

**Christmas:
Where Did It Come From and How Should I Deal With It?**
By Dave Redick

Introduction

(Read Matthew 1:18-25)

Ted Engstrom tells the story of Pat Moore. One day in May, 1979, Moore, who looked like she must be eighty-five years old, opened the door of her New York apartment and stepped nervously into the hall. She put her cane out in front of her and hesitantly felt for the first step on the stairs. Her legs moved gingerly, awkwardly. One step... two... three... all the way to the twelfth step. So far, so good. When she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, she saw her landlady who exclaimed, "Oh, I'm sorry, I was expecting somebody else."

"Don't you recognize me?" asked Pat, her voice strained and cracked. "No, ma'am, I don't," said the landlady, staring at the frail woman. "I'm Pat Moore," she said laughing. As she saw her landlady's mouth widen in disbelief, Pat knew in that flash of a moment she had passed the test.

You see Pat Moore was not eighty-five years old at all. Not even close. She was an attractive twenty-six-year-old specialist in industrial design who was concerned about the needs of the aged. At least once each week for the next three years, Pat put on her masquerade of facial latex foam, a heavy fabric that bound her body, and a convincing gray wig. She visited fourteen states as an old woman. She met hundreds of people who never once discovered her true identity. Pat Moore wanted to have a first hand experience of what it was to be elderly in America.

The journey God made nearly two thousand years ago from the throne of glory to the stable in Bethlehem was *that* kind of journey. God, in Jesus Christ, set aside His comfort and convenience, took on the form of a helpless baby and came into our world. No, He didn't need to know what it was like to be human. He knows everything, so that wasn't necessary. Rather, it was a case of our needing to know what God was like. And He showed us.

We refer to the event as *the incarnation* - God taking on human flesh and coming to walk among us.

At this season of the year many stop to celebrate the incarnation in this holiday we call *Christmas*. You are probably involved in some observation or acknowledgment of it yourself. Christmas has come to mean a lot of different things to different people. Probably most would say that it is the most universally positive holiday we observe.

For many, Christmas is the happiest time of the year. It is often a time of peace. Hostile armies have been known to stop fighting on Christmas day. Even hostages are allowed to receive cards and gifts. It is a time for families and memories. "I'll be home for Christmas," the song goes. It's a season of gladness and warmth, when friends mix and mingle, exchange gifts and good wishes, and relax in the aura of happiness and good will.

For many it is bright lights and tinsel and the wonder in children's eyes. It's the glowing log in the fireplace, presents under the tree. It's street-corner caroling. It's also a greater awareness of those lonely souls without homes and families. It's the long line at the post office with packages addressed for distant destinations. It's children crowded into the back of the family mini-van on the way to Grandma's for dinner. It's hugging and shaking hands with cousins and aunts and uncles.

Christmas to many is a mailbox full of greeting cards, tantalizing aromas coming from the kitchen, roasting turkey, fudge, pies and cakes. It's fruit baskets and flowers for homes and hospitals.

Maybe for you this season it is all these things and more.

How did it all get started - this thing we call Christmas? What about those words we hear occasionally of "pagan origins?" What are they and how should we respond to them?

Let's take a brief look at the history of Christmas, then I'll make some remarks about its observance that may be helpful.

I. A Quick History.

Someone has wisely said, "If there were no Christmas, we would all be moved to invent one for all its positive benefits for the human race."

That statement is more true than its originator probably realized because that is exactly what man has done. Our ancestors invented this winter holiday season centuries ago. In fact, it usually surprises people to learn that it was actually invented *before Christ and the Christian era*.

Prior to the birth of Christ certain Germanic and Celtic tribes held a festival in honor of the Winter Solstice. Solstice is that point astronomically when the sun is the farthest from the earth's equator. During this festival, the sun, moon, planets, and stars were worshipped for what was believed to be their role in the changing seasons. This period of worship was called the "Yule Season" and the major event in its observance was to commemorate the return of the "burning wheel" (the sun). The sun was worshipped as a god and it was felt that such celebrations helped ensure that this "god," so important in the heavens, would return for another year. Pagans during this "Yuletide" celebration used holly and mistletoe (symbols of life in the dead of winter), the "yule log" (a symbol of the burning heat of the sun), and the evergreen tree and evergreen wreaths (symbols of perpetual life in winter). Today these relics are still with us, symbols of pre-Christian observances.

The word "Christmas" was not coined until the eleventh century. It comes from the medieval *Christ Mass* of the Roman Catholic Church. We do, however, find evidence of some Christian celebration of the birth of Christ as early as the time of the Roman Emperor Commodus, who died in 180 A.D. A second significant historical reference to celebration of the nativity is found in an account about a congregation of believers who met to celebrate the birth of Christ in the city of Nicomedia. The account goes that the pagan Emperor Diocletian (born in 284) ordered the door of the meeting place shut and bolted. Fire was set to it and all those inside died.

