

CHRISTMAS – SEPARATING TRUTH FROM FICTION

Every December, folks the world over engage in perpetuating a myth. This myth is the so-called “Christmas Story.” This myth says that Jesus Christ was born on December 25th to a virgin named Mary, and her husband, Joseph. They tried to get a room in Bethlehem, but there was no room for them in the inn. Thus, she had her baby in a stable and laid him in a manger. Soon after, three wise men and some shepherds, who had been following a special star, appeared to worship the Christ-child. Jesus came to bring peace to the nations. Therefore, all of humanity needs to stop on December 25th and worship God and remember the birth of the Christ-child. Honoring Him can include singing “Happy birthday” to Jesus, offering a prayer, or any religiously-minded thing one would like to do in His honor.

The above story has some basic facts correct. For example, the fact that Jesus was born into this world is true (Matt. 1; Lk. 2). His mother *was* a virgin named Mary (Isa. 7:14; Lk. 1:26-35), and she was married to a man named Joseph (Matt. 1:18; Lk. 1:27). Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the days when Rome ruled the world (Matt. 2:1; Lk. 2:1-7), and He would eventually die as a sacrifice for the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29).

The details beyond this fundamental truth of Christ’s birth are where the myth begins. Sadly, many have fallen for this fantasy. What do I mean by “myth” and “fantasy”? Let us take a close look at what men call the “Christmas story” and see what myths are told today.

Myth #1: Calling The Event Of Christ’s Birth The “Christmas Story.”

TRUTH: “Christmas” is an Old English word that means “The Mass of Christ.” It had its beginnings not with the Bible but with the Catholic church. When looking back into history, we find that “there

is no month of the year not assigned by some writer as that of Christ's birth."¹ Historic study also shows that a celebration of the birth of Christ was not celebrated until the 3rd or 4th century.² In other words, this celebration did not have its origin in the New Testament! Celebrating Christ's birthday was not taught nor practiced by the apostles. It began centuries after the apostles died.

The Catholic church made the decision to celebrate a birthday for Christ on December 25th. Liberius, a bishop in the Catholic church (considered by Catholics to be one of the early Catholic popes), ordered December 25th to be adopted as the date for the celebration of the birth of Christ in the year 354 A.D.³ "December 25 was already a festive day for the sun god Mithra and appealed to the Christians as an appropriate date to commemorate the birth of Jesus, the 'Light of the World.'"⁴

Myth #2: Jesus Was Born On December 25th.

TRUTH: The exact day of Christ's birth was never revealed by God. As we saw above, the Roman Catholics declared that December 25th is Christ's birthday. However, when studying Scripture, the only clue we are given concerning a time of year for the Lord's birth is the record Luke gives us when he speaks of the time of taxing or census that the Romans did, as well as the fact that the shepherds were in the fields in this time of year (Lk. 2:1-8). Based on these facts, some have conjectured that Christ's birth was in the spring rather than December. Nevertheless, anyone who wishes to state with any certainty what day Christ was born is perpetuating a myth. God never revealed this aspect of Christ's life on earth (Deut. 29:29; I Pet. 4:11).

¹ *St. Louis Register*. [Catholic publication]. Nov. 11, 1955

² *The New Schaff-Herzog Religious Encyclopedia*. Vol. III. p. 47; Walker Williston. *A History of the Christian Church*. p. 169

³ *World Book Encyclopedia; Encyclopedia Britannica; Collier's Encyclopedia*

⁴ *The Lincoln Library of Essential Information*

Myth #3: The Shepherds Followed A Star To Find Jesus.

Some folks leave us with the impression that all parties interested in finding Christ followed a star to find Jesus the night He was born.

TRUTH: The shepherds were not even looking for the Messiah when they were told Christ was born “*in the city of David.*” They were busy watching their flock when Christ was born. The angels said in order to find the Messiah; they needed to find a baby lying in a manger and “*wrapped in swaddling clothes*” (Lk. 2:11-12). After this visit from the angels, the shepherds then went to find the Christ and found Him as the angel had said (Lk. 2:15-17). The shepherds, though, never followed a star to find the Lord.

Myth #4: The Wise Men Saw Jesus On The Night He Was Born.

Generally, on any “Christmas Card,” T.V. ad, billboard, etc., one sees in December, the “Nativity scene” is the same. They will depict the shepherds and wise men together visiting the Lord Jesus on the night of His birth.

TRUTH: The shepherds were there the night of Christ’s birth (Lk. 2:8-17). The wise men, however, were not present that night. In fact, the Bible reveals that the wise men were not present until some time after His birth.

Just like the exact date of Christ’s birth, the actual day the wise men visited Jesus, Mary, and Joseph is unknown. What we know is that these wise men followed a star to find the Messiah (Matt. 2:2). However, they went to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem (Matt. 2:1). When they went to Jerusalem and inquired about the “*King of the Jews,*” they met Herod who had concern about His birth – until he perceived the “threat” from a King (Matt. 2:2-4)! The wise men and scribes told Herod about the prophecy of a coming Messiah, and then the wise men told Herod when they had first seen the star in the sky (Matt. 2:7).

