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The Christmas Clues: A Glimpse of the Real Jesus & the Founders of Christianity

By Jim Myers

Christmas provides us with two clues that give us a glimpse of the real Jesus and the founders of Christianity. The first is the *Theology of Christmas* and the second is the *Spirit of Christmas*. The *Theology of Christmas* consists of beliefs and the *Spirit of Christmas* is defined by actions. Their origins provide us the very important clues.

Have you ever been to a Christmas play? Back when I was in elementary school many years ago, presenting the Christmas play was an annual tradition that usually took place the night before the Christmas break began. The cafeteria would be filled to standing room only as families packed in to watch our performance. I seemed to always end up playing one of the shepherds. The highlight of our scene was when the angels appeared and made their famous announcement:



"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace, good will toward men."¹

The angels gave "*praise and honor to God first,*" and then revealed what God's will is on the earth – "*peace and goodwill toward men.*" This seems pretty obvious, but religious institutions have interpreted it otherwise. Many conclude that the first part is about the *Theology of Christmas* and the second about the *Spirit of Christmas*. Below is an overview of what I found on the internet:

Christmas season brings with it the most intensely emotional time of year. **Caring, sharing and love** take over in the forms of charitable giving and taking time off to spend with families and friends – "good will toward men".

This sums up the meaning of the meaning of the *Spirit of Christmas*. *It is the time of year when caring, sharing and love take over; when time is made to spend with families and friends.* This theme is found in many Christmas movies; two in particular

immediately come to mind – *It's a Wonderful Life!* and *A Christmas Carol*. Below is a quote from each:

“Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about . . . they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him. But to you, a warped, frustrated old man, they're cattle. Well in my book, my father died a much richer man than you'll ever be!”²

“I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future. The Spirits of all Three shall strive within me. I will not shut out the lessons that they teach!”³

Mr. Potter and Scrooge (before the three visitors appeared) shared much in common. They were greedy men who placed wealth as their highest value and the lives of people were irrelevant to them. They make audiences hiss and boo. Potter and Scrooge are clearly the antithesis of the *Spirit of Christmas*. Everybody recognizes the presence of the *Spirit of Christmas* when George's community came rushing to his aid -- *caring, sharing and loving him*. Remember the Scrooge that said, “Bah! Humbug!” He was a stingy, greedy, lonely man, but the Spirit of Christmas transformed him into a *caring, sharing and loving caretaker, especially of Tiny Tim*. Regardless of our theologies, our instincts and hearts tell us the presence of the Spirit of Christmas results in acts that are good and right.

But the internet also revealed how others feel that the *Theology of Christmas* is much more important.

The “**true meaning of Christmas**” lies elsewhere. When the angels announcing Christ's birth sang about “good will toward men,” they were **NOT singing about people showing good will toward other people**, but about God showing good will toward men. By becoming human, dying on the cross for our sins, and rising from the dead, Jesus overcame sin and the grave for us. Because Jesus Christ came to earth and overcame sin, it's a wonderful life both now and forever for **all who believe in Him**.

The *Theology of Christmas* can produce a very different result. It can polarize and divide people who are Christians. Obviously people who belong to other religions have little interest in it. During my years of research on the real Jesus, a Jew, I made a number of great Jewish friends. At first I assumed that all Jews probably believed about the same thing, but after learning about Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Judaism, I realized that being Jewish could some mean very different things. My BS (belief system) was challenged when I met Jews who said they were atheist. That just did not fit. But what surprised me even more was that some of them faithfully participated in many of the Jewish holidays and rituals as a matter of identity, not theology.

It was clear that my Jewish friends had no interest in the *Theology of Christmas*, but many felt very different about the *Spirit of Christmas*. They told me many stories about loving to go over to their Christian friends' houses and help decorate Christmas trees and join in the festivities and gift giving, but they would never have gone to church with them. They volunteered to work on Christmas so their Christian friends could be off and celebrate Christmas with their families. This made me wonder what the Jewish Jesus would have thought about the *Theology of Christmas* and the *Spirit of Christmas*. Would he have viewed them in the same way as my Jewish friends?

