

*Celebrating*  
**Christmas**



*James Boice*



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS



# Celebrating Christmas

James Boice



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**James Montgomery Boice** (1938-2000) was the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia from 1968 to 2000. During that time, he took up the mantle of Dr. Donald Barnhouse's Evangelical Ministries, which reorganized in 1994 as the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals.

James Boice served as the chairman of the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy (ICBI), which in 1978 drafted the seminal "Chicago Statement." He also served as assistant editor of *Christianity Today*, and as editor of *Eternity Magazine*. James Boice's Bible teaching continues on *The Bible Study Hour* radio and internet program, which prepares listeners to think and act biblically.

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# 1. Celebrating Christmas

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We have before us a well-known text, Luke 2:17-20, which tells how to celebrate Christmas. How should we celebrate Christmas? The question is important because of the importance of the day and because so many obviously do not know how to celebrate it.

I know, of course, that Jesus was probably not born on December 25—at least there is no real evidence that He was. Nevertheless, this is the day that most people, Christians and non-Christians alike, observe as His birthday, and if we are to mark it at all, this seems to be the only realistic time to do it. But how? That is the question. What is a genuinely Christian way to observe Christ's nativity? Quite obviously, the fact that the world often celebrates the day in non-Christian ways is no excuse for Christians to either neglect or misuse it.

How do you celebrate Christmas? If we are honest, we must admit that many persons, even Christians, celebrate it most by watching football games on television, decorating their houses, visiting relative and friends, or buying presents. Others—I hope Christians are not among this number—celebrate it by getting drunk, some beginning at the office party on the last working day before Christmas and not sobering up until sometime after the twenty-fifth or even after New Year's. This, of course, is monstrous. The other ways are inadequate.

But how should a Christian celebrate Christmas?

Before we turn to our text we need to say first that by far the best and greatest way to celebrate Christmas is by becoming a Christian if you have never done so. In other words, the best way to

celebrate Christmas is by becoming a follower of Him whose birth we commemorate. It has to do with why Jesus came.

The Bible tells us that the birth of Jesus was unlike all other births in that Jesus existed before birth as the second Person of the Godhead and He became man, not to provide us with a sentimental story to tell children each winter or even as a theme for our greatest musical compositions, but in order to grow to maturity and then to die for our sin as a means of our salvation. Jesus was born to be our Savior as the carol says:

*Good Christian men, rejoice,  
With heart, and soul, and voice,  
Now ye need not fear the grave:  
Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
To gain his everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save!  
Christ was born to save!<sup>4</sup>*

Let me suggest that anyone can understand Christmas by just three propositions:

1. I am a sinner.
2. As a sinner I need a Savior.
3. Jesus is that Savior.

Three propositions! Hence, the best way to celebrate Christmas is to believe on Jesus as your Savior. If you have never done that, then this is a great season in which to believe on Him. Jesus wants you to come to Him. Come to Him! He wants to be your Lord.

But now, assuming that you have believed on Him and that you are a Christian, what can you add to this in order to celebrate Christmas properly? At this point our text comes in, for it is a report of how those who witnessed the first Christmas observed it. The passage begins by speaking of the shepherds. "And when they



had seen it, they **made know abroad** the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it **wondered** at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and **pondered** them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, **glorifying and praising** God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them" (Luke 2:17-20).

The means of celebrating Christmas which this passage suggests are:

1. To tell others about it.
2. To wonder at the event itself.
3. To ponder on its meaning.
4. To glorify and praise God for what was done there.

We need to think about each one.

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## **Tell Others About It**

In the first place, we are told that the shepherds, after they had come to Bethlehem and had seen the infant Jesus, "made know abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child." In other words, the shepherds became witnesses of the event. The reasons why they became witnesses are that there **was** an event, a great event, and that others very much needed to hear of it.

Can we doubt that the shepherds had something worth telling? Hardly! For if their story was not worth telling, then no story that has even been told is worth telling and life is lacking in all joy and is meaningless. What had happened to these men? Well, they had been out in the fields of Bethlehem in the middle of the night, watching over their sheep as they had for many hundreds of nights previously and as their fathers undoubtedly had before them. They had no thought for spiritual things—at least we are not told that they did—and they certainly did not expect the miracle. But then, suddenly, an angel appeared with the message: "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, who is Christ the Lord." After the angel there appeared a host of angels all praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." When the angels had departed the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem. So they left their flocks and came and found Jesus, precisely as the angels had indicated. In other words, what they had been told coincided with their own experience, and they could not resist speaking of such things.

These men, poor shepherds though they were, had seen God incarnate. They had heard the music of heaven. They had seen the angels and had come to worship the angels' King. How could their tongues be silent when they had heard such music? How could they refuse to tell what they had seen?

