



STATEMENT DC275

IS CHRISTMAS CHRISTIAN?

Should Christians celebrate Christmas? A number of unorthodox new religions which profess to follow Christ insist that Christmas is a pagan festival to be shunned by all true Christians. Probably the most notable of these religions is the Jehovah's Witnesses, who publish stinging attacks on the celebration of Christmas year after year. Other religions that take the same position include the World Wide Church of God (led by Herbert W. Armstrong) and the Assemblies of Yahweh.

However, these unorthodox religious groups are not alone in their condemnation of this most popular of religious holidays. Many evangelical Christians also believe that Christmas is a pagan celebration dressed up in "Christian clothes." While many Christians mark Christmas as a special day to worship Christ and give thanks for His entrance into the world, they reject anything to do with Santa Claus, Christmas trees, exchanging gifts, and the like.

Are there biblical grounds for rejecting all or part of Christmas? What should be the attitude of Christians in this matter? That is the question before us. The answer given here is that while certain elements of Christmas tradition are essentially pagan and should not be indulged at that time of year, Christmas itself and many of the traditions associated with it may be celebrated by Christians with a clear conscience. Those who are inclined to reject out of hand such a position might be interested to know that at one time this writer would have agreed with them. A closer examination of the issues involved, however, leads to a different conclusion.

Celebrating Jesus' Birthday

The most basic and common argument brought against Christmas is that it is not found in the Bible. Many Christians, as well as groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, feel that because Christmas is not mentioned in scripture, it is therefore not to be observed. In fact, the Witnesses argue that since the only people in the Bible who celebrated their own birthdays were Pharaoh (Gen. 40:20-22) and Herod (Matt. 14:6-10), God takes a dim view of celebrating birthdays in general. Therefore, they feel, God would hardly approve of celebrating Jesus' birthday.

In answer to these arguments, a few things need to be said. First of all, the fact is that the Bible says nothing against the practice of celebrating birthdays. What was bad in the cases of Pharaoh and Herod was not that they celebrated their birthdays, but that they did evil things on their birthdays (Pharaoh killed his chief baker, and Herod killed John the Baptist). Second, what the Bible does not forbid, either explicitly or by implication from some moral principle, is permissible to the Christian, as long as it is edifying (Rom. 13:10; 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; Col. 2:20-23; etc.). Therefore, since the Bible does not forbid birthdays, and they do not violate any biblical principle, there is no biblical basis for rejecting birthdays. For the same reason, there is no biblical reason to reject entirely the idea of celebrating Jesus' birthday.

December 25

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Another common objection to Christmas relates to observing December 25 as the birthday of Christ. It is frequently urged that Christ could not have been born in December (usually because the shepherds would supposedly not have had their flocks in the fields at night in that month), so that December 25 could not have been his birthday. It is also pointed out that December 25 was the date of a pagan festival in the Roman Empire in the fourth century, when Christmas began to be widely celebrated on that day.

It is true that there seems to be no evidence for December 25 as the actual birthday of Christ. On the other hand, it has been shown that such a date is not impossible, as is so commonly supposed.¹ Nevertheless, it may be granted that it is highly improbable that Christ was actually born on December 25. Does this fact invalidate Christmas? No. It is not essential to the celebration of someone's birth that it be commemorated on the same date as his birth. Americans commemorate Washington's and Lincoln's birthday on the third Monday of February, even though Washington's was February 22. If it were to become certain that Christ was actually born on say, April 30, should we then celebrate Christmas on that day? While there would be nothing wrong with such a change, it would not be necessary. The intent or purpose is what matters, not the actual date.

But what of the fact that December 25 was the date of a pagan festival? Does this not prove that Christmas is pagan? No, it does not. Instead, it proves that Christmas was established as a rival celebration to the pagan festival. That is, what Christians did was to say, "Rather than celebrate in immorality the birth of Mithra, a false god who was never really born and who cannot save you, let us celebrate in joyful righteousness the birth of Jesus, the true God incarnate who is the Savior of the world."

Sometimes it is urged that to take a pagan festival and try to "Christianize" it is folly. However, God Himself did exactly that in the Old Testament. Historical evidence shows conclusively that some of the feasts given to Israel by God through Moses were originally pagan agricultural festivals, which were filled with idolatrous imagery and practices.² What God did, in effect, was to establish feasts which would replace the pagan festivals without adopting any of the idolatry or immorality associated with them. It would appear, then, that in principle there is nothing wrong with doing so in the case of Christmas.

Santa Claus

Perhaps the thing that bothers Christians about Christmas more than anything else is the Santa Claus tradition. Objections to this tradition include the following (1) Santa Claus is a mythical figure endowed with godlike attributes, including omniscience and omnipotence; (2) when children learn that Santa Claus is not real, they lose faith in their parents' word and in supernatural beings; (3) Santa Claus distracts children from Christ; (4) the Santa Claus story teaches children to be materialistic. In the face of such weighty objections, can anything good be said about Santa Claus?

Before examining each of these objections, let it be noted that Christmas can be celebrated without Santa Claus. Take Santa out of Christmas and Christmas remains intact. Take Christ out of Christmas, however, and all that remains is a pagan festival. Whatever our individual differences however best to handle Santa Claus with our children may be, as Christians we should be able to agree on this much.

