himself for us, we give to others." Make the connection explicit.

## **Principle 2: Observe Advent as Distinct from Christmas**

Advent and Christmas are different seasons with different character and purposes. Collapsing them into undifferentiated "holiday season" from Thanksgiving through New Year's loses Advent's distinctive value. The distinction between Advent and Christmas is explained in Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004).

### **Advent is:**

- Preparation, not celebration
- Anticipation, not arrival
- Waiting, not fulfillment
- Solemn (though hopeful), not purely festive

### **Practically, this means:**

**Delay some Christmas elements** until Christmas actually arrives:

- Consider not decorating fully until later in Advent or Christmas Eve
- Save some special foods/treats for Christmas Day rather than consuming throughout December
- Keep some gifts wrapped, some activities reserved for Christmas itself
- This creates anticipation and makes Christmas Day more special

**Observe Advent practices:**

- Light Advent wreath candles weekly
- Use Advent devotional materials
- Practice increased prayer, Scripture reading, service
- Attend midweek Advent services if your church offers them

**Teach children about waiting.** In a culture of instant gratification, Advent's patient anticipation forms character. Help children understand that waiting is not punishment but preparation. The formative power of waiting is discussed in Ben Patterson, *Waiting: Finding Hope When God Seems Silent* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989).

**Resist cultural pressure** to celebrate Christmas prematurely. Stores and media promote Christmas from November onward; Christians can maintain Advent as distinct season.

That said, balance is needed. Rigid insistence on "no Christmas until December 25" can become legalistic. The goal is meaningful distinction between seasons, not rules for their own sake.

**Principle 3: Practice Simplicity and Resist Consumerism**

Christmas has become overwhelmingly commercial in Western culture, with pressure to spend excessively on gifts, decorations, food, entertainment. The commercialization of Christmas is analyzed in William T. Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed: Economics and Christian Desire* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

**Christians should resist this:**

**Set budgets and keep them.** Decide in advance what you can afford for Christmas, and don't exceed it. Debt for Christmas gifts contradicts stewardship principles. Biblical financial stewardship is explored in Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity* (rev. ed., Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2003).

**Limit gift-giving.** Consider:

- Restricting number of gifts per child

- Drawing names in extended families rather than everyone buying for everyone
- Focusing on experiences or homemade gifts rather than expensive purchases
- Giving to charity in others' names

**Question whether you need it.** Before buying decorations, holiday clothes, special items, ask: Is this necessary? Will it serve a purpose? Or is it just consumption for its own sake?

**Focus on presence, not presents.** Time together, attention given, experiences shared often mean more than material gifts.

**Teach children contentment.** Counter the "I want" mentality by fostering gratitude for what they have and joy in giving to others. Teaching contentment is explored in Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (1648; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964).

**Remember the first Christmas's simplicity.** Jesus was born in a stable, laid in a manger, visited by poor shepherds. The Incarnation occurred in poverty, not prosperity. While we needn't romanticize poverty, we should recognize that elaborate celebration wasn't Christmas's original character.

Biblical wisdom applies: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have" (Hebrews 13:5). Christmas should exemplify this, not contradict it.

#### **Principle 4: Be Generous to the Poor and Needy**

Christmas generosity should extend beyond family and friends to include those genuinely in need. The biblical mandate for generosity to the poor is explored in Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road* (2nd ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

Jesus' teaching is clear: "When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you" (Luke 14:13-14).

#### **Practically:**

**Adopt a family.** Many churches and charities coordinate Christmas adoption programs, connecting donors with families in need. Consider providing gifts, food, or necessities for a family who otherwise would have little.

**Give to organizations serving the poor.** Food banks, homeless shelters, rescue missions, international relief organizations—all need additional support during holidays.

**Include the lonely.** Invite international students, elderly neighbors, single parents, or others who might be alone for Christmas to your celebrations. The ministry of hospitality is explored in Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

**Volunteer.** Serve meals at shelters, participate in gift-distribution programs, visit nursing homes, support prison ministries.

**Teach children to give.** Involve children in selecting gifts for needy children, donating toys they've outgrown, contributing to charitable giving. This forms generous hearts.

**Give quietly.** Jesus taught, "when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing" (Matthew 6:3). Genuine generosity doesn't seek recognition.

**Remember proportionality.** If you spend \$500 on your own family's gifts but give \$20 to the poor, your priorities may be skewed. Generosity to those in need should be substantial, not token.

### **Principle 5: Create Family Traditions That Form Faith**

Family traditions are powerful formative influences, shaping children's understanding of faith, values, and identity. The formative power of family traditions is explored in Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family the Forming Center*.

**Wise families cultivate Christmas traditions that:**

**Teach Scripture.** Reading the Nativity story (Luke 2) on Christmas morning, dramatizing it with children, or working through an Advent devotional together all teach biblical content.

**Explain theology.** Discuss what decorations mean (evergreen = eternal life, lights = Christ as light, nativity scene = Incarnation), why we give gifts (God gave His Son), why we celebrate (salvation through Christ).

**Foster worship.** Attend services together, sing carols as a family, pray together, observe Advent rituals—make worship central to family Christmas.

**Build memories.** Repeated annual traditions create shared memory and identity. Baking certain cookies, watching particular movies, visiting certain places—these become touchstones.

**Include service.** Make serving others part of family tradition—annual volunteer project, adopting a family, caroling at nursing homes—teaches that Christianity is lived, not merely believed.

**Balance old and new.** Honor traditions from previous generations while creating new ones appropriate to your family's current situation.

**Some practical tradition ideas:**

**Jesse Tree:** Create or purchase Jesse Tree ornaments representing Old Testament salvation history. Each day of Advent, read a Scripture passage and add corresponding ornament, culminating in nativity ornaments at Christmas. The Jesse Tree tradition is explained in Geraldine McCaughrean, *The Jesse Tree* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014).

**Advent calendar:** Daily Scripture readings, devotional thoughts, or service activities—not just candy (though candy's fine too!).

**Christmas Eve box:** Wrap pajamas, hot chocolate, Christmas movie, and Christmas story book. Open on Christmas Eve for cozy family time.

**Birthday cake for Jesus:** Some families bake and serve birthday cake on Christmas, explicitly celebrating Christ's birth.

**Ornament exchange:** Extended family exchanges ornaments annually, each choosing or making ornament representing that year's memories.

**Christmas morning worship:** Before opening gifts, gather for prayer, Scripture reading, and hymn singing.

**Letters to Jesus:** Children write letters to Jesus expressing love, gratitude, questions—focusing attention on relationship with Christ, not just wish lists for gifts.

The key is intentionality. Traditions don't form accidentally; they're cultivated through consistent practice and explicit connection to faith.

### **Principle 6: Rest and Delight in God's Good Gifts**

Christianity isn't joyless asceticism. While resisting consumerism and maintaining simplicity, we can also delight in God's good gifts—beauty, food, family, rest, celebration. The legitimacy of enjoying God's gifts is explored in Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans as They Really Were* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986).

God created:

- Beauty (and decorated the world elaborately)
- Taste (and made food delicious, not merely nutritious)
- Human relationships (and called them "very good")
- Festivity (commanded Israel to celebrate feasts)
- Rest (built Sabbath into creation order)

### **Christmas can rightly include:**

**Good food.** Special meals, favorite recipes, treats not eaten regularly—celebrating with feasting isn't sinful but biblical (Nehemiah 8:10: "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord").

**Beautiful decorations.** Creating lovely spaces honors God who makes all things beautiful. Aesthetic enjoyment reflects Creator in whose image we're made. The theology of beauty is explored in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982).

**Rest from work.** Taking time off, slowing down, being present with family—Sabbath rest principles apply to Christmas. The principle of Sabbath rest is explored in Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Finding Rest, Renewal, and Delight in Our Busy Lives* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999).

**Joyful celebration.** Laughter, games, singing, dancing—joy is fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22) and appropriate response to God's goodness.

**Giving and receiving gifts.** While resisting materialism, we can appreciate thoughtful gifts expressing love and care.

#### **The balance:**

**Enjoy without excess.** Feasting becomes gluttony when we eat to discomfort or waste. Gifts become greed when we demand more. Rest becomes sloth when we neglect responsibilities.

**Enjoy with gratitude.** Recognize all good things come from God (James 1:17). Let enjoyment lead to thanksgiving, not entitlement.

**Enjoy while remembering others.** Our abundance should move us to share with those in need, not hoard for ourselves.

**Enjoy within priorities.** Don't let legitimate enjoyment displace worship, Scripture, or service. Keep first things first.

Remember Paul's principle: "I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound... I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:12-13). Christians can enjoy abundance gratefully without being dependent on it, and can endure lack without despair.

### **Addressing Specific Challenges**

Christian families face particular challenges in contemporary Christmas celebration requiring wisdom and discernment.

