

The Lesson from Christmas Past

I have said before that a Christian without any knowledge of church history has spiritual amnesia. Lacking the ability to know what has gone before, he is unable to understand himself and the church in the present, let alone chart a course for the future. Sad to say, whenever Christmas rears its head, this ignorance is seized upon by people who wish to give us a revisionist history of the celebration of Christmas.

All sorts of supposed facts about paganism, about idolatrous orgies, about winter solstices and worship of the god Tammuz are pulled out of the bag, and the shell-shocked Christian retreats, reasoning that if that is the history of the holiday, he had best have nothing to do with it. But that is just the problem. What exactly is the history of Christmas?

To say that the Bible does not command the celebration of Christmas is beside the point. The Bible does not command birthdays, or church anniversary celebrations, or strictly speaking, worship on a Sunday. But most of us do these things, because they do not violate a Scriptural law, and because they give great occasion to celebrate God's goodness. Besides, it seems unlikely that the early church, so fresh out of Judaism with its rich traditions and celebration of various feasts, would have not soon developed its own.

Someone might ask, 'Why didn't the disciples begin observing Christmas immediately?' Philip Schaff, the church historian, gives four reasons for this:

- [First, no Old Testament festival corresponded either to the timing or the anticipation of the coming of Messiah. There was no Jewish celebration already in observance to which the event would naturally be tied, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost. Easter and Pentecost were celebrated by the early second century.
- [Second, since the exact time of the birth of Christ was unrecorded by the Gospel writers, there was no date to focus on, unlike the Jewish feasts which had exact dates and months prescribed.
- [Third, the church naturally focused first on the last and most significant aspect of the work of Christ—His death and resurrection and the completed fact of redemption—and made that day the centre of its weekly worship and the church year.
- [Fourth, the early church's observance of the feast of Epiphany already included a commemoration of the incarnation; so the Christian celebration of the Christmas event—the incarnation—actually originated very early in church history.

Very early in the history of the church, it began to celebrate a feast known as Epiphany. The feast of Epiphany, observed on January 6, is mentioned by Clement of Alexandria (150–220 A.D.). Epiphany (which means 'manifestation') celebrated the manifestation of Christ to the world. It originally featured a twofold focus on the birth and the baptism of Jesus

Epiphany, for the Eastern church, became to focus especially on Christ's baptism, the unveiling of His Messiah-ship, and the first manifestation of His miraculous power at Cana. The Western church came to celebrate at Epiphany the arrival of the Magi, as Christ's first manifestation to the Gentile world, transforming it into a celebration of Gentile missions. Thus the Western connection of Epiphany with the birth of Christ was preserved, forming the close of the Christmas celebration cycle.

So, from as early as the second century, Christians were celebrating Christ's entrance into the world.

Now what about the December 25th date? Well, the fact is, a number of different customs coincided around that date. The Romans had the festival of Saturnalia, which ran from December 17th to the 24th. On the 25th, they would hold a festival translated as, ‘The Festival of the Unconquered Sun’, to celebrate the sun making it through the winter solstice. Throughout ancient pagan Europe, it is to be expected that there were various celebrations surrounding the solstice, as pagan peoples made much of the sun and its influence on agriculture.

So how did December 25th get connected with Christ’s birth? Well, history doesn’t really tell us. The Bible doesn’t tell us exactly when He was born; many have suggested September, but there is a renewed movement amongst Biblical scholars who believe that a December birth was not unlikely.

But we do know that by the year 225, a writer by the name of Julius Africanus was connecting the date with Christ’s birthday. In fact, the early church had some thinking behind such a date. The church held that Christ was crucified on March 25th, which is not an unlikely date at all. That date coincided with the vernal equinox and the date that Adam was said to have been created, according to their reckoning. The thinking was that Christ, the second Adam, was conceived on the same day of the year that the first Adam was created, meaning Christ’s birth would be nine months later on December 25th. Now you might not agree with the church’s reasoning, but you can at least see that men who loved God were giving justifiable reasons for such a date; not trying to mingle pagan festivals with the celebration of Christ. Indeed, is it not more reasonable to think that Christians would have been seeking to create Christ-honouring alternatives to the debauchery going on all round.

Many of the ancient Christians defended that date as highly symbolic of Christ. Cyprian, who lived from about 200 to 259, said ‘O, how wonderfully acted Providence that on that day on which that Sun was born . . . Christ should be born.’ Chrysostom also said ‘But Our Lord, too, is born in the month of December . . . the eighth before the calends of January (i.e. 25 December)... But they call it the ‘Birthday of the Unconquered’. Who indeed is so unconquered as Our Lord . . .? Or, if they say that it is the birthday of the Sun, He is the Sun of Justice.’

