

Christmas Traditions

Christmas is so full of wonder, meaning and tradition. But, where did all these things that we now call Christmas -- come from? Lets just briefly sketch the origin and development of what we now celebrate as Christ's Birth.

The Biblical Celebration

- The Dawning of Light Luke 1:78-79
- The Fullness of Time Gal 4.4-5
- The Mystery of Incarnation 1 Timothy 3:16

The Pagan Connection

- Dr. Phillip Schaff, a noted church historian of the last century, wrote a monumental 8 volume History of the Christian Church¹. In this work he relates that history records that the ancients celebrated an annual victory of the Sun over the long night of winter. This religious festival was held near the winter solstice of 12/21 -22 each year.
- By Roman times there was:
 1. A silent testimony of nature: the seasons that show winter as death and spring as life and resurrection. And,
 2. A Public Celebration in Paganism that:
 3. Related the Sol Invictus legend of the conquest of darkness by the Sun.
 4. This tradition was embodied in the Saturnalia Festival. This festival was a feast of images, the giving of gifts, and the setting free of slaves.
- According to the Astronomers, on the night of 12/21-22, the earth is at its darkest, the night is the longest, the light of day is the shortest, and the Sun is closest to the Earth of any time of the year.
- What an amazing picture of Christ's coming to us. As John 1 says He came to a sin darkened world, He came as a Sunrise from on High and offered a free gift of salvation and liberation from servitude to the servants of darkness.

The Christian Regeneration of this Pagan Celebration

- By the year AD 360 the church was celebrating the Birth, Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ.
- By AD 386, Chrysostom was preaching, "Without the birth of Christ there is no Baptism, no Passion, no Resurrection, no Ascension and no Pouring out of the Holy Spirit..."
- As the centuries went on the tradition grew to include Epiphany [manifestation] when Christ was circumcised on the 8th day after His birth. The eastern church celebrates this on January 6th.

¹ III, pp. 394ff.

The Christian Meaning to Ancient Traditions

- **December 25th** was the Saturnalia Festival of emancipation, gift giving and the triumph of light after the longest night. The Christian sees the truth implicit in this pagan tradition that reflects: Christ the Light of the world, His triumph over the night of sin in Luke 1:78-79
- **Evergreen Trees** were the symbol of eternal life. Martin Luther introduced them to the Reformation Church as a picture of our endless life in Christ, by bringing in a tree to his family on Christmas Eve lit with candles. Isaiah 60:13
- **Candles** are a picture that Christ is the Light of the world John 8:
- **Holly** speaks of the thorns in His crown Matthew 27:29
- **Red** is a color of Christmas that speaks of Christ's blood and death.
- **Gifts** are a reminder of the gifts of the Magi to baby Jesus. Each of them speak to a component of His incarnation: Majesty in life, Bitterest Agony in Death and He as Gods Perfect gift to us. Matthew 2.
- **The Yule Log** was a symbol by which all the men in the family would carry a log large enough to burn for 12 days into the house. They were identifying with Christ and His Cross. The fire was started with a fragment from the previous years [this refers to the eternal existence of Christ before His birth] log. it speaks of warmth, unity, joy and the security of endless life.
- **Mistletoe** was an ancient symbol from the Roman times. It was under Mistletoe that old enmities and broken friendship were restored. So Christ was the One who took away the enmity and gave us Peace with god. Romans 5:1; 8:1.
- **Bells** are associated with ringing out news. Christ is the good news, the best news of all.
- **Christmas Eve** is a time when we remember that Christ came in the darkest night of Earth's need to be the Light of the World.
- **Shepherds** who were watching lambs for use as sacrifices in the Temple, were the first to hear the great news that the Lamb to end all sacrifices had appeared.
- **Christmas Pie** is an old tradition that uses a Mince pie with various spices to remember the spices of the Magi. For centuries it was made in a manger shape.

Modern Additions

- **In 1822** Clement Moore wrote a poem for children that has never been forgotten. It was entitled, "Twas the Night before Christmas..."!
- **Santa Claus** is a Dutch word that is actually Sinter Claus, Saint Nicholas in English.
- **Saint Nicholas** was the supposed early Bishop of a church in Asia Minor [the modern country of Turkey]. He became of some desperate needs in his congregation, and a family having to sell their children into slavery, so one night he came and left money on their doorstep. It was gold in a stocking.
- **Christmas Cards** started in 1844. An English artist named William Dobson, drew up some pictures in England for use at this season. They found local use there and soon spread to America. In 1846 Cole and Horsley saw the commercial potential of this growing tradition and started the production of what is now over a \$1,000,000,000.00 industry, that sees 4 billion cards sent each year in America alone.

A Final conclusion:

- Don't lose the **Spiritual Depth of Christmas** because of its Pagan association.
- Don't miss the **Spiritual Delight of Christmas** because of the Commercial association.
- Don't forget the **Spiritual Despair of the World** because of Christmas and its wonders.
- Some challenges:
 1. Give a gift to Jesus.
 2. Like Christ, give to those who can't repay you.
 3. Pause to sense the darkness outside at night, and then thank God for sending the light.
 4. Read the Scriptures to your family.
 5. Start some traditions that point to Christ.
 6. Enjoy this wonderful time of the year, don't lose the season for the rush.

