

Christmas Confusion: Keep Christ in *Which* Christmas?

"Test all things; hold fast what is good." (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

The more I study the Word, and the more I observe practices of our own churches and broader "Christian" culture, the more confused I become. People rapidly take to arms when someone wants to call a Christmas tree a "family" tree, or say "Happy Holidays" instead of "Merry Christmas." (What is that supposed to mean, anyway?) However, I am not convinced that Christians clearly understand Christmas, whatever it is supposed to mean. We argue and fight over and defend Christmas, but why? Who defined the holiday in the first place? How are we directed to celebrate Christmas, if we are to celebrate it at all? We do not even carefully follow the Word.

Granted, we already put up with a great deal of liberty in how we observe the supposedly Biblical narrative. Whether its three kings, Mary riding on a donkey, or Joseph presumably going from inn to inn trying to find a place to stay, and then finding a gracious innkeeper, etc. these things have been identified as extra-biblical, and have been thoroughly vetted. There is also continued rhetoric regarding the pagan origins of the Christmas holiday itself, including timing and several of its practices, of which many have redefined by our own Christianized meanings, reasons, and terms. People annually defend the existence of a real Santa (of sorts) by pointing back to a kind-hearted Nicholas of bygone days, as if that somehow justifies the fictional variations of Santa, or the Christmas season and its practices itself. Then there is the baseless fiction of drummer boys, a red-nosed reindeer, and the like, which many embrace and review (at a minimum, through the medium of music) due to the ultimate warm feeling they bring, not because there is any thread of truth concerning them at all, and if the feeling of the season was all that mattered. All of these have been addressed, discussed, defended, and ignored. Christmas goes on as usual, with the hope of, and now with the fight for, "keeping Christ in Christmas."

Someone has aptly separated at least three Christmases which are observed¹: commercial, cultural, and religious (Christian). Though this may be true (and though additional "Christmases" might also be identified), it seems that Christians hardly perceive or practice any separation of the three. All are lumped together and justified as a unit. Christians claim to seek to keep Christ in Christmas, but in reality Christ has never existed in the first two whatsoever. What is even more disconcerting is that it is questionable that He is truly in the third (if Scriptural accuracy means anything).

The commercial Christmas contains Christ only to sell. Macys, Sears, Wal-Mart (or even Christian bookstores, to some degree) really could not care less what you call the largest buying season, as long as people buy, and buy from them. Many stores are publicly traded companies, wherein the bottom line is the only true concern. They will try to appeal to as many as possible, in order to sell as much as possible. If that means keeping "Christ" in the word "Christmas," that is fine. However, it is equally fine to rename it "holiday" or something else if that is what creates the best selling atmosphere. It is in no way an acknowledgement of Christ or Christianity. It is nothing more than carrying out a demand-driven marketing strategy. If they keep their commercial clientele happy, it matters not what else they sell, and whomever else they keep happy selling it. For example, the same stores that "keep Christ in Christmas" sell Kwanzaa products (the wholly man-made holiday that is religious at its core, with its own seven-principle core doctrine), DVDs and video games that promote or highlight sensuality, immorality, witchcraft and such, etc. Christians do not respond whatsoever to most of this, as long as a Christmas tree is called just that. How superficial our faith (and how easy it will be to "lose market share" when other groups out-number us).

The second Christmas, the cultural Christmas, is observed by anyone and everyone all over the world. People who fight against a religious-based Christmas, and even those that would expunge Christianity from society altogether, still like getting Christmas day off, exchanging gifts, decorating trees, and spending time with loved ones during this "season." There is nothing intrinsically Christian or Biblical in this Christmas. In fact, I as a Baptist find it somewhat amazing that many members of our congregations skip more services from their local congregations during this season due to this cultural mandate (you know, "family time," which trumps every obligation anywhere). It is irreligious at best, and draws many away from a true focus on Christ. In this cultural Christmas, Christ is certainly not warranted here, and with a great many, Christ is not even wanted.

My greatest concern, if indeed we can get beyond the first two types of Christmas (which I do not believe is true for most), is what could be identified as the Christian Christmas. This is the supposed religious, Bible-based observance that true, pious believers in the Savior somehow observe and practice during this season. If, for one year, people wiped the commercial and cultural observances from their practice, and observed the time of the incarnation that the Bible describes, I seriously wonder what there is that would resemble anything close to what is practiced. Because of space considerations, I will only list observations and concerns regarding Christmas with brief comments. Each deserves a full discussion, but let the list stimulate your thinking for now.

On the Rest of the Christmas Story (Little details we miss or forget.)

- *Christ's coming was clouded with scandal.* By becoming the earthly mother of Jesus, Mary assumed a life-long reputation of scandal. Joseph, by taking this "unwed mother," also entered into this scandal. In fact, it was so well-known, it continued into Jesus' earthly ministry, and was used as a point of argument against Him! (John 8:41) Everyone was not happy for Joseph and Mary. They were the target of gossip and presupposed judging.
- *Christ's coming was met with wholesale rejection.* Whatever Christmas is today, it is probably closer to the "first Christmas" in that it is more a celebration of the rejection of Christ. Christ's coming was rejected by the majority of political leaders, religious leaders, and people. Though multitudes observe some form of Christmas today, it is very evident that our moral state and direction are not reflecting any embrace of Christ or Christianity. Christmas as practiced today does not promote Christ or Christianity, or much of our nation and the world would be followers of Christ. The opposite is true. Christmas *as practiced*, whatever it is, is not Christian, let alone evangelistic. It seldom brings any opposition, which in itself seems out of character.
- *Christ's coming was followed by murder.* The Christmas story is surrounded by tragedy. Herod murdered all male children two years old and younger in Bethlehem and in its districts. Christmas was a time of great sorrow and mourning, of great loss. Where is our Christmas carol about this? At least a verse of *We Three Kings* could address this, as it happened around that time, or *O Little Town of Bethlehem* could certainly take on new, heart-rending significance.

