

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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### PERSPECTIVE NUMBER ONE

#### *Christmas: Themes of Hallelujah and Worship*

Sometime during the 2011 Christmas season, you have no doubt heard the reverberating words from George Friderich Handel's imposing oratorio, *Messiah*. Written in just twenty-four days in 1741, *Messiah* has three distinct sections: part one, the "Christmas Story;" part two, "The Redemption Story;" and part three, "The Resurrection and Future Reign of Christ on Heaven and Earth." Initially, Handel's oratorio was performed more during the Easter holiday, but gradually it became associated with Christmas, such that today it is almost always performed sometime in December by community, church and college choirs throughout the nation. The Hallelujah Chorus, now almost always sung at Christmas, is the majestic culmination of *Messiah*, the story of Jesus that Handel detailed in music—the story that was foretold by the Prophets (especially Isaiah), heralded in the Annunciation and portrayed throughout His earthly life. The story's message centers on the King and His Kingdom. Indeed, the central theme of both the first and the last book of the New Testament is Jesus as King. For example, Matthew's gospel is the only one to record the visit of the magi from the East, who sought "the one born king of the Jews, for we have seen his star in the East and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:2). Once they found Him in Bethlehem, their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (2:11) were worthy of royalty. The book of Revelation records the astonishing song of heaven's multitudes pronouncing, "The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). In addition, throughout the Gospel accounts, we see Jesus healing the sick, raising the dead and casting out demons—all the while proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand. His titles—Son of Man, I am, Son of God—all reflect His divine royalty. His preaching, especially the Beatitudes, provides the ethical paradigm for kingdom living. Finally, as He answered His disciples' questions in Matthew 24, He charted the course of His second Advent, when He will establish His earthly kingdom in all its fullness. Therefore, for genuine biblical Christianity, Christmas is more than Christmas carols, white lights, sumptuous food and family. It is the inauguration of God's kingdom. In the New Testament, Jesus is declared to be the "King of kings and the Lord of lords." In fact, near the end of Handel's oratorio, we hear the phrase, "King of kings and Lord of lords!" (from Revelation 19:16) sung in a stirring fourfold refrain, culminating in a fivefold "Hallelujah!" Tradition has it that England's King George II was so moved in 1743 by the performance of *Messiah*, especially the Hallelujah Chorus, that he stood to his feet, giving reverence for an even greater King. The rest of the audience stood as well, as have audiences for generations since. "The Hallelujah Chorus" anticipates the day when "a great multitude from every nation, tribe, people and language" will stand before His throne in celebration of God and His salvation (Revelation 7:9-10). For Christians, then, that is why we sing the Hallelujah Chorus: God, His Messiah and His kingdom have come to earth! And the worship at Christmas time is but a

prelude of all that is to come, for then the chorus of hallelujahs will ring for evermore!  
Hallelujah!

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER TWO

### *Charles Dickens and the Message of Christmas*

For over 150 years Charles Dickens' story of the miserly, miserable Ebenezer Scrooge and his three ghosts has been a regular Christmas tradition throughout Western Civilization. Indeed, even Hollywood has fueled this tradition by producing more than 15 feature productions of "A Christmas Carol." Why is this story so powerful, so gripping and such a staple of the Holiday season? The answer lies in understanding the author, Charles Dickens. Charles Dickens is arguably the most influential novelist in the English language. It was his Christmas stories and his struggle with Christianity that dominated much of his life and permeated his writings.

Born in 1812, Dickens' early life was one of poverty. His father, a lowly government clerk, found himself in debtor prison and young Charles consequently found himself laboring in the dismal factories and the workhouses of the day. These years marked him. When he finally escaped poverty later in life, he devoted his abundant writing gifts to exploring the lives of the poor, the frustrated and the unfulfilled. These themes we see in his *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, *David Copperfield*, *A Tale of Two Cities* and *Great Expectations*, among others. Because of his success as a novelist, his life was truly a rags-to-riches story. At the heart of Dickens' writing is a quest for significance, which eventually led him to explore the Christian faith. But he struggled with the consistency of Anglican Christianity; he saw so much hypocrisy and hurt in the supposedly Christian nation of England. He thus wrote innumerable essays on the disparity between Christian teaching and Christian practice and he lectured widely on the nature of Christian ethics and society. He even wrote a perplexing, yet searching life of Christ, entitled *Life of Our Lord*.

His annual Christmas stories, begun in 1843, were the most widely used forum for his musings on Christianity. The first, and in my judgment the best, was *A Christmas Carol*. Everyone knows the story: Ebenezer Scrooge and his clerk, Bob Cratchit, whose financially destitute, yet joyful, family ekes out an existence in old London, constitute the story's main characters. Cratchit's youngest son, Tiny Tim, is the focal point of Scrooge's miserliness. The ghosts of Christmas past, present and future haunt Scrooge throughout Christmas Eve night, as they expose all of his sins and shortcomings. He comes to terms with his greed and selfishness as "the squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous" miser. In short, Scrooge is regenerated, born again, into a generous, compassionate, loving man who rescues Tiny Tim from death, and becomes one "who knew how to keep Christmas well." Powerfully and with crystal clear clarity, Dickens's story is thus the transformation of Ebenezer Scrooge. Depravity, dispossession and depression are overcome by the power of repentance, redemption and resurrection. Perhaps, Scrooge is actually Dickens's alter ego, ending his quest for significance in the story of Christmas.

