

December 21, 2014
Sunday Morning Service
Christmas
Community Baptist Church
643 S. Suber Road
Greer, SC 29650
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To Ponder . . .

Questions to ponder as you prepare to hear from 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

1. Why should we think about the “word of the cross” during Christmas?
2. Why did the early Church not celebrate Christ’s birth?
3. What holiday was very popular in ancient Rome on December 25th?
4. Is it right for Christians to try to “take over” pagan holidays?

CHRISTMAS - THE CELEBRATION OF FOOLISHNESS 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Stop to consider that the earliest extant statements regarding Jesus’ birth are the two records given in the Bible. Matthew and Luke penned separate, but agreeing, accounts of the birth of Christ over sixty years after the grand event had come to pass. Mark did not mention Christ’s birth at all. Ninety years after the fact, John described the incarnation of God the Son with words that are bound to rock the thinking mind. But he wrote nothing about an actual birth.

Several ancient secular writers mentioned Christ’s death but not His birth. Thallus wrote in 52 about Jesus’ crucifixion. We don’t have an original but we have a quote to that end by Julius Africanus in 211. Josephus, the famous Jewish historian, made two passing references to Jesus in his work, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (Books 18 and 20).

Those statements came over ninety years after Jesus’ birth and neither reference was to that birth. Tacitus, the often quoted Roman historian, wrote over 120 years after Christ’s birth. He too mentioned Christ’s crucifixion but not His birth. A handful (4) of other ancient historians or writers in the first couple centuries mentioned Christ’s death but none mentioned His birth.

In light of the fact that there was not a lot written about Jesus’ birth, are we then surprised that there is no record of Christians in the early Church celebrating Christ’s birth or Christmas? Those early Christians celebrated His resurrection almost from the moment it happened by changing their meeting times from the Sabbath (Saturday) to the first day of the week, the day Christ rose from the dead. And so it has been. That practice is well validated in many writings. But there was no celebration of the Savior’s birthday in the early Church.

Actually, we should not be surprised about that at all in light of the fact that (as far as we can tell) the early Christians did not celebrate anyone’s birthday, including their own.

The evidence from the ancients that we have seems to point to the fact that the origins of offering birthday greetings and wishes for happiness were rooted in magic. Ralph Linton concluded, “The working of spells for good and evil is the chief usage of witchcraft. One is especially susceptible to such spells on his birthday, as one’s personal spirits are about at that time. Dreams dreamed on the birthday eve should be remembered, for they are predictions of the future brought by the guardian spirits which hover over one’s bed on the birthday eve. Birthday greetings have power for good or ill because one is closer to the spirit world on this day. Good wishes bring good fortune, but the reverse is also true, so one should avoid enemies on one’s birthday and be surrounded only by well-wishers. ‘Happy birthday’ and ‘Many happy returns of the day’ are the traditional greetings” (Ralph Linton and Adelin Linton, *The Lore of Birthdays*, Publisher, H. Schuman, 1952. Original from, Indiana University. Digitized, Jun 18, 2009, p. 20).

Along with that practice of superstition, the giving of birthday gifts is a custom associated with the offering of sacrifices to pagan gods on their birthdays. Apparently, the exchange of birthday

presents was somehow associated with the importance of ingratiating good and evil fairies on a person's birthdays.

Therefore, according to John Bugge (1975), "Early Christians (*The World Book Encyclopedia*), considered the celebration of anyone's birth to be a pagan custom." The ancient Greeks, for instance, believed that each person had a protective spirit that attended the person's birth and thereafter watched over him. That spirit maintained a mystic relation with the god on whose birthday the individual was born. Therefore, in pagan cultures of the past, birthdays had an intimate link with astrology and the horoscope.

Because of these pagan and spiritistic roots, the Christians rejected birthday customs. The history of God's people indicates that they had viewed these pagan celebrations with disfavor for generations. These were humble, modest men and women who did not view their arrival in the world as so important that it should be celebrated. To celebrate themselves would fly in the face of God's simple standard for "good." *He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8).*

There are a couple of examples of pagan birthday celebrations recorded in the Bible that illustrate the conflict. One was Pharaoh's birthday party. *On the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, he made a feast for all his servants and lifted up the head of the chief cupbearer and the head of the chief baker among his servants. He restored the chief cupbearer to his position, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them (Genesis 40:20-22).* It is not difficult to imagine what kind of celebration this was.

Even more graphic is the birthday celebration Herod threw for himself. *But when Herod's birthday came, the daughter of Herodias danced before the company and pleased Herod, so that he promised with an oath to give her whatever she might ask. Prompted by her mother, she said, "Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter." And the king was sorry, but because of his oaths and his guests he commanded it to be given. He sent and had John beheaded in the prison (Matthew 14:6-10).* Drunkenness, licentious dancing and such things really offended the Christian conscience in the first century.

Therefore, because Christians did not participate in celebrating their own birthdays, it is not surprising that they did not celebrate Christ's birthday. However, over the years things tended to change. By the time the Church is just over 300 years old (AD 354 to be exact), Bishop Liberius of Rome declared that Christians everywhere should celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25. What changed and why that date?

