

## REFLECTIONS ON CHRISTMAS PAST

By David Morsey

It's all over, now, and it's only a memory...or a dream...or a nightmare.

For some, Christmas has been a time of pleasant memories. There have been the family traditions and spiritual uplift—warm, inspiring, exhilarating.

For many there were only dreams of bygone bliss.

But, for all too many, the season of dreams and fulfillment was only a nightmare.

Heartache and loneliness are always more poignantly real at the holiday season. And there are the disappointments and disillusionments that come from unrealistic expectations of a world that ought to be, but isn't. It seems so unfair that some should have so much, and others, so little.

And then, there are the badgered and beleaguered souls upon whose shoulders falls the unwieldy task of putting Christmas together for everyone. These are usually the women—wives and mothers—who make the dreams come true for everyone else.

All the wonderful traditions—the sights and sounds and scents—had to be provided by someone. For these “someones,” Christmas is two months of chaos and calamity—of frantic efforts to meet deadlines, and rack brains, and stretch dollars. It is a balancing act between bedlam and sanity; between sense and nonsense; between a cheerful spirit and sheer survival. Unfortunately, those for whom such sacrifices are made, are rarely aware of the magnitude of the sacrifice.

On the surface, the whole Issue may seem trivial—a sort of Christmas *post mortem*. What's the profit? Actually, the issue is not as trivial as it may seem. The profit lies in the dispelling of regrets—remorse, guilt, and disillusionment. It lies also in the sorting out of the sense and significance of what we are trying to express and experience in the celebrating of the birth of Christ.

But, the issue lies deeper yet, in the realities of our relationships with others. That, of course, is what Christmas is all about—love and togetherness with God, evolving love and togetherness among the people of earth. The essential significance of the coming of Christ is revealed in one of the names given to the newborn child—Immanuel—which means “God with us.” The Creator came in the person of Jesus, to share human life with created, in order that the created might be lifted to share eternal life with the Creator. The Bible begins with the tragic separation, and ends with the grand togetherness. “*Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God, Himself, shall be with them and be their God*” (Revelation 21:3). The body of believers is a family—not a collection of religious zealots. Its essential purpose is sharing with each other, not “shaping up” each other. Relating to each other all year in a spirit of sharing and caring, will eliminate much of the necessity of a frenetic effort at Christmas time, to hastily contrive the symbols of caring and kindness that have been neglected throughout the year.

So, while the memories of the season are fresh in our minds, we ought to take a long look at what we have just been through, to see if we have, indeed, brought enrichment to our relationships, or only obscured them in a multitude of artificial symbols of good cheer.

Starting now, will give us time to reflect, and to see to the cultivating of proper relationships with Christ and one another—relationships that will grow throughout the year. For, if Christmas be not conceived in the heart, and brought to birth in spontaneous deeds of love and kindness, it is not a true child of our spirits, but a puppet of the flesh—a marionette, dangling on the fragile threads of obligation, and pious formalities. We must begin now to cultivate the sense of the meaning and value of persons. Then, and only then, will we be able to bring to the Christmas season, the kind of genuine expressions of love and joy that will enrich our relationships rather than smother them in trivial symbols of jollity and good cheer. Of course, these symbols are not trivial if they be genuine expressions of the heart, and not merely empty tokens of obligation.

This discussion of Christmas is not intended in any way to pass judgment on the propriety of individual preferences in the methods of celebration. It is rather an effort to evaluate what we are doing to see if it is a genuine expression of our true feelings, and to see if what we are doing actually flows with the meaning of our relationship to one another, as well as to Christ. It is also an effort to determine why it is that the day of “glad tidings” has become for so many a time of headache and distress rather than joy and gladness. Should not this season, of all times of the year, provide comfort for the afflicted in greater measure rather than less?

### **Where Has Christmas Gone Wrong?**

To blame it on the merchants is to dodge the issue. Presents and party favors never seem to obscure the spirit of birthday celebrations, nor diminish the importance of the guest of honor.

Nor has there been any significant ignoring of Christ in the American Christmas traditions. It is true that there are many non-religious aspects that are given undue prominence, but in the shopping centers and public places, there is a remarkable concentration on Christ, in the irrepressible carols and crèches and greeting cards, all bearing witness to the birth of the King of Kings. There is, in fact, no season of the year when the name of Christ, and the message of redemption is more widely heard than at Christmas. There are those that would do away with the holiday. What a triumph that would be for Satan, who hates the name of Christ more than anything on earth! Any pretext—even a religious one—to get rid of this disturbing phenomenon, would be most welcome to him.

