

Christmas

The Untold Story



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As surprising as it may seem, the apostles and New Testament Christians did not celebrate Christmas. Why didn't they? What is the real significance of Jesus' birth anyway? And the many unusual Christmas customs—what do they have to do with Jesus' birth? Be prepared for some surprising answers to these and other questions about Christmas—the most popular holiday in the Christian world.

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AN "OLD FASHIONED" CHRISTMAS!

It is a festive season. Little children are filled with anticipation and excitement. Families are busy putting up decorations. Boughs of holly and evergreen are assembled and placed about the houses. Trees are chosen and decorated with sparkling trinkets and ornaments.

It is a season of giving and receiving presents, of sending greetings; a time to sing songs. Parades with special floats, sumptuous meals and merrymaking add to the festivity.

Does that seem familiar? Certainly this could be a description of a Christmas celebration in some countries today. But it also describes something else. In late December and early January, festive religious celebrations such as these were taking place among non-Christians centuries *before* Jesus Christ was born! Such customs do not come from the Bible. They have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not originate them, nor were they observed by the apostles or the New Testament Church.

Where and how, then, did the Christian world get Christmas, the most widely observed of all its holidays?

Most people assume it comes directly from the Bible. Certainly the story of Jesus' birth is recorded in the Scriptures. But actually the Bible nowhere instructs Christians to commemorate his birth. In fact, notice what the *Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary* has to say under the article "Christ-

mas": "In the earliest days of the Church there was no such feast . . ."

They just did not commemorate Jesus' birth in the early days of the Church. And there were good reasons for that. For one thing, even back then no one knew—as no one knows today—the date his birth occurred. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) explains: "Inexplicable though it seems, the date of Christ's birth is not known. The Gospels indicate neither the day nor the month." (Article "Christmas and Its Cycle.")

Why then does the Christian world celebrate Christmas when it does? Let us look at various views. "According to the hypothesis . . . accepted by most scholars today," the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* continues, "the birth of Christ was assigned the date of the winter solstice (December 25 in the Julian calendar, January 6 in the Egyptian) because on this day, as the sun began its return to northern skies, the pagan devotees of Mithra celebrated the *dies natalis Solis Invicti* (birthday of the invincible sun)."

From pre-Christian times, during the season of the solstice, the Romans engaged in their boisterous feast of the Saturnalia (December 17-23). They did this in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. In addition, the expansion of the Empire introduced Romans to many Oriental cults, one of which was the worship of the Persian sun-god Mithra, whose birthday was celebrated December 25.

Again, the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*: "Christmas originated at a time when the cult of the sun was particularly strong at Rome. . . . Though the substitution of Christmas for the pagan festival cannot be proved with certainty, it remains the most plausible explanation for the dating of Christmas."

In ancient times, many people realized their dependence upon the sun for light, heat and the growing of crops. With deep interest they observed the sun's yearly course through the heavens. To expedite its journey, they created various feasts and celebrations to be observed at different seasons.

The end of December was an especially significant time in the northern hemisphere. Days were short; nights long. The sun was at its lowest point. This called for the celebra-

tion of special festivals of thanksgiving and encouragement to the waning sun.

When, at the winter solstice in late December, the days began to lengthen once again, there was great festivity lasting into the first part of January. The reason was that the declining sun—the light of the world—had been reborn and began to gain in strength.

In the early centuries of the Christian era festivities once meant to honor the sun and the sun-god easily lent themselves to become part of the increasingly popular "Christian" religion. Only now, it was reasoned, they could honor the birth of Jesus—the real light from heaven. "With the triumph of Christianity, Christmas replaced the pagan festival, Christians having applied 'Sun of Righteousness' (Mal.

T*he Gospels do not record—and no one knows today—the date of Jesus' birth.*

4:2) to Christ" (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*, article "Christmas").

It was not until A.D. 354 that we have the first clear reference to December 25 being regarded as the anniversary of Christ's birth. A Roman almanac from that year mentions the date, but even so, gives no evidence of any great celebrating to mark the occasion. Some three centuries had gone by since Jesus' birth, death and resurrection—three centuries during which there is no record of the Christian world commemorating Christ's birth on December 25.

