

PERSPECTIVE

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DATING TO THE GLORY OF GOD

Bonus Article

10 QUESTIONS
TO HELP US
THINK ABOUT
CHRISTMAS

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DATING TO THE GLORY OF GOD



I'm not a dating expert.

I took my junior prom date to dinner at Subway. It was inside a gas station. It's a long story.

My first date with my now wife, Jamie, took place just outside the Dallas airport and lasted about 15 minutes. She brought me Taco Bell during a layover. I gave her a book on the spiritual disciplines. Again, it's a long story.

Sadly, I could keep going. But to save myself any more embarrassment, I'll assume you get the point.

I'm not a dating expert. But thankfully, I don't need to be, and neither do you. To date to the glory of God and to counsel those who are seeking to date to the glory of God, we don't have to be experts. As in every area of Christian life, what we need is a clear understanding of what God says about dating, what it is, and what it's for. What I hope to show you in this article is that dating to the glory of God is dating done in accord with God's Word.

TAKING OUR CUES FROM THE WORD

Sadly, far more Christians take their cues from the world than from the Word when it comes to dating. This is due in large part to the fact that we don't think the Bible has much, if anything, to say about dating. Sure, it speaks a good bit about marriage. And, yes, it mentions betrothal (which, honestly, seems a little

weird to our ears, and is more akin to engagement than dating). But does it really have anything to say about dating? The answer to that question is a resounding, "Yes!"

The Bible has far more to say about dating than we typically think. Does it ever use the word dating? No. Does it ever mention the concept of dating? No. But does that mean it has nothing to say about dating? No. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, the Apostle Paul tells us that, in his Word, God has given us everything we need to live for his glory. And that means the Bible contains everything we need to date to the glory of God.

In what follows, I want to offer ten biblical principles that ought to guide our understanding of what it means to date to the glory of God. This list isn't exhaustive,¹ but I hope it helps to give you a vision for dating that looks less like the world's and more like the Lord's. Let's consider what God has to say about dating.

TEN BIBLICAL PRINCIPALS FOR DATING TO THE GLORY OF GOD

1. *Understand the purpose of marriage.*

Before a Christian begins dating, he should ask himself a question: "Why do I want to date?" My guess is that most single Christians would say they want to date because they want to be married. And that's the right answer to the question. The desire

to date should flow out of a desire for marriage. But that's not the only question we need to ask.

A second, and more important question (assuming you get the answer to the first question right) is this: "Why do I want to get married?" This question typically reveals what's *truly* driving the desire to date. You might desire to be married because you're lonely and long for companionship. You might want to be married because you want children. You may want to be married so that you can enjoy the gift of sex without experiencing the guilt and shame that come from seeking it anywhere else. These are all good things. But, in and of themselves, they aren't good reasons to start dating. That's because they all fall short of God's primary purpose for creating marriage. They aren't what marriage is ultimately about.

Marriage is ultimately about displaying the glory of God to the world by living out a flawed but faithful picture of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:22–33). As Marshall Segal explains, "Marriage is about knowing God, worshipping God, depending on God, displaying God, and being made like God. . . . What makes marriage worth having is that you, your spouse, and those around you see more of God and his love in Jesus."² God gave us marriage, not primarily to satisfy our desires and make us happy, but to glorify his name as he works through it to make us holy.

Understanding the purpose of marriage reorients our priorities in dating. It leads us to look for more than a companion, more than someone we think will make a good father or mother, more than someone who will satisfy our sexual desires. When we grasp God's purpose for marriage, dating becomes an opportunity to find a man or woman who challenges us to love God more, one who's committed to helping us see more of Jesus and look more like him.

2. Understand the aim of dating.

The Christian purity culture of the '90s and early 2000s was in full blossom when I became a Christian at the end of college. Its leaders rightly emphasized the goodness of singleness, rejected the idea of casual dating (dating solely for the sake of dating), and emphasized the importance of intentionality in dating relationships. They called us to guard our hearts (Prov. 4:23) and not to awaken love too early (Song 2:7; 3:5; 8:4). That led some to kiss dating goodbye, opting instead to revive the practice of courtship, and others, like me, to drastically rethink

their approach to dating. This wasn't all bad. It made us realize that dating needed to have an aim.

The movement posited that the primary aim of dating was marriage. This meant that asking a girl out needed to sound something like, "I'd like to begin pursuing you with the intention of moving toward marriage." I'm pretty sure I used almost those exact words to ask Jamie to begin dating long-distance. Talk about putting pressure on a relationship! If every date is a precursor to marriage, then you had better be certain this is "the one" before you ever start. While purity culture was right to say that dating needed to be aiming at something, it overshot and ultimately missed the mark.

