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Christmas Is About a Baby

Orson Scott Card

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CHRISTMAS IS ABOUT A BABY

Orson Scott Card

When I was a child, I completely understood all the Santa Claus stuff. No great moment of disillusionment, because my parents were wise enough to let us help create the illusion for the younger kids as soon as we were old enough.

I loved decorating the tree. I was the icicle fanatic, laying each one on individually. Even better was setting up HO trains all around the tree (and short-circuiting the train by laying icicles on the track for the engine to run over).

Shopping for gifts was great, but when I was feeling ambitious, so was creating some of the most awful “crafts” that ever forced a parent to smile and pretend to not only “love” the gift but also understand what it was supposed to be.

The Christmas carols. The church Christmas bazaar. Pretending to like candy canes. Playing games with the family. Digging treats out of the stockings. Trying to conceal my envy when my older siblings got cool gifts that my parents thought I was too young for (but they were always wrong, in my opinion).

You know: Christmas.

As a kid, I took Santa Claus in stride, but after a while I wondered about the Christ child: What was all the hoopla about?

What did the shepherds see when the angels sent them into Bethlehem? A baby. What did the Wise Men see after traveling so far and ineptly tipping off a corrupt king about a threat to his throne? A toddler.

As a kid, I had seen plenty of babies. They were all alike — wordless, clumsy, big headed, sleepless, pukey, demanding, incontinent, and incompetent at everything.

But cute.

The only thing different about baby Jesus was they swaddled him like a mummy, and he had a bunch of people looking at him and worshiping him.

But come to think of it, almost all babies are surrounded by worshipers. Oh he's so cute. Look at those eyes. Whose nose does he have? (Answer: Nobody's. Because he barely has a nose at all.) He can already do *that*? (No, he can't, but his parents are delusional and everyone pretends to believe them.)

As I got older, I started hearing some of the medieval legends about baby Jesus's miracles — Joseph cuts an expensive board too short for the piece of furniture he's making, but little Jesus makes it long enough. That sort of thing.

I wasn't expected to believe those miracle tales. Because the doctrine *we* believe is that Jesus was born as a baby. Not a miraculous winged creature with a wand, like a cross between a Victorian fairy and a Victorian Cupid — just a baby.

The point was that he was born into *mortal* life and suffered the same kinds of problems we suffer. He learned “line upon line” like any other child in a religious family. He learned “obedience by the things which he suffered” (Hebrews 5:8).

Christ was able to have “compassion on the ignorant” because “he himself also is compassed with infirmity” (Hebrews 5:2). Both at church and at home, I learned that Jesus was not a miracle-working child — he worked and played, got frustrated and probably skinned his knees, and had childish adventures and had friends who sometimes liked him and sometimes didn't.

He was one of us. That was the whole point of his becoming a mortal man — he could sin, but when he learned the law, he chose to obey it perfectly and thus needed no atonement himself and so could suffer as a perfect sacrifice for our repentance's sake.

If he had known all along that he was Savior of the world, if he had been chatting with angels from the start, if he was working miracles, if he never had to live by *faith*, then how could he tell us, “I am the Way. Come follow me”?

Or, as my wife puts it, “Fasting doesn’t count if you are not actually hungry.” I have a friend who sometimes forgets to eat. I have no idea what that would feel like. But it doesn’t count as “fasting” simply to miss meals because you didn’t remember that it was mealtime. When Jesus was fasting in the wilderness, when Satan tempted him to turn stones into bread, what was the point if he didn’t care about food?

Likewise, it’s no great accomplishment that I keep the Word of Wisdom. Tea and coffee always looked and smelled icky. Alcoholic drinks stank and made people stupid. I hated campfires because the smoke always tried to choke me; cigarettes involved deliberately taking smoke into your lungs. Why would anyone ever do that? So I don’t earn any celestial points because I obey the Word of Wisdom — I was never *attracted* to those sins.

Why would we praise Jesus for being perfect if *no* sin ever tempted him? If he never had cause for anger or wished for something that he didn’t have but somebody else did?

We usually depict him bearded, which suggests he passed through puberty like any other boy; do we have any reason to think he wasn’t flooded with the normal hormones? If he wasn’t, then what’s the big deal about his chastity? And how could he possibly understand all of us who *do* know about such pleasurable desires?

In all those Christmas stories, Jesus himself was only a baby. Yes, his real Father wasn’t a regular guy, but he was *raised* by a regular guy. And maybe Mary never raised her voice at any of the kids, but ... Jesus certainly heard *other* mothers chewing out their kids.

He was a baby, then a toddler, then a boy, then a young man, and he experienced life at every stage. If Jesus didn’t have the normal bodily desires and needs, then it was no great accomplishment for him to shun the more popular sins.

So to me, as a boy thinking about Christmas, it seemed that while it was good to have the tree and the lights and the gifts and the parties and the carols, what really mattered about Jesus was not that he was the Son of God, but that he was One of Us.

It is not his *difference* from ordinary mortals that we should be celebrating, it's his *similarity*.

And as I held each of our children in my arms, and later each of our grandchildren, I have thought: Joseph and Mary might have had signs that their baby was going to be remarkable, but so did my wife and I, and so do our grandchildren's parents. Nobody knows the paths the children will walk through life — but we're filled with hope all the same.

Wise Men may not bring gold, frankincense, and myrrh, but clever and loving women and men show up with stuffed animals, car seats, rattles, teething rings, clothes, and all sorts of other helpful items.

Angels may not sing to shepherds, but they're not needed — all the local shepherds are checking out the baby pictures on Facebook.

Every baby who's born into this world is a son and daughter of God, even if He is not the literal genetic sire of the body. And so are the parents of every child, imperfect as we parents always are.

All children come from a heavenly realm, they had a premortal identity and experience that, just like Jesus, they voluntarily set aside in order to experience this life and show themselves and everyone else what they choose to do when they don't know that God is watching.

We are all immortal beings who are clothed in these incompetent, incontinent sacks of skin and bone that somebody else has to take care of and clean up and protect and educate for *years* before we're finally skilled enough to contribute to society.

We are all filled with divine potential, and God loves and cares about us all.

So I'm perfectly happy that in choosing the day to celebrate Christmas, the early Church Fathers picked the season of Saturnalia, so that the Church could provide a faith-promoting alternative to the absurd but popular pagan revelry of the season.

Let everyone's favorite holiday now be centered on the stories surrounding the birth of the Son of God. Even though

as a baby, Jesus didn't do *anything* that other babies don't also do, why not surround our memory of his life with gifts and sharing, fellowship and charity?

If we want to see what the Christ child was like, we have only to look at any and every baby making noise in sacrament meeting, or crying in nursery the first time the parents left him behind, or toddling into some dangerous predicament because he has no clue what to be afraid of.

Every baby partakes of divine nature and young baboonhood at the same time. And the struggle of raising those babies to adulthood is to help the divine nature triumph over the baboon.

Jesus's parents had to teach him the law as well as social rules of ordinary courtesy. He was trained to show respect for figures of authority. He learned to dress himself. To feed himself. And, eventually, to use the tools of his father's trade — as well as the books and teachers that taught him about his Father's business.

When we see the purity and innocence of babyhood, along with the messiness and inconvenience, we are seeing the spirit of Christmas past, present, and future.

Thank God for all the babies. God bless them, every one.

Orson Scott Card, publisher of NauvooTimes.com, is first counselor in the bishopric of his ward in Greensboro NC, where his house is the first one to have Christmas lights every year, and his wife, Kristine Allen Card, keeps the house filled with her seminary students. Card also writes fiction and teaches writing and literature at Southern Virginia University.

