

## The Christmas Question

(Part 1 – Problems with December 25 as Christ’s Birthday and its day of Celebration)

### INTRODUCTION:

1. I decided to preach on this subject for three reasons.
  - A. First, a great number of people believe December 25, Christmas day, is Jesus’ birthday.
  - B. Second, many believe there are definite *rules* for celebrating this day and season of the year.
    - i. Some insist that greetings related to this season must be “Merry **Christmas**” and not “Happy Holidays” or “Season’s Greetings.”
    - ii. Others get upset at the secularization and commercialization of Christmas. We hear, “Put Christ back in Christmas” and “Jesus is the reason for the season.”
    - iii. Others get upset with the idea of “Santa Claus” because he *takes the focus away from Jesus*.
  - C. Third, some say we must abstain from the celebration of Christmas altogether...
    - i. Because it is celebrating an unauthorized religious day.
    - ii. Because it was originally a pagan day of celebration or worship.
2. My purpose for this lesson is to present the biblical, historical, and logical problems with these three approaches. I do so in hopes of giving you some food for thought...
  - A. Concerning what people in our society think about Christmas.
  - B. That you might examine your approach toward such days and seasons to assure it is acceptable to God.

### BODY:

#### **I. December 25: Problems with dating Jesus’ birth**

- A. Biblical problems relating to December 25 as the day of Christ’s birth:
  1. The Bible says nothing about the calendar day on which Jesus was born.
    - a. This is in sharp contrast to the many dating indicators surrounding the time of Jesus’ death (Passover, etc.).
    - b. If this was to be a celebrated day, why is no specific day given by the Holy Spirit?
  2. December 25 (wintertime) doesn’t fit with the Roman census taking place when Jesus was born (Luke 2:1-7 – “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”).
    - a. Calling for a census during the winter would be self-defeating because winter would make travel difficult or impossible for many.
    - b. Travelling in the winter would be very difficult for Mary who was near her due date.
  3. December 25 (winter) was not the time shepherds would be *staying*, or *living*, with their flocks *in the field* (Luke 2:8-12 – “Now there were in the same country shepherds **living [staying – NASB, NIV, HCSB] out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.** <sup>9</sup> And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. <sup>10</sup> Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. <sup>11</sup> For there is **born to you this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is **Christ the Lord.** <sup>12</sup> And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”).
    - a. H.A.W. Meyer writes in *Critical and Exegetical Handbook To the Gospels of Mark and Luke* that the Rabbins stated that “the driving forth of the flocks took place in March, the bringing in of them in November” (p. 273).
    - b. Andrew McGowan in the article *How December 25<sup>th</sup> Became Christmas* writes: “The Bible offers few clues: Celebrations of Jesus’ Nativity are not mentioned in the Gospels

or Acts; the date is not given, not even the time of year. The biblical reference to shepherds tending their flocks at night when they hear the news of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:8) might suggest the spring lambing season; in the cold month of December, on the other hand, sheep might well have been corralled." ([www.biblicalarchaeology.org](http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org)).

i. Yet, he cautions that even this may not be conclusive.

ii. Although the gospels, Acts, and the epistles are *historically inaccurate*, the Holy Spirit saw fit not to reveal the specific day of Jesus' birth.

B. There are historical problems with December 25 as the day of Jesus' birth.

1. Clement of Alexandria around 200 A.D. (*Stromateis*, 1.21.145) showed the confusion of his day: "There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord's birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar]... And treating of His Passion, with very great accuracy, some say that it took place in the 16th year of Tiberius, on the 25th of Phamenoth [March 21]; and others on the 25th of Pharmuthi [April 21] and others say that on the 19th of Pharmuthi [April 15] the Savior suffered. Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21]." (Ibid, *How December...*).

a. Note that there is no mention of December 25<sup>th</sup>.

b. That date would not gain acceptance for another 150 years or so.

2. "The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus' birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman (church, rp) almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked...: "Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea." (Ibid, *How December...*)

3. How did December 25 become the day of Christ's birth? (one explanation)

a. Jewish Rabbinical thought was that if God did a great thing in someone's life on a certain day, then in the future God would do another great thing i that person's life on that day.

b. So, when Tertullian in the early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century wrote that the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nisan, or March 25, was the day of Christ's crucifixion (Ibid., *Origins*, pp. 86, 90-91), this led some to surmise that Jesus must have been conceived on March 25 as well.

c. Since December 25 is exactly 9 months later, December 25 became the day of Christ's birth.

d. So, tradition produced more tradition, which is very shaky ground!

