

Biblical Backgrounds of Current Christmas Customs and Symbols: PowerPoint Guide and Commentary

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Author's Note: The red numbers in parentheses refer to the corresponding slides in the accompanying PowerPoint presentation, [Biblical Backgrounds of Current Christmas Customs & Symbols](#). These documents are on both my [academic Website](#) and on my [general Website](#). On the latter, to locate any subject you want on any document on the Website, simply type that subject in the search bar at the top of the [home page](#). Both the accompanying PowerPoint program and this guide and commentary can be used in teaching classes, small group Bible study, offering a one-session program, or for individual Advent and Christmas devotion.

INTRODUCTION

- A. The Bible is the background and foundation of much of our culture in the western hemisphere (2) and elsewhere in the world where missionaries have had an impact and God's Kingdom has been extended.
- For example, we see the Bible's influence in our form of government (its balance of powers among the three branches with its assumption that men are inherently sinful), and
 - the value of human life in our nation that has been shaped by the Bible's influence on our founders, which has been revealed by studies of their correspondence, speeches, and legislation.
 - Our language is filled with words from the Bible: e.g., redeem, save, inspire; we hear and use them daily. David Lyle Jeffrey spent 16 years editing the huge volume, *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Eerdmans, 1992), in which he argues that one cannot properly understand the English language without an understanding of the Bible.
- B. The Bible has also given the basis for many current Christmas customs that have become long-standing traditions,
- but this connection has been lost or covered over and is not readily apparent to many of us.
- C. We hear about and sense constantly in this season the need to "keep Christ in Christmas"—to not allow the commercialization of Christmas to eclipse its spiritual significance. We can keep Christ in Christmas, and thus increase our joy at this time and throughout the rest of the year, by associating the many common Christmas customs and their symbols with their Biblical connections and backgrounds as

expressed in historic Christian theology. In these traditional Christmas customs, we have the essence of the Gospel on display, *if we use them as symbols of events and teachings in the Bible.*

D. The following presentation organizes the customs and symbols according to the three-fold structure of the Biblical teaching concerning our guilt, grace and gratitude, one of the classic designations of the three sections of the historic Reformation catechism, *The Heidelberg Catechism*. The terms sin, salvation, and service are also used for the three divisions of the catechism, but for our purposes now, the terms guilt, grace, and gratitude are particularly helpful as an organizing principle for this subject.

I. Guilt is the result of our sin.

A. The historic liturgical color for advent is purple. This color signifies penitence for our sin and preparation for the coming (advent) of the King.¹ (John 19:2, Mark 1:1-5, 7-8) (3, 4) Purple, the combination of red (which symbolizes the blood of Christ that he shed for the remission of our sins, the reason for his first advent) and blue (a royal color), is thus an appropriate color for our celebration of Advent.

- This color as symbolic of royalty has existed from Bible times: “The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe.” (John 19:2) However, until the 12th century A.D. there are no clear references to specific colors for the different celebrations of the church year. At the beginning of the 12th century we first find references to liturgical uses of colors, but it is only in relatively recent times that a standard has resulted. The standard color for Advent is purple. In medieval times blue was often worn in Advent, but blue is less common in our day and age.²

B. The Messianic rose has its roots in the Old Testament. (Isaiah 35:1) (5)

1. Looking ahead to the Messiah’s coming, the prophet Isaiah wrote, “The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.”³
2. This statement is, of course, referring to the Messiah’s second advent, or second coming, when he will renew the earth. In the Old Testament, the prophecies of

¹ Church denominations that follow the church year celebrations have an added blessing as they enter Advent, having just the previous week celebrated Christ the King Sunday. For further information on the meaning of Christ the King Sunday, see “[Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church.](#)”

² For more on Advent liturgical colors, see “[Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church.](#)”

³ RSV, NASB, NIV, NRSV: Crocus. Recent Biblical research now holds that a more accurate translation of the Hebrew word the King James scholars translated “rose” is rendered with the word “crocus.”