On the Bad Side of Christmas (What is often ignored and never sung about.)

- *Christmas Affirms the Revelation of God* – What God has revealed is true (about everything, including creation, marriage, and sexuality, to name a few). The incarnation underscores the veracity of God's Word.
- *Christmas Demonstrates God's Control of Conception* – It is without question that God's sovereignty in power over conception is required for Him to keep His promises. (Luke 1:31) How we have diminished our God and His Word regarding His wisdom, His ability and His right to control conception, and His words regarding children being a blessing rather than a curse! (Ps 127:3) What if Mary had only considered the right she had over her own body? What if Mary rejected the "curse" of children?
- *Christmas Recognizes that an Infinite Being Can Be Present in the Womb at Conception* – The whole concept of abortion becomes moot if personhood exists at conception. Here you have the eternal Son of God, fully God, in Mary's womb at the moment of conception. Is Christmas a time to discuss life at conception, and the sin of termination of pregnancy, whether by abortion-inducing pills and devices or abortionists? It certainly should be.
- *Christmas Emphasizes the Importance of Moral Purity* – The fact that Gabriel was sent by God to appear before a virgin is extremely significant. God chose to use a *morally pure* young lady to be the earthly mother of His Son! God also chose a *righteous man* to be Jesus' earthly father! Joseph responded righteously when he sought to put away Mary. Purity was of utmost importance! Where is the Christmas carol on purity? Where is the practice?
- *Christmas Affirms the Prediction of Coming Judgment* – It was foretold that Christ would come twice. The first time He came to die, "to save His people from their sins." The second time He comes as the Righteous Judge to Whom all will give an account. Christmas should be a time of warning!
- *Christmas Highlights the Desperate Condition of Mankind* – Mankind is so hopeless and helpless that the possible solution was for God to come to earth to die! It was a drastic measure to solve the sin problem for a condemned humanity. It is not a pretty fairy tale, but a confirmation of the lost state of mankind.
- *Christmas Reveals the Utter Humiliation of Christ* – God becoming flesh by being conceived and being born as a helpless baby was not intended to be cute. To have the Son of God, the Creator of the World, take on human form was complete and utter *humiliation*. Unlike us, who began at conception, Jesus did not begin there. What would you consider it if you had to have someone carry you, change you, and feed you NOW?
- *Christmas Illustrates the Complete Selflessness of Christ* – Is selflessness a part of the Christmas holiday season? It was fully what Christ's incarnation was about (Phil 2:6-10). It is how we have any clue what true divine love is about, and our obligation because of it (1 John 3:16).
- *Christmas Emphasizes the Sacrificial Death of Christ* – Jesus is revealed as the Lamb of God, slain from the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8). *Our Savior did not come to be admired as a baby.* Jesus came as the Lamb of God who would be tortured to death for the sins of mankind! He is the Creator, the Sustainer, the Preeminent One, the Savior, and Judge. His coming is marked by sober sacrifice, not fanciful nursery stories. The true story is often left at or lost at the "baby in the manger." The fact that Jesus became a baby was a necessary part of the process, but it in no way is part of the emphasis of the Gospel or of significant emphasis in Scripture as a whole. Jesus' incarnation was a prerequisite to the Gospel, but not a primary element in the presentation of the Gospel.

On Exchanging Gifts (This drives the Commercial Christmas) – Why do we exchange gifts at Christmas?

- *Is it because God gave His gift to us?* (2 Cor 9:15) If so, would not the important point be to encourage people to consider God's Gift, or more fully rejoice because of it, rather than distracting by the things of this world? The central theme is Christ as Savior, not some physical gift in place of Him. God's Gift was something money could not buy, but exactly what people needed! God could have given gifts. Instead, He gave His Son.
- *Is it because the wise men gave gifts to Jesus?* (Matt 2:11) It is interesting to note that the wise men gave gifts in recognition of Jesus' *identity*, not in recognition of His birth (nor at His birth). Their very goal was to find Jesus that they could *worship* Him, not celebrate His birthday. Their initial response when they found Jesus was to fall down and worship Him. Their focus was not on what had arrived, but Who had arrived. The emphasis of the "Christmas story" is God's PRESENCE, not the PRESENTS. It is also very important to note that they gave gifts to *Jesus*, not to one another!
- *Is it because Christians are to give to others in need?* (1 John 3:16-17) If so, giving to those in need is something that we are to do for those in need as a lifestyle, all year long, not just at Christmas.
- *Is there some eternal reward that comes from showering one another with gifts?* It seems that we are somehow misled, thinking that giving to one another (usually meeting wants rather than needs), we are building up rewards in heaven. If Luke 14:12-14 has any bearing, it would seem that if we give to those that can give back (and do), we have that reciprocation as our reward alone.
- *Do gifts not just add to our love of things?* (1 John 2:15-17) Are we not to seek the things which are above, NOT the things on the earth? (Col 3:1-5, including "covetousness, which is idolatry") Does not the pile under the tree feed our own wants, and bring the focus to us, rather than to Christ? Is it not still possible yet to succumb to the cares, riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity? (Luke 8:14)

Regardless of how you "celebrate Christmas," does your practice have any resemblance of the coming of the Savior? Does how you promote the Baby in the Manger make any eternal impact on your family, your church, or your culture? In your fight to "keep Christ in Christmas," have you ever examined to see if He ever was really there to begin with?🙏🙏

¹ Kevin T. Bauder, "In the Nick of Time" article *The Three Christmases*. (<http://seminary.wcts1030.com/publications/20051216.pdf>)