It is important to point out, however, that Christianity has not been of one mind in selecting a date. In the eastern part of the Roman Empire Jesus' birth and baptism were being observed even previous to 354 A.D., but on January 6. By the middle of the fifth century, however, most of the Eastern church too had adopted December 25 as the anniversary of Christ's birth, keeping January 6—Epiphany—to commemorate his baptism.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE IN THE BIBLE?

Jeremiah 10:2-5 reads as follows: "Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax ["a craftsman shapes it with his chisel"—N.I.V.]. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple. They are upright, like a palm tree ["like a scarecrow in a melon patch"—N.I.V.], and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot go by themselves. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor can they do any good."

Reading those verses, especially without the alternate translations in brackets, it is easy to conclude that they describe

the modern Christmas tree. This conclusion is even more believable if it is thought to have historical support. In reality, however, there is no historical basis for such a conclusion.

What these verses in Jeremiah describe is the idolatrous custom of cutting down a tree and carving it into an idol, embellishing it with precious metals.

We cannot say that Jeremiah was referring to a Christmas tree. Unlike the Christmas tree, this idol looks like it should be able to speak, move and act on its own. But it cannot because it is lifeless.

While this specific custom may no longer be in use, the principle enunciated at the beginning of this passage from Jeremiah remains in effect: God does not want his people to adopt idolatrous customs.

Carryover from Ancient Times

There may be some uncertainty as to why December 25 (or January 6) was chosen to commemorate Jesus' birth. Nevertheless, the fact that from ancient times non-Christian festivals had taken place at that season influenced the choice.

"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." (Hastings' *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 3, article "Christmas.") Thus dates of midwinter feast days observed by non-Christians were adopted by the expanding Christian religion.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* makes this point: "The traditional customs connected with Christmas have developed from several sources as a result of the coincidence of the celebration of the birth of Christ with the pagan agricultural and solar observances at midwinter." (15th edition, 1985, article "Christmas").

The simple fact is that, as more and more people from throughout the Western Roman Empire became converted to an increasingly popular Christianity, they brought many of their favorite customs with them. "The pagan [winter festivals of the] Saturnalia and Brumalia were too deeply entrenched in popular custom to be set aside by Christian influence. . . . The pagan festival with its riot and merrymaking was so popular that Christians were glad of an excuse to continue its celebration with little change in spirit or in manner. . . . Christians of Mesopotamia accused their western brethren of idolatry and sun-worship for adopting as Christian this pagan festival. Yet the festival rapidly gained acceptance and became at last so firmly entrenched that even the Protestant revolution of the sixteenth century was not able to dislodge it . . ." (*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge*, Volume III, article "Christmas.")

Many and Varied Customs

Through the centuries different combinations of customs, often regional in nature, developed in different nations. Many Iranian Christians, for example, abstain from meat,

eggs, milk and cheese during the whole month of December leading up to Christmas day. Then there is great feasting. It is not customary there to exchange presents. An Ethiopian custom on Christmas is to feast on raw meat. Armenian villagers do not eat food derived from animals for one week before Christmas.

In Ghana, fireworks are a popular part of festivities, as they are in Liberia. In Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and other areas in the southern hemisphere, people of European heritage celebrate their Christmas traditions in the setting of a summer holiday, with appropriate adaptations.

In Colombia many love to disguise themselves on Christmas eve and join the crowds in the streets. Anyone who recognizes a person in spite of that person's disguise has a right to a gift. Mexican children use sticks to beat a suspended earthenware figurine until it breaks, scattering the goodies that are inside. In Iraq, Christian families gather around bonfires of dried thorns. Good fortune is indicated if

all the thorns burn to ashes. In Syria, the holiday season is spread over the period of more than one month.

By far the most universally recognizable and widely observed Christmas traditions, though, are some that developed in the area of the Western Roman Empire. As the Christian religion spread from Rome into northern Europe, local customs associated with winter solstice rites began to blend with Christian observances. Around

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A.D. 600 Pope Gregory I specifically instructed Augustine, the first Archbishop of Canterbury, to adapt existing local religious customs to Christian usage in order to help propagate the faith.

