

Christmas, Syncretism, And Presumption

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In 1980, the host of a Columbia, South Carolina, radio talk show invited the pastor of a large Baptist church onto his show to discuss Christmas and some of its customs. The clergyman admitted to the pagan origin of Christmas, but said that it really did not matter.

On the same radio station, in the weeks before Christmas, a syndicated commentary, "The Customs of Christmas," aired daily. During one of these, the narrator said, "There is almost nothing about Christmas in the Bible except the actual story from the book of Luke."

These are significant admissions about the origins of the biggest holiday of the year. However, we should expect such admissions because Christmas presents an excellent illustration of the perversity of human nature. Americans claim, generally, to have sprung from Judeo-Christian roots, and both Jews and Christians profess to get their ideas, customs, practices, and teachings from the same book, the Bible. Yet we find most Christians—and even some Jews!—celebrating Christmas, a festival that is nowhere mentioned in the Bible.

Years ago, the editors of *Newsweek* produced a montage of pictures showing how people in various parts of the world celebrate Christmas. One of the most striking featured holiday decorations in Japan. The normal trappings, banners, and lights were taken to the extreme limits of gaudiness. Thousands, probably millions, of lights had been strung up over some of the city streets or on the sides of buildings. Santa Claus and his reindeer flew among the lights and banners. It was a visual cacophony of light and color. We might expect this in France, Spain, or Germany, because these nations claim to be Christian, but not in Japan, an Oriental nation whose major religion is Shintoism! They too have been caught up in the "spirit of the holidays."

Christmas is a worldwide phenomenon. It is not restricted to the Israelitish countries, or to the "Christian" nations of the world. We see vestiges of its presence in every corner of the world, no matter how far removed from Christian influence. When we take an honest look at its global appeal, we find that the real interest in it is commercial rather than religious. The latter factor is often dismissed or ignored.

Like the Baptist preacher, can we afford to dismiss it so glibly? Is Christmas really all that innocent? Can we pass it off by saying, "Oh, it really doesn't matter all that much"? Should we be so careless?

Some excuse it with trite statements like, "It's what you have in your heart, the ideals, the teaching, that counts, not the actual practice of it." Now this may sound reasonable because, after all, we want to glorify God in every aspect of our lives. Does not Christmas glorify the newborn Christ? Although God does not mention it in His Word, is it not something that perhaps we ought to do? On the other hand, does God give us better reasons not to add it to our worship of Him?

Zeal Without Knowledge

The apostle Paul describes a general Israelitish characteristic—one still in evidence—in Romans 10: 1-3:

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Are modern Israelites who celebrate Christmas really deceived? Is the deception so strong that they cannot see it? Interestingly, a commentator writes that "they being ignorant of" (verse 3) could be translated into "for they ignoring," which puts a different sense on Paul's thought. When one is ignorant, he just does not know. Perhaps knowledge was withheld from him. On the other hand, when one ignores knowledge, it is readily available, but he turns his back on it.

A self-deceived person is ignoring truth rather than ignorant of it, and if that indeed is Paul's emphasis, it makes this Christmas question much more serious. It means that people are accountable for what they are doing, and therefore, they will pay more for it than if they acted in ignorance.

Most Americans are aware that many of the Christmas traditions have no connection with Christianity. Almost every year, articles on the origins of various Christmas customs appear in the newspapers, especially in the larger cities. The authors of these articles cannot trace any of the "modern" traditions back to the Bible because most of the customs came from pre-Christian traditions in Germany, Norway, Russia, Holland, and other nations. Thus, people cannot claim that such knowledge was withheld from them.

In Romans 1:18-20, Paul asserts that things involving God's existence, power, and nature are clearly seen, but mankind suppresses the truth. What God wants man to know, man willingly ignores and suppresses through the addition of beliefs, customs, and traditions that cloak the truth. The truth is still there, hidden behind a screen of falsehoods that most never attempt to remove.

Theologians call this process *syncretism*. According to *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, syncretism is "the combination of different forms of belief or practice." Syncretism could possibly describe other fields, like philosophy, but scholars use it almost exclusively in religious contexts. *Syncretize*, the verb form of the word, is very revealing. It means "to attempt to unite and harmonize especially without critical examination or logical unity." In other words, those who syncretize will frequently attach one belief or practice to their religion without trying to ascertain whether it is proper to do so.

Using Christmas as an excuse, men have added foreign beliefs and practices to the worship of God the Father and Jesus Christ. They have combined pagan ideas, beliefs, and practices with Christianity without examining whether God approves.

