

# Christmas and Epiphany

## Christian Reflection

A SERIES IN FAITH AND ETHICS



BAYLOR  
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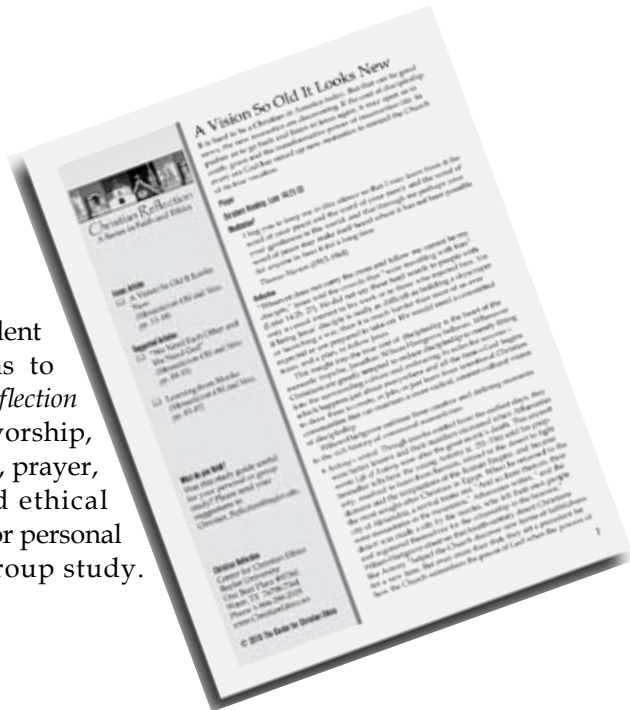
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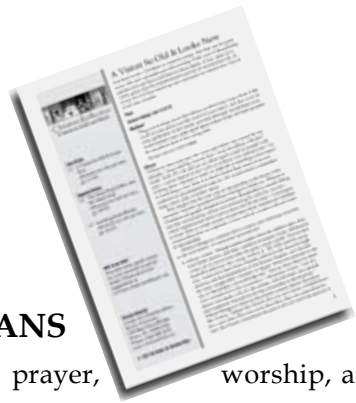
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### CHRISTMAS AND THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism—each making religious claims about the meaning of life. In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material.

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Augustine called Epiphany "a feast worthy of most devout celebration." This festival completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Three traditions—baking a Kings' Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi's blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles—help us interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

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The entire season of Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party based on disjointed events: the Magi's visit to Bethlehem, Christ's baptism by John, and Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana. What ties this wealth of images together?

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# Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

**How should the Church's first cycle of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—mold our discipleship? We explore the original trajectories of Christmastide (the twelve-day season of Christmas) and Epiphany, so we can celebrate them faithfully and winsomely today.**

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**T**his issue joins an earlier one, *Advent Ethics*, in exploring how the Church's first cycle of preparation, celebration, and rejoicing—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany—should mold our discipleship.

"Churchly celebrations should provide a way back, a way into the richness of Christmas past and present," Donald Heinz observes. Yet, he cautions, for the Church to "get Christmas right, or better, may require retrieval of lost knowledge and unlearning modern assumptions." Our contributors probe the original trajectories of Christmastide (the twelve-day season of Christmas) and Epiphany, so we can celebrate them faithfully and winsomely today.

Joseph Kelly's *The Birth of Christmas* (p. 11) takes us back to "an age when Christians did not celebrate Christmas or even pay much attention to the feast's scriptural foundations, the Matthean and Lukan Infancy Narratives." He traces how the great religious festival of Christmas emerged by the sixth century—settling on the date of December 25, filling out biblical figures with details from Hebrew prophecy and early Christian sources, and charting the celebration's relation to Epiphany. The early Christians, he shows, "took Scripture very seriously, . . . showed respect for Jewish customs and . . . also showed respect for the differing cultures within their own faith."

In *Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations* (p. 19), Donald Heinz observes that "Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism—each making religious claims about the meaning of



life. In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material." Heinz appreciates the good elements of secular Christmas celebrations, but urges us to recover the riches of the theological tradition. "Getting Christmas right means getting ourselves right and ultimately getting God right," he writes. "A religiously robust Christmas enables the Church to re-gift the Incarnation to the modern world."

An important facet of the theological tradition of Christmas is the iconography in paintings of the Nativity. In *The Shepherds' Adoration* (p. 34), Heidi Hornik and Mikeal Parsons compare Ghirlandaio's *Adoration of the Shepherds*, painted in Florence, with the famous altarpiece of that name that had been created by the Flemish artist Hugo van der Goes and brought to Florence a few years earlier. Both artists drew from a common store of visual symbolism to interpret Christ's birth in light of his passion. In *The Magi's Adoration* (p. 32), Hornik notes how Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* had introduced the use of narrative scenes in church altarpieces earlier. She explains, "this image works well iconographically in its location in the sacristy (where the clergy robe themselves and prepare for the Mass), for Christ becomes manifest in the Eucharist on the altar during the Mass; he is revealed to the faithful in the congregation as happened to the Magi."

The carol is another art form that bears the theological tradition of Christmas. "A carol is like a snapshot: it gives us a glimpse of one aspect of the Incarnation," David Music writes in *Caroling* (p. 27). He traces the development of carols from medieval dancing to monastic "spiritual entertainment," their banishment by Puritans, and the reemergence of their nativity themes in modern hymnody and popular tunes.

To guide our adoration of the Christ child, David Music gives us a beautiful new carol, "A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep" (p. 41). His text, which is both a theological meditation and birthday celebration, frames the worship service (p. 44) that follows. The liturgy can be used for a Christmas Eve carol sing and candlelight vigil in honor of the Nativity of Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

We need a full season of Christmas—from the vigil before Christmas Day to the feast of Epiphany—to absorb the good news of the Nativity, Emilie Griffin reminds us in *The Color of Christmas Extended* (p. 53). "The Christmas season," she writes, "is a banquet for the affections, a time to glory in the amazing story of Christ incarnate, the full meaning of the Trinity in Christmas dress."

Reflection on the story of the Magi's visit to Bethlehem traditionally has been reserved for the culmination of the Christmas season in the feast of Epiphany. Michael Clingenpeel's *A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration* (p. 75) recovers some remarkable insights about the Magi from Augustine's sermon for Epiphany in 412. "Epiphany reminds us that Jesus is for Magi in the courts of the mighty as well as shepherds in the fields, East as well as West, global

as well as local,” Clingenpeel writes. In *Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany* (p. 69), Amber and John Inscore Essick commend three practices – baking a Kings’ Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi’s blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles – that help families and congregations share in the Magi’s discovery of the meaning of God’s gift in Christ Jesus.

The feast of Epiphany, and the season that follows it, are about more than the Magi’s visit to Bethlehem. Traditional scripture readings focus on Christ’s baptism by John and Christ’s miracle at the wedding at Cana as well. What ties together this wealth of images? In *Seeing Epiphany Whole* (p. 61), Steve Harmon suggests the common thread running through the season is “the truth that the Triune God reveals in Jesus Christ, and the truthful living engendered by our encounter with this revelation,” and he traces this thread through other Epiphany-related scripture readings and acts of worship.

The seasons of Christmas and Epiphany train us “to become students following a new curriculum of grace, reflecting the difference Christ’s presence makes in the world,” Bill Shiell writes in *When Grace Appears* (p. 79). As he explicates a key scripture reading for the Christmas service, Shiell explains how the early Christians were taught to live the Christ life as they “listened to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them.”

Mark Suderman’s *Choral Music for Christmas* (p. 89) reviews some gems from among the work of ten renowned choirs – The Cambridge Singers, Chanticleer, The Tallis Scholars, The Sixteen, Robert Shaw Chamber Singers, Theatre of Voices, the choirs of King’s College and St. John’s College in Cambridge, the choirs of St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, and John Eliot Gardiner’s Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists. Suderman commends these recordings as “excellent staples for a personal music library” for they introduce “outstanding choral literature to use in a variety of sacred Christmas settings.”

In *The History of Christmas* (p. 84), Sujin Pak reviews four books that explain how the festival of Christmas began in the early church and developed as a secular and religious observance over the centuries. Three of the books – *The Origins of Christmas* and *The Feast of Christmas* by Joseph F. Kelly, and *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* by Donald Heinz – highlight the religious history and practices of Christmas. The fourth book, Bruce Forbes’s *Christmas: A Candid History*, is a briefer look at the season’s secular and religious elements. These authors “underscore that Christmas has had secular features from its very origins, and encourage readers to appreciate *both* the religious and secular facets of Christmas and not assume an inherent conflict between them,” Pak notes. They broaden our view of the possibilities of Incarnation. “Or, perhaps to state it in the vernacular [with Heinz]: ‘God gets carried away at Christmas.’ In this festival, Incarnation spills out of its religious vessel to saturate secular material culture.” ❖

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# The Birth of Christmas

BY JOSEPH F. KELLY

**Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it. How did a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth come into being, and what elements of that feast can we draw upon?**

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Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it or even pay much attention to the feast's scriptural foundations, the Matthean and Lukan Infancy Narratives. After I survey how a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth came into being, I will consider what elements of that feast modern Christians might draw upon.<sup>1</sup>

Modern exegesis stresses the Jewish background of post-Resurrection disciples, who continued to worship in the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 2:46-4:4). Even Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, stressed his own Jewishness (Philippians 3:5). Luke says that he continued to observe the Sabbath (Acts 13:14, 16:13) but also saw the first day of the week as a time for breaking bread (20:7). Yet the disciples had little incentive to establish new feasts with the Parousia so imminent (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). As the years passed, however, Christians such as Luke recognized that the Parousia might be quite distant, and in Acts he portrays the Holy Spirit guiding the Church in continuing Christ's work in the world.

We moderns simply cannot conceive how those disciples must have struggled to accept this radically new view of time. The pseudonymous author of 2 Peter (c. 125) tried to explain the delay (3:1-10), but most Christians eventually accepted that the Church would be in the world for an indeterminate time. Charisms such as prophecy and glossolalia declined as Christians established the necessary elements for an ongoing community—such as organized if uncharismatic offices, a canon of their own sacred writings, and specifically Christian feasts.

Not only had time changed, so had geography and demographics. The Christians evangelized the Gentiles with considerable success. By the early second century, even before all the New Testament books had been written, we hear of prominent Gentile leaders such as Papias of Hierapolis, Clement of Rome, and Polycarp of Smyrna. The Church would develop in the Gentile world of the Roman Empire.

### **ORIGINS OF THE FEAST**

The basics for Christmas appeared soon. Although Athanasius of Alexandria first listed the now accepted twenty-seven books as the New Testament in 367, canon formation began early. By the mid-second century all canon lists included the four Gospels, guaranteeing that Matthew and Luke's Infancy Narratives would be part of Scripture and thus always play a role in Christian life and thought.

The Jewish feast of the Pasch (Passover) metamorphosed for Christians into the feast of Easter (to use the early Medieval English word), but Christians could not celebrate the feast unless they knew the date of Jesus' resurrection. This led to what scholars call the "Paschal Controversy" in the mid-second century. Christian scholars ultimately concluded that they could not determine the exact date of Easter, which is why it migrates through a five-week period in the spring. The dating of Christmas would engender another controversy.

Contemporary with the establishment of Easter was the observation of martyrs' feast days. Roman tradition required families to celebrate a memorial meal on the anniversary of a loved one's death. Christians similarly honored the anniversaries of martyrs' deaths but with an important twist: for them, the martyrs did not die but were born anew in a heavenly afterlife. The date of martyrdom became their "true" birthday. This is important for Christmas since some early Christians, especially Origen of Alexandria, objected to birthday celebrations because the Bible mentions only two of them: one for Pharaoh (Genesis 40:20) and one for Herod (Mark 6:21; Matthew 14:6) which both resulted in executions! However, when Christians became interested in Christ's birthday, acceptance of the martyrs' "birthdays" guaranteed that no real opposition would occur.

But while scholars were debating about Jesus' birth, an anonymous Syrian made an end run around them. *Circa* 150 in the region of Antioch appeared the *Protoevangelium of James*, a "prequel" to the Nativity because it purported to tell of events before Jesus' birth. It enjoyed enormous popularity, partly because of its vivid, fictionalized account but mostly because Christians who had come to accept being in history were taking an interest in Jesus' own history.

The *Protoevangelium* tells of the birth of Jesus' mother Mary to Joachim and Anna (the first mention of those names), of Mary's being dedicated to the Temple, of the high priests choosing Joseph for her spouse because a

dove flew out of his staff, of Mary's being sixteen at Jesus' birth, of Joseph's being elderly, and of the presence of a midwife at the birth. All of these details became staples of medieval and renaissance art. Never a serious candidate for the New Testament canon, this work appealed to average believers if not to scholars, the first but hardly the last time that popular attitudes would influence the development of an ecclesiastical feast.

As Christian interest in Jesus' birth grew, scholars in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa began to investigate the date of the Nativity. They initially hoped to determine the exact day—unmentioned in the Gospels—by determining the date of his death. Why?

Jewish tradition taught that great figures, such as Moses, were born and died on the same calendar day. If Scripture says Moses lived 120 years, then it must mean *exactly* 120 years. Determining the date of the Crucifixion proved very difficult to do, partly because the Gospels do not provide enough information and partly because no one knew the year when Jesus died. Undeterred, third-century Christian scholars pushed ahead, and knowing that Jesus died near Passover, the North African Tertullian and the Roman Hippolytus concluded that Jesus died on March 25, which would also mean that he was born on that date.

But allegory, a favorite interpretive tool of ancient scholars, quickly entered the discussion. According to the Julian calendar, March 25 was the spring equinox—for pagans the anniversary of the creation of the world.

That date for Jesus' birth appealed to many Christians because Paul identified Christ as the new Adam (Romans 5:14) and Revelation 21 used images of re-creation. But a different allegory soon challenged it.

Matthew says Jesus' face shone like the sun at the Transfiguration (17:2), an image repeated in Revelation (1:16). Mark says that the women went to the tomb as the sun rose (16:2). In the Synoptic Gospels, when

Jesus died the sun was darkened (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45a), while John speaks of the Logos as the light shining in the darkness (1:5). Supporting this solar imagery was Malachi 4:2, that on the day of reckoning would appear the sun of righteousness, an image applied to Jesus by many early Christian writers such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Hippolytus, and an anonymous North African scholar who

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around 243 produced *De Pascha Computus* (*On Computing the Paschal Feast*). For author of the *Computus*, March 25 was indeed the anniversary of the creation but not of Jesus' birth which would be more appropriate on March 28, the fourth day of creation when God formed the sun. This approach never caught on, but it demonstrated the power of sun symbolism and the willingness of writers to go beyond the supposed factual information.

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**Celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 presented a unique opportunity for Christians to counter three pagan feasts: the cult of the *Sol Invictus*, the veneration of a Persian virility deity named Mithra, and the festival of Saturnalia.**

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Contemporary with the *Computus*, another North African, Sextus Julius Africanus, introduced a theological variant on March 25. Having travelled widely in the Eastern Mediterranean and studied in Alexandria, he knew of Gnostics who belittled the importance of Jesus' physicality and of Docetists who outright denied that Jesus had a body. For Sextus the central issue was the Incarnation, the taking on of flesh by the Son of

God. Keeping the anniversary of the creation, he argued that on March 25 Jesus had become incarnate via his conception in his mother's womb at the annunciation by Gabriel. Following the Jewish exact-dating theory, Sextus believed Jesus had been born precisely nine months later on December 25. This enabled Sextus to keep the sun imagery in an effective way. According to the Julian calendar, December 25 was the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, when the sun was at its weakest. Every day thereafter it grew stronger and stronger, just as a baby would.

This sounds like we have Christmas, but, as always in scholarship, things were more complicated. Julius was not an influential writer because, while still a pagan, he had served in the army of a persecuting emperor and later worked as a librarian for another emperor. So, many Christians had difficulty accepting him. But at least December 25 had entered the discussion.

Something else had entered the discussion: pagan sun worship. Elagabalus, a member of a Roman dynasty but son of a Syrian, had served as a priest of a Syrian sun god until a palace coup in 218 made him emperor. He introduced into Rome the cult of *Deus Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun God) to whom he made human sacrifices. In 222, his incompetence and immorality cost him his life via another coup, but he had popularized worship of the sun god which had been growing in Rome before his reign.

The emperor Aurelian (270-275) also worshipped the Unconquered Sun. Realizing that traditional polytheism had declined, he established solar mono-

theism with a cult centered in Rome itself, although he did nothing to interfere with the multifarious local religions. The great feast-day of the Sun was December 25, the winter solstice and the Sun's birthday. Initially Aurelian treated the Christians fairly but by 274 he decided to persecute them, likely because Christianity was the only monotheistic religion capable of challenging the worship of *Sol Invictus*. His murder in 275 by palace officials in a coup prevented the persecution.

Did their challenge to the Unconquered Sun push the Christians toward utilizing December 25 as Christ's birthday? No Christian author said so explicitly, but it is probable because, where feasible, Christians would replace local pagan traditions with Christian ones, substituting veneration of a local martyr for that of a mythical hero. (This did not always work; many bishops complained about the persistence of pagan traits in Christians celebrations.)

December 25 presented a unique opportunity for Christians to counter three pagan feasts. The cult of the *Sol Invictus* survived Aurelian. Furthermore, many Roman soldiers and other men venerated a Persian virility deity named Mithra, whose birthday fell on December 25. To this can be added the festival of Saturnalia (December 17 to 23), a week of vigorous drinking, eating, sexual misconduct, and the overturning of social and even gender roles. Celebrating Christ's birthday on December 25 would directly oppose two pagan feasts and weaken another, as the bishops would have realized.

But had Christmas actually become a feast by the late third century? The earliest reference to Christmas as an established feast dates it to Rome in 336, but how long before 336 had it been accepted?

Augustine in *Sermon 202*, dated 412, reproaches the Donatists for not celebrating Epiphany as other African Christians did, yet he does not mention Christmas, a far more important feast in the Western churches. The Donatists split from the larger church in 311 and many scholars believe that if they had also rejected Christmas Augustine would have mentioned that as well, so Christmas could date to the early fourth century. For an argument from silence, this is a good if not conclusive one.

The Roman church produced the key text, the *Chronograph of 354*, which incorporates material dating to 336. It twice says that Christ was born on December 25, once in a list of consular dates and then in a list of martyrs' deaths, thus linking the birth of Christ with the "birthdays" of the martyrs. But the *Chronograph* does not explain the date. Possibly the Romans preferred Sextus' chronology and also wanted to counter *Sol Invictus* whose cult had been instituted in their city.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE FEAST**

December 25 caught on quickly in the West and within half a century had won favor in the East, reaching Cappadocia by 370, Constantinople by 380, Antioch by 386, and Alexandria by 432. Jerusalem held out, observing the traditional Eastern date of January 6 until *circa* 575 when the Byzantine

emperor Tiberius II (574-582) imposed the new date. Some Eastern Christians, such as the Armenians, still celebrate Christ's birthday on January 6 but most use it for the Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi.