Thus, "the church endeavoured to amalgamate, as it were, the old and new religions, and sought, by transferring

the heathen ceremonies to the solemnities of the Christian festivals, to make them subservient to the cause of religion and piety. . . . The result has been the strange medley of Christian and pagan rites which contribute to make up the festivities of the modern Christmas." (Chambers' *Book of Days*, Vol. 2, article "December 25.")

Trees, Candles and Holiday Cheer

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* lists practices the Christmas season has absorbed. "On the Roman New Year (January 1), houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites. . . . Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir trees, gifts and greetings all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life, have always been associated with the winter festival, both pagan and Christian." (15th edition, article "Christmas.")

Though the modern Christmas tree can easily be traced back to seventeenth century Germany, it "may well be a descendant of some sacred tree carried about or set up at the beginning-of-winter festival. All things considered, it seems to belong to a class of primitive sacraments of which the example most familiar to English people is the Maypole." (*Guinness Book of Christmas*, page 17.)

Branches of holly and mistletoe were likewise displayed. Not only did these plants remain green through the winter months, but they also bore fruit at that time, thus symbolizing life in an otherwise dead season. Today, in Christmas celebrations the world over, greenery plays a prominent role.

And Santa Claus?

An important part of Christmas celebrations in most cultures is the visit of a legendary gift-giver. The description of this personage may vary widely, but most often it is that of an elderly man known by such names as Father Christmas, Saint Martin, the Weihnachtsmann, Père Noël, Saint Nicholas or Santa Claus.

Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus, has become the most

widely recognizable name of this winter gift-bringer. Little is known about the real Nicholas, except that he was a bishop in Asia Minor in the fourth century A.D. Reportedly he was a very generous man. One of the attributes he eventually was given was that of being the patron saint of children. Since his feast day, December 6, fell in the Christmas season, legends about him easily blended with ancient tales of mysterious gift-givers who appeared at that time of the year.

Through the centuries the Saint Nicholas legend underwent regional adaptations. Stories about his deeds proliferated and he became one of the most popular saints of the Middle Ages. It was Clement Moore's poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" ("Twas the night before Christmas") and American imagination that are principally responsible for the roly-poly, bewhiskered figure in red coat and cap so well known today as Santa Claus.

There is no biblical connection whatsoever between Santa Claus, or any other of the mythical Christmas-season gift-bringers, and the birth of Jesus. These traditions are of human origin.

An article that appeared in the personal opinion section of the December 1974 *U.S. Catholic* magazine eloquently asked: "If one stops to consider, doesn't Santa stand in almost total opposition to the mission and teaching of the Son of Man? 'It is better to give than to receive,' said Jesus. But through the Santa myth we teach children, 'To receive is all.'"

Clearly there is more to Christmas customs and traditions than most of us have realized!

WHY CHRIST WAS BORN!

Each year during the Christmas season the story of what is traditionally thought to be the “first Christmas” is told and retold. It is featured on greeting cards, portrayed by Nativity scenes, acted out in plays. It is the subject of books and movies, art and music.

But the actual, original story of Jesus’ birth is found in only one place—the Bible. And when we look at it there we make a remarkable discovery. The biblical account of that great event has a significantly different emphasis than we find in the traditional version so popular at Christmas time!

One of the main tenets of Christianity is that Jesus was not just another human being; he was the promised Messiah and Savior of mankind. He was the Son of God, God in the flesh. One of his names was Immanuel, meaning “God with us” (Matt. 1:23).

When Jesus was born his birth was not a totally unexpected event. Prophecies that it would happen are scattered throughout the Old Testament. The first one was spoken back at the beginning of human history, after the first sin committed by Adam and Eve. God told them of a coming Seed, a Seed who would triumph over evil (Gen. 3:15).

Through thousands of years this prophecy of a special Offspring from a woman was periodically revealed in symbolic and specific terms from God. Some seven hundred years

CHRISTMAS— AGAINST THE LAW?

Many people are surprised to learn that keeping Christmas was once outlawed in Britain and the Puritan colonies of North America.