In order to answer that question we must compare our views about Christmas with some important facts about Christmas. Let's begin by asking why we celebrate Christmas on December 25th in the first place? The obvious answer is that Jesus was born on that day. Now let's look at the facts. The first reference to December 25th being the date of birth of Jesus was written between 202-211 CE by Hippolytus of Rome in his *Commentary on Daniel*:

"For the first advent of our Lord in the flesh, when he was born in Bethlehem, was December 25th, a Wednesday, while Augustus was in his forty-second year. . ."⁴

But, it would not be until 354 CE that we find references to December 25th being observed as the date of Christ's birth:

The earliest extant record of Christ's birth being observed on December 25 is the *Chronography* in 354 A.D. . . By the time that Chrysostom was Bishop of Constantinople (398-404), Christ's birth was being observed on December 25 throughout Christendom, though the Church in Armenia observed it on January 6.⁵

How was Christmas observed throughout Christendom back then? Below is a quote from a Christmas sermon of John Chrysostom:

And so, He bestowing and we receiving, He prepares for us the treasure of Life. He takes our flesh, to sanctify us; He gives us His Spirit, that He may save us. Come, then, let us observe the Feast. Truly wondrous is the whole chronicle of the Nativity. For this day the ancient slavery is ended, the devil confounded, the demons take to flight, the power of death is broken, paradise is unlocked, the curse is taken away, sin is removed from us, error driven out, truth has been brought back, the speech of kindness spreads on every side, and a heavenly way of life has been implanted on the earth.⁶

This Christmas celebration focused on the *Theology of Christmas*. Chrysostom's sermon was a quick overview of the salvation doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. It was the exclusive Christianity of the West until the 16th century when a priest named Martin Luther created a new religion – *Protestantism*. Doing things the "old Catholic way" became a negative in the new Protestant churches, which included the way Christmas was celebrated. By the time of the colonization of America new ideas about Christmas

were appearing, one of which was about a guy named St. Nicholas that delivered gifts to people:

“Colonial Germans in Pennsylvania kept the feast of St. Nicholas, and several later accounts have St. Nicholas visiting New York Dutch on New Years' Eve, thus adopting the English custom (New Year gift-giving had become the English custom in 1558. . . this English custom lasted in New York until 1847). . . John Pintard commissioned artist Alexander Anderson to create the first American image of Nicholas for the occasion. Nicholas was shown in a gift-giving role with children's treats in stockings hanging at a fireplace. . . .”⁷

Some Protestant churches eliminated the Christmas holiday completely.

“The 19th century was a time of cultural transition. New York writers, and others, wanted to domesticate the Christmas holiday. After Puritans and other Calvinists had eliminated Christmas as a holy season, popular celebrations became riotous, featuring drunken men and public disorder. Christmas . . . was characterized by raucous, drunken mobs roaming streets, damaging property, threatening and frightening the upper classes. . . Through the first half of the 19th century, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, Catholics, Episcopalians and others continued to regard December 25th as a day without religious significance, often in very strong language. . . .”⁸

Christmas were becoming a social problem when a group of New Yorkers came up with a new plan.

The New York elite succeeded in domesticating Christmas through a new "Santa Claus" tradition invented by Washington Irving, John Pintard and Clement Clarke Moore.”⁹

*'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
in hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there. . . .*¹⁰

“Moore's poem . . . and other descriptions of the Santa Claus ritual appeared in more and more local papers. More than anything else, `A Visit From St. Nicholas' introduced the custom of a cozy, domestic Santa Christmas tradition to the nation. . . .