No, we must look elsewhere for the heart of the problem. We must look to the deeper issues—to the spirit behind the observance. It is not so much the meaning of Christmas that is lost, as it is the sense of the celebration. Just what is it that we are trying to accomplish? What is the value and purpose of the traditions that we follow so religiously? Many have never stopped to ask relevant questions? Why do we keep these traditions? How do our activities affect one another? Or, how, in fact, are we personally affected? To get at these questions, we must first ask, “What is the value of celebrating Christmas at all?” And then, we must ask, “What is the appropriate way to celebrate?”

### **THE VALUE OF CHRISTMAS**

The value depends on the individual. Paul says that some people regard one day above another, and some regard every day alike. It is sheer nonsense to debate the issue on religious grounds. It is certainly obvious that the Bible gives no instruction on remembering the Birthday of Christ. It does give specific instructions on remembering the death of Christ. On the other hand, to say that we should not remember the birth of Christ, because the Bible does not tell us to do so, is to destroy the spontaneity and individuality of our

worship of Christ. To say we do not have the liberty to celebrate the birthday of Christ is as silly as to say that we do not have the right to remember the birthday of friends and loved ones. There are those who teach this, but it does not come from the Bible, and it evolves a religion like that of the Pharisees—bound by the chains of legalism, and locked in the prison house of sterile religious theories.

Again, to put the celebration of the birthday of Christ on an obligation basis is as idiotic as to put the celebration of birthdays on an obligation basis. Those who wish to celebrate have the liberty to do so. Those who do not wish to celebrate have the liberty not to do so. That is not to say that the one who celebrates loves Christ more than the one who does not celebrate. Paul makes this point abundantly clear in Romans 14. *“Let each be persuaded in his own mind.”* If one maintains a daily interaction with Christ, one may not feel the need of a special day of remembrance.

Nor, should one who chooses not to celebrate Christmas be labeled a “Scrooge.” There are any number of legitimate reasons why one would not care to join in festivities. Circumstances and moods change from year to year. It is somehow assumed that at a given signal, everyone must mask their true feelings and join the Christmas carnival. It is not a sin to be in sorrow, nor is it a crime to prefer quiet expressions of caring. The Scriptures are very clear about the necessity of *“rejoicing with those who rejoice, and weeping with those who weep.”* Jesus was very pointed in His declaration that worship is a matter of the spirit, and not religious forms, or fleshly feelings. (See John 4:24.)

By the same token, those who wish to give expression to their feelings by joyful celebration should be at liberty to do so, without apology, or necessity of Biblical precept. The heart of the matter is genuineness and spontaneity. Symbols of joyfulness—decorations, gifts, festivities—are certainly appropriate, if the spirit behind the symbols is genuine. When the spirit in which the celebration occurs is genuine, the task of preparing for the celebration will be less burdensome—especially if one is careful not to exceed the limits of spontaneous desire.

### **A Witness**

Within the limits just expressed, the value of celebrating Christmas can be great. In the first place, there has been throughout the world, through the centuries, a massive witness to Christ. This witness has never been lost, in spite of mounting traditions of secular nature.

### **A Remembrance**

In the second place, it provides an important moment of remembrance—reassessing what it meant for Christ to come into the world. In this respect, it provides a marvelous medium through which to teach the children—unforgettable lessons on the meaning of love and grace, as well as the obvious narrative of the birth of Christ.

### **A Sharing**

In addition to the more obvious values, Christmas provides an opportunity for fellowship and sharing. We do get busy and sometimes need special occasions to encourage us to pause, and to attend to the important values of personal relationships. When properly observed, Christmas can be a time of renewing friendships, strengthening family ties, and bringing blessing to the hearts of others.

## **THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTMAS**

The celebration of Christmas is a matter of personal choice. The value is there; the liberty is there. The Scriptures give no guidance, except for general precepts regarding all practices—that Christ should not be offended. There is no debate about the liberty to celebrate. It is a matter of private choice.

