

Christmas: Is It Biblical?

Revelation 11:10 *And they that dwell upon the earth shall rejoice over them, and make merry, and shall send gifts one to another; because these two prophets tormented them that dwelt on the earth.*

The Book of Revelation is rich with intriguing figures that have profound spiritual significance. In the eleventh chapter are described two powerful witnesses of God whose testimony serves as a torment to men. There has been much speculation as to the identity of these two witnesses and some have even suggested that they are not individuals, but God's church and God's word: two witnesses of Himself which He left in the earth. Whoever these witnesses are, they stand as a torment to men until their testimony is finished and then men default to rejoicing, making merry and exchanging gifts. A curious figure indeed, one of which the spiritually-minded should take note, and one which serves as a provocative springboard for an article against Christmas: a festive time of rejoicing, making merry and exchanging gifts that flourishes in the absence of the testimony of God.

It comes as a shock to many that some Christians do not participate in Christmas celebrations and traditions. One of the first assumptions usually made is that such Christians are either not Christians at all or are part of some cult movement. As for us, we do not celebrate Christmas because of what Holy Scripture teaches about such a custom. We are convinced that we have God's infallible word delivered to us as the King James Bible and would hope that others believe they have God's infallible word also. As such, we also hope that readers of this article would do as the noble Bereans, who "...searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so..." (ACT 17:11). This article also mentions certain non-Scriptural facts about the Christmas custom which the noble reader can readily check out for himself since the information is voluminous and very available, and so "prove all things..." (1TH 5:21). The following is a brief treatment of the topic. Please prayerfully check this information out for yourself.

As familiar as the Christmas custom is in America today, such was not always the case. In fact, until about the early to middle part of the 19th century, Christmas was not even officially recognized as a civic holiday. On the contrary, Christmas was generally looked upon as a superstitious holiday to be avoided, it having no place in a society founded on Christian principles as found in the King James Bible. In 1851, a Cleveland minister is supposed to have nearly lost his job because he brought a Christmas evergreen tree into the church building. As late as 1870, public schools in Boston remained open on Christmas Day and apparently expelled students who stayed home. In the infancy of this country laws were even on the books which imposed fines and/or imprisonment should one be found observing the Christmas celebration. One such law in Massachusetts read:

"Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or in any other way.....shall be subject to a fine of five shillings." (Compton's Pictured Ency.)

We do not advocate that religious worship should be thus mandated by force of law but rather by persuasion of conscience. However, one might pause to ask whether America is more Biblically oriented today than it was back then, or is it the other way around? In earlier times in America, various Protestant denominations and many Baptists refused to recognize Christmas for Biblical reasons similar to those which are to follow.

It is the endeavor of our church, by the grace of God, to not be conformed to the world (**ROM 12:1-2**) but to His word and honor the instructions for service and worship there given. We affirm that the word of God is the standard whereby we judge all things, including our faith and practice. We also stand to be corrected if error can be proven from the Scripture. Those who don't believe they have an infallible Bible or have no intention of being regulated by such may want to stop reading here.

It is commonly believed that God is equally pleased with various forms of worship---that all religions are equally valid. But this is not the position of the God of the Bible. Observe His words concerning worship:

John 4:23-24. *But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him **must** worship him in spirit and in **truth**.*

The Savior tells us plainly that there is a specific, exclusive form of worship that God is seeking. He later commissioned His apostles to go into all the world thus:

Matthew 28:20. *Teaching them to **observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you**: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen.*

Again, notice the directive for men is not to observe whatever they think is right but rather the things which He has commanded. He later inspired the Apostle Paul to write these words in his letter to the church at Corinth:

I Corinthians 11:1-2. *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and **keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.***

It is evident here again that the ordinances of God's religion are to be kept "**as delivered.**" But what, one might wonder, does this have to do with Christmas? Perhaps you might have noticed that a significant amount of activity that attends Christmas is conspicuously absent from the Bible, let alone there being no Scriptural command or example for even observing the birthday of Jesus Christ as a "holiday." Where did all these customs come from and what does God have to say concerning them?

