

Hail to the Lord's Anointed*James Montgomery (1771–1854)*

Hail to the Lord's Anointed,
 great David's greater Son!
 Hail, in the time appointed,
 His reign on earth begun!
 He comes to break oppression,
 to set the captive free,
 to take away transgression,
 and rule in equity.

He comes with comfort speedy
 to those who suffer wrong;
 to help the poor and needy,
 and bid the weak be strong;
 to give them songs for sighing,
 their darkness turn to light,
 whose souls, condemned and dying,
 are precious in His sight.

He shall come down like showers
 upon the fruitful earth;
 and love, joy, hope, like flowers,
 spring in His path to birth;
 before Him on the mountains
 shall peace, the herald, go;
 and righteousness, in fountains,
 from hill to valley flow.

O'er every foe victorious,
 He on His throne shall rest,
 from age to age more glorious,
 all-blessing and all-blessed;
 the tide of time shall never
 His covenant remove;
 His name shall stand forever—
 that name to us is Love.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*In the Nick of Time***I Love Christmas. And I Hate Christmas.***Kevin T. Bauder*

If the ghost of Christmas past is composed of the memories of our earlier Christmases, then I am haunted by a splendid one. When I think of Christmas celebrations during my childhood, every memory shines like a Christmas candle. I remember decorating the tree in our big, country home: stringing lights and tinsel, hanging bulbs, crowning the tip of the tree with a star, and then covering everything with a layer of lead-foil icicles. I remember my grandmother's Christmas tree, always flocked, with blinking lights and colorful strings of beads. I remember strolling downtown from my other grandmother's home, gazing at the giant candy canes that graced the lamp-poles as we walked toward the illuminated snowmen and reindeer in the municipal display. I remember being allowed to raid the Christmas stockings as soon as I got up on Christmas morning—always earlier than Mom and Dad—and I remember the excitement of ripping bright paper from eagerly-awaited presents. None of my Christmas memories is bad.

Nevertheless, I recall that my father was ambivalent about Christmas. He enjoyed the holiday at home, and as a new believer he delighted in reading the Christmas story from Luke 2 before we opened presents. All the same, he worked in the transportation industry, and for him Christmas brought unique stresses. The crowds were larger than usual. People were in a bigger hurry. No one seemed to bear much goodwill toward those whose labors were necessary to make their day special.

When I was in college, I spent a Christmas working in the toy department at Montgomery Ward. It was a good experience in one way: I made more money than I had ever made during a comparable period in my life. On the other hand, it was hard work. Sometimes I would spend ten hours at a stretch just standing behind a cash register ringing up people's purchases. About every fifth person took time to berate me: we were too slow, the prices were too high, we didn't have the toy they wanted, or the store's music was too annoying (I actually agreed with that). I began to wonder whether after all there wasn't special meaning to the phrase, "Bah! Humbug!"

Through all my youth I never quite appreciated the wonder of the incarnation. Of course I knew about and believed in the virgin birth of Christ. I



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understood that it was a miracle. What I did not grasp was just what the miracle accomplished or why it was important.

That perspective (or lack thereof) began to change with Myron Houghton's seminary course in Christology. I'm sure I'd been exposed to some of the same teaching earlier, but Myron exegeted text after text as he took his class through a guided tour of biblical Christology. Under his mentorship I began to grasp the doctrinal and practical connections, both within Christology itself and for other doctrinal fields. Ancient heresies like Cerinthianism, Arianism, Apollinarianism, and Nestorianism ceased to be mere labels and now loomed as monstrous denials of the gospel. The great symbols of the Church—the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and the formula of Chalcedon—stood out as heroic attempts to defend the truth about the person of Christ and the way of salvation.

Through Myron's instruction I learned to love the truth of the incarnation as never before. The more I thought about the subject, the more impenetrable the mystery seemed. How can one person be both divine and human? What does it mean to add a complete human nature to a divine person? How complete does the human nature have to be? How do the properties of the deity and the humanity communicate to the person, and how (if at all) do they communicate to each other? How is it possible to affirm opposite truths of the person according to the individual natures? The questions were so many, and so profound, that I began to understand why we Christians decided to set aside a season every year simply to ponder them.

In the long run, I ceased to think of Christmas as a single season (for it is a season and not just a day). I began to see three distinguishable Christmases. I respond to each of these three Christmases differently.

One is the Commercial Christmas. This is the Christmas of jammed aisles, crowded planes, cash registers, and the resentful giving of unwanted gifts. This Christmas rouses irritation in all who observe it and creates stress for those who serve it. The Commercial Christmas begins as a celebration of the lust of the eyes and often ends in the idolatry of covetousness. While I cannot entirely escape this Christmas, my attitude toward it is, "Bah! Humbug!"

Next is the Cultural Christmas. The Cultural Christmas overlaps with the Commercial Christmas, but it is not identical to it. It is the Christmas of red berries and green ivy, of bright lights and glistening tinsel, of Tannenbäume and wreaths, of elves and reindeer, of mirth and good will. Honestly, I love the cultural Christmas. I love to gawk at brightly decorated homes. I love a good eggnog (spiked with just a splash of Vernors, not with alcohol). I love the lighting of the tree, the jingling of the bells, and the faces of children as they open their gifts. For me, the Cultural Christmas is a holly-jolly good time.

Fun as it is, though, the Cultural Christmas has little to do with the incarnation of the Lord Jesus. For that reason, I see less and less place for it in church. A Christmas tree in the living room is a grand thing, but in the church's corporate worship space it becomes a distraction (at best). So I keep the tinsel at home, for it has no part in the Christian Christmas.

The Christian Christmas is a contemplation and celebration of the incarnation of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is a time for joy but not jollity, for reverence but not rollicking, for wonder but not wassail. While it is a mighty celebration, the Christian Christmas is also a steadfast consideration of the majestic condescension of God the Son who, though He subsisted in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be selfishly grasped, but emptied Himself by receiving the form of a slave and by coming to be in the likeness of humans.

I would exclude the Cultural Christmas from our churches, not because I disapprove of it (far from it!), but because I love the Christian Christmas even more. The Christian Christmas can and should spill over into the Cultural Christmas (caroling, anyone?), but when the Cultural Christmas invades the church it runs dangerously close to idolatry. I can enjoy each, but I want to enjoy it in its place.

God rest ye merry.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
