

A close-up photograph of a Christmas tree branch. The branch is covered in vibrant green needles and is adorned with several gold-colored ornaments of various sizes. A decorative ribbon with a red and gold pattern is draped across the branch. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light yellow, creating a warm and festive atmosphere.

IS
**CHRISTMAS
CHRISTIAN?**

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By Dexter B. Wakefield

We see the scene every year—decorated trees, evergreen wreaths, and bright multi-colored lights. Sometimes there is a little crèche in the corner, depicting an infant child receiving lavish gifts. Yet most of the gift-giving these days is done by debt-laden adults, trying to outdo each other in gifting children, family members, and friends with the latest style or fad.

Is this what Jesus Christ had in mind for His followers? For that matter, do these traditions have anything at all to do with the birth of Jesus Christ? People often say, “Let’s put Christ back in Christmas”—but was He ever there? Where did we get our many traditions? The answers may surprise you!

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Preface

The Reason for the Season?

Around the world, Christmas is by most measures the most popular single holiday, as well as the centerpiece of the world's largest religious tradition. Ninety-six percent of Americans who call themselves Christian say they celebrate Christmas, and even eighty-one percent of those who do *not* call themselves Christian claim to observe a Christmas holiday of some sort ("Christmas also celebrated by many non-Christians," Pew Research Center).

But what are they celebrating? Millions go into debt buying gifts to celebrate a Jesus who reminded us that we cannot serve both God and mammon. The Savior who warned against covetousness is honored, they seem to think, by the annual consumer frenzy that culminates around the Christmas tree. Every December, millions of revelers overindulge in rich foods, drink a little too much, and engage in wild behavior—in celebration of the Savior whose Sermon on the Mount praised meekness and humility.

And what about church? Almost any pastor or priest can tell you about "twice-a-year Christians" who only show up to church on Christmas and Easter.

Then again, Christmas is also a time when pious believers set up the "Christmas crèche" and reflect on the legends surrounding Christ's birth. Instead of filling their minds with the latest consumer fad or bargain-basement sale, they prefer to think of the baby Jesus in His manger, visited by Magi bearing gifts. Would these well-meaning people be shocked to learn not only that this common Christmas scene is never found in the Bible, but that the Bible itself proves a very different story than the one they have learned?

Christmas has become important to billions of people for a variety of reasons. It is fun. It is profitable. It is a way to reflect on cherished traditions. Yet there is a fundamental question that usually goes unanswered: Is Christmas Christian?

Read on, and the information in this booklet will open your eyes, change your perspective—and maybe even spur you to an even deeper and more meaningful relationship with the true Jesus Christ, beyond all the Christmas legends and traditions!

Chapter I

Why December 25?

How did Christmas originate? *Long before Jesus was born*, the season around December 25 was a birthday celebration! Christmas has a pre-Christian origin!

About that time each year, an event that was very important to ancient agrarian societies occurred, called the *winter solstice*. That event occurs when the days cease becoming shorter and begin to grow longer. The sun's arc begins to become higher in the sky each day, portending the return of springtime, which will lead to a rebirth of life to the wintry and seemingly dead earth. Cultural anthropologists note, "All over the world, for countless millennia, people have participated in a religious ritual at the winter solstice, when the sun's downward course is arrested and it turns back, as it seems, to earth. This change of state in the bleak mid-winter of the year was experienced as *the rebirth of the sun and commemorated as the birth day of the sun god, the luminous divine child*" (Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, emphasis added).

When the sun declined in the sky and the days shortened, it marked the onset of winter and the loss of productivity in the land. The shortest day of the year is the lowest point of the sun's arc in the sky. That day is called the *winter solstice*. But after that time, the sun's arc across the sky begins to increase each day, foretelling the coming of spring and a rejuvenation of the earth. The midwinter festival of the winter solstice was an important event for all sun-worshipping cul-

tures, and much mythology formed around it. Also, much celebration accompanied it.

The fact that Christmas is of pagan origin is not particularly controversial—as popular encyclopedias attest. Note what the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says about it:

Its observance as the birthday of the Saviour is attended with secular customs often drawn from pagan sources; indeed, Christmas and Epiphany, which falls 12 days later on Jan. 6, are *transformed pagan celebrations of the winter solstice*, and so closely linked that their origins cannot be discussed separately....

December 25 in Rome.—This was the date of a pagan festival in Rome, chosen in A.D. 274 by the emperor Aurelian as the birthday of the unconquered sun (*natalis solis invicti*), which at the winter solstice begins again to show an increase of light. At some point before A.D. 336 the church at Rome established the commemoration of the birthday of Christ, the sun of righteousness, on this same date....

Traditional Customs.—The traditional customs connected with Christmas have been derived from several sources as a result of the coincidence of the feast of the Nativity of Christ and the pagan agricultural and solar observances at midwinter. In the Roman world the Saturnalia (December 17–24) was a time of merry-making and exchange of presents.... But, though Christmas festivities were indirectly influenced by these customs, the fact that Christmas was celebrated on the birthday of the unconquered sun gave the season a solar background, connected with the kalends of January (Jan. 1, the Roman New Year) when houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and presents were given to children and the poor. To these solstitial observances were added Germano-Celtic yule rites when the Teutonic tribes penetrated into Gaul, Britain and Celtic Europe. Yuletide brought its own tradition of feasting and mortuary customs, to combine with Roman solstitial and transitional New Year rites.... Evergreens, as symbols of survival, have a long association with Christmas festivities, probably dating to the 8th

century when St. Boniface completed the Christianization of Germany and dedicated the fir tree to the Holy Child to replace the sacred oak of Odin (1966, vol. 5, “Christmas,” emphasis added).

