

**O Come, O Come, Emmanuel***Anonymous (12th century); tr. J. M. Neale (1818–1866)*

O come, O come, Emmanuel,  
and ransom captive Israel,  
that mourns in lonely exile here,  
until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to Thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free  
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;  
from depths of hell Thy people save,  
and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to Thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Dayspring, come and cheer  
our spirits by Thine advent here;  
disperse the gloomy clouds of night,  
and death's dark shadows put to flight.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to Thee, O Israel.

O come, Thou Key of David, come,  
and open wide our heav'nly home;  
make safe the way that leads on high,  
and close the path to misery.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
shall come to Thee, O Israel.

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ***In the Nick of Time***Advent and Christmas***Kevin T. Bauder*

Any Christian discussion of holidays must begin with the recognition that we observe them in the absence of any biblical requirement. Does this mean that it is wrong to celebrate holidays? Not as long as the holiday is simply a focused instance of something that Christians have a biblical obligation to do anyway. Christians ought to ponder the incarnation, so it is not wrong to have a day or even a season regularly set aside for that purpose. Christians ought to exult in Jesus' resurrection, so it is not wrong to set aside a day to focus especially on that event. Observances such as Easter and Christmas are allowable as matters of circumstance, but they must never be treated as required elements of our worship.

What complicates the discussion is the large number of cultural and commercial accretions that tend to attach themselves to the holidays. Holidays can even become occasions of vice. Something like this has happened within American Christianity. Evidently, the liturgical calendar of modern America includes seven principal holidays, each of which is devoted to the pursuit of a deadly sin: Thanksgiving (gluttony), Christmas (greed), Valentine's Day (lust), Easter (envy), Independence Day (pride), Labor Day (sloth), and Halloween (vengeance).

To be clear, I do not believe that every cultural addition to the holidays is necessarily evil—just as long as we are careful to distinguish the Christian holy day from the cultural festivities. Plenty of enjoyment can be found in Christmas trees, eggnog, and tinsel, but they should be kept in our homes, not brought into our churches. Still, these cultural observances are the very things that get exploited by the hucksters who wish to commercialize Christmas. In this respect, we may discover that the growth of secularism works to the advantage of biblical Christianity. The cultural and commercial celebration of "Christmas" is dropping the façade of having anything to do with Christ. It is rapidly becoming simply the "Happy Holidays" or the "Winter Celebration." Since the Lord Jesus was never the object of the buying and selling, separating the commercial and cultural festivities from the Christian observance may actually help to clarify what Christmas—the *real* Christmas—is about.



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What American evangelicals think of as “the Christmas season” used to be divided between two distinct observances. The first was Advent, which began four Sundays before Christmas. The second was Christmas, which was not just a day, but a festival of at least twelve days. Each observance had its own emphasis.

Advent anticipated the entrance of the Savior into the world. It focused upon the reason for which God needed to send a Savior—namely, human sin. It was an occasion for pondering the darkness of the world into which God sent the true Light. Consequently, Advent was a season for affliction of soul rather than festivity, a time to consider one’s own contribution to the weight of guilt that the Savior would have to bear. The sensibility of Advent is nicely captured in the most famous of the Advent hymns:

O come, O come Emmanuel, And ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here, Until the Son of God appear.

Just as Advent represents the anticipation of Christ’s coming in the incarnation, it also represents the anticipation of the Second Coming. The two comings are analogous in certain ways: as the world groaned under the guilt of sin until the Savior came to provide forgiveness, now the Lord’s people groan under the combined weight of depravity, mortality, and oppression until Jesus appears to bring deliverance. One of the important themes in the counterpoint of Advent is yearning for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In spite of its afflictions and ponderings, however, Advent is hardly a season of unrelieved gloom. The element of hope, of anticipation, is always present. Advent ends with Christmas, and for that reason, the blessing and joy of the incarnation, while subdued, are constantly bursting in. It is no accident that the hymn repeats the refrain,

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

Because Advent combines elements of sorrow for sin with elements of anticipation, it is an appropriate season to consider those who were longing for the first coming of the Savior. Figures such as Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, and Anna provide models of the viewpoint of Advent. Above all, Mary typifies the spirit of one who anticipates the arrival of her Savior. Since Christians can learn from their godly example, we should give attention to these saints.

Whatever its secondary emphases, the primary message of Advent remains, “the Savior is coming.” The entire atmosphere changes with the arrival of Christmas itself, when the message becomes, “the Savior has arrived,” or, to put it in biblical terms, “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men.” Anticipation

bursts into celebration and affliction into exultation as the season takes on the aspect of unmitigated joy.

Traditionally, the preparations for Christmas take place after mid-day on Christmas Eve. Decorating and baking form the immediate prelude to the celebration that begins at midnight. Furthermore, when Christmas day is over, Christmas itself has just begun. The celebration extends through the next twelve days, ending with a commemoration of the arrival of the Magi on what is sometimes called *Epiphany* (January 6).

While none of these observances is obligatory, they can be done so that they honor the Scriptures and communicate genuine spiritual values. If we are going to do them rightly, however, then we need to become genuinely counter-cultural. If we are going to celebrate Christmas, it needs to be the Christian Christmas, not simply the commercial or cultural Christmases. The advertisers want us to begin to celebrate on the day after Halloween, and they want us to celebrate mainly by using our credit cards. One very good way of both resisting the commercial Christmas and keeping the cultural Christmas in its place would be to reinstate the historic distinction between anticipation and realization, between Advent and Christmas. Perhaps we should make the attempt.



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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.

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