If the primary aim of dating isn't marriage, then what is it? I would argue that the aim of Christian dating is God-honoring clarity.³ The purpose of dating isn't to begin moving toward marriage. The purpose of dating is to determine if the person you're dating is the man or woman God would have you marry, if your union would be pleasing to the Lord (Eph. 5:8b–10). Dating should be a time of prayerful, careful discernment. When a couple begins dating with the mutual understanding that their aim is clarity, it takes significant pressure off the dating relationship. When clarity is the aim, asking someone out to dinner or coffee isn't saying, "I'd like to begin pursuing you with the intention of moving toward marriage." It's simply saying, "I'd like to get to know you better." I'll say more about how to seek clarity in point six below.

3. Don't start too soon.

Let me be up front. As a general rule, I don't think high schoolers should date. That's primarily because I don't think high schoolers are ready to embrace the responsibilities of marriage (Eph. 5:22–33; Col. 3:18–19). More than that, I don't think the vast majority of high schoolers who want to date even have marriage on their radar when it comes to the "why" of their desire (see point one above). If the aim of dating is clarity, then marriage has to be a part of the equation. Dating in high school isn't practice for dating in adulthood. "Liking" a boy or girl isn't a reason to date.

To be ready to date, a young person needs to understand and embrace the purpose of marriage. A young man needs to understand and embrace what being a husband entails. He needs to be ready, willing, and able to lead, protect, and provide for a wife. He needs to be able to lead her spiritually (Eph. 5:25–30). A young woman needs to understand and

embrace what being a wife entails. A young woman needs to be ready, willing, and able to take on the responsibility of helping and submitting to her husband. Both need to be ready, willing, and able to embrace the gift of children if God should see fit to grant them (which could be much sooner than the young couple expects). And both need to be ready, willing, and able to leave their parents and hold fast to their spouse (Gen. 2:24).

Parents, I encourage you to start having conversations about dating with your children before they enter the teen years. Teach them the purpose of marriage. Explain to them the aim of dating. Explain why you don't think dating in high school is wise. Teach them how to relate well to the opposite sex. Encourage them to build God-honoring friendships with boys and girls and to enjoy those relationships without the pressure of feeling like they should be "going out" (or whatever teens call it these days) with someone. Encourage them to attend things like homecoming and prom with a group rather than a date. And spend lots of time talking about what they ought to be looking for in a spouse when they do begin dating as an adult.

4. Don't wait too long.

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2024, the median ages of a couple getting married for the first time were 30.2 for the man and 28.6 for the woman.⁴ When Jamie and I got married back in 2006, the average ages were 27.5 and 25.5, respectively. These numbers have steadily risen for decades, even among evangelicals. While the rise is due in large part to our secular culture's views on the importance of marriage and the normalization of cohabitation as a viable alternative, that isn't the only reason.

Another common reason for waiting to pursue marriage is a desire for financial and career stability. This, I suspect, is the more common reason for the increase in age among evangelicals. Brother, sister, if this is you, let me challenge you to reconsider your reasons for waiting to pursue marriage. Scripture nowhere demands a specific set of academic or career achievements as a prerequisite for marriage. Nor does it define being able to provide by our ability to reach a specific annual income or own our own home. What it does say is that, unless we are firmly established in our hearts that we have the gift of singleness (and with it the ability to keep our sexual desires under control), we ought to pursue marriage (1 Cor. 7:6–7, 25–38).

Brother, sister, don't let worldly standards determine your readiness to pursue marriage. No position in your company, no amount of money in your bank account, can tell you that you're ready. If you desire to be married, have a job, or are on the path to one, and the only thing that's keeping you from pursuing marriage is a desire to get to a place of financial or career stability, let me encourage you. Talk to a trusted brother or sister at Mount Vernon about your desire, preferably one who is already married. Share your reasons for waiting, and ask for their honest input. My guess is that they'll encourage you not to wait any longer.

5. Don't start without an established pattern of sexual purity.

If you have a porn problem or another pattern of sexual sin in your life, you aren't ready to date yet. Nothing has the power to destroy a dating relationship and devastate a future marriage like sexual immorality does. At its root, sexual immorality is selfish. It uses another person for its own personal pleasure (whether physical or relational). It makes sex all about taking to satisfy your desires—for pleasure, intimacy, control, security, etc.—rather than selflessly giving out of a desire to serve the other person. And, contrary to popular belief (at least among men), marriage isn't going to change that. Sexual self-control won't magically materialize in your life when you say, "I do." If your life is presently marked by a pattern of selfishly taking sex, you aren't ready to pursue marriage and the selfless giving of sex it requires (1 Cor. 7:3).⁵ And that means you aren't ready to date.

Just to be clear here, I'm not saying that anyone who has struggled with pornography use or sexual immorality in the past shouldn't be dating. What I am saying is this: If you have a "*regular and consistent current pattern*" of struggling with pornography or any other kind of sexual sin, you should not be dating.⁶ Instead, you should be laboring by God's grace and with the help of others in the church to begin the process of putting your sexual sin to death.

