

# Where Is Christ in Christmas?

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## Introduction

Christmas—a very mention of the word produces delight and expectation in the hearts of people everywhere. Or does it? From some Christians, Christmas is a time to celebrate the birth of Christ. For others, it is also a time to encourage family closeness and tradition. But others refuse to celebrate at all, insisting that the season is rooted in pagan ritual and should be avoided. Such is the case for men like Garner Ted Armstrong, a Christian evangelist, who maintains that “it is impossible to ‘put Christ back in Christmas,’ since He was never in Christmas in the first place!”

Added to this controversy is the growing concern of many Christians to “put Christ back in Christmas” while the expanding secular culture of commercialism is forgetting the babe in the manger all together. For instance, WorldNetDaily reported on December 14, 2002 that a national survey indicated that “just over a tenth of Americans today believe Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the focus of Christmas, with almost nine out of ten people saying the holiday has become less religious.”

Much of the controversy for Christians, however, is largely due to ignorance and speculation. Add to these varying misinterpretations of Scripture, and you have a recipe for confusion. For believers on any side of the issue—whether a synthesis of celebrating Christ’s birth and family tradition, an insistence upon focusing on Christ alone, or a rejection of the season altogether—a clear understanding of history and the Bible plus reasonable common sense must rule any discussion of Christ and Christmas.

## History of the Celebration

Much of the controversy surrounding Christmas is rooted in historical speculation. Countless arguments against celebrating Christmas have included stories of Druid tree worship, pagan festivals, and human sacrifice. A brief sketch of the history of the Christmas celebration will clear some of the confusion, though it is important to understand that the origins of a particular tradition do not necessarily affect its usefulness today. The custom must be evaluated for itself. Nevertheless, an examination of the roots of Christmas may shed some light on the controversy.

The middle of winter has long been a time of celebration around the world. Even before the birth of Christ, Europeans celebrated during the winter solstice when the worst of the winter was behind them and they could look forward to longer days and extended hours of sunlight. The end of December was a perfect time for celebration in most areas of Europe. At that time of year, most cattle were slaughtered so they would not have to be fed during the winter. For many, it was the only time of year when they had a supply of fresh meat. A particular group’s religious beliefs determined of what this celebration consisted. For some culture’s these feasts developed into worship of pagan gods associated with the season, but many were not.

Christians did not celebrate the birth of Christ until the fourth or fifth century. The only

significant event that the early believers celebrated was the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the middle ages Christian leaders decided to hold the celebration of Christ's birth at the same time as traditional winter solstice festivals to increase the chances that Christmas would be popularly embraced. Part of the reason for this was that as the Roman Church grew in power and influence, it often compromised with pagans in order to pacify them and maintain peace in the empire. What resulted was a pseudo-religious celebration that soon degraded into a raucous festival. This *Cristes Maesse*, or "Mass of Christ," was firmly established as a church festival by the end of the sixth century.

After the Protestant Reformation, many Protestant believers were concerned with what the Christmas celebration had become, so they banned the festivities altogether. Christmas was outlawed in England in 1645 with Oliver Cromwell, but reinstated when Charles II was restored to the throne. Strong Puritans in early America outlawed Christmas from 1659-1681. Anyone caught celebrating would be fined five shillings. This rejection of Christmas actually helped the Revolutionary troops when General Washington attacked after crossing the Delaware on Christmas Day in 1776. Washington's troops surprised the German soldiers who, as strong Lutherans, made a big deal of Christmas and were engaged in a drunken celebration of the event. Especially after the American Revolution, English customs, including Christmas, fell out of favor. In fact, Congress was in session on December 25, 1789, the first Christmas under America's new constitution.

This all changed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This period in American history was one of class conflict and political turmoil. During this time, unemployment was high and gang rioting often occurred during the Christmas season. In 1828, the New York city council instituted the city's first police force in response to a Christmas riot. This catalyzed certain members of the upper class to begin to change the way Christmas was celebrated in America.

In 1819, author Washington Irving published *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon*, a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas in an English manor house. In these stories, Irving "invented" Christmas traditions, portraying this English squire as a kind man who invited peasants into his home for the Christmas celebration. Also during this time, English author Charles Dickens created the classic holiday tale, *A Christmas Carol*. The story's message of the importance of giving and good will struck powerful chords in the United States and England and showed members of these societies the benefits of celebrating the holiday. After these publications, Americans re-invented Christmas and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia.

