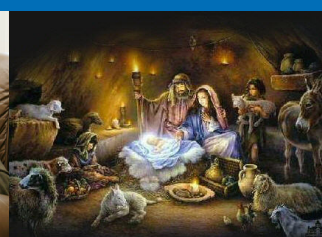




# The Truth About Christmas



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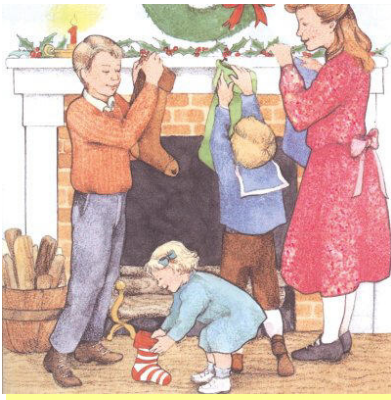
Questions & Answers

Psychologists say suicide rates actually go up after the holiday season when most people return home and have the first chance to act on their depression. Many people feel that Christmas has become too commercialized. Instead of feeling liberated, many feel trapped and unable to deal with the Christmas hangover. We have given family celebration, friendship and spirituality a new definition. It means spend more money, shop till you drop, find the perfect gift.

Then there is the social pressure to spend. So great is this social pressure to spend that 44 percent of Americans feel they spend too much on Christmas gifts. In 1998, Americans spent between \$160 billion to \$200 billion on presents! {That's about \$600 to \$800 per person.} Polls continue to show that most Americans consider Christmas to be the most stressful holiday of the year. And the number one irritant of Christmas, you guessed it, fighting crowds in the stores.

Another area of stress is the family reunion. You would normally consider a family get-together as a good thing. However, the "Leave it to Beaver," perfect functional family is not what our society and culture is producing. In fact, the ugly reality is this, many families are dysfunctional and reunions only serve to open old wounds. Christmas is celebrated with mass consumerism and other frenzied customs. What is the real truth about this most celebrated holiday?





# The Truth About Christmas



WHEN I was a very little boy, I was taught to hang up my stockings on Christmas Eve. When I awakened the next morning, they were filled with small toys and sacks or little boxes of candy and nuts. And beside the mantle, from which my stockings hung, a Christmas tree had suddenly appeared, decorated with shiny tinsel. And on it hung presents. Other presents for us children were piled on the floor underneath. I was told Santa Claus had come down the chimney during the night and left all these things. But did I question what my parents had told me? Of course not. I accepted it--took it all for granted. Didn't you?

Stop and think a moment! Very few have ever reflected on why they believe what they do--why they follow the customs they do, or from where those customs came. We were born into a world filled with customs. We grew up accepting them without question.

Why? Sheep instinct? Well, not exactly.

But by nature we do tend to follow the crowd, whether right or wrong. Sheep follow others to the slaughter. Humans ought to check up where they are going. How--when did Christmas originate? Does Christmas really celebrate the birthday of Christ? Was Jesus born on December 25th?

Did the original apostles, who knew Jesus personally and were taught by Him, celebrate His birthday on December 25th? Did they celebrate it at all? If Christmas is the chief of the Christian holidays, why do so many non-

Christians observe it? Do you know? Why do people exchange presents with family members, friends, relatives, at Christmas time? Was it because the wise men presented gifts to the Christ-child? The answer may surprise you.

Most people have "supposed" a lot of things about Christmas that are not true. But let's quit "supposing" and get the facts!

## What Encyclopedias Say

The word "Christmas" means "Mass of Christ," or, as it came to be shortened, "Christ-Mass." It came to non-Christians and Protestants from the Roman Catholic Church. And where did they get it? NOT from the New Testament--NOT from the Bible--NOT from the original apostles who were personally instructed by Christ--but it gravitated in the fourth century into the Roman Church from paganism.

Since the celebration of Christmas has come to the world from the Roman Catholic Church, and has no authority but that of the Roman Catholic Church, let us examine the Catholic Encyclopedia, 1911 edition, published by that church. Under the heading "Christmas," you will find: "Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church...the first evidence of the feast is from Egypt." "Pagan customs centering around the January calends gravitated to Christmas."

And in the same encyclopedia, under the heading "Natal Day," we find that the early Catholic father, Origen, acknowledged this

truth: "... In the Scriptures, no one [who obeyed God] is recorded to have kept a feast or held a great banquet on his birthday. It is only sinners [like Pharaoh and Herod] who make great rejoicing over the day in which they were born into this world" (emphasis ours).

Encyclopedia Britannica, 1946 edition, has this: "Christmas (i.e., the Mass of Christ)... Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church..." It was not instituted by Christ or the apostles, or by Bible authority. It was picked up afterward from paganism. The Encyclopedia Americana, 1944 edition, says: "Christmas.... It was, according to many authorities, not celebrated in the first centuries of the Christian church, as the Christian usage in general was to celebrate the death of remarkable persons rather than their birth...." (The "Communion," which is instituted by New Testament Bible authority, is a memorial of the death of Christ.) "... A feast was established in memory of this event [Christ's birth] in the fourth century. In the fifth century the Western Church ordered it to be celebrated forever on the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, as no certain knowledge of the day of Christ's birth existed."

