

Christmas and the Christian

From a social viewpoint alone, there is much to question about the festival of Christmas; families getting into debt to buy lavish presents, relatives with nothing in common thrown together, sometimes resulting in feuds, squabbles and of course, in the West, over-consumption of food and drink in a way which contrasts markedly with the poverty in the rest of the world. It is not the purpose of this leaflet to be a "killjoy", but it may be that many sincere Christians would be shocked to discover the origins of many of the Christmas traditions.

Based on the clues given to us in the Gospel accounts, many historians place the Messiah's birth date in the Jewish month of Ethane, which corresponds to our late September, early October. One thing we can be sure of is that was not December 25th.

Much research has gone into disproving this date as Christ's birthday, so let us be content with a few simple facts:

During the winter of 1992/1993, Israel expelled around 400 Palestinians, who were forced to stay out in the open in no-man's land between Israel and Lebanon. Our television pictures showed them in appalling weather conditions including driving snow - much worse than we were currently experiencing in Britain. Two points arise from this; no ruler would command their people to travel long distances for a census in such conditions and no shepherd would be out in the fields. Their flocks would be in folds down in the valleys. Clearly then, the December weather conditions alone prove that the events surrounding the birth of Jesus could not have taken place in December. Why therefore, is the birth of Christ celebrated on the 25th December?

Hutchinson's New 20th Century Encyclopaedia has the following to say about Christmas:- The actual day of the Nativity has never been decided, and as late as the 5th cent. AD, the feast was variously held on 25th Dec, 6th Jan, and 25th March; 25th Dec, the winter solstice was a highly significant date in pagan mythology - the Mithraists, for instance, kept it as the birthday of the 'Unconquered Sun' - and its increasing acceptance in the Western Church from the 4th Cent. onwards owed much to the desire to facilitate the conversion of the pagans to Christianity. In Britain, 25th Dec has been kept as a festival since long before the introduction of Christianity."

So at the heart of the custom to celebrate Christ's birthday on 25th December is a compromise arrived at to accommodate the pagan beliefs of new converts. But if we have to celebrate Christ's birth anyway, why not do so on a day that suits everyone?

Jesus commanded that we commemorate his death whereas he made no such statement concerning his birth. This harmonises with the scripture in Ecclesiastes 7:1 which states: "A good name is better than fine perfume, and the day of death better than the day of birth". When Christ was born, he had achieved nothing. Certainly here was the fulfilment of the promise made by God through the prophets that a saviour would be born in Bethlehem, but salvation came to mankind through Christ's death, not his birth.

So the facts suggest that it is both unnecessary to celebrate Christ's birth at Christmas, as well as untimely. If, however, a Christian wishes to set aside a special day to remember the birth of his saviour, is there anything wrong with that? Well, the answer to that question is "No, of course not", but by selecting December 25th, what other celebrations are getting mixed up with the remembrance of Christ's birth? Where do the various customs and symbols originate and are they suitable for Christians to get involved in?

Far from having a scriptural basis for these customs, the Religious Encyclopaedia states - "The Saturnalia in Rome provided the model for most of the merry customs of Christmas. The time was one of general mirth. All classes exchanged gifts, the commonest being wax candles and clay dolls. Christmas inherited the general merriment .games, giving of gifts, abundance of sweetmeats and - as to the more ceremonious elements - the burning of candles."

What does the Hutchinson's Encyclopaedia say about the decorations that adorn many houses in the festive season? "The yule log was taken from the Norse festival. The holly, ivy and mistletoe used to decorate churches and homes are symbols of fertility with their winter berries. Fir trees used to adorn the Roman Saturnalia."

A magazine article supports these facts and adds - "Mistletoe was sacred among the druids and was believed to have miraculous powers. For the Romans it was a symbol of peace and, when they met their enemies under it, they discarded their weapons and declared a truce. From this custom comes the custom of kissing under the mistletoe."

"Initially, Christians were not enthusiastic about the pagan worship but they were favourably impressed by the decorated evergreen trees and decided to adopt the custom. It was generally believed that the first Christmas tree was of German origin dating from Boniface, the English missionary to Germany in the 8th Century, who replaced the sacrifices to Odin's sacred oak, with a fir tree decorated in homage to the Christ Child."

One is reminded here of the scripture at Jeremiah 10:3&4, where it states - "For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not." (AV)

Linked with Saturnalia in the Roman celebration was Natalis Solus Invicti: the "Birth of the Unconquerable Sun"--the date when the day began again to lengthen. It is significant that the Catholic Encyclopaedia itself says-- "The well known solar feast of Natalis Invicti, celebrated on Dec. 25, has a strong claim for the responsibility of our Christmas date."

Perhaps we should now consider some other scriptures which put the scriptural viewpoint on our topic. "He then brought me into the inner court of the house of the LORD, and there at the entrance to the temple, between the portico and the altar, were about twenty-five men. With their backs towards the temple of the LORD and their faces towards the east, they were bowing down to the sun in the east .. Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them.. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them." (Ezekiel 8:16&18).

This false worship of the sun was justly condemned by God. These particular people had literally turned their back on true worship to follow the false. All Christians will be determined not to follow this example.

"They worshipped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought." (2 Kings 17:33)

"You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy?" (1 Corinthians 10:21&22)

Both these scriptures clearly prove that a mixture of true and false worship is detestable to God.

Alexander Hislop, in his monumental Two Babylons, states-- "The Christmas tree, now so common among us, was equally common in pagan Rome and pagan Egypt...The festivals of the Roman Church are innumerable, but five of the most important may be singled out for elucidation, viz: CHRISTMAS, Lady-day, Easter, the Nativity of St. John, and the Feast of the Assumption. Each and all of these can be proved to be Babylonian.

Christians have not always celebrated Christmas. The first Century Christians had never heard of it and some later groups "bucked the trend" and avoided it. Various attempts to suppress it have even been made by the authorities. In 1503, the Glasgow Kirk Session of the Scottish Reformation sentenced 5 people to public penance for keeping the "superstitious day called Yule". In 1644, the English Parliament, backed

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by early Baptists and Presbyterians passed an act forbidding the observance of Christmas and in Massachusetts in 1659, a law was passed to impose fines on anyone observing Christmas.

It is my hope, that sincere believers, being in possession of the facts, would want to think carefully and prayerfully about what they allow into their homes at this time of year.

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