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## Q&A#98 Should We Sing Happy Birthday to Jesus at Christmas?

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Today's question:

"I recently ran into a new (to me?) liturgical trend that seems to be suddenly ubiquitous, and that, at least initially caught me somewhat flat footed: Celebrating Christmas by singing "Happy Birthday" to Jesus, and/or making part of the Christmas celebration a birthday party for Jesus.

My initial feeling is that this celebration is extremely misguided, and I think I can articulate some objections; but I'm having some difficulty clearly and thoroughly articulating an objection (assuming it is problematic), and I don't know how to respond well. What are your thoughts on this sort of liturgical practice, and how to respond to it well? I'm particularly concerned regarding the catechesis of my daughter.

(RE: Its ubiquity: Today our pastor said the church would sing "Happy Birthday to Jesus" in the liturgy after the Christ candle in the advent wreath is lit--as if the Christ candle were His birthday candle(!), and there'd be birthday cake for Jesus after the service; my daughter sang it as part of her preschool's Christmas celebration; and my nephew's LCMS Christmas celebration was a celebration of "The birthday of our best friend, Jesus".)"

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<https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

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## Transcript

Welcome back. If you're watching the video today, as you can see, I have a different background behind me. I moved house last week and am currently based in Stoke-on-Trent, while I sought out this house in preparation for new tenants, before I moved to the US.

Today's question is a Christmas-related one. I recently ran into a new, to me, liturgical trend that seems to be suddenly ubiquitous, and that, at least initially, caught me somewhat flat-footed. Celebrating Christmas by singing Happy Birthday to Jesus and or making part of the Christmas celebration a birthday party for Jesus.

My initial feeling is that this celebration is extremely misguided, and I think I can articulate some objections, but I'm having some difficulty clearly and thoroughly articulating an objection, assuming it is problematic, and I don't know how to respond well. What are your thoughts on this sort of liturgical practice and how to respond to it well? I'm particularly concerned regarding the catechesis of my daughter. Regarding its ubiquity, today our pastor said the church would sing Happy Birthday to Jesus in the liturgy after the Christ candle in the Advent wreath is lit, as if the Christ candle were his birthday candle, and there'd be birthday cake for Jesus after the service.

My daughter sang it as part of her preschool's Christmas celebration, and my nephew's LCMS Christmas celebration was a celebration of the birthday of our best friend Jesus. Well, I think the first reaction of the questioner to this is absolutely right. It is extremely misguided for a number of reasons.

I think the main thing to notice is that this is something that would be very unlikely to arise in a culture other than our own, where there is a very low power difference. When we talk about power difference or power distance, we think about the relationship between two people in, for instance, a person of one generation and the person of an older generation. A society with a larger power distance will have a lot more deference in that relationship.

They'll speak to that older party with terms like Sir, or if you're relating to someone from another family, you'll use Mr. or Mrs., or you'll address people as Sir or Mom, or you'll address people using a formal title. There's a sense of formality, deference, and etiquette, and all these sorts of things that our society, particularly in the US, UK, we don't have in most places. There are certain parts of the US where you do have this, but in the UK and in the US more generally, there is not a very strong power difference or distance.

What we have is overly intimate relationships where we'll talk about everyone as if we were on first name terms. We'll break down any sort of sense of distance and the deference that needs to be expressed across that. Now, when we're talking about our relationship with Christ, this is something that can be very noticeable in the sort of spiritualities that develop within these contexts.

So within the Western world, there's been an appreciation for a very low power distance relationship with Christ, where we speak about Christ primarily as in friend or using an overly intimate way of relation. And we think about the term Abba as if it contained that sense of a very intimate daddy relationship. But that's not actually what that term means.

And it's also important to recognise that within scripture we do not see these terms functioning in quite that same way. So when Jesus says that he calls the disciples his friends, there is something different implied by that than our idea of friendship, which is an overly intimate situation for understanding how Christ relates to his disciples. When we're talking about Christ as our friend, then it's a very different sort of thing from this hyper intimate and informal relationship that we tend to celebrate.