But, whether or not Christmas is a time of blessing and good cheer, or disappointment and disillusionment, depends upon the practice of Christmas. This is where the problems lie. There are several major areas of difficulty—Conformity, Inequity, and Intensity.

### **Conformity**

For many, Christmas is a time of great pressure and frustration. Mostly, this pressure arises out of the absurd notion that everyone must participate in Christmas, and that everyone must participate in conformity to certain traditions. No one stops to question the validity of this pattern of behavior.

Since there are no scriptural guidelines, the practice of Christmas is as personal as the choice to observe it at all. Individuals, or family groups, have the right to establish their own patterns, or traditions. Any attempt whatever to impose on another, special patterns, or traditions, is a coercion out of keeping with the true spirit of Christmas, and unworthy of the “liberty with which Christ has set us free.” To judge another’s devotion on the basis of proscribed forms and rituals, is completely unsound, as well as ungracious.

### **Inequity**

Another area of problem in the celebrating of Christmas, is the great disparity between the “haves” and the “have nots.” Christmas should be a time of good will to all. In fact, It should be a time of hope and encouragement especially for the poor, since Jesus elected to be born to poverty rather than to wealth. It is ironic that the poor are the very ones for whom Christmas is a time of greater misery.

The reason is not so hard to find. In its early beginnings, the church was primarily associated with the poor and the humble. Gradually, as it acquired more and more earthly power, it became associated with the aristocracy.

In fact, the wealth and power of the clergy was one of the underlying causes of the French Revolution in the Eighteenth Century. At one time, the church owned twenty percent of France. Nor did the church ever really lose this affluent image. From the splendid cathedrals of Europe, to the lavish palaces of worship in America, the church has established an irreversible trend—“Whom God blesses, He first makes rich. If you want the good life on earth, come to Jesus.” This is the constant message across America. “If you come to Christ, He will heal you, and prosper you, and solve all your problems.” In fact, it is regarded as a sign of unbelief if this does not happen. It is difficult to keep up with the activities of the average church, without, at least, a middle class status. Christmas celebrations are no exception. The lavish displays, and productions and festivities all cost money. And where does the money come from? From the people. But the people are led to believe that these material things are somehow a witness to joyfulness, and therefore, a gift to Christ. The same mood is carried out in the homes. Children, in the church, are brought up in a tradition that leads them to an inescapable conclusion—without these things, they are deprived.

The church ought not to participate in the farce. It should rather be teaching the people that “life consists not in the abundance of things one possesses.” Instead of making a feeble

effort to lift the poor to the level of the affluent, for the holiday, it should rather be teaching them to find the realities in what they have. Its message should be, “Envy not the rich, nor pity the poor, but find the joy of the spirit.” Jesus said, “*Blessed are the poor.*” The church has said, “Blessed are the rich.”

One of the most basic facts of life is that life on this earth is simply not fair. The only place of true equality is in the spirit. If life be judged by external circumstances, then creation was a monstrous error. Christmas is a good time for the poor to rise above that fallacy, and to demonstrate that the peace and joy of Christ prevails, in spite of the surrounding inequities of the material realm. In this respect, perhaps the rich are more to be pitied for the illusions and fantasies of life that their circumstances perpetuate. As Jesus said, “*With what difficulty do the rich enter the kingdom of God.*”

It is not wrong to be rich. For Christians, it is often a gift of God, to be used for His purposes. Nor does God preside over the expenditures of His people to be sure nought is wasted. It is not so much what one acquires, as it is what importance is attached to what one acquires, that is at issue. After all, this earthly existence is a great “cosmic sandbox.” Who has the largest sandcastle is rather irrelevant. For the most part, we are all children. We will be so until we are glorified, as Paul indicates in I Corinthians 13. We use this world’s goods in many ways—sometimes wisely and sometimes childishly. It is not a sin to be childish—it is normal for earthlings. Festivities and merriment all appeal to the child in us. This is to be expected. If we try to deny the child in us, we become phony and self-righteous. We become judgmental of what we regard as childish behavior, and thus perpetrate a greater error.