Now notice! These recognized historical authorities show Christmas was not observed by Christians for the first two or three hundred years--a period longer than the entire history of the United States as a nation! It got into the Western, or Roman, Church, by the fourth century A.D. It was not until the fifth century that the Roman Church ordered it to be celebrated as an official Christian festival!

## **Jesus Was Not Born December 25th**

Jesus was not even born in the winter season! When the Christ-child was born "there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). This never could have occurred in Judea in the month of December. The shepherds always brought their flocks from the mountainsides and fields and corralled them not later than October 15, to protect them from the cold, rainy season that followed that date. Notice that the Bible itself proves, in Song of Solomon 2:11 and Ezra 10:9, 13, that winter was a rainy season not permitting shepherds to abide in open fields at night. "It was an ancient custom among Jews of those days to send out their sheep to the fields and deserts about the Passover (early spring), and bring them home at

commencement of the first rain," says the Adam Clarke Commentary (Vol. 5, page 370, New York ed.).

Continuing, this authority states: "During the time they were out, the shepherds watched them night and day. As...the first rain began early in the month of Marchesvan, which answers to part of our October and November [begins sometime in October], we find that the sheep were kept out in the open country during the whole summer. And, as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, our Lord was not born on the 25th of December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could He have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. On this very ground, the nativity in December should be given up. The feeding of the flocks by night in the fields is a chronological fact..."

Many encyclopedias and other authorities affirm that Christ was not born on December 25. Even the Catholic Encyclopedia frankly states this fact. The exact date of Jesus' birth is entirely unknown, as all authorities acknowledge. Chapter 2 of this booklet covers scriptures which at least strongly indicate it was in the early fall--probably September--approximately six months after Passover. If God had wished us to observe and celebrate Christ's birthday, He would not have so completely hidden the exact date.

## **How This Pagan Custom Got into the Church**

Then how did this pagan custom creep into the Western Christian world? The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge explains it clearly, in its article on "Christmas": "How much the date of the festival depended upon the pagan Brumalia (Dec. 25) following the Saturnalia (Dec. 17-24), and celebrating the shortest day of the year and the 'new sun'...cannot be accurately determined. 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. Christian preachers of the West and the Near East protested





against the unseemly frivolity with which Christ's birthday was celebrated, while Christians of Mesopotamia accused their Western brethren of idolatry and sun worship for adopting as Christian this pagan festival."

Remember, the Roman world had been pagan. Prior to the fourth century, Christians were few in number, though increasing, and were persecuted by the government and by pagans. But, with the advent of Constantine as emperor, who made his profession of Christianity in the fourth century, placing Christianity on an equal footing with paganism, people of the Roman world began to accept this now-popular Christianity by the hundreds of thousands.

But remember, these people had grown up in pagan customs, chief of which was this idolatrous festival of December 25th. It was a festival of merrymaking, with its special spirit. They enjoyed it! They didn't want to give it up! Now this same article in the New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge explains how the recognition by Constantine of Sunday, which had been the day of pagan sun worship, and how the influence of the pagan Manichaeism, which identified the SON of God with the physical SUN, gave these pagans of the fourth century, now turning over wholesale to "Christianity," their excuse for calling their pagan festival date of December 25th (birthday of the SUN-god), the birthday of the SON of God.

And that is how "Christmas" became fastened on our Western world! We may call it by another name, but it's still the same old pagan sun-worshipping festival! The only change is in what we call it! You can call a rabbit a "lion," but it's still a rabbit, just the same.

Again from the Encyclopedia Britannica: "Certain Latins, as early as 354, may have transferred the birthday from January 6th to December 25, which

was then a Mithraic feast...or birthday of the Unconquered SUN... The Syrians and Armenians, who clung to January 6th, accused the Romans of sun worship and idolatry, contending...that the feast of December 25th, had been invented by disciples of Cerinthus...."

## Yes, and Even Santa Claus!

But what about dear old Santa Claus? Is he as benevolent and holy as many suppose! The name "Santa Claus" is a corruption of the name "St. Nicholas," a Roman Catholic bishop who lived in the 4th century. Look in the Encyclopedia Britannica, volume 19, pages 648-649, 11th edition, where you'll read:

"St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra, a saint honored by the Greeks and Latins on the 6th of December.... A legend of his surreptitious bestowal of dowries on the three daughters of an impoverished citizen...is said to have originated the old custom of giving presents in secret on the Eve of St. Nicholas [Dec. 6], subsequently transferred to Christmas day. Hence the association of Christmas with Santa Claus...."

Through the year, parents punish their children for telling falsehoods. Then, at Christmas time, they themselves tell their little children this "Santa Claus" lie! Is it any wonder many of them, when they grow up and learn the truth, begin to believe God is a myth, too?