Other editions of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* add the following:

The precise origin of assigning December 25 as the birth date of Jesus is unclear. The New Testament provides no clues in this regard. December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus’ birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date. One widespread explanation of the origin of this date is that December 25 was the Christianizing of the *dies solis invicti nati* (“day of the birth of the unconquered sun”), a popular holiday in the Roman Empire that celebrated the winter solstice as a symbol of the resurgence of the sun, the casting away of winter and the heralding of the rebirth of spring and summer. Indeed, after December 25 had become widely accepted as the date of Jesus’ birth, Christian writers frequently made the connection between the rebirth of the sun and the birth of the Son (“Christmas,” *Britannica.com*, December 16, 2020).

Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church.... Christmas customs are an evolution from the *times that long antedated the Christian period*—a descent from seasonal, pagan, religious and national practices, hedged about with legend and tradition....

In the south of Europe, in Egypt and Persia, the sun gods were worshipped with elaborate ceremonies at the season of the winter solstice, as a fitting time to pay tribute to the benign god of plenty, while in Rome the Saturnalia reigned for a week. In northern lands mid-December was a critical time, for the days became shorter and shorter and the sun was weak and far away. Thus these ancient people held feasts at the same period that Christmas is now observed.... Thus, the central idea of the winter solstice—the return of light—became the hope of the world in the birth of Christ, the light of the world.... When the fathers of the church in A.D. 440

decided upon a date to celebrate the event [of Christ's birth], *they wisely chose the day of the winter solstice which was firmly fixed in the minds of the people and which was their most important festival.* Because of changes in man-made calendars, the time of the solstice and the date of Christmas vary by a few days (1962, vol. 5, "Christmas," emphasis added).

Did you notice that? In 440 AD, the professing Christian authorities simply transferred an ancient pagan practice to the worship of Christ—thinking in effect that they would “Christianize” what the pagans had already been doing! *But were they “Christianizing” pagan practices or “paganizing” Christianity?*

Chapter 2

When Was Jesus Born?

At what time of the year was Jesus actually born? It might surprise you to know that it *could not* have been in late December! Luke 2:8 records that at the time Jesus was born, “there were in the same country shepherds living *out in the fields*, keeping watch over their flock by night.” This scene could not have occurred in the winter, because in the early autumn the flocks were brought in from the countryside to winter in more sheltered areas. The winters in that region are cold and wet, and sometimes snow covers the browned-off pastures. The shepherds and the sheep cannot endure the exposure to the elements all winter. Note the clear statements on this in the well-known *Adam Clarke Commentary*:

It was a custom among the Jews to send out their sheep to the deserts, about the passover, and bring them home at the commencement of the first rain: during the time they were out, the shepherds watched them night and day. As the passover occurred in the spring, and the first rain began early in the month of Marchesvan, which answers to part of our October and November, we find that the sheep were kept out in the open country during the whole of the summer. And as these shepherds had not yet brought home their flocks, it is a presumptive argument that October had not yet commenced, and that, consequently, *our Lord was not born on the 25th of*

December, when no flocks were out in the fields; nor could he have been born later than September, as the flocks were still in the fields by night. *On this very ground the nativity in December should be given up* (“Luke 2:8,” emphasis added).

If Jesus could not have been born in December, then is there any indication when He *was* born? The exact date cannot be known from Scripture, but there are strong indications that it must have been in the early autumn, around September.

Note that Jesus began His ministry around His thirtieth birthday: “Now Jesus Himself began His ministry at about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23). And the gospel accounts show that He ended His ministry after three-and-a-half years when He was crucified at Passover, which occurs in the spring of the year in late March or April. That puts the time of His birth a half-year after Passover, in the autumn around late September or early October.

Also, the timing of the birth of John the Baptist provides another confirmation of an autumn birth for Jesus.

Luke 1 tells of an important event leading up to the conception and birth of Jesus. There was a priest named Zacharias serving in the temple, who attended according to his assigned course, the course of Abijah (v. 5). Elizabeth, his wife, was a relative of Mary, Jesus’ mother. Zacharias and Elizabeth were “well advanced in years” (v. 7) and had no children. When Zacharias was serving at his particular time in the temple, the angel Gabriel appeared to him and told him that his wife would become pregnant. Their child would later be known as John the Baptist (Luke 1:13-17; Matthew 3:1-3).

Centuries earlier, King David had divided the priesthood serving the temple into a rotation of 24 courses (1 Chronicles 24:1-19). Zacharias’ course was the eighth of the 24, and corresponded to a certain time of the year—around the end of May on our calendar. The Holy Day of Pentecost occurred the week after Zacharias’ course, and he was required to serve during that time as well, as all the priests were. He was apart from his wife during his service, and the earliest he could have returned home and begotten a child was around the second week of June.

