

Rediscovering the Beauty of Christmas

I love to celebrate **Christmas** because I love the **Christ of Christmas**. Yet we live in a day when celebrating “Christ’s mass” is frowned upon by the secularists, who want to excise Jesus from the holiday, and, surprisingly, by some Christians who want to exorcize Christmas from the calendar.

You have no doubt heard some of these more popular “*Bah! Humbug!*” criticisms from sanctified scrooges: Christ wasn’t born in winter, let alone on Dec. 25; Christmas comes from an occult winter-solstice festival; evergreen trees and holly and mistletoe come from pagan customs and therefore are “of the devil.”

Sound familiar? Let’s see if I can help those “Christ-massers” among you celebrate the birth of the Savior in a deeper, more meaningful and festive way, without guilt or condemnation.

Have you ever heard of syncretism? It means mixing, blending or incorporating different belief systems and their practices. Christianity becomes guilty of syncretism when critical, basic elements of the Christian faith are undermined or replaced by the religious elements of its host culture or the world around it.

However, to denounce a Christian tradition or practice as rooted in paganism simply because a similar practice appears in ancient pagan rituals is tantamount to throwing the baby out with the bath water. Such logic cannot be maintained consistently in every matter of faith and practice. Logic of this sort would result in surrendering all God’s creation to pagans and atheists—leaving nothing for Christians to use in worshipping the God who created all things for His pleasure (Rev. 4:11).

Christianity is the “new kid on the block” as far as belief systems go, so almost anything we use to remember Christ has probably been used by older religions first, including the days of the week. John Ankerberg writes: “We would be hard-pressed to find a day to celebrate that did not have pagan roots. Every day of our week, indeed our entire calendar is pagan!”

Jesus didn’t use such logic when deciding what His family could and could not use in celebrating Jewish festivals, such as the Feast of Tabernacles. If He had, they would have had to go without branches or booths, since other, older religions used tree branches in their idolatrous rituals, as the prophet Ezekiel noted (see Ezek. 8:17).

“Anti-Christ-massers” couldn’t apply their rationale to Old Testament Jewish worshippers either. Scholars have found archaeological evidence that the Egyptians and Assyrians worshipped ark-like structures made of gold with cherubim atop them, such as the one used in Moses’ tabernacle.

William Barclay, in his commentary on the Gospel of John, pointed out similarities between pagan rituals and the baptism of John, as well as pagan lore resembling the Virgin Birth. He also called attention to an ancient Greek tradition in which a miracle similar to the turning of water into wine by Jesus at the wedding in Cana (John 2) was allegedly performed by Dionysus once a year in his temple.

Even the bull-worshipping pagans of Mithraism incorporated the re-enacting of death and resurrection rituals. Should this, then, eliminate any possibility of Christians re-enacting the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus?

Of course not.

Patrick, the 12th century bishop of Ireland, took the shamrock (three-leaf clover) away from the pagan Celts and claimed it as a Christian symbol. It was the favorite occult symbol of

the Celts and Druids, but Patrick decided to use it redemptively to illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity.

His plan was so successful that in a short period of time all of Ireland was being taught this essential Christian doctrine, with the shamrock becoming its chief symbol. The result was that the pagans could no longer use the shamrock as a symbol of their beliefs.

This kind of strategy is not new for missionaries, who constantly look for something familiar in other cultures that they can use to build bridges to the Christian faith. That's exactly what Christmas traditions are supposed to do—point people to Jesus. So let me share a few facts behind some well-known Christmas traditions.

Christmas. The word *Christmas* comes from the term *Cristesmaesse* and is another way of saying *festival* or *celebration*. Christmas is the celebration of Christ's birth, or the great feast day of Christ's birth. In other words, Christ is the purpose for the party.

Taking their cue from Old Testament Jewish celebrations and festivals, Christians developed their own feast day commemorating the event and called it "The Feast of the Nativity." It was later called "Christ Mass" or "Christ's Mass" and eventually shortened to "Christmas."

Christmas is a significant "Christocentric" term because it calls to mind that the center of the celebration is Christ! A third century theologian said it well: "We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of Him who made it."

Christ's birthday. A widely held opinion is that Christ was not born on Dec. 25. Many believe we celebrate Christmas on the 25th because the third century church Christianized the day on which some pagan festivals were observed.

The truth is that Roman Emperor Aurelian passed an edict in A.D. 274 establishing the festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti* ("Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun") while dedicating a temple. But such notable church fathers as Tertullian and Augustine were convinced that Christmas preceded this pagan holiday.

