

Materialism, Myth, or Immanuel

(Based on a Kevin Bauder's essay)

[Read Matthew 1:21-23]

Most of us receive a number of Xmas cards at this time of year, and many of them will wish us a merry Christmas. Some of these cards will include biblical scenes, typically a manger scene. But some of the cards will include no references to Jesus at all. They include pictures of Santa Claus, snow men, trees, families, or even the Grinch—but no Jesus.

How are these non-biblical images associated with Christmas? What do people mean when they say “Merry Christmas?”

When people talk about Christmas these days, they may have a variety of things in mind.

There are three separate meanings of the term “Christmas.”

- I. For some, Christmas celebrates materialism.
 - A. For many people today, Christmas is little more than an excuse for shopping. Christmas revolves around buying, giving, and receiving gifts. Massive ad campaigns urge us to buy this or that gift for our loved ones. They tell us that the reason for the season is generous giving. If we love our families and friends, we will buy presents for them.
 - B. I've heard that some stores would go out of business if it were not for holiday spending binge. December sales account for a large share of the year's profits. All that extra spending for Christmas is what keeps them in business.
 - C. Sadly, we end up wasting a lot of money on those presents. I read somewhere that people in the US waste about \$13B every year in giving unwanted gifts to one another. People spend a lot of time, effort, and money giving their loved ones things they don't really want or need.

- D. We can certainly enjoy the giving and receiving of gifts. After all, part of the Xmas story includes the giving of gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Not many object to the giving of gifts at Xmastime.
- E. However, the genuine spirit of Xmas is not all about giving and receiving gifts. Xmas for us should not center on material things. We don't want to be crassly materialistic about our celebration of this holiday. We can enjoy gifts, but not focus on the gifts.

Trans: In our gift-buying, giving, and receiving, we must be careful not to be carried away with the commercialism and materialism now so closely associated with this holiday.

II. For some, Christmas celebrates mythology.

- A. For many people, Xmas is the day of red and green, holly and ivy, eggnog and caroling, tinsel, evergreen trees, and lights. Such customs as cutting and decorating the tree, attending holiday parties, school vacation, candles, sleigh bells, reindeer, and Kris Kringle are part of this exciting holiday.
- B. Stories like the *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and *White Christmas* show us the supposedly "real" meaning of Christmas, which, we are told, is generosity, family, and food. The songs of the season focus on magical and mythical characters like Santa and elves, the Grinch, and Frosty the Snow Man.
- C. Some of the traditions of the mythical Christmas celebration are ancient and possibly pagan in origin. Others are relatively recent. For example, many of the common images of Santa Claus come to us through advertisements.

Back in 1931, an artist used the image of Santa Claus to promote the drinking of Coca Cola. Many corporations today try to combine their products with the Xmas holiday. They often use mythical Xmas characters to advertise their merchandise.

Main-stream advertisers don't use images of Jesus to sell their products, but they don't hesitate to use the mythological figures of the season to sell their products.

- D. I'm not suggesting we do away with the mythical aspects Christmas. I don't believe that enjoying the fictions of Christmas is likely to do any harm, and it is great fun.
- E. However, there are some dangers or potential problems associated with mythological Christmas.
1. The traditions of cultural Christmas can *replace* the real meaning of the holiday. I.e., this is all some people think about—Santa and reindeer and elves and trees and lights and presents. That's it. The meaning is almost thoroughly secular. It may not be materialistic, but it's all based on myth and sentimental feelings. No depth to it. It's all myth and magic.
 2. Another danger is that the mythology may *get mixed up* with the real meaning of the holiday. I.e., the mythological elements of Christmas become entangled with the true story of Christmas.
- F. This is where Christians must be careful in their celebration of the holiday. An overemphasis upon the mythology of Christmas will distract people from the true meaning of Christmas. They will be thinking about Santa coming down the chimney when they ought to be thinking about how Jesus was laid in a manger. Their minds will be focused on Christmas cards and cookies when they should be focused upon Christ's condescension.
- G. This does not mean that the other elements of Christmas are necessarily wrong, but we should keep them in their proper place. The only way to avoid confusing the Christian Christmas with the mythological Christmas is if each is kept in its own rightful place.
1. I think this is especially true with young children. It takes a while for kids to understand the differences between the myths of Xmas and the reality of the biblical story of Xmas. Parents should be careful to distinguish between myth and reality when celebrating Xmas in their own homes.

Parents need to make a distinction between the fictional Xmas story books and reading the biblical account.

2. The place to celebrate mythological Christmas is not in church. Christmas mythology, fun as it is, is an activity that belongs outside of Christian worship. We can enjoy the frivolity and fun of the season in some settings, but let it not intrude into the church.

You'll notice that we don't have a Xmas tree up here at church. I have nothing against Xmas trees, but I don't think they belong in the church. The Xmas tree tradition is not biblical, and I don't want to blend mythology and tradition with reality.

3. In church, we must focus on the biblical elements of the story—the baby Jesus, Joseph and Mary, the angels, the shepherds, and the wise men. These are not mythical characters. These people lived the events that we read about in the Gospels. We must remember and appreciate the significance of these events.

Trans: I think we can enjoy the frivolities of the season as long as we recognize such things as fictional. The magic and myth of Christmas is not truth of Christmas.

III. For some, Christmas celebrates Immanuel.

For some people, Christmas is a celebration of the coming of Christ into the world. They are celebrating the Christian holiday, not the materialism or the mythology of the season.

- A. The birth of Jesus is the center of attention for the Christian celebration of Xmas.
 1. We are not celebrating a winter holiday. The point is not presents, vacations, family fun and food. We can enjoy those things, but they are not the main point.
 2. We are not celebrating a mythology that has built up over the years. We are not paying homage to fictional characters or to frivolous events.
 3. Materialism and mythology have nothing to do with the celebration of Jesus' birth.

- B. Christmas focuses upon the incarnation, how eternal Second Person of the Trinity added a complete human nature to His deity. A Christian Christmas celebration re-focuses our attention on the God-man, Immanuel, God with us. “Jesus is the reason for the season.”
- C. Granted, the Bible does not *command* that we celebrate the birth of Jesus. We are not obligated to celebrate Christmas, and there are many good Christian people who don’t.
- D. But I think there is good reason for celebration. The message is “good tidings of great joy.” It’s a reason to celebrate.
- E. During the Christmas season, we simply direct our focus more specifically to the wonder of the incarnation, setting aside time to ponder this event intentionally.
- F. Done properly, a celebration of the incarnation can be a wonderful season of instruction, reflection, and devotion. That’s what we are trying to do—focus our attention once again on the story of Jesus’ birth and highlight what it means.
- G. And we must not forget that the birth of Jesus was only one step in the fulfillment of the ultimate goal. Jesus was born for a purpose: “He will save his people from their sins” (Mt 1:21). Jesus came into the world “to seek and to save that which was lost” (Lk 19:10). Christ came to save sinners (1 Tim 1:15). That’s why we celebrate this important historical event. This is very good news, and it’s worth celebrating.

Christians should rightly react against the *materialism*, greed, and carousing so evident in our culture today. Christmas means much more than buying and selling, giving and receiving.

Christians may enjoy the traditions and customs of *mythological* Christmas, as long as we keep those celebrations where they belong.

Our deepest sense of wonder should be reserved for Christmas celebrated as the coming of *Immanuel*, God with us. The marvel of the incarnation ought to captivate us during the Christmas season and throughout the year.