The same angel, Gabriel, was sent to Elizabeth’s relative Mary, a virgin, six months later to tell her that she would become pregnant

with the Messiah by the power of the Holy Spirit. “And the angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible’” (Luke 1:35–37).

If John the Baptist was conceived shortly after Zacharias returned home in mid-June, and Jesus was conceived six months later, that puts Jesus’ birth in mid-to-late September. At that time of the year, the flocks would still have been in the fields, as Luke 2:8 states. *Christ’s birth did not happen on the winter solstice in late December.*

Every December you hear it—“Let’s put Christ back in Christmas.” The reason that people feel the need to “put Christ in Christmas” is that He *has never been* in Christmas!

Chapter 3

Dreaming of a Commercial Christmas?

Many observers lament the “commercialization” of Christmas. Retailers even have the term “Christmas creep” to describe how the Christmas retailing season seems to begin earlier and earlier each year.

Many of us can remember when holiday decorations in the stores appeared only in December. Then the selling season began encroaching into November, and the Christmas music in the stores began around the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States. Then it moved to the week before Thanksgiving. Now we commonly see decorations and hear seasonal music in the mall around Halloween in October.

As far as the secular promotion of the Christmas holiday goes, the “reason for the season” is clear—*just “follow the money”!*

“Black Friday” is the name retailers give to the day after Thanksgiving in the U.S. and the U.K.—or “*Vendredi Noir*” in France—which occurs near the end of November. It refers to the time when retailers traditionally consider that their cash flow goes from a loss—“running red ink” during most of the year—to a profit when they say they are “in the black.” This means that most of their profits come from sales in the holiday season: *No Christmas, no profits!*

The Christmas holidays are critical to the retailing economy. Naturally, many would want to extend the buying season as long as possible. There is great financial incentive to maximize retailing activity during that period.

Christmas can be “make or break” for retailers. Each year they have to find ways to maintain or increase their sales volume during the holidays. Creative marketers find numerous ways to create a longer selling season, because it means that more of consumers’ hard-earned cash is available to buy their products. If customers have not saved throughout the year for Christmas purchases—which is the case for most people—they will likely have to finance their purchases either from their current wages or through credit card debt. So having a three-or-four-month selling season brings in more sales than marketing in December only—hence, we see what retailers call “Christmas Creep.” The holiday marketing season “creeps” into November, October, or earlier if merchants can get away with it.

One of the most important marketing tactics is to generate “Christmas spirit” in the stores and shopping districts. Initially, holiday decorations remind shoppers of the season and add to a festive feeling of involvement in it. Soon there is seasonal music—usually of a secular sort to avoid offending the non-religious—and it is a very important element in convincing shoppers to buy more and more. Crooners, some of whom are long gone, sing sentimental renditions of “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” or “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” After the selling season is over in January, most people are very relieved to escape the constant musical marketing.

Many employers give year-end bonuses, and the retailers want to capture as much of that bonus money as possible. So, many merchants have big year-end sales to clear out remaining merchandise and to take hold of that cash for themselves!

Guilt sells! Parents are made to feel that they are not good parents if their kids fail to have “a big Christmas.” A lot of sentimentality is attached to the presence, each Christmas morning, of a huge pile of presents that the givers sacrificed financially to purchase—such that the main beneficiary of that sentiment may be the merchant who sold the gifts, rather than the recipients!

Overextending financially on Christmas for emotional reasons is a common problem—as credit repair agencies know.

Credit Card Debt—“The Ghost of Christmas Past”

“What’s in the cards?” Christmas debts! Credit card debt spikes during the holidays—and then must be paid off during the rest of the

year at very high interest rates. Personal finance experts call this accumulation of expensive debt the “Holiday Debt Hangover.” Credit repair firms love it! “Consumer counseling agencies see a 25 percent increase in the number of people seeking help in January and February, and most of that traffic is propelled to their doors by holiday bills that haunt consumers like the ghost of Christmas past. ‘A lot of people get by, paying the minimums on their credit cards,’ said Durant Abernethy, president of the National Foundation for Credit Counseling. ‘Add on the holiday bills and all of a sudden, those minimums are more than they can afford’” (“Lingering Christmas Bills Can Lead to Debt Woes,” *ABCNews.Go.com*).

Credit card companies love the holiday season and the “Holiday Debt Hangover” it produces. It is extremely lucrative for them and extremely expensive for unwise holiday shoppers. There is plenty of sane advice on dealing with the problems that the holiday season creates. Jeremy Vohwinkle asks, “Does this scenario sound familiar?”

You use credit cards to do your holiday shopping, promising yourself you’ll pay the debt off within two or three months. Six or eight months later (or more), you’re still paying, and those items that seemed like such bargains end up costing you 10 to 20% more than you thought thanks to the credit card interest. For many Americans, this debt pattern is repeated year after year. Personal finance experts call this the “holiday hangover” (“Avoid a Financial Holiday Hangover This Year,” *GenXFinance.com*).

