

Is Christmas Really Christian?

Rod Reynolds

Every year in December we see in the U.S.A. and other parts of the world trees adorned with garlands and lights, and ubiquitous images of a fat, jolly old man in a red suit.

Christmas is ostensibly observed to honor and worship Jesus Christ and God. I remember seeing one year near Christmas a group of singers in a shopping mall with a sign saying "Jesus is the reason for the season." But few seem to stop and ask themselves, "Is this how Christ would have me worship him?"

God Of Truth

God in his word characterizes himself as a God of truth (Deuteronomy 32:4). His Spirit which he sends forth to dwell in his people is called "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13). During this time of year we have among us in the world what is called the "Christmas spirit." Is the Christmas spirit a spirit of truth?

God demands that we must worship him in truth (John 4:23-24). Is keeping Christmas worshiping God in truth? Is Christmas Really Christian?

Some years ago I had a brief conversation with a young woman who told me in effect that if for no other reason Christmas should be kept for the children, because they delight in it so much.

What is it that children are being taught to delight in? Keep in mind that we find in I John 2:21 the statement "that no lie is of the truth." Yet, millions of parents are telling their children a lie - that Santa Claus rewards them if they are good. James wrote that every good gift comes from God (James 1:17). But parents are telling their children not that God is the giver and provider of their blessings but that Santa Claus - whom the parents likely consider to be a fictitious character - is the one to whom the children should look for rewards.

Not only are children being taught to believe a lie, and, by example, that lying is acceptable, but Santa Claus also in the minds of many children displaces God. Santa Claus, not Jesus Christ, is the one chiefly on the minds of children at this time of year. Santa Claus is pictured not only as an all knowing judge and rewarder of good, but as a timeless, eternal being with magical powers. In other words, Santa Claus is a counterfeit of God.

God tells us in his word what we are to be teaching our children, and it's not lies about "Santa Claus." Rather, we are to teach children to love God, and keep his commandments (Deuteronomy 6:5-7). One of the laws which we are told to teach our children is, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Deuteronomy 5:20). Or, as Paul wrote, "Do not lie to one another" (Colossians

3:9).

Where Did The “Santa Claus” Idea Come From?

The figure Santa Claus is a confused amalgamation of myths from many sources. One series of legends revolve around a Catholic bishop of the city of Myra in Asia Minor. Revered as the patron of children, the weak, the poor, slaves, sailors, travelers, merchants, seaports and the Russian empire, Nicholas was allegedly born in the 3rd or 4th century A.D. Legend has it that he stood up in a tub on the day of his birth, clasped his hands, looked to heaven and thanked God for bringing him into the world (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, William S. Walsh, Gale Research Company, Detroit, 1970, p. 18). If this story were true, of course, he was arguably the most precocious child ever born.

Later, on his way to visit the tomb of Jesus, it's said that a storm broke which threatened to wreck the ship on which Nicholas was a passenger. He bade the sailors to be of good cheer, prayed and the storm calmed. It's believed that he healed children by making the sign of the cross over them, heard prayers made to him from hundreds of miles, and that even after his death he continued to hear and answer prayers. In the church at Bari in Italy water trickles out through the rocks which form the traditional tomb of Nicolas. It is collected by priests and bottled, then sold under the name "manna of Saint Nicholas" as a cure-all (*ibid.*, pp. 18-19, 21, 26, 30-45).

But don't get the idea that the Santa Claus legend dates back only to the fourth century A.D. Many of the pictures of this St. Nicholas have the same face and features of the god Saturn worshiped by the Romans (*ibid.*, p. 70). The Roman Church has a long history of adopting pagan gods and renaming them Christian saints.

The fourth century witnessed explosive growth in what the world calls "Christianity." But at the same time heresy and apostasy flourished even more among those nominally Christian than it had in previous centuries.

