

The Real Christmas

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The time is drawing near when books will be closed and hearts and thoughts turned toward home. Like the shepherds of old who journeyed to the manger marked by the star, many of you will travel to a place where a special star hangs over your home—a holy place, a place where love and confidence increase with the years.

Christmas is a busy season. Streets and stores are filled with people making last-minute preparations. Travelers on the highways increase, airports are crowded—all Christianity seems to come to life with music, lights, and festive decorations.

A writer has said:

Of all the holidays there is none that enters so fully into the human heart, and stirs so many of the higher sentiments. The thoughts, memories, hopes, and customs linked with it are bound by antiquity and nationality collectively; and by childhood and old age individually. They embrace the religious, social, and patriotic sides of our nature. The holly and mistletoe entwined among the evergreens, the habit of giving gifts to those we love, the presence of the Christmas tree, the superstition of Santa Claus, all combining to make Christmas the most longed-for, the most universal, and from every standpoint, the most important holiday known to man.

[Clarence Baird, "The Spirit of Christmas," *Improvement Era*, 23:154 (December 1919)]

The Origin of Christmas

The season is steeped in tradition and its roots stem back in history. The commencement of the holiday lies in pagan worship long before the introduction of Christianity. The god Mithra was worshiped by the ancient Aryans, and this worship gradually spread to India and Persia. Mithra at first was the god of the heavenly light of the bright skies and later in the Roman period was worshiped as the deity of the sun, or the sun-god—*Sol Invictus Mithra*.

In the first century after Christ, Pompey carried on conquests along the southern coast of Cilicia, in Asia Minor, and many of the prisoners taken in those military actions were brought captive to Rome. This introduced the pagan worship of Mithra to Rome, for these prisoners spread the religion among the Roman soldiers. The worship became popular, particularly in the ranks of the Roman armies. We find today, in the ruins of the cities of the

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far-flung Roman Empire, the shrines of Mithra. Mithraism flourished in the Roman world and became the chief competitor of Christianity in the religious beliefs of the people.

A festive season for the worshipers of the sun-god took place immediately after the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year—the time when the sun stands still after its annual dip into the Southern Hemisphere. The commencement of its climb from this low point was regarded as the rebirth of Mithra, and the Romans celebrated his birthday on the twenty-fifth of December each year. There was great merriment on this holiday—festivals and feasting, gifts given to friends, and the dwelling places decorated with evergreens.

Gradually Christianity gained a victory over Mithraism, which had been its strongest rival, and the festival day celebrating the birth of Mithra was used by the Christians to commemorate the birth of Christ. The pagan worship of the sun, deeply rooted in Roman culture, was replaced by one of the greatest festivals among Christians. Christmas has come down to us as a day of thanksgiving and rejoicing—a day of good cheer and goodwill to men. Although it has an earthly relation and significance, it is divine in content. The ancient Christian celebration has lived continuously through the centuries.

The Meaning of Christmas Today

How is Christmas regarded today? The legend of Santa Claus, the Christmas tree, the decorations of tinsel and mistletoe, and the giving of gifts all express to us the spirit of the day we celebrate; but the true spirit of Christmas lies much deeper than these. It is found in the life of the Savior, in the principles he taught, in his atoning sacrifice—which becomes our great heritage.

Many years ago the First Presidency of the Church made this significant statement:

Christmas, to the Latter-day Saint, is both reminiscent and prophetic—a reminder of two great and solemn events, which will yet be regarded universally as the mightiest and most wonderful happenings in the history of the human race. These events were predestined to take place upon this planet before it was created. One of these was the coming of the Savior in the meridian of time, to die for the sins of the world; and the other is the prospective event of the risen and glorified Redeemer, to reign upon the earth as King of kings. [Millennial Star, 70:1 (January 2, 1908)]

In Paul's short letter to the Galatians, he showed great concern over their apparent disbelief and their forsaking of his teachings regarding Christ. He wrote to them: "But it is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, of whom I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you. . . ." (Gal. 4:18–19). In other words, Paul expressed himself as suffering pain and anxiety until Christ be "formed" in them. This is another way of saying "in Christ," as that expression is used by Paul repeatedly in his writings.

It is possible for Christ to be born in men's lives, and when such an experience actually happens, a man is "in Christ"—Christ is "formed" in him. This presupposes that we take Christ into our hearts and make him the living contemporary of our lives. He is not just a general truth or a fact in history, but the Savior of men everywhere and at all times. When we strive to be Christlike, he is "formed" in us; if we open the door, he will enter; if we seek his counsel, he will counsel us. For Christ to be "formed" in us, we must have a belief in him and in his atonement. Such a belief in Christ, and the keeping of his commandments, are not restraints upon us. By these, men are set free. This Prince of Peace waits to give peace of mind which may make each of us a channel of that peace.

The real Christmas comes to him who has taken Christ into his life as a moving, dynamic, vitalizing force. The real spirit of Christmas lies in the life and mission of the Master. I continue with what the writer defines as the real spirit of Christmas:

It is a desire to sacrifice for others, to render service and to possess a feeling of universal brotherhood. It consists of a willingness to forget what you have done for others, and to remember what others have done for you; to ignore what the world owes you, and think only of your duties in the middle distance, and your chance to do good and aid your fellow-men in the foreground—to see that your fellow-men are just as good as you are, and try to look behind their faces to their hearts—to close your book of grievances against the universe, and look about you for a place to sow a few seeds of happiness, and go your way unobserved. [Baird, p. 154]

In his contemplation of the Christmas season, John Wallingford penned these lines:

*Christmas is not a day or a season, but a
condition of heart and mind.
If we love our neighbors as ourselves;
if in our riches we are poor in spirit and in
our poverty we are rich in grace;
if our charity vaunteth not itself, but suffereth long
and is kind;
if when our brother asks for a loaf, we give
ourselves instead;
if each day dawns in opportunity and sets in
achievement, however small;
then every day is Christ's day and Christmas
is always near.*

A wise man has said:

The most amazing thing about the Christmas story is its relevance. It is at home in every age and fits into every mood of life. It is not simply a lovely tale

once told, but eternally contemporary. It is the voice crying out in every wilderness. It is as meaningful in our time as in that long-ago night when shepherds followed the light of the star to the manger of Bethlehem. [Joseph R. Sizoo, Words of Life, p. 33]

It has been said that Christmas is for children; but as the years of childhood fancy pass away and an understanding maturity takes their place, the simple teaching of the Savior that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35) becomes a reality. The evolution from a pagan holiday transformed into a Christian festival, to the birth of Christ in men’s lives, is another form of maturity that comes to one who has been touched by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Find the True Spirit of Christmas

If you desire to find the true spirit of Christmas and partake of the sweetness of it, let me make this suggestion to you. During the hurry of the festive occasion of this Christmas season, find time to turn your heart to God. Perhaps in the quiet hours, and in a quiet place, and on your knees—alone or with loved ones—give thanks for the good things that have come to you, and ask that his spirit might dwell in you as you earnestly strive to serve him and keep his commandments. He will take you by the hand and his promises will be kept.

I know that God lives. I bear witness of the divinity of his Son, the Savior of the world, and I express appreciation for the blessing of having upon the earth a prophet of the living God.

In closing I would like to say that President Harold B. Lee has asked that I extend to you his love and the heartfelt greetings of the Board of Trustees to the administration, the faculty, and the student body of this great university.

May God bless each of you this day and always is the prayer I humbly ask. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.