

What does Christ have to do with Christmas?

It will not be long until Christmas is upon us again. What come to your mind when you think of December 25th? To many, it is a time of family get-togethers, a time of sharing, giving, and being with family and loved ones you perhaps have not seen since the year before. It is a special time of warmth and friendliness. Yet to many people of the world, it is more than that. It is the time when Christendom celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ. It is the time when one sees nativity scenes, figures of angels, shepherds, three wise men (even though the Bible is silent as to the number), parades, and plays.

Why is it that members of the church of Christ do not celebrate it as do those among the denominations? Do we just want to be different? NO! We simply want to do only what the Lord has authorized us to do. We want to be true to the Bible. We must do things in **“the name of the Lord”** [by His authority] (Colossians 3:17).

I would like to take this opportunity to study this question and examine why it is not observed among the “elect of God”. We are to always be ready to give an answer when people ask us questions (1 Peter 3:15). Therefore, to what can we attribute the origin of Christmas?

The Origin and Development of Christmas

The Bible is silent concerning the celebration of Christmas. Neither can history nor encyclopedia denote the observance of such history in the first century. It is strictly a post-apostolic concoction of man of at least some 300 years after the establishment of the church on Pentecost.

Philip Schaff in his *“History of the Christian Church”* says:

“Notwithstanding, this deep significance and wide popularity, the festival of the birth of the Lord is of comparatively late institution. This may doubtless be accounted for in the following manner: In the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament... In the second place, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be determined.

We find it [the celebration of Christmas] first in Rome, in the time of the bishop Liberius, who on the twenty-fifth of December, 360, consecrated Marcella, the sister of Ambrose, nun or bride of Christ, and addressed her with the words: ‘Thou seest what multitudes are come to the birth-festival of thy bride-groom.’ Christmas was introduced in Antioch about the year 380; in Alexandria, where the feast of Epiphany was celebrated as the nativity of Christ, not until about 430. Chrysostom, who delivered the Christmas homily in Antioch on the 25th of December, 386, already calls it, notwithstanding its recent introduction (some ten years before), the fundamental east or the root, from which all other Christian festivals grow forth” (Vol. III, pp. 395-396).

The Christian festival has transferred from “a series of kindred heathen festivals – the Saturnalia, Sigillaria, Juvenalia, and Brumalia – which were kept in Rome in the month of December... in honor of the unconquered sun...” Early men in the Church history link the feast of the birth of Christ “to the birth-festival of the unconquered sun, which on the twenty-fifth of December, after the winter solstice, breaks the power of darkness and begins answer his heroic career” (Vol. III, pp. 396 – 397).

“An Encyclopedia of Religion” edited by Vergilius Fern says there was not much interest to set a date as the birthday of Christ until the time of Hippolytus (a bishop of Rome in the first half of the 3rd century). “He first January 2nd, others proposed May 20th, April 18th or 19th, March 25th or 28th” (pp. 164-165). For some time, many had been celebrating January 6th as Christ’s spiritual birthday, the day of His baptism. Evidence seems to indicate that some even observed this same day as His birth.

“Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church, and before the 5th century there was not general consensus of opinion as to when it should come in the calendar, whether on January 6th, March 25th, or December 25th” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 5, p. 641). On page 642 of the

Britannica, we find that “as late as 245 A.D., Origen repudiated the idea of keeping the birthday of Christ, as if He were a king Pharaoh.”

Certainly much more evidence could be given but it would be needless since all sources claim no Biblical authority whatsoever for any date or its observance. Our Lord put no religious significance upon the celebrating of His birth and when we do so, we go beyond that which is written and do “**not abide not in the doctrine of Christ**” (2 John 9). *Our Lord has just as much to do with the observance of the fourth of July as He does with the twenty-fifth of December!*

The word “Christmas” is really made up of two words: “Christ” and “Mass”. The so-called Mass was a gathering of disciples at which certain rituals were performed being mixed with paganism and Judaism. The annual mass which celebrated the birthday of Christ came to be known as “Christmas Mass”, or “Mass of Christ”, or as we call it, “ChristMas.” As we have already seen, there was much confusion over the date. Three dates usually accepted were: December 25th, January 6th, and March 25th. Most kept January 6th, but in 440 A.D., bishop Juvenal introduced December 25th even though many opposed it because of the Roman pagan Sun Worship being the same day. However, in 534 (94 years later), December 25th was made official by the bishop of Rome.

