



God in the Flesh

VOLUME SEVEN

Essays by Gene Shelburne

THE CHRISTIAN
Appeal



God in the Flesh

Since we are now in the final year for *The Christian Appeal*, this will be our last set of Christmas essays by Senior Editor Gene Shelburne. Just like our previous six volumes of issues on the theme “God in the Flesh,” this one will focus on the bedrock Christian truth that God became a man. The Word became flesh. Nobody can mark a precise calendar date when that happened, but every year this special season does remind believers in every tribe and nation of just how much God loved us when he decided to appear as a baby in Bethlehem.

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Curtis Shelburne

“But when the fullness of **time** had come, **God** sent forth his **Son**, born of **woman**, born under the law, to **redeem** those who were under the law . . .”



The Apostle Paul
Galatians 4

God in the Flesh

Face to Face

Add up the years from first grade to my last graduate studies and you'll see that I spent almost a fourth of my life getting ready to live. And without a moment's doubt I will tell you that what blessed me most in those years of study was not the facts I learned. The most lasting impact came from my personal interaction with a vast array of teachers.


Over seven decades later I still can see the smiles and frowns and pursed lips and twinkly eyes of a multitude of teachers. I still can hear their chuckles and comments and corrections. Mrs. Canafax taught me English in the eighth grade. Ms. Gibbs taught me to type when I was a sophomore. Every single day I use the skills and information those very different ladies imparted to me, but who I am today depends far more on the attitudes and behavior they modeled for me.

Does this help you understand why I'm so sure that the virus-driven shift to virtual schooling has cost us an enormous price? I agree with retired school-headmaster Dr. Bill Summerhill that the lessons students most need can be "best learned in the give and take of classrooms, clubs, and teams, when boys and girls can engage with their elders and their peers in

creating, solving, competing, and cooperating." He warns us that the process where grownups can impart attitudes and behaviors to students cannot "be effectively duplicated in online education at home." Virtual schooling may teach formulas and facts, but not life.

I'm convinced that virtual church is no better. During the worst virus days I heard Dr. Howie Batson's fine sermons on TV. I heard my friend Dan Baker singing magnificent praises to the Lord. But neither of these talented men of faith knew I was listening. Neither of them could see my smiles or tears. None of the hundreds of people watching those services could reach out to me. Something vital to worship was missing. Virtual church simply is not church.

Evidently God knew this when he decided to come live side-by-side with us. He could control the tides and program the planets from his throne in Heaven. Without setting foot on Earth, he could manage all the creatures and craters and crises down here. But virtual creation just wouldn't do the job. To do it right, he had to become just like us and teach us face to face.

That's what we celebrate every Christmas. 

God in the Flesh

Getting Back Santa

When I moved my family home to Amarillo, our daughter Paula was 7, old enough to enjoy but to no longer believe in Christmas fantasies like Rudolph and Frosty and Santa. Now she was a big girl who saw the world through mature eyes.


But on our first Christmas in the house Paula still lives in, we had an unexpected Christmas Eve visitor. Dressed up like Santa Claus, Gil Muddell showed up on our doorstep that night with gifts in a big red bag. With his gray beard (that he had allowed to get bushy for this enactment) and with his old-man paunch, Gil made a perfect Santa.

So perfect, in fact, that his unexpected presence erased Paula's new doubts. Years later when we lost Gil, she said with heartfelt appreciation, "He gave me back Santa Claus for a year."

Unlike some of folks with Puritan roots, I'm glad we have all the trappings of Christmas. I like to hear the bells jingle and to watch the Budweiser Clydesdales, or to see yards full of snowmen and sleighs and the icicles on our tree. And I love all the Christmas music—not just the carols. The secular aspects of the season bless me a lot.

But all of these make-believe holiday embodiments do cause me one concern. No. It's not how much they cost us, although they do tend to be the commercialized face of Christmas. My concern is that far too many professing Christians may lump the wisemen and the shepherds and the angels and the baby Jesus into the same category as Santa Claus. They may think they're now too mature, too wise, too realistic to believe the events recorded in Luke 2.

