

American Decency Association

PO Box 202, Fremont, MI 49412 231-924-4050 www.americandecency.org
Encouraging Christians to guard their hearts December 2018

Christmas According to the Apostle Paul

by R. Fowler White



One of the most beloved carols that Christians sing during the Christmas season is that of William C. Dix, *What Child is This?* As few other carols do, the lyrics of this selection prompt us to contemplate the identity, the person and work, of the Babe in the manger. In fact, the carol politely but persistently presses us to answer the question: is this Child truly a holy infant or a mere holiday infant?

... [L]et us consider Christmas according to the Apostle Paul. Yes, even the Apostle reflects on the wonders of the birth of Jesus, and he does so in Galatians 4:4-5.

“But when the fullness of time had come, God

sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.”

The Apostle Paul tells us six extraordinary things about Christ as he tells his answers to the question that the carol poses to us. In this our first installment in a three-part series, let us consider two of those truths.

First of all, notice that, according to the Apostle, Jesus is the Child for whom all of time had waited. Paul’s words prompt us to reflect on the timing of Christ’s appearance in the world: “when the fullness of time had come.” The time at which Jesus came is said to have been time at its fullest point, a unique occasion when all the parts of history that had to occur had, in fact, occurred. Each and every detail that had to take place was now in place. Clearly, Paul wants us to realize that the timing of the historical appearance of the Father’s Son was something agreed upon

and fixed between the Father and the Son from all eternity. The Apostle Peter adds that the timing of the Son’s arrival was a date that the prophets of old diligently searched out, and it was revealed to them and predicted by them (1 Pet 1:10-12). These words, then, urge on us the realization that the timing of Christ’s birth was according to the determination of God, who, from all eternity, had, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably ordained whatsoever comes to pass. Christ could not have been born either sooner or later.

If, then, the birth of Jesus took place in the fullness of time, what did that fullness look like? We can summarize it in four characteristics. It was a time of political preparation. The Roman Empire had brought the pax Romana (“peace of Rome”) to the then known world and so the world was united as never before (cf. Luke 2:1). It was a time of economic preparation. The Romans had constructed a fine transportation system,

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focused in five main highways leading from Rome to destinations in the ancient world (cf. Col. 1:23). It was a time of cultural preparation. The Greek-language had become the medium of commerce, culture, and philosophy (i.e., the lingua franca), and so it was possible for the gospel and the gospel literature to reach a universal audience. And, finally, it was a time of religious preparation. A famine of the soul, individual and societal, had come upon the world. The failures of paganism and even Judaism, along with a revival of Messianic hopes, characterized much of the ancient world. Thus, in his phrase, “when the fullness of time had come,” the Apostle Paul points us to the truth that, politically, economically, culturally, and religiously speaking, history had been orchestrated by the one true God. In particular, by His singular sovereignty and providence, the histories of Rome and Jerusalem, both of which figured so

prominently in our Lord’s sojourn on earth, had converged. The appointed date for the debut of the Son of the Father arrived right on schedule.

What Child is this in the manger, then? He is the Child for whom all of time had waited.

Second, the Apostle’s words in Galatians 4:4-5 tell us what Child this is when he says that Jesus is the Child who was “born of a woman.” With these words, Paul begins to reflect on the circumstances of His birth, which in turn directs our attention to the humiliation of the glorious eternal Son. In accord with prophecies such as Gen 3:15 and Isa 7:14, the Son was born of a woman. He was, thus, fully human as well as fully divine, the one and only God-man. The Son of God was sent to be one with us in our humanity.

But there is more to this expression, “born of a woman.” You see, the Apostle knows the history of Jesus’ nativity. At that time, it was customary to speak of being “born of a man,” a custom to which the genealogies of the period bear witness - gene-

alogies other than the one of Jesus. He was born of a woman, indeed of a virgin, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. This Child was born without a man, born of a woman, the Son of God the Father.

Yet “born of a woman” tells us still more about this Child. He was not only made and formed “in” woman, but “of” her. That is, He was born of her flesh and blood; of these He took part. Such is the first circumstance of His birth to which the Apostle calls our attention as he reflects on the low estate and great humiliation of the Son of the Father.

What Child is this, then? He is the Child who was born of a woman, just as He was the Child for whom all of time had waited.

In our next installment we look at two more truths that the Apostle Paul teaches us about Christmas.

To read parts 2 and 3 in this series go to <https://bit.ly/2riPo3p>

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