Jesus' first and second advents were typically telescoped, i.e., revealed together without differentiating them, in what Anthony Hoekema, and other Biblical scholars, call the prophetic perspective, as he explains in his classic text, *The Bible and the Future*.⁴

3. This joy had its beginning in the foretaste of God's blessing experienced by the returning exiles in the 6th century B.C., then by those of us who are living in this phase of the Messiah's kingdom, and that joy will be fully felt when Christ's kingdom is completed at his second coming, his second advent.
- II. Grace is the unearned blessing of God whereby he has taken away our sin and guilt as only he can. (6)
- A. The poinsettia is regarded by some as having the same symbolism as the Messianic rose (or crocus).
1. While its use at Christmas may have arisen from a secular origin and its popularity due as much to the appeal of its beautiful red leaves as to any other association, a long-standing tradition has seen deeper symbolic significance in this striking plant.
 2. This tradition builds on the ancient interpretive literary tool called typology, where a person, place, or other thing which has a rudimentary meaning in the Old Testament is seen to be a precursor of something that is more completely developed or fulfilled in the New Testament.
 3. The medieval church connected God's descent to mankind in a burning bush (as he did when he appeared to Moses as described in Exodus 3) with his descent to humans as a newborn child.
 4. Thus, the poinsettia is seen to be a type of God's coming to humanity, with specific reference to the Old Testament's great redemptive prototype of freedom from bondage in the Exodus event, presaging that which Christ was to do most completely in his coming to redeem us from our bondage to sin. With only a little imagination the poinsettia, especially one with several red leaves, resembles the flames of fire in a burning bush and thus offers a graphic depiction of God's descent when he came to Moses, and at the same time a visual representation of God's descent to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord, Immanuel, God with us.

⁴ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), pp. 9, 12, 148-149. For further information, visit the home page of my WordPress Website at <https://fromacorntoak12.com/> and type the term, prophetic perspective, in the Search bar.

Nurture your poinsettia at least through Easter to remind you and others as to the link between Christmas and Easter, why Jesus Christ came to earth in his first advent. Remember to thank him for doing so!

B. The manger symbolizes Christ's humble birth. (Luke 2:7) (7, 8)

1. Theologically, it is the beginning of his state of humiliation, when he laid aside his divine majesty, took on our human nature, and began his ministry as an obedient and suffering servant. (Philippians 2:6-11)
2. Careful attention to the Greek New Testament and life in first century Bethlehem indicates that the "inn" which was too crowded for baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph was most likely the lodging area, called a κατάλυμα (*kataluma*), of a house or probably a cave where their relatives lived. This explains why no innkeeper, especially a greedy or angry one (as often portrayed in contemporary Nativity plays), is mentioned in the text. Compare Luke 22:11, where we see the same Greek word, *kataluma*, translated guest room, the place to be prepared for Jesus to eat the Passover with his disciples.

The English word inn, is not an accurate term to translate *kataluma*. In English, inn means a commercial establishment for lodging, food, and entertainment of travelers, a small hotel, or a tavern, and it also refers to buildings in London that were used to house students, especially law students. Thus, with this concept of inn, readers of Luke 2:7 form an inaccurate understanding of the text and the context in which Jesus was born.

There is a different word that does mean, and is properly translated, inn. That word is πανδοχεῖον (*pandocheion*), the caravansary, an inn for travelers, to which the good Samaritan took the badly beaten man who fell into the hands of the robbers. (Luke 10:34) Furthermore, in that account one verse later, we do read of an innkeeper, a πανδοχεύς (*pandocheus*).

The video clip in the accompanying PowerPoint shows a home in a Bethlehem cave with its *kataluma* and area in the back for animals and a manger. Read Luke 2:6-7.

3. The Israeli guide in the video is Mr. Jeries Farah. He is the best guide I ever had on the tours I led to the lands of the Bible.

