

~Other Speakers A-F: Samuel Davies:

A Christmas-day Sermon

By Samuel Davies, December 25, 1760

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God, and saying: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good-will towards men!" Luke 2:13, 14

This is the day which the church of Rome, and some other churches that deserve to be placed in better company, have agreed to celebrate in memory of the Prince of Peace, the Savior of men, the incarnate God, Immanuel. And I doubt not—but many convert superstition into rational and Scriptural devotion, and piously employ themselves in a manner acceptable to God, though they lack the sanction of divine authority for appropriating this day to a sacred use.

But, alas! it is generally a season of sinning, sensuality, luxury, and various forms of extravagance; as though men were not celebrating the birth of the holy Jesus—but of Venus—the goddess of sex, or Bacchus—the god of wine—whose most sacred rites were mysteries of iniquity and debauchery!

The birth of Jesus was solemnized by hosts of angels; they had their music and their songs on this occasion. But how different from those generally used among mortals! "Glory to God in the highest, on earth, peace, good will to men!" This was their song. But is the music and dancing, the feasting and rioting, the idle songs and extravagant mirth of mortals at this season—a proper echo or response to this angelic song? I leave you to your own reflections upon this subject, after I have given the hint; and I am sure, if they are natural and pertinent, and have a proper influence upon you, they will restrain you from running into the fashionable excesses of riot on this occasion.

To remember and piously improve the incarnation of our divine Redeemer, to join the concert of angels, and dwell in ecstatic meditation upon their song—this is lawful, this is a seasonable duty every day; and consequently upon this day as well. And as Jesus improved the feast of dedication, though not of divine institution, as a proper opportunity to exercise his ministry, when crowds of the Jews were gathered from all parts—so I would improve this day for your instruction, since it is the custom of our country to spend it religiously, or idly, or wickedly—as different people are differently disposed.

But as the seeds of superstition which have sometimes grown up to a prodigious height, have been frequently sown and cherished by very inconsiderable incidents, I think it proper to inform you, that I may guard against this danger, that I do not set apart this day for public worship, as though it had any peculiar sanctity, or we were under any obligations to keep it religiously. I know no human authority, which has power to make one day more holy than another, or that can bind the conscience in such cases. Special days, consecrated by the mistaken piety or superstition of men, and conveyed down to us as holy, through the corrupt medium of human tradition, I think myself free to observe them or not, according to convenience, and the prospect of usefulness; like other common days, on which I may lawfully carry on public worship or not, as circumstances require. And since I have so fair an opportunity, and it seems necessary in order to prevent my conduct from being a confirmation of present superstition, or a temptation to future, I shall, once for all, declare my sentiments more fully upon this head.

But I must premise, that it is far from my design, to widen the differences existing among Christians, to embitter their hearts against each other, or to awaken dormant controversies concerning the non-essentials of religion. And if this use should be made of what I shall say, it will be an unnatural perversion of my design.

I would make every candid concession in favor of those who observe days of human institution, that can consist with truth and my own liberty. I grant, that so many plausible things may be offered for the practice as may have the appearance of solid argument, even to honest inquirers after truth. I grant, that I doubt not but many are offering up acceptable devotion to God on this day; devotion proceeding from honest, believing hearts, and therefore acceptable to him on any day—acceptable to him, notwithstanding their little mistake in this affair.

I grant, we should, in this case, imitate the generous candor and forbearance of Paul, in a similar case.

The converts to Christianity from among the Jews, long retained the prejudices of their education, and thought they were still obliged, even under the gospel dispensation, to observe the rites and ceremonies of the law of Moses, to which they had been accustomed, and particularly those days which were appointed by God to be religiously kept under the Jewish dispensation.

The Gentile converts, on the other hand, who were free from these early prejudices of education and custom, and had imbibed more just notions of Christian liberty, looked upon these Jewish holy-days as common days, and no longer to be observed. This occasioned a warm dispute between these two classes of converts, and Paul interposes, not so properly to determine which party was right, (that was comparatively a small matter,) as to bring both parties to exercise moderation and forbearance towards each other, and to put a charitable construction upon their different practices in these minor articles; and particularly to believe concerning each other, that though their practices were different—yet the principle from which they acted was the same, namely, a sincere desire to glorify and please God, and a conscientious regard to what they apprehended was his will.

"Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord." Romans 14:1, 5, 6. That is, it is a conscientious regard to the Lord, which is the principle upon which both parties act, though they act differently in this matter. Therefore, says the apostle, "You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat?" That is, why do you severely censure him for practicing differently in this minor affair?

"So whatever you believe about these things" says he, have you a full persuasion of what is right in these punctilios and ceremonials. Then, "keep between yourself and God;" verse 22. Keep it to yourself as a rule for your own practice—but do not impose it upon others, nor disturb the church of Christ about it. It befits us, my friends, to imitate this toleration and charity of the apostle, in these minor differences; and God forbid I should tempt any of you to forsake so noble an example.

But then the example of the same apostle will authorize us modestly to propose our own sentiments and the reasons of our practice, and to warn people from laying a great stress upon ceremonials and superstitious observances. This he does particularly to the Galatians, who not only kept the Jewish holy-days—but placed a great part of their religion in the observance of them. "You observe days, and months, and times, and years;" therefore, says he, "I am afraid for you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain." Galatians 4:10, 11.

The commandments of God have often been made void by the traditions of men; and human inventions have often been more religiously observed than divine institutions! And when this was the case, Paul was warm in opposing even ceremonial mistakes.

Having premised this, which I look upon as much more important than the decision of the question, I proceed to show you the reasons why I would not religiously observe days of human appointment, in commemoration of Christ and the saints. What I have to say shall be particularly pointed at what is called Christmas-day: but may be easily applied to all other holy-days instituted by men.

The first reason I shall offer is—that I would take my religion just as I find it in my Bible—without any imaginary improvements or supplements of human invention. All the ordinances which God has been pleased to appoint, I would honestly endeavor to observe in the most sacred manner. But when ignorant presuming mortals take upon themselves to improve upon Divine institutions, to make that a part of religion, which God has left indifferent; in short, when they would mingle something of their own—with the pure religion of the Bible—then I must be excused from obedience, and beg permission to content myself with the old, plain, simple religion of the Bible. Now that there is not the least appearance in all the Bible—of the Divine appointment of Christmas, to celebrate the birth of Christ—is granted by all parties; and the Divine authority is not so much as pretended for it. Therefore, a Bible-Christian is not at all bound to observe it.

Secondly, the Christian church, for at least three hundred years, did not observe any day in commemoration of the birth of Christ. For this we have the testimony of the primitive fathers themselves. Thus Clemens Alexandrinus, who lived about the year one hundred and ninety-four, "We are commanded to worship and honor him, who, we are persuaded, is the Word, and our Savior and Ruler, and through him, the Father; not upon certain particular or select days, as some others do—but constantly practicing this all our life, and in every proper way."

Chrysostom, who lived in the fourth century, has these words, "It is not yet ten years, since this day, that is, Christmas, was plainly known to us;" and he observes, the custom was brought to Constantinople from Rome. Now since this day was not religiously observed in the church in the first and purest ages—but was introduced as superstitions increased, and Christianity began to degenerate very fast into popery; ought not we to imitate the purity of these primitive times, and retain none of the superstitious observances of more corrupt ages!

Thirdly, if a day should be religiously observed in memory of the birth of Christ, it ought to be that day on which he was born. But that day, and even the month and the year, are altogether uncertain. The Scriptures do not determine this point of chronology. And perhaps they are silent on purpose—to prevent all temptation to the superstitious observance of it; just as the body of Moses was secretly buried, and his grave concealed—to guard the Israelites from the danger of idolizing it.

Chronologers are also divided upon the point: and even the ancients are not agreed. The learned generally suppose that Christ was born two or three years before the common reckoning. And as to the month, some suppose it was in September, and some in June. And they imagine it was very unlikely, that he was born in the cold wintry months of December, because we read, that at the time of his birth, shepherds were out in the field, watching their flocks by night; which is not probable at that season of the year.

