



"Many folks want to serve God, but only as advisors."
—Anonymous

09-Dec-16

The Names of Christmas

As I hustled through an office park on my daily morning walk, a woman arriving for work responded to my "Good morning" with, "Merry [Christmas!](#)" I waved politely and walked on. Her well-wishes reminded me that we are deep within the time of the year when such words are thrown about with wild abandon (though with far less abandon than in previous years due to political correctness). Also in the air are the songs, hymns, carols, and stories that accompany the celebration of Christmas, and these mention Yule, Yuletide, Noël, the Nativity, Advent, the Feast of the Incarnation, and so forth. And these are just the names for this holiday in English!

Anyone with a rudimentary understanding of etymology soon realizes that these terms, like most English words, have been borrowed from other languages. In fact, "Yule" and "Yuletide" may be the only true English words among them, coming from the Old English word, *géo!*. None of them originate in the Bible, certainly not in the context of any kind of biblically mandated celebration to be held at the dawning of the winter season. So what do these words really mean?

We will begin with "Yule." It refers to a twelve-day winter festival of feasting, drinking, and sacrificing observed for centuries by Germanic peoples throughout northern Europe. Indisputably, the celebration has pagan origins, associated with the Norse [god](#) Odin, one of whose names is "Yule Father" (he is also called "the Yule One"). The word "jolly," a term that we immediately associate with Santa Claus, has its roots in "yule." "Yuletide" is simply the time or season of Yule.

Yule has been connected with the pagan Wild Hunt—the passing of supernatural hunters or the dead across the sky, led by Odin—which is thought to portend some kind of catastrophe or mark some unfortunate soul's descent into the underworld. Another association is the Anglo-Saxon Modranicht ("Mothers' Night"), an all-female fertility rite observed on what is now Christmas Eve, which may have involved some sort of sacrifice. The Yule log, eating ham (the Yule boar), and singing carols on Christmas all derive from this Germanic festival.

Like "Yule" and "Yuletide," "Noël" identifies not only the day of Christmas (and its carols) but the season preceding it. "Noël" and "Nativity" are both derived from the same Latin word, *natalis*, meaning "of the birth." Rome celebrated a winter festival that was called *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti*, "the Day of the Birth of the Unconquered (or Invincible) Sun." The name points to the festival's date, the day of the winter solstice, when the sun's light, having reached its nadir, begins to regain its strength—to the Romans, it was the sun's "birthday" or "rebirth-day." While the date of the winter solstice has regressed to December 21 over the centuries, in pre-Christian times it fell on December 25.

It is thought that the Roman Catholic Church appropriated this festival into Christianity since its date coincides with a traditional, allegorical calculation that, since [Jesus](#), like other great men, must have been conceived on the same date that He died (by their reckoning, March 25), the date of His birth nine months later would have been December 25. Though modern scholars attempt to downplay any association between the "Christian" observance of Christmas and the pagan celebration, a line in a Christmas-day sermon by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430) suggests otherwise: "Let us celebrate this day as a feast not for the sake of this sun, which is beheld by believers as much as by ourselves, but for the sake of Him who created the sun." It appears that Augustine felt it necessary to remind his parishioners that the "Christian" observance of the day had, for them, superseded the pagan one.

Some Christmas-keepers begin to feel the excitement as early as Advent. This first season of the liturgical calendar has its origins in the fifth century and possibly earlier. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas (late November or early December). In modern times, to celebrate Advent, people keep an Advent calendar, light a wreath, give gifts, pray a daily devotional, set up Christmas decorations (particularly a Christmas tree), sing special carols, attend special services, etc. The most devout fast for forty days before Christmas in the manner that some fast during Lent, going without a particularly tempting food.

