

THE CHRISTMAS CHALLENGE

Christmas History Told Through Song

Recently Becky and I had the chance to eat dinner with four of our five children at our favorite barbeque restaurant, The County Line. Over dinner I told the table that I was going to present The Christmas Challenge this week in class, asking and answering questions about Christmas past and present. I ask each one at the table, “What questions do you have about Christmas?” Their answers were interesting, and so I have tried to include those questions in our lesson today.

After we finished and loaded into the car, the overwhelming suggestion was to drive through the Prestonwood subdivision on the way home, looking at the Christmas decorations and singing carols in the car. Prestonwood is famous for its decorations, and many blocks work together on unique themes, competing for subdivision awards. Soon we were driving down the block that celebrated: The Twelve Texas Days of Christmas. We were singing each sign,

“On the first day of Christmas my pardner gave to me... A possum in a pine tree...”

Lights, songs, decorations, family time, a festive mood – it is no wonder Christmas is a favorite holiday, even among those without a faith in the Christ child. As believers in the miracle of God incarnate, we pause to consider this holiday, both as a holy day and as a secular celebration. Where does the holy intersect the secular? What are the roots for the holy? What are the roots for the secular?

These are interesting questions. Their answers reveal some surprising results. A number of the secular traditions actually have roots in the holy. In obverse fashion, we might be surprised to find that some of the holy traditions have roots in the secular! Our consideration of the roots of traditions is often clouded in the mysteries lost in history. Of some things we are relatively certain. Others are more reasoned conclusions, while some remain fairly rank speculation. We cannot hope to answer all the questions in a 45-minute lesson, but many of the citations give fuller information and relevant discussion should one wish to research further!

Christmas as a season and as a church opportunity to focus on the birth of Christ has always found expression in song. This is not surprising because even beyond the church’s expression of song, we have a special understanding of the significance of songs associated with the birth of Christ. As Luke recorded the events surrounding Christ’s incarnation and birth, Mary the mother of Jesus went to visit her relative Elizabeth who was pregnant with John the Baptist. Elizabeth

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was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied over Mary and the baby Jesus in her womb. Mary's response was in verse. We have what the church has come to call, "*The Magnificat*," or "*Mary's Song of Praise*." Later when Jesus was born, the heavens were singing God's praises as witnessed by shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem.

Since the beginning, song has heralded the birth of the Christ. The church has continued this celebration in song in the two thousand years since the manger scene. History has unfolded with many cultures and traditions, but song has permeated them all. Sometimes the songs are very scriptural, but other times not so much so! In much the same way as Christmas, we find secular ideas and traditions creeping into Christmas song.

As Christianity permeated pagan cultures, people who left their paganism for the church tended to bring certain pagan traditions along. At times the church fought the inclusion of pagan traditions. Often, the church simply offered new interpretations for the pagan rituals, developing a Christian understanding that produced some unusual traditions still seen today. Not surprisingly, this liaison between faith and culture is reflected not just in traditions, but also in the songs of the season.

Our lesson in this Christmas Challenge class, explores Christmas from both its scriptural and cultural aspects. Our tool for this process will be song and verse. The goal is to enrich not only our understanding, but also our personal practices as we seek to infuse this season with holy reverence and joy over God made man. And so with melodies in our head, we begin...

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1. The song, "*O Little Town of Bethlehem*" recognizes the "everlasting light," as "Christ is born of Mary" as witnessed by singing of "praise to God our king and peace to men on earth." This honors the teaching of Matthew that "Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea" (Mt. 2:1). When questioned, the Chief Priests and scribes were able to quote Micah and tell Herod definitively that the Christ was "to be born" in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:4-6). Which name or label of Jesus fits in well with the location of his birth?
 - A. Immanuel
 - B. The Good Shepherd
 - C. Jesus
 - D. Bread of Life

2. In the fourteenth century, a Latin Christmas carol named *Resonet in Laudibus* was popular. In 1853, an English translation of the song appeared, still sung by choirs today and entitled, *Christ was Born on Christmas Day*. If we focus on time, however, we note that the Bible does not indicate that Jesus was born precisely on December 25. Of the following choices, which month has the greater Scriptural support as a possible time of Jesus' birth?
 - A. January
 - B. February
 - C. May
 - D. December

3. In 1849, Unitarian pastor Edmund Sears wrote the lyrics to the song *It Came Upon a Midnight Clear*. In this song, we sing of Jesus being born at Midnight. Where did this idea come from?
 - A. The celebration of Christmas at a midnight mass
 - B. Non-Biblical Jewish writings
 - C. The need to rhyme something with "bending near"
 - D. Incorporation of a druid worship tradition