Alvin J. Schmidt, in his scholarly work *Under the Influence*, states that in northern Africa Christians were already celebrating the birth date of Jesus as Dec. 25 in A.D. 243, which was 30 years before Aurelian's edict. If this is true, it wasn't Christianity that Christianized a pagan festival but a pagan emperor attempting to paganize a Christian festival that predated it by 30 years.

Alfred Edersheim, one of the foremost scholars on ancient Jewish culture and sacred writings, disagrees with those who question Dec. 25 as the date of Christ's birth. He states that "there is no adequate reason for questioning the historical accuracy of this date. The objections generally made rest on grounds, which seem to me, historically unfeasible."

Shepherds with their flocks by night. Another popular argument against Christ's being born in December asserts that shepherds would not have their flocks out past October. Therefore, there weren't any shepherds out in December. Is this true?

Edersheim claims there were shepherds at a place called Migdal Eder, near Bethlehem, who were commissioned by the Jewish priests to keep temple flocks in a specific pastureland year-round. Their demanding duties prevented them from participating in religious observances.

Taking as his source the Mishnah, the book of Jewish oral traditions, Edersheim writes that specific passages "lead us to infer that these flocks lay out all the year-round." The shepherds who watched them could not worship and learn about God at the temple, so God chose them to be the first ones to

see His newborn Lamb.

Christmas trees. Trees are very important in Christian theology. The Bible begins with a tree (the tree of life in the Garden of Eden) and ends with a tree (the cross on which Jesus paid the price for our redemption).

Some have dismissed the display of Christmas trees as a pagan yuletide custom unfit for Christian usage. But evergreen trees are key in the biblical revelation of redemption and restoration.

According to the Bible, the first thing that happened as a consequence of sin was that the earth was cursed. Immediately thorns sprang up, and from that time forward, thorns, briars and thistles became the biblical symbols of accursedness and barrenness because of sin. Later on, the Lord chose pine trees as His symbol for redemption and restoration.

Not just any tree was chosen for such a purpose, but the evergreen tree family exclusively. In fact, evergreens are biblical metaphors for reversal: They symbolize divine reversal from a state of accursedness and judgment to a state of blessedness and restoration. God even identified Himself as a pine tree in Hosea 14:8.

Scriptures such as Isaiah 41:17-20, 55:10-13 and 60:13 name two to three species of evergreen trees as prophetic signs of God's promise to reverse the curse over the land and usher in an age of blessing. The pine tree prefigured the cross (also referred to as a tree) as a symbol of redemption. Trees represent God's "instead ofs" when speaking to a people under judgment.

“‘Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the myrtle will grow. This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed’” (Is. 55:13, NIV).

Chrismons. A *chrismon* is a Christmas tree that has been purposely decorated with symbols that clearly point to the person and work of Christ and the biblical account of His incarnation. Pronounced KRIZ-mon, the word comes from the Latin word for monogram.

In effect, a chrismon serves as a word picture, telling the story of Christ's birth with its decorations. Chrismons emerged in 1957 when Frances Kipps Spencer, the daughter of a Lutheran minister, decorated her Lutheran church's Christmas tree with centuries-old monograms and Christograms that pointed to the person and work of Christ.

In many Christian homes today the same is being done. Believers are intentionally making their Christmas celebrations more Christ-centered by turning their Christmas trees into chrismons.

The Paradise Tree. The first Christmas tree tradition probably emerged as a result of an 11th century play. In early times, Christian leaders taught illiterate converts the Bible by using drama and skits.

One of the most popular of these plays—*The Paradise Tree*—was performed on Christmas Eve. It dealt with creation and the sin of Adam and Eve, and ended with the prophecy in Genesis 3:15 of Christ, the future deliverer.

The play was unusual because its only prop was a huge fir tree laden with apples placed in the middle of the stage. Earliest commentaries say that Eden's "tree of life" was a fir tree, and the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was an apple tree. The focal point of the play was Eve's taking a bite out of the forbidden fruit and giving it to Adam—actions that brought about the fall of humanity.

Later on, Christian families set up paradise trees in their homes as symbols of redemption through the birth of Christ.

Because of this close association with the work of Christ, the paradise tree became known as the redemption tree. At first apples, representing the fall, were secured to the branches of the tree. The tree itself symbolized the Savior.

As the redemption tree tradition developed, the apples were put into a basket at the foot of the tree, and sugar-coated fruit, candies and communion wafers were secured to the branches instead (representing the sweetness of the Savior and the fruit of His redemption). Soon there were so many fruits, candies and treats on the tree that its boughs were weighed down.

