

Putting Christ Back Into Christmas?

This is the time of the year where millions celebrate the birth of Christ. Even the name implies its relation to Christ. "Christ's Mass" was a special time to celebrate the birth of Jesus. The idea of the mass is that Christ is offered again in sacrifice each time the mass is said.

If you go by any denominational church building this time of year, you will probably see slogans on their outdoor signs like, "Let's put Christ back into Christmas" or "Jesus is the reason for the season." Some preachers really like to ring this message out. Some will even ask, "What are you going to give Christ on His birthday?" Even some liberal churches of Christ will have messages like these emblazoned on their buildings. A lot of groups will organize and hold Christmas programs for the community.

The term "holiday" comes from the Old English and it means "Holy Day." Since Christmas is recognized by most people as a religious holiday, it would be good for us to study its meaning. Considering Christmas has the word "Christ" in it, it should have some connection with our Lord. If there is a connection with the Lord, then we should be able to turn to our Bibles and read of this observance. However, what you read today may shock you.

Most people probably think that people who do not celebrate Christmas in the fullest sense are atheists or anti-Christian because they choose not "to commemorate the birth of Christ." But I want us to know the real facts. Some of you may be thinking, "What do you mean real facts? Isn't it in the Bible?" No, it is not in the Bible. Many are shocked when they are told of this fact. Matthew and Luke are the only two gospels that deal with the birth of Jesus. Neither of these men give a date (year, month or day) for His birth.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:21 we are told to "*prove all things.*" We are never to accept something as truth unless we have first tested it in the light of the word of God. If this annual observance is really Christ's birthday and if God wants us to render special service in memory of that day, then we ought to be able to find the necessary information in the Bible. On the other hand, if the Bible does not sanction this day, we should honestly accept the truth.

If there is no mention of Christmas in God's word, then it is not from God; it is from man. God has given us "*all things that pertain unto life and godliness*" (2 Peter 1:3). Christ promised that the Holy Spirit would guide the apostles into all truth (John 16:13), but He did not tell them the month nor the day of the month to observe His birth. In fact, you will not find one

apostle mentioning anything about the day of Christ's birth. The first century Christians never celebrated any such day as Christmas.

In order to find Christmas, one must go outside of the Bible. If you will look in every major encyclopedia, you will find that no one can pinpoint the date of Christ's birth. In fact, chances are that Christ was born sometime between April and October because December 25th falls within the rainy season in Palestine; therefore, the shepherds would hardly have been in the fields at night as they were when Jesus was born (Luke 2:8).

Most encyclopedias and a host of religious scholars will place the first Christmas observance somewhere between A.D. 300-350. It is believed that in A.D. 345, Bishop Liberius of Rome ordered the people to celebrate Christmas on December 25th. Christmas probably does not date earlier than A.D. 200. The most likely theory and most generally accepted one is that the birth of Christ was assigned to the date of the winter solstice. This date is December 21st in our Roman calendar, but was December 25th in the Julian calendar which predated our own. The solstice, when days begin to lengthen in the northern hemisphere, was a time of rejoicing among many ancient cultures and was referred to by pagans as the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun." During the third century, the Emperor Aurelian proclaimed December 25th as a special day dedicated to the sun-god, whose cult was very strong in Rome at that time. Even before this time, Christian writers already had begun to refer to Jesus as the "Sun of Justice."

It was logical that as the gospel began to dominate the religious scene in the Roman Empire, the date of the "newborn sun" should be chosen as the birthdate of Christ. Since December 25th was a familiar pagan feast day, it was not very difficult to change the purpose of celebrating the day and give it a religious significance with a supposedly "Christian" flavor. Furthermore, the date of December 25th was undoubtedly chosen for its nearness to Epiphany, which, in the East, was celebrated on January 6th and originally included a commemoration of the nativity and the visit of the Magi. This has given rise in the west to the notion of a twelve-day festival, starting on December 25th, and ending on January 6th, called the twelve days of Christmas. In popular celebration, Epiphany is far more ancient than Christmas. Technically it is more important than Christmas, ranking after Easter and Pentecost.

The origins of "St. Nick" and the Christmas Tree are also Roman Catholic and pagan. In Asia Minor, there lived a Bishop whose name was Nicholas. He was said to be very liberal with his wealth. After he died, people are said to have paid tribute to him by exchanging gifts on December 6th. Later these

gifts came to be given at Christmas and Bishop Nicholas, who had by then been "sainted," became the Christmas saint.

It was the practice of the Teuton pagans to worship a god called Odin during which they sacrificed a child before Odin's "sacred oak." In the eighth century, Boniface persuaded them to abandon this worship and to cut down a big fir tree, take it home and celebrate around it with their children. The big tree, with its evergreen leaves and top branch pointing straight to heaven, was supposed to represent immortality. The ancient English used holly branches in their Druidic services on feast days. The "missionaries" under Pope Gregory in A.D. 601 spread the legend that the crown of thorns upon the head of Christ was wreathed with holly and that the berries turned from white to red on the day of the crucifixion. The long holly branches were then woven into fat "Christmas wreaths."

So it is obvious from studying history that Catholicism and paganism, not the Bible, is responsible both for Christmas and much of the tradition surrounding it. The *New Book of Knowledge* says that Christmas came about by the "efforts of the early churchmen in Rome to change pagan customs into Christian rites." Therefore, a Christian will not attach any religious significance to Christmas. They will not have any "mass" for Christ, will send no religious cards, or engage in religious services commemorating the birth of Christ or in any way indicate that anything they do is done because they consider the season to be honoring the birth of Christ.

God authorized no religious observances peculiar to December and January. But He does warn against the "*doctrines and commandments of men*" (Matthew 15:9). He said through the apostle Paul that those who "*pervert the gospel of Christ,*" "*observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain*" (Colossians 2:2; Galatians 1:7; 4:10-11). If we offer to God worship that He has not authorized, we are being presumptuous. Psalm 19:13 says, "*Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression.*"

Christ cannot be put back into Christmas because He was never there in the first place! Christmas was conceived in an unauthorized, unscriptural Roman Catholic and pagan background. Maybe you know of people who are only "religious" (that is, they only think about God and Christ) around Christmas. It is such a shame to see people who zealously observe Christmas as Christ's birth because this worship, according to the Bible, is vain.

The emphasis in the New Testament is on the death of Christ, not His birth. God has left three memorials to Christ; all of which point to His death and resurrection: (1) God has commanded that unsaved people believe and be baptized in Christ's name (Mark 16:16; Romans 6:3-5; 1 Peter 3:20-22); (2) He has commanded that His people observe the death of Jesus every first day of the week (Sunday, the Lord's day). By partaking of the Lord's Supper together we "*shew the Lord's death till he come*" (1 Corinthians 11:23-29) and (3) worship on the Lord's day, the first day of the week, reminds us of His resurrection (Matthew 28:1; Acts 20:7; Revelation 1:10). God does not want His Son remembered as a baby lying in a manger, but as the suffering Savior and resurrected Redeemer!

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