Moreover, not only did these men have something to tell, as we do, they also knew of a world that needed desperately to hear their message. It was a sad world in their time. It was lost, confused, dying. It was lost because it lacked direction, primarily spiritual direction. It was confused because it lacked revelation and therefore also an awareness of truth. It was dying because it had no adequate cause for which to live. The world of the shepherds' day was much like the world of our day, in which the lamps of knowledge and culture seem to be slowly flickering out.

But over against this dying world there was Jesus. And what was Jesus? Well, later in His life He would speak of Himself in terms that spoke to precisely the world's condition. He would say that He was "the way"—for a world that lost. He would say that He was "the truth"—for a world that was dreadfully confused. He would say that He was "the life"—for a world that was dying. The Way! The Truth! The Life! The shepherds took this message, in the only form they knew, to their contemporaries. This is the perfect combination, then: a knowledge of the Good News (which is only another name for the gospel) and men who need to hear it. This

combination, when truly understood and seized upon, produces witnesses.

Would anyone want to say that these men were not authorized to spread such a message? Will anyone argue that they were uneducated? Or that they had not been endorsed by the temple authorities? If anyone would argue in this way, let him notice that they had the most important authorization of all—possession of good news which had been revealed to them by God. Anybody who knows good news is authorized to tell it, particularly when it is news that will be the means of the salvation of others. The Scriptures say, "And let him that heareth say, Come " (Revelation 22:17). In other words, the only ultimate essential for proclaiming the gospel is a knowledge of it. So every one who knows of Christ and has become a Christian can tell others of Him.

Here then is the first way to celebrate Christmas, as suggested by these verses. Imitate the shepherds in making "known abroad the saying" which has been told to us concerning this Child.

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## **Wonder at the Event**

The second way in which you and I can celebrate Christmas is to wonder at it. This is suggested in Luke 2:18—"And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

There were two kinds of wonder, of course, and to be perfectly fair we must admit this at the beginning. There is one kind of wonder which is merely a tickling of the fancy. It is what we associate with a seven-day wonder; that is, a temporary fascination with something unusual. After such a wonder has run its course nobody gives the cause of it a second thought, and rightly so. The other kind of wonder is quite different. It is a holy wonder, which is a proper amazement at those acts of God which are beyond human comprehension and which, therefore, borders on adoration if, indeed, it is not identical with it.

In one sense all the acts of God are legitimate grounds for such wonder. If we turn back to the earliest chapters of Genesis, we discover a description of the globe before God fashioned it into the kind of world we know now; and we are told that in this period "the Spirit of God brooded upon the face of the waters." What a cause for wonder that is! Then out of the darkness we hear God speaking to call forth life and order. We turn from that picture to the final pages of the Bible, and in those pages we find the Lord Jesus Christ high and lifted up, and all created orders paying homage to Him. This is a cause for wonder. From beginning to end God's dealings with our race are a cause for great wonder. But of all these dealings undoubtedly that which should evoke our greatest wonder is the incarnation of the Son of God, which we mark especially at Christmas. God become man! The Infinite in human flesh! How can this be? We cannot understand it, but it is true nevertheless, and we marvel at it. Or at least we should marvel at it.

Do you want to celebrate Christmas? Then wonder at it. Allow it to stretch your mind, and learn that there are more things n heaven and earth than are dreamed of in any human philosophy. Milton wrote of this wonder:

*Welcome all wonders in one sight—  
Eternity shut in a span,  
Summer in winter, day in night,  
Heaven in earth, and God in man.  
Blest little one,  
Whose all embracing birth  
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.*<sup>2</sup>

For my part I believe this is why the wonder of children seems so appropriate at Christmas time. It is not that their wonder is all a Christian wonder, of course. They are not all thinking of God or Jesus as they stand spellbound at the presents and tree on Christmas morning. Or at least that is not the whole of their wonder. But their wonder is not inappropriate for, at the very least

it is an analogy of what our wonder should be if we are those who (at least in part) understand the Christmas story.

So let the learning be two ways. Children must learn who Jesus is and what Christmas is all about from us. They must learn to love Him and to serve Him more and more acceptably. But let us also learn from them and so recapture our own sense of wonder at the incarnation. This the second way to celebrate Christmas.

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## Ponder Its Meaning

The third way in which you and I can celebrate Christmas is to ponder it, for Mary, we are told, "kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (verse 19). This is connected with wonder, of course, for it begins with it. But it also goes beyond wonder as an attempt to understand it or figure it out. It implies a diving beneath the surface. It involves an effort to enter into the heart and counsels of God. So do that. Spend some time at Christmas thinking over what you do know of God and trying to understand the ways of God more fully.

May I add one other thought to that? Pondering is work. It is not just brooding or getting into a pious frame of mind. It is an attempt to take what you know and then by an exercise of the mind to build upon it. Think what it involved in the case of Mary, Jesus' mother. First, it involved her memory; for we are told that she "*kept all these things.*" Second, it involved her affection, for she "*kept all things. . . in her heart.*" Third it involved her intellect; for she "*kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*"

Can you do that as a Christian? Of course, you can. And you should! You can remember these events. You can remember the moment in which they became real for you personally. You can sharpen up your affections; indeed, you must, for it is a terrible thing to have your love for the One who is the Lord of love grow cold. Then, you can think about these things and allow God to teach you more about Himself. I know that Christmas is a busy

time. But our time is poorly spent if we allow the bustle of Christmas to eclipse our times of Bible study and of pondering upon God's Word.

