

# Christmas

## Introduction:

The following lesson is intended to be informative. We shall answer the question of Christmas, its origin, its tradition, and finally examine what the Bible has to say about it. Is Jesus the true reason for the season? To most of us today, Christmas is a time for watching movie classics (ex. "It's a Wonderful Life), watching football, eating some great food, and being with family. Others; however, view Christmas as a time to reflect and celebrate the birthday of Jesus. The purpose of this study will thereby be to find what the Christian's disposition toward Christmas should be.

## I. Two views of Christmas; Spiritual and Non-spiritual:

- A. **Spiritual:** "December 25, a holiday celebrated by Christians as the anniversary of the birth of Jesus" (AHD 271). While most protestant and Catholic Church members celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>, the Orthodox Church celebrates the 12 days of Christmas (Christmastide) from December 25<sup>th</sup> to January 6<sup>th</sup> (Epiphany). Some religious people sing the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" in connection with the 12 days leading up to Epiphany. Epiphany traditionally celebrates the arrival of the three wise men who gave Jesus gifts and the anniversary of Jesus' baptism. Some believe that Epiphany is in connection with the first miracle at Cana that Jesus performed (turned water into wine).
- B. **Non-spiritual:** "In addition to being a religious holiday, Christmas is a widely observed secular (not specifically pertaining to religion or to a religious body ex. Secular music) 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 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

## II. The origins of Christmas:

- A. "Historians are unsure exactly when Christians first began celebrating the Nativity of Christ" (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).
- B. Traditionally, it is believed that Christmas had its origins in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Romans had a Pagan holiday termed "solstice" where they celebrated the astronomy fact when the sun was at its furthest point from the Earth's equator (around December 22-25 for the winter solstice). The Romans would feast for seven days in celebration of Saturn (the god of agriculture), i.e., the festival of Saturnalia, and end at the winter solstice (~ December 25). During this time, the Romans cancelled business, exchanged gifts, halted wars, and temporarily released prisoners. In the Roman world the winter solstice meant the lengthening of daylight and so they would give honor and worship to the ancient Persian god of **light** Mithra.
- C. The Roman Catholic church (~ 4 AD) took this pagan day and turned it into a religious day (marking the birth of Jesus Christ who is the **light** of the world).

- D. At the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, the Orthodox church also began celebrating Christmas; however, they stressed January 6 as a more important holiday because it marked the baptism of Jesus.

### III. Traditions associated with Christmas:

#### A. Mistletoe:

1. “Ancient Europeans believed that the mistletoe plant held magic powers to bestow life and fertility, to bring about peace, and to protect against disease...
2. “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).

#### B. Santa Clause (alias Saint Nicolas):

1. 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. Cement added sleighs and reindeer to the story.
2. “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 chastize naughty children. Here, dressed in a bishop's robes, Sinter Klaas rides through the streets distributing sweets to the children” Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.



Pic of Santa Clause found at <http://en.wikipedia.org>

3. Santa Claus morphed into a jolly large fellow that distributes gifts on Christmas Eve.

#### C. Christmas Tree:

1. Traced back to the 15<sup>th</sup> 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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

2. "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>).



Pic of Christmas tree  
found at  
[:http://en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)

**3.**  
**D. Christmas Cards:**

1. "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."
2. 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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

- E. Interesting notes: 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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).
- F. 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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

#### **IV. Christmas’ history of revelry:**

- A. During the 16<sup>th</sup> century the reformation Protestant church challenged the Catholic Church on its long standing tradition of celebrating Christmas with its pagan revelry.
- B. “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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).
- C. “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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).
- D. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christmas came to be more of a family holiday of exchanging gifts and 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® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved). 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.

#### **V. The Bible and Christmas:**

- A. Was Jeremiah speaking out against Christmas trees at chapter 10? Was Matthew and Luke telling the story of Christmas at Matt. 2:1-2; Lk. 2?

- B.** “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. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).
- C.** Consider what the apostle Paul said at Galatians *“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”* (4:10-11).
1. We see here how far the Galatians had gone in following the Judiazers’ teachings. They were observing days, months and so forth. Apparently the Galatians were keeping the Sabbath, Feast of Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles, etc. in a way of worship to Jehovah.
  2. There is a great lesson on worship here. God has revealed His **pattern for New Testament worship** (cf. Jn. 4:23). Worship included singing (Eph. 5:19), praying (I Tim. 2:8), preaching the gospel message (Acts 20:7ff), partaking of the LS (I Cor. 11:23ff), and giving of our means (I Cor. 16:1ff). To add the above mentioned days, months, or certain foods to God’s prescribed worship would be sinful. Likewise if one were to add to Jehovah’s worship **Christmas** or Easter it would be sinful. If one wanted to participate in Christmas and Easter in a non-religious way (i.e., exchange gifts and hunt Easter eggs), then no sin would be found. When one follows circumcision for medical reasons no sin has occurred (cf. Gal. 2:3ff; I Cor. 7:19). When the conscience brother who desires to worship God by means not delivered in scriptures and imposes this worship on others he sins.
  3. Due to the Galatians’ religious participation in these Jewish practices Paul exclaimed, *“I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labor upon you in vain.”* To go back to the system that enslaves is to make void Paul’s work of preaching. Note that Paul experienced *“fear”* likely in the form of anxiety. Paul wanted those to whom he preached to remain faithful for their soul’s sake. He experienced anxiety over those who did not remain faithful (cf. II Cor. 11:28).
  4. The Christian today who seeks to worship the Lord on the first day of the week with a “Christmas service” for the purpose of “celebrating the birth of Christ” has greatly erred. Paul explained to the Roman brethren that if one so desires to

set aside a day in the week for prayer and that man feels convicted to do so let him so do. One sins; however, when imposing upon others things that are not commanded in God's word.

5. The individuals who lay claims to Jesus' birth date as a day of worship and then demand that all else follow their lead have greatly erred in the traditions of men. We cannot introduce into worship that which God has not authorized.

## Conclusion:

There will be thousands assembling this Christmas holiday season to remember the birth of Jesus. The picture below is taken from the Encarta Encyclopedia with the following caption:



“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” (Microsoft® Encarta® Encyclopedia 2002. © 1993-2001 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved).

Should the Christian worship in such an assembly? No. God has authorized what He so desires in our worship service. Shall I decorate a tree, watch Santa Clause movies on television, kiss under the mistletoe, listen to Christmas Carols, and or send Christmas cards to friends? According to Galatians 4:10-11 and Romans 14 it is apparent that the Christian may participate in any events so long as he or she does not introduce spirituality into an area that God did not. The brethren in Colossi apparently had this issue with ascetics (cf. Col. 2:20ff).

The thing to do around the Christmas season is to stay away from decorations, songs, and cards that turn Christmas into something that God never authorized (i.e., religious). As long as Christmas remains a “tradition” (like giving flowers at valentines day, celebrating mother’s and father’s day, etc.) all is well. When we begin to bind spiritual matters, such as Christmas, upon others as though it were a divinely appointed spiritual time God is not pleased (read Matt. 15:1ff).