

Christmas: The Never Ending Struggle

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This time of year, many are thinking of the holiday season, the Christmas parties, the family meals, the shopping, or the good cheer. This season is the biggest season for retail, travel, and commerce. If you are like me, you believe that this is your favorite time of year. Andy Williams believes that this is the “most wonderful time of the year,” and I agree. The Christmas story is almost 1700 years old.



Not 2000, but 1700 years. I am not referring to the story of the manger, the shepherds, or the birth of Jesus. I am referring to the holiday Christmas, the Feast of the Nativity, or the Christ mass. When we turn to the Bible we may find differing stories than those we see on the television, but we also find that God did not command us to celebrate Christmas. The early church over 2000 years ago had no account of this celebration. Why celebrate? Why mention this day? Why care?

The Feast of the Nativity was not mentioned in early church literature until the middle or end of the fourth century. Before that time December 24-25 served a different purpose. In 274 AD the Roman emperor, Aurelian, chose December 25 as the day of the sun God. This became a Roman holiday throughout the empire. During Dec. 17-24 a special feast was also celebrated called the Saturnalia. During this week masters served their slaves, officials waited on peasants, presents were given, and feasting was the norm. Tertullian, the bishop of Carthage, wrote that some cities sacrificed children to Saturn. Saturn was the God, also known as Kronos, who ate his children. At the beginning of the fourth century paganism would have been at its peak during this month.

December 25 was also the birthday of the Persian god Mithras. Mithras was an ancient *PBR rodeo cowboy*. He killed a bull and later became a god to the Persians. His religion, Mithraism, spread to the Roman Empire and he was extremely popular among Roman soldiers. During the second century Mithraism was considered to be the largest religion in the Empire.

What did the church do? How did they reach their members, new converts, or those waiting to be initiated into the faith? It seems that the Feast of Nativity was introduced to keep the Christians in the empire from falling into paganism. Early church writers knew that Jesus was not born in December, but they chose this date to celebrate the child, rather than sacrifice the child. They celebrated the birth of Jesus rather than



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Mithraism. They chose to worship the light rather than the sun. Notice—Christmas was never a pagan holiday. It was a confrontation of paganism.

By the third century Christianity outgrew Mithraism and became the largest religion in the Roman Empire. The Christ mass was a method of evangelism and a way to retain Christmas from the sin of paganism. Christianity confronted other religions and seized December 25 and the surrounding days. **The church used Christmas to guide the lost to Jesus.**

This zeal was taken to other countries. Between the fourth and twelfth centuries men took the gospel into Europe and the Feast of the Nativity to December 25. The church spread to the northern countries by men such as: Patrick in Ireland (461 AD), Augustine of Canterbury in England (604 AD), Boniface in Germany (754 AD), Columban and Gall in Switzerland (615, 646 AD), Ansgar in Scandinavia (865 AD), Cyril and Methodius in the Slavic countries (869, 885 AD), and Adalbert in Hungary (997 AD). These men brought the Feast to pagan cultures, which worshiped the winter solstice with their various traditions. It is written that Augustine baptized over 10,000 Britons on Christmas day in 598 AD. The evangelistic zeal that was associated with December 25 was outstanding. Many were baptized on this day as the church used the Christ mass to win the masses.

As this day flourished, in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, cultures brought their own traditions to the celebration. The lights from the Irish, the tree from the Germans, and the greenery from England all displayed their cultural and religious beliefs. In the home this celebration became a time of feasting and folly. December was the time of slaughter, rest from the harvest, and the time of drinking, sex, carousing, and over eating. The month began to resemble less of Christ and more of the flesh.

In Europe the church reacted to this injustice. The churches of the Reformation changed the Christ mass to a service of prayer and sermons. The church used Christmas to control the lost. Christmas was less a celebration and more a discipline. Instruction and personal piety were emphasized. Because of this, Christmas was driven into the homes to be celebrated. In the home the immoralities and traditions continued in spite of religion. The Puritans in England reacted to this “debauchery”. In the early sixteenth century pamphlets were distributed to warn of the evils of Christmas. In 1642 the churches were not allowed to hold services on December 25. By 1644 the church deemed the day as a day of fasting and penance. On June 3, 1647 Parliament stated:



...no observance shall be had on the fifth and twentieth day of December, commonly called Christmas day; nor any solemnity used or exercised in churches in respect thereof.

