

## Celebrating Christmas

Franklin Church of Christ  
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PM Assembly

### Introduction:

In 1966, Elvis Presley asked, "Oh why can't every day be like Christmas?" No doubt most people, for one reason or another, view Christmas as a very special day. It is a day for family to get together. It is a day to eat big. It is a day to exchange presents. For many this time of year brings out the best in them to be a little more generous and caring. For most, however, the day is considered special because they see it as the birthday of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In fact, when anyone questions that, most look bewildered. So ingrained is the concept of celebrating the birthday of Jesus that many can't imagine questioning it. Sadly, because it is not in vogue and certainly not politically correct, we have often stopped bringing up the truth about this holiday and even Christians are mistakenly celebrating the birth of Jesus on December 25 and in some places even bringing that celebration into the local congregation. Let's consider the celebration of Christmas.

### Discussion:

- I. The real issue: Is Jesus Lord of our lives and our worship?
  - A. When I left the denominational world and became a Christian, one of the first things I learned is that Bible stories were rarely told correctly in the books I read and the shows I had seen as a child. I had to relearn several Bible stories accurately (which is one reason I am so opposed to so many of the modern videos that almost never get the Bible stories accurate). One of those stories was the supposed Christmas story. I learned that numerous mistakes were made in that story. Namely, the Bible doesn't mention three wise men. Additionally, the wise men don't visit on the night of Jesus' birth. The Bible never says Jesus was born in a stable. On the list goes. When I first learned those things, I was very upset. From that time, I heard multiple lessons explaining how awful Christmas was because it got the story of Jesus' birth all wrong. However, recently I have figured out that is not the real issue. After all, if we took that message to people who celebrate Christmas as Jesus' birthday, we won't change anything about the holiday other than getting them to tell the story more accurately. We need to understand here and now, the real issue for us surrounding Christmas is not whether the story of Jesus' birth is accurate. The real issue is whether or not Jesus is the Lord of our lives and our worship.
  - B. I know that is shocking, so let me repeat it. The real issue is whether or not Jesus is the Lord of our lives and our worship. **Luke 6:46** says, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (ESV). If Jesus is our Lord we will do what He says. We will worship and serve Him the way He has declared. **Colossians 3:17** says, "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus" (ESV). That is, we are to do all things by His authority. Further, **II Timothy 3:16-17** says that the Scripture equips us for every good work. If the Scripture provides us no equipping for a work, it is not good; no matter how much we like it.
  - C. We must understand this completely. This is not a question of trying to stand out. This is not a question of trying to be different. This is not a question of nitpicking. This is a question of Jesus' Lordship. Is Jesus our Lord or not? If He is, then let us worship and serve Him the way He has authorized. In the context of Jesus' birthday, my question is where is the equipping to celebrate Jesus' birthday? The scripture equips us for every good work, but it hasn't equipped us to celebrate Jesus' birthday at all. So absent is the equipping that we don't even know the day of Jesus' birth.
  - D. There isn't even a really good historical reason for setting the date on December 25. Consider what some historical sources say, "There is no certain tradition of the date of Christ's birth... The exact circumstances of the beginning of Christmas Day remain obscure."<sup>1</sup> In fact, most believe the date was set not based on anything Christian or Scriptural but in order to compete with the pagan holidays surrounding the winter solstice. "The reason for establishing December 25 as Christmas is somewhat obscure, but it is usually held that the day was chosen to correspond to pagan festivals that took place around the time of the winter solstice, when the days begin to lengthen, to celebrate the 'rebirth of the sun.'"<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 2002, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. v16, p305.

<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana International Edition*, Scholastic Library Publishing Inc, Danbury, CT, 2006 v6, pp 666-7

E. The Bible doesn't even tell us the day of Jesus' birth, how can we remotely believe there is any Scriptural authority for celebrating Jesus' birthday? Please note, I have tried very specifically to speak against celebrating Jesus' birthday. I have not said anything against celebrating Jesus' birth. I think we can and should do that, but we can and should do it God's way. Not our own.

## II. Christmas: A Holiday with Pagan roots.

A. While Christmas is considered to be the premier Christian holiday by most of the world, its actual background is steeped in paganism. In fact, I suggest there is more of a pagan background to the modern Christmas celebration than Christian. The only thing remotely Christian about the holiday is that so many today make it a day to tell the story, sing songs and set up a nativity scene about Jesus' birth. Everything else that is done comes from paganism.