Further evidence of these wise men not coming on the exact day of Christ's birth is seen when we find the wise men going to Bethlehem and following the star to the "house" where Christ and His parents were (Matt. 2:11). Note these folks were not outside with the animals. Jesus was not lying in a manger or feed trough. They were in a house in Bethlehem. Chronologically, Joseph and Mary had already taken Jesus to Jerusalem by this time, and they had already seen Simeon and Anna (Lk. 2:22-38). Thus, he is older than forty days. Folks like brother J.W. McGarvey have suggested that six months had elapsed since the star had appeared.⁵ Another reason for this explanation is due to the inclusive nature of Herod's edict when he commanded the baby boys "two years old and under" be killed (Matt. 2:16). If the wise men were present the night of Christ's birth, all that was necessary was for Herod to kill all the newborns. For Herod to pass such an edict means the wise men must have arrived at a later time than His birth to worship Christ (Matt. 2:2).

Myth #5: There Were Three Wise Men.

TRUTH: This is perhaps the most well-known and universally accepted myth surrounding the birth of Christ. Folks read about the three gifts the wise men brought (gold, frankincense, myrrh) and assume this means only three men were present (Matt. 2:11). Some have gone so far as to name the wise men who visited Christ! Again, their names are unknown in the Bible. It is a pretty broad assumption when one assumes that Jesus receiving three kinds of gifts means only three wise men were present! The only thing we know is that there was a plurality of wise men who came to worship Jesus at Bethlehem (Matt. 2:2, 11).

Myth #6: Jesus Came To Bring World Peace.

When the shepherds saw the angels, they heard these words of exaltation and praise: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14). Was this a declaration that Christ came to bring peace between nations? If it is, then Christ has failed miserably at this work! Furthermore, Christ said, "I have not

⁵ J.W. McGarvey. *The Four-Fold Gospel*. p. 51.

come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). So, which is it? Did He come to bring peace, as the angels said, or to bring a sword as He said?

TRUTH: These statements are not contradictory. The peace under discussion was not peace between men but peace between God and man. Ephesians 2:15 declares Christ made peace when he broke down the “*middle wall of partition.*” The peace of Luke 2 was not promised to be seen in physical nations, but it is enjoyed on a spiritual level. Yes, peaceful coexistence is possible between men and nations (Col. 3:11; Rom. 12:18). However, this happens when we are at peace with God first! This is what Christ came to establish, not necessarily peace between nations of men.

Myth #7: Christ Wants Us To Celebrate His Birthday.

To suggest that Christ does not want His birthday celebrated is almost “anathema” in some circles. Yet, there is nowhere in Scripture where Christ or the apostles stated or implied that Christ’s birthday is to be celebrated.

TRUTH: All the things necessary for pleasing God today have been revealed in Scripture (2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet. 1:3; 1 Pet. 4:11; etc.). A simple perusal of Scripture will show that the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ is what the New Testament continually emphasizes. Seeing that Christians are people who act according to what God has revealed (1 Pet. 4:11), then we need to reject any teaching or practice that has not been revealed in Scripture (Deut. 29:29). The day of Christ’s birth, a need for celebrating such, etc., are things which God has not revealed. Therefore, let us stop perpetuating these myths!

Myth #8: Mary Is A Perpetual Virgin.

While we note the Catholic origins and various myths behind a religious observance of the “Christmas Story,” we must also mention the false doctrine related to Christ’s birth, where some say that Mary was a perpetual virgin. Yes, many deny Mary had any other children after Jesus.

TRUTH: Mary did not remain a virgin, She had several more children after her first-born Son, Jesus (Lk. 2:7), was born.

Matthew 13:55-56 records an occasion when the people listening to Him were “astonished” (Matt. 13:54). At this, they asked, “*Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter’s son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?*” Note that in this short section, the people named four brothers Christ had and spoke of Him having a plurality of sisters! Matthew 12:46 also speaks of Christ’s mother and brothers.

No, Mary was not a “perpetual virgin.” She had several other children in addition to her eldest, Jesus.

Conclusion

Certainly, we could name other myths associated with the birth of Christ. Yet, I hope these will help open our eyes to the truth. I write these things not to diminish the glory, beauty, and truth concerning Christ’s birth. Instead, I have written to help us put things in perspective. Let us be satisfied with what God has said and not delve into areas where God has been silent (Deut. 29:29; Col. 3:17; I Pet. 4:11)!

The birth of Christ takes its place as a momentous event in mankind’s history. Yet, we need to understand that the birth of Christ means nothing if He did not die on the cross! If our Lord had died a “natural death,” if He had died of “old age and complications,” then His birth would have meant nothing. It is because of our Lord’s sacrificial death on the cross that His birth has meaning. As Jesus stood falsely accused before Pilate, facing an unjust and cruel death at the hands of sinners, He said, “*To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth hears my voice*” (Jn. 18:36). His birth was celebrated by the angels, and by men because of what He was going to do, i.e. die as a sacrifice for men, and bring salvation to all (Lk. 2:28-35, 36-38). Even if men

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did not completely understand this at the time (Matt. 16:21-22), this was the purpose of celebrating His birth by the angels. The “peace,” the “goodwill,” etc., (Lk. 2:14) is realized by those who are Christians! Since this is true, we find repeated emphasis placed not upon Christ’s birth but upon His death for all mankind. Remembering the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is what is revealed in the Scriptures (Matt. 26:26-28; 1 Cor. 11:24-25; Rom. 6:3-6, 16-18; etc.); but observing His birth religiously (on December 25th, or any day of the year) is not!

- Jarrod Jacobs

Caneyville church of Christ

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Times:

Sunday Bible Study: 10:00 A.M.

Sunday Worship: 10:45 A.M.

Sunday Worship: 5:00 P.M.

Wednesday Bible Study: 7:00 P.M.

Where We Meet:

201 N. Main St. Caneyville, KY