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Institute for Creation Research

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Christmas: Pagan or Christian?

There is no doubt that many of our present-day Christmas-New Year customs have little relevance to Biblical Christianity. Such things as the commercialism, the drunkenness, the highway deaths, and the general letdown in morals that have come to be associated with the so-called “Holiday Season” obviously have no basis in New Testament Christianity. The same is true of the Christmas tree, the holly and mistletoe, the Santa Claus myth, and similar more pleasant Christmas traditions.

As a matter of fact, many of these things are more properly associated with the festival of Saturnalia, and other similar periods of feasting and revelry, which were almost universally practiced in the ancient pagan world near the end of the year, than they do with Christianity. There is in fact much historical evidence that these were pagan customs, which became grafted on to the modified forms of Christianity that began to be prominent in the centuries following the apostolic age.

There is no indication in the New Testament or elsewhere that the early Christians observed Christmas at all.

Furthermore, many Bible scholars believe now that Jesus was born, not in the winter, but more probably in the early fall. It is not surprising, therefore, that there have been various groups of Christians, both in the past and in the present, who have reacted against Christmas and New Year celebrations so vigorously as to reject them altogether and to prohibit their members from taking any part in them.

Modern atheists and various others, for altogether different reasons, are even trying today to expunge all public implications of Christ and the Bible from our Christmas customs, hoping to make it nothing but a secular holiday.

On the other hand, there is much in our Christmas traditions, which even though not explicitly taught in the Bible, may make it a legitimate and wholesome application of the significance to the world of the Incarnation of Christ. In a society which is becoming increasingly secularized and fragmented, it is surely good to have an annual and universal remembrance of the great historical fact that *“In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him”* (I John 4:9).

Even rank unbelievers and hardened cynics often seem to sense, at Christmastime, that *“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”* (I Timothy 1:15), and this makes it a good time for evangelism.

Christmas can be a time for family reunions, for communicating with friends, and especially for reconciling differences that may have come between friends and relatives. Surely this is an appropriate remembrance of Him who *“hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation”* (II Corinthians 5:19). Except for the spirit of commercialism and covetousness that tends to intrude, the practice of exchanging gifts at Christmas should be a reminder of the One who *“so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him might not perish, but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16).

And while we are giving gifts to our loved ones, it is singularly appropriate to give a special gift to the Lord Jesus, first *“our own selves,”* and then special gifts to those who are sacrificially *“ministering”* in His Name (II Corinthians 8:4-5).

The emphasis on children at Christmastime is surely wholesome, as it can and should remind parents again of their solemn responsibility to *“bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord”* (Ephesians 6:4). We are also confronted anew with the amazing fact that, when God became a man, He first became a babe and then a child and a youth, thus experiencing and thereby understanding in a very personal way the entire range of man’s problems and needs.

The Christmas tree and other traditions have been so divested of their original pagan connotations by now that few are even aware of them. Thus, a

Christian can, in good conscience, utilize these traditions to encourage the spirit of love and reconciliation that honors Christ. Even those who are still unsaved participate in some measure in the “common grace” shed abroad on all men when Christ came into the world. As the Scripture says: *“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men”* (Titus 2:11).

As far as the date of Christmas is concerned, this is unimportant in comparison with its message, which is the great and miraculous event of the Incarnation, when the great Creator, without whom *“was not any thing made that was made”* (John 1:3), the eternal living Word of God, *“was made flesh, and dwelt among us”* (John 1:14).

Certainly the Saturnalian aspects of the Christmas and New Year celebrations ought to be avoided by Christians, as these are clearly pagan and anti-Christian in both origin and character. Apart from this, it seems singularly appropriate to observe the entrance of God into man’s life right at the time of the winter solstice, when the sun is at its farthest retreat and the nights are longest, for *“the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”* (II Timothy 1:10).