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## **Glorify and Praise God**

Finally, our text suggests that we can celebrate Christmas by glorifying God and by praising Him. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them" (verse 20). Do you do that? To do so is to worship God both by words and in song.

I love this word "glory" or "glorify." It is one of the great words of the Greek language. Long ago, when the Greek language was in its infancy, the word from which the word "glory" came meant "to have an opinion." Later it came to mean only "a good opinion." The noun form of the word is *doxa*, which we have in our words "orthodox," "heterodox," and "paradox." These words mean "a right opinion," "a wrong opinion," and "a contradictory opinion" respectively. Finally, by an obvious extension, glory meant a person's true "worth." Now when you acknowledge a person's true worth or express a proper opinion of him, you may be said to be glorifying him. And, of course, this is the sense in which we glorify God. Moreover, since acknowledging His true worth is the essential meaning of worship—it means to acknowledge God's worth-ship—to glorify God is to worship Him by words. It is in this sense a doxology, which means to express a right opinion of God verbally.

Now this is what the shepherds did. And it is this in which we are to imitate them. Do you do it? You can tell if you do by attempting to rehearse God's attributes. What are they? Well, the birth of Christ itself teaches us of God's love; for God loved us so much that He became man in order to die for us. It also teaches us of God's power, for an incarnation is beyond our ability even to conceive, let alone to bring it into being. In the birth we see God's

wisdom. We learn of His mercy. We see His disposition to use little things, to exalt the humble and to subdue the proud. We see His grace. Have you seen those things? Have you confessed them to God and to others? To do this is to glorify Him, an act which is, as the Catechism states, one aspect of man's chief end.

Moreover, you can do it in song. For praising God is essentially an act of glorifying God with the whole being and, in this, music quite naturally takes a part. This is why carols are so much a rightful part of Christmas; for, when sung by those who understand them, they are a means of praise.

*Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King."<sup>3</sup>  
Joy to the world! The Lord is come.<sup>4</sup>  
O come, all ye faithful,  
Joyful and triumphant,  
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem,  
Come and behold Him  
Born the King of angels;  
O come, let us adore Him,  
Christ the Lord.<sup>5</sup>*

Let me say two things in closing. First, if these four means of celebrating Christmas are new to you and if you are now desiring to put them into practice, I suggest that you begin **not** with the first verse, verse 17, but with verses 18, 19, and 20. Verse 17 suggests that we are to tell others what we have seen and heard; but we can hardly do that effectively until we have first wondered at Christ's birth, pondered its meaning, and glorified and praised God for it. You cannot tell that which you have not first felt and experienced. So begin by wondering—wondering at the fact that you have not suffered the just punishment of your sin, that God has loved you, that Jesus came and died for you, that God called you to faith in Himself when you were yet without hope of salvation, and that you are now God's child and are secure in His love. Continue by pondering these things. Ponder the great

doctrines of the Christian faith—doctrines of the incarnation, atonement, grace, sanctification, heaven, perseverance, and others—so that you begin to grow strong in doctrine. Then glorify and praise God for what you know. Sing God's praises. Finally, when you have done these things and are truly qualified to speak, go back and tell others what you know.

Furthermore—and this my last remark in closing—do not think that you need to go back to church in order to do these things, but learn rather to do them wherever God sends you—in your home, school, business. This is what the shepherds did. We are told of them that they "returned" glorifying and praising God. To what did they return? Why, to their sheep obviously. And there, where they had first heard the angels' song, they themselves were heard to be singing God's praise.

May God give you grace to do that. If you and I and all others who call upon the name of our God should do it, I suppose that the whole world would then rightly resound with His praise.



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## 2. Finding Joy in Christmas

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Each year, when I reread the Christmas story, I am impressed with the role that the angels play in it. When I return to these wonderful chapters of Matthew and Luke in order to prepare my Christmas messages I seem to find a detail that I had overlooked before and which therefore speaks to me in a new way.

It struck me, as I began to read this story once again, that apart from the angels no one would have understood what the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ meant—not the shepherds, not Joseph, not even Mary. Oh, it would doubtlessly have been a puzzle to Mary. She would have wondered how she could have conceived without having know a man. But the significance of it would have passed her by. Would she have guessed what was happening because of her familiarity with the Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah's prophecy that "the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" (Isaiah 7:14)? At best she might have guessed that the child that was born of her might possibly be the Messiah. But she could not have know that for sure. Nor would Joseph have known. He would have simply thought her unfaithful. And the shepherds would not have come to the manger in the little town of Bethlehem—if the angels had not conveyed their message.

