

The Celebration of Christmas

Introduction:

- A. Picture the celebration of Christmas in Colonial America
 - 1. A post card-like scene of a Virginia estate with a large Christmas tree in the front room decorated with popcorn and candles and handmade ornaments.
 - 2. Or a more simple celebration in a small farmhouse decorated with holly and mistletoe and presents by the fireplace - The children so excited on Christmas eve that they can hardly sleep.
 - 3. Or a city scene of people shopping in stores decorated for the season and Santa Claus himself making an appearance on Christmas eve in the town square, arriving in a red horse-drawn sleigh.
- B. These pictures will have to be in your imagination because none of them ever happened. Why? Because most of Colonial America did not celebrate Christmas. Shocked? Most people are.
- C. Why did Washington, crossing the Delaware on Christmas night to surprise the Hessian troops, result in such a complete victory? Because the Hessians had spent the day in drunken celebration while, to the colonial soldiers, Dec. 25 was just another day.
- D. The reason for this gives us insight into the origins of this holiday and how we came to our present day celebration.
- E. We want to examine the origins of Christmas and evaluate what the Christian's relationship should be to this most celebrated of holidays.
- F. What is the significance of such origins?
 - 1. If the authority for your worship and service to God is not significant; if what you do in service to God can be determined by men and their traditions, etc., then this discussion will be of little consequence to you.
 - 2. However, if you are interested in Bible authority for what you do in service to God, then the authority for celebrating any religious holiday becomes very important to you.
 - a The religious leaders asked Jesus for His authority for what He did?
 - b Knowing their basic dishonesty, Jesus asked these religious leaders "The baptism of John, is it from heaven or from men?" They didn't like John or recognize him as a prophet but even they understood the significance of John's baptism if it were from God. It had to be authorized for it to be acceptable.
 - c So it is with anything we do in service to God. It must be authorized by God to be acceptable to him.
 - i. E.g. - our observance of the Lord's Supper this morning. Did man come up with that? No. Jesus instructed us to so observe His death on the cross

(Matt. 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-28; Acts 20:7). That is why we do it - not because we thought it up and think it would be a good idea to do it. Our opinion is irrelevant in the matter. What matters is what God authorized.

- ii. That is how we should look at all religious celebrations and observances - What has God authorized about the matter? He has authorized the observance of Jesus' death. What has he authorized concerning the observance of Jesus' birth?
- d Jesus recognized the limitation of abiding in the things authorized by the Father in Heaven - John 5:19, 6:38; 7:16-17; 12:48-50.
 - i. If Jesus placed that limitation upon Himself in determining what he would teach and how he would serve the Father, who am I, who are we to presume to decide on our own how we will serve God.
 - ii. According to Jesus, it is not up to us. It is up to God. And whatever we do in service to our God we better be able to show that God said we could do it.
 - iii. That biblical principle applies in all areas of service to God but today we will apply it to the matter or religious observance and holidays and to the celebration of Christmas in particular.
 - iv. I hope you will keep an open mind in this discussion as we seek to understand what God says on the matter.
- e Hopefully this discussion will help you understand, not only Christmas and its origins, but also the importance of serving God *as He directs*, not as men have designed.

I. How has the Christmas tradition developed in America?

- A. I believe a little historical background will help us to understand how modern Christmas celebrations came about and how they came to be accepted in mainstream churches today.
 - 1. I will be quoting extensively from statements by Karin Calvert, Univ. of Pennsylvania historian
- B. According to Ms. Calvert, visions of apple-cheeked colonial children hanging wreaths and singing Christmas carols are "totally fictitious," she said, because for two centuries Protestant America considered Christmas a "popish" holiday.
 - 1. Mrs. Calvert is a specialist in the history of children in America. These excerpts are from a lecture she delivered at Rochester, NY's Margaret Woodbury Strong Museum on "Christmas in America: The Fabrication of Tradition." (As quoted in an article datelined Rochester, NY, that appeared in the Birmingham New, Thurs., Dec. 20, 1984, pg. 12C.
 - 2. "I'm not trying to debunk Christmas by any means," she said in an interview. "I'm trying to give credit where credit is due." She says that our modern Christmas celebration dates back no earlier than the 19th century. Christmas in its modern sense is a "conscious and deliberate invention" in the mid-19th century of such figures Washington Irving, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Clement Moore, Thomas Nast, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens, she said.