This feast also had some theological advantages. Against the Apollinarians who denied Christ's full humanity, it celebrated his human birth. Against the Arians who denied Christ's divinity, it celebrated the Son of God become

human. Since the feast of Jesus' birth was also that of Mary's maternity, Marian devotion became widely popular, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Artistic creations soon appeared. Writers such as Ephrem the Syrian, John Chrysostom, Ambrose of Milan, and the Spanish layman Prudentius wrote Nativity poems, hymns, and prayers. Visual artists, all now anonymous, produced magnificent nativity

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**Did the Christians have to deal with commercialization and "caloric abuse"? Saturnalia partly survived and transmogrified into the secular revelry of Christmas. Bishops complained about excessive eating and drinking. Yet the new feast endured.**

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scenes via frescoes, wall paintings, and sarcophagi (the large stone tombs favored by aristocratic Romans). Nativity scenes on those reminded Christians why Jesus had been born. As the Appalachian carol "I Wonder as I Wander" says, "Jesus our Savior is come for to die."

When fascination with the Nativity demanded more information than the plain text of the Gospels could provide, Christian scholars filled in the details—especially with the Magi, the only Gentiles (other than Caesar Augustus) mentioned in the Gospels and thus important to the Gentile Christians. Via allegory and typology of Old Testament passages, the unnamed, unnumbered Magi became three (the three gifts?), took on royalty, migrated from Persia, and acquired names. Writers also hypothesized about the size and brightness of the star, the childhood of Jesus, and the adventures of the Holy Family in Egypt.

But at least the Christians did not have to deal with commercialization and "caloric abuse"? Not exactly. Saturnalia partly survived and transmogrified into the secular revelry of Christmas. In *circa* 400, bishop Asterius of Amasea in Cappadocia complained that at Christmas people wanted presents so badly that they went into debt; other bishops complained about excessive eating and drinking. Yet the new feast endured.

The last stage of early Christmas began in the fifth century. It had become second only to Easter in importance, and some churches thought that it too deserved a preparatory period. Fourth-century Gallic and Spanish churches



had such a period before Epiphany for baptizands because January 6 was the supposed day of Jesus' baptism. By the fifth century, as the Western churches elevated December 25 over January 6, those churches observed a preparatory period for Christmas. Northern Italy had such a period by the fifth century, and Advent, with that name, appears in Rome in the sixth century. Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) codified the Advent period as one of four Sundays, although he saw Advent more as a liturgical period than a penitential one.

### **LESSONS FOR CELEBRATING THE FEAST TODAY**

History is the greatest show on earth and perennially fascinating, but does learning how Christmas originated tell us anything about celebrating the feast today? Absolutely.

The ancient writers took Scripture very seriously, struggling to keep close to the Bible when determining the date, and their attempt to learn more about the biblical figures always started with Scripture. For example, Origen claimed there were three magi in an explication of Genesis 26:26-31 about three pagans who honored Isaac, a traditional type of Christ. Even some rather far-fetched apocrypha built upon the scriptural text.

The early writers' use of the exact-days theory showed respect for Jewish customs and played a key role in choosing December 25. The early Christians also showed respect for the differing cultures within their own faith. Greek-speakers in the Eastern Mediterranean and Latin-speakers in the Western Mediterranean combined to produce this feast. They also showed openness to those who did not accept the consensus, such as the Armenians who still favor January 6. We can extend such understanding not just to those who celebrate Christmas differently but to those who do not celebrate it at all.

The writers used the contemporary culture where appropriate, such as the Julian rather than the Jewish calendar, and accepted it where it did no harm, such as commemorating the martyrs' "birthdays," a direct borrowing from pagan Roman funeral customs. Many contemporary Christians see the secular Christmas as a threat to the religious one. We would do well to see the many good elements of the secular holiday, such as the trees, lights, music, family dinners, and all-around good cheer that make Jesus' birth the most beloved of Christian days. Indeed, if I may jump to nineteenth-century America, the secular Christmas observed by so many Christians caused even recalcitrant Calvinists to rethink their opposition to the feast. In 1856 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow observed, "The old Puritan feeling prevents Christmas from being a cheerful, hearty holiday, though every year makes it more so."<sup>2</sup>

The early Christians transformed their culture, and so do we, even if we often think we do not. Let me give a potent example. Every December television abounds with Christmas movies burdened with commercials urging

people to buy and buy. But has anyone ever seen a television Christmas movie about a child who got an enormous hoard of presents and rejoiced to show them all off and lord it over friends who received less? On the contrary, the movies typically deal with families getting together, troubles put aside, estranged siblings being reconciled, misers recognizing the true joy of Christmas, and good people helping those who have less. All of these are values we believers promote. Even the most ruthless advertisers pay us a compliment by recognizing that people will not watch shows exalting greed and selfishness but rather want to see programs that portray the *Christian* values of *Christmas*.

The religious character of Christmas may occasionally become obscured, but the great religious feast created by learned Christians almost two millennia ago still survives and, if I may say so, flourishes.<sup>3</sup>

## NOTES

1 I use "Nativity" to refer to Jesus' birth and "Christmas" for the feast celebrating the Nativity.

2 This is in the poet's journal entry for December 25, 1856, in Samuel Longfellow, ed., *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: with Extracts from his Journals and Correspondence*, vol. II (Boston, MA: Ticknor and Company, 1897), 324.

3 I develop these reflections further in *The Birth of Jesus according to the Gospels* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008) and *The Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004).

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# Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations

BY DONALD HEINZ

**Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism—each making religious claims about the meaning of life. In the consumer Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material.**

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**C**hristmas is the celebration of God's coming to earth, clothing divinity in material form. Its legacy is a treasure trove of theology and worship and arts and Christian life and piety. But where is the treasure today? How much of its gold is recoverable? From the residue of a great religious festival, are we down to shopping, winter holiday, and good family times?

Keeping an eye on Christmas allows us to chart the uneasy course of Incarnation in the world. Once, as early Christianity planted the birth of Christ in the wild fields of December, end-of-year debaucheries threatened to engulf it. Pagan rootstock in the fields of winter proved too persistent for eradication. Would Christianity be satisfied with a yearly harvest of wheat and chaff, or would it be tempted to burn down the fields? The Church wagered that a hearty new theology could Christianize heathen celebrations. So Christmas became the Christian entry in a contest over the power of the calendar and its meanings. Christmas lasted. It outlasted the European paganism that it, with difficulty, had baptized.

So holy day and holiday have long been kissing cousins. But, as Christmas in the modern world became disconnected from its original embeddings in historic and still living religious communities and traditions, a new Christmas was invented in which secular meanings have crowded out the original

reason for the season. The “commodification of culture” turns religious celebration into the buying and selling of products. Today it is easier to imagine Christmas without religion than Christmas without shopping.

### **CHRISTMAS TODAY**

Well-wrapped in the modern world, the American Christmas is a sacrament of material consumption that everyone wants a piece of. Consumer capitalism has elbowed out religion to be first in line at the manger scene. Indeed, some scholars now call Christmas the civil religion of capitalism. This new religion of the global market is compulsory for all citizens. While Christian faith is optional, holiday consumption is not. Christmas requires a panoply of accessories on offer by urban outfitters eager to assist us in decking out our true selves.

Under the weight of incarnational extravagance (God’s or ours?), a religious festival is getting buried under the landfill of materialism. The deep immersion of religious festival in the material world made Christmas susceptible to a hostile takeover by modern capitalism. During the course of the twentieth-century, capitalism had certainly far outdistanced all its rivals as a means of producing wealth. The free market became the god that succeeded and thus the meaning of everything, just as communism was turning into the god that failed. Disconnected from covenant and community, a new kind of rapacious capitalism became the worm in the Christmas apple. Christmas became the religious expression of this new kind of capitalism. As an all-encompassing worldview that claims to put the meaning of life on offer, capitalism engaged Christianity in a contest over seasonal message control. It became a computer virus that colonizes every inbox and commences to send out rival messages, with the complicit user hardly noticing or incapable of resisting. If we pause before pushing *Send*, the jingles of advertising, playing through earphones we cannot remove, drown out our reflections. They assure us that this new and improved Christmas is all the season ever was.

The Incarnation of God in human form had confirmed a creation theology that called the world good. Historic Christianity believed that all earthly goods have a built-in end that points to the ultimate Good. But this nuanced religious view is far different from the materialist view that insists there is no transcendent reality beyond earthly goods. The materialist line goes: What you see is what you get. The spiritual discipline of “seeing beyond” is a foolish diversion from what is plentifully at hand. Shopping is layered with sacred sentiment. Insidious advertizing pitches the calculated deception that if your empty life longs for a Christmas of old, the accumulation of goods can deliver it. Things bought and sold are the essential carriers of meaning. The seasonal sacred narrative is about the emptiness of life that products can fill. It is scarcely possible to opt out of the American Christmas, even if it gets easier all the time to opt out of Christianity’s Christmas.

Religious authority passes from the Church to the market, which itself is good news for all people. Christmas as holy day is a discontinued line.

Christians, like Christmas itself, occupy both religious and secular worlds. Each year the coming of Christmas magnifies a clash of civilizations between Christianity and consumer capitalism – each making religious claims about the meaning of life and each creating an ethos that models how we are to live. A festival of consumption, especially without regard for the poor, is a blatant competitor to biblical religion. But many churches scarcely notice this because they are heavily invested in a worldview that contradicts the Christian one. In the new and better Christmas, the Incarnation is reversed. Human attention drifts to all the materials that claim to be good instead of the Good that claims to be material. As C. S. Lewis argued, matter is good but it has lost its original Goodness, which must be recovered through a Christian worldview if matter is again to contribute to substantial joy and pleasure. Augustine kept his eye on ultimates: “You have made us for yourself; our hearts are restless till they rest in you.”

When the Church is in a prophetic mood, it can see clearly these rival meaning systems. But it is a plot hard to keep our eye on. Why? We can *look at* religion, at Christmas, but consumerism is what we *look through*, the glasses we cannot take off. Hence the religious forces that have risen to resist “the war on Christmas” never see the real enemy. Assuming that the chief rival to Christmas is the anemic agnosticism of nefarious enemies of the faith, they give all-

encompassing capitalism a pass and never train their analysis on the very system in which they are fully implicated. While across history Christianity has sometimes transcended or resisted social and economic domination systems, North Atlantic Christianity is more likely to help establish and even sacralize what is in fact a system of meaning stuffed with false claims. The irony of the American Christmas

is that a religiously tinged capitalism has become socially compulsory in a society that normally keeps its hands off religion.

Looking closely into great “cultural performances” like Christmas, as anthropologists methodically do, we see the dramas that run beneath life in society and the fuller proportions of the human project. The store windows of Christmas reveal our deepest aspirations. Look at the stories we tell our-

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**Some scholars call Christmas the civil religion of capitalism. While Christian faith is optional, holiday consumption is not. Christmas requires a panoply of accessories on offer by urban outfitters eager to assist us in decking out our true selves.**

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selves and the rituals in which we annually act them out. We see there our attempts to create meaning in the world, to spin ourselves in webs of significance. The picture is not good, the image of God not clear. The acids of materialism have defaced the human imprint of God's Incarnation.

### **THE RISKS OF INCARNATION**

Did God foresee how Christmas would turn out? Did God consider the risks of Incarnation? If we develop a failsafe plan to save Christmas, will it require putting God back in the envelope, reversing the Incarnation? Given the human propensity to ruin a good thing, beginning with Adam and Eve, the wayward course of Christmas should not surprise us.

The Incarnation of God became a coming-of-age drama about the divine course on earth. The Gospels are clear about the consequences of God coming fully clothed in human context: King Herod's rage at a rival from another place, treacherous crowds and foolish followers, the dangerous road to Jerusalem, and ultimately the crucifixion. To become a divine Child within the grasp of earthlings is to risk being taken into the hands of strangers, carried away to unknown destinations, treated like an unwelcome refugee.

In the evolution of Christmas celebration we witness the amazing three-scene story of how an original religious festival celebrating the very heart of Christianity relentlessly expanded the divine investment in "lived religion." The play opens with the original Christmas story and its protagonists embedded in the texts of the New Testament. The Christian Church then comes to understand itself as a theater of Incarnation with the Church as its festival house. Finally, spilling far beyond sacred pages and ecclesiastical auspices there spreads across time and place, to cathedral square and market and home, an expanding range of human celebration until all the world becomes the stage for Christmas. By its very nature, Incarnation seems to authorize a risky trajectory far beyond Bethlehem as God takes up residence in many cultures. We are deeply implicated in how God's venture turns out.

The written Word and the Word Incarnate inevitably undergo change and development—every age finds a new Christ and the Bible today is domesticated for the American middle class. The New Testament narratives about Jesus Christ do not stay put. Subsequent readers and hearers carry them, with the Christ Child, into new worlds. Their theological definitions and sacred stories come loose from ancient moorings, escape ecclesiastical control, and evolve in response to changing human contexts. The "ship with cargo precious" of which the carol sings visits many a foreign port. New inculturations, to use missionary language, keep happening. The American Christmas, even in the churches, may seem more like an "invented tradition" than an ancient festival. This is witness to the carrying capacity of Incarnation, if also its susceptibility to reckless adventures.

That the idea of Incarnation should become a pregnant theme that unending and unauthorized midwives are eager to deliver, this is the full-

ness of Christmas as we trace its long history and find its presence today. The Incarnation would not remain a pristine idea in the mind of God (or the Church). Rather, it would become a daring divine-human venture, including not only marches of pilgrims drawn to festival but every imaginable prop piling up on stages everywhere and nearly overwhelming the central prop, the manger scene. When we look at Christmas celebration today, do we see the ultimate reach of Incarnation to every material thing or the ruination of religious festival by materialism's suffocating embrace?

All manner of gifts are stacked at the manger. Are they incongruous tokens of God's bounty now brought for consecration, or do they betray no awareness whatever that this is a *religious* festival? "What can I give him?" the carol asks. Is the answer to be "Anything and everything will be a fit prop in the nativity play"? Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts—quite apart from the sacred community that is the Church. In the jostling of holy day and holiday, the Incarnation is just another ornament. Abstracted from their original contexts and from living faith traditions, religious symbols lose their power and become additional products dispersed in a network of holiday outfitting and emptied of theological and ethical substance. The Church is easily construed as just another religious merchandiser. When Christmas began to play on a world stage, far removed from ecclesiastical precincts, whose plan was that? How complicit is the Church, and are individual Christians, in the unmooring of Christmas from its anchorage in sacred texts and history? Is the ubiquity of Christmas, including made-in-China and sold-at-Walmart, a remarkable triumph of Incarnation or its final degradation? God gets carried away at Christmas—is that a cheer or a lament?

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**Contemporary consumer culture is able to absorb all previous cultures as content waiting to be commodified, distributed, and consumed in highly individualistic acts—quite apart from the sacred community that is the Church.**

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### **CAN THE MODERN CHRISTMAS BE SAVED?**

Early Christianity gave the world Christmas as the birth announcement of a turning point in human history. Public worship became the incarnational stage on which Christians could see and experience what they were believing and model it for a curious world. Gradually, the people of God turned into the stories they were telling: a believable body of believers became the body

of Christ. Catching up with Christian worship, theology came along to define, expound, interpret, and extend the Incarnation.

But every single dimension of the performance practice of the modern Church, of lived Christianity, is troubled. All this together is the crisis of Christmas in the modern world. Only authentic public worship, believable Christians, and convincing theology can save Christmas.

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**If the play of Christmas is to be convincing, Christians must themselves be a believable performance troupe. The modern Church has to be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world.**

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Christian worship and liturgy have been called guerrilla theater because they subversively stage alternative realities to the ones playing in the public square. Christians come together in Christmas worship amidst the ever more aggressive encroachments of a buying and selling culture that redefines human festival as an opportunity to consume. Authentic

Christmas worship is the one hope of getting the season right.

Advent is the beginning of the alternative reality Christmas proclaims because it practices the spiritual discipline of paying attention. As Thoreau went to Walden Pond to escape the distractions of his age and to re-center himself, the four weeks of Advent become a religious antidote to the powerful distractions of the market. The minions of holiday are exhausted, overspent, grim, depressed, and without hope for times and places of respite and renewal. To practice a sacred calendar is to save the date for the presence of God, to schedule planned runnings into mystery. A sacred calendar becomes a mode of resistance to the relentless claims of the everyday. Like the Old Testament Sabbath, the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany season aspires to return us to the great rhythms of creation and salvation. It is said that Jews do not keep the Sabbath, but the Sabbath keeps Jews.

The liturgies that can save Christmas must be public, communal, historic, artful, and attuned to the biblical drama of salvation. However important personal piety expressed in family life may be to a fully realized, lived Christianity, it is not sufficient for a determined Christian resistance to the social and economic powers that drive the clash of civilizations. The Incarnation must play in public, not merely in private homes. Early Christianity indisputably set Christmas within the worship and sacramental life of the Church. The Apostle Paul was certain that Christ's body born in Bethlehem could still be located on earth: the Church is the continuing extension of the Incarnation. Centuries of festal days have laid down rich accumulations of Christian culture that form an incarnational imprint and the Church's own



birthright and legacy. Focusing on the Church, its appointed heir and custodian, is the way into Christmas as a religious festival.

Worship requires a refreshing slap in the face, as Catholic confirmations once did. Sacred thresholds crossed make clear the difference between inside and outside. Today museum guides know that an understanding of past religious art requires a retrieval of knowledge lost and an unlearning of modern assumptions. This is also the Church's difficult task as it plays a provocative Christmas before contemporary audiences, including many Christians themselves, who have totally different ideas. Christians were and are the original performers of Christmas.

The challenge of Christmas as theater of Incarnation is to summon people to re-imagine themselves as pilgrims to a sacred festival, not seasonal shoppers. From God as the first pilgrim who journeyed light years to Mary's womb, pilgrimage became a root metaphor for the Christian journey through the world. To invite and model the posture of the pilgrim for modern consumers is to detour them down a different street and to a different and surprising destination. The performance of any play requires a momentary suspension of disbelief. Playgoers who come to Christmas from their holiday tour through the powerful consumer culture outside the building are invited, inside, to suspend their incredulity during a staging of alternative realities – including the genuinely disturbing presence of God in the midst of earthly cares.

If the play of Christmas is to be convincing, Christians must themselves be a believable performance troupe. The Church's mission is to perform its incarnational narrative convincingly before an audience of God and the world. The parables of Jesus (Matthew 25:1-13) and the admonitions of Paul (Romans 13:11-14) caution the people of God to be alert and well-rehearsed. The New Testament Gospels are formational, not merely informational. The modern Church has to be spiritually shaped by and begin to look like the Body of Christ in the world. It must acquire the moral character and disposition that are distinctive to New Testament proclamation. Over centuries, the Incarnation has left deep deposits in Western culture, but also in the Church itself as a unique gathering of God's people. We must draw on this spiritual residue, claim it, and renew it.

