

Christmas Day, 1975 - A Reason to Celebrate

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President Neil A. Salonen addresses members on Christmas Day -- (L to R) Keith Cooperrider, Neil Salonen, Reiner Vincenz

This is Christmas day, 1975. Christmas is usually one of the most joyful holidays in this country. Theoretically Easter is a more joyful day, but actually Christmas is the day that's usually celebrated more. That's really wrong, if you think about it. Easter is the day to celebrate because it's the day of resurrection.

America is nominally a Christian country, but in fact even most Christians don't attend church on Christmas. We have a saying in this country, "an Easter and Christmas Christian," meaning someone who goes to church just on Easter and Christmas. But that may not be the day that they go, because Christmas gets so busy, so they don't go, and Easter they're busy with all the relatives coming over for a big meal, so they don't go. What it really means is they go about twice a year when they get a chance, which is on one of the off days, probably. There's always a certain number of people in church on any given Sunday, but only a few of those are really hard core.

Christmas is a day which is supposed to celebrate hope, because it is the day marking the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is the day that hope came back into the world. It is the day that God renewed His promise to mankind. Because of man's original nature, since the beginning of time he has been seeking hope, fulfillment, and a true relationship with God.

That hope which came to Christianity 2,000 years ago has not been significantly realized, and Christians know that very well. But because their desire for hope is so great, they celebrate the day anyway as a renewal of hope, a renewal of God's promise. As they look back over the last 2,000 years, they cannot note much accomplishment, except that they have been able to maintain that great hope.

Real hope cannot come to man until he understands the reason for his sinful state, so hope will really come when knowledge is revealed -- when man can understand himself, his fallen nature, and God's providence for his restoration.

Two thousand years ago, the hope was that Jesus could bring the truth, and embody it, so that others could not only worship him but could follow him. Through him they could become incarnations of the truth. But Jesus' words were never heeded and were never really listened to, so that truth was lost and all that remained was the initial flicker of hope. Because man so strongly desires to realize that hope, even without understanding, he fans the flames, and hopes in the face of despair.

This year, with the economy so depressed and people having less money to spend, the stores were expecting a bad year. In fact, this has been one of the best years for merchants.

People are under so much pressure that they don't know how to cope with it. They can't confront it, so they do the only thing that they can do -- they close their minds, turn away, and believe in hope. Everything's completely out of control. It's a crazy world. And people are responding the only way that

they can, by just closing their eyes and living in hope. They're going out and spending all the money they have. At least they have it now and they can buy something with it now; it may not be worth anything a few weeks from now, and there may not be anything to buy.

We're supposed to celebrate Christmas because it represents the beginning of God's new work of salvation when Jesus Christ was born. Although that is the nominal purpose, it's really the day we celebrate a renewal of hope, when we just try to find some joy and belief in a coming peace. We sing the old Christmas carols and continue to hope and pray for the same things. But just like the consumer who is living in a hope that's based on nothing, all too many Christians are continuing to live on a hope that's also based on nothing, nothing they can understand, nothing that they can measure, nothing they can point to. The world is not drawing closer to peace; it is drawing closer to war.

The economy is not growing ever more prosperous; it is growing ever more inflationary. The situation gives no objective reason for hope, so more than ever before people are grasping onto that hope. So, Christmas is a passive holiday. It represents our waiting for God to do something, to come down and change the world.

Until that time we pray and wait and live as best we can according to the tenets of our faith. But we lack the direction and the understanding to cut through the chains that have been holding man in a sinful and selfish state and to create the peaceful world that we have been longing for and praying for all this time.

While Christians debate and even fight over the meaning of Jesus' words, in our movement our struggle is to be able to overcome within ourselves the fallen nature which works against our realizing those things. It is an internal struggle for us, but one which is filled with hope because we have the example and we have a pattern. We have a direction, and we have guidance. And ' we have brothers and sisters surrounding us to make it possible to continue, to encourage each other and be encouraged ourselves to advance along that spiritual path.

