

Three Christmases

By David de Bruyn

Every year, as we come up on Christmas, there is the annual debate by Christians as to whether or not Christians can or should celebrate Christmas. As usual, we find the extremes in the debate. The extremes, believe or not, are not people who do and don't celebrate Christmas. The extremes are the people who aggressively criticise people who do celebrate Christmas, and people who aggressively insist that everyone should celebrate Christmas.

I know that this program will convince no one from those groups. That's not my intention. But it is my desire to shed some extra light on this question, and speak to Christians who have to battle through this issue every year and are perhaps still uncertain as to where the Biblical wisdom for this issue lies.

Kevin Bauder suggests that there are really three Christmases. While they are celebrated on the same day, and while there is considerable overlap between them, there is enough difference between them to call them distinct. Each of these should be approached differently, and I believe that we can come out with fairly conclusive answers as to how Christians should approach them.

The first of these we might term

The Commercial Christmas

The Commercial Christmas essentially grew out of the second half of the nineteenth century. As popular culture emerged, retailers took full advantage of the possibilities of Christmas and turned it into their most lucrative opportunity of the year. One hundred and fifty years later and it is an all-out celebration of materialism and greed. Whereas it may once have been about the giving of gifts, it has now turned into the demanding and expecting of gifts. None of us are blind to this Christmas. Retailers and businessmen who would not in a thousand years own the name of Christ are selling things in the name of Christmas in early October.

It is hard to see how this kind of Christmas is not an all out illustration of I John 2:16 "For all that *is* in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. (1Jo 2:16)

It's hard to see how a Christian can get knee deep into this kind of Christmas without defilement.

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." (Luk 12:15)

But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; (Eph 5:3)

Let your conduct be without covetousness; be content with such things as you have. For He Himself has said, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." (Heb 13:5)

While there is nothing wrong with the giving or receiving of gifts, every Christian needs to be extremely careful lest the spirit of mammon overtakes one here. Better no gifts than to feed the lust of the flesh. So as to the commercial Christmas, it is hard to see how Christians can freely and enthusiastically partake of this and avoid the dangers of covetousness.

Great caution is needed. Great discernment, and sometimes great abstinence is necessary.

The second kind of Christmas we might term

The Cultural Christmas

This is a cultural holiday. It is cultural in the sense that it has developed through ethnic, folk and popular usage. It is the holiday of Christmas trees, Christmas decorations, mistletoe, holly, candles, bells, the giving of gifts, lights, certain Christmas carols, Christmas stories – depending on how far you go – Santa Claus etc.

Now it is around this holiday that most of the controversy rages. One section of Christians is adamant that this cultural Christmas is pagan in origin, pagan in association and therefore irredeemable as a holiday to celebrate Jesus Christ.

Let me take a few moments to address this notion of the pagan nature of the cultural Christmas. Let's take the date, December 25th as one example of how misinformation abounds. It is often said that the date as well as the custom of gift-giving comes from the pagan festival of Saturnalia. Little real evidence exists to support that notion. That may surprise you if you have accepted such statements as fact, but the truth is, little historical evidence can verify that a December 25th Christmas definitely originates from Saturnalia. True, late Romans do seem to have exchanged gifts around the Saturnalia, which was observed in late December and early January. But the question may well be asked, who influenced whom?

In fact, it is a conceit from the Enlightenment which wanted to downplay and explain away all things Christian that developed the notion that Christians had borrowed the holiday from pagans. It may have been the other way around. It may be that early Christians developed a distinctly Christian festival to counter the pagan festivals running at the time. It is sad that Christians would use atheistic ammunition on their own. What is worse is to see how Christians pick up a statement from another which sounds historical and factual with little or no research of their own, besides checking a few questionable websites.

In fact, the best scholarship of our day is revealing that Christ's birth may well have been December time, in spite of ignorant comments about the shepherd's not being out in winter. I bring that up to show that the debate about the pagan origins of the cultural Christmas is often based on hearsay, rumour and unfounded information. And yet it is treated like one of the Ten Commandments – an unquestionable, historical fact.

On other fronts, dogmatic statements about the pagan origin of certain customs of the cultural Christmas are often listed in painful detail. What the bells meant, what Christmas trees meant (some preposterously use Jeremiah 10:3-4 as a supposed indictment of a Christmas tree), what the mistletoe meant, what the giving of gifts meant, what the lights meant, what holly meant and so on. As I said, sometimes these origins connected with pagan rituals are based on very shaky historical evidence. Some are true, some are not. The fact is, *almost all of them are irrelevant*. Here is why.

Virtually no one intends those customs in any pagan sense today, and they have nearly or completely lost any idolatrous connotation. Indeed, Christians who reject any celebration of a cultural Christmas for supposedly anti-pagan convictions, are usually guilty of being inconsistent with their conviction in other areas. Modern life is littered with things originally having pagan connotations. Here are some examples.

