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David F. Holland

Abstract: *Early American campaigns against Christmas illustrate both the irrepressibility of the impulse to celebrate Christ and what is lost when we reject the good that comes from suspect sources. Both lessons point us toward the Savior's gracious acceptance of our own imperfect offerings.*

Christmas in rural New England is a mood. Snow falls softly on colonial-era farmhouses. Candles sit in the gabled windows that line little village streets. Townsfolk gather on the common to trim and light a tree. As the song suggests, it is nearly "like a picture print by Currier and Ives" — a land of pumpkin pies and Longfellow poems and Alcott's literary visions of the March girls taking their Christmas feast to the needy.[1] When we suggested to our college-student children that, instead of bringing them home, we might travel to them for the holidays this year, there was near rebellion. New England, we were told, *is* Christmas.

Now, I enjoy all this yuletide sentimentality and its carefully curated aesthetic as much as anyone. I am a sucker for the spice-scented ambiance that settles upon our communities as Christmas approaches. It is indeed lovely. But I am also a historian who knows something about the religious values of New England's past, and I cannot help but be somewhat amused by the fact that this effusion of holiday nostalgia would make the region's Puritan progenitors sick. Maybe furious. Definitely disappointed. They had actually done their darndest to kill Christmas.

As early modern Britons, Puritans knew Christmas to be an annual excuse for too much drinking, too much ribaldry, too much irreverence and unrest. Worse still, as radical Protestants, they saw Christmas as

1. Mitchell Parish, "Sleigh Ride," music by Leroy Anderson (Nashville, TN: EMI Mills Music, 1950).

a reflection of Catholicism's paganizing influence in Christendom. Just as they rejected the Catholic mass as a jumble of sensory rituals that benumbed the soul with alluring sights, smells, and sounds, they suppressed "Christ mass" as a celebration unfit for their Savior. The observance of Christmas was not something that — by their reading — the scriptures sanctioned, and its extravagant imposition could only lead the gullible away from the spiritual demands of discipleship.[2]

They were serious about this. Boston made celebration of the holiday a finable offense for decades. Even after the lifting of such official punishments, stalwart Puritans sought to suppress the practice. In a December 25th diary entry, the prominent Boston judge Samuel Sewall exulted in the fact that most of the town's inhabitants still refused to acknowledge the day, going about their business as usual. Sewall spent a typical morning reading Psalms with his family and then took occasion "to 'dehort [them] from Christmas-keeping, and charged them to forbear.'"[3] Puritans like Sewall carefully observed their community to make sure it did not observe the holiday.

The story of how New England went from a region radically dedicated to the eradication of Christmas to a region identified by its iconic observance of the holiday is long and complicated. It has to do with demographic change, and economic development, and a host of other historical forces of limited relevance for the purposes of this essay. There are, however, a pair of implications in this history that seem worth noting.

First, I am struck by the irrepressible desire to rejoice in the birth of our Lord. Puritans were right about so much: December 25th *was* an unverified date for the advent; pagan influences *had* seeped into the modes of observance; riotous revelries *were* incongruous with claims of devotion. But they seemed dead wrong on one thing: they underestimated the power of even imperfect celebrations to meet a deep Christian desire to celebrate the Savior's arrival in our fallen world. Their best effort to suppress that celebratory impulse, albeit pursued in the name of strict

2. Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A Social and Cultural History of Our Most Cherished Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 3–48; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 10.

3. Quoted in Stephen W. Nissenbaum, "Christmas in Early New England, 1620–1820: Puritanism, Popular Culture, and the Printed Word," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 106/1 (1996): 153, https://www.americanantiquarian.org/proceedings/44539478.pdf.

gospel purity, could not be sustained. This effort to honor God by eradicating Christmas failed.

I cannot help but see some parallels between the Puritans' ill-fated campaign against Christmas and the account in Luke of our Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem: as he arrived "the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen; saying, Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord: peace in heaven, and glory in the highest." When the Pharisees sought to silence the celebration, Jesus "answered and said unto them, I tell you that, if these should hold their peace, the stones would immediately cry out" (Luke 19:37–40). The same impulse to rejoice in the arrival of the world's great Hope, which could not be contained that day in Jerusalem, similarly cannot be suppressed among those who feel the meaning of his humble entrance into our shared mortality. Worship — when fueled by gratitude and adoration — will not be so easily silenced. It comes from somewhere deeply seated within us, an instinct we share with the very elements of the earth itself. It can be muted for a time, but it won't be gone for long. The history of New England would tell us as much. In this it is not alone.