The Christian epoch, or reckoning time from the birth of Christ, was not introduced until about the year five hundred; and it was not generally used until the reign of Charles the Great, about the year eight hundred, or a little above nine hundred years ago. And this must occasion a great uncertainty, both as to the year, month, and day. But why do I dwell so long upon this? It must be universally confessed, that the day of his birth is quite uncertain. Nay, it is certain that it is not that which has been kept in commemoration of it.

To convince you of this, I need only put you in mind of the late parliamentary correction of our computation of time by introducing the new-style; by which Christmas is eleven days sooner than it was accustomed to be. And yet this chronological blunder still continues in the public prayers of some, who give thanks to God, that Christ was born as upon this day. And while this prayer was offered up in England and Virginia on the twenty-fifth of December old-style, other countries that followed the new-style, were solemnly declaring in their thanksgivings to God, that Christ was born eleven days sooner! That is, on the fourteenth of December. I therefore conclude, that neither this day or any other was ever intended to be observed for this purpose.

Finally, superstition is a very growing evil; and therefore the first beginnings of it ought to be prevented. Many things that were at first introduced with a pious design, have grown up gradually into the most enormous superstition and idolatry in after ages! The ancient Christians, for example, had such a veneration for the pious martyrs, that they preserved a lock of hair, or some little memorial of them; and this laid the foundation for the expensive sale and stupid idolizing of the relics of the saints in popish countries!

They also celebrated their memory, by observing the days of their martyrdom. But as the number of the martyrs and saints real or imaginary, increased, the saints' days also multiplied to an extravagant degree, and hardly left any days in the year for any other purpose! And as they had more saints than days in the year, they dedicated the first of November for them all, under the title of All-saints-day.

But if the saints must be thus honored, then certainly much more ought Jesus Christ. This seemed a natural inference: and accordingly, these superstitious devotees appointed one day to celebrate his birth, another his baptism, another his death, another the day of Pentecost, and an endless list that I have not time now to mention.

The apostles also must be put into the calendar: and thus almost all the days in the year were consecrated by superstition, and hardly any left for the ordinary labors of life. Thus the people are taught to be idle the greatest part of their time, and so indisposed to labor on the few days that are still allowed them for that purpose. This has almost ruined some popish countries, particularly the Pope's dominions in the fine country of Italy, once the richest and best improved in the world.

Addison, Burnet, and other travelers, inform us—that everything bears the appearance of poverty, notwithstanding all the advantages of soil and climate: and that this is chiefly owing to the superstition of the people, who spend the most of their time as holy-days.

And if you look over the calendar of the church of England, you will find that the festivals in one year, amount to thirty-one. The fasts to no less than ninety-five, to which add the fifty-two Sundays in every year, and the whole

will make one hundred and seventy-eight: so that only one hundred and eighty-seven days will be left in the whole year, for the common labors and purposes of life.

And whether the poor could procure a subsistence for themselves and their families by the labor of so few days, and whether it is not a yoke that neither we nor our fathers are able to bear—I leave you to judge.

It is true, that but very few of these feasts and fasts are now observed, even by the members of the established church. But then they are still in their calendar and Canons, and binding upon them by the authority of the church; and as far as they do not comply with them, so far they are dissenters: and in this, and in many other respects, they are generally dissenters, though they do not share with us in the infamy of the name.

Now, since the beginnings of superstitious inventions in the worship of God are so dangerous in their outcome, and may grow up into such enormous extravagance, we ought to shun the danger, by adhering to the simplicity of the Bible-religion, and not presume to make more days or things holy—than the all-wise God has been pleased to sanctify. He will be satisfied with the religious observance of his own institutions—and why should not we? It is certainly enough, that we are as religious as he requires us. And all our will-worship is liable to that confounding rejection, "Who has required this at your hands?" Isaiah 1:12.

I now proceed to what is more delightful and, profitable, the sublime anthem of the angels: "Glory to God in the highest! on earth, peace! good will to men!"

What a happy night was this to the poor shepherds, though exposed to the damps and darkness of midnight, and keeping their painful watches in the open field! An illustrious angel, clothed in light which kindled midnight into noon, came upon them, or suddenly hovered over them in the air, and the glory of the Lord, that is, a bright refulgent light, the usual emblem of his presence shone round about them. No wonder the poor shepherds were struck with horror, and overwhelmed at the sight of so glorious a phenomenon.