The bulk of Christmas festivities are time-honored traditions of men. And herein lies a problem. It may be stated virtually as a canon that where the ideas and traditions of men are exalted in religion, the effect of the word of God decreases proportionately. The Lord Jesus Christ put it thus:

Mark 7:13. *Making the word of God of none effect **through your tradition**, which ye have delivered....*

God has given us sound principles in His word which ought to govern our religion. Some of these are plainly expressed in the Old Testament scriptures and deserve our attention since we are told this in the New Testament:

II Timothy 3:16. *All **scripture** is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for*

doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

I Corinthians 10:11. *Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.*

This should not be construed to imply that N.T. Christians are bound by all of the O.T. laws and ordinances but it is good reason to examine the mind of the Lord as revealed there, since **all Scripture** is profitable. We shall see shortly that *some* of the principles that God instituted for the people of Israel are still in effect today. Please observe His command for that people regarding the keeping of His religion:

Deuteronomy 12:29-32. *When the LORD thy God shall cut off the nations from before thee, whither thou goest to possess them, and thou succeedest them, and dwellest in their land; Take heed to thyself that thou be not snared by following them, after that they be destroyed from before thee; and that thou inquire not after their gods, saying, **how did these nations serve their gods? Even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt not do so unto the LORD thy God** for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters they have burnt in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.*

Competitive religion was something to which the Jews would be exposed and God specifically warned them to *not* incorporate the practices of the pagans into His service but rather avoid them. This is in keeping with the verses which have already been cited and no less an order exists for N.T. Christians. They likewise are to be separated from other religions and their practices:

II Corinthians 6:14-18. *Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? **And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?** for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore **come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.***

Religion is as natural to man as water is to a duck but unless that religion is in conformity to God's desires, it is not acceptable to Him. This is why there is such a pressing need for the knowledge of His will as revealed in His word. God once dealt with a nation, Israel, in a fashion that no other nation knew. He gave them His laws, religion and most importantly, His written word. Observe these verses which show how that people was blessed:

Romans 9:4. *Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and **the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises;***

Romans 3:1-2. *What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of*

circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God.

Psalms 147:19-20. *He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the LORD.*

The Gentile nations of old were obviously religious but they lacked the word of God where God's will concerning His worship was revealed. What then was the nature of their worship, even though they may have had good intentions? How did God view their religion? Prepare yourself for a shocker!:

1 Corinthians 10:20. *But I say, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to devils and not to God: and I would not that ye should have fellowship with devils.*

This does not mean that everyone who is not worshipping God in Spirit and in truth is a child of the devil and on the way to hell. But it is evident that imaginative unscriptural (even though well-intended) religious effort may not be glorifying God but Satan. King David approached God by his own means instead of serving Him "...after the due order" (see **1CH 13:1-4 & 1CH 15:12-13**), and did greatly err. Aaron's priestly sons offered "...strange fire before the LORD, which he commanded them not" (**LEV 10:1-2**), and invited consumption. The Corinthian saints dishonored Christ by the unscriptural manner in which they kept the Lord's Table and Paul would have to write, "For this cause many are weak and sickly among you and many sleep" (**1CO 11:30**). To a Samaritan woman whose people worshipped in a manner contrary to God's revealed order, Jesus Christ said, "Ye worship ye know not what..." (**JOH 4:22**). There are other examples of people in the Bible who were children of God but who were errantly trying to worship Him by doing it "their way." We will consider a prime example of this momentarily.

From where, then, comes the custom of Christmas as celebrated today amongst professing Christians? There is some disagreement as to the precise time of this wedding of flesh and spirit, but a general consensus is that it was a 4th Century invention. We could cite many sources both religious and secular but this one from World Book Encyclopedia is typical:

"In A.D. 354, Pope Liberius of Rome ordered the people to celebrate on December 25. He probably chose this date because the people of Rome already observed it as the Feast of Saturn, celebrating the birthday of the sun. Christians honoured Christ, instead of Saturn, as the light of the world."

What happened here? People looked to the ways of the heathen and incorporated them into the religion of God. But remember the command: "Thou shalt **not** do so unto the Lord thy God..." (**DEU 12:31**).

