

Keeping Christmas Well:

The Meaning of Christian Conversion in Dickens' Christmas Books

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The Catholic author and literary critic G.K. Chesterton once said of the phantasmal encounters described in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*: "Whether the Christmas visions would or would not convert Scrooge, they convert us."¹ This theme of *conversion* is seen quite clearly in this celebrated novel. The book begins with reference to death – "Marley was dead: to begin with" – and Dickens may well have added, "... and so was Scrooge." For Ebenezer Scrooge, the novel's protagonist, is indeed a man dead in spirit: or, to use Dickens' more colorful description, "a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!"² Into this wretch's life of solitude and despair Dickens plunges his reader, who with Scrooge is spirited (literally) through a series of terrible spectral encounters to find at the novel's end not only redemption for Scrooge but hopefully a kind of redemption for himself as well. And *A Christmas Carol* is hardly unique in this regard: in much of Dickens' writing, but most especially in the five novels commonly called his "Christmas Books,"³ the importance of personal reformation and conversion looms large. In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, for example, a man named Tackleton, described as a "domestic Ogre" at the outset, is transformed eventually into a "pleasant, hearty, kind, and happy man."⁴ Therefore, it is worthwhile to the deeper appreciation of Dickens' writings, and in particular his Christmas writings, to consider more thoroughly this theme of redemption and to consider it in light of Dickens' personal religious views.

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens, The Last of the Great Men* (New York: The Readers Club, 1942), 123.

² Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Books of Charles Dickens* (Ann Arbor, MI: Tally Hall Press, 1996), 6. Subsequently cited as *Christmas Books*.

³ See Robert Higbie, *Dickens and Imagination* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), 71. See also Mary Carole McCauley, "Dickens' Christmas sequels," in Let's Go Online/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 29 November 1998, "Dickens' famous 'Carol' overshadowed 4 more holiday novellas," available from <http://www.jsonline.com/letsgo/daily/1129dickens.stm>; Internet; accessed 22 April 2004.

⁴ *Christmas Books*, 266-267.

It would seem at first glance that Dickens' characters and readers journey together through his Christmas stories toward the Christian virtues of virtue, humility, and goodness. But to what extent in Dickens are these virtues really bound up with Christianity? And is what Dickens means by "conversion" truly commensurate with traditional Christian doctrine? One thing that can be said for certain at the outset is that conversion in Dickens is a social, as well as a personal, reality. In fact, this social aspect may indeed be the primary concern. It seems that Dickens is most concerned with mankind taking Christ's teaching to heart because it is a means to the end of achieving social reform. With this focus on improving life in this world, however, the conversions of Dickens' miserly and misanthropic protagonists present a vision that somewhat obscures concern with the life to come. The Gospel message of Christmas hope has a stunted horizon here, terminating at societal justice and harmony rather than relationship with God.⁵ Thus, the conversions in his work present something of a paradox: the Good News seems to be a centrally motivating force, but there's rather a muddy idea of what exactly that Good News is. The message of Christmas, "On earth peace, good will towards men," preempts the prior singing of "Glory to God in the Highest" and replaces it as the central dictum both of Dickens' personal faith and of his quest for social reform.⁶ Christ's teachings in His public ministry strike the reader as little more than a template for achieving a sort of perpetual Christmas on earth – an idealistic and utopian notion. The Cross and Resurrection, themes central to any *true* Christian conversion, are hardly anywhere to be found.⁷ One commentator on

⁵ Cf. Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1942), 53.

⁶ See K.J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens: A Complete Edition* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 90, 153.

⁷ A notable exception is the redemptive arc of Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities* ending ultimately in an act of self-sacrificial love accompanied by the remarkable testimony, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known."