When should someone who struggles with sexual sin start dating? When your life is marked by a disciplined pursuit of the means of grace, a vibrant and growing relationship with the Lord, faithful engagement in the church, regular, proactive accountability,⁷ and consistent, sustained victory (anywhere from 6 to 8 months without incident) over sexual sin. If you are currently dating someone and that last sentence

doesn't describe your life (or theirs), I'd strongly encourage you to hit pause on your relationship. Step away entirely, engage fully in the fight for sexual purity, and trust the Lord to do what's best with that relationship while you do what is best for your soul and for your future soulmate, whoever he or she may be.⁸

6. *Know what you are looking for.*

Imagine trying to go deer hunting if you'd never seen a deer and had no idea what one looked like. You might come home with something in the back of your truck, but it probably wouldn't be a deer. Or, imagine that you know what a deer looks like, but the image you have in your mind is that of a flawless 16-point buck. If that's the only deer you are willing to shoot, odds are you'll come home empty-handed. Now, please don't take the analogy too far. I'm not saying that dating is like deer hunting. What I am saying, though, is that the only way to get the clarity that you're aiming for in dating is to know what you're looking for and to make sure that you aren't looking for something that doesn't exist.

Let's start with what you ought to be looking for.⁹ First, the person needs to be a Christian. If you are a Christian, Paul's command is clear: "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14). The Bible doesn't have a category for missionary dating. Second, the person needs to be an active member of a local church. You cannot thrive as a Christian apart from a vital connection to Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:12–27). Don't date someone who doesn't have a proven track record of walking with the Lord in the context of a local church, even if they are willing to start coming to church with you after you start dating.

Third, don't just look for "an attractive person of the opposite sex who 'loves Jesus.'"¹⁰ While attraction and compatibility certainly play an important part in determining whether or not you ought to marry someone, they aren't the most important things. Far more important is the question of whether they possess the godly character qualities that would make them a suitable spouse (e.g., Ruth 2:1; Prov. 20:6–7; 31:10–31; 1 Pt. 3:3–4). In his helpful book, *Dating with Discernment*, Sam A. Andreades suggests that clarity in a dating relationship is found by asking and answering the right questions. Below is a sample of the kinds of questions a dating couple ought to be asking as they pursue clarity in their relationship:¹¹

1. What pieces of the fruit of the Spirit do I see in his/her life (Gal. 5:22–23)?
2. Is he/she a person of integrity (Prov 19:1; Matt. 5:37)?
3. Is he/she humble (Phil. 2:1–4)?
4. Have I been growing in my relationship with Christ as a direct result of our dating relationship (Heb. 10:24)? How?
5. Can he protect me physically and spiritually (Gen. 2:15–17)? // Can she help me become the man God calls me to be (Gen. 2:18)?
6. Do I respect him and trust him to lead me (and, if God wills, our family) to a place of spiritual flourishing (Eph. 5:25–29)? // Can she joyfully and respectfully follow my leadership even when we disagree (Eph. 5:22–24)?
7. Does he/she have a vibrant relationship with Christ and a biblical vision for living out the Christian life when it comes to work, finances, family, parenting, church, discipleship, etc. (Matt. 28:18–20; Col. 3:23–24; Eph. 6:4)?
8. Do we share the same vision of the God-honoring life when it comes to work, finances, family, parenting, church, discipleship, etc.? (Quick aside: It's far more likely that this will be true if the two of you are members of the same church, or very like-minded churches.)
9. What do those who know me well think about this relationship? Do they see ways that he/she is helping me look more like Christ? Do they see any changes in me since we started dating?

Finally, don't look for the perfect person. Instead, look for God's perfect person for you. Marshall Segal helpfully explains, "God's perfect person for each of us isn't all that perfect. Every person who marries is a sinner. Therefore, the search for a spouse isn't a pursuit of perfection but a mutually flawed pursuit of Jesus. It is a faith-filled attempt to become like him and make him known with another."¹² Look for someone who faithfully, though imperfectly, will help you look more and more like Jesus and make much of him in the world.

7. *Date with purity.*

In 1 Timothy 5:2, Paul called Timothy (a single young man) to treat "younger women as sisters, in all purity."

The principle applies to both men and women and ought to mark all of our relationships, *especially* our dating relationships. We know this, and yet, far too many Christian dating relationships push the boundaries of sexual purity. And many, if not most of those relationships end with one or both parties haunted by some combination of heartache, hurt, guilt, shame, and regret.

Why do Christians who know better still end up pushing the bounds of sexual purity in their dating relationships? The easy answer is sin. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:14). That's certainly true, but I'm convinced there's more to it than that. At least two other realities contribute to the problem. For some couples, the problem is found in the fact that one or both entered into the dating relationship enslaved to sexual sin (see point five above). It's naive to think that someone struggling to fight for sexual purity as a single will somehow be able to flip a switch and begin fighting for it once they begin dating.

