


1 TIMOTHY 3:16 THE LOST CAROL

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

He was manifested in the flesh,
vindicated by the Spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the nations,
believed on in the world,
taken up in glory.”¹

veryone celebrates Christmas. This is not an exaggeration. A new study reveals that nine in ten Americans personally celebrate Christmas. That includes agnostics, those claiming to be adherents of religions other than Christianity, and even atheists. In fact, 89% of agnostics and those claiming no religious preference celebrate Christmas, 62% of those claiming other religions and 55% of atheists celebrate Christmas.² It would seem accurate to say that what was discovered in the survey in the United States holds true in Canada as well. Everyone celebrates Christmas.

Brilliant light displays are evident on the homes even of neighbours that make no pretence of worshipping the Son of God. The exchange of gifts will take place in almost every home, though I doubt that many pause to think of why they would exchange gifts. Few families fail to come together at Christmas where they will share a scrumptious meal served on a table groaning under the weight of the food.

Then, there are the carols that are traditional at this season of the year. What is your favourite Christmas song? Perhaps not surprisingly, among the twenty-five most popular holiday songs, only one is remotely connected to the birth of the Son of God. A list compiled of the 25 most performed holiday songs is available online.³ Here's the list:

The Christmas Song (Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire)
Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas
Winter Wonderland
Santa Claus is Coming to Town
White Christmas
Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!
Jingle Bell Rock
Little Drummer Boy
Sleigh Ride
Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year
I'll Be Home for Christmas

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Brooklyn Lowery, “AMERICANS CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS: To many, however, it's devoid of religious meaning, LifeWay survey finds,” Baptist Press, <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=34294>

³ ASCAP Announces Top 25 Holiday Songs, http://www.ascap.com/press/2005/120105_holidaysongs.html

Silver Bells
Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree
Feliz Navidad
Blue Christmas
Frosty the Snowman
A Holly Jolly Christmas
It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas
I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus
Here Comes Santa Claus
(There's No Place Like) Home for the Holidays
Carol of the Bells
Santa Baby
Wonderful Christmastime

Each of these songs undoubtedly evoke memories for many of us, and undoubtedly each of us enjoy hearing them. Most of us present will enjoy hearing and singing some of the great hymns that mark our faith in the Son of God. "Joy to the World," "Angels We Have Heard on High," "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," and hundreds of other hymns and carols bespeak faith in Jesus our Saviour.

However, I suggest that the greatest Christmas carol ever written is unknown to most of us. It is a First Century oldie with lyrics that are so phenomenal that there is no way they should remain unknown. The tune is no longer known; but the lyrics—well, let's just say they are inspired. I have no doubt that the song was once sung in such places as Thyatira, Sardis, Philippi, and it was assuredly known in Ephesus where it was sung during worship. The song definitely captures the essence of Christmas—the Incarnation—the time that God became man.

The song points those who sing, and those who listen, to Christ Jesus who is declared to be God! It is doubtless true that Paul was quoting a well-known hymn of that era when he wrote the words before us. The hymn would qualify as a Christmas carol, if for no other reason than where it begins—the birth of Jesus the Messiah. As we prepare to remember the birth of the Messiah, and especially as we anticipate a day of joyous celebration tomorrow, I invite you to think of what is declared in this lost carol.

When Paul writes, "Great indeed, we confess," he uses language that means "by common consent." In other words, what he is about to state is held as essential to the Christian Faith. Without common consent on what follows, there is no Faith. Those who wish to be called "Christian" must hold to this common belief about essential truth. What truth is in view? The question is not only legitimate, but it is essential. The Faith is defined by this ancient hymn that was once sung as part of worship in all the early churches.

First, the Son of God was manifested in the flesh. The word translated "manifested," is a Greek term that carries the connotation of revealing. In other words, it is a strong testimony of the pre-existence of God the Son, just as John declares of Him. "No one has ever seen God; the only One, Himself God, who is in closest fellowship with the Father, has made God known" [JOHN 1:18].⁴ While we speak of Christ being born of a virgin, no one should imagine that the Word of God implies that His existence began with His birth. Rather, His expression as man began with His birth of a virgin.

⁴ NET Bible

The hymn continues by saying that He was vindicated, or justified, by the Spirit. In His flesh, Jesus was declared righteous by the Spirit Himself. In contemporary language, Jesus lived a righteous life. When Paul writes the Roman Christians, he says of the Saviour that he “was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of Holiness by His resurrection from the dead.” So that no one need ever be confused as to the identity of this awesome personage, He is identified as “Jesus Christ our Lord” [**ROMANS 1:4**].

Understand that Jesus our Saviour “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” [**PHILIPPIANS 2:6-8**]. Though He was presented as humble, you need to realise that He is the Lord of Glory, as testified in the ancient carol when it states that He was “seen by angels.” According to the Word of God, the holy angels long to look into the matters concerning salvation [see **1 PETER 1:12**]. This humble Jesus was Creator of all thing, and now, “though the church the manifold wisdom of God [is] made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places [**EPHESIANS 3:10**].

This Jesus is proclaimed among the nations, reminding us that we have received a charge to tell all the world that life is offered to all who will receive Him as Master. We have received the charge, “Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Glorious as that command may be, we also are given the assurance of success if we will obey when Jesus said, “Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” [**MATTHEW 28:19, 20**].

If we will obey, we may be assured that He will be “believed on in the world.” We do not coerce anyone to believe; neither do we force this Faith on anyone. Rather, we are confident that when we declare the mystery of godliness that the Spirit of God still works in the heart of those whom God appoints to salvation. We are certain that some will believe, for the Master has taught us that the Spirit of God working in the hearts of mankind will “convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgement: concerning sin, because they do not believe in [Jesus the Christ]; concerning righteousness, because [He goes] to the Father, and [we] will see [Him] no longer; concerning judgement, because the ruler of this world is judged” [**JOHN 16:8-11**],

Our Master was born into a humble home in the most humiliating of circumstances. He lived a sinless life, and at last presented His life as a perfect sacrifice because of our sinful condition. We were incapable of assuaging the wrath of Holy God. By birth and by choice, each of us is compelled to confess that we are sinners. His sacrifice, if we accept it in our place, removes all guilt and satisfies the penalty of sin. He verified His claim to be the Son of God by conquering death and rising from the dead. After His resurrection, He walked among men, being seen by as many as five hundred at one time. Then, after preparing those who believed, He ascended into the glory. “When they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’” [**ACTS 2:6-11**].

This is the Christmas message, a message that has no meaning until you receive it as truth directing your own life. This is the offer of God extended to each person at Christmas—Christ the Lord was born that He might die. However, His death extends life to any who will receive it as offered in his or her place. He did not stay dead, but He conquered death and rose from the dead. Therefore, we can announce the glad tidings that life is offered—the forgiveness of sin, freedom from guilt, acceptance into God’s family—when you receive the reign of Christ over your own life.

This is the promise of God: “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.” As Scripture promises, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” [**ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13**]. Amen.