

2. SHOULD WE CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS?

www.thebiblejesus.com

Now, recall that baby Jesus was placed in a **manger** --- a trough used to put animal feed in because the Guest Room [*kataluma*] was already fully occupied. As **Kenneth Bailey** logically points out,

If at the end of Luke's Gospel, the word *kataluma* means a guest room attached to a private home (22:11), why would it not have the same meaning near the beginning of his Gospel? ¹

What seems likely to have happened is that Joseph had relied on either a family relation or friend in Bethlehem for hospitality, but upon arrival the Guest Room was already filled with other guests --- more than likely other family relations.

So, as already mentioned, no relative or friend in that culture would have shut the door to one of David's royal line, and especially knowing a birth was due any day now. **The host family warmly welcomed Joseph and Mary into their own main family room!**

Once Mary's labour began, the men and children would have been cleared out and the womenfolk and more than likely the village midwife would have assisted the birth. Once born and swaddled tightly in linen cloths, the baby was then laid in the manger in that family room --- no doubt with new hay and straw underneath him. And you can be sure the donkey(s), ox(en), sheep and cattle were there too

THE VISIT OF THE SHEPHERDS.

Luke goes on to tell us the first people to visit this scene were the shepherds. The angel of the LORD had told them the LORD's Messiah had just been born --- definitely **not** that the LORD God had been born for that's a sheer impossibility as God cannot be born! **"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger"** (v.12)!

Going in haste, they indeed found the Christ, Israel's Anointed King in an ordinary family home. He was not in a palace. He was not in surroundings of wealth and pomp. He was in a feeding trough in a humble family home just like theirs, no doubt. This was good news for them. This was their language, their **sign!**

Now here's the thing. If those shepherds had found Mary and Joseph and the baby all alone in a cave or a barn, abandoned by everybody in Bethlehem, they would have been aghast.

After the vision of the angelic host, after the announcement of the birth of Israel's king and, after finding the sign they were given, they would have said, **"This is outrageous! You will come with us into one of our homes, and our families will take care of you!"** The honour of their district of Bethlehem was at stake here. That's how the Middle Eastern mind works to this very day. It's an honour-shame society. ²

But the fact the shepherds went on their way rejoicing at everything they had heard and seen that night, is another proof that Jesus was lying in the manger of a loving family home and not in a cold, abandoned stable or cave. No wonder they left praising God after the events of that holy night!

¹ *Op Cit.* p 33

² I owe this thought also to Kenneth Bailey, *Ibid* p 35

WHAT IS OUR RESPONSE?

So, should we celebrate Christmas? Let me give you my considered and prayerful answer by telling you about ...

MY AMERICAN CHRISTMAS AT 17 YEARS OF AGE

I shall never forget my first Christmas abroad. I awoke to snow falling in the American Midwest. I had never seen snow before, and for it to fall on Christmas Day was surreal. There was the open wood fire burning with its crackle and warm glow. There were the decorations and presents under the tree. And there was a loving Christian family gathered in the circle.

Before any other activity, and the first thing on that day the husband and father did was to ask each member to share why Christmas was special to them. How can I forget the sincere and heart-felt testimony of everybody present? All, from youngest to oldest, spoke deeply about God's redeeming love in sending His Son. Bible verses were recited. There was worshipful prayer. There were songs of praise. There was celebration in the giving and receiving of gifts. There was feasting that day with joyful hearts, as the snow continued to fall on the white-covered hills and trees outside.

The indelible impression left upon me was, "Wow. Thank you Father God, for letting me share in your great heart for humanity in the home of this beautiful Christian family. What a difference the birth of Your Son has made to the world."

A MODERN OBJECTION

One of the objections to my personal story from folks who do love and believe the Bible and who want to please God in all things, is that they will say, "Well, Greg, you don't read in the NT that the first Christians celebrated Christmas. Where is your Scriptural authority?" Good point. And there is, I am convinced, a perfectly good Biblical answer --- or two!

The Jewish Torah gave people regular moments of "sanctified time" and you read about these Biblical Feasts in **Leviticus 23** for example. The feasts reminded the Jews they were no longer slaves in Egypt who must work all the time. Slaves work without let-up. Free people have time for leisure and their families have time for fun and friends.

God mandated His people take regular times off from the mundane. He wanted His redeemed people throughout the year to especially honour and remember and rejoice in His goodness. This is a wonderful precedent for our workaholic world! We all need time out from the humdrum to inject deeper meaning into our lives.

My point is that these festivals gave meaning and character to God's redeemed people. It reminded them they were God's special people. ***This was especially important in the raising of good, faithful Jewish children!*** Those festivals were **primary vehicles** for transmitting the Biblical heritage to the next generation. Those holy-days were jewels in the crown of God's people adding beauty and spiritual significance to their lives. The feasts invigorated their souls and sanctified their lives.

OBJECTION NOT ANSWERED! Now, somebody will say, "But Greg, you've missed the point! Those feasts were given by God himself, and the Jews had Scriptural warrant for them, but where is the Biblical warrant for celebrating Christmas?"