B. We have already seen that the day on which Christmas is celebrated comes from paganism and not Christianity. Consider another statement:

The true birth date of Christ is unknown. The worldwide census reported in Luke 2:1-2 cannot be substantiated. By the late second century different groups of Christians held divergent ideas on the date of Christ's birth: January 6 or 10..., April 19 or 20, May 20, or November 18...

With no evidence for the exact date of Christ's birth, and no clear proof of the date at which the feast began to be celebrated, nor its rationale, liturgical historians have developed two noncompetitive theories.<sup>3</sup>

C. The tree comes from paganism.

The use of evergreen trees, wreaths, and garlands as a symbol of eternal life was an ancient custom of the Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews. Tree worship, common among the pagan Europeans, survived after their conversion to Christianity in the Scandinavian customs of decoration the house and barn with evergreens at the New Year to scare away the devil and of setting up a tree for the birds during Christmastime...<sup>4</sup>

Long before the advent of Christianity, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter. Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows. In many countries it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

In the Northern hemisphere, the shortest day and longest night of the year falls on December 21 or December 22 and is called the winter solstice. Many ancient people believed that the sun was a god and that winter came every year because the sun god had become sick and weak. They celebrated the solstice because it meant that at last the sun god would begin to get well. Evergreen boughs reminded them of all the green plants that would grow again when the sun god was strong and summer would return.

The ancient Egyptians worshipped a god called Ra, who had the head of a hawk and wore the sun as a blazing disk in his crown. At the solstice, when Ra began to recover from the illness, the Egyptians filled their homes with green palm rushes which symbolized for them the triumph of life over death.

Early Romans marked the solstice with a feast called the Saturnalia in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs. In Northern Europe the mysterious Druids, the priests of the ancient Celts, also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life. The fierce Vikings in Scandinavia thought that evergreens were the special plant of the sun god, Balder.<sup>5</sup>

D. The Yule log comes from paganism. "Another popular ritual was the burning of the Yule Log, which is strongly embedded in the pagan worship of vegetation and fire, as well as being asso-

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<sup>3</sup> *New Catholic Encyclopedia 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, Gale, Detroit, 2003, p 551.

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., Chicago, 2002, 15<sup>th</sup> ed. V 3 p 284.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content\\_type=Minisite\\_Generic&content\\_type\\_id=1284&display\\_order=4&mini\\_id=1290](http://www.history.com/minisite.do?content_type=Minisite_Generic&content_type_id=1284&display_order=4&mini_id=1290)

ciated with magical and spiritual powers.”<sup>6</sup> “Burning the Yule log was adapted to English custom from the ancient Scandinavian practice of kindling huge bonfires in honor of the winter solstice.”<sup>7</sup>

Buring (sic) rites in Europe were common during the Dark Ages, and the Yule Log is most likely another example of a Pagan Ritual being slowly converted into a Christian Tradition. On the darkest day of year, the Winter Solstice, peasants would light a large log on fire to help keep away the evil spirits as they waited through the longest night for the sun to rise.

This marked the sun's victory over darkness; the days would now grow longer. The cinders from the burnt log were thought to protect homes from lightning and the evil powers of the devil.

Later, as Christianity spread, the tradition become more closely associated with Christmas, especially in England where Father Christmas is often seen carrying the Yule Log.

In pagan times different woods were burned to produce different effects:

Aspen: invokes understanding of the grand design?

Birch: signifies new beginnings?

Holly: inspires visions and reveals past lives?

Oak: brings healing, strength, and wisdom?

Pine: signifies prosperity and growth?

Willow: invokes the Goddess to achieve desires<sup>8</sup>

- E. Holly and mistletoe come from paganism. “The Celtic culture of the British Isles revered all green plants, but particularly mistletoe and holly. These were important symbols of fertility and were used for decorating their homes and altars.”<sup>9</sup>

The idea of using evergreens at Christmastime also came to England from pre-Christian northern European beliefs. Celtic and Teutonic tribes honored these plants at their winter solstice festivals as symbolic of eternal life, and the Druids ascribed magical properties to the mistletoe in particular. The evergreen holly was worshiped as a promise of the sun's return, and some say that Christ's crown of thorns was made of holly.<sup>10</sup>

Many people think that the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe is linked to the Norse myth of Balder, the god of beauty. The myth relates how Balder dreamed of his own death. His mother, Frigga, asked every animal and plant to help keep her son safe, but she forgot to ask the mistletoe and Balder was killed by a mistletoe arrow. Mistletoe was widely seen as a symbol of fertility, mainly because it was believed to rejuvenate the trees on which it grew.

