

A Christ-Focused Christmas

Although the name Christ is in the word Christmas, the tragedy is that Jesus Christ is the forgotten one in this holiday tradition. This is so not only among those who would not consider themselves believers, but among Christians as well! How do you know if this applies to you? If it does, how do we remedy the situation and have a truly Christ-focused holy day? Or holy season?

Here is a test. When you think about Christmas or hear the word, what is the first thing that comes to your mind? When you speak to others about Christmas, what do you talk about? Here are some thoughts - shopping, gifts, children, Santa Klaus, family, parties, Christmas plays, Handel's Messiah. Perhaps some might include Christmas eve service. In many we have remade Christmas into a consumer-buying, retail-loving shopping frenzy. We betray our true feelings when we say such things as Christmas means family get together, or Christmas is for children. In these ways we have remade Christmas.

Here is the Biblical truth about this church created day of Christmas. Christmas is for sinners. It is for us to remember the incarnation - the coming of God the Word into world in the flesh for us humans and our salvation. The first celebration among Christians regarding Christ's appearance emerged in the East with Epiphany celebrating the coming of the Wise men to see the Christ child. In the West, Christmas came into recognition around the fourth century. The modern association of Christmas with Santa Claus came from a cartoonist drawing in Harper's Weekly magazine in 1863 and later by the Coca Cola Company advertisements in 1931.

If we Christians wish to celebrate a Christ-focused holy season, then we must act to separate Christ's birth from the fables such as Santa Klaus and from secular preoccupation with materialism. We cannot have a Christ-focused Christmas by simply saying *Merry Christmas* to people! This is a shallow response to secularism.

Observing Christmas is a matter of Christian freedom. But if one chooses to observe it, then the time and manner should be Christ-centered. It is a festival or celebration of the incarnation - the Word made flesh (John 1) - God taking up residence among us as a human to bring about our salvation. Thus, we are commemorating a historical event of great import. This is not the stuff of fairy tales or make-believe. It is blood and bone reality that occurred in Palestine, involving a young Jewish maiden in time and space history. Therefore, we must be careful to not mix the Santa Klaus make believe with it. When the fiction of Santa is mixed with the history of Jesus we create in the minds of children and maybe others a foundation for doubt about the reality of Jesus Christ.

Here are some practical suggestions on how to have a Christ-focused celebration. There are certain activities we often do in December related to Christmas. We can modify each one where needed to be Christ-focused:

Mailing of Christmas Cards. Instead of using generic holiday cards use cards that relate truths about Jesus Christ. After all, this is what Christmas is about.

Decoration of Christmas trees. Instead of using a mixture of various ornaments turn your tree into a testimony about Jesus the Messiah by decorating it simply but beautifully with Christ symbols. This is called a "Chrismon Tree." Another idea is that of a Jesse Tree which relates the ancestry of Jesus.

Attend worship services or events. If the churches are to give a certain sound on the true meaning of Christmas, then a worship service is very important. There should be a Christmas eve and/ or a Christmas day gathering for the worship of God in and through Jesus Christ. Pastors and churches must lead the way.

Home worship on Christmas. It can be simple, such as reading the story of Christ's birth and singing a Christmas carol or hymn that carries the central message. One suggestion would be Charles Wesley's hymn, ***Hark! The Herald Angel Sing.***

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King:
peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
join the triumph of the skies;
with th'angelic hosts proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Refrain:

Hark! the herald angels sing,
"Glory to the newborn King"

2 Christ, by highest heaven adored,
Christ, the everlasting Lord,
late in time behold him come,
offspring of the Virgin's womb:
veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
hail th'incarnate Deity,
pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus, our Immanuel. [Refrain]

3 Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace!
Hail the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,

risen with healing in his wings.
Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth. [Refrain]

or

Martin Luther's *From Heaven Above to Earth I Come*

From heav'n above to earth I come,
to bear good news to ev'ry home;
glad tidings of great joy I bring
whereof I now will say and sing:

To you, this night, is born a Child
of Mary, chosen mother mild;
this tender Child of lowly birth
shall be the joy of all the earth.

