

ual observance of a 'Christian Sabbath' (see *Col. 2: 17*). While concessions may be made, the Apostle Paul clearly regarded the observation of special days as a sign of spiritual immaturity (*Rom. 14: 1-5*). Christ Himself only ever commanded the remembrance of His death in the Lord's Supper (*Lk. 22: 19*), but not on a particular day (*1 Cor. 11: 26*). What applies to 'Christmas' applies also to 'Easter'. Since the English translation of the Greek word *pascha* is 'passover', the retention of the pagan 'Easter' in the Authorised Version of Acts 12: 4 is misleading. The chief point is that every day of a Christian's life, not just one in seven, or other special days, is to be lived for Christ (*Matt. 6: 11-12; 2 Cor. 4: 16*).

#### **A CONSISTENT CHRISTIAN CONCLUSION**

Plainly, it is time to call it a day - an ordinary day! If the traditional Christmas is without a biblical basis, it should not be observed. Only then will celebrating the message of salvation from sin cease being an occasion for more sin. If we have the courage to avoid being 'conformed to this world' (*Rom. 12: 2*), we will then experience that 'liberty by which Christ has made us free' (*Gal. 5: 1*). However, those still 'trapped by tradition' will probably object as follows:

#### **Question 1: Don't Jehovah's Witnesses ban Christmas?**

*Answer:* Yes they do. But they throw the baby out with the bath water by denying the deity of Christ. An anti-Christmas stance is not to be confused with their anti-Christian heresy.

#### **Q. 2: To neglect the church calendar is to invite an unstructured and unbalanced understanding of the Christian Faith.**

*Ans:* This does not necessarily follow. With the cessation of the Jewish festivals, the Apostles managed quite well without a new religious calendar. Expository preaching through whole books of the Bible ensures a comprehensive preaching of the Gospel. Regular weekly affirmations of the Christian Faith (e.g. in the creeds) keep all the truths of Christ's life before us all through the year.

#### **Q. 3: Cannot Evangelical Protestants use Christmas to preach the Gospel?**

*Ans:* Yes, but to observe Christmas for such a reason is to follow the same compromising pagan-inspired agenda adopted by Roman Catholics and others. Sadly, Protestant churches are guilty here. Should we resort to pragmatism, using an unbiblical method to promote the biblical Gospel? Even 'Christian Christmas' cards - as distinct from undated greetings - are at variance with Galatians 4: 10. We do not need the season of Christmas to preach the gospel (*2 Tim. 4: 2*).

#### **Q. 4: If consistent biblical Christians follow a cheerless Christmas, does that commend the Christian life?**

*Ans:* Shame on us! We do not need the artificial merriment of a pagan-inspired, pseudo-Christian festival. True Christians should have personal and family joy all the year round. That may include gifts and celebrations with family and friends (*Est. 9: 22; 1 Sam. 2: 19; Lk. 11: 13; Phil. 4: 14-19; Jude 12*) at any time of the year - including even the month of December! *But there is simply no case for linking these things with a dubious date.* We may enjoy them (*Acts 14: 17; 1 Tim. 6: 17*) with contentment and moderation (*1 Tim. 6: 8-10; Phil. 4: 11-12*) and without forgetting the poor and the needy (*Gal. 2: 10*).

#### **Q. 5: What about the children? Can they be expected to understand this teaching? What about presents?**

*Ans:* That all depends on their parents. Why are Christian parents prepared to teach their children Bible truth all the year round, only to teach them dubious tradition in December? Presents are quite in order (*Lk. 11: 13*) - even in December - but not as 'Christmas' presents.

Certainly, Christian restraint will be misunderstood (*1 Pet. 4: 3-4*) but, unlike the world's extravagance and obscene entertainment, our cheer will be without regrets or hangovers or worse! And why? Because we believe the everlasting gospel: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life' (*Jn. 3: 16*). Reader, may you also know the joy of this faith and have the courage to rethink the whole question of 'Christmas'.

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## **IS CHRISTMAS CHRISTIAN?**

### ***A Reformed Rethink***

While expressions of goodwill, social gatherings and exchange of gifts and greetings are welcome at any time of the year, the Christmas period poses many problems. Indeed, few would disagree that the Christmas has become a commercial racket. The life-style of many surely indicates that 'Christ' has been replaced by 'X', the symbol for the unknown. It is not uncommon for people to turn their noses up at 'religious' Christmas cards. But even if 'Merry Xmas' is preferred to 'Happy Christmas', it is very doubtful if the merriment is what it was.

#### **A HAPPY CHRISTMAS?**

Who looks forward to Christmas? Well, children do. Small children are enchanted at the prospect of getting gifts from Santa Claus. Older children, after they've grown out of the 'Father Christmas' phase, still enjoy the excitement of presents. For teenagers, Christmas is a time for parties, extra opportunities for a 'good time' - drinking, dancing (with drugs?) and late-night fun. Many adults also enjoy the season of goodwill and good food: presents, office parties, family get-togethers and a chance to relax.

#### **A HARROWING CHRISTMAS?**

For other adults, especially the unemployed, Christmas is a worrying if not depressing time. Family and commercial pressures make it difficult to meet their children's expectations, made worse by the stress of peer pressure. For others, Christmas aggravates - and frequently causes - the misery of divorce and family breakdown. In these circumstances, the strain of being sociable is intolerable. Spending a few hours trying to be nice to those you seek to avoid for most of the year is not exactly enter-

tainment!