But when God strikes his people with terror, it is often an introduction to some signal blessing. And they are sometimes made sore afraid, like the shepherds, even with the displays of his glories. The first appearance even of the great deliverer, may seem like that of a great destroyer. But he will at length make himself known as he is—and allay the fears of his people. So the gentle angel cheers and supports the trembling shepherds, "Fear not," says he, you need not tremble—but rejoice at my appearance; "for behold" observe and wonder, "I bring you" from heaven, by order from its Sovereign, "good tidings of great joy," the best that was ever published in mortal ears—and not only to you, not only to a few private people or families, not only to the Jewish nation; but good tidings of great joy, "which shall be to all people" to Gentiles as well as Jews, to all nations, tribes, and languages—to all the various ranks of men—to kings and subjects—to rich and poor; to free and slave! Therefore let it circulate through the world, and resound from shore to shore!

And what is this news that is introduced with so sublime and transporting a preface? It is this: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!" Unto you mortals—unto you miserable sinners, is born a Savior—a Savior from sin and ruin! A Savior of no low or common character—but Christ, the promised Messiah, anointed with the Holy Spirit; and invested with the high office of Mediator! Christ the Lord, the Lord and ruler of heaven and earth, and universal nature! He is born—no longer represented by dark types and prophecies—but actually entered in the world—born this day! The long expected day has at length arrived; the prophecies are accomplished, and the fullness of time has come—born in the city of David—in Bethlehem, and therefore of the seed and lineage of David, according to the prophecies. Though he is a person of such eminence, Christ the Lord is now a feeble infant, just born. The Son born, and the Child given—he is the mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." Isaiah 9:6.

The condescension of the angel, and the joyful tidings he brought, no doubt recovered the shepherds from their consternation, and emboldened them to lift up their faces. And how was their joy heightened, that they were chosen and appointed by Heaven, to be the first visitants to this new-born Prince! "This shall be a sign to you," said the angel, by which you may know this divine Infant from others.

What shall be the sign? Shall it be, that they will find him in a palace, surrounded with all the grandeur and majesty of courts, and attended by the emperors, kings and nobles of the earth; lying in a bed of down, and dressed in silks, and gold, and jewels? This might be expected—if we consider the dignity of his person. It would be infinite condescension for him to be born even in such circumstances as these. But these are not the characteristics of the incarnate God.

No! says the angel, This shall be a sign to you, "you shall find the babe, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger!" Lying in a feeding-trough for animals! Luke 2:12. Astonishing! who could expect the new-born Son of God to be there? There, lying in straw, surrounded only with oxen and horses, and waited upon only by a feeble, solitary mother, far from home, among unkind, regardless strangers, who would not allow her room in the inn, even in her painful hour. Perhaps her poverty disabled her from bearing her expenses in the ordinary way; and therefore she must take up her lodging in a stable! In such circumstances of abasement did the Lord of glory enter our world!

In these circumstances he was "seen by angels" 1 Timothy 3:16; who were accustomed to behold him in another form—in all the glories of the heavenly world. And how strange a sight must this be! How bright a display of his love to the guilty sons of men!

The angel, who was the willing messenger of these glad tidings, did not descend from heaven alone. He appears to have been the commandant of an army of angels, that attended him on this grand occasion. For suddenly there was with him a multitude of the heavenly host, or, as it might be rendered, of soldiery of heaven. The angels are not a confused irregular body, or unconnected independent individuals; but a well-disposed system of beings, with proper subordinations; all marshaled into ranks under proper commanders. Hence they are called "thrones, and dominions, and principalities, and powers;" Col. 1:16.

We read of angels and archangels; 1 Thess. 4:16; of Michael and his angels; Revelation 12:7. They are called in the military style, the Lord's armies; Psalm 103:21, 148: 2; and the army of heaven; Daniel 4:35. Revelation 19:14; to signify the order established among them, and also their strength and unanimity to execute the commands of their sovereign, to repel the dragon and his angels, and defend the feeble heirs of salvation, on whom they condescend to wait.