The first mention of the observance on December 25th is in the time of Constantine about 325 A.D.

Actually, no one knows for sure the date of the birth of Christ. It has been reasonably suggested that it could not have been in winter because the shepherds would not have been in the fields in wintertime as the account in scripture reports.

Some historians feel that the celebration of Jesus' birth was a reaction to a sect that arose between 215 and 277 A.D., which was a mixture of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Christianity. Central to the teaching of this cult was Persian *dualism*. Dualism was the absolute separation of the physical and the spiritual. The question raised was the same as that of the old Gnostic controversy: was Jesus all human or all divine? It was felt by this sect that Jesus could

not have been both God and man. Since they considered all matter to be evil and all deity to be pure, Jesus could not have been man and God at the same time. Of course, the teaching that Jesus is God in the flesh is central to the teaching of the New Testament, thus, the controversy. We can see how a greater emphasis on the birth of Christ, the *virgin birth* especially, could have been used to combat this false teaching.

By late in the fourth century or early in the fifth, certain bishops of the church actually ordered the nativity celebrated each year during the period of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, the god of the Sun, since no proof could be found in the Scriptures or in history for the actual birth date of the Lord Jesus. Thus, what was not Scriptural, but what became traditional to Christianity was mixed with all the extra baggage of mistletoe, evergreen trees, and other symbols that have become a part of the observance as we know it today.

Actually, during the time of Christ, the Jews didn't celebrate birthdays. Rather, they commemorated the *deaths* of important people. Until the practice was introduced later, the early Christians didn't celebrate the birth of Christ. The death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, and the massacre of the innocent children of Bethlehem were both commemorated long before Christmas was a formal celebration of the birth of Christ.

So, what we have historically are these facts:

We don't know with any certainty the birth date of Jesus. Neither Scripture nor history indicates it.

The birth of Jesus was not celebrated by the early church under the direction of the Apostles. It is a custom - a tradition- that was added later by uninspired men.

Many of the symbols that are used today in the observance of Christmas are baggage that came over when it was ordered that the birth of Christ be celebrated during the same season that the pagans celebrated the feast of the birth of Sol, the god of the Sun.

Some of you may have thought it strange that we don't get overly excited in the church when the Christmas season rolls around. Perhaps these things will help you understand the reasons why. Jesus, in Matthew 15:9, did warn us about teaching the commandments of men as the doctrines of the church. It is reasonable, I believe, that there be caution in such things. Christmas is not Bible doctrine, so I don't teach it as such. The birth of Christ, of course, *is* Bible doctrine, so you will hear me speak about it from time to time, as I did last Sunday.

Now, having said these things, some of you may have me paired up by now with Scrooge in Dicken's, A CHRISTMAS CAROL. So, lest you expect a "Bah! Humbug!" or two from me, let me say a few more things before you shut me off. Let me speak of what I have come to believe is...

II. A Reasonable Response.

Because the observance of Christmas is a mixture of pre-Christian pagan practices and post-Christian traditions not found in the teaching of Christ or the apostles, some would disavow it's observance altogether and declare that December 25th should be no different than any other normal day on the calendar. Such people do not put up the evergreen tree in their homes, don't exchange gifts and generally avoid the hoopla of the season. They believe that it is not proper for a Christian today to participate in Christmas due to the roots in paganism and Catholicism. May I say that I understand this position very well, as it was mine for some years after I was converted to Christ.

Others, and this takes in the majority of those professing Christ, don't see that it is any issue at all. They see no need to distinguish between what is Scripture and what is tradition in any of their practices, so why get upset about Christmas?

I presently cannot endorse either of these positions, though if I were forced to choose, I would probably choose the first. I firmly believe that we *must* distinguish between Scripture and tradition lest we eventually fall into the same condemnation of the religious leaders of Jesus' day who substituted their traditions for the Word of God. In Matthew 15:6 He rebuked them because they "*invalidated the word of God for the sake of their tradition.*" We need to be careful that we do not drift away from the truth as we pass our practices on from generation to generation.

Yet I don't feel the necessity to preach to you this morning that we should ban Christmas from our practice, provided we make an important distinction. Since Christmas is a product of man's teaching rather than that of Christ, we need to distinguish between "holiday" and "holy day."