Part of this may be our fault. In the centuries past, we pastors and church leaders have added bits of fantasy to the simple Bible record of our Lord's birth. After seeing the fairytale-ized scenes of that Bethlehem stable in storybooks and movies all our lives, for example, how many of us have any valid idea of what that animal stall really looked like? And our truly glorious pageant reenactments of that holy night have filled our minds with non-biblical details.

All of us know this, so it should not surprise us that some "believers"—without even realizing it—abandon belief in a real Jesus and put him on the myth shelf right next to Santa Claus. Am I describing you? 

God in the Flesh

God With Us

I grew up in a Christian fellowship that echoed the Puritans' resistance to religious holidays. We were careful not to preach Christmas messages in December. If we mentioned the holiday at all, it was to point out that a holiday called Christmas is nowhere mentioned in the New Testament, so it is a celebration we should avoid.

Somehow we overlooked the pervasive biblical truth that God has always used annual religious holidays to keep the faith of his people informed and alive. Holidays such as Yom Kippur. A whole week was set aside every year for God's people to bow down before him and seek atonement for their sins. Or Passover. How important it was for them never to forget how God freed them from Egypt and made them his own nation. Or Pentecost. Also known as the Feast of Weeks, this was a time when the Jewish people paused every year to thank God that a new year of harvests had begun.

Many centuries after Moses instituted those Hebrew holidays, Jesus observed them faithfully every year. And he didn't limit his celebrations to the special times outlined in Exodus and Leviticus. When his people closed their shops and idled their farms to celebrate Hanukkah (the rededication of their

Temple over three centuries after their scriptures ended), Jesus was there to participate in the festivities (John 10:22). That non-biblical annual religious holiday blessed his soul.

Christmas and Easter fill this same role in maintaining our Christian faith generation after generation. If in our churches and our families we keep the focus of Christmas on that special Bethlehem baby and not just on pagan trappings such as Rudolph and Santa, this annual reminder can sustain the faith of our kids and grandkids. This non-biblical holiday can remind us every year of important truths in the Bible.


Sixteen centuries ago, St. Augustine of Hippo used the birth of Jesus to remind his people of some of the most basic Christian truths:

*He was created of a mother
whom He created.*

*He was carried by hands
that He formed.*

*He cried in the manger
in wordless infancy.*

*He the Word,
without whom all human
eloquence is mute.*

John MacArthur said far more simply that "if we could condense all the truths of Christmas into only three words," those words would be "God with us." 

God in the Flesh

Christmas and Easter

Christmas can bless us if it causes us to see more clearly what God intended to do for us when he showed up as a newborn baby in that Bethlehem manger. If singing the glorious carols of the season and reading again the scriptures of Advent awaken us to the ongoing impact of the Incarnation (of God becoming a man), then this holy season can lift us up far beyond anything we may find in the glitter and gifts of the holiday.

Four hundred years ago the English poet John Donne was contemplating Genesis 1, but he also seems to have been reflecting on Christmas when he wrote:

*'Twas much,
that man was
made like God before,
But that God should
be like man
much more.*


That God choose to become like us "in every way," as the writer of Hebrews noted, is a bedrock truth of the Christian faith. Because of this, we know that our Creator fully understands all the pains and challenges we humans face. He has been there, done that.

But Christmas also showcases

an equally important Incarnation truth. Way back in 300 AD, the church leader now remembered as St. Athanasius did a masterful job of summing up this message of Christmas. Why did the Word choose to become flesh? Athanasius wrote: "He became what we are that he might make us what he is."

This basic truth of Christmas can be expressed in multiple ways. In Bethlehem we see God humbling himself so that we may be exalted. We see God coming down to Earth in order to take us up to Heaven. On that night the Almighty became weak so that his human creatures might become strong.

In addition to reading Luke 2 to hear the Christmas story this year, we would do well to also read the first half of Philippians 2. Paul tells us there that although Jesus really was God, he chose not to hang on to that rank. Instead "he gave up everything . . . when he became like one of us." Why did Jesus do this? Because "he was humble," Paul wrote. Humble enough even to let himself be executed on a cross.

But this is Christmas, not Easter, you may protest. And you're right. But it takes both of them together for either one to mean anything. 

God in the Flesh

Sleeping In?