#### **Challenge: Santa Claus**

Perhaps no Christmas issue generates more debate among Christians than Santa Claus. Should Christian families include Santa in their Christmas celebration? The Santa Claus question is discussed from various perspectives in Russell W. Dalton, *Faith Journey Through Fantasy Lands: A Christian Dialogue with Harry Potter, Star Wars, and The Lord of the Rings* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

#### **Arguments for including Santa:**

**Cultural participation.** Santa is ubiquitous in Western culture. Excluding him entirely can make children feel excluded or "other."

**Harmless fun.** Many Christians experienced Santa as children without damage to faith. It's imaginative play, not theological threat.

**Teachable moment.** The Santa legend, properly understood, can teach about giving (St. Nicholas's historical generosity), anticipation (waiting for Santa parallels waiting for Christ), and eventually discernment (learning truth about Santa can prepare for understanding religious truth).

**Parental freedom.** This is a matter of Christian liberty where Scripture doesn't give explicit command. The principle of Christian liberty is explored in D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996).

### **Arguments against including Santa:**

**Lying to children.** Deliberately deceiving children (even about Santa) seems problematic for parents called to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4). The importance of truth-telling is emphasized in Paul David Tripp, *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

**Confusion with Christ.** Santa's attributes (omniscient—knows if you're good or bad, omnipresent—visits all children in one night, rewards good behavior) parallel God's attributes. This can confuse young children or make faith seem like Santa—something you outgrow.

**Displaced focus.** Santa can easily dominate Christmas, with Christ becoming secondary. Children's excitement about Santa can exceed their interest in Jesus.

**Works righteousness.** "Be good or Santa won't bring presents" teaches behavior-based reward system contrary to grace.

**Materialism.** Santa's primary function is bringing material gifts, reinforcing consumerism.

**When children learn the truth,** they may feel betrayed, potentially damaging trust in parents and by extension in Christian teaching.

### **Middle ground approaches:**

**Include Santa as make-believe.** Some families treat Santa as fun fictional character (like Winnie the Pooh) without pretending he's real. Children know it's imaginative play, not deception.

**Focus on St. Nicholas.** Teach the historical St. Nicholas (4th-century bishop known for generosity), making him historical figure worthy of emulation, not magical gift-bringer. The historical St. Nicholas is documented in Charles W. Jones, *Saint Nicholas of Myra, Bari, and Manhattan: Biography of a Legend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

**Minimize Santa's role.** Allow cultural exposure (seeing mall Santas, Santa in media) without making him central to family celebration. Santa exists but doesn't dominate.

**Be explicit about priorities.** Make clear that Christmas is about Jesus, with Santa as minor cultural element if included at all.

**Respect others' choices.** Don't judge families who include Santa differently than you do. This is disputable matter (Romans 14).

**Whatever you choose:**

- Be intentional, not default
- Make Christ clearly primary
- Don't lie if asked directly
- Prepare for questions when children learn the truth
- Focus more on what you're for (Christ) than what you're against (Santa)

**Challenge: Family Expectations and Obligations**

Extended family can create pressure about how, when, and where to celebrate Christmas, particularly for married couples navigating two families' traditions. Navigating family systems is explored in Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985).

**Common tensions:**

**Which family to visit.** When both spouses' families expect Christmas presence, conflict arises.

**How long to stay.** Extended visits can be exhausting; brief visits can offend.

**Conflicting traditions.** Families celebrate differently—opening gifts different times, eating different foods, attending different churches—requiring negotiation.

**Ungodly family behavior.** Excessive drinking, gambling, inappropriate conversation, worldly focus—things Christians may want to avoid.

**Financial expectations.** Pressure to give gifts you can't afford or participate in expensive activities.

**Wise approaches:**

**Communicate early and clearly.** Don't wait until December to discuss plans. Early, honest conversation prevents misunderstanding.

**Establish your own family's priorities.** You and your spouse are a new family unit. You're not obligated to maintain every tradition from families of origin.

**Consider alternating years.** Spend Christmas with one family in even years, the other in odd years. Or celebrate different days (Christmas Eve with one, Christmas Day with the other).

**Set boundaries graciously.** You can love family while saying no to requests or expectations that violate your convictions or exceed your capacity. Setting boundaries is explored in Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *Boundaries: When to Say Yes, How to Say No to Take Control of Your Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

**Be flexible where possible, firm where necessary.** Compromise on matters of preference; stand firm on matters of principle.

**Honor parents** (Exodus 20:12) without being controlled by them. Honoring doesn't mean obeying or enabling unhealthy patterns.

**Keep focus on Christ.** When family gatherings become contentious or stressful, remember Christmas's purpose. Don't let family dynamics steal joy or distract from worship.

**Remember grace.** Family members aren't perfect; neither are you. Extend the grace you've received. Forgive offenses. Pursue peace where possible (Romans 12:18).

### **Challenge: Work Demands and Busyness**

The weeks leading to Christmas are often frantically busy—work deadlines, holiday parties, shopping, decorating, cooking, traveling. The activity that should prepare for celebration instead creates exhaustion. The problem of busyness is explored in John Ortberg, *The Life You've Always Wanted: Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).

This busyness undermines Christmas's purpose. We arrive at December 25 depleted, not prepared; stressed, not peaceful; relieved it's over, not joyfully celebrating.

#### **Counter this by:**

**Saying no.** You don't have to attend every party, accept every invitation, participate in every activity. Selective participation leaves time for what matters.

**Planning ahead.** Don't wait until December to shop, plan meals, organize logistics. Spreading tasks over weeks reduces crunch.

**Simplifying expectations.** The perfect Christmas is enemy of the good Christmas. Aim for meaningful, not magazine-cover-worthy.

**Protecting time for rest and worship.** Schedule rest like you schedule activities. Guard time for church, family devotions, quiet evenings at home.

**Limiting commitments.** If your calendar is packed before Thanksgiving, December will be overwhelming. Build in margin.

**Remembering priorities.** When faced with competing demands, ask: Does this serve Christ? Does this form my family? Or is it just busyness?

**Working efficiently.** Shop online to avoid crowds. Meal plan to streamline cooking. Delegate and ask for help.

**Being realistic about capacity.** Introverts need more quiet time than extroverts. Parents of young children have less margin than empty nesters. Know your limits.

The goal isn't avoiding all activity but ensuring activity serves celebration rather than undermining it.

### **Challenge: Loneliness, Grief, and Difficult Circumstances**

Christmas can be painful for those facing loss, loneliness, illness, unemployment, family estrangement, or other difficulties. Cultural expectation of universal Christmas joy can make suffering feel doubly isolating. Ministry to the suffering during holidays is explored in Kenneth C. Haugk, *Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart: How to Relate to Those Who Are Suffering* (St. Louis: Stephen Ministries, 2004).

#### **The church should:**

**Acknowledge honestly** that Christmas is hard for some. Don't pretend everyone is joyful. Make space for grief, lament, and struggle.

**Reach out intentionally.** Identify and contact those likely struggling—the bereaved, divorced, lonely, ill, financially stressed. Invite them to gatherings, offer practical help, simply check in.

**Preach with sensitivity.** While preaching Christmas joy, acknowledge that some hearers are hurting. Christ came for the brokenhearted, not just the comfortable.

**Create inclusive opportunities.** Services or gatherings specifically for those grieving, struggling, or lonely can provide community without forced cheerfulness.

**Offer practical help.** Single parents need childcare. The unemployed need financial assistance. The homebound need visitors. Meet concrete needs.

#### **Those experiencing difficulty should:**

**Be honest about your pain.** Don't feel pressure to fake joy you don't feel. Lament is biblical and appropriate. Biblical lament is explored in Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012).

**Seek community.** Isolation intensifies pain. Even when you don't feel like it, spend time with others.

**Remember Christ's solidarity.** Jesus entered into our suffering, was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He understands.

**Focus on truth, not feelings.** Christ's birth is objectively good news even when you don't feel joyful. Truth sustains when emotions fail.

**Practice gratitude for small things.** Even in suffering, small mercies exist. Noticing them doesn't deny pain but recognizes grace.

**Adjust expectations.** Christmas may look different this year. That's okay. Lowered expectations relieve pressure.

**Look forward to Christ's return.** Christmas's "already-not yet" tension is especially poignant for those suffering. Christ has come (bringing hope); Christ will come again (bringing complete redemption).

### **Teaching Children About Christmas**

Parents bear primary responsibility for their children's faith formation. Christmas provides rich opportunities for teaching, but requires intentionality. Parental responsibility for faith formation is explored in Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (rev. ed., Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2005).

#### **Start with Scripture**

The foundation is biblical literacy. Children should know the Christmas story from Scripture, not just cultural versions.

**Read Luke 1-2 and Matthew 1-2** regularly during Advent and Christmas. Make this as familiar as any Christmas movie.

**Act it out.** Young children learn through play. Let them dramatize the nativity, dress up as characters, build stable with blocks.