Order and subordination is still retained even among the fallen angels in the kingdom of darkness. Hence we read of the prince of the devils; Matthew 9:34; the dragon and his angels; Revelation 12:7; legions of devils; Mark 5:9; which was a division of the Roman army, something like that of a regiment among us.

Now a regiment of the heavenly militia descended with their officer, to solemnize and publish the birth of their Lord, when he took upon him our nature. And no sooner had their commander delivered his message, than they immediately join with one voice, filling all the air with their heavenly music: "Praising God, and saying, glory to God in the highest! On earth, peace! good-will to men!" The language is abrupt, like that of a full heart: the sentences short, unconnected, and rapid; expressive of the ecstasy of their minds.

"Glory to God in the highest!" This deservedly leads the song. It is of more importance in itself, in the estimate of angels, and of all competent judges, than even the salvation of men. And the first and chief cause of joy and praise from the birth of a Savior is—that he shall bring glory to God. Through him, as a proper medium—the divine perfections shall shine forth with new, augmented splendor. Through him, sinners shall be saved in a way that will advance the honor of the divine perfections and government! Or if any of them perish—their punishment will more illustriously display the glory of their offended Sovereign.

The wisdom, grace, and mercy of God—are glorified in the contrivance of this scheme of redemption, and making millions of miserable creatures happy forever! His power is glorified, in carrying this scheme into execution, in spite of all opposition. His justice is glorified, in the atonement and satisfaction made for the sins of men by an incarnate Deity, and in the righteous and aggravated punishment executed upon those who obstinately reject this divine Savior, and who therefore perish without the least umbrage of excuse.

Oh! what wonders does Jehovah perform, in prosecution of this method of salvation! What wonders of pardoning mercy and sanctifying grace! What miracles of glory and blessedness does he form out of the dust, and the polluted fragments of human nature! What monuments of his own glorious perfections does he erect, through all the extensive regions of heaven! From these wonderful works of his—the glory of his own name breaks forth upon the worlds of angels and men, in one bright unclouded day, which shall never be obscured in night—but grow more and more illustrious through the endless ages of eternity!

Of this, the choir of angels were sensible at the birth of Christ; and therefore they shout aloud in ascriptions of glory to God. It was especially on this account, that they rejoiced in this great event. And all believers rejoice in it principally on this account too.

"Glory to God!" is the first note in the song of angels: and "hallowed be your name;" that is, let your name be sanctified, or glorified, is the first petition in the prayer of men. The glory of God should always be nearest our

hearts—**to this everything should give way; and we should rejoice in other things, and even in our own salvation, as they tend to promote this.**

Such is the disposition of every godly man—his heart is enlarged, and extended beyond the narrow limits of self; he has a generous tender regard for the glory of the great God; and rejoices in the way of salvation through Christ, not merely as it makes him happy—but especially as it advances and displays the divine honor! This is his disposition, at least in some hours of refined, exalted devotion. Self is, as it were, swallowed up in God! And friends—is this your disposition?

"Glory to God in the highest!" In the highest. That is, in the highest strains. Let the songs of men and angels be raised to a higher key, on this great occasion. The usual strains of praise are low and languid, to celebrate the birth of this illustrious prince. This is a more glorious event than has ever yet happened in heaven or earth; and therefore demands a new song, more exalted and divine than has ever yet employed, even the voices of angels. At the birth of nature, the sons of God, the angels, sang together, and shouted for joy: but when the Author and Lord of nature is born, let them raise a loftier and a more ecstatic anthem of praise.

Or, "Glory to God in the highest" may signify—let glory be given to God in the highest heaven by all the choirs of angels. This celestial squadron call upon their fellow-angels, whom they left behind them in their native heaven, to echo to their song, and fill those blessed regions with the melody of new ascriptions of praise, as if they had said—though men receive the benefit, let all the angels of heaven join in the song of gratitude. Though men be silent, and refuse to celebrate the birth of their Savior and Lord; though earth does not echo with his praise, though more intimately concerned; let the heavenly inhabitants sound aloud their ascriptions of glory, and supply the guilty defect of ungrateful mortals.

