

The Celebration of Christ

by: Ronald L. Dart

I was thinking this morning that in spite of all the things that divide God's people and we know that there are enough of those, we are all really united in one thing. This today, primarily, but this weekend, the holy spirit has kicked us all out of our homes and set our feet on the road. There has not been a day in the last year when so many of God's people had been on the road. We were all united today in looking for the feast, heading for the feast, wherever it might be. I think that is a very good sign. That says that so many of us moving around, that so many of us on the road, so many of us leaving home that we still believe, we still trust God, we are still determined to keep the Feast of Tabernacles wherever we do it and however we do it.

I am really not that discouraged that we are meeting at so many different places. Because we could never be all together in the same place anyway. I feel bad sometimes when a face that I hoped to see at the feast isn't here, gone somewhere else because there is a family reunion and I know you got to go to the family reunion and I know you want to see your family more than you want to see me and that is okay, but I miss the people who are not here for whatever reason that they are not. But I am not discouraged by that, because I think we can take comfort in the fact that Jesus said, Wherever two or three of you are gathered together in my name, I am there. I am with you. So consequently we are able to keep these festivals wherever it is.

It is just as well I think also that we gather around the special things that we have in common. Sometimes it is family, sometimes it is doctrine, sometimes it is culture and sometimes it is geography. It is just as well that we do this until that special day when finally we all once again, Jesus calls us together at his feet and that song that we sing on the last great day of the feast, which we will again this year, I do not care if it does make you cry. God be with you until we meet again and until we meet at Jesus' feet. Because that is the time when a lot of the stuff that divides us will no longer matter very much. So we come together to honor God with our presence. We come together to eat, drink and play in his presence and most important we come together to worship and to celebrate him in song and in worship.

Now if you notice something, you probably did not really particularly notice the word that I used there, I chose it deliberately. We come to celebrate God. I discovered something this morning that I had overlooked before. My old granddad, my paternal

granddad got religion when he was advanced in years. I remember vaguely when I was a very, very young boy being out with him when he would have the two mules up in Northern Arkansas plowing the furrows and the garden and different work. His vocabulary when he addressed those two mules was often very colorful and rather specific and the threats he made at them would have been dire indeed if he had ever carried them out. But some time between the first time I ever went out with him plowing like that and later in his life, he got religion and I am not really sure what it was. It was one of these brush arbor places that he went to. I remember going out there with him, it was one of those places where they get together and sing and it was very lively music and so forth. When the time came to pray, they all knelt all around the brush arbor and everyone prayed at the same time out loud.

Well my granddad began to salt his speech with praise the Lords. I mean it was everything that he said was accompanied by the word, praise the Lord. So that is, you know it has been something that has sort of sat in the back of my mind for a long time. Of course, I realize that when we sing our songs that have the word Hallelujah and we love to sing those songs. Hallelujah is a good sound. It is a good word. It is a good one to get out there and we all know that it means Praise Jehovah or Praise Yah.

Now what I really did not really realize, and I realized this for a long time and you may not that the expression Praise God is an imperative. In other words when you say praise God, what you are doing is, you are telling some one that they should praise God. That the expression praise God is not exactly praise, it is an admonition to praise in the English language. But what I did not realize as I said, I got to looking this up. There are two words in the Old Testament translated praise and used in connection with God. One is to put forth the hand. And I long since have understood that whenever the Bible speaks of the hand in symbolic terms it is talking about the things that you do. When it talks about the forehead it is talking about the will and the mind and the things, the decisions that you make and the hand has to do with what you do.

The other word is the word *Hallel* which forms the first part of Hallelujah and I looked it up in the Lexicon today and much to my surprise. Well let me read you what it says. It says, *Hallel*, a primitive root to be clear, originally of sound, but usually of color. To shine, hence to make a show and to boast. It goes on down, actually there is a whole lot of stuff, but it gets all the way down to the end of the line about I don't know how many lines of description of this and finally at long last way down in the lower corner it says in certain context it means praise. Yet the King James translators nearly every time they saw it translated it praise. Where as in actual fact what the word is really talking about is to celebrate. To celebrate God.

