

Christmas

Origin, traditions, and the
Bible



“St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City holds a special Christmas service each year. Christian churches of all denominations feature seasonal decorations and singing during Christmastime, while some also perform dramatizations of the biblical story of Christ’s birth”

What is Christmas?

- “December 25th, a holiday celebrated by Christians as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus” (AHD 271).
- “Christmastide” and “Epiphany.”
- “In addition to being a religious holiday, Christmas is a widely observed secular (not specifically pertaining to religion or to a religious body) festival. For most people who celebrate Christmas, the holiday season is characterized by gatherings among family and friends, feasting, and gift giving” (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia)

Christmas today according to Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

- A religious festival celebrating the birth of Christ.
- A non-religious holiday – a time when family and friends gather together to spend time together and exchange gifts.

The Origins of Christmas

- “Historians are unsure exactly when Christians first began celebrating the Nativity of Christ” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).

Christmas: Traditional Beginning

- Roman festival during the “winter solstice” where the pagans celebrated the mythical god Saturn (the god of Agriculture) for seven days. The Romans cancelled business, exchanged gifts, halted wars, and temporarily released prisoners. Additionally, the winter solstice meant the lengthening of daylight and so they would give honor and worship the ancient Persian god of light Mithra.
- [4th Century] Seeing that Jesus is the true “light of the world,” the Roman Catholic church took this pagan concept and turned it into a religious day (marking the birth of Jesus).

Christmas Traditions

Mistletoe

- “Ancient Europeans believed that the mistletoe plant held magic powers to bestow life and fertility, to bring about peace, and to protect against disease...”
- “Northern Europeans associated the plant with the Norse goddess of love, Freya, and developed the custom of kissing underneath mistletoe branches. Christians incorporated this custom into their Christmas celebrations, and kissing under a mistletoe branch eventually became a part of secular Christmas tradition” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

Santa Claus (Saint Nicolas)

- “The Dutch Saint Nicholas, or Sinter Klaas, is the immediate forebear of the North American Santa Claus. According to legend, Sinter Klaas makes his rounds on December 5, Saint Nicholas's Eve. He is sometimes said to be accompanied by a figure named Black Peter, who carries a whip with which to chastise naughty children. Here, dressed in a bishop's robes, Sinter Klaas rides through the streets distributing sweets to the children” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).



Santa Clause in America

- The tradition of Santa Clause was first brought to America in 1823 when a New York newspaper published an article written by Clement Moore on the European tradition of Saint Nicolas. Clement added to the legend of Santa from his own imagination.

The morphing of Santa



Christmas Trees

Traced back to the 15th century:
“According to **legend**, the Christmas tree **tradition** began with the founder of German Protestantism, Martin Luther. While walking through the forest on Christmas Eve, Luther was so moved by the beauty of the starlit fir trees that he brought one indoors and decorated it with candles to remind his children of God’s creation” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).



Jeremiah 10:1-5

- “Some Christians feel that the practice of having "Christmas Trees" is prohibited by the [Book of Jeremiah](#) 10:1-5 which says, "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." KJV" (<http://en.wikipedia.org>).

Christmas Cards

- “In 1843 English illustrator John Callcott Horsley created the first modern Christmas card. The card depicted a family celebration and its caption read, “A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to You.”
- “In the United States, German-born printer Louis Prang made advances in color lithography that enabled him to mass-produce a colorful Christmas card in 1875. The card sold extremely well, and soon the custom of exchanging Christmas cards spread throughout the country” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002.

Interesting Christmas traditions around the world

- **Italy:** “Italian children wait for La Befana, a good witch who rides her broom to their homes on Epiphany to distribute gifts. According to folk belief, La Befana—whose name refers to the word Epifania (Epiphany)—was too busy to accompany the Three Wise Men on their journey to visit the infant Jesus in Bethlehem. Now, to atone for her failing, she visits all good children, leaving treats. She also visits bad children and leaves them lumps of coal or bags of ash” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).

Interesting Christmas traditions around the world

- **Mexico:** “Although some Mexican children hope for a visit from Santa Claus, many wait to receive gifts on Christmas Eve from Quetzalcoatl, a Toltec and Aztec god and the legendary ruler of Mexico (see Aztec Empire). In addition, many children write letters to the Christ child, listing the gifts they hope to receive. On the night before Epiphany, they place their shoes at the foot of their beds for the Three Wise Men to fill with presents” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).

Christmas: A History of Revelry

- During the 16th century the reformation Protestant church challenged the Catholic Church on its long standing tradition of celebrating Christmas with its pagan revelry.
- “For a brief time during the 17th century, Puritans banned Christmas in England and in some English colonies in North America because they felt it had become a season best known for gambling, flamboyant public behavior, and overindulgence in food and drink” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).
- “Among some groups, Christmas was an especially boisterous event, characterized by huge feasts, drunkenness, and raucous public revelry. In an English tradition that survived in some parts of North America, Christmas revelers would dress in costume and progress from door to door to receive gifts of food and drink. Most holiday gifts were limited to small amounts of money and modest presents passed from the wealthy to the poor and from masters to their servants” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).
- During the 19th century Christmas came to be more of a family holiday of exchanging gifts and spending time with the family. “Giving gifts to children and loved ones eventually replaced the raucous public celebrations of the past, and Christmas became primarily a domestic holiday” (Microsoft® Encarta®).
- Gift giving came so wide spread during this time that many consumers began to complain that Christ had been taken out of Christmas and the holiday totally secularized.

The Bible and Christmas

- “The Bible provides no guidelines that explain how Christmas should be observed, nor does it even suggest that it should be considered a religious holiday. Because of the lack of biblical instructions, Christmas rituals have been shaped by the religious and popular **traditions of each culture** that celebrates the holiday. Traditionally, the sacred Christmas season starts with Advent, which begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas and continues to Christmas Day. The sacred season ends on Epiphany, January 6. During Advent, Christians make preparations for the commemoration of Jesus’ birth on December 25, and also look forward to the Second Coming of Christ. Each of the four weeks symbolizes a different way in which believers perceive Christ: through the flesh, the Holy Spirit, death, and Christ’s judgment of the dead. The Advent wreath, which consists of four candles anchored in a circle of evergreen branches, originated with German Lutherans; the tradition has been adopted by many churches and families. At the beginning of each of the four weeks preceding Christmas, Christians light an Advent candle as they say a prayer” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002).

Consider Galatians 4:8-11

- *“Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labor upon you in vain”*
- A case in point (cf. Gal. 2:1-5).
- God has authorized specific acts of worship (cf. Jn. 4:23).

Conclusion

- When we make our traditions matters of faith we sin (cf. Matt. 15:1-9).
- Where is the scripture that commands the worship of Jesus' birthday on Dec. 25?
- Is there sin in participating in traditions? (i.e., a yearly get together of family to have a "thanks giving" meal... An annual gathering to run a race in Dallas... giving your wife flowers on Valentines day... wearing green on St. Patrick's Day... what about mother's and father's day...
- The sin occurs when I bind my traditions on others as a matter of faith (cf. Matt. 15:1ff; II Cor. 2:17).