As noted above, it is unlikely that December 25 is the actual birth date of Christ. Various dates for Christmas even today are observed as Christ’s birthday by different Christian groups. Perhaps the most

probable date, though no one really knows, is about September 29. This was the first day of the great Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, when thousands of pilgrims from all over Israel would go up to Jerusalem to dwell in small “*tabernacles*” or booths, commemorating their wilderness wanderings and anticipating the coming kingdom when God Himself would “*tabernacle*” with men (note Revelation 21:3).

This would have been a good time for the Roman census, with the weather still warm, most of the harvest in, and people traveling anyway. Shepherds would still have their flocks in the field, whereas none of this seems at all likely in the winter time.

This same date was later celebrated by Christians as Michaelmas (meaning “Michael sent”), Michael being the great archangel of God. It seems reasonable to suppose that this observance could have had its origin in the coming of Michael and the angels to announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds (Luke 2:9-14).

“The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In this verse, “*dwelt*” is literally the Greek word “*tabernacled.*” It is altogether fitting that the God whom the Feast of Tabernacles anticipated may actually first have been seen by men on that very day. *“We beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth”* (John 1:14).

It is at least very interesting that, if one counts back 280 days (the normal period of human gestation)

from September 29, he arrives at the previous December 25. And then he realizes that the great miracle of Christ's Incarnation was not His birth, which was a normal human birth in every respect, but rather the miraculous conception, when the Holy Spirit placed that "*holy thing*" in the womb of the Virgin Mary! (Luke 1:35.)

It was on that great day that the eternal Son, the second person of the divine Trinity, left the courts of heaven and "*took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men*" (Philippians 2:7), knowing that this eventually would take Him to the "*death of the cross,*" (Philippians 2:8) when He would willingly suffer and die for "*the sin of the world*" (John 1:29), enduring all the wrath of God as a substitutionary sacrifice for "*our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world*" (I John 2:2). In fact, "*by the grace of God*" He suffered death for "*every man*" (Hebrews 2:9), so that "*He that believeth on Him is not condemned*" and shall "*not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:18,16).

Even the religious aspects of the Christmas season tend to be expressed today mainly in terms of a little baby cradled in a manger, sometimes shown as receiving certain gifts from three eastern wise men. There is nothing particularly wrong with that perception, of course, unless it obscures the reason *why* the child was there in the first place.

Even if we don't know the exact date when Christ was born, wouldn't it be more fitting to celebrate His

Incarnation instead of His birth anyhow? That was the moment when the eternal Son of God “*made Himself of no reputation . . . and was made in the likeness of men*” (Philippians 2:7). That was surely the greatest event since the Creation itself!

We could thereby invest Christmas with a far more profound meaning than just the birth of a special child (after all, the birth of every child is special to its parents!). If people could somehow be encouraged to think more about the eternal Word becoming finite man than just to think about babies and shepherds, our Christmas season would surely become more meaningful, yet no less joyful.

In its original usage, the word “Christmas” could actually have meant “Christ sent.” The religious term “mass” came originally from a Latin word meaning to “dismiss” or “send forth.”

Thus we can justifiably believe that the very word “Christmas” actually implies the wonderful truth that Christ was sent from Heaven to Earth to redeem lost men, women and children. “*When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth His Son, made of a woman . . .*” (Galatians 4:4), so that He could Himself be a perfect man as God would have intended men to be, and then die in substitution for all men to atone for their sins and give forgiveness and eternal life to all who would accept Him by faith.

It is true that the world today is filled with unrighteousness and conflict, and that even Christmas in large measure has become a time of license

and covetousness, but there is still much beauty and truth and love in the world, and it does not seem possible that God should allow Satan (and his Saturnalia) altogether to corrupt its everlasting witness to the One who came that men might have true life forever.

Other Christmas Booklets of Interest

The Gifts of God
God's Only Begotten Son
Creation and the Virgin Birth
When God Became Man
His Son's Name
When They Saw the Star

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