Even before the birth of the Savior, an important religious festival was observed by the Northern Hemisphere pagans at the time of the winter solstice. It was usually attended by gross lasciviousness, lusts, drunkenness, revellings and banquetings: immoral adjuncts of idolatry from which Christians are to abstain (**1PE 4:3**) and which are very typical of the modern winter festival kept in the name of

Christ. Scripture points to the commonly acknowledged fact that all pagan religion ultimately is sun-worship. As man without God's written revelation tries to worship the source of life, he finds that all material life depends upon the sun. Thus, it was a thing to be adored and worshipped as the generative power of nature and the elements of pagan religion represented and imitated that generative power.

In **Isaiah 14:12-14**, we see that Satan's desire is to imitate God, that he would be "*like the most High.*" Thus, it is not surprising to find an important pagan celebration honoring the devil (remember **1CO 10:20**?) observed by the darkened Gentiles at the time of the winter solstice to entice the sun's return to fructify the earth for another year. In northern latitudes around December 22 (the shortest daylight period of the year), the sun's influence is at its least. But curiously THREE days later (the 25th on our calendar) they acknowledged that he was "resurrected" to renew the eternal cycle of life again. In some cultures this was symbolized by the burning of a yule log on the eve of the "resurrection" which was then seen the next morning in the form of an evergreen tree in the home. Do you see a subtle counterfeit here: a god "resurrected" after three days and three nights, per **MAT 12:40**?

So when was the true Savior born? THE BIBLE DOES NOT SPECIFICALLY SAY! Given men's propensity to enshrine and idolize things, God wisely obscured the precise date of Jesus' birth as He once hid the body of Moses (**DEU 34:5-6**). There is some evidence in Scripture which points to an autumn birth but the accuracy of this is limited. It has been noted that it is very unlikely that He was born on December 25 because at the time of His birth we are told there were "*shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night*" (**LUK 2:8**). It is also unlikely that shepherds did this in winter even in that Mediterranean region since the nights could be quite cold there and winter was the rainy season:

Song of Solomon 2:11. *For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;*

Even the Savior told His disciples to pray that their flight from Jerusalem's coming destruction would be at a more accommodating time of year:

Mark 13:18. *And pray ye that your flight be not in the winter.*

One of the most common elements of Christmas custom is the evergreen tree which is deemed to represent God's eternality. Tradition holds that Martin Luther introduced this concept to German Christianity around 1500 A.D. But the God of heaven has expressly denounced the use of *ANY* image to represent Him or as an aid to worshipping Him:

Deuteronomy 4:15-19. *Take ye therefore good heed unto yourselves; for ye saw no manner of similitude on the day that the LORD spake unto you in Horeb out of the midst of the fire: Lest ye corrupt yourselves, and make you a graven image, the similitude of **any** figure, the likeness of male or female, The likeness of **any** beast that is on the earth, the likeness of **any** winged fowl that flieth in the air, The likeness of **any** thing that creepeth on the ground, the likeness of **any** fish that is in the waters beneath the earth: And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, even all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven.*

God knew the corrupting nature of imagery and therefore gave this warning against what is elsewhere called idolatry. On the one occasion when God allowed Israel to have an image to look upon (Moses' brass serpent, **NUM 21:8**), it eventually became an idol which had to be destroyed (**2KI 18:4**). But one might say, "All of this was in the O.T." True, but idolatry is forbidden in the N.T. as well (**1CO 10:14; 1JO 5:21; ACT 15:19-20** et. al.) and accounts like the brass serpent are expressly said to be "...for ensamples...written for our admonition..." (**1CO 10:11**) that the N.T. believer who thinks he can trifle with images with impunity might "...take heed lest he fall" (**1CO 10:12**).

Here are a few verses which show that green trees were a common element of pagan worship: **DEU 12:2; 1KI 14:23; 2KI 16:4; 17:10; 2CH 28:4; ISA 57:5; JER 2:20; 3:6, 13; 17:2; EZE 6:13**. Scripture also affirms that decorated trees had been used by pagans in their service to their gods long before Jesus Christ or Martin Luther:

Jeremiah 10:2-4. *Thus saith the LORD, learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. 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.*

The Hebrew word here translated "deck" is a primitive root which means "to be bright" and speaks of beautification or as is appropriately denoted here by "deck" — *decoration*. A popular Christmas song says, "Deck the halls with boughs of holly..." What Jeremiah here describes sounds very much like what is commonly done by well-meaning people with an evergreen tree at Christmas. Some have tried to evade the obvious implications of this text by suggesting that Jeremiah is only here warning against the manufacturing of an idol of wood from a tree trunk. But whether a tree be denuded, carved and gilded or left in a natural evergreen state and decorated is a false distinction. The concept of representing God by an image is what is condemned. And, it is a historical fact that Pagan Rome and some northern cultures used fir trees as part of their winter festival celebrating their idol god's death and rebirth.