If the gift-buying of the holiday season is an economic boon to retailers and credit card companies, the months after the holidays are a veritable gold mine for *credit repair firms*. Credit repair firms do much of their business as a result of holiday credit card purchases.

Merchants’ “Christmas Creep” may make people feel that the holiday selling starts earlier and earlier each year, but the holiday season actually started far earlier than most people think. *As a matter of history, the observance of December 25 began as the birthday of the sun god, not the Son of God!*

Chapter 4

The “Ho, Ho, Hoax”

How many children have asked their parents, “Is Santa Claus real?” Did they get an honest answer?

Kids are encouraged to believe in the Santa Claus myth, but at some point they always find out that the whole story was never true. They learn that there is no immortal, bearded, stout man in a red suit, no reindeer, and no workshop at the North Pole with busy elves making toys. What they take away from that inevitable discovery is the idea that there are myths associated with their religious beliefs. Christmas, after all, is supposedly a religious festival. The Santa Claus myth is presented to an impressionable young mind as being factually true—and then the child finds out it was never factually true. Parents may even leave faked evidence of the Santa visit, such as an empty milk glass or a half-consumed soft drink. Once a child learns the truth, this introduces the idea that stories involving the supernatural are likely faked. And children do invariably learn that the Santa Claus story is a fabrication—a lie or even a complicated series of lies. Most learn this at a very early age.

David Kyle Johnson, a Professor of Philosophy at King’s College, Pennsylvania, writes on *PsychologyToday.com* that every child who believes in a real-life Santa Claus has a “big moment” when he or she realizes that it simply is not true. He reports that there are “some horrific stories about the ‘big moment’—stories that show discovering the truth about Santa is often not without consequences—every-

thing from the erosion of parental authority and trust to turning a child into an atheist.”

For example, [one boy] defended Santa’s existence in front of his whole class on the mere basis that his “mother wouldn’t lie” to him, only to read the encyclopedia entry on Santa in front of the whole class and simultaneously discover that she indeed would. When [one little girl] realized that the reason she didn’t always get what she asked Santa for was that he didn’t exist, she figured that God’s non-existence was the best explanation for why her prayers also went unanswered. I’m not saying that this happens to all kids; I am saying it’s a possibility. If you are religious, I doubt it’s a possibility you would willingly invite. Of course, if you are an atheist, you might like that the Santa lie does this (“Say Goodbye to the Santa Claus Lie”).

Of course, not all children react badly to the “big moment,” and many kids, if not most, are resilient. But doubts and skepticism learned as a child can stay on into adulthood.

No, Virginia...

On September 21, 1897, a well-known bit of Christmas lore occurred. An eight-year old girl named Virginia O’Hanlon wrote New York’s *Sun* newspaper and said, “Dear Editor: I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, ‘If you see it in The Sun it’s so.’ Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?”

She received the famous reply that read in part, “Virginia, your little friends are wrong.... Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.... Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus!... Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies!”

Fairies?

But Virginia had undoubtedly been taught by her parents *to tell the truth*, and she had asked the editor to please tell her the truth. She was asking whether there is *actually* a Santa Claus. Do you think that the answer she received was the truth? *No, Virginia, it was not the truth!* But one day, Virginia undoubtedly discovered the truth about Santa Claus—and fairies as well.

A child wonders, if a magical Santa Claus is a mythical part of the Christmas festivities, about the miraculous birth of Jesus. Did angels *really* announce it? Did the Magi *actually* come? Was there *actually* a star over Bethlehem? Is Jesus *really* a King? Will the child wonder whether all the miraculous things in the Bible are myths? When they discover the truth about Santa Claus, children are being taught the idea that religious miracles can be myths. A very regrettable feature of the Santa Claus myth is that children are told to believe it “*on faith.*” When that faith is lost, as invariably happens, this may create skepticism about faith in religious matters in the future.

In truth, Santa Claus is not coming to town, and it is best that children’s religious faith be established in things that are the truth. Jesus said that *God’s word* is truth (John 17:17).

Old Myths

Where did the modern Santa Claus myth come from? According to historians, it developed from a variety of sources over many centuries. In the fourth century AD, there actually was a Greek bishop in Myra (now modern Turkey) named Nicholas who was declared to be a saint by the Roman church. The day set aside in his honor as “St. Nicholas’ Day,” December 6, gradually became blended with the customs associated with “Christ’s Mass” (Christmas) later in the month.

For many generations before they entered the Roman Catholic church, the Germanic peoples had observed a midwinter festival called *Yule*, and as a result, many *Yuletide* traditions were absorbed into Christmas. Rome found it useful to “Christianize” many of the pagans’ former customs in order to make the pagans more amenable to Catholic evangelization. The meaning of the day might be superficially changed, but the actual practice and the time on the solar calendar remained the same.

Some of the imagery of Santa Claus that we have today likely originated with the Germanic god *Odin*, who was said to have a white beard, bring gifts, and ride through the sky. “The appearance of Santa Claus or Father Christmas, whose day is December 25, owes much to Odin, the old blue-hooded, cloaked, white-bearded Giftbringer of the north, who rode the midwinter sky on his eight-footed steed Sleipnir, visiting his people with gifts.... Odin, transformed into Father Christmas, then Santa Claus, prospered with St Nicholas and the Christchild became a

leading player on the Christmas stage” (Margaret Baker, *Discovering Christmas Customs and Folklore: A Guide to Seasonal Rites Throughout the World*). Over the centuries, a variety of sources have influenced the many variations of the Santa Claus mythology.