C. Bells announce the birth of Christ and call his people to worship. (9-11)

1. Using bells to celebrate the birth of Christ is thought to have begun by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania, Italy, who died in AD 431. (9)

2. Bell ringing to celebrate Christ was used to eclipse a pagan superstition in the Middle Ages.
 - People once thought that evil spirits were afraid of sharp noises and would flee when they heard them. So, bells were rung before church services to rid the building of demons in order that believers could worship in peace. The eighth century A.D. Archbishop of York, Egbert, composed a blessing of church bells in which we see a reference to that unbiblical superstition. He wrote: “Whenever this bell sounds, let the power of enemies retreat, so also the shadow of phantoms, the assault of whirlwinds, the stroke of lightning, the harm of thunders, and every spirit of the storm winds.”⁵

3. A more Biblical link with bells and Christmas exists. God told Moses to have bells put on the blue robe under the high priest’s ephod. (10)
 - “And upon its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet, all around its hem, and bells of gold between them all round...And it shall be upon Aaron when he ministers, and its sound will be heard when he goes into the holy place before the LORD and when he comes out, that he may not die.” (Exodus 28:31-35)

4. Matthew Henry (1662-1714, English Presbyterian minister; famous commentary written in early 18th century) observed that the bells of Aaron’s robe “typify the sound of the gospel of Christ in the world, giving notice of His entrance within the veil for us,” which is what he came to do. He finished that work on Calvary. (Matthew 27:51) (11)
 - THIS IS WHY JESUS CAME IN HIS FIRST ADVENT! AS LONG AS WE KEEP THIS KEY ELEMENT OF CHRISTMAS IN OUR FOCUS, THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS WILL ECLIPSE THE SUPERFICIAL GLITZ, GLAMOR, AND GLITTER, WHICH IS FLEETING AND MAKES SO MANY FEEL EMPTY AS SOON AS CHRISTMAS IS OVER. BY KEEPING OUR FOCUS ON THESE BIBLICAL REALITIES, THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS WILL LAST THROUGHOUT THE NEW YEAR! AND FOREVER!!

5. We also read in Hebrews 9, “When Christ came as high priest...he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle...he has appeared to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Hebrews 9:11-28)

⁵ John C. McCollister, *The Christian Book of Why* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers, Inc., 1983), p. 246

- D. The Crèche: To inspire and to teach the meaning of the birth of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi built a life-size stable in a cave in Graecia, near Assisi in 1223. (12)
1. The crèche came to be used in homes as well as in churches.
 - Many believers have wise men in their crèche scenes and have taken a fair amount of heat for it, since the preponderance of Biblical scholarship today concludes they likely came later. However...
 2. while uncertain, the Wise Men (KJV), called Magi, a close transliteration in newer English translations of the original Greek, μάγοι (*magoi*), Magi (in Matthew 2:1-17), may have arrived sooner than some think. Since 2:11 states that the Magi came to the house where Jesus and Mary were, some scholars believe the Magi arrived a considerable time after Jesus was born. However, the Greek word, οικίαν (*oikian*), while translated house, also means dwelling or household, and could refer to the place where Jesus was born, which many today believe was in a cave in Bethlehem. Thus, the Magi may have visited while Jesus was in the manger (the crèche), though likely in a house sometime later.
- E. Candles symbolize the light Jesus brought to the world. (John 8:12) The fourth and fifth century scholar, Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin (the *Vulgate*), said that candles were to express Christian joy. (13)
- Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)
- F. During the season of Advent, when we celebrate the first coming of Christ, we notice all the beautiful lights.
1. (14) Remember what Jesus said, “I have come as a light for the world in order that everyone believing in me may not remain in the darkness.” (John 12:46, my translation) Jesus, here saying he is a light, is referring also to the prophets who testified about him, who thus were also lights pointing to the Christ to come: Jesus, THE light of the world. (John 8:12). The Greek word for world (κόσμος [*kosmos*]) in 8:12 refers to the whole world, including all the spiritual darkness in it now. Jesus later said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome [Greek: νενίκηκα (*nenikēka*) conquered] the world” with all its evil. (John 16:33) What comfort and peace this reality provides! We celebrate now his first coming; in his second coming, our celebration will be huge and eternal!

