

The Truth About Christmas

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INTRODUCTION:

The “Christmas Story” is repeated time and again on radio, TV, in the press, in special church programs, in so-called “Bible Story Books,” and is depicted by crib and manger scenes across America.

It usually goes some thing like this: “On Dec. 25, in the year ‘zero,’ in the quiet little town of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary could not find lodging in the inn and had to stay in the stable. Jesus was born. Mary wrapped him and put him in a manger. There was a halo around Mary’s head. The angels sang ‘peace on earth — good will toward men’ to the shepherds. The three wise men saw the star and rode their camels to the place. They gave gifts to Christ. After Herod decided to kill the male children under two, Mary and Joseph left for Egypt. Mary carried the Baby Jesus and rode a donkey with Joseph walking and leading the animal. Mary remained a virgin perpetually...”

Truth and erroneous speculation are mingled together in the above tale and thus it is simply FALSE!! Now, let us look carefully at the TRUTH:

I. WHEN WAS JESUS BORN?

- A. The birth year was not “zero,” but between 7 and 4 B. C.
 1. Dionysius Exiguus, a monk, in A. D. 526 worked out the A. D./B. C. dating. He placed the birth of Jesus at 753 AUC (from the founding of Rome). He was off at least 4 to 6 years.
 2. Other information harmonizes to place the birth of the Lord at between 7 to 4 B. C.
 - a. Herod the Great died in 4 B. C. (M. C. Tenney, *New Testament Times*, p. 367).
 - b. Information from the papyri leads us to believe that a census was taken every 14 years. One was taken in Egypt, which was under Roman rule, in A. D. 104. This inscription required everyone to return to his ancestral home for the census. The Luke 2 census could probably be placed at 7 or 8 B. C. (Blaiklock, *Out of the Earth*, p. 14ff).
 - c. Cyrenius (or Quirinius) was governor of Syria in A. D. 6. He also served as head of the government there (over two other men) some time between 9 and 4 B. C. (Tenney, *Ibid.*, p. 137; *Cf.* Lk. 2:2).
- B. Month and Day
 1. Some scholars say that it was not likely in December. The shepherds were watching their flocks by night (Lk. 2:8), and this was not done in the winter months. Dr. William Arndt replies to this as follows: “Scholars have pointed out that the considerably lower altitude of the field may not be without significance, but may explain why even in winter shepherds would not find these fields too cold for their flocks” (Dr. William Arndt, *From the Nile to the Waters of Damascus*, p. 52).
 2. Can the EXACT date be known?
 - a. Albert Barnes (Presbyterian): “But the exact time of His birth is unknown; there is no way to ascertain it. By different learned men it has been fixed at each month in the year. Nor is it of consequence to *know* the time; if it were, God would have preserved the record of it. Matters of moment are clearly revealed; those which He regards as of no importance are concealed.”
 - b. *Collier’s Encyclopedia*: “It is impossible to determine the exact date of the birth of Christ, either from the evidence of the gospels, or from any sound tradition.”
 - c. *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: “Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church” (III:724-728).
 - d. Adam Clarke (Methodist): “The time in which Christ was born has been considered a subject of great importance among Christians. However, the matter has been considered of no mo-

ment by Him who inspired the evangelists; as not one hint is dropped on the subject by which it might be possible to guess nearly to the time. Learned and pious men have trifled egregiously on this subject, making that of importance which the Holy Spirit, by His silence has plainly informed them is of none" (*Clarke's Commentary*, on Lk. 2:8, Vol. V, p. 227).