The problem see with us, we all speak English. In our normal language as we talk. When we talk about praising someone, we talk about a compliment. We talk about maybe thanking them for something they have done or telling them what a good job they have done. Praise in our society, praise in our work, in our lives is words. Almost entirely words. We may write up a plaque you know and put on a wall of some good thing that somebody does. It is words. We put the words on the wall and we have praised this person for what they have done. Words are cheap though. All of us know that and sometimes I think we may not understand that when we come to the scripture and it says, Praise God, it is actually saying a lot more than merely to say good words about God. But what we are commanded to do is to celebrate God. The problem with the word praise in English is, it says way to little.

To celebrate goes way beyond it. It involves a whole host of things. It involves as I said, a show, to make a noise. Actually one of the expressions was to make a fool of yourself. It may be harken back to King David, who was bringing the arc back to Jerusalem. As he walked and came ahead of the arc and the arc was being brought along behind him and the music was playing and the cymbals were dashing and David danced before God. He threw off his outer garments and he danced and he danced and he whirled. He kind of exposed himself. He got home and his wife Michel told him specifically what he had done and that he had made an absolute fool of himself that day.

That in a sense is what celebration does sometimes involve. It involves doing some foolish things. It involves making fools of ourselves. You will find before this feast is over that our song leader as he takes us through this feast will once in a while lead us to act foolishly. You know it bothers some people. I remember last year we had this neat little song. If you are happy and you know it, clap your hands. Do any of you know that song? You know it is a nice little song. (Singing) If you are happy and you know it clap your hands (clapping hands). Ah ha. See you do know. (Congregation laughs). Well a fellow I knew who was there that day, he was embarrassed by it. He thought this was terrible you know. It is just totally undignified. You know who I am talking about I think. Totally undignified. Okay. Well Brent had us going on it and I don't know how far we got. Did we get beyond stamp your feet? But the next thing you know, this guy who thought it was kind of foolish was back there and we got especially I remember to the one where it says, If you are happy and you know it say, Amen. Amen. He was back there with his fist in the air just like this. The celebration got to him.

There is nothing wrong with losing your dignity every once in a while. In fact, I think sometimes we get just way too dignified. Now I am not ready to. I do not think this group is ready for holy dance. (Congregation laughs). I do not think that we are quite

ready for tambourines and dancing in the aisle in services. Maybe at the fun show or the talent show. Some of you may be ready for that. I do not think that you are ready for that here, but I do think that we need really to loosen up just a little bit and to celebrate God more. To celebrate means decorations. It means events. It means put up some balloons. It means get some extra things. If you are going to have a party at your place, go to some trouble. Put up some balloons, do some crepe paper. Whatever it is that you like to do for decorations and make a show of this thing.

Because the things that we do here at the feast from the parties that we throw to the meals that we eat together, to the times that we share to the prayers that we make together. We do all these things before God to celebrate him and to celebrate his son and this is pleasing to God. It is pleasing to him that we would be willing to be a fool for him. That does not bother God at all. For the Hebrews I think this was a lot more natural for them than it is for us. But you know for us in the western culture, we can I think do our best.

Now I want to call upon you tonight to celebrate one of the most marvelous of God's works. Because God's works all deserve celebration and this one not the least. I think one of the reasons the saints gathered together to keep the feast is to appear before God. I think it is fair to say that you people who are here tonight have a longing to be closer to God, and you would like to go home from this feast feeling that God was with you and that you had drawn closer to God and that you were prepared for the coming year knowing that he was with you and would walk with you and would be with you wherever you went. There is a longing in all of us to be close to God. What you may not realize is that there is a longing in God to be close to us. To be close to you. To have that same closeness that you want, what you want of him, he wants also of you.

When Israel was in the wilderness, they were marching up and down and all those years that they were out there. God did not sit in his ivory throne in heaven and look down on poor Israel out there in the wilderness and send an angel every once in a while and say well where are they now? God's tent was right in the middle of the camp every night and God tabernacled with Israel. He camped out with them. When the time came for the high priest to walk within the veil, God said, I will appear between the cherubim above the cover of the arc. Every day the cloud was there. Every night the fire was there. No one could approach these things, because there was too much power there because God was walking in the desert with them. God was camping out with them wherever they went.