Back in the 1940s, in rural towns like my mother's hometown of Robert Lee, Texas, every Saturday morning the main downtown street became a bustling human ant bed. People from all over the county would come to town that day to buy groceries, go to the barbershop, pick up castor oil or Hadacol, drink cherry cokes at the drugstore soda bar, and just to visit.


In almost all small rural towns like that, Main Street was packed on Saturdays. All the parking places were filled with Model Ts and WWII-vintage cars or old pickups. The wide sidewalks were lined with farmers and ranchers smoking and swapping tales. People jostled each other shoulder to shoulder. In those pre-Walmart days, the two or three blocks of businesses in most country towns were lively all week, but on Saturdays they overflowed with customers, especially in the morning hours.

Today, a Saturday morning, I drove through the downtown area of a similar West Texas town. The place was deserted. I didn't see a single human on the sidewalks or a car in the usually full parking places. My RAV4 was the only vehicle going anywhere on Main

Street. Not a single business had opened its doors. It was Saturday.

Every time I see one of these tiny towns, once so lively on Saturdays and now so dead, I have to wonder what caused this light-to-dark change. I can factor in everything from youth sports to FedEx deliveries to driving thirty miles to shop at Sam's. Changes in farm and ranch duties and the shift of business to digital venues surely play a role. That list could go on and on. But the empty streets still bother me.

Most of us older folks are seeing similar changes in our churches. Programs and practices that once blessed all of us have shrunk drastically or disappeared altogether. Not because people love the Lord less, but because the society we live in just keeps changing. Just as a deserted downtown on Saturday doesn't mean the town is dead, neither does a church with the lights off and the doors locked on Wednesday evening indicate a loss of faith. We oldtimers know that, but it's still hard for us to embrace the changes.

Aren't we blessed that the Lord we live for remains the same today, yesterday, and forever? He never changes. 

God in the Flesh

The Donkey Search

Mary's and Joseph's donkey probably is the most famous Bible burro, but not the only one.

Whenever I get to hear my colleague/friend Dr. Howie Batson preach, he blesses me. Just as he did on a Lord's day when some nasal crud made me stay home and miss church. Instead, on TV, I got to hear Howie preach his insightful message on young Saul's lost-donkey search.

I've taught that same Bible event dozens of times, but Howie helped me see it from a new angle. He pointed out how God accomplished his purposes by putting that unsuspecting young man into circumstances Saul had no way to plan or orchestrate. Saul thought he was just hunting his dad's lost burros, but God was sending him down that road to anoint him as king.


All the following week the light Howie lit for me that Sunday kept illuminating crevices in my own life. Over and over in the decades now past, God has led and prepared me for Kingdom roles, just as he guided Kish's donkey-hunting son without Saul knowing it.

How could I have dreamed that even in my earliest years the Lord was teaching me people skills I would use in ministry for decades to come?

When God had me grow up next door to an Air Force colonel's disciplined family, when he made our school principal my personal friend by positioning him as one of my paper route customers, when he arranged for me to fold my newspapers at 5 a.m. beside a huge, black, amiable veteran, or when he had me spend my thirteenth summer working for a German hardware store owner who treated me kindly but had precise expectations . . . and the list of similar encounters could go on and on.

I could list by name at least a dozen teachers who, in some important way, shaped my personality and thinking without me knowing it was happening. Add to that list at least a dozen pastors or church leaders. While going about their own duties, without knowing it, they trained and molded me.

When God put me in those situations or let me work alongside those special people, like Saul on the donkey chase, I saw not even a hint that he was getting me ready to serve him in countless circumstances I had no way to foresee.

What is the Lord doing today to get you ready for distant tomorrows? 

God in the Flesh

It's Not the Same

Have you noticed that Christmas just keeps changing?

Slowly—bit by bit—old holiday trappings vanish, and new sounds and symbols announce the season.

Manger scenes in church yards were common in the small town I grew up in. I haven't seen one for years.

Every Christmas Santa and his sleigh have appeared, but one Christmas several years ago that reindeer with the shiny nose showed up. Who dreamed up Rudolph?

I can't recall when Santa didn't have a beard, but compared to the whiskers so many guys sport in this Duck Dynasty era, Santa's chin hair makes him look like a piker. And in some television commercials last year, Santa turned black, and he was almost bald.

