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December 2022 “Celebrating Jesus’ Birth”

Dear Friends,

Once again, we have entered what to me is the best time of each year: the Christmas season! In fact, one of my favorite “non-church” Christmas songs is, “It’s the Most Wonderful Time of the Year,” as recorded by Andy Williams (I really like the older Christmas songs from the 1940’s through the 1970’s). Though many Christians denounce the way Christmas is celebrated, I thoroughly enjoy all the decorations, lights, and Christmas songs played on the radio and in stores. I look at it as though they are all celebrating the birth of Jesus.

I have so many wonderful childhood memories of Christmas. For a few years, Mom and Dad put up one of those aluminum Christmas trees in the living room, then illuminated it with a multi-colored light wheel positioned at the base of the tree. I would lie on the carpet next to the tree, look up and watch as the thousands of aluminum strands reflected the alternating red, blue, green and yellow light. (Hmmm, I wonder if I could find one of those trees and light wheels today?)

Since almost all my parent’s families lived hundreds of miles away in other states, our Christmas dinners involved Mom, Dad, my sister, brother, and me (I am the oldest). The food was always delicious (Mom was a great cook) and we had plenty of leftovers. Though we weren’t a wealthy family, Mom and Dad did their best to be sure the three of us kids had presents under the tree.

What I find so sad are the people who claim to have few – if any – treasured memories of Christmas. Many people dread to see the holidays approaching because they tend to bring back painful memories. It is not uncommon for hospital emergency rooms to have people come in on Christmas Eve or Day with complaints of various ailments; but when tests fail to reveal any genuine illness, the emergency room staff realize the true problem: the patients are lonely or broken-hearted.

I too could face each Christmas with dread and sadness. My mother passed away on May 12, 1989, the Friday before Mother’s Day. But my father passed away on December 22, 2002, three days before Christmas. It’s bad enough when a parent dies, but when it happens that close to Christmas you’re not only dealing with the sudden loss, but also with the cards and presents that you were going to give that parent. The greatest consolation is that both my Mom and Dad were born again and truly loved Jesus. I know they are with Him in Heaven.

Since that time, I have made a choice to focus on the friends and family I still have in my life, and to enjoy the presence of the One who is the true foundation for Christmas. If it weren’t for Jesus, we would have no Christmas season. If it weren’t for Jesus, schools would not have Christmas break (now sadly referred to as “winter break”). If it weren’t for Jesus, there would be no celebrations this time of year. There would be no Christmas trees, no lights, no decorations, no presents, no Christmas hymns (“Silent Night,” “Joy to the World,” “O Holy Night,” etc), no

children's programs in churches, no special visits with family and loved ones, and so on. (On a lighter note, there would also be no fruit cakes, no eggnog, and no ugly sweater contests.)

Jesus is the foundation for Christmas, the heart of Christmas, and the life of Christmas. Yes, I admit there has been a tremendous secularization of Christmas. But ironically, such secularization would not exist if it weren't for Jesus and what Christmas truly represents.

Something I've observed over the years is how attitudes toward Christmas change in some people who get born again. There are those who used to celebrate Christmas with decorations, parties, special meals, and gift-giving but begin shifting their ideas and perspective to the point of believing any form of celebration is wrong. Some even become almost antagonistic toward Christians who put up Christmas trees, decorate with lights, give presents and so on. It gets to the point that there is almost no acknowledgement of what Christmas represents.

I totally agree that December 25th cannot in any way be verified as the actual day Jesus was born. Furthermore, I am very aware that certain pagan celebrations took place during the week of Christmas. But decorating for Christmas is in no way comparable to decorating for Halloween when people display images of demons, witches, skeletons, and more. Christmas decorations are not about darkness and death, but about light, joy, peace, and Jesus. Is it really blasphemous for someone to put a manger scene in their front yard and illuminate it at night?

Don't misunderstand and think I am implying everyone should decorate at Christmas. If you do not have peace about putting up a tree, decorating with lights, attending parties, and giving gifts, then don't do any of those things...but at the same time, don't demonstrate harsh criticism and interrupt the peace of those who do participate in such activities.

Aside from Easter, there is no better time of the year to share the gospel than Christmas. Think of the reaction lost people might have if invited for dinner to the home of Christian relatives on Christmas day only to walk in the house and see absolutely no decorations. When asking about it, they're told, "We don't celebrate Christmas." I don't doubt those lost relatives might wonder, "I don't understand. They're always telling us how much we need Jesus, but they don't even celebrate His birth." Even more awkward would be how the lost relatives might feel as they stand there holding beautifully wrapped presents for the hosts.