In writing of this period historian Wallace K. Ferguson writes: "The easy conversion of those who were merely following the line of least resistance or of personal advantage signified no very vital change in their method of life or in their thought. They clung stubbornly to ancient superstitions, translating them into terms of the new religion. The cult of a host of saints and martyrs sprang up to take the place of the many local gods of pagan mythology" (*A Survey of European Civilization*, third edition, pp. 91-92). For example, the Egyptian "god" Osiris was now called by the Catholic name Saint Onephris. Similarly, the worship of other "gods" and "goddesses" was incorporated into "Christianity." Artemis was renamed St. Artemidos, Dionysus - St. Dionysus, Apollo - St. Apolinaris, Bacchus - St. Bacchus, and even Saturn was canonized as St. Satur. and on it goes.

Nicolas in Greek means conqueror or destroyer of people. The Roman god Saturn was the equivalent of the Greek god Cronus. Cronus means the "horned one." The horn is an ancient symbol of power and dominance, used as such even in the Bible (e.g., Deuteronomy 33:17). So horned one is equivalent to mighty one, or ruler, which is equivalent to Nicolas, the victorious or conqueror. Thus Saturn, Cronus, Nicholas are different names for the same deity. So "Santa Claus," short for Saint Nicholas, is simply Saturn in disguise.

The customs of the original pagan gods were also preserved and adapted into the nominally Christian religion. "Most of the Christmas customs now prevailing in Europe, or recorded from former times, are not genuine Christian customs, but heathen customs which have been absorbed or tolerated by the church" ('Christmas customs,' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, James Hastings, vol 3, p. 608).

Saturnalia was a festival in honor of Saturn observed near the same season of year – the winter solstice – as Christmas is observed today. "The saturnalia in Rome provided the model for most of the merry customs of the Christmas time" (*ibid.*, p. 609). It was a time of drunkenness, revelry and licentiousness. People exchanged gifts. Wax candles were lit in honor of Saturn. Dolls were offered to him – a relic of an even more ancient tradition of human sacrifice. These same traditions have continued in the celebration of Christmas.

William Walsh describes how the revelries of saturnalia continued in the Christmas tradition, "The wild revels, indeed, of the Christmas period in olden times almost stagger belief. No amount of drunkenness, no blasphemy, no obscenity was frowned upon. License was carried to the utmost limits of licentiousness" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p. 75).

Saturn and St. Nicholas were stern, austere figures, older looking with white beard and hair. Santa Claus in some countries still looks that way. In the United States he is a fat, frivolous, merry character. The Greeks had a festival at the same time of year in honor of Bacchus or Dionysus. The representative god of the festival was Silenus – the tutor of Bacchus. "He was the most jovial of tipplers. His outlook was as rosy as his nose. A cheery laugh beamed over his large, fat face. The light of humor twinkled in his beady eyes. His rotund stomach spoke of good cheer. His smile beamed assurance of an unruffled disposition" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 71-72). He was surrounded by satyrs – woodland spirits or demons – as St. Nick by elves.

We might ask how did Santa Claus get mixed up with Christmas? The answer is he was always there, because Christmas is a pagan custom featuring pagan false gods with the name of Christ attached.

This fact is widely documented, and such documentation is not hard to find. Many people see no harm in borrowing pagan customs and calling them Christian. But

what does God say about using man's traditions to worship him? (Deuteronomy 12:29-32; Matthew 15:8-9).

Christmas is celebrated in the name of Jesus Christ. But the doctrine and the tradition is a lie. No lie is of the truth. Obviously, then, observing Christmas is not compatible with worshiping God in spirit and in truth.

How Did Christmas Come To Be Called Christian?

Let's take a closer look at history to see if we can discover how and when Christmas was adopted into nominal Christianity. The Bible does not reveal the date of Christ's birth, nor that of any other person. We are commanded in Scripture to observe and remember Christ's death, not his birthday (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26). The birthday of Christ was not celebrated in the New Testament Church he founded. The birthday custom itself is firmly rooted in idolatry and superstition. Even two or more centuries after the time of Christ Christians commonly "...considered birthday festivities to be survivals of heretical practice. The Greek and Roman birthday feasts were looked upon as pagan orgies" (*The Lore of Birthdays*, Ralph and Adelin Linton, p. 42).

