

History of Christmas

Text of Power Point presentation from "Is Christmas Christian?" sermon
November 24, 2012 by Pastor David Liesenfelt
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Question:

Why do we at Rock Valley Christian Church not teach the celebration of Christmas... especially since the world considers it the biggest Christian holiday of the year?

Holiday Quiz

How many verses are there in the Bible?

Answer: 31,240

Holiday Quiz

How many verses are in the Old Testament?

Answer: 23,282

Holiday Quiz

How many verses are in the New Testament?

Answer: 7,958

Holiday Quiz

How many verses are dedicated to the celebration of Christmas in the Old Testament?

Answer: Zero

How many verses are dedicated to the celebration of God's Feasts in the Old Testament?

Answer: 472 (about 2.0% of all verses)

Holiday Quiz

How many verses are dedicated to the celebration of Christmas in the New Testament?

Answer: Zero

How many verses are dedicated to the celebration of God's Feasts in the New Testament?

Answer: 202 (about 2.5% of all verses)

674 verses in the Bible are in reference to God's Feasts. How many verses have the following words?

Obey, Obeys, Obeyed, Obedience: 119

Humble, Humility, Lowly, Meek: 77

Kingdom: 316

Mercy, Merciful, Mercies: 341

Sing: 102

Praise, Praised, Praises: 266

Spirit: 456

Salvation, Saved, Save, Saves: 419

Kind, Kindness: 87

Forgive, Forgives, Forgiven, Forgave, Forgiveness: 102

Believe, Believes, Believed, Faith: 505

Pray, Prayer, Prays, Prayers: 457

Love, Loves, Loved: 466

Hope, Hopes, Hoped: 130

If we only listen to God's voice in the Bible for our practices, what holidays (holy days) would we be keeping as a part of our Christian practice?

"The first Christians ... continued to observe the Jewish festivals, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events which those festivals had foreshadowed" (The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th edition, Vol. 8, p. 828, "Easter").

Since there is no Biblical evidence or instruction for keeping Christmas, is it truly a Christian holiday?

If Christmas is not a Biblical holiday, how did it become "Christian"? What are its origins?

Holiday Quiz

Since there is no Biblical evidence, is there any non-Biblical evidence that Christmas was celebrated by Jesus? No.

By His disciples? No.

By their disciples? No.

In the first century? No.

In the second century? No.

“Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts.” Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume 3, 1911, “Christmas”

[Irenaeus lived in the late second century and Tertullian lived and wrote through the first 25 years of the 3rd century.]

“The early Christians were not initially concerned with the Nativity of Christ, and even in the fourth century C.E. it was not a universally fixed observance among Christians.” Encyclopedia.com 2012, “Christmas”

If not from the Bible, what are the origins of Christmas and how did it become “Christian”?

The largest pagan religious cult which fostered the celebration of December 25 as a holiday throughout the Roman and Greek worlds was the pagan sun worship – Mithraism... This winter festival was called the “Nativity of the Sun”. The Golden Bough, James George Fraser.

“The well known solar feast of Natalis Invicti [the Nativity of the Unconquered Sun] celebrated on 25 December has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date”. The Catholic Encyclopedia, volume 3, 1911, “Christmas”

“It is common knowledge that much of our association with the Christmas season – the holidays, the giving of presents and the general feeling of geniality – is but the inheritance of the Roman winter festival of the Saturnalia” The Legacy of Rome, Cyril Bailey.

Christmas came to be celebrated on the Roman holiday of Saturnalia, and it was from the pagan holiday that many of the customs of Christmas had their roots. The celebrations of Saturnalia included the making and giving of small presents (*saturnalia et sigillaricia*). This holiday was observed over a series of days beginning on December 17 (the birthday of Saturn), and ending on December 25 (the birthday of Sol Invictus, the "Unconquered Sun"). The combined festivals resulted in an extended winter holiday season. Business was postponed and even slaves feasted. There was drinking, gambling and singing, and nudity was relatively common. It was the "best of days," according to the poet Catullus.[3]

The feast of *Sol Invictus* on December 25 was a sacred day in the religion of Mithraism, which was widespread in the Roman Empire. Its god, Mithras, was a solar deity of Persian origin, identified with the Sun. It displayed its unconquerability as "Sol Invictus" when it began to rise higher in the sky following the Winter Solstice—hence December 25 was celebrated as the Sun's birthday. In 274 C.E., Emperor Aurelian officially designated December 25 as the festival of Sol Invictus.

