

## CHRISTMAS

"For preventing disorders, arising in several places within this jurisdiction by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonour of God and offense of others; it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shilling as a fine to the county." From the records of the General Court, Massachusetts Bay Colony, May 11, 1659

Puritans may have been austere but banning Christmas? What's going on here? This week we look at the celebration of Christmas in the early church and today.

### Then

This could be a very short discussion: Until at least 200 A.D., there is no record whatsoever of any observance of Jesus' birthday among the ekklesia. In fact, it was not common to celebrate birthdays at all. Tertullian (145-220), an early Christmas leader and apologist claimed that "offerings are made in honour of our departed friends, on the anniversaries of their deaths, which we esteem their true birthdays, as they are born to a better life." (Apology IV.1)

Both Tertullian (On Baptism, 19) and Origen (Against Celsus, VIII.22), writing in the early second century, list only Easter and Pentecost as Christian feast days.

This is not surprising in light of the fact that the dates of Easter and Pentecost can be fixed by their concurrence with the Jewish feasts of Passover and Tabernacles. In the Gospels, the location and the manner of Jesus' birth are detailed, but the Bible is silent about the date. One thing is virtually certain: Jesus was not born on December 25. The Bible tells us that at the time of Jesus' birth "there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8) but in those days shepherds brought their flocks in and corralled them beginning in mid-October to protect them from the winter cold.

The December 25 date was established in 350 A.D. by Pope Julius I, but the Catholic Encyclopedia admits "there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ's birth." So where did December 25 come from? An authoritative answer to that question is lost in antiquity, but most sources agree that it comes from pagan festivals. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia again, states "(t)he well-known solar feast...of Natalis (Solis) Invicti [the birth of the invincible sun], celebrated on 25 December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date." Other suggestions of a pagan origin for the date of Christmas include the Roman festival of Saturnalia (December 18-24) and Brumalia (December 25), celebrating the beginning of the "new sun." Because of human dependence on and worship of the sun, the winter solstice was adopted as the "birthday" of many ancient gods: Thor, Dionysus, Isis, Adonis, and most notably Mithra, who played a significant role in Roman culture.

Saturnalia was dedicated to the Roman God of agriculture, Saturn. Saturnalia was the most important Roman holiday of the year—a time for merry-making, rest and relaxation, connections with family and friends, celebrating the new solar year, prayers for protection of winter crops, and honoring deities. It was an enjoyable time deeply entrenched in Roman culture, something people would hate to give up. Kalends, another Roman holiday, when new consuls took office and homes were decorated with evergreens, occurred on January 1. So when Constantine claimed Christianity in 313 and paganism began to fade from Roman culture, it would have been convenient and socially-acceptable to simply replace the pagan holiday season with a Christian one. Depending on one's perspective, it was either an abominable accommodation or an astute political move.

Even after the Roman church adopted December 25, there was wide disagreement. Churches in other parts of the world did not accept the date until later and often with Roman arm-twisting. In fact, churches in Jerusalem didn't adopt December 25 until the seventh century! We have no biblical basis for observing (or even knowing) the birthday of Jesus. None of the traditions that surround Christmas—decorations, gift-giving, Yule logs, Christmas cards, eggnog, Santa Claus, mistletoe, caroling, bells, etc.—have any direct relationship to the story of Christ Jesus. The Apostles—those closest to our Lord during His lifetime—make no mention whatsoever of His birthday.

## Now

No one can really question that our current form of Christmas celebration is deeply infused with pagan traditions and crass materialism. The "Christmas Season" is not so much a focus on Christ Jesus as it is a celebration of rampant consumerism, one on which the retail sector of our economy is highly dependent. Many, if not most, of the traditions associated with Christmas have pagan roots.

The issue of Christmas comes down to one of syncretism (the combination of different forms of belief), and I think there are two legitimate opposing arguments.

### Argument 1

"(B)eware that you are not ensnared to follow them [pagan cultures], after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?' You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods..." (Deuteronomy 12:30-31a)

By attempting to masquerade pagan practices as Christian symbols we offend God. Even though we may claim we are honoring God in our Christmas celebrations, it is at best in vain and at worst an abomination. "But in vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men." (Matthew 15:9) Lacking a biblical foundation for Christmas, its observance is a human tradition. Like those who worship nature, it is the worship of the creation rather than the creator. Christmas trees, Yule logs, and mistletoe are all vestiges of the pagan worship of nature. All three, in one way or another, honor the sun rather than the Son.