Before I started to school, I remember how excited I got when packages from our West Texas grandmothers showed up in our Gulf coast mail, all of them marked "Do Not Open Before Christmas!" Now, starting two months before Christmas, FedEx packages start showing up on our porch, and all of them get opened instantly.

When I was a kid, for a Christmas tree every year Dad cut a small cedar on a friend's ranch, and we

decorated it with construction-paper ornaments. Then we moved up to store-bought evergreens, followed by fake trees that fold up and spend the year in our attic.

Just as Yuletide keeps morphing, so does the world we live in the rest of the year. It used to take us at least a decade or two to evolve to cars we could start by pushing a button instead of using a crank. Now, almost overnight, we're replacing our noisy gas guzzlers with almost silent battery-powered vehicles. And driverless autos soon may become the norm. Are you ready for that change?

Can your teenagers imagine a world without cell phones? Or social media? Or Wi-Fi? Or video games? For a lot of us, all of those life-altering changes (and countless others) happened during our lifetime.

This year as the Christmas season starts again, no doubt we'll be shocked to see some of the latest changes in this grand holiday. But this is the perfect time of year for us to focus on the eternal truth that the almighty God who created our world chose to become one of us. Regardless of what else may vary in this holiday, that truth won't change. *CA*

God in the Flesh

Googling "Christmas"

Have you tried Googling "Christmas"?

I promise you that when you spend an hour or two delving into the sources Google identifies on the subject, you still won't know any more about the true meaning of Christmas.

Google will provide you a list of bank holidays during Yuletide 2022. As if you felt some urgent need to know that? Slightly more useful will be the articles about what day of the week Christmas falls on this year (as if you couldn't open any calendar and see that).

Although my lady and I aren't able to do much Christmas shopping anymore, I found lengthy articles about this year's most popular gifts. Alongside them were multiple presentations designed to alert us to new trends in Christmas decorations—information I might have found useful back when I could still climb a ladder to install them.

"Gifts for Women" was one category that surprised me a bit, since nowadays we are told every two minutes that no job and no military rank and no perk can be designated just for men.

I was not surprised when Google's Christmas catalog included Mickey's "very special Christmas" and then made sure to top an array of Disney offerings with Hallmark and Netflix

holiday movies. And, as we would expect, Dickens' tales surface multiple times during any Christmas search.

After I had clicked through over a dozen pages of Google's Christmas, the one link that interested me most was the one that featured traditional Christmas recipes. No doubt, that says something my friends already know about me.

I didn't make it even halfway through Google's lengthy "Christmas" category, but of the hundreds of sources they listed, only two or three (pieces about traditional carols) said anything about the real meaning of the holiday. Rudolph and Dr. Seuss's Grinch and Santa and the drummer boy all merited notice, but not Jesus. Not once that I saw.

Let me hasten to say that this column is not a "bash Google" blast. Instead, it is a word of concern about the current trends to secularize our entire culture. For centuries the baby born in a Bethlehem stable was the central focus of Christmas. In late December, people all around the globe paused to pay special tribute to Jesus and to thank God that he chose to become one of us.

If that's what Christmas still means to you, you are part of a dwindling minority. *CA*

God in the Flesh

Joy to the World

I love the music of Christmas. From my earliest years when my parents blessed our family with an RCA 78 rpm record player, my Christmases have been enriched by the glorious carols sung by everybody from the Mormon Tabernacle Choir to Bing Crosby and the Oak Ridge Boys.

At every level in school when I was growing up, we heard and sang the familiar Yuletide hymns, with “Rudolph” and “Frosty the Snowman” and “Jingle Bells” thrown in for good measure. My soul hurts when I see that today only a handful of the present generation of church kids know the traditional Christmas music, perhaps because in our public schools it’s now illegal (or at least not PC) to sing about the birth of Jesus.

Only in recent years have I learned enough about music history to realize that classic carols such as “Silent Night” and “O Come, Let Us Adore Him” are just like songs in every other genre. Most songs vanish quickly. Thousands are written every decade, but only a tiny handful of the very best survive for centuries. When we sing or hear the most common carols (or hymns of any kind), we are enjoying the


masterpieces of the ages.

