

# CHRISTMAS

## Why We Celebrate Christmas

### *A Statement from the Elders of Galway City Church*

One practice that has become fashionable in the building trade these days is the act of reclaiming old materials for use in building projects. Old tiles, stones, or wood trusses are reclaimed in an effort to restore an original look and feel.

Most of us would probably agree that we need to reclaim Christmas. Most of us would probably agree that the present-day cultural model of Christmas has morphed into something that is anything but honouring to God. Whatever Christmas originally looked like seems to, presently, lie broken and tattered in the fields of our modern-day culture. Christmas has been taken captive. It must be reclaimed.

But those words are meaningless unless we talk about what they mean. What does it look like to reclaim Christmas? Should we reclaim it? Is there even a legitimate historical understanding of Christmas to reclaim? What should we as Christians do when it comes to this season of Christmas? Some have chosen to abandon the observance of Christmas altogether, feeling even that it is wrong for believers to participate. Others, sadly, have been swept away in the cultural current of consumerism to the point that they have forgotten what the Advent season is really all about. We feel that there is a third way; a more balanced response which is best.

Those who propose that believers should not observe the Christmas season usually do so for some combination of five reasons. We want to briefly consider these reasons in no particular order before discussing four reasons we feel it is appropriate and good for us as believers to remember the birth of Christ at this time of year.

#### ***OBJECTION 1: HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS WITH PAGAN FESTIVALS AND SYMBOLS***

Many who oppose the observance of the Christmas season point out the historical associations between pagan idol worship and the 25th of December as well as the symbols used in the celebrations (eg, Christmas trees, yule logs, mistletoe, etc.) down through the years. As regards the former, the argument is that the Christian Church was attempting to Christianize a pagan festival, and, therefore, Christians should not join in because to do so is to associate too closely with that pagan festival. As to the latter it is suggested that the use of Christmas trees and other symbols of the season is distracting at best and idolatrous at worst.

While it is true that there was a winter pagan festival which culminated on 24 December, it is unclear exactly why the Church originally chose to observe the birth of Jesus on this date.<sup>1</sup> We know that Hippolytus, an early theologian who lived from A.D. 165-235, believed that 25 December marked the birth of Jesus and that Chrysostom in A.D. 386 agreed (though the Eastern Church held to its date of 6 January)<sup>2</sup>. There is, in fact, “a relatively old tradition of a midwinter birth.”<sup>3</sup> But even if the Church did select the date because of the pagan festival, there is a difference between attempting to Christianize a pagan festival and creating a whole new celebration to rival such a festival. We should not assume that the early Church’s celebrations of Jesus’ birth were merely a redressed version of a

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<sup>1</sup> The Feast of Saturnalia in early Rome was celebrated from the 17th to 24th of December. *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (804-5).

<sup>2</sup> Hoehner, Harold W. *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ*, 25-6.

<sup>3</sup> Hoehner, 26.

pagan festival. It seems that the Church would have been interested in creating an alternative to the observance of this pagan festival. We see this today with things such as music festivals when believers attempt to create more positive alternatives to the options available in the culture at large.

But if the holiday originally arose as an alternative to a pagan festival, does that, then, somehow, preclude us from observing it today? In other words, is the cultural understanding of Christmas the same now as it was then?

It is important to remember that dates and symbols are culturally interpreted. Even if it is granted that Christmas began as a holiday with pagan cultural associations, those associations have long since vanished in our culture today. As one pastor argues, “the roots are so far gone they have vanished.”<sup>4</sup> Our culture today associates neither the season of Christmas, nor the symbols used in its celebration, with paganism or pagan deities. The culture-at-large does not bow down and worship the Christmas tree; nor do our neighbors have statues of Saturnalia in their homes! If there ever were culturally held pagan views linked with this season of the year, they have long since been forgotten today by the vast, vast majority of people. Furthermore, if our concern is association with pagan worship, we would do well to rename the days of our week. Each of the days of our week are named for deities and designed, originally, to offer tribute and homage to those deities on a particular day! And yet, we have not done so. Why not? Because we intuitively understand that no one really holds Sunday as the day we worship the sun or Monday the moon. We rightly perceive Saturday as a day off from work as opposed to a day to worship Saturn. We correctly understand that cultural meaning changes over time; that a pagan connection in the past does not imply a pagan connection in the present.