At wedding ceremonies, the custom of having bridesmaids goes back to a pagan custom of wanting to have bride look-alikes to confuse evil spirits that would want to kidnap the bride. When Christians have bridesmaids at their weddings, are they giving credence to this pagan custom? No, it has long since lost that association. Another tradition of throwing confetti over newlyweds originates from the pagan rite of showering the happy couple with grain or rice to wish them a fruitful union as they believed that the fertility of the seeds would be transferred to the couple on whom they fell. Again, Christians are not worshipping fertility gods when they throw confetti on the couple. This association no longer exists, only the custom, which is enjoyed for its own sake.

When someone sneezes, we often say “Bless You!” Many believe this goes back to a pagan belief that when a person sneezed, their soul was expelled for a moment, and by saying a blessing, you protected the soul from being snatched by evil spirits until it returned to the body. Now, when you say it today, do you re-enact that custom, or do you simply empathise with a person’s sneezing?

What about the days of the week? Monday named after the moon goddess. Tuesday, named after Tiw the god of war, Wednesday named after the chief Norse god Woden, Thursday named after the son of Woden, Thor, Friday named after the goddess Friga, Saturday after the Roman god Saturn and Sunday named after the worship of the sun. Now when Christians speak of Wednesday, Friday, Monday or when they acknowledge, “Today is Tuesday” or “Tomorrow is Thursday” – do they celebrate these pagan gods? Of course not. The same can be said for the months of year, seven of them named Roman gods.

For that matter, the celebration of birthdays is rooted in paganism. The keeping of birthday records was important in ancient times principally because a birth date was essential for the casting of a horoscope – for looking into the stars and the use of astrology. Must we abandon birthdays because this is their origin? No, we do not use those pagan reasons for celebrating birthdays anymore.

I have risked lengthy examples to make this point. A custom may have a pagan origin, but that is irrelevant if it is no longer used for pagan reasons. Even those who forbid cultural Christmas on these grounds unwittingly live out this principle every time they use the names of the days of the week, or partake in a wedding or celebrate a birthday.

Now once we recognise this, there can be simple and clean fun in much of cultural Christmas. It need not be weighed down with guilt, as if we are celebrating pagan gods. The issue becomes non-moral, and therefore one of conscience.

Romans 14 is the guide for the celebration of cultural Christmas. We read there: “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. One person esteems *one* day above another; another esteems every day *alike*. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes *it* to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe *it*. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.” (Rom 14:4-8)

Now, I am sometimes tempted to dismiss debating this issue with someone who has not read and sought to understand Romans 14. Quite simply, the Bible is saying, when something morally neutral is at stake between two Christians, your conscience must guide.

The issue is not whether a Christian has the liberty to participate in an idolatrous pagan festival. As we've seen, the customs that are pagan have lost their pagan associations. What we are dealing with is this – should Christians celebrate a non-moral day called December 25th with various cultural customs? Paul is saying, if you are convinced in your conscience that celebrating a day – which is neutral in itself, and in this case – a cultural holiday on a particular day of the year is wrong, then for you it is wrong. But the point of Romans 14 is, when there is no Biblical injunction against it, you are forbidden to condemn those who in good conscience observe it to the Lord. Conversely, if we are convinced that we may so celebrate Christmas, we are not to look down on or disdainfully dismiss the conscience and practice of those who do not. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. That's Christian liberty. You have the right to partake. You have the right to not partake. You do *not* have the right to condemn other believers operating on this same Romans 14 principle.

But that is not to say that everything in the cultural Christmas is redeemable or useful to a Christian. For example, I cannot see the value of Christian parents telling their children in all seriousness that Father Christmas is a real person who delivers presents to them. If it is all done tongue-in-cheek, it might be safe and no harm might come of it. But no child being raised by believing parents should think that there is in reality an almost omnipresent, all-knowing being named Santa Claus who rewards the supposed righteousness of little children. This can only detract from faith in Christ and a trust in Him. Some symbols and traditions in the cultural Christmas must either be dispensed with or handled very wisely to avoid either confusing the real message of Christmas, or at the very least – trivialising it.

Likewise, some of the greed and excess often done supposedly in the name of a Christian Christmas must grieve the heart of God. There is no reason to indulge the flesh with excess eating and drinking simply because it is Christmas. Christians need to continue to behave like Christians over Christmas.

So, in short, a Christian has freedom to wisely, and with Christian discretion partake of the cultural Christmas, so long as his conscience does not forbid him.

However, a word of caution. There is a danger with the cultural Christmas, and it is this: it is when it becomes confused and mixed up with the third Christmas, which I term the Christ-Centred Christmas.