**Ask questions.** "Why was Jesus born in a stable?" "Who came to visit Him?" "What did the angels say?" Engage children's minds.

**Connect to the whole biblical story.** Show how Christmas fulfills Old Testament promises. Jesus is the promised Messiah, the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), the son of David, the Savior prophets foretold.

**Use age-appropriate resources.** Children's Bibles, picture books, videos can supplement but not replace actual Scripture reading.

#### **Explain Theology Simply**

Young children can grasp profound theology when explained simply and concretely. Teaching theology to children is discussed in Marty Machowski, *The Ology: Ancient Truths Ever New* (Grand Rapids: New Growth Press, 2015).

**The Incarnation:** "Jesus is God, but He became human like us. He was born as a baby so He could live with us and save us."

**The virgin birth:** "God did a miracle so Mary could have a baby even though she didn't have a husband. This shows Jesus is special—He's God's Son."

**Why Jesus came:** "We sin (do wrong things), and sin separates us from God. Jesus was born to grow up and die on the cross to take away our sin. That's why His birth is such good news!"

**Purpose of gifts:** "We give gifts because God gave us the best gift—Jesus. Everything good comes from God."

**Meaning of symbols:** Explain nativity scenes, evergreens, lights, stars—each carries meaning pointing to Christ.

**Use repetition.** Children need to hear truth repeatedly across years to internalize it.

**Answer questions honestly.** When children ask hard questions ("Why didn't the innkeeper have room?", "Why did Herod want to kill Jesus?"), give truthful, age-appropriate answers.

### **Model Faithful Celebration**

Children learn more from observation than instruction. Your Christmas practices teach more than your Christmas words. The formative power of parental example is explored in James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016).

If worship is non-negotiable in your life, children learn worship matters.

If you're generous to the poor, children learn generosity.

If you resist consumerism, children learn contentment.

If you speak gratefully about God's gifts, children learn thanksgiving.

If Christmas causes you stress and irritation, children learn that too.

If you focus on gifts and decorations more than Christ, that's what they'll value.

**Be consistent.** Don't teach one thing and live another. Hypocrisy damages faith formation more than almost anything.

### **Create Teachable Moments**

Christmas is filled with teachable moments if we're alert to them.

**When decorating:** Explain symbols' meanings.

**When shopping:** Discuss wise stewardship, generosity, gratitude.

**When serving others:** Explain why Christians serve, connecting to Christ's example.

**When receiving gifts:** Practice expressing gratitude, both to giver and to God.

**When seeing cultural Christmas:** Discuss differences between Christian and secular celebration.

**When singing carols:** Explain lyrics' theology.

**When visiting nativity scenes:** Tell the story, answering questions.

Don't preach constantly (that becomes nagging), but seize natural opportunities for spiritual conversation.

### **Balance Wonder and Truth**

Children's sense of wonder is precious and appropriate. The Incarnation is wondrous! Angels appearing is amazing! The star guiding Magi is mysterious and beautiful!

**Nurture wonder without fostering false beliefs.** Marvel at God's mighty acts without relying on myth or magic.

The biblical Christmas story is more wonderful than any fictional version. God became human! That's more astonishing than flying reindeer.

**Let children ask questions and express doubts.** Don't demand they believe without thinking. Faith that survives adulthood often develops through childhood questioning. Fostering faith that endures is explored in Kara Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

**Acknowledge mystery.** Some things we can't fully explain (How can Jesus be fully God and fully human? How did the virgin birth work biologically?). "I don't know" is sometimes the honest answer. Mystery isn't enemy of faith.

**Celebrate with joy.** Christianity isn't grim duty. Christmas should be genuinely joyful, not forced or artificial, but authentically celebrating good news.

### **Christmas as Witness**

How Christians celebrate Christmas testifies to neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family about what we believe and value. The concept of witness through lifestyle is explored in Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012).

### **Public Witness Through Private Practice**

Your Christmas observance is public witness even in private:

Neighbors see your decorations (or lack thereof). What do they communicate?

Coworkers hear how you talk about Christmas—complaints about stress and spending, or genuine joy about Christ's birth?

Friends observe your priorities—where you invest time, money, energy.

Extended family watches how you navigate cultural Christmas versus Christian Christmas.

This doesn't mean performing for observers or being self-conscious about witness. It means living consistently so private practice and public profession align.

### **Hospitality as Witness**

Opening your home to neighbors, international students, coworkers, or others provides natural evangelistic opportunity. The evangelistic power of hospitality is explored in Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2018).

Hospitality shows: Christians are generous, welcoming, others-focused—reflecting Christ's character.

#### **Christmas gatherings can include:**

- Reading the Nativity story
- Explaining why you celebrate (Christ's birth)
- Singing explicitly Christian carols
- Praying before meals
- Discussing Christmas's meaning

Do this naturally, not heavy-handedly. Overt preachiness feels like bait-and-switch. But authentic faith naturally expresses itself.

Hospitality particularly matters for international students, refugees, or others far from home. For many, this may be their first encounter with Christian celebration.

### **Explicit Testimony**

Sometimes witness requires explicit words—clear articulation of the gospel. The necessity of verbal witness is emphasized in Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel Wholly by Grace Communicated Truthfully & Lovingly* (rev. ed., Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

#### **Christmas provides natural openings:**

**When asked what Christmas means to you:** "Christmas celebrates Jesus' birth. I believe He's God who became human to save us from our sins. That's incredibly good news worth celebrating!"

**When giving gifts:** Include Christian books, Bibles, or gospel literature along with other gifts.

**When sending cards:** Choose explicitly Christian cards with Scripture or gospel message, and write personal notes expressing what Christ means to you.

**When discussing plans:** "We're attending Christmas Eve service because worship is central to how we celebrate."

**At work holiday parties:** When asked about your Christmas, share both the fun (family gatherings, traditions) and the sacred (worship, Scripture reading, serving the poor).

**Be winsome, not defensive.** Share your faith positively, joyfully, humbly—not judgmentally or confrontationally.

**Be prepared for questions.** Expressing genuine Christian faith will provoke curiosity. Be ready to explain further, invite to church, offer to discuss.

Remember Paul's exhortation: "Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Colossians 4:5-6).

### **Conclusion: Faithful Christmas in Faithless Age**

We live in strange cultural moment regarding Christmas—simultaneously over-celebrated (commercially, culturally, festively) and under-celebrated (theologically, spiritually, worshipfully). The cultural dynamics of contemporary Christianity are explored in James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009).

The culture knows Christmas as shopping season, family gathering time, decorative aesthetic, vague "holiday spirit," perhaps nostalgic religious background—but increasingly not as celebration of the Incarnation.

Christians must resist both wholesale rejection (abandoning Christmas because culture has distorted it) and uncritical acceptance (celebrating exactly as culture does, just with Christian vocabulary added).

#### **The faithful path is:**

**Clear Christian identity.** We celebrate Christmas because Christ was born, because God became human, because the Word took flesh. This is our reason, and it's sufficient.

**Theological depth.** We understand what we celebrate—Incarnation theology, virgin birth, dual natures, salvation accomplished through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

**Practical wisdom.** We navigate cultural Christmas's challenges—consumerism, busyness, sentimentality, secularization—with discernment, keeping Christ central while engaging culture appropriately.

**Generous spirit.** We celebrate with open hands and hearts—giving to the poor, including the lonely, serving others, bearing witness to Christ.

**Joyful conviction.** We refuse both grim legalism (turning Christmas into burden) and shallow sentimentality (reducing Christmas to feelings). We celebrate with authentic joy rooted in theological truth.

**Formative practice.** We use Christmas to form ourselves and our children in Christian faith, creating traditions and rhythms that shape discipleship.

**Witness orientation.** We see Christmas as opportunity—to proclaim Christ, to serve neighbors, to demonstrate love, to invite people into the gospel.

This is hard work. Faithful Christmas celebration requires constant vigilance against cultural pressures, intentionality in forming family practices, courage to prioritize differently than surrounding culture, wisdom to navigate complex decisions, and grace toward ourselves and others when we fall short.

But it's worth it. Christmas—when celebrated faithfully as worship of Christ, rooted in Scripture and theology, expressed through generous service, and forming us in Christian discipleship—becomes powerful witness to the world and means of grace for believers.

The Word became flesh. That truth remains as revolutionary, transformative, and glorious today as when angels first announced it to shepherds. Our Christmas celebration should proclaim this truth, embody this truth, and testify that God so loved the world that He gave His only Son.

May our Christmas celebrations—in homes and churches, in public and private, through word and deed, in joy and in service—faithfully honor the One whose birth we celebrate, the Lord Jesus Christ, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, God with us, Savior of the world.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

## **EPILOGUE**

The journey through this comprehensive exploration of Christmas—its biblical foundations, historical development, theological significance, global expressions, and practical application—brings us full circle to the question with which we began: What is Christmas?