This also applies to symbols, whose meanings are also culturally assigned. Many who object to Christmas celebrations on the basis that some of the symbols are idolatrous incorrectly interpret texts of the Old Testament that speak of idols made from fir trees.<sup>5</sup> But these texts are clearly speaking of idols carved out of wood and stone to which the people looked in hope and worship to do for them what God alone could do. These weren't Christmas trees! It would be far more correct and reasonable to associate these idols with cars, bank accounts, or other toys that we look to do for us what only God can do. Anything that deflects our attention and affection from God can be understood as an idol. Most people do not think of Christmas symbols in this way.<sup>6</sup>

## ***OBJECTION 2: JESUS WASN'T BORN ON 25 DECEMBER***

We will pick up here on something touched on in the previous objection. Many argue that since Jesus could not have been born on 25 December (or even in the winter-time), the whole celebration is wrong. The fact of the matter is that we do not know when Jesus was born. Because of this limitation, we must consider the evidence and do the best we can. While many argue that the connection with December for the date of Jesus' birth is, either, totally manufactured or just incorrect, there does remain good evidence that Jesus was born sometime in midwinter - if not on the 25th itself.

Those who argue against a midwinter birth note that Luke 2:8 states that the shepherds were attending their flocks by night in the fields near Bethlehem. It is then noted, however, that sheep were usually taken into enclosures between November and March to avoid exposure to the cold, wet nights common to the region. If this practice was followed, there would have been no shepherds in the fields minding their sheep if Jesus was, in fact, born in midwinter.

But is this conclusion an absolute given? Dr. Harold Hoehner, a scholar who has done a lot of reputable work in the area of New Testament chronology has made the following observations in reaching his conclusion that Jesus was, in fact, born in the midwinter of 5-4 BC. First, he notes the possibility that it could have been a mild winter and that the cold would not have prevented shepherds

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<sup>4</sup> John Piper, accessed from <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/ask-pastor-john/should-christians-celebrate-christmas/print?lang=en>. Accessed on 1/12/11.

<sup>5</sup> Often cited in this argument are Isaiah 40:19-20; 44:14-17; Jeremiah 3:6, 13; 10:2-5. These texts have nothing to do with Christmas symbols.

<sup>6</sup> Of course that is not to say that there are absolutely none who do this, only that any such person represents a staggeringly small cultural minority. The culture-at-large has reinterpreted these symbols so that any past negative associations are not valid.

being out in the fields with their flocks. Second, he suggests (based on the language used by Luke) that the shepherds were not out in the wilderness but in fields very near Bethlehem. Third, he notes that just because it was common practice for the sheep to be brought indoors in the winter, it was not a certainty that they were. Finally, the record of the oral tradition, the Mishnah, seems to indicate that the shepherds around Bethlehem were outdoors year-round, and especially as the Passover drew near. This would at least have placed them outdoors in February which is the coldest and wettest month in the area.<sup>7</sup> One archaeologist working in the area noted the presence of shepherds regularly congregating in the fields outside of Bethlehem during the winter months. The winter rains cause the fields to be transformed into lush green fields of grass, perfect for hungry sheep.<sup>8</sup>

But does the fact that we do not know with certainty whether Jesus was or wasn't born on 25 December matter? The fact that we do not know does not, in itself, mean that we should not celebrate the birth of our Saviour. We've already mentioned the historical connection to the 25th of December going back to the late 2nd, early 3rd century. 25 December is the date we have, and we aren't going to be able to change it to anything more certain, mostly because we don't know anything more certain.