Dickens' life and work attests to how even his most explicitly Christian work possibly demonstrates this attitude: "To read *The Life of Our Lord* that Dickens wrote for his own children is to think that the key moment in Christianity is Christmas, not Easter" ⁸

The two Christmas novels mentioned above, *A Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, are illustrative of this mindset. In both, Dickens' presents conversion stories that, imbued with Christian sentiment as they may be, yet seem to involve no real *faith* at all. Humphrey House saliently observes, "The language of [Dickens'] religion is all in human metaphors, its charity is confined to the existing scheme of social life and takes its tone from common heartiness. Scrooge does not see the Eternal behind the Temporal, a new heaven and a new earth: he merely sees the old earth from a slightly different angle".⁹ Likewise, in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, the substance of Tackleton's conversion seems to consist essentially in his becoming a more sociable man.

It is true, of course, that Dickens succeeds nonetheless in evoking an emotional response from his readers that may kindle truly Christian sentiments; and it cannot be denied that the work contains much of the Gospel spirit, for the life he presents is clearly beyond what ordinary fallen man guided by base motivations aspires to live. As one biographer puts it, "It is of no consequence whether *A Christmas Carol* is true to life. It is better than life."¹⁰ Even so, within the books themselves, and to all appearances in Dickens' personal system of belief, the importance of Christian charity and virtue relates not so much to achieving eternal life as to

⁸. J. Bottum, "The Ghost of Christmas Past: Charles Dickens's Triumph," in Mr. Renaissance: The Christian Living and Apologetics Website, 08 March 2001, "The Ghost of Charles Dickens," available from <http://www.mrrena.com/dickens.shtml>; Internet; accessed 22 April 2004.

⁹. House, 53.

¹⁰. Stephen Leacock, *Charles Dickens: The Life and Work* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1936), 111.

gaining a better lot in this life. Scrooge's conversion is certainly the central point of *A Christmas Carol*, but the upshot of that point is not the rewarding effect on Scrooge's own eternal soul, but rather the beneficent effect on Scrooge's society, the Cratchits and others who depend upon him.

¹¹ Whatever the Ghost of Christmas Past might mean in revising his answer from "your welfare" to "your reclamation" in response to Scrooge's worldliness, ultimately the reclamation offered to Scrooge seems just as much bound to this earth: it is still within the sphere of a good night's rest rather than that of eternal rest. In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, on the other hand, the redemption of Tackleton is not even the central concern of the story, but even narratively is subordinated to the matter of the resolution of the conflict between John Peerybingle and his wife, Dot. The domestic peace of the couple trumps even the broader and more aspirational "peace on earth" of Dickens' own social Gospel, represented by Tackleton's reform.¹² In any case, in both stories the Gospel values' import for social and family relationships are of greater moment than the restoration of right relationship with God.

We see, therefore, a kind of constriction or narrowing of the Christmas message in Dickens. In a way, then, the less-celebrated *The Cricket on the Hearth* might arguably be put forward as the more representative and quintessential example. This is because, in the words of Mary Carole McCauley, "a Dickensonian Christmas celebrates the hearth, not the altar."¹³ At least the focal point of Scrooge's redemption encompasses community and the general welfare, whereas Tackleton's conversion is a secondary concern to the domestic tranquility of Peerybingles; and this captures more fully how, for Dickens, the Christian religion finds its consummate expression not in hallowed halls, but in hallowed homes. Indeed, Dickens' view of

¹¹. House, 110.

¹² See McCauley, *passim*.

¹³. McCauley, 2.

organized or communal religion, with all its trappings, was downright hostile at times.¹⁴ Several documents from Dickens' life testify to this fact. In a letter to an acquaintance, Dickens wrote, "As to the Church, my friend, I am sick of it,"¹⁵ and in his will, he urged this kind of attitude upon his children, exhorting them to "... try to guide themselves by the teaching of the New Testament *in its broad spirit*, and to *put no faith in any man's narrow construction of its letter here or there.*"¹⁶ Worship, sacrament, concelebration, and so many other prominent characteristics both of the Church of England and of Catholicism, were to Dickens outside of and even in some cases opposed to "the spirit and life of Christianity."¹⁷ It is notable, in this context, to recall how briefly, incidentally, and tangentially in *A Christmas Carol* is the mention of Scrooge's going to Church at the end of the novel.¹⁸ Whereas Dickens expatiates rather on Scrooge's charity toward the Cratchit family, and the dinner he shares with them. It is this sharing of society – *this* "communion" – that discovers God's blessing, and it is at this sacred locus – the dinner table rather than the altar – that Scrooge's conversion comes fully to fruition.¹⁹

