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Christmas in Transition: From Figgy Pudding to the Bread of Life

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CHRISTMAS IN TRANSITION: FROM FIGGY PUDDING TO THE BREAD OF LIFE

Spencer J. Condie

Abstract: *While Christmas traditions around the world have evolved, some losing their focus on the Christ child, there is still need for us to center our thoughts and hearts on his message of forgiveness and redeeming love.*

The late President Gordon B. Hinckley observed that “There would be no Christmas if there had not been Easter. The babe Jesus of Bethlehem would be but another baby without the redeeming Christ of Gethsemane and Calvary, and the triumphant fact of the Resurrection.”¹ So it is that Christmas is but the overture to the Savior’s mortal ministry, culminating in His atoning sacrifice that enables all mortals to overcome the bonds of death and manifests His redeeming love to all who come unto Him with full purpose of heart.

There was a time when Christmas truly did commemorate the birth of the Savior of the world as reflected in those sacred hymns such as *O, Little Town of Bethlehem*, *Away in a Manger*, and *Silent Night*. But, alas, through the passage of time, these sacred hymns were partially replaced by *Jingle Bells* and even *Jingle Bell Rock*. Christmas is a joyful time, as reflected in a song of halls bedecked with holly. Neighborhood carolers invariably end their medley of songs with the ever-popular *We Wish You a Merry Christmas*, including the refrain “Oh, bring us some figgy pudding ... and a cup of good cheer.” What once began as a sacred, yet joy-filled,

1. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Wondrous and True Story of Christmas,” *Ensign* (December 2000) 5.

commemoration of the birth of Christ the Lord has gradually undergone a transition from the “Bread of Life” to figgy pudding.

We lived for several years in Europe, and I remember the overwhelming feeling of dismay one December as large signs in the city were changed from “Christmas Celebration” to “Winterfest.” The city fathers felt that the word “Christmas” might offend those citizens not of any Christian persuasion.

We had some English-speaking friends in a communist-dominated country who asked if we might be able to send them some English children’s books telling the story of the Nativity. We told them we would be pleased to help, so we visited several book shops in search of books for young children about the birth of Baby Jesus. We were disappointed to find a plethora of books about Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Frosty the Snow Man, The Night before Christmas, and Santa Claus, but there were no children’s books about shepherds, wise men, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.

Many countries have perpetuated legends of a saintly soul known for his kindness and compassionate giving. Some traditions refer to this man as St. Nicholas, Kris Kringle, or Santa Claus. Regardless of his origins, this legendary mortal being became a model of generosity and selfless giving. Over the years Santa Claus became the man to whom children would make their demands for gifts. A few years ago in late December, I walked into a department store and spotted a fairly large man in overalls with a white, bushy beard. I approached him and asked enthusiastically: “What are the chances of meeting Santa Claus on his day off?” He smiled and said, “Being Santa isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” Then he showed me his left hand which was black and blue. He explained, “I was Santa Claus in the middle school last Wednesday afternoon and, unfortunately, we ran out of candy canes and a little rascal seated on my lap was so disappointed not to get his candy cane he bit my hand — hard.” Santa is no longer a symbol of compassionate giving to others; rather, he has become the font for receiving.

In December of 1961 in Germany, my missionary companion and I were invited to spend Christmas Eve in the home of a family comprised of five young children and their parents who all lived in a cozy little apartment. The mother and older children had been baptized. However, the father resisted baptism because of

his addiction to alcohol. Somehow he was able to maintain steady employment, but whenever we visited the family, the room was filled with fumes, and the father invariably slurred his speech.

So, it was with some apprehension that we accepted the invitation to spend a sacred evening with this family. When we arrived in their home, to our pleasant surprise and relief, it was readily apparent that the father had not drunk any alcohol for several hours. The air had a subtle fragrance of pine from the little four-foot tree in the corner of the room with a vestige of smoke wafting from the burning candles. The father uncharacteristically assumed his role as patriarch and invited us all to join in singing Christmas hymns. None of the songs mentioned Rudolf or Frosty or the wish that Santa would replace missing front teeth for Christmas. Each and every hymn was about the Light of the World.

After a considerable length of time singing all the verses of each and every hymn, this young father rose to his role as family patriarch, and with dignity and reverence he opened the Bible. He could have asked one of the elders to read these sacred passages, but he assumed that responsibility and began to read: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). He did not raise his voice, nor was there any dramatic enunciation of the words. Here was a humble father whose life was a tug of war with trials and troubles, and he was re-telling (or reading) a sacred story with the authenticity of an eye witness.

He continued: "And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7). Reading further he spoke of "shepherds abiding in the field" and the voice of an angel declaring: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:6, 10). The shepherds "came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child ... But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:16–17, 19).

I have had the blessing and privilege of attending General Conference sessions, temple dedications, solemn assemblies, and countless testimony meetings, but I have seldom felt the Spirit being manifest more strongly than in that cozy cottage with an alcoholic father and his little family on Christmas Eve.

Of all the hymns about the Savior, perhaps the one most beautiful — because it is the most personal — is the “Song of Redeeming Love.” After Alma relinquished the civic office of chief judge in order to devote full time as a high priest over the church, he went first to the people in Zarahemla, where he asked them a series of 42 soul-searching questions. Among these questions he asked: “[I]f ye have experienced a change of heart, and if ye have felt to sing the song of redeeming love, I would ask, can ye feel so now?” (Alma 5:26). During that Christmas Eve so long ago, we truly felt the song of redeeming love. That young father eventually entered the waters of baptism, and he, too, was able to sing the song of redeeming love, the song extolling the Atonement of Christ and the miracle of forgiveness, the greatest Christmas gift of all.

Spencer J. Condie attended Idaho State University, Brigham Young University, the University of Utah, and the University of Pittsburgh where he received a Ph.D. in medical sociology. He was a professor of sociology and ancient scripture at Brigham Young University and served as a mission president in the Austria-Vienna Mission when it included the countries of Hungary, Yugoslavia, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Greece. From 1989-2010 he served as a General Authority Seventy and then as President of the Nauvoo Temple. He and his lovely wife, Dorothea, are the parents of five children with eight grandchildren.