

SHOULD CHRISTIANS KEEP CHRISTMAS?

INTRO: Welcome to the traditional day of commemorating Christ's birth. I had not planned to speak on this subject but I have been approached several times about that question and then found it was not commemorated by people like Voddie Bauchum and I saw several videos on You Tube, and decided I should give my mind on this subject.

I, like you, grew up keeping 12 religious holydays each year, just like all of you did. A holyday, became what we know as a holiday. We had New Years; Epiphany (Jan. 6); then the Easter festival, which started on Friday and ended three days later on Easter Sunday. Then 40 days later, we had Ascension day, and 10 days later, Pentecost, which again was a three day festival. Three of those days have their origin in the OT, the other nine we have set out as holy days without Biblical precedent. Then after Pentecost came Christmas. This also was, and still is among our people, a three day festival. That ended our holydays for our religious year.

I have done three messages I called, "The Good, The Bad, and the Ugly". Some day, Lord willing, I will do one more and call it, "The Weak, the Strong, and the Lovely." I will base it on Romans 14 which deals with diets and days. You may wish to study that chapter for yourselves. Let me give the basic final principles. With regard to diets, "Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him." With regard to the days mentioned in Romans 14, we may list all 12 days I mentioned that we keep. But from this Scripture, here is the principle: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." And here is the sum of the whole: "He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks."

And when I became a Christian, I had to weigh through everything I had been taught. We had learned to live by tradition, and I had to learn to live by the Bible. And so I came to a conclusion. I will keep what I have been taught to do, until I learn otherwise in the Bible. And I learned

that Christmas, New Years Day, Epiphany, and Ascension day were *traditional* holy days but it could not be shown that they were holy days from the Bible. If I were in another culture and they did not keep them, I suppose I would have no problem not commemorating those days. I would have a little trouble with disregarding the day of Christ's death, and resurrection Sunday and Pentecost. I also do still highly value Ascension day. But it is not set out as a holy day biblically.

But I will tell you about one thing that happened when I became a Christian. Nobody had to teach me about this one thing. This one thing was very clear to me. It is this. When I became a Christian I never again talked about Santa Clause or Easter eggs or Easter bunnies. Our children grew up not knowing who this 'Snow Man', as they called him, was. We might buy our kids some chocolate bunnies or Easter eggs but they never learned to associate them with anything spiritual.

I am now in a culture that still keeps all the days I grew up with, and I have no problem with them, not even Christmas. But of late, a new wave of study of history has excited some to lay aside Christmas. You can listen to some of that on You Tube. I was sent an e-mail regarding Caryl Matriciana's talk on Christmas on You Tube. There are others as well. When you have watched and heard the teachings abroad today, you might well question commemorating Christ's birth. So I want to give my mind on this.

I. WHY IS COMMEMORATING CHRISTMAS BEING QUESTIONED?

A. Because Nobody Knows The Day Christ Was Born

So let me begin by asking, "Why this question about commemorating Christmas?" Well, it is said, "We do not even know the day Christ was born. Why would we commemorate December 25th when we do not know the day? Now, that we don't know the day He was born is not a new fact. Long before the Catholic Church came into being Christians worked on the date of Christ's birth. Before a day was sanctified to remember Christ's birth, it was being researched by Christians.

Listen to this quote from the Catholic Encyclopedia,

"...there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned [Christ's](#) birth" end quote. For me, I have not heard or read anything that would lead me to say with any assurance, "I think this is the date." Not from the stars, not from Zechariah's service in the courses of the priests in Luke 1:5 or from the shepherds in the field. We simply do not know the date. Not yet at least. We could spend many interesting hours on this subject here, and in the end we would have to say, "We do not know when Christ was born."

In my recent research I was sent a link to a talk by Caryl Matriciana on You Tube and a short write up by David Hocking, a very good Bible scholar. And both gave September 29th as the most likely date. If that is correct, Caryl Matriciana points out that He would have been conceived around December 25th. That is interesting to me, and I may research further some day. But the facts are we do not know the day, and that raises the question of whether it should be kept at all.

Furthermore, it is argued that the Roman Catholic Church set December 25th as the day Christ was born. An internet article on the customs of Christmas says, "The first recorded date of Christmas being celebrated on December 25th was in 336AD in the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine (he was the first Christian Roman Emperor). A few years later Pope Julius I officially declared that the birth of Jesus would be celebrated on the 25th December."