This implies presumption by the syncretizer. *Presumption* is "an attitude or belief dictated by probability." Facts play little part in presumption, just probability and likelihood. Its first synonym is "assumption," followed by "arrogance," "boldness," "impertinence" and "imprudence." *Presume*, its verb form, means "to undertake without leave or clear justification; to expect or assume especially with confidence; to suppose to be true without proof; to take for granted."

As we begin to combine the concepts of syncretism, presumption, and the Israelitish characteristic of misguided zeal without knowledge, we will see why a holiday like Christmas could become and remain a practice in modern Israel. The Israelitish people—especially the sons of Joseph—seem to be imbued with a spirit of zeal that is both a blessing and a curse. It is almost paradoxical that Israel's

zeal for God is often its greatest hindrance, as it retards true righteousness that comes by faith and submission to God. Virtually all of Israel's religious zeal is wasted because it stampedes in the wrong direction.

Joseph's Drive to Expand

Before he died, Jacob made a prophecy regarding the traits of his descendants, the tribes of Israel, "in the last days" (Genesis 49:1). Notice what he says about Joseph: "Joseph is a fruitful bough, a fruitful bough by a well; his branches run over the wall" (verse 22). The people of Joseph are a productive lot. To produce goods and services requires a vast amount of energy—call it zeal, enthusiasm, or drive. They live in a well-watered land that enhances agriculture and industry. The people are so driven that they extend their influence and zeal beyond the boundaries of their countries.

Historically, the people of Joseph have moved into other countries, taken the raw materials to make their products, built manufacturing plants, and influenced the native culture. When the British or Americans colonized, they brought their way of life and imposed it on the natives. Americans continue to introduce movies, television, rock music, household appliances, big cars, etc., to impoverished nations around the globe.

These things just typify the inherent drive of the people of Joseph, a proclivity to expand beyond the frontiers in every endeavor. They are an aggressive and innovative people in science, industry, education, government, and religion. This is generally beneficial and productive, but in one area, religion, it has profound repercussions. Satan has taken advantage of this characteristic, producing a religion that allows Israelites to think that they are Christian and yet still be free to explore the frontiers of religious thought.

This proclivity is not confined to the people of Joseph, as we can see by tracing God's revelation to man. God first gave His religion to Israel through Moses, and later, through Jesus Christ by means of the Holy Spirit, He gave to His church an improved, spiritual religion based upon the original. The early apostles preached and taught this revelation, writing books that provide for us the foundation for Christianity.

But what has happened through the centuries? People have felt free to expand their religious horizons into areas of thinking far removed from the orthodox teachings of the Bible. They say, "Isn't this idea interesting? Wouldn't it be good if Christianity absorbed this? Look at the benefits it would bring!" Thus, they throw away the holy days and the Sabbath, but accept pagan holidays, the trinity, and heaven and hell. Through the centuries, the truth is forgotten, and the false ideas that sprang from human reason become a major part of the religion.

Modernizing Christianity

Things have not changed; the proclivity is still in mankind. Notice this quotation from a modern book, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, by William Hordern. The title of the chapter from which this comes is "The Remaking of Orthodoxy."

The method of liberalism includes the attempt to modernize Christian theology. The world, liberals argue, has changed radically since the early creeds of Christendom were formulated; this makes the creeds sound archaic and unreal to modern man. We have to rethink Christianity in thought forms which the modern world can comprehend. Fosdick

[a liberal Christian theologian] argued that we must express the essence of Christianity, its "abiding experiences," but that we must not identify these with the "changing categories" in which they have been expressed in the past. For example, says Fosdick, an abiding experience of Christianity has been its conviction that God will triumph over evil. This has been traditionally pictured in the category of Christ's second coming on the clouds to destroy evil and to set up the good. We can no longer retain this outworn category, but we can still believe the truth which this ancient thought form was trying to express. We can continue to work in the faith that, through His devoted followers, God is now building His Kingdom and that there will be a renewing of life, individual and social, to bring it into conformity with the will of God. The essence of the faith is thus retained, argues Fosdick, while the thought form in which it was once clothed has been abandoned. (p. 74)

Thus, in a few words, he says that Christ will not come because that is an outworn idea—that is just how ancient people thought. Today, he claims, we know the Kingdom is already here, and it will gradually grow as God adds to it. Again, we see unrestrained zeal without knowledge.

Hordern continues, "Man's mind is capable of thinking God's thoughts after Him. Man's intuitions and reason are the best clues that we have to the nature of God." What blasphemy! God's nature is like human nature? The Bible explicitly says, "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

"The mind must be kept open to all truth regardless of from whence it comes," Hordern adds. Now he rationalizes that if "truth" comes from paganism, we can include it in Christianity. Christ was born. That is true. Giving gifts is good, right? So it must be all right to pretend that a fat man in a red suit brings gifts to children to commemorate Christ's birth.

