

## 1 How Pagan is Christmas?

Honoring Christ in our holiday traditions

## 2 Where our treasure is...

- If you look at economic indicators, Christmas is by far the most important holiday in American culture.
- In December 2009, December purchases in department stores alone totaled an excess of \$27.4 Billion, a 45% increase over purchases from any other month of the year.
- Over \$30 billion in electronics are purchased online each December.

## 3 ...there will our heart be also

- All of this means that Christmas is an incredibly important time of year for our society.
- But not everyone is celebrating the same thing for the same reasons.
- Many Christians are concerned that Christmas is too materialistic, or too pagan, to celebrate with their families.

## 4 Where we're going

- 1) Discuss what the Bible says about the celebration of holidays
- 2) Discuss what the Bible says about redeeming pagan elements when they exist in our culture and traditions
- 3) Examine the origins and backgrounds of a number of Christmas traditions, and their suitability for us as Christians today

## 5 **WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HOLIDAYS**

## 6 Galatians 4:9-11

- *But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.*
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## 7 Colossians 2:16-17

- *Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. (Col 2:16-17)*

## 8 Not in bondage

- From these two verses (which are contextually speaking of the adherence to the Jewish calendar) we can determine the following about holidays:
  - We are under no bondage to observe them, so long as not observing does not become a means to judge
  - We are under no bondage not to observe them, so long as observing them does not become a means to judge

## 9 **ENCOUNTERING AND REDEEMING CULTURE**

## 10 Pagan beginnings

- Western civilization as we know it has some distinctly pagan roots and traditions, most of which have nothing to do with Christmas.
- This is something that the early church fathers, the reformation fathers, and the founding fathers all understood and knew how to deal with.
- Many of these pagan traditions have existed for so long that they have lost their pagan meaning.

## 11 Paul on the Areopagus

- Preaching on Mars Hill (the Areopagus or "rock of Ares") in Athens, Paul sets a valuable precedent for us in dealing with paganism in our culture.
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## 12 Acts 17:22-25

- *So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.*

## 13 Acts 17:26-28

- *And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, for **"In him we live and move and have our being"**; as even some of your own poets have said, **"For we are indeed his offspring."***

## 14 Paul on the Areopagus

- Paul makes two very important references to the paganism of his day:
  - He speaks of the altar to the Unknown God, a sort of “catch-all” in case the Athenians had missed any, and tells them of Who they should really be worshipping.
  - He quotes the writings of the Cretan poet Epimenides regarding Zeus, but applies them to God instead. Paul will later quote this same author in Titus.

## 15 The precedent

- Paul thus uses two different elements of Greek paganism to teach valuable truths of God’s Word in a way which would point the people to which he was preaching toward Jesus.

## 16 The precedent

- This brings us to the question we should ask about our own holiday traditions:
  - Not, how did someone misuse this in the past?
  - Rather, how can we use this to point our children and the world around us toward Jesus?

## 17 The days of the week

- Sunday – “Sun’s Day” for the worship of the sun
- Monday – “Moon’s Day” for the worship of the moon
- Tuesday – “Tyr’s Day” for the worship of the Norse God of combat
- Wednesday – “Wodan’s Day” for the worship of the chief Norse god Wodan or Odin

## 18 The days of the week

- Thursday – “Thor’s Day” for the worship of Thor, the Norse god of thunder
- Friday – “Frey’s Day” or “Frigg’s Day” for the worship of the Norse goddess of love and fertility
- Saturday – “Saturn’s Day” for the worship of the Roman god Saturn

## 19 The days of the week

- The days of the week have more pagan meanings and origins in their names than do the American traditions of Christmas.
- Yet, no reasonable person would suggest that we start using new names to refer to our days because the old ones are too pagan.
- “Sunday” – No longer associated with sun-worship, even non-believers know it’s the day when Christians worship Jesus.

## 20 OUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

## 21 The Blog Series

- <http://gentlemanadventurer.org/category/how-pagan-is-christmas/>

- Twice-weekly blog series on the backgrounds behind some of our Christmas traditions, as well as suggestions on how to teach and apply those things for your family.

## 22 1) A little history of Christmas

- There are three pagan holidays which both Christians and secularists have, throughout the years, tried to tie Christmas to. They are:
  - Sol Invictus
  - Yule
  - Saturnalia

## 23 Sol Invictus

- *Sol Invictus* (or more correctly, *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* – “the birthday of the unconquered sun”) was a pagan festival was a Roman celebration on the Winter Solstice (formerly December 25<sup>th</sup>) to celebrate Sol Invictus, the official sun god of the Roman Empire.
- However there is no evidence to suggest that the two holidays are or ever have been related.

## 24 Sol Invictus

- “[W]hile the winter solstice on or around the 25th of December was well established in the Roman imperial calendar, there is no evidence that a religious celebration of Sol on that day antedated the celebration of Christmas...”- Steven Hijman
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## 25 Sol Invictus

- Early church father John Chrysostom (347-407) commented:
- “They [the pagans] call it the 'Birthday of the Unconquered'. Who indeed is so unconquered as Our Lord . . .?”