B. Because **Catholicism** Converted A Pagan Day

But there is a second and even bigger reason why the celebration of this feast is being questioned. It is this. Many hold that the pagan holiday of Saturnalia, a very immoral holiday was Christianized by the Catholic Church and converted into Christmas in order to Christianize the pagan day of Saturnalia. Let me read it to you from an internet article from Judaism on line at simpletoremember.com. It is called, "The Real Story of Christmas", and I quote: "Roman pagans first introduced the holiday of Saturnalia, a week long period of lawlessness celebrated between December 17-25. During this period, Roman courts were

closed, and Roman law dictated that no one could be punished for damaging property or injuring people during the weeklong celebration. The festival began when Roman authorities chose "an enemy of the Roman people" to represent the "Lord of Misrule." Each Roman community selected a victim whom they forced to indulge in food and other physical pleasures throughout the week. At the festival's conclusion, December 25th, Roman authorities believed they were destroying the forces of darkness by brutally murdering this innocent man or woman.

B. The ancient Greek writer poet and historian Lucian (in his dialogue entitled *Saturnalia*) describes the festival's observance in his time. In addition to human sacrifice, he mentions these customs: widespread intoxication; going from house to house while singing naked; rape and other sexual license; and consuming human-shaped biscuits (still produced in some English and most German bakeries during the Christmas season).

C. In the 4th century CE, Christianity (Roman Catholicism) imported the Saturnalia festival hoping to take the pagan masses in with it. Christian leaders succeeded in converting to Christianity large numbers of pagans by promising them that they could continue to celebrate the Saturnalia as Christians.

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D. The problem was that there was nothing intrinsically Christian about Saturnalia. To remedy this, these Christian leaders named Saturnalia's concluding day, December 25th, to be Jesus' birthday.

E. Christians had little success, however, refining the practices of Saturnalia. As Stephen Nissenbaum, professor (of) history at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, writes, 'In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior's birth by assigning it to this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been.' The earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, sexual indulgence, singing naked in the streets (a precursor of modern caroling), etc" end quote.

Why this question about Christmas keeping? First, because we do not know the day. Second, because the

Roman Catholic church converted a pagan holyday into a Christian one. And, converting Saturnalia into a Christian holyday seems to be like converting Halloween into a Christian holyday. And so, today you can listen to preachers in various places, including You Tube, who will list this debased feast of Saturnalia and its conversion to Christianity by the Roman Catholic Church, and you have the very best of arguments against commemorating Christmas. By the way, the very name "Christmas" is actually "Christ's mass" and you can see that it gives away this day as a Roman Catholic festival on December 25. All of this, when in fact we do not even know the day He was born. And all of a sudden you have a case against Christmas that seems open and shut.

Now I might just mention that when I say, "Should Christians Keep Christmas?" I am not talking about keeping the Catholic Mass. You see, the name 'Christmas' means, Christ's Mass, the Mass of Christ. Now we do not believe in the Mass at all. That is a subject of its own, a matter for which many of our Mennonite forefathers gave their lives. To be more accurate I should have called this message, "Should Christians commemorate Christ's birth?" That is what 'Christmas' is for true Christians. Almost all the pagan traditions now associated with Christmas have lost their historical meaning, including the name "Christmas."

But, back to our subject, when you study the Puritans of Britain, who came to America you will find that Christmas was banned in America for some time because of them. I understand that was due to the tremendous debauchery of this pagan holiday as it was practiced in Britain.

You can trace almost every practice in Christmas to paganism. And if you cannot trace Christ's birth to December 25th, it seems that every practice in this day is pagan. The Yule log, the mistletoe, the gifts, eating human shaped crackers or cookies. Decking the halls with bows of holy was to keep evil spirits away etc... etc... Even the "Ho, Ho, Ho" has pagan roots. Now we begin to see even more clearly why this question about keeping Christmas.

II. WHAT ARE THE HISTORICAL FACTS ABOUT CHRISTMAS?

So, let me give you some interesting facts about the commemoration of Christmas that may help you keep everything else in perspective. We used to have a radio show called, "The Rest of the Story." It was done by Paul Harvey. He would pick up some forgotten fact or little-known fact on a variety of subjects, and then trace it to some famous person, and then he would conclude his show with these words, "And now you know the rest of the story." I want to give you the rest of the story.