3. Mrs. Calvert also says she is often considered a Scrooge-like figure to people who prefer to imagine that the Pilgrims decked the halls with boughs of holly. "They're quite irate," she said. "It's hard on someone who's living in a 1790 house and trying to decorate it authentically and are told they can't."
 4. She says the "inventors of Christmas emphasized the pagan origins of the holiday because they wanted nothing to do with the Roman Catholic roots of the celebration of Christ's birth. Mrs. Calvert said, "If you had to choose between Catholic and pagan, pagan was the lesser of the two evils." Colonial America would not celebrate what they regarded as a Catholic religious holiday. Why? Because so many colonists had come to America to escape the religious persecution of the Catholic church and its offshoots. Pilgrims, Quakers and many others were adamantly opposed to any observance rooted in Catholicism. That was how they viewed Christmas - as a Catholic religious holiday - and in that view they were right, as we shall see.
 - a The result was that as the celebration of the holiday slowly crept into American culture, it was without religious significance. For example, Christmas trees were topped with an American flag or a sugar plum fairy, never a star.
 - b There was some celebration of Christmas in the southern colonies such as Virginia where you would find many who were Anglicans religiously, thus not far removed from Catholicism. But most Colonialists did not celebrate the holiday.
- C. The modern tradition of Christmas was the work of the aforementioned authors and writers. The article details the role their writings played in remaking St. Nick into Santa Claus and changing the emphasis of the holiday from religious to one of family reunion and charity (ex. Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*). That story says nothing about the birthday of Christ or a religious observance. If he had the story would not have sold.
1. By the turn of the century, Christmas became nearly universal when writers said "that parents owed it to their children. Mrs. Calvert said, "They played on a very, very strong point: parental guilt. And it worked beautifully,"
 2. The shopping spree is among the newest Christmas traditions, Mrs. Calvert also said. In the 1880's, sales of Christmas goods began on Dec. 23. As recently as the 1920's, advertisements for the Christmas season did not begin until Dec. 15. (Ah, the good old days!!)
 3. Newer still are Christmas characters like Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph, the Little Drummer Boy, The Grinch who stole Christmas.
 4. Mrs. Calvert went on to say, "The process of inventing Christmas is still very much going on. I would guess in 50 or 100 years it will be even richer."
- D. All of this may come as a shock to you. But more than that all of this should raise questions in our mind about the origins of the holiday and its *religious* celebration, which has become almost universal among churches in our country. Is this something God wants us to do? Has he asked us to celebrate this day?

II. Origins of Christmas

- A. Even the Catholic Encyclopedia tells us that "Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church."

B. The Name - Christ Mass. According to the Encyclopedia Americana, "The name is derived from the medieval *Christes Masse*, the mass of Christ." The Catholics has a special "mass" (their corruption of the Lord's Supper - SP) for Christ and so they called it Christ-Mass. In time this was shortened to "Christmas."

1. It is a celebration begun by the Roman Catholic church for the birthday of Christ.

C. Early celebration?

1. The Encyclopedia Americana further states: "The celebration was not observed in the first centuries of the Christian church, since the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than the birth." The Bible, of course, teaches us that the death of Christ is the important thing and not the birth.

D. Even the facts surrounding the birth of Jesus are often misrepresented in the retelling of Christ's birth as recorded in Matthew 1 & 2 and Luke 2.

1. For example, the wise men who visited Jesus did not come to the manger to see him. They arrived perhaps as late as two years after his birth when Jesus' family was living in a house (Matthew 2:1-12). And the Bible does not say how many wise men there were.

2. The Date of Jesus' birth is incorrect.

a Miscalculations were made by a monk in 526 A. D. who created a calendar, supposedly dating from the birth of Christ, at the request of the emperor Justinian. Jesus was most likely born sometime between 7 and 4 B. C.

b The time of year of his birth is also unknown with Dec. 25. being a rather unlikely candidate since, at that time of year, shepherds would not have their flocks out in the fields of Palestine.

c Noted Presbyterian commentator Albert Barnes wrote: By different learned men it has been fixed at each month in the year. Nor is it of consequence to *know* the time; if it were, God would have preserved the record of it. Matters of moment are clearly revealed; those which *He* regards as of no importance are concealed."

d Collier's Encyclopedia concurs with Mr. Barnes when it says, "It is impossible to determine the exact date of the birth of Christ, either from the evidence of the gospels, or from any sound tradition."

e The commonly accepted dates for the birth of Christ were January 6, March 25, and December 25. Why was Dec. 25 chosen?

f Liberius, Bishop of Rome (it should be remembered that the Catholics consider him as one of their early popes), in 354 A. D. ordered that December 25 be adopted. The choice of this date was probably influenced by the fact that this was the day on which the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the Sun-god. The Roman Saturnalia also came at this time.

i. "The indications are that the Church in this way grasped the opportunity to turn the people away from a purely pagan observance of the winter solstice to a day of adoration of Christ the Lord. Both St. Cyprian and St. John Chrysostom allude to this thought in their writings. (Collier's Encyclopedia) Other sources could be quoted that indicate the date's pre-Christian origins among pagans.

- E. The origins of Christmas then are clearly not to be found in the 1st century church or in the divinely inspired writings of the New Testament. It is rather a celebration introduced centuries later by an apostate church under the authority of men. It was introduced to encourage people to cease celebrating a pagan festival and replace it with a "Christian" festival invented by men.

