



SHOULD WE KEEP CHRISTMAS?

It's December again, and talk of Christmas is in the air, everywhere! Christmas must surely be the most widely observed festival in the world—people from all countries and religions keep it or know about it. Very few people in New Zealand are not affected by it.

What should our attitude to Christmas be? In the past, the Worldwide Church of God has said we shouldn't observe Christmas because it is pagan and unbiblical. Here's a newspaper report about the approach one person took towards Christmas:

NSW pastor's 'assassination' of Santa (From the Otago Daily Times, 23/12/1994)

The Christmas spirit of peace and goodwill to all men appears to have bypassed the northern New South Wales town of Lismore this year, with a local pastor ordering the 'slaying' of Santa Claus. Pastor Michael Butler, of the Potters House Christian Fellowship, decided the jolly fat man in the red suit was hijacking the true meaning of Christmas, so arranged an 'assassination' in Lismore's main shopping street last Saturday.

A member of the church, dressed as Santa Claus, ran through the streets yelling 'ho ho' while another church member chased behind him with a realistic-looking toy pistol. The 'gunman' eventually yelled out 'freeze Santa' and when Santa duly obliged, the assassin followed up with 'you've ripped me off for the last time; you're a fake', and fired the pistol, accompanied by the recorded sound of a bursting balloon.

Shocked locals, including a large number of highly upset children, looked on as Santa fell to the ground, spilling his sack of gifts on to the street. The stunt quickly backfired though, with Pastor Butler receiving several death threats and the police fielding complaints from irate parents whose children were upset.

Despite being told to 'tone it down' by police, Pastor Butler (45) was unrepentant. 'Maybe next Christmas we'll have Santa whipping Jesus,' he said. 'Every second phone call has been a death threat. I'm just amazed at all these adults who are so protective of Santa, who is an absolute myth. My job is to preach the gospel. Unfortunately, part of that job is to expose myths and lies. The fact is Christmas is just a big scam. It's supposed to be about Jesus, the birth of Christ, but he really doesn't get much of a mention and all the kids' eyes are on Santa, this mythical person.'

Well, we were never that fanatical about it, but we did have reasons for not observing it. Let's look at them:

1. It is not mentioned in the Bible. But does this mean it is wrong? The word "Bible" is not in the Bible. Does this mean we shouldn't call it the Bible? There is no Bible basis for a minister performing a wedding ceremony—it doesn't happen in the Bible. There are plenty of things not mentioned in the Bible which are quite valid and pleasing to God.

Interestingly, there are even examples in the Bible of Festival observances established by men that were acceptable to God. For example, in Esther 9:18-19, 22 18 "The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.¹⁹ That is why rural Jews—those living in villages—observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other ²² as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into

a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.”

This sounds very much like our Christmas customs today! It is a day the Jews started to observe because of the victory God gave them, and He didn't say it was wrong.

Similarly, they had a Festival of Hanukkah, or Lights, or Dedication, that Jesus Himself attended, in John 10:22-23 ²² “Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade.”

The fact that Christmas isn't commanded in the Bible doesn't necessarily mean it is wrong.

2. But a stronger argument against it is that it was Pagan in origin and God says we must not learn the ways of the Pagans.

Deuteronomy 12:30-31 ³⁰ “and after they have been destroyed before you, be careful not to be ensnared by inquiring about their gods, saying, “How do these nations serve their gods? We will do the same.” ³¹ You must not worship the LORD your God in their way, because in worshiping their gods, they do all kinds of detestable things the LORD hates. They even burn their sons and daughters in the fire as sacrifices to their gods.”

Does this really mean we can't serve God in any of the ways the Pagans served their gods? Then we would not be able to use temples, priesthoods, sacrifices, sacred music, tithing, festivals etc. Pagans built temples thousands of years before Moses, but God asked Moses to build a tabernacle and later authorised a temple.