In the latter days, God decided once again that he wanted to be close to man. Because over the years after Israel went into the land, they drifted away from God and God

drifted away from them. He no longer was close to them. He no longer camped out among them. He no longer appeared in fire between the cherubim on the mercy seat. God and Israel drifted apart. There came a time in later generation, a fullness of time when God decided that he once again wanted to be close to man and this time he wanted to be closer than he had ever been before.

The operative scripture, the one I want you to turn to is John the first chapter. The first chapter of John verse 1. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. Now forget about all the arguments that people have about Trinitarianism, Unitarianism and all of that. Let's just take the scripture, the Word was with God and the Word was God. All things were made by him and without him was nothing made that was made. And the antecedent of him is the Word folks. In him was life and the life was light of man and the light shined in darkness and the darkness could not comprehend it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came for a witness to bear witness of the light that men would believe. He was not that light. He was sent to bear witness of it. That was the true light that lights every man that comes into the world. He was in the world and the world was made by him and the world did not know him. He came to his own and his own would not receive him. As many as received him to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in his name which were born not of the blood, not of the will of the flesh, not of the will of man, but of God, and the word. This word that came among men, that came to his own and was rejected by his own. This word of God became flesh or was made flesh and tabernacled among us and we beheld his Glory. The glory of the only begotten of the Father full of Grace and truth.

It is stunning when you look at that word that he came and... What the Greek word which comes from the Hebrew word means is to tabernacle or to camp out or to tent. That is the choice of words that the son of God, Jesus Christ came to this earth to camp out with us. To tabernacle with us once again. In the flesh this time not as a pillar of fire and not as a cloud, not as one that could not be approached. Not as one that if you offered strange fire in the tabernacle you would get fried to a cinder and be carried out in your coat and buried, no, no, no. This time he came in the flesh and you could touch him. You could hold him and you could lean on his shoulder. You could talk to him and hear his voice falling on your ears and the proximity of God and of the touch of Jesus Christ was there. He was with men in a way that he had never been before.

The Feast of Tabernacles is symbolically connected to the birth of Jesus. I do not believe that Jesus was born on this night or on any holy day. The reason I do not

believe that is I think it would have been impossible for the gospel writers not to have commented on that had it been so. It would have been just too strong an event for that to have been ignored by them. I nevertheless think that John's choice of words when he says, The word became flesh and tabernacled among us is very significant. It is also John who warned us of a false doctrine about Jesus and you will find it. You do not need to turn to this, I will read it for you.

It is in I John 4 and verse 1. Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God, because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know you the spirit of God. Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God and every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. That is the spirit of Antichrist whereof you have heard that it should come and even now it is already in the world.

For many years now, it has been my custom to make my confession of this great truth on this great night that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. For this is the advent season. It is certain that Jesus was born at this season of the year and it is clear that the ministry of Jesus Christ is indelibly stamped on this day as he came to tabernacle with men, to dwell with us temporarily, to walk in the temporary body as a human being whom when you cut him he would bleed. When he worked too long and was up too long got tired and his body had to sleep. This is the advent season.

A little over 2000 years ago on this night, Mary held the baby Jesus in her arms and marveled at what God had done with her. It is hard to imagine what it must have meant to her. I would love to know that woman. She was a young woman. Many people think that she was still in her late teens when Jesus was born based upon their knowledge of the culture I suppose. But I will tell you this, she was some woman. For God to look down from Heaven and of all of the women he might have chosen to have chose Mary. When you go back in Luke 2 and you read the story of how the angel Gabriel came to her and he said, Hail, Mary you are highly favored among women and she says, HUH, cast about in her mind wondering what this salutation might be. The angel gave her the message and it was a message that I would think would have struck most people dumb, would have left them in total shock, but Mary was able to respond and say, I am the handmaid of the Lord, be it as he wills and to accept God's will in her life.