To view Christmas as a holy day is to attach meaning to it that God has not done in his Word. Some have called Christmas "the Highest Holy Day of all Christianity." What that has done, among other things, is create a seasonal devotion to God. It has spawned the existence of those whom we call "Christmas and Easter Christians." Nothing could be more disgraceful to the teaching of Christ than to perpetuate the idea that being a Christian means simply coming to church on Christmas and Easter! Jesus taught that we are to take up our cross *daily* and follow Him - not once or twice yearly.

Yet, I do not believe that enjoying the social value of the holiday is wrong for the Christian when he or she understands the distinction. Some of you may need some more reason than that, so let me explain the Biblical basis for this conclusion.

There is another observance that falls within the season of winter solstice that perhaps you will recognize. The Jewish people celebrate what they call "the Feast of Lights." You probably know it better as *Chanukah*. Interestingly, this holiday had its origin in the 400-year period of Jewish history between the time the last book of the Old Testament was written and the first book of the New Testament was penned. During this time the temple in Jerusalem was captured by Antiochus Epiphanes then retaken by the Maccabees in 164 B.C. To commemorate this important event and the courage it took to recapture the temple, the "Feast of Lights" or "Feast of Dedication" was devised. Nowhere in the Law of Moses is this feast day mentioned or commanded. It originated solely in the tradition of the Jews. In that sense it has a lot in common with our tradition of Christmas. It originated with man, not God. It has a lot of excess baggage attached to it just like Christmas. It falls in the same winter season.

"So what," I can hear someone say. "Jesus rebuked them for substituting their traditions for the word of God, so what does that prove?"

What is interesting is to look at the way Jesus handled this holiday during His ministry. Yes, it is mentioned in the New Testament where it is called the "Feast of Dedication."

(Read John 10:22-24)

So where was Jesus during the Feast of Dedication? He made His pilgrimage to the temple to join His countrymen as they celebrated the traditional holiday. He was walking in the temple. What was He doing there? He was using the opportunity to teach the people. I think it is noteworthy that He did not condemn their practice, nor did He boycott the celebration. Rather, He used the opportunity to teach.

I'm very glad this morning that we have some people present this time of year because of the holiday. Just like my Lord, I appreciate the opportunity to teach them about God.

Now having said that, may I tell you kindly, that just coming to church on Christmas and Easter won't get you to heaven? What you need to do is totally surrender your life to Christ and accept the benefits of His substitutionary death for your life. You need to have your sins forgiven. Nothing short of that will make you right with God. I say that not to offend, but as one who knows what the Bible says to those who may not know.

I find, then, nothing especially demanded or denounced in regard to the observance of Christmas as a holiday. I thrill at the crowds that gather to look at a front yard nativity scene or attend a play that tells the story of His birth. I will say, though, that my heart is heavy for those who do not realize that the baby in the manger grew up to be the Savior and ultimately the Judge of the world. He has, since His incarnation so many years ago, been patiently calling people to Himself, offering them the gift of salvation by His grace and mercy before judgment comes.

Now, before we go, please allow me to suggest...

III. A More Important Remembrance.

You see, Jesus didn't come to earth just to give us a touching story of a baby in a manger. He came here to die.

The Bible teaches that all men everywhere have sinned against God. This includes you and me. The Bible also teaches that the penalty for that sin is the second death - eternal separation from God and loved ones in a place called Hell. Revelation 20:14 says, *"This is the second death, the lake of fire. And anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire!"*

Romans 6:23 tells us *"the wages of sin is death."*

All of us have wracked up a pretty big stack of these kinds of wages. Payday is coming, and believe me, no one here really wants to collect on that!

The message of Christ is that He came to earth, as I said, to die. When He died, He died for all of us who will accept Him. When we accept Him, He wipes the record of our sins clean.

Accepting Him requires more than a seasonal devotion, though. It requires our full surrender to His will.

I have a fear inside myself. That fear is that someone here is going to leave this building today, go home, plug in the lights of the Christmas tree, settle down on the sofa, turn on the TV and go through this holiday season just like all the others - unprepared to meet God in judgment.

I hope it won't be you. Why not make this Christmas different from the rest? Why not give yourself to Christ? Not the baby in the manger. That won't do it. Give yourself to the risen Christ who died so you could spend eternity with God.

You know, you could confess your faith in Christ today. You could be baptized before the day is out. You could then go home and plug in those tree lights knowing you are on your way to heaven. But you must make the decision. No one else can make it for you.

Conclusion

One Sunday night at the close of an evening worship service the preacher had the children come up front for a lesson. After interviewing those who had a birthday that week, he called on a little boy to pray. The boy prayed, "Lord, we thank you for Jesus, God's only *forgotten* Son."

So often that is the post Christmas condition of Christ in so many lives - forgotten. Will it be different for you this year?