So what does God mean here? He makes it pretty clear in Verse 31 in what way we shouldn't follow the Pagans. Child sacrifice—this indeed was an abomination God doesn't want His people to follow. But that is a far cry from exchanging gifts and having a nice meal together like at Christmas!

In Verse 3 Moses said to break down their altars, but he set up altars for God. In the 10 commandments he said not to make an image of anything, because that was pagan, but later he made an image of a snake and held it up before the people.

Just because pagans did things doesn't mean the same thing can't have a right use in worship of God. But detestable things like child sacrifice are not pleasing to God!

3. But wasn't December 25th an evil day? Didn't pagans honour this day as the birthday of the sun god? When you look into history books, it is harder than I thought to prove that. All sorts of different theories abound, but it does appear that is right—December 17-24 was the time of the Roman Saturnalia, a time of jubilant celebration, and December 25 was the day of the unconquered sun, a pagan day of sun worship at the time of the Winter Solstice.

It appears that Church leaders gradually replaced this celebration with one to honour the birth of the “Sun of Righteousness,” and “Son,” Jesus Christ on the same day. Is such a thing a dangerous compromise with paganism, or was it an opportunity to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21)?

The days of the week are named after pagan gods—Sunday is named after the sun god, so if we worship on Sunday are we compromising with paganism? Well, Saturday is named after Saturn! Monday is the moon god's day, etc.

The word “church” comes from “circe” in old English, which described religious sites marked with circles of stones and trees, and linked with Circe, a sorceress goddess of paganism. Wedding rings are a pagan custom, and are not commanded in the Bible, but wearing them doesn't mean we are corrupted by paganism. They have quite a different use now—no one thinks of their pagan origin when they wear them. The origin of something doesn't determine its present meaning.

Isaiah 2:3-5 talks about a time when swords will be beaten into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. What a marvellous transformation of a thing used for evil into a thing used for good!

Would you say “I'm not going to use this ploughshare because it used to be a sword used to kill people in warfare? Isn't it good to replace an evil thing with a good thing? Isn't it good to replace an evil pagan observance of the sun god with a good observance honouring the true God?

We were all once walking in the ways of the world (Ephesians 2:2), heathens, far from worshipping God, but now we are transformed from sinners to saints. Should we avoid fellow Christians because they were once influenced by paganism? Jesus took a symbol of shame and humiliation (which the cross was) and triumphed over it, turning it into a symbol of victory! So even though December 25th was once a pagan celebration, surely we can replace it with something good!

And Christmas does do a lot of good! It does force people to think about Jesus Christ once in the year. The carols all talk of Him. The nativity scenes focus on Him. Yes, it is terribly commercialised, and by and large Christ has been taken out of Christmas, but still, it is a time when at least to some extent the birth of Jesus is acknowledged by the world. Millions of people have become aware of His birth and life because of Christmas celebrations.

December 25th used to be a pagan festival, used to honour pagan gods. Now it isn't. People don't honour the sun god on that day, they honour Christ. So Christianity has triumphed over paganism.

In Vanuatu, December 25th never was a pagan holiday. For them, it has a Christian origin, because missionaries introduced it as a day to celebrate Christ's birth. Does it help them or hinder them to tell them they shouldn't keep it because it once was used to honour pagan gods?

4. Of course, we don't know when Christ was born. It probably wasn't on December 25th. No one knows. So if people celebrating Christmas say that He was born that day, they are wrong. But that doesn't mean you can't celebrate His birth at that time, as long as you realise that may not have been the exact day.

We celebrate Queen's birthday on a day that is not her birthday. We celebrate Christ's return on the Day of Trumpets, even though we are not sure that is the Day when He will return.

5. Another objection to keeping Christmas is that December 25th was Nimrod's birthday and Santa Claus is evil. But you can check in any Encyclopaedia and find out that St Nicholas was a believer in Jesus Christ, a minister in Myra, Turkey, in the 4th century, instrumental in bringing many pagans to Christ. He was greatly admired for his kindness, dedicated life and generosity. Various countries in Europe followed his good example by adopting a custom of leaving gifts in his name to the poor in early December. Later the custom came to be associated with December 25th. In a poem, his name was shortened to Santa Claus and so it caught on.