It happened in the early seventeenth century, when Puritans in England were offended by the popular Christmas celebration. Excesses in eating, drinking and other matters were common during the seasonal festivities. Puritans saw the whole occasion as dangerously non-Christian. After the Puritan party rose to political power under Oliver Cromwell in 1642, all Christmas celebrations religious and secular were forbidden by decree of Parliament.

"No Christmas," town criers proclaimed and December 25 was declared to be an ordinary work day. Anyone who treated it as having religious significance or who stayed home from work on that

day faced a fine or prison.

After the end of Puritan rule and the restoration of King Charles II in 1660, Christmas observance gradually began to surface once again in Britain. Meanwhile, the Puritan influence had been brought to America, particularly to New England. There colonists also regarded December 25 a work day. In 1659 a law was passed by the General Court of Massachusetts forbidding Christmas observance. The law was repealed in 1681 but hostility on the part of local Christians toward Christmas festivities continued for many years.

But while the Puritans were opposing the keeping of Christmas, other segments of Christianity were, of course, promoting it. The truth is the various denominations in Christianity never have been of one mind concerning Christmas!

before Jesus' birth, for example, Isaiah was inspired to write: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel" (Isa. 7:14).

He also wrote that the Christ would be born of the House of David, the son of Jesse (Isa. 11:1-11). About the same time Micah was inspired to name the exact town, Bethlehem, where this would take place (Mic. 5:2).

The Messiah was to be put to death for the sins of humanity (Isa. 53:1-12), as Jesus ultimately was. The importance of that part of his mission is heavily stressed by most churches. And rightly so. But there is another reason for his being born. The Messiah was also prophesied to be a world-ruling king!

Again from Isaiah: "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder. . . . Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end" (Isa. 9:6-7).

Some 2,000 years ago, principally in the small nation of Judah, expectation was widespread that the long foretold coming of the Messiah was at hand. Certainly many people wanted that day to be at hand. "Even the Roman historians knew about this. Not so very much later than this Suetonius could write, "There had spread over all the Orient an old and established belief, that it was fated at that time for men coming from Judaea to rule the world" (Suetonius: *Life of Vespasian*, 4:5)" (Barclay's *Daily Study Bible—New Testament*, Vol. I, page 27).

Josephus wrote about a belief among the Jews that "about that time, one from their country should become governor of the habitable earth" (*Wars of the Jews*, 6-5-4).

We know there were some individuals, like Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, and a man named Simeon, to whom God had directly revealed that the appearance of the Messiah was near (Luke 1:67-79; 2:25-26). There is no indication but what they told others and news like that would have spread fast, conditions being what they were at the time.

Judah was a conquered nation, ruled by Rome. Many Jews longed for a deliverer like the Messiah was portrayed to be by centuries-old prophecies contained in their sacred Scriptures.

Peace on Earth?

The first announcement of Jesus' birth was given to shepherds watching over their flocks in the Judean hills. For them the night was passing like countless other nights spent under the starlit skies. Then everything changed. Suddenly the countryside was illuminated with radiant brilliance. A majestic angelic being appeared and spoke to the terrified shepherds: "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people" (Luke 2:10).

Here was good news, the angel said, and it was intended for everyone—for "all people." He went on to announce the birth of Jesus in the nearby town of Bethlehem. No sooner had he finished when he was joined by a multitude of heavenly voices proclaiming: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!" (verse 14).

Such peace is possible only under the rulership of Jesus Christ. The day before Jesus was put to death the Roman governor Pilate asked him if it were true, as he had heard, that Jesus claimed to be a king. Jesus didn't deny it. But he declared, "My kingdom is not of this world," meaning it was not of this present system of things, this age, this society (John 18:36). It is true that there is a spiritual representation of the kingdom in the Church. While living in a world generally opposed to the values of this kingdom Christians may still experience spiritual peace and happiness as they follow Christ. But Christ's literal world-ruling government is yet to be set up on earth.