A. Facts Regarding When Commemorating Christmas Began

First, I want to give you some facts regarding when commemorating Christmas began. But before we go further, let me clarify something according to my understanding. It is the claim of the Roman Catholic Church, the name 'catholic' meaning 'Universal Church'; that their origin goes back to Christ through the first Pope, the Apostle Peter. It is my view that their origin goes back to the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine, who was supposedly converted to Christianity. It is also my view that Constantine's so called conversion was not a true conversion, and one of the worst catastrophes ever to befall the Christian church! In my view, the Catholic Church was born with Constantine, as the name 'Roman' Catholic church indicates, and it is my view that it was born apostate, if that is possible. I have absolutely no question that the Catholic Church is not Christian in the true sense of the word. If I should be identified with the Catholic Church because I commemorate Christ's birth, I should not keep this day. Now Constantine's supposed conversion took place in 312 AD. Remember that date. From there, of course, it took some years for Roman Catholic doctrine to take shape.

So, let me ask, did Catholicism begin the practice of commemorating Christ's birth? Answer: No! Let me begin with a quote from nothing less than the Catholic Encyclopedia itself. And I quote: "The first evidence of the feast (i.e. Christmas) is from [Egypt](#). About A.D. 200, [Clement of Alexandria](#) ([Stromata I.21](#)) says that certain [Egyptian theologians](#) "over

curiously" assign, not the year alone, but the day of [Christ's](#) birth, placing it on 25 Pachon (20 May) in the twenty-eighth year of [Augustus](#). [Ideler (Chron., II, 397, n.) thought they did this [believing](#) that the ninth month, in which Christ was born, was the ninth of their own calendar.] Others reached the [date](#) of 24 or 25 Pharmuthi (19 or 20 April)." Later this encyclopedia says, "...there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned [Christ's](#) birth."

So, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia itself, Christ's birth was commemorated long before Constantine's conversion. If I am correct on Catholicism and Constantine, then the Catholic Church had nothing to do with the beginning of commemorating Christ's birth. I will give more quotes in later points that will reconfirm this point. The point? Roman Catholicism did not begin the commemoration of Christ's birth, Christianity did. Rome only followed what was already being done.

B. Facts Regarding The Date Of December 25th

"But," you may ask, "did not the Catholic church set December 25th as the birth date of Christ and we know it was not December the 25th?" So, let us look at some facts regarding this date of December 25th. First, we do not know it was not December 25th. No lesser an authority than Alfred Eidersheim says it may well have been in the end of December (Appendix VII).

There is some similarity between what is attributed to the Roman Catholic church regarding Sunday keeping and keeping Christmas on December 25th. Some years ago I was given a book written by A. Jan Marcussen on Sunday keeping. Here is what he writes quoting from, *The Convert's Catechism of Catholic Doctrine*, pg. 50, third edition which goes like this: 'The Catholic church by virtue of her divine mission changed the day from Saturday to Sunday.' 'Question - Which day is the Sabbath? Answer - Saturday is the Sabbath. Question: Why do we observe Sunday instead of Saturday? Answer - We observe Sunday instead of Saturday because the Catholic Church, in the Council

of Laodicea (A. D. 364), transferred the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday."

And I ask, "Is that a fact? Did the Roman Catholic church transfer the solemnity from Saturday to Sunday?" Several years ago I did two messages on that topic which you can get from sermonaudio.com/lhec. But here are the facts, that is, the rest of the story. Long before Constantine was converted and Catholicism was born, Christians were already keeping Sunday because it was the day of Christ's resurrection. I give a lot of evidence for that in those sermons which you can listen to if you are interested in this.

So, here is a modern day argument regarding keeping Sunday. "You should not keep Sunday because the Catholics converted the pagan day of the Sun into a Christian holyday." Conclusion: Wow! That is horrible. We should not keep Sunday! But what are the facts? The facts are that long before Catholicism was born, Christians were keeping Sunday. And it had nothing to do with the god of the day of the sun. It was based on the resurrection of Christ!

I think the same thing is true of December 25th. Let me explain. About a year ago, my wife signed out two books out of the town library called, "Christianus Sum". Now she remembered that I had preached on those words which I got from reading an article by Richard Wurmbbrandt. Wurmbbrandt had suffered tremendous persecution in Romania. And he spoke of the early Christians who went to their death saying, "Christianus Sum." How can I recant? I am a Christian! Kill me if you must, but Christianus Sum."

And so I read these books with interest. And in the first book, the setting is about the year 250. And he wrote that in Rome, they were commemorating Christmas at that time already, and had been for about 20 years already. This is long before Constantine. I e-mailed the writer, Shawn Pollett, to verify what he had written and he e-mailed back like this: "My apologies for taking so long to respond--illness. Hippolytus of Rome, writing in the early 200s (more than a century before the Council of Nicaea) dates the birth of Christ to December 25th."