One little fellow, sadly disillusioned about "Santa Claus," said to a playmate, "Yes, and I'm going to look into this 'Jesus Christ' business, too!" Is it Christian to teach children myths and falsehoods? God says, "Thou shalt not bear false witness!" It may seem right, and be justified by human reason, but God says, "There is a way that seemeth right to a

man, but the end thereof are the ways of death!" "Old Nick" also is a term for the devil! Is there a connection? Satan appears as an "angel of light," to deceive! (II Cor. 11:14; Rev. 12:9.)

And so when we examine the facts, we are astonished to learn that the practice of observing Christmas is not, after all, a true biblical practice, but a human custom--one of the ways of Babylon our people have fallen into!

But when it comes to the most important part of all in this Christmas observance--the Christmas shopping season--the buying and exchanging of gifts--many will exclaim triumphantly, "Well, at least the Bible tells us to do that! Didn't the wise men give gifts when Christ was born?"

Again, we are due for some surprises, when we learn the plain truth. Let's look at the historic origin of trading gifts, and then see exactly what the Bible does say about it.

### Isn't Exchanging Gifts Scriptural?



From the Bibliotheca Sacra, volume 12, pages 153-155, we quote: "The interchange of presents between friends is alike characteristic of Christmas and the Saturnalia, and must have been adopted by Christians from the Pagans, as the admonition of Tertullian plainly shows."

The fact is, this custom fastened upon people of exchanging gifts with friends and relatives at the Christmas season has not a single trace of Christianity about it, strange though that may seem! This does not celebrate Christ's birthday nor honor it or Him! Suppose someone you love has a birthday. You want to honor that person on his or her birthday.

Would you lavishly buy gifts for everyone else, trading gifts back and forth with all your other friends and loved ones, but ignore completely any gift for the one whose birthday you are honoring? Rather absurd, when viewed in that light, isn't it?

Yet this is exactly what people the world over are doing! They honor a day that is not Christ's birthday by spending every dime they can scrape together in buying presents to trade back and forth among friends and relatives.

Now consider what the Bible says about the wise men giving gifts when Christ was born. It is in Matthew 2:1-11. "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews?... And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto HIM gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

Notice, they inquired for the child Jesus, who was born KING of the Jews! Now why did they present

gifts to Him? Because it was His birthday? Not at all, because they came several days or weeks after the date of His birth!

Are we to see in this an example for us, today, to trade gifts back and forth among ourselves? No, notice carefully! They did not exchange gifts among themselves, but "they presented unto HIM gifts." They gave their gifts to Christ, not to their friends, relatives, or one another!

### Gifts For a King

Let me quote from the Adam Clarke Commentary, volume 5, page 46: "Verse 11. (They presented unto

him gifts.) The people of the east never approach the presence of kings and great personages, without a present in their hands. The custom is often noticed in the Old Testament..."

There it is! They were not instituting a new Christian custom of exchanging gifts with friends to honor Christ's birthday. They were following an old and ancient eastern custom of presenting gifts to a king when they came into his presence. They were approaching Him, born KING of the Jews, in person. Therefore custom required they present gifts--even as the Queen of Sheba brought gifts to Solomon--even as many people today take a gift along when they visit, for example, the White House for an appointment with the President. No, the custom of trading gifts back and forth does not stem from this scriptural incident at all, but rather, as quoted from history above, it is the continuance of an ancient pagan custom. Instead of honoring Christ, it invariably retards His Work, often sets it back, at the Christmas season every year.

## Does It Really Honor Christ?

Now come two arguments often used to justify Christmas observance.

(1) Many will reason this way: "But, even though the exact date of Jesus' birth is unknown, should we not select some date to celebrate as His birthday?" The answer is positively no! Did you not notice the statement quoted earlier from the Catholic Encyclopedia that sinners alone celebrate their birthdays? The celebration of birthdays is not a Christian, but a pagan custom, observed by sinners!

(2) But, many still reason, "Even so--even though Christmas was a pagan custom, honoring the false sun-god, we don't observe it to honor the false god, we observe it to honor Christ."

But how does GOD answer in His Word? "Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them [the pagans in their customs]...that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God: for every abomination to the Lord, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods" (Deut. 12:30-31).

God says plainly in His Instruction Book to us, that He will not accept that kind of worship, even though intended in His honor. To Him, He says, it is offering what is abominable to Him, and therefore it honors, not Him, but false pagan gods. GOD says we must not worship Him according to the "dictates of our own conscience"--a term we often hear. But Jesus said plainly, "God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). And what is truth? God's Word--the Holy Bible--said Jesus, is truth (John 17:17); and the Bible says God will not accept worship when people take a pagan custom or manner of worship and try to honor Christ with it.

Again, Jesus said: "In vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:9). Christmas observance is a tradition of men, and the commandments of God, as quoted, forbid it. Jesus said, further, "full well ye reject the commandment of God, that ye may keep your own tradition."