The celebration of Christmas as Christ’s birthday is of pagan origin and has nothing whatsoever to do with the Bible for there is no divine authority for its observance. The Bible says we must have authority for what we do (Colossians 3:17).

The Development of Modern Customs

The Scandinavians are credited with burning a log which they called a “yule log” since it was the **yule season**. Yule comes from “jol” from which we get our word “jolly”. To say “yule tide” or “jolly time” denotes the joyfulness and festivity of this season of the year. This log was burned once a year to honor Thor, the god of thunder. When these people entered Christianity, they adopted the yule log as an important part of their Christmas ceremonies.

Holly and mistletoe were considered sacred by ancient peoples. Some considered the holly sacred because to them it depicted the crown of thorns which was placed on our Savior’s head. *The Encyclopedia Americana* (Vol. 19, p. 262) says regarding mistletoe: “Anciently, the European species was held to be sacred by the Druids and the Germans.” Originally, it was hung over doors for good fortune. The custom today to give one a kiss that stands under it is of more recent origin.

“The **Christmas tree** has been traced back to the Romans. It went from Germany to Great Britain, and is almost universal in the United States, where the customs of so many nationalities meet and have gradually blended into a common usage” (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 6, p. 623). Martin Luther seems to be the one who first cut a tree and put in the house. “It is related that he wandered through the woods one starry Christmas Eve and became enamored of the wonders of the night, for the sky was filled with stars. He cut a small snow-laden fir tree and, when he returned home, set it up for his children and illuminated it with numerous candles to represent the stars” (*The Book of Festival Holidays*, by Marguerite Ickis, Dodd, Mead, and Co, New York, p. 152). It is thought the idea came to him by seeing the light of the moon glistening off the snow on the limbs with a background of starry sky.

The sending of **Christmas cards** by way of friendly greeting and remembrance has grown up since about 1860.

The custom of making **presents** at Christmas is derived from ancient usage. Few people make their presents anymore. Christmas shoppers provide as much as 50-70% of the annual income of many businesses.

The origin of **giving gifts** is attributed to an ancient woman of Palestine who awaited the return of the Three Kings of the Orient who had passed her way bearing gifts to the infant Jesus. It is said she still waits today since, unknown to her, they returned a different way. “Her influence watches over little children who, on the eve of Epiphany, **hang their stockings** before the hearth-fire, go to bed early, and wait to hear the cry, ‘Ecco LaBefanah’, when up they jump to find their presents awarded for good behavior during the past 12 months. A stocking full of ashes is for bad behavior. The parallel custom in the U.S., Great Britain, Germany, and Protestant communities,

generally is obviously the visit of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 3, p. 442).

The beginning of **Santa Claus** dates back to a so-called bishop of Myra of Lycia, on the coast of Asia Minor in the 4th century. He was called Nicholas and considered a saint for his good deeds, hence, we have **Jolly Ole Saint Nicholas**. This man came from a wealthy family and was himself wealthy. He had a reputation of slipping gifts into the homes of people in the dead of night, not wanting anyone to find out his identity or that he was doing such good deeds. The story is told of a poor nobleman in the town of Patara who had three daughters and was unable to provide them with a proper dowry. When Nicholas learned of it, he secretly went by one night and threw a purse of gold into an open window. The second night he did the same. From this incident, it became the custom for older members of the family to place presents in the shoes and stockings of their young relatives. When discovered the next morning, it would be attributed to the generosity of Saint Nicholas. We might point out the accounts of his life are only legendary (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 20, p. 312).

The American **Santa Claus** is a corruption of the Dutch Saint Nicholas. In his crossing to America, McKnight says, "The exact route followed by him is somewhat open to question. On the way, he traded his gray horse or ass for a reindeer and made changes in his appearance. In America, he has made himself very much at home and, according to the explanation most generally accepted, from America he recrossed the Atlantic to England whence he had journeyed to the most distant parts of the British Empire, to India and to Australia, where he is as familiarly known as in America" (*Encyclopedia Americana*, Vol. 20, p. 313).