It is significant that the fourth century was a watershed time for the visible church. The various Church Councils of those days reveal that all kinds of heresy and false teaching was pouring into the Church. This is when pragmatism started to take over, which led to the atrocities of the church visible becoming a political force that vied for power with worldly empires, that sold indulgences so people could escape hell, and that tortured and killed people who truly trusted Christ alone for salvation. In those dark ages of history, examples of true faith were scant.

So what does an organization do when it is built on the foundation of faith in Christ, but the leaders offer the people every teaching except faith in Christ? At that point, the organization has to compete with the world. Not surprising then, the religious (but non-Christian) leadership looked to outward sources to bolster interest in their dead religion. That is when celebrations and entertainment began to surface within the church.

Most scholars agree that the birth of Jesus was not even in the month of December at all. In fact, the true Christians never chose December 25 as the day to celebrate Jesus' birth. The pagan Roman rulers picked that date. Sometime earlier the Romans realized that the days continued to grow shorter and shorter until the end of December. It looked like the world was winding down and dying. But then, right around the last week of December, the sun started moving back north and the days grew longer. The Romans decided they needed to celebrate the resurgence of the sun and, in AD 274, they created the "Feast of the Sol Invictus" (the Unconquerable Sun). Sure enough, the celebration fell on December 25.

As the church of Rome conformed more and more to the world, it soon became obvious to the leaders that they were going to lose their tithers if they didn't compete with the world. Being pragmatic like they were, the leaders of the Roman church decided that they

needed to offer an alternative celebration to this very popular *Festival of the Unconquerable Sun*, so that their adherents would stick with the church.

Thus, in order to keep the Christians away from all the pagan rituals that were part of this worship of the sun, Bishop Liberius of Rome declared, in AD 354, that all Christians everywhere should celebrate the birth of our Lord on December 25. And so Christians have done that with few exceptions over the past nearly 700 years. A few notable exceptions would be times like during the rule of Oliver Cromwell (Lord Protector of Britain and the Commonwealth) when the celebration of Christmas was banned because of “the heathen traditions surrounding this sacred event.” Due to that edict, from 1649 to 1658 no celebration was allowed except for special church services on Christmas eve.

That is kind of where we are today. We truly are agitated by the pagan celebrating that bombards us from every quarter. We easily get swept up in the carnal materialism, and some Christians even find themselves at parties where people get drunk and people who demand respect at work end up going to bed with co-workers. All around us is the evidence of riotous living and it is hard to stay separate from it.

But if we can keep our minds on the true purpose of our celebration, the rest of the world will be glad if we don’t buy their worthless trinkets and attend their drunken orgies of carnality. It might be good if at this season we adopt the attitude of John Knox who on his deathbed said, “I am tired of this world and this world is tired of me.” It will be very helpful for us to remember that the world’s celebration is gross foolishness and our celebration is foolishness to them.

That is what Paul wrote when he focused on God’s amazing plan of salvation. In God’s incomprehensible sovereign design, He, represented in God the Son, would come to earth as a human, live perfectly under His own law, be killed though innocent, in order to pay sin’s debt, so that He can justifiably offer salvation to sinners who offend Him.

And the world, the people who enjoy their drunken orgies, cry out, “That’s the most foolish thing we have ever heard. If we want to escape the punishment of hell, we will earn the way out by our own works!” And God responds, “My foolishness puts your wisdom to

shame.” The full meaning of “Merry Christmas” truly is utter foolishness to the carnal citizens of this culture. But it is our eternal hope.

God’s Wisdom Destroys the Wisdom of the Wise.

God has a plan. His plan is the foundation for the Christian celebration for Christmas. It doesn’t look anything like the pagan celebration of the holiday. *For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart” (v.19).* This verse states in the first place that God created the plan for eternal salvation. Seven hundred years before God inspired Paul to write this, Isaiah promised that God would destroy human wisdom with His own plan for salvation.

God’s plan is clearly not in line with human wisdom and discernment. Instead of making a plan that would be fitting for human wisdom, God created a plan that destroys human wisdom. The Greek word for the English “wisdom” is *sophia*. The *sophia* of the wise is the pinnacle of human intelligence. This *sophia* is expressed in the writings of brilliant philosophers like Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates. It is expressed in the inventions of engineers and discoveries of scientists that make this generation almost frighteningly advanced. *Sophia* is the expression of artists, writers, and musicians who have created masterpieces that continue to endure the test of time. *Sophia* is the very best of the best human talents, abilities, and intelligence.

God’s plan also destroys discernment. The discernment of the discerning is the ability to think, reason, calculate, solve problems, understand mysteries, and answer the dark sayings of sages. In ages past, the kings surrounded themselves with men of discernment who could answer the hard questions. By human discernment nations are founded, laws are established, and truth interpreted and applied to the culture.

And God created a plan that purposely destroys this wisdom and cleverness. It is not just that human wisdom and discernment will pass away, be ruined or come to naught. The active voice verb teaches that God is in the process of utterly destroying all accomplishments of human wisdom regarding eternal life. That seems so unnecessary, so unkind to a world awash in humanism. But God

destroying man's wisdom is necessary because human wisdom is thoroughly infected by sin. Human wisdom displays selfishness, arrogance, boasting, and conceit. We are quite proud of what we accomplish.