The *Encyclopedia Americana* notes, “On the eve of his festival day... St. Nicholas makes his tour, visiting palace and cottage.... When he is gone, the children place receptacles for the gifts which St. Nicholas is expected to let fall down the chimney” (vol. 20, p. 327). The Dutch version of the name was *Sinterklaas*, which was anglicized in America to *Santa Claus*. The English version is *Father Christmas*, which is a common version of the name in many languages, such as *Papá Noel* in Spanish and *Le Père Noël* in French. Even the Muslim Turks have their own version of Father Christmas, *Noel Baba* (“Father Noel”). But since they are mostly Muslim, to them he supposedly brings gifts on New Year’s. For Turks who profess Christianity, he is said to come on Christmas. The Santa Claus character appears in many cultures with his name translated into many languages.

The “New” Santa

The general origin of the name Santa Claus is well understood, but the *popular images* of today’s Santa Claus are quite different from those of the Germanic god Odin or the fourth-century St. Nicholas. From where does the modern image of a portly, laughing elf in a red suit come from? Mainly from three sources.

’Twas the Night Before Christmas (originally called *A Visit From St. Nicholas*) was a poem written by Clement Clark Moore, which was first published December 23, 1823 in the Troy, New York *Sentinel* newspaper. It established the imagery of a jolly, bearded elf delivering toys to tots from a sleigh pulled through the sky by reindeer. This poem became very popular and gave rise to a specific image of St. Nicholas.

Later, the words of the poem were given graphic form when cartoonist Thomas Nast drew a depiction of St. Nicholas in 1881. The famous cartoon showed a smiling, portly, white-bearded man carrying toys for kids, and it caught the public imagination.

The image was further evolved by the marketing efforts of the Coca-Cola Company, which posted ubiquitous images of a jolly, white-bearded man in a Coca-Cola-red suit happily holding up the

Is Christmas Christian?

company's product. That commercialized image—or variations of it—is used throughout the Christmas marketing season by retailers and Christmas-card makers. And it is the most common image of Santa Claus in the public mind today.

Is Santa Claus coming to your town? One could argue that in some mythical sense, he may come as the patron god of retailers. But for the child that asks, "*Please tell the truth,*" as Virginia O'Hanlon did, the answer is "*No, he won't come, in fact—and never has.*"

Chapter 5

Evergreens and Other Christmas Traditions

The use of evergreens at or around the winter solstice is found in many ancient pagan cultures, including that of the Egyptians, the Romans, and the Vikings, as well as the Druidic culture of the Celts. They are usually associated with the worship of a sun god—particularly around the time of the winter festival, which occurs in many cultures at the winter solstice, the point when the sun is at its lowest in the winter sky.

Did you know that the decoration of trees with silver and gold—in connection with a celestial event—is mentioned in the Bible? However, the reference is not a favorable one.

The prophet Jeremiah lived for many years under Babylonian rule, and saw Babylonian customs with his own eyes. Does the practice he describes sound familiar to you? Perhaps, over the years, you and your family have done almost the exact same thing in your home for Christmas as Jeremiah describes:

Thus says the LORD: “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at *the signs of heaven*, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple. They are upright, like a palm tree, and they cannot

“speak; they must be carried, because they cannot go by themselves. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor can they do any good” (Jeremiah 10:1–5).

In the Western world, the tradition of evergreen decorations around Christmas—especially the adornment of fir trees—was maintained by the Germans, who brought their custom into the English-speaking world. Indeed, any reputable historian of the period will confirm that the use of evergreen trees and holly in connection with winter solstice festivals was a tradition in place *long before the birth of Jesus Christ*.

For millennia, evergreen trees have been a symbol of returning life during the cold, winter months when it seems that all plant life dies or goes dormant. Unlike many plants, the evergreen fir tree and bushes such as holly remain green during the winter. So, it is perhaps no surprise that these hardy plants have long been used to celebrate the winter solstice and its related festivals, as they served well to symbolize the life that remains in nature even in the depths of winter. While all the foliage around them seemed to die, the evergreen plants were seen to represent the promise that life would return in the spring.

This connection is well known and not of recent discovery. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* reports, “In the Roman world the Saturnalia (Dec. 17-24) was a time of merry-making and exchange of presents.... Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life, have always been associated with the winter festival, *both pagan and Christian*. Evergreens, as symbols of survival, have a long association with Christmas festivities” (1970, vol. 5, “Christmas,” emphasis added).

Why Gift-Giving?

The custom of gift-giving during the winter festival goes back to Roman times and earlier, as the *New World Encyclopedia* describes:

The celebrations of Saturnalia included the making and giving of small presents ([Latin:] *saturnalia et sigillaricia*). This holiday was observed over a series of days beginning on December 17 (the birthday of Saturn), and ending on December 25 (the birthday of Sol Invictus, the “Unconquered Sun”).