That is precisely what the millions are doing today. They ignore the commandment of God. He commands, regarding taking the customs of the pagans and using them to honor or worship God: "Thou shalt not do so unto the Lord thy God." Still, most people today take that command of God lightly, or as having no validity whatsoever, and follow the tradition of men in observing Christmas.

We have professed to be Christian nations, but we're in Babylon, as Bible prophecy foretold, and we don't know it! "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues"--soon to fall--is the warning of Revelation 18:4.

Make no mistake! God will allow you to defy and disobey Him. He will allow you to follow the crowd and the traditions of men. He will allow you to sin. But He also says there is a day of reckoning coming. As you sow, so shall you reap! Jesus was the living Word of God in Person, and the Bible is the written Word of God. And we shall be judged, for eternity, by these words! They should not be taken lightly or ignored.



# Jesus' Birth The Untold Story

Was Jesus born in December? If not, when was he born? And in what year? Anyway, what difference does it make? These are questions often asked. It is time they were answered!

## A Visit to Bethlehem

In late December of each year, thousands of tourists flock into the small town of Bethlehem in the Judean Hills south of Jerusalem to participate in annual Christmas celebrations there. Some make the 6-mile journey from Jerusalem on foot. Upon arrival, they crowd with silent awe into the paved expanse of Manger Square in front of the revered Church of the Nativity, built over the traditional site of Jesus' birth. Inevitably, some of these tourists arrive in Israel unprepared. They have not thoroughly studied their guidebooks. As they step off their plane, they receive a real shock!



Winter time in Israel

November through early March is "winter" in Israel! The weather gets cold, especially at night. Often it rains--or even snows! Yet many arrive in Israel carrying luggage bulging with summer attire, reasoning that it is always hot and arid in the Middle East. So they hurriedly purchase coats and sweaters

in Tel Aviv or Jerusalem for their pilgrimage down to Bethlehem.

Nevertheless, most of those who stand in Manger Square on December 25 each year--prepared and unprepared alike--fail to perceive the message being proclaimed by the very weather around them!

Notice this plain testimony of your Bible: On the day of Jesus' birth "there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). The shepherds were living out in the open fields, tending their flock through the night. The point? Ask any biblical scholar, or any modern Israeli: This never could have occurred in Judea in the month of December--nor even in November, or late October for that matter!

In ancient times as today, shepherds brought their flocks in from the fields and penned them in shelters not later than the middle of October! This was necessary to protect them from the cold, rainy season that usually followed that date. (The Bible itself makes it clear that winter in Palestine is a rainy season; see Ezra 10:9, 13; Song of Solomon 2:11.)

Yet Luke 2:8 tells us that at the time of Jesus' birth, the shepherds were yet abiding in the fields--by night, at that! They had not yet brought their flocks home to the sheepfolds. Clearly the cold, rainy season had not yet commenced. Thus, on the basis of Luke's testimony alone, we see that Jesus could have been born no later than mid-October--when the weather is still pleasant at Bethlehem. A December 25 nativity is too late!

## More Proof

Additional biblical evidence lends further support to the foregoing conclusion. Luke 1:24-38 informs us that the virgin Mary miraculously became pregnant with Jesus when her cousin Elizabeth was six months pregnant with a child who would later be known as John the Baptist. Jesus, then, would have been born six months after John. If we could know the time of John's birth, we could then simply add six months and know the time of Jesus' birth.

Does the Bible reveal the general time of John's birth? Notice: Elizabeth's husband Zacharias was a priest at the temple in Jerusalem. Luke 1:5 records that Zacharias was "of the course of Abia [in Hebrew, Abijah]." In the days of King David of ancient Israel (10th century B.C.), the number of priests had so increased that they had to be divided into 24 courses or shifts, which would take turns in performing the priestly duties (I Chron. 24). Each course served one week at a time, beginning and ending on a weekly Sabbath day (II Chron. 23:8). The course of Abijah was the eighth course or shift in the rotation (I Chron. 24:10).

The Talmud (collection of Jewish civil and religious laws and commentaries) records that the first course performed its duties in the first week of the first month of the Hebrew calendar. This month (called Abib or Nisan) begins about the start of spring in the Northern Hemisphere.

The second course worked the second week. The third week--being the annual festival season of Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread--found all 24 courses serving together, sharing the heavy duties of that special time. The third shift then took its turn during the fourth week of the year. Projecting

forward, the eighth course--the course of Abijah, in which Zacharias served--worked the ninth week of the year. But Zacharias' course then stayed on at the temple to serve the 10th week also--the week of the annual Pentecost festival--along with all the other courses.

It was during that two-week period of work--near the end of spring--that the announcement by the archangel Gabriel came to Zacharias regarding his wife's imminent conception (Luke 1:8-20). When his two weeks' service was completed, Zacharias and Elizabeth went back to their home and Elizabeth conceived (verses 23-24)--sometime late in June or early July.

The rest is a matter of biology and arithmetic. Elizabeth's sixth month of pregnancy would have been in December. She would have given birth three months later--in late March or early April of the following year. Six months after that, Jesus would have been born, in late September or early October--before the sheep were brought in from the fields, as we have seen! Clearly, Jesus was not born in December.