Clement, writing between 193 and 211, dated Christ's birth at November 18, 3 B.C., but acknowledged that there was no general agreement as to this date. Referring to evidence from Clement's writings, the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* says: "The remarkable point in this evidence is that it shows no trace of Dec. 25 as the date of the nativity, and connects Jan. 6 as the feast of the baptism only with a gnostic sect..." ('Christmas,' vol. 3, p. 601).

Many of the earliest writers who discuss the date of Christ's birth suggest it was in the late summer or early fall. Several of the early professing Christian writers (second and third centuries) preferred a spring date for the birth of Christ. At the same time the early writings have a strong tendency to equate Jesus with the sun and with the solar year. During this time the popularity of the eastern mystery religions was spreading into the west.

"For the majority of the people of the empire, the vacuum left by the decay of classical paganism was filled by the mystery religions, which had spread through the Hellenistic east during the three centuries before Christ and which began to penetrate the west in the last years of the Roman republic.

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"By the third century, they were the dominant religious force in the west as well as in the east. The most important of the mystery religions were those of the "Great Mother" (Magna Mater) from Asia minor, of Isis from Egypt, and of Mithra from Persia.

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“The cult of Mithra included a baptismal rite, the eating of a sacred meal of bread and wine which identified the devotee with the savior god, and the celebration of the birthday of Mithra on the twenty-fifth of December, the date on which the lengthening day announced the rebirth of the sun” (*A Survey of European Civilization*, Ferguson, p. 84).

Isis was worshiped in the western Roman Empire as part of a trinitarian cult including also Horus and Serapis. Horus, the son of Isis, was considered the reincarnation of the sun god. His birthday had long been celebrated at the time of the winter solstice. Serapis is a shortened form of the compound of Osiris-Apis. Osiris was the leading deity, hero-martyr god of the Egyptians. He was god of the underworld, or realm of the dead, and was represented as a young bull or calf. Apis was a mystical name for the slain Osiris, the legendary father of Horus, often identified in mythology with the sun.

Mithra was also a sun god. Mithra was represented as a god of light who fought against darkness. Mithraism had several superficial similarities with Christianity, and even more similarities with the popular apostate Christianity which had abandoned the Sabbath for Sunday, and whose adherents were already participating in the saturnalia, brumalia and other pagan feasts long before they were officially adapted into the Church.

Tertullian, considered a father of the professing Church, wrote about 230 A.D., “By us who are strangers to Sabbaths, and new moons, and festivals, once acceptable to God, the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia, are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, new year’s day presents are made with din, and sports and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to their religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians” (*De Idolatria*, chapter 14).

In order to gain and hold adherents the professing Church, especially after it gained official status in the fourth century, embraced the popular customs. “There can be little doubt that the church was anxious to distract the attention of Christians from the old heathen feast days by celebrating Christian festivals on the same days” (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 'Christmas,' vol. 3, p. 607).

Christmas does not appear in the lists of legal holidays of the Christianized Roman Empire under Valentinianus (389), Theodosius (438) or Alaric (506). But it is included in the Justinian code of 534. However, a regulation forbidding performances in theaters and circuses on Sunday was extended to Christmas, Easter and epiphany in 400.

The evidence indicates that Christmas was not observed as a Christian festival until the fourth century. Evidence indicates that it was originally observed on

January 6, but was changed to December 25 in 354 by pope Liberius. The influence of Mithraism, and solar worship in general, in the eventual adoption of Christmas is evidenced by the fact that many Christian writers, among them Chrysostom, Ambrosius and Augustine, make use of the coincidence of Christmas with the unconquered sun, or the new sun. Identifying Jesus Christ with the sun served as a justification for celebrating his birthday on the ancient birthday of various sun gods – the winter solstice or thereabouts. "...the 'solar' argument is the only one which is found in early Christian literature to account for Dec. 25" (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 'Christmas,' vol. 3, p. 607).

The adoption of Christmas simply follows the pattern found in a multitude of other customs and observances of the professing Church. Namely, adopt popular religious customs and call them Christian. Of course, if possible, attempt to give them a biblical explanation, as Chrysostom did with Christmas. But of his attempt to justify Christmas from the Bible it is said: "...the whole explanation is posterior to the institution of the feast, and was invented to prove, from the gospels, a date which had already been chosen for other reasons" (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 'Christmas,' vol. 3, p. 607).