Legend associates Santa Claus with St. Nicholas, the fourth century bishop of Myra in Asia Minor. Little is really known about St. Nicholas, but his supposed charity to others has tied him to Christmas traditions. But gift-giving is also associated with the Roman Kalends holiday, as well as the Norse god, Thor, who supposedly brought good children gifts of fruit, candy, and coal to burn in the fireplace. Of course, the typical Christian justification for gift-giving is the story of the three magi in Matthew

2:1-11. But the wise men gave gifts to Jesus because they regarded Him as King of the Jews—they didn't give gifts to each other!

Christmas is one of Satan's most successful deceptions, an "angel of light" (2 Corinthians 11:14) all dressed up in the wonderful "Christmas spirit," but in reality drawing us into a web of gluttonous consumerism and pagan celebrations. And if Christmas is such a time of love and joy, why is December the busiest month for most mental health professionals? "Humbug" is too kind a word for what Christmas represents!

#### Argument 2

"For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Corinthians 1:18)

There could be few more powerful symbols of the power of Rome and its pagan culture than the cross. It was the ultimate form of execution—public, cruel, and absolute. Yet the cross became the most important symbol of Christianity from its earliest days—God changed a symbol of death to one of life. Similarly, early Christians also referred to themselves as bond-servants/slaves of Christ—a degrading institution transformed into a noble goal.

Is it possible to do the same with the pagan symbols now associated with Christmas?

What if the entire Christian world were to suddenly disassociate itself from Christmas? Would the world be a better place? Would the endless ads for Christmas shopping immediately cease?

God has enormous power to use our flawed human efforts to serve His purposes. God does not condemn all traditions—He condemns those that represent hypocrisy or that draw people away from Him. To be sure, all the commercialism surrounding Christmas can certainly draw just about anyone away from spiritual thoughts. On the other hand, even the biggest cynic must have difficulty completely separating Christ from Christmas.

The answer probably lies in HOW we celebrate Christmas. Are we in bondage to the secular side of it, or are we focused (and help others focus) on Jesus? We recently received a catalog from World Vision listing gifts available to give needy children and their families around the world—animals, health care, education, clean water, clothing, food. Unfortunately, I think we had already expended much of our Christmas budget, but I hope they repeat the catalog next year.

After all, doesn't the Bible say, "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world"? (James 1:27) . The World Vision catalog is an opportunity to do both!

This time of year, there is a lot of talk about the "Christmas Season," which mostly means spend, spend, spend. But it does represent an annual opportunity, when people are perhaps a little more open to the Gospel, to share the good news! Ultimately, how each Christian observes Christmas is one of those difficult areas of individual conscience. It would be very wrong to condemn or even criticize Christians with different perspectives. In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul addressed the subject of special observations:

"Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions...One person regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. He

who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God." (Romans 14: 1,5-10)

From this we learn that if a person sees value in celebrating Christmas and does so for the glory of God, another person has no right to judge that. That is also true for those who choose not to observe Christmas or any other holiday. It's all about bringing glory to God, after all. It's hard to see how Santa Claus, reindeer, mistletoe, eggnog, and the like does that, but there are many other aspects of Christmas that certainly bring Him glory.

When the Massachusetts Bay Colony "banned" Christmas celebrations, it was almost certainly an effort to remove secular activities from a spiritual holiday, not vice versa. Our problem is America today is that most efforts around Christmas or other religious activities are attempts to remove the spiritual aspects of what has become a secular activity.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, post a message so we can all share in the discussion!

## **NEXT ISSUE: Cities of the Ekklesia: Corinth**

To gain a greater understanding of the New Testament, particularly the letters distributed in the early church and now found in the Bible, it is valuable to understand the culture of the original intended recipients. This issue will be the first in a series (not consecutive) on the cities of the New Testament, where the ekklesia lived and worked. Of all those cities, I find Corinth the most interesting and the most relevant to modern America.

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