The renewal of Christmas will not come about through nostalgic returns to a past time of Christian predominance or through prohibitionist scolding, but through an active imagination that makes everything captive and obedient to Christ. In a society that has lost heart and art, the Church is called (as the Orthodox would say) to stage heaven on earth as God did in the coming of Christ. If the mission of the Church is to be the theater of God in the world, the temptation will be to endlessly do old plays with nothing changed. But the Incarnation authorizes ever new incarnational wagers that mimic God's risks and lay new claim to all earthly things in the name of Christ.

This is why vigorous Christian theologies are necessary – following and preceding Christian worship and coaching believers on clear-sightedness.

But the proclamation of Christmas today has been domesticated and tamed, not to mention trivialized as consumption. No longer can anyone see, as Herod did, that this Christ Child must be a challenge to all political and economic domination systems. Theology aspires to integrate incarnational meanings into an entire Christian worldview, both rendering them rationally coherent and magnifying their mystery. Today the theologians' task is to find ways for Christmas to survive as a religious festival. How many are working on this problem?

Getting Christmas right means getting ourselves right and ultimately getting God right. To see how Christmas is faring is to see how we, and Christianity, and God, are faring today. A religiously robust Christmas enables the Church to re-gift the Incarnation to the modern world.

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# Caroling

BY DAVID W. MUSIC

The singing of carols reminds us that God, in his love for us, sent his Son to *be* one of us. Just as that first Christmas was marked by singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah.

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The word “carol” describes a type of song that, in many ways, is characterized by ambiguity. This situation results in large part from the carol’s long history. The carol had its origin in the medieval period as vocal accompaniment to a dance; its distinctive feature was a chorus that was sung at the beginning of the dance and again after each stanza. The dancers would sing the chorus as they danced, while the stanzas were performed by a soloist as the dancers rested.<sup>1</sup>

By the fifteenth century the carol had lost its association with dancing, though the original form of chorus-stanza remained. The words could be in English, Latin, or a mixture of the two, and usually dealt with some religious aspect of the Christmas season. These carols were largely the work of clerics and monastics who had the background and education to write the Latin phrases and to appreciate the theological sophistication of the texts and the artistry of the music that accompanied them. The songs had no specific place in the liturgy and they appear to have been used mainly as “spiritual entertainment” for the clergy, nobility, and perhaps (in some circumstances) the general populace. In Richard Leighton Greene’s fetching phrase, these carols were “popular by destination rather than by origin.”<sup>2</sup>

The carol as a specific form did not survive the English Reformation, since the abandonment of monasteries removed the very people who were its primary authors, composers, and consumers, and the carol became linked with the ballad as a form of popular music. During the seventeenth century the Puritans attempted to suppress Christmas celebrations – and the songs

that were associated with them—but the carol endured as a popular song type associated with the Christmas season.

In the eighteenth century, hymn singing (as opposed to versified psalm singing) was introduced into English church services and writers such as Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley wrote texts that dealt specifically with the Incarnation.<sup>3</sup> While these are perhaps more properly known as “hymns,”

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**One notable aspect of carols is their ubiquity. They are known across cultural, ethnic, national, and even religious boundaries. They form one of the best known bodies of religious song in the United States and far beyond.**

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they have colloquially come to be known as “carols” because of their Christmas subject matter. The nineteenth century saw the first significant attempts to preserve the carols of the folk tradition, and new hymns continued to be written on Advent-Christmas-Epiphany themes, such as James Montgomery’s “Angels, From the Realms of Glory.” A unique contribution of

the twentieth century was the American popular song with a secular Christmas theme: “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” “White Christmas,” and so on. Such songs quickly became “traditional” and have been added to the historic body of religious carols that are heard and sung annually.

Thus, over the course of its long history the carol has fulfilled a variety of roles and taken on many different forms. It has been sacred or secular, folkish or artistic, liturgical or extra-liturgical; followed a specific form or been freely constructed; found welcome in or been banned from the Church; had a known author/composer or been completely anonymous; and been cultural or countercultural.

### **THE CAROL IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

In the modern church, carols typically do not have a specific liturgical role to play: essentially they simply replace hymns during the Advent and Christmas seasons. The chief exception is in the service of “lessons and carols,” a series of Scripture readings on the Incarnation alternating with carols for congregation or choir. Here the carol is more fully integrated into the service, becoming a distinct means of response to the biblical message. The once popular custom of “caroling,” the practice of going from house to house singing Christmas songs with a group, has steadily diminished in frequency as entertainment has become more professionalized and electronic, and as Americans have become busier and less neighborhood-conscious.

Carols have several features that set them apart from other types of song in American life. One notable aspect of carols is their ubiquity. For at least a month each year carols can be heard not only in churches, but also in elevators, shopping malls, and automobiles. They are known across cultural, ethnic, national, and even religious boundaries. It has been claimed that "Christmas carols are probably the most influential body of songs in the Western world."<sup>4</sup> It is certainly true that they form one of the best known bodies of religious song in the United States and far beyond.

Another important characteristic of Christmas carols is that they are one of the few elements of American culture in which public religious expression is still readily accepted. It is difficult to imagine "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" or "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" being broadcast over loudspeakers in shopping malls or sung in public schools. However, it is not uncommon in these places to hear recorded versions of "Silent Night" or to find children singing "The Little Drummer Boy."

True, in some places, most notably public schools, concerts of Christmas music have now become "holiday programs," but even here religious carols generally find a place because they are such an important part of the Western musical heritage for this time of the year. Even semi-religious patriotic songs such as "My Country 'Tis of Thee" and "America, the Beautiful" are often not welcome in public schools, but Christmas carols are usually at least tolerated, especially if balanced with secular material or pieces from other religious traditions. During the Christmas season, and only during this season, religious messages can be heard or sung by thousands of people in these secular venues.

Another unusual aspect of the Christmas carol is that it seems to be one of the few song types in contemporary American life in which music in minor keys is widely accepted. Popular hymns and secular songs in the United States are almost invariably in major keys. At Christmas, however, people readily hear and sing "Coventry Carol" ("Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child"), "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," "We Three Kings of Orient Are," and "What Child Is This," all of which make use of minor keys.

## **THE CAROL AND CHRISTIAN FAITH**

Given the historic variety of styles and roles of Christmas carols, not to mention their familiarity, it is important to evaluate how they function in faith formation. As noted above, in the Church carols operate in much the same manner as hymns or other spiritual songs. Both hymns and carols furnish a vehicle for praise, prayer, and proclamation in worship, education, ministry, evangelism, and fellowship. Carols may contain sophisticated theological messages ("Of the Father's Love Begotten," "O Come, All Ye Faithful") or be simple, child-like expressions of faith and joy ("Silent Night," "Good Christian Men, Rejoice").

Like other types of Christian song, carols are a significant means of teaching the faith. While most church-goers are probably familiar with the Nativity stories found in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 2, these are reinforced and interpreted through Christmas carols such as “The First Nowell” and “While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night,” which retell the story in poetic and musical—and therefore more easily memorable—form. Some songs use the Christmas story to project messages on different, though related subjects. For example, neither “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” nor “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” mentions Jesus or any details of the Incarnation directly; instead, both use the second part of the song of the angels in Luke 2:14 as the backdrop for a song about peace on earth.

The teaching of incarnational theology and biblical information through Christmas carols must be approached with some caution. Many of these songs were written not by pastors, professional theologians, or biblical scholars, but by humble laypersons whose knowledge of the story may have been shaped more by legend, enthusiasm, and imagination than by the Scriptures. A case in point is “The First Nowell,” the original second stanza of which began “They looked up and saw a star / shining in the east, beyond them far.” The problem is that “they” refers back to the shepherds mentioned in stanza one, but according to the Bible it was not the shepherds but the wise men (who do not come into the carol until the third stanza) who saw the star. Without going into all the pros and cons about whether the star was an unusual and striking phenomenon that would have been visible to all (including the shepherds) or an astronomical sign whose meaning would only have been evident to those who could interpret it (such as the Magi), it is generally unwise to add to the details given in Scripture.

Furthermore, carols often tell only half the story: the Incarnation is incomplete without the Crucifixion and Resurrection. A few carols touch on these subjects (most notably “What Child Is This”), but those who encounter Christian song only at Christmas will probably have at best only a partial understanding of what it is all about.

With that said, a certain amount of leeway must be given to the carol. Carols seldom originate or function primarily as theological expression but as outpourings of tenderness and rejoicing. No single carol can tell the whole story, just as no single hymn, or all of them together, can express the entire truth. A carol is like a snapshot: it gives us a glimpse of one aspect of the Incarnation. Add these snapshots together and we can get a fuller picture, but even then they can never exhaust the subject.

Furthermore, carols often approach their subject obliquely through symbolism, metaphor, and simile. An obvious example is “Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming” (based on Isaiah 11:1), in which the newborn Jesus is compared to a flower blooming from a stem that has been awaiting this budding for centuries, but “poetic license” is frequently found in other carols as well, such as “The Holly and the Ivy” and “I Saw Three Ships.” It undoubtedly

aids the memorability of carols to sing that the angels appeared to the shepherds at midnight, that there was hay in the manger, or that the birth took place amid cattle and donkeys, though none of these features are mentioned in Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Whether these elements are literally true or not, they certainly reinforce the biblical message that Jesus was born in humble circumstances.

The singing of carols reminds us that God, in his love for us, sent his Son to *be* one of us. Just as that first Christmas was marked by singing, so Christians through the centuries have celebrated and borne witness through song to the coming of the Messiah. And they will continue to do so for ages to come, for this is a message that is worth singing about.

## NOTES

1 This background is evident in the term “chorus” which is derived from the Greek word for dance.

2 Richard Leighton Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, second edition, revised and enlarged (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), clxxii.

3 Isaac Watts, as a Calvinist, did not write Christmas carols per se: his versification of Psalm 98, “Joy to the World! the Lord Is Come,” does not include a single detail of the biblical Christmas story, merely stating in the first line that “the Lord is come,” but it has become traditionally associated with Christmas. Charles Wesley wrote “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing.”

4 William E. Studwell, “The Christmas Carol as a Cultural Phenomenon,” *The Hymn*, 45:4 (October 1994), 9.

5 See “It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” “Away in a Manger,” and “What Child Is This.” The suggestion that the angels’ song was at midnight derives from the shepherds “keeping watch over their flock by night” (Luke 2:8), but for all we know, the angels might have sung at 8:00 p.m. or 2:00 a.m. The implications regarding the hay, cattle, and donkeys are grounded in the fact that Jesus was laid in a manger. There is every possibility that the assumptions made by the carol writers are all true; they might equally well be false.



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**Gentile's *Adoration of the Magi* works well iconographically in its location in the sacristy (where the clergy prepare for the Mass): for in the Eucharist, Christ is revealed to the faithful in the congregation as happened to the Magi.**



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# The Magi's Adoration

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

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**T**he *Adoration of the Magi* was commissioned by Palla Strozzi, a banker and perhaps the richest man in Florence at the time, who wanted an altarpiece with a subject appropriate for his family burial chapel in the Sacristy of Sta. Trinità, Florence. Prior to this work, altarpieces did not show narrative scenes. Yet this image works well iconographically in its location in the sacristy (where the clergy robe themselves and prepare for the Mass), for Christ becomes manifest in the Eucharist on the altar during the Mass; he is revealed to the faithful in the congregation as happened to the Magi.

Gentile was born in the Marches region of Italy and worked in Venice prior to coming to Florence. His paintings combine the naturalism of the Early Renaissance with the elegant, refined drapery style and meticulous attention to details that characterize the International style. In this composition, the oldest magus, having removed his crown, prostrates himself before the Christ Child who affectionately touches his balding head; the second magus kneels as he lifts his right hand to remove his crown; and the third and youngest magus stands waiting his turn. Their entourage on the right includes irreverent servants (exchanging glances or making jokes as their masters bow to a child), well-groomed horses, a dog with a jeweled collar, chained monkeys, exotic leopards, and fighting falcons. Behind the Holy Family are the traditional symbols for the Gentiles (the ox) and Jews (the ass), positioned here to emphasize the attentive response by the Gentile visitors. The distant background depicts the entourage on its way to the Bethlehem city gate.

The predella (horizontal panel beneath the central composition) shows three scenes from the infancy narrative of Christ: the Nativity with the shepherds in the background, the flight into Egypt, and the presentation in the Temple. These scenes instance a sophisticated use of atmosphere (the Nativity may be the first painted night scene) and the casting of shadow determined by an identifiable light source. These observations of light and shade in nature are one of the most critical contributions made by fifteenth-century artists to the history of art. Gentile da Fabriano interprets the manifestation of Christ to the Magi, a supernatural event, through the observation of nature in a precise and profound way that will, stylistically, become known as the Renaissance.

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**Ghirlandaio makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi.**

*Domenico Ghirlandaio (1448-1494), ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS (1483-1485). Tempera and oil on wood. 167 x 167 cm. Sassetti Chapel, S. Trinità, Florence. Photo: © Alinari/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.*

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# The Shepherds' Adoration

BY HEIDI J. HORNİK

AND MIKEAL C. PARSONS

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The story of the shepherds and the angels is uniquely Lukan (2:8-20) and is told immediately after the birth of Jesus. The angels appear in the field and make the announcement that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (2:11), which prompts the shepherds to visit the child. The shepherds' adoration of the child is described in Luke 2:16: "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger."

This single verse inspired numerous artists to produce the composition known as the Adoration of the Shepherds. The subject was very popular in the region of Europe located north of the Alps, and it was hardly less popular in Italy, especially after the late fifteenth century. Domenico Ghirlandaio, working south of the Alps in the city of Florence, painted a major altarpiece depicting the Nativity and Adoration of the Shepherds for Francesco Sassetti's sepulchral chapel in Santa Trinità. This painting in some ways typifies the characteristics of the Italian Renaissance (modeling of the figures, local color, anatomical proportion, realistic perspective, use of antiquity), yet it incorporates Northern Renaissance elements in a manner not done prior and never repeated again.

The Lukan story is composed of two parts: the birth of Jesus (2:1-7) and the visitation of the shepherds (2:8-20). The first unit begins with a reference to a census decreed by the Emperor Augustus (2:1). The present text raises some historical questions since there is no evidence of a registration of the whole Roman Empire under Augustus. The theological significance, however, is clear: the Messiah's birth in a lowly manger brings peace throughout the earth. This is a direct challenge to the Augustan propaganda, praising the peace Augustus had brought to the Roman Empire, which was found throughout Roman literature (see Virgil's *Aeneid* and *Fourth Eclogue*) and art (for example, the *Augustus Primaporta* and *Ara Pacis Augustae*, to say nothing of the Forum of Augustus), and was no doubt familiar to Luke's authorial audience.

What modern audience can hear the opening words of the second unit (2:8-20) and resist being swept back into a sentimental stupor recalling Christmas days of past childhood? "In that region there were shepherds living in

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*Hugo van der Goes* (c.1420-1482), *ADORATION OF THE SHEPHERDS, PORTINARI ALTARPIECE – OPEN, FULL VIEW* (c. 1475). Oil on wood. 253 x 141 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: © Scala/Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

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the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” But the authorial audience would most likely have responded to this text in a much different way. Both the setting and the characters would alert the audience that God had chosen to disclose the birth of the Messiah in a dangerous place to a violence-prone group. Sparsely populated countrysides throughout the Roman Empire were havens for vagabonds and thieves, a motif developed fully by Luke (cf., for example, the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37). With this reality in mind, the angelic chorus’s message, “on earth peace among those whom he favors,” delivered to one of the most violent groups in one of the most dangerous places is remarkable! No less shocking is the reaction of these shepherds who, upon hearing this news, decide among themselves to go to Bethlehem to see “this thing which has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us” (2:15).

The birth of the Messiah, according to Luke, has the power to lift up the lowly, the despised, and the violent (1:52). And these shepherds, whose vocation for the authorial audience at first conjures up an image of a despised and potentially violent group, by their actions—finding the child and “glorifying and praising God”—align themselves with the more positive portrait of the good shepherd, an image already evoked by the mention of the city of *David*, who was, of course, himself a shepherd before becoming king. The very form of the story reinforces the final positive impression of the shepherds.

The story of the shepherds’ adoration is, of course, part of the larger nativity cycle, the story of the birth of Jesus. As such, the shepherds have been overshadowed by other details of the story, especially by the Magi (Matthew 2). The prominence of the Magi in Epiphany secured their importance in the story, insuring a minor role for the shepherds, especially in art, for centuries. When the shepherds were treated, it was often to contrast or

complement the role of the Magi. This changed for Florentines in May, 1483, when Hugo Van der Goes's *Adoration of the Shepherds* (p. 36), commissioned by Tomasso Portinari, the manager of the Medici bank in Bruges, arrived in the city and immediately influenced Domenico Ghirlandaio in the Sassetti chapel.

Domenico Bigordi, the first of five children born to Antonia and Tommaso Bigordi, was called Il Ghirlandaio in Florence. He was born the same year as Lorenzo de' Medici, 1449. Domenico was a painter and mosaicist and, according to Vasari, trained as a goldsmith. By the 1440s every large city south of the Alps was influenced by northern artists through the import of paintings. Domenico probably received the commission for the funerary chapel of Francesco Sassetti sometime in 1478 or 1479 before leaving for Rome to do the Sistine Chapel wall frescoes. Ghirlandaio actually painted the Sassetti frescoes between May 1483 and the chapel's dedication on Christmas 1485. Francesco Sassetti (1421-1490) was the general manager of the Medici bank, which had branches across Italy and beyond the Alps. His career with the Medici began as a factor in the Geneva branch between 1438 and 1439 and, according to documents, within eight years he became its manager.

Ghirlandaio's composition finds its source in the Portinari altarpiece. However, while the donors flank the central panel in the Portinari folding triptych, this triptych style never became popular in Florence. The Sassetti altarpiece retains the square *all'antica* frame, but Ghirlandaio places the patrons in frescoed "panels" on either side of it. The square panel is a mixture of the egg-based tempera technique and oil. Ghirlandaio made incisions with a straight edge in the gesso to indicate the general form of the composition. Skin tones and the broad modeling of drapery were laid in over an underdrawing on the gesso. The descriptive details and highlights in the composition were painted more meticulously with the tip of a brush dipped in tempera.

Ghirlandaio's *Adoration* has some distinctive, in some cases unique, interpretations of the Lukan story. The visual depiction of the Nativity typically shows the Virgin kneeling next to the Christ child lying before her, while Joseph can be found somewhere else in the composition, usually off to one side as in the Portinari panel. Joseph here is in the exact center of the painting. The type, an old man with gray hair, remains. Joseph shades his eyes with his hand as he looks upward towards a flying angel. Of course, the focus of the Nativity is on Mary and Christ, not Joseph. This point is made clear from the inscription on the painting's frame: "IPSVM QVEM GENVIT ADORAVIT MARIA" (Mary adored the very one whom she bore). The double focus on Mary and the Christ Child is indicated by other elements as well.

