

# Christmas: Dance, Thou Universe!

Maker of the sun, He is made under the sun.

In the Father He remains, from His mother He goes forth.

Creator of heaven and earth, He was born on earth under heaven.

Unspeakably wise, He is wisely speechless.

Filling the world, He lies in a manger.

Ruler of the stars, He nurses at His mother's bosom.

He is both great in the nature of God, and small in the form of a servant.

Augustine (354-430)

On this day earth shall ring

With song children sing

To the Lord, Christ our King,

Born on earth to save us;

Him the father gave us.

Ideo, Ideo, Ideo

gloria in excelsis Deo!

Charlemagne the Great (742-814)

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*With song the children sing* ... my early childhood memories of Christmas resound with the songs of the season: Joy to the World! ... Away in a Manger ... O Come, O Come, Emmanuel ... Good Christian men, Rejoice ... Hark, the Herald Angels Sing ... The First Noel ... O Little Town of Bethlehem ... O Come, All Ye Faithful ... Silent Night, Holy Night ... Angels We Have Heard on High.

*Gloria in excelsis Deo* ... As a six year old singing on Christmas eve, I had no idea what these words meant, but what I did know was that: (1) the song was beautiful and (2) the song was joyfully celebrating the coming of Christ to earth. Years later and with some Latin under my belt, a translation is in order: The Savior of the World has come. *Ideo, Ideo, Ideo* (for this reason, for this reason, for this reason), boast with joy in the distinguished excellencies of God.

I could not wait for the Tueten ... after our Christmas Eve worship service, all the children would receive a large paper sack, a Tueten, filled with nuts, candy, figs, apples, and oranges. Giving children the Tueten was one of the many traditions practiced by German Mennonites at Christmas time.

As G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) wrote:

“It is in the old Christmas carols, hymns, and traditions – those which date from the Middle Ages – that we find not only what makes Christmas poetic and soothing and stately, but first and foremost what makes Christmas exciting. The exciting quality of Christmas rests on an ancient and admitted paradox. It rests upon the paradox that the power and center of the whole universe may be found in some seemingly small matter; that the stars in their courses may move

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like a wheel around the neglected outhouse of an inn.”

At various times in my adult life I have sadly encountered sincere Christians who debunk the whole idea of celebrating Christmas. One of two reasons is usually given: (1) They are offended by the commercialization of the season (and rightly so), and (2) they not so politely condemn all Christmas observances and traditions as pagan. Most in the second reason camp are rabidly anti-Roman Catholic.<sup>1</sup> They tell me to just look at the very word Christmas ... Christ mass ... and conclude, “Cased close, argument sealed.” If that does not convince me, they list a number of reasons that this essay will briefly investigate.

## The Hislop/Woodrow thesis

The fuel that lights most of the anti-Christmas fires originates from two books: *The Two Babylons* by Alexander Hislop (1853, reprinted in 1959) and *Babylon Mystery Religion: Ancient and Modern* by Ralph Woodrow (1981). Both authors document a remarkable collection of data on ancient pagan rites and observances. However, the conclusions that they draw are fallacious. For example, while it is true that the pagans worshipped the evergreen tree and many other trees (the savage Teutonic tribes of Germany worshipped the oak tree), *this does not make these trees pagan*. Trees are God’s handiwork. According to Romans 1, those who suppress the truth of God’s handiwork in creation end up worshipping His handiwork using His handiwork thereby! We should not be surprised, then, by what these authors tell us about the practices of ancient paganism.

In contrast, Christians have always understood the tree of life (see Genesis 2:9 and Revelation 22:2) as a type of Christ. The celebration of Christ as the tree of life at His nativity appeared very early in Church history and the tree of life symbol has been used on and off over the centuries by Christians.

## What about the Christmas tree tradition?

The evergreen Christmas tree has a long and storied testament in Church history as a type of Christ, the tree of life. It became a popular symbol in Europe in the 8<sup>th</sup> century after Boniface of Crediton (680-755) decided to leave a life of comfort and security to become a missionary to the Teutonic tribes of Germany. Faced with the awful specter of their brutal pagan practices, he decided to strike at the root of their superstitions. In the city of Geismar, he publicly announced that he would destroy their gods. He then marched toward their sacred grove of oak trees. In sight of an immense and awestruck crowd, he cut down the sacred Oak of Thor, an ancient and revered object of pagan worship. When immediate punishment did not strike Boniface because of his sacrilege, the crowd realized that their gods were powerless. They professed faith in Christ.

Three weeks later, on the first Sunday of Advent, Boniface heard that a vestal virgin was about to be sacrificed by Druid priests near the sacred grove. Running through the snowy woods, he arrived just in time to see the knife raised above the girl’s bosom. As the knife plunged downward, Boniface thrust a small, wooden cross he was carrying between the blade and the girl’s heart saving her life. In the astonished aftermath, Boniface seized upon the opportunity to declare that Christ had already made the ultimate once for all sacrifice on the tree of Golgotha. As the surrounding crowd listened in stunned silence, Boniface took the sacrificial knife in hand and began to hack off low hanging branches in the sacred grove. Passing them to everyone present, he told each to take the small fir boughs home as a reminder of the completeness of Christ’s work on the tree of Calvary. He told them to adorn their hearths with symbols of God’s grace and encouraged them to chop logs from the sacred grove to fuel their home

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fires as a memorial of Christ's coming.

