



CHRISTMAS 2019 - WHERE IS YOUR FOCUS?

Perry Atkinson & John Mittendorf

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INTRODUCTION

Now that many people have recently celebrated Thanksgiving, the current emphasis on Christmas – in reality – started weeks ago with:

- Merchants decorating shops, stores and malls with Christmas decorations
- Early Christmas advertising and a shopping emphasis on “Black Friday” and “Cyber Monday” that typically denotes remarkable deals and the rush to buy gifts for family and friends
- Traveling, visiting friends, family and attending selected parties/gatherings
- Recalling Santa Claus, elves, Christmas trees, Charlie Brown, Rudolph, the Little Drummer Boy, decorations, stockings and the prospect of opening presents
- Christmas tree lots on numerous corners
- And so on.....

Clearly, the Christmas season can become a highly anticipated and time intensive holiday season with the potential result of changing our primary focus from the real reason of Christmas to the materialistic demands of our secular society. Obviously, this dilemma asks two basic questions – “*what is the reason for Christmas,*” and “*are we really celebrating the real reason for Christmas?*” With these thoughts in mind, let’s briefly explore:

- Where did the name of Christmas come from?
- Why is Christmas celebrated on December 25?

- The war on Christmas
- The true gift of Christmas
- Common Christmas misconceptions

WHERE DID THE WORD CHRISTMAS COME FROM?

The word Christmas (which can also be referred to as Christmas Day and Christmastide) is a combination of the words *Christ* and *mas*. The word **Christ** is derived from the Greek word *Christos*, meaning “chosen one” or “anointed one” and is also the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, or Messiah. Even though the name of **Jesus** is the Lord's human name that was given to Mary by the angel Gabriel in Luke 1:31 – “*And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus,*” **Christ** is His title signifying Jesus was sent from God to be a Deliverer (Daniel 9:25) and King in Isaiah 32:1 – “*Behold, a King will reign in righteousness, and princes will rule with justice*” to:

- Spiritually redeem His people from sin (John 8:31-36)
- Physically establish His future Kingdom on the earth as the King of Kings (Isaiah 9:1-7 and Zechariah 14:9).

In the compound word Christmas, the word **mas (or mass)** can be defined from the following viewpoints as follows:

- Mas evolves from the Old English word *maesse* which means festival, feast day or mass (which can be viewed as a celebration)
- Mas can also be derived from the Latin word *missa*, which is a form of the verb *mittere*, which means, “to send”

Summarily then, we can combine the definitions of Christ, *maesse*, and *missa* as a celebration of the sending of Christ to this world.

WHY IS CHRISTMAS CELEBRATED ON DECEMBER 25?

Although there are numerous views on the date of the actual birth of Christ, December 25 is the specific date that is celebrated by many countries worldwide, including some countries without Christian beliefs. However, because the Bible does not give the date of the birth of Jesus and there is some evidence for both a winter and summer birth of Jesus, the *actual* month and date of His birth are unknown so December 25 may not be the correct date. Therefore, let's briefly look at the history of December 25.

From a historical perspective, it is true that angels and shepherds originally celebrated Christ's birth (Luke 2:11-20). However, it is likely that people began to re-celebrate this event at a later date. December 25 is mentioned by early church father Sextus Julius Africanus in *Chronographiai* as being

celebrated in AD 221 but the first *recorded* date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25 was in AD 336 during the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine, the first Christian Roman Emperor. A few years later, Pope Julius I officially declared in AD 350 that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th of December. Later, it is known that by the mid 4th century, the Western Christian Church had placed Christmas on December 25, a date that was later adopted in the East. As a side issue, December 25 was solidified by the Gregorian calendar (also called the New Style Calendar) that is the solar dating system now in general use and was decreed in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII as a reform to the older Julian calendar.

Although we cannot be certain of the date of the birth of Jesus, we can be certain that Jesus was born close to the late evening or night for an angel informed the shepherds of His birth at night:

"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night"
Luke 2:8

A parallel issue that is often mentioned with Christmas is the perception that it originated from the ancient Roman pagan holiday of Saturnalia that honored the deity of Saturn. Saturnalia was originally celebrated on December 17 and then expanded about 7 days to around December 24/25, and consisted of special decorative greenery in homes, evening bon-fires, exchanging gifts and numerous parties (sound familiar?), and continued to the 3rd or 4th century. However, as secular pagans had no regard for the birth of Christ and Christians were officially without a more sober celebration, Pope Julius I officially declared an alternative (December 25) to the pagan celebration of Saturnalia for Christian believers.

A greater concern should be the extent that Christians have minimized their focus on the birth of Christ and adopted some of the secular-pagan practices during Christmas. The primary issue is not the precise date Christ was born but taking the proper time and focus to remember and celebrate Christ's birth into this world.