This nativity scene does not occur in the infancy narratives of either Matthew or Luke but might be loosely interpreted as following Luke 2:7: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth,

and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” During the fifteenth century, the literary sources for many details in the scene relied on apocryphal writings and visionary experience, especially that of the Swedish mystic, Saint Bridget.

The Virgin, triangular in form, is given a place of importance in both compositions. Ghirlandaio allowed the traditional Florentine red gown to be seen from beneath the navy mantle which, while retaining the solemnity of the figure, draws the viewer to the beauty of her face. The facial type is most certainly based on a Florentine rather than a Netherlandish female model. The contours and shadows on her face and neck, which emit an internal glow, exemplify Ghirlandaio’s highly effective use of light and color. He carefully arranged each form and its lighting so that where the edge of the form meets the background there is an opposite light level to ensure that the outline of the form is not lost, and *rilievo* is achieved.

Ghirlandaio depicts Mary not only as a woman who reflects upon the Savior, but also a mother who looks at and prays for her child. This eliminates the physical and emotional distance between the Virgin and Child apparent in the Van der Goes painting. The intimacy and relationship between mother and child is further emphasized in the Ghirlandaio painting by the placement of the infant on the fanned-out mantle of the Virgin. The shape of this drapery extends the beauty of the Virgin to the most sacred area of the composition, the body of Christ. Whereas Van der Goes places the radiant Child on bare ground in the center of the composition, for Ghirlandaio’s the drapery provides a soft material for the infant’s body and covers the sheaf of wheat, symbol of the Eucharist, under his head.

Not so subtle is Ghirlandaio’s use of a sarcophagus for the Savior’s manger. The motif of the sarcophagus is not derived from any traditional representations of the Nativity, either written or contained in the iconographic precedents, and it is never followed. That Ghirlandaio chooses to allude to Christ’s death with a sarcophagus may take on more poignant dimensions given the personal history of the Sassettis, whose first son Teodoro died during the execution of this commission.

Ghirlandaio, like Van der Goes, inserts symbolism in seemingly irrelevant details of the nativity scene. Several of these details provide additional confirmation of the connection between the infant Christ’s birth and passion. Ghirlandaio’s placement of a lamb in the standing shepherd’s arms, instead of the hat this shepherd holds in Van der Goes’ painting, not only identifies the shepherd’s occupation but also is a well-known symbol of Christ’s atoning death (cf. the words of John the Baptist in John 1:29: “Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”). Ghirlandaio also replaces Van der Goes’ vase of cut flowers with a goldfinch, again a symbol of Christ’s passion.

Classical elements are a common feature in Florentine paintings by 1483. Each artist and patron chooses to incorporate different classical structures in

unique ways that are sometimes relevant to them personally or to the community in which they live. Often the patron or artist will seek the assistance of a humanist for the iconography. The sarcophagus and pilasters (each with a Latin inscription), the triumphal arch above the procession of the Magi in the background (the shepherds have taken center stage here for a change), and the cityscapes of Jerusalem and Rome have significance to the patron and spectator that contribute to the meaning of the painting.

For instance, the pilasters supporting the sarcophagus and the triumphal arch have inscriptions that introduce the theme of the successive reigns of the Hebrews, the Romans, and of Christ, through the story of the Roman general Pompey. The inscription on the triumphal arch through which the Magi pass cites the Roman general who conquered Jerusalem: "GN[AEO]. POMPEIO MAGNO HIRCANVS PONT[IUS]. P[OSUIT]" (Hircanus, High Priest, Erected This For General [Imperator] Pompey the Great). This inscription suggests that the Jewish High priest, Hyrcanus, erected the monument in gratitude to Pompey, who after the conquest of Jerusalem reinstated him in his office.

The pilaster on the left records the date: "MCCCCLXXXV" (1485). The manger-sarcophagus used for the Savior's crib, together with the ancient pilasters supporting the roof, are the foundations for the new temple succeeding its Hebrew and pagan predecessors. The letters on the sarcophagus read: "ENSE CADENS SOLYMO POMPEI FVLVI[VS] / AVGVR / NVMEN AIT QVAE ME CONTEG[IT] / VRNA DABIT" (Falling at Jerusalem by the sword of Pompey, the augur Fulvius says that the urn which contains me shall produce a God). If the first inscription on the arch indicated the triumph of paganism over Judaism, this second signifies the victory of Christianity over the heathen world.

The most distant hill on the right is believed to be Jerusalem with the Dome of the Rock visible. In the center of the background is a view of Rome, which includes the Torre delle Milizie and the mausoleum of Hadrian. Therefore, the two world empires, Hebrew and Roman, are now in the background to the beginning of Christ's new kingdom.

Luke, like Ghirlandaio, was also interested in the relationship between things religious and political, though the two seem to have construed that relationship quite differently. Luke alone among the Evangelists takes pains to set the story of Jesus' birth against the backdrop of the Roman Empire. He notes that the census prompting Mary and Joseph to sojourn to Bethlehem was the result of "a decree" that "went out from Caesar Augustus." We have already noted that for Luke the "peace" that Christ's coming brings is celebrated by the angelic host before the shepherds. The contrast between Christ's peace and Augustus's Pax Romana was surely clear to Luke's audience. Though scholars disagree about exactly how, almost all agree that in his second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, Luke attempts to legitimate Christianity, then a tiny Jewish messianic set, within the larger Roman

empire—trying to forge a way for the movement to survive while at the same time holding true to its central tenets. By Ghirlandaio’s day, of course, hindsight shows that Christianity has triumphed and stands in a succession of “global” empires from the Hebrews to the Romans to the Christians.

The vast majority of the art produced during the Renaissance and Baroque periods were intended as spiritual aids for believers’ meditation on various aspects of the life of Christ and his followers. Ghirlandaio’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*, like the Gospel of Luke before it, makes the bold move of placing Christianity on the larger political landscape. And like the Third Gospel before him, Ghirlandaio makes the audacious claim that the transition of dominance from the Romans to Christianity is to be found not in Emperor Constantine’s conversion or his mighty Christian army, but rather in the birth of a child who is first adored by lowly shepherds rather than cosmopolitan Magi. Further, no sooner has the child been born than the audience is asked to reflect on Christ’s death already foreshadowed in the symbols surrounding his birth (a sarcophagus, a goldfinch, a lamb, a wheat sheaf) and to contemplate the social and political implications which an embrace of this Child and his good news must surely entail.<sup>†</sup>

## NOTE

<sup>†</sup> Several paragraphs of this article are borrowed, in somewhat altered form, from the fourth chapter of our book *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003). This material is reprinted with permission from Continuum International Publishing Company.

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# A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep

BY DAVID W. MUSIC

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A Lamb is born among the sheep,  
sing, sing nowell.  
The shepherds' Shepherd lies asleep,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Nowell, nowell, nowell,  
now sing, sing nowell.  
Nowell, nowell, nowell,  
now sing, sing nowell.*

Eternity breaks into time,  
sing, sing nowell,  
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Refrain*

The Light into the darkness shines,  
sing, sing nowell,  
as heaven now with earth combines,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Refrain*

# A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep

WORDS AND MUSIC  
DAVID W. MUSIC

1. A Lamb is born a - mong the sheep, sing, sing now -  
 2. E - ter - ni - ty breaks in - to time, sing, sing now -  
 3. The Light in - to the dark - ness shines, sing, sing now -

ell. The shep - herds' Shep - herd lies a - sleep,  
 ell, while an - gel choirs sing songs sub - lime,  
 ell, as heav - en now with earth com - bines.

*Refrain*

sing, sing now - ell.  
 sing, sing now - ell. Now - ell, now - ell, now - ell, now  
 Sing, sing now - ell.

Musical notation for the first system of the refrain. The treble staff contains a melody starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4 and B4, then a half note C5. The bass staff provides accompaniment with chords and a melodic line. The lyrics are: "sing, sing now - ell. Now - ell, now - ell, now -"

Musical notation for the second system of the refrain. The treble staff continues the melody with notes G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. The bass staff continues the accompaniment. The lyrics are: "ell, now sing, sing now - ell."

# Worship Service

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

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*The service includes an optional Christmas drama, "Three Visitors," in which the characters gradually merge into the congregation's worship on Christmas Eve. The order of service may be followed without the drama. If the drama is performed, only its title should appear in the printed order of service.*

*The drama requires four empty chairs in a catty-cornered row on the podium, simulating a pew that faces both the congregation and the pulpit. The lights in the sanctuary are low. Four candles are lit on the Advent wreath. The musician meditatively plays variations on the hymn tune, A LAMB IS BORN. The sanctuary lights are increased for the reading of the prophecy of Isaiah.*

## *Prelude: Variations on A LAMB IS BORN*

### *The Witness of the Prophets: Isaiah 9:2, 4-6*

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

## Gathering Carol

“A Lamb Is Born among the Sheep”

A Lamb is born among the sheep,  
sing, sing nowell.  
The shepherds’ Shepherd lies asleep,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Nowell, nowell, nowell,  
now sing, sing nowell.  
Nowell, nowell, nowell,  
now sing, sing nowell.*

Eternity breaks into time,  
sing, sing nowell,  
while angel choirs sing songs sublime,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Refrain*

The Light into the darkness shines,  
sing, sing nowell,  
as heaven now with earth combines,  
sing, sing nowell.

*Refrain*

*David W. Music (2011)  
Tune: A LAMB IS BORN  
(pp. 41-43 of this volume)*

## A Christmas Drama: “Three Visitors”

*As the musician resumes playing A LAMB IS BORN, a woman who is well known to the congregation enters. She carries a large purse. She arranges herself in the third empty chair from the congregation and drops the purse onto the second one. She glances through her order of service until the music stops.*

*She muses to herself in a stage whisper: “You never know who will come to a Christmas Eve service. Visitors from all over, I suspect....” (Pause) She reads to herself from the order of service: “A Lamb is born among the sheep, / sing, sing nowell. / The shepherds’ Shepherd lies asleep, / sing, sing nowell.” She looks puzzled. “I wonder what ‘nowell’ means?”*

*A young man dressed in working clothes enters. He carries a stuffed lamb. He sits in the first open chair, the one closest to the congregation. Leaning toward the woman, he answers her question gently: “It means ‘birthday.’ ‘Nowell’*

means birthday...as in 'happy birthday' to the Lamb of God." *He continues speaking, now to the lamb cradled in his arms: "I love that verse: 'A lamb is born among the sheep / The shepherd's Shepherd lies asleep.'"*

*The woman is staring at the lamb. Seeing this, the young man smiles and says to her: "It's all right. I'm professional. You know – a shepherd, from Bethlehem." Looking often to his lamb, the shepherd reads aloud the meditation from the order of service.*

### *Meditation on the Lamb*

Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee,  
gave thee life, and bid thee feed  
by the stream and o'er the mead;  
gave thee clothing of delight,  
softest clothing, woolly, bright;  
gave thee such a tender voice,  
making all the vales rejoice?  
Little Lamb, who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb, I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb, I'll tell thee:  
He is called by thy name,  
for he calls himself a Lamb.  
He is meek, and he is mild;  
He became a little child.  
I a child, and thou a lamb,  
we are called by his name.  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!  
Little Lamb, God bless thee!

*William Blake (1757-1827)*<sup>1</sup>

*The woman is staring at the shepherd. Noticing this, he says to her in a stage whisper: "What? Shepherds may be poor and disadvantaged, but we're not dumb. We see things...." He stands, and motions for the congregation to stand, as someone comes to the pulpit to read the Witness of the Gospels.*

### *The Witness of the Gospels: Luke 2:1-20*

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to

Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

*After some silence, the shepherd and woman begin singing "Silent Night! Holy Night!" The shepherd motions the congregation to join them.*

### *Response Carol*

"Silent Night! Holy Night!"

Silent night! holy night!  
All is calm, all is bright  
'round yon virgin mother and child;  
holy infant, so tender and mild,  
sleep in heavenly peace,  
sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night! holy night!  
Shepherds quake at the sight,  
glories stream from heaven afar,  
heavenly hosts sing alleluia;  
Christ, the Savior, is born!  
Christ, the Savior, is born!

Silent night! holy night!  
Son of God, love's pure light  
radiant beams from thy holy face  
with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth.

*Josef Mohr (1792-1848); tr. John F. Young (1820-1885)*

*Tune: STILLE NACHT*

*An older woman enters. She carries a quill pen and a small notebook, square at the bottom but rounded at the top. The shepherd and woman make room for her in the first chair by shifting themselves and the purse to the other chairs. The shepherd says to her: "Good evening, Hildegard. I thought the beautiful music of Christmas might draw you to join us." He introduces her to the first woman: "Hildegard, this is \_\_\_\_\_, a member of this congregation; \_\_\_\_\_, this is Hildegard of Bingen, who writes wonderful songs, and plays, and books on theology and medicine...."*

*Hildegard stops him quickly by raising her hand. "Just let me join you in worshipping the Lamb at his Nativity." The shepherd is impatient: "But please say you will write a song to celebrate the occasion!" Hildegard replies: "No one can just write a song for the Nativity. As you said, one must first 'see things.' Your poet, for instance, sees in the story how the angels' song links heaven to earth as God comes to us – for he says, 'Eternity breaks into time.'"*

*The shepherd will not be satisfied: "And what have you seen in the story, Hildegard?" She replies: "To contribute to our worship, here is a song I have received; may it be our prayer to the Lamb." She closes her eyes for a brief moment as if recalling a vision; as the others bow to pray, she reads the Prayer to the Lamb from the order of service.*

### *Prayer to the Lamb*

Holy Life Giver,  
Doctor of the desperate,  
Medicine for all wounds,  
Fire of love,



Joy of hearts,  
fragrant Strength,  
sparkling Fountain,  
Protector,  
Penetrator,  
in you we contemplate  
    how God goes looking for those who are lost  
    and reconciles those who are at odds with Him.  
Break our chains!

You bring people together.  
You curl clouds, whirl winds,  
    send rain on rocks, sing in creeks,  
    and turn the lush earth green.  
You teach those who listen,  
    breathing joy and wisdom into them.

We praise You for these gifts,  
Light-giver,  
Sound of joy,  
Wonder of being alive,  
Hope of every person,  
and our strongest Good.

*Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)<sup>2</sup>*

*The first woman and shepherd say, "Amen!" After a moment, Hildegard smiles and says to the congregation: "Now, I would really enjoy hearing your songs to the Lamb's Nativity. Would you honor me by sharing some of your favorite carols to tell me what you have seen in the story?"*

### *Sharing of Favorite Carols<sup>3</sup>*

#### *The Witness of the New Testament: Titus 2:11-14*

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

*A man in his forties, wearing a suit, arrives. He is carrying a sheaf of papers. Once again the other characters make room for the newcomer in the first chair by shifting themselves to the other chairs. The woman looks at her large purse, shrugs her shoulders, and hides it out of the way on the floor.*

*Hildegard speaks first to the newcomer: "Welcome, Dietrich. You remember the young shepherd, and this is \_\_\_\_." The man smiles and nods to the shepherd, but stands to extend his hand to the first woman: "Hello, my name is Dietrich Bonhoeffer." She replies: "Ah! The theologian and pastor of the Confessing Church in Germany during World War II—nothing surprises me now. Welcome to our worship." He nods and responds: "Thank you. It is my pleasure to join your worship of the Lamb."*

*Returning to his seat, Bonhoeffer indicates the sheaf of papers and says to the shepherd with a bit of embarrassment: "I have prepared just a few notes." The shepherd smiles: "Be brief, Pastor Bonhoeffer, but do tell us what brought you to us tonight." Bonhoeffer says to him and then to the congregation: "It was your reading of that wonderful promise in Titus which says so much about the manger: 'For the grace of God has appeared....' Or as your poet wrote, 'The light into the darkness shines / as heaven now with earth combines.' It is this about the manger that calls out our response." Looking to the others and receiving their nods to continue, he stands to read his Meditation on the Lamb's Nativity to the congregation.*

### *Meditation on the Lamb's Nativity*

When God decides to come in person into this world, in the manger of Bethlehem...we cannot just sit there like a theater audience and enjoy all the lovely pictures. We ourselves will be caught up in this action, this reversal of all things; we will become actors on this stage... What story is being enacted when Mary becomes the mother of God, when God comes into the world in a lowly manger?

The judgment and redemption of the world—that is what is happening here. For it is the Christ Child in the manger himself who will bring that judgment and redemption....

It is God, the Lord and Creator of all things, who becomes so small here, comes to us in a little corner of the world, unremarkable and hidden away, and wants to meet us and be among us as a helpless, defenseless child—not as a game or to charm us, because we find this so touching, but to show us where and who God really is, and from this standpoint to judge all human desire for greatness, to devalue it and pull it down from its throne.

The throne of God in the world is set not on the thrones of humankind but in humanity's deepest abyss, in the manger. There are no flattering courtiers standing around his throne, just some rather dark, unknown,

dubious-looking figures, who cannot get enough of looking at this miracle and are quite prepared to live entirely on the mercy of God.

...Who among us will celebrate Christmas rightly? Who will finally lay down at the manger all power and honor, all high regard, vanity, arrogance, and self-will? Who will take their place among the lowly and let God alone be high? Who will see the glory of God in the lowliness of the child in the manger?

*Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945)<sup>4</sup>*

*Bonhoeffer says "Amen." After a moment, he motions for the congregation to stand as someone comes to the pulpit to read the Witness of the Gospels.*

### *The Witness of the Gospels: John 1:1-14*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

This is the gospel of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

*The four characters sit silently for a minute. Then the shepherd stands and beckons: "When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him, he declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' Given what you have seen and heard in the story tonight, who will light the Christ candle for us to declare the Lamb's glory?" A young family from the congregation answers, "We will." The sanctuary lights are dimmed as they come to light the Christ candle on the Advent wreath.*

## Lighting of the Christ Candle

*The shepherd, Hildegard, and Bonhoeffer light their small candles from the Christ candle. They move through the congregation, passing their light on others who do the same. The musician softly plays variations on A LAMB IS BORN.*

*When every congregant's candle is lit and the music stops, the woman character, who is alone on the podium, stands and goes to the pulpit. She reads the benediction, as with newfound insight.*

### Benediction: 1 Peter 2:9-10

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Once you were not a people,  
but now you are God's people;  
once you had not received mercy,  
but now you have received mercy.

*She concludes: "Nowell, nowell, everyone, a blessed nowell. To all who visit with us tonight, a blessed nowell. May we go now to live in the redemptive grace and peace of the newborn Christ." She blows out her candle as a signal for all.*

## NOTES

1 William Blake, "The Lamb," *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (1789).

2 Hildegard of Bingen, "Holy Life Giver," in Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Spiritual Reader* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007), 37. Used by permission.

3 Invite members of the congregation to call out a favorite Christmas carol, briefly saying what the carol highlights in the Christmas story. Then sing one or two familiar verses of the carol.

4 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *London, 1933-1935*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, volume 13, translated by Isabel Best (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2007), 344-347.

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# The Color of Christmas Extended

BY EMILIE GRIFFIN

The Christmas season through the feast of Epiphany is twelve days and more to ponder and receive the grace of Incarnation. It is a banquet for the affections, a time to glory in the amazing story of Christ incarnate, the full meaning of the Trinity in Christmas dress.