Here is the point. It was not the Roman Catholic Church that first set the date of December 25th. That date had been arrived at by others long before Catholicism was born. Rome only verified what had already been taking place. So, it was Rome that followed what Christianity had already been doing, not vice versa.

C. Facts Regarding The Feast of Saturnalia

And now, if you have studied this subject, you might well say, "But, what of the fact that Roman Catholicism baptized that horrible feast of Saturnalia into Christmas and thus Christianized this pagan day? What about all those horrible pagan practices in Christmas?"

Again, I want to give you the rest of the story regarding Rome's Christianizing of Saturnalia. You see, some who have learned some of these facts of the feast of Saturnalia will give you all the history of the pagan feast of Saturnalia, its debased practices, the depraved acts committed on that feast and the history of that feast in light of the gods of Saturn and numerous others, and so on, and say, "Look at what you are doing when you commemorate Christmas." And you will come away and say, "Oh that is terrible. I did not know the Catholics started this day. I did not know they baptized a horrible pagan holiday and turned it into a Christian holy day. Oh, we must not commemorate Christmas any more."

Let me quote part of an earlier point taken from an internet article from Judaism on line at simpletoremember.com. Here is what they say, "In the 4th century CE, Christianity (by Christianity they mean Roman Catholicism) imported the Saturnalia festival hoping to take the pagan masses in with it. Christian leaders succeeded in converting to Christianity large numbers of pagans by promising them that they could continue to celebrate the Saturnalia as Christians."

And then they say this, "Christians had little success, however, refining the practices of Saturnalia. As Stephen Nissenbaum, professor

(of)history at the University of Massachussetts, Amherst, writes, 'In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior's birth by assigning it to this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been.' The earliest Christmas holidays were celebrated by drinking, sexual indulgence, singing naked in the streets (a precursor of modern caroling), etc" end quote.

And here is the question: Is that what really happened? I mentioned earlier the books my wife found in the library called "Christianus Sum", and she brought them for me to read. These books are novels based on the history of early Chistianity. The first book in this set of three, of which the third has not yet been written, is set in about the year 250. That is well before Constantine and Catholicism. The writer is Shawn Pollet, who lives in Ontario. He has a PhD in Ancient History from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland. Having an understanding of early Christian History, he has written these novels based on that understanding. In the books, Julius Valens Liscinianus wins a woman by playing dice for her. She becomes his servant and he later falls in love with her. Having won a beautiful Christian slave girl by dice, he sets her free and he takes care of her while she serves him on his estate.

In the story, in the year 250, during the winter solstice Rome celebrated the week-long celebrations of Saturnalia. During this week the household slaves were freed from their duties. In the book, some of the Christians who did not join these celebrations did the estate chores so the others could keep their holydays. The Romans exchanged gifts during this time and they ate animals sacrificed to their gods, and many other very evil things were done. Horrendous sins were committed and allowed. The law was virtually non-existent during these days and they lived in sin to the full.

And as the young lady of the story prepares to celebrate the Nativatas Christi, the birth of Christ, her owner Valens comes to talk to her. And he asks her about the Nativatas Christi. And she says, "...we

are very excited. Especially me. This is my first Nativitas." And he says, "Your first? You did not celebrate it in Africa?" She had been imported from Africa by her former owner. And she says, "I never heard of it before I came to Rome. Solon (a pastor in her church in Rome) tells me it is a fairly new celebration, not more than twenty years old" end quote. If this is correct, the celebration began as early as 230 AD. This is close to the time the Catholic Encyclopedia said it was first commemorated. It also agrees with Dr. William Gutsch, who said keeping this feast began while Christianity was an outlawed sect. It also agrees with the Catholic Encyclopedia.

I mentioned earlier that I e-mailed Shawn Pollett to verify what he had written and he e-mailed back like this: "My apologies for taking so long to respond-- illness. Hippolytus of Rome, writing in the early 200s (more than a century before the Council of Nicaea) dates the birth of Christ to December 25th. This does not mean it was a feast day, but the natural desire of all humans to celebrate important events suggests such an important event would not long go uncelebrated. Regardless, it is no surprise that when the 'Feast of the Nativity' first comes into existence, it does so at Rome. As I stressed in my novel, this is evidence ONLY for its celebration at Rome, not elsewhere. The cycle of festivals celebrated by the church was still many centuries away from being uniform. Thus Damarra mentions that the church in North Africa where she grew up did not celebrate the Feast of the Nativity. [It's noteworthy, however, that the African schismatic sect, the Donatists, refused to celebrate any feasts that originated AD 312 or later, and so would not celebrate the Feast of the Epiphany, BUT, DID celebrate the Feast of the Nativity, which suggests it was indeed celebrated in Africa BEFORE AD 312.]"