Moreover, if you will permit me to apply it in this way, it seems to me that apart from the truths which the angels revealed to Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds two thousand years ago concerning the birth of Christ—apart from really understanding what they said and meant—undoubtedly, this Christmas, the real meaning of the birth of Christ will pass us by also.

The world will not allow us to miss the holiday. There will be a little Christian sentiment, some happiness and much activity. But this is all there will be—until the angels appear with their message. We only understand the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ by revelation.

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## **Five Angels, Three Messages**

There are five appearances of an angel, or angels, in the Christmas story, and another appearance of an angel to Joseph later to tell him to return to Israel from Egypt. They are:

1. The appearance of Gabriel to Zacharias to announce the birth of John the Baptist
2. The appearance of Gabriel to Mary to announce the birth of Jesus
3. The appearance of an unnamed angel to Joseph to explain the virgin birth and to name the child
4. The appearance of first one angel and then a multitude of angels to the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem, and
5. An appearance to Joseph in a dream to tell him to take the child Jesus and His mother into Egypt to escape the wrath of King Herod.

Here are five great appearances of an angel, or angels. And in the center of them—in the appearances of angels to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds—there are three message which, more than any other, perfectly explain the true, divine meaning of Christmas.

### *The First Message*

The first of these important appearances was to Mary. It is recorded in Luke 1:26-38. In these verses the angel first greets Mary, then gives this message: "Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favor with

God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father, David. And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end" (verses 30-33). There are four main points to this short message:

1. That Mary was to have a son
2. That His name was to be Jesus
3. That He would be great, in fact, the Son of God and
4. That His birth would be in fulfillment of all those prophecies that foretold the coming of the Messiah and His eternal reign over the nation of Israel.

Each of these points is important, of course. But in the message itself, as well as in the context, the emphasis is upon the fulfillment of prophecy and upon the underlying truth that God is faithful.

Think of the situation under which the Jews lived at this time. There had been revelations from God in the past. But now, for over four hundred years the prophetic voice had been silent. Malachi, who lived in the fifth century before Christ, was the last of the prophets. Since his day no one had been raised up to declare the sure word of the Lord. Had God forgotten His people? Had He forgotten His promises? Suddenly the angels appear, first to Zacharias and then to Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, and the word is out: God has not forgotten! The time of fulfillment has come!

I am convinced that this thought was uppermost in Luke's mind as he set about to write this opening section of his Gospel. For the chapter begins with the appearance of the angel to Zacharias—in which there is a reference to the closing words of the Old Testament, the words that foretell the coming of Elijah before the

Messiah's appearance (Luke 1:17; cp. Malachi 4:5-6)—and it ends with Zacharias' great hymn of praise to God for His faithfulness. In this hymn, known as the "Benedictus," the aged priest exclaims: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people, and hath raised up an horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant, David; as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets, who have been since the ages began" (Luke 1:68-70).

So, you see, if Christmas means anything, it at least means this—that **God has not forgotten His people**. This is the first message that I would leave with you.

Do you sometimes feel that God has forgotten you? Perhaps you have prayed for something and have not received an answer, at least not the answer you were waiting for. This can be a very trying experience. But it does not mean that God has forgotten. It is just that His plans do not run on our timetables. Be patient! Trust Him! I have known people who have had deep and fervent prayers answered after the better part of a lifetime has gone by—prayers for the salvation of a son or a daughter, prayers for success in some worthwhile endeavor, prayer for reconciliation with an erring wife or husband. God did not forget! And God has not forgotten you!

Perhaps you are anxious to be delivered from some tenacious sin, but you do not seem to have deliverance. "Has God forgotten me?" you are asking. No, He has not forgotten you. God is faithful. He is able to deliver you from whatever your particular may be—alcoholism, unlawful sex, a bad temper, gossiping, pride, selfishness—whatever it is, God is "able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us" (Ephesians 3:20).

Perhaps you are one who longs for the Lord's return. Things seem to go as they have been going from the beginning, and you want something better. That is good. That has been the cry of God's people from the beginning—"How long, O Lord, how long?" God

has not forgotten. Peter tell us that God delays only long enough to call to repentance all whom He has before determined should believe (2 Peter 3:9). Jesus is coming. The God who did not forget us in Christ's first coming will not forget us in His second.

### *The Second Message*

The second message brought by the angels concerning the birth of Christ is the message to Joseph. I am glad that the angel appeared also to Joseph and not only to Mary. For you see, Joseph was in a difficult position. The situation was such that it would have been difficult for anyone to understand it, let alone a man engaged to a woman who was expecting a child. All Joseph could ever have thought was that Mary had been unfaithful. But the angel appeared and explained to Joseph what was happening. And then—this is what is so wonderful!—Joseph believed Him. He trusted God and received a great revelation concerning the work of the Savior.