In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, the subordination of the sub-plot involving Bertha Plummer and Mr. Tackleton might not merely be a matter of ordering priorities, but a more cogent structural design imbued with a meaning of its own. Elisabeth Gitter, in her Freudian analysis of the work, focuses on the Bertha's blindness and her father's deluding her (albeit well-meant) into a life of illusion.²⁰ Bertha is unaware that she lives in poverty, under the boot

¹⁴. *Ibid.*

¹⁵. Mamie Dickens and Georgina Hogarth, eds., *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1839), 575.

¹⁶. Geoffrey Rowell, "Dickens and the Construction of Christmas," *History Today* 43, no. 12 (1993), in *Religion and Philosophy Collection* [database on-line], EBSCOhost; accessed 22 April 2004; emphasis added.

¹⁷. *Ibid.*

¹⁸. *Christmas Books*, 73.

¹⁹. *Christmas Books*, 75-76.

²⁰. See Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Blind Daughter in Charles Dickens's *Cricket on the Hearth*," *Studies in English Literature (1500-1900)* 39, no. 4 (Autumn 1999): 675-689.

of Tackleton, whom she thinks is a loving and gentle man. Admittedly, much of Gitter's analysis stretches credibility as much Freudian analysis does, yet she nevertheless does draw attention to an often-overlooked detail: namely, the highly suggestive and strongly symbolic implication of the themes of blindness and disillusion embedded in a story about faith and conversion. Robert Higbie suggests that Bertha's toys and delusions about Tackleton are all representative of idealistic notions that people accept in blind faith, without realistic experience or practical knowledge.²¹ This type of faith ultimately fails Bertha, and the narrative thus "raises the possibility of disillusion in order to repudiate it."²² When Bertha is relieved of her ignorance and places her faith not in illusory, unseen things, but in a now-grounded knowledge of the reality that surrounds her, she becomes much happier: her relationships with her father, Tackleton, and others improve.²³ Is it too much to suggest that all of this is a subtly-woven commentary by Dickens upon faith? Recalling what has been said above about Dickens valuing the social reform aspects of faith the most, could one not read *The Cricket on the Hearth* as implying that faith is merely an illusion unless it finds application in tangible realities and concrete situations? This leads to one more noteworthy kind of subordination that may be missed, involved not only in *The Cricket on the Hearth* but also in *A Christmas Carol*: namely, that of the supernatural to the natural. The Cricket and the other Fairy Spirits, along with Marley's ghost and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, do not encourage the characters with whom they interact to gaze Heavenward, but rather to look more honestly at their own earthly conditions. The spirits extol faith not in the Incarnation as a manifestation of God-with-us, but in the effect of good works and the basic decency of humanity guided by the

²¹. Higbie, 71-73.

²². Higbie, 72.

²³. *Christmas Books*, 245 ff.

edicts of Christ's social message. The Spirits, if Heaven sent, nevertheless serve Earth and point to earthly realities rather than those beyond.