## 26 Saturnalia

- Saturnalia was originated in 217 BC to raise Roman spirits after a crushing military defeat. It was originally celebrated on December 17<sup>th</sup>, and later extended through the 23<sup>rd</sup>.
- Saturnalia was a time of feasting, celebrations, and the worship of the god Saturn.

## 27 Saturnalia

- While there has been much speculation that Saturnalia was the origin of the Christmas celebrations, even modern secular scholars have abandoned this idea for the following reasons:
  - There is no historical evidence to support this claim
  - Neither the original dates of the celebration of Christmas (December 6<sup>th</sup>), nor the current date (December 25<sup>th</sup>) coincide with the celebration of Saturnalia
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## 28 Yule

- Yule was a festival in Germanic Paganism that was originally held from late December to early January.
- Eventually, as the various Germanic lands were converted to Christianity, the name “Yule” became used interchangeably with “Christmas”, and a few of the customs of Yule made their way into the European celebration of Christmas.

## 29 Yule

- Yule logs
- Hanging mistletoe
- Interestingly, many of these customs did not make their way to the United States for hundreds of years, thanks to groups like the Pilgrims.
- Since Yule and Christmas originated independently and in different parts of the world, no serious scholar would presume for a moment that Yule was one of the influencing factors in the establishment of the Christmas holiday.

### 30 Christmas

- Scripture does not give us a date for either the conception or the birth of Jesus Christ. We do, however, know that the Early Church believed, as early as 221 AD, that Christ's miraculous conception took place on the Spring Equinox.
- Counting forward nine months, we arrive at December 25<sup>th</sup>, which was the date the early church considered to be the birthday of Christ and celebrated as Christmas as early as 300 AD.

### 31 Christmas

- December 25<sup>th</sup> is actually a reasonable date for Christmas for a number of reasons.
- Whether or not Christ was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>, of course, is not as important as how we celebrate His birth and, above all else, how we use it to bring glory to Christ.

### 32 Christmas in the Middle Ages

- It was in the Middle Ages that the first secularization of Christmas began:
- The holiday became an excuse for drunkenness, gambling, and gross immorality. Under the corrupt Roman Catholic Church, European society took something that had been intended to be a time of worship and thankfulness to God for the gift of his son and turned it into an excuse for licentiousness.

### 33 Christmas abused

- Just because something has been abused in the past does not mean that we should shun it or ban it entirely.
- This is a little like saying we should stop partaking of the Lord's Table because so many have misinterpreted it or practiced it wrongly over the years (1 Corinthians 11).

### 34 Christmas and the Reformation

- Christmas was just one of the things in Christendom to get a facelift when the Protestant Reformation took place.
- Martin Luther sought to purge Christmas of what he considered to be the pagan and idolatrous influence of the Roman Catholic Church.
- This included replacing nativity scenes with Christmas Trees.

### 35 Christmas Trees

- It is important to note that there are no documented instances of Christmas trees being used prior to the fifteenth century, where they originated in an essentially Christian society and context.

### 36 Christmas Trees

- One passage frequently used, both by some of the Puritans as well as modern-day fundamentalists, to prove the pagan origins of the Christmas Tree is Jeremiah 10:1-4 –

### 37 Jeremiah 10:1-4

- *Hear the word that the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel. Thus says the LORD: "Learn not the way of the nations, nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity. A tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an axe by the hands of a craftsman. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so that it cannot move.*

### 38 Jeremiah 10:1-4

- There are two problems with applying this passage to the Christmas Tree.
  - First, it divorces the passage from its context, which is clearly talking about the creation of a graven image or idol:

### 39 Jeremiah 10:1-4

- *Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field, and they cannot speak; they have to be carried, for they cannot walk. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good." There is none like you, O LORD; you are great, and your name is great in might. Who would not fear*

*you, O King of the nations? For this is your due; for among all the wise ones of the nations and in all their kingdoms there is none like you. They are both stupid and foolish; the instruction of idols is but wood! (Jer 10:5-8)*

#### 40 Jeremiah 10:1-4

- Secondly, it ignores the historical context of the writing.
- No culture in Jeremiah's day cut trees down, took them into their homes, and decorated them with ornaments.
- It is unfaithful to the plain meaning of the text to apply this passage to the Christmas tree.

#### 41 Christmas Trees

- How can I make this tradition point toward Jesus?
- Traditions like these can be valuable tools for teaching our children about Christ as we celebrate the holiday.
- In teaching my children about this tradition, am I confronting & redeeming, or am I surrendering to the culture?

#### 42 So how pagan is Christmas?

- Christmas is exactly as pagan as we allow it to be. If we make it about the things we do (or do not!) celebrate, then we make the holiday itself an idol and fail to focus on Christ.
- If we abandon the holiday and/or its traditions based on alleged pagan origins, we lose the culture war by default and we allow the world to claim them for their own.