For other couples, the problem is a fundamental flaw in their approach to dating. Rather than pursuing clarity before intimacy, they pursue “clarity *through* intimacy.”¹³ In their attempt to determine if they ought to get married, they open themselves up emotionally, sharing their hearts (and often their bodies) with one another in ways that are only safe in the context of a committed covenant. Segal again offers sage advice: “Intimacy is safest in the context of marriage, and marriage is safest in the context of clarity. . . In our pursuit of clarity, we will undoubtedly develop intimacy, but we ought not do so too quickly or naively. Be intentional and outspoken to one another that, as Christians, intimacy before marriage is dangerous, while clarity is unbelievably precious.”¹⁴

Dating for clarity orders our priorities in a way that helps to guard the hearts (and bodies) of both parties. When clarity is our aim, it changes the way we think about the pursuit of sexual purity. We stop asking questions like, “How far is too far?” Instead, we ask questions like, “Is she committed to fleeing from sexual immorality, not just for my sake but for hers (1 Cor. 6:18)?” “Does he ‘know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God’? And, is he committed to my sanctification (1 Thess. 4:4–5)?” Moreover, when clarity is our aim, we can quickly part ways with anyone who evidences a lack of self-control and a willingness to compromise and

transgress God's commands to get what they want. That's clearly not the kind of man or woman we want to marry.

8. Date in community.

No, I'm not about to make a case for chaperoned dates. Instead, I want to make a case for opening yourself up to the input and accountability of others in the church as you date. Please hear me out. Far too many singles start dating in secrecy, intending to open themselves up to the feedback of others only if the relationship becomes more serious. But if the aim of dating is God-honoring clarity, then the sooner we involve others, the better.

In Proverbs, Solomon repeatedly tells us that safety is found in a multitude of wise counselors (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 20:18; 24:6). This is particularly true when it comes to the big decisions of life, like choosing whom you'll marry. I would suggest seeking out at least three different kinds of counselors to ask for input and accountability in dating: (1) your parents (especially if they are godly), (2) an older, wiser married couple in the church (ideally your discipler and their spouse), and (3) godly friends who've known you for a while. If you are going on a first date, let them know a little about the person and ask them to pray. Share with them the details of your relationship as it unfolds, invite their input, and be willing to listen to what they have to say, even if it isn't what you want to hear. All three groups can provide helpful insights into your relationship that you won't be able to see if you go it alone.

With that in mind, let me offer an important word of counsel: If the person you are dating doesn't want any outside eyes looking in on your relationship, that's a *big* red flag. If they don't want the eyes of older, wiser Christians on your relationship, that's a big red flag too. Fools shun counsel. The wise seek it (Prov. 12:15). The kind of person you want to marry is the kind of person who invites and embraces the counsel of others.

9. Don't drag your feet.

If the aim of dating is God-honoring clarity, dating relationships don't need to last for years and years. Men, if you and those you've invited into your relationship are convinced the woman you are dating is the woman God would have you marry, and she and those in her life feel the same way, wonderful! “He who finds a wife finds a good thing and obtains

favor from the Lord” (Prov. 18:22). Begin moving toward marriage.

On the flip side, both men and women have an obligation to end a dating relationship as soon as they become convinced that the person they’re dating isn’t the person God would have them marry. Though this can be really difficult, it’s far more loving and God-honoring to end it as soon as you know than to allow the relationship to continue on even though you know it’s heading nowhere (Jas. 4:17). For your good, and for theirs, don’t drag your feet.

10. Don't settle.

Dating can be exhausting. Prolonged singleness can be painful, especially when you have a strong desire to be married. The difficulty of both can make it tempting to settle for something less than God’s ideal in your dating relationships. Don’t. Don’t settle for a man who says he loves you and Jesus, but doesn’t love the church (Jn. 13:34–35). Don’t settle for a woman who’s physically attractive but lacks the true beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit (1 Pt. 3:4). If you find yourself trying to talk yourself into continuing on in a dating relationship because you worry you might not find anyone better, you don’t want to go back to being single, or you think that you’ll be able to “fix” the other person, you need to end the relationship.

If God would have you marry, he would have you marry a man or a woman who, though imperfect, is godly in all the right ways. You shouldn’t have to squint to somehow fit the person into the mold of a godly husband or wife. Trust him to provide in his perfect timing. Don’t settle for something less than God’s ideal for marriage. It’s entirely worth the wait.

SO MUCH LEFT UNSAID

Contrary to popular belief, the Bible has a lot to say about dating. These ten principles are only a portion of the guidance God offers to those desiring to be married. If that’s you, I’d encourage you to dig even deeper into the abundance of counsel contained in the Scriptures. A number of helpful resources exist to point you in the right direction. Here are a few I highly recommend:

- *Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness and Dating* by Marshall Segal
- *Dating with Discernment: 12 Questions to Make a Lasting Marriage* by Sam A. Andreades

- *She’s Got the Wrong Guy: Why Smart Women Settle* by Deepak Reju
- *Danger Signs of an Unhealthy Dating Relationship* by Lou Priolo