Jesus promised, "I will come again" (John 14:3). This very Jesus who was born in Bethlehem will—in a time yet ahead—establish his kingdom and bring lasting peace to the world even as he now grants peace to those individuals who submit their lives to him. The Bible gives far more attention to explaining the good news of Jesus' life, death, resurrection and second coming than to the story of his physical birth. It is simply out-of-proportion to put so much emphasis, as the popular celebration of Christmas does, on the birth of Jesus when there is so much more of importance concerning him, what he stands for, what he is doing now and what he is going to do in the future.

When and Where

A number of assumptions regarding the story of Jesus' birth are worth examining in light of what the biblical account may indicate. There is no proof, for example, that Jesus was born in midwinter. In fact, there are some reasons to think the opposite. Keep in mind that it did—and does—get cold during the winter in Judea. This comes as a surprise to many people. Even in April—in the early spring—when Jesus was crucified, certain “servants and officers who had made a fire of coals stood there, for it was cold, and they warmed themselves. And Peter stood with them and warmed himself” (John 18:18).

It was for the purpose of registering for a census, remember, that Joseph and Mary made the journey to Bethlehem, Joseph's home town. And they were not alone in this; “all went to be registered, everyone to his own city” (Luke 2:3). Virtually the whole nation was in movement; roads were crowded, temporary lodging at a premium.

Notice what one author concluded in an article extolling the observance of Christmas:

“The exact time of the nativity of Christ can never be known . . . The twenty-fifth day of December . . . has little in its favor beyond the fact that it was the day on which, in antiquity, the return of the sun from its winter absence was kept . . . It [Jesus' birth] could hardly have been at that season, however, for such a time would surely not have been chosen by the authorities for a public enrolment, which necessitated the population's traveling from all parts to their natal districts, storms and rain making journeys both unsafe and unpleasant in winter, except in specially favorable years.” (*Holy-Days and Holidays*, article “Christmas at Bethlehem” by Cunningham Geikie, D.D.)

By what means did Joseph and Mary make the journey to Bethlehem? The common concept is one of Mary seated on a donkey being led by Joseph. But if we limit ourselves strictly to what the Bible records, we must say we don't know how they traveled because the Bible doesn't say. Nor does the Bible show Jesus being born in a wooden stable surrounded by various barnyard animals.

WHICH CALENDAR?

The Julian calendar, established by Julius Caesar, incorporated an error in calculation that, by the mid-1500s A.D., had shifted the dates of the seasons about ten days from what they were in Caesar's time. To correct this, Pope Gregory XIII proclaimed a calendar reform in A.D. 1582. The resulting "Gregorian" calendar has come to be used by most of the world. The difference between the two calendars, however, has promoted disharmony in the Christian world as to

when to observe Christmas. Thus, while most celebrate the holiday on December 25 by the Gregorian calendar, the Russian Orthodox church observes Christmas December 25 by the Julian calendar, which now puts the observance on January 7 of the Gregorian calendar. The celebration of the Armenian church, which to this day regards January 6 (Epiphany) by the old Julian calendar as the Feast of the Nativity, falls on January 19 by the Gregorian.

DECEMBER-JULIAN						
25	26	27	28	29	30	31
JANUARY-GREGORIAN						
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
JANUARY-JULIAN						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
JANUARY-GREGORIAN						
14	15	16	17	18	19	20

There is nothing in the Bible to indicate how far along Mary's pregnancy was when she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. The expression "great with child" in Luke 2:5 of the Authorized or King James Version merely means, in seventeenth century English, "expecting a child." All we know is that sometime "while they were there" in Bethlehem Mary's pregnancy came to term (verse 6).

The room they sought to use for the birth was filled. Room was found, however, in a place the Bible describes as having only a manger available. Houses of the time often had an attached section where animals were sheltered. Sometimes this section was one of the many natural caves in the Holy Land, against which a house could be built. A popular tradition and some scholars hold that Jesus was born in just such a cave. This would fit with the fact that, when the Magi arrived, they did not come to a separate "stable," but rather they came "into the house" (Matt. 2:11)!

Since Bethlehem was Joseph's home town, it would have been logical for the "house" to belong to relatives or friends. In that way, instead of Joseph and Mary being alone for this important event, they would be surrounded with kinfolk, including women who could render assistance.

