Is Christmas Necessary?

Christians have had to respond to the customs of the surrounding culture since the beginning of the church. In the end, though, Jerry Solomon wrote that Christmas is necessary only in terms of its historical and theological content.

This article is also available in Spanish.

What do you think of when you hear the word "Christmas"? Frantic shopping? Family traditions? A commemoration of the birth of Jesus? Or a combination of all these responses and more? If you've been living in the United States long, you probably find it difficult to focus on just one without the others. And if you're a Christian you probably want to focus on the birth of Jesus, but you spend a great deal of your December on shopping and traditions. Then you may finish "The Season," as it has come to be known, feeling guilty because you didn't focus on Jesus as the "Reason for the Season." You may even want to ask if the season is really necessary, because you're exhausted, broke, and relieved when it's over for another year.



So we want to ask, "Is Christmas necessary?"

In order to address this question we will focus first on a history of the celebration and its accompanying customs. Then we will concentrate on whether economics, traditions, or theology make it necessary.

A Brief History of Christmas

The very early church has not left us with any indication that Christmas was a part of their yearly calendar. Certainly the

New Testament doesn't include such an emphasis. Philip Schaff, a church historian, offers three reasons for this.

> In the first place, no corresponding festival was presented by the Old Testament, as in the case of Easter and Pentecost. In the second place, the day and month of the birth of Christ are nowhere stated in the gospel history, and cannot be certainly determined. Again: the church lingered first of all about the death and resurrection of Christ, the completed fact of redemption, and made this the center of the weekly worship and the church year. Finally: the earlier feast of Epiphany…afforded a substitute. The artistic religious impulse, however, which produced the whole church year, must sooner or later have called into existence a festival which forms the groundwork of all other annual festivals in honor of Christ.{1}

So the Christmas celebration appeared comparatively late in church history. And it appeared as the result of a change in the ways Christians dealt with their surrounding culture. In order to see the progression of this change, it will be helpful if we consider early pagan festivals that were eventually transformed by the church.

Some scholars assert that the earliest precursor of the Christmas celebration can be found within a Persian religion that influenced Roman life.

One of the great festivals of ancient Rome was related to the winter solstice, celebrated on December 25 as the Natal Day of the Unconquerable Sun and tied to the Persian religion of Mithraism, one of Christianity's early rivals. The church took over this day to turn the attention of Christians from the old heathen festival to the celebration of the "sun of righteousness."{2}

It is especially interesting to note that the mythological god Mithra, for whom Mithraism was named, "is described as being

born from a rock, the birth being witnessed by shepherds on a day (December 25) that was later claimed by Christians as the nativity of Christ."{3}

Actually "the Christmas festival was probably the Christian transformation or regeneration of a series of kindred heathen festivals…which were kept in Rome in the month of December, in commemoration of the golden age of universal freedom and equality, and in honor of the unconquered sun, and which were great holidays, especially for slaves and children."{4} Our contemporary struggle with how to react to Halloween may be similar to the struggle the early church had with Christmas. In particular, they had to decide if they should and would celebrate the birth of Christ. Then the question was, when would this celebration take place? Their answers are instructive for us today.

Schaff describes this regeneration of heathen festivals in light of the cultural changes that began to affect the church:

> Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidness of opposition between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen. Besides, there lurked in those pagan festivals themselves, in spite of all their sensual abuses, a deep meaning and an adaptation to a real want; they might be called unconscious prophecies of the Christmas feast.{5}

Frank Gaebelein informs us that before Christmas was recognized in the West another festival was prominent among Christians in the East.

> The earliest reference to December 25 as the date for the Nativity occurs in the Philocalian calendar, which refers to its Roman observance in A.D. 336. But recognition of

> December 25 [in the West] had been preceded by that of another date—January 6 [in the East], when Epiphany was celebrated first in relation to the baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan and later in relation to the coming of the wise men, or Magi, to worship the infant Jesus.{6}

When the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity he sanctioned the "Christianizing" of various pagan emphases. So he was probably influential "in the institution of a Christian feast of the birthday of the Sun of Righteousness' (Malachi 4:2) as a rival to the popular pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) at the winter solstice."{7} But it is helpful to know that his understanding of Christian doctrine was such that he "was not aware of any mutual exclusiveness between Christianity and his faith in the Unconquered Sun."{8}

So from the era of Constantine (306-337) onward, Christmas (from the Old English Cristes Maesse, "Christ's Mass") was gradually included in Western culture. By the time of the Reformation most leaders, including Martin Luther, "were for the abolition of all feast days, except Sunday; but the…long habits of the people were against such a radical reform."{9} "During Cromwell's time in seventeenth-century England [Christmas] was banned by Parliament, and in old New England the celebration of Christmas was officially forbidden."{10} Now, of course, almost a quarter of each year is devoted to the celebration of Christmas in American culture. And as we will see, a variety of customs emphasize many facets of the season.