The combined festivals resulted in an extended winter holiday season.... The feast of *Sol Invictus* on December 25 was a sacred day in the religion of Mithraism, which was widespread in the Roman Empire. Its god, Mithras, was a solar deity of Persian origin, identified with the Sun. It displayed its unconquerability as “Sol Invictus” when it began to rise higher in the sky following the Winter Solstice—hence December 25 was celebrated as the Sun’s birthday. In 274 C.E., Emperor Aurelian officially designated December 25 as the festival of Sol Invictus (“Christmas”).

Why Do We Call It “Christmas?”

The English word “Christmas” comes from the Catholic term “the Mass of Christ” or “Christ’s Mass.” According to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, “The word for Christmas in late Old English is *Cristes Maesse*, the Mass of Christ, first found in 1038, and *Cristes-messe*, in 1131.... Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church” (“Christmas,” *NewAdvent.org*).

There are two major assumptions regarding the origin of the word “Noël.” Some say that it is a distortion of the Latin word *natalis*, meaning “birth.” In the twelfth century, this word was spelled *nael* in Old French and it shares the same root as the Nativity (*nativitas* in Latin) celebrated on December 25 (“Noël” and “Nativité,” *Le Grand Robert*). Others think that “Noël” comes from the combination of the Gallic words *noio* (new) and *hel* (sun)—the renewal or the rebirth of the sun (Martyne Perrot, *Ethnologie de Noël*). In either case, the Bible never teaches the observance of the birthday of Jesus Christ or the rebirth of the sun.

The history of the observance of December 25 goes back long before the birth of Jesus, and Christmas entered Christendom as a “baptized” pagan festival. The early Catholic fathers wanted to ease their pagan converts into the Catholic faith and often found it useful to attach “Christian” meanings to the existing pagan practices. Historically, those pagan practices included gift-giving, parties, decorating evergreen trees, holly, mistletoe, and celebrating the birth or rebirth of a god.

Chapter 6

Can Christmas “Sanctify the Pagan”?

Historians know that Christmas had its origin in pagan antiquity, but theologians have long reasoned that it is possible to “sanctify the pagan.” In this view, a culture may keep its pre-Christian forms, but the pagan symbols and myths can become Christian in meaning and purpose.

The influential Roman Catholic prelate Cardinal John Henry Newman wrote, “We are told in various ways by Eusebius [an early church historian], that Constantine, in order to recommend the new religion to the heathen, transferred into it the outward ornaments to which they had been accustomed in their own.... The use of temples, and these dedicated to particular saints... holydays and seasons... turning to the East, images at a later date... are all of pagan origin, and sanctified by their adoption into the Church” (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, chapter 8).

Theologian Christopher Dawson went even further when he asserted, “The complete sanctification of the pagan is the end result of the Christianization of the world” (Bradley Birzer, *Sanctifying the World*). In this view, converting the world to Christianity necessarily involves accepting pagan practices.

But which would adopt which? Would paganism be adopting Christianity or would Christianity be adopting paganism? It is clear that the fact is well-known among secular and religious historians that many of the symbols of Christmas and the time of its observance

came from pagan practices. What is questionable is the doctrine of “sanctifying the pagan” that is used to justify many practices in “Christendom.”

While this rationale can be attractive for theologians and traditionalists, it is contradicted by the Bible. What does God think about “sanctifying the pagan”? What has He said? The truth may surprise millions who just assume they can blend their cherished pagan traditions with the worship of the true God, who told His people:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it (Deuteronomy 12:29–32).

How dare anyone defy this clear instruction from the inspired word of God? If you considered a pagan practice to be “nice” and not “abominable,” would it then be suddenly acceptable to observe it in God’s worship?

Some who want to observe the modern counterparts of the pagan holidays argue that in this scripture, God was only forbidding Israel from observing the worst “abominations” of the pagans, like child sacrifice. So, they reason, the rest might be acceptable. Yet that is not what God said. He was forbidding all of the pagan practices and affirming His own. Even if you think it is “nice,” He said not to do it. God said, *“Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.”*

Some may argue theologically that God can cleanse and sanctify whatever He wants to—but the point is that He said in no uncertain terms that *He does not want to*. We are commanded to observe what He commands and not add to or take away from it!

Did Jesus observe a pagan practice? Some point out that Jesus observed the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22), which occurred on Kislev 25 of the Hebrew calendar—which is usually around mid-December on our modern calendar. That traditional feast was instituted by a great hero of Judaism, Judas Maccabeus, to commemorate an important event in Jewish history—the rededication of the temple after it was defiled by the Greek ruler Antiochus Epiphanes. But this traditional observance is observed on the Hebrew lunisolar calendar, not the Roman solar calendar, and it is not an adopted pagan practice. It marks an important event in history, similar to Thanksgiving or Independence Day in America. Similarly, Purim is a Jewish festival occurring in later winter or early spring that marks God’s protection of the Jewish people in the time of Esther. Both are found on the Hebrew calendar, and neither is taken from paganism. Jesus was an observant Jew and observed many legitimate traditions of His people—yet He *never* observed a pagan practice.