In any case, the shelter, humble as it was, had the essentials to serve as a birthplace. The manger, cleaned and filled with fresh straw and blankets, made a secure crib. The wonder of it all is that the very Son of God—the Lord of glory—should be born in such lowly surroundings when he certainly deserved to be born in a royal palace. Truly, in becoming human, the One who created all things "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself . . ." (Phil. 2:7-8).

Of Jesus' birth itself, the Bible only records, "And she [Mary] brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths" (Luke 2:7). These were long, narrow strips of cloth wound around newborn babies.

The Star and the Magi

Most Nativity scenes portray three wise men or Magi, as they are often called. But the Bible does not say there

were three wise men. No one knows how many there were.

We do know they were led to Jesus from their land in the East by a "star" (Matt. 2:2). Exactly which presumed star or planet this was has given rise to much speculation. According to the biblical account the "star" appeared to the Magi. There is no indication it was seen by anyone else. If others could have seen it and understood its significance King Herod easily would have been able to find Jesus and destroy him.

The "star" moved, leading the Magi, and finally stood over the house where Jesus was (verse 9). Some have speculated that it was simply an angel, a constellation or a special guiding light. Whatever this "star" was, it led to the house where the Christ child was. The event was a miracle from God.

The shepherds, who were from the region close to Bethlehem, as soon as they were told about Jesus' birth, immediately sought out and found the newborn child as they were instructed to do (Luke 2:16).

The Magi, on the other hand, came from a considerable distance. Traveling from the East, searching for the one who was born "King of the Jews," they came to Jerusalem first.

The giving of gifts by the Magi is often used to justify the practice of exchanging Christmas gifts. What is overlooked is that the Magi did not exchange gifts among themselves. Rather, they presented all their gifts "to Him"—to Jesus (Matt. 2:11) because it was a custom to honor royalty in that way. How different from the modern custom of trading Christmas gifts and giving nothing to Christ on a day mistakenly called his birthday.

The *Encyclopedia of Religion* has this to say about Christmas gift giving: "Giving gifts at Christmas probably originated with the pagan Roman custom of exchanging gifts (*strenae*) at the New Year" (1987 edition, article "Christmas").

Yes, there is much in the popular Christmas story that is not necessarily supported by the Scriptures.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

As we have pointed out, Christmas was never observed in the Bible by the apostles or the early Church. We have seen that it has roots in pre-Christian and non-Christian traditions. But you might ask, “What difference does it make as long as we use such traditions to honor Christ?”

Is Christ truly honored by customs that were once used to honor other gods? Can such traditions be assimilated and become an accepted part of the worship of the God of the Bible? Let’s see what the Bible itself has to say about this.

Notice what happened shortly after Moses led the children of Israel out of Egyptian bondage. The newly freed people demanded a golden calf to worship, presumably as they had seen in Egypt. Aaron, Moses’ brother, attempted to satisfy their religious desires. Though he should have known better, he reasoned that a compromise would resolve the situation. He would mingle what seemed to be harmless religious customs, like those of other nations, with the worship of Israel’s God. And he would take it upon himself to set aside a day as “a feast to the Lord” (Ex. 32:5).

This compromise seemed to satisfy the people, but it was not God’s way (Ex. 32:21, 25). Later on, the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land. The land was inhabited by various peoples who worshiped other gods. God gave Israel

a stern warning. Do not, he declared, look at other nations and “inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’ You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way . . . Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it” (Deut. 12:29-32).

Worship in Vain?

Combining idolatrous practices with the worship of God was a recurring problem among the Israelites. The part of the Bible commonly called the Old Testament contains many warnings against such practices. Some people wonder whether such scriptures apply to New Testament Christians. “Now all these things happened to them [the Israelites] as examples, and they were written for our admonition,” the apostle Paul wrote to the New Testament Church (I Cor. 10:11, see also Rom. 15:4).

When it comes to matters of religion, Paul plainly instructed that there should not be a mixing together of Christian and idolatrous practices. “For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness?” he asked. “And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial [Worthlessness]?” (II Cor. 6:14-15.)