### ***OBJECTION 3: WE HAVE NO BIBLICAL COMMAND TO OBSERVE JESUS' BIRTH***

Perhaps you have heard people argue that because we are not clearly instructed in Scripture to celebrate Jesus' birth, it is wrong to do so. At the core of this objection is the idea that we are only permitted to do what Scripture expressly commands. But is this a helpful way of interpreting and applying the Scriptures? There are many things that we do and use in our lives and worship celebrations that are not mentioned in the Scriptures: powerpoint, sound systems, chairs, personal Bibles, Sunday School, Kids' Clubs, outreach events, COFFEE! None of these things are mentioned or prescribed in Scripture. The question is whether Scripture operates as a railway set and firm so that only what is mentioned is allowable, or whether it operates as a motorway providing boundaries but allowing freedom to choose whether we drive in the left, centre, or right hand lanes.

We propose the latter. We propose that the spirit and intent of Scripture is to present timeless truth to be applied within time-bound cultures.<sup>9</sup> And so, when we come to the Scriptures, we want to understand the original meaning, discover the timeless truth, and apply that truth in our specific context. The idea that only what is in Scripture is allowable is overly literalistic and results in misapplications in our present day context. Would we argue that organizations who solicit donations to help feed the poor on the other side of the world are unbiblical simply because the Scriptures make no mention of them? Perhaps some would, and yet doesn't the spirit and intent of the Scriptures present to us a God who wants us to be active in helping the poor? Aren't said organizations acceptable applications of that principle? This hyper-literal mindset can also lead to legalism if it's taken that those who do not hold such a view are somehow not as spiritual as others. So while it is true that there is no specific command to observe Jesus' birth; that, in-and-of itself, does not make it wrong to do so.

### ***OBJECTION 4: SCRIPTURE FORBIDS THE ELEVATION OF SPECIAL "HOLY" DAYS***

Some take the above objection to a new level. It is not that we have no biblical command to observe the birth of Jesus, but, even more, that the Bible forbids the elevating of certain days as carrying more significance than others. Many cite Colossians 2:16-17 as evidence of this claim. But Paul, in this text, is not referring to the observation of special days as being forbidden in itself. What he is here referring to are Old Testament practices which were shadows of what Jesus fulfilled in the Cross and Resurrection and yet were being prescribed to make believers holy and spiritual. That is, those whom Paul is speaking about were prescribing these practices in addition to belief in Jesus in order to be saved and made holy. These practices in view were actually dishonouring Christ by

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<sup>7</sup> Hoehner, 26.

<sup>8</sup> J. Hampton Keathley III, "Should Christians Celebrate Christmas?", 7. Accessed from <http://www.bible.org>.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that there are not applications set forth in Scripture that are timeless, only that the art of interpreting and applying the Scriptures is to discern which applications are prescribed and which truths are to be culturally applied.

arguing that He was not enough to save us in Himself. Paul's point is that these practices are obsolete because Jesus fulfilled them.

These verses cannot rightly be seen, in their context, as forbidding the observation of special days unless we prescribe them as required to make us holy. But this is not how we treat the Advent season. We do not affirm that the observation of any season makes us saved or holy; nor do we prescribe that all Christians should observe the Advent season because to fail to do so somehow renders them less spiritual. To do this would be to bring dishonour to Jesus' sacrifice and what it accomplished which is the exact opposite of the goal in our observations of Advent. The fact is that there is no biblical precept violated by the Christ-centred observance of Christmas.<sup>10</sup>

### ***OBJECTION 5: SOCIETY HAS MORPHED THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS***

There seems to be a new paganism in the land as it relates to the Christmas season. Most objectors, while perhaps conceding that pagan deity worship is not the cultural focal point of the Christmas season today, would argue that a new paganism has replaced the old as the cultural focal point of the season.<sup>11</sup> That new paganism surfaces in the radical materialism and consumerism that drives so much of our culture's celebration of the season. The question then becomes, "Should Christians associate themselves with cultural distortions which are displeasing to God?"

