

# Christmas & Christians



# The Origins of Christmas – Pagan Roots

- In ancient Rome, December 25 was a celebration of the Unconquered Sun, marking the return of longer days.
- It followed **Saturnalia**, a festival where people feasted and exchanged gifts. The church in Rome began celebrating Christmas on December 25 in the 4th century during the reign of Constantine, the first Christian emperor, possibly to weaken pagan traditions.
  - **Saturnalia**, the most popular of Roman festivals. Dedicated to the Roman god Saturn (Mithra, Iranian sun god)
  - Saturnalia was a pleasure-seeking time, food and drink were plentiful and the normal Roman social order was turned upside down. Enslaved people were given temporary freedom and treated as equals. Business and schools were closed so that everyone could participate in the holiday's festivities. Akin to today's Mardi Gras.

# The Origins of Christmas Traditions

- In Scandinavia, the Norse celebrated Yule from December 21, the winter solstice, through January. Norway is birthplace for the “Yule log.”
- In recognition of the return of the sun, fathers and sons would bring home large logs, which they would set on fire. The people would feast until the log burned out, which could take as many as 12 days.
- The Norse believed that each spark from the fire represented a new pig or calf that would be born during the coming year.
- While Christmas did not start in Germany, many of the holiday’s traditions began there, including decorating trees.
- Christmas traditions around the world are diverse, but share key traits that often involve themes of light, evergreens and hope.
- Probably the most celebrated holiday in the world, our modern Christmas is a product of hundreds of years of both secular and religious traditions from around the globe, many of them centered on the winter solstice.

# The Origins of Christmas – Pagan Roots

- It is claimed that in Germany about 723 the English missionary St. Boniface encountered pagans preparing a sacrifice at an oak tree dedicated to the god Thor (Donar).
- Boniface took an ax to the tree, and, when not struck down by their god, he proclaimed to the awed pagans that a nearby evergreen was their “holy tree.” Other sources report that a fir grew on the site of the fallen oak.
- Evergreen trees became part of Christian rites in Germany, and in the Middle Ages “paradise trees” began to appear there.
- Meant to represent the Garden of Eden, these evergreen trees were hung with apples and displayed in homes on December 24, the religious feast day of Adam and Eve.
- Other decorations were added—Martin Luther reportedly first hung lighted candles on a tree in the 16th century—and paradise trees evolved into Christmas trees.
- By the 19th century, Christmas trees were a firmly established tradition in Germany.

# The Origins of Christmas Traditions

- Poinsettia plants are named after Joel R. Poinsett, an American minister to Mexico, who brought the red-and-green plant from Mexico to America in 1828.
- Christmas cards can be traced back to England. An Englishman named John Calcott Horsley helped to popularize the tradition of sending Christmas greeting cards when he began producing small cards featuring festive scenes and a pre-written holiday greeting in the late 1830s.
- Celtic and Teutonic peoples had long considered mistletoe to have magic powers. It was said to have the ability to heal wounds and increase fertility.
- Christmas pudding, also known as “figgy pudding” or plum pudding, is an English dish dating back to the Middle Ages.
- Caroling also began in England. Wandering musicians would travel from town to town visiting castles and homes of the rich. In return for their performance, the musicians hoped to receive a hot meal or money.
- In the United States and England, children hang stockings on their bedpost or near a fireplace on Christmas Eve, hoping that it will be filled with treats while they sleep. In Scandinavia, similar-minded children leave their shoes on the hearth. This tradition can be traced to legends about Saint Nicholas.
- In France, Christmas is called Noel. This comes from the French phrase *les bonnes nouvelles*, which means “the good news” and refers to the gospel.

# The Origins of Christmas Traditions

- Clement Clarke Moore's 1823 poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, helped transform Santa Claus from a minor 4th century saint into the chimney-diving, right jolly old elf we all know today.
- Our modern image of Santa Claus as a rotund gentleman of a certain age dressed in a red-and-white suit and matching hat comes from an incredibly successful marketing campaign by Coca-Cola in the 1930s.
- Saint Nick precedes the advent of Christianity: His legend is mingled with that of Odin, who was at the center of the Yule celebration.
- Odin, the king of the gods also known as the god of wishes, was often depicted with a long white beard and rode an eight-legged horse that could fly.
- Charles Dickens' 1843 novel *A Christmas Carol* was conceived as a way for the cash-strapped author to make a quick buck.
- Dickens took the scenes he observed on the streets of London, added a heavy dose of sentiment, and made a smash-hit novel in around six weeks. Translated the world over, *A Christmas Carol* still defines the holiday for millions around the world.