There is very little in the Bible about Nimrod. Although he lived thousands of years ago, people say he was born on December 25th, but that is very hard to prove. To say the evil Nimrod was the first Santa Claus is really an incredible jump in reasoning. Santa Claus is definitely traceable to someone who lived in the 4th century AD! And he is a good person, a jolly fellow, a giving person, wanting children to be good and honour their parents. True, he is make believe, but so is Mickey Mouse, and I don't think he is pagan! Revelation 2:6 warns of the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which some think refers to St Nicholas. But Revelation 2 was written in the 1st century and St Nicholas wasn't born until the 4th century!

6. One last argument against Christmas is that Jeremiah 10 condemns the Christmas tree. Jer. 10:2-4 ²"This is what the LORD says: "Do not learn the ways of the nations or be terrified by signs in the heavens, though the nations are terrified by them. ³For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. ⁴They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter."

In the KJV it says "workman" and "axe", which seems to refer to a lumberjack cutting down a tree. But the word for "ax" is specifically referring to a carving tool or chisel, as it is in the NIV and most other versions.

Verse 5 shows it is talking about an idol that has been shaped out of a tree. It's not talking about the tree itself. This is a condemnation of idolatry, not Christmas trees. (Continues in vv8-9). ⁵"Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good."

Certainly Christmas is abused by some, like anything else. Some get drunk. Some go foolishly into debt. There is more family strife at Christmas than any other time of the year. The shops are crowded with people who feel obliged to buy gifts for people they don't even like.

But let's not forget the good fruit of Christmas. People do nice things for each other. People reach out and feed the homeless, and give toys to poor children. Families get together for special times of food and fellowship. Employers give special bonuses and parties for the workers. Radio stations which normally pay no attention to Jesus Christ play hymns for several weeks. Malls, airports and TV stations tell the story of Christ's birth. Trees and shop windows are lit up with beautiful lights and joyous decorations appear in the streets. There is an overall feeling of peace on earth, good will toward men.

The account of Jesus' birth is told and retold, in thousands and thousands of places. It's an important story, the foundation of the Christian revelation.

Colossians 1:15,19, says that “Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” and “in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.” As Tammy Tkach put it in her latest letter, “the great God of the Universe miraculously focused all the power and glory of Himself into the baby Jesus, His Son.”

It can be argued that the incarnation is the most stupendous miracle of all, because it is so deep and incomprehensible. The resurrection is of course a vitally important miracle, but the birth of God as a man is maybe even more difficult to understand—how could it happen?

In the Worldwide News in 1996, Mr Joseph Tkach outlined the Church’s policy concerning Christmas.

“The Worldwide Church of God no longer teaches that observing Christmas is a sin. The decision whether to observe Christmas, and if observing it, how to observe it, is a personal matter. Some Christians celebrate Christmas with traditional trappings, while some celebrate it without traditional trappings. Some avoid Christmas altogether. The church teaches that Christians who celebrate Christmas and those who do not should seek to honour Jesus Christ (Romans 14:5-6). If members choose to celebrate Christmas with their families, we encourage them to make Christ the centre of their celebration.”

Let’s close today in Luke 2:10-14 ¹⁰ “But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.”

They celebrated the birth of Christ, so there’s no reason why that can’t be done. But whether we celebrate Christmas or not, however we view it, one thing is for certain: we should be so grateful, we are so blessed that Jesus Christ became a human being to reveal the Father to us, to fulfil and magnify the law and bring the New Covenant, to conquer Satan, to be our Prophet, Priest and King, to pay the penalty for our sins. How thankful we can be for the fantastic miracle of the incarnation, the birth as a human being and the life of Jesus our Saviour and King!!