The words to Joseph recognized Joseph's authority and responsibility in the naming of Mary's child. So he was told, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). *Jesus* is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Jehoshua*, meaning "Jehovah is salvation." Thus the message to Joseph centers primarily on that great work which Jesus, the Messiah, was to do. **He was to save His people. He is the Savior.**

It is unfortunate that these great words "savior" and "salvation" have been watered down so much as they have been in our day. But they have. And we need to understand exactly what the biblical meaning of these words is if we are to understand this part of the angel's announcement.

One person who has been responsible for watering down the biblical meaning of the word "salvation" is Paul Tillich, the German-born American theologian. Tillich developed his understanding of salvation from the meaning of the Latin word *salvus*, which underlies it. *Salvus* means "healthy" or "whole." So,

according to Tillich, who popularized this approach in his three-volume *Systematic Theology*, and in his lectures, salvation can therefore be applied "to every act of healing: to the healing of sickness, or demonic possession, and of servitude to sin and to the ultimate power of death."<sup>6</sup> It means "reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man, man and his world, man and himself."<sup>7</sup> This basic approach to salvation has been picked up in an avalanche of books on pastoral counseling, Christian psychiatry, and the cure of souls.

The difficulty with this approach does not lie in the thought that the biblical view of salvation is unrelated to such themes. In fact, the opposite is the case. For there are many references to salvation as deliverance from disease (Matthew 9:21; Luke 6:9; 18:42; James 5:15), captivity (Philippians 1:13, 19), or physical death (Mark 13:20; John 12:27; Hebrews 5:7). The difficulty lies rather in the fact that today, if only because of the impressive achievements of medical science, this approach inevitably fails to distinguish between the salvation that God alone can bring and that salvation which men are apparently providing for themselves. What, for instance, is the difference between that wholeness experienced by a member of the church in the course of counseling session with his minister and wholeness gained by an atheist as the result of his session with a reputable but non-Christian psychiatrist? Unless our way of talking about salvation makes distinctions here, our interpretations inevitably fall short of the biblical conceptions.

Another example of modern tendencies to reduce biblical salvation to human dimensions is the increasing emphasis upon the social aspects of the Christian gospel conceived in opposition to evangelism as traditionally understood. Beyond any question, the gospel of Jesus Christ has important social implications. Christians are to be active in many efforts to achieve social justice, improve the life of the poor, minister to the needy. But that is not what the Bible is talking about when it talks about salvation. In fact, the Bible would not even support the view that the world is capable of

being redeemed socially apart from the supernatural intervention of God in history.

A third example of the drift toward a man-centered doctrine of salvation may be seen in the works of the so-called "death of God" advocates, and others, who tend to see salvation as freedom from metaphysical fears and social limitations.

What are we to say of such theories? No doubt, these examples of the reduction of the biblical view of salvation to human dimensions are not equally bad. Some even contain good emphases.

Nevertheless, each of them fails at the most important fact—the great fact that salvation in the biblical sense is by God alone—and tries to encourage the age-old desire of man to save himself, which is impossible. If man could save himself, then there would have been no need for Jesus Christ to be born. There would have been no need for His life, His death on the cross, of His resurrection. On the other hand, if man cannot save himself spiritually—if he is headed for an eternity without God and is unable to reverse his condition—then Jesus Christ had to come. His birth was necessary. And the promise of the angel—"for he shall save his people from their sins"—is the great word of the entire Christmas story. Jesus fulfilled that promise when He died for your sin and rose again for your justification.

Have you seen that truth in the story? Have you recognized yourself as a sinner? Do you know that you haven't fallen short of God's standards and that nothing within you will ever be able to

move up to the fulfilling of them? If you have, then you understand your need of a Savior and are at the place where you can receive Jesus as the One who died to save you. Let your prayer be the cry of the publican: "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" As you pray that prayer you will find that God has already been merciful in Jesus. And you will enter, perhaps for the first time, into the Christmas story.

## *The Third Message*

Finally, there is the appearance of first one angel, then a multitude of angels to the shepherds as they were in the fields around Bethlehem. Like the message to Mary, this message also has four parts:

1. The proclamation of great joy to all people
2. The annunciation of Christ's birth
3. The sign by which the baby was to be identified and
4. The doxology, in which glory is ascribed to God and peace is declared to be man's heritage.

Also, like the message to Mary, it has an important emphasis, which, in this case, is **the proclamation of joy**. The angel said, "Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy" (Luke 2:10).

Joy is a wonderful thing; it is an appropriate part of Christmas. I wonder if you have experienced joy at this season. I am not referring to activity, of course. There is much activity—but many go through these activities in a joyless way. Nor am I referring to happiness. Happiness is a wonderful thing at Christmas—shopping, decorating, entertaining, mailing cards also; but it is the world's virtue, and like all the world's virtues it quite easily passes away. Happiness is related to circumstances. When circumstances are right, there is happiness; but when the source of happiness departs, happiness departs with it. It is not this way with joy. Joy is of God. It is based upon what God has done, and it is given to the Christian by God and is sustained by Him. Nothing destroys joy except sin.