When we join this movement several problems come up. We have been raised to celebrate Christmas with great hope and great joy, so in the beginning members often feel a division. They feel that perhaps they should go back to their families to celebrate this day. Is that bad? It depends on if it is understood.

At this stage in our development, Rev. Moon has called us as members of the Unification Church to act as a sacrifice. I'm sure the lamb slaughtered at the altar did not want to be slaughtered; it would rather run free with the other lambs. But by symbolically taking the best of his flock and sacrificing it to God, the shepherd was asking God's blessing on the remainder of the flock. For the sake of the others, some had to be sacrificed.

Rev. Moon has called many members here from around the world -- Japanese and European members. They have no possibility of going home to visit their families on this day, or any day. They don't even think about it at all. Their family doesn't think about it at all. They're foreign missionaries. They've gone to a distant country. They've dedicated themselves. They have been able to separate themselves from their past loyalties and attachments to offer themselves wholly for God's purpose.

I know of many Christian homes which have sent either one son or daughter as a foreign missionary. They're proud of what their child is doing, and they understand the sacrifices which are required. Unless we can explain to our families and to our friends and to all those whom we know that our lives are now consecrated -- that we've become missionaries, priests and priestesses of a new promise -- we can't expect them to understand. If you explain your involvement in our church as if it were a job just like any other job, then it's only natural that they will begin to say, "Well, don't they even let you have one week off? Isn't that only reasonable?" And then they remind you of all the times they sacrificed for you, saying, "Is it really asking too much to come home and have Christmas together?"

I'm in favor of people visiting their homes, and I've often encouraged people to go home. But I feel that it must be done at a time and in a way that is effective and justifiable, in view of our position as a sacrifice. If you can take the position with your parents that the reason you don't come home for the holidays is because you have a responsibility to help make those holidays meaningful for someone else, they can be proud of the work that you are doing. Certainly that's true for nurses, doctors and others. Yet we who are dedicated and committed to doing something so much greater than any of those things somehow find it difficult to explain what we are doing. I think it's because we have lost sight of our responsibility, of our position, and of the nature of our movement.

In order for us to celebrate a real Christmas, as a milestone in God's agonizing efforts to restore mankind, we come together and have joy. But this must be as a family. This must be the place where we celebrate with greater joy, with greater love because we have a greater light.

It is really important for us to understand our role and use this day to re-evaluate our commitment in contrast to the commitment of the churches in whose midst we are working. The Unification Church is

not a denomination like any other church. It is a movement which is realizing God's hope for mankind. And those of us who are called really pledge our lives, all our energies and talents when we first join. But how quickly we qualify that pledge with conditions, circumstances, personal directions, or personal ambitions, and as we chop away, at the end how much is left? In a way it would be easy to die. It is much more difficult to die to ourselves, as Jesus said, to live only for His purpose, to let our lives be an example and a sacrifice.

This will be the year that shakes America and the world. If we can dedicate ourselves just for the next several years, we can go home and spend hundreds of Christmases, because the foundation will have been set and the value of our work will be easily recognized by all. If we can dedicate ourselves for the next couple of years to work without ceasing for the immediate goals -- because the hands are so few that are doing this work -- and if we can accomplish those goals, not only our parents and our friends but all mankind and our descendants will be grateful for generations to come. Because we have knowledge, we also have responsibility.

This is a day that we celebrate with Christians -- the birth of Jesus and the beginning of God's dispensation centering around Jesus Christ. This is the time when we should be grateful for what was accomplished, and we should pay respect to the hard work and sacrifice of all those who have followed Jesus in the last 2,000 years. How incredible it is that they gave as much as they did, knowing as little as they did. How incredible it is that they remained faithful under the most difficult circumstances, with no clear answers. And how much more responsible we are to redouble our efforts to surpass anything they could have accomplished because of what we see so clearly looming on the horizon month by month and year by year.

Many people who were not interested in our movement before are now turning to us in desperation to find out what it is that we have that enables us to mobilize people with such an intense dedication. Some people have been attacking us for brainwashing, but most people don't take those charges seriously. They can't understand, though, what it is that has inspired people to give themselves so completely.