Should this history make us uneasy? Should we consider disbanding the Christmas season? Obviously some have answered, "Yes!" to these questions in the past and present. But perhaps the wiser response is to give heed to the long traditions of the church and decide if those traditions have a legitimate end. Then we are challenged to decide if we are to isolate ourselves from our culture, become like our culture, or

transform our culture. At the present time it appears that we should reevaluate what it may mean to transform the Christmas season for the glory of God.

Customs

The Christmas season includes many customs we take for granted. Where, when, and how did these customs come to have a place in the Christmas celebration? Their origination probably will surprise you.

Merriment and Gifts

"The merriment and giving of gifts, especially to children, may reflect the Roman Saturnalia."{11} During this festival the Romans honored "the god of agriculture by engaging in much eating, drinking, visiting, masked reveling and notorious celebrations on the streets. Courts closed, and no one was convicted of a crime. Gambling was legal. Slaves dressed as their masters and were served by them. A mock king was chosen. Gifts were exchanged, at first simple wax candles or clay dolls."{12}

Greenery and Lights

"As for the use of greenery and lights, this goes back to the celebration of the Kalends of January in ancient Rome."{13} Kalends was a celebration of the Roman new year. People gave each other gifts of green boughs, "honeyed things," lamps for light and warmth, and silver and gold objects. "Christians used candles symbolizing Christ as the Light of the World, seemingly a combination of Roman and Hebrew customs."{14} Druids set lighted candles on tree branches. People in the Middle Ages put lighted candles in their windows on Christmas Eve to guide the Christ child on His way. No stranger was turned away, because it could have been Christ in disguise.

Christmas Trees

“Romans trimmed trees with trinkets and toys during the Saturnalia, and put candles on them to indicate the sun’s return to earth.”{15} “Druids honored Odin by tying golden apples and other offerings to tree branches.”{16} In the eighth century, St. Boniface purportedly dedicated the fir tree to the Holy Child as a counter to the sacred oak of Odin. However, Martin Luther gets credit for the tree we are more familiar with.”{17} The Germans placed fruit, gilded nuts, gingerbread, paper roses, and glass balls on their trees. The Poles placed stars and angels. The Czechs made ornaments of painted egg shells.

Manger Scene

During the Middle Ages the manger scene was used to tell the story of Christ’s birth. St. Francis of Assisi set up a nativity outside a cave with live animals and people. In France children gather moss, stones, and greens for a nativity scene which is called a creche.

Christmas Carols

“The first Christmas hymns were written in the fifth century. Originally composed in Latin, they contained primarily theological topics. Carols (noels), songs with more human personal subjects, appeared in the 1200s. During the Middle Ages people incorporated drama and plays into the celebration of Christmas. Carols became an integral part of these reenactments. After the plays, carolers strolled down the street singing thus the birth of street caroling.”{18}

The Yule Log

The word yule refers to the feast of the nativity. Yule log refers to a large log formerly put on the hearth on Christmas eve as the foundation of the fire. Sometimes the Druids burned a Yule log to symbolically represent the removal of evil

spirits and dissention in the family at Christmas.

Mistletoe

For the Norsemen mistletoe was sacred to Frigga, goddess of love and mother of the sun god. Balder, her son, was killed by an arrow tip dipped in mistletoe. Frigga shed tears which became the mistletoe berries. Frigga would kiss everyone who passed beneath the tree. The Druids' high priest used a golden sickle to cut sacred mistletoe.

Holly

The holly plant was sacred to the Roman god Saturn. Romans gave one another holly wreaths and decked images of Saturn with it. Christians decked their homes with it. Druids believed that holly remained green so the world would be beautiful when the sacred grove lost its leaves.

Poinsettia

The poinsettia was brought to this country over one hundred years ago by Dr. Joel Poinsett, the first U.S. minister to Mexico.

Christmas Cards

The first painted Christmas card was designed by John C. Horseley in 1846. The giving of cards became a tradition in Victorian England due to the queen and Charles Dickens' story "A Christmas Carol."

