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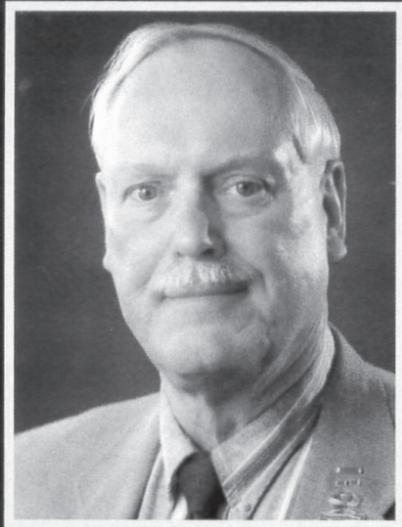


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Xmas: Do We Need It?

by Eric Wiggin

FAN readers may recall the spring issue where I wrote about my courting Dottie Hackney of Fruitport, which began in 1961 with a Christmas banquet date at Fort Wayne Bible College. Next day, Saturday, I watched sadly from a dorm window as her brother, Chuck Hackney, helped Dottie load her suitcases into their dad's red and white '56 Chevy station wagon.

Xmas? Some of you are already indignant about my spelling! Please continue your ire. I'll explain later.

Christmas day in Fruitport several years after our first date, and dozens of Hackney grandkids scrambled over one another in the old, four-room house on the hill at the end of 5th Avenue, as Grandma Hattie and Dottie fixed dinner. Cousins Chip Hackney and Scott Barnhard, armed with identical toy submachine guns, raced past. "Someone should send those kids outside," I muttered.

Grandpa Ernest Hackney heard me. "Outdoors, boys." He pointed toward the kitchen exit.

Shortly before Christmas 15 years earlier, I'd attended a Sunday evening church program honoring the birth of our Savior. On Monday morning, my heart filled with joy that only a few days of school remained before Christmas vacation, I sat on a bench in an old Chevy van, a makeshift school bus. Merry, freckled, red-headed Larry slipped out his harmonica and played a Christmas song, a top-40 radio hit new to me. Indignant, I squirmed as other kids erupted in a chorus that seemed to mock the Christmas we'd celebrated last night at church. "Rudolph, the red-nosed reindeer had a very shiny nose," they sang.

Sixty years passed, and I now waited at a checkout at Walmart near our daughter's Ohio home in a north-side suburb of Cincinnati. I'd left daughter Debbie with Grandma Dottie and our grandkids for some last-minute gift shopping. A man singing a Christmas song played over the store's PA.

I caught the eye of the, grey-haired cashier. "Recognize that voice?"

She smiled. "Gene Autry!"

This song about the lucky reindeer, I'm sure, was known to most customers. But that mellow, singing-cowboy voice? Few recognized it; perhaps fewer even cared that Autry had introduced Rudolph to the world when I was a child.

In the years between that frustrating school bus ride and the shopping foray in Cincinnati, I'd matured. Dottie and I, with children and grandchildren, had attended stage presentations of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Ballet* in Portland, Maine; Fort Wayne, Indiana; Winston-Salem, North Carolina; and Muskegon, Michigan. I'd watched movie versions of Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* maybe a dozen times; and both Christmas movies starring James Stewart several times.

Not one of these stage or silver-screen productions meaningfully features Jesus' birth in a manger, yet none supplants the Christ of Christmas.

Last Christmas I heard the pastor of a mega-church in Dallas tell his radio audience of millions that the "most important day in the history of the world" was Christmas.

The Bible teaches, and I believe more than ever, that Jesus—"Mighty God"—was born in Bethlehem of a virgin (see Isaiah 9:6). But I still eschew Rudolph and Santa, both which have become American culture icons, draining the meaning of Christmas from a holiday begun to honor Christ, who came to die as our Savior. I grieve that cashiers have caved in to political correctness and mutter "Have a nice holiday," instead of "Merry Christmas." So it may seem odd for me to insist that that Dallas pastor was mistaken. *Christmas is NOT history's "most important day."*

Let's briefly return to the Xmas in our title. Some folks get tied in knots over this advertising abbreviation. Yet Xmas was used for at least 1,000 years by monks writing about the birth of Christ. The "Let's keep Christ in Christmas" argument is an old-wives-tale explanation that it's a deliberate way to get folks to forget Christ.

X (*chi*) is the 22nd letter in the Greek alphabet. Its English equivalent is CH. Christ is spelled *Xristos* (*chi, rho, iota, sigma, tau, omicron, sigma*) throughout the Greek New Testament, so X (*chi*) is a correct abbreviation for Christ, as in Xmas.

The difficulty with Christmas as "the most important day in history" is much more subtle. There will be millions in heaven who never realized that Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem, since they lived and died before the birth of Jesus. Millions more, who may have celebrated Christmas holidays with reverent exuberance, won't be there. Nowhere in the Bible is it written that "If you believe Jesus was born of a virgin in a manger you'll be saved." Even Isaiah, rightly quoted by Matthew as having made this prediction, didn't understand this (see Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1: 22-23). Paul, however, wrote that Abraham believed and was saved, yet nowhere did Paul state exactly what Abraham believed, except that Abraham "believed God" (see Galatians 3:6; Genesis 15:5-6).

Belief leading to salvation, you see, is not left to a nebulous faith in knowing just about anything about God. This "message of faith," found in Romans 10:9-10, says "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." It's that simple—and that certain.

So, what the most important day in history? It's Resurrection Sunday, celebrated on Easter, a holiday with an unfortunate pagan name that honors an ancient fertility goddess. The Gospel (Good News) of salvation is laid out in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4: that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and He was raised from the dead.