## **The Christmas Tree**

One of the staple traditions of Christmas observance is the decoration of an evergreen tree. Though this seems to be one of the more accepted customs for Christians, it is nevertheless rejected by some for many of the same reasons as spurning the celebration of the holiday itself.

Because evergreen trees remain green throughout the winter season, they have always reminded people that all the rest of the green plants would grow again when the sun was once again strong and summer would return. It was common, therefore, to use the evergreen tree as a

representative symbol in winter solstice festivals even before the birth of Christ. And just as the festival developed into pagan worship feasts in some cultures, so the tree itself became an object of worship for some.

Trees have also had significance for believers as well, however, and most of the traditions connected with the Christmas tree today began as Christian customs. In the Middle Ages, about the 11<sup>th</sup> century, religious theater was born to help the illiterate masses understand the truths of Scripture. One of the most popular plays concerned Adam and Eve, their fall, and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was represented by a fir tree hung with apples. It represented both the Tree of Life and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The play ended with the prophesy of a coming Savior, and for this reason this particular play was often enacted during the Christmas season.

The one piece of scenery—the “Paradeisbaum” (the Paradise Tree) became a popular object and was often set up in churches and private homes. It became a symbol of the Savior. Since the tree represented not only Paradise and man’s fall but also the promise of salvation, it was hung not merely with apples, but also with bread or wafers, representing the crucified body of Christ, and often sweets, representing the sweetness of redemption. The wafers were later replaced by little pieces of pastry cut in the shapes of stars, angels, hearts, flowers, and bells. Eventually other cookies were introduced bearing the shapes of men, birds, roosters, and other animals. Martin Luther was the first to add lighted candles to a tree to recreate the beauty of stars twinkling amidst evergreens.

German and English immigrants brought the Christmas tree to America. Here, too, fruits, nuts, flowers, and lighted candles adorned the first Christmas trees, but only the strongest trees could support the weight without drooping. Thus, German glassblowers began producing lightweight glass balls to replace heavier, natural decorations. These lights and decorations were symbols of the joy and light of Christmas.

## **Santa Claus**

Certainly the most offensive Christmas tradition to many Christians is Santa Claus. Even some believers who participate in other Christmas practices have strongly negative attitudes toward Jolly Old St. Nick. Again, some of this reaction is rooted in misunderstanding and ignorance.

The original St. Nicholas was a priest in the late third century in what is now modern-day Turkey. He was known for his kindness including giving away all his inherited wealth and traveling the countryside helping the poor and sick. One of the best known of the St. Nicholas stories is that he saved three poor sisters from being sold into slavery by providing them with a dowry so that they could be married (he left cold coins in the stockings that the girls had left by the fire to dry). People began to celebrate his kindness on December 6, the anniversary of his death. Even after the Protestant reformation, St. Nicholas was revered, especially in Holland.

Dutch families who immigrated to America in the 1770's brought with them the tradition of honoring St. Nicholas on the anniversary of his death. The name “Santa Claus” evolved from his Dutch nickname, “Sinter Klaas,” a shortened form of Sint Nikolaas. The folklore surrounding

this mysterious saint remained suspect for many non-Dutch Americans until the publication of a silly poem called “An Account of a Visit from St. Nickolas” by a descendant of Dutch immigrants named Henry Livingston Jr.<sup>1</sup> The poem became quickly popular, and soon became known by its first line, “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” Livingston’s poem is largely responsible for the modern image of Santa Claus as a “jolly old elf” who descends down chimneys to give gifts to children and his miniature sleigh led by eight flying reindeer, who Livingston also named. This pleasant picture of Santa Claus was further ingrained in American culture with a series of engravings by Thomas Nast in Harper’s Weekly and a set of paintings by Haddon Sundblom that appeared in Coca-Cola ads between 1931 and 1964.

## Replacing Christ?

One other significant modern Christmas practice that upsets believers is replacing “Christmas” with “Xmas.” Many Christians insist that this is an attempt to take Christ out of Christmas. However, since the Greek letter that begins the word “Christ” is a capital “X” (chi), “Xmas” is simply a shortened form of “Christmas” that became popular in Europe in the 1500’s. The word “Xmas” is so common in advertising most likely because “Xmas” and “sale” have the same number of letters, and “Xmas” is significantly shorter than “Christmas.”