Christmas activities may indeed bring out the child in us, and create disparities, but, when we put it in proper perspective, it ought not to be the cause for judging one another, or for demanding equality, as though God must oversee the sandcastles. If people find pleasure in festivities and pageantry (whether they can afford them or not), that is their choice. It is the same with all special occasions—weddings, birthdays, funerals. There are great differences in the way people celebrate, either by choice, or by necessity. It is really more childish to envy the sandcastle than to build it. Every human on earth has something of the child within. *So, envy not the rich, nor pity the poor. Let everyone Judge his own sandcastle.*

## **Intensity**

Early celebrations of Christmas were simple—a few gifts, usually handmade, and a good deal of food and fellowship. In later years, there has been a spiraling complexity. With the emphasis on material symbols, as the evidence of faith and blessing (an attitude fostered no less by the church than by society), it seems to take more and more to satisfy the quest for joy and bliss. Forms and traditions replace the spontaneity of genuine personal faith, while obligation fills the vacuum of religious piety.

Unfortunately, many who come to the season with vitality of faith and genuine devotion, are caught in the snare of entrenched traditions. They are thus pressed into an intensity of activities from which they would gladly be free, had they the courage to confront friends and relatives with the truth about the selfish insistence with which some impose their own will on others. (“Spoiled bratism” can be as much with adults as with children.)

The intensity of activities in the celebration of Christmas destroys the holiday for many. It is not a matter of selfishness, or lack of love, but the magnitude of the task—to meet ever-lengthening gift lists, and guest lists; ever-increasing traditions and obligations; and ever-decreasing strength and purchasing power. And, while the demands of Christmas intensify, so do the demands of daily life, with increasing families; and the increasing complexities of

modern life.

It is high time we reevaluate what it is they are trying to accomplish in our celebrations. It is high time that we be freed from the bondage of traditions and obligations that we may be free to express our true inner feelings, and spontaneous desires in the remembrance of Christ and others. When the remembrance of others is not all concentrated on one season of the year, it is a reasonable and rewarding thing to express our caring. Love knows no season. Remembrance is always in order. Spread throughout the year, and delivered from the facade of obligation, it becomes a true expression of the heart, and is so received. A spontaneous gift of appreciation requires no reciprocity, and so is free from the onus of ulterior motive.

Free from the intensities of obligation, one is able to function within the limits of one's own capacities, and choose one's activities in keeping with genuine expressions of caring. One can find, then, true enjoyment, and the vitality, as well as the time, to experience whatever worship and remembrance of Christ, one chooses.

It is obvious, of course, that true giving entails sacrifice, but one should have the right to choose the object and extent of that sacrifice. Spontaneous sacrifice, for those we love, is never burdensome.

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTMAS**

Since there are no instructions in the Bible for the celebrating of Christmas, the nature of the observances is quite personal. In general, the celebration should be spontaneous and genuine; it should not be dictated by others; it should not put an undue, or unwelcome burden on anyone.

### **Christmas and the Non-celebrant**

Those who do not wish to celebrate Christmas find themselves in a difficult position. It is, however, most important that they remain true to their own convictions. It is equally important, however, that they do not judge others, who wish to celebrate. To look upon those who celebrate, as inferior, or secularistic, is as indefensible as it is bigoted and completely Pharisaical.

Given the universality of the holiday, however, a word of explanation is gracious, if not mandatory. If it is a family matter, it needs very special handling, and, where there are children, satisfactory alternatives are essential with careful instruction, in which one will need the help of the Holy Spirit. If it is a decision newly made, a note to friends and relatives, with a brief explanation is in order. This will prevent embarrassment on their part. If they do not receive it, they will reflect their own intolerance. Where one acts as an individual, the matter is less complex, but the same principles apply. If others still wish to include one, it is perfectly proper to decline.

### **Christmas for the Family**

Without presuming to enter into specific practices, one may suggest certain helpful guidelines.

In the first place, it is essential that the family get together well ahead of Christmas to determine what they are going to do. Included in the discussion should be the issues of financial limits, individual needs and preferences, distribution of workload. It is never

acceptable to make demands on others. Everyone should have the privilege of establishing their own limits and desires, else the whole spirit and meaning of Christmas is lost. But each one must be frank and open in expressing these feelings.

In the second place, it is important not to be swayed by the traditions of others. Jesus taught that when a couple marries, they must leave father and mother and establish their own family unit. It is *never* a valid argument that “these are our family traditions.” It is time to cut the apron strings. What was acceptable to father and mother is not necessarily acceptable, or even feasible for the new family unit. It is absurd and idiotic for young people to rush about in a frenzy at Christmas time, trying to satisfy the selfish demands of parents and relatives. It is high time that relatives should grow up and quit acting like spoiled brats.