Or finally, "Glory to God in the highest" may mean, glory to God who dwells in the highest heavens: glory to the high and lofty one, who inhabits eternity, and dwells in the high and holy place, Isaiah 57:15; and yet condescends to regard man that is a worm, Job 25:6, and sends his Son to assume his humble nature, to lie in a manger, and die upon a cross for him. Glory to God—for this astonishing condescension and grace!

The next article of this angelic song is, "Peace on earth!"

Peace to rebel man with his offended Sovereign;
peace with angels;
peace with conscience;
peace between man and man;
universal peace on earth, that region of discord and war.

Peace with God to rebel man. The illustrious Prince now born, comes to make up the breach, and reconcile sinners to their offended Sovereign. He is the great Peace-maker, who shall subdue the enmity of the carnal mind, and reduce the revolted sons of Adam to a willing subjection to their rightful Lord. He will bring thousands of disloyal hearts to love God above all, which were accustomed to love almost everything more than Him. He will reconcile them to the laws of his government, and the practice of universal obedience and holiness. He will set on foot a treaty of peace in the ministry of the gospel, and send out his ambassadors, to beseech the rebels in his stead, to be reconciled to God.

He will also reconcile God to man, by answering all the demands of his law and justice, paying the debts of insolvent sinners, and making amends for all their offences. He will appear as an all-prevailing advocate with his Father, in favor of a rebel world, and turn his heart to them again. So that this revolted province of his dominions, shall again become the object of his love, and he will look down and smile upon the obnoxious sons of men.

Oh happy peace! Oh blessed peace-maker! who puts an end to so fatal and unnatural a war, and brings the Creator and his creatures, the offended Sovereign and his rebellious subjects—into mutual friendship again, after the grand breach, that seemed likely never to be made up, and indeed never could be made up but by so great and powerful a Mediator; a Mediator of infinite dignity, merit and authority, able to remove all obstructions in the way of both parties.

The Peace proclaimed on this grand occasion may also imply, Peace with angels; peace between the inhabitants of heaven and earth. The angelic armies, the militia of heaven, are always upon the side of their Sovereign; always at war with his enemies, and ready to fight his battles. And upon the apostasy of our world they were ready to take up arms against the rebels. But now, when their Sovereign proclaims peace, they lay

down their arms, they acquiesce in the peace, and receive the penitent, returning rebels with open arms. These benevolent beings rejoice in the restoration of their fellow-creature man, to the divine favor, and shout forth their songs of praise upon the publication of the news.

Again; this proclamation of peace may include peace with conscience. When man commenced an enemy to his Maker, he became an enemy to himself: his own conscience took up arms against him, and is perpetually fighting the cause of its Lord. But now the guilt of past sin may be washed away from the conscience with the pacific blood of Jesus, and all its clamors silenced by his all-satisfying righteousness. And now the peace will be preserved, and the contracting of new guilt prevented, by the sanctifying influence of the grace of this new-born Prince. His grace shall change disloyal hearts, and reform rebellious lives; and those shall enjoy the approbation of their conscience, who were accustomed to sweat and agonize under its tormenting accusations. Thus, self-tormenting sinners shall be reconciled to themselves; and peace in their own breasts shall be a perennial source of happiness: a happiness

"Which nothing earthly gives, nor can destroy,
The soul's calm sunshine, and the heartfelt joy."

Farther; peace on earth includes peace between man and man. Now the Prince of peace is born; and upon his appearance let animosity and discord, contentions and wars cease; and let universal harmony and benevolence prevail through the world. Let the bonds of love unite all the sons of Adam together in the closest friendship. It was love which constrained him to put on the nature of man, and to change his throne in heaven—for a manger! Love is the ruling passion of his soul; love is the doctrine he shall preach; love is the disposition he shall inspire; and love is the first principle of his religion.

Therefore, let all the world be melted and molded into love. Let the wolf and the lion put on the nature of the lamb; and let nothing hurt or destroy through all the earth. Let nation no more lift up sword against nation: let them beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; and let them learn war no more. For of him it is foretold, that in his days abundance of peace shall flourish, so long as the moon endures. Psalm 72:7.

