

Charismatic Believer Explains Why Many Jesus-Followers No Longer Celebrate Christmas

It's that time of year again. It's time to explain why many of Jesus' followers stop celebrating Christmas.

It's done out of a deep desire to respect Jesus and God's Word. No longer celebrating Christmas can be easily misunderstood and challenging for one's family, relatives and congregation. It is usually perceived as if one is no longer celebrating the birth of Jesus, his life and God's great gift to the world. With this in mind, why are more and more of Jesus' followers giving up Christmas celebrations?

The reason that many stop celebrating Christmas, is not that they try to minimize the Son of God. Rather, they do it out of respect for him. To understand this question, some background history is needed. Mutual respect and clear communication are also necessities. If someone does not want to invest the short time needed to learn the history of Christmas, he probably does not have the right to criticize either.

The Bible Question

There are many amateur sources on Christmas easily found on Google, but these are often filled with speculation. It is better to turn to a more official source, such as an encyclopedia. A clear and concise source for the history of Christmas is (The Bible Question).

"The Bible Question was started in 1996, and is today the largest Christian Swedish Q&A website on the internet, with about 90,000 monthly visitors. The site does not promote any particular creed, but has as its only purpose in being an objective source of information—a living Bible

dictionary—where students and anyone interested can receive concrete and detailed answers on questions that pertain to the Bible, Christian faith, the history of the Church, etc.”

Question: “Since what century has Jesus’ birth been celebrated, and why specifically on December 25th?”

Answer to the Bible Question

To begin with, the Church tried to have Emperor Constantine ban the sun religion and its December festival, but eventually a compromise was made ...

During the first 300 years of the history of the Christian Church, no one celebrated the birth of Jesus whatsoever. The reason was primarily threefold: Firstly, the date for the birth of Jesus is not given anywhere in the Bible. Secondly, in the Bible, only wicked people celebrated their birthdays. Thirdly, in the pagan Roman Empire (which was occupying Israel at the time of the beginning of the Church) there was a common tradition to celebrate the birthdays of the pagan gods.

At the time of the birth of Jesus, the Roman Empire included almost all of Europe and the Middle East. In Rome, the great god was called Saturn. In the middle of the winter, there was a long celebration held in his honor. This feast was called “Saturnalia” and lasted from December 17–24. It was a feast when one ate and drank, gathered friends together, and gave gifts to one another. December 25th was the last and greatest day of Saturnalia.

During the first 300 years of the Roman Empire, sun worship had begun to spread from the East—from Syria and Persia—and reached large parts of the Empire. Already in ancient Babylon, people had worshiped the sun. One of the highest deities among the Babylonians was the sun god Shamash. The most important day in the solar religion was the day when the sun was “born” again and rose in the heavens, after it had

been sinking closer to the horizon and the days had become shorter and shorter in the fall and early winter. When the winter solstice occurred on December 25, it was celebrated with a great feast.

Eastern philosophers and mystics preached about the divine nature of the sun and immigrants from the East brought their faith to the West. This resulted in the solar religion getting ever more followers in the Roman Empire.

Then it happened that a Roman emperor won a great military victory after praying to the sun god for victory. As a thank you, he elevated the "Invincible Sun" (Sol Invictus) above all the other gods of Rome. In the year 273 CE, he had a magnificent temple built for the sun. This temple was dedicated on the birthday of the sun—December 25.

Barely 50 years later, the Roman emperor Constantine became an adherent of the Christian doctrine. He was a former sun worshipper and the new religion presented a problem. What should he do with the annual festival for the sun?

To begin with, the church tried to have him ban the sun religion and its December festival, but he refused. If he banned the popular feast, conflicts could arise between the followers of the different religions. Finally, a compromise was made.

December 25 was the winter solstice, the day when the sun was born again. Why not transfer the worship of the masses from the sun god to the "sun of righteousness," "the light of the world"—Christ? It was easy to illustrate the symbolic connection. If one "Christianized" the festival of the sun god, by instead celebrating the birth of Jesus on that day, perhaps conflict could be avoided. In addition, many people would automatically join the new religion.

Consequently, the Romans were allowed to continue celebrating the large feast on December 25, but the sun god was removed

and Christ was put there instead. And, once Rome had accepted December 25 as the “birthday” of Jesus, there was no difficulty for the feast to spread to the rest of the Roman Empire.

