

C.S. Lewis' 'Lost' Parable on the Meaning of Christmas

C.S. Lewis was famous for taking ordinary topics, injecting them with an unexpected twist of thought, and presenting them in a fanciful way for his readers. His thoughts on Christmas are no exception.

In 1954, Lewis sat down to write an essay entitled *Xmas and Christmas: A Lost Chapter from Herodotus*. The essay described the fictitious island of Niatirb (aka Britain) which had a yearly celebration called "Exmas."

As Lewis goes on to explain, the celebration of Exmas is characterized by insanity in which individuals run around sending greeting cards and buying gifts for others because it is demanded of them. Such insanity naturally brings the following results:

"And the sellers of gifts no less than the purchasers become pale and weary, because of the crowds and the fog, so that any man who came into a Niatirbian city at this season would think some great public calamity had fallen on Niatirb. This fifty days of preparation is called in their barbarian speech the Exmas Rush.

But when the day of the festival comes, then most of the citizens, being exhausted with the Rush, lie in bed till noon. But in the evening they eat five times as much supper as on other days and, crowning themselves with crowns of paper, they become intoxicated."

What's often overlooked in the Exmas Rush, Lewis reports, is a much smaller, simpler celebration known as "Crissmas."

"But the few among the Niatirbians have also a festival,

separate and to themselves, called Crissmas, which is on the same day as Exmas. And those who keep Crissmas, doing the opposite to the majority of the Niatirbians, rise early on that day with shining faces and go before sunrise to certain temples where they partake of a sacred feast. And in most of the temples they set out images of a fair woman with a newborn Child on her knees and certain animals and shepherds adoring the Child."

Lewis ends his tale of Exmas on Niatirb with the conclusion that Crissmas and Exmas are simply not the same festival for two reasons:

"But what Hecataeus says, that Exmas and Crissmas are the same, is not credible. For first, the pictures which are stamped on the Exmas-cards have nothing to do with the sacred story which the priests tell about Crissmas. And secondly, the most part of the Niatirbians, not believing the religion of the few, nevertheless send the gifts and cards and participate in the Rush and drink, wearing paper caps. But it is not likely that men, even being barbarians, should suffer so many and great things in honour of a god they do not believe in."

Lewis's words present several poignant questions. Like the citizens of Niatirb, the Christmas rush annually wears out many Americans. But is this Christmas rush a bit hypocritical on the part of both Christians and non-Christians? If non-Christians don't believe in the birth of Christ, then why do they go to the trouble to recognize the holiday? And if Christians truly wished to honor the birth of their Savior, then wouldn't they be more willing to do away with the madness which accompanies the holiday in order to focus more on Him?