This, my friends, has already been accomplished in part: for peace and benevolence is the genius of Christianity; and wherever it has prevailed, it has introduced peace and harmony in families, in neighborhoods, and among nations. Nor can the present disturbed state of things, the animosities, quarrels and wars, that are in the world, disprove what I say: for these prevail only so far as the Christian spirit does not prevail. Just as much as there is of these among men, just so much of Christianity is lacking; just so far the genuine tendency of the birth of Jesus fails of its efficacy. However, we rejoice in the hope, that our world shall yet see better times, and experience the full effects of this illustrious birth: when the kingdom of the Prince of peace shall become universal, and diffuse peace among all nations. Oh! when shall that glorious revolution commence!

The next article in the song of angels is, "Good-will towards men." That is, the good-will and grace of God is now illustriously displayed towards men, sinful and unworthy as they are. And may they dutifully receive it, and enjoy all the happy effects of it!

Thus the angels declared, foretold, and wished. They declared that even then glory would redound to God, peace be established on earth, and the good-will and favor of God enjoyed by guilty men. And they foretold that thus it would be more and more to the end of time, and even through all eternity. And they also wished that these glorious effects might follow, as agreeable to the high regard they had for the divine honor, and their generous benevolence to their unworthy fellow-creatures, men.

This suggests a question, and also an answer to it. The question is, since the angels were not redeemed by Jesus Christ, and do not share in the benefits of redemption, as man does, why did they thus rejoice and sing at his birth? This we can account for from their regard to the glory of God, and their good-will to men.

Their happiness consists in the knowledge and love of God: and the more he displays his perfections in his works, the more they know of him, and consequently the more they love him. Now the redemption of sinners through Jesus Christ gives the most upright and amiable view of the divine perfections: and on this account the inhabitants of heaven rejoice in it. They know more of God from this great event—than from all his other works of creation and providence.

Hence Peter represents them as bending and looking with eager eyes, to pry into this mystery. Paul also intimates, that the founding of a church in our guilty world, and particularly the gathering of the poor outcast

Gentiles into it, was a secret even to the angels, until revealed by the event; and that the revelation of it revealed to them more of the wisdom of God, than they ever knew before. "This," says he, "was a mystery, which from the beginning of the world was hid in God;" but it is now revealed, "to the intent that unto principalities and powers,"—to the various ranks of angels, "might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God." Ephesians 3:8, 10. This cleared up many of the dark events of Providence, which they could not before account for: and enabled them to see farther into the designs of divine wisdom.

Methinks when Abel, or the first saint from our world, arrived in heaven, the glorious natives of that country were struck with agreeable surprise, and wondered how he came there. They were ready to give up the whole race for lost, like their kindred angels that fell; and could contrive no possible method for their recovery. And how then are these earth-born strangers admitted into heaven? And when they found, by the proceedings of divine Providence, that God had gracious designs towards our world, and that these designs were to be accomplished by his Son, must they not be agreeably perplexed and bewildered to find out the manner in which he would accomplish them? In what way could he satisfy divine justice—who was himself the judge? How could he die for sin—who was all-immortal? These and the like difficulties must perplex the inquiries even of angels.

But now all is made plain; now the grand secret is disclosed. The Son of God—must become the son of man, must obey the law, and die upon the cross; and thus he was to accomplish the great design, and restore guilty man to the favor of God. Angels must rejoice at this discovery, as advancing the glory of God, and increasing their own happiness.

See how they bend! see how they look!
 Long had they read the eternal book,
 And studied dark decrees in vain:
 The cross of Calvary makes them plain.
 —Watts

Again: the angels are benevolent beings, and therefore rejoice at the birth of Christ, as tending to the salvation of poor sinners of the race of man. The Lord of angels tells us, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repents." Luke 15:10. And how much more must they rejoice to see the grand scheme disclosed, by which numerous colonies were to be transplanted from our guilty world to people the heavenly regions, and perhaps fill the vacant seats of the fallen angels!

I may add, it is not unlikely that the angels may receive some great advantages, to us unknown, by the mediation of Christ; though they do not need a mediator in the same sense that we do. But I have not time to enlarge upon this.