Now, when you think about birthday parties, when you think about singing someone happy birthday, it's a very deep level of familiarity expressed there. An intimacy, a sort of informality, a familiarity and an entrance into a shared realm of privacy where you can address someone on first name terms. You can speak to them in a very informal way and you can relate to them as a private person.

Now, when we talk about Christ, increasingly within our culture, we tend to think in those sorts of categories as if we relate to Christ as a private person rather than a saviour and lord, the one who sits on the throne, the one whose counsel we enter into. And that's a certain sort of friendship that is more close to the notion that we see in scripture. But we like to think in terms of this deeply intimate, close, personal, informal relationship where we can relate to Christ in these very informal categories as our buddy, our pal, our friend.

And we can relate to God as Abba, Daddy, not recognising that that term does not mean Daddy in that hyper intimate sense. The other thing to notice about this is it presents the celebration of Christ's incarnation as if it were a private celebration, a personal celebration of Christ's own that we are celebrating with him and for him. We're celebrating Jesus today because Jesus is so awesome.

And so we're celebrating something about him which does not really recognise the true character of this event. The birth of Christ is not just a birthday. It's the incarnation.

It's a theological event of immense significance, of world changing significance. We date our years from this event. This is something that gives orientation to time.

This is not just another event that occurs within time. A private celebration that we celebrate with Christ because he's our friend and our pal and we want to celebrate him and say how good he is. No, this is something that changes history.

And in the same way as the resurrection, the resurrection is another event of birth. It's the birth from the dead. It's the first fruits of the last resurrection that's going to occur.

So when we think about Christ's birth, his incarnation, it's the coming of God in human flesh. That isn't the same thing as what we think about as a birthday. This is something that changes history.

It's something that has significance for everyone. It's something that changes the way that society thinks about itself. It's the way that we relate as a human race to God.

God is now one of us. And that is what this event means. It's not just Christ's private celebration of a special day in his life, how it all began.

And we wish Christ many happy returns of the day. No, Christ's birth is something so much more than that. Christ's incarnation is not the same thing as just a birthday.

And as Christ sits at the right hand of the Father in human flesh, we are not just wishing him many happy returns. We are celebrating the fact that human flesh, the dust of this earth, is seated at the right hand of God's throne in heaven. We are celebrating something far more significant than a birthday, a private event.

We're not doing this as a celebration of some intimacy over familiarity and this sense of informality in our relationship with God. No, we're relating to our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ, the Judge of all, the one who is the last man, who's the second man and the last Adam. He's the one who represents the human race.

And that is a very different sort of celebration. But with our way of viewing this, we easily fall prey to these sorts of novelties, these ways of reducing a deep theological event of the incarnation into something trivialised, something that's a private celebration that we enter into, that cuts Christ down to a size that is unfitting of his dignity. When we celebrate even the birthday of Her Majesty the Queen, now, if you're in the US, you don't.

Unfortunately, you do not have the privilege of having Her Majesty as your monarch. But when we celebrate her birthday, it's not just a celebration of some private events in her life with candles and birthday cake and singing happy birthday. There's 41 gun salute or trooping of the colour, these sorts of things.

It's a very majestic event. It's a celebration of something that's far greater, that she represents us. She stands for the nation.

And so her birthday celebration has to be befitting a person of her stature and recognising something of the power distance between her and us that we can't be informal and over-familiar with her. We can recognise and love her and we can be drawn to celebrate that event. But it's not the same thing as an informal celebration, an over-familiar celebration.

This is one of the things that we are not very good at recognising within our society. And so I think unless we unpick some of the problems that we have in recognising authority and a proper comportment towards authority, we will struggle to do this well and we'll easily fall into the trap of these sorts of practices. So I believe there are very good reasons to resist this.

If your church is doing it, I would advise you to encourage, in an appropriate way, just discuss it and encourage people not to do this. Because it is not a fitting way of responding to Christ's majesty. It's not a fitting way of thinking about the incarnation.

And it's not a fitting way of comporting ourselves to God. If you have any further questions, please leave them on my Curious Cat account. If you would like to support this and future videos, please do so using my Patreon account or using my PayPal account.

Lord willing, I'll be back again tomorrow. Thank you very much for listening. God bless.