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# Christmas



The Season of Life and Light

*Fullness of Time series*



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# The Fullness of Time

## SERIES PREFACE

ESAU MCCAULLEY, SERIES EDITOR

Christians of all traditions are finding a renewed appreciation for the church year. This is evident in the increased number of churches that mark the seasons in their preaching and teaching. It's evident in the families and small groups looking for ways to recover ancient practices of the Christian faith. This is all very good. To assist in this renewal, we thought Christians might find it beneficial to have an accessible guide to the church year, one that's more than a devotional but less than an academic tome.

The Fullness of Time project aims to do just that. We have put together a series of short books on the seasons and key events of the church year, including Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These books are reflections on the moods, themes, rituals, prayers, and Scriptures that mark each season.

These are not, strictly speaking, devotionals. They are theological and spiritual reflections that seek to provide spiritual formation by helping the reader live fully into the practices of each season. We want readers to understand how the church is forming them in the likeness of Christ through the church calendar.

These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for comments from historians pointing out minutiae. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus.



## I

# The Origins of Christmas

Christmas (a shortened form of “Christ’s mass”) has been an embattled holiday for much of its history—and not just because talking heads on TV like to argue about the “war on Christmas” every year. The truth is, long before Black Friday sales and seasonal Starbucks cups, many Christians (yes, Christians) viewed Christmas as a thoroughly debauched and godless season. With all the raucous drinking, public carousing, and even violence, many reasoned that genuine Christians would never join in such immoral and irresponsible revelry. In addition, some of the symbols and rituals of Christmas seem disconnected from the true “reason for the season”; many are thought to be thoroughly pagan in origin. When you add to this sketchy history the fact that we don’t know for certain when Jesus was born, sincere Christians might be tempted to discard Christmas observance entirely. What do we make of these concerns?

Let's start with the date of Jesus' birth. Despite various efforts to square our modern calendar with the historical event, no one knows for sure when Jesus was born. From the records we have, it seems the earliest Christians weren't very interested in determining the date. In the third century Clement of Alexandria writes that some calculated the day of the Lord's birth to be today's May 20 or April 20 or 21.<sup>1</sup> One hundred years later, in the mid-fourth century, we find widespread consensus building around two dates: December 25 in the West and January 6 or 7 in the East.

How did this happen? There are a few theories, but two are the most common. The best-known, especially in popular venues, is the "history of religions theory," which says December 25 was simply adopted from a pagan celebration. The Roman Empire celebrated a midwinter Saturnalia festival in late December, coinciding with the time of the winter solstice. And in 274 CE, the Feast of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) was formally established by Emperor Aurelian on December 25. So, the theory goes, early Christians intentionally seized on this coincidence to promote the Christian faith among pagans, claiming December 25 as Jesus' birthday.

The problem is that there is scant evidence for this view. Fourth-century Christian writers like Ambrose note the intersection of the winter solstice and Jesus' birth, but they don't speak of it as an intentional missional choice. In fact, it wasn't viewed as the church's choice at all. Instead, they saw the coincidence of the two dates as God's providential sign of Jesus' superiority over pagan gods. Jesus' birth on December 25, they said, proves that he is the true Sun who outshines all false gods.

The other problem with the Christians-adopting-a-pagan-holiday theory is that it is anachronistic. It attributes to the early church a practice that, up to that point, was foreign to them: intentionally assimilating pagan festivals into Christian ones. As a persecuted minority, Christians in the first three centuries were very concerned to distance themselves from pagan religious celebrations like temple sacrifices, games, and festivals. In fact, their refusal to participate in Roman religious devotion was one reason for their persecution. It would have gone against the grain of their practice at that point to purposely incorporate a pagan festival.

After the conversion of Emperor Constantine in 312 CE and the establishment of Christianity as the empire's

avored religion, it became more common for Christian leaders to incorporate pagan festivals. We know Gregory the Great in the seventh century, for example, recommended his missionaries in modern-day Great Britain convert pagan temples into churches and transform pagan festivals into feasts for Christian martyrs. But the date of Christmas is very unlikely to have been chosen in this way, particularly since we know it is present in the historical record before Constantine's conversion.

