

The Three Christmases

Kevin T. Bauder – December 16, 2005

<http://seminary.wcts1030.com/publications/20051216.pdf>

One of the perennially favorite debates among conservative Christians is about the observance of Christmas. While most Christians celebrate Christmas with joy and enthusiasm, a small minority object on one or more of several grounds. Some say that Christmas is a pagan holiday. Others insist that it is a Romanist holiday (as evidenced by the “mass” at the end of the name). Yet others object that it violates the Rule of Prescription or, as the Reformed call it, the Regulative Principle. This is the rule or principle that restricts the order of the church to elements that are directly authorized by Scripture, and particularly by the New Testament.

The argument that Christmas is a pagan day hardly seems worth troubling with. Much of this argument is based on speculation. The much-repeated suggestion that the date of Christmas and the custom of gift-giving were copied from the Roman Saturnalia is an example of such speculation. Little real evidence exists to support it. True, late Romans do seem to have exchanged gifts around the Saturnalia, which was observed in late December and early January. A real question exists, however, as to who influenced whom. That Christians borrowed the celebration from pagans is a conceit of the Enlightenment. It could just as easily have been the other way around.

This is not to suggest that no Christmas customs have roots in pagan observances. In a civilization that borrows even the names of days and months from pagan polytheism, it would be surprising if no pre-Christian customs were held over in Christian observances. In itself, however, that does not necessarily render those customs any more evil than designating days as Wednesday (Wotan’s Day) or Thursday (Thor’s Day).

Before proceeding, we probably ought to distinguish three uses of the word *Christmas*. So different are these uses that they have really come to refer to three distinct holidays. While these holidays occur at the same time, each has its own rites and customs. We may grant that the customs sometimes overlap, but that fact does not erase the huge dissimilarities between the three holidays.

The first Christmas is *the commercial holiday*. This day was invented during the second half of the Nineteenth Century with the emergence of popular culture and its exploitation by retailers. The commercial Christmas was developed and promoted by Thomas Nast, Currier and Ives, and the like. By the end of the Twentieth Century, it had become devoted to the acquisitive spirit. *It is a day that plays upon human covetousness. It has turned the giving of gifts into the expecting of gifts, and then the demanding of gifts. It remains our civilization’s most important celebration of avarice. While no one can object to the giving of gifts, it is difficult to see how any Christian can enter into the Spirit of Christmas Commercial without defilement.*

The second Christmas is *the cultural holiday*. It is the day of red and green, holly and ivy, eggnog and caroling, tinsel, trees, and lights. Such customs as Yule logs, wassail, candles, sleigh bells, reindeer, and Kris Kringle are part of this holiday. Some of the traditions of the cultural Christmas are ancient and possibly pagan in origin. Others are relatively recent, and some of these (Rudolph, for instance) have come into the cultural holiday on loan from the commercial holiday.

As a practical matter, observing the cultural Christmas is not likely to do any harm, and it is great fun. Even the (possibly) pagan origin of some traditions is not a serious matter. Virtually no one intends those customs in any pagan sense today, and they have nearly or completely lost any idolatrous connotation. At the very worst, they are the moral equivalent of meat that was offered to idols such a long time ago that none who are now alive ever saw it happen (and neither did their grandparents).

*The danger of the cultural Christmas comes when it gets mixed up with the Christian holiday, which for lack of better terminology could be called **the theological Christmas**.* The theological Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation. It focuses upon the mystery of the eternal Second Person, adding to His deity a complete human nature. This is one of the pivotal events in salvation history, the kind of event that Christians cannot ponder too often or too deeply.

This is all the justification that Christians require in order to celebrate the theological Christmas (by the way, that “mass” at the end of the word simply signifies a church service and not a formal ritual involving a supposed transubstantiation). In principle, we would be justified in celebrating the incarnation every time we gathered for worship, and in certain senses that is exactly what we do. During the Christmas season, we simply direct our focus more specifically to the wonder of the incarnation, setting aside time to ponder this event with deliberation. In principle, any season of the year could work for such a celebration of the incarnation, and late December is as good as any other. Interestingly enough, some of the best scholarship now indicates that this may actually have been the season of Jesus’ birth.

Done properly, a celebration of the incarnation can be a wonderful season of contemplation, instruction, reflection, and devotion. This, however, is just where the cultural Christmas is a danger. *An overemphasis upon the cultural Christmas will distract most people from the theological Christmas.* They will be thinking about reindeer when they ought to be pondering God in flesh. Their minds will be focused on Christmas cards and cookies when they should be focused upon Christ’s condescension.

This does not mean that the cultural Christmas is necessarily wrong, but it does need to be kept in its place. That place is not in church. The only way to avoid confusing the theological Christmas with the cultural Christmas is if each is kept in its own rightful sphere. The cultural Christmas, fun as it is, is a profane (in the sense of “common”) activity that belongs outside of deliberate worship. Let it be enjoyed in home and hall, but let it not intrude into the temple—and make no mistake, every New Testament church is a temple, indeed, a Holy of Holies.

We need to take seriously John’s warning: “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.” *We must shun the idolatry of the commercial Christmas.* We may, however, observe the traditions and customs of the cultural Christmas, as long as we keep those celebrations where they belong. When it comes to the theological Christmas, the truly Christian Christmas, we ought to embrace the idea. The date and season are not biblically prescribed, but the subject matter is. The marvel of the incarnation ought to captivate us at least once each year.

And so without apology or hesitation, I bid you Merry Christmas.