"Although ...the date of Christmas had been fixed upon as December 25 there is no biblical reason why this should be so.

.....

"... the fixing of the date as December 25th was a compromise with paganism" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, p. 62).

Although many see no harm in blending pagan customs and forms with the worship of the God of the Bible, or of Jesus Christ, the practice is a denial and violation of God's word.

Israel's Example

The pagan worship with which Israel and Judah defiled themselves took various forms, but most often it was a syncretized worship that blended the use of God's names, such as El or Yahweh, with the names, symbols and traditions associated with heathen gods. When the Israelites made a golden calf (resembling the Egyptian *Apis*) to worship in the wilderness while Moses was in the mountain receiving the law, they said of their idol, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" (Exodus 32:4). Then Aaron, after building an altar before the idol, proclaimed, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD [Yahweh]" (Exodus 32:5). God was not impressed. At first he was inclined to destroy the whole nation. But relenting upon the plea of Moses, God, nevertheless, promised to punish them for this sin and sent a plague upon them (Exodus 32:9-14, 34-35).

During their trek through the wilderness Israel also blended the worship of God with that of other false gods, such as Moloch and Remphan (Acts 7:42-43).

Remphan is a transliteration of the Hebrew *Chuin* or *Kewan*, an ancient Semitic name for Saturn. Moloch (also called Molech, Milcom, Malcham, Malik, Molk, etc.) is the Saturn of Romans, also known by the name Baal-Hammon and the Greek name Kronos (*Role of Human Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East*, Green, p. 182). As we've seen, Saturn later morphed into Saint Nicholas. "...the Saint Nicholas of Southern France and Germany...[is] grave, sedate, severe, preserves more of the Saturn than the Silenus type. He is Saturn christainized and dignified with episcopal robes. He distributes gifts like our Santa Klaus, but in addition to gifts for good little boys and girls, he carries a birch-rod for bad ones. In the more primitive sections, such as certain parts of Lorraine, the Tyrol, Bohemia and so on, he is attended by an evil spirit called Ruprecht who looks after bad boys and girls" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, pp. 76-79).

Later in Israel's history, around 930 B.C., Jeroboam, King of Israel, made two similar golden calves, associating them also with Yahweh, the Eternal One, who brought Israel out of Egypt (1 Kings 12:28). Ostraca (pottery remnants) bearing the name Egelyau have been found in Samaria. The name is a compound of 'egel' (calf, or young bull) and *yau* (a shortened form of Yahweh), "thus supporting evidence from other sources that in northern Israel the calf was a Yahweh symbol..." (*Documents from Old Testament Times*, D. Winton Thomas, ed., p. 206). "...the cult of Yahweh with bull-images at Bethel and Dan may have borrowed much from the cult of Baal, whose cult animal was the bull" (*Archaeology and the Old Testament World*, John Gray, p. 118). The Israelites claimed to worship the Eternal God, Yahweh, but blended his name with the symbols and worship of idols, gods of their own imaginations.

Among the Jews who fled from Egypt near the time of the Babylonian captivity were some who settled in Elephantine, Egypt. There a temple was built for the burning of incense and offering of meal offerings. Papyri texts from the area confirm that the Jews in Elephantine continued the apostate, syncretistic religious practices that resulted in the destruction of their homeland. Alongside Yahu (a variation of Yahweh), the texts indicate other deities were worshiped.

Bethel (God's house) is found hyphenated with the names of pagan deities, including Anath. And Anath, the name of a Canaanite goddess, is also found hyphenated with Yahu (*ibid.*, p. 257). "Anath is often associated with Athtart (later Hebrew Ashtoreth, Greek Astarte). Both are renowned for their beauty, and both are closely associated with **Baal**" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, CD-Rom edition, 1998). Anath was "the most active goddess in the fertility-cult, in Palestine, and at Bethshan [about 25 miles northeast of Samaria, in the Jordan valley] in one of the five Late Bronze Age temples a basalt panel was found with a dedication in Egyptian hieroglyphics to 'Antit, Queen of Heaven and Mistress of the Gods' " (*Archaeology and the Old Testament World*, Gray, p. 118).