My Scriptural warrant is found in Jesus' own example. You do know he celebrated a feast that had no Scriptural authority, don't you? That's right. He celebrated the **Feast of Hanukkah**, or as it is also

known, the **Festival of Lights**. Without going into the details of **Hanukkah** here, sufficient to say the Jewish folk thought it a great idea to celebrate the rededication of their Temple during the inter-testamental period --- after the last OT prophet Malachi went silent and before God moved 430 years later to introduce the last great prophet before the birth of Christ. ³

Jesus showed no scruples about using an extra-Biblical festival to get his point across! It was during this extra-biblical festival that he announced, **“I am the Light of the world”!** When Jesus participated in **Hanukkah** he showed he did not need Scriptural warrant to redeem every situation to testify to the redemptive truths of His kingdom! He was the ultimate Son of God and no slave. We are joint-heirs with him.

We have a lot to learn from this very Hebrew and Christian principle. If we have eyes to see it, these special occasions are opportunities to honour the LORD God. Jesus himself is my example. Therefore, speaking personally, I have no objections to anybody wishing to celebrate Christmas in the right spirit and in truth!

Once we strip away the centuries of accrued myth, once we are clear about what really happened in Bethlehem on that holy night, why should we not join the wonderment of the participants in that first historical Christmas narrative?

God brought His Son into the world proving He is the faithful and promise-keeping God. God sent His Son into the darkness. God through the person of Jesus His Messianic Lord invaded the world's darkness and lies. To me, that's the spirit of Christmas. Not by retreating, not by letting the pagan darkness overwhelm us, but by engaging head-on through dialogue, through testimony, through bold witness to the facts..

If I can use what's become a secularised Christmas season for a platform to promote the positive truth that God has brought His Son onto the world's stage to bring us His Shalom-peace, salvation and blessing in the Kingdom, then I am all for celebrating it. I believe that every place we put our feet in the name of Jesus can be sanctified.

When I was full-time pastoring I can testify that many who never darkened the door of a church would come at Christmas time. And when I preached they heard the Gospel, and not a few believed in Christ the Lord.

Let me prove to you this is what God Himself did that first Christmas;-

THE LESSON OF HISTORY!

In the 20th Century an ancient pagan inscription was found in **Priene**. This inscription, erected in 9 B.C. just 5 years before the birth of Christ, celebrates the birth of the **Emperor Caesar Augustus**. It announces the *euangelion*, the Good News Caesar's birth brought into the Roman world:

Since the Providence which has ordered all things is deeply interested in our life has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit mankind sending him as savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance, surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the world of the good tidings that came by reason of him. ⁴

³ For a fuller description of this see my article, *“I And The Father Are One”*.

⁴ Translation in M. Eugene Borin, Klaus Berger & Carsten Colpe, *Hellenistic Commentary on the New Testament*, Abingdom, Nashville, TN: 1995, p169 (The words “Good News”, “appearance”, and “Saviour” in this pagan inscription are all words the Christians adopted to tell the story of Jesus!)

Why do I quote this inscription which was erected just a few years before the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ? To remind you, that into that dark pagan world which celebrated and worshipped the birth of their Emperor-Saviour Caesar Augustus, that the God of Creation announced the birth of His Son, the world's true Lord and Saviour.

The Gospel writers took the very message and even the very same words from their pagan Roman conquerors and transformed them by applying them to the real Lord and Saviour Jesus the Messiah! It was bold. It was subversive. It was revolutionary! The real story of the birth of the world's Lord and Saviour smashed the pagan icon!

That's God's way of dealing with secularism. Invade pagan practice and message. History tells us the early Christians took the fake pagan secular worldview and injected it with new light and meaning.

So, I say, let's celebrate Christmas in the right spirit and in truth. If I can peel back the layers of myth and preach the historical truth, then I shall, God helping me.

And if I should say to you, "Merry Christmas" I am definitely not wishing you a pagan "Christ Mass" anymore than when I say to you, "See you next Thursday" means Thor, the god of Thunder, is my god!

Remember that lovely lady I mentioned at the beginning who is afraid to invite some of her own Christian friends to their house because they may be offended at the Christmas decorations? What a shame it is she feels unable to joyfully celebrate the miraculous birth of our Saviour because of the scruples --- no matter how well intentioned --- of her fellow believers.

Like those shepherds, it's time to go forth with confidence knowing what we have seen and heard of the miracle virgin birth of our Messiah. Let's go out announcing that we too have seen the sign of the babe lying in the manger, **so that all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds (Lk. 2: 18).**

But let each person **be fully convinced in his or her own mind.** And let us not pass judgment on one another, because it is for freedom that Christ was born to set us free **(Rom. 14:4ff).**

At the end of the day, we are New Covenant people, no longer subject to rules like **"Touch not, taste not, handle not!"** for the **substance belongs to Christ.** Ours is the exhilarating task to announce:-

Merry Christmas!

Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men!