Churches or people celebrating this day would suffer punishment for disobeying a direct order from the courts. Anglican ministers were removed from preaching if they broke this law.

In America the Puritans continued this persecution of the day. On December 25 businesses were expected to stay open, some even working earlier to keep people

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out of church services. Schools were in session on Christmas day. The immigrants came and brought their Christmas traditions to the colonies but the day was again driven into the homes. The church tried to remove Christmas from the hearts of the people but the season continued to be a time of debauchery. Christmas had become a “pagan holiday” because the churches neglected the day.

Many of our American traditions have come from this period. Our feasting is from the continual feasting that occurred during December from the slaughter, aged drink, and rest from harvest. Caroling and wassailing were forms of harassment that the poor did to the rich. Gangs of young men would enter the homes of the rich to demand money, drink, or food. One example that we have is from a popular carol.

Now bring us a figgy pudding and bring it out now!

We won't go until we get some so bring it our now!

If you give to us, we will bring you good tidings and cheer! Christmas bonuses were given to insure that the poor and common workers would not turn on you during the year.

During this period there were a high amount of births in September and October to young couples married only a few months. During long nights of December men raped women or carried off young women to enjoy a night of passion and later married them. Sex and feasting became signs of uncontrolled behavior that was thought to be festive and joyful during the “Christmas Holidays”. “’Tis the season to be jolly” was a popular slogan. The church continued to speak out against this abuse of the day, but to no avail. Christmas had been driven into the home to be celebrated according to the individual. Christmas had lost its form of paganism and gained a new form, debauchery and immorality.

Slowly the preachers and church officials stopped condemning the day and began to allow the religious celebration to continue. This time the church encouraged the people to attend church and return to the “true meaning of Christmas”. Prayer, religious worship, and devotions were given to help the people honor the Christ, rather than degrade Him. Christmas became a time of Christian celebration and reflection. It was never meant to be in the hands of the pagans, but a day to oppose their practices. Slowly the abuses subsided and **the church again used Christmas to guide the lost to Jesus.**

Clement Clarke Moore’s poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas,” otherwise known as “’Twas the Night Before Christmas.” Changed the role of the poor man in the rich man’s home. The peddler opened his pack and gave gifts to all. The rich homeowner had nothing to fear, because the visitor came to give rather than receive. Christmas became a time to give, not demand. Christmas was about gifts, not threats. The department stores capitalized on this theme. At Christmas many of the stores became more elaborate than the churches and cathedrals. In 1920 Gimbel’s, in Philadelphia, placed Santa Clause at the head of the Thanksgiving parade. In 1939 Thanksgiving was moved from Nov. 30 to the twenty-third. This gave six extra shopping days,



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according to Chicago's Marshall Field and Company. By 1941 Thanksgiving was moved to the fourth Thursday of November to ensure at least four shopping weeks before Christmas. Since then Christmas has become more about commercialism and materialism.

Today we pump thirty-seven billion dollars a year into our economy during December. Christmas shopping accounts for fifty percent of all retail sales. Christmas is not about idolatry or debauchery it is about possessions. Getting is not the problem, buying becomes the problem. There may be people here today who, on December 26, will wonder how they will pay for the presents. Some will work overtime to buy everyone what they want. Some may be working overtime now to put a dent in the credit card bills. Some may be worried about getting everyone everything. In the last few years Lori and I have handed out toys to area citizens. We heard the same sentiments, "now my kids can have a good Christmas." A good Christmas is no longer measured by evangelism, baptisms, or devotions; it is measured by how many, what kind, or in a word . . . greed. Christmas has taken on a new paganism, which it was never meant to do.