On the contrary, consider the reaction of the lost relatives as they walk into the home of Christian family members for Christmas dinner and see a beautiful tree and decorations. They would feel very comfortable and at ease. At some point during the evening, someone in the host family could read the story of Jesus' birth from the Bible, explaining why He came to Earth, what He offers all humanity, and that the decorations are to celebrate the Son of God and Savior.

Again, please don't think I am implying all Christians should have Christmas trees and decorations. But is it really hypocritical and compromise with the world to do so? Do the research and you'll discover that decorating to celebrate the birth of Jesus did not start in taverns and department stores; it started centuries ago in the homes of Christians who wanted nothing to do with paganism, but wanted to honor and recognize Jesus Christ, the Messiah and King of kings.

I seriously doubt you'll find lost people driving around throughout the year singing along with worship songs playing on the radio. But at Christmas? It's easy to get lost people to sing about Jesus and worship Him: "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing (Glory to the Newborn King)," "What Child is This?" "O Little Town of Bethlehem," "Joy to the World! The Lord is Come," and many more. Quite honestly, the Christmas season is the one time of the year when, even in the midst of all the secularization, there is a focus on Jesus.

In a manner of speaking, we could say God Himself started the tradition of celebrating the birth of Jesus.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, and on earth peace, good will toward men. (Luke 2:8-14)

The brilliant, illuminating glory of the Lord was the original Christmas light. The multitude of the heavenly host held the original Christmas celebration. Additionally – though I can't yet prove this – it's possible that the tradition of giving gifts at Christmas has as its origin the story of the three wise men in the book of Matthew.

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.

And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. (Matthew 2:1-11)

The entire story surrounding Jesus' birth is one of glory and miracles. The angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and declared God's will that she give birth to Jesus. Gabriel explained that, though she was a virgin, the Holy Ghost would move upon her and she would become pregnant with the Son of God. She could have said no, but instead said, "be it unto me according to thy word." The Holy Ghost then did what Mary could not have done on her own; He worked a miracle by releasing the life of God into her, and for nine months that life was growing, developing and maturing until the day when Jesus was birthed into the world.

This is such a perfect illustration of the miracle of the new birth. Someone presents to us the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus. We then have a choice: we can say no, or we can do as Mary and say, "Be it unto me according to the Word of God." At that moment, the Holy Ghost does for us what we cannot do on our own; He works a miracle by first washing away our old sin nature and then releases God's life and nature in us and we are born again.

Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior (Titus 3:5-6)

The life of God is now within, and we have the responsibility to nurture it for growth, development, and maturity until out of our "spiritual womb" we give birth to the character of the One who saved us.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance: against such there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Those who have truly accepted Jesus as Savior have so much to celebrate. Though we don't need trees, decorations, parties, and feasts to rejoice in the birth of Jesus, the Christmas season is the perfect opportunity to use all that for the purpose of directing attention to the Savior of humanity, the hope of eternity with God.

At the beginning of this letter, I made reference to one of my favorite secular Christmas songs. In closing, I'm going to share the words to one of my favorite Christmas hymns. Written in 1719 by Isaac Watts, "Joy to the World" is one of the most uplifting and inspiring Christmas songs ever composed. As you read these lyrics, I'm guessing you'll start hearing it sung in your mind, if not singing it out loud:

Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King;
let ev'ry heart prepare him room
and heav'n and nature sing, and heav'n and nature sing,
and heav'n, and heav'n and nature sing.

Joy to the earth, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ,
while fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,
repeat the sounding joy, repeat the sounding joy,
repeat, repeat the sounding joy.

No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground;
he comes to make his blessings flow
far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found,
far as, far as the curse is found.

He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove
the glories of his righteousness
and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love,
and wonders, wonders of his love.

May God's divine peace, presence, joy, and love fill your life this Christmas season!

In His Grace,

Jim

P.S. – My special offer this month is a CD of the Christmas sermon, *The Birth of Joy*. To receive your copy, complete and mail the order form below.

2023 REVIVAL NOW! CONFERENCE

Our Revival Now! Conference will be held Sunday, April 23 – Friday, April 28. Services will be held morning and evening. There is no charge to register or attend. All services will be held at our church. I'll be sending more information in future letters. If you have any questions, email me at PastorJimGCC@gmail.com.

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