2. (15) For your sake, for your loved ones' sake, and for all others, the Lord has called us to proclaim his Good News; don't neglect to point them beyond Santa, gifts, digital devices, and the other temporal and short-lived delights of the season. Point them to the One it is all about, and with his help you can all do far more than just cope...you can rejoice and thank God! As you look at the beautiful lights, think about Jesus, and contemplate the eternal light and joy who will not fade, the One who conquers all darkness, Christ the Lord!
- G. We also consider the colors of Advent and Christmas. (16) They significantly represent and remind us of who Christ Jesus is and what he came to do. As we contemplate the meaning of the colors we are lifted, strengthened, encouraged, and filled with joy.
1. Blue signifies his royalty, kingship.
 2. Red signifies Jesus' blood he shed for the complete remission of all our sin and sins (Colossians 1:20).
 3. Green signifies the eternal life for all who have been dead in sin but whose faith in Christ Jesus now credits them with his righteousness and thereby life in and with our triune God forever. (Romans 4; 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:22)
 4. White signifies purity, victory, holiness, perfection. (Revelation 3:4-6; 7:14; 19:11-16)

The colors at Christmas are very important. (17) In addition to the joy they bring, use them for talking with family members, or with people in a witness for the Lord, about why Christ came. When looking at a Christmas tree or driving by a beautiful display, as in this photo in a mall in our city, ask, "Have you ever thought about what the beautiful Christmas lights signify?" Questions, especially when timely asked, motivate further thought. Notice how Jesus often used questions.

- H. The wreath, made of evergreen, symbolizes life and, being circular without end, the eternal life that is ours as a result of Christ. (John 11:25-26a) (18-20)
- Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26a)
- I. Holly with its sharp points on the glistening green leaves and bright red berries on a wreath reminds us of the joyous salvation to eternal life that is ours in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. The wreath helps us recall Jesus' crown of thorns, with the

red berries portraying his shed blood as he redeemed us from our sin in this most wonderful demonstration of love ever! (Luke 22:44, Romans 5:6-11) (20)

- Jesus' crown of thorns would have had much blood on it from the long spikes being jammed deeply beneath his skin as the governor's soldiers "took the staff and beat him [Jesus] on the head again and again" which we read about in Matthew 27:30.

J. The red bows remind us of the blood Jesus shed to redeem us, which is the reason for his first advent. Long streamers on the bows graphically depict the streams of Jesus' blood. (Colossians 1:20) (21, 22)

- I love to see the long red ribbons hanging down from the bows—the longer the better!! Here we see very long ribbons coming off the bows in a church sanctuary. This placement is architecturally significant, symbolizing worshipers being washed and cleansed in the blood of Christ as they enter the sanctuary, thereby being made worthy to stand in the presence of God who is not only holy, but as he revealed through the prophet Isaiah, holy, holy, holy!

K. The Advent wreath has been used by many Christians in personal, family, and church worship services to symbolize several aspects of the Scriptural teaching about Christ. The main liturgical color applying to Advent is purple, signifying and helping us concentrate on penitence for our sin, our need and preparation for the coming (Advent) of Christ the Messiah, King, Savior, and Lord. Purple combines the key Advent colors of blue (referring to royalty, signifying Jesus' Kingship) and red (referring to Jesus' shed blood, which is what he came to do).⁶

One of the most well-known symbolisms of the Advent wreath is the following:

1. The first candle (pale purple) represents promise. (Isaiah 9:6) (23)
 - a. The color of this candle is often a lighter, paler, purple as in these pictures, and it represents the Old Testament promises.
 - b. "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)
2. The second candle (purple) represents waiting. (Isaiah 7:14) (24)
 - "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with

⁶ For more on worship during Advent, see "[Worship: A Course on Worship in the Christian Church](#)."

child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” (Isaiah 7:14)

3. The third candle (purple) represents peace. (Micah 4:3-4) (25)

- “He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes for strong nations far and wide. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. ⁴Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken.” (Micah 4:3-4)

4. The fourth candle (purple) represents hope. (Luke 1:31-33) (26)

- “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, the angel, Gabriel, told Mary. ³²He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” (Luke 1:31-33)

5. The fifth candle (white) represents joy, adoration, and the purity and victory of Christ. This is often called the Christ candle. (Luke 2:10b-11, 14; Revelation 19:11-16) (27)

