

"The end is not an event but a person."
—G. B. Caird

18-Dec-20

What Is This "Advent"?

[The world](#) around us is celebrating what many call Advent, the month-long buildup to [Christmas](#) that the more devout among them treat as a period of more intense prayer and fasting. Most nominal Christians do little more during this liturgical season—which originated as far back as the fifth century—than erect a Christmas tree and decorate their homes with traditional greenery. Some few attend extra church services and pray through an Advent daily devotional, keeping an Advent calendar to count down to Christmas Day.

Advent derives from a Latin word, *adventus*, which means "arrival" or "appearance." It is the Latin equivalent of the Greek word *parousia*, found 24 times in the New Testament, which means "presence" or "arrival." It can also indicate "the visit of a royal or official personage." For this reason, Advent can refer both to Christ's first coming as a human being, born in Bethlehem of Joseph and Mary, or to His [second coming](#) in overwhelming power and glory to punish the wicked and establish the [Kingdom of God](#) on earth.

However, most Christians of this world think of Advent in terms of His first, human arrival. At this time of year, manger scenes crop up at many churches

and in the yards of celebrants all over Christendom, competing with glowing Santa Clauses, animatronic reindeer, candy canes, and colorful, sometimes blinking, lights. We cannot but hear Christmas carols extolling this glorious Child and telling the story of His birth just about everywhere we go.

The irony of all this is that the New Testament writers *never* use *parousia* for Jesus' birth. The apostle Paul, who employs it the most, uses it six times to refer to the arrival or presence of certain men like Titus, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, and even his own presence ([I Corinthians 16:17](#); [II Corinthians 7:6-7](#); [10:10](#); [Philippians 1:26](#); [2:12](#)). He even utilizes the word when speaking of the "coming of the lawless one" in [II Thessalonians 2:9](#). Peter writes of "the coming of the day of [God](#)" ([II Peter 3:12](#)) in another usage of *parousia*.

The remaining sixteen appearances of the term ([Matthew 24:3](#), 27, 37, 39; [I Corinthians 15:23](#); [I Thessalonians 2:19](#); [3:13](#); [4:15](#); [5:23](#); [II Thessalonians 2:1](#), 8; [James 5:7-8](#); [II Peter 1:16](#); [3:4](#); [I John 2:28](#)) all refer to Christ's *second coming*. Two-thirds of the Bible's uses of *parousia* point to a future world-shattering event, and not one memorializes or even refers to the baby-in-a-manger story. Without a doubt, such an overwhelming witness directs the Christian's attention to the now more significant coming of the Lord.

This witness aligns with the New Testament's overall emphasis. While Matthew and Luke relate the incarnation story of [Jesus Christ](#) in detail in their gospels, and other writers refer to it in a handful of other places (like [John 1:14](#); [Galatians 4:4](#); [Philippians 2:7](#); etc.), the Bible focuses far more on His finished work as the sacrifice for [sin](#) and His present work as High Priest, along with the [hope](#) of His future coming as [King of kings](#). When we place this scriptural emphasis alongside the glaring fact that the Bible nowhere commands—or even hints about—celebrating the day of His birth, observing Advent and Christmas becomes suspect. Does the Bible not say that we are not to add or subtract anything from what God has revealed ([Deuteronomy 4:2](#); [12:32](#); [Proverbs 30:6](#); [Revelation 22:18-19](#); see also [Deuteronomy 5:32](#); [Joshua 1:7](#))?

To be fair, many of the readings and devotionals during Advent center on Christ's second coming and the final judgment of humanity, although some focus on His incarnation too. Yet, only the most pious participate in these

devotional readings and hear the sermons given on Sundays during Advent. Increasingly, most people who call themselves Christians darken their local churches' doors only on Christmas Eve and [Easter](#), and perhaps not even then. They do, however, put on their Christmas cheer, put up a tree and other decorations, give gifts to family and friends, sing carols, kiss under the mistletoe, and watch *It's a Wonderful Life*. The revival of Advent among Protestants—intended to help "put Christ back in Christmas"—is failing miserably. Since Christ was never in Christmas to begin with, the venture is futile.

The question may arise, "Why does God not want us to celebrate His Son's birth?" An immediate answer necessarily includes the fact that Jesus' birth definitely did not occur on December 25, nor can history or scholarship pinpoint an exact day. Had God wanted us to observe Jesus' birth, He would have made His birthday plain in Scripture.

But there is more to the answer than our ignorance of the right day. We can see a hint of a weightier reason in Paul's instructions about the Christian observance of [Passover](#):

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body [which is broken for you](#); do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes. ([I Corinthians 11:23-26](#))

Notice the repeated use of the words "in remembrance of Me," which the apostle highlights in his summary by asserting that our remembrance of Christ in taking the Passover "proclaim[s] the Lord's death." We should recall, too, the principle found in the Old Testament that "the day of death [is better] than the day of one's birth. . . . The end of a thing is better than its beginning" ([Ecclesiastes 7:1](#), 8). Scripture directs us to consider fruits and accomplishments, not necessarily even boundless potential (see [Matthew 7:16](#), 20; [12:33](#); [John 15:8](#)).

Simply put, then, while Jesus' coming as a human being was an essential part of God's plan, His birth was only a wonderful beginning. In reality, He was a helpless baby. His real work was years away; He had accomplished nothing of what His Father had sent Him to do. What God commands us to remember is His finished work, culminating in His death as a sinless sacrifice on Passover. Herein lies the significance of Jesus' last words, "It is finished!" ([John 19:30](#)). He had accomplished His mission, and now billions would eventually have the opportunity for eternal life in God's Family.

That is something to observe with awe and thanksgiving!

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Excusing Paganism in Christmas](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

God has never commanded us to commemorate the time of Christ's birth, but instead to annually observe the time of his death. Many 'Christian' leaders embrace a celebration that has undeniably pagan roots, stemming from the winter solstice festivals, observing the rebirth of the sun. John Chrysostom, by miscalculating the course of Abijah, thought he had made a case for a December 25th birth of Christ. Baptist scholar, author, and pastor John Piper proclaims that he sympathizes with those rigorous Christians who are alarmed about the origin of Christmas having pagan roots, but suggests that the roots are so far gone that it does not matter. Piper contends that even if these roots connect Christmas to pagan worship, it is worth "the risk," to enshrine Christmas as a Christian holiday because we moderns have placed a more "sanctified" meaning on it. The difficulty with Piper's position is that neither he nor any other human can sanctify anything; only God has that prerogative.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[So You Plan to Keep Christmas Now?](#)

by Mike Ford (1955-2021)

Mike Ford takes a few stabs at Christmas trees, lights and Barbie dolls—all, believe it or not, traceable to pagan customs!

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