One of the biggest things I’ve left unaddressed (at least explicitly) in this article is the online dating scene. That’s because, to do it justice, the topic needs its own article. Certainly, all the principles above apply to online dating. But, so much more needs to be said. For example, I’ve yet to meet a Christian man who hasn’t struggled with sexual sin while using dating apps. I’m not saying they don’t exist, but given the number of data points I have, I think those men are few. Because of that, I counsel Christian guys to stay away from dating apps. Ladies, that reality should at least give you pause before using an app to find a date. Aaron has helpfully addressed some of the other potential dangers of online dating in a *Letter to the Church Scattered* entitled “Dating Culture and God’s Design.” You’ll find a link in the footnotes below.¹⁵ In it he points out that dating apps focus our attention on the external when the thing that matters most to God, and ought to matter most to us, is the internal. Dating apps fix our attention on person’s face, figure, and interests, when our attention ought to be on their heart, holiness, and character. While using dating apps isn’t inherently wrong, Christians need to be aware of their dangers and deficiencies.

So much more could be said, but I’ll leave it there for now.

DATING TO THE GLORY OF GOD

I’m not a dating expert. But praise God he is. His wisdom is far better than any advice the world can offer us about dating. And, in his kindness he’s given us everything we need to date in a way that brings him glory and praise. My hope is that this article has given you a small but helpful taste of the dating wisdom contained in God’s Word. And my prayer is that it will help you and those you counsel date to the glory of God.

— Dustin Butts

¹ For a more thorough discussion of what it looks like to date to the glory of God, see the list of books at the end of the article.

² Marshall Segal, *Not Yet Married: The Pursuit of Joy in Singleness & Dating* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 108.

³ Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 110.

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html>

⁵ Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 149-51.

⁶ Deepak Reju and Jonathan D. Holmes, *Rescue Plan: Charting a Course to Restore Prisoners of Pornography* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2021), 154.

⁷ See chapter 3 of Heath Lambert, *Finally Free: Fighting for Purity with the Power of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), for more on what this ought to look like.

⁸ For more on this topic, I'd encourage you to read chapter 8 of *Rescue Plan* by Deepak Reju and Jonathan Holmes (available in the MVBC Church Library).

⁹ For the sake of brevity, I'm assuming we agree that you should only date members of the opposite sex (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-6; Eph. 5:24-32)

¹⁰ Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 109.

¹¹ These have been adapted from Sam A. Andreades, *Dating with Discernment: 12 Questions to Make a Lasting Marriage* (Minneapolis, MN: Cruciform Press, 2021), 82-241, and Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 146-147.

¹² Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 109.

¹³ Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 137.

¹⁴ Segal, *Not Yet Married*, 110.

¹⁵ https://storage.googleapis.com/mvbc-archive/Files/Dating_Culture_and_God's_Design

10 QUESTIONS TO HELP US THINK ABOUT CHRISTMAS



When I was much younger, my father gave me a boxed set of C. S. Lewis's now-classic, *Chronicles of Narnia* series. I digested each book with childish delight. The pages were worn by the time I was an adult, and now that I've re-read them many times over with my own children, the books are practically falling apart. If you've ever spent time in Narnia, you know why.

The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe is the first book in the series. Young Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy Pevensie find themselves in the strange land of Narnia. It's a realm ruled by the White Witch, a woman wicked to the core. There is no love in her soul. She likes to be served. She worships herself and expects every creature in the land to do the same. And if they don't she simply turns them into a statue of stone—as villains in children's books are prone to do!

Narnia under the lordship of the White Witch is smothered by a cold tarp of snow. The land is as frosty as the witch's heart. It's not the kind of snow one can enjoy—think sledding, snowball fights, and hot chocolate. No, this snow pierces with dread. It's a hopeless, joyless cold. It is, as Mr. Beaver put it, "Always winter and never Christmas."

"Always winter and never Christmas."

That line meant something to Lewis. Most people remember Lewis as the author of fanciful, even spiritual, science fiction. He had a fertile imagination, ripe with interesting characters and even more remarkable places. (My favorite may be the land of Bism, a land so far below the earth that the gems are still alive. Rubies melt in your mouth and diamonds can be juiced!) But Lewis was more than an author. He was first and

foremost a Christian. And when he described Narnia as a Christmas-less, frozen tundra, he didn't just mean it was a land without decorations and presents, eggnog and sales—he meant it as a land without hope, and that is far, far worse.

And yet, not long after the Pevensie children arrive, something tremendous happens. Christmas returns with a most familiar character:

It was a sledge, and it was reindeer with bells on their harness. But they were far bigger than the Witch's reindeer, and they were not white but brown. And on the sledge sat a person whom everyone knew the moment they set eyes on him. He was a huge man in a bright red robe (bright as holly-berries) with a hood that had fur inside and a great white beard that fell like a foamy waterfall over his chest. Everyone knew him because, though you see people of his sort only in Narnia, you see pictures of them and hear them talked about even in our world—the world on this side of the wardrobe door. But when you really see them in Narnia it is rather different. Some of the pictures of Father Christmas in our world make him look only funny and jolly. But now that the children actually stood looking at him they didn't find it quite like that. He was so big, and so glad, and so real, that they all became quite still. They felt very glad, but also solemn.