Late September or early October was also the time of year that taxes were customarily paid--in the fall, at the end of the harvest. Joseph and Mary, it will be remembered, had journeyed to Bethlehem to be taxed (Luke 2:3-5).

The fact that there was "no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7) also suggests the time of the autumn harvest, because the annual fall festivals occurring at that time attracted multitudes of Jews to Jerusalem and nearby towns, filling all available accommodations.

## In Jesus' Name?

We have seen the proof that Jesus was born in the early autumn, not in the winter. But, some will ask, what difference does it make? Is it not the thought that counts? What is wrong with celebrating a day--any day--in honor of Jesus' birth?



Each December, articles inevitably appear in newspapers and magazines pointing out the ancient origins of today's Christmas customs. All authorities agree that the customs surrounding Christmas--the Christmas tree, mistletoe, holly wreaths, yule logs, stockings on the hearth, exchanging gifts and so on--were practiced in connection with pagan religious celebrations centuries before the birth of Jesus. None are of Christian origin!

Anciently, December 25 was the date of the pagan Roman Brumalia, the final day of the popular weeklong Saturnalia celebration, celebrated in honor of the god Saturn. It was the day of the "invincible sun"--a winter solstice festival. "Christmas" was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. It was not until the mid-fourth century that Pope Julius I decreed December 25 to be Christmas ("Christ-Mass") Day. He sought to overshadow the popular Brumalia by imparting "Christian" connotations to the day.

But again, some will ask: What is so wrong with borrowing some of those early customs and using them to honor Jesus? May we not continue to celebrate December 25, as long as we do it in Jesus' name?

Can pagan practices be "Christianized" in this way? More than 34 centuries ago, the rebellious children of Israel fashioned a pagan idol-

-a golden calf--in the wilderness (Ex. 32). It was the god Apis, the sacred Egyptian bull deity worshiped at Memphis on the Nile. Aaron declared that the pagan, Egyptian rites by which the Israelites worshiped the calf were "a feast to the Lord" (verse 5).

Did God feel honored? Did he approve of their using pagan customs to worship him? Absolutely not! It was a great sin (verse 21), and 3,000 paid with their lives (verse 28)! They had deceived themselves that what they were doing was right.

We are commanded not to seek to worship God with customs borrowed from other religions (Deut. 12:29-32). "Learn not the way of the heathen," God declares (Jer. 10:2).

True Christians never meet paganism half way. Pagan worship--whether "in Jesus' name" or not--remains pagan worship! Christianity mixed with paganism is not Christianity at all. Righteousness has no fellowship with unrighteousness (II Cor. 6:14). God simply will not accept that type of false "worship."

If God had wanted us to observe Christ's birthday, he would have given us the exact date and specific instructions on how to observe it. But he has not! Christmas is an invention of man, issuing from pagan worship.

## The Christmas Card You Will Never Receive



The book of Revelation tells the real story about Jesus birth, it was no silent night! Behind the scene there was a spiritual battle between the forces of good and evil.

"And there appeared a great sign in the heavens, a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon was under her feet, and a crown of twelve stars on her head, and having a babe in womb, she cries, being in travail, having been distressed to bear.

And another sign was seen in the heavens. And behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads! And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and cast them onto the earth.

And the dragon stood before the woman being about to bear, so that when she bears he might devour her child. And she bore a son, a male, who is going to rule all nations with a rod of iron. And her child was caught up to God and to His throne...

And there was war in Heaven. Michael and his angels warring against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels warred, but did not prevail. Nor was place found for them in Heaven any more. And the great dragon was cast out, the old serpent called Devil, and Satan, who deceives the whole world. He was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him." [Revelation 12:1-5, 7-9]

# So You Are Not Keeping Christmas

SO You have decided it's time to make some changes. This year you and your family are (sssh--don't let the neighbors know!)--not going to keep Christmas!

But it isn't quite as easy as that though, is it? Christmas has become so much a part of most people's lives that not to observe it can mean a major disruption. No Christmas cards. What will Aunt Tess think? No relatives over for Christmas dinner. No decorations. No lights or Santa Claus. You'll have to try to avoid the office party, and you'd better write to the school explaining that you don't want little Fred to play an angel in the Christmas play. And no tree.

I remember the first time we didn't have a tree. It had always been a feature in our house. We would go to a lot of trouble to decorate it beautifully, and then put it in the front window for all to see. A good-looking tree was a status symbol in our neighborhood and, though I do say it myself, ours was one of the best and most impressive.

But we noticed in the Bible where God made some pretty pointed remarks about decorated trees. Check it for yourself in Jeremiah 10:3-4. God said it was a futile, pagan custom--a clear case of worshipping Christ in vain. So--no tree. Even though we knew we had done the right thing, we really missed that tree. The neighbors all had them, sparkling in their windows, but our window remained dark.