What lessons does Dickens teach us through his redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge? Dickens gives us no reason to believe that Scrooge has ever been dishonest in his business dealings. He

is thrifty, disciplined and hard-working. But it seems to me that Dickens is arguing that these virtues are not enough. As Scrooge's early patron, Mr. Fezziwig, demonstrates, moneymaking, generosity and a spirit of goodwill are not only compatible but inextricably linked in a purpose-filled life. Private charity combines with hard work in Scrooge's personal redemption. Although considerably romanticized, Dickens also depicts hard-working families gathered for a day of well-earned rest, merriment and modest excess. Christmas day becomes a reassuring antidote to the factory jobs and crowded cities of Victorian England. Today, we are far removed from Victorian England. But perhaps that is why we love the story so. We can identify with Scrooge in his miserliness, yet also long for his redemption. The message of Christmas is that God understands our miserly, selfish human condition and provides our redemption through His son, Jesus. The message of Christmas remains that the babe in the manger on Christmas morning was God's "unspeakable gift" to the human race. Until and unless we embrace that reality, we will remain in hopeless destitution as a modern Ebenezer Scrooge.

## PERSPECTIVE NUMBER THREE

### *The Hope of Christmas*

One of my favorite books, or actually series of books, is *The Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. In the first book of the series, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, Narnia is frozen in a seemingly permanent state of cold, frigid winter. There is never spring and there is never Christmas. Edmund is enslaved to the white witch, because he loved her offering of Turkish delights. He is trapped and hopeless! But Edmund notices it is less cold, there are green sprigs of grass bursting forth from the snow, and there is the sound of running water. The reason? Aslan, a clear Christ-like figure in the series, is near. Andree Seu writes: "His breath warms the sin-cursed ground, thaws the icicles around relationships, and ends indentured servitude to the witch we loved for Turkish delight. A lifelong winter that was never Christmas melts into first Christmas." Indeed, Mr. Beaver almost sings:

*Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,  
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,  
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,  
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.*

In so many ways, we are caught in this Narnia-like tension. The thawing has begun, but we are often cold, barren and seemingly lifeless when it comes to spirituality. We experience great defeat in our daily battle with sin, yet we see victories. We live with the reality of a sin-cursed, fallen world; yet we await the soon and certain return of our King. There is great, almost immeasurable sorrow in this fallen world, yet there is great comfort as well, a comfort that comes from Jesus. Seu writes: "For Christ has come indeed. But [we] live in the in-between time, where old age and new age overlap, and things are messy. The Lion is come—yea, is sacrificed on the stone table—but the book has several chapters in it yet. This is a mop-up operation but not a chimera; the skirmishes are real. Let us lay hold of Christmas, then, seizing the day and its power 'until the day dawns and the morning star rises' with all the confidence of spring." As Christians, we are caught in the tension of the already, not yet. We have the certainty of salvation that Jesus purchased for us, but we await His triumphant return and the establishment

of His glorious kingdom. The rebellion will end and all of His creation will acknowledge Him as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In the words of Revelation 7:16-17, there will be no more hunger, thirst, disease, pain—and there will be no more tears! Until that time comes, we wait. The First Advent provides the basis of our salvation through His death, burial and resurrection. The Second Advent will complete the program of redemption. That is the promise and the hope of Christmas.

The hope of Christmas morning gives us a certainty about God's Providence in the affairs of the humans. One of the best examples of this hope is the writing of the Christmas carol, *Silent Night*. The setting is Oberndorf, Austria, near Salzburg. On 23 December 1818, the new village priest, Josef Mohr, faced the challenge of a broken organ, which could not be repaired until after Christmas. That night he attended a Nativity pageant in a neighboring village. As he walked home from the stirring pageant, he reflected on that first Christmas. He began to fashion a poem in his mind, entitled "Silent Night." That night he wrote three stanzas. He showed the poem to the church organist, Franz Gruber, who composed the melody, writing his arrangement for the guitar. That Christmas eve, Mohr and Gruber sang, with a choir of young girls, the new hymn to the accompaniment of a guitar. Church members loved the new Christmas carol and it spread rapidly through the hills of Austria—and around the world. Had the organ not broken in Oberndorf, there would have been no *Silent Night*. God's Providence, as we live in the tension of the already not yet, is real and dependable. God continues to accomplish His purposes, His way. That is one of the key themes of Christmas.

See "Breakpoint" (25 December 2002) and Andree Seu, "We Shall Have Spring Again" in *World* (23 December 2006).