"I've come at last," said he. "She has kept me out for a long time, but I have come at last. Aslan is on the move. The Witch's magic is weakening."

Your house may not make much of Santa Claus, but keep in mind that Lewis wrote for a wide audience. He had a message: Christmas is coming because "Aslan is on the

move.” Aslan is the True King of Narnia. Narnia wouldn’t be saved by Father Christmas. He was simply the evidence that Aslan had arrived. And with Aslan comes hope. Christmas isn’t fundamentally about the arrival of a large man bearing gifts—even in Narnia. Christmas is about the coming of God Most High bearing salvation. Christmas is about God being on the move. And so we can rightly say that with Christ on our side it is always Christmas and never winter.

In light of all this, it’s good for us to pause and spend a few moments thinking about Christmas: what it is, why it happened, why it’s important, how we should celebrate it, and how it should change our lives. After all, God is on the move. Here are 10 questions to get you thinking about the meaning of Christmas.

1. WHAT DOES THE WORD “CHRISTMAS” ACTUALLY MEAN?

We’ll think theologically about what Christmas means in a moment. But the actual word, “Christmas” is a compound word. “Christ” is a title and it corresponds to the Hebrew word, Messiah or Anointed One. To say that Jesus is the Christ is to say he is the Anointed One, the King. “Mass” is a word most often associated with the commemoration of Christ’s death by the taking of the bread and the cup (i.e., the Lord’s Supper). But mass simple means feast day—a religious day of celebration. So Christ-mass or *Christmas* is a day to celebrate Christ.

2. WHY IS CHRISTMAS CELEBRATED ON THE 25th OF DECEMBER?

The earliest Christians didn’t make much of special days, other than Sunday. Every Sunday was set aside to recall the resurrection of the Savior. In a smaller way, every Friday was an opportunity to fast and mourn the death of the Lord. When Christians began setting aside days for annual celebrations, Resurrection Day was the most important celebration added to the calendar. But Christmas soon followed.

The exact date of Jesus’ birth is unknown, but Christians eventually celebrated it nonetheless. Virtually every month has been put forward as the possible month of Jesus’ birth. Starting in the third century the incarnation was commemorated on January 6, the feast of Epiphany. However, churches in the fourth century adopted December 25, probably to replace several Roman, pagan holidays held at this time.

3. HOW DID CHRISTMAS GET COMMERCIALIZED?

Three names stand out. It’s not that these men deserve the blame for the blatant commercialism of Christmas, but their creativity caught the imagination of a generation that found a way to reinvent Christmas in the popular forms we find today.

The first is Washington Irving. Most of us know this nineteenth-century writer for his famous works, *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip van Winkle*. However

his lesser-known work arguably had an even greater impact. In 1809 Irving wrote *Knickerbocker’s History of New York*. In this book he made fun of colonial America, including the Dutch settlers who called Nicholas, their patron saint, Sancte Claus. Irving describes St. Nicholas riding over treetops, smoking a pipe, and putting presents in stockings hung in front of chimneys.

It’s important to keep in mind that Christians in America at this time weren’t sure what to do with Christmas. Many refrained from making one day *more* sacred lest the other days be considered less sacred. But Irving’s portrayal of families singing carols around a holiday feast were charming and compelling.

The second is Clement Clarke Moore, a religion professor who, in 1823, wrote a little poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, for his children. It begins with the famous line, “’Twas the night before Christmas,” and goes on to discuss children with “visions of sugar-plums” dancing in their heads, jolly St. Nick calling out to Dasher, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Doner, and Blitzen, and toys delivered by a merry man with a “nose like a cherry.” Moore’s imaginative words spread like wildfire. From then on, it was hard to think about Christmas without mention of the gift-giving St. Nick.

Fast-forward to 1931 and we encounter our third name, Haddon Sundblom. The Coca-Cola Company commissioned Sundblom to create a vision of Santa Claus to help market all things Coke. The Michigan-born artist conjured up his memory of Moore’s poem and for over thirty years Sundblom painted images of St. Nick that have been seared into the American consciousness. Close your eyes and think of Santa and it more than likely one of Sundblom’s pictures will appear in your head. It shouldn’t be a surprise to learn that Coca-Cola’s Santa was the first to be dressed in a bright, red suit.

Between the satirical history of Irving, the poetry of Moore, and the pictures of Sundblom a holiday narrative was created that appealed to every American girl and boy and provided a secular foundation upon which to build many of the Christmas traditions we still practice today.

4. BUT WHY DID CHRISTMAS GET SO COMMERCIALIZED?

This is not the fault of Irving, Moore, and Sundblom, it’s the problem of the human heart. It has been our inclination, our bent, to take good gifts from God (i.e., the birth of a Savior) and trivialize them (i.e., “Have a holly, jolly Christmas”). We do this all year long, not just at Christmas. Long ago, through the prophet Isaiah, the Lord said about Israel, “This people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me” (Isa 29:13). In other words, we are quite able to give the impression that we are worshipping God while, in reality, he means nothing to us. The commercialization of Christmas is living proof of the ability of the human heart to twist God’s

good gifts. Satan is pleased when people sing of the incarnation with their lips while in their hearts they reject the Savior King.