Christmas is celebration of the most astonishing claim in human history: God became human. The Creator entered His creation. The eternal Word took temporal flesh. The infinite became finite. The invisible became visible. Heaven came to earth. As G. K. Chesterton wrote in *The Everlasting Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1925), "The hands that made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle."

This claim is either the most profound truth or the most audacious falsehood. If true—and Christians through the centuries have staked their lives on its truth—then Christmas is not optional, peripheral, or merely cultural. It is central, essential, and eternally significant.

The Incarnation that Christmas celebrates is not isolated theological curiosity but the hinge of salvation history. Without the Word becoming flesh, there is no gospel, no salvation, no hope. Christmas is prerequisite for Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The cross requires the manger. Redemption required Incarnation. As Athanasius wrote in *On the Incarnation* (trans. and ed. Penelope Lawson, New York: Macmillan, 1946), "He became what we are that He might make us what He is."

As we conclude this study, several truths stand clear:

**First, Christmas is biblical.** Though the New Testament doesn't command its observance or specify its date, the Nativity narratives invite remembrance, contemplation, and celebration. The church's decision to designate a feast commemorating Christ's birth honors Scripture's witness and creates annual opportunity for focused reflection on the Incarnation.

**Second, Christmas is theological.** Properly understood and celebrated, Christmas teaches profound doctrines—Incarnation, virgin birth, Christ's dual natures, God's faithfulness to promises, the salvation He came to accomplish. Christmas is theology made accessible, doctrine proclaimed in story and song and symbol.

**Third, Christmas is formative.** Through repeated annual observance—Advent's preparation, Christmas's celebration, the season's sacred rhythms—Christians are formed in faith. We are shaped by what we repeatedly do, and Christmas shapes us to contemplate God's condescension, to practice generosity reflecting God's gift, to orient lives toward Christ.

**Fourth, Christmas is missional.** The gospel proclaimed in Christmas—Savior born, good news for all people—is inherently evangelistic. Christians' Christmas celebration should witness to watching world that Christ has come and will come again, that salvation is available, that God loves the world.

**Fifth, Christmas is joyful.** Despite commercialism's distortions and culture's secularization, despite personal difficulties and global suffering, Christmas remains occasion for genuine joy. The joy isn't naive—we know the baby in the manger will die on a cross—but it's real, rooted in God's faithfulness and salvation's certainty. As C. S. Lewis wrote in *Miracles* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), "The central miracle asserted by Christians is the Incarnation... Every other miracle prepares for this, or exhibits this, or results from this."

**Sixth, Christmas is global.** From Bethlehem to Beijing, from Norway to Nigeria, from ancient Ethiopia to contemporary South Korea, Christians worldwide celebrate Christ's birth in countless cultural expressions. This global chorus testifies to the gospel's universality and the church's catholicity.

**Seventh, Christmas is demanding.** Faithful Christmas celebration requires discernment, discipline, intentionality, and courage. It's easier to drift with cultural currents

than to swim against them, easier to celebrate superficially than theologically, easier to focus on gifts than on the Gift. Faithful Christmas costs something—but it's worth the cost.

As you finish this book and prepare for future Christmas celebrations, my prayer is that you will:

- **Know Scripture better**—understanding the biblical accounts of Christ's birth, the prophecies foretelling His coming, the theological truths proclaimed in the Nativity
- **Appreciate tradition more deeply**—recognizing that centuries of Christians have developed rich expressions of Christmas faith, from which we can learn and which connect us to the communion of saints
- **Celebrate more faithfully**—keeping Christ central, resisting cultural pressures, forming your family in Christian practice, and witnessing to others through how you celebrate
- **Worship more fully**—making corporate worship the heart of Christmas, participating in the church's liturgical life, and letting Christmas deepen your relationship with Christ

Christmas comes each year—offering annual opportunity to proclaim, celebrate, and respond to the Incarnation. May we use this opportunity well, honoring Christ through faithful celebration that forms us in discipleship and witnesses to the world.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. We have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father (John 1:14).

Glory to God in the highest.

Amen.

## GLOSSARY OF CHRISTMAS TERMS

### **Theological and Biblical Terms**

**Advent** - From Latin *adventus* meaning "coming" or "arrival"; refers both to Christ's first coming (Incarnation) and second coming (Return in glory); also the liturgical season preparing for Christmas, beginning the fourth Sunday before December 25 and characterized by themes of hope, peace, joy, and love.

**Annunciation** - The announcement by the archangel Gabriel to Mary that she would conceive and bear Jesus, the Son of God (Luke 1:26-38); celebrated liturgically on March 25.

**Atonement** - The reconciliation of God and humanity through Christ's sacrifice; from "at-one-ment," indicating the restoration of unity between God and His people; accomplished through Christ's substitutionary death.

**Branch** - Messianic title from prophetic literature (Isaiah 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; Zechariah 3:8, 6:12); refers to the shoot from Jesse's stump, indicating new life from the Davidic line; fulfilled in Christ.

**Chalcedonian Definition** - The doctrinal statement from the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD) affirming that Christ is one person with two distinct natures (fully divine and fully human) united "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

**Christ** - From Greek *Christos*, translating Hebrew *Mashiach* (Messiah), meaning "anointed one"; refers to one set apart by God for special service, particularly the promised deliverer of Israel; a title that became functionally a name for Jesus.

**Christkindl** - German for "Christ Child"; Protestant tradition originating in Reformation Germany where the Christ Child (often represented by an angel-like figure) brings gifts on Christmas Eve as alternative to Catholic St. Nicholas tradition.

**Communicatio Idiomatum** - Latin for "communication of properties"; the theological principle that attributes of either Christ's divine or human nature can be predicated of the one person of Christ.

**Davidic Covenant** - God's promise to King David (2 Samuel 7:12-16) that his throne would be established forever through his descendants, fulfilled ultimately in Christ, the eternal King from David's line.

**Dies Natalis** - Latin for "birthday"; in early Christianity, referred to a martyr's death date (their "birthday" into eternal life); later applied to Christ's birth celebration.

**Dies Natalis Solis Invicti** - Latin for "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun"; Roman festival celebrated December 25 under Emperor Aurelian (274 AD); one theory suggests Christians chose December 25 to counter or appropriate this pagan festival.

**Docetism** - An early heresy claiming Christ only appeared to have a physical body and human nature; denied the reality of the Incarnation; from Greek *dokein* ("to seem").

**Emmanuel (Immanuel)** - Hebrew name meaning "God with us" (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23); signifies God's presence among His people in the person of Jesus Christ; forms an inclusio with Jesus' promise in Matthew 28:20.

**Epiphany** - From Greek *epiphaneia* meaning "manifestation" or "appearance"; celebrated January 6, commemorating the Magi's visit and Christ's manifestation to the Gentiles; in Eastern churches, also celebrates Christ's baptism.

**Eschatology** - The study of last things or end times; includes Christ's second coming, final judgment, resurrection, and the consummation of God's kingdom; Advent emphasizes both Christ's first and second coming.

**Eucharist** - From Greek *eucharistia* meaning "thanksgiving"; the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion; the Christian sacrament commemorating Christ's Last Supper; especially fitting at Christmas as response to God's gift of His Son.

**Everlasting Father** - One of the messianic titles in Isaiah 9:6; indicates the Messiah's eternal nature and paternal care for His people; not to be confused with God the Father in Trinitarian theology.

**Fall, The** - The disobedience of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), resulting in sin entering the world and the corruption of human nature; Christmas celebrates the beginning of redemption from the Fall.

**Fiat** - Latin for "let it be"; refers specifically to Mary's response to Gabriel at the Annunciation: "let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38); model of faithful obedience.

**First Adam** - Adam, the first human created by God, whose disobedience brought sin and death into the world (Genesis 2-3; Romans 5:12-21); contrasted with Christ, the Second Adam.

**Firstborn** - Greek *prototokos*; a legal term indicating preeminence and special status; applied to Christ both literally (Mary's firstborn, Luke 2:7) and theologically (preeminent over all creation, Colossians 1:15).

**Fullness of Time** - Phrase from Galatians 4:4 indicating that Christ's birth occurred at the divinely appointed moment when historical, political, and cultural conditions were optimal for the gospel's spread.

**Hypostatic Union** - The union of Christ's divine and human natures in one person (*hypostasis*); the orthodox Christian understanding of the Incarnation defined at Chalcedon.

**Incarnation** - From Latin *incarnatio*, "to make flesh"; the Christian doctrine that God the Son took on human nature and became man in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:14); the central mystery Christmas celebrates.

**Jesse Tree** - Advent devotional practice using ornaments representing Old Testament salvation history, from Jesse (David's father) through Christ; based on Isaiah 11:1's prophecy of the Branch from Jesse's stump.

**Justification** - The act of God declaring a sinner righteous through faith in Christ; a legal declaration that one is in right standing before God; accomplished through Christ who came at Christmas.