Her prayer called the *Magnificat* is magnificent to say the least of a woman who praised God, honored God, celebrated God and would celebrate God in ways that no one else in history would ever be able to do again. I do not know how many days before today that Jesus would have been born. I am reasonably certain that he was born probably between the Feast of Trumpets and today in the last two weeks based

upon the historical references to the priest, the course of Abijah and the priesthood and the father of John the Baptist who was in the temple at every certain time of the year came out and caused John to be conceived and the sequence of events described make it very clear that it was at this time of the year that Jesus Christ was born. So Mary tonight even though he may not have been born tonight, no doubt held this tiny baby in her arms and marveled at him.

He had ten tiny fingers and ten tiny toes and little finger nails you know on his fingers just like every tiny baby did. He got hungry and he cried. Mary put him to her breast as every little girl and every little boy of those days would have been.

You know the reason why I think this is so important is that God, there is no greater way that God could have illustrated for us the total vulnerability of Jesus than to make him a baby. He did not fall down from heaven full grown. He could have conceivably been just, Oh, he is in the world, he is flesh. There he is. You can touch him, he is physical, but that wouldn't have been, not really. He would not have been tempted in all points like we are. He would not have gone through the human experiences he has done so. But here is a child absolutely vulnerable, totally dependent on his mother and on his stepfather for his sustenance and really for his life. This is the way God came to tabernacle once again with us.

He made him vulnerable in that there was no army to meet him. There was no noble person with his retinue there to greet him or to protect him in any way. No nobles gathered around to honor him. The only announcement that was made on this night was the announcement made to a hand full of sheep herders who were camped out in a nearby field. That all by itself is completely astonishing. To the lowest rung of society. No one at the temple knew. No priest was told. No prophet was told. Just some sheep herders who were camped out in the cool night air nearby Bethlehem.

These poor guys were frightened out of the wits. I mean one minute they are sitting around their camp fire and maybe lying back on the duffel and looking up at the stars in the heaven at the gorgeous night that was there and all of a sudden they could not see stars anymore because of the light of this incredible staggering being that appeared in front of them, probably Gabriel once again and looked at these men. They were afraid and the angel said, Don't be afraid. I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord and these men knew what that meant. He is the Messiah of God that has been born this day. Everybody was waiting for this. Everybody was longing for it. Everybody was praying for it, for these were a captive people, a people put upon by the Romans and to these men the secret was revealed.

This shall be a sign to you he said, you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. This is rather an unlikely story, but that is what they told them. All of a sudden there was with the angel a multitude. What is a multitude? The Mormon tabernacle choir is what 200 people? I figure it was more than that. A multitude of the heavenly hosts praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth, Peace, Goodwill toward men. And I would have loved to have heard that song, praising, celebrating God. It was okay for the angels to celebrate the birth of Jesus. It was okay for the shepherds to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Is it wrong for us? Somehow that we would not do that?

When it came to pass, the angels had gone away from them to heaven. The shepherd said one to another, Let's go to Bethlehem. Let's see what has happened which the Lord has made known to us and they came with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and a baby lying in a manger and when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child and they that heard it wondered if these things which were told them by the shepherds, but Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned Glorifying and praising God, celebrating God for all the things that they had heard and seen and was told to them. A big celebration.

It occurs to me that one of the very worst things about Christmas is that Satan has used it to poison the minds of God's own people to a celebration of the birth of the Son of God. It is true you know. Any number of people who are very uneasy about any idea of the celebration of the nativity of Jesus. The word nativity makes some people uncomfortable because of all of the years that they have heard how pagan Christmas is. And it is pagan. There is no question about that. It is a combination of the Saturnalia and of the Nordic Gods and their festivals that made their way to this country and got in the hands of the commercial interests and the rest is history and away it went. And indeed, all of that is true, but in the process. I have actually heard people say, Well, everything that has ever been connected with Christmas is pagan and wrong and we should not observe it.

