

Christmas Customs

or

There really *WAS* a Santa Claus!?

by Rev. William Mark Bristow

Every year Christians ask me, "Should I celebrate with all the traditional customs of Christmas? They all seem so materialistic. Aren't some of these customs really pagan?"



Icon portrait of Saint Nicholas from a beautiful church of his namesake in Calafat, Romania taken when we were preaching in Vidin, Bulgaria just across the Danube river.

So every year, I endeavor to bring out a few facts from our Christian Heritage. Let's start with the real shocker -- *There really was a Santa Claus -- and he was a PREACHER!!* Yes Sir! His name was St. Nicholas and he lived and worked as the Bishop of a little town of Myra, (now in the country of Turkey). Tradition says he was born in Patara, a seaport, and traveled to Egypt and Palestine as a young man. Eventually he became bishop of the church at Myra. During the period of persecution of Christians by Emperor Diocletian, he was imprisoned, but he was released by Diocletian's successor, Constantine the Great.

By the 6th century his burial shrine was well known at Myra. In 1087 his remains were moved to Bari, Italy, which became a crowded pilgrimage center in his honor. Devotion to him spread throughout the Christian world, and he was chosen patron saint of Russia and Greece. Thousands of churches throughout Europe have been named for him. His feast day was set on December 6.

He was credited with many miracles. In one story he saved three officers from death by appearing to Constantine in a dream. In another legend he provided bags of gold to a poor man as dowries for his three daughters.ⁱ When he died on December 6 in the year 345, he was revered for his generosity and kindness. It became the custom to give gifts to loved ones on his saint's day, the date of his death. Later Christians adopted St. Nicholas for Christmas day, which commemorates the date God gave the greatest gift of all, Christ Jesus for the redemption of the world.

Santa Claus is probably a Dutch mispronunciation of Sint NiCholas. Kriss Kringle is probably an English mispronunciation of the German, "Christkindlein" (little Christ child).

In 1822 Santa received a drastic makeover through the poem penned by a pastor. Rev. Clement C. Moore felt his church's poor offerings were going to make a very dismal Christmas for his children. The weather was bleak and everyone needed some cheering. Rev. Moore held down a secular job to help meet expenses. He had been thinking of Saint Nicholas, from all accounts a very serious and austere man in appearance. A story began to form in Rev. Moore's mind, his children would love a good story. What about *A Visit from Saint Nicholas*? He looked over at the portly German fellow who drove the sleigh on their way home from work. A new vision of St. Nick began to take shape -- the horse drawn sleigh ... NO! ... Flying Reindeer. Well, you know the poem by its first line, *'Twas the night before Christmas...* The poem was intended for his children's ears, only, but after great insistence it was read to his congregation. A parishioner published the poem a few years later in a Troy, New York newspaper. In the 1950's Coca Cola needed a spokesman for their soda at Christmas time. Someone drew an artists rendering of Rev. Moore's St. Nick and Coca Cola made the jolly ol' elf famous as we have Him today.

Another question is always asked, "Why December 25th? We know Jesus was probably born sometime between April and November. - after all the scripture says that shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields?" Recently, I was told that Jesus was born on the 15th of Tishri (Sept/Oct) which is the feast of Tabernacles, or Strong's Exhaustive Concordance Hebrew word #5521. "cukkah", sook-kaw'; fem. of H5520; a hut or lair:--booth, cottage, covert, pavilion, tabernacle, tent. Although this is a real possibility -- I must tell you after hours of searching Matthew Henry, Halley's Bible Dictionary, Compton's Encyclopedia, The American Book of Days, the 12 Volume Interpreter's Bible, Holman's Bible Dictionary, Revell Bible Dictionary and volumes on Christian Sites on the World Wide Web, all definitely state, "we do not know when, or even what year." (Although he had to be born sometime between 4 and 8 BC due to Herod's reign and death.

While it is accepted that Jesus was born in the small town of Bethlehem a few miles south of

Jerusalem, there is no certain information on the date of his birth, not even of the year (*see* Jesus Christ). One reason for this uncertainty is that the stories of his birth, recorded in the New Testament books of Matthew and Luke, were written several decades after the event. And those who wrote of it gave no specific dates for the event.