**Kenosis** - From Greek *kenoo* meaning "to empty"; refers to Christ's self-emptying or voluntary laying aside of certain divine prerogatives in the Incarnation (Philippians 2:5-8); theological concept explaining how God became human.

**Light of the World** - Jesus' self-designation (John 8:12); fulfilled in Simeon's prophecy (Luke 2:32); celebrated at Christmas through candles, lights, and liturgical emphasis on Christ bringing light to darkness.

**Logos** - Greek for "Word"; in John 1:1-14, refers to Jesus Christ as God's perfect self-expression and communication; the eternal Word who became flesh at the Incarnation.

**Lord** - Greek *kyrios*; in the Septuagint, used to translate the divine name YHWH; applied to Jesus, it indicates His divine status and authority; the angels proclaim the newborn as "Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

**Magnificat** - Latin for "magnifies"; Mary's song of praise (Luke 1:46-55), beginning "My soul magnifies the Lord"; theologically rich canticle celebrating God's faithfulness and Mary's role in salvation history.

**Manger** - Greek *phatne*, meaning feeding trough for livestock; the place where the infant Jesus was laid after His birth (Luke 2:7, 12, 16); symbol of Christ's humility and the poverty of His first coming.

**Messiah** - Hebrew *Mashiach*, meaning "anointed one"; the promised deliverer and king from David's line who would restore Israel and establish God's kingdom; Jesus is confessed as the Messiah (Christ).

**Metanoia** - Greek word meaning "repentance"; literally "change of mind"; indicates fundamental reorientation from sin toward God; John the Baptist's Advent message preparing for Christ's coming.

**Mighty God** - One of the messianic titles in Isaiah 9:6 (*EI Gibbor*); clearly affirms the Messiah's full deity; the same title used for YHWH elsewhere in Isaiah.

**Nativity** - The birth of Jesus Christ; from Latin *nativitas* meaning "birth"; refers both to the historical event and to artistic/dramatic representations of Christ's birth scene.

**New Eve** - A theological typology identifying Mary as the counterpart to Eve; where Eve's disobedience brought sin, Mary's obedience facilitated redemption; patristic interpretation emphasizing Mary's role in salvation history.

**Nunc Dimittis** - Latin for "now dismiss"; Simeon's song of praise upon seeing the infant Jesus (Luke 2:29-32), beginning "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace"; one of the Gospel canticles.

**Original Sin** - The doctrine that all humanity inherits a sinful nature and guilt from Adam's first sin; the universal human condition of separation from God and inclination toward sin; the problem Christ came to solve.

**Parousia** - Greek word meaning "presence" or "coming"; used in the New Testament to refer to Christ's second coming; Advent celebrates both Christ's first coming and anticipates His Parousia.

**Prince of Peace** - One of the messianic titles in Isaiah 9:6 (*Sar Shalom*); indicates the Messiah will establish comprehensive peace (*shalom*); Jesus brings peace with God and will ultimately bring cosmic peace.

**Protoevangelium** - Latin for "first gospel"; refers to Genesis 3:15, the first biblical promise of redemption after the Fall; promise that the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head, fulfilled in Christ.

**Redemption** - The act of buying back or ransoming; God's deliverance of humanity from sin and death through Christ's atoning sacrifice; the purpose for which Christ came at Christmas.

**Righteousness** - Right standing before God; conformity to God's moral law and character; in justification, the righteousness of Christ credited to believers; Jesus comes as "the LORD is our righteousness" (Jeremiah 23:6).

**Root of Jesse** - Messianic title from Isaiah 11:10; paradoxically, Christ is both the Branch (descendant) and Root (source) of Jesse, pointing to His dual nature as David's son and David's Lord.

**Salvation** - Deliverance from sin and its consequences; restoration to right relationship with God through Christ; Jesus' name means "YHWH saves," indicating His saving mission (Matthew 1:21).

**Second Adam** - Christ, who through His obedience undoes what the first Adam did through disobedience; establishes a new humanity (Romans 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45-49); redemption parallels creation.

**Seed of the Woman** - Phrase from Genesis 3:15 referring to the coming deliverer who would defeat the serpent; in Christian interpretation, refers to Christ; unusual phrase "seed of the woman" seen as foreshadowing virgin birth.

**Septuagint (LXX)** - The Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, completed around 250-150 BC; widely used in the first-century world; translated *almah* (young woman) in Isaiah 7:14 as *parthenos* (virgin), influencing Matthew's interpretation.

**Shalom** - Hebrew word often translated "peace"; encompasses wholeness, completeness, well-being, harmony, and flourishing in all dimensions of life; the peace the Prince of Peace brings.

**Sin** - Rebellion against God; violation of God's law; missing the mark of God's perfect standard; separation from God; the condition from which Christ came to save us.

**Son of David** - Messianic title emphasizing Jesus' descent from King David and right to David's eternal throne; prominent in Matthew's Gospel and the Nativity narratives.

**Son of God** - A title for Jesus indicating His unique divine nature and relationship with God the Father; affirms His deity; announced by Gabriel (Luke 1:32, 35) and affirmed throughout the New Testament.

**Son of Man** - Jesus' preferred self-designation; connects to Daniel 7:13-14 and indicates both His humanity and His divine authority and glory; appears rarely in Nativity narratives but central to Jesus' ministry.

**Son of the Most High** - Title from Gabriel's announcement (Luke 1:32); emphasizes Jesus' supreme divine status as son of the Supreme God.

**Substitutionary Atonement** - The doctrine that Christ died in the place of sinners, bearing the punishment they deserved, thereby satisfying God's justice and securing their redemption; the purpose accomplished through Incarnation and crucifixion.

**Sun of Righteousness** - Messianic title from Malachi 4:2; associated with Christmas celebration as Christ brings light; early Christians connected December 25 to Christ as the true Sun opposing the pagan sun god.

**Swaddling Cloths** - Strips of cloth wrapped tightly around infants in ancient times; part of normal infant care; mentioned as a sign for the shepherds (Luke 2:12); may symbolize Christ's future burial cloths.

**Theotokos** - Greek for "God-bearer" or "Mother of God"; title for Mary affirmed at the Council of Ephesus (431 AD) to protect the doctrine of Christ's divinity against Nestorianism.

**Trinity** - The Christian doctrine that God exists eternally as three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) who are distinct yet share one divine essence; Nativity narratives show all three persons active in the Incarnation.

**Virgin Birth** - The doctrine that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary without a human father (Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 1:26-38); affirms both Christ's humanity and deity.

**Wonderful Counselor** - First of the messianic titles in Isaiah 9:6 (*Pele Yo'etz*); indicates the Messiah will possess supernatural, miraculous wisdom beyond human capacity.

**Word** - Translation of Greek *Logos*; John 1:1-14 identifies Jesus as the eternal Word who was with God, was God, and became flesh; God's perfect self-expression and communication.

## **Hebrew and Greek Terms**

**Almah** (Hebrew) - Young woman or maiden; used in Isaiah 7:14, translated in the Septuagint as *parthenos* (virgin); whether *almah* necessarily means virgin is debated, but Septuagint and Matthew interpret it as such.

**Christos** (Greek) - "Anointed one"; translates Hebrew *Mashiach* (Messiah); initially a title but became functionally a name when combined with Jesus.

**Dikaios** (Greek) - Righteous, just; used to describe Joseph (Matthew 1:19), Simeon (Luke 2:25), and other faithful individuals; indicates moral uprightness and covenant faithfulness.

**Doxa** (Greek) - Glory; translates Hebrew *kabod*; the visible manifestation of God's presence, majesty, and splendor; angels proclaim "Glory to God in the highest" (Luke 2:14).

**Eirēnē** (Greek) - Peace; translates Hebrew *shalom*; comprehensive well-being and harmony; proclaimed by angels at Christ's birth (Luke 2:14).

**El Gibbor** (Hebrew) - "Mighty God"; one of Isaiah 9:6's messianic titles; the same phrase used for YHWH in Isaiah 10:21, clearly affirming Messiah's deity.

**Eskēnōsen** (Greek) - "Tabernacled" or "dwelt"; from *skēnē* (tent/tabernacle); used in John 1:14 to describe the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us; echoes Old Testament tabernacle imagery.

**Euangelion** (Greek) - Good news, gospel; the message of salvation through Christ; the angels bring *euangelion* to the shepherds (Luke 2:10).

**Eulabēs** (Greek) - Devout, reverent, God-fearing; used to describe Simeon (Luke 2:25); indicates piety and careful observance.

**Hesed** (Hebrew) - Steadfast love, loving-kindness, covenant faithfulness; God's loyal love toward His people; celebrated in Mary's Magnificat.

**Kabod** (Hebrew) - Glory, honor, weightiness; the manifestation of God's presence and majesty; God's glory revealed in Christ's incarnation.

**Katalyma** (Greek) - Guest room or lodging place; the word translated "inn" in Luke 2:7; could refer to a caravanserai or a guest room in a private home; "no place for them in the *katalyma*."

