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"For this I was Born..." Jesus

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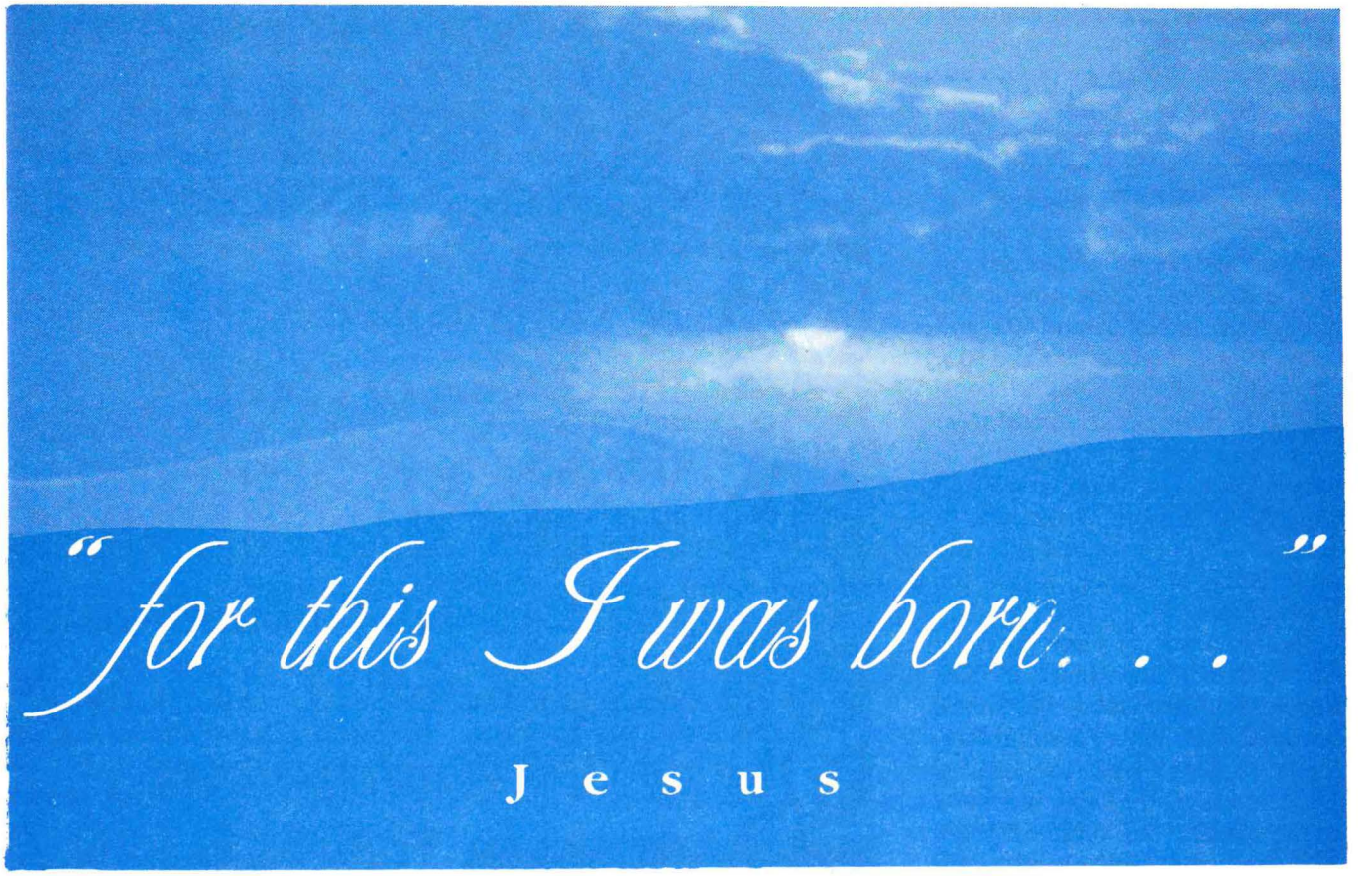

Throughout the year, but especially at Christmas, we celebrate the coming of Christ to the world God loves. Familiar carols ring out the festive theme— "Joy to the World! The Lord is come. . . ." And seasonal memories invade our minds spontaneously. But have we considered recently why Jesus came, and thus the meaning of the event we celebrate?