4. While on the issue of timing, if we set aside the day, month, or season of Christ's birth, how good are we at securing the year of his birth?
 - A. 6 – 4BC
 - B. 4 – 1BC
 - C. 0
 - D. 1AD

5. In the mid-1800's Episcopal deacon John Henry Hopkins wrote the song *We Three Kings*. In this song, we sing of three kings following "yonder

- star” bringing gifts to the Christ child, the “perfect light.” What does Scripture most definitely say of these star followers?
- A. They were three
 - B. They were Kings
 - C. They came from the East
 - D. They knew where they were going
6. In the song *Twelve Days of Christmas*, we sing of all sorts of gifts, always ending each verse with “a partridge in a pear tree.” What are the twelve days of Christmas and where did they come from?
- A. The Roman calendar
 - B. The flight into Egypt
 - C. The visit of the Magi
 - D. Medieval gift traditions
7. Among the Christmas carols first learned by children is *Away in a Manger*. The song speaks of the nativity scene, with the “Little Lord Jesus” asleep in the hay. Many homes and churches include nativity scenes as a part of their celebratory décor during the Christmas season. Who is recognized as starting the tradition of a nativity scene as a part of Christmas celebrations?
- A. Pope Gregory the Great
 - B. St. Francis of Assisi
 - C. Martin Luther
 - D. George Washington
8. In the song *Frosty the Snowman*, we have a modern Christmas song that produced a television Christmas show. The song and show are about a snowman who came to life long enough for fun, dying with the melting snow, and promising in his last words to “come back again one day.” Some

- mark this as the beginning of commercialism removing “Christ from Christmas.” If we scan history, how early can we identify cultural practices in the name of Christmas, yet with seemingly no link at all to any spiritual significance of the holiday?
- A. Middle Age plays in France
 - B. 19th century German opera
 - C. 1930’s radio shows
 - D. 1940’s Macy parades.
9. Most children know the song, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*. It was a smash hit when written in 1934 and all over America kids have sung of Santa coming to their town. Our question is not where old Saint Nick is coming to, but rather, where does history teach that old Saint Nick *really* lived?
- A. New York
 - B. Amsterdam
 - C. The North pole
 - D. Turkey
10. Saint Nicolas became the patron saint of what city?
- A. Jerusalem
 - B. London
 - C. New York
 - D. Lubbock
11. In 1962, Kitty Wells had a seasonal hit with the song *Ole Kris Kringle*. If we try to chase down the origin of Kris Kringle, the road will lead to whom?
- A. Martin Luther

- B. John Calvin
- C. Henry VIII
- D. Hollywood

12. *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree* is one of many contemporary songs that sing of the ubiquitous Christmas tree. Legend associates Christmas trees (rightly or wrongly) with whom?

- A. Martin Luther
- B. John Calvin
- C. Henry VIII
- D. Hollywood

13. The song *Hark, the Herald Angels Sing* recounts the voices of the angels in the fields around Bethlehem. Luke recorded the song with angels praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2:14). Our song commemorates this with, "Hark, the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the new born king. Peace on earth...'" What war had a significant "peace moment" because of Christmas?

- A. The Revolutionary War
- B. The Civil War
- C. World War I
- D. World War II

14. We sing (or hear young children sing) all sorts of variations off the song *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Where did this song come from?

- A. Sears and Roebuck
- B. Norway
- C. Montgomery Wards

D. Gene Autry

15. Which of the following has *not* been a regular image of Saint Nicholas (or Santa, etc.):

A. Red coat with fur

B. Blue coat

C. Chubby

D. Thin

ANSWERS

1. D. “The Bread of Life.”

Each of the labels and names are important Scriptural affirmations of Jesus.

“Immanuel” means “God with us,” and is cited by Matthew as an appropriate name and label for Jesus in light of the prophetic word of Micah:

‘Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us) (Mt. 1:23).

As the “Good Shepherd” we have a metaphor for the activities of Jesus that would be familiar in the shepherd lands around Bethlehem, but the label has no particular tie to the name Bethlehem.

“Jesus” is the Greek version of “Jehosua” or “Joshua.” It means “Yahweh saves.” For this reason Joseph was told by the angel Gabriel to “call his name Jesus” (Lk 1:31-32). As Matthew recounted, “you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21).

“Bethlehem” in Hebrew means the “House of bread,” hence our answer D, “The Bread of Life.” It is most fitting that from the House of Bread would come the Bread of Life!

2. C. “May.”

This is a bit of a trick question, because there is not scriptural support for May per se, but there is more support for May than for any of the other options given! We are at a bit of a loss because the New Testament does not give any indication that

the early church celebrated the birth of Christ on any special day. In fact, Paul makes no reference in all of his writings to the birth of Christ, nor do other New Testament writers beyond Matthew and Luke. In Luke's history of the church (the book of Acts), he also does not make any reference to the church celebrating Christ's birth. Of the two accounts of the birth of Jesus (Matthew & Luke), neither of those accounts gives any indication that the birth occurred on December 25th, yet in Luke we do have a clue!