5. DOES THIS MEAN THAT IT'S WRONG TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS THE TRADITIONAL WAY?

It is wrong to make light of the incarnation. Our God is not to be trivialized. He is holy, just, and good. He is strong, righteous, and powerful. In Christ God took on flesh and dwelt among us that we might know him, and so that he might one-day die for sinners like us. If you can't honor that message while decorating trees, putting up holly, and singing Bing Crosby then, by all means, throw out the tree, discard the holly, and put Bing Crosby to rest! There is nothing inherently *Christian* about any of this, and that's something every true Christian has to keep in mind.

6. HOW SHOULD I CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS, THEN?

I'm glad you asked. It is crucial that we think biblically about Jesus' birth. To do that, we need to read the Bible. It's only as we immerse ourselves in the Word of God that Christmas can have any redemptive meaning in our lives. Take some time over the course of the next few weeks, and read through some passage that speak of the incarnation: Isaiah 7:19-25; Isaiah 9:1-7; Isaiah 42:1-9; Jeremiah 23:1-8; Malachi 3:1-5; Matthew 1:18-2:12; Luke 1:26-2:21; John 1:1-34; Philippians 2:1-11; Hebrews 4:14-5:10; 1 John 1:1.

7. WHAT'S THE EARLIEST MENTION OF CHRISTMAS IN THE BIBLE?

The word, "Christmas," can't be found in the Bible. But remember, at Christmas we celebrate the incarnation of God. We commemorate the fact that God took on flesh, in Christ, and dwelt among us. And we have hints and promises of this great fact throughout the Bible, long before the pages of the New Testament.

The earliest hint is Genesis 3:15. You may recall that Genesis 3 is a record of the fall—the moment humanity rebelled against God and fell from a state of perfect fellowship with God. This fall brought upon Adam and Eve God's curse. Not only would the pair experience death, but the woman was told childbearing would now be painful, and the man was warned that work would now be harsh. But it's not just Adam and Eve who were cursed, but the horrible tempter, Satan, was cursed, too. Satan had entered the Garden of Eden and encouraged them to reject God's good commands. And God judged Satan for it. Notice, carefully, the word of judgment: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen 3:15).

In these words of judgment against Satan is a word of hope for us. Satan is told that he will one day bruise the heel of the woman's offspring. But notice what her offspring will do: he will bruise Satan's head! Christians

have called this verse the *protoevangelion*—the first sharing of the gospel! What is described in blurry terms in Genesis 3:15 took place in HD clarity on the cross. Jesus was bruised—he was crucified. And Satan rejoiced over this. But on that cross something Satan should have expected took place: the Son of God bruised Satan's head. In other words, the power of Satan was destroyed. As Paul put it in Colossians 2:15, Jesus "disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him."

There is a promise of a Savior in Genesis 3:15—a man will one day conquer Satan. That's what we celebrate at Christmas, the birth of the Son of God, the God-man, who would one day bruise the head of Satan for the sake of our salvation.

8. HOW CAN GOD TAKE ON FLESH?

Before I even address the question of "how," it's important to recognize that this is the plain teaching of Scripture. John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." John testifies that the Word became flesh. And in John 1:1, John makes it clear who, exactly, this Word is. He is none other than God himself: "and the Word was God." So before we even try to wrap our puny minds around how this is possible, it's crucial to admit that this is clearly what the Bible teaches.

But how is this possible? Certainly it pushes against what we consider to be reasonable! Yes, it does. Still, is it any less reasonable than an eternal God creating all things out of nothing (Gen 1:1)? Is it any harder to believe in the incarnation than it is to believe that a dead man was brought to life (Jn 11:44; 20:1-10)?

When we say that God took on flesh, we are saying that the sovereign God chose to reveal himself in humanity. Jesus is fully God *and* fully man. We are not saying that Jesus gave up his divinity when he took on flesh. We are saying that he took on our humanity. Jesus "made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:7).

9. BUT WHY DID GOD TAKE ON FLESH?

This was the question posed by the eleventh-century archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, who in 1098 wrote his most famous work, *Cur Deus Homo* or, *Why Did God Become Man*? Anselm disagreed with those who insisted that on the cross Jesus paid a ransom to Satan. To say such a thing would be to assert that somehow humanity owed a debt to Satan, as if Satan needed to be paid back for our sin.

Anselm found this idea thoroughly unbiblical. God, not Satan, is the offended party in our sin. The ransom must be paid to God. Anselm described sin as robbing God of the honor due him. It's the failure to give God what he deserves.

God can't allow our rebellion to go unpunished, Anselm said. But how can we be forgiven. If God is infinite, the debt we owe him is infinite, too. How can a finite, sinful human being pay back an infinite debt to an infinitely holy God? Anselm recognized this as the dilemma we all face.