### A 'HELLISH' CHRISTMAS?

For those who live alone, Christmas can only deepen their misery. For the homeless, it can be 'hell'. For many sensible parents, Christmas will heighten anxiety if their not-so-sensible teenage children drink and drive. For the police and ambulance services, Christmas can create nightmare scenarios - crimes of robbery and drunken violence, drink-drive accidents and associated human carnage. Of course, the world of commerce hopes to grow fat around Christmas - at our excessive expense.

So, is Christmas all that it's cracked up to be? In their more sober moments, even nominal church-goers may wonder what all this has to do with the birth of Christ. Indeed, what harmony is there between selfish enjoyment and salvation's evangel? Is there any link between carols and commercialism? The ever-widening gap between secular materialism and Christian spirituality becomes an unbridgeable chasm at Christmas time. The consumer craze hardly fits with the manger message. In these circumstances, more serious Christians feel increasingly trapped by the unholy alliance between a carnival of greed and the celebration of God's grace. It is surely time to ask how a feast to Christianise a pagan festival has become a festival that paganises the Christian feast. Is it simply enough to go on pleading that we shouldn't forget the meaning of Christmas? In short, how did it all begin?

### CHRISTMAS IS NOT BIBLICAL

Of this we can be sure, the Christmas festival didn't begin in the New Testament. The Gospel writers never hint that Christ was born on December 25th. While the date of Christ's birth is far less important than the event itself, evidence suggests that this took place in the Spring. Indeed, Judean shepherds never kept their flocks in the fields in the middle of winter

(see *Luke 2: 8*). Jewish sources indicate that the Bethlehem sheep were in readiness for the Passover (see the *Mishnah: Shekalim 7. 4*). Winters in Israel can be very severe, so when Christ prophesied the Roman destruction of Jerusalem (which occurred in AD 70), He himself urged the persecuted to pray that their escape might not be in winter (*Matt. 24: 20*). There is no evidence that the Romans decreed the 'taxing' or census at a time when travel might be difficult (*Lk. 2:1-3*). It probably occurred after winter in the interests of administrative efficiency. Thus Christ would not have been born in the winter.

### CHRISTMAS HAS A PAGAN ORIGIN

How then was 'Christmas Day' fixed on December 25th? Associated with the winter solstice (the transition from shortening to lengthening days), it was an attempt to 'Christianise' the pagan mid-winter festival known as the 'Nativity of the unconquered sun'. Let *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (R. Appleton, 1911, Vol. 3, p. 727) confess to the truth: 'The well-known solar feast of 'Natalis Invicta' celebrated on 25th December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our Christmas date'. The choice was made by 'Pope' Julius I (AD 337-52). Indeed, this was the result of a growing tendency of the Roman Church to meet paganism half-way. And the great Roman *Saturnalia*, a festival of fire and light was notorious for its wild celebrations. All kinds of grotesque merriment and conduct were encouraged in honour of Sol, the sun-god. So, by the end of the fourth century, 'Christmas Day' was established.

This Christianised paganism brought its obvious problems. Many people identified Jesus with Sol! The 2nd century church father Tertullian had opposed this early tendency and Augustine (AD 354-430) lamented the continuing confusion. Pope Leo I (AD 440-61) bitterly reproved it. Throughout Europe as a whole, the false association between Christ's birth and pagan customs became entrenched. Christmas trees, mistletoe and yule logs all have pagan significance. But

they have nothing to do with the birth of Christ. For further details, see Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons* (Loizeaux Brothers, 1959), pp. 91ff. This much is clear, that the resultant blend between Christian and blatant pagan symbolism is an unholy alliance. The real message of Christ has been suffocated. The mid-winter romp is making nonsense of the thin veneer of Christian ritual. See Margaret Baker, *Christian Customs and Folklore* (Shire Publications, 1968), p. 4.

### WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

As the centuries passed, the church calendar developed. Saints days and special days dominated an increasingly superstitious piety. Examples are *Candlemas Day* (feast of the purification of Mary), February 2nd; *Lammas Day* (harvest), August 1st; and *Michaelmas Day* (feast of St. Michael), September 29th. For a comprehensive list, see Ralph Woodrow, *Babylon Mystery Religion* (R. Woodrow Evangelistic Association, 1981), pp. 30ff. However, all this is in glaring contradiction to the Bible. While Old Testament Judaism was structured around a religious calendar, New Testament Christianity dispensed with it. When some Christians were being ensnared by 'Judaisers', the Apostle Paul wrote: 'You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have laboured for you in vain' (*Gal. 4: 10-11*). The Colossians also forgot that Old Testament 'holy days' were now obsolete symbols since Christ had come (see *Col. 2: 16-17*).

While calendars - rightly used - reflect the physical realities and routines of daily life (see *Gen. 8: 22*), they possess no ritual significance. Even 'the first day of the week' (*Mk. 16: 2*), on which Christ's resurrection was discovered, was only used as a point of reference (*1 Cor. 16: 2*), notwithstanding that it came to be called 'the Lord's Day' (*Rev. 1: 10*). That Christians usually worship on the 'Lord's Day' is for reasons of order and convenience rather than a rit-