The reward for faith in "good will," for Dickens and for so many others in that great age of reform, is a better society with relative peace, not eternal life with God in heaven. Indeed, Dickens seems somewhat of a spirit with those other reformers of his epoch, such as Marx and Engles, who said that Christian hope and consolation built upon expectation of a better world to come were attitudes positively counter-productive to achieving reform in the here and now. One thing is clear throughout all of Dickens: he is impatient for peace and justice for all – he wants it *immediately*. And he sees the Beatitudes and other teachings of Christianity as primarily instrumental means to achieving such a goal. He does not seem to put stock in the reminder that "there will be poor always."²⁴ He seems conveniently to ignore that the peace Christ offered his disciples ended, for most of them, in painful martyrdom, not earthly contentment. Hence, Dickens ceaselessly showers upon the good Christian men and women of his tales joy and happiness, especially the poor and downtrodden.²⁵ Those whom he portrays in poverty always maintain a positive perspective on life, and harness more fully than his other characters the true Christmas spirit. And Dickens presents them as already paid in kind; as Humphrey House puts it: "The Christmas spirit of good-fellowship and kindness *wins worldly returns* as surely as it *expresses itself in worldly goods*."²⁶ In both *A Christmas Carol* and *The Cricket on the Hearth*, after the conflict has been resolved, Dickens sits his characters down to Christmas feasts and celebration; he frees them of their burdens and promises them a life of happiness ever after.²⁷

²⁴. John 12:8.

²⁵. See *Christmas Books*, 42-45, 187-192.

²⁶. House, 110; emphasis added.

²⁷. See *Christmas Books*, 75-76, 257-259.

Peace on earth to men of good will and glad tidings for the poor abound amidst the Christmas feasting and gifts, but nowhere among the gifts are frankincense and myrrh, nowhere admit the tidings of the Birth of Christ those words that Mary kept and pondered in her heart.

Yet even with Dickens' stunted vision of what Christmas and Christianity really mean, there are great redeeming qualities in his work. In spite of what he may have *intended* in the portrayal of Bertha's blind faith or Scrooge's perfunctory visit to Church, Dickens was working with a subject matter that explodes any constraints one may attempt to put on it: it is a gift that won't stay wrapped. Thus the truth of Chesterton's observations: whether or not Scrooge is converted, many readers will be. Besides the intrinsic meaning of Christianity that will not be constrained, though, Chesterton gave another reason why Dickens ends up an effective witness of the very Gospel he seems not to have understood: namely, that Dickens had a capacity for sympathy and an a level of compassion for the the plight of the poor that is practically unparalleled in all of literature.²⁸ This love Dickens had for the downtrodden was surely a Divine love, and that is what shines through with such piercing clarity.

Dickens at least understood well the centrality of the poor to the Christian proclamation, from the message of the angels to the Magnificat of Mary. Whatever he may have missed, he had this much at least, and had it in abundance. He also had in abundance what Chesterton called the gigantic secret of the Christian: *joy*. As Chesterton noted of *A Christmas Carol*:

The beauty and the real blessing of the story do not lie in the mechanical plot of it, the repentance of Scrooge, probable or improbable; they lie in the great furnace of real happiness that glows through Scrooge and everything around him; that great furnace, the heart of Dickens.

²⁸. Chesterton, 122-124.

Scrooge comes to be a man, *A Christmas Carol's* narrator tells us, of whom it could be said, "that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge."²⁹ Whether one thinks Scrooge really did possess such knowledge, or whether Dickens did, the message that such knowledge is important comes through loud and clear and convicts the reader to discover what that knowledge is. That knowledge, once gained, will indeed help change the world and make it a better place, as Dickens shows so beautifully. But it will do more than that: it will lead to a still better place. The man who keeps Christmas well holds Emmanuel in his heart: he remains in that Word made Flesh and that Word remains with him, and that Word will never die. Thus the mystery of Christmas leads to the greater joy of Easter. And so, while Dickens may not inspire faith in his readers deliberately or directly, his love for the poor, his ardent desire for peace and justice, and his manifestation of the gigantic joy of the Christian at Christmastime are such that they could hardly lead readers anywhere but to Bethlehem, and that is a journey essential to both the welfare *and* the reclamation of each and every Scrooge.³⁰

²⁹. *Christmas Books*, 76.

³⁰. Chesterton, 122-124.

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