Luke notes, "there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night" when an angel said to them, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you" (Lk 2:8,11). They were in the fields with their flocks at the time that Jesus was born. Scholars seem fairly certain that during the era when Christ was born, shepherds kept their flocks in the fields from the months of March through November.¹ This seasonal indication does not definitively tell us *when* the birth occurred, but it does imply that it would not have been in December through February!

Scholars are uncertain when exactly December 25th became the date to celebrate the birth of Christ. Clearly by 336, December 25th was in place for at least the Roman church. In an almanac called "The Chronograph of 354," which is actually dated for 336, December 25th is listed as the celebratory feast day for the birth of Christ (Actually, the Chronograph date is the "eighth of Kalends of January," but translated into our calendar that is December 25th!) This is our earliest written reference to the 25th being the official celebration date. We also know that St. Ambrose (See Church History Lesson 23), who died in 397, wrote a number of nativity hymns for singing during the Christmas season around December 25th. Pope Siricius (who died in 399) wrote the Bishop of Spain in 384 referencing the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25th.

Why was December 25th picked as the day to celebrate, especially, in light of the fact that there is no biblical basis for that view? Scholars differ on their answers to these questions. Two hypotheses are currently in vogue among scholars. The first is called "The History of Religions Hypothesis," and the second is called "The Calculation Hypothesis."

The History of Religions Hypothesis argues that Christians seized December 25th as a celebration day for the birth of Christ because of a Roman festival celebrated at much the same time. The Romans celebrated the Sun God in a feast of "Saturnalia." This was a 7-day feast that occurred from December 17th through December 23rd. It was a pagan festival that had a lot of lewd behavior as well as gift giving and other traditions and festivities. Some believe that Christmas was a "Christianizing" of this pagan festival. The idea is that while Rome was in the

¹ Kelly, Joseph, *The Origins of Christmas*, (Liturgical Press 2004) at 57.

after-math (and hangover) of celebrating their Sun God, there were enough distractions that Christians could “get away” with a celebration of the birth of Christ. Supporters of this theory are quick to point out the many parallels between the pagan Sun Feast and Christmas. For example, December 25th is the actual winter solstice in the Roman calendar. By that, we mean it was the Roman calendar day when the sun began to “reassert itself” and days started lengthening. There is no question that Rome was fond of sun worship by the time that Christmas began finding its celebration in the church. Sun worship itself reached an apex in 274 when the Emperor Aurelian declared that the Sun God would be the preeminent of all Gods to be worshipped.

The History of Religions Hypothesis then asserts that while the worship of the Sun God was so popular during this December time period, the church was emphasizing that Jesus was in fact the real “sun” to be worshipped. Now, Latin and Greek did not make the pun off the words “sun” and “son” that English makes. The church taught Jesus as the Sun using both analogy and scripture.² Scholars say we find here the basis for Christianity morphing a pagan festival into what we now consider to be Christmas. The History of Religions Hypothesis is first noted in the margin of Dionysius Bar-Salibi’s 1100’s manuscript. But, it really found its modern punch from writers in the last 120 years. Noteworthy are works by H. Usener in 1889 and B. Botte in 1932. This History of Religions Hypothesis is still the predominant hypothesis in Europe.³

A second, more recent hypothesis is called “The Calculation Hypothesis.” This hypothesis says that the church opted for December 25th birthday for Jesus by making calculations from other dates believed true by the church at the time. At the time the church decided on December 25th as the birth of Christ, the church believed the crucifixion of Christ occurred on March the 25th. How the church came to March 25th is not fully known. March 25th was the Spring Equinox, and was considered the anniversary of creation. Writers like Hippolytus (c. 170-235) and Tertullian (c. 161-220) (See Church History Lesson 16) believed that creation itself started on the day of the Spring Equinox. These writers and others then viewed the new creation following the crucifixion of Jesus as also occurring on the same day.⁴

² These sermons frequently pointed out that the sun rises in much the same way that Jesus had a resurrection. These sermons would also point to Malachi 3:20 where the sun of justice arises in a way that is prophetic about Jesus.

³ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, (2d Edition) Vol. 3, p. 552.

⁴ Kelly at 61.

What does the date of crucifixion have to do with the date of Christ's birth? During this early church time period, the church commonly believed that patriarchs and others in the Bible lived for exact year periods. In other words, when the Old Testament says that Moses was 120 when he died, many early church writers believed that 120 years were exactly 120 years ("Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died" Dt. 34:7.) So, they reasoned, Moses must have died on the anniversary of his birth. Otherwise, scripture would have said Moses lived 119 years and 364 days, or whatever it would have been. In similar fashion, these writers believed that Jesus started his ministry when he was 30, not 29 and 11 months and 4 days, but 30. Evidently, these writers did not notice that Luke dates Jesus as being "about" 30 (Lk 3:23).