Most of us won’t live long enough to verify this, but I have a gut feel that Mark Lowry’s new carol “Mary, Did You Know?” may turn out to be part of the Christmas music that is still cherished centuries from now. It may be a carol our great-great-grandchildren (and their grandchildren) still enjoy. I hope so.

Do you realize, though, that “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” was first written in Latin in the early 1700s? *Veni, Veni, Rex Gentium* . . . Over a hundred and fifty years later, a priest and scholar named John Mason Neale translated the English version we are still singing another century and a half later. It is a “golden oldie” that deserves to survive long after we’re gone.

Not just at the celebration of Jesus’ birth but in every season of the year, we need to be praying to Him:

*O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of
peace.*

Can you think of a prayer more urgently needed in this time of conflict and angry confrontations? 

God in the Flesh

Christmas Sunday

2022 is a rare year when Christmas comes on Sunday.

How often does that happen? I’m not a calendar expert, but by my calculations we enjoy a Christmas Sunday only about once every six years. It’s not precise, since leap year shoves everything ahead one day every four years.

Suffice it to say that a Sunday Christmas is relatively rare. Enough so to make this a special day for those of us whose faith and hope rest entirely on that baby born in Bethlehem.

This Christmas will be a day when those of us with basic Christian faith will gather to call out to all who trust in Jesus, “O come, let us adore Him!” With more bonafide emotion than usual, we worshipers can cry out, “Joy to the world! The Lord is come!”

I think I’m telling the truth when I confess that for most of us who wear the name of Jesus, weekly worship often becomes a bit perfunctory. We go through the motions, we recite the words, we sing the hymns, but our hearts too often are somewhere else and our minds are in neutral.

So, for most of us believers, it

may be an unforeseen blessing to have this special day fall on the Lord’s day. When you go to the house of the Lord on Christmas morning, I hope you get an extraordinary thrill when you hear the heavenly announcement, “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

On this Christmas Sunday, I hope it awakens your soul when you hear the praise of the angels, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

Yes. I know that many of us have been singing the familiar carols all of our lives. But it may mean a lot more to us to pray on Christmas morning,

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born in us today.
We hear the heav’nly angels
The great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us,
Our Lord Emmanuel.*



God in the Flesh

Christmas Giving

Gifts have always been an important part of Christmas for me.

During my earliest years, my gift focus was on what I would get. During the bulk of my productive years, I concentrated instead on what I would give. Now that my lady and I have more than we need of just about anything you might list, gifts for each other have stopped mattering much. And most of our Christmas gift-giving is done by the Grandma I married. She's the one who puzzles for months to decide exactly what we should give to which great-grandchild.


When I was growing up in post-Depression days, we always had wrapped gifts under our shabby Christmas tree. But not very many. Even before Santa Claus escaped (up the chimney we didn't have), my siblings and I knew that those ribbon-wrapped packages contained socks and undies and other clothing items our parents knew they'd have to buy for us anyway. Every year just one of our gifts would be a special toy. Finding it was always part of our delight on Christmas mornings.

I was about ten when I began earning a few dollars. Having even that paltry income shifted my

perspective on Christmas gifts. For the first time ever, I became the giver. For the first time, I spent December hours wondering what I should buy for my mother.

Sometimes that process was agonizing, but it was worth it. I suspect that your experience mirrored mine. Getting to watch our loved ones open "just the right gift" we had purchased for them gave us far more delight than any gift we received. Jesus was right when he said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Some theological historians trace Christmas gift-giving to the gifts the magi (the wisemen) brought to Jesus. This may be right, although those camel-jockeys probably didn't show up at Christmas time. I know they appear in our Christmas pageants right on the heels of the shepherds, but murderous King Herod seems to have timed Jesus' birth as many as two years before those stargazing gift-bearers showed up in Bethlehem.

Does it matter? Not in the least. The gift all of us need to imitate is not theirs. It is the gift God sent from heaven when he gave us his Son to show us how to live. It is the gift Jesus gave when he died for our sins. 