But one might say, "We're not pagans, we're doing this to the LORD." This would be a good time to consider a very interesting Scripture where we see a great man of God (Aaron, God's chosen High Priest to the nation of Israel) thinking the same way. At the time, Moses had been up on Mt. Sinai receiving the stone tables of holy commandments from God. God told him to get back down to the camp because the people had corrupted themselves and persuaded Aaron to fashion an idol (the golden calf) as part of a worship celebration. But were they intending to only worship a false god? No! Observe:

Exodus 32:5-6. *And when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said, **Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD**. And they rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play.*

Notice that 'LORD' is capitalized, which in the KJV Bible means 'Jehovah-God'. They were intending to worship the true God. They had taken an image from pagan culture and adapted it to the worship of

the true God, thinking that it would be acceptable to Him. It certainly was not, as the death of three thousand men in the rest of the chapter clearly proves. One might not be able to see any basic difference between this and what a lot of well-intentioned people do with an evergreen tree in December. Neither do we, which is one reason we are convicted to not do it.

How many churches would even give passing consideration to the placing of a golden calf in their houses of worship, hanging a wreath around its neck, draping multi-colored lights on it and saying that this was all to the glory of God? None that we know of, and yet in Scripture the evergreen tree of fertility is no less condemned as an element of superstitious idolatry than is the golden calf. And, "*what agreement hath the temple of God with idols...?*" (**2CO 6:16**). Are we still under such a censure? Let us read the words of Jesus Christ as given to the Apostle Paul, referring to the "golden calf" incident at the base of Mt. Sinai:

I Corinthians 10:5-7. *But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. **NOW THESE THINGS WERE OUR EXAMPLES**, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. **NEITHER BE YE IDOLATERS, AS WERE SOME OF THEM**; as it is written, *The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.**

What Aaron and Israel had done was irrefutably called IDOLATRY and obviously N.T. believers are not to pattern their belief and practice after such errors.

In objection to the above some might say that such reasoning is cold, hard, or legalistic and out of touch with the principle of Christian liberty in the New Testament. But liberty was never meant to be used as "*an occasion to the flesh...*" (**GAL 5:13**), and it should be remembered that God's displeasure with the Corinthian saints was fundamentally that they had done that very thing: exploited their liberty for fleshly delights. How? They had taken the simple, spiritual religious ordinance that God had given them (the Lord's Table) and turned it into a festival which catered to their carnal appetites (**1CO 11:20-34**), very similar to the way Christmas became the popular custom that it is today.

There is much more which could be said on this subject; this article is only a primer. Some, if not all of the things which you have just read may seem unpleasant or difficult. But the way of truth and life was never meant to be easy:

Matthew 7:13-14. *Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.*

We might add here that we are certainly not opposed to people having a season of warmth and joy or family togetherness but not by polluting the religion of Jesus Christ. Frankly, we would hope that the positive aspects of this season (joy and praise of God, brotherly love, etc.) would be observed year round instead of confining them to a month-long emotional catharsis. Furthermore, if a person so chooses to set aside a specific day to honor the birth of Christ, why do it by draping naked pagan theology with a flimsy negligee of Christian terms or forms? Why not honor Him by living out the very reason that He came to earth: to "*...save His people from their sins*" (**MAT 1:21**): sins like idolatry, carnality and unbiblical traditions of men? In other words: set aside "*...To day...while it is*

called To day..." (**HEB 3:7-13**) to repent, believe the gospel and follow Christ in obedience to His word, striving to worship Him in Spirit and truth without human inventions and especially without the synthesis of pagan customs.

And that, friends, is some of why we do not celebrate Christ's birth according to the Christmas custom. May God bless you with an open, receptive and understanding heart.

If you have been provoked to repentance by this article and would like to learn more, please contact the Cincinnati Church (a historic baptist assembly) through our website: www.cincinnatichurch.net

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