

# CHRISTIAN HEADS, HEARTS, AND HANDS

ARTICLES TO HELP FORM US AS FOLLOWERS OF "THE WAY"

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## Consider Skipping "Christmas Season" This Year

by Daniel Montgomery and Bobby Gilles

Advent means "coming." It's a time for us to celebrate the first coming of Christ, but also to anticipate his return. When we sing, "O come, o come, Emmanuel; To ransom captive Israel" we're not just taking a sentimental journey back in time. We're reminding each other of God's faithfulness in the past, and we're expressing our own longing for Jesus to come back and put an end to injustice, hatred, sin, and fear.

Jesus repeatedly told his followers to watch and pray for his return. The season of Advent is an opportunity for us to reorient our thinking and to corporately express our fervent hope in the Second Coming of Christ. Our Lord wants us to be an *expectant* people. But what if we're not? What if we live as if this present world order will go on forever? What if we ignore the lessons of Advent? What can we expect when we're no longer expecting God to reconcile all things to himself and create a new heaven and a new earth, wherein all righteousness dwells?

### 1. No Passion for Evangelism or Mission

Regardless of what our church statement of faith says, if we practically live as if this present world will roll on forever, why work for the kingdom? *Do you not say, "There are yet four months, then comes the harvest?" Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together.* (John 4:35-36)

### 2. 'Your Best Life Now' Heresies

Many nominal Christians reduce Christianity to a set of healthy, rational principles for feeling good about yourself, staying in shape, balancing your checkbook and doing good deeds. Why not? If this life is all there is, we may as well make ourselves comfortable. *What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* (1 Corinthians 15:32)

### 3. Dangerous Church Leadership

When churches finally become hardened enough to the truth of Christ's return, they lay the groundwork for wolves to enter, dressed as sheep. And the Lord said, *"Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you, he will set him over all his possessions. But if that servant says to himself, "My master is delayed in coming," and begins to beat the male and female servants, and to eat and drink and get drunk, the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know, and will cut him in pieces and put him with the unfaithful.* (Luke 12:42-46)

### Our Proposal: Skip 'Christmas Season'

Or better yet, celebrate the birth of Christ when our church fathers intended, during the 12 days between Christmas Day and Epiphany. But first, let Advent be Advent. In doing so, your Christmas celebration will be even more joyous. Advent season begins each year on the fourth Sunday before December 25. While "Christmas season" is often marked by greed, gluttony, and (if you're lucky) a few warm fuzzy feelings as you stand under the mistletoe or drink hot cocoa by the fire, Advent stirs our hearts for the return of the king.

We acknowledge the already/not yet tension that Christ has come, and that Christ will come again---that he is the one "who is and who was and who is to come" spoken of in Revelation 1:8. We re-enact the yearning of those Old Testament saints who longed to see Messiah. And in doing so, we let the Spirit of God stir our hearts in anticipation of our own deliverance, and Christ's promise (Revelation 21:5) to make all things new.

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## How a Christian Witnesses with Good Deeds

Don Carson

One metaphor our Lord uses to describe the witness of the Christian is light (Matt. 5:14–16). Christians are the light of the world—a world that, by implication, is shrouded in thick darkness. Jesus talks about two sources of physical light: the light from a city set on a hill, and the light from a lamp set on a lampstand. The first source, the city, is often misunderstood. Some think that Matthew, in recording Jesus’s teaching, became somewhat confused and put in an irrelevant illustration about a city visible from a great distance because of its elevation. The illustration is colorful, it is thought, but out of place in a context concerned with light. Such critics, I think, are only revealing that they live in the industrialized world where light is so readily available.

### Importance of Light

They don’t know how dark nature can be. In Canada it’s possible to go camping hundreds of miles away from any city or town. If it’s a cloudy night, and there’s no phosphorus in the area, the darkness is total. A hand held three inches from your face can’t be seen. But if there’s a city nearby, perhaps 100 miles away, the darkness is relieved. The light from the city is reflected off the clouds, and the night, once perfectly dark, is no longer quite so desolate. Likewise Christians who let their light shine before men can’t be hidden; the good light they shed attenuates the darkness that would otherwise be absolute.

When once we imagine a world without hundreds of watts of electric power at our instant personal disposal, we’ll understand how darkness can be a terror and a symbol of all that is evil. The light from the city, even if it isn’t as powerful as our modern sources of illumination, makes the darkness a little more bearable than it was before. Light is so important that it’s ludicrous to think anyone would want to extinguish the flickering flame from an olive-oil lamp by smothering it with a peck measure. That burning wick may cast only a little light by modern standards, but if the alternative is pitch blackness, its light is wonderful, quite sufficient for everyone in the house (Matt. 5:15).

### Importance of Good Deeds

“In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). What is this light by which Jesus’s disciples lighten a dark world? In this context, we read of neither personal confrontation nor ecclesiastical pronouncement. Rather, the light is the “good deeds” performed by Jesus’s followers—performed in such a way that at least some men recognize these followers of Jesus as sons of God, and come to praise this Father whose sons they are (Matt. 5:16).

The norms of the kingdom, worked out in the lives of the heirs of the kingdom, constitute the witness of the kingdom. Such Christians refuse to rob their employers by being lazy on the job, or to rob their employees by succumbing to greed and stinginess. They are first to help a colleague in difficulty, last to return a barbed reply. They honestly desire the advancement of the other’s interests, and honestly dislike smutty humor. Transparent in their honesty and genuine in their concern, they reject both the easy answer of the doctrinaire politician and the *laissez-faire* stance of the selfish secular man. Meek in personal demeanor, they’re bold in righteous pursuits.

For a variety of reasons, Christians have lost this vision of witness and are slow to return to it. But in better days and other lands, the faithful and divinely empowered proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ (who himself is the light of the world par excellence [John 8:12]) so transformed men that they in turn became the light of the world (Matt. 5:14). Prison reform, medical care, trade unions, control of a perverted and perverting liquor trade, abolition of slavery, abolition of child labor, establishment of orphanages, reform of the penal code—in all these areas the followers of Jesus spearheaded the drive for righteousness. The darkness was alleviated. And this, I submit, has always been the pattern when professing Christians have been less concerned with personal prestige and more concerned with the norms of the kingdom. “In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”