**Kecharitomene** (Greek) - "Favored one" or "full of grace"; Gabriel's greeting to Mary (Luke 1:28); indicates Mary's special grace-filled status.

**Kyrios** (Greek) - Lord, master; in the Septuagint, translates the divine name YHWH; applied to Jesus, indicating His deity; angels proclaim Jesus as "Christ the Lord."

**Logos** (Greek) - Word, reason, divine rationality; in John 1:1-14, the eternal divine Word who became flesh; richest Christological term in New Testament.

**Mashiach** (Hebrew) - Anointed one, Messiah; one set apart by God through anointing with oil for special service (prophet, priest, or king); Jesus is the ultimate Anointed One.

**Pele Yo'etz** (Hebrew) - "Wonderful Counselor"; Isaiah 9:6 messianic title; *pele* indicates miraculous, supernatural quality; *yo'etz* means advisor or counselor.

**Parthenos** (Greek) - Virgin; used in the Septuagint to translate Isaiah 7:14 and in Matthew 1:23; clearly indicates virginity, distinguishing from general term for young woman.

**Phatne** (Greek) - Manger, feeding trough; the place where Jesus was laid (Luke 2:7, 12, 16); humble beginning for the King of Kings.

**Prototokos** (Greek) - Firstborn; indicates both temporal priority (first to be born) and preeminence of status (heir, primary); applied to Christ literally and theologically.

**Rhema** (Greek) - Word, saying, utterance; a specific statement or promise from God; Mary treasured these *rhemata* in her heart (Luke 2:19).

**Sar Shalom** (Hebrew) - "Prince of Peace"; Isaiah 9:6 messianic title; *sar* means prince or ruler; *shalom* is comprehensive peace and wholeness.

**Shalom** (Hebrew) - Peace, wholeness, completeness, well-being, harmony, flourishing; far richer than mere absence of conflict; what the Messiah brings.

**Sōtēr** (Greek) - Savior, deliverer; applied to God in the Old Testament and to Jesus in the New Testament; angels proclaim Jesus as "Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).

**Tekton** (Greek) - Craftsman, builder, carpenter; Joseph's occupation (Matthew 13:55); possibly working with wood, stone, or both; indicates modest social status.

**Theotokos** (Greek) - God-bearer, Mother of God; affirms that Mary bore the divine Son; title protects Incarnation doctrine by insisting Jesus is one divine person from conception.

**YHWH** (Hebrew) - The personal, covenant name of God, often rendered "the LORD" in English translations; from the verb "to be," indicating God's eternal, self-existent nature; the name Jesus (*Yeshua*) incorporates.

**Yeshua** (Hebrew) - Jesus; means "Yahweh saves" or "the LORD is salvation"; programmatic name announcing Jesus' mission (Matthew 1:21).

## **Christmas Traditions and Symbols**

**Advent Calendar** - Originally German tradition; counts down days from December 1 to Christmas Day (or through Advent season); modern versions often include daily chocolates, Scripture readings, or devotional content.

**Advent Wreath** - Circular evergreen wreath with four candles (traditionally three purple and one pink) arranged around the perimeter and sometimes a white Christ candle in the center; candles lit progressively on the four Sundays of Advent, with the Christ candle lit on Christmas Eve or Day.

**Belén/Nacimiento/Pesebre** - Spanish/Latin American terms for nativity scene (*belén* = Bethlehem); often elaborate, multi-level displays occupying entire rooms; central to Latin American Christmas celebration.

**Boxing Day** - December 26; traditionally the day when church alms boxes were opened and distributed to the poor; also when servants received gifts from employers; observed in Commonwealth countries.

**Candlelight Service** - Christmas Eve worship service, typically culminating in congregation lighting individual candles while singing "Silent Night"; symbolizes Christ as Light of the World and gospel spreading person to person.

**Carol** - A song of religious joy, particularly celebrating Christmas; from Old French *carole*, a circle dance with singing; Christmas carols teach theology through music and create emotional connection across generations.

**Christingle** - Primarily British tradition; orange representing the world, red ribbon representing Christ's blood, candle representing Christ as light, dried fruits and sweets representing God's creation; used in children's services.

**Christmas** - The feast celebrating Christ's birth; name derives from "Christ's Mass"; observed December 25 in Western churches, January 7 in some Eastern churches using Julian calendar.

**Christmas Rose** - Legendary flower said to have bloomed in the snow at Christ's birth; symbol of Christ bringing life in midst of death; *Helleborus niger* blooms in winter.

**Christmas Star** - Decoration representing the Star of Bethlehem that guided the Magi; common tree-topper; made from various materials including glass, metal, paper.

**Christmas Tree** - Evergreen tree decorated for Christmas; German origin, popularized by Martin Luther (legend) and spread globally via German customs and British royal family; evergreen symbolizes eternal life, triangular shape represents Trinity.

**Christkindlmarkt** - German Christmas market; medieval origin; sells handcrafted decorations, gifts, food, drink; most famous include Nuremberg and Dresden markets; combines commerce, community, and tradition.

**Creche** - French term for nativity scene; from Latin *cripia* (manger); three-dimensional representation of Christ's birth scene.

**Día de las Velitas** - Colombian "Day of the Little Candles" (December 7); marks Christmas season's beginning; people place candles and paper lanterns around nativity scenes and throughout neighborhoods.

**Epiphany** - January 6; celebrates Magi's visit and Christ's manifestation to Gentiles; called Twelfth Night (twelve days after Christmas); traditional end of Christmas season; in some traditions, gift-giving day.

**Evergreen** - Plants that remain green year-round (holly, ivy, pine, fir); used in Christmas decoration to symbolize eternal life, God's faithfulness, Christ's victory over death; ancient pre-Christian use Christianized.

**Holly** - Evergreen plant with red berries and sharp leaves; traditional Christmas decoration; sharp leaves symbolize Christ's crown of thorns, red berries symbolize His blood, evergreen nature symbolizes eternal life.

**Jesse Tree** - Advent devotional using ornaments representing Old Testament salvation history from Jesse (David's father) through Christ; ornaments added daily through Advent; based on Isaiah 11:1.

**Las Posadas** - Mexican/Central American tradition (December 16-24); reenacts Mary and Joseph's search for lodging; procession each night stopping at houses requesting shelter until finally welcomed; includes prayers, songs, *piñatas*, food.

**Lessons and Carols** - Service originating at King's College, Cambridge (1918); nine Scripture readings tracing salvation history from Creation through Incarnation, interspersed with hymns and carols; widely adopted format.

**Luminarias/Farolitos** - Paper lanterns or luminaria bags with candles inside; line walkways and rooftops especially in American Southwest and Latin America; guide way like stars guided Magi.

**Magi** - Wise men or astrologers from the East who followed a star to find and worship the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12); traditionally numbered three (based on three gifts) and given names Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar.

**Midnight Mass** - *Missa in Nocte*; traditional Mass beginning late Christmas Eve (11-11:30 PM) and extending past midnight into Christmas Day; one of three traditional Christmas Masses in Catholic liturgy; solemn, elaborate celebration.

**Mince Pie** - Traditional British Christmas food; originally contained meat (hence "mince"); spiced fruit filling represents Magi's gifts; eating one pie each day for twelve days of Christmas supposed to bring good luck.

**Nativity Pageant** - Dramatic presentation of the Christmas story, typically involving children costumed as Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, Magi; educational and formative for children and families.

**Nativity Scene** - Three-dimensional representation of Christ's birth; essential figures include Mary, Joseph, infant Jesus, manger; common additions include shepherds, angels, Magi, animals (ox, donkey); popularized by St. Francis of Assisi (1223).

**Noche Buena** - Spanish for "Good Night"; Christmas Eve; primary celebration in most Latin American countries, more important than Christmas Day; features elaborate family meals, Midnight Mass, gift-opening.

**Parol** - Filipino Christmas lantern; star-shaped, traditionally made from bamboo and paper; represents Star of Bethlehem; distinctive symbol of Filipino Christmas; displayed in windows and used in processions.

**Poinsettia** - Plant with red and green leaves native to Mexico; introduced to US by Joel Poinsett; star shape represents Star of Bethlehem, red represents Christ's blood; popular Christmas decoration.

**Rosca de Reyes** - "King's Cake"; ring-shaped sweet bread eaten on Epiphany (January 6) in Latin America and Spain; decorated with candied fruits; contains hidden baby Jesus figurine; finder hosts party on Candlemas (February 2).

**Simbang Gabi** - Filipino tradition of nine dawn Masses (3-5 AM) from December 16-24; completing all nine traditionally grants a wish; followed by traditional breakfast foods.

**Star of Bethlehem** - The star that guided the Magi to Jesus (Matthew 2:1-10); subject of astronomical speculation; symbolized by star decorations and tree-toppers; represents Christ as Light and divine guidance.