4. So, neither the bible nor secular history substantiate a December 25 date of Christ's birth.

## II. December 25: Problems with the celebrating this day as Christ's birthday:

A. Biblical problems:

1. There is no command or instruction for a local church or individual Christians to celebrate the day of Christ's birth.

a. That doesn't mean we can never give thanks to God for causing Jesus to be born into the world.

b. The only day *commanded/instructed* to be celebrated by the local church is **Sunday**, the resurrection day, when we assemble to worship by partaking of the Lord's Supper, singing, praying, teaching, and giving of our wealth to support the work of the church.

i. Jesus commanded the Lord's Supper in Matt. 26:26-29 and the N.T. church assembled to partake of it (Acts 20:7 – "Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.").

ii. 1 Corinthians 14 instructs the Corinthian church concerning the need for edification in their worship together through teaching, singing, and praying together.

iii. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 and 2 Corinthians 8-9 the local church is commanded to take up money into a treasury for the purpose of doing the work of the church.

c. Since there is no command or instruction from the Lord to celebrate this day:

- i. The local church, as a church, cannot celebrate it (1 Cor. 4:6 – “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us **not to think beyond what is written**, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.”).
    - 1) We are to accept what has been revealed and do that.
    - 2) To add days of celebration without written authority in the N.T. causes division and sin!
  - ii. It would be wise for individual Christians to avoid a religious celebration of this day.
    - 1) For, we must take care not to add to or take away from what God has taught (Rev. 22:18-19).
    - 2) Putting religious overtones into our observance may cause others to sin in how they observe this holiday (1 Cor. 8:9-13 – “But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol’s temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? <sup>11</sup> For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. <sup>12</sup> And so, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause my brother to stumble.”).
    - 3) And, it is important that you be assured of your actions being right (Romans 14:23 – “But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *he does not eat* from faith; for whatever *is* not from faith is sin.”).
- B. Secular history problems:
1. There is no early historical evidence that N.T. Christians celebrated Christ’s birth.
    - a. “Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the church, and before the fifth century there was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come in the calendar, whether January 6<sup>th</sup>, March 25<sup>th</sup>, or December 25<sup>th</sup>.” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 5, p. 641).
    - b. “The extrabiblical evidence from the first and second century is equally sparse: “There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 130–200) or Tertullian (c. 160–225). Origen of Alexandria (c. 165–264) goes so far as to mock Roman celebrations of birth anniversaries, dismissing them as “pagan” practices—a strong indication that Jesus’ birth was not marked with similar festivities at that place and time. As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.” (*How December 25<sup>th</sup> Became Christmas*)
  2. The “official” celebration of *Christmas* on December 25<sup>th</sup> was decided by the apostate church, or *Catholicism*, establishing this date without biblical or historical foundation.
    - a. The apostate church is the origin of the name “Christmas,” from the “Christ Mass.”
      - i. “Mass” is used by the Roman Catholic Church for their celebration of the Eucharist, or their version of the Lord’s Supper.
      - ii. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* says that the “Christ Mass” was first recorded in 1038 A.D. (“Christmas”, Vol. 3).
    - b. So, even the name itself is of very late origin and *tradition*, rather than from the Bible.
- C. There is also the question of Santa Claus.
1. We should know that there is no biblical basis for Santa Claus.
  2. The American Santa Claus was derived from the Dutch figure Sinterklaas, which was based on stories about the historical figure of Saint Nicholas.
  3. He was a 4<sup>th</sup> century Bishop of Myra in Lycia who had the reputation for secret gift-giving and being the friend of children, thus our modern Santa Claus.
  4. Who Santa is and his role in Christmas has *evolved* since his death around 350 A.D., as has Christmas itself.

## CONCLUSION:

1. There are many biblical and historical problems related to the religious world's dating of Christ's birth and its celebration of Christmas.
2. We should be careful to not allow Satan to take advantage of us through carelessness on our part concerning how we as individual Christians might observe the day.
  - A. For, others **may** be watching.
  - B. And, we have to be sure that what we do in connection with that Day is acceptable to our conscience and the Lord.
3. In next week's part 2 we will consider the implications of this information concerning the approach of many toward this holiday season among other things.
4. If you truly want to honor Jesus, you need to come to Him in F-R-C-B and then live faithfully throughout your life to receive a crown of life in the end!