Evidence that early Christians were observing December 25 as Jesus' birthday comes from Sextus Julius Africanus's book *Chronographiai* (221 C.E.), an early reference book for Christians. Yet from the first, identification of Christ's birth with a pagan holiday was controversial. The theologian Origen, writing in 245 C.E., denounced the idea of celebrating the birthday of Jesus "as if he were a king pharaoh." Thus Christmas was celebrated with a mixture of Christian and secular customs from the beginning, and remains so to this day. New World Encyclopedia, 2012, "Christmas".

"The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar. The celebration of this day as Jesus' birth date was probably influenced by pagan [unchristian] festivals held at that time. The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn, their harvest god; and Mithras, the [sic] god of light... As part of all these celebrations, the people prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving. These customs gradually became part of the Christmas celebration." The World Book Encyclopedia, Vol. 3, "C-Ch", 1997, "Christmas".

Christmas, the festival commemorating the birth of Jesus Christ, is celebrated by a majority of Christians on December 25 on the Gregorian calendar. But early Christians did not celebrate his birth... In the 3rd century, the Roman Empire, which at the time had not adopted Christianity, celebrated the rebirth of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus) on December 25th—this holiday not only marked the return of longer days after the winter solstice but also followed the popular Roman festival called the Saturnalia (during which people feasted and exchanged gifts). It was also the birthday of the Indo-European deity Mithra, a god of light and loyalty whose cult was at the time growing popular among Roman soldiers. Encyclopaedia Britannica Blog, Facts Matter 2006-2012, "The Origin of Christmas in December".

What was the initial reaction to Christians wanting to turn again and celebrate feasts that served other gods?

[Teaching people to celebrate Jesus birth in the place of Sol created confusion]

“Tertullian had to assert that Sol was not the Christian’s God [Jesus]; Augustine denounced the heretical identification of Christ with Sol.” Catholic Encyclopedia, 1911, “Christmas”

"The [church] Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Epiphanius, contended that Christmas was a copy of a pagan celebration" (The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 499, "Christianity").

"By us [Christians], ...the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, new year's day presents are made with din, and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to *their* religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians" (Tertullian in *De Idolatria*, quoted by Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, 1959, p. 93).

"As early as A.D. 245, the Church father Origen was proclaiming it heathenish to celebrate Christ's birthday as if He were merely a temporal ruler when His spiritual nature should be the main concern. This view was echoed throughout the centuries, but found strong, widespread advocacy only with the rise of Protestantism. To these serious-minded, sober clerics, the celebration of Christmas flew in the face of all they believed. Drunken revelry on Christmas! The day was not even known to be Christ's birthday. It was merely an excuse to continue the customs of pagan Saturnalia" The Christmas Almanac, Gerard and Patricia Del Re, 1979, p.20

"Christians of Armenia and Syria accused the Christians of Rome of sun worship for celebrating Christmas on December 25 ... Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century tried to remove certain practices at Christmas which he considered in no way different from sun worship" Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays, Robert Myers, 1972, p. 310.

Galatians 4:8-11

8 But then, indeed, when you did not know God, you served those which by nature are not gods.**9** But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? **10** You observe days and months and seasons and years. **11** I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain.

The Romans "kept the winter solstice with a feast of drunkenness and riot. The Christians thought that they could bring a better meaning into that feast. They tried to persuade their flocks not to drink or eat too much, and to keep the feast more austere —but without success " A History of Christianity, Owen Chadwick, 1995, p. 24.

How did Christmas progress through the centuries among Christians?

As the church in Rome only formally celebrated December 25th in 336 during the reign of the emperor Constantine, who made Christianity the effective religion of the empire, some have speculated that choosing this date had the political motive of weakening the established pagan celebrations. The date was not widely accepted in the Eastern empire, where January 6 had been favored, for another half-century, and Christmas did not become a major Christian festival until the 9th century. Encyclopaedia Britannica 2006-2012, "Christmas".