The Calculation Hypothesis concludes that March 25th would have been the date of the crucifixion and Jesus would have been crucified on an anniversary of his birth date. However, in the case of Jesus, you should not look to March 25th as a birth date, but rather an "incarnation" date. In other words, March 25th was believed to be the day that Jesus was conceived. If you then add 9 months for the time that Jesus would have spent in Mary's womb, presto! December 25th is the birth date of Christ! This theory also explains why the Eastern Church celebrated Christmas January 6th. In the east, they believed that Jesus was conceived April 6th, not March 25th. Then, 9 months runs to January 6th. This theory has found a great deal of support after a publication by Thomas Talley, entitled *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, (Collegeville, Minn. 1991).

3. A. "6 - 4 BC"

As discussed earlier, we have no evidence of the New Testament church celebrating the birth of Jesus. This is not totally surprising, in the sense that the New Testament church anticipated the return of Jesus most any day. Faced with the imminent return, the church never seemed to focus on any annual celebrations. We do not even have an indication of the New Testament church celebrating Easter in the sense that we observe it today.

By the 2nd Century, however, there were branches of Christianity that were focusing on when Jesus was born. Many scholars believe some of this focus arose because of the Gnostic movement within Christianity (See Church History Lessons 8 and 9 on Gnosticism⁵). Because the Gnostics never saw the death of Christ as anything redemptive, they had a tendency to focus on other events within the life of Christ as the basis for their doctrine and teaching. For some, it seems the incarnation was an event worth celebrating, or at least recognizing. Therefore,

⁵ Our Church History lessons are available at the class Internet site, www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

some Gnostics tried to make a determination on which date Jesus was born. Clement of Alexandria (he lived from the mid 100's to c.215) wrote that the Gnostics, or at least one group of Gnostics, dated the birth of Christ to be May 20, 3 BC.⁶ This was one of a number of different dates bantered about as the possible date of Christ's birth. During this same time period, Origen (c.185-254) (see Church History Lessons 10 and 11) wrote against the concept of celebrating Christ's birth at all. Origen's review of scripture indicated to him that only evil people celebrated birthdays (namely Pharaoh and Herod).

The "BC" connotation was not devised until about 525 by a Catholic Monk named Dionysius Exiguus (Latin for "Dennis the Short"). He was charged by Pope John I to calculate the date of Easter. In completing his task, Dionysius decided to redate matters with "1" being the year of Jesus's birth.⁷ Each subsequent year would be labeled "*anni Domini nostril*" meaning "years of our Lord." Today we abbreviate that Latin as "AD." The problem is Dionysius made a mistake in computing the calendar. He dated Christ's birth too late. Matthew records that Christ was born while Herod the Great was on the throne. Herod died in 4 BC. Most scholars today, therefore, recognize Christ was born somewhere between 6 and 4 B.C.⁸

4. B. "Non-Biblical Jewish Writings."

A Jewish book, The Wisdom of Solomon, has several verses that some early Christians applied to Jesus' birth:

For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your [God's] all-powerful word leapt from heaven."

⁶ All of these dates that we use during this time period are reinterpreted into our calendar. Clement of Alexandria wrote with the Egyptian calendar ("they say it took place in the 28th year of Augustus [3 BC] and in the 25th day of the month Pachon" [May 20th that year] See Origen, *The Stromata*, Chapter 21), which obviously was very different than our own.

⁷ Yes, Dionysius left out the year 0, although in fairness, the Romans did not use zero!

⁸ A difficulty arises in this dating from Luke 2:1-2 which states that Joseph took the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem because of a decree from Caesar Augustus to register all the world for taxation. Luke adds, "This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria." A good bit of history indicates that Quirinius became governor of Syria in about 12AD. Solutions to this dilemma include translating the passage a bit differently ("The census took place *before* Quirinius was governor." Alternatively some see it as a process that began much earlier but was finally completed when Quirinius was governor. A number of different views are explored and documented in Marshall, I. Howard, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Gospel of Luke* (Eerdmans 1978).

These early Christians thought that the “word” was Jesus (based on John1). They also believed that “the night half gone” meant that the time was midnight. This midnight belief some scholars believe gave rise to the midnight mass of the Middle Ages.⁹

5. C. “They came from the east”!

The song comes from Matthew’s recounting of the Magi’s visit:

...behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ... Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh (Mt. 2:1-11).