I covet that kind of joy for you. I would like you to have the experience of entering into the kind of joy that Mary and Joseph and the shepherds had on that first Christmas morning. Did they



have joy? Of course they had! But the circumstances were not good. Mary and Joseph were far from home, in a strange town, without even a room to themselves in which Mary could give birth to the child. But I imagine that the joy of this couple on this occasion was the greatest this world has even seen. Why? Because it came from God and was centered in the birth of the Savior. If you know this joy, then you can go on, as the angels did, to give glory to God; and you can possess that peace of heart and soul which passes understanding.

The message of the angels do not reinforce our secular views of Christmas. But they do carry us deep into the mind and counsels of our great God. The first message is a message of the faithfulness of God. The second concerns the salvation of men. The third message is of the outcome, which is joy for man and glory for God. Have you heard these messages and appropriated them for yourself? To do so is to participate in the Christmas story.

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## 3. The Peace of Christmas

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Peace on earth. Judging from the Christmas cards I get every year, I suspect that this is the phrase from the Christmas story that is most popular with people in our day. This has something to do with the age in which we live as well as with the general aspirations of mankind, I suppose. But the problem is that what God means by the phrase is not what men generally mean when they use it.

Let me illustrate this by a story from the life of Dr. Ralph L. Keiper,<sup>8</sup> who was a professor of English Bible at Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado, and who was for many years associated with Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse in his ministry. Dr. Keiper relates how during his university days, when he often spent the weekends preaching, he had the following conversation with one of his non-Christian professors. One day just before Christmas vacation the professor said, "Well, Keiper, are you going to preach that old Christmas farce again?"

Keiper asked what he meant. Keiper asked what he meant. He answered, "That old threadbare message of peace on earth, good will to men."

Keiper asked, "Why do you call it a farce?" He answered, "I have heard that message preached from the pulpit every Christmas since I was a little boy. Now I am an old man, and I haven't any reason to believe that there is any truth in that text at all. To me it is a farce!"

Dr. Keiper walked with him over to his office and, calling him by name, said, "Have you ever read the text carefully?"

The professor replied that he thought he had. Keiper then took his Bible from his briefcase and turned to Luke 2:14, to the verse that is our text, and then read with his professor, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

He asked him to examine the last clause of the verse carefully: "good will toward men." He explained the full force of the original language which literally means "Glory to God in the highest and peace *among men of good will.*"

He then assured the professor that the reason why the Christmas message was an apparent farce to him was not God's fault. The trouble lies with men. Keiper concluded, "When men are truly men of good will—seeking to do God's will—this text becomes a mighty force. When men seek to have their own way, it becomes a mighty farce. Because man is at odds with God, there cannot be peace on earth. What we sow we shall reap."

The world treats the message of Christmas as wishful thinking because the world is not right with God and it does not wish to assume its own spiritual responsibility before Him. It looks at the fighting and the wars of history and of our own age and does not find the type of peace that it is seeking. Because of the Gospel, Christians understand that the peace of God is only for those who acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. And they know that as a result of this faith they are at peace with one another.

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## Peace with God

To understand what God has to say about peace we need to recognize that there are different types of peace spoken about in the Bible and that of all these the most important is the **peace we have with God** as the result of justification. This is the peace spoken of by the Apostle Paul in the first verse of the fifth chapter of Romans: "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." It is important because man's

problems stem from the fact that in his natural state he is not at peace with God.

There is a clue to what peace means in this verse in the way the word is used in the earlier chapters of Romans. There are three instances. In chapter 2, verse 10, Paul writes to God's fairness in granting "glory, honor, and peace, to every man that worketh good." In other words, peace will come when men are truly men of good will. But if that is true, why do we not see peace today? The answer is in chapter 3, verse 17: "And the way of peace have they not known." That is, men are not men of good will. Finally, in chapter 1, verse 7, Paul indicates that the only solution to the problem lies in receiving peace from God: "Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." Together these verses teach that men are not naturally at peace with God but that God has acted to make peace through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Further light is shed upon these verses by the meaning of the words for *peace* in the original Greek and Latin. The Latin word for peace is *pax*. It comes from a Latin verb which means "to make a bargain" or "to make an agreement between contracting parties." We see the force of this verb when we recognize that it was used of persons who were becoming engaged, hence, of the engagement contract. The word "pact" also comes from it.

The Greek word for peace is *eirene*. It comes from a verb which means "to reconcile" or "to bring back into harmony." Both of these ideas are related to the idea of a mediator who bring irreconcilables together. Taken together, therefore, the Greek and Latin definitions imply, first, that peace is not primarily a state of mind or an individual virtue but rather a state existing between two or more persons. Second, there is the strong possibility that the persons may not be in harmony but that they will want to make a compact between themselves in order to settle their differences. Third, there is the suggestion of the work of a mediator who makes the reconciliation possible.

