

# What does the Bible say about Christmas?

By Brent Hunter, Evangelist for the Kirkland church of Christ

We are in the midst of a festive season in our land and throughout much of the world. Christmas is not only a national holiday, but for most people, at least nominally, it is also a religious holy day. Because of this, questions and concerns arise in the minds of those who desire to do God's will in all things. What has He revealed in His word concerning Christmas? What principles has He given to us to guide our degree of participation in this time of celebration?

Gail and I wish you all a very memorable and fulfilling holiday season with your families. In Christ, we certainly do enjoy a most wonderful life of giving and sharing which is one of the aspects of this season that I enjoy the most. We are staying this Christmas, but will miss many of you while we are away, and may God bless you with safe travels.

Given the fact that Christmas is right around the corner, let us observe some facts, traditions and matters of judgment concerning 12/25 you may find helpful.

**These are facts that one may check out in the Bible or find in practically any encyclopedia.**

1. One does **not read about Christmas in the Bible**. The word is not found there. There is no indication that the first century church under the leadership of the apostles celebrated the birthday of Jesus in any special way.
2. **The Bible does not reveal the date or even the time of year of the Savior's birth**. Before the 5th century A.D. various dates were offered including Mar. 25, dates in April, May and September, Nov. 17.
3. **Dec. 25 came to be the most popular date through the influence of a Bishop Liberious, who in 314 AD declared it arbitrarily to be a date when Christ's birth would be celebrated**. In antiquity, long before Christ, this date was celebrated by pagans as the birthday of the sun god, and of Baccaus, the god of wine. Bishop Liberious was proud that he had changed the day from the *"birthday of the sun god, to the birthday of the Son of God."* Given the times and the encouragement of the Roman Empire that people convert to Christianity, the pagan festivities were quickly replaced with Christian symbols. The widely held pagan holiday soon became an almost universally accepted Christian holiday.
4. **Many Bible scholars have opined that it is unlikely that Jesus was born in December**. This is a cold and rainy season in Palestine. Albert Barnes and others state that the shepherds identified in Luke 2:8 would not likely be tending their sheep in the fields at night at this time of year.
5. **The word "Christmas" does not mean "the birthday of Christ." It refers to the Mass of Christ**. The Mass is a sacrifice offered in "an unbloody manner." According to Roman Catholic doctrine, the bread and wine of the communion are changed by the consecration of the priest into the actual body and blood of Christ. The name "Christmas" or "Mass of Christ" was given to this ordinance by the Catholic Church.

### **Traditions Relating to Christmas:**

- 1. Most of the customs such as trees, decorations, mistletoe, holly and feasting had their origins in pagan ceremonies that predated Christ and the church.** The star on top of the Christmas tree was added later to remind folks of the star which appeared in the sky and lead believers to the baby Jesus.
- 2. Interestingly, Santa Claus or Saint Nicholas was actually a fourth century bishop who lived in the Roman province of Asia Minor.** Many stories circulated about gifts that he left for various people. He was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church (after his death of course) and became known as the *patron saint of children*. Legends about him have accumulated through the years.
- 3. Many of the traditions that are presented in the typical manger scenes and some Christmas carols are without biblical support.** For example, there is no evidence that there were three wise men or that they were kings. We have no idea of how many there were. Some early Christian traditions presume there may have been as many as forty wise men. All we can say for sure is that there were more than two, and that three gifts were brought. Also, a careful reading of Matt. 2 will indicate that these magi did not come to the stable to see the Christ child, but actually came sometime later to a house in Bethlehem.
- 4. Current emphasis on the Winter Solstice is the New Age return to the old age pagan customs.** The month of December marks a time when the days are short and dreary, especially in Scandinavia lands. The sun grows weak and distant. Bonfires were lighted to lend strength to the sun, and sure enough, the days grew longer and the light returned.

### **Questions and Judgments Relating to Christmas:**

- 1. Shall the church incorporate this day into the worship and follow the religious traditions started by the Roman Catholic Church and borrowed by most of the denominations?** I don't believe this is a matter of judgment or opinion. We who are dedicated to speaking as the oracles of God (I Peter 4:11) should certainly ask: where is the Lord's authority for so doing? Until such is presented, we surely must refrain from such.
- 2. Shall I participate in the customs and festivities of the season? The exchanging of gifts, the ornaments and decorations, etc.?** Am I involving myself in the rites of paganism if I do? Some for conscience sake choose to not engage in the Holiday at all. Others openly embrace the idea that "Christ is the reason for the season." Sadly, Christ was not put in Christmas by the Holy Spirit or by the early church but by the Catholic Church. Each person must determine his or her own degree of participation. My judgment is that one may enter into aspects of the holiday on an individual basis. The pagan roots of the celebrations are no longer in the view of most people. No more than the pagan origins for the names we give the days of the week or the names of many cities. No more than most people are aware of the history and etymology of the word, Christmas.
- 3. Should I celebrate the birth of Christ?** Absolutely! The angels did and that looks like a pretty good approved example to me. Shall I celebrate it on Dec. 25? Sure. And every other day too! But shall I set

this day especially aside to be thankful for His birth? Well, you'll have to make that judgment for yourself; but it is one thing to say "I have set this day aside for this purpose," and another to tell people that historically this was Christ's birthday and therefore everyone who believes in Christ ought to honor His birthday." The former has Biblical support, the latter is simply dishonest based upon the historical and Biblical facts we have just examined.

Rom 14:5 says: "One man esteems one day higher than another, another esteems every day alike. Let each man be fully persuaded in his own mind." This means it is acceptable to individually set aside one day and honor it as special for any noble purpose as Christians. Christians may do this for the birth of Christ, as individuals, they may even choose 12/25 because the world does so. But it is important to not expect the Lord's church to do so or force this on anyone else in a corporate assembly.

#### **Final Suggestion:**

**Why not have a family discussion about these principles and make sure that your family and our children have the right concept about the Christmas?** Beloved, it is so important that we don't allow ourselves to be "conformed to this world" (Rm 12:1) but instead be centered upon God's will in all things.

And while you are at it, examine closely the Holiday songs we sing. Some of the seasonal songs are merry and edifying. Some of the songs such as "Joy to the World" are scriptural and appropriate to sing any time! However, some of the holiday songs such as "We Three Kings" have no biblical basis as mentioned earlier. Given the fact that we "teach and admonish one another" by our singing (Col 3:16-17), and we are to "sing with the spirit and sing with the understanding also" (I Cor 14:15); we should be careful that we sing only songs that scriptural; both in and out of the assembly.

I hope this has been helpful to you in clarifying your thinking about these matters. May God bless you richly during this Holiday season!