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**I**t was cold and rainy on the January night when I approached the door of our small Catholic cathedral in downtown Alexandria. I praised God for our Catholic Louisiana celebration of Christmas – not one day, not twelve days, but even a few days more.

In some ways it was an anxious time. My husband and I had left the house together, heading downtown for a “final” performance of that lovely opera of the Wise Men, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. It was one of our favorite parts of the extended Christmas season that ends with the celebration of Epiphany. But Bill had an asthma attack in the car and had to turn back. I dropped him at our front door, determined that it was safe to leave him there, and drove downtown through the cold rain on my own.

When the cathedral door opened, the grace of the moment overwhelmed me. Our small but elegant “pocket cathedral” was filled with music, color, and song. I was late. The opera was half over but I knew the story and the music so well I could start in most anywhere.

*“Have you seen a child, the color of wheat, the color of dawn?”<sup>1</sup>*

The three Wise Men are mysterious figures whose identity is not explained at first. They come looking for the Christ child. They have seen his star in the east and they are searching for him. They stop on the road and beg hospitality from a poor woman and her crippled son, Amahl.

This stunning music and lyrical text carries me back in memory to the time when Jesus was born. The modern Italian composer, Gian Carlo Menotti, has captured in a contemporary opera the intensity and wonder of the Incarnation.



But there is another memory linked to this particular work of art. My own first full-scale experience of Christ Jesus came in my twenties. I like to call it a time of conversion. By grace I felt led from place to place, from decision to decision. Filled with a sense of wonder at the scope of Christian history and teaching, I accepted Jesus for myself, was later baptized and confirmed, and embraced Roman Catholic faith sure that God's grace had been with me all along. I suspect the reason why I make this Menotti connection is that during my conversion time in New York City a determined revival of the cathedral play was in progress in many Manhattan churches—Anglican, Roman, and Orthodox. That was a heady time of renewal. We hoped to recover the practices of ancient Christianity and in Milton's phrase, to "fetch the age of gold."<sup>2</sup>

I believe this is the argument and rationale for the extended celebration of Christmas which is today being recovered by Christians of all persuasions. Theologically, we know that every day is Christmas. If we have studied the history of the Reformation—with its odd, sometimes angry, zigzag course—we understand why many resisters and objectors of the Puritan stamp refused to celebrate Christmas and wanted altars stripped and holy objects destroyed forever. Their fear of idolatry extended to imagery and for many centuries suppressed the observance of Christmas at least for the northern Christian churches and sects in Europe and America. That experience is part of our legacy.

Yet, the extended celebration of Christmas has remained strong within the liturgical churches—Anglican, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic. In my home city of Alexandria it is plain to me that the Roman Catholic bishop considers himself a witness to the full meaning and experience of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany for the wider community. Other downtown churches, notably Emmanuel Baptist Church, have taken part in their own extended observance of Christmas as well.

Mind you, I have not discussed this with our current bishop. But everyone in our community has come to appreciate his personal love of music and the arts, and his way of extending a welcome to everyone through the cathedral. In Roman Catholic practice the cathedral is "the bishop's church." In a few brief years as Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Alexandria, Bishop Ronald Herzog has sponsored musical and creative events at the Cathedral, often with an ecumenical breadth. At our cathedral concerts and through the Red River Chorale, Bishop Herzog has emphasized gathering, rejoicing, celebrating—and reaching out to others, including those who do not fully embrace the Christian faith.

As a lifelong Roman Catholic, I have paid attention to how the Church has guarded the ancient beliefs of Christians and embodied them in feasts and seasons – occasions for fully experiencing the gospel. As a writer, speaker, and spiritual director, I appreciate this aspect of Roman Catholicism. Christmas – an extended time that begins with Advent, runs throughout the days of Christmas, and is summed up in the Epiphany – is a banquet for the affections, a time to glory in the amazing story of Christ incarnate, the full meaning of the Trinity in Christmas dress.



For many believers and unbelievers, Christmas is the most important time of the year. Children love Christmas, and many adults justify the huge display of gifts, food, and self-indulgence because Christmas is “for the children.” Christmas is designed to explore and proclaim the importance of memory. The Church remembers the life of Christ in this amazing, large scale festival. The feast of Christmas itself, on December 25<sup>th</sup>, is a time to imagine the birth of the Christ child, the entrance of Christ Jesus into history.

As this feast is recovered some awkward facts are exposed. Scholars today suppose that the birth of Jesus of Nazareth was probably in summer. Because of the re-juggling of calendars the dates of these events are in flux. The Davidic lineage is clearly a factor in the biblical story, yet some scholars question the Infancy Narratives. Our Scripture study reveals that the genealogies given in the Gospels

do not line up neatly. Similar questions are raised about astronomical history. What do we know about the star the Wise Men followed? Who were the Wise Men anyhow? Why are Roman Catholics so confident about naming them when their names – Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar – are not actually in the Bible?

Are these our primary questions as the Christmas season spools out? Not

usually. Most contemporary people, even faithful believers, experience the Christmas season – of whatever length – as a time of busy preparation, of gift-giving, of hassle, sometimes of exhaustion. Travel may be involved. Coordination is needed. Long awaited visits and elaborate plans may not work out just right. Even in a time of peace there are fits of temper and annoyance. Some relatives and neighbors may feel excluded, unwelcome.

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**In that heady time of renewal, we hoped to recover the practices of ancient Christianity and in Milton’s phrase, to “fetch the age of gold.” This is the rationale for the extended celebration of Christmas which is being recovered by Christians of all persuasions.**

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People bring their worries and anxieties into the Christmas season – what to wear, what to buy, what to bring – how to keep up with the neighbors’ more affluent or less affluent standards. Will I be welcome? Will I fit in? Will so-and-so’s mother or father like and accept me? Will I feel, in some unexplained way, that there is really “no room for me at the inn”?

Today’s Christian teachers, pastors, and spiritual leaders are conscious of these anxieties. They know that Christmas is a holy time for some and just an extended bash for others. On another level they know the hunger of the human heart for acceptance and for a sense of identity. The longer celebration of Christmas, which harks back to the earliest days of Christianity, extends this sense of anticipation and this yearning for home. The whole drama of salvation is acted out in the season that begins with Advent, moves through the twelve days of Christmas, and ends with the January feasts including Epiphany.

I cherish the Advent readings in the liturgical calendar because they lift us into an almost angelic place. Here is the first reading for the first Sunday of Advent:

In days to come,  
the mountain of the LORD’S house  
shall be established as the highest mountain  
and raised above the hills.  
All nations shall stream toward it;  
many peoples shall come and say:  
“Come, let us climb the LORD’S mountain,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may instruct us in his ways,  
and we may walk in his paths.”

*Isaiah 2:1-5 (NAB)*<sup>3</sup>

I love the long-distant prophetic tone, the sense that God is with us then, long ago, now, right away, and in the days to come. Somehow, it is enough to take my mind off things, worrisome but global things like climate change, which are way beyond my control. God is in charge of it all and he loves us with an inexhaustible love.

Christmas is a festival of homecoming and the Christmas story is clear about the “real” meaning of Christmas. Home is not a physical place but a God-space. Christmas – not one day but the whole celebration – reminds us of our deep welcome into the heart of God.

The story of Jesus is what matters. As Christian missionaries throughout the world have told us, it is the story that converts. The full celebration of Christmas embeds the story in almost every day of this long season. We begin our observance with Advent, which proclaims not only the first but the second coming of Christ. Advent helps us to look forward to a messianic time.



When we reach December 24 and 25 we think, ah, Christmas is here at last. But no, Christmas is more than one day even though Christmas Eve and Christmas Day may feel like the ultimate in sacred, holy time. But as the early church fathers knew, the pull of the secular will always be with us. Christmas allows us to feel and know how the entrance of Christ Jesus into our world transforms us, gradually and imperceptibly. Our ordinary living is changed by grace. We become God's people. No, we become God's people again and again. I always love those words of John Henry Newman: "The most perfect Christian is to himself but a beginner...."<sup>4</sup> Newman accepts, and blesses, our human failings and imperfections, our tendency always to be "falling back" or "falling down." Our simple human condition is what plagues us. But Jesus comes to make it right.

Our worship on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day gives us a sense that our childhood hopes are still alive, that the child Jesus has them well in hand, that new hopes and new beginnings are possible.

But these two great feasts, the Vigil of Christmas and Christmas Day, are only opening a door. It is something like the cathedral door that opened for me when the Menotti music poured out. A flood of grace is waiting for us as we enter into worship and into the heart of Christ. When we come into the cathedral we are looking for the child in the manger, the Christ child in Mary's arms. We find him, yes. But if we are open to it, we find Christ in his fullness, the second person of the Trinity. We find God the Father and the Holy Spirit as well. The simplicity of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, the simplicity of the animals and the shepherds, all these are images both of our imperfection and of God's willingness to come to us where we are.

We live in the middle and the muddle of things, and Jesus comes to find us there.

The longer observance of Christmas is a good idea. Because of it, the full range of Christ's personality takes hold of us. The many attributes of his identity become part of our desire for a new beginning.

Most people who relate to the twelve days of Christmas think about "calling birds and turtle doves." Actually, this lively song commemorates an interesting episode in Christian history and has its own cunning revelations.

But the liturgical feasts of Christmas as presently observed in Catholic churches are sometimes a bit less merry and more challenging. The feast of

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**Christmas is a festival of homecoming and the Christmas story is clear about the "real" meaning of Christmas. Home is not a physical place but a God-space. The whole celebration of Christmas reminds us of our deep welcome into the heart of God.**

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Stephen which falls on the day after Christmas is a good example. Tradition has it that this feast was placed next to Christmas in order to pull us back from the high of sensible pleasures, to enhance our sense of the mystical and our yearning for heaven. Maybe it does that for some. You must enter deeply into the story of Stephen and the Scriptures appointed for the feast in order to get the connection. Another great feast that falls within the twelve days is that of the Holy Innocents. This feast commemorates a horrifying event described in Matthew 2:13-18. Still another daunting observance is that of Peter and Paul. In this holy day, emphasis is often placed on their martyrdom. Why, the theologians ask, do we focus on suffering and death in the midst of a happy time of visiting and celebration?

Various explanations are offered. Some say the liturgical calendar grew in a hodge-podge kind of way. Nowadays the common interpretation is somewhat mystical and influenced by John's gospel. The Christmas season, like other great extended festivals of Christianity, reflects both light and darkness. God is sovereign over both, but in our humanity we continue to experience the ups and downs of ordinary living, the joys and the sorrows, the brokenness of the human condition.



In January 2011, just as the Christmas season was ending, I had an intense experience of spiritual formation and transformation. I was teaching and offering informal spiritual direction at the Renovaré Institute. About forty participants were on hand and our emphasis was on Christian history as it affected spiritual transformation and instruction. Participants were from many different Christian churches and groups. For some the liturgical tradition was a novelty even though its ancient structures are still felt in modern Western societies.

On January 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> I led the morning prayers. I thought I was following a simple, comfortable prayer format that would be easy for everyone. Instead I found that the emphasis I put on the Epiphany – the interpretation of the Wise Men and their long journey to find the Christ child – was new and powerful for our assembled group. Old as it was, ancient as the dawn of time, God's Word became new and powerful to me again as I stood up to lead the morning prayers.

This chance to bring the message was both a high and a low. I felt exalted by God's Word, lifted up by the joy of interpretation, and very unworthy, all at the same time.

The power of God's grace seemed to penetrate those teaching days. When I returned to my home city in Louisiana I was filled with gratitude.

At the closing dinner some participants told me that though they were lifelong Christians and students of the Bible, they had never had the visit of the Wise Men fully explained and taught to them before. Even the names, Caspar, Melchior, and Balthazar, were a pleasing novelty. They thanked me

with an almost childlike pleasure for this larger interpretation. Inwardly, I was grateful for this validation of my work. I resolved to try to live better, to accept the full reality and blessing of God's grace.

When I came back to Louisiana, the Feast of Epiphany should have been over. But it wasn't. There was a little bit more to the story.



At home I found my own life, very real, very ordinary. My gifted husband had been soldiering on without me through the cold and rainy January days. He was struggling with asthma and other challenges. I was wrestling with health challenges and life challenges, too.

But when he met me at the airport I could see the joy. A new year was beginning for both of us and nothing could dim our sense of God's grace.

So there was an extra meaning for me when the cathedral door opened and the color of Christ's extravagant presence poured out.

The church was not crowded. Some of us were rain-soaked. Wet umbrellas were everywhere. The Wise Men in their tall gorgeous turbans and silken hats were magical, but a little worried about how to deal with the winter rain. Yet our small cathedral was filled with the grace of God. I felt a sense of God's abundant mercy. It was enough to take us through storm and trouble in search of the amazing Christ.

When the opera ended, we all trundled over to the reception where we would have hot punch and cold punch and sandwiches and cake—and the beauty of each other. Along the way, as I inched down the rain-soaked ramp (built for people like me who are handicapped and rely on a cane) I passed the child Amahl and one or two Wise Men. In the story, Amahl had left his crutch behind to follow the Lord Jesus.

I felt sustained and lifted up by the healing power of grace. I thought...I hoped we would get better. The doctors said it was just a flu infection and would go away in the next few weeks and as warm weather came again. But inwardly I had felt a spiritual healing with Amahl, who rose out of poverty to meet the mystical visitors and to join their search of the mystical child, the gift of grace.

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**The Christmas season reflects both light and darkness. God is sovereign over both, but in our humanity we continue to experience the ups and downs, the joys and the sorrows, the brokenness of the human condition.**

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*"The Child we seek holds the seas and the winds on his palm.  
The Child we seek has the moon and the stars at His feet...."*

*"He's fed by Mother who is both Virgin and Queen.  
Incense, myrrh, and gold we bring to His side, and the Eastern Star is our  
guide."<sup>5</sup>*

The music had flooded my heart. The words of Menotti's opera were etched in memory and would remain.

Throughout Christian history the creative impulse of Christians to tell stories about Jesus Christ and his kingdom has festooned and extended the holy season till it permeates our consciousness and wonder in the darkest and most sunless time of the year. The light of Christ penetrates our darkness. The color of Christ's presence spills out of the church doors and floods into our sometimes discouraging world.

## NOTES

1 Gian Carlo Menotti, *Amahl and the Night Visitors: Vocal Score* (New York: G. Shirmer, Inc., 1986 [1951]), 28.

2 John Milton, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity" (1629), section II ("The Hymn") XIV.3. Speaking of the angels' song announcing Christ's birth, the poet says "For if such a holy song / enrap our fancy long, / time will run back and fetch the age of gold."

3 Scripture texts marked NAB are taken from the *New American Bible with Revised New Testament* © 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

4 John Henry Newman, "Christian Repentance," *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, III (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997 [1831]), 542.

5 Menotti, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, 31-32.

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### EMILIE GRIFFIN

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# Seeing Epiphany Whole

BY STEVEN R. HARMON

**Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party marking disjointed events: the Magi's visit to Bethlehem, Christ's baptism by John, and Christ's miracle at the wedding at Cana. What ties together this wealth of images?**

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epiph-a-ny *noun*

- 1 *capitalized*: January 6 observed as a church festival in commemoration of the coming of the Magi as the first manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles or in the Eastern Church in commemoration of the baptism of Christ;
- 2 an appearance or manifestation especially of a divine being;
- 3 **a** (1): a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning of something; (2): an intuitive grasp of reality through something (as an event) usually simple and striking; (3): an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure;  
**b**: a revealing scene or moment.<sup>1</sup>

**A**s the dictionary definition of “epiphany” suggests, there is a tension between the non-religious use of the word and the meaning of the Christian observance of Epiphany: the origins, associations, and essential theological meaning of the feast and ensuing season of the Christian year are not easily perceived or intuitively grasped in a “simple and striking” manner. In some traditions, Epiphany also names a season of variable length (depending on the date of Easter) that begins on January 6 and extends to the beginning of Lent. It was celebrated as a commemoration of the baptism of Christ beginning in the third century, but by the fourth century in the West it also became associated with the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles in the persons of the Magi.<sup>2</sup> Subsequent associations with

events in the life of Jesus have included Christ's miraculous provision of wine for the wedding at Cana. Rather than a feast and season with an "essential nature or meaning," Epiphany can seem like a cacophonous party marking disjointed events.

What ties together this wealth of images? The Greek word *epiphaneia*, of which "Epiphany" is a transliteration, means "manifestation" – thus the non-religious usage of the word in the sense of "a revealing scene or moment." Understanding Epiphany as a feast and season that celebrates divine revelation can help the Church see Epiphany whole. British Baptist theologian John Colwell recently published a systematic theology creatively structured around the seasons of the Christian year in which Epiphany serves as the basis for the chapter on the doctrine of revelation, titled "The One Who Is Revealed."<sup>3</sup> On the connections between Epiphany, revelation, and Christian living, Colwell writes:

Epiphany is a celebration of a light that has shone and is shining – it shone in Christ, and it shone into our lives – and as a celebration, Epiphany is a response of gratitude and of trust, [for] we have seen this light and we have confidence in this truth; we have come from darkness to light. To have come to see this light which shines through the gospel story, to have come to see it without refusing it, rejecting it, or perverting it, is to live truthfully.<sup>4</sup>

The focus of Epiphany on the truth that the Triune God reveals in Jesus Christ, and the truthful living engendered by our encounter with this revelation, is the common thread running throughout all the Scripture readings and other acts of worship associated with the Epiphany season.

Rather than offering a theoretical account of how the theological theme of revelation lends coherence to the discrete occasions of worship during the season of Epiphany, the remainder of this article will exemplify the sorts of connections that can be made between the doctrine of revelation and any Epiphany-related occasion or act of worship.<sup>5</sup>



### *A Sermon for the Epiphany Season*

*Genesis 18:1-15*

Whether Epiphany is observed only on January 6 or celebrated as a season extending through Ash Wednesday, Epiphany is about divine revelation. The focal event of Epiphany is the coming of God's revelation in Christ to the Gentiles, in particular to the Magi. Like the light of the star that led them to the Christ child, God's revelation shows us something about God, about ourselves, about our world that we never would have seen apart from God's revelation. It is appropriate that we learn about hospitality from Abraham

and Sarah in the midst of Epiphany, for their journey from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land that God would show them foreshadows the Magi's journey to Jesus. The story unfolds in episode after episode of revelatory significance. Time and time again, the story tells us that "the Lord appeared to Abram"; "the Lord came to Abram"; "God spoke to Abram." These acts of revelation show Abraham and Sarah, and their physical and spiritual descendants, something about God, themselves, and their world that they, and we, could never have seen apart from God's revelation.