**Stollen** - German Christmas fruit bread; originated in Dresden; contains dried fruits, nuts, spices; dusted with powdered sugar; shape sometimes interpreted as representing swaddled infant Jesus.

**Three Kings Day** - *Día de los Reyes Magos*; January 6 (Epiphany); when children in many cultures receive gifts from the Three Kings; more significant than December 25 in some traditions.

**Twelve Days of Christmas** - December 25 through January 5 (ending before Epiphany on January 6); traditionally festive period when decorations remain up and celebration continues; inspired famous carol.

**Vigil** - Evening service before a major feast; Christmas Vigil occurs Christmas Eve; liturgical concept of feast beginning at sunset previous evening.

**Wassail** - Hot spiced cider or ale; traditional Christmas drink; from Anglo-Saxon *waes hael* ("be well/healthy"); associated with wassailing tradition of going door to door singing and drinking.

**Yule** - Germanic/Norse winter solstice festival; term Christianized to refer to Christmas season; Yule log tradition of burning large log throughout Christmas.

**Yule Log** - Large log traditionally burned in fireplace throughout Christmas season (ideally from Christmas Eve through Twelfth Night); modern yule log cake (*bûche de Noël*) represents this tradition.

### **Liturgical and Worship Terms**

**Advent Antiphons** - The "O Antiphons"; seven antiphons sung December 17-23; each begins with "O" and addresses Christ by different messianic title (O Wisdom, O Lord, O Root of Jesse, etc.); basis for hymn "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

**Benedictus** - "Blessed be"; Zechariah's song (Luke 1:68-79) sung after birth of John the Baptist; prophesies John's role and celebrates coming redemption; used in morning prayer liturgies.

**Candlemas** - February 2; Feast of the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple; commemorates Simeon and Anna's recognition of Jesus (Luke 2:22-38); traditional end of Christmas season; candles blessed.

**Carol Service** - Service centered on Christmas carol singing, often interspersed with Scripture readings; may be worship service or concert; accessible format for visitors.

**Christ Candle** - White candle in center of Advent wreath; lit on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day; represents Christ, the Light of the World.

**Christmas Eve** - December 24; vigil of Christmas; primary celebration in many traditions; features special services including candlelight services and Midnight Mass.

**Christmastide** - The Christmas season; traditionally from Christmas Day through Epiphany (January 6); sometimes extended through Baptism of the Lord or Candlemas.

**Collect** - Short prayer in liturgical worship; typically follows specific structure (address, basis, petition, purpose, conclusion); special collects composed for Christmas season.

**Epiklesis** - Invocation of the Holy Spirit; in Eucharistic prayers, asking Holy Spirit to consecrate elements and sanctify participants; relevant at Christmas as Holy Spirit's role in Incarnation.

**Gloria in Excelsis** - "Glory to God in the highest"; ancient hymn based on angels' song (Luke 2:14); omitted during Advent, sung at Christmas Mass; expresses joy and praise.

**Great Thanksgiving** - Eucharistic prayer; includes Christmas themes when celebrated during Christmas season; emphasizes Incarnation and God's gift of His Son.

**Lectionary** - Schedule of Scripture readings for worship services throughout liturgical year; Christmas lectionary includes Nativity narratives and prophetic texts.

**Liturgical Calendar** - Yearly cycle of Christian feasts and seasons; includes Advent, Christmas, Epiphany; structures worship and shapes formation.

**Liturgical Colors** - Colors used in vestments and paraments corresponding to seasons/feasts; Advent traditionally purple or blue; Christmas white and gold.

**Magnificat** - Mary's song (Luke 1:46-55); "My soul magnifies the Lord"; used in evening prayer services; theologically rich canticle expressing God's faithfulness and reversal of fortunes.

**Missa de Gallo** - Spanish for "Rooster's Mass"; Midnight Mass; called such because roosters crow at midnight when Christ was supposedly born.

**Nativity Fast** - Forty-day fast before Christmas in Eastern Orthodox tradition (November 15-December 24); preparation through abstinence similar to Lent before Easter.

**Nunc Dimittis** - Simeon's song (Luke 2:29-32); "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace"; used in evening prayer services; expresses fulfillment and peace at seeing salvation.

**O Antiphons** - See Advent Antiphons above.

**Octave** - Eight-day period of celebration; Christmas Octave runs December 25-January 1; each day celebrates aspect of Incarnation.

**Pericope** - Selected passage of Scripture appointed for liturgical reading; Christmas pericopes include Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 1-2, John 1:1-14.

**Postlude** - Music played as congregation exits after service; often festive, celebratory at Christmas.

**Preface** - Part of Eucharistic prayer; special Christmas prefaces emphasize Incarnation; begins "It is truly right and good...".

**Processional** - Entrance of clergy, choir, or worship leaders at service beginning; often elaborate at Christmas with candles, cross, banners.

**Proper** - Variable parts of liturgy changing with season or feast; includes proper prayers, readings, music for Christmas.

**Sanctus** - "Holy, Holy, Holy"; sung during Eucharistic prayer based on Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8; expresses worship of holy God who became incarnate.

**Te Deum** - Ancient Latin hymn "We Praise You, O God"; sung on major feasts including Christmas; expresses praise and thanksgiving.

**Vigil** - Evening service before major feast; Christmas Vigil on Christmas Eve anticipates feast's celebration.

### **Historical and Cultural Terms**

**Annunciation, Feast of** - March 25; celebrates Gabriel's announcement to Mary; exactly nine months before Christmas; calculated by some as conception date leading to December 25 birth.

**Augustus, Caesar** - First Roman emperor (63 BC – AD 14); ruled 27 BC to AD 14; his census decree brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem (Luke 2:1).

**Bethlehem** - Hebrew for "house of bread"; city of David's birth, located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem; prophesied as Messiah's birthplace (Micah 5:2); Jesus' birthplace.

**Caravanserai** - Inn or rest stop for travelers and their animals; typically courtyard surrounded by rooms; possibly the *katalyma* where there was no room for Mary and Joseph.

**Census** - Roman administrative registration for taxation and governance purposes; Augustus's census brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at appointed time.

**Dies Natalis Invicti** - See *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* above.

**Galilee** - Northern region of Israel; Nazareth, Mary and Joseph's home, located in Galilee; area of mixed Jewish-Gentile population.

**Gentiles** - Non-Jewish peoples; Magi represent Gentile recognition of Christ; Simeon prophesies Christ as "light for revelation to the Gentiles."

**Herod the Great** - King of Judea 37-4 BC; known for building projects (including temple expansion) and brutality; sought to kill infant Jesus (Matthew 2); died shortly after Jesus' birth.

**Jerusalem** - Israel's capital city and religious center; site of the temple; about 5 miles north of Bethlehem; where Jesus presented and recognized by Simeon and Anna.

**Judea** - Southern region of Israel, including Jerusalem and Bethlehem; under Roman rule through client kings like Herod.

**Julian Calendar** - Calendar instituted by Julius Caesar; used until Gregorian calendar (1582); Eastern churches still using Julian calendar celebrate Christmas January 7.

**Katalyma** - See Greek terms above; guest room where there was "no place" for Mary and Joseph.

**Levitical Law** - Laws given through Moses, particularly in Leviticus, governing Israel's worship, purity, and daily life; Mary and Joseph observed these (purification, presentation at temple).

**Magi** - Wise men or astrologers from the East who followed star to worship infant Jesus (Matthew 2:1-12); likely from Persia/Babylonia; number traditionally three based on three gifts.

**Nazareth** - Small, insignificant village in Galilee; Mary and Joseph's hometown; Jesus' childhood home; prompted question "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

**Pax Romana** - "Roman Peace"; period of relative peace and stability throughout Roman Empire (27 BC – AD 180); facilitated travel and later gospel spread; providential timing of Incarnation.

**Quirinius** - Roman governor of Syria mentioned in Luke 2:2; his census dating debated by scholars; governed Syria multiple times.

**Rabbi** - Jewish teacher or master; title of respect for religious teachers; Jesus later called Rabbi.

**Sabbath** - Seventh day of week (Saturday); day of rest commanded in Mosaic Law (Exodus 20:8-11); day after Jesus' birth would be Sabbath.

**Sanhedrin** - Supreme Jewish council in Jerusalem; consisted of chief priests, scribes, and elders; seventy-one members; later condemned Jesus.

**Saturnalia** - Roman winter festival (December 17-23) honoring Saturn; characterized by role reversal, gift-giving, feasting; one theory links to Christmas date, though differences significant.

**Scribes** - Jewish scholars and teachers of the Law; experts in interpreting and applying Mosaic Law; Herod consulted them about Messiah's birthplace (Matthew 2:4).

**Second Temple Period** - Jewish history from temple rebuilding (515 BC) until destruction by Rome (AD 70); Jesus born, ministered, and was crucified during this period.