Now you see, this information shows that Roman Catholicism did not begin the commemoration of Christ's birth, they did not choose the date December the 25th, and it was commemorated during Saturnalia long before it is said Rome converted Saturnalia to Christmas. So, once more, Rome only continued what Christians had long been doing before. And, according

to Pollett, Christians did not partake of Saturnalia or its mal practices.

I want to read from one more article. It gives a very interesting suggestion as to why Christians commemorated Christ's birth during the Saturnalia, though I have not found this elsewhere. In an article, "The True Origin Of Christmas," written by Dr. William Gutsch, chairman of the American Museum of Natural History-Hayden Planetarium, December 18, 1989, in a Westchester, New York, newspaper, *The Reporter Dispatch* he gives a very interesting possibility. In his article he first pointed out, and correctly so I think, that much of what we have in Christmas, including the Christmas tree, had its origins in paganism. But the article had a very interesting quote in it. Let me read it for you, "If many of the trappings of the Saturnalia, however, seem to parallel what so many of us do today, we can see where we borrowed...our holiday traditions. And indeed, it has been suggested that while Christ was most likely *not born in late December*, the early Christians--then still an outlawed sect-- moved Christmas to the time of the Saturnalia to draw as little attention as possible to themselves while they celebrated their own holiday."

Now, if this quote is correct, then Christians had started to commemorate Christ's birth when Christianity was still an outlawed sect. That is before Constantine's supposed conversion as we have shown to be the case earlier from several quotes. What is most interesting is if what he says is correct the early Christians commemorated Christ's birth during the festival of Saturnalia, in order that they would not be detected commemorating Christ's birth.

Now if you study the history of that time, they would have had every reason to disguise their festival for people died by the thousands just for being a follower of Christ. Commemorating Christ's birth could cost you your life. Pollett, the writer I quoted earlier gives vivid descriptions of the horrendous torture of Christians by pagan Rome, a practice that would later take place through religious Rome. And so, the writer has suggested the

possibility of commemorating Christ's birth during Saturnalia in order that they might not be detected in their own festival.

And once more, to conclude this point, it was not the Roman Catholic Church that decided to commemorate Christ's birth during the festival of Saturnalia. They only followed what Christians had already been doing. And I have no question that those who were truly Christian, as Pollett writes, did not follow the pagan practices!

CONCL: And so, in conclusion, who began the tradition of commemorating Christ's birth? The early Christians at Rome, not Roman Catholicism, began this tradition. Why do we commemorate Christ's birth December 25th? Because the early Christian church, not Roman Catholicism, set that date as well, and it became the traditional date to commemorate Christ's birth. I would agree with David Hocking who said in the article I mentioned earlier, "Personally, I am happy to celebrate the birth of the Messiah on any date of the year you wish it to be! The good news is that in the city of Bethlehem, ISRAEL, the city of King David, the Savior was born, and He is 'Christ the Lord' - Messiah - KING of kings and LORD of lords!"

Is the commemoration of Christ's birth on December the 25th because the Roman Catholic church converted the festival of Saturnalia into Christ's Mass, or Christmas? No, long before the Roman Catholic church came into existence, Christ's birth was commemorated on December 25th.

Let me mention as well, I have been reading through the book Martyr's Mirror. These Christians stood up against Rome on almost every false practice, but I have not yet read of the inclusion of Christmas. And one more brief point. Today, when we remember Christ's birth, the world is rising up against the Christ in Christmas more and more. Why? Because it is Catholic? No! Because of Christ!

And today, all over the world, though it is true that much wrongdoing will take place, people all over the world will be made to think of Christ. Muslim ruled Bethlehem will shout to the world, "Christ was born here!" Benjamin Netanjahu will welcome people to Israel, "where Christ was born." And so, above everything else, remember, Christmas is about Christ; not any other tradition! And Christ came

to deliver us from sin!

Might I mention one more thing? When Christians began to commemorate Christ's birth, the world had long forgotten why they were commemorating Saturnalia. And today, very few know the pagan story behind many Christmas practices, but today, after almost 2000 years of commemorating Christ's birth, the true church is recognizing the significance of it more and more. Our Sunday School Christmas program this year emphasized that fact.

Years ago in North America, it was the Christmas Season. Then it became the Christmas holidays, and today it is simply "Happy Holidays." You can see that in our own town of LaCrete.

And now you know, the rest of the story. Have a very blessed Nativatas Christi!