- e. Oscar Cullman: The early Christians "altogether rejected such a festival as unchristian" ("The Origin of Christmas," *The Early Church*, p. 34).
3. Why Was December 25th Chosen?
 - a. In the 3rd and 4th centuries the Church was already observing Epiphany on Jan. 6, "and in so doing conjoined the baptism and the birth of Christ" (Cullman, p. 25). Some also linked the adoration by the wise men and the first miracle at Cana as part of the Epiphany celebration (*The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 346).
 - (1) EPIPHANY means "appearing." A heretical sect in the second century held that "the divine Christ first *appeared* on earth at the baptism of Jesus; and their festival of the baptism was accordingly called Epiphany..." (Cullman, p. 24).
 - (2) Later, the Orthodox Eastern Church began to observe the festival of baptism on Jan. 6. These regarded the birth of Jesus as his real *appearing* on the earth.
 - (3) The early part of the 4th century was when the controversy over the divinity of Christ was at its height.
 - b. So, how came Christmas to be celebrated on Dec. 25th?
 - (1) The Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the Sun God. The Roman Saturnalia and other pagan feasts came at this time also. The idea of *light*, which appeared in Christ and dispersed the darkness is certainly basic in Christianity. John 1:5ff. The Emperor Constantine the Great "pursued the deliberate policy of uniting the worship of the Sun with that of Christ" (Cullman, p. 29). "Some time before 336 the Church in Rome, unable to stamp out this pagan festival, spiritualized it as the Feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness" (James Taylor, "Christmas," *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 223). **Note:** New Testament Christians gathered for worship on the Lord's Day; the New Testament never uses the word "Sunday." The term "Sunday" was applied to the Lord's Day in the second century. Constantine, in A. D. 321, officially recognized Sunday as a day of rest in the empire. This was a day that had already been dedicated to the Sun god by the Romans.
 - (2) The first observance on Dec. 25th probably took place in Rome between A. D. 325 and 354. The reason for selecting Dec. 25 was theological. The Council of Nicaea (A. D. 325) expressly condemned the doctrine that God did not become incarnate in Jesus at his birth.
 - (3) "We find it first in Rome, in the time of the bishop Liberius (Catholics consider him as a Pope), who on the twenty-fifth of December, 360, consecrated Marcella, the sister of St. Ambrose, nun or bride of Christ, and addressed her with the words: 'Thou seest what multitudes are come to the birth-festival of thy bridegroom.' This passage implies that the festival was already existing and familiar" (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, III:395). Cullman points out that the source from which this information was taken has been re-dated and was written before October A. D. 336 (p. 29).
 - (4) "It took Christians 300 years to get around to celebrating their Lord's birthday. Christmas was first observed in Rome about 336. Another century went by before the festival became general throughout the Christian world" (*The Orthodox Herald*, Jan., 1964. Published for Russian Orthodox Church of North America).
 - (5) The spread of the observance of Christmas on Dec. 25th.
 - (a) Constantinople. Introduced by Gregory of Nazianzus, the defender of the divinity of Christ, in A. D. 379.

- (b) Antioch (A. D. 386). Chrysostom said that Christ was actually born on that day. (To my knowledge, he was the first to say so. F.J.)
 - (c) Egypt continued opposition, but finally submitted in A. D. 431.
 - (d) Jerusalem showed the greatest reluctance to change from Jan. 6 to Dec. 25th (Cullman, pp. 32-33).
- C. Christmas began with the apostate church which was developing into what we know as the Roman Catholic Church. It had its origin in a pre-Christian age among the pagans.
- D. Christmas did not originate by the authority of God, Christ, or the Apostles.

II. WHAT DOES “CHRISTMAS” MEAN?

- A. “The name is derived from the medieval Christes Masse, the Mass of Christ” (*Encyclopedia Americana*). In time this was shortened to CHRISTMAS.
- B. Catholics teach: “The Sacrifice of the Mass is identical with that of the Cross, both having the same victim and high priest—Jesus Christ” (Gibbons, *Faith of Our Fathers*, p. 254). “The Only difference consists in the manner of the oblation. Christ was offered up on the cross in a bloody manner, and in the Mass He is offered up in an unbloody manner” (Ibid). The Bible says that Christ was offered only ONCE (cf. Heb. 9:26-28).

III. SOME CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS. Most of the customs now associated with Christmas originated as pre-Christian and non-Christian customs.

- A. Christmas Tree. The tree is thought to be of German origin. Boniface, an English missionary to Germany, is said to have “replaced the sacrifices to Odin’s sacred oak by a fir tree adorned in tribute to the Christ child” in the 8th century (Britannica). Even atheists have trees in their house at this season (Article about Jon Murray, son of Madalyn Murray O’Hair and president of the American Atheist Center, *Tampa Tribune*, 12/25/81).
- B. Santa Claus. Santa Claus is believed to have originated with a 4th century bishop, Nicholas of Myra in Asia Minor. Most of the information about him is shrouded in mystery. “The patron saint of Russia as well as of sailors and children, he was believed to bring gifts to children on his feast day, 6 December” (NIDCC, 710). “The concept of a jolly Santa Clause was first made popular in 19th-cent. New York City” (*The Concise Columbia Encyclopedia*, p. 169).
- C. Miscellaneous Customs. “The yule-log, caroling, mistletoe, and gifts at Christmas are English” (Ibid.).