Like it or not, though, this question represents a slippery slope for us. For what good thing from God has Satan and our culture not distorted and twisted? Satan and the culture in which we live have taken churches, food, sex, even the Bible and, in some way, have twisted them for their own purposes. We would not advocate abandoning any of those things, nor do we argue that to continue to participate in them means that we endorse the cultural distortions. Rather, we would argue that any practice which has been distorted needs to be reclaimed and redeemed. So, for instance, rather than swimming in the cultural current of consumerism in our gift giving by losing all sense and attaching our meaning and worth to the kind of gifts we are able to give; we should be sensible and trust that the Christ who came at Christmas has given us eternal worth. Rather than abandoning the practice of gift-giving because the culture makes it the centre, we can redeem it by focusing our attention on Jesus who gave far more. We redeem the distortion of Christmas, not by abandoning its observance, but by magnifying the Christ of Christmas in the face of the cultural distortions. As we'll mention below, each believer must decide in faith how he or she will apply and practice scriptural principles to the culture in which they live.

### **WHY WE CELEBRATE THE SEASON**

Jesus, then, becomes the focal point for us as a church this time of year. We don't make Christmas about the tinsel, decorations, or gifts; but are happy to use those things to make much of Jesus. Let me mention four reasons why we, as a church, choose to observe this time of year in a special way.

#### ***REASON 1: OUR CONNECTION TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH***

As a church, we do not find ourselves floating isolated in space and time. Rather, we find ourselves swimming in the stream of the universal and historical Body of Christ. As we observe this season of the year, we join with our brothers and sisters all over the world and from throughout history in marveling at the Incarnation of our God and Saviour. In raising our voices in praise, we join with millions of other believers from all sorts of denominations in reflecting back and making much of Jesus' First Advent even as we anticipate and look towards His Second Coming. Now would we stand with these groups in other areas of theology or practice? Perhaps not. But in the idea that the Incarnation is worthy of celebration, we agree.

#### ***REASON 2: BIBLICALLY SPEAKING, IT IS ACCEPTABLE FOR US TO DO SO***

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<sup>10</sup> Some argue, in addition, that the making of holy days (much like the use of symbols) is idolatrous in itself. But as we have argued elsewhere, anything can become an idol. Idolatry is defined by intent. No inanimate object or day is idolatrous in itself. Anything is only idolatrous if we make it so in our hearts.

<sup>11</sup> Piper article

The question of whether to observe the Christmas season is, biblically speaking, not a question of right and wrong. As there is no clear biblical command at stake (see above), this question rightly falls under the umbrella of the unclear. Romans 14:5-6 speaks to our attitude in such areas and seems to clearly teach that these things which are not clearly spelled out are permissible if done in faith, with love, and in a way that edifies.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, while there is no command to do so, there does seem to be precedent in the New Testament for the celebration and announcement of the birth of Jesus.<sup>13</sup> Consider the angelic host who appeared in order to announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds and to celebrate what His birth would mean for humanity. Consider the shepherds themselves, who celebrated as they sought out the baby Jesus in order to worship Him. Don't forget the Magi who came from the East in order to celebrate the birth of this King, Jesus. These groups, of course, while certainly literal figures, represented those who would come after them - Jew and Gentile alike - to celebrate the birth of Jesus and what it meant for mankind. In addition, we also see Simeon and Anna celebrating and offering praise at the birth of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

### ***REASON 3: SOME THINGS ARE WORTH CELEBRATING***

On the horizon of the Christian faith, there are three peaks that stand above the rest because of the central role they play in the story of our salvation: the Incarnation of our Saviour, His crucifixion, and His resurrection. Without these events, we would not know salvation. In our view, these are things worth celebrating. It is certainly true that we should celebrate these events and their effects in our lives every day of the year.

But the reality is that we often don't.

All of us allow the pressures of the day to push the amazing truths of God's activity in our lives to the edges. Thankfully, the fact of our salvation has nothing to do with our memories because our memories are often short. The reality is that the beauty of the Gospel so often fades into the background as we busy ourselves with what is around us. And so, practically speaking, the idea that everyday is special so often ends up meaning that no day is special.

