

Christmas: What's All the Fuss?

Is there a more popular holiday in all the world than Christmas? Though the secular elite these days seem obsessed with eliminating its observance, the stubborn fact remains that Christmas is the most celebrated of all holidays. People of all faiths take joy in the stories of the stable, the star and the shepherds. But of course, no one celebrates Christmas quite like we do in America. Each year 95% of Americans celebrate the holiday by purchasing over 30 million Christmas trees, 1.5 billion Christmas cards and 1.8 billion candy canes, enough candy canes to circle the world six times. In all Americans spend over 500 billion each year on Christmas, 20% of total retail sales in America. Most important of all, Americans will be treated to one of over 500 different recordings available of "White Christmas". Yes, with a few exceptions, we Americans get into Christmas.

One of those exceptions might be surprising to many: Christians. Not all Christians are excited about Christmas. In fact, up until fairly recently, Christmas was not celebrated by at all by most Christians in America. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Christmas was anything but a popular holiday. The Massachusetts General Court outlawed the celebration of Christmas in 1659. In 1835, Dr. Samuel Miller, a professor at Princeton University, starkly declared, "Presbyterians do not observe Holy Days," of which Christmas was

one. A recent survey of Church of Christ ministers asked them to respond to the statement, “It is acceptable for a congregation to observe religious holidays like Christmas through special worship experiences.” Less than 50% of them agreed with that statement. So, what’s all the fuss about Christmas?

There are actually many reasons given. In the 16th century, many religious leaders sought to restore the Church to its biblical simplicity. The Christmas festival was seen by them as a part of the elaborate, even ostentatious religion of Roman Catholicism. The very name “Christmas” came from the phrase “Christ’s mass,” a Roman Catholic practice. Calvinists, especially the Puritans and John Knox’s Presbyterians, disapproved of the Christmas holiday. Here is a sample of their thought published in the Scotch General Assembly, August 6th, 1575. *That all days which heretofore have been kept holy, besides the Sabbath days, such as Christmas, saints’ day and such others, may be abolished and a civil penalty be appointed against the keepers thereof by ceremonies, banqueting, fasting and other such vanities.*

Those Christian leaders were concerned that much of the Christmas celebration grew out of the pagan holidays. Christmas festivals in the church were probably first introduced in the 4th century. As Christianity became the dominant religion of the western world, festivals of the pagan religions were transformed into Christian celebrations. Consequently, many Christmas

traditions have their roots in pagan religion. For example, the “Saturnalia” was a celebration of the reign of the God Saturn and was usually held in December. The “Sigillaria,” also celebrated in December, honored images of the gods and included the giving of gifts to children. “Brumalia” was observed on the shortest day of the year recognizing the end of the winter solstice and the beginning of the return of the sun god Sol. Paganism included the worship of nature with trees and sacred groves given special reverence. The “Christmas Tree” may have its roots in early nature worship.

One reason assimilating these practices into a “Christian festival” bothered many was that pagan festivals were often accompanied with immoral behavior, excessive drinking and revelry. Sometimes the Christian versions weren’t much better. Philip Schaff records that, “the abuse of the festivals . . . and the sensual excesses of the pagan feasts in spite of the earnest warnings of several (church) fathers, swept in like a wild flood upon the church.”

But maybe the simplest reason some Christians are not too eager to celebrate Christmas is that the Scriptures themselves seem to de-emphasize it. Outside of the gospels, the New Testament is remarkably silent about the birth of Jesus. It is the story of the cross more than the story of the manger that is told. Even so, today most Christians do celebrate Christmas. However, because of their past abstinence, they do so with some ironic results.

Some hesitate to see in their celebrations any religious or worshipful motivation. They don't mind putting up a tree in their homes, but don't want a tree in their churches. They enjoy singing carols at home and school and work but not in their worship at church. They will decorate their homes with holiday lights, but decorating the church would be unthinkable. Watching their children perform at a Christmas pageant in school is okay, but having a Christmas pageant at the church would be questionable. Preaching about the birth of Jesus is acceptable throughout the year except at Christmas, for that would be acknowledging and encouraging the Christmas heresy. This schizophrenic observation sends mixed messages, especially to children. One family I know elaborately decorated their home each Christmas, but they took great care to tell their little boy that they really didn't believe in Christmas.

A second irony is by de-emphasizing the religious aspect of the season, our celebration is little different from the world's. If Christians choose to celebrate Christmas, their celebration should be different from the world. Christians too easily fall into the self-indulgence and materialism so rampant at this time of year. One wonders how appropriate it is to celebrate the birth of Him who told us to give everything to the poor, by giving each other motorized tie racks! Ironically, because Christians boycotted Christmas, they unwittingly allowed the world to shape holiday rituals so that observances of

Christmas are not as Christian as they might be. It is interesting that the most popular Christmas movies, while wonderful family films, have very little to say about Jesus and are not particularly Christian. You will not hear mention of the name Jesus in the following films: *It's a Wonderful Life*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, *White Christmas*. It is as if our only options are either to boycott Christmas or to take Christ out of Christmas. These are not good options. I suggest another. Let's invite Christ back into Christmas.

