

JOHN 1:1-5, 14

SHOULD WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”¹

Puritans under Oliver Cromwell banned Christmas celebrations in 1644. Since Christmas was observed by Anglicans, Lutherans, Dutch Reformed and Catholics, the Puritans regarded the celebration as a form of residual popery to be avoided by devotees of the Way. After 1660, the ban was no longer enforced, and the law was finally repealed in 1681. However, Puritans continued to disapprove of the celebration. It is important to note that Puritans were not the only Christians to discourage Christmas observances—Anabaptists, Quakers, Congregationalists and Presbyterians likewise discouraged Christmas festivities. To this day, some fellow believers are uncomfortable observing the Feast of the Nativity because there is no mention of it in the Bible, and because they see the observance as a form of concession to the evil of false religion.

Lack of biblical support is not the sole reason given for disapproval of the fête. Commercialisation of the season is reason enough for many Christians to resist the celebration. Other conscientious believers are concerned about the pagan origins of the celebration, and they are concerned for the increasing adoption of unholy practises by the world about them. Consequently, pastors are frequently asked, “Should we celebrate Christmas?” It seems likely that Christmas will continue to be celebrated by believers and unbelievers alike; and so the question should perhaps be rephrased to ask, “How should we celebrate Christmas?”

ISSUES SURROUNDING CHRISTMAS — To be certain, there is no command to celebrate the birth of Christ. However, it must be noted that neither is there a prohibition against such celebration. Whilst the observance of Christmas is not mentioned in the Word of God, the commemoration of Christ’s birth has ancient roots. The earliest evidence I can find for the observance of Christ’s birth is from about 200 A.D., when a few Egyptian theologians are reported as observing the 20th of May in the 28th year of Augustus for commemorating the birth of the Christ.² Within the next two hundred years, similar observances during the spring of the year had spread to Cyprus, throughout Mesopotamia, Armenia and Asia Minor, and were occurring in such diverse and important locations as Jerusalem, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome.

There is little question but that the date adopted for the current observance was a continuation of the Roman Saturnalia festival, a week of lawlessness observed each year. Early on, it would appear that some Roman popes urged some of the most egregious excesses of Saturnalia on the masses, especially using the day as an excuse to abase Jews living in Rome.³

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² “Christmas” (article), Catholic Encyclopedia, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm>, accessed 15 December 2011

³ “The Real Story of Christmas,” http://www.simpletoremember.com/vitals/Christmas_TheRealStory.htm#_ftn5, accessed 15 December 2011

Similarly, many of the trappings of the season—Christmas trees, tinsel, yule logs and other such accoutrements—find their origin in the pagan observances of the Druids and other northern European tribes. Many of these symbols were adopted by Christians living in what were at the time the outlying areas of the Empire. The effort appears to have been an attempt to co-opt the pagan practises, much as modern Catholicism adapts itself to pagan practises of the natives of the New World. Some, like Santa Claus, was quite modern. Whilst Father Christmas and Black Peter are known in Europe, Coca Cola was looking for a symbol to sell its drink during the midst of the Great Depression. They contracted with a Norse artist to draw a figure and dressed him in Coca Cola red to market their product. The rest, as they say, is history.

Another matter that must be addressed is the fact that Christmas is today a civic holiday. I would say that it has grown into a civic holiday, but the evidence indicates that even prior to the sixteenth century the day was set aside for the masses to drink and eat to the point of excess. It was this marked dissipation and excess that generated such strong Puritan opposition during Cromwell's reign. Though Christmas is mandated by legislation as a holiday, any religious reference is nevertheless discouraged by many legislators. Let that knowledge sink in: Christmas is a worldwide observance among virtually all cultures. Though the day is set aside by legislation as a civic holiday, efforts to marginalise or eliminate any reference to Christian Faith continue, and appear to be increasing, to this day.

Undoubtedly, the day is problematic for conscientious Christians. Believers who permit themselves to think are disquieted by what the day has become and with the manner in which we celebrate. We see the popular attitude toward the day as an opportunity to eat to excess, to drink to excess, to impoverish ourselves to demonstrate our love for members of our family—but there is scant inclination to worship on Christmas Day. Perhaps some tolerate a Christmas Eve service, but the emphasis among many professed saints is to cancel services should Christmas fall on a Sunday. Unfortunately, the majority of professing followers of the Lamb refuse to think, or at least fail to think. The festivities, the comforting presence of family, the feasting as a means of celebration occupy the attention of most of us who are the professed people of God.