One thing that has been connected, incorrectly, but it has been to Christmas is the nativity of Jesus. All the word nativity means is the birth and the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. When you read Luke 2, you have read the nativity story. Because Satan had poisoned our minds about it, you could go for years and never hear a sermon out of Luke 2, right? You could run a little quiz around some of the kids and teenagers in church and find that over half of them would not know the name of Jesus' mother. The thing is that because of the recoiling away, the reaction against what Satan has done that in the process we lost something that God intended for us to have. The angels celebrated it. The shepherds celebrated it, but because some people many generations ago grabbed the birth of Jesus, attached it to the Roman Saturnalia on December 25th and surrounded it with all the trappings of the sun god and the winter fest of the Nordic Gods it caused some people to feel a little queasy at the very reading of the scriptures about the birth of Jesus. At the same time, there has long been a heresy in Christian circles that makes Jesus not quite flesh. There is a movement abroad in this country that I think probably we ought to get behind. It is a movement to completely divorce Christmas from the birth of Christ. There were times when

I sort of thought the idea that they were not going to allow any crèches on court house lawns was a bad idea, but then I rethought it and I thought no that is a very good idea. There should not be. If we could possibly have it to where there was absolutely no connection with Jesus Christ with Christmas at all we would have enormously improved the world. I do not know when you will ever get that done, but I think frankly we should probably be behind that sort of an effort. No crèche on the court house lawn in December. No religious Christmas songs in the public square. Let Christmas be a totally secular celebration.

Because what makes Christmas wrong is the attempt to worship Jesus Christ to celebrate him with all the trappings of the ancient pagan religion. But don't make that mistake of saying that everything that has ever been associated with Christmas is pagan. Because the nativity of Jesus is most assuredly not.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with a song that celebrates the birth of Jesus as such. There may be something else about the song that would be wrong, but what is wrong about it would not be the nativity of Jesus. There is a sweet little song. It is actually, I think it is really considered a children's song. I think most of you probably know this song. It is Away in a Manger. Away in a manger, no crib for a bed. The little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head. Ahh? Is this a problem to refer to Jesus as sweet? But aren't all babies sweet and aren't they all beautiful? And why would one not say the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head? The stars of the sky look down where he lay. The little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay. Well he was and he was there.

I wonder why we have come to the place to where it is so hard for us to enjoy that. To relish that. To celebrate that and to realize that almighty God in heaven, his son, actually Jesus Christ who emptied himself of his divinity came down to this earth and became totally vulnerable to man, to destruction, to pain, to suffering, to weakness for our sake that we who could celebrate the birth of a child for one of us could not celebrate the birth of a child of our dad? Of Abba, our heavenly father. Oh come all ye faithful, which is one of those wonderful, wonderful songs, could have been written, could have been sung by the shepherds as they wandered through the streets of Jerusalem. Oh come all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant. Come ye, oh come ye, to Bethlehem. Come and behold him, born the King of angels. Oh come, let's adore him. Have we come to the place where we cannot adore God, we cannot adore Jesus Christ? Have our spirits become so dry? Sometimes, sometimes I wonder about me. Sometimes I even wonder about you.

Culturally these things are not very Jewish. Not at all, but then one thing some people are forgetting that Jesus had no intention of merely being the Lord of the Jews. Jesus intended to be worshiped in every culture, in every tongue, in every place and every time and sure enough here we are.

I know that Christmas is a pagan origin and I deplore the deception and the corruption of it, but most of all I hate what it has for too long taken away from some of us. The right, the

privilege and the joy of celebrating the birth of the Son of God and our savior. The devil has taken that away from us and we want it back.

Let's celebrate the wonderful works of our God and the festival he has given us. Let's rejoice in his presence. Let's give thanks to him. And when we have occasion in the feast to sing, Hallelujah to our God, let's all know that it is a call to celebrate God with our works and with our lives and not merely with words and music.

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Ronald L. Dart titled: "The Celebration of Christ" (99F1) 9/24/99
Transcribed by: jsm

Ronald L. Dart is an evangelist and is heard daily and weekly
on his Born to Win radio program.

You can contact Ronald L. Dart at Christian Educational Ministries
P.O. Box 560 Whitehouse, Texas 75791
Phone: (903) 839-9300 — 1-888-BIBLE-44

www.borntowin.net