We missed it so much that we cheated a bit. We put up a few decorations--not a tree, mind you, just a few bits and pieces to make the place look more cheerful. And we had a Christmas dinner, only we didn't call it that. It was only a celebration."

We felt guilty about it, because we knew we had compromised. It was just that the old way seemed so comfortable and without a tree and all the rest of the paraphernalia, Christmas just didn't seem like,

Christmas. Jesus Christ knew this would happen. He explained to His disciples that they would indeed miss some aspects of the old way of life, and that even as they learned the truth from him they would look back nostalgically from time to time.

Jesus taught an important lesson in Luke 5:36-39: "No one puts a piece from a new garment on an old one; otherwise the new makes a tear, and also the piece that was taken out of the new does not match the old" (verse 36). Any seamstress understands that. New, unshrunk material cannot be used to patch old, worn garments. When it shrinks, it will tear the old cloth even worse than before.

Jesus' second analogy is not quite so easy for us to follow in the 20th century: "And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; or else the new wine will burst the wineskins and be spilled, and the wineskins will be ruined. But new wine must be put into new wineskins" (verses 37-38).

In New Testament times glass bottles were rare, so wine was often transported in animal skins, usually from goats. They made a strong, airtight and moisture-proof container, but you had to be careful. New wine that had not finished fermenting gave off gas that would expand the skins. A new wineskin had some "give" to it, and would allow for the expansion. But old, used skins lost their elasticity. They would burst. The wine would be spilled and the wineskin ruined.

But why tell people that? Jesus Christ's business was not to give the multitude helpful household hints. Jesus was using a familiar situation to teach an aspect of Christian living.

## Withdrawal Symptoms

When someone begins to understand the teachings of the Bible, it is a totally new experience--unlike anything he or she has ever known--like new wine



or an unused piece of cloth. Now, what most of us do is try to fit this new truth into our old way of life. That is only natural, because it is hard to change, and no one likes to admit having been wrong. The old way of life is familiar and comfortable, and we want to hang on to as much of it as possible. How about you? Perhaps you have fond memories of the Easter sunrise service, the fun of Halloween and those beautiful candlelight carol services down at the old family church. The truth comes smashing into inherited religious ideas and preconceived notions of right and wrong. It challenges comfortable beliefs, making you question things you have always done.

This new way--even if it is right--sometimes seems like an unwelcome intruder, and you find yourself resenting it. Jesus warned us that that could happen: "And no one, having drunk old wine, immediately desires new; for he says, 'The old is better'" (verse 39).

It is not surprising that so many people, even though they acknowledge the truth, still prefer to cling to their old beliefs. Or perhaps they do as my family did when we met the truth halfway, with a sort of "unChristmas" celebration.

We didn't enjoy our "unChristmas." You never can if you know that you are

compromising with what is right. We were trying to put our new wine in the old bottle, and we spoiled everything.

## All The Way

Don't make that mistake. If you are beginning to understand what it means to be a real Christian, realize that it is going to demand positive action on your part. You can't have it both ways, observing this world's customs and still expecting the blessing of the world tomorrow. "Why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not the things which I say?"

Jesus thundered (Luke 6:46). He expects total commitment. He demands that we come out of the Babylon of confusion that characterizes so much religion today.

So along with the excitement of learning new truth comes the responsibility of making some painful decisions. Don't compromise. God does not want to take from us anything that is good. His way of life is filled with exciting experiences that mean something and lead somewhere, not empty, senseless but often very expensive rituals.

As you take the plunge and follow God's way of life, you will begin to miss the "old wine" less and less. You will see it for what it is--a hollow counterfeit of the real thing.



In 1998, Americans spent between \$160 billion to \$200 billion on presents! {That's about \$600 to \$800 per person.}



Over 34 million Christmas trees are cut down each year. Sales for Christmas trees go over 80 million a year.

## Blue Christmas

Christmas time is the most likely time of the year to experience depression. The suicide rate is higher during December than any other month, which tells us that

Christmas depression should be taken quite seriously. Depression at Christmas time can be triggered by a multitude of things, such as losses, failures, and loneliness. These elements are exacerbated this time of year. People who have had deaths in the family or have experienced divorce or the loss of a child are more prone to depression, especially during the holiday season.

# Questions & Answers

1. You say that Christmas observance does not come from the Bible. Where does it come from, then?

Where Christmas customs came from is really no secret. You can read the origins of Christmas customs in encyclopedias and other reference works, as well as in newspaper and magazine articles that often appear during the Christmas season.

The facts are readily accessible. At the end of December and the beginning of January festive celebrations were taking place in various nations of Europe centuries before Jesus was born!

When that festive season rolled around, little children were filled with anticipation and excitement. The whole family got busily involved in putting up decorations. Boughs of holly and evergreen were assembled and placed about the house. The mistletoe was hung. A tree was chosen and decorated with ornaments.

It was a season of giving and receiving presents, a time to sing songs, admire all the pretty lights and burn the Yule log. There were parades with special floats, sumptuous meals and merrymaking. All this and Jesus wasn't even born yet!