1. There is no doubt that Santa Claus in its present form is a fairy tale or myth. However, there really was a Santa Claus. The name "Santa Claus" is an Anglicized form of the Dutch Sinter Klaas, which in turn meant "Saint Nicholas." Nicholas was a Christian bishop in the fourth century about whom we know little for sure. He apparently attended the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325, and a very strong tradition suggests that he did show unusual kindness toward children. While the red-suited old man in a sled pulled by flying reindeer is a myth, the story of a children-loving old man who brought them gifts probably is not -- and in many countries, that is all there is to "Santa Claus."

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Telling children that Santa can see them at all times and that he knows if they have been bad or good, etc., is wrong. Parents should not tell their children the Santa Claus story as if it were literal truth. However, children under seven or eight years of age can play "let's pretend" and derive just as much fun from it as if they thought it was real. Indeed, at that age they are learning the difference between make-believe and reality. Much younger children will be fascinated by presents that are discovered Christmas morning under the tree that they are told are from "Santa," but they will not draw any conclusions about the reality of Santa Claus from those discoveries.

2. When children learn that Santa Claus is not real, this will upset them only if they have been told by their parents that he really exists and does all that he is purported to do. Therefore, children should be told that Santa is make-believe as soon as they are old enough to ask questions about reality. Rather than a stumbling block to belief in the supernatural, Santa can be a stepping stone. Tell your children that while Santa Claus is make-believe, God and Jesus are not. Tell them that while Santa can only bring things that parents can buy or make, Jesus can give them things no one else can -- a friend who is always with them, forgiveness of the bad things they do, life in a wonderful place with God forever, etc.
3. Follow the suggestions above, and Santa Claus will not be a distraction from Christ. Tell your children that the reason "Santa" gives gifts is because God gave us the wonderful gift of Jesus.
4. On the contrary, the Santa Claus story is best told when it is used to encourage children to be selfless and giving. For an example of how to teach your inquiring child about Santa Claus, see the book, *Santa Are You for Real?* by Harold Myra (Thomas Nelson, 1977).

Christmas Trees

One of the few elements of the traditional celebration of Christmas, which those opposed to it claim is spoken of in Scripture, is the Christmas tree. Specifically, it is thought that in Jeremiah 10:2-4 God explicitly condemned Christmas trees:

Thus says the LORD...
"For the customs of the people are delusion,
Because it is wood cut from the forest,
The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool.
They decorate it with silver and with gold,
They fasten it with nails and with hammers
So that it will not totter."

There certainly is a resemblance between the thing described in Jeremiah 10 and the Christmas tree. Resemblance, however, does not equal identity. What Jeremiah described was an idol -- a representation of a false god -- as the next verse shows (Jer. 10:5):

"Like a scarecrow in a field are they,
And they cannot speak;
They must be carried,
Because they cannot walk!
Do not fear them,
For they can do no harm,
Neither can they do any good."

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The parallel passage in Isaiah 40:18-20 makes it clear that the sort of thing Jeremiah 10 has in mind is an actual objection of worship:

To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare with Him?
As for the idol, a craftsman cast it,
A goldsmith plates it with gold,
And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.
He who is too impoverished for such an offering
Selects a tree that does not rot.
He seeks out for himself a skilled craftsman
To prepare an idol that will not totter.

Thus, the resemblance is merely superficial. The Christmas tree does not originate from pagan worship of trees (which was practiced), but from two explicitly Christian symbols in medieval western Germany. The Encyclopedia Britannica³ explains as follows:

The modern Christmas tree, though originated in western Germany. The main prop of a popular medieval play about Adam and Eve was a fire tree hung with apples (Paradise tree) representing the Garden of Eden. The Germans set up a "Paradise tree" in their homes on December 24, the religious feast day of Adam and Eve. They hung wafers on it (symbolizing the host, the Christian sign of redemption); the hosts eventually became cookies of various shapes. Candles, too, were often added as a symbol of Christ. In the same room, during the Christmas season, was the Christmas pyramid, a triangular construction of wood, with shelves to hold Christmas figurines, decorated with evergreens, candles, and a star. By the 16th century, the Christmas pyramid and Paradise tree had merged, becoming the Christmas tree.

Once again, there is nothing essential about the Christmas tree to the celebration of Christmas. Like the modern Santa Claus myth, it is a relatively recent tradition; people celebrated Christmas for centuries without the tree and without the semi-divine resident of the North Pole. What is essential to Christmas is Christ. Yet that does not mean that we must throw Santa and the tree out altogether. In this matter we have Christian liberty to adopt these traditions and use them to teach our children about Christ, or to celebrate Christ's birth without them. For that matter, there is no compulsion to celebrate His birthday at all, since it is not commanded of us in Scripture. Nevertheless, it would be strange indeed if someone saved by the Son of God would not rejoice in thinking of the day that His incarnation was first manifested to the world on that holy night.

NOTES

1. Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Zondervan, 1977).
2. The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia Vol. 4 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981), p. 601.
3. The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Micropaedia, Vol. II (Encyclopedia Britannica, 1981), p. 904.