THE FOCUS FOR BELIEVERS — What should be the focus of believers is Christ and the reason for His coming as a child. Perhaps the finest Christmas text imaginable is that which Paul provides in his second Corinthian letter. He wrote, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” [2 CORINTHIANS 5:21].

At Christmas, we would do well to recall the words of Simeon when he encountered Joseph and Mary as they presented the child at the Temple. Simeon took the child up in his arms and blessed God, saying,

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation
that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and for glory to your people Israel.”

Then, turning to Mary, the old man warned, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed” [LUKE 2:29-32, 34, 35].

Simeon's prophecy presages that which the Master Himself would say one day. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" [MATTHEW 10:34-39].

Let me point out an uncomfortable truth: we cannot mix truth and error and expect that truth will result. James undoubtedly disturbs our fragile peace with his disconcerting challenges, "Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs?" The brother of our Lord concludes quite logically, "Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water" [JAMES 3:11, 12].

To an uncomfortable extent, modern Christmas celebrations mirror the wickedness of Jeroboam. You will recall that Jeroboam received a portion of the Kingdom; then, in fear, he began to mix pagan practises with righteousness. His motive appeared to be noble, but the result was unmitigated wickedness. It is written in the Word of God that, "The Levites left their common lands and their holdings and came to Judah and Jerusalem, because Jeroboam and his sons cast them out from serving as priests of the LORD, and he appointed his own priests for the high places and for the goat idols and for the calves that he had made" [2 CHRONICLES 11:14, 15].

We want to mix a little bit of religion with our festivals so they feel legitimate. However, it will not work. There is a saying in the Southern United States, "Good is enemy of the best." Celebrating family is good, but we have Family Day already. Remembering the poor and needy is good, but we are responsible to do this on an ongoing basis. Encouraging others through giving is good, but aren't we responsible to encourage others already? Showing love for our spouse and for our children is good, but we are responsible to do this daily. When we attempt to set aside one day to do all these things, making it legitimate in our eyes through baptising it in religious trappings, what we have created is a monstrous idol.

When Israel attempted to mix their own efforts with God's commands, the result was disastrous. When the wife of Jeroboam came to Ahijah to seek divine guidance because her child was ill, she received a stern warning. Ahijah warned, "Go, tell Jeroboam, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: "Because I exalted you from among the people and made you leader over my people Israel and tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you, and yet you have not been like my servant David, who kept my commandments and followed me with all his heart, doing only that which was right in my eyes, but you have done evil above all who were before you and have gone and made for yourself other gods and metal images, provoking me to anger, and have cast me behind your back, therefore behold, I will bring harm upon the house of Jeroboam and will cut off from Jeroboam every male, both bond and free in Israel, and will burn up the house of Jeroboam, as a man burns up dung until it is all gone. Anyone belonging to Jeroboam who dies in the city the dogs shall eat, and anyone who dies in the open country the birds of the heavens shall eat, for the LORD has spoken it."'"

If that weren't serve enough, he concluded, "Henceforth, the LORD will strike Israel as a reed is shaken in the water, and root up Israel out of this good land that he gave to their fathers and scatter them beyond the Euphrates, because they have made their Asherim, provoking the LORD to anger. And he will give Israel up because of the sins of Jeroboam, which he sinned and made Israel to sin" [2 KINGS 14:7-11, 15, 16].

Religious leaders must guard against distorting the truth, lest we become like Amaziah who said to Amos, “O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, and eat bread there, and prophesy there, but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom.”

We need to hear again Amos’ words to the priest. “I was no prophet, nor a prophet’s son, but I was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore figs. But the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” [AMOS 7:12-15]. The bold prophet declared:

“The lion has roared;
who will not fear?
The Lord GOD has spoken;
who can but prophesy?”

[AMOS 3:8]

So, the question remains, “Should we celebrate Christmas?” The answer is that each of us is responsible to determine what we seek to do. Do we recognise the coming of the Lord to give His life as a sacrifice? Or is our focus on something else? Are we testifying to the grace of our Lord Jesus in yielding His life because of our sin? Or are we focused on fulfilling our own desires? If we are celebrating a day of feasting, we find no warrant in the Word. If, on the other hand, we are exalting the grace and mercy of God in sending His Son as a sacrifice because of our helpless condition, we may perhaps find warrant for what we are doing.

My prayer is that each one listening to the message takes time to read with those gathered to eat a meal the account of His coming, including in particular the purpose of that coming. Focus on the grace of God revealed through the sacrifice of His Son. No finer account that will fulfil this purpose can be found than that provided by the Evangelist John who wrote:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

“The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” [JOHN 1:1-18].

Amen.