In ancient times, many of the earth's inhabitants, realizing their dependence upon the sun for light, heat and the growing of crops, watched the sun's yearly course in the heavens with deep interest. At different seasons, feasts and celebrations were held to help, it was thought, the solar orb on its way.

The end of December was an especially significant time in the Northern Hemisphere. The days were short. The sun was at its lowest point. Special festivals of thanksgiving and encouragement to the sun were held. When, at the winter solstice, the days began to lengthen, there was great celebration lasting into the first part of January. The sun--the light of the world--had been (re)born!

Such festivities, once meant to honor the sun and its god, were freely adopted by the spreading and increasingly popular "Christian" religion. Why not, in the same way, honor Jesus--the real light of the world (even though He was not actually born in December)?

2. All right. So Christmas is based on pagan traditions and myths. What is wrong with borrowing some of those customs and using them to honor Jesus on His birthday? If we are supposed to celebrate Jesus' birthday, why doesn't the Bible give us the date of that event? Elsewhere in the Scriptures, when God revealed certain days He wanted His people to observe, no room was left for doubt as to when those days occurred.

The instructions were specific because God wanted His people to observe those particular days. Why, then, the silence as to which day Christ was born? The truth is that the Bible nowhere commands us to observe birthdays in the first place!

But an even more important point to consider is this: When Jesus' name is applied to borrowed pagan ideas and practices, does Jesus really feel honored? After all, it was Jesus Himself who told His people Israel not to seek to worship Him with customs borrowed from other religions (Deut. 12:29-32). Time and again He made it clear through His prophets that He wanted His people to remain "cleansed ... of everything pagan" (Neh. 13:30, Revised Authorized Version).

3. Even though I have ceased to celebrate Christmas, is there anything wrong in continuing to exchange gifts out of the motive of giving rather than wanting to follow pagan customs?



There is nothing wrong with giving to others. Part of God's overall purpose for our existence is that we learn to give instead of seeking to get. But a Christian needs to be careful about giving a gift around Christmas time.

The reason? Christians are to be lights to the world. They must set the example of righteous living. To engage in gift giving with those who are celebrating Christmas may give the appearance to them that you are participating right along with them in Christmas festivities.

God tells us to come out of the religious system of this world and to be "separate" (11 Cor. 6:14-18). How can a person be separate from such goings on and continue at the same time to dabble in them? Why not give gifts at other times of the year when they will be appreciated as spontaneously sincere and heartfelt?

4. How do I tell my friends and relatives that I no longer wish to exchange presents? With a smile! That's right. Show firmness, yet at the same time be relaxed and friendly about it.

(1) One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to come across as a religious fanatic fired up with purple-veined emotion on the subject. There's no need to make friends and relatives feel condemned and guilty by what you say. Your example will be testimony enough to them.

Most of them haven't the faintest idea where Christmas customs came from or why they are following them. It's more superstition than it is religion. They're just doing what everyone around them does. Many of the problems arising from the Christmas season can be resolved if you apply three principles: After the initial shock wears off, most people will respect your stand and secretly wish they had the courage to do likewise. Some, in fact, heartened by your example, may do just that!

(2) Maintain a sense of humor. Let's face it, cutting trees down and then setting them back up loaded with ornaments, the whole gift-trading rigmarole, the thought of an overweight, bearded individual decked out in flamboyant red and traveling through the air in a sled or some other conveyance when he

is not slithering up and down someone's chimney--these and so many other traditions are ridiculous. Feel free to point that out. Who can deny it?

(3) Put the burden of proof on those who are celebrating Christmas. It's not that there isn't overwhelming proof to back you up in your decision to cease celebrating Christmas. There certainly is. But most people have neither the time nor the interest for a detailed explanation. So shift the burden of proof to them. Say, in effect, "If you can show me where the Bible says I ought to observe Christmas, or where it says early Christians celebrated Jesus' birthday, I will celebrate it also!" The discussion will probably end very suddenly at that point. Of course, if the person to whom you are speaking shows an obvious interest in learning about the real origin of Christmas, you should be prepared to give an appropriate answer.

5. What happens if someone gives me a gift anyway? Should I return it?

If a person is testing you to see how deeply your religious convictions lie, returning the gift is a proper response. On the other hand, in cases where the person sincerely doesn't know or comprehend your stand, a polite note of thanks for the gift and a brief statement that you no longer observe the Christmas holiday may be sufficient. By the way, you will find that most people will stop giving you Christmas gifts anyway after a year or two of not receiving a gift from you in return.

6. My friends and relatives continue to send me Christmas cards. Should I write back to each of them and explain that I have quit celebrating Christmas?

A brief note to that effect may be in order. As with gifts, most people will cease sending Christmas cards when they stop getting them in return.

7. What do I tell my children now that they will no longer be receiving presents at Christmas?

Why not tell them the truth? Why not tell them that you have come to understand that the world is wrong in its observance of Christmas and that you are going to do God's will because it is better than Christmas?