It's into this noise of the everyday hustle and bustle of life that Christmas calls us to step back and consider what is truly valuable. We need Christmas in order to help us to focus in on what is truly important - Jesus. We need a day to remember what forms the context of every other day of the year. A man is called to love his wife 365 days a year, but the reality is that some days that reality is more at the forefront of his mind than others. That's what anniversaries are for. We need special days where we can step back and stop everything else we're doing in order to celebrate in a special way that which makes the other 364 days of the year so great. Christmas gives us a special opportunity to magnify the Lord in worship as we reflect on His Incarnation. This season helps us to redirect our attention and affection heavenward; to recenter our thinking with hopeful effect on the year to come. Christ's birth really is a big deal!

### ***REASON 4: WE WORSHIP, BUT WE ALSO ANNOUNCE***

Isn't it interesting that for one month of the year, the world turns upside down. Pagans unknowingly become theologians! Those far from God unwittingly sing the creeds of the Church! Have you considered that many of the songs we sing at Christmastime are deeply theological. Now certainly many are not, but many of the songs we sing at Christmas are deeply biblical and orthodox. The message of the Gospel - the coming of God to earth to save humanity - plays softly in the background in shops all over as people glibly walk by oblivious to the magnitude of the events of which they speak. And yet, for most people in our cultural context, there is an openness present at

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<sup>12</sup> While all of Romans 14 is relevant, verses 5-6 read as follows: "One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God." ESV

<sup>13</sup> Keathley III article, 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:10-20; 25-38.

Christmas that is not present the other eleven months of the year. Walls that go up to the things of God are mysteriously made a bit lower. While it might be difficult to explain, it's easy to see that this season represents an opportunity to announce to our friends, families, and neighbours what the Incarnation means for them. Again, this is not to say that all people are necessarily looking for God at Christmastime, but is to suggest that many are more sensitive to God because of what is going on around them. We feel like the Christmas season presents us with an incredible opportunity to speak into people's lives with the Gospel at a time when they are more willing and interested in listening to us talk about the true reason for the season. This, then, along with worship, becomes one of the ways we redeem the season; becoming all things to all men so that by all possible means we might win some. And this fits perfectly with our understanding of the Church on mission. The Church in any given time and place is bilingual: speaking the language of the Gospel in the language of the culture.

## **CONCLUSION**

So we want to reclaim Christmas. We long to celebrate and worship the God who took on flesh for us. We don't accept that this time of year is a time to drown ourselves in consumerism, but neither do we accept that it is a time to hide out and be silent. We want to magnify Jesus as we celebrate His first coming and anticipate His coming again. And as we do that, we want God to draw in worshippers from among our friends, families, neighbours, and coworkers who do not understand that Jesus came for them.

We have great freedom in Christ. He has set us free from the slavery of being bound to a code that cannot produce life. We are free to follow in faith alone. That doesn't mean that we are free to do whatever we like in all circumstances. It does, however, mean that we obey in the things God has clearly given us to obey; and we walk in faithful discernment in the others.

Our feeling on Christmas is that each believer should be free to observe the season in whatever way they like - only excepting those celebrations that would put us at odds with the clear teachings of Scripture (e.g., drunkenness, the worship of other things, attributing salvation or growth to the observance of a season, etc.). Romans 14 speaks of these things in which we come to our own conclusions in faith while respecting that those around us might see things differently.

So our encouragement to you is to prayerfully consider what you will do this Advent season. Perhaps there are elements emphasized in the surrounding culture which you feel you should eliminate. Hopefully, at the very least, you feel that your observance needs to be heavily Christ-centered. Take some time to reflect on your practice for yourself and your family. Keep in mind, however, that the same freedom that allows you to do this, also affords to your brothers and sisters in the faith.

In whatever way you decide to observe the season or not, this much is true: Our Lord came to earth in order to save us from our sin. The Incarnation was God's first step to Calvary! On this, we can all agree. So whatever you choose to do, do it all for the glory of God!