You now see the reasons of the joy of angels on this occasion: and it is no wonder they sung, "Glory to God in the highest, for peace proclaimed on earth, and goodwill towards men."

But how ought WE to improve this subject more immediately for our own advantage? This is our great concern; for we are personally interested in it, which the angels were not; at least, not in the same degree. Hence then,

We may learn HOW we ought to celebrate the birth of Christ—celebrate it like angels, not with balls and assemblies—not with reveling and carousing, and all the extravagances that are usual at this season; as if you were celebrating the birth of Venus or Bacchus, or some patron of iniquity; not with the sound of bells, muskets and cannons, and the other demonstrations of joy, upon occasions of a civil nature. Some of these are not innocent upon any occasion, and have a direct tendency to make men still more thoughtless, and giddy, and to prevent the blessed effects of this illustrious birth. Others of them, though lawful upon seasons of public national joy, for temporal blessings or deliverances—yet are impious and profane, when practiced in honor of the incarnation of the holy Jesus.

You will all grant, no doubt, that pious joy ought to be expressed in a pious manner; that the usual mirth, festivity, and gaiety of a birthday, in honor of our earthly sovereign, are not proper expressions of joy for the birth of a spiritual Savior—a Savior from this vain world—a Savior from sin and hell.

Therefore, I say, celebrate it as the angels did: giving glory to God in the highest, in your songs of praise; giving him glory by dwelling upon the wonders of redemption, in delightful meditation; by giving him your thoughts and affections; and by a life of devotion and universal obedience. Celebrate the birth of this great Prince of peace—by accepting that peace which angels proclaimed. Give a welcome reception to this glorious

stranger. Do not turn him out of doors, as the Bethlehemites did; but entertain him in your hearts. Let every faculty of your souls open to receive him. "Lift up your heads, O you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in." (Psalm 24:7.) O let every heart cry, "Come in, you who are blessed by the LORD. Why are you standing out here?" (Genesis 24:31.)

He came to procure and restore peace between God and man; therefore I, his poor ambassador, "Beseech you in his stead—be reconciled to God." (2 Corinthians 5:20.) No longer continue in arms, rejecting his authority, trampling upon his laws, and refusing the offers of his grace: otherwise this peace will not extend to you; and war, eternal war, will continue between you and the omnipotent Lord God. But if the boldest rebel among you this day submits to his government, you shall enjoy the blessed peace, which angels proclaimed at his entrance into the world, and which he left as a legacy to his friends, when he was about to leave it. (John 14:27.)

Make peace also with your own conscience; and scorn to live at variance with yourselves. How ill do you take it, when others condemn you? and can you be easy, while perpetually condemning yourselves? Let conscience have full liberty to exercise its authority upon you, as Jehovah's deputy, and dare not to disobey its orders. Live in peace also with one another. Silence! you noisy brawlers: the Prince of Peace is born! Peace! be still! you contentious, angry passions: the Prince of peace is born! Away slander, backbiting, quarreling, envy, malice, revenge—away to your native hell: for the Prince of peace has entered into this world, and forbid you to appear upon it! Thus, friends, celebrate the birth of the Savior, and that not only upon this day—but every day through all your lives: and thus you may have a merry Christmas all the year round.

To CONCLUDE. What encouragement may this angelic proclamation afford to trembling, desponding penitents? "Fear not! for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy; for to you is born a Savior, Christ the Lord!" O! do not your hearts spring up within you at the news? I have somewhere heard of a crowd of criminals under condemnation, confined in one dungeon: and upon a messenger's arriving from their king, and proclaiming a pardon, they all rushed out so eagerly to receive the pardon, and see the publisher of the joyful news, that they trod and crushed one another to death. And shall there be no such pressing and crowding to Jesus Christ in this assembly today? Shall there be no such eagerness among us to receive a pardon from his hands? Alas! will any of you turn this greatest blessing of heaven—into a curse? Was it your destroyer who was born, when the angels sung the birth of a Savior? Indeed, if you continue to neglect him, you will find him such to you; and it would have been better for you, that neither you nor He had ever been born! Even the birth of the Prince of peace proclaims eternal war against you. I therefore now beseech you in his stead to be reconciled to him. Amen.