He concludes, "This means that the liberal must have an open mind; no questions are closed." Nothing is absolute with this kind of thinking. We can *never* know what is true! This leads to such tolerance that every evil and perversion is permitted because nothing is wrong. Anything goes!

Can we be so blind to think that this "openmindedness" is not evident in the U.S., Canada, Britain, Australia, and other Israelite countries? It starts with such things as allowing Christmas to be a part of the worship of God. This syncretistic inclusion begins to dilute the purity of our God-given religion, and before long, other barriers begin to fall. Soon all absolutes are passé, and perversions are commonplace.

Does It Matter?

Is it any wonder when the clergy—supposedly the guardians of religious purity—thinks so liberally, that the laity acts the way it does? The clergy shrugs off the paganism in Christmas, claiming that it is harmless. Is it? Does it really make any difference whether we celebrate Christmas?

One of our ministers visited a prospective member, a policeman, a person accustomed to dealing with law. A policeman is at least experienced with the biblical principles regarding the importance of law. During the visit, the minister and the policeman began discussing Christmas, and the minister asked where in the Bible God commanded its observance. The minister said he could show him many

verses that plainly said that God did not want us to learn the way of the heathen, nor add their ways to our worship. Since he could not quote Scripture, the policeman's only argument was that the Bible related the story of Jesus' birth.

The policeman asked, "Does it make any difference if I keep Christmas?" The minister said, "No, it doesn't make any difference whether you celebrate Christmas or not, *unless there is a God.*" Then he showed him Deuteronomy 12:29-31:

When the Lord your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise." You shall not worship the Lord your God in that way; for every abomination to the Lord which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

It certainly matters to God, the Lawgiver! It was because of these heathen practices that God was driving out the inhabitants of the land. He did not—and does not—want His people to get caught in the process of judgment and punishment that results from broken law!

Notice that God says "that you are not ensnared." In the Bible, a snare is a figurative expression of destruction through deception. The snare itself does not destroy, but it leads to destruction. The Israelites heard these words in the last months before going into the Promised Land. God had set the land aside for them, but the people who inhabited it were still there. It was a ready-made nation for their use. The towns, fortifications, houses, farms, businesses—everything was ready for them to take over.

We too were born into an ready-made society. The world was already here when we came into it, and because we had no alternative, we accepted it without resistance. We absorbed the culture because our parents taught it to us. However, with our calling God now has us moving in the other direction, away from this world. We must reject the false practices of those who have inhabited the land before us.

Not God's World

I John 2:15-17 warns us that there is a profound gulf between the Father and the world, and that a Christian is faced with making a choice between them. Spiritually, morally, and ethically, Christianity does not allow for neutrality. God is bringing us into a position where we recognize truth, admit it is true, and make it a part of our lives.

We are learning a new way of life, so He does not want us to be ensnared by the attractiveness of many things that are in the world. We cannot presume that because something appears to be harmless, it would be fine to do "just this one time." Therefore, we have to learn to resist the urge to think and conduct our lives as the world does.

"World" in I John 2 is the Greek *cosmos*, and its basic meaning is "an ordered system." Because of the disparity between God and this world, it cannot possibly be the world for which God gave His only begotten Son. The world He created He called "very good." Nor is He referring to mankind, also part of His creation. He loves people and desires to save them.

Nevertheless, He does not like man's way of life. This ordered, human-centered system is anti-God and anti-Christ, and Satan sits at its head. This system occupies His creation and consists of people that God loves so much that He sent His Son to die for them, but He does not love the system! It produces people that need to be rescued, and it tends to make them worse and worse.

When God speaks of "the world," He is identifying all of man's purposes, pursuits, pleasures, practices, and places where God is not wanted. Much of this world is religious, cultured, refined, intellectual, but it is still anti-God and anti-Christ.

Through His calling, God puts us into a position where He forces us to choose between disparate ways of life, and both of them are realities. We must choose either the eternal and worthwhile or the temporal and vain. God is not saying that this world is unpleasant, unattractive, or unappealing, but we have to choose between that reality and His. The sum of I John 2:15-17 is that this ordered system—anti-God yet appealing and attractive—has the power to seduce the believer, to ensnare him and turn him from God. We have to be vigilantly on guard against it.

Christmas is a vivid illustration of the world's power of attraction. It plays upon all of a person's senses with pleasant music, lights, colors, foods, clothes, gifts, and parties. Though it is a very attractive trap, it nonetheless ensnares the person into destruction. By itself, it does not destroy the person—it is the snare, the trap!