- Christ’s purity is credited to us by faith which alone makes us worthy of being in the presence of God who is most holy. (Romans 1:17; 4:18-25; 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-10)
- “[T]he angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.’” (Luke 2:10-11)

L. The exact date of Jesus’ birth is uncertain. (28)

1. The Bible does not give a date for the birth of Jesus the Christ.
2. The great 19th Century Biblical scholar, Rev. Alfred Edersheim, D.D., Ph.D., who converted from Judaism to Christianity, explains in his classic text, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, why it is reasonable to hold that Jesus could have been born on the date of December 25.⁷

⁷ Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1905), Vol. I, p. 187.

3. Others say early Christians set that date to eclipse the pagan festivals of Saturnalia and *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquerable Sun) pertaining to the change of the seasons at the winter solstice, as early Christians did with the same rationale to set the dates for celebrating other New Testament holy days, such as Epiphany. The excellent Lutheran professor of history, Paul Maier, explains that “Christianity sought to replace these pagan festivals with a Christian celebration honoring the “sun of righteousness,” a common epithet for Jesus as Messiah [who being the Second Person of the triune God of all creation is truly unconquerable, sovereign, and all powerful, and whose hands govern the seasons and all else].”⁸

4. Maier also explains that it was “a sixth-century Roman monk-mathematician-astronomer named Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Little) who unknowingly committed what became history’s greatest numerical error in terms of cumulative effect. For in reforming the calendar to pivot about the birth of Christ, he dated the Nativity in the year 753 from the founding of Rome, when in fact Herod died only 749 years after Rome’s founding [in 4 B. C. (cf. Matthew 2:15)]. The result of Dionysius’ chronology, which remains current, was to give the correct traditional date for the founding of Rome, but one that is at least four or five years off for the birth of Christ.”⁹

Putting the above and other details together, such as historical data pertaining to when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-2), Maier states that “according to the best reckoning, Jesus may indeed have been born in the winter of 5-4 B. C.”¹⁰ He states, “some time between the fall of 5 B. C. and March of 4 B. C.”¹¹

M. The Christmas tree has long been associated with Christ’s birth. (29)

1. In medieval times an apple-decorated fir depicted the Garden of Eden. The Paradise Play, which had a theme of the expulsion of Adam and Eve and humankind’s hopeful anticipation of salvation, tied the evergreen to Christ’s birth.
 - Later, in addition to apples, which were used to symbolize Adam and Eve’s fall, people began to decorate a fir tree they called the “paradeisbaum” (the tree of life in the garden of Eden]) with sacramental wafers, symbols of

⁸ Paul L. Maier, *First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story* (London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1971), p. 43.

⁹ Paul L. Maier, p. 40.

¹⁰ Paul L. Maier, p. 43.

¹¹ Paul L. Maier, p. 41.

salvation as used in the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper.

2. Many people attribute bringing an evergreen tree into the house to Martin Luther (1483-1546). The light shining through these trees reminded him of Christ who came down from heaven. (John 3:13, 6:32-35; James 1:17)
 - Luther is said to have decorated the fir tree with candles to represent the stars and their symbolic heavenly light.
 3. Even before Luther, the practice of using pine and other evergreens for Christian celebrations was well established with a long tradition.
 4. The fragrance of pine and related trees in the barrenness of winter reminded early Christians of the promise of renewal in the spring, a symbol of new and everlasting life in Christ.
 5. The color green is significant as we saw, and the evergreen tree points toward heaven, reminding us that there is more than this phase of life and that Christmas is primarily about God and his mighty acts in the reconciliation, the peace, and the eternal life he has provided for us in the coming of Jesus the Christ. (Luke 2:14)
 6. If you have a natural tree, what will you do with it when you put away your Christmas decorations? (30)
 - a. Historic Trinity Lutheran Church in Detroit has made a cross, called the Tree Cross, from the trunk of a Christmas tree, symbolizing why Christ came in his first advent and helping people focus on the true, and by far most important, meaning of Christmas.
 - b. A Tree Cross can be a very effective symbol to facilitate Christian worship. Located in the Narthex by the central door leading into the Nave, it represents the access to the presence of God that Christ came to provide, and has provided, for those who believe in and follow him.
- N. Ball ornaments represent the world, created and redeemed by God in and through Christ. (31)
1. Balls as ornaments represent the world created by God, and which though now fallen is being redeemed by God and living in the real and certain hope of renewal in Christ when he returns at his second coming.
 - a. The ball, representing a globe, also reminds us of the venue of the one, holy, catholic (i.e., universal) and apostolic church, which has Christ's

commission to go into all the world bringing the good news of Jesus' comings to all people. (32)