## Conclusions

Arguments against celebrating Christmas or at least eliminating certain Christmas practices abound. Some will say that since Scripture doesn’t explicitly authorize such a celebration, Christians shouldn’t participate. But such logic carried consistently would prohibit myriads of other modern church practices, including Thanksgiving. Others will try to appeal to Old Testament Scriptural passages that talk about cutting down wood for worship (Jeremiah 10.2-5; Isaiah 40.19-20; 44.14-17) to demonstrate that the Christmas tree is idolatrous and forbidden by God. However, even a cursory study of these passages will show that they forbid idolatry and not other legitimate uses of trees. Still others will cite the historical roots sketched above and insist that there is nothing Christian about Christmas. But anything neutral or good can be distorted and used by Satan for evil. This does not necessarily corrupt the activity itself.

After careful study and consideration, believers can use the following conclusions to help guide their attitudes toward Christmas:

- 1. There is nothing “holy” about Christmas.** Colossians 2.16-17 is clear that it is wrong to insist upon observing a particular religious festival. There is no Scriptural command to remember the birth of Christ, and if someone decides not to participate in Christmas activities, he is not disobeying Scripture. Furthermore, Christians should be careful not to view celebrating Christmas as a prescribed religious duty or a necessity for holiness.

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<sup>1</sup> Many have ascribed the poem to an Episcopal minister and theology professor, Clement Clarke Moore. Recent literary investigation, however, has revealed that it is more likely that Moore took credit for the poem for its financial profit (he didn’t claim authorship until the poem was well-published) and that the poem was actually written by Henry Livingston Jr. See “Yes, Virginia, There Was a Santa Claus” in Don Foster, *Author Unknown: On the Trail of Anonymous* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2000) p. 222.

Believers have cause for concern regarding the increasing secularism of modern society, but they must be careful not to make too much of “putting Christ back in Christmas” as a biblical obligation.

2. **The general celebration of Christmas began innocently, but developed into something displeasing to the Lord.** History is clear that the pagan religious festivals connected to the winter solstice feasts and the raucous drunken orgies tied to the attempt to “spiritualize” the celebrations were certainly sinful and displeasing to God.
3. **The modern “re-invented” Christmas is significantly disconnected from its historical antecedents.** While certain historical roots of Christmas were certainly corrupt, the motives behind the season’s “re-invention” and the subsequent outcome were wholesome and good. Sentiments of giving and peace that abound even among believers during this time of year are a clear demonstration of the common grace of God.
4. **Christians should guard against the rampant commercialism and greed that dominates the modern Christmas season.** Unfortunately the vices of a culture driven by mass media and commercialism have slowly eclipsed much of the good that the season has to offer. Believers must not allow themselves and their families to be overcome with greed and materialism through the influence of pop culture.
5. **The Christmas season can be a wonderful time for remembering Christ’s birth and the reason for His coming.** While there is no explicit biblical command to celebrate the birth of Christ, there is certainly nothing wrong with doing so. In fact, much profit can come from it. Christmas can be a time to refocus one’s mind on Christ and the reason for His coming. The Christmas season can also be a ripe time for evangelistic opportunities.
6. **The Christmas season can be a wonderful time to encourage family closeness and to foster wholesome family traditions.** Even unbelievers recognize the wholesome family sentiments of the Christmas season. This time of year is a wonderful time for relaxation and enjoyment with family members. Establishing family or church traditions during the season is a profitable exercise.
7. **The celebration of is an issue of legitimate Christian liberty.** Christians should look to the principles of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8-10 when deciding how they will participate in Christmas customs. Every believer must be convinced in his own mind (Romans 14.5). Christians must not judge others who come to different conclusions on the matter (Romans 14.3, 4, 13). There is nothing inherently wrong with celebrating Christmas or a tree, presents, Santa Claus, or other traditions. Any one of them could be used for evil, but a person’s attitude and motives in their use determines their value.

Therefore, a believer can legitimately decide to do away with any observation of Christmas, or he can limit his observation to explicitly “religious” activities, or he could participate in all or some of the Christmas traditions and use them for wholesome purposes. Whatever one decides, he must not judge others who come to different conclusions.