Then our responsibility is all the more to make sure that we are at every moment exemplifying total giving. Do you want them to see you on vacation? Do you want to try and explain, "Well, during the week I'm very dedicated, but this is Saturday and I'm not as dedicated on Saturday. I don't just feel the urgency as much." Or, "I'm urgent between nine and five. In the evening I'm much less urgent."

How people respond to our dedication depends exactly on how we feel about it ourselves. They're not doing it. They may not be prepared to do it, but how they feel about our doing it depends on how they perceive us to be feeling. If we are filled with determination and inner joy, if we are glad to do it and we feel that this is our voluntary sacrifice for some greater purpose, that spirit is contagious and impressive.

This is the time for us to prepare to pledge ourselves to be the people living according to a new standard, in order for our children, our friends, and our relatives to have the life that everyone desires. Someone has to be willing to sacrifice himself, not just by working hard but by transcending individual desires. I first experienced our movement as a New Testament Christian. I kept thinking about my growth, my ability to contribute.

I wasn't thinking at all about what the group needed to accomplish. I'm not criticizing that period except for saying very little changed. Although I enjoyed my relationship with the group -- I thought it was a very inspiring group, a healthy and spiritually growing family -- it wasn't changing the city and it wasn't about to influence the country or the world. Therefore nobody wrote against us. Nobody was afraid of us. Nobody criticized us for brainwashing. We were studying just as intensely in fact we had stricter discipline · than we do now. But no one ever criticized those techniques as brain control, because it was irrelevant to them.

Then I had an experience for which I am very grateful. In 1968, some of us had gone to a New Year's Eve party to witness. I was driving home in a Volkswagen -- it was a snowy night. As we drove along, my mind was on something else and I just went sailing right through a stop sign into the path of an oncoming car. We collided; the car I was driving was totaled and some people were hurt -- but no one seriously, for which I was grateful.

The car I was driving was hit in the front and the back. The wheels completely collapsed. The steering wheel I was holding was bent out of shape when I was thrown up against it, and the key was broken out of the ignition. My head hit the side of the window and the window shattered, so I thought, "I must be hurt," but I wasn't at all.

What I thought was a very simple thought, but very profound. "I could have been dead. Maybe I should have been dead." Many people die in automobile accidents every day. If I had died on that day I never would have been able to buy another thing. I never would have been able to do another thing for myself, or for anyone else. I wouldn't have existed at all. My life could have ended at that point and everything

that I was would have been summed up at that point. If I had died, how many regrets would I have had? How many things would I have left undone?

I found it very useful to think of myself as somebody who had died. In terms of planning my life, dedicating myself, and making a sacrifice I thought, "Why don't you think of yourself as someone who is dead? All of this is bonus time." In those next few months I really changed; I can really say I felt commitment to our movement. It has never left me since that time, because it is so easy to think that I would not have even existed. I'm not sacrificing anything now, because there would not have been anything.

Whatever I am doing now is because God spared my life; therefore that life no longer belongs to me -- not that it ever did in the beginning, but now more than ever it belongs to God. Our mission is to discover God's purpose for our life. Our life is an investment that God makes in us. It is just a loan, something borrowed. It's easy to be selfish about the things that you create, like the money you earn or the food you cook. But the thing about which we're most selfish is the thing that we had nothing to do with at all -- our own life. Our life was given to us, and some day we have to give it back, our only challenge is what we do in the meantime.

It is difficult to sacrifice 10 percent or 20 percent because you are constantly struggling and evaluating your concerns against what's a reasonable level of commitment. But it's easy to sacrifice 100 percent, because regardless of the circumstances you give everything, and then you can expect a miraculous result. Jesus Christ was an example of perfect giving. Christmas is the celebration of the work that was begun by Jesus Christ, but because the people didn't understand, and because he couldn't teach them the things that they needed to know to follow his example, the hope that he brought has remained distant and irrational until this time.

Now is the time and we are the people who can celebrate the hope of Christmas. Let us make this day a day of celebration of that hope. And from this day let us prepare ourselves to be qualified to represent the Unification Church and to lead lives of sacrifice, lives of dedication, and lives of hope.