The other theory about the dating of Christmas, often called the “calculation theory,” has more going for it. The calculation theory says the dating of Christmas has to do with the dating of the annunciation (when the Virgin Mary was told she would be with child) and Jesus' conception, which was determined by dating Jesus' death at Passover. This can get a little complicated, especially given the difference in calendars between the Eastern and Western churches. But a brief summary goes like this: early church fathers determined that the date of Jesus' death (the fourteenth day of Nisan, according to the Gospel of John) in the year he died was equivalent to their March 25. Later the church recognized March 25 as the Feast of the Annunciation, which falls exactly nine

months before December 25. So Jesus was thought to have been conceived and crucified on the same day of the year, with his birth occurring exactly nine months later.

Why would the church conclude that Jesus was conceived and killed on the same day? Some think it is rooted in ancient Jewish tradition about creation and redemption occurring in the same time of year. The Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism, reflects this point of view. For example, second-century Rabbi Yehoshua says, “In Nisan the world was created; in Nisan the Patriarchs were born; on Passover Isaac was born . . . and in Nisan in the future the Jewish people will be redeemed in the final redemption.”<sup>2</sup> This reflects the expectation of a timely symmetry between human origins and human salvation. We have evidence of the same belief in an anonymous fourth-century Christian treatise from North Africa. And by the fifth century, Augustine was also familiar with the argument, saying, “For [Jesus] is believed to have been conceived on the 25th of March, upon which day also he suffered; so the womb of the Virgin, in which he was conceived, where no one of mortals was begotten, corresponds to the new grave in which he was buried, wherein was never man laid, neither before him

nor since. But he was born, according to tradition, upon December the 25th.”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars convinced of the calculation theory think the same logic is at work in the Eastern dating of Christmas. But instead of the fourteenth day of Nisan in the Hebrew calendar, the Greek fathers used the fourteenth day of the spring month in the Greek calendar, which is our April 6. April 6 is exactly nine months before January 6, which was originally the Eastern date for Christmas (beginning at sundown). As a result, Christians in the East and West calculated the date of Jesus’ birth based on the belief that his death and conception took place on the same day, though due to their respective calendars, they came up with slightly different results.<sup>4</sup>

In the end, though, we must admit we don’t know with certainty the exact date of Jesus’ birth and likely never will. But I don’t think it matters much—the point is, Jesus was born. He was born as a particular person in a particular time and place: a poor Jewish boy in Roman-occupied Judaea. “When the set time had fully come,” Saint Paul says, “God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” (Galatians 4:4-5).

From very early on the church has felt compelled to celebrate the birth of God's Son. And rightly so! It happens they chose a date on which to do so sometime in the fourth century. Though there is no empirically verifiable way to guarantee December 25 is *the day*, there's no good reason to refrain from celebrating the coming of Christ on that day either.

Unlike the contemporary retail-driven tendency to observe Christmas from the day after Thanksgiving through December 25, the Christmas season actually begins on Christmas Day. In 567 CE, the Council of Tours officially declared that the twelve days from Christmas Day to Epiphany ought to be observed as a sacred and festive season.<sup>5</sup> So before it became a jaunty song about exponentially multiplying gifts, the twelve days of Christmas referred to the time stretching from Christmas Day (December 25) through Epiphany (January 6).

In addition to the Feast of the Nativity (observed from sundown December 24 through December 25), the season of Christmas, or Christmastide, includes a number of other feasts and holy days as well: Saint Stephen's Day (December 26), the Feast of Saint John the Apostle (December 27), the Feast of the Holy Innocents (December 28), Saint

Sylvester's Day (New Year's Eve, December 31), the Feast of the Circumcision or Feast of the Holy Name (January 1), the Feast of the Holy Family (variable), and Twelfth Night (Epiphany Eve, January 5). Twelfth Night is the last night of the Christmas season, the day before the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6). We'll briefly discuss the significance of each of these days in the chapters that follow.

