

Christmas Origins

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How did December 25th come to be celebrated as Christmas? The answer is rooted in history, blending pagan traditions with religious adaptations. Christmas as we know it today was not originally a Christian celebration but stemmed from the Roman festival of Saturnalia. Over time, this pagan observance was repurposed by the early church, leading to the holiday we now associate with the birth of Christ.

Saturnalia, held from December 17th to 25th, was a Roman holiday dedicated to Saturn, the god of agriculture and time. The festival was characterized by indulgence and lawlessness. Courts, schools, and businesses closed, and Romans celebrated with feasting, gambling, and immoral behavior.

The Greek historian Lucian described Saturnalia as a time when communities chose a victim, known as the “lord of misrule,” who was forced to indulge in excess throughout the week. At the festival’s conclusion, this person was sacrificed in honor of Saturn. The week was also marked by public drunkenness, promiscuity, and caroling in the streets, often performed naked.

These customs, while shocking, provide the backdrop for understanding how Saturnalia eventually influenced Christmas.

In the fourth century AD, as Christianity spread, church leaders sought to convert the Roman pagan population. To make Christianity more appealing, they co-opted certain pagan festivals, including Saturnalia. December 25th was designated as the day to celebrate Christ’s birth, providing a Christian alternative to the pagan holiday.

However, early Christmas celebrations often retained the rowdiness of Saturnalia. Feasting, drinking, and other behaviors persisted, making the holiday more about indulgence than reverence. Though the church sought to give new meaning to the day, the customs and spirit of Saturnalia lingered.

The Catholic Church played a significant role in formalizing Christmas. The term “Christmas” comes from “Christ Mass,” a service dedicated to honoring Christ’s birth. Pope Julius I officially declared December 25th as the date of celebration, even though no biblical evidence supports this as the actual day of Christ’s birth.

Protestant churches later adopted Christmas, along with other practices rooted in Catholic tradition, such as infant baptism and sprinkling. A Catholic priest once observed that Protestants often attempt to justify these practices biblically, though they originated from church councils rather than Scripture.

Unlike Protestant traditions that emphasize biblical authority, the Catholic Church acknowledges its reliance on tradition and church decrees. This distinction highlights why Christmas is celebrated despite its lack of biblical roots.

The Bible provides no command or authorization for celebrating Christ’s birth on December 25th, or any other day. The date is not mentioned in Scripture, and the circumstances described in Luke 2:8 suggest Christ was born in a warmer season, as shepherds were watching their flocks at night.

Romans 14:5-6 offers guidance for Christians on observing certain days: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind."

This passage implies that Christians are free to choose how they regard specific days, provided their actions honor God. Celebrating Christmas as a family tradition, through gift-giving, decorating, or gathering, is not inherently wrong. However, treating it as a religious holiday without biblical authority adds to God's Word, something Scripture warns against.

While Christ's birth fulfilled prophecy (Isaiah 7:14), the Bible emphasizes His death, burial, and resurrection as the foundation of faith. 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 states: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures."

The gospel message centers on Christ's sacrifice and victory over death, not on the specific day of His birth.

Many modern Christmas traditions mirror the indulgence of Saturnalia. Lavish feasts, consumerism, and even drunken parties are common, reflecting a focus on personal pleasure rather than spiritual reflection.

Even within religious contexts, Christmas can become more about spectacle than devotion. Theatrical church services often draw crowds who rarely return until the next Christmas. Many celebrate Christ as a baby in a manger but fail to honor Him as Lord throughout the year.

Paul warned against observing days without divine authority in Galatians 4:10-11: "You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have labored for you in vain."

Such practices risk adding to God's Word, a serious transgression according to Revelation 22:18: "If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book."

While Christmas should not be observed as a religious holiday, Christians can celebrate it as a secular occasion. Like other holidays such as Labor Day or Independence Day, it can be a time for families to come together, exchange gifts, and enjoy traditions without attaching religious significance.

Decorating a tree, sending cards, or sharing a festive meal can be meaningful ways to celebrate, provided these activities honor God in spirit and truth.

The origins of Christmas reveal a complex history of blending pagan and Christian traditions. While December 25th has been set aside by man as a "holy day," the Bible provides no such instruction. For Christians, the focus should remain on living out faith daily, rejoicing in Christ's sacrifice and resurrection rather than limiting worship to man-made holidays.

Celebrating Christmas as a secular holiday is a personal choice, but it should not replace the call to honor God through obedience and faithful living every day of the year. By prioritizing the gospel message and adhering to biblical authority, Christians can glorify God in all they do, during the holiday season and beyond.