In the early years of Christianity, the birth of Jesus was not celebrated. In the fourth century, church officials decided to institute the birth of Jesus as a holiday. Unfortunately, the Bible does not mention date for his birth (a fact Puritans later pointed out in order to deny the legitimacy of the celebration). Although some evidence suggests that his birth may have occurred in the spring (why would shepherds be herding in the middle of winter?), Pope Julius I chose December 25. It is commonly believed that the church chose this date in an effort to adopt and absorb the traditions of the pagan Saturnalia festival. First called the Feast of the Nativity, the custom spread to Egypt by 432 and to England by the end of the sixth century. By the end of the eighth century, the celebration of Christmas had spread all the way to Scandinavia. History Channel, 1996-2012 A&E Television Networks, LLC, "Christmas".

By the fifth century, it [the Roman Church] was ordering that the birth of Christ be observed on this date [December 25], even though this was the day of the old Roman feast of the birth of Sol, one of the names of the sun-god. Encyclopedia Americana, Volume 6, "Christmas"

"In the late 300's, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire... The popularity of Christmas grew until the Reformation, a religious movement of the 1500's. This movement gave birth to Protestantism. During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs. During the 1600's, because of these feelings, Christmas was outlawed in England and in parts of the English colonies in America." *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, "C-Ch", 1997, "Christmas"

"... The suppression of the Mass during the Reformation led to a sharp change in the observance of Christmas in some countries. In England, the Puritans condemned the celebration and, from 1642 to 1652, issued a series of ordinances forbidding all church services and festivities. This feeling was carried over to America by the Pilgrims and it was not until the nineteenth-century wave of Irish and German immigration that enthusiasm for the feast began to spread throughout the country. Objections were swept aside and the old traditions revived among Protestants as well as Catholics." *Collier's Encyclopedia*, Vol. 6, 1992, "Christmas"

In England "the Protestants found their own quieter ways of celebrating, in calm and meditation," while "the strict Puritans refused to celebrate at all ...The Pilgrims in Massachusetts made a point of working on Christmas as on any other day. On June 3, 1647, Parliament established punishments for observing Christmas and certain other holidays. This policy was reaffirmed in 1652" *The Christmas Almanac*, Gerard and Patricia Del Re, 1979, p.20

Even colonial America considered Christmas more of a raucous revelry than a religious occasion: "So tarnished, in fact, was its reputation in colonial America that celebrating Christmas was banned in Puritan New England, where the noted minister Cotton Mather described yuletide merrymaking as 'an affront unto the grace of God'" (Jeffery Sheler, "In Search of Christmas," *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 23, 1996, p. 56).

In New England, Christmas remained outlawed until the mid-nineteenth century, and in Boston classes were held in the public schools on Christmas Day until 1870, with pupils who missed school that day being punished or dismissed. The mass immigration of Irish Catholics to New England brought about the reinstatement of Christmas celebrations. *Religious Holidays And Calendars - An Encyclopaedic Handbook*, 1993

"We remember that the Christmas festival ... is a gradual evolution from times that long antedated the Christian period ... It was overlaid upon heathen festivals, and many of its observances are only adaptations of pagan to Christian ceremonial" *The Story of Santa Klaus*, William Walsh, 1970, p. 58.

Is it OK in God's eyes to mix the practices of false religion and use them in the worship of Him, the true God?

Exodus 32: 1-8

1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." **2** And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." **3** So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron. **4** And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" **5** So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD [Yahweh]." **6** Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. **7** And the Lord said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. **8** They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them.

Jeremiah 10:1-5

1 Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel: **2** Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. **3** For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. **4** They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. **5** They are upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also is it in them to do good.

1 Kings 12:26-33

And Jeroboam said in his heart, Now the kingdom may return to the house of David. If these people go up to offer sacrifices in the house of the Lord at Jerusalem, then the heart of this people will turn back to their lord, Rehoboam king of Judah, and they will kill me and go back to Rehoboam king of Judah... Jeroboam ordained a feast on the fifteenth day of the eighth month, like the feast that was in Judah... in the month which he had devised in his own heart.

Deuteronomy 12:28-32

28 Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. **29** "When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, **30** take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.' **31** You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. **32** Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.