Matthew does not tell us the Magi were kings, nor does Matthew tell us that there were “three.” Matthew clearly indicates that they did not know where they were going! Labeling the Magi as kings and numbering them as three are later church decisions! The English Standard Version translates the Magi as “wise men,” but that translation is a step away from what the Greek of Matthew reads. Matthew writes of visiting *magoi* (plural of *magos*). John Nolland explains the history behind the Greek word:

The word ‘Magi’ was originally applied exclusively to members of a priestly caste of the Medes and Persians who had esoteric skills in interpreting dreams. However, the use of the word broadened to embrace various categories of persons who were marked out by their superior knowledge and ability, including astrologers, soothsayers, and even oriental sages. From here the term became debased first to functioning as a label for sorcerers and magicians in general, and then in the end to becoming a term for quacks, deceivers, and seducers. The difficulty with the term is that later

⁹ Kelly at 73.

developments do not displace earlier usages, but rather the various usages tend to coexist¹⁰

Matthew merely reports that the Magi came from the East and brought Christ gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. However, the early church saw this Matthew passage indicating a fulfillment of Isaiah 60, which promised,

A multitude of camels will cover you...They will bring gold and frankincense, and will bear good news of the praises of the Lord (Is. 60:6).

Earlier in the chapter, Isaiah noted that, “Nations will come to your light, and the *kings* to the *brightness of your rising*” (Isa. 60:3). From this passage, the church decided the gift-giving Magi must have been the kings Isaiah prophesied following the star which was the “brightness” of Jesus’ birth or “rising.” This was already well in circulation by 200 when the North African theologian Tertullian¹¹ wrote that the Eastern Church regarded the Magi as kings.

Why does the song (and Christmas tradition) say there were three? Some believe that the three gifts indicated three men, but history shows us more! Origen, the great early church father who allegorized the Old Testament, believed that Isaac, Abraham’s son, was a prototype of Jesus. From that, Origen went to Genesis 26:26-31 where King Abimelech and two others came to Isaac and acknowledged him as blessed of the Lord. Origen said that these three were the prototypes in the Old Testament of the Magi.

6. C. “The visit of the Magi.”

As discussed earlier, in the 300’s the Western Church was celebrating Christmas on December 25. It is noteworthy that prior to this time in the Eastern Church, January 6th was celebrated as the feast day for the birth of Christ. By the late 300’s, however, the Eastern Church joined in celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25th. The Cappadocian Fathers preached Christmas sermons on December 25th (we have sermons of Basil as well as Gregory of Nazianzen).¹² We also have sermons of St. John Chrysostom that date from 386 and assert that December 25th is the proper date to celebrate the birth of Christ.

¹⁰ Nolland, John, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Eerdmans 2005), at 108.

¹¹ For more on Tertullian, see lesson 16 in our Church History Literacy series available for download at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

¹² See church history lesson 22.

The Jerusalem church celebrated January 6th for the feast of Christ's birth until the mid-600's. At that point, the church began celebrating the birth of Christ on December 25, and shifted the January 6 celebration as the day of the Magi's visit. January 6 then becomes the last (or 12th!) day of Christmas, the day of celebrating the Magi.

Of these twelve days, many churches recognize six of them with special liturgies. December 25 has the Christmas liturgy. The December 26th liturgy recognizes the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen. On December 27th, the liturgy recognizes St. John the Evangelist. The children who were murdered at the orders of Herod, in an effort to kill the Christ child, are commemorated on December 28th, "The Feast of the Holy Innocents." January 1 is celebrated as a commemoration of Jesus' circumcision, and then the 6th of January is "Epiphany" or the visit of the Magi and end of the twelve days of Christmas.

The song itself is apparently originally French, although it is first known published in England as a nursery rhyme. It dates back into the 1700's at least, and the lyrics do not seem to have much significance to Christmas (outside of the "twelve days" reference. In 1979, Canadian Hugh McKellar wrote an article "decoding" the twelve days, but the associations he made in his decoding were his own, not from antiquity.¹³ Still those associations have become prominent, especially in Internet chains, as reflecting the "true meaning" of the song. As typically urged today, the song's references are: Jesus (the one partridge); the Old and New Testaments (the two turtle doves); the three kings (three French hens); the four gospels (four calling birds), etc. We might note here that "four calling birds" itself is an error from the original song lyrics. Originally the song was "four colly birds," an expression for blackbirds!

7. B. "St. Francis of Assisi."

St. Francis of Assisi started the Christmas tradition of the manger scene.¹⁴ Two years after Francis died, his friend and student Thomas of Celano wrote a biography of Francis. In the biography, Thomas explained the first nativity scene that Francis had made just three years prior to Francis's death, quoting Francis:

"I wish to enact the memory of that babe who was born in Bethlehem: to see as much as possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his

¹³ McKellar, Hugh D., "The Twelve Days of Christmas", *The Hymn*, (Oct. 1994) Vol 45, No. 4 at 1ff.