Santa was embraced by the public, and with the efforts of merchants, the image of Christmas began to change. As it changed, so did the way it was observed in the Protestant churches:

“Church musicians embracing carol singing, began to bring Christmas observances into their lives. The growth of Sunday Schools in cities exposed hundreds of thousands of children to Christianity. Initially opposed to

Christmas observance, by the 1850s Sunday Schools had discovered that a Christmas tree, Santa and gifts, greatly improved attendance. So, in a strange twist of fate, the new "secular" Santa Claus, no longer seen as a religious figure, helped return Christmas observance to churches."¹¹

The return of the celebration of Christmas to the churches brought with it the *Theology of Christmas* too. It was became an important part of the Christmas service. The *Spirit of Christmas* also made its way into the churches as a result of the revivals of the Great Awakening, which inspired young people to get involve with outreach work through various religious organizations. Local churches ran all sorts of relief programs, helping the homeless and those victimized by unforeseen circumstances.¹² During the Christmas season Christian charitable activities increased greatly. Collecting toys, clothing and food for the needy became a familiar Christmas ritual and it has maintained its popularity ever sense. The help and joy the Spirit of Christmas has provided for millions cannot be measured in dollars.

I remember a story my late uncle told me one Christmas. He was my mother's older brother. When they were very young one Christmas times were hard. His parents were having a very difficult time just keeping something to eat on the table. They knew there was simply nothing left for buying Christmas presents. On Christmas Eve they heard a knock at the door and when they opened it they found a group of people with boxes of food and gifts. He couldn't remember the toys he was given, but my mother was given a doll. They gave his family joy and hope at a very difficult time. When he grew up he sent a donation to that charity every December for the rest of his life. He wanted to help them help other families experience that same *caring, sharing and love*. The *Spirit of Christmas* stopped by his house that day and it remained in his heart the rest of his life.

Now let's get some facts about the name given to the birthday of Jesus -- *Christmas*. Does it reflect the *Theology of Christmas* or the *Spirit of Christmas*?

late O.E. Cristes mæsse, from Christ (but retaining the original vowel sound) + *mass* (n.2). Written as one word from mid-14c. Father Christmas first attested in a carol attributed to Richard Smart, Rector of Plymtree (Devon) from 1435-77.¹³

Long before the word "Christmas" had been coined, the Roman Catholic Church held a *Mass* to celebrate the birth of Christ. The word *Mass* (*missa*) first established itself as the general designation for the Eucharistic Sacrifice in the West after the time of Pope Gregory the Great (d. 604).¹⁴

In the early history of the Church, vigils were held before every feast for the purpose of preparing for the feast itself. Mass would be held in the evening, followed by a period of prayer and contemplation. Solemn services were then held the next morning. As more feasts arose, the number of vigils kept was decreased. In the current Roman Calendar, there are six Masses designated as vigils to proceed the feasts the next day: vigils for Easter, Christmas,

Pentecost, Ascension, Nativity of St. John the Baptist, and the Feasts of Saints Peter and Paul.¹⁵

A central part of Mass is the profession of faith, which originated at the Council of Nicea in 325 CE.

We believe in God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in Being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered, died, and was buried. On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. With the Father and the Son he is worshipped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.¹⁶

This brings us then, to the next question – *When was Christianity founded?* For that answer we must turn to the Bible.

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul (Paul), and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the congregation and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.¹⁷

Christianity was founded at Antioch after Saul and Barnabas had been teaching for a whole year. The disciples of Barnabas and Saul were the first to be called “Christians.” No one had been called a “Christian” before then. This took place over a decade after the crucifixion of Jesus and about 275 years before the Council of Nicea. The man who taught many of the ideas that made their way from Antioch to Nicea was Saul, aka Paul.

It is hard for Bible readers to accurately understand who Paul was and what he taught because his writings were bundled with others books and then canonized by the Roman Catholic Church and called the New Testament. They do not grasp the importance of the fact that originally each book stood alone as an individual text and was read that way for many years. A book’s words were read in light of what was written in it and not in conjunction the contents of any other books. When we view them in their context we discover that the books of the New Testament do not speak with unified voice and deliver a unified Christian message. When we remove the theological chain of institutional theological beliefs and allow each book to tell its own story, we hear ancient

voices that tell very different stories. Let's see what Paul says about himself and the teachings that became the foundation of Christianity.

Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus *the* Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.¹⁸

Paul proclaimed himself to be an apostle chosen by Jesus after he was resurrected from the dead. He never met Jesus before he was crucified. He makes it clear that no human chose him. He claims to have a "supernatural calling" which makes him a very different apostle from the others.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel I preached is not of human origin. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; but through a revelation of Jesus *the* Christ.¹⁹

Paul had his own gospel and it also came from a supernatural source and he received it by a supernatural means. No other human, including the other apostles, had ever heard it before Paul. How did he receive it? Paul says he received it "through a revelation," which could be a vision or dream. His revelation led to his followers being called "Christians."

But you have received the spirit of Son-ship. When we cry, "Abba Father," it is the Spirit itself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Dr. James Tabor makes this point very clear: "*This infusion of the Christ-Spirit into the elect group makes them also "Christs."*"²⁰ At Antioch Paul's students were being taught that they had become Christs, so apparently that led to people calling them "Christ+ain+s." The suffix "-ain" means "one who is." *The name Christian means "one who is Christ," therefore the name reflected Paul's gospel.*

Paul believes that God has a universal plan for all the descendants of Adam: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22), but he believes this process unfolds only in stages. . . His entire concentration is upon the tiny initial group that he calls "the elect," who he believes is being collected together just before the end of the age. . . Paul never mentions any idea of hell or eternal punishment in any of his letters, but he did believe that those who are chosen first can escape the wrath of God that will come with God's judgment at the end of the age."²¹

This is the primary source for the *Theology of Christmas*, which is recorded in his message to the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scripture, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.²²

The elect, who Paul says were chosen before the creation of the heavens and earth, and hold on to Paul's gospel will become the kingdom of God -- *but not until they receive new spiritual bodies*.

Now this I say brothers, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, neither does the perishable inherit the imperishable.²³

When Paul says "flesh and blood cannot inherit" he literally means it. One must have a spiritual body to be in the kingdom of God and that will only happen after the arrival of Christ in the clouds at the end of time.

According to Jesus, in the "age to come" the Messiah will sit on his throne of glory and judge all the nations (Matthew 25:31). Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the righteous of all ages will be raised from the dead and "sit at table in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29). It is spoken of as a "new world," but there is no idea of leaving the earth and going to heaven.²⁴

Paul's gospel places beliefs first and this became the standard of his movement. However, he also made it very clear that if his followers persist in immoral behavior they will "not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Corinthians 6:9-10; Galatians 5:21).²⁵ Belief in his gospel was essential. But what Paul taught about the kingdom of God was not what Jesus taught about it.

Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of God,²⁶ but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your TZEDAQAH surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of God.²⁷

According to Jesus, TZEDAQAH is the essential requirement for entering into the kingdom of God. What did TZEDAQAH mean to Jesus? He made its meaning very clear – *almsgiving*.

The term TZEDAQAH was used to specifically mean "almsgiving." Almsgiving is regarded as an offering brought to God. "*They that give alms to the poor, give it to Me,*" says God, for it is said, "*My offering, My bread*".²⁸ Surely God needs no bread, nevertheless He says: "*I count your gifts as though you were My children supporting their father.*" "*He hath dispersed, he hath given to the poor; his TZEDAQAH endures forever.*"²⁹

When Jesus described the final judgment, every person would be required to appear before the Son of Man and be judged. There was no way to avoid it like Paul's gospel promised. The standard that the Son of Man would use to judge mankind, according to Jesus, was TZEDAQAH.

These inherit eternal life.	These go to eternal punishment.
(1) Fed the hungry.	(1) Did not feed the hungry.
(2) Gave drink to the thirsty.	(2) Did not give drink to the thirsty.
(3) Invited in a stranger.	(3) Did not invite in a stranger.
(4) Gave clothes to those in need.	(4) Did not give clothes to those in need.
(5) Visit and cared for the sick.	(5) Did not visit and care for the sick.
(6) Visited prisoners.	(6) Did not visit prisoners.

The message of the real Jesus is the foundation of the *Spirit of Christmas*. Men's theologies are not important to God. How can mere mortals explain God? What is important to God is "peace on earth and goodwill toward men" and that becomes a reality in the manifestation of the *Spirit of Christmas*. It could not lead to Inquisitions and religious wars, like the *Theology of Christmas*. The *Spirit of Christmas* protects and preserves life – *it enhances the quality of life*. When that happens the proclamation made by the angels becomes a reality: "Peace on earth and good will toward men."