Santa Claus

"A popular medieval feast was that of St. Nicholas of Myra (c. 340) on December 6, when the saint was believed to visit children with admonitions and gifts, in preparation for the gift of the Christ child at Christmas. Through the Dutch, the tradition of St. Nicholas (Sinter Klass, hence 'Santa Claus') was brought to America in their colony of New Amsterdam, now New York."{19} "Over the years the American Santa developed

many of the secular characteristics of the British Santa, 'Father Christmas,' including entering a house through the chimney and stuffing stockings hung near the chimney. This idea came from an old Norse (Scandinavian) legend. But the American Santa became better defined in the 1800s. Clement Moore in 1822 first described Santa in a fur- trimmed suit leading a sleigh pulled by reindeer in his poem, Twas the Night Before Christmas.'"{20}

Now that we have scanned the history and customs of Christmas, can we conclude that any of it is necessary in our time? We will consider economics, traditions, and history/theology as we attempt to answer this question.

Is Christmas Necessary Economically?

First, is Christmas necessary economically? C.S. Lewis, in his brusque, reasonable manner, gives us reasons to consider the question of the economic necessity of Christmas. He wrote:

> Three things go by the name of Christmas. One is a religious festival. This is important and obligatory for Christians; but as it can be of no interest to anyone else, I shall naturally say no more about it here. The second (it has complex historical connections with the first, but we needn't go into them) is a popular holiday, an occasion for merry-making and hospitality. But the third thing called Christmas is unfortunately everyone's business…I mean of course the commercial racket.

Lewis then goes on to make the following statements about the "commercial racket":

1. It gives on the whole much more pain than pleasure.
2. Most of it is involuntary.
3. Things are given as presents which no mortal ever bought for himself.
4. The nuisance.{21}

Such comments probably "ring true" for many of us. But is it realistic to attempt to eradicate what has become a major element of the economic system in this country? Helen Dunn Frame offers insights into this question:

> As to economics, we might not be "less in debt" without Christmas purchases, because…over one quarter of the year's retail business is transacted [during the Christmas season] in everything from department stores to grocery stores. Without this holiday volume, year-round prices could be higher, and fewer jobs might be available.{22}

Such reflection leaves us with a challenge. If we want to de-emphasize the commercial side of Christmas, how do we do it without upsetting the economy? Perhaps the economic gain that comes from the Christmas season can be supplanted by some other holiday or emphasis. But what would it be? Perhaps it would be overtly pagan, which would not leave us content. There seems to be no immediate answer to the dilemma the Christian faces while living in this country. I'm reminded of the slow eradication of slavery from the early church. If slavery had been eliminated immediately, it would have created chaos in the social and economic fabric. Thus there was a patient change as the church influenced the culture around it. Maybe that process can serve as a model for us.

Is Christmas Necessary Traditionally?

Second, is Christmas necessary traditionally? Most of us live with traditions. There are national traditions, family traditions, religious traditions, sports traditions, military traditions, etc., that affect our lives. Some are good; others are not-so-good. Some are stifling; others provide stability and continuity. It seems that traditions are very much a part of what it means to be human.

The Christmas season is full of traditions. When we begin to focus on Christmas at the end of each year it usually means

that we begin to give attention to the reestablishment of things passed from the previous generation to ours. A tree is put in the same place; the same decorations, most of which have a story of their own, are extracted from storage; cards are written; gifts are purchased; and we devote a great deal of energy to one particular day with the renewed hope that a sense of peace and joy will infuse us. Even if those feelings don't characterize us when the celebration is over, we still strive for them the following year. And of course it is sad that many dread Christmas because the traditions that were a part of their past cannot be restored since those who shared the traditions are no longer here to share them.

So is Christmas necessary traditionally? In order to answer this, I want to offer three comments. First, Christmas traditions can be life-enhancing or stifling portions of our lives. It is up to us to decide which they will be. Second, traditions that bring family and friends together should be positive events. The positive nature of them is up to us. Third, traditions that point to the truth of the Incarnation are reminders of God's glorious provision for us. The way we construct our traditions will either lead us towards or away from this truth.

Is Christmas Necessary Historically or Theologically?