- b. Also, the different colors symbolize the Gospel's being for "every tribe and language and people and nation" around the globe. **Ponder that purpose as you pause beside your tree this Advent season!**

2. See Genesis 12:3; Luke 2:10, 14; John 3:16; Revelation 5:9.

- O. Candy canes point back to the staffs of the shepherds' (Luke 2:8-20) and the newborn Babe who became the Great Shepherd. (Hebrews 13:20) Their white color symbolizes Jesus' purity and victory, and the red stripes depict his shed blood. When included, a green bow adds the vital reference to eternal life that Jesus Christ has provided in the shedding of his pure, perfect, and precious blood for the redemption and salvation of those who believe in him. (33)
- P. The star is a symbol of the spiritual light Jesus brought into the dark world dominated by sin, the spiritual darkness having been caused by the disobedience of mankind. It also reminds us of the star the Wise Men followed. (Matthew 2:1-12) (34)
- Q. The word angel means messenger, and angels sent by God with messages to humans have an important place in the Christmas narratives in the Bible. (Luke 1:11-20, 26-38; Matthew 1:20-24; Luke 2:9-15) (35) Angels appear five times in the Nativity narrative:
1. Gabriel appears to Zechariah announcing the birth of John the Baptist.
 2. Gabriel appears to Mary announcing the birth of Jesus the Christ, as here in this picture.
 3. An angel announces Mary's conception of Jesus to Joseph.
 4. An angel first announces Jesus' birth to the shepherds near Bethlehem,
 5. then a great company of angels appears to the shepherds and praises God saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Gloria in Excelsis Deo, Luke 2:14 KJV, is the closest English translation to the Greek on this verse.¹²

¹² R. C. H. Lenske, *The Interpretation of St. Luke's Gospel*, WORDsearch, p. 133.

- R. While too rarely seen as a symbol of Christmas, the cross is the reason Jesus came at his first advent. This is the reason why the early Christians did not hold Christmas celebrations. They believed that celebrations of Jesus' birth did not include the essential importance of his death and resurrection. So let's always include the cross at Christmas; we have a strong Biblical basis for doing so. For just one text, consider what Simeon said, as gently as possible, but prophetically. Forty days after Jesus' birth the Holy Spirit inspired Simeon to tell Mary what Jesus came to do (Luke 2:34-35), symbolized here by the passion cross. (36)

The cross is a symbol of God's great love for us and an important symbol which should not be omitted in Advent. (John 3:16 [KJV], 15:13; Romans 5:8) (37)

- My daughter and I were Christmas shopping one day, and I saw this ornament. I was struck by the highly significant heart-shaped symbols of love, which truly represent what took place at Christ's first coming, where God provided redemption for our sins at such great cost to himself, in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever! Which deeply moves us to...

III. Gratitude, which is always the Biblical response believers' give for God's grace. (38)

- A. The joy of our salvation moves us to sing! Carols are ancient means God's people have used to express joy, praise, and gratitude to God for his indescribable gift to us of Jesus.

1. Psalms were sung in the Old Testament in worship and in many other contexts.
2. The praises of the angels in Luke 2:13-14 may have been sung but the text does not say that; it says the angels were "praising God and saying,..." (2:13) Nowhere in the Bible does it say that angels sing, but neither does it say they don't. The emphasis is on the message they said.
3. Jesus and his disciples sang hymns together (Matthew 26:30),
4. as did the early church (Acts 16:25).
5. The origin of caroling as a part of celebrating Christ's birth is unknown, and authorities differ with regard to dating. It is certain that early Christians employed music of some kind in their Christmas celebrations.
 - a. French historians attribute to Bishop Telesphorus of Rome the introduction of singing in the celebration of Jesus' birth around A.D. 129.
 - b. Carols were from the beginning in a folk genre, at first in Latin and then

in the vernacular.

