



*A Ministry of the
Church of God (Seventh Day)*

A Closer Look at Christmas



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Jesus the Christ was born in the land of Palestine more than two thousand years ago. God the Father sent His Son to live as a human on earth, to teach the way of salvation and then become the all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins.

We enjoy reading Luke's Gospel account of Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, where Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable because there was no room in the inn. We rejoice as we read how an angel from heaven announced His birth to the shepherds who were in the fields attending their sheep: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11). Just as the shepherds glorified God at this wonderful news, we are glad that Christ was born to bring the offer of salvation for everyone.

When did this marvelous event take place? Strangely, no one knows for certain the day, month, or year of Jesus' birth! But people the world over celebrate it on December 25 and call that day Christmas. The Christmas season is generally a time of joyous activity among friends and good will toward others. Many Christians consider it the best time of the entire year.

Others, not a few, have inquired, "Is this celebration taught in Scripture?" They often learn, to their surprise, that Christmas is neither taught by the Bible nor was it ever observed by the New Testament church.

If this is true, then what is the origin of Christmas? What about the date of December 25? What about the Christmas tree,

lights, decorations, and Santa Claus? Where did these traditions come from? Who authorized them, and for what reason? What should our attitude be toward the celebration of Jesus' birth on Christmas Day?

The purpose of this study is to examine and answer these questions.

Origins of Christmas celebration

Authorities on the origins of Christmas have long known that most of the related customs did not begin with the first century Christian church. In fact, many familiar and widely practiced elements of Christmas celebration came to us by way of ancient pagan religions. Here are excerpts from various sources indicating the origin of Christmas.

Christians began to celebrate Christmas about 200. But they observed it on varying dates, because the exact date of Christ's birth was unknown. In 354, December 25 was declared to be the birthday of Christ, and in 440 the pope decreed that Christmas should be celebrated on that date. The church at Constantinople, however, observed it for years on January 6, and that date is still used in some Eastern Orthodox churches.

December 25 comes only a few days after the winter solstice (about December 22), the shortest day of the year in the Northern Hemisphere. This season had long been a period of celebration among pagans in many parts of the world because it symbolized the beginning of a new year in nature. Christmas thus replaced a pagan holiday with a Christian one, while keeping the same symbolism

— the birthday of Christ corresponds to the birth of the year. Many of the pagan customs became part of the Christmas celebration.¹

Mesopotamia is the very ancient Mother of Civilization. Christmas began there, over 4000 years ago, as the festival which renewed the world for another year. The “twelve days” of Christmas; the bright fires and probably the Yule log; the giving of presents; the carnivals with their floats, their merrymakings and clownings, the mummers who sing and play from house to house; the feasting; the church processions with their lights and songs — all these and more began there centuries before Christ was born. And they celebrate the arrival of a New Year.²

For that day [December 25] was sacred, not only to the pagan Romans but to a religion from Persia which, in those days, was one of Christianity’s strongest rivals. This Persian religion was Mithraism, whose followers worshiped the sun, and celebrated its return to strength on that day. The church finally succeeded in taking the merriment, the greenery, the lights, and the gifts from Saturn and giving them to the Babe of Bethlehem.³

It happened that the date [December 25] did fall in the midst of the Saturnalia. Far from being an invention to compete against Roman and Persian paganisms, the birthday of Christ ran the danger of being swallowed up in pagan merrymaking. The [church] Fathers tried strenuously to keep Christmas strictly a church celebration. It was part of their unremitting struggle to break the grip of the pagan gods upon the people. And they broke

the grip — after a battle of centuries. The pagan Romans became Christians — but the Saturnalia remains.⁴

Christmas customs

The evolution of Christmas customs, as they are celebrated in the western world, has taken place over many centuries. No longer is much attention given to the origin of these customs, as they have taken on an “air of respectability” by their adoption into the Christian church. Listed below are three time-honored traditions of Christmas celebration, with their origins.

Tree

It is a fact that the Christmas tree stems from primitive pagan customs. Its main features, green foliage and candles, were associated with the winter solstice when nature seemed dead, and green branches and the trees were used in a magical rite to insure the return of vegetation and the victory of light over darkness.⁵

Nearly all American customs can be traced to other countries — the homeland of the many nationalities represented in the United States. For instance, the Christmas tree, usually an evergreen, was first used in Germany. The mistletoe was sacred to the Druids, priests of ancient Britain and Gaul. The Norse used holly and the yule log to keep away evil spirits.⁶

Gifts

Gifts were exchanged during the Roman celebration of the Saturnalia, a feast to the god Saturn, held December 17-23.