Santa Claus is no more true or false than is "Old Mother Hubbard", "Jack-in-the-Bean-Stalk", or any other fairy-tale or legendary figure.

What is the Christian's Relationship to Christmas?

Holy Days Were Observed by the Israelites

The Israelites were very familiar with the observance of holy days. They celebrated the Passover, Pentecost, Feast of Tabernacles, new moon, the Sabbath, Jubilee, and others. This is one reason why it is so significant to notice that when they became Christians, no religious days or times were observed. The Old Testament was abolished and nailed to the cross which contained such holy days (Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 2:14); therefore, if any days or times were to be observed under Christ's new law, they would of necessity have to be included in it. The fact is, there have been no new days or times given except the remembrance of the Lord's death, burial, and resurrection which takes place in the observance of the Lord's Supper each first day of the week (Acts 20:7). On the contrary, the New Testament forbids the observance of any holy days. "**You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain**" (Galatians 4:10-11).

The Secular Observance of Christmas

Much of the world recognizes December 25th as Christmas, Christ's birthday. It is observed by many as a religious celebration or holiday. Despite that fact, the Christmas season had developed certain 'social aspects' down through the years apart from any religious significance. Can the Christian observe it in a purely secular way if no religious significance is placed on it? Can we observe other holidays such as the 4th of July, Labor Day, or New Year's Day?

There is nothing specifically religious about national holidays; therefore, nothing is wrong with enjoying them. It is certainly proper and right to observe special days secularly if no moral wrong is involved and no religious significance is attached thereto. Therefore, we can observe this national holiday called Christmas, if only in a **secular way**. To observe a special **holy day** would be "another gospel" of which Paul had warned the Galatian brethren (Galatians 1:6-9). Any day or month or time we attach special religious significance to is wrong and consequently **sin**.

The Bible is silent as to the observance of a special holy day to commemorate the birth of Christ. It came about only by men departing from a "thus saith the Lord." If God had intended for us to celebrate the birth of Christ in an annual observance, he would have told us. When one speaks

where the Bible has not, he goes beyond that which is written (2 John 9). We must respect what the Bible says for it will judge us in the end (John 12:48). We must not add to nor take from God's holy word (Revelation 22:18-22). God has furnished us completely with all we need to grow and live faithfully (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Peter 1:3). God placed no special mandate as to the remembering of Christ's birth; therefore we are sinning if we add special significance to it. Jesus taught His disciples to observe all things whatsoever He commanded (Matthew 28:20). He did not command them to observe His birthday (Christmas); therefore, we have no authority to do so. To observe December 25th as a secular holiday can be no more wrong than to observe any other non-religious holiday of the year. Are we not glad to accept the day off with pay and eat a meal with all the family? We ought to be thankful for the closeness this season affords families. The blessedness of sharing and giving is a good thing. It ought to be practiced 365 days a year, but at least there is one time when many people's thoughts turn toward others.

What Should We Do?

We live in a world where December 25th is observed religiously as Christ's birthday. We obviously cannot partake in something of which the Bible gives us no authority (Colossians 3:17). What should we do, we cannot "**go out of the world**" (1 Corinthians 5:9-10).

Several things should be kept in mind as we near this holiday season.

1. Be careful not to lead people to believe you observe this day religiously.
2. Refrain from using decorations that have a religious connotation.
3. Use greeting cards that depict a seasonal atmosphere rather than a religious one.
4. Teach your children that Christmas and the church of Christ have nothing in common and that December 25th is not to be celebrated as Christ's birthday.
5. Treat Santa Claus as you would any other fairy-tale character; for when your children grow up to learn he is only imaginary, they might also suppose that God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit are too.
6. Be certain to practice good-will and friendliness as an attitude of life all year long.

Conclusion

We must take care so as not to involve ourselves or family in any activity emphasizing the religious ideas of Christmas. Why then sing songs about the birth of Christ around Christmas time when we do not sing them any other time of year? Why would some go **caroling** and leave the impression we believe this is Christ's birthday? We must be careful in these things!

Those who desire to be pleasing to God must only do those things for which we have authority given in the Bible (Colossians 3:17). Be honest enough with yourself to do things the Bible way regardless of what others might think, for we will stand before Christ one day to be judged according to how we have lived in this life (2 Corinthians 5:10).