God in the Flesh

Christmas Without Jesus

Some of us belong to denominations that have Puritan roots. Our religious forefathers spent more energy opposing Rome than praising Jesus. I am delighted to see that in my eight decades this passion to bash our brothers has abated somewhat, but in our church the need to oppose all non-biblical church traditions was still in high gear in my early years.

I was an adult—I had been in ministry for decades—when one of our larger congregations invited me to come preach a Sunday night series for them during that December.


When I got there the first night, the coordinators of that study apologized. My presentation would be delayed a bit, they explained. Before we started the service, they wanted to give their youth groups—from toddlers to teens—a chance to sing Christmas music for parents and church friends.

That was fine with me. I enjoyed it. But it hurt my soul that the only Christmas music I heard in that church that night focused on "Frosty the Snowman" and "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" and "Jingle Bells" and decking the halls with holly. Not one word about Jesus. To hear about him that night, we'd have to go a few blocks away to

hear carols sung by youngsters in churches who long ago laid to rest their Puritan hangups about religious holidays.

I'm glad to say that the congregation in the tale I just told you later repented. A decade or two later (after most of the anti-Christmas generation were pushing up daisies), they too could croon "Silent Night" or "Joy to the World." And they still do, with gusto.

My own parents—bless their souls—were not as extreme as some of our church friends, but they had enough of our Puritan heritage to make sure that we never celebrated Christmas as the birth of Jesus. We decorated a tree. We gathered the relatives. We exchanged gifts. But in my childhood home nothing but the Mormon Tabernacle carols on the record player would offer even a hint that this was the right time of year for us to thank God that the Word become flesh.

I'm so glad we outgrew that Puritan passion to protest Christmas. Instead of turning thumbs down on manger scenes and Bethlehem, I want to spend this season thanking God that a virgin bore a child and called him Emmanuel—God with us. 

God in the Flesh

The Right Time

We don't need to wait until the Christmas season to ponder Galatians 4:4, "When the time was right, God sent his Son, and a woman gave birth to him" (CEV). Although this is a Bible verse that conjures up visions of Bethlehem and Mary and that famous manger, it also helps us focus on one of life's important truths.

"When the time was right . . ." Most of us know, often from hard experience, that timing is everything. Too early or too late often makes the difference in failure or success, whether you're a day late paying your water bill or a year too early to get your driver's license. Right timing can make a huge difference, and the Bible tells us Jesus came at just the right time.

Several years ago I heard a Christian couple telling the story of their first child's birth. For a decade they had tried unsuccessfully to start a family, but finally their fervent prayers and frequent visits to the fertility clinic paid off. They were ecstatic when she found out she was pregnant.


Her baby bump began to show and, unlike some gals, she did everything she could to display it. Then, to their dismay, almost two

months before the target date her water broke and her delivery pains began.

She gave birth to a tiny son who weighed less than a pound and a half. The doctors doubted that this barely breathing infant could survive. He did, but he spent almost four months hooked up to multiple tubes and wires and machines in a neonatal unit before his parents finally got to take him home.

His early arrival bankrupted his parents, and that infant's poor timing almost cost him his life. It takes nine months to hatch a healthy baby. Timing is everything.

Timing almost always matters. It matters when you put a cake into the oven, or when you invest big bucks in the market or take them out. Timing matters when you snap a football, or radiate a cancer, or speak a single word on stage. If you doubt that timing matters, just ask a pre-schooler how old she is. Some of the saddest words we ever hear are "too late."

The Creator who created time knows how crucial it can be, so after centuries of careful preparation and planning, he sent his Son into the world at just the right time. 

God in the Flesh

Together for Christmas

If you have read very many of my devotional essays, then you probably know how much I love Christmas. Almost everything about the season—the music and decorations and gifts and most of the other traditional Yuletide trappings—all of this delights my soul.

Few things in life have blessed me more than having a special time to focus on the amazing fact that the God who made us chose to become one of us. That's incredible. I'm grateful that we humans have designated a special season every year to ponder this truth. But near the top of my list of what I value most about Christmas would be family.


One of my good friends moans and whines and gets knots in his belly as December draws near, because he knows he'll have to spend the holiday week with a house full of relatives who detest each other. What a tragedy!