Hippolytus (180-236), came up with a Dec. 25 date, which he attempted to calculate from information in the Gospel of Luke regarding the ministry of the priest Zecharias, John the Baptist’s father (**Luke 1:5, 8-10**). There Zecharias’ priestly duty was given, and since they served at various times, it was possible to do some calculations from that date, when Elisabeth was pregnant, to Mary’s conception which the Bible states was six months after Elisabeth’s.

So the church was not copycatting the world. The chances are that they were seeking to outdo the world. Looking back, you will find that the idea that Christianity was always placating or copying pagans comes from the sceptical teachers of the Enlightenment period. Before that, Christians had not called Christmas pagan.

It was somewhere around the fourth century that a definite celebration of Christmas emerges. The feast of Epiphany continued, but now, in the Western church, a more specific focus on Christ’s birth emerged.

In fact, the ancient church father Chrysostom delivered a Christmas day sermon on December 25th, 386. Chrysostom described the Christmas celebration as ‘the fundamental feast, or the root, from which all other Christian festivals grow,’ for ‘without the birth of Christ there was

also no baptism, passion, resurrection or ascension, and no outpouring of the Holy Ghost; and hence no feast of Epiphany, of Easter, or of Pentecost’.

Fairly soon, one finds the celebration of Christmas in churches at Rome, Antioch and Alexandria. By the fourth century, Christmas is an established celebration. You might remember that Charlemagne had himself crowned Roman emperor on Christmas day, 800 A.D.

Now we have spent time going through all this to point out that there are some lessons for us today. We, the church of the present, ought to consider carefully what the church of the past did. To say that the church of the fourth century was already overrun with paganism and doctrinal error is to re-write history to suit our own present-day convictions. The truth is, error had crept in, with certain practices, but the church was by no means captive to the pagan culture around it. So then why did the early church do what it did regarding Christmas celebrated on the 25th of December?

Consider what the early church was seeking to do. They wanted to supplant the pagan holiday with one that revered Christ. It is obvious they would not partake in the revelry of the pagans. But they were also not going to batten down the hatches and stare glumly out the window, scowling to themselves about the frivolous joy of unbelievers. Their approach was both evangelistic, and substitutionary.

It was evangelistic in that the pagans expected everyone to partake in their raucous celebrations. Peter talks about this in **1 Peter 4:3-4**: *For we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles; when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries. In regard to these, they think it strange that you do not run with them in the same flood of dissipation, speaking evil of you.*

It was not unusual for these things to take place. So what would the world say when they saw these Christians, instead of joining them, heading off to a church service? By the way, that’s all the word, ‘mass,’ referred to at the end of the word Christmas means. It was not at this early stage of church history referring to a belief about the Lord’s actual body being eaten. It was simply a service – a Christ service, a Christ mass.

Well, the pagans would think it strange. They would be intrigued, puzzled, and not a little convicted.

It is much like what happens today when co-workers and friends ask on Friday – ‘What are you going to do this weekend?’ And they are hoping to hear that you will be headed for the same kind of debaucheries that they will be going to. But if you are a believer, you will tell them you will be in church on the Lord’s Day, and you won’t be doing any of those things they delight in.

One of the strongest reasons for a Christian celebration of Christmas is precisely its evangelistic opportunity. When their attention is riveted on gluttony, drunkenness, indulging sensual and materialistic appetites, and greedily getting as much for self as possible, our celebration of Christmas ought to convict them and cause them to ask questions. There is no doubt that what modern-day pagans do with Christmas has nothing to do with Christ. But what did you expect? Do you honestly expect unbelievers to reverence a Christ they have not submitted to? What do you expect them to do with a day which has become fully commercialised and centred around indulgence? Now, you might be offended that they do what they do on a day considered a Christian holiday, and rightfully so. But do not be

surprised that pagans celebrate Christmas like pagans. The early church wasn't. Their entire intention was not that the whole Roman world would no longer celebrate The Return of the Unconquered Sun, but that they would see entirely new and different behaviour from Christians on one of their high holidays.

With the departure of Western society from Christianity, that same opportunity presents itself to us again. Instead of scowling at the pagans living riotously, we should use the day as a testimony to them that we live lives in the fear of God. After all, do you have a perpetual scowl on your face every Sunday when you see unbelievers playing golf and tennis and avoiding anything to do with God's house? Hopefully, you breathe out silent prayers for them. Hopefully, you rejoice that your own heart has been won to Christ, so that you spend the Lord's Day for the Lord.

What are some ways your celebration of Christmas can be a testimony to the unsaved?

Firstly, what you refuse to partake of at gatherings with them. As they seek to get drunk and overeat, you can display that you are quite content and joyful to keep your body and its appetites under the Lordship of Christ. Very soon, they will wonder whom you serve, if you do not serve your belly, as they do.