- c. While often containing rich and substantive theology, perhaps their primary function is to serve as a vehicle for the expression of our joy, praise, and gratitude to God for his indescribable gift to us in Jesus the Christ.
- B. Gifts (39) reflect God’s greatest gift, his only begotten Son, and the giving of the Wise Men.
1. The gifts we give are out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us, which is why we consider them now—in the section on gratitude, as part of our response to God’s blessings to us—not in an earlier section which would place them in the unbiblical attempt to derive some kind of meritorious act whereby a person would be trying to earn his or her own salvation, which is at the heart of all other religions, except Christianity.
 - We keep in mind that Christ is God’s greatest gift to us, and that we give out of gratitude, **never** with the motive of attempting to gain merit. This key teaching of the Bible, that we cannot earn our salvation, that it is a free gift of the God who loves (and is therefore also just and righteous), relieving us of the stress, anxiety, worry, and many other problems that come with religious beliefs that require people to earn their own salvation. That we believers in and followers of the Savior and Lord Jesus Christ simply obey and give out of gratitude, is unique to Christianity. All other religions outside the Bible are autosoteristic (lit.: self-saving), i.e., they involve different ways human beings attempt to save themselves.
 2. (40-44) The Magi (μάγοι [*magoi*]) were wise men, likely priest-sages, who scholars believe came from any country East of Palestine, from Arabia (now mostly contemporary Saudi Arabia) to Persia and Media (now mostly contemporary Iran), since the Bible does not specify the country or countries of their origin. (Matthew 2:1-11) Maier explains that the “safest conclusion is that the Magi of Christmas were Persian, for the term originates among the Medo-Persians, and early Syriac traditions give them Persian names.”¹³ He also cites several other compelling reasons for drawing this conclusion.

The Magi followed the star to Jerusalem and inquired of King Herod the Great (37—4 B. C.) where they might find the king for whom they were looking. Thus, they went to his palace seen here. The gifts we give also remind us of the gifts the Magi brought for the King of the Jews.

¹³ Paul L. Maier, p. 67.

(41) Maier identifies the most important fact of Matthew's account of the Magi.

Whatever their origin, the visit of the eastern sages was of great significance for later Christianity: the wise men were pagans, not Hebrews, and the fact that gentile magi performed the same adoration as Jewish shepherds symbolized the universal outreach for future Christianity. "And gentiles shall come to your light," the prophet Isaiah had written, "and kings to the rightness of your rising." ([Isaiah] 60:3)¹⁴

This understanding, of course, was not new with the New Testament. Throughout the whole Bible, including the Old Testament, God's will is clearly seen to be that his people were to reach out to the whole world with his message of salvation. (Genesis 12:1-3; Jeremiah 4:2; Jonah 3:1-3; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 2:4; Revelation 7:9)

3. (42) Frankincense is resin from trees of the genus *Boswellia*. It was burned on the altar of incense in the tabernacle's Holy Place. (Ex. 30:1-8) Frankincense is one of the gifts of the Magi (Matt. 2:11), which fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that gold and frankincense would be brought from the Gentiles to honor the heavenly king. (Isaiah 60:6)

(43) Frankincense is the purest incense. It makes a white smoke symbolizing the prayers of God's people, which is why the altar of incense was just before the veil separating the most holy place from the holy place in the temple. (Exodus 30:1-8; Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4)

4. (44) The word, myrrh, refers to an aromatic gum, and the perfume extracted from it. Myrrh has been used from ancient times for medicinal purposes, including to heal wounds, and to prepare bodies for burial. Thus, the Magi's gift of myrrh points to Jesus' destiny to suffer and die a special death. (Cf. John 19:38-42, esp. v. 39; Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:4, 8)
5. Gift giving is also said to have grown out of the desire to follow the unselfishness of Christ. As we receive gifts at Christmas, we should remember that our most wonderful and precious gift is the gift of our eternal life that Jesus came to give. In gratitude for that greatest gift, we also give: to him in our worship and to others, near to us and far from us. (45)

¹⁴ Paul L. Maier, p. 67.