Gift-giving came to symbolize the gifts brought to the Christ Child by the Three Wise Men or Magi.⁷

The wise men of the Bible (Matthew 2:1-12) gave gifts to Jesus but did not exchange gifts among themselves. Their gifts to Jesus were not birthday gifts. They brought gifts to Him because He is a King: "The people of the East never approach the presence of kings and great personages without a present in their hands."⁸

The wise men did not institute a new custom by bringing Jesus gifts. They merely followed an ancient Eastern custom of approaching royalty with a gift. Quoting from the Magi, Jesus was born king of the Jews. "We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him" (Matthew 2:2).

Santa Claus

Santa Claus is a variation of a Dutch folk tale based on the historical figure Saint Nicholas, a fourth century bishop from Myra in Asia Minor. Saint Nicholas was made a patron saint of children by eastern Christians because he reportedly used his inheritance to give gifts to children and assist the needy, sick, and suffering. He was a religious figure but not always associated with Christmas.

The story of Saint Nicholas inspired the mythical figure of Sinterklaas, a celebrated subject in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Germany. This in turn inspired the myth and name of *Santa Claus*, which actually started as a mispronunciation of the Dutch word *Sinterklaas* by English settlers in early North America.

In England and many other countries, this legendary figure is known as Father Christmas, Saint Nick, Kris Kringle, Santy, Jolly Old Elf, Santa Klaus, or Santa. Other names are used in various cultures for a mythical figure who distributes gifts to children and adults, traditionally on the night before Christmas while everyone is sleeping. By now, in the twenty-first century, American influence has spread the legendary Santa Claus, or his equal, to many cultures worldwide.

Santa Claus has become an important part of the Christmas celebration for children. He is pictured as the jolly old elf who knows if children have been “naughty or nice.” Children are taught to write to Santa, or they sit on his lap at shopping malls and make known their Christmas wishes for gifts. They are taught that Santa brings their presents as he encompasses the world on Christmas Eve, flying from housetop to housetop in his sleigh, pulled by eight reindeer.

While it is not the case in every Christian home, the popularity of Santa Claus often rivals that of Jesus among children in the Christmas celebration. It is Jesus’ birthday that is supposedly celebrated at Christmas-time. But it is Santa to whom children are taught to pay attention. Is Jesus honored by all this myth and deception? Santa has become the benevolent god who sees and knows the actions of everyone. He is the bearer of good gifts! Santa is the one children learn to ask for the things they want.

Jesus is not a myth! He is the true Giver of good gifts. How can Jesus, the personification of “light” and “truth,” be honored by attributing His characteristics to the mythical

figure, Santa Claus? Of course, Jesus is not honored by such a misdirected show of love and affection.

When one stops to think of Christmas celebration — tree, lights, decorations, Santa Claus and all — Christianity's main contribution is the insertion of Jesus' birth as recorded in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. From a historical perspective, the miraculous birth account was incorporated with ancient pagan customs in an attempt to justify their practice by Christians.

Mixed religion

Syncretism is the term given to the practice of harmonizing and fusing elements of various religions. It serves to make the resulting religious union more acceptable to more people. It is the way of man, but forbidden by the God of heaven. God allows no fusing, intermingling, or uniting of false, foreign elements in worshiping Him. Jesus described exactly how God wants to be worshiped: "true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

The biblical case against religious syncretism is even more compelling when we find it repeated in different sections of Scripture. The paragraphs that follow will trace this holy protest against mixing the false with the true in the Law, the Prophets, and the New Testament epistles.

We begin with the prohibitions of Moses to ancient Israel:

"Destroy completely all the places

on the high mountains, on the hills and under every spreading tree, where the nations you are dispossessing worship their gods. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and burn their Asherah poles in the fire; cut down the idols of their gods and wipe out their names from those places. You must not worship the Lord your God in their way . . . be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, "How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same. You must not worship the LORD your God in their way . . ." (Deuteronomy 12:2-4, 30, 31a).

Next, the prophet Jeremiah spoke to Israel about the syncretistic practices of that day:

This is what the Lord says: "Do not learn the way of the nations . . . For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter" (Jeremiah 10:2-4).

While this text refers to making idols in ancient Israel and not to a Christmas tree of more modern times, the application is close at hand. As Moses did in Deuteronomy 12:2 (quoted previously), so does the prophet relate pagan practices with trees generally. If the custom of the people in Jeremiah's day was worthless as worship to God because it included a blatant form of idolatry — false worship to a false god — we may ask ourselves if the custom of people in our day involving a cut, mounted, and decorated tree is not too close for comfort.

Skipping many similar cautions scattered in Scripture, we come to the apostle Paul's warning in the New Testament against syncretism:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." Therefore, "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." And, "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty" (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

The apostle's very next words are these: "Since we have these promises [to be sons and daughters of God], dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (7:1).