Viewed in themselves, these holy days aren't pagan in orientation. They were established to direct our hearts and minds to the story of Christ and his people—and to place our lives and communities within this sacred narrative. But there is more to the history. As Christianity spread out from the Middle East, becoming the established religion of Europe, the observance of Christmastide slowly evolved into a twelve-day spree of merriment and mischief-making. How these celebrations developed through the ages is a long and fascinating tale.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, it helps to know that most of the population lived by agricultural rhythms. Since planting and harvesting were completed in spring, summer, and fall, wintertime coincided with the cessation of labor (including laying off seasonal workers) and slaughtering of livestock. Thus, winter was a natural time for relaxing,

feasting, and, in the midst of widespread idleness, troublemaking. And it just so happens that all of this was taking place during Christmastide.

In the medieval period, especially, Christmas developed into a carnivalesque time for turning hierarchies and social conventions on their heads. Peasants went about demanding gifts from lords, threatening violence and looting if they weren't satisfied. (Remnants of this practice can still be heard in the lyrics to "We Wish You A Merry Christmas": "O, bring us some figgy pudding, And bring it right here! / We won't go until we get some, So bring it right here!") Servants dressed up as their masters and lampooned them publicly while men disguised themselves as women, parading through the streets drinking and caroling. Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* typifies the bawdy, upside-down nature of the festivities. A shipwrecked woman, Viola, pretends to be a man, creating an impossible comedic love triangle, and a pompous commoner, Malvolio, seeks to become a nobleman by marriage to one far beyond his station.

As you might imagine, the association of the twelve days of Christmas with partying, immorality, and social upheaval led many Christians during and after the Protestant

Reformation to forsake the holiday altogether. In fact, many used the supposed pagan origins of the December 25 date as one reason for denouncing the celebration. In the sixteenth century the English cleric Hugh Latimer had this to say: “Men dishonor Christ more in the twelve days of Christmas than in all the twelve months besides.”<sup>7</sup> The Puritan party of the Church of England was especially outspoken, publishing tracts against Christmas and eventually outlawing it once they settled in New England. When you combine the association of Christmas with paganism and depravity, it begins to make sense why so many pious Protestants eschewed the holiday altogether.

With such strong opposition, how did Christmas make a comeback? There were many contributing social and cultural factors, including changes to the way Christmas was observed. In the nineteenth century Christmas shifted from a social and communal holiday to one focused on private hearth and home. This cut down significantly on vulgar public displays and increased spending among individual households. In this respect, the cultural influence of Clement Clarke Moore’s “The Night Before Christmas” (1822) and Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1834), both of which present a home-centered,

generosity-focused Christmas, should not be underestimated. Whatever the confluence of factors, though, the bottom line is that by the late 1800s the average pew-sitting Protestant wanted to celebrate Christmas—and the clergy eventually complied. By the turn of the twentieth century, therefore, even the most virulently anti-Christmas groups, including the descendants of the Puritans, had finally embraced Christmastide festivities.<sup>8</sup>

What does all this history tell us? There's no doubt that some of the practices adopted during Christmastide have been immoral and unchristian. And Christians today should be discerning about how to observe the season so that the incarnation of God in Christ remains central rather than peripheral. But history does not support the premise that Christmas is pagan in origin. The date of Christmas was fixed by the fifth century and the church established the observance of the twelve days of Christmas in the sixth century.

The point of Christmas, like the rest of the liturgical calendar, is to attune our whole selves to the triune God. Observed with wisdom, thoughtfulness, and care, the twelve days of Christmas provide numerous opportunities to rejoice in God's salvific work in Christ and open

ourselves to the Spirit's transforming power in our hearts, homes, and communities.

### **FOR FURTHER READING**

Saint Augustine. *Sermons for Christmas and Epiphany*. Translated by Thomas Comerford Lawler. New York: Newman, 1952.

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