In Luke 1:46-55, Mary rejoices in her pregnancy and praises God. The song tells us something about God. First, Mary tells us how God is acting in her life. God has lifted up this humble woman (1:48,52). God is doing mighty things for her, even though she is an insignificant part of her society (1:48). Because of God's hand many generations will call Mary blessed. Mary is excited because the Almighty God is giving her a purpose and hope in life. Her life has meaning. This is why she says that God's name is holy and His mercy endures. For Mary, God's mercy is enough. For Mary, God has always lifted up the oppressed and weak. For Mary, the birth of Jesus will be about victory to the poor, humble, and outcast.



Second, Mary tells how God has acted in the life of her people. Throughout Israel's history God has protected them, lifted them up, and fed them. God has attacked their enemies. Since God keeps promises to Abraham, God is remembered as the author of mercy. God has continued to show mercy, power, faithfulness, and justice. Mary tells us that God has always been faithful, merciful, and lifted up those who responded in love. When Jesus was born, the angel told the shepherds (who were the rogues of society) that the Savior was a sign to them (2:11-13). Outcasts without hope, peace, and salvation saw the birth of Jesus. He is a sign to them that they could have hope, peace, and salvation.

These are stories about victory, hope, and vindication. God is on the side of the children. When they walk with and follow God's direction they receive mercy. No matter who we are, from where we've come, or what we have done—our love is great because God is merciful to us. Jesus is the great "Emmanuel" (God is with us) and a reminder of God's mercy. The sacrifice of the Son and King Jesus, is a reminder that God is loyal and stands with us. It is God's nature to be merciful. It is God's nature to be faithful. It is God's nature to be holy. **God is seeking to guide the lost into an eternal kingdom.**

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Isn't this what Christmas was all about? Wasn't it about feeding the poor, giving gifts to the poor (before Nicolas became a "saint" in a red suit), doing good things for people? Weren't the origins of the day about helping people stay faithful to God? Wasn't the day about honoring and praising God for His Son rather than expecting our entire Christmas list? Was it about *debt or freedom*? Was it about the *free gifts or family*? Was it about *joy or a toy*? Was it about *materials or the Messiah*? Mary said that God sends the rich away empty but fills the hungry. What happens to us this time of year? Is **Christmas a day to guide others further into the kingdom** or a day to guide others into *debt and greed*. Are our children hearing about *merchants or mercy*? Is Christmas a day to confront paganism or ignore it (and hope it goes away)?

The battle for Christmas lives on even today. We are constantly tempted to buy or charge what we think we need, all in the name of Christmas. We slave away for 11 months trying to pay off the Christmas debts because we can't say "NO". Christmas is no longer about the Savior; it is about Santa and the savings. Christmas is not about the manger; it is about marketing and materialism. Christmas is not about God, is about gifts and getting. The little drummer boy now has to take his no hassles credit card and charge a brand new Peavy drum system. Why? Because his little drum is not enough for the baby Jesus.

I appeal to you in the name of Christ. I appeal to you in the name of a church made or man-made holiday. No matter what happened in the world this day was always alive in the home. Return to your homes and teach you children what Christmas is really about. If you can't afford all the presents return some of them and pay your bills. Maybe you can adopt a family from the abuse shelter or neighborhood and give them some of the presents. Instead of working the extra overtime, spend that time with your family. Rent a Christmas movie or one of our "Jesus" videos and eat pizza together. Talk about enjoying the life God has given us. Go to the nursing home and visit Uncle Joe or Aunt Bessie and really listen to them. Get together with family and talk about each other, not each other's gifts. Teach each other that Christmas is about people, enjoying what we have, and reflecting about God.

One year my son Nathan asked Santa for two presents and Santa said, "Is that all you want?" Nathan said, "yep that's it." I told Nathan he was supposed to ask Santa for a bunch of presents. Isn't it sad when an adult is greedier than a child? What if we restored that evangelistic zeal to the day and tried to bring folks to church each Sunday? What if we had a baptism on December 25, like the ancient missionaries?

Christmas was never a pagan holiday. It will always be a battleground for hearts and a time to ask, "How can we, the church, use Christmas to guide the world and our children closer to Jesus?"

Merry Christmas