In the mouth of these three witnesses from both Testaments, it is logical to conclude that time and circumstances do not remove the stigma that paganism leaves on religious customs. God, who changes not, is adamant against the Christian church's inclusion of practices derived from paganism into her worship. Mixing religious practices of various sects may be acceptable within paganism and New Age theologies, but it has never been acceptable to the God of

our Lord Jesus and of Holy Scripture. “Therefore, come out from them and be separate” (6:17a).

Putting Christ back into Christmas

Just as Christmas music is played and decorations are displayed each December, we also hear it said, “Put Christ back into Christmas.” This slogan assumes that Christ was once a part of Christmas, that it was observed by the early Christian church or that He advocated its observance. The following shows that neither position is true:

1. Most Bible scholars admit that Jesus was not born on or near December 25. That date was adopted as the birthday of Jesus mostly because of its popularity as a festive pagan season long before Christ’s birth. The actual date of Jesus’ birth is unknown, and no New Testament instructions are given for its commemoration.
2. The observance of Christmas as a Christian festival was unknown until the fourth century — a long time after the New Testament was written. “The observance of December 25, only dates from the fourth century and is due to assimilation with the Mithraic festival of the birthday of the sun.”⁹ “Christmas was generally celebrated in the West only after the triumph of Constantine, when the time of Christ’s birth was reckoned with the day of the Unconquered Sun on December 25.”¹⁰
3. Pagan elements incorporated into the celebration of Christmas have overpowered its purported meaning as a celebration of

Jesus' birthday: "The pagan Saturnalia and Brumalia were too deeply entrenched in popular custom to be set aside by Christian influence. . . . The pagan festival with its riot and merrymaking was so popular that Christians were glad of an excuse to continue its celebration with little change in spirit and in manner."¹¹

Put Christ back into Christmas? It cannot be done! Christmas is a borrowed relic from the heathen scene, predating our Lord's birth. Christ cannot be put back into a celebration He did not originate or approve.

Upholding the Bible

Rejecting the celebration of Christmas in no way slights nor denigrates the sacred truth of Jesus' birth. That historical fact is of great importance to all Christians. The Church of God (Seventh Day) holds the biblical account of Jesus' birth in high regard. The virgin birth of Christ in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of Bible prophecy, a vital part of our theology and Christology. While we do not support the traditional Christmas celebration, we gladly celebrate the wonderful Bible truths of Jesus' birth, life, crucifixion, resurrection, and return — all year long!

We understand that many people have strong feelings about the celebration of Christmas. It often brings friends and family together in a festive atmosphere. Goodwill abounds. Anticipation runs high. Many are deeply committed to its observance. So the question arises, "How do we approach those who celebrate Christmas?"

As Christ's disciples and lovers of all

the brethren, we should be sensitive and respectful in teaching our conviction about Christmas. Let us be patient as we share our belief with friends and family. Paul gave Timothy instructions that apply here: "And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth" (2 Timothy 2:24, 25). Our views about Christmas should never be shared with the assumption that believers who celebrate Christmas are insincere. Let us stand firm in our convictions and remember that as recipients of God's wonderful grace, we are all still learning.

Conclusion

What difference does it make? We admit that Christmas lights, carols, giving and receiving gifts, and the festivities of Christmas are attractive. Does celebrating Christmas matter? It really does when you consider that the date of Christ's birth is unknown; when you understand that the Scriptures are silent about His followers celebrating His birth; and especially when you know that many elements of Christmas are rooted in paganism. It matters because God has made His will known about mixing customs and practices of pagan origin with worship of Him. That is unacceptable!

God is rightly worshiped only in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). A festival adopted from false religious faiths misses the mark of true, spiritual worship. Because of its heritage in

heathenism, we do not believe the traditional Christmas celebration honors Jesus or His Father. We honor both Father and Son when we commit our lives to serve and worship in the context of His Word, with all our heart.

1. *New Standard Encyclopedia*, Volume 4, Article "Christmas" (Chicago: Standard Education Corporation, 1989), C-320.
2. Earl W. Count, *4000 Years of Christmas* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1948), 18.
3. *Ibid.*, 27.
4. *Ibid.*, 28.
5. R. Brasch, *How Did It Begin?* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1966), 332, 333.
6. *New Standard Encyclopedia*, Volume 4, C-320.
7. *Ibid.*, C-320.
8. Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary*, Volume 3, Matthew 2:11 (Cincinnati: Applegate, Pounsford & Co., 1868), 37.
9. *World's Popular Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, Article "Christmas" (Cleveland: The World Syndicate Publishing Co., 1937).
10. M. A. Smith, *From Christ to Constantine* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 150, 151.
11. *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Volume 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1908), 48.



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