That is why God cannot allow us to accomplish salvation. He must destroy any method that will result in the created being boasting about gaining eternal life through his own wisdom or discernment. A couple of verses later in this context, Paul concluded that the result of God's plan is that no one can boast in God's presence. *God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1 Corinthians 1:28-29)*. It is a good thing when we are unable to take credit but must give all credit to God for His astonishing plan. *But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world (Galatians 6:14)*.

God's plan is working. Still God asks where the wise people are. *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? (v.20)*. Thinking people respond, "Why, the wise, the writers, the lawyers, they are achieving great things in all walks of life!" Yes, that is true. All of life is about their accomplishments. The nightly news fawns over the wisdom of humanity.

But, where is the wise man from the past? Where are the wise men who taught that the world is flat? Where are the wise men who taught that the universe revolves around the earth. Where are the wise teachers who taught countless innocent students about the Greek gods and goddesses? Where are the brilliant Senators of Rome who created laws that would be permanent? Most important, "Where are the wise men and women on the only stage that counts, the stage of eternal life?" Hasn't God proven in time that some of the most popular conclusions of the wise are now considered foolishness? Has God not proven that all the theories wise men created regarding eternal life are false and foolish?

The worldly wise do not accept His plan. God determined that human wisdom would never comprehend Him. *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who*

believe (v.21). How amazing that the world through wisdom does not know God. He has done all that is necessary to reveal Himself to His created beings. He graciously reveals His invisible attributes, His eternal power, and His divine nature in the creation. What humans need to know about God in order to trust Him is sufficiently displayed without a spoken word. But wise humans reject God's gracious revelation. *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (Romans 1:18)*.

In spite of human rejection of the truth God gives, He is pleased to reveal even more truth through the folly of preaching. And in response to preaching, *Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom (v.22)*. Some people think they would be convinced if God would do miracles for them. But for centuries they have rejected Jesus the miracle worker just like His peers did. Others think God should convince them with wise teaching. But they reject Jesus the wisest teacher who ever lived.

In the end, the Baby in the manger wins! *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (v.25)*. The world thinks the story of baby Jesus being born in a manger to provide salvation for all sinners is a silly story fraught with superstition. So they celebrate human wisdom and materialism during this time of year. And all the time they are celebrating they cannot fathom that . . .

God's Wisdom Sends a Baby to the Cross.

Christ was born to die. That is why *we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (v.23)*. The term "Christ" is very instructive in this text. It is more than just a name. The "Christ" is the promised Messiah, the King. The wise men from the east came to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews. Yes, they were looking for the baby Jesus. Yes, the baby was the promised Christ, the *anointed One*, who was ordained to die on the cross for sins. That very idea causes Jews who want a mere earthly ruler to be offended. The idea of the baby Jesus being the Savior of the world by dying on the cross is utter foolishness to wise pagan Gentiles.

But in the infinite wisdom of God, Jesus Christ was born for the express purpose of shedding His blood to provide the ransom for His people. And so when we preach Christ crucified, we must also preach His virgin birth. We preach that He was far more than a baby born in unusual circumstances who becomes the king. That idea makes for great novels, but God deals in reality not fiction. But that idea cannot provide salvation for sinners who long to be free from their guilt.

God's amazing plan is rejected by the thinking people of the world, but it is our eternal hope. Perishing people do not appreciate the word of the cross. *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (v.18)*. People who are in the process of walking daily toward an eternal hell do not understand the wisdom of the cross. People who have been born again by embracing Christ's sacrifice on the cross know that it is the greatest expression of God's power.

In contrast, the called people cling to the word of the cross. While the humanly wise are perishing, *to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God (v.24)*. Christ the baby born in a manger, perfect in life – innocent in death, is the perfect expression of God's power. The birth of Christ is a greater expression of His power than creation and all the miracles of the Bible together. What the world counts as pointless antiquity, we cling to as the most powerful action in eternity. The perfect baby grown to be the perfect man and executed in innocence is God's wisdom. Of course the world does not appreciate it. Indeed, the mere mention of this plan in the simple greeting "Merry Christmas" offends the wise people of this world. But for us who God has called to salvation through the effectual call of grace, this plan that seems foolish to human wisdom is the quintessential wisdom of God.

If we really believe that God saving us from sin through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the perfect expression of God's wisdom, we will not be ashamed of it. Do you find yourself tempted to join in with the grand celebrations that ignore God's plan of wisdom? Are you not at least offended by the endless expressions of holiday warmth, gift giving, kindness, and emotionalism that ignores your Savior? In light of the fully pagan celebrations that go on around us, it is easy for us to understand why the early Church did not celebrate Christmas. They concluded that the

wisdom of God was so far above the mindless frivolity of the *Feast of the Sol Invictus* that they didn't want any part of it. During this time of pagan celebration, let us be zealous to do what God commends us to do through the Apostle Paul: *Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil (Ephesians 5:15-16)*.