For me, Christmas has always been the exact opposite. My siblings and I could hardly wait for school to turn out and the holidays to begin, because we knew that we'd soon be laughing and dining with a cluster of aunts and uncles and cousins in one of

our grandparents' homes. For us as kids, Christmas was family.

That didn't change when I grew up and left home to start my own family. Only God knows how many miles we drove, how many meals we cooked, how many duties we rearranged in order to spend quality time with our kin during the last days of December. I can't imagine Christmas without family.

Now that my lady and I are old and decrepit, we're blessed to have a swarm of grandkids and great-grands who follow Santa Claus to our doorstep. We know that all of them have other obligations to other relatives, but we feel blessed beyond words that so many of them still want to spend some of these festive days with us.

When the Creator chose to be known to us as our Father, he was telling us something we need to hear. When he called us his children, God elevated family to the highest priority. In this increasingly secular age, the decline of faith seems to be wiping out the nuclear family. What does that forebode for a traditionally family holiday like Christmas? Are we about to lose it too? 

God in the Flesh

Adeste Fideles

Although it has always been one of my favorite Christmas carols, I was shocked by some of the unexpected details Benjamin Ivry shares in his historical review of “Adeste Fideles” (“O Come, All Ye Faithful”).

Worshippers at St. Peter's in Rome will enjoy it again this year as they conclude their Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, while non-Catholics worldwide will be singing the same carol in most of their Christmas celebrations. Few things have done more than this carol to unify all sorts of Christians around the globe.

Originally written in Latin (hence, its traditional name), the call, “O come, let us adore Him,” Ivry says, will be used in liturgies by Christians of an amazing variety of stripes. Partly because some sections of the carol repeat the Nicene Creed.

Many scholars trace the music itself to a lay Catholic musician, John Francis Wade, who got kicked out of England after the Jacobite revolution. Some people in that setting heard the music in this now-popular carol as a call for revolutionaries to return to London to restore Bonnie Prince Charles to the throne. That's amazing. How many of us have ever heard a hint of patriotic content in it?

But musicologists fiddle with

other ideas about its origin. One myth attributes the musical score to a 17th-century Portuguese king who was an amateur composer. But that is not why folks in England during one period called it “the Portuguese hymn.” In the anti-Catholic British world of the 1700s, they first had heard this “papist song” performed at Portugal's embassy in London.

A century later, “Adeste Fideles” had become one of the most popular tunes in Scotland, whistled by apprentice boys on every street and, as one missionary described its popularity, even “the blackbirds in the square joined in the chorus!”

While the true source of the music may never be known, nothing has spiked this carol's popularity more than the translation of its Latin words into English. Actually, though, its popularity has grown among people of almost all nationalities and languages.

Some amusing anecdotes are told about translation bloopers that occurred as the carol moved from tribe to tribe. But no matter where you are or what language you speak, one thing is universally true. Everybody thinks of Christmas when they hear these most-familiar notes calling us:

*O come, let us adore Him,
Christ the Lord!*



**“For to us
a child is
born,
to us a son
is given.”**



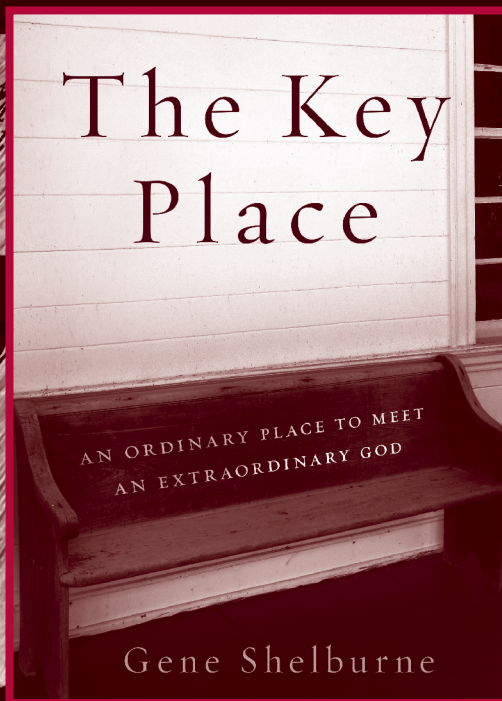
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Isaiah 9***

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