This is exactly what we have in Christianity. The Bible teaches that men are in revolt and rebellion against God but that God has acted to establish peace through His Son Jesus Christ, the Mediator. It says, "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man, Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time" (1 Timothy 2:5-6). Moreover, the Bible teaches that if you will believe that—that is, if you will believe that you are not at peace with God naturally but that He has made peace through the death of His Son for your sin—then God will enter into the kind of eternal relationship with you in which you can be called His son or daughter. And you will be at peace with God in a way that you were not at peace formerly.

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## Peace of God

Now, just as the Bible speaks of *peace with God* so also does it speak about a **peace of God**, and this is quite different. It refers to what we would call "peace of mind" or a "peace of the heart." It is a result of the Christian's first having entered into a relationship of peace with God. The book of Philippians speaks of this peace when it says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7).

I believe that I can illustrate the fact that two kinds of peace are involved here by the wording of one of Charles Wesley's great hymns, in which the same contrast is found, although the actual word used is different. Thy hymn is "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," and the stanza to which I am referring is the second. Wesley wrote it as follows: "Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit...

*Into every troubled breast,  
Let us all in thee inherit,  
Let us find that second rest.*

*Take away our bent to sinning,  
Alpha and Omega be,  
End of faith, as its Beginning,  
Set our hearts at liberty.<sup>9</sup>*

Apparently, some of the editors of our hymnbooks, including the one used in my own church, have been troubled by Wesley's line "Let us find that second rest," fearing that some people would think (of that Wesley himself thought) that there was a "second blessing" experience to find beyond salvation. So they have changed the line to read "Let us find that promised rest."

Now it is true that this line is less likely to be misinterpreted. But in changing the line the editors of the hymnbooks have probably missed the main point of Wesley's thinking. For, since Wesley had filled his mind with Scripture and since he used references to it extensively in his verses, it is likely that he was thinking of a verse of the Bible that speaks of two kind of peace, two kinds or rest, and was saying that he wished to enter into the second as he had once entered into the first. Is there such a verse? A concordance soon gives the answer. For we quickly come upon the Lord Jesus Christ's great invitation recorded in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Looking at the verse closely we find that it uses the word "rest" twice. "Come unto me. . .and I will give you rest." And "ye shall find rest to your souls." Here is a rest that is *given* and a rest that is *found*. Or, in other words, there is a peace with God that we receive freely at the moment of our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and there is another peace that we are able to enter into increasingly as we learn to know and trust Him. Wesley was praying for the second of these rests, the *peace of God* that Paul was writing about to the Philippians.

Now someone will say, "Well, if the second type of peace is not something automatic—that is, you have to find it—how do you find it? How does this peace of God become mine?"

There are two answers. First, you need to learn about Jesus. That is what Jesus Himself said: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart, and ye shall find rest unto your souls." In this verse the word "learn" is a Greek word from which we have derived our word mathematics (μαθαίνω). It teaches us that we will find this second rest when we take time to "figure out" the Lord Jesus Christ and attempt to walk in His way.

Ralph L. Keiper writes, in *Peace in Storm*, "When we know Christ, not as a doctrine or a theory, but as Savior and Friend in our daily experience, we gain a confidence in Him which brings peace to our hearts. Jesus Christ does not thus become some magical wand which causes all our troubles to disappear. Rather, He enables us to face them with a quietness, a calmness and confidence, which makes it possible to find a solution."<sup>10</sup> This is the peace that Edward Bickersteth wrote about in the late nineteenth century, in a verse which has since become one of our great hymns:

*Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?  
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.  
Peace, perfect peace, by throng duties pressed?  
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.  
Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?  
On Jesus' bosom nought but calm is found.<sup>11</sup>*

The first way in which we find this peace, then, is by learning of Jesus. But there is a second way also. It is the way mentioned in the book of Philippians. "Be anxious for nothing but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and mind through Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7). We find peace by praying.

Now the one thing prayer will most do for us is bring out minds into a greater conformity with the mind of God. Notice that this verse does *not* say, "In everything. . . Let your requests be made unto God. And God will grant your requests." If God did that, He would soon make a muddle of our Christian lives because "we know not what we should pray for as we ought" (Romans 8:26), and we pray amiss. However, God does promise to give us what we need (Philippians 4:19), and He promises to keep our minds in His peace, if we will pray to Him.

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## Peace with One Another

The third type of peace is a peace with one another. There is peace *with* God. There is the peace of God, which is personal. And there is peace *with one another*. You say, "How does this come about?" Well, peace with one another results from having peace with God and with finding the peace of God personally.

What is the source of the fights and turmoil in the world today and, unfortunately at times, within the churches? It is selfishness, plus the lack of individual peace and contentment. The Apostle James was one who knew this, and he spoke of it in a passage that is a perceptive analysis of such problems in the world and in church circles. He wrote—and remember, he is writing to Christians—"From whence come wars and fights among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not; ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain; ye fight and war, yet have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:1-3). James means that the lack of peace between men has its true source in men's emotions.