In the third place, it is important that the celebration should be in keeping with fiscal responsibility. It is totally unsound for parents to teach their children that Christmas is a time when we are excused from economic realities. The celebration should teach the young people that joyfulness is not dependent on how much we spend. The fact that the neighbor children or church mends have received more, should be an excellent opportunity for instruction on the meaning of material things. To overspend at Christmas may, in fact, jeopardize the well-being of the children, in areas of necessity.

In the fourth place, since Christmas is not mandated by the Bible, nor governed by spiritual rules, it should be a time of joyfulness, without “sabbath solemnity.” To constantly caution the remembrance of spiritual values is as self-defeating as it is pharisaical piety.

Children love birthday parties. It is no insult to the guest of honor when they simply enjoy themselves without having to listen to the intonation of the virtues of the one whose birthday is being celebrated. The fact that they care enough to come is honor enough. On the other hand, it is a wonderful occasion for the worship of Christ.

Finally, let Christmas be what you want it to be—no more, no less, and without apology. You cannot be responsible for everyone else’s well-being. The level of one’s responsibility to others should be something determined and carried out throughout the year. It is phony and unrealistic to stretch things out of shape, merely to provide material symbols for the poor at Christmas. Usually such efforts only serve to heighten the disparity. We ought to help the poor; we ought to be concerned about the welfare of others; but merely to do it at Christmas is a mockery. If the family desires to make special provision for others at Christmas, it should be a family decision. We cannot determine someone else’s devotion. Children should be taught to give and to care, but giving and caring should be part of daily living and not just a token at Christmas.

So then, for the family, Christmas should be mutually acceptable; it should not be dictated by others; it should be in keeping with one’s circumstances; it should not become merely a religious form; and, it should not be an occasion for empty charities that are seasonal, and not a part of one’s constant regard for the welfare of others.

### **Christmas for the Individual**

And, if one is alone? What then? Well, the matter is simplified, of course, by allowing the liberty of private choice. But, there are other problems. If one has no family, there may be the problem of loneliness. But loneliness is, itself, a choice one makes. Loneliness is a state of mind. To be alone and to be lonely are two different things. There are many advantages to being alone. One can function freely without the complication of the wishes of others. There are so many things one can do to make a rewarding use of one’s time, if one can get

over the hurdle of feeling that there is something unfair about having to be alone. It is resentment at being alone, and not aloneness itself that causes the problem.

Loneliness, like the martyr complex, is an indulgence in self-pity. It is amazing how hard people will work at making up excuses to preserve their right to be lonely. If you think no one cares, maybe it's because you have cared for no one, or maybe you have always had strings attached to your "caring." If you don't want to be alone, reach out to someone. Don't wait for someone to reach out for you. Invite another lonely person to share with you.

If you do have relatives, there are more complex problems. But, by all means, respect their right to their own celebrations as you insist on their need to respect your wishes. It is also essential that you make clear to them what you desire to be the level of your participation with them. Have alternative plans, so that you can avoid any possibility that they are including you out of pity, or obligation. Spending Christmas alone can have many rewarding possibilities. It can be a rich experience once you get over the hump of feeling discriminated against.

If people do wish to include you, don't feel obligated to reciprocate, if you are unable to do so. After all, Christmas is for giving. Reciprocation can nullify the gift. A gift to the hostess is always in order, but gifts for all, are completely unnecessary if not unrealistic.

### **In Conclusion...**

There is so much more to be said, but it is hoped that the thoughts expressed will provide, at least, seedlings that evolve a fresh look at this grand holiday.

Nothing that has been said, should be construed to set arbitrary limits of any kind on the observance of Christmas. Christmas should be whatever the heart wishes it to be. Expressions both of worship and festivity must be spontaneous, else the value and vitality are lost in the barren wasteland of religious and social bondage.

This glorious festival of the gladsome remembrance of Christ is in danger of being crushed under the juggernaut of traditional artifice and trivia. It is hoped that the spirit may be liberated from the shackles of coercion and imposition and allowed to soar free in the heights of joyful expression.

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