Secondly, how you approach the matter of gifts. There is nothing wrong with gift giving. But do not allow the spirit of the lust of the eyes and the pride of life sweep over you at this time. **Luke 12:15** *And He said to them, 'Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.'*

The truth is, if you were trying to witness to gluttons, you might fast to get their attention. If you were witnessing to brawlers, you would emphasise meekness. If you were witnessing to sluggards, you would be extra diligent. In a season of covetousness, wastage and greed, we do well to redirect our energies and focus away from that whole spirit. While giving of a few gifts here and there is fine, it might be more of a testimony to spend ourselves in service to someone. Perhaps someone in hospital, a sick believer who is bedridden, a bereaved person needing comfort, lonely brothers and sisters in Christ without close family.

Thirdly, display reverence towards the day. I doubt that any unbeliever experiences anything close to reverence. But to truly honour Christ is to approach it with profound respect and gravity. It means more than going to church on Christmas day, though certainly that is one way of displaying the reverence. It is seen in traditions such as reading of Scripture the night before, praying, perhaps singing reverent hymns to Christ as a family. What of using Christmas lunch as an opportunity to discuss the greatness of the Incarnation? Reverence is also seen in refusing the things which trivialise and make light of such a significant day. While there are cultural attachments to Christmas that can be enjoyed separately for their own sake, don't mix the awe-inspiring truth of the Incarnation of the Son of God with Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. Keep them separate, and so be sober-minded before the on-looking world. Christmas is to be enjoyed, but frivolousness is not a synonym for joy.

Very often you can start by saying – 'What has gone wrong with this day as far as the world goes? What would be the opposite of the sinful behaviour exhibited by the world on this day?' If it is greed, let it become a day of sacrifice. If it is flippancy, let it be a day of reverence for you. If it is a day of gluttony, let your moderation be known to all.

The second thing that the early church was doing was what you might call an act of substitution.

Perhaps they understood human nature better than we do. They knew that the Bible instructs us not only to put off the old man, but equally to put on the new man. Christianity does not only instruct us to subtract sin, but to add righteousness. We are to flee from sin, and follow after righteousness. The Christian life is not about simply avoiding certain practices; it is about positively loving the Lord our God with all our heart soul and mind. The early church knew that merely rejecting the debauchery of the Roman festivals would not suffice in the hearts of many Christians. When there seemed to be enough evidence to place Christ's birth close to that date, they seized the opportunity to have a substitutionary celebration - a day not given to evil, but to reverence and worship of the Christ born in Bethlehem. In other words, they learned to substitute the evil with good.

They knew that our hearts are like vacuums when we remove one thing. It must soon be filled with something else. You either fill it with the same thing, and even more of the same, or something completely different. And that is what they did.

Please don't take this to mean, as some misguided Christians have done, that if the world has nightclubs, we should set up Christian nightclubs, and if the world has immoral entertainment, we'll make Christian immoral entertainment. No, that is simply using our freedom as an occasion to serve the flesh. That is not what the church was doing. They were not substituting flesh for flesh. They were replacing a feast given to debauchery with something entirely different, a day of serving and honouring Christ. Does that mean that all Christians used it that way? No, certainly there were abuses early on, just like many Christians continue to abuse the Lord's Day.

So, in what way can we substitute a Christ-honouring day for the obviously pagan holiday around us?

Well, just in the way that we will not be partaking of certain things, it is important that we make sure we do partake of Christ-honouring traditions as we approach and experience the day. Traditions are a powerful tool to imbed the wonder and glory of the occasion of Christ's incarnation in the minds of children and adults alike. Traditions such as the lighting of one candle for every Sunday you approach Christmas; the saving up of money to be given to one of Christ's people, which He said was like giving to Him – which is fitting if we are remembering His birthday; a variation on the Christmas tree, using ornaments specifically symbolic of Biblical truths surrounding the event. Examples might be putting on ornaments like a Lion, since He is the lion of Judah, a Rose, since He is the Rose of Sharon, a Sun, a Sheep, a Crown, a Dove, a Candle, A Cross, Thorns – all of which represent Him. Typical manger scenes can also be used. In this way, we substitute powerful symbols for meaningless glitter.

We can use the day to be a day of service. Instead of placing our hope in the reception of gifts, we look forward to being a blessing to someone on the day, and growing in anticipation of what we can do for another on that day. There are no limits to how creative you can be to make the day a day of joyful experiencing of Christ, instead of a day of sinful self-indulgence. Put simply, you will not do well to simply pride yourself in not doing what the world does. It is more satisfying, and a lot safer overall to replace the day with an enjoyable, Christ-honouring day that brings much joy to your heart, and that of your family and your local church.

So what has the church of Christmas past taught us? When surrounded by pagans, don't batten down the hatches and curse the day from beginning to end. Respond to a near universal

celebration with a Christ-focused, reverent, moderate and sober-minded celebration of one of the most important events in human history. May this Christmas be such an event for you and your loved-ones.