One version of the story tells how Frigga finally revived her son after three days, and, in her happiness, kissed everyone in sight. She proclaimed that mistletoe would never be used for evil: she commanded that anyone who stood under mistletoe would kiss as a sign of love conquering all.<sup>11</sup>

- F. Amazingly enough, even the presents come from paganism, but also a mixture with the celebration of a Catholic saint.

The custom of giving gifts to relatives and friends on a special day in winter probably began in ancient Rome and northern Europe. In these regions, people gave each other small presents as part of their year-end celebrations.

By 1100, Saint Nicholas had become a popular symbol of gift giving in many European countries. According to legend, he brought presents to children on the eve of his feast day, December 6. Nonreligious figures replaced Saint Nicholas in certain countries soon after the Reformation, and December 25 became the day for giving gifts.<sup>12</sup>

- G. When you study the history behind the traditions of a modern Christmas, you find that most of them actually stem from supposed Christians adopting pagan customs. We don't fully know the reasons for this. Some sources suggest it was so Christians could blend in and not be persecuted for their celebration. Some suggest it was so Christians could attract and keep the con-

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.christmas-time.com/cp-hist.html>

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana International Edition*, Scholastic Library Publishing, inc, Danbury, Connecticut, 2006 v. 6, pp 666-7.

<sup>8</sup> <http://stcharleschristmas.com/yulelog.htm>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.christmas-time.com/cp-hist.html>

<sup>10</sup> *Encyclopedia Americana International Edition*, Scholastic Library Publishing, inc, Danbury, Connecticut, 2006 v. 6, pp 666-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Gods, Goddesses and Mythology*, Marshal Cavendish, New York, 2005, v4, p 516.

<sup>12</sup> *World Book 2001*, World Book, Inc, Chicago, 2001, v 3, 534.

verts from paganism. However, no one remotely suggests that any of these customs come from God's word as authority and equipping to worship Him or celebrate His Son's birth. Again, we are struck with the question, who is the Lord of our lives and worship? If we are going to celebrate Jesus' birth, how can we possibly do it by adopting ancient pagan rituals even if they have lost their pagan meaning? How can we possibly claim we are acting with Jesus' authority when the actions we perform originated with false gods instead of the one true, living God?