In this particular episode when "the Lord appeared to Abraham," God discloses something about divine nature and human virtue that greatly enriches our understanding of biblical hospitality. The text has long been read as the epitome of the hospitality that the people of God ought to embody. There is a long tradition of Jewish rabbinical commentary in which Abraham's welcome of his three mysterious visitors teaches that showing hospitality to strangers is a sacred duty, as sacred as welcoming the divine presence. Rabbinical tradition identified these guests as angels and gave them names: Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. That might be saying more than we can know about who these strangers are. But it does suggest that the author of Hebrews had this text in mind when writing "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). The early church fathers and the great Christian commentators since then are unanimous in observing that whatever else this text may mean, it is an example of how hospitality is chief among the practices that characterize saints. As Martin Luther put it in his lectures on Genesis, "There is hospitality wherever the church is.... Therefore let those who want to be true members of the church remember to practice hospitality, to which we are encouraged not only by the example of the saintly patriarch but by very important testimonies of Scripture."<sup>6</sup>

What do this saintly patriarch and matriarch teach us about hospitality?

First, hospitality, like the totality of the Christian life, is the gracious gift of God that comes to us in the freedom of God. We do not become hospitable people by simply deciding to become hospitable and then lining up occasions for showing hospitality. Unlike the contemporary distortion of hospitality as providing entertainment, it is not something we can easily schedule or engineer ourselves. Even when we recognize that hospitality requires God's help and we ask God to

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**The season of Epiphany focuses on the truth that the Triune God reveals in Jesus Christ, and the truthful living engendered by our encounter with this revelation.**

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make us more hospitable, the answer to that prayer may not turn out as we imagine. It is like the old adage about asking God to give us patience. God may very well answer that request, but not in the way we would prefer: not by magically infusing us with something called patience, but by giving us annoying people and exasperating situations – opportunities to practice patience. So it is with hospitality. God helps us be more hospitable by graciously giving us opportunities to practice hospitality. The stranger is never far away, and when the stranger comes to us it is God’s doing. The immigrant, for example, who may not speak our language and may not even be in the country legally, comes to us in the grace and freedom of God. For the civil government, immigration is a policy problem; for the Church, immigration is a God-given opportunity to be the Church: “There is hospitality wherever the church is,” said Luther. That is God’s gracious work. It is the grace of creation. God created us to be people who welcome the other; when we practice hospitality, we are doing what God freely and graciously created us to do. It is the grace of redemption. As fallen sinners, our inclination is to be self-centered and closed off from the other. In redemption, God reorients us away from self and toward God and toward the other. It is the grace of sanctification. We cannot do this in and of ourselves, so the hospitable God reproduces the divine character in us through the indwelling and empowering Holy Spirit. Hospitality is through and through the gracious work of God.

That means it should not be an onerous burden; it is not something we *have* to do, it is something we *get* to do. It is a gift. There is a line in the U2 song “One” that is frequently misheard: it is not “we’ve *got* to carry each other,” it is “we *get* to carry each other.” That is exactly right. Like Abraham and Sarah, we get to practice hospitality, by the grace of God, whenever and however the stranger comes to us.

We also learn from Abraham and Sarah that hospitality happens on a journey. We tend to think of hospitality as something offered by people of means, people who have arrived in life, people who at least have a home. Where is the home of Abraham and Sarah? In this story they are camping out at Hebron, one of many places they camped while journeying toward the place God would show them. When the Septuagint translated these accounts of the various places Abraham and Sarah settled, it did not use the Greek verb *katoikeo*, which means to dwell or settle down somewhere (literally, to put down your house somewhere). It used *paroikeo*, which means to journey, to live somewhere as a stranger or alien (literally, to have your house along the way). When Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church at Corinth late in the first century, he took that same word *paroikeo* that the Septuagint used for the sojourns of Abraham and applied it to the relation of the church to the place it finds itself. Its superscription begins, “The church of God which *sojourns* in Rome, to the church of God which *sojourns* in Corinth.” The home from which we show hospitality is



not a geographical place or a physical structure or a station in life; our home is the Church on a journey toward the heavenly city.

There is also a hint in this story that the hospitality we show to others is grounded in the hospitality of the Triune God. The text makes it clear in 18:1 and again in 18:13 that the Lord God himself appeared and spoke to Abraham. What most English translations render as “Lord” in small caps is the divine name “Yahweh” in Hebrew. It is clear that this is ultimately an encounter with God himself, but who exactly are the three men? It is easy for Christians who know the one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to read this and say, “It’s obvious these three men represent the three persons of the Trinity.” The earliest Christian interpreters of this text among the church fathers were not so sure. Eusebius of Caesarea thought one of the men was the Divine Word appearing in human form, and it was only this one of the three that Abraham addressed as Lord. Ambrose of Milan thought they typified the Trinity: “[Abraham] added religious devotion to hospitality,” said Ambrose, “for although he beheld three, he adored one, and while keeping a distinction of the persons, yet he called one Lord.”<sup>7</sup> That is pretty precise Trinitarian theology for someone who lived two-and-a-half millennia before the Council of Nicaea! Augustine, on the other hand, was content to call them angels, appearing as human beings, through whom God spoke.

Fast-forwarding to the Reformers – Martin Luther, I think, got it right. Luther granted that according to the historical meaning of the text, these are three men (perhaps angels) whom Abraham initially regards as human beings and receives with hospitality, but whom Abraham comes to recognize as emissaries of the invisible God. Thus we do not depend on this passage for our doctrine of the Trinity; the foundations for that are laid solidly enough elsewhere in Scripture. Yet Luther argues that there is a legitimate hidden meaning in this text, according to which it is good and proper to read it in light of the Church’s biblical Trinitarian theology, for the God who encountered Abraham in the three strangers by the oaks of Mamre is the one God we know in the three persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>8</sup> We have here a hint that God is hospitable within God, even prior to the creation of the world and apart from God’s hospitality toward us. From eternity the God who is love has always been persons in loving, hospitable relationship to one another, always fully open to one another and fully sharing the being and work of one another. This God creates the world and humanity within it as an expression of hospitality, and despite our sin continues to practice hospitality toward us, welcoming those who because of sin are strangers to God. We are created in the image of the hospitable God to be hospitable people. Biblical hospitality is nothing less than participating in the life of the Triune God ourselves and welcoming others to join us in that participation. There is a sense, then, that hospitality is not so much a distinct practice among other practices of the Christian life as it is a particular way of naming the whole of Christian life. We know what sort of life this

is because it is grounded in the hospitality of the Triune God, and we know what this looks like because hospitality took on human flesh and dwelt among us, doing things like feeding great crowds of more than five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17) and more than four thousand hungry people (Matthew 15:32-39; Mark 8:1-10).

We learn not only from Abraham and Sarah but also from Jesus and his disciples in their feeding of the crowds that hospitality is a community practice. In more ways than we will ever know, our seemingly individual acts of hospitality are not individual. They depend on the hospitality of others with whom we are in relationship. It is not only Abraham, but also Sarah and their servant who, working together, manage to pull off this impromptu feast. And it is Jesus and his disciples, and perhaps others in the crowds who shared what they had, who together participate in Jesus' miraculous act of divine hospitality. As Luther said, "There is hospitality wherever the church is." Hospitality is an ecclesial practice: it takes the Church to practice hospitality, and not merely the individual acts of its members. We would have no idea what the practice of biblical hospitality looks like in the flesh, in the here and now, were it not for the fact that other members of the Church have extended hospitality to us and modeled hospitality to others before our very eyes. The Church forms us in hospitality, and when we practice hospitality ourselves we do it in community as members of the Church.

We also learn from Abraham and Sarah, in an anticipatory way, what we learn fully in Jesus Christ: that hospitality is a cruciform practice. Jesus tells us that following him means denying self and taking up the cross – it is a radical reorientation of our lives away from self-centeredness and toward costly hospitality, toward an openness to others that is willing to suffer for their sake. Abraham and Sarah experience this and model this in more than one way. Their act of hospitality here points toward another – their parenting of Isaac in their old age. That practice of hospitality led to another event even more profoundly cruciform: Abraham's offering of Isaac in chapter 22, a revelatory event that pointed toward the costly divine hospitality by which God reconciles strangers to himself in Christ. That cruciform hospitality is central to the Epiphany hymn "O Love, How Deep, How Broad."<sup>9</sup>

O Love, how deep, how broad, how high,  
how passing thought and fantasy:  
that God, the Son of God, should take  
our mortal form for mortals' sake!

For us to evil power betrayed,  
scourged, mocked, in purple robe arrayed,  
he bore the shameful cross and death,  
for us gave up his dying breath.

All glory to our Lord and God  
for love so deep, so high, so broad –  
the Trinity whom we adore  
forever and forevermore.

The Apostle Paul knew something of that cruciform hospitality. He writes in Galatians 4:12-20 of receiving that sort of hospitality from his readers, who, had it been possible, would have torn out their eyes and given them to him: “You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you; though my condition put you to the test, you did not scorn or despise me, but welcomed me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus” (4:13-14). Then he speaks of his own experience of the pains of childbirth for their sake until Christ is formed in them. Hospitality led him to take up the cross himself and die a martyr’s death for the sake of others’ salvation, as have innumerable other martyrs through the history of the Church.

The witness of the martyrs leads me to point out something else hinted at in this text: that hospitality is a missionary practice. We might not be accustomed to thinking of Abraham and Sarah as missionaries, but that is what they were in their practice of hospitality. As they journeyed from place to place, welcoming strangers along the way, they shared their faith in the God who called them from their country and kindred to the land prepared for them. From Abraham and Sarah to this day, missionaries have found opportunities to share the good news through receiving and rendering hospitality. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is a famous practitioner of missionary hospitality. You may remember the media reaction when Mother Teresa’s correspondence with her confessors was published in 2007 and it became known that for the last half-century of her life she felt no presence of God whatsoever – neither in her heart nor in the Eucharist. That shocked some people. But we of course know that the long, dark night of the soul is a common Christian experience, and the Mother Teresas of the Church are not exempt. When I read an article on that revelation, I was struck by the timing of her experience of the seeming absence of God.<sup>10</sup> The absence began right at the time she embraced the work of showing hospitality to the poor and dying of Calcutta in 1948. I do not find that merely coincidental. Like the righteous in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 who failed to recognize in their earthly lives that their practice of hospitality was done also to Christ, Mother Teresa did not consciously experience God’s presence where it was in fact most near to her: in the poor and dying she served in Calcutta. Before January 1948, she had known God’s presence in powerful mystical experiences and audible voices; after January 1948, God became present in the poor, even if unrecognized. Luther made precisely that connection in his comments on Genesis 18: “What greater praise can there be for this virtue than that those who are hospitable are not receiving a human being but are receiving the Son of God Himself?

On the other hand, what is more hideous than inhospitality? By it you shut out from your house not a human being but the Son of God, who suffered and died for you on the cross."<sup>11</sup>

Are you longing for a deeper experience of God's presence? "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels" – and even the Triune God – unawares. May it be so, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one hospitable God, now and forever. Amen.

## NOTES

1 "epiphany," *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* ([www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epiphany)).

2 Peter G. Cobb, "The History of the Christian Year," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, Edward Yarnold, and Paul Bradshaw, eds., *The Study of Liturgy*, revised edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 459-460.

3 John E. Colwell, *The Rhythm of Doctrine: A Liturgical Sketch of Christian Faith and Faithfulness* (Milton Keynes, U.K.: Paternoster, 2007), 45-59.

4 *Ibid.*, 56-57.

5 During Epiphany 2009, I preached in a chapel service at Samford University's Beeson Divinity School as part of a year-long series "Table Grace: A Biblical Call to Hospitality" based on Beth Newman's book *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2007). Seeing Epiphany whole, as a season celebrating divine revelation and its relevance for our lives, enabled me to make connections between the assigned chapel series text on the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 18:1-15 and some of the readings appointed for that Tuesday in the week of 4 Epiphany from the daily office lectionary. An abridged version of that homily follows.

6 Martin Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in Jaroslav Pelikan, ed., *Luther's Works* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 3:178.

7 Mark Sheridan, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 2: Genesis 12-50* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 61-62.

8 Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Works* 3:194.

9 "O Love, How Deep, How Broad," fifteenth-century Latin hymn translated by Benjamin Webb, altered (verses 1, 4, and 6), in *Worship & Rejoice* (Carol Stream, IL: Hope Publishing Co., 2001), 244.

10 David Van Biema, "Mother Teresa's Crisis of Faith," *Time*, August 23, 2007 (accessed July 22, 2011) [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1655415,00.html).

11 Luther, "Lectures on Genesis," in *Luther's Works* 3:178.



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# Distinctive Traditions of Epiphany

BY AMBER AND JOHN INSCORE ESSICK

The Epiphany feast completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Three traditions—baking a Kings' Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi's blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles—help us interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

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To celebrate the feast of Epiphany is to continue down the liturgical path that originates in the anticipatory weeks of Advent. The feast completes the season of Christmas by inviting us to discern the identity of the Christ child. Like the Magi who anticipated, recognized, and welcomed the infant king, congregations and families can recognize and proclaim the appearance of God's chosen one. Thus, Epiphany is the culmination of the Christmas season, not its ending.

Recovering three historical Epiphany traditions—baking a Kings' Cake, marking a door lintel with the Magi's blessing, and elaborating worship with lighted candles—can help God's people interpret the Christmas season appropriately.

## THE KINGS' CAKE

Just as the Magi made a careful search for the child king upon his birth, so we should acknowledge that an important component of our faith involves seeking and searching for the Lord in unlikely places. One delightful way to celebrate Epiphany in the home is to prepare and eat a Kings' Cake with friends and family. In this symbolic search for the baby Jesus, children and adults gather to eat a delicious cake or pastry with a toy baby hidden inside.

The person who finds the baby Jesus in his or her piece of cake is awarded the honor of providing the next year's cake and/or hosting the celebration.

At an Epiphany celebration a few years ago, we were all surprised to find at least six or seven baby Jesus figures in the cake! While the baker seemed to have misunderstood the directions, everyone found baby Jesus on that day.

Kings' Cakes are made in many shapes. One tradition involves a wreath-shaped cake, which symbolizes the circuitous route the Magi took to avoid King Herod, who hunted for the Christ child to harm him. Also, in some parts of the world there is a tradition of using a bean instead of a figurine.

Many Hispanic bakeries will carry *Rosca de Reyes* (the Kings' Cake) in the days leading up to the feast of Epiphany on January 6. In the Gulf Coast region of the United States there is a similar product, the King Cake, available for Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday, or Shrove Tuesday), the feast that concludes the extended season of Epiphany. Remember when you are shopping for King Cake that the date of Mardi Gras varies each year because it is tied to the lunar calendar, like Easter. If these cakes are not sold in your area, or you prefer to bake your own, many recipes for *Rosca de Reyes* and New Orleans-style King Cake are available on the Internet.

The Kings' Cake tradition is as meaningful as it is enjoyable. Besides the element of searching involved, any time Christians gather around the table it evokes images of the Lord's Supper at which we share in the presence of Christ. Even as the risen Christ was made known to his followers in the breaking of bread, so on Epiphany celebrants discover the incarnate Christ as they break and eat the Kings' Cake. There is also an important link between hospitality and the Epiphany: did not the Magi enjoy the hospitality of the Holy Family? Did not King Herod display a considerable *lack* of hospitality when he deceived and exploited his guests? As we give and receive hospitality during Christmas and Epiphany, we participate in the story of the Magi and their search for the Christ child, we celebrate the joy of Jesus' appearance, and we find God at a surprisingly familiar place: the table.

### **THE MAGI'S BLESSING**

Less frequently mentioned in discussions of hospitality is its reciprocal nature. Often when guests receive a host's welcome and provision, they bless the household who welcomes them. Another tradition of Epiphany invokes the Magi's blessing upon the household that hosts the party. Guests typically read a brief, responsive liturgy that includes the biblical account of the Magi's visit and then "chalk the door" with a series of marks.

The markings include letters, numbers, and crosses in a pattern like this: 20 † C † M † B † 12. The numbers correspond to the calendar year (20 and 12, for instance, for the year 2012); the crosses stand for Christ; and the letters have a two-fold significance: C, M, and B are the initials for the traditional names of the Magi (Caspar, Melchior, and Balthasar), but they are also an abbreviation of the Latin blessing *Christus mansionem benedicat*, which means, "May Christ bless this house."

A brief liturgy fit for chalking the lintel can be found at the end of this article. Although the service of chalking the door with the Magi's blessing is intended for an Epiphany celebration in a private family dwelling, you can adapt it for other contexts. At any time during the seasons of Christmas and Epiphany it may be used to bless a room in a hospital, nursing home, or extended-care facility; to inaugurate the spring semester in a college dormitory room; to set aside a Bible study meeting place, choir practice room, or youth area at church; and so on.

The Magi, who journeyed a great distance to recognize the birth of a foreign king, recognized the blessing of peace that this king's appearance signified. Their gifts and obeisance to the new king implied their acceptance of his peaceful reign. As we reenact the Magi's blessing, we acknowledge that Christ's entrance into the world makes our homes places of peace and hospitality.

### **CANDLELIGHT ON EPIPHANY**

From Advent wreaths to Christmas Eve candlelight services to symbolic tongues of fire on Pentecost, candlelight is an important metaphor and teaching tool for many congregations throughout the liturgical year. In addition to the Kings' Cake and Magi's blessing, thoughtful and intentional incorporation of lighted candles in homes and churches can help us reclaim Epiphany as a celebration of the arrival of the Magi. The candlelight also reminds us that the feast of Epiphany marks the theophany of Christ, the recognition of Christ in his baptism by the Father and Holy Spirit.

According to Luke and John, God's appearance in the person of Jesus is comparable to light entering a darkened world. When Simeon took the Christ child in his arms, he praised God for sending salvation and light to all nations and as a glory to God's people of Israel

(Luke 2:32). The prologue of John proclaims that the Word is God's light, already appeared in our midst, though not everyone recognizes its arrival (John 1:4-5). Many congregations gather on Epiphany for a service of candlelight and lections to celebrate the coming of God's light. It is common in these services for celebrants to process with candle in hand or along a path marked by luminaria – traditionally made by setting candles in sand inside

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**The Magi's gifts and obeisance to the new king implied their acceptance of his peaceful reign. As we reenact the Magi's blessing, we acknowledge that Christ's entrance into the world makes our homes places of peace and hospitality.**

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small bags — to a location suitable for a series of readings, hymns, and prayers. If indoors, a candlelight procession into the sanctuary is envisioned, whereas an outdoor procession might climax around a nativity scene. When coupled with a Kings' Cake or blessing of the Magi, candlelight Epiphany services on the twelfth day of Christmas can teach valuable lessons to children and adults about adoring the Word made flesh.

In the feast of Epiphany God's people can also learn from the Magi how to be attentive to the light. The Magi observed the heavens with great acumen, but their efforts to find the newborn king ultimately required insights gained from a close reading of the Scriptures. On Epiphany, then, consider depicting the night sky and Magi's star by lighting a series of smaller candles before lighting a larger, central candle as a means of preparing to hear the Scriptures read aloud. With some planning, it can be meaningful to incorporate the Christ candle from the Advent wreath for such a purpose. In this way, the lighting of candles in worship serves as a visual representation of the Church's need for divine assistance to read faithfully about God's presence in our midst.