A German craftsman solved the problem by making glass-blown pieces of fruit that were much lighter than actual fruit. These became the artificial decorations we have today, derived from Christ-honoring Christmas traditions rooted in a desire to glorify Jesus.

Christmas greenery. God Himself, speaking through Isaiah, inspired the idea of using a variety of evergreen trees to decorate the sanctuary of the Lord: “‘The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of my feet” (Is. 60:13).

By the 16th century, Western Christians were practicing the Christmas tradition of “greening” the church and home with evergreen trees, branches and cones. Laurel wreaths pointed to the victory of Christ. Holly and ivy later replaced laurel, carrying the idea of peace (because of the birth of Christ) and joy (because of the glad tidings of Christ).

The holly wreath, with its thorns and red berries, symbolized the crown of thorns, with the red berries representing the drops of Christ’s curse-reversing blood. That is why we deck those halls with boughs of holly!

The significance behind the Christian observance of Christmas

lies in the person it celebrates. If our Christmas celebrations are to be more meaningful and filled with festive joy, Christ must become the forethought of everything we do instead of an afterthought.

So go all out with Christmas decorations, but use only those symbols and traditions that point to the Savior's birth, person and work. Get out the crèche, golden horns, silver trumpets, harps and bells, angels, shepherds, stars and musical notes, lights and wreaths, and holly wreaths and evergreens. Let every decoration and tradition point to some aspect of Jesus Christ, who alone is the life of the party.

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Do You Hear What I Hear?

What do bells have to do with Christmas? For centuries church bells rang all over the world, expressing the glad tidings of Christ's birth.

In medieval times bells somberly tolled an hour before midnight on Christmas Eve, warning the powers of darkness of the approaching birth of the ultimate Deliverer. In England this was called "tolling the devil's knell."

At the stroke of midnight, which ushered in Christmas, the bells started ringing joyously and continued every hour afterward. Christmas bells have played a major role in ancient Christmas traditions, warning the devil and his demons to flee, as well as calling Christians to joyous exaltation over the birth of Christ. This hope-producing Christmas tradition

was referenced in the carol by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

Decoding a Christmas Carol

The 12 days of Christmas mentioned in the carol by this name refer to the 12 days of feasting and celebration originally designated in the sixth century as a time to commemorate the incarnation of Christ. The 12-day period began on Dec. 25 and ended on Jan. 5.

The carol dates to the 16th century when Roman Catholics were experiencing religious persecution in England. From 1558 until 1829 it was illegal for them to practice or express their faith in any form in public.

In fact, to be caught in public with any material about the Christian faith brought imprisonment and death. Out of this intense persecution, "The 12 Days of Christmas" emerged as a kind of coded message affirming belief in Christ and in the Bible.

Each of the 12 days represents an important aspect of the Christian faith that the disciple was to learn and adhere to. Here are meanings hidden in this clever Christmas carol:

First day: The "partridge in a pear tree" represents the birth of Christ on Christmas Day. Christ is portrayed as a partridge because of the instinctual habit of mother partridges to pretend to be injured in order to decoy predators away from their helpless young.

Second day: "Two turtle doves" refers to the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Third day: "Three French hens" stands for the three virtues

written about in 1 Corinthians 13:13: faith, hope and love.

Fourth day: "Four calling birds" symbolizes the four Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

Fifth day: "Five golden rings" points to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

Sixth day: "Six geese a-laying" stands for the six days of creation and the affirmation that Almighty God is the creator and sustainer of all things.

Seventh day: "Seven swans a-swimming" represents the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit mentioned in Romans 11: prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving and generosity, leadership, and compassion and mercy.

Eighth day: "Eight maids a-milking" stands for the eight beatitudes Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5), each beginning with "Blessed are": (1) the poor in spirit; (2) those who mourn; (3) the meek; (4) those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; (5) the merciful; (6) the pure in heart; (7) the peacemakers; and (8) those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Ninth day: "Nine ladies dancing" represents the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit listed in Galatians 5:22-23.

10th day: "Ten lords a-leaping" symbolizes the Ten Commandments (see Ex. 20:1-17).

11th day: "Eleven pipers piping" refers to the 11 faithful disciples. Because Judas Iscariot, the 12th disciple, betrayed Jesus he is not included among the faithful.

12th day: "Twelve drummers drumming" emphasizes the 12 doctrinal points of the Apostles' Creed, which outlines the core beliefs of the Christian faith.