The Christ-Centred Christmas

The Christ-Centred Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation. It is a celebration that the Second Person of the Trinity added to His deity a complete human nature. He came to earth and walked amongst us. This is a mystery and a joy which deserves contemplation, reflection and celebration. Let me say, *that is all the justification we need to celebrate a Christ-Centred Christmas*. Some object by saying there is no Scripture commanding us to celebrate this. To answer that, we can quickly add there is no explicit Scripture commanding us to meet together on a Sunday. There are inferences in I Corinthians and Acts, and I think it is a good thing to do, but we are not commanded to do it. Yet we do it. We're commanded to gather in Hebrews 10:25, but we are not told when and how often. So if you meet regularly on Sunday, then you already obey the principle necessary to celebrate Christmas – that the Incarnation is worthy of wonder, awe, rejoicing (as the angels did) and since Christians are

commanded to gather, we can gather together on a particular day to remember this tremendous event. Furthermore, God's people were given days to recall God's acts in the Old Testament, it is not a principle God is against. To select a day to celebrate His incarnation is not unbiblical. Yes, it's true, we do this every time we meet in principle, but there is nothing wrong with directing our focus more specifically to the wonder of the incarnation on a particular day, setting aside time to ponder this event with deliberation.

By the way, the 'mass' at the end of the word Christmas is simply an old way of referring to a church service and not a formal ritual involving a supposed transubstantiation. In fact, the best evidence tells us that Christians were doing this a very long time ago. In the second century, Epiphany was a celebration of His incarnation that was observed. The Christian celebration of Christmas was evidently well-established at least by the middle of the fourth century, and conceivably much earlier.

The Christ-Centred Christmas can be a wonderful time of devotion, consecration, awe and reverence. It can be a time for glorifying Him for His awesome humility in taking on flesh. It can be a time of singing our thanks for initiating salvation. It can be a time of rejoicing with other believers that He came, wondering at the mystery of God – the eternal, uncreated God, taking humanity up into Himself and being born as a lowly child in a stable. It can be a time of testifying to unbelievers – not from the vantage point of a hostile rejection of all things Christmas, but of clarifying the nature of the Incarnation, which unbelievers unwittingly sing about when they hum the carols played at the malls.

But here is where I must return to my caution. The cultural Christmas, while possibly fun and enjoyable for its own sake – must not take away from or intrude upon the Christ-Centred Christmas. It must not be mixed up with and be confused as one holiday.

It is possible to enjoy the cultural Christmas for its own sake, but it must be kept distinct from, and subordinate to, the Christ-Centred Christmas. When the two begin to compete, clash, or confuse, then the cultural Christmas must always defer to the Christ-Centred Christmas.

To be thinking about bells and tinsel and holly and reindeer when you should be thinking about God entering the time stream of humanity is a poor exchange. To be thinking about egg-nog, decorations and turkey more than about being awed by the mystery of Christ come to earth is not something we should accept. If children are more excited about Father Christmas than about Christ, then we have a problem. If we enjoy 'Jingle Bells' or 'I'm Dreaming of White Christmas' more than 'Joy to World' or 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing' – we have mixed up priorities. And if you can't tell the difference between those songs, then it proves that my point is probably quite applicable in your life.

To put it simply, each must remain in its own sphere. You can keep the cultural Christmas, but don't bring it into the church. Enjoy it in the home and in the hall, but do not try to bring the cultural Christmas into deliberate worship of Christ. If it does not violate your conscience, you can observe the traditions and customs of the cultural Christmas, as long as you keep those celebrations where they belong.

A truly Christ-centred Christmas must be the pure celebration of Christ come to earth, with songs and hymns that celebrate this acts of grace, not trivialise it or sentimentalise it. A truly Christ-centred Christmas must be Word-centred, returning to the glorious themes of Jewish prophecy fulfilled, of all the drama and beauty of the

Magi and Herod and the lowly Shepherds, and humble Simeon and Anna – with the angelic announcements - more than anytime in history - with the awesomeness of God the Son now being a baby in a feeding trough born to a young Jewish virgin. A Christian Christmas testifies to one another and to the unsaved, God truly came to earth. Yes, this is to be sung, preached, proclaimed and enjoyed.

So there really are three Christmases. A commercial Christmas, a cultural Christmas and a Christ-Centred Christmas. As to the commercial Christmas, believers ought to shun the greed, commercialism, sensuality and materialism of this holiday and continue to be models of sobriety, temperance and simple, modest living. If gifts are to be given, let it be a time of gratitude and celebration of grace, not a self-centred time of expectations.

As to the cultural Christmas, there are features which, I believe, a Christian can enjoy in good conscience. There are some features which are probably irredeemable. Every Christian must use biblical wisdom and a sanctified conscience to guide them. If at the end of the day you emerge deciding that there is no place for it in your walk with God, then hold that conviction to the Lord, and do not insist that others do as well. The same is true if you choose to celebrate it.

As to the Christ-Centred Christmas, we ought to embrace this. The time and date is not important. The concept is. At least once a year, we ought to be stunned into wondering silence at the mystery of the Incarnation.

So, in that note, I wish that you as a believer, whatever you decide about the cultural Christmas, will indeed enjoy a reverent, joyful celebration of a Christ-Centred Christmas.