

## Should we celebrate Christmas?

Christmas Day, December 25<sup>th</sup>, was originally part of the Roman festival of Saturnalia where there were festivities, gift exchanges, special food, the Yule log, greenery and fir trees, and wassail. The festival of Saturnalia eventually culminated on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the birth of unconquered sun. By the late 4<sup>th</sup> century Christians, on the other hand, did not want to participate in these pagan festivities and decided to celebrate the birth of Christ, the Son of God, on the 25<sup>th</sup>. Later, the day became known as the day for the mass to celebrate the birth of Christ, hence *Christ mass*, or Christmas. It was in the 8<sup>th</sup> century in what is now Germany that St. Boniface dedicated the fir tree to Christ; this was to counteract the Germanic practice of worshipping the sacred oak tree of Odin. Several centuries later, Saint Nicholas, who was the patron saint of children and sailors in the Roman Catholic Church, became associated with Christmas by the Netherlands Protestant settlers of New Amsterdam, what is now New York. These Dutch Protestants replaced St. Nicholas (*Sinter Claes* in Dutch) with a kind of benevolent magician, Santa Claus. St. Nicholas was also made the Father of Christmas in Germany, where Reformed churches were in the majority and also in France.

Now, when we look at this thumbnail sketch of the origins of Christmas, we should note several facts. The creation of Christmas has its roots in a reaction to a pagan festival. The Christmas tree has its origins in reaction to the worship of a pagan deity. The introduction of a Roman Catholic saint as Father Christmas, surprisingly enough, has its origins from Dutch Protestants, and took root in heavily Reformed areas of Europe. Now, however well intentioned all of these things were, we must ask whether Christians should participate in something that has no real origins in Scripture but is instead a reaction to pagan practices. We must answer this question on two fronts, first for the Church in gathered worship, and second for the individual Christian.

Should the church celebrate Christmas? Generally speaking, the Bible sets forth the principle for worshipping God. We must worship God according to the principles that He sets forth in His Word and we are not to add anything else to what He commands us to do. This most vivid reminder of this principle was with Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, who worshipped God in a manner that He did not authorize or command (Lev 10.1ff). Ultimately, when we worship God we must do what is pleasing to Him, not what is pleasing to us (see esp. Isa 58.13-14). Does this mean that we should not celebrate the birth of Christ in the worship of God? No. By all means, the church should celebrate the birth of Christ whenever it gathers for worship. In fact, we should celebrate the Incarnation in April or even August! We should not, however, celebrate the birth of Christ to the exclusion of other important events in redemptive history, the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost, or the Second Coming of Christ. Moreover, that much of the world is talking about the birth of Christ is an opportunity for the Church to speak and sing the truth and proclaim the Gospel. This is why Calvin would break from whatever book of the Bible he was preaching from to preach a message on the birth of Christ. This is also why the Swiss Reformed churches approved the celebration of Christ's birth, Circumcision, Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension (see the *Second Helvetic Confession*, art. 24). This, however, does not mean that the Church should celebrate Christmas in the same way that the world does. God has commanded that we read the Word, sing psalms

and hymns, pray, hear the preaching of the Word, and make use of the sacraments. He has not authorized that we bring in Christmas trees, or associate the birth of His Son with a benevolent magician or a patron saint of the Roman Catholic Church. This means that when the Church celebrates the birth of Christ, it should do so adorned only by those things that God has commanded—Word and sacrament. What about the individual believer?

Should the individual believer celebrate Christmas? The individual believer, like the Church gathered in worship, should feel free to celebrate the birth of Christ on any day of the year, including December 25<sup>th</sup>. Now, while the Christian has more latitude in the private worship of God in comparison to the Church gathered for worship (i.e., a person can pray in his underwear in private, whereas this would be totally inappropriate in public worship!), this does not mean that the Christian can throw caution to the wind and celebrate Christmas in any manner he chooses. The Christian should always beware of mixing the worship of Christ with pagan or cultural practices (syncretism). If we decided, for example, that we are going to celebrate the birth of Christ, what does a patron saint or benevolent magician have to do with His incarnation? What has St. Nicholas to do with Christ? On the other hand, it is appropriate to exchange gifts as an act of gratitude to recall the mercy that has been shown to us in the gift of Christ. If a family wishes to have a Christmas tree as a seasonal decoration, much like using a flag to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, it is within the bounds of Christian liberty to do so. We should always be careful, however, to ensure that our celebration of Christ isn't overshadowed by other things; otherwise, we are no longer celebrating the birth of Christ.

So, should we celebrate Christmas? The answer is Yes, though we should always do so carefully so that we do not introduce foreign elements into the public worship of God and so we don't allow our personal celebration to be eclipsed by other things.

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