- Some families arrange their gifts for giving to reflect the emphasis on the unselfish giving of Christ rather than on receiving. When it comes time for opening presents each person sits around the tree with the gifts he or she is **giving**, instead of the ones he or she is receiving.
- C. When considering the custom of gift giving at Christmas time, it's hard to overlook Santa Claus, but let's set the record straight. The story of Santa has its basis in the benevolence of a fine Christian man and church leader who actually lived in the fourth century A.D. His name was Nicholas. (46)
1. The real St. Nicholas was Archbishop of Myra and a delegate to the first general council of the early church, the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.
 2. One of the main issues he addressed with his fellow delegates at that council was the question of Jesus' divinity. The council ruled that the Father and the Son share the **same substance**. Christ is not just like God; he is part of God and is fully (100%) divine as well as being fully (100%) human. (John 10:30) He is thus referred to as the Second Person of the triune God (together with the Father and the Holy Spirit).
 - Christ is the only begotten (original Greek, μονογενής [monogenēs], only begotten, i.e., of the same substance) Son of God. (John 3:16) These two Biblical truths (that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human), were believed by the early church and overwhelmingly affirmed by the Council of Nicaea (the vote was 300-2, hardly a squeaker as people read in the spurious novel, *The DaVinci Code*). Nicholas voted with the majority. This overwhelming vote, a strong testimony about Christ Jesus that resolved a very important challenge to Christian theology, established Biblically-based theological doctrine pertaining to Christ, and defeated Arius and his followers at the Council, needs to be understood by all of us and explained to Arius' present day followers, the Jehovah's Witnesses...and others!¹⁵
- D. Ivy, because it is always green, is another symbol of eternal life.
1. Jesus said..., "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26) (47)

¹⁵ For more on St. Nicholas, see the paper, "[The Real Saint Nicholas](#)." For further information on the Bible's teaching and historic Christian theology pertaining to Christ, see "[Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#)."

2. Since it clings to its life source and support, it also symbolizes attachment, undying affection, reliance on one stronger, and fidelity, four important responses of gratitude to God’s grace in Christ for us. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10) (48)

CONCLUSION (49)

- A. Let us now continue in the Advent and Christmas season and enjoy it to the fullest. Let us not fear the attempt by some to “secularize” Christ out of Christmas. They can’t do it anyway. The Triune God is sovereign and everywhere present!¹⁶
- B. Let us transform the cultural trappings into the true meaning of Christmas as the early church did (50) by
 1. recalling the Biblical message underlying their symbolisms and
 2. attaching Biblical significance to those customs we want to use or with which we come into contact (such as Santa Claus to St. Nicholas).

Always be encouraged by viewing all these matters from this perspective: Jesus told us, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

God is sovereign; Satan is not. God and Satan are NOT peers; Satan is a little peanut contrasted with God.¹⁷ We should not ignore Satan; we need to always be alert and on guard against him, but we need never fear him.

- D. Our Christmas will be most rewarding, meaningful, and fulfilling, if we keep in mind the essential meaning of Jesus’ first coming to earth: how God has removed our *guilt* by his *grace* through faith in Christ Jesus, letting that understanding shape the perceptions and experiences we have, and then out of *gratitude*, following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—i.e., acting in accord with his Word and will in thanksgiving for the eternal salvation he has provided for us at such great cost to himself in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever, in his life, suffering, death, and resurrection—throughout the new year and always. In so doing, we will have a Christmas filled with joy that will last throughout the coming year and far into the future, indeed forever! (51, 52)

¹⁶ For more on who God is, what he is like, and what he is doing, see “[Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#).”

¹⁷ For more on the spiritual war in which we are engaged and its outcome, our triune God’s sovereign power over Satan and all else, God’s love and always being with us, see “[Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology](#).”