Jesus declared: “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition . . . making the word of God of no

effect” (Mark 7:9, 13). The result of this, Jesus said, was a vain worship. “This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (verses 6-7)!

What a paradox! Christendom has chosen to celebrate

Combining idolatrous practices with the worship of God was a recurring problem among the Israelites.

Christmas—a day God did not ordain. At the same time it has neglected to observe the days God did ordain.

There is nothing wrong with beautiful music, with happy family gatherings, with feasting, rejoicing and even appropriate festive decorations and treats for children. But why not enjoy such pleasures on the days God has given us rather than on days based on idolatry?

Jesus was born to be a king. He will ultimately set up his kingdom over all nations on earth. All through his ministry he preached the gospel of the kingdom, the government, of God. In the four biblical accounts of his ministry Jesus is quoted more than 100 times referring specifically to the kingdom of God.

The Bible means what it says. A kingdom is a government. A kingdom is made up of a ruler governing by laws over a territory wherein are subjects. The gospel of the kingdom of God, then, is about God's rule. As a result of God's calling, Christians can rejoice in the glorious truth of their personal salvation. They now have hope—hope for eternal life in happiness as children of God in his eternal kingdom. They no longer have to fear the enemy death or the trials of this life as do those without knowledge of the salvation that is in Jesus Christ. But as Christ's disciples, walking in his love, they must not just keep this precious gift to themselves.

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Good News!

God has commissioned his Church to take this wonderful message of the gospel to others—to take it into all the world (Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus Christ is the central figure of the gospel. The Worldwide Church of God proclaims this gospel, which is all about the reality of Jesus' human life as the incarnate Son of God, his sacrificial death for the sins of

THE GIFTS OF THE MAGI

The Magi, wise men from the east, were miraculously led to the house where the recently born Christ child and his parents were (Matt. 2:11). They brought with them gifts to give to Jesus. The choice of gifts—gold, frankincense and myrrh—was not happenstance; it was rich in significance.

The gold was an appropriate gift for a king. Jesus was born to be a king. The wise men knew they were entering into the presence of royalty. It was and still is customary to bring costly gifts on such an occasion. Gold was one of the three gifts presented to the future "King of kings."

The frankincense was a sweet perfume used by the priests in worship at the tabernacle or temple (Ex. 30:34). In addition to being

King of kings (Rev. 19:16), Jesus is also a high priest (Heb. 4:14-15). In his role as high priest he actively ministers in the heavenly temple on behalf of those who submit their lives to him. He intercedes for them, makes atonement for them, sends them help when they are in need. Frankincense was a fitting gift for an infant who would become our high priest.

Myrrh was used to embalm the bodies of the dead. This little child Jesus was to grow up and one day be put to death for the sins of the world. It is his sacrifice which makes God's plan of salvation possible, for without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins (Heb. 9:22). Myrrh was a gift for one who was destined to die for the sins of mankind.

mankind, his resurrection to glory, his presence in the lives of true Christians through the Holy Spirit, his present role as Intercessor and High Priest for the saints, and his second coming as King of kings to rule over all nations. (See Luke 24:44-49; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Romans 1:1-6; Galatians 1:16; Acts 26:14-18; 28:31; Hebrews 4:14-16 and Matthew 24:14.)

That true gospel is almost totally lost in the celebrating of Christmas. And yet it was the message he told his Church to preach. It encompasses the solving of all the problems that plague mankind—strife, wars, greed, crime, drugs, pollution, illiteracy, disease, poverty, hunger—all of them.

These are the critical issues of our time. Jesus Christ is an all-powerful, glorified member of the universe-ruling Godhead. He is now an active helper and Savior to those who turn to him. He will one day be King of kings on this earth, for “the Lord shall be King over all the earth” (Zech. 14:9). “He shall judge between many peoples, and rebuke strong nations afar off; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Mic. 4:3).

Equitable government and world peace at last—this is what the Church Jesus Christ established continues to proclaim.

This is what the whole world needs to hear. It is the ultimate good news! Relief is coming to suffering mankind. Peace is on its way. A prosperous and happy world lies ahead.

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