When we consider why Jesus came, there are few better passages to turn to than the ones from John's Gospel in which He declares "I have come in order that. . ." (John 20:31), but John also contains some of the clearest statements regarding Jesus' reason for coming. And central to these purpose statements is Jesus' declaration to Pilate, "For this I have been born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." (John 18:37)

"The truth" in John is absolutely central to the mission of Jesus. As the only begotten of the Father, Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14); the kind of worship inaugurated by Jesus is in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23f); to know the truth is to be set free by it (John 8:32); and Jesus Himself is the way, the truth and the

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life—the one through whom all who come to the Father do so. (John 14:6) In the above passage, Jesus has been born to witness to the truth, and to abide in the truth is to recognize His voice. Jesus indeed is a king, but his Kingdom is one of truth.

Ironically, Pilate the governor has no comprehension of what this Government is all about. As with every other instance in John where a partner in dialogue with Jesus does not understand Jesus' words, Pilate's noncomprehension serves as a foil, against which the writer drives home his points. In this sense, it is not just Pilate who is exposed as failing to understand the ways God works through Jesus, but all members of the audience who cling to false notions of power, authority and truth. So what does it mean that Jesus came to witness to the truth? In the light of John 18:36-38, the following points become clear.

1) The origin of Jesus' Kingdom is not of this world; therefore, his servants cannot fight to protect it. It is not a matter of permission (may not), but a function of reality. The furthering of Jesus' Kingdom cannot be advanced by violent means—rather it is set back by them. Truth never triumphs by force. It always persuades by convincement. Lasting good can never be accomplished through evil means. The character of the means always affects the complexion of the outcome. Human kingdoms and empires can never be equated with the eternal Kingdom of God. Neither nations nor institutions are sovereign; only the truth of God will abide at the end of time, and it

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can only be furthered by truthful and righteous means.

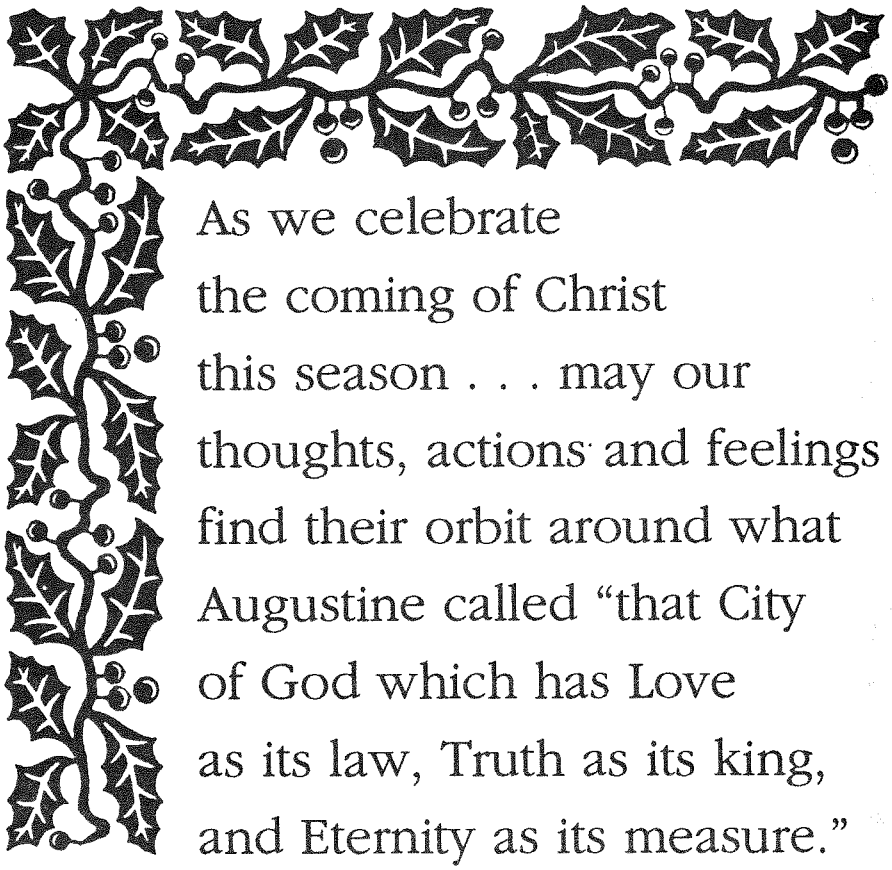
This teaching is all the more striking when set against the backdrop of Jewish and Christian relations with the Romans. While John was probably not "published" until the 80's or 90's, Christians had already undergone several waves of persecution by the Romans. Most notoriously under Nero in the 50's and 60's, and under Domitian in the 80's and 90's, Christians had been fed to lions, nailed to crosses and burned alive for their commitment to Christ. At many times they must have been tempted to "defend" themselves, or at least to strike back and maintain some sense of dignity, as did the Jewish Zealots.