In Constantinople, they started to celebrate Christmas year 380 CE; in Asia Minor, year 382; in Egypt, around year 430; and in Jerusalem, around year 440. This spread up through Europe, where the “sun-turning feast” had been celebrated since ancient times in most of the countries. Also, in the far North, something called “Jul” [still the Swedish name for Christmas today], a midwinter feast was celebrated. The word jul some claim comes from the Anglo-Saxon hweol which means “wheel,” symbolic of the divine sun and its path around the earth.

The Icelandic author Snorre Sturlason wrote in the beginning of the 12th century of how the pagan northerners used to celebrate three large sacrificial feasts, among them the “Midwinter Blute” (the sun-turning feast), when they would sacrifice in order to receive a favorable crop. When Christianity arrived, the ancient northern “Jul” was Christianized and ever since then we have continued to celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25.”

There is another aspect to the story as well. The church adopted the holiday within a larger paradigm shift, a process of intentionally cutting itself off from its Jewish roots and God’s own calendar, in order to establish a separate identity and gain cultural influence in Rome. The majority of today’s Christians are probably unaware of this history. Some, who do know it, feel that the pagan origin of Christmas is something in the past and of no current significance. They feel that the history might be unfortunate, or that the church did right in Christianizing the feast, but maintain that Christians who celebrate Christmas do not worship idols, but simply celebrate Jesus and spend quality time with family. Attacks on Christmas

are often aimed at Jesus, and against the entire Judeo-Christian heritage more broadly. They feel the roots of Christmas are not always the present reality. God sees to the heart and genuine gratitude is given to God during the holiday.

While these are not trivial concerns, many (including me) see the nature of Christmas as ultimately irreconcilable with biblical faith for several serious reasons. It is primarily because Scripture teaches strongly against such syncretism, i.e. to "Christianize," or appropriate, pagan rites (see for instance Deut. 12:1–5,30–31).

"You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way ... take care that you be not ensnared to follow them, after they have been destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire about their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods?—that I also may do the same.' You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way" (from Deut. 12, ESV).

It is a question, not about how we feel about the subject, but about how God feels about it, and what He has said in His Word. Aside from the scriptural principles that contradict Christmas celebrations, we can name the following reasons: 1. Many unbelievers are well aware of the history of Christmas and consequently mock the faith. 2. No one in the apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) or the centuries immediately following celebrated Christmas. Why then should we? 3. Regardless of all the positive aspects given in support of Christmas, the overall effect of its materialism and indulgence on our families and fellowships is often more negative than positive. 4. The pagan elements of Christmas are far from absent. Aside from Jesus, nearly every Christmas custom has pagan roots, and biblically, we are neither called to purify Christmas nor to "put Christ back in Christmas." Attempts to rescue it therefore produce mixed results. 5. Regardless of weather, most people in modern times disregard the origins of Christmas, the dark principalities that once

were worshipped through the holiday are still a reality in our world. 6. Why is it that believers are not suspicious of the fact that the secular world, while generally hating the gospel, enthusiastically celebrates Christmas? 7. More examples could be given.

These are reasons why more and more people stop celebrating Christmas. They do it out of a sincere respect for the Lord and His Word. Some might have difficulty communicating their convictions, and the ensuing discussions sometimes get heated. Is Christmas the weightiest matter of the Law? No. But to an ever-increasing number of people, it still matters, and they wish to correct it carefully, without neglecting justice, mercy, and faith. The next time that you meet fellow believers or family members that do not participate in Christmas, you can better understand why.

This is not a new innovation. Several Christian movements throughout history have refrained from celebrating Christmas, ever since it was Christianized—from church fathers to Reformers, Puritans and Watchman Nee. Earlier attempts to disassociate from the holiday have not had a lasting impact. I believe the reason it has not been successful is that Christians have not tried to return from the Roman-based liturgical year to something more biblical and compelling. The Jewish roots of our faith does provide just such a biblical alternative, and the more Christians seek their roots in Jerusalem and the Book of Acts, the more Christmas loses its appeal. Nature abhors a vacuum.

I doubt it is possible to leave the Roman-inspired holiday behind without a positive alternative. Interestingly, we are living in such a paradigm shift today, away from Rome and toward Jerusalem and the future. {eoa}

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