As I stated at the beginning, Christmas provides the clue that gives us a glimpse of the real Jesus & the founders of Christianity. Was it a surprise to discover that they were not the same person? Dr. James Tabor wrote:

"Paul is the most influential person in human history, and realize it or not, he has shaped practically all we think about everything³⁰. . . Not only do I believe Paul should be seen as the 'founder' of the Christianity we know today, rather than Jesus and his original apostles, but I argue he made a decisive bitter break with those first apostles, promoting and preaching views they found to be utterly reprehensible."³¹

Think about what would happen if the *Spirit of Christmas* was here all year! **BHC**

December Memorials

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>In Loving Memory</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">MARJORIE ANN STEWART</p> <p style="text-align: center;">b. 1927 December 21, 2009</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>May you dwell under His wings in complete SHALOM forever!</i></p>	<p><i>May their memories inspire us to seek those qualities of mind and heart which they shared when we walked life's journey together. May we help to bring closer to fulfillment their highest ideals and noblest strivings.</i></p> <p><i>May their memories deepen our loyalty to those things which we valued and shared -- faith, love, peace and devotion and our biblical heritage. As long as we live, they too will live; for they are now a part of us, as we remember them.</i></p> <p>(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor Reflections - <u>The New Mahzor</u> - The Prayer Book Press)</p>	
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In today's world the *Spirit of Christmas* is needed more than ever and we know that the *Theologies of Christmas* will never fulfill that need. Institutional religions that exist to proclaim those theologies as the highest value of God are losing members who are seeking a spiritual path that leads to a better life – *a life of caring, sharing and loving – a path that repairs lives, relationships & the world.*

The Biblical Heritage Center is committed to helping people discover that path by understanding the paths that brought them to where they are.

Please support our work by making a special and generous year end contribution.

We are obviously not funded by large and wealthy religious institutions.

We rely on you and need your help urgently.

If you understand the importance of the *Spirit of Christmas* – help fund our work so we can make it a reality in the lives of many others. Please help us make peace on earth and goodwill toward men a reality.

Your gift is an act of caring, sharing & love – *and you make a difference!*

¹ Luke 2:14 King James Version

² <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038650/quotes>

³ <http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/3097440-a-christmas-carol>

⁴ <http://www.chronicon.net/chroniconfiles/Hippolytus%20and%20December%2025th.pdf>

⁵ http://www.orthodox.org/html/chrmas_pagan4.html

⁶ <http://lectioecclesia.com/Chrysostom,-John-on-the-Incarnation,-Sermon-on-Christmas-Day.php>

⁷ <http://www.blackdog.net/holiday/christmas/twas.html>

⁸ <http://www.blackdog.net/holiday/christmas/twas.html>

⁹ <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/origin-of-santa/>

¹⁰ <http://www.blackdog.net/holiday/christmas/twas.html>

¹¹ <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/origin-of-santa/>

¹² http://charity.lovetoknow.com/History_of_Volunteerism_in_America

¹³ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?search=christmas>

¹⁴ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10006a.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.aquinasandmore.com/catholic-articles/the-tradition-of-midnight-mass/article/119>

¹⁶ <http://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=1529>

¹⁷ Acts 11:25-26

¹⁸ Galatians 1:1

¹⁹ Galatians 1:11-12

²⁰ Paul and Jesus: How The Apostles Transformed Christianity © 2012 by James Tabor; Simon & Schuster, New York. NY; p. 117.

²¹ Paul and Jesus; p. 125

²² 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

²³ 1 Corinthians 15:50

²⁴ Paul and Jesus; p. 123

²⁵ Paul and Jesus; p. 122

²⁶ Translations have "Heaven" instead of "God." "Heaven" is a euphemism used instead of the name of God.

²⁷ Matthew 5:19-20

²⁸ Numbers 28:2

²⁹ Psalms 112:9

³⁰ Paul and Jesus: How The Apostles Transformed Christianity © 2012 by James Tabor; Simon & Schuster, New York. NY; p. xvii

³¹ Paul and Jesus; p.6