The term "Advent" derives from a Latin word, *adventus* (equivalent to Greek *parousia*), which means "coming," referring in Scripture to the *second* coming of Christ. However, in

the twelfth century, due to the preaching and writing of Bernard of Clairvaux, it began to be popular to speak of three comings of Christ: in the flesh, in a believer's heart, and in His glory. Today, this tripartite distinction has all but disappeared, as the modern Advent focuses almost exclusively on preparing for the commemoration of the birth of Christ, that is, for Christmas. Granted, some readings for the period do concern Christ coming as Judge at the end time.

Advent, despite its quasi-scriptural name, has no basis in the Bible. God's Word speaks of Christ's *parousia* only in terms of His [second coming](#), His "glorious appearing" ([I Thessalonians 1:10](#); [2:19](#); [3:13](#); [4:15](#); [5:23](#); [II Thessalonians 2:1](#), 7-9; [Titus 2:13](#); etc.). His return to this earth as [King of kings](#) and Lord of lords ([Revelation 19:11-16](#)) has no biblical connection to the month of December or to these modern Advent practices. There is certainly no scriptural command to keep it or anything like it.

What about "Christmas" itself? It is clearly composed of two words, "Christ" and "mass." It comes as no surprise, then, to know that it originated in an Old English phrase, *Cristes Maesse*, which means "Mass of Christ." *Mass*, also known as Communion or the Eucharist, is commonly defined, for instance, from the *Cambridge Dictionary*, as "a religious ceremony based on Jesus's last meal with [H]is disciples." This definition, though, obscures the fact that the Catholic Church believes the Mass to be the exact same sacrifice that Christ offered at Calvary. In effect, He is offered in sacrifice each time the mass is taken. (However, compare [Hebrews 6:6](#), where the author warns about re-crucifying the Son of God, and [Hebrews 9:24-28](#), where he writes that His sacrifice was done once for all).

This name, then, has disturbing connotations, especially in light of the emphasis on the "baby Jesus" in Christmas festivities and decorations. Despite the obvious dating error, "the Feast of the Incarnation" ("the Feast of His Coming in the Flesh") would be a more accurate name for the holiday than "Christmas," which most people do not realize can suggest a repeated sacrifice of an infant Christ accompanied by jollity, festivity, and crass commercialism. The biblical commemoration of His death as our Savior, the Christian Passover, is a solemn observance, and the bread and wine mere symbols to remember His broken body and shed blood.

Names are important—and even more significant than just identifiers. Names mean something, and the names of Christmas reveal just what the holiday is all about.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[What's Wrong With Christmas?](#)

by Martin G. Collins

Martin Collins, citing a Protestant commentator's article about the problem with Christmas, an article which admits pagan origin of this holiday and its contribution to religious confusion, marvels that the author wants to salvage the holiday anyway, even though it totally scuttles the truth. Human nature would rather indulge in pagan lies and idolatry, taking pleasure in unrighteousness, rather than be corrected or guided by truth. Christmas thrives in this syncretistic culture, having adopted the Roman Brumalia-Saturnalia festival, celebrating the birth of the invincible sun. The Roman Catholic Church carefully blended a little truth with a lot of falsehood in order to have the birthday of the Son of God coincide with the birth of the invincible sun. This shameless syncretism does not have God's endorsement. God does not approve of false ministers who try to appropriate God's words to promote their selfish ends, turning peoples' hearts away from Him. Pagan customs cannot be assimilated into the truth, as our forebears learned that worshipping a golden calf does not coincide with worshipping God. Christians need to extricate themselves from the worshiping of Satan. Regarding our beliefs, we must always start with God, not man, and that we regard the Bible, not human reason as our ultimate authority. Christmas seems to thrive on covetousness and the way of get, while God's holy days encourage the way of give.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Christmas, Syncretism, and Presumption](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Many think keeping Christmas is fine because it honors Christ, yet God never tells us to celebrate the day of His Son's birth. John Ritenbaugh explains that it is presumptuous on many Christians' parts to believe that such a syncretized holiday could please God.

CGG Weekly: The Names of Christmas (09-Dec-16)

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