'Tis Christ our God, who far on high
had heard your sad and bitter cry;
Himself will your Salvation be,
Himself from sin will make you free.

Now let us all, with gladsome cheer,
follow the shepherds, and draw near
to see this wondrous Gift of God,
who hath His own dear Son bestowed.

Glory to God in highest heav'n,
who unto us His Son has giv'n,
while angels sing, with pious mirth,
a glad New Year to all the earth.

Another suggestion is:

Pray a Christmas Prayer. Be sure to offer a prayer of thanksgiving to God for such a gift as Jesus.

A Christmas Prayer

Glory be to God for the wonder of his love made known to us in the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ.

Glory be to God for the gift of his Son, who took our flesh of the virgin Mary, his mother, and shared our human life.

Glory be to God for the great salvation he has sent us and to all mankind, bringing joy to the world.

For these manifold blessings and for all the wonder of Christmas, glory be to God forever and ever. (Frank Colquhoun, *Contemporary Parish Prayers*)

We give thanks to the Father at this Christmas time for the gift of his Son to be our Savior;

For the love of Christ in taking our human nature;

For his lowly birth at Bethlehem;

For the great redemption he has brought to us and to all of mankind who receive Him. With the angel hosts we too cry,

Glory to God in the highest. And on earth peace, goodwill towards men!

(Frank Colquhoun, *Contemporary Parish Prayers*)

Use Catechism Questions. Another way to keep Christ in Christmas is to use a catechism with questions and answers. Here is a section from the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. 21. Who is the Redeemer of God's elect?

The only Redeemer of God's elect is the Lord Jesus Christ,^[a] who, being the eternal Son of God^[b] became man,^[c] and so was and continues to be God and man, in two distinct natures and one person forever.^[d]

Q. 22. How did Christ, the Son of God, become man?

Christ, the Son of God, became man by taking to himself a body and a soul^[a] like ours, being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary, and born of her,^[b] yet without sin.^[c]

Q. 23. What offices does Christ fill as our Redeemer?

Christ as our Redeemer fills the offices of a prophet,^[a] of a priest,^[b] and of a king,^[c] in his states both of humiliation and exaltation.

Q. 24. How does Christ fill the office of a prophet?

Christ fills the office of a prophet in revealing to us by his Word^[a] and Spirit^[b] the will of God for our complete salvation.^[c]

Q. 25. How does Christ fill the office of a priest?

Christ fills the office of a priest in his once offering up of himself to God as a sacrifice, to satisfy divine justice^[a] and reconcile us to God;^[b] and in making constant intercession for us.^[c]

Q. 26. How does Christ fill the office of a king?

Christ fills the office of a king in making us his willing subjects, in ruling and defending us,^[a] and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies.^[b]

Q. 27. In what did Christ's humiliation consist?

Christ's humiliation consisted in being born, and that in poor circumstances;^[a] in being subject to God's law;^[b] in undergoing the miseries of this life,^[c] the wrath of God^[d] and the curse of death on the cross;^[e] in being buried; and in continuing under the power of death for a time.^[f]

Q. 28. In what does Christ's exaltation consist?

Christ's exaltation consists in his rising again from the dead on the third day;^[a] in ascending into heaven;^[b] in sitting at the right hand^[c] of God the Father; and in coming to judge the world at the last day.^[d]

Another suggestion involves Gift Giving.__Each year Americans spending lavishly on gifts and many go into debt feeling it necessary to engage in this blatant materialism. Narrow your gift giving both in regards to the number and the recipients. Spread giving throughout the year. Give specials gifts in honor of Christ to Christian causes. Transfer your gift-giving from Christmas Day to Epiphany in imitation of the Wise men who gave gifts and then tell the story. We do not have to be captive to the customs of society. We can make customs of our own more befitting the story of the Savior who came to redeem us.

And lastly, Celebrate the Twelve Days of Christmas. Begin Christmas Eve and each day until January 6 focus on some aspect of Christ's person and work in Bible readings, prayers and songs of the incarnation.

By focusing on such Christ-centered activities, Christmas can truly be a Christ-focused and a spiritually meaningful season of the year.

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