

INTRODUCTION

Christmas is the only Christian holy day that is also a major secular holiday—arguably our culture’s biggest.¹ The result is two different celebrations, each observed by millions of people at the very same time. This brings some discomfort on both sides. Many Christians can’t help but notice that more and more of the public festivities surrounding Christmas studiously avoid any references to its Christian origins. The background music in stores is moving from “Joy to the World” to “Have a Holly, Jolly Christmas.” The holiday is promoted as a time for family, for giving, and for peace in the world. “Christmas is a wonderful, secular holiday,” wrote one enthusiast at the popular Web site Gawker.²

On the other hand, nonreligious people can’t help but find that the older meaning of Christmas keeps intruding uninvited, for instance, through the music of traditional Christmas carols. It can be irritating to have to answer their child’s question, “What does that music mean—‘born to give them second birth?’”

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As a Christian believer, I am glad to share the virtues of the day with the entirety of society. The secular Christmas is a festival of lights, a time for family gatherings, and a season to generously give to those closest to us and to those in greatest need. These practices are enriching to everyone, and they are genuinely congruent with the Christian origins of the celebration.

Because of the commercial indispensability of Christmas, it will remain with us as a secular festival. My fear is, however, that its true roots will become more and more hidden to most of the population. The emphasis on light in darkness comes from the Christian belief that the world's hope comes from outside of it. The giving of gifts is a natural response to Jesus' stupendous act of self-giving, when he laid aside his glory and was born into the human race. The concern for the needy recalls that the Son of God was born not into an aristocratic family but into a poor one. The Lord of the universe identified with the least and the most excluded of the human race.

These are powerful themes, but every one of them is a two-edged sword. Jesus comes as the Light because we are too spiritually blind to find our own way. Jesus became mortal and died because we are too morally ruined to be pardoned any other way. Jesus gave himself to us, and so we must give ourselves wholly to him. We are, therefore, "not [our] own" (1 Corinthians 6:19).

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Christmas, like God himself, is both more wondrous and more threatening than we imagine.

Every year our increasingly secular Western society becomes more unaware of its own historical roots, many of which are the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Yet once a year at Christmas these basic truths become a bit more accessible to an enormous audience. At countless gatherings, concerts, parties, and other events, even when most participants are nonreligious, the essentials of the faith can sometimes become visible. As an example, let's ask some questions of the famous Christmas carol "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," heard in malls, in grocery stores, and on street corners.³ *Who is Jesus?* He is "everlasting Lord," who from "highest heaven" comes down to be the "offspring of the virgin's womb." *What did he come to do?* His mission is to see "God and sinners reconciled." *How did he accomplish it?* He "lays his glory by," that we "no more may die." *How can this life be ours?* Through an inward, spiritual regeneration so radical that, as we have seen, it can be called "the second birth." With brilliant economy of style, the carol gives us a summary of the entire Christian teaching.

While few of the most familiar Christmas songs and Bible readings are that comprehensive, it remains that one season a year hundreds of millions of people, if they would take the trouble to ask these kinds of

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questions, would have this same knowledge available to them. To understand Christmas *is* to understand basic Christianity, the Gospel.

In this book I hope to make the truths of Christmas less hidden. We will look at some passages of the Bible that are famous because they are dusted off every Christmas, at the one moment of the year when our secular society and the Christian church are, to a degree, thinking about the same thing. In the first chapters of the book, looking at the Gospel of Matthew, we will learn about the gifts God gave us at Christmas. In the following chapters, focusing on the Gospel of Luke, we will consider how we can welcome and receive those gifts.

My hope is that, when the reader is done, the true meaning of Christmas will no longer be hidden.