Third, is Christmas necessary historically or theologically? Of our three questions, this is the only one that has a definite affirmative answer. Without the Incarnation there is no hope, and Christmas would be given over completely to economics and traditions devoid of Christ. Malcolm Muggeridge has written poignant phrases to describe the importance of the birth of Christ:

> Thanks to the great mercy and marvel of the Incarnation, the cosmic scene is resolved into a human drama. A human drama

> in which God reached down to relate Himself to man and man reaches up to relate himself to God. Time looks into eternity and eternity into time, making now always and always now. Everything is transformed by this sublime drama of the Incarnation, God's special parable for man in a fallen world.{23}

These profound comments lead me to consider what probably is the major fallacy of the Christmas season when Christ is not considered. That is, we attempt to "concoct" happiness and meaning without substance. As Muggeridge states, "I find myself more and more strongly aware that this is the true situation: that the hope of man, that he can create through human agency either a happy life as an individual or a satisfactory life as a collectivity, is the ultimate fantasy."{24} Christmas without the historical birth of Jesus in space and time and the theological implications of that birth leave us grasping for something that cannot be obtained.

But some level of the implications of that birth can be grasped. Let's reawaken to the awesome presence of God in human flesh! To pass through the Christmas season without thoughtful contemplation of the wonder that "God with us" is shameful. "The Eternal Being, who knows everything and who created the whole universe, became not only a man but (before that) a baby, and before that a fetus inside a Woman's body. If you want to get the hang of it, think how you would like to become a slug or a crab."{25} Consider these beautiful, penetrating phrases from the pen of Augustine:

> He it is by whom all things were made, and who was made one of all things; who is the revealer of the Father, the creator of the Mother; the Son of God by the Father without a mother, the Son of man by the Mother without a father; the Word who is God before all time, the Word made flesh at a fitting time, the maker of the sun, made under the sun; ordering all the ages from the bosom of the Father, hallowing a day of today from the womb of the Mother;

> remaining in the former, coming forth from the latter; author of the heaven and the earth, sprung under the heaven out of the earth; unutterably wise, in His wisdom a babe without utterance; filling the world, lying in a manger.{26}

C.S. Lewis contributes two memorable illustrations of the Incarnation as he considers what it means to assert that God descended to us:

> In the Christian story God descends to reascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity….But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with Him. One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders. Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in midair, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. He and it are both colored now that they have come up into the light: down below, where it lay colorless in the dark, he lost his color too.{27}

May we "break the surface" of our views of Christmas so that we can recover the precious thing that truly is Christmas: celebration of the birth of Jesus the Savior.

Conclusion

No aspect of the contemporary celebration of Christmas is necessary in an absolute sense. But there is an economic

necessity; this can be changed with great effort. Another economic emphasis could be devised at another time of the year for different reasons. There is a traditional necessity; but this can be met through other celebrations. Indeed, this need is met presently by many through other means. There is a historical/theological necessity that cannot be altered. If God had not become flesh, there would be no hope for mankind. There would be no birth of Christ, no death on our behalf, and no resurrection from death to life. Praise God He did humble Himself and become as a man!

Notes

1. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. III (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1910), 395.
2. Frank Gaebelein, "The Most Beautiful Story Ever Told," *Christianity Today* (7 December 1979):19.
3. *The New Encyclopaedia Brittanica,* Macropaedia, 4:552.
4. Schaff, 396.
5. Ibid.
6. Gaebelein, 19.
7. *The New Encyclopaedia Brittanica,* 603.
8. Owen Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1967), 126.
9. Schaff, 393.
10. Gaebelein, 19.
11. Ibid.
12. Helen Dunn Frame, "Life Without Christmas: What if they gave our holiday back to the heathens?" *The Dallas Morning News: Scene Magazine* (9 December 1979), 42.
13. Gaebelein, 19.
14. Frame, 42.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Bill Perry, *American Holidays* (Ephrata, Penn.: Multi-Language Media, 1995), 21-22.

19. *The New Encyclopaedia Brittanica*, 604.
20. Perry, 20.
21. C.S. Lewis, “What Christmas Means to Me,” *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1970), 304-305.
22. Frame, 42.
23. Malcolm Muggeridge, “Nature is a Parable,” *National Review* (24 December 1982), 1614.
24. Ibid., 1615.
25. C. S. Lewis, “The Incarnation,” *The Joyful Christian* (N.Y.: Macmillan,1977), 51.
26. Walter Elwell, “When God Came Down,” *Christianity Today* (7 December 1979), 17.
27. Lewis, “The Incarnation,” 54-55.

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