¹⁴ See Church History lesson 42.

infant needs, how he lay in a manger, and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay.”¹⁵

It was 1223 in the town of Greccio, and the preparations were just as Francis instructed. Coming to the rebuilt nativity, Francis was “glad” for he saw firsthand how,

Simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.¹⁶

Interestingly, the Franciscans are also credited with being one of the principle sources of spreading Christmas Carols. Evidently, they were fond of singing, and took those carols as part of their celebration with nativity scenes throughout Europe.

8. A. “Middle Age Plays in France.”

In the Middle Ages, Christmas was a civil holiday and the start of the church calendar. It was marked in various ways by celebrations. We have records of Christmas plays being performed in 11th Century France. The celebrations eventually took on an almost un-Christian atmosphere of partying and revelry. In reaction, the reformation movement sought to seriously downplay, if not outright remove, Christmas celebrations. The reformers believed that if God had intended the church to celebrate Christmas, he would have given an indication of its true date.

In England in 1647, Parliament passed a law forbidding the observance of Christmas. In Puritan-laden Massachusetts in 1659, it also became illegal to celebrate Christmas. This law lasted until 1681 when it was revoked. Still, Christmas was slow to recover in New England. It was not until New England experienced an influx of large numbers of Irish and German immigrants, that Christmas generated a great deal of celebrants. The basis for the puritanical ban on Christmas was the recognition that the New Testament scriptures nowhere provide the basis for such a celebration.

Those parts of America settled by Spanish and French, however, had no such reticence about the holiday. In these parts of America, Christmas was celebrated with great fanfare and festivities. Still, as America went into the 1800’s, Christmas was not considered a time of “family togetherness” nor were there

¹⁵ Thomas of Celano, *The Life of Saint Francis*, (New City Press 2004), at 94-95.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Christmas trees, Christmas cards, or really much in the way of Christmas presents (and Santa was nowhere to be found in America at that time either!).

9. D. “Turkey.”

Saint Nicolas was a real man who had lived in the area of Turkey in the late 200’s and early 300’s. We actually have very little knowledge of him from his lifetime. We know he was the Bishop of Myra and that he died around 345-352. Beyond that, we have a number of very old legends that sprang up about him. The legends include his presence at the Council of Nicaea¹⁷ where he supposedly slapped the heretic Arius over the divinity of Christ. Other legends include his care for others. One key legend said that Nicolas learned of a man with three daughters who had no dowry to give so that they could marry. The man was going to have to sell his daughters into slavery. Hearing of it, Nicolas took small bags of gold and tossed them into the man’s window at night. The man caught Nicolas the third time, but Nicolas exacted a promise that the man would never identify Nicolas as the gift giver until after Nicolas’s death (hence the explanation for the legend as opposed to a contemporaneous account).

Nicolas was also considered the patron saint of sailors. Through the centuries after his death, sailors throughout Europe invoked Nicolas as their protector in their ships. By the Reformation, more churches were dedicated to Nicolas than any other personage of the church other than Mary and Jesus himself. The reformers sought to eliminate the veneration given to Nicolas, but a number of countries continued to honor him as a patron saint looking after children and sailors. In Holland, he was called “Sinter Claas” (from *Sinter* – “Saint” and *c’lass* – “Ni-colas”). Many scholars deduce that the Dutch brought this tradition and veneration to New Amsterdam (later renamed “New York”).

10. C. “New York.”

In 1812, Washington Irving published, *Diedrich Knickerbocker’s History of New York*. In it, Saint Nicolas plays a role in the work as the patron saint of New York, supposedly telling the Dutch where to found New Amsterdam (which later becomes “New York.”) In this work, Irving wrote of Nicolas flying over trees in a wagon bringing gifts to children, with “smoke from his pipe spread like a cloud overhead.” This is not deemed reliable history, recognizing the author is the same fellow who wrote Rip Van Winkle!

¹⁷ See church history lesson 18.

Just two years earlier, John Pintard tried to help quell the civil unrest and vandalism in New York by holding a banquet in honor of Saint Nicolas. Pintard felt that resurrecting old customs where rich and poor celebrated together would help stop the unrest. Pintard had a poster prepared for his celebration (which he set for December 6, the feast day of Saint Nicolas) of “Sancte Claus”.

In 1822, New Yorker Clement Clarke Moore joined in adding to the Nicolas tradition writing the children’s poem, “Twas the night before Christmas.”¹⁸ Actually, he called it, “A Visit from St. Nicolas!” The poem was picked up by various media and within 20 years had spread throughout the country. Moore invented the eight reindeer and set the time for the visit: The night before Christmas. Behold, a new tradition was born.