This fact was poignantly on display in the First World War, when English and German combatants had an impromptu Christmas Day ceasefire, emerging from their trenches to sing and make merry together. What the Puritans could not do in the name of religious devotion, a World War could not do in the name of imperial conquest. Neither one could defeat the desire to honor the Prince of Peace by celebrating his birth. They hadn't stopped Christmas; it came just the same.[4]

Another lesson I take from the Puritans' campaign against Christmas is the very real risk of religious overcorrection. Folks like Samuel Sewall certainly saw themselves as doing God's work in their effort to eliminate the holiday, but they made the age-old mistake of defining this aspect of their faith in the negative. They weren't quite sure what they should do to recognize the Nativity, they just knew it wasn't going to be at all associated with what their theological opponents did. In critiquing medieval Christianity, they cast away everything that seemed stained by its unscriptural practices. If some reform was good, more must be better, they reasoned, and they were going to purify the House of God until it was immaculate.

4. See Stanley Weintraub, *Silent Night: The Remarkable Christmas Truce of 1914* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

This sort of theology by reaction tends to recoil at anything associated with those it deems its enemies, even if they actually have something of potential value to offer. This seems to be a tragic instinct of humanity in general, and perhaps it particularly affects religious disputants, given a tendency to seek absolute doctrinal purity. From 2 Nephi 29 to the most recent General Conference, where we were reminded of the good to be found in those with whom we may have even serious theological disagreement, Latter-day Saints have reasons to resist this inclination. As the Prophet Joseph declared, "One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may."[5] Elsewhere he wrote, "We believe that we have a right to embrace all, and every item of truth, without limitation or without being circumscribed or prohibited by the creeds or superstitious notions of men, or by the dominations of one another."[6]

At times, we as a people have engaged in the tendency to theologize by overcorrection. A desire to avoid what we saw as the theological errors of evangelicalism, for instance, has occasionally made us too hesitant to acknowledge our profound dependence on divine mercy. Where Puritans tossed away Christmas because it was too pagan and too Catholic, we have too frequently muted an amazing grace because it seemed too Protestant. As we appear to be learning in our growing comfort with the language of grace, we can accept the truths cherished by others, even if we disagree on much else. We were too quick to suspect the theological gift that evangelical counterparts had already offered. Just as Christmas would not be killed, our need for divine grace could not be lastingly downplayed.

Among the instructive symbols of the Christmas story is the way in which various figures are remembered for their observance of the Lord's advent. Shepherds marked the moment in their way; wisemen in theirs; and Simeon and Anna in theirs. The Christ received the blessings that each had to bring, regardless of the source. To borrow the prophet's phrasing, he "let them come from whence they may." Later in his mortal ministry, the Savior welcomed the dinners offered by Pharisees and the ministrations of a disgraced woman, even when the two seemed

5. The Joseph Smith Papers, "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," 1666, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844/36.

6. The Joseph Smith Papers, "Letter to Isaac Galland, 22 March 1839," 54, https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-isaac-galland-22-march-1839/4.

fundamentally at odds. He accepted the good that many sought to do him, graciously receiving their imperfect offerings without minimizing his critique of the wayward in their lives. So he does for us, both receiving what we give him in good faith and calling us to repentance, knowing that in all of human history perhaps no one has ever presented him with a perfectly pure offering. If He were to reject the good things we present because they are intertwined with human folly and fault, he would never accept a thing any of us has ever brought to the altar.

As I consider the Puritan heritage of New England and the persistence of Christmas joy, I am struck by the beauty that can result when we make room for the imperfect gifts we encounter. I am profoundly grateful that some elements of that early New England asceticism have remained to temper the neo-pagan materialist excesses of a modern capitalist Christmas. Similarly, I am grateful that the desire to be generous and joyful at the commemoration of Christ's birth overcame the Puritans' theology of overcorrection. Even damaged offerings can enrich our lives when we resist the temptation to reject the truths therein because they strike us as coming from unlikely sources. And I am grateful for a Savior, represented in the Nativity narrative by his infant self, who patiently welcomes what we have to offer. Among *his* greatest gifts is his magnanimous willingness to accept *ours*.

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