But what of all those concerns some Christians have? Should we emphasize something the scriptures do not? No. But it's a mistake to say scripture doesn't emphasize the birth of Jesus. The story of the birth speaks to one of Christianity's most important doctrines: the Incarnation. Not every writer speaks of mangers and magi, but all proclaim the miracle of the Almighty becoming human. The apostle Paul's Christmas story goes like this: *Christ, who being in very nature God did not count equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.* (Phil 2:7) What is this about if not the birth of Jesus? The writer of Hebrews tells the story this way. *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So, Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers... Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity.* (Heb 2:11,14)

Jesus is in our family because he was born to Mary. The decision to be born in a barn testifies to his not being ashamed to share the humble condition of humanity. John's Gospel begins with the cosmic version of the nativity. *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning... and the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.* (John 1:1,2,14)

The story of the Word becoming flesh to which John testifies was witnessed first by the shepherds. True, the story of the cross is the culmination of the birth, but what kind of logic says we can't celebrate the manger, the beginning of the story as well as the end? If angels of God announced this birth with hosannas, how can anyone say the brothers and sisters of the Son of God should not proclaim his birth with equal joy and celebration?

Further, while there may be no mention of celebrations of the birth among the early Christians, is it really so clear that they did not celebrate Jesus' birth? They did have many festivals. So many in fact, it was a bit of a problem for the churches, determining which festivals should be observed and which should not (Rom 14). Jewish Christians continued to celebrate Passover and Pentecost, but now with the deeper meanings brought by Christ's coming. These festivals helped them to understand basic doctrines of the cross and new life through the Spirit. The doctrine of the Incarnation is as important as any

teaching in Scripture. Whether or not the early Christians celebrated Christ's birth, a festival which helps us to understand and appreciate that birth seems appropriate and consistent with the practice of the early church.

But what about the pagan problem? Shouldn't we be bothered by all those rituals that once were used to support false religions? No. Why be bothered celebrating a pagan festival *transformed* by Christianity? Christianity is all about transformation! The scriptures command us all to be transformed. *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind* (Rom 12:2). The scriptures tell us that we are in a process of daily transformation. *And we who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness* (2 Cor 3:16).

The scriptures say we were all pagans, enemies to God, until Christ transformed us from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light (Col 1:13). If Christianity is all about transformation, then how fitting our celebration of the birth involves the transformation, more than that, the liberation of rituals and traditions once in service to false religion but now to the true King. After all, the Christmas tree is not the first tree transformed by Christ. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree"* (Gal 3:13). Was there ever a more pagan symbol than the cross. Yet, Christ transformed

that symbol of punishment and cruelty into one of forgiveness and mercy. So, if trees once worshipped in ignorance now bow in reverence under the weight of a host of angels and one bright star, all the better. The Christmas holiday itself is a symbol of what Christ can do, must do, to every person -- chase away the darkness of our former lives and transform us.

So let's invite Christ into Christmas. Let's celebrate Christmas without apology but not merely as the world does. I'm not saying to get rid of Frosty and Rudolph and the Grinch. I am saying though, that as people who truly understand the reason for the season, our traditions and parties and all our festivities should be genuinely Christ-like. Let us reflect the truths of the Christmas story. Just as Christ did not count equality with God something to be grasped but emptied himself and took the nature of a servant, let us create traditions that help us to be less focused on ourselves and strive to serve others at Christmas. As Christ was not ashamed to call us brothers and become a member of the family of man, let us live our lives unashamed to befriend all people, and to show greater respect and dignity to others. If our Christmas traditions reflect genuine Christ-likeness, then this dark world will see reflected in our faces not just the flicker of Christmas lights, but the inner glow of Christ's light. For as the apostle wrote, *In Him was life and that life was the light of men and that light shines in the darkness (John 1:4).*

In other words, what the Christmas holiday does symbolically we must strive to do in reality. Our lives must be the ornaments and decorations that give hope to an increasingly hopeless world. We must be the ones who respond to the darkness around us not by cursing it, but by dispursing it with the light of the gospel. No one has expressed how to do that more beautifully than St. Francis in his immortal poem, *Lord, make me an instrument of Your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is error, truth; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy.*

There is another song I'd like to end with, a Christmas song that expresses the transformation Christmas is all about. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote the poem Christmas Bells on Christmas day, 1863. The Civil War was raging and the nation was being ripped in two, brothers killing brothers. Longfellow pleaded for reconciliation between the North and the South, to no avail. Only a month before writing the poem Longfellow received word that his oldest son Charles had been severely wounded in one of the Civil War battles. The despair of the world in his day was almost more than he could bear. Our nation is not embroiled in a Civil War but it certainly is being ripped apart by the constant warring of uncivil citizens. Surveys tell us our trust of fellow citizens is at an all time low. In man ways these are dark

days. But Longfellow's words remind us that the hope of Christmas is sometimes shaken by the times we live in, it is never undone.

*I heard the bells on Christmas Day, their old, familiar carols play,
and wild and sweet the words repeat of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And thought how, as the day had come, the belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along the unbroken song of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Till ringing, singing on its way, the world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime of peace on earth, good-will to men!
Then from each black, accursed mouth the cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound the carols drowned of peace on earth, good-will to men!
It was as if an earthquake rent the hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn the households born of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong and mocks the song of peace on earth, good-will to men!"
Then pealed the bells more loud & deep "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The Wrong shall fail, the Right prevail with peace on earth good-will to men."*

As Christians let us be less concerned about making a fuss about Christmas and more concerned with showing the world a true Christmas in the midst of all the fuss.