The rendering of Jesus' teaching here must have been aimed at countering such inclination, but notice the approach. Rather than presenting a pacifistic legalism, Jesus is portrayed as getting to the very heart of the matter. The origin of Jesus' Kingdom—and the locus of his followers' aspirations—is eternal. This is why his true followers do not, and cannot, fight.

2) Jesus is indeed a king, but his Government is one of truth. Here we have a classic confrontation between true authority and power and their false imitations. One would think Rome's authority and that of its representative would be absolute, but Pilate is portrayed ironically as being held hostage to the whims of the masses. He tries to set Jesus free, but the crowds will not let him. He claims to have the authority to release or to crucify Jesus, but obviously, he is impotent to do so.

Finally, the very Jewish leaders who feel they must put Jesus to death, accusing him of blasphemy, reduce themselves to idolatry, chanting "We have no king but Caesar!" (John 19:15) Nowhere is irony used more powerfully in John than here. Just as the origin of Jesus' Kingdom is from above, so is the source of all true authority.

Jesus declares to Pilate, "You would have no authority. . .unless it were given you from above." (John 19:12)



As we celebrate the coming of Christ this season . . . may our thoughts, actions and feelings find their orbit around what Augustine called "that City of God which has Love as its law, Truth as its king, and Eternity as its measure."

The real source of all power and authority is neither structural, nor organizational, nor charismatic, nor popular. It is truth; and this is the character of Jesus' Government.

Everyone who abides in the truth hears the voice of Jesus. Again, the noncomprehending statement of Pilate, "What is truth?" alerts the reader to the writer's scandalizing use of irony. Here Pilate is exposed as failing to "hear" the voice of Jesus, as are the Jewish leaders. The meaning of abiding in the truth is clarified against the sharp relief of its alternatives.

Clinging to conventional means of power, yearning for the approval of the populus, confidence in human-made religion, the lust for notional certainty—all of these are exposed as bankrupt idolatries that hinder one's ability to attend, and to hear, the living voice of Jesus. Conversely, all who abide in the truth, and who live out of the reality, hear the voice of Jesus and contribute to His Kingdom.

As we celebrate the coming of Christ this season, may we also attend the meaning of His coming. Jesus came to bear witness to the truth, and this insight bears within itself the power to transform our very approaches to life. Rather than living by conventional values and standards, may our thoughts, actions and feelings find their orbit around what Augustine called "that City of God which has Love as its law, Truth as its king, and Eternity as its measure." This is the reason Jesus was born, and this is the greater meaning of Christmas. Q