# Christmas transition

- **Early Christians had a soft spot for pagans**
  - As Christians spread their religion into Europe in the first centuries A.D., they ran into people living by a variety of local and regional religious creeds.
  - Early Christians wanted to convert pagans. Dec. 25 (winter solace) perfect time to advance Christianity and partly why several traditional pagan symbols were kept (Christmas tree)
  - The date had a pleasing philosophical fit with festivals celebrating the lengthening days after the winter solstice (Dec. 21).
  - How fitting that the celebration of a sun god (Saturn) turns to celebration of the Son of God! The light of the World!
- **The Church was slow to embrace Christmas**
  - Despite the spread of Christianity, midwinter festivals did not become Christmas for hundreds of years. The Bible gives no reference to when Jesus was born
- **The Puritans hated the holiday**
  - As Catholic Church gradually came to embrace Christmas, the Protestant Reformation would ban the celebration. Christmas was illegal in England.

# Christmas transition

- **Gifts are a new (and surprisingly controversial) tradition**
  - It wasn't until the Victorian era of the 1800s that gift-giving shifted from New Year' Day to Christmas.
  - The consumerism of Christmas shopping seems, to some, to contradict the religious goal of celebrating Jesus Christ's birth. The excessive spending is the modern equivalent of the revelry and drunkenness that made the Puritans opposed.
- The first Christmas feast held on December 25 was in Rome in 336 A.D., after Christianity had become the Empire's official religion. The date was chosen as a way of overriding the winter solstice with a Christian celebration.
- **Christmas became a U.S. holiday in 1870** – turning it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia
  - The pilgrims (1620), were orthodox in their Puritan beliefs. As a result, Christmas was not a holiday in early America.
  - From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident.
  - After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas. Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.

# The making of Christ - mass

- Only two of the 27 books in the New Testament mention the Nativity, the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. They were written more than 80 years after Jesus' birth and don't mention the actual day of his birth.
- Christmas is literally “the mass for Christ”, the day on which Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus.
- The date for Jesus' birth was chosen by Pope Leo I, bishop of Rome (440-461), to coincide with the Festival of the Saturnalia, when Romans worshipped Saturn, the sun god.
- This was the day of the solar equinox, the shortest day of the year in the northern hemisphere, which officially marked the halfway point of winter.
- Western Christians celebrate the Nativity on a fixed date, 25 December. Some Eastern Orthodox Christians celebrate it on 6 January together with Epiphany, the revelation of the infant Jesus to three wise men. The Greek and Russian Orthodox celebrate Christmas on 7 January and Epiphany on 19 January.

# The making of Christ - mass

Some Christians reject Christmas as a “tradition of men” and old testament requirements

- Col 2: 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.
- Jeremiah 10: **1** Hear ye the word which the LORD speaketh unto you, O house of Israel: **2** Thus saith the LORD, Learn not the way of the heathen [Gentiles], and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. **3** For the customs of the people *are* vain: for *one* cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. **4** They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. **5** They *are* upright as the palm tree, but speak not: they must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither also *is it* in them to do good.
- Santa Clause (false god/deity – works based concept – anti-christ – deceiver):
  - You better watch out, You better not cry, Better not pout, I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town  
He's making a list, And checking it twice; Gonna find out Who's naughty and nice  
Santa Claus is coming to town  
He sees you when you're sleeping, He knows when you're awake  
He knows if you've been bad or good, So be good for goodness sake!  
O! You better watch out!  
You better not cry, Better not pout  
I'm telling you why  
Santa Claus is coming to town

# The making of Christ - mass

- **1 Corth. 8: 1** Now as touching things offered unto idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. **2** And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know. **3** But if any man love God, the same is known of him. **4** As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol *is* nothing in the world, and that *there is* none other God but one. **5** For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) **6** But to us *there is but* one God, the Father, of whom *are* all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom *are* all things, and we by him.
- God has allowed for the birth of His Son to become a global holiday
- Whole world is focused on the birth of CHRIST – gives us the opportunity to present the gospel
- No one is knowingly or intentionally worshiping the anti-Christ
- What does your HEART say and what is your intentions in observing Christmas?

# Things we can/should do in observing Christmas

## Bring the focus back to Christ – 7 “Rs”

- Redeem – celebrate the birth of Christ | Give Christ a gift! How?
- Reject – reject certain sectoral traditions (e.g., Christmas tree, corals, Santa Clause)
- Relay – share the story of Christ’s birth – the GOSPEL STORY!
- Remind – remind children on the REAL purpose of Christmas and why we celebrate
- Reflect – perfect time to reflect on the reason and the story of Christ’s birth and why
- Rejoice – great time to rejoice and worship
- Respect - respect the belief or conviction of other that may observe/celebrate Christmas differently