**Septuagint** - See Hebrew/Greek terms above; Greek Old Testament influencing New Testament interpretation.

**Shepherd** - One who tends flocks; in first-century Judaism, often marginalized despite profession's biblical honor; first to hear of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8-20); symbol of God's reversal of expectations.

**Sol Invictus** - "Unconquered Sun"; Roman sun god; cult established by Emperor Aurelian with December 25 festival (274 AD); one theory suggests Christians chose/adapted this date.

**Swaddling** - Practice of wrapping infant tightly in cloth strips; normal infant care; mentioned as sign for shepherds (Luke 2:12).

**Synagogue** - Jewish place of assembly for prayer, Scripture reading, teaching; Mary and Joseph would have attended synagogue in Nazareth.

**Temple** - Central place of Jewish worship in Jerusalem; Second Temple (rebuilt after exile) stood during Jesus' time until AD 70 destruction; Jesus presented here forty days after birth.

**Winter Solstice** - Shortest day/longest night of year (December 21-22 in Northern Hemisphere); ancient festivals celebrated sun's "rebirth"; December 25 coincides roughly with solstice.

## **Biblical and Theological Figures**

**Abraham** - Patriarch of Israel; God's covenant with Abraham promised blessing to all nations through his seed (Genesis 12:1-3; 22:18); fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:16); ancestor of Jesus through both Mary and Joseph's lines.

**Adam** - First human, created by God in His image; his disobedience brought sin and death into world (Genesis 2-3; Romans 5:12-21); Christ is Second Adam who undoes Adam's work.

**Anna** - Elderly prophetess (84 years old or widowed for 84 years); recognized infant Jesus at presentation in temple; proclaimed Him to all awaiting redemption (Luke 2:36-38); represents faithful remnant of Israel.

**Augustine of Hippo** - Church Father (354-430 AD); wrote extensively on Incarnation; preached Christmas sermons showing established liturgy by late 4th/early 5th century; developed theology of original sin and grace.

**Balthasar** - Traditional name for one of three Magi; often depicted as African or Indian king bringing myrrh; represents Gentile worship of Christ.

**Caspar (Gaspar)** - Traditional name for one of three Magi; often depicted as young, bringing frankincense; represents Gentile recognition of Christ's deity.

**David** - Israel's greatest king; God promised Messiah would come from David's line and establish eternal kingdom (2 Samuel 7:12-16); Jesus is "Son of David"; both born in Bethlehem, David's city.

**Elizabeth** - Mary's relative; wife of Zechariah; mother of John the Baptist; recognized Mary's child as "my Lord" (Luke 1:39-45); baby John leaped in her womb at Mary's greeting.

**Eve** - First woman; her disobedience with Adam brought sin into world (Genesis 3); Mary sometimes called "New Eve" whose obedience facilitated redemption; patristic typology.

**Francis of Assisi** - Saint (1181-1226); created first live nativity scene at Greccio (1223); popularized visual representation of Christ's birth; emphasized Incarnation's humility and poverty.

**Gabriel** - Archangel who announced births of John the Baptist (to Zechariah) and Jesus (to Mary); name means "God is mighty"; one of few angels named in Scripture.

**Herod the Great** - See Historical Terms above; murderous king seeking to destroy infant Jesus; represents worldly power opposing God's kingdom.

**Isaiah** - Major Old Testament prophet (8th century BC); prophesied extensively about coming Messiah: virgin birth (7:14), child born/son given (9:6-7), suffering servant (53), light to Gentiles (49:6).

**Jerome** - Church Father (347-420); translated Bible into Latin (Vulgate); contributed to Nativity interpretation; defended virgin birth.

**Jesse** - Father of King David; ancestor of Jesus; Isaiah prophesies Branch from Jesse's stump (11:1) and Root of Jesse (11:10); Jesse Tree tradition based on this.

**John Chrysostom** - Church Father (349-407); preached Christmas sermons in Antioch (386 AD); evidence of Christmas liturgy spreading East; "golden-mouthed" preacher.

**John the Baptist** - Son of Zechariah and Elizabeth; forerunner who prepared way for Jesus; baptized Jesus; identified Him as "Lamb of God" (John 1:29); six months older than Jesus.

**Joseph** - Husband of Mary; legal father of Jesus; descendant of David; righteous man (*dikaios*) who obeyed God's guidance through dreams; carpenter (*tekton*); protector of Holy Family.

**Mary** - Virgin chosen by God to be mother of Jesus; from tribe of Judah and David's line; responded to Gabriel's announcement with faithful obedience (*fiat*, Luke 1:38); model of discipleship; honored but not worshiped in Protestant tradition.

**Melchior** - Traditional name for one of three Magi; often depicted as elderly, bringing gold; represents Gentile acknowledgment of Christ's kingship.

**Micah** - Old Testament prophet (8th century BC); prophesied Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (5:2); quoted by scribes when Herod inquired about Christ's birthplace.

**Moses** - Lawgiver of Israel; led Exodus from Egypt; received Law at Mount Sinai; type of Christ as deliverer and mediator; Deuteronomy 18:15 prophesies prophet like Moses (fulfilled in Christ).

**Nicholas of Myra** - Bishop (4th century); known for secret generosity; basis for Santa Claus tradition; historical figure worthy of emulation for charity; feast day December 6.

**Simeon** - Righteous and devout man who recognized infant Jesus at presentation in temple; prophesied both Christ's glory and suffering, Mary's sorrow (Luke 2:25-35); represents faithful Israel awaiting consolation.

**Zechariah** - Priest; husband of Elizabeth; father of John the Baptist; struck mute for doubting Gabriel's announcement; restored after John's birth; sang Benedictus (Luke 1:5-25, 57-79).

### **Doctrinal and Church Historical Terms**

**Adoptionism** - Heresy claiming Jesus was merely human until "adopted" as God's Son at baptism; denies Incarnation and virgin birth; condemned by early church.

**Arianism** - Fourth-century heresy denying Christ's full divinity; claimed Christ created being, not co-eternal with Father; condemned at Council of Nicaea (325 AD); would undermine Christmas's significance.

**Athanasius** - Church Father (296-373); defended orthodox Christology against Arianism; wrote *On the Incarnation*; famous line: "He became what we are that He might make us what He is."

**Calvin, John** - Reformer (1509-1564); Geneva; emphasized God's sovereignty, double predestination; some Reformed churches minimized Christmas observance following his principles.

**Chalcedon, Council of** - Ecumenical council (451 AD) defining orthodox Christology: Christ one person with two natures (divine and human) united "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

**Church Fathers** - Early Christian theologians and teachers from first several centuries; writings help interpret Scripture and define doctrine; include Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine, Jerome, and others.

**Docetism** - Early heresy claiming Christ only appeared to have physical body; denied reality of human nature and physical suffering; from Greek *dokein* ("to seem"); opposed to Incarnation.

**Ephesus, Council of** - Ecumenical council (431 AD); affirmed Mary as Theotokos (God-bearer) against Nestorianism; protected doctrine that Jesus is one divine person from conception.

**Eutychianism** - Fifth-century heresy confusing Christ's two natures into hybrid; denied distinct preservation of divine and human natures; condemned at Chalcedon.

**Luther, Martin** - Reformer (1483-1546); retained Christmas observance; emphasized preaching, congregational singing; simplified ceremonial; wrote Christmas hymns; legend credits him with first Christmas tree.

**Nestorianism** - Fifth-century heresy dividing Christ into two persons (divine and human); denied that Mary bore God; condemned at Council of Ephesus (431 AD).

**Nicæa, Council of** - First ecumenical council (325 AD); affirmed Christ's full divinity against Arianism; produced Nicene Creed affirming Christ as "eternally begotten of the Father."

**Nicene Creed** - Creed from Council of Nicaea (325 AD), expanded at Constantinople (381 AD); clearly affirms Incarnation: "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man."

**Orthodox Christianity** - Faith conforming to ecumenical creeds and councils; distinguishes true doctrine from heresy; includes both Eastern Orthodoxy and orthodox Protestant theology.

**Puritans** - English Reformed Protestants; famously opposed Christmas as Catholic corruption lacking biblical warrant; banned Christmas in England during Commonwealth (1640s-50s) and in New England colonies.

**Reformation** - 16th-century movement reforming Western Christianity; Protestant Reformers responded variously to Christmas: Luther retained it, Reformed minimized it, Radical Reformers rejected it.

**Reformed Theology** - Protestant theological tradition following John Calvin; emphasizes God's sovereignty, Scripture's authority, salvation by grace alone through faith alone; some Reformed churches historically minimized Christmas.

**Vatican II** - Second Vatican Council (1962-1965); reformed Roman Catholic liturgy: vernacular languages, greater congregational participation, revised lectionaries; affected Christmas worship.

**Westminster Confession of Faith** - Reformed doctrinal standard produced by Westminster Assembly (1646); widely used in Presbyterian churches; reflects Puritan suspicion of holy days not biblically mandated.