Frank E. Gaebelin writes about this passage in *The Practical Epistle of James*, "A few years ago, former Chancellor Hutchins of the University of Chicago said war begins in the minds of men. But the writer of this epistle had a deeper insight into humanity. 'From



whence,' he asks, 'come wars and fightings among you?' He answers his question by another one: 'Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?' . . . In other words, James is saying that war begins with men's emotions. Its genesis is not merely on the intellectual level; it goes down into the vast emotional reservoir of life and conduct that underlies the intellectual. It is in this emotional center of man, called by Scripture 'the heart,' that James says war begins, when the lusts within a man strive together."<sup>12</sup>

What is the solution? It is clearly God's transformation and control of the emotions. When a person is at peace with God judicially and is experiencing increasingly in his own life that peace of God which transforms him and gives him tranquility even in the midst of great emotional turmoil and misunderstanding, then there is a firm foundation on which to overcome those interpersonal tensions that upset families, churches, cities, governments and the world. What is more, in these verses God promises to give us all victories for peace in these quarters if we ask Him.

This is the message of the angels. It is the message of Christmas. There is a sense in which the world will never know even one of these three types of peace until the return of Jesus Christ. There will always be wars and rumors of wars. But at the same time the one who will come to Jesus Christ will know a great peace even in a world that denies it. What is more, he can be set free to become a peacemaker in this world as Jesus taught that he should be in the seventh beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3-12).



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## Notes

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1 "Good Christian Men, Rejoice." Words: Heinrich Suso (?-1366); translated from Latin to English by John M. Neale in *Carols for Christmastide* (London: 1853). Music: In *Dulci Jubilo*, 14th Century German melody; harmony from *Christmas Carols Old and New*, 1871.

2 John Milton. *Paradise Lost*. 1667.

3 "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" Words: Charles Wesley, *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739. Music: Mendelssohn, Felix in his cantata *Festgesang an die Kunstler*, 1840. Arrangement: William H. Cummings, *Congregational Hymn and Tune Book*, 1857.

4 "Joy to the World." Words: Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David*, 1719. Music: Antioch, arranged by Lowell Mason, 1836.

5 "O Come, All Ye Faithful" Words: John F. Wade, circa 1743. The verse quoted was translated from Latin to English by Frederick Oakeley, 1841. Music: *Adeste Fideles*, attributed variously to John Wade, John Reading or Simao Portogallo.

6 Tillich, Paul. *Systematic Theology*. Volume I, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), page 146.

7 Paul Tillich. *Systematic Theology*, Volume 2. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957). Page 166.

8 Keiper, Ralph L. *Peace in Storm*. (Philadelphia: Evangelical Foundation), 1961, pages 12-13.

9 "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." Words: Charles Wesley, Hymns for Those that Seek and Those That Have Redemption in the Blood of Jesus Christ, 1747. Music. Beecher, John Zundel. Christian Heart Songs, 1870.

10 Keiper, Ralph L. op. cit. pages 24-25.

11 "Peace, Perfect Peace." Words: Edward H. Bikersteth, Jr. 1875. Music: Pax Tecum. George T. Caldbeck and Charles J. Vincent, 1876.

12 Gaebelien, Frank. The Practical Epistle of James. (Great Neck, NY: Doniger & Raughley, 1955). Reprinted by Moody Press, 1969.

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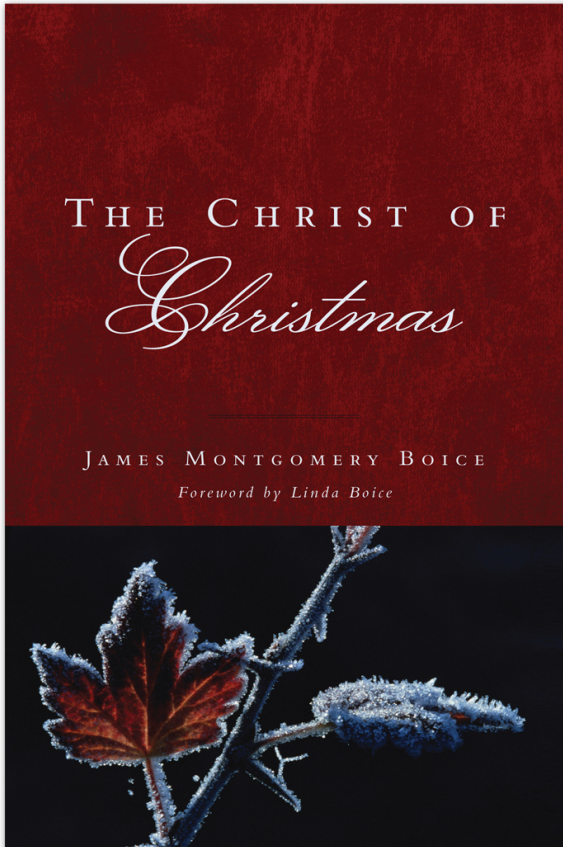
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