For several centuries the Christian church itself paid little attention to the celebration of Jesus' birth. The major Christian festival was Easter, the day of his resurrection. Only gradually, as the church developed a calendar to commemorate the major events of the life of Christ, did it celebrate his birth.ⁱⁱ

Till about the year 250-300 there was little celebration of Christ's birth, other than a solemn memory. His death and resurrection were all important to new Christianity. As the church spread around the world, it encountered the Roman/European festival of the Winter Solstice. This was a day of great festivity in the pagan world. Because there was no knowledge about the date of Jesus' birth, a day had to be selected. The Eastern Orthodox and the Eastern Rite churches within the Roman Catholic church chose January 6. The day was named Epiphany, meaning "appearance," the day of Christ's manifestation. The Western church, based at Rome, chose December 25. It is known from a notice in an ancient Roman almanac that Christmas was celebrated on December 25 in Rome as early as AD 336.ⁱⁱⁱ In about 547 A.D. St. Augustine was sent by Pope Gregory the Great as the first official missionary to England. He followed an edict from the Pope, "If the religious customs of the people are not evil in origin, they should be blended into Christianity." The early church had a real problem with this all important festival of the SUN God. The church in the Holy Land had begun to observe January 6th at the birth of our Lord. The Austrian church observed May 20th. Still other parts of the church observed March 25th.

Collier's Encyclopedia says, "The choice of December 25 was probably influenced by the fact that on this day the Romans celebrated the Mithraic feast of the Sun-god, and that the Saturnalia also came at this time. **The indications are that the Church in this way grasped the opportunity to turn the people from a pagan observance of the Winter Solstice to a day of adoration of Christ.** Both St. Cyprian and St. John Chrysostom allude to this thought in their writings."

Since people were going to celebrate the re-birth of the SUN on December 25th -- the church would really celebrate -- the most important birth, the birth of the SON of God.

It took a little time but Christianity prevailed. Although two customs, the yule log, and kissing under the mistletoe still remain from the pagan days, most every other custom we have today

comes from Christ's birthday.

"CHRISTMAS". The word comes from the Old English term *Cristes maesse*, meaning "Christ's mass." This was the name for the festival service of worship held on December 25 to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Gift giving is one of the oldest customs associated with Christmas: it is actually older than the holiday itself. When the date of Christmas was set to fall in December, it was done at least in part to compete with ancient pagan festivals that occurred about the same time. The Romans, for example, celebrated the Saturnalia on December 17. It was a winter feast of merrymaking and gift exchanging. And two weeks later, on the Roman New Year January 1, houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. As the Germanic tribes of Europe accepted Christianity and began to celebrate Christmas, they also gave gifts.^{iv}

Much confusion has concerned the beautiful Christmas Tree. *Jer 10:2-4 (NRSV)* "Thus says the LORD: Do not learn the way of the nations, or be dismayed at the signs of the heavens; for the nations are dismayed at them. 3 For the customs of the peoples are false: a tree from the forest is cut down, and worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan; 4 people deck it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move." This scripture certainly sounds like a description of the Christmas Tree. But is that really what the passage speaks of? Let's read on. *Jer 10:5-10 (NRSV)* "Their **idols** are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor is it in them to do good. 6 There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. 7 Who would not fear you, O King of the nations? For that is your due; among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is no one like you. 8 They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction given by idols is no better than wood! 9 Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, and gold from Uphaz. They are the work of the artisan and of the hands of the goldsmith; their clothing is blue and purple; they are all the product of skilled workers. 10 But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation." Verse 5 has the key -- this is speaking of hewing and carving an idol to be gilded or silvered, and placed as a "god" for worship. This has nothing to do with a Christmas Tree as you and I know it. The nations around Israel had some terrible idol "gods" whom they worshipped.