### III. Celebrating Christmas: Some Applications.

- A. Neither churches nor individual Christians are given the authority to celebrate Jesus' birth through the modern Christmas celebration. How can we claim to be worshiping God in spirit and truth (**John 4:23-24**) if we are worshipping our Lord in ways completely foreign to His word and in ways that originated from pagan practice?
- B. Yet, we should celebrate and rejoice at the birth of our Savior. Elizabeth did (**Luke 1:41-45**). The angels did (**Luke 2:9-15**). The shepherds did (**Luke 2:15-18**). Simeon and Anna did (**Luke 2:25-38**). The wise men did (**Matthew 2:9-11**). But how should we do that? The exact same way we celebrate everything else about Jesus, by praising God and thanking God in prayer and song, reading the Scriptures, teaching the story accurately. The fact is, there is only one aspect of Jesus' life that the Scriptures equip us to remember and celebrate with any special ritual, for lack of a better term. That event is the death of Jesus that we remember through the weekly observance of the Lord's Supper (**I Corinthians 11:23-26**). Every other event in His life we celebrate through prayer, song and Bible study, why would we do anything differently with His birth when the Scripture provides us no other authorization. This applies to both the local congregation and the individual. If you think you are somehow celebrating the birth of Jesus by setting up and decorating a tree, putting out lights, eating a huge meal and passing around presents, you are going beyond what is written, adding to God's word and serving God without authorization.
- C. We can celebrate secular holidays without religious significance. We can do so with Christmas as well. I recognize there is a certain amount of conscience issue here. I highly respect those who cannot in good conscience celebrate Christmas at all because of its history or because so many in the world view it with Christian significance. At the same time, I do believe the Scripture authorizes us as individual Christians to be involved in secular and national holidays. There is nothing wrong with celebrating July 4<sup>th</sup>, Thanksgiving, Memorial Day, etc. In the same vein, if we are setting aside December 25 as nothing more than a day to spend time with family, exchange gifts, be nice and generous, there is nothing wrong with that.
  1. First, perhaps in years past this wasn't the case, but in 2007 people do not assume you are celebrating Jesus' birth just because you celebrate Christmas. "Like Easter it is celebrated as a secular holiday and a religious holiday."<sup>13</sup> "Many non-Christians take joy in the holiday, even accepting many Christian or Christianized customs, such as Christmas trees and Christmas songs."<sup>14</sup> Thus, participating in the secular celebration does not show partnership with the religious celebration of some.
  2. Second, none of the activities maintain their pagan significance today. Decorating a tree with lights and ornaments is not the same as worshiping a tree. Hanging a wreath on the door is not honoring the pagan sun gods with the evergreen decoration. Hanging up mistletoe is not paying homage to the Germanic god Balder. I encourage each of us to take care if we want to push this issue. The fact is, we all realize tacitly that a pagan past does not necessarily define present practice. For instance, none of us are honoring the god of the sun when we call the day we assemble together Sunday. Nor are we worshiping the moon on moonday (Monday). Nor the Germanic gods Tiu, Woden, Thor or Frijia on their respective days Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday or Friday. Nor the Roman god Saturn on Saturn's day (Saturday). We are not worshiping the Roman god Janus in January, Mars in March, Maia in May or Juno in June. Further, we are not celebrating the deity of Julius or Augustus Caesar in July or August. You see, we recognize that a pagan background does not equal modern pagan practice.

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<sup>13</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals*, Frank Salmone, ed., Routledge, New York, 2004, p 85.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.* p. 86.

3. I believe **Colossians 2:20-23** applies to this situation. We know we are not allowed to do anything without the authority of Jesus Christ, but in many areas Christ's word is completely silent about individual activity. I don't know how many times I have been asked when in discussions about authority questions like, "Where is the New Testament authority for brushing our teeth?" Or "Where is the New Testament authority for using a camera?" **Colossians 2:20-23** explains something about God's word. When it comes to prohibitions regarding the individual life, God is concerned about activities that promote the indulgence of the flesh. He is not interested in prohibitive rules about issues that do nothing about the indulgence of the flesh. Decorating trees, setting out lights, singing Jingle Bells, burning Yule logs, have nothing to do with indulging the flesh. No doubt, at this time of year we do need to take care with issues of materialism, covetousness and gluttony, but the celebration of Christmas itself doesn't necessitate those things. If you can, in good conscience, celebrate the Christmas holiday secularly, without believing you are trying to worship Jesus or false gods through your practice and without indulging the flesh, then don't feel the need to follow man-made rules of "Do not taste. Do not handle. Do not touch."
- D. Let's capitalize on those who do view it religiously. In **Acts 17:23**, Paul saw the Athenians worshipping an unknown god as part of their idolatry. However, he did not rebuke them for their idolatry with the unknown god, he used that as a means to capitalize on their understanding and make a connection to talk to them about the real God. I believe we can do the same thing with holidays such as Christmas and Easter. Right or wrong, good or bad more people are open to Jesus and attending a church's assemblies around Christmas. Instead of constantly rebuking people for celebrating the holiday unscripturally, instead of castigating people because the only time they are interested in attending our assemblies is around this holiday, let's capitalize on this. Let's take this opportunity to talk about Jesus to people. Let's take this opportunity to invite people to our assemblies and classes. Let's let people know we appreciate that they are willing to think about Jesus and the church and then use that as a stepping off place to help lead them into the truth more accurately.

### **Conclusion:**

Again, we have to ask ourselves, who is the Lord of our life? Who is in control? The reality is, the religious observance of December 25 didn't come from Jesus; it came from mixing paganism with Christianity. It may sound good. It may feel good. We may think it is a great thing. However, if we cannot come up with scripture equipping us to celebrate Jesus' birthday, then we had better refrain. Let's honor God His way, because that is the only way in which He is truly honored.