Some make the mistaken assumption that because we may use things of pagan origin in our daily lives, it must be acceptable to use them in our religious activities as well. They point out that the names of the days of the week have their origin in pagan words. For instance, the name Wednesday takes its name from Woden—a Norse god. Thursday is derived from another Norse god, Thor. Saturday corresponds to Saturn’s Day, from the Latin *Sāturni dies*—Saturnus was a Roman god. Also, most Western institutions do not use the biblical lunisolar calendar; they use the solar Gregorian calendar.

In fact, the Israelites’ own calendar used months with Babylonian names. This being so, it is important to draw a distinction; people do not read or sing from a calendar at their churches. The fact that society has a myriad of pagan-influenced practices does not mean that we can ignore a plain biblical instruction. God does not say that a month cannot have a Babylonian name; he does command that His worship not be taken from Babylonian (or other pagan) practices.

Who Adopted Whom?

The Roman emperor Constantine allowed Christianity to be practiced openly in the Roman Empire beginning in 318 AD, and it was later declared to be the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 AD. Historians have long recognized that when the Roman world be-

gan to profess Christianity, many religious leaders found it beneficial to adapt various pagan customs to fit the new faith. The less change from old practices, the better—or so they thought!

Noted historian Will Durant wrote an eleven-volume history titled *The Story of Civilization*. In the third volume, titled *Caesar and Christ*, he commented **very frankly** on the effect of paganism on the later development of professing Christianity:

*Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it. The Greek mind, dying, came to a transmigrated life in the theology and liturgy of the Church; the Greek language, having reigned for centuries over philosophy, became the vehicle of Christian literature and ritual; the Greek mysteries passed down into the impressive mystery of the Mass. Other pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist result. From Egypt came the ideas of a divine trinity, the Last Judgment, and a personal immortality of reward and punishment; from Egypt the adoration of the Mother and Child, and the mystic theosophy that made Neoplatonism and Gnosticism, and obscured the Christian creed.... From Phrygia came the worship of the Great Mother.... The Mithraic ritual so closely resembled the eucharistic sacrifice of the mass that Christian fathers charged the Devil with inventing these similarities to mislead frail minds. *Christianity was the last great creation of the ancient pagan world* (emphasis added).*

Some may reason that it does not matter if they use pagan practices in their worship as long as they do so to honor God. But what they should ask is whether God has changed His mind about this matter. He has told us, “I am the LORD, I do not change” (Malachi 3:6), and that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus quoted the prophet Isaiah and said, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Matthew 15:8–9). God has not changed His mind about how He is to be worshiped.

God rejects pagan practices and instructs us not to incorporate them into His worship. He tells us what days we are to observe, how

we are to observe them, and why we are to observe them. There was no instruction by Christ or the Apostles to have an annual memorial to Christ's birth or to copy the pagans in their festivals! Quite the contrary—copying the pagans in God's worship was forbidden.

Sanctified by Truth!

God's truth sets His begotten children apart. Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth" (John 17:17-19). History shows us that the belief and practice of professing Christianity, from the second century AD onward, was very different from the faith Christ and His Apostles preached. Seeing this already beginning to happen in his day, Jude wrote to the faithful Church, "Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain men have crept in unnoticed, who long ago were marked out for this condemnation, ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 3-4).

We must not go along with the widespread desire to turn Christ's message into a popular paganized affront to His very teachings. God's truth shows us the way, and deviating from "the faith which was once for all delivered" is tantamount to deviating from the path He has placed us on—the narrow way. Sadly, we see that the narrow gate has sifted out many in the past decades, just as in ancient times. One lesson we must always remember is that the true Church is a "little flock" (Luke 12:32).

We cannot "sanctify the pagan"!

Chapter 7

God Offers a Better Way

Did the original Church observe any kind of Christmas holiday? No! There is absolutely no mention in the Bible or in secular history of the first-century Church keeping Christmas—or any such observance. As noted earlier, history records that Christmas became a pervasive practice only when Roman Catholicism became the official religion of the Roman Empire. It is easy to understand that when the official state religion changed, millions of pagans throughout the Empire did not suddenly have a “conversion experience”—rather, they generally kept their customs and traditions, which were given “new meanings” by the Roman church.

There are historical records of Christ’s supposed December 25 birthday being observed before Constantine’s supposed “conversion” in 336 AD, but before then it was not an institutionalized practice even of the Roman church! And for the Church of the first century—the original believers taught by Christ’s own Apostles—there **never was** any such observance! The first-century Church used the Hebrew lunisolar calendar (as the New Testament demonstrates) and avoided the religious observances associated with the Roman solar calendar—which is the type of calendar we use today.

What Memorial Did Christ Command?

What were the religious observances of the first-century Church, according to the Bible and secular history? What was “the faith which

was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3) that they were to contend for, and what were the annual observances of the Church that the Apostles taught? In sharp contrast to the idea that there should be an observance of Christ’s birth, **Jesus Christ Himself instructed His followers to keep a memorial to His death**, and the Apostles passed His command on to the churches they raised up.