Through Jeremiah God warned the people of Judah not to flee to Egypt (Jeremiah 42-44). God pronounced punishment on the Jews who fled to Egypt, saying,

“...you provoke Me to wrath with the works of your hands, burning incense to other gods in the land of Egypt where you have gone to dwell...” (Jeremiah 44:8). Notably those who dwelt in “Pathros,” derived from Egyptian and meaning region of the south, refused to give up their syncretistic worship, including the worship of the “queen of heaven” (Jeremiah 44:15-19). Elephantine was a city in the southern region, Upper Egypt. The temple there, which should have never been built in the first place, was destroyed in 410 B.C. by the Egyptians. And the Jewish colony there soon after disappeared from the pages of history, in partial fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah 44:11-14, 27-29.

We’ve already discussed how the professing Church blended pagan customs and forms with the nominal worship of Christ. Using idolatrous customs and practices and calling it Christianity is not acceptable to God. Idolatry is a major reason for end time punishment.

Many of the prophecies of the Bible are to have a dual fulfillment, and others pertain exclusively to the end of this age. The message of the book of Ezekiel was intended primarily for the people of Israel, for example (Ezekiel 2:3). But Israel had already been sent into a national captivity more than a hundred years before Ezekiel's prophecies were written. Ezekiel himself was a captive in Babylon when he prophesied (Ezekiel 1:1). His prophecies are primarily for the end of this age, and are fully relevant to the times we're living in today.

Moreover, God is no respecter of persons, and we can expect him to have the same view toward sins committed in our age, as in ancient times (Malachi 3:6; Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25; Hebrews 13:8).

Major reasons God sent ancient Israel into captivity, as he had warned for generations, were Sabbath breaking and idolatry. These same warnings apply at the end of this age, as well (Ezekiel 20:23-24. Jeremiah 16:14-18. Isaiah 2:5-6. 8-9, 17-22. Revelation 9:20-21).

Genuine Christians are to have come out of idolatry (1 Thessalonians 1:9. 1 Peter 4:3-4). We are warned, if we desire to be in God's kingdom, to be among his people, to separate ourselves from idolatrous practices (1 Corinthians 6:9; 2 Corinthians 6:16-18).

Using the ancient Israelites as an example, the Bible warns, “... do not become idolaters ...” (1 Corinthians 10:6-7). How did some of the Israelites become idolaters? “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play” (1 Corinthians 10:7). Partaking of idolatrous feasts, knowingly eating foods dedicated to such worship, is forbidden to Christians (1 Corinthians 10:14, 21; Acts 15:29; Revelation 2:14, 20; see “[May Christians Eat Food Offered to Idols?](#)”).

Nicolas means “conqueror of the people,” essentially the same meaning as Kronos, Moloch and Baal. Satan has conquered and deceived the world largely

through enticing them into idol worship, as Baalim did under Satan's influence. Christmas is a manifestation of ancient Baal worship, and it represents a system of lawlessness (2 Thessalonians 2:7; Matthew 7:21-23).

While they may seem innocent to most, idolatrous customs such as Christmas lie at the root of evil and lawlessness, man's way as opposed to God's. The deceitful manner in which they appeal to the human senses, the power with which they grip the emotions of multitudes, make them powerful tools of deception for Satan and his minions. It's amazing how easily people can be blinded by such things as a little tinsel, colorful lights, trees adorned with trinkets, and fanciful tales of a man in a red suit.

But idolatrous worship cuts us off from God (Ezekiel 8:16-18; Ezekiel 14:3-11). Such worship, based on human devised tradition and the commandments of men, is vain (Mark 7:6-9, 13).

We are admonished in the Bible to worship God according to his word, not according to the dictates of our own hearts (Jeremiah 13:7, 10; 9:12-16).

Moreover, covetousness permeates much of the activity associated with Christmas. The Santa Claus lie teaches and encourages covetousness, which itself is a form of idolatry, and is condemned (Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:5-6).

Be spiritually aware. This world is given to idols. We must keep ourselves from them, as the apostle John wrote, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (1 John 5:21).

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Messenger Church of God
PO Box 619
Wentzville, MO 63385
USA