THE WAR ON CHRISTMAS

When Christmas is typically considered the most popular holiday of the year (Christian or secular) and is hallmarked by deep religious convictions, beauty, gifts and celebrations, why would anyone oppose this particular time of each

year? The easy answer is the secular rejection to the emphasis on Christ as the *“reason for the season.”*

Up until about the 18th century, the Western world had largely supported biblical truth for centuries. However, during the 18th century, a subtle attack on biblical truth based on evolutionary and naturalistic theories of the earth’s creation emerged in addition to two enlightenment-generated philosophical movements – deism and atheism. These movements elevated human reason to a place of supreme authority and took an anti super-naturalistic view of the Bible, holding it to be just another human book.

Then, after the 18th century, many Christians in the early 19th century sought to harmonize biblical teaching with Darwinism that led to modern secular science, naturalism, and humanism being inseparable. By default, God and the Bible were eliminated and mankind became the ultimate authority above God (which is known as the religion of humanism). Since then, we have witnessed God and the Bible attacked in every arena as humanists have demanded the removal of God and the Bible from every area of life, including Christmas. As an example, consider the following examples:

- The Bible and prayer removed from schools
- Removal of the Ten Commandments from public places
- Removal of the Pledge of Allegiance
- Continued elimination of singing Christmas Carols in public
- The refusal to say “Merry Christmas” and replacing with “Happy Holidays”
- Forced removal of Nativity scenes in public
- Writing Xmas instead of Christmas
- Claiming Christmas was pagan

THE TRUE GIFT OF CHRISTMAS

Quite simply, the true gift of Christmas is *Christ*, the Son of God, who became a man from a humble beginning to dwell among us and willingly sacrifice Himself on a cross for the atonement of our sins to provide a way to save us from our sins and eternal damnation. This gift is beautifully summarized in Isaiah as follows:

(6) “For unto us a child is born, to us a Son is given, and the government will be upon His shoulders. And He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. (7) Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord almighty will accomplish this”

Isaiah 9:6-7

The primary focus of this gift is that it is free if we simply repent and receive Christ as Savior. Yes, it's that simple and yes, it's eternally important!

COMMON CHRISTMAS MISCONCEPTIONS

Let's look at some common questions that often surface during Christmas and then separate biblical truth (as outlined in the parallel accounts in the first and second chapters of Matthew and second chapter of Luke) from secular myth and perceptions. Starting with the account in the second chapter of Luke and then later with Matthew as a template:

(4) "Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, (5) to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. (6) So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. (7) And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (kataluma)"

Luke 2:4-7

- **When Mary and Joseph arrived in town, Mary was in labor and about to deliver, so Joseph was forced to accept any available lodging.**

False. Mary was not in labor when they arrived in Bethlehem. Notice there was no urgency (*"while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered"*) so they waited there until the right time

True. When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, there was no available lodging so they were compelled to lodge in a manger

- **The New Testament indicates that the innkeeper told Joseph and Mary there was no room for them in the inn.**

False. There is no mention of an innkeeper

- **The New Testament uses the Greek word *kataluma* that is translated as "inn." Therefore, *kataluma* means "small hotel."**

False. It is likely that tradition has obscured the true meaning of inn. The Greek word *kataluma* is best translated as "guest room" as the exact word/meaning is also used in Mark and Luke as follows:

"Wherever he goes in, say to the master of the house, the Teacher says, where is the guest room (kataluma) in which I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"

Mark 14:14

"Then you shall say to the master of the house, the Teacher says to you, where is the guest room (kataluma) where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?"

Luke 22:11

Additionally, the 2011 update to the NIV now reads *"because there was no guest room available for them"*

- **The New Testament indicates that Joseph and Mary spent the first night in a stable.**

False. There is no biblical mention of a stable, only a manger. Today, we are aware through modern archaeology that the common home (in this area) was over a manger-type area for animals. Additionally, manger was generally the term used for a feeding trough for animals. So, Joseph and Mary had to locate in the lower level of a building, a place that often gave shelter to animals in ancient Israel. This arrangement provided security for the animals and protection from the exterior elements

- **Some stories indicate the innkeeper's wife brought towels and water to Mary and assisted Joseph in the birth of the baby Jesus.**

False. There is no mention of an innkeeper's wife in the biblical account

Now, let's look at the account in the second chapter of Matthew:

(1) "Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, (2) saying, where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him"

Matthew 2:1-2

- **The New Testament says three wise men traveled to see the new baby Jesus and were present the night of His birth.**

False. Matthew indicates, *"wise men from the East came to Jerusalem."* Three gifts are mentioned (gold, frankincense, and myrrh) but not the number of wise men that either traveled or were present. The wise men were not kings, but Magi, Magicians or Astrologers – possibly Zoroastrian wise men from Persia whose knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures could be traced back to the time of Daniel (Daniel 5:11). Additionally, although the Bible is silent on the age of Jesus, some scholars believe it is likely that Jesus could have been two years old when visited by the Magi. Remember that by the time the Magi arrived, Mary, Joseph and Jesus were situated in a house, not a stable as detailed in Matthew:

"And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshipped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh"

Matthew 2:11

These three valuable items were standard gifts to honor a king or deity in the ancient world (see Isaiah 60:6), but the Bible does not elaborate on why these three gifts were given by the Magi but does state the gifts were gold, frankincense and myrrh. There are varying interpretations of the meaning and significance of these gifts, but a common explanation that has merit is as follows:

- Although gold is representative of divinity, gold is also a precious metal and could have been used to finance Joseph and Mary's escape to Egypt
- Frankincense is a white resin or gum from a tree in Arabia and is a symbol of holiness and righteousness. Used as a fragrant incense
- Myrrh is also obtained from a tree in Arabia, was used in embalming, and is symbolic of bitterness, suffering and affliction. Also used as a spice
- **The "star" the Magi followed from the East to Jesus in Bethlehem can be explained by past astronomical events.**

False. This could not have been a supernova or a conjunction of planets as some modern theories suggest because of the way the star moved and settled over one place:

"When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was"

Matthew 2:9

It was more likely a supernatural reality similar to the Shekinah (God's glory expressed as light) that guided the Israelites in the days of Moses (Exodus 13:21) as God was in complete control of this event

- **The Christmas tree represents the Asherah poles mentioned in the Old Testament.**

False. Christmas trees were first used as a symbol of Christmas in Latvia in 1510, Strasbourg in 1521, and as a German *tradition* introduced by Prince Albert in 1841

- **The Bible forbids bringing trees into our homes and decorating them.**

False. The primary scripture that is used for this misconception is found in Jeremiah:

(2) "Thus says the Lord, do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. (3) For the customs of the peoples are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. (4) They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple"

Jeremiah 10:2-4

In the context of Jeremiah 10, these three verses refers to the fact that idols were often carved from wood and then ornamented with gold and/or silver for the purpose of bowing before it for worship. These verses must be taken out of context to align them with a legitimate argument against the use of Christmas trees for Christmas celebrations

Christmas traditions are primarily secular in meaning.

Potentially false. Depending on the proper interpretation, consider the following examples:

- Bells are played to signify the joyous news of the birth of Jesus
- Candles are set alight to emphasize that Christ is the Light of the world (John 1:4-9). This tradition began in Germany
- Candles are placed in windows to symbolize that Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the ultimate light of the world
- A star is placed at the top of a Christmas tree to remember the Star of Bethlehem
- The three colors typically associated with Christmas are red, green and gold and stand for:
 - Red - the blood of Jesus shed in crucifixion
 - Green - evergreen tree for eternal life
 - Gold - royalty
- **Xmas is a secular substitution for Christ in Christmas.**

Potentially false. In Greek (the original language of the New Testament), the word for Christ is *Xpistos*, which begins with the Greek letter X and is the same as the English letter X. Originally, Xmas was just an abbreviation of Christmas, entered the English language as early as AD 100, and is even used in the Oxford English Dictionary back in 1551. However, when applied to the modern secular world, **the word Xmas does minimize and/or obscure the emphasis (and importance) of Christ in Christmas. However, today the X is commonly used to replace Christ in christmas**

As a side note, as some people are often interested in the origin of notable "*Christmas traditions*," a brief history of the following traditions of interest are briefly overviewed:

Christmas Cards

In 1843, an educator named Mr. Cole was not only well known but also travelled within the elite strata of early England. During the aforementioned Christmas season, he happened to receive an inordinate number of letters as a result of a recent expansion of the British postal system and the implementation of the "Penny Post" system that allowed a sender to forward a letter or card anywhere

in the country for a single penny stamp. Approaching an artist friend, he asked the artist to design an uplifting illustration on a 5X3-inch cardboard card that led to 1,000 copies being printed and sent to friends. The idea was quickly copied and the rest is history.

Christmas Ornaments

Christmas tree ornaments began in Germany in the 16th century by devout Christians who brought decorated trees into their homes. In America, the first recorded account of decorated trees in homes was in Pennsylvania in 1830 by German immigrants.

Christmas Tree Lights

The first known electrically illuminated Christmas tree in the United States was by Ed Johnson, an associate of Thomas Edison. In 1882 he developed a smaller version of Edison's new invention (the incandescent light bulb) and used it to replace candles on Christmas trees. By 1900, businesses started stringing Christmas lights behind their windows and the rest is history. As a significant side-benefit, replacing candles with lights also resulted in reducing Christmas tree fires and saving many lives from these fires.

Santa Claus

The modern Santa Claus grew out of traditions from the historical Saint Nicholas, a 4th century Greek Bishop and gift-giver that also carried over to the Dutch figure of Sinter Klaas. The term Sinter Klaas was brought to this country by early Dutch immigrants. The modern portly, joyous, white-bearded man with a red coat became popular in the United States and Canada in the 19th century.

CONCLUSION

Although we have considered many facets of Christmas, the focus for any Christmas should be the realization that God became a man and gave his life on a cross so that mankind could live in eternity with Him (the gospel). This supreme act of love is found in John as follows:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved"

John 3:16

Use the Christmas of 2019 to once again refocus on the birth of Christ, the free gift of salvation and what that means for eternal life with Christ. Also, remember to pray for this country and the current administration that is tasked with governing this country.

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