11. A. “Martin Luther.”

Kris Kringle is a modernization that originated in changes Luther brought with the Reformation. Luther sought to stop the practice of honoring and praying to saints. In an effort to give people a new and proper place for focus, he substituted the honoring of Saint Nicolas during the Christmas season with honoring the Christ Child. In Old German, “Christ Child” was “*Kris Kindl*.” It was just a matter of time before *Kris Kindl* became Kris Kringle in Anglican usage and merged into the Father Christmas figure.

“Father Christmas” was another similar effort to change things from honoring Catholic saints, although this was by Henry VIII. Father Christmas was in many ways an incarnation of the Saturn figure associated with the pagan celebration of Saturnalia still extant a bit from Roman times.¹⁹

12. A. “Martin Luther.”

¹⁸ Over the last few decades a long quiet debate about the authorship of this poem has gained prominence. For generations the family of a New Yorker named Henry Livingston, Jr. claimed that Livingston wrote the poem in 1807 or 1808. Supposedly he gave a copy of the poem to a guest and then the poem resurfaced in 1821 with Moore claiming authorship. While this claim never gained much traction, Don Foster, a Vassar College English professor, recently published an analysis of the poem comparing everything from grammar, word selection, spelling and style to what one might expect from Moore (a professor of ancient languages) and Livingston (who was three-quarters Dutch – a fact important in the analysis!). Foster makes a strong case, for those who might care, that Livingston really was the originating author. See, Foster, Don, *Author Unknown: On the Trail of Anonymous*, (Holt 2000).

¹⁹ Federer, William, *There Really is a Santa Claus*, (Amerisearch 2003) at 39.

While Luther wins this one as well as question 11, this one is likely a legend rather than reality. Christmas trees are of uncertain origin. We do have records of a Christmas play performed in 1605 in Strasbourg. In that play, there was a “Paradise Tree.” The Paradise Tree was hung with apples and was termed to be the tree of life. It was also seen as an appropriate celebration tree with Christmas, because in Christ, Christians have a return to paradise with God.

A particularly interesting legend about Christmas trees gives credit to Luther for them. Supposedly, Luther was walking home on a cold Christmas Eve. He saw the glistening starlight reflecting off the icy trees and was so moved by the beauty that he cut a tree, brought it into his home, and lit it with candles. The legend is nice, but there is no basis for this legend actually occurring, especially considering that Luther was one of the main reformers who actually fought against a common celebration of Christmas.

Perhaps the most famous Christmas song about the tree is *O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree*, which is an English adaptation of the German song, *O Tannenbaum*. A tannenbaum is a fir tree, and we have lyrics of German tannenbaum songs that date to the 1500’s.

By the 1830’s, Christmas trees became a common occurrence in Germany. Many scholars believe that German immigrants brought the tradition over to America around this time period. With due respect to the legend that George Washington attacked the Hessian (German) troops on Christmas Eve at Valley Forge while they gathered around a Christmas tree rather than guarding their position, there is no basis for the “Christmas Tree” part of that legend. The first written indication of Christmas trees in America is found in Matthew Zahm’s diary entry on December 20, 1821. The tradition gradually grew throughout the country.

13. C. “World War I.”

Almost one million had died in World War I by the end of 1914. On the Western Front, both sides were stuck in rat-infested, damp, filthy trenches separated by “no man’s land.” They were close enough to hear each other, but technology and war strategy left them in these trenches with neither side able to advance successfully. Any attempt to crawl out of the trench into no man’s land resulted in almost certain death. On Christmas Eve, a cold front blew through, helping solidify the mud with frost and cold air. That night, lights appeared from the German trenches, making the British think another assault was about to happen. Rather than charge out of the trenches, the Germans started singing “Silent Night” (*Stille Nacht*). The lights were small lights on small Christmas trees erected by German infantry. Without permission from any generals, both sides left their trenches and went forth into no man’s land. They began singing together, eating together and

drinking together. At places, they joined forces to bury the dead that littered the fields.

This display alarmed the leaders on both sides and once everyone returned to their trenches, the leaders of both armies put forth great effort to prevent any such occurrence from happening again.²⁰

14. C. “Montgomery Wards.”

Now first we should teach our younger readers that Montgomery Wards was a department store “back in the day.” Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer was a marketing gimmick! In 1939, Montgomery Wards employee Robert L. May wrote a booklet for customers called, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The book was a smash! The company gave away 2,400,000 copies in 1939 and reissued it in 1947 giving away another 3,500,000 copies. May’s brother-in-law then put the Rudolph character into a song which Gene Autry *reluctantly* recorded in 1949. It became his biggest hit, by far out-selling Autry’s own penned Christmas song, *Nestor, the Long-Eared Christmas Donkey!*

15. This is an unfair question! The answer is not given, because Santa/Saint Nick has been portrayed as all of the above! In Europe, Saint Nicolas was frequently pictured as a stern patriarch in bishop’s robes (frequently blue). In the first edition of *The Night Before Christmas*, Santa looks almost like a gnome wearing a frock coat and pantaloons. The current incarnation of Santa, in his red coat with fur, came from one principal source: Thomas Nast.