The custom of decorating a tree comes directly from the Great Reformer Himself, Martin Luther and from a German Play about Adam and Eve in Paradise. One Christmas eve, Martin Luther was out in the field and the beauty of the stars shining through the snow covered limbs of the tree overwhelmed him with the beauty of God's creation. He had to show his children. Rather than risk their health in the snow, he cut down the tree and carried it home. Candles replaced the stars, and thus the Christmas tree began. There was also a very popular play in the German

church about Adam and Eve. The paradise tree was a central theme of the play. It was adorned with fruit -- all representing the things they were allowed in the garden. After Martin Luther's example, many families adorned a paradise tree with fruit, or even gilded fruit (our glass balls) as gifts to their children, and to teach them of the provision and goodness of God who gave the best gift. Later Prince Charles carried a tree home to Buckingham Palace where Queen Victoria decked it out Royally. Society news spread all over the world, and the decorated tree immediately became the symbol of the gifts God had given, and, the evergreen tree, the symbol of everlasting life.

There is a legend that Holly was originally a thorned vine, and was originally used as the cruel crown of thorns for our Lord. The berries being originally white, when they became stained with His blood, they turned forever red, and the plant withdrew its vicious thorns for the spiny leaves. The plant was probably originally called "HOLY" not Holly. Whether true or legend only, the early French and English hung a piece over the door of a house where Christ was celebrated. Holly, with its prickly leaves and red berries, came into holiday use because it reminded people of the crown of thorns worn by Jesus on the way to his execution the berries symbolizing droplets of blood.^V

Our burning of lights (previously candles) is a symbol that Christ is the light of the world.

The rich foods and deserts come from the precious gifts the Magi brought to Christ. Mincemeat pie is the real symbolic food of Christmas. It is full of spices and fruits (and yes, if made correctly) meat! (A luxury in the days of no refrigerators). It was baked as a symbol of the gifts, spices, and treasures of the Wise Men from the east.

Originally churches rang (or tolled) their bells when someone died. Churches in medieval times tolled their bells to tell the devil his time was short, because Jesus was born.

Christmas Carols bear a remarkable origin. In 1223 St. Francis of Assisi decided the regular celebration of Christ's Mass was in a rut. So, he had an entire manger scene built in his church in Italy, replete with hay, actors, and animals. He thought the singing was also in a rut. So he took a couple of secular, pagan, songs and wrote words telling the story of the birth of Christ. The church elders said he was crazy. The people said he was a saint.

The most loved hymn of all time has an interesting history, and, of course, is a Christmas carol. On Christmas Eve 1818, Joseph Mohr, assistant pastor of the church of Saint Nicholas asked the organist Franz Gruber to put music to a poem he had written for the midnight celebration of mass. Franz went to the organ and found that rats had eaten holes in the bellows. Thinking quickly, he took out his guitar and played the only song he knew well on the guitar -- an old bar

song -- a beer-drinking pub song! The poem fit perfectly (and surely everyone would know the music?!)

Silent Night. Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright. Roun' yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly. Silent Night, holy night. Son of God, love's pure light. Radiant beams from thy holy face. With the dawn of redeeming grace, Jesus, Lord, at thy birth. Jesus Lord at thy birth. (These are verses 1 & 3. Verses 2 & 4 were added later and are anonymous.)

Over the years, the very pious and religious have sought to stamp out an festivities. Old laws can be found which forbid any celebration in 1644 in England, and several in the early years of the American Colonies -- but the truth is, *we have something to celebrate! God gave His son for our redemption.* Mary celebrated, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior ... For He that is mighty hath done to me great things and holy is His name." The shepherds celebrated, the Angels Celebrated, the Wise Men celebrated and gave gifts. You can still hear His name in department stores. You still see His image in manger scenes. You still find people who desperately need to know the truth of this Jesus -- This Savior. Get out the lights, the food, the gifts. Yes! Show your love. God did.

(All information of dates and historical events unless otherwise marked are taken from the Encyclopedia Americana and The American Book of Days.)

i·Excerpted from *Compton's Interactive Encyclopedia*. Copyright © 1994, 1995 Compton's NewMedia, Inc.

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