Such exploits inspired a number of Christmas traditions that served to reenact the Christmas story learned from Boniface:

- The Advent wreath – a fir garland set with five candles, one for each of the four Sundays of Advent and the last for Christmas day itself.
- Strings of lights and garlands under the eaves and across the mantles.
- Yule logs burning in the fireplace.
- The Christmas tree, decorated with candles, tinsel, baubles, and fruits (hung to reflect Revelation 22:2). Martin Luther, the great 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformer, encouraged the Christmas tree tradition, in honor of Boniface, as a reminder that the idols of this world have been rendered powerless by Christ's finished work and that the tree of Calvary has become the very crux of history. That the tree be evergreen speaks of everlasting life in Christ.

## The Puritans did not celebrate Christmas

The Puritans in early America abandoned *for a season* the celebration of Christmas, not because of its association with ancient paganism, but because of the prevalence of drunkenness. Again, the argument to renounce Christmas because of its association with drunkenness is fallacious. Irrespective of the Christmas celebration, people continue to get drunk on any and every occasion.

## Christ was *not* born on December 25

Some debunk the idea that Christ was born on December 25. Hislop and Woodrow correctly link this day with ancient pagan festivals, which included human mutilations and vestal sacrifices. In his sterling work, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Alfred Edersheim gives evidence that favors Christ's birth on this date. Although Professor Ernest L. Martin's book *The Birth of Christ Recalculated* uses astronomical evidence to point to a early autumn date for Christ's birth, he also concludes that December 25 was the likely date of the Magi's visit of the Christ child (one or two years after Christ's birth). The visit of the Magi is traditionally celebrated as Epiphany on January 6. Again, just because ancient pagans "made brutal merriment" on December 25 does not make December 25 pagan. Would not our sovereign God, in His providential wisdom, use a day of pagan darkness to introduce to the world the Light of Life?<sup>2</sup> Whether Christ was born on December 25 or not, this is certainly how the early Christians understood the issues surrounding this day.

## The early Church did not celebrate Christmas

Hoping to add fuel to the anti-Christmas fire, some reiterate that the Bible nowhere commands us to observe the Lord's birth. As a pious addendum, they say Christians should "honor the birth of Christ" every day of the year. This we rightly should do, but does that mean that we should *not* take especial note of Christ's birth? Everyday I am thankful that my children have been born. That does not mean that I disregard their birthday. Heaven and said child forbid! Note that the Bible nowhere commands us to worship twice on Sunday, have prayer meetings on Wednesday night, Sunday school, etc. But the Bible does *command* us to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:30). Rejoicing wholeheartedly in our Lord's coming is one way of showing this love.

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The early Church understood the implications of celebrating the birth of a King. Scholars too often tell us that the early Christians (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) did not observe Christmas or knew nothing about such celebrations. We have been told that the first Christmas observances occurred in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century. If this is true, *then why do we find these Christmas observations so well defined and developed?* A legitimate conclusion would be that the fine-tuned 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century Christmas celebrations reflected centuries of pre-established practice and patterns.

The early Christians certainly imitated the pattern established by the magi (Matthew 2:2) and celebrated the birth of Christ as the coming of the blessed and only Potentate, the King of kings and Lord of lords (I Timothy 6:15). In ancient times, the king's birthday was the cornerstone of holidays and observed annually, sometimes even monthly. This celebration acknowledged the ruler as King and Savior, his word as law. According to Ethelbert Stauffer, in *Christ and the Caesars*, when the Assyrian Great King ascended to the throne, an age of salvation was promised:

“Days of justice, years of righteousness, plenteous rainfall, good prices for merchandise. Old men leap for joy, children sing. The condemned are acquitted, the prisoners set free. The naked are clothed, the sick are cured.”

Imprudent as these statements are, they only grew more so in the days of Rome. Virgil hailed the advent of Caesar Augustus as the “turning point of the ages.” Inscriptions on official coinage read, “Salvation is to be found in none other save Augustus, and there is no other name given to men in which they can be saved” (compare with Acts 4:12). For anyone in Rome to celebrate another king's birthday was treasonous and this is why, during the first few centuries, Christians could not openly observe the birthday of their King. As an historical sidebar, note that during the Enlightenment, the “enlightened” Christian monarchs of Europe banned as treasonable and revolutionary the use of Mary's Magnificat (Luke 2:46-55).

Christmas is not a compromise with pagan idolatry. If the reader still thinks that it is, then, with respect to Christian liberty, he cannot and should not celebrate Christmas. This liberty, however, should not be used to criticize or chide the one who understands Christmas as a time to especially honor Christ the King in whom all idolatry has been rendered powerless.

For me, Christmas is a time to gather with the family of God to exuberantly recall the purpose of Christ's first advent – that He has come to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found. It is a time to anticipate the blessed hope of the inevitable triumph of His Second Advent. It is a time for all good Christian men to rejoice. It is a time to enjoin all creation to “Dance, thou universe, on hearing the glad tidings of great joy!”

## Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> I write as one committed to the doctrines that fueled the Protestant Reformation. Although I recognize the doctrinal errors that eventually engulfed Christendom in the late Middle Ages (which the Reformers attempted to correct), I steadfastly reject the notion prevalent in some Protestant circles that anything “medieval” is bad, ugly, and erroneous. We must seek to “honor our fathers” (Exodus 20:12) in the faith, however wrong they might have been about certain doctrines. Remember, without medieval Christendom, there would have been no Protestant Reformation let alone Western Civilization. We err greatly if we categorically reject this heritage.

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<sup>2</sup> Note carefully that the pagan festival of the “Birth of the Unconquered Son” instituted by the Roman Emperor Aurelian on 25 December 274, was almost certainly an attempt to create a pagan *alternative* to a date that was already of some significance to Roman Christians.