Thomas Nast was a political cartoonist made famous early in life drawing for Harper’s magazine. He was responsible for the drawings of the donkey and elephant as mascots of the Democratic and Republican parties. He brought down politicians and was credited for politicians’ victories. General Ulysses S. Grant attributed his election victory to the sword of General Sheridan (a union general in the Civil War) “and the pencil of Thomas Nast.”²¹ Nast made a “jolly, round-bellied, white-bearded, fur-clad embodiment of good cheer.” Nast also placed Santa’s workshop at the North Pole, a politically neutral place that stopped any country from claiming him as a “national.”²²

²⁰ See the amazing history of this preserved by Brown, Malcolm and Seaton, Shirley, *Christmas Truce*, (Leo Cooper/Secker & Warburg 1984).

²¹ Nast St. Hill, Thomas, *Thomas Nast’s Christmas Drawings*, (Harper & Brothers 1978), at v.

²² *Ibid.*, at vi-vii.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“The word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (Jn 1:14).

John does not give us the nativity scene in his gospel account, yet he still gives us the core message of the nativity: God became man, full of grace and truth, yet fully human as well. Similarly, Paul does not write of the nativity, but he places the concept front and center to the Philippians when he urged them:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11).

This is the point of Saint Francis re-enacting the nativity scene. A chance to observe simplicity in a place of honor, where poverty is exalted, and humility is commended. May we find this Christmas spirit in our lives everyday!

2. *“One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord”* (Rom. 14:5-6).

Some people believe that Christmas should not be celebrated as the birth of Jesus because we have no example or instruction for such observance in the New Testament. Our best evidence indicates that this observance arose in the early church, but not the New Testament church. I have a number of Christian brothers and sisters who do not celebrate the holiday as a special religious day, but simply as a secular time of giving and acknowledging the giving nature of our God. Others point out that the New Testament church did not celebrate anyone’s birthday. History accords that anniversaries of deaths were celebrated in New Testament times, but not anniversaries of births. Once society and culture began to celebrate birthdays, the church included in such celebrations the birth of Christ. Then still others believe that to celebrate Christmas with any aspects of commercialism (Santa, gift

extravagance, etc.) is wrong and loses the focus of what should be only a holy day. What should we do?

Might I suggest that each family and each person can seek what is right before God. The key answer for everyone should be the same: Do what you think is right before God, but do not hold your opinion over others who are themselves seeking what is right before God. Scripture details that God is seeking hearts devoted to him and his will. Our goal as believers should be to discern that will prayerfully, and then seek to follow it. We can unite upon the Savior, born into the world with a chorus of rejoicing angels. We can unite upon this same Savior who died in this world, alone with the sins of humanity. We can unite upon the Savior who rose in resurrection with the angels again proclaiming the empty tomb. Our unity is Jesus, not our philosophy of Christmas! Let us use this season to seek God, devoted to follow where that leads, and with unity of Spirit, encourage others to do the same!

3. *“Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, “Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we...have come to worship him. Herod...assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people...inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, ‘In Bethlehem...’”* (Mt. 2:1-5).

This story has always stunned me. There are four sets of characters: the wise men, Herod, the Jewish scholars, and the infant Jesus. The wise men are searching for Jesus to worship him. Herod wants to know where Jesus is to kill him. The Jewish leaders know their Scripture and know where Jesus is born. When Herod calls the chief priests and scribes in to get the location, the response is not, “Let us go home and study on this, and we’ll answer you next week.” No, the response is immediate, “In Bethlehem... as the prophet says...” The Jewish scholars then quote Micah on Bethlehem as the locale.

Look what happens next: the wise men use their new found knowledge to go interact and worship, experiencing the most holy moment to yet occur in the history of the world. Soon Herod sent his executioners to slaughter the innocent children. Perhaps most stunning of all, the Jewish scribes and priests, those *with knowledge of where the Messiah was to be*, went home and went about their normal business, never seizing the chance to witness the most remarkable moment in the history of the human race.

This story jolts me because it leaves me wondering about the many who know where Jesus is, but choose not to experience him. People who know where and how to interact with him, but can’t be bothered, people that choose other priorities than relating to the Divine. I do not want to be that

person! Let us use this season, and every season, to seek the God who wants to be found!

WANT MORE?

Give this Christmas season. Find someone less fortunate than you and do something for him or her. When you do so, do not do it in your name or honor. Do it as anonymously as possible, simply giving the credit and glory to God and the Christ child born in Bethlehem!