IV. THE BIBLE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF CHRIST.

- A. Read the account chronologically.
 - Birth of Jesus. Mt. 1:25§; Lk. 2:1-7
 - Visit of Shepherds (same night)†. Lk. 2:8-20
 - Jesus’ circumcision (eight days old) Lk. 2:21
 - Jesus’ presentation (at least 40 days after birth. Read Lev. 12:2-6) ‡Lk. 2:22-38
 - Visit of Wise Men¶. Mt. 2:1-12
 - Journey to Egypt Mt. 2:13-15
 - Male Children killed Mt. 2:16-18
 - Return to Nazareth Lk. 2:39; Mt. 2:19-23
 - §Mary was not a perpetual virgin.

†The shepherds who provided unblemished sheep for the temple were the first to learn of the birth of the lamb of God.

‡Their offering indicates they were poor (Lk. 2:24).

¶The wise men found Jesus in “the house” (Mt. 2:11).

B. Notice a number of points in which this is in conflict with the popular “story.”

1. No month and day given.
2. Stable or cattle shed idea.
3. Bethlehem any thing but quiet. Christ was born in occupied territory under alien rule. There were forms to fill out, *etc.* Cf. Blaiklock, *Out of the Earth*, pp. 15-18.
4. Halo — Catholic imagination.
5. “Peace on earth — Good will to men.” Men speak of this as the panacea of the world’s troubles in a material way — all wars will stop. Not so!
 - a. KJV reads “...and on earth, peace, good will toward men.”
 - b. ASV “and on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased.” Foot note: (Gr. men of good pleasure).
 - c. NASB reads “...And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” Several foot notes.
 - d. NIV reads “and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”
 - e. It is literally: ‘Glory in the highest (heavens) to God, and on earth peace among men of *good will*.’ The phrase ‘men of good will’ is a Hebraism, and means men who are the objects of God’s good will” (*New Bible Commentary*, Lk. 2:14).
 - f. A. T. Robertson comments: “As a matter of fact real peace on earth exists only among those who are the subjects of God’s goodwill, who are characterized by goodwill toward God and man” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*, II:25).
 - g. Notice song sung by angels: Glory → to God → in the highest; Peace → on earth → to men.
 - h. This is accomplished in the Gospel (Rom. 10:15, KJV; Eph. 2:14, 17).
6. Three wise men (Magi). We know neither their number nor their names. The legendary names are Caspar, Melchior, Balthazar.
7. Rode camels — perhaps Arabian horses, chariots, walked, *etc.*
8. Wise men came between 40 days and 2 years after birth. Mt. 2:7, 8, 16 shows that Herod learned “diligently” (KJV), “exactly” (ASV).
9. Did Mary ride donkey?

C. We must get over the concept of worshipping “Baby Jesus” and begin to serve King Jesus (Acts 2:36; 1 Tim. 6:15).

V. CAN WE KEEP THE “HOLIDAY”?

A. The Church.

1. The church of our Lord was a part of God’s eternal purpose (Eph. 3:10-11). New Testament churches did not celebrate, in any special way, the birth of Christ.
2. God has given us all things that pertain to life and Godliness in the Scriptures (2 Pet. 1:3). There is no authority for the church to participate in any kind of special service related to Christmas.
3. New Testament Christians were warned regarding the observance of days, *etc.* (Col. 2:16; Gal. 4:10-11).

B. The extent to which an individual may participate in the activities of Christmas is a matter of opinion. My family has always recognized Christmas as a *civil* or *cultural* holiday. It is a fine time for families to gather, exchange gifts, and to explain to others the difference between church and individual activities. Further individual participation in the religious aspect of Christmas may fall within the category of Rom. 14:5. Each person should be “fully assured in his own mind.”

1. Many of the religious aspects of Christmas have lost their significance. We call the first day of the week "Sunday" just as the Romans did, but we have no intention of worshiping the sun. One might write a letter to Corpus Christi, TX, fully knowing that the city is not the "body of Christ" in any sense.
2. I believe that Jesus may have left us an example of participation in an activity that was both religious and cultural. Jesus was present in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication (Jn. 10:22). This feast was not one of those authorized by the Old Testament; it was a post-biblical festival. During the period between the testaments the Seleucids desecrated the temple in Jerusalem. The climax of the Maccabean revolt was the removal of all evidence of pagan worship from the temple. They observed an eight day Feast of Dedication, also called Hanukkah, or the Festival of Lights, in 165 B. C.

CONCLUSION:

There should not be, and will not be, any special services at this church of Christ in observance of Christmas. Whatever else we may wish to do or not do individually, let us keep it on a personal opinion basis and not judge one another.



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by Ferrell Jenkins

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