Are Easter and Christmas in the Bible? In the *King James Version* of the Bible, the English word “Easter” appears in Acts 12:4. However, it comes from a mistranslation of *Pascha*, which is Greek (*Πάσχα*) for “Passover.” This error is corrected in the *New King James Version* and in most modern translations, which render the word correctly as “Passover.” The word “Easter” is an Anglo-Saxon word for a spring festival honoring the Teutonic goddess “Eastra” or “Ostara.” The name of the festival and some of its associated practices were carried over by the early Anglo-Saxons when they converted to Roman Catholicism.

How, then, did Christ want to be memorialized? The Apostle Paul instructed the brethren in Corinth, Greece—a congregation composed of Gentile believers—“For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed [Nisan 14, the beginning of the Passover] took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; *do this in remembrance of Me.*’ In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it [each Passover], *in remembrance of Me.*” (1 Corinthians 11:23–25). The early Church observed *a memorial to Christ’s death* just as they were instructed by Jesus and the Apostles. Christ’s sacrificial death as the Lamb of God is of great importance to the whole world. *He gave us no memorial to His birth!*

Jesus asked, “But why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). He also said, “These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:8). People say that they want to honor Christ, but they institute their own ways in contradiction to what Christ instructed them. Jesus continued, “*And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men*” (v. 9). If we want to honor Christ and have our hearts close to

Him, *we will do the things He said—and we will not do the things He said to avoid*. We have a clear choice between the practices that God authorized and the traditions that mankind has created for itself.

Opting Out of Christmas

Should Christmas be a religious celebration for you? The origins of Christmas are well known and are not particularly controversial. It is a traditional holiday that originated in paganism and was incorporated into professing Christianity in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. It is not a biblical feast and was never practiced by the first-century Church. Jesus Christ never authorized a memorial to His birth; rather, He instructed His faithful followers to keep a memorial to His death (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23–26).

This matters because the Bible **forbids** God's people from adopting pagan customs in the worship of the true God—the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Jesus Himself said that using mankind's traditional practices in His worship does not honor Him (Matthew 15:9). So, Christmas is not an appropriate religious observance for one who professes to obey Christ!

Furthermore, the secular aspects of the Christmas holidays—the costs and hassles that dominate the season—are difficulties many would rather avoid. The seasonal celebrations often involve excessive drinking and the number of traffic accidents increases dramatically during the holidays; everyone should be very careful on the highways, particularly at night.

The loud and widespread commercial marketing of Christmas dominates the days and weeks before the holiday arrives. Shopping can be very stressful, since stores are packed with shoppers trying to finish their shopping for long lists of gift recipients. Also stressful are the debts that mount up during the season—which often stay with shoppers for much of the following year. So, more and more people are opting out of the secular festivities—to their great relief.

As a religious holiday, Christmas is not biblical. In fact, the Bible instructs us **not** to use pagan practices in our worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And we should not teach our children that lies and myths—such as those surrounding Santa Claus—are religious truths. Even simply as a secular custom, Christmas is generally an expensive, stressful time that many people would rather do without.

Does Christmas honor Christ? What does the Bible say? It records that *as a matter of history*, the first-century Church of God kept the seven annual festivals, including the Christian Passover, commanded in Leviticus 23. In doing that, they were not trying to “be Jewish”—*they were simply obeying God*. The Bible records no observance of the birth of Jesus. We honor Him by obeying Him and observing these festivals, which picture God’s plan of salvation.

Passover pictures the cleansing of our sins by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God, since “Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us” (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Days of Unleavened Bread picture God’s Church being and remaining “unleavened” by sin. Pentecost pictures the founding and sanctification of the Church of God by the giving of the Holy Spirit.

The Feast of Trumpets pictures the return of Christ in power and glory “with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God” (1 Thessalonians 4:16). The fast that occurs on the Day of Atonement pictures the binding of Satan and the freeing of this world from Satan’s rule. The great Feast of Tabernacles pictures the rule of Christ as King of kings with His saints on the earth for 1,000 years. The day following the Feast of Tabernacles, the Last Great Day, pictures the Great White Throne Judgment, the hope of all who have ever lived and died without a real chance to live God’s way of life. The annual Holy Days are *holy time* and should not be profaned by our regular work. They have great meaning for Christians and map out God’s plan of salvation for mankind.

By commanding the observance of these festivals, God, in effect, has us *act out* this great plan by participating in His annual Feasts—so that we will always remember it. The Apostle Jude exhorted both the first-century Church and us today, “Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to *contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all* [including both Gentile and Jewish Church members] *delivered to the saints*” (Jude 3).

Both biblically and in secular history, “*the faith which was once for all delivered*” included the annual biblical festivals. The real choice today is whether to follow the instructions of Christ and the Apostles—as recorded in the Bible—or to continue with the familiar human traditions that replaced those instructions. *Christ’s clear in-*

structions are for His Church to observe a memorial to His death, not to His birth.

For more information on this vital subject, be sure to request our free booklet *The Holy Days: God's Master Plan*. This powerful and eye-opening booklet will help you understand which days your Creator really intended for His true people to observe, and will explain more about how, as we have mentioned, these days teach us about the magnificent plan He is working out here on the earth. To request your free copy of *The Holy Days: God's Master Plan*, contact us at the Regional Office nearest you or go to *TomorrowsWorld.org*, where you can read the booklet or order your very own free printed copy. This vital information will change your life!

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