



STATEMENT DC336

CHRIST IN CHRISTMAS

Christmas — bright lights, glittery trees, children’s squeals of excitement, church chimes in frosty air, the press of shoppers — memories of Christmas. Oh, yes, almost forgotten — in a scratched, wobbly, wooden manger on a church’s front lawn, there’s a baby doll, plastic fingers upraised in frozen appeal, alone in the night.

Christmas has forgotten Christ. For many, celebrating Jesus’ birth has little to do with Christmas, and even many Christians don’t know how to “put Christ back into Christmas.” I believe we can overcome the commercialism and paganism with the Good News — “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Below I have used a **C-H-R-I-S-T-M-A-S** acronym to explain how to honor Jesus Christ this Christmas.

C, the first letter in *Christmas*, stands for the person who alone gives any day eternal significance: Christ our Lord. It is easy to shove Christ aside on this holiday, but we should celebrate the birth of Jesus, whose very name means “the Lord is salvation” and whose title, “Christ,” points to His role as the Redeemer of humankind. If Jesus is not Christ in your life, celebrating the birth of an obscure Jewish carpenter’s son is meaningless to you.

H stands for *history*. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are not myths or fantasy, but are historical realities. That God became man in Jesus Christ is an actual, testable historical event. Christmas reminds us that Christ is not just a warm feeling in our hearts, or an imaginary therapist enabling us to face life’s traumas.

We don’t know the exact day of the year Jesus was born.¹ We do know, however, that the December 25 date was advocated as early as about A.D. 220.² The church may have chosen to celebrate on December 25 as a triumph of Christianity over paganism because it came right after the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, one of the popular pagan winter solstice holidays (December 17-24).

R stands for *rejoice*, an appropriate response in recognition of what Christ has done. Favorite Christmas hymns show that rejoicing has always been an integral part of Christmas. We should rejoice because Christ came, not because of a nice present or a week off! We should rejoice like the psalmist, who said: “Come, let us rejoice in him” (Ps. 66:6).

I stands for the *Incarnation*, describing that glorious event in which God became man. Christ is not only eternal God (John 1:1), but at a time in history He became man as well (John 1:14). Matthew’s gospel says, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel — which means, God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

S stands for *St. Nicholas*, the fourth century bishop of Myra, a Christian whose story — embellished by years of telling — nevertheless exemplifies Christian faithfulness and charity. Christmas should remind us of the faithfulness of God, without which we have no hope of redemption through His greatest gift, His Son (John 3:16). Little historical knowledge is available concerning St. Nicholas,³ commonly called by his German/English equivalent, Santa Claus. But he is known for kindness to children in need, and for his commitment to Christ through persecution and martyrdom. Many traditions associated with Santa Claus are objectionable — especially that he is all-knowing or able to be present everywhere. However, the themes of faithfulness and charity are biblical and honor Jesus Christ.

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

T stands for *tradition*, the stories and customs associated with Christmas. Christmas traditions are of three types: (1) those strictly non-Christian, inappropriate for Christians; (2) those that were initially pagan but were changed to affirm the gospel; and (3) those developed within the church.⁴ One inappropriate tradition from early pagan mid-winter festivals is drunkenness and immorality. The drunken Christmas party may reflect Rome's ancient Saturnalia, but has nothing to do with celebration of Christ's birth.

Some Christians think the Christmas tree is a pagan tradition forbidden by Jeremiah 10:2-4. However, the Jeremiah passage is not about trees dedicated to one day of the year (Christmas); rather, it refers to permanent, all-year-round idols carved out of wood and covered with gold and silver. The Christmas tree actually symbolizes that Jesus brings us eternal life (the evergreen) and is the light of the world (lights or candles).

Likewise, boughs of holly with red berries and green leaves represent Christ's shed blood on the cross and eternal life. Even the candy cane/shepherd's crook represents Jesus as our Shepherd. While tradition is no substitute for dynamic personal faith, it enhances our appreciation of Christ's birth.

M stands for the *magi*, or wise men, directed by God to find and worship Christ. We shouldn't forget that no one is wealthy enough, powerful enough, or far enough away that he or she should not bow before Jesus Christ, the King of kings and Lord of lords (1 Tim. 6:15).

A stands for *advent*, a word referring to Christ's coming. Christ came once in Bethlehem — as an infant who grew to manhood, died for our sins, and rose again the third day. Christians eagerly look forward to His Second Coming — “the blessed hope” (Titus 2:13). Many churches conduct advent services for the four weeks prior to Christmas, encouraging Christians to look forward to the birthday of Christ and also to His Second Coming.

S stands for *salvation*, made possible by the coming of Christ. The gospel story is so simple we often forget it, but so profound it affects every individual. We are all sinners, separated from God, with absolutely no way to reach God except He reached down to us through His Son. With the coming of Christmas comes recognition that because He came, He died, and because He died and lives again, we also may live (Rom. 6:8; 8:11).

Christmas is not primarily a celebration of human life, although each human life is valuable; not primarily a celebration of peace and love, although peace and love are noble. The center and circumference of Christmas should be the celebration of the birth of our Lord: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

— Hank Hanegraaff

(Based upon the article originally printed in the From the President column of the Christian Research Newsletter, Volume 5: Number 5, 1992)

NOTES

¹He may have been born in the fall, based on information in the Bible on the birth of John the Baptist and his father Zacharias's priestly schedule (1 Chron. 24:10; Luke 1:5, 9, 23-24, 26, 36, 56).

²See Harold W. Hoehner's *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 25-26.

³When I use the term saint, I am not implying that only extraordinary Christians are “saints.” Verses such as Psalm 30:4, Romans 8:27, and Ephesians 6:16 declare that all believers are saints. Nicholas is, however, an excellent example and role model of a “saint.”

⁴See Clement A. Miles, *Christmas Customs and Traditions*, (New York: Dover Publications, n.d.).