Be sure to emphasize the positive side--that God's way is better than Christmas. As proof of this, tell your children you are going to give gifts to them throughout the year because you love them all year long, not just on Christmas Day. That, in turn, is precisely what they can tell their friends who will be showing off their Christmas gifts.

It is important not to leave a void in your children's lives by removing Christmas observance and putting nothing in its place. Arrange special activities with them often, and especially centering on the Holy Days God has ordained in the Scriptures--the days He does want us to observe. (For more information, order our free booklet, *The Sign of God*)

### 8. Is there anything I can do to prevent my child from having to participate in Christmas activities at school?

One of the most important steps you as a Christian parent can take is to discuss the subject with the children's teachers, addressing the problem ahead of time. Politely inform the teachers involved that you do not observe certain holidays and that you do not want to have your children take part in celebrations centering around those days.

Seek to avoid, as much as possible, leaving a teacher in a difficult situation with children to teach but not knowing what to have them do while others, for example, are drawing Santas. You can advise that your children may draw winter scenes or snowmen instead of things immediately associated with Christmas.

If the whole class is having a Christmas party perhaps you could offer to come to school and take your children home that afternoon to relieve the teacher from having to find something else for them to do.

In any case, try to be very cooperative with school officials. Above all, ask God for wisdom, grace and favor in their sight. Your children themselves,

especially as they get older, will be a determining factor as to whether they become involved in worldly religious holiday activities at school or elsewhere away from home. You can't be with them every minute. This underlines the absolute need to provide positive instruction at home. If children are convinced in their own minds that they should not participate in certain activities, much of the battle is already won.

### 9. It is a standard policy for the company where I work to give all employees a Christmas bonus. Should I accept this bonus?

Bonuses given at the end of the year are usually not considered as Christmas gifts. They are often given in gratitude for work done throughout the preceding year. It is logical to wait until the end of the year before giving such a bonus, and Christmas seems to be as good an occasion as any.

Most large companies are not interested one way or the other in the personal convictions of their employees and, when that's the case, there is no reason to refuse the bonus.

If you are working for a smaller company where you know your employer personally, it may be advisable to mention to him or her that you don't celebrate Christmas. If he or she wants to give you the bonus regardless, as simply a gift or token of appreciation, you can accept it with a clear conscience.

### 10. Some relatives have invited me to their house for dinner on Christmas Day. Should I refuse the invitation?

Not necessarily. It depends on the nature of the occasion. Since you understand the truth about Christmas, to you the day will be just another ordinary day of the year. And to you the simple fact of eating a meal with others on that day is no different from eating one with them on any other day. What matters in this case, though, is how your relatives will regard the occasion.

If they look on the meal as part of Christmas festivities and place religious significance upon it, then you would be out of place there. Your attendance could give the impression that you are

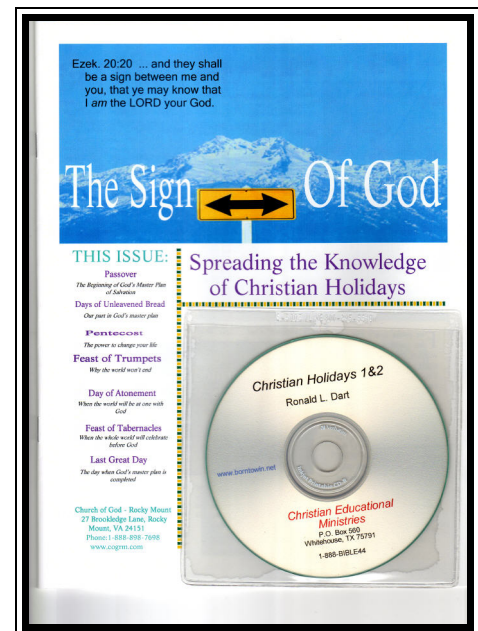


observing Christmas with them or, if they know about your beliefs, that you are willing to compromise on your beliefs.

On the other hand, if the meal is merely a convenient opportunity for a family get-together, and there is no objectionable connotation placed upon the meal, then it might be all right to accept the invitation. Better be prepared to answer some questions, though, because sooner or later the conversation is sure to focus on why you don't observe Christmas.

## 11. What should I say when someone wishes me "Merry Christmas"?

It is often sufficient to respond with a question such as "Where has this last year gone?" or "It's that time of year again, isn't it?" or "Do you think it is going to snow?" or even a parting statement on an entirely unrelated subject such as "Good-bye now" or "Have a good day!" The surprising fact is that few individuals will even notice that you haven't wished "Merry Christmas" in return, so meaningless is the expression. At other times, a smile and a "Thank you" (meaning you are grateful for their concern) may be more appropriate.



In a world filled with the tradition of men, we forget that God has a story to tell. The greatest story ever told is found hidden within God's Holy Days. It's the story of what God is doing through mankind. Like a mystery that goes deeper and deeper, so each holy Day reveals a deeper understanding about the mysteries of God and what God is doing through mankind.

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