Anyone who has ever hunted a wild animal like a deer knows one cannot bag his prey by blundering through the woods making noise and leaving his scent everywhere. Instead, a hunter makes himself as invisible as possible so that the deer wanders under his stand where he can shoot it. The same holds true with trapping smaller animals. A successful trapper makes a trap that will entice the animal in without letting it know that it will be caught.

Christmas is a well-laid trap. In celebrating it, the people of the land honor, worship, and glorify a god, but not the God of the Bible. It is appealing and attractive with all the ornamentation and catchy music. There is also an appealing baby, born to be the King of kings, and his lovely mother radiant in her motherhood. In addition, what could be better than giving gifts? Certainly giving is Christian. And what about decorating evergreen trees, hanging mistletoe and holly boughs, caroling, stuffing stockings, and burning Yule logs? Everything just seems to go so well together. Nevertheless, it is a trap *because it is not true* .

Adding and Taking Away

In all sincerity, men and women have gone to great lengths to try to please God. Without seeking His permission, they presume to add things to the worship of God because they are attractive and have a vague attachment to the One whom they look upon as their Savior. They think their sincerity in worship is more important than the truth.

But God thinks differently: "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (Deuteronomy 12:32). Christmas is a festival that has been added. It is syncretism, blending a practice from paganism into the stream of Christianity. Only the revelation of God shows how He will be worshipped, and He will not be served in imitation of other gods. God's way *cannot* be "improved" by human sincerity.

Deuteronomy 13 defines the law regarding apostasy. Those who led others to worship other gods or adopt the practices of the nations around them were to be stoned! Cities that fell under the sway of corrupt individuals were to be attacked, burned to the ground, and left as rubble! God considers tampering with His truth to be evil that must be eradicated!

Apostasy begins with the perverse drive in man to push beyond the bounds of what has been revealed by God as the basis for His way of life. When God gives instruction, He frequently does so in broad generalities. Within the perimeters of those broad generalities, He expects us to explore and to apply them in their spirit and intent. Unfortunately, history reveals that that has not been mankind's approach. Man has consistently tried to "improve" upon God's revelation using his limited reason and logic.

Proverbs 30:1-6 describes the approach of a godly man:

The words of Agur the son of Jakeh, his utterance. This man declared to Ithiel—to Ithiel and Ucal: Surely I am more stupid than any man, and do not have the understanding of a man. I neither learned wisdom nor have knowledge of the Holy One. Who has ascended into heaven, or descended? Who has gathered the wind in His fists? Who has bound the waters in a garment? Who has established all the ends of the earth? What is His name, and what is His Son's name, if you know? Every word of God is pure; He is a shield to those who put their trust in Him. Do not add to His words, lest He reprove you, and you be found a liar.

Agur claims no great intelligence or superior understanding. He feels his education is lacking in the more important areas of life, like the proper way to live and the knowledge of God. He is only a common man with no special abilities, powers, or privileges—in fact, he would like to know the person who could do some of these things.

In verses 5 and 6 he states his conclusion: To get the most and the best from life, we should believe God, not presuming that we can comprehend the effects of our actions without advice from God in His Word. God's Word cannot be improved upon; every word of God is pure, as gold is pure. The value of God's Word cannot be increased by adding to or taking from it, anymore than gold can be increased in value by alloying it with something else. He advises that we strive to do nothing that God forbids, and leave nothing undone that God commands. This is the approach of a man whose sole aim was to please God, and who does not want to do or not do anything that might strain the relationship.

In the religious Jews of His time, Jesus faced man's proclivity to add to and take from God's Word:

Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do. . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition. (Mark 7:6-9)

The Jews added thousands of regulations in a sincere effort to make their obedience to God as complete as they possibly could. Their traditions were different from ours, but the principle is the

same. Their religious life did not depend on listening to God but upon clever arguments and interpretations of the experts, the rabbis. They substituted human ingenuity for God's law. Jesus called their ingenuity vain and hypocritical, and their additions resulted in nothing good in terms of the Kingdom of God.

Fruits of Christmas

We have to apply the same kind of judgment to modern Christianity and its use of Christmas. God nowhere speaks of making Christmas a part of Christianity, nor does He say to celebrate His Son's birth. He does tell us, though, not to add to His worship anything that is a tradition of the heathen. Such additions hinder rather than enhance our journey to God's Kingdom.

What are the fruits of keeping Christmas? Has Christmas helped to glorify God? Has it clarified and aided man's spiritual life? We have a record of the fruits of the Jews' additions. Their intent may have been better than those who accepted Christmas into Christianity, since they at least attempted to obey the law of God. Still, when Jesus walked among them, they did not recognize their own Messiah! Adding to and subtracting from God's Word changes the focus God intends.

Christmas is no better. When the so-called Christians added