Anselm saw God as the only answer: "There is no one, therefore, who can make satisfaction except God himself." God is the only one who can solve our problem. And yet the problem is *ours*. It is our responsibility to make satisfaction for our sins. God may be the only one who *can* make satisfaction, "But no one ought to make it except man."

Do you see the problem? We have sinned against an infinitely holy God. But the debt we owe him is so great we could never pay it. Only God can make a payment so big. What is to be done?

God provided the answer. God became man; he took on flesh. But God remained fully God. So when Jesus Christ, the sinless God-man, went to the cross and died, he did so in our place (because he is fully man) and his death paid the infinite debt we owe (because he is fully God).

Do you have a headache yet? This is serious theology! But it's so important. It explains why God had to take on flesh. It explains the incarnation. We were in a horrible state: we needed salvation. We couldn't bring salvation ourselves, only God could do that. And he did it! Christ is God our Redeemer. The poet Mary Macdonald put it well:

*Child in the manger,
infant of Mary;
Outcast and stranger,
Lord of all!
Child who inherits,
All our transgressions,
All our demerits
On Him fall.*

*Once the most holy
Child of salvation,
Gently and lowly
Lived below;
Now as our glorious
Mighty Redeemer,
See Him victorious
O'er each foe.*

10. HOW SHOULD THIS CHANGE HOW WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

You may already celebrate Christmas very well. My point in bringing all this up is to teach you that the gospel is really at the heart of Christmas. Millions and millions of people today live as if it is always winter and never Christmas. They wake up, scrounge a living, go to bed and wake up only to do it all over again. They'll do anything to distract themselves from the mundane reality of their daily lives.

These distractions differ from person to person. For some it's entertainment, for others travel, for others drugs, for others sex, for still others its personal glory. But the distractions are always temporary. The entertainment will never last. The travel will one day stop. Drugs will cripple the body as they do the soul. Sex can never fulfill. Personal glory is fleeting. You see, for people like this it's always winter and never Christmas.

Christmas means there is hope. Christmas means God cares. Christmas means God can and did do something about the hopeless world in which we live. Christmas means God attacked the hopeless winter into which we were born. And how did God do this? He did it by doing what we couldn't do for ourselves. He entered this world and lived a perfect life. Jesus never sinned. He never fell. He never failed. He perfectly obeyed his heavenly Father every single day of his life. But that's not all. Jesus Christ went to the cross. The one man who didn't deserve death faced death for each and everyone one of us who would repent and believe. He died for those who would turn from their sins and trust in him. Jesus took on flesh so that he could die in our place, taking the wrath of God that we so rightly deserved. Peter put it this way: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Pet 2:24). Jesus didn't just bring hope; he wrapped it up, placed a bow on top, and delivered it right to our doorstep.

How should you celebrate Christmas? Simple: make much of Christ. Don't let the tree and the presents and the feast overshadow the King. After all, it's because of him that for all those in Christ, it's always Christmas and never winter.

— Aaron Menikoff

BIBLE READING PLAN

DECEMBER

TAKE UP & READ

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message.
Take Up & Read!

December 1 Jude 17-23
December 2 1 Thessalonians 1
December 3 1 Thessalonians 2
December 4 1 Thessalonians 3
December 5 Amos 4:6-13
December 6 2 Peter 3
December 7 Jude 17-23
December 8 Jude 24-25
December 9 1 Thessalonians 4
December 10 1 Thessalonians 5
December 11 Philippians 4
December 12 Psalm 121
December 13 Hebrews 10
December 14 Jude 24-25
December 15 Matthew 1:1-17
December 16 Matthew 1:18-25

December 17 Luke 2:1-20
December 18 John 1:1-14
December 19 Matthew 1
December 20 Isaiah 9:1-7
December 21 Matthew 1:1-17
December 22 Psalm 67
December 23 Psalm 68
December 24 Psalm 69
December 25 Luke 2
December 26 Romans 10:8-18
December 27 Psalm 70
December 28 Psalm 67
December 29 Revelation 1:1-8
December 30 Daniel 7:1-14
December 31 Revelation 22:6-21

*Sermons in Bold

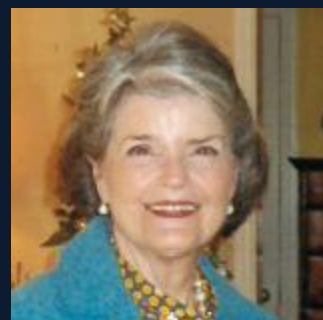
NEW MEMBERS



HOUSTON &
ADRIANA BASS



JOHN & HANNAH
COFFIN



KATHERINE FLACK



PAUL & JANET
HILL



HARRISON NGUY



TRAVIS & CELINA
STREET

"We must grasp once again, the idea of church membership as being
the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honour
which can come a man's way in this world."

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES



MOUNT VERNON

BAPTIST CHURCH

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