III. How should a Christian view Christmas?

- A. Christians are taught to serve God in the way He has revealed to us in His Word. To add to or go beyond his revealed Word is a sin. Again Jesus example makes this clear as well as other N. T. passages.
1. **John 5:19** - "Then Jesus answered and said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner." Cf. 6:38; 7:16,17; 8:28; 12:48-50.
 2. 2 Peter 1:3³ as His divine power has given to us all things that *pertain* to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, (NKJV)
 3. Deuteronomy 29:29²⁹ "The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are revealed belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we may do* all the words of this law. (NKJV)
 4. **1 Corinthians 4:6**⁶ Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. (NKJV)
 5. 2 John 9-11⁹ Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son.¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; ¹¹for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. (NKJV)
 6. Revelation 22:18-19¹⁸ For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; ¹⁹and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and *from* the things which are written in this book. (NKJV)
- B. Again, the principle of not going beyond what the Bible says is clear. We must "not go beyond the things that are written." - 1 Cor. 4:6
- C. So, how does a Christian view the religious celebration of Christmas? He does not look upon it as a holy day authorized for our observance. We are nowhere taught or commanded in the Bible that the church is to celebrate the birth of Christ as a religious holy day. The New Testament church, under apostolic direction, did not celebrate it. (Historians are all in agreement on that point.)
- D. It is only after the church, under Roman influence, has drifted off into apostasy and has begun to extensively revise and adapt New Testament Christianity that we begin to see the celebration called Christmas.

1. Christmas is but one of many examples of the Roman church adapting what were essentially carnal or pagan superstitions and religious practices and trying to "Christianize" them. (Compare Mariology and female gods; Roman emperor rule was incorporated into the papacy.)
- E. Those who wish to follow the Bible and not Catholicism would not accept the Catholic church as authority for such a religious celebration as Christmas.
1. Just as we don't celebrate All Saints Day, All Souls Day, Lent, Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, Whitsuntide, Easter, etc., etc..
 2. Again, this is why there was such opposition to the observance of Christmas in Colonial America. Americans had left Europe in droves to get away from Catholic religious oppression and persecution. They weren't about to accept anything the Catholic church celebrated that was not based in scripture.
 - a In fact it was even against the law to celebrate Christmas in some parts of Colonial America. Someone who took Christmas day off in Massachusetts 3 centuries ago could be fined 3 shillings. (from B'ham News article quoted earlier.)
 3. Thus not celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday is actually more in keeping with American tradition than celebrating it. But what matters to the Christian is what God's Word says. And it says nothing about celebrating Christmas as a religious holiday. Christmas is a Roman Catholic Holy Day begun by them and authorized only by them for religious observance.
 4. Protestant denominationalism, which, not that long ago also opposed religious observance of Christmas in this country, has capitulated and now celebrates with Catholicism the holy day with its religious significance. But anyone following the Bible as their only guide to serving God will not accept the practice of the Roman church as authority for what they do in this matter or any other.
 5. Maybe that seems harsh but you must understand - it is a matter of principle. Am I going to be able to give Bible authority for what I do religiously or not? If I am, then I must set aside the religious celebration of Christmas. God does not approve of it. (And the commercialization of Christmas has only made it worse.)

IV. The secular side of Christmas

- A. What Charles Dickens, Thomas Nast and others tried to create in America in the 1800's was a holiday season that centered not on the religious but on the spirit of family reunion and charity. They did not and would not connect it with the religious celebration.
- B. Today in America, there is clearly a secular side to this time of the year that is not attached to the religious significance at all. It is a time of school holidays, days off from work, of family gatherings, sharing and gift giving. This is the non-religious side of the season where Santa Claus is a mythical elf, not a Catholic saint, where families share and enjoy one another's company; where people can enjoy that part of the year that is traditionally centered around the home without being involved in the religious aspect many attach to the holiday.
- C. I believe one can separate the secular and religious observance of this holiday. Let me illustrate.

D. I can celebrate the resurrection of Christ on "Sun's Day" (Sunday) without honoring the sun-god. I can celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King on "Moon's Day" (Monday) without honoring the moon-god. I may celebrate my daughter's birthday on "Thor's Day" (Thursday) without honoring the Norse god Thor. From that viewpoint, I believe I can enjoy Christmas as a national holiday where, because of the opportunity afforded by the season, I can visit family and friends, show hospitality and even give them tokens of my appreciation for them for the friendship of the year past. That is Christmas to me - not a religious holy day but a national holiday, as pictured in Dicken's A Christmas Carol, to be enjoyed with family, like Thanksgiving.

E. But the N. T. church has no authority to celebrate this as a religious holiday. And this is the key to pleasing God - serving God in the way He authorizes - not in the way I or anyone else thinks is best.

Conclusion:

F. I know much of what I have presented today may have come as a shock to you. But I do hope it has challenged you - challenged you to want to make sure that what you believe and practice is soundly based on what the Bible says and not upon the ideas and traditions of men. After all what Christianity is all about is not pleasing others with our service but with pleasing God.

G. Do you want to serve God in this way? According to His will and not man's? If you are interested in studying God's way, you may be surprised to find that a lot of things people do religiously are not authorized by the Lord and, thus, are unacceptable to Him.

H. We encourage you to study and learn God's way in every aspect of your life and live by it and not by man's.

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