The act of lighting candles in the home or sanctuary focuses our liturgical attention and helps narrate the drama of God's self-revelation in Jesus.

## **CONCLUSION**

As you prepare to celebrate Epiphany in your home or church, bear in mind a couple practical suggestions. First, *hold the tradition lightly*. Take advantage of the fact Epiphany traditions vary by region, denomination, and family. If your church does not celebrate Epiphany on January 6, celebrate it on the Sunday before or after. Any of the activities associated with Epiphany lend themselves well to a children's time in worship or in Sunday school. Even a home gathering held on January 5 or 7 is better than none at all. Flexibility, rather than rigidity, will help us to recover Epiphany celebrations over time.

Second, *involve as many people as possible when establishing your traditions*. If the guests at the party live near one another, it may be possible to chalk everyone's door as part of the celebration. Some congregations even distribute chalk in church on the Sunday prior to Epiphany. Another way to meet others and share the joy of Epiphany is to purchase a Kings' Cake from a local Hispanic bakery. Three Kings' Day, as it is also called, is widely celebrated among Hispanic, Latin, and some European cultures, so many of them will be familiar with the cake. Exposure to those in our neighborhoods from other cultures on Epiphany reinforces the concept that Christ's manifestation is a blessing to all people.

To proclaim the Epiphany is to celebrate the Epiphany. Reclaiming the feast of Epiphany means that families and congregations join the Magi in seeking and adoring the Christ child. Baking a Kings' Cake, chalking the door post with the Magi's blessing, and incorporating lighted candles in



congregational and family worship help us complete the Christmas season and be drawn deeper into the Christian liturgical pilgrimage.



*Liturgy of the Magi's Blessing*

Peace be with this house and all who dwell in it,  
**and peace to all who enter here.**

In keeping the feast of Epiphany, we celebrate  
the Magi's search for the infant king,  
the Christ child's appearing to the world,  
and the peace and hospitality shared between the Magi and the Holy  
Family.

Let us hear again the Magi's story:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

*Matthew 2:1-12*

This is the word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

*(Participants now take turns using the chalk to make part of the Magi's blessing on the inside lintel of the front door.)*

May this home in the coming year be a place where Christ is pleased to dwell.

**May all our homes share the peace and hospitality of Christ which is revealed in the fragile flesh of an infant. Amen.**

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# A Feast Worthy of Devout Celebration

BY MICHAEL J. GLINGENPEEL

**“The whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration,” Augustine wrote in his sermon on Epiphany in 412. Sixteen hundred years later, Augustine’s sermon on the Magi reminds us of important Epiphany truths.**

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**E**piphany, January 6, marks the culmination of the Christmas season. It also begins the season after Epiphany, which runs until Ash Wednesday. When he was minister at The Memorial Church on the campus of Harvard University, Peter J. Gomes delivered a sermon in which he described Epiphany as “the most important season in the church’s year.”<sup>1</sup>

This was not my experience growing up. I was raised Southern Baptist, which is to say I grew up liturgically-challenged. We lit candles to depict progress toward the Lottie Moon Offering goal, processed down the aisle to place our pledge cards on the Communion table, and the closest we came to a creed was recitation of the church covenant from the back of the *Baptist Hymnal*. Christmas and Easter were big deals, as were Promotion Sunday, Pledge Day, and Thanksgiving. American culture and Nashville set our church calendar.

It was a healthy tradition in which I heard the call of God. It prepared me for a lifetime of ministry among Baptists in the South. Eventually, however, I came to learn that I swam head down in a narrow creek and never noticed flowing nearby a wide river whose headwaters started long ago and far away. This powerful river had channels both East and West, which in places merged and separated, and had overlooks called Advent, Epiphany, Lent, and Pentecost. Along this river I encountered names like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and Wesley. This river has borne me along, no less than I was transported

early by Annie Armstrong, Lottie Moon, and E.Y. Mullins. I am grateful.

Now I know that Christmas does not end on the evening of December 25, that the Wise Men did not show up in Bethlehem within twenty-four hours of Jesus' birth, and that God is made known to us wherever we are, here and now, as there and then. "Epiphany," which means manifestation or showing forth, is the word for what happened at Bethlehem and in the weeks, months, and years following. It happens still.

Epiphany, and the season after it, is important. To understand why, we turn to Epiphany's roots. The feast of Epiphany was first celebrated in the fourth century. It recalls three events in which Jesus was made known: the manifestation of Jesus' birth to the Magi, representing the Gentiles (Matthew 2:1-12), the announcement of Jesus' identity at the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22), and Jesus' miracle of turning water into wine at the Cana wedding feast (John 2:1-11).<sup>2</sup>

Epiphany entered the life of the Church in an age of great preaching. Important preachers included John Chrysostom, Ambrose, Pope Leo I, and Augustine.

On Epiphany in 412, Augustine delivered a sermon on the account, unique to Matthew, of the revelation of the birth of Jesus to the Magi and their subsequent journey to Bethlehem bearing gifts. He described Epiphany as a "noteworthy celebration...throughout the world." He added that "the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration."<sup>3</sup>

Sixteen hundred years later, Augustine's sermon on the Magi reminds us of three Epiphany truths.

First, Epiphany helps us recall that our world is not bereft of God's presence. God leaves hints and signs, a trail to be discovered by those who seek to pursue the Holy in the midst of life. The hint or sign, said Augustine, was a star: "For, on this day, the Magi are said to have adored the Lord, warned by the appearance of a star and led by its guidance. In fact, they saw the star in the East on the very day He was born and they realized whose birth it portended.... To the Lord Himself, then, they came, led by the star; they adored Him who had been thus pointed out to them."<sup>4</sup>

Our experience of God is not easy to discern. God has not chosen to lay out a media campaign designed to splash a brand, logo, tag line, and jingle across our world. For most, the call of God comes by nudge and whisper, not by shove and shout.

Those who hear or see the Holy One tend to do so because they are seeking. The Magi saw the star because they scanned the night sky, questioning and discussing together what they saw. And they were ready to take the journey when they saw something of promise.

God showed up and keeps showing up in our world in Jesus. The more we probe the life and work of Jesus, ponder his words and practice his deeds, the more likely we are to experience the depth and breadth of God's character.

Second, Epiphany is a reminder that the gospel is for everyone, not just a few. For Augustine, the central truth of Epiphany was that Jesus was manifest to the Gentiles: "Therefore, the whole Church of the Gentiles has adopted this day as a feast worthy of most devout celebration, for who were the Magi but the first-fruits of the Gentiles? The shepherds were Israelites; the Magi, Gentiles. The one group came from nearby; the other, from afar. Both, however, were united in [Christ] the cornerstone."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus is Lord of all, not just a few. Peter Gomes likened Epiphany to a stone dropped into water that sets off a series of bigger and bigger ripples: "We begin to find ourselves with our fellow believers in all places and at all times, drawn in relationship to those circles that emanate from the Incarnation of Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Epiphany keeps before us the truth that Jesus is for Magi in the courts of the mighty as well as shepherds in the fields, East as well as West, global as well as local, universal as well as sectarian. The season of Epiphany rebukes the provincialism and spiritual myopia of too many Christians.

This was a particularly important message to Augustine, because the unity reflected in the idea that God sent Jesus for Gentiles as well as Jews was a source of controversy in his day. In his sermon Augustine counters the Donatists, who he claims do not celebrate Epiphany because they do not believe Jesus had been manifest to all the same way.

Third, Epiphany reinforces that meeting Jesus leaves us altered, different persons. Augustine concluded his Epiphany day sermon by reminding his listeners that the Magi did not return to their homes by the same road they traveled to Palestine: "For this is why the Magi did not return as they had come. The way was changed; their way of life was changed."<sup>7</sup>

Augustine understood this, of course, better than most. Born in North Africa, Augustine rejected the Christian life taught him by his pious mother, Monica. He took more than one mistress, fathered at least one child outside of marriage, and dabbled in a variety of philosophical systems. Then in 386, Augustine came under the influence of the preaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. The moment of his dramatic conversion came in a garden, and is recounted in his *Confessions*, written ten years later:

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**Epiphany reminds us that Jesus is for Magi in the courts of the mighty as well as shepherds in the fields, East as well as West, global as well as local. The season rebukes the provincialism and spiritual myopia of too many Christians.**

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I snatched [the Bible] up, opened it, and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof.' I wanted to read no further, nor did I need to. For instantly, as the sentence ended, there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the gloom of doubt vanished away.<sup>8</sup>

At age thirty-three his life changed course.

During Epiphany we discover that paying homage to Jesus in the manger leaves us different. We cannot return to the same place, to do the same things in the same way. Augustine learned, as did Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Peter, and Paul before him, and as you and I after him, that an encounter with God leaves us altered.

Christmas is the season when we celebrate that God took the risk to enter human history, with all its limitations, in the baby named Jesus. Epiphany is its logical successor, the season in which week-by-week we grow in our awareness that Jesus is revealed to the whole world (the story of the Magi), that Jesus is uniquely related to God (the baptism of Jesus), and that Jesus came to accomplish a remarkable work (the miracle at Cana). It is, as Augustine said long ago, a feast worthy of devout celebration.

## NOTES

1 Peter J. Gomes, *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1998), 30.

2 Peter G. Cobb, "The History of the Christian Year," in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold, eds., *The Study of Liturgy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 414-415.

3 Augustine, Sermon 202, in Mary Sarah Muldowney, trans., *Saint Augustine: Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959), 71.

4 Ibid.

5 Augustine, 71-72.

6 Gomes, 31.

7 Augustine, 74.

8 John K. Ryan, trans., *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Image Books, 1960), 202.

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# When Grace Appears

BY WILLIAM D. SHIELL

The book of Titus sees the flash of the glorious, unexpected appearance—or epiphany—of Christ beginning a transformation that continues throughout the whole of our lives. We are to become students following a new curriculum of grace, reflecting the difference Christ’s presence makes in the world.

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**M**ost of us abruptly end our celebration of Christmas, perhaps after lighting a last candle on the Advent wreath and singing a carol or two. December 26 brings the bustle of “after Christmas sale” shopping and holiday gift returns, and New Year’s Eve parties loom just around the corner. No sooner have the candles been extinguished and the New Year’s countdown begun than the holy season is over and we put it away as a memory.

In the book of Titus, the early Christian perspective on Christ’s appearance is not as suited as ours to personal comfort or consumerist scheduling:

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Declare these things; exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one look down on you.

*Titus 2:11-15*

Far from putting Christ's birth away "auld lang syne," Titus sees the flash of the glorious, unexpected appearance—or epiphany—of Christ beginning a transformation that continues throughout our lives. We are to become students following a new curriculum of grace, reflecting the difference Christ's presence makes in the world.

### **IDENTIFYING WITH TITUS'S COMMUNITY**

In the first century, much like in ours, community identity and memory were shaped by popular heroes, gods, and political figures. Communities erected statues and leaders commissioned coins featuring their worthies. Most people in the ancient world, including Crete where Titus lived, assumed that the gods appeared in human form, magically intervened in our affairs, and then returned to doing whatever it is that gods do. Today, people flock around celebrities and athletes. A prominent movie theater in my community hosts a fundraiser for a children's charity each year. The theater donates its services, invites a celebrity to premier an upcoming movie, and receives contributions in the charity's name. This event is a classic example of celebrity culture, marketing strategy, and public fawning, all in the name of a "good cause." People stand for hours along a red carpet, snap pictures of their hero, and donate money, but never get personally involved in the cause. Much like the ancient world, the supposed gods descend, wave a few times, and return to whatever it is they do.

Early Christian communities flocked for different reasons. They came together to be shaped around a common identity in Christ and to be taught how to live the Christ life. They listened to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them. Through this process, Christ became a real and continuing presence who constantly confronted them and transformed their gathered communities into the living Body of Christ. Jesus' birth and anticipated return provided a forum for texts such as the book of Titus to guide the community's memory and identity.<sup>1</sup>

Titus 2:11-15 fits within a larger group of early Christian texts addressing the difference that following Christ makes. All of them occur in contexts where memory, oral instruction, and communal reading play significant roles. These activities are mentioned explicitly or exemplified in 1 Timothy 4:13-16, Hebrews 10-13, Ephesians 5:19-6:9, 2 Timothy 1:4-2:26, and Titus 2. Each of these passages employs the ancient concept of *paideia*, consisting of instruction, discipline, and formation. Titus 2 specifically asks how Christ's coming shapes the believer and the community.

### **TRAINING IN GRACE**

This passage in Titus describes a way of living formed by the coming of Christ. This community remembers, rejects, and trains.

*Remember.* The passage evokes memories of Jesus' birth in the back of a Bethlehem cave.<sup>2</sup> As the passage is read, the community remembers God's first appearance (v. 11) and hopes for his second epiphany (v. 13). The audi-



ence lives in the real world not of celebrity worship but of Christ-formed people. They have been given a complete picture of the way life begins, with a baby born to a teenager from Galilee. By coming into the world as a baby, God invites a decision from all people to receive the Christ child.

*Reject.* By taking up the Christ child, a person chooses to lay down a life shaped by “worldly passions” and be embraced by a baby who demonstrates a new way of living. This decision to accept the Christ child means rejecting “ungodliness and worldly passions” (v. 12), a reference presumably to the kinds of things a Greco-Roman audience might observe as part of the curriculum of training, or *paideia*, in their society.

In the ancient world, the virtuous life revolved around the personal attainment of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. These cardinal virtues, if mastered, opened the door (from *cardo* for hinge) of the heart. The center of moral decision making was the individual. In what we commonly refer to as “self-help,” people could live well as long as they learned how to make virtuous decisions.

This approach poses a significant problem, and Titus alludes to it. Personal effort toward prudence, justice, temperance, and courage cannot cure the darkness of life. No resolutions to mark the New Year can overcome the difficulties. Our preference for idols (whether the gods or entertainment and athletic celebrities) corrupts us. We do not naturally reject ungodliness and worldly passions. People’s desire to live better does not make them better people.

Through Christ’s birth, God provides divine help by exposing the darkness of our hearts. As the carol says, “Long lay the world in sin and error pining, ‘till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.”<sup>3</sup> The baby that appeared in Bethlehem requires us to lay down our attempts at living apart from God’s revelation and getting things right on our own. Instead we must undergo a new kind of training that can only come from this child.

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**Early Christians came together to be shaped around a common identity in Christ and to be taught how to live the Christ life. They listened to texts read aloud by discussing, arguing, interrupting, responding, debating, and questioning them.**

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*Train.* Just as a person needs a new way of living to be a parent, so we need training in how to love and be loved by the Christ child who instructs us. As we learn to receive the gift of the Christ child and anticipate his return, we are trained in a curriculum of grace.<sup>4</sup>

Rhetorically, the text uses a *sorites*, or stair-step approach, interlinking the virtues in the curriculum and the people who listen. Through the divine

power of grace, we are taught (v. 15) and receive correction from one another to live with self control or temperance. This instruction leads to upright living (justice/righteousness) and eventually to godliness (sound judgment/reverence). Notice how these moral qualities produced by the training echo the cardinal virtues of the ancient world. Grace teaches that without God's help and training, nothing is possible. As we hear these instructions given in community, our lives are linked together virtuously with others who hear. We teach, correct, and train each other in a grace-full process of accountability.

### **MY CONTINUING EDUCATION**

Even a pastor needs training from a baby, especially when we think Christmas is over. Following a nice Advent and Christmas, my spouse and I, like most pastors' families, look forward to some uninterrupted free time and quiet nights with no parties. On New Year's Eve in 2009, we greeted the New Year by dozing off while watching the Times Square celebration. At 2:00 a.m., the phone rang and the voice on the other end identified himself as a police officer. He sounded vaguely like one of the youth at church, so I assumed this was a New Year's Eve prank call. Insisting he really was a police officer, he asked if I really was the pastor of First Baptist. He regretted to inform me that one of our sheep had been stolen. Still in a daze, I asked him to explain how our sheep could have been stolen. We did not own any. The officer politely explained that someone had stolen one of the sheep from the Nativity set on the church's front steps. Having just recovered the sheep that was being carried down Main Street, the officer asked if I could come downtown and identify it. I asked him in a very pastoral way, "How hard is it to identify a plaster sheep? We are the only church in Knoxville that places sheep on the front steps." He relented and allowed me to stay home.

A few weeks later I was summoned to appear in court concerning the stolen sheep. Perturbed because the court date was on a Friday, my day off, I waded through the line and waited in the packed court room. Looking around at the folks who had gotten in trouble during the holidays and at some of their victims, it became apparent that Christmas was not going to end so quickly for me that year. It was time for my training in the Christ child's curriculum of grace.

You see, if I had been paying attention early that New Year's morning, I could have resolved the issue with the officer by appearing at the church. But instead, the defendant (who had a very brief history of theft) and I had to appear together in court. The district attorney allowed me to share my story of receiving the phone call on New Year's morning. I left her my card and told her to go easy on the young man.

When I turned around, he was looking straight at me. He stood with his wife who was pregnant with their first child. I was right where the Christ child had summoned me, looking at the real lost sheep. Pastors are supposed

to be specialists in identifying and caring for lost sheep, but apparently I still needed some training.

The sheep snatcher served his sentence by performing community service at a church, and I had an epiphany.

## NOTES

1 I develop this theme further in *Delivering from Memory: The Effect of Performance on the Early Christian Audience* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

2 G. K. Chesterton drives home this point in his chapter “The God in the Cave” in *The Everlasting Man* (1925).

3 Placide Cappeau, “O Holy Night” (1847), verse 1, translated from French by John S. Dwight.

4 Ben Witherington III, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, volume 1: *A Socio-rhetorical Commentary on Titus, 1-2 Timothy and 1-3 John* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 143.



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# The History of Christmas

BY G. S U J I N P A K

Ever wonder how December 25<sup>th</sup> became the date to celebrate Christmas, or the history behind Santa Claus? Did you know that Christians in the first three centuries of the Church did not celebrate Christmas? These questions and many more are answered in the four books reviewed here.

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**H**ave you ever wondered how December 25<sup>th</sup> became the date to celebrate Christmas? Did you know that Christians in the first three centuries of the Church did not celebrate Christmas? What is the history behind Santa Claus? How has the observance of Christmas changed or developed over time? These questions and many more are answered in the four books reviewed here. Despite some repetition among them concerning the history, theology, and practices of Christmas, each volume makes a distinctive contribution to the conversation. They awaken us to how sensitive this topic can be, for Christmas is close to the hearts of many people — whether they are observant Christians or secular enthusiasts.

Three of the books — *The Origins of Christmas* and *The Feast of Christmas* by Joseph F. Kelly, and *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* by Donald Heinz — highlight the religious history and practices of Christmas. The purpose of Bruce Forbes's pithy tome *Christmas: A Candid History* is quite different: it seeks to portray a concise "candid history" of how Christmas developed in both its secular and religious elements (x-xi). Yet, all four books express several important themes: they underscore that Christmas has had secular features from its origins (Kelly, *Origins*, 60-68, 129; Heinz, 106-107; Forbes, 141-142), and encourage readers to appreciate both the religious and secular facets of Christmas and not to assume an inherent conflict between them (Kelly, *The Feast*, ix; Heinz, xii, 221; Forbes, 153). The real enemy of Christmas, they argue, is not its secular accoutrements, but consumerism (Kelly, *The Feast*, 101-102; Heinz, 222-229; Forbes, 112-118).



*The Origins of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004, 151 pp., \$11.95) is the stronger of the two authored by Joseph Kelly. He begins with an insightful survey of the Nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke that highlights the distinctive theological themes of each one. Noting that there are questions about the historicity of the accounts, he recognizes that the gospel writers are concerned to present not history per se, but a rich and informed theology (13).

The best contribution of this book, especially for Protestant readers, is Kelly's tracing how certain Old Testament passages, early Christian apocryphal books, and teachings of the church fathers augment the Christmas story. For instance, the Gospels do not mention there being any ox or donkey at the manger scene or camels with the Magi; they do not mention the number of Magi and do not describe them as kings. Our common assumptions about these matters stem from the use of Old Testament passages (Isaiah 1:2-3; 60:3, 6, 10-11; and Psalm 72:10) and early Christian apocryphal texts to inform the Christmas story. Kelly demonstrates how these sources added significantly to visual depictions of the Nativity. For example, a popular medieval document, the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, places an ox and a donkey at the manger scene (based on its use of an erroneous translation of Habakkuk 3:2) and serves as the source for the "Cherry Tree Carol," in which the infant Christ orders a fruit tree to bend to feed a wearied Mary. Furthermore, several distinctively Catholic beliefs surrounding the Nativity have these apocryphal narratives as a main source. For instance, the *Proto-evangelium of James* depicts Joseph as an old widower with two sons from a prior marriage and names Anne as Mary's mother. This text also speaks of both a virginal conception and a virginal birth, in which Mary's virginity remains intact even after giving birth.

The contributions of the church fathers to the development of Christmas appear most clearly in the dating of Christmas and expansion of its liturgical season. Among these four books, Kelly offers the best account of this history. He shows how the Christological debates in the early church influenced the formation of Christmas, and how writings of the church fathers added other aspects to the Christmas story, especially concerning the Magi. For example, by paralleling the story of the Magi with Genesis 22, Origen set forth the tradition of *three* Magi. Yet, Kelly's book concludes rather rapidly and sketchily with very brief accounts of St. Nicholas and the roles of Christmas art and music. Here the book would have been better served by remaining true to its strength of giving an account of the texts that inform the origins of Christmas and leaving these latter subjects for a future venture.

Kelly's second book on Christmas, *The Feast of Christmas* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010, 121 pp., \$14.95), repeats in succinct form the contents of the prior book, but with less eloquence and helpful detail. New material finally appears in chapter four with a depiction of the role of feast

days in the expansion of the Christmas season. Yet this description is based upon a singular account, *The Golden Legend* of Jacob of Voragine, which the author uses to exhibit how the “myths and legends surrounding Christmas had grown” and reached acceptance by a wide audience (50-51). This is supplemented by an account of the Corpus Christi plays as a further illustration of how legends deeply informed the narration of Christmas. Ultimately, this

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**Heinz broadens our view of the possibilities of Incarnation. Or, perhaps to state it in the vernacular: “God gets carried away at Christmas.” In this festival, Incarnation spills out of its religious vessel to saturate secular material culture.**

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chapter lacks persuasiveness for three reasons. First, its claims are based on a small amount of evidence. Secondly, it does not make clear the significance and role of feast days and feasting for the Christmas celebration. Finally, the points so helpful in his former book – about supplemental features to Christmas that come from the church fathers and Christian apocryphal books – are called “legends” in this one.

The most significant contribution of *The Feast of Christmas* is tracing the growth of the secular Christmas from the sixteenth century forward in England and the United States through the influence of key figures like Washington Irving, Clement Clarke Moore, and Charles Dickens, and the Puritan rejection of Christmas. Here, as in his first book, the detail and clarity of his historical account shine. Yet, the stated focus on the “feast” of Christmas ultimately remains unclear throughout the book. In the end, Kelly’s contribution to the larger conversation is that he is the better historian in this group of authors, and his first book is the better read.



Donald Heinz’s *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, 274 pp., \$25.00) is a welcome partner to this conversation. At its most eloquent and profound moments, this book offers a theological reflection of Christmas as a celebration of the Incarnation. Heinz endeavors to portray the ways in which Christmas “inaugurates and plays out the risks and realizations of Incarnation” (xii). Hence, the author encourages Christians to perceive in the material culture of Christmas – in both its religious and secular forms – the possibility that God could be at work here in authorizing “ever widening vernaculars” (222, 88-89). Heinz aims to broaden our imaginations of the possibilities of Incarnation, especially pertaining to

Christmas, so that we might better recognize how wide the space is for Divine Presence through an expansive affirmation of material culture. Or, perhaps to state it in the vernacular: “God gets carried away at Christmas” (129). In this festival, Incarnation spills out of its religious vessel to saturate secular material culture.

The body of the book is a depiction of various material forms of Christmas as forms of Incarnation. Heinz employs the concept of Christian worship as theater to discuss the historical and theological uses of Christmas plays and manger scenes, and to emphasize the centrality of liturgy and sacraments to Christian worship more generally and the celebration of Christmas in particular. He seeks to remind Protestants that material culture—images, ornamentation, theater, and music—has provided rich resources of envisioning, experiencing, and hearing Incarnation in the history of the Church. The book concludes by interpreting the secular accoutrements of Christmas as “ornamenting” the Incarnation with further visual and musical incarnations through the varieties of feasting, wrappings, lights, trees, and music of Christmas. To take one single example, St. Nicholas can serve as an invitation to a “return to wonder” and enchantment (168), that we might see the possibility of miracles once again.

While Heinz depicts the ways in which Incarnation spills out beyond its religious vessel at Christmas, he warns that the reverse can and does happen too: secular culture can start to saturate Christian Christmas practices. This is most evident in the influences of consumer capitalism. Heinz names this with powerful eloquence: “A capitalist Christmas focuses on all the materials that claim to be good instead of on the Good that claims to be material” (225). The danger is that consumer capitalism “re-trains believers to act like consumers *precisely when they are behaving religiously*” (225). In the very worst reversal, Christmas becomes not only a “secular shopping festival,” but also the “religious establishment of capitalism” that is socially compulsory (226-227).



The great contribution of *Christmas: Festival of Incarnation* is its contemplation of Christmas centered on a theology of Incarnation that seeks a judicious but generous affirmation of material culture. The strength of Joseph Kelly’s books is their detail in the account of the *history* of Christmas in church history. The last partner in this conversation is David Forbes’s *Christmas: A Candid History* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008, 179 pp., \$16.95). The asset of this book is its concise account of the most interesting features of the development of Christmas in both its religious and secular forms. Yet, the pithiness is at the cost of a number of important historical details and notable lack of theological reflection. For example, absent is the awareness of the various origins of certain “embellishments” of the Christmas story from Christian tradition (e.g., from the church

fathers and early writings) that Kelly so helpfully unpacks. Instead, these are presented negatively by pointing out that the biblical account has no donkey, sheep, and oxen, no bright star, and no specific number or description of the Magi (32-36). While the book gives a bit more detail on a few topics such as the history of the Christmas tree and Santa Claus and provides some information not found in the other books under review in this article (such as how the poinsettia became aligned with Christmas), it falls short in important historical, biblical, and theological details and sources.

My most serious criticism of the book, though, is that from start to finish it collapses Christmas into a universal, midwinter celebration and, in effect, robs it of its Christian theological roots and meaning. This move is best summed up in the book's closing sentence: "Christmas's roots in a midwinter celebration present not so much a problem but a path to a solution, if persons from different religions and cultures can appreciate their common human impulse to celebrate and survive, to search for joy and meaning, in the middle of winter" (153).

Even with the various strengths and contributions of these four books on Christmas, I find myself still hungering for something more. Undoubtedly revealing my own biases, I am troubled by the language and distinction of "religious" versus "secular" that is employed in one way or another in all of these books. Even Heinz, who I think aims ultimately to speak theologically, fumbles over the terminology by trying to speak more "universally" through the use of the terms "religion" and "religious," rather than embracing the particularity of speaking as Christians and speaking *theologically*. It would be very refreshing to read a book that provides an account of the *theologies* of Christmas in the history of Christianity over the centuries. Perhaps what we need even more than positive affirmations of how secular elements need not detract from Christians' sacred observance of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany is a more robust *theological history* of Christmas.

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# Choral Music for Christmas

BY MARK J. SUDERMAN

**Choral music plays a key role in how we experience the Christmas season. The CDs reviewed here, focusing on the work of ten choirs, are excellent staples for a music library. Each contains outstanding choral literature to enhance public worship and stir celebration of the Nativity.**

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Choral music plays a key role in how we experience the Christmas season. When planning for the Christmas season, we look for music that will enhance public worship and stir us personally to reflect on and celebrate the Nativity. The compact disk recordings reviewed here would be excellent staples for a personal music library. Each one contains outstanding choral literature to use in a variety of sacred Christmas settings.

Choosing a few gems from among the hundreds of Christmas CDs available is a daunting task, so I have decided to focus on the work of ten choirs, many of whom are considered to be among the world's best choral ensembles. Each choir has a number of Christmas recordings available, though I will review only one of them. Six of these choirs are purely professional, two are affiliated with a specific chapel and a type of service, one is a college choir, and the final choir offers an example of one of many major works for the Christmas season. Mostly they sing short Christmas choral anthems or carols, but their literature ranges widely from medieval chant to contemporary pieces, and represents several countries, languages, and church denominations.



The first of the professional choirs is The Cambridge Singers conducted by John Rutter. Among their numerous (and all excellent) Christmas CDs, one of my favorites is *Christmas Night: Carols of the Nativity* (Collegium

Records COLCD 106, released 1993, \$16.36 CD). While many of the pieces are sung a cappella (without instrumental accompaniment), some are accompanied by The City of London Sinfonia. The rich, clean tone of the choir, with their impeccable intonation, helps deliver the text and its meaning in an unobstructed way, allowing the listener to truly appreciate the music. In addition to traditional pieces (such as “O Tannenbaum,” “The Cherry Tree Carol,” and “Away in a Manger”), it contains Harold Darke’s gem “In the Bleak Mid-Winter” as well as other more obscure but delightful carols, including “The Three Kings” by Peter Cornelius and “Myn Lyking” by R. R. Terry. John Rutter, the conductor, is also known as a first-rate composer; the CD includes three of his original carols—“Candlelight Carol,” “There Is a Flower,” and “Nativity Carol”—and several of his arrangements.

The premier American professional choir, Chanticleer, is known for its seamless blend of sound. This male ensemble, composed typically of twelve voices ranging from low bass to countertenor, imparts a unique all-male sound in its rendering of traditional SATB literature (which is usually sung by both females and males). *Our Heart’s Joy: A Chanticleer Christmas* (Chanticleer Records CR-8803, remastered 2004, \$15.98 CD, \$9.99 MP3 download) is a beautiful collection of a cappella pieces from two earlier recordings. The album opens with a number of early music Christmas pieces from the Medieval (1150-1400) and Renaissance (1400-1600) periods, including traditional carols like “Riu, Riu, Chiu” and “E la Don Don.” However, some fine twentieth-century pieces are also included, such as the double choir anthem “A Hymn to the Virgin” by Benjamin Britten. Two highlights of the CD are the sumptuous “Ave Maria” by Franz Biebl and the energetic “Medley of Christmas Spirituals” arranged by Chanticleer member, Joseph Jennings.

The Tallis Scholars are known for their excellent singing of early music, typically medieval and renaissance music. This choir of male and female singers has a brighter, clear tone with minimal use of vibrato, typical of the sound that music historians believe was used during this early period in European music. The two-CD set *Christmas with the Tallis Scholars* (Gimell CDGIM 202, released 2003, \$14.93 CD, \$14.93 MP3 download) uses literature that highlights the ensemble’s expertise. The first disc begins with a number of medieval carols, as well as four early music settings of “Ave Maria” by various composers. It also displays some beautiful settings of German Chorales and a Christmas motet and mass by Jacob Clemens non Papa (c. 1510-c. 1555). The second disc is comprised almost entirely of chant writing. The choir does an exquisite job of singing the flowing unison lines of a Christmas mass and various Christmas hymns in this plainsong tradition.

Another chamber choir known for their early music singing is The Sixteen conducted by Harry Christophers. However, the choir makes use of their early music tone in singing pieces from the twentieth century in *Hodie: An English Christmas Collection* (Coro 16004, released 2009, \$12.00 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download). The clear, bright sound with minimal vibrato that is good for

early music also works well here with twentieth-century music that contains dissonances and close harmonies. The Sixteen has a bit warmer, fuller sound than The Tallis Scholars. *Hodie: An English Christmas Collection* has a wonderful selection of pieces by various British composers, including Herbert Howells, John Tavener, Kenneth Leighton, and John Linton Gardner. This recording is well worth the purchase not just for its fine selections of British Christmas choral music, but also because it contains Benjamin Britten's *A Ceremony of Carols*. This brilliant twelve-movement work features the choir accompanied by harp.

For those looking for a CD of very traditional Christmas music, an excellent choice is *Songs of Angels: Christmas Hymns & Carols* (Telarc CD-80377, released 1994, \$8.97 CD, \$8.97 MP3 download) directed by Robert Shaw, the eminent choral director of the twentieth century. His relatively large choir of almost fifty singers offers a rich, full-bodied sound and wonderful musicality with careful attention to the text. All of the selections, arranged by either Robert Shaw or Alice Parker or both, are sung a cappella. A sampling of titles includes "God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "What Child Is This?," "O Come, O Come Emmanuel," and "The Holly and the Ivy."

A setting of traditional carols in a very different vein can be heard on *Carols from the Old & New Worlds* (Harmonia Mundi 907079, released 1994, \$9.90 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download) featuring the Theatre

of Voices choral ensemble directed by Paul Hillier. (There is a second volume available—Harmonia Mundi 907233.) Mr. Hillier is the arranger of the traditional carols on this recording from America, Bavaria, Austria, and England, some of which are familiar, but many are not heard very often. Beyond the traditional carols, there are also a number of composed Christmas pieces by early

American composers, such as Supply Belcher and Daniel Read. Mr. Hillier has skillfully molded the small ensemble of fourteen voices so that the choral tone and style changes to fit the piece, its historic location, and the era in which it was written. This adds to the delight of listening, as the choral tone changes from rich, warm romantic singing to the more strident, bright sounds that were typical of early American music.

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**For traditional Christmas music, an excellent choice is *Songs of Angels: Christmas Hymns & Carols*. A setting of carols in a very different vein—from America, Bavaria, Austria, and England—can be heard on *Carols from the Old & New Worlds*.**

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For many choral music listeners, Christmas music is synonymous with Christmas Eve at King's College in Cambridge, England. Each year since 1919, a Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols has been presented in the chapel at King's College. An exquisite choir of men and boys perform music interspersed with Scripture passages foretelling the birth of Christ. The program is broadcast live around the world. A long line of organists and choir directors have led these services through the years and composed or arranged many fine Christmas carols. The two-CD set *Classic Christmas Carols: 50 Favourite Carols* (EMI Classics 5 15086 2, released 2008, \$9.97 CD, \$9.49 MP3 download) is an excellent compilation of the music from these services, featuring numerous organists, the Philip Jones Brass Ensemble, and directors David Willcocks, Philip Ledger, and Stephen Cleobury. Other CDs are available that offer both the Scripture readings and the music. The music is rich and poignant, offering a wide range of literature from a boy's opening solo on "Once in Royal David's City," to an organ voluntary, to the full choir and congregation singing "O Come, All Ye Faithful" with brass and organ accompaniment. Listeners are sure to recognize many of the carols and anthems, but also enjoy learning new pieces, all expertly performed.

In a similar vein is *Advent Carols from St. John's* (Nimbus Records NI5414), released 1994, \$14.84 CD, \$8.99 MP3 download) featuring The Choir of St. John's College, Cambridge, England with Christopher Robinson conducting. The Advent Service presented here is representative of the four Sundays in the season of Advent, offering a time of preparation for Christmas. The excellent choir, though not quite up to the standards of King's College, offers a nice variety of musical styles and time periods on this recording, including plainsong, traditional carols, and composed anthems by a variety of European composers. The music is interspersed with the collects and readings of Advent. Notable pieces include "Adam Lay Ybounden" by Boris Ord, "Es ist das Heil uns Kommen Her" by Johannes Brahms, and "A Spotless Rose" by Herbert Howells.

From the many fine Christmas recordings available from American college and university choirs, I have chosen one from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota, which is well-known for its long history of excellent choral music. The college's Christmas Festival, first held in 1912, is part of its Christian mission in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. (It should be noted that other denominations have similar Christmas programs, derived from their faith and musical heritage.) The two-CD set *Where Peace and Love and Hope Abide: Christmas at St. Olaf 2007* (St. Olaf Records E-3008/9, released 2008, \$24.98) is a live recording of the Scripture readings, orchestral music, congregational singing, and choral numbers in the 96<sup>th</sup> Christmas Festival. The St. Olaf Orchestra and five choirs, including the well-known St. Olaf Choir directed by Anton Armstrong, provide the music either individually

or as a mass choir. Many of the pieces were composed or arranged by Lutheran musicians, including John Ferguson, Carl Schalk, Rene Clausen, and F. Melius Christiansen. The combination of pieces and variety of ensembles make this a wonderful collection of sounds and textures.



The final category features major choral works for the Christmas season. These works, which are larger (and longer) than the typical Christmas carol or anthem, are often accompanied by orchestra or brass. There are fine musical settings of the *Gloria*, which opens with the angels' song announcing the Messiah's birth (Luke 2:14), either from an entire mass or in a stand-alone arrangement, by composers including Antonio Vivaldi and John Rutter. Settings of Mary's song of praise, the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), are great for the season and prominent composers here would be J. S. Bach and Francesco Durante. Other excellent Christmas works include George Frideric Handel's *Messiah*, Daniel Pinkham's *Christmas Cantata*, and Ralph Vaughan William's *Hodie*.

A piece worth mentioning in more detail is J. S. Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* or *Weihnachtsoratorium*. A sparkling performance can be heard under the direction of John Eliot Gardiner from his Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists (Archiv 423 232-2, released 1990, \$24.58 CD, \$18.06 MP3 download). The oratorio is a combination of six sections that were performed on the six feast days from Christmas to Epiphany in 1734-1735. The clarity and precision of the instrumental playing along with the musicality of the soloists and choir make this an outstanding recording to enjoy and celebrate the entire Christmas season.

There are hundreds of other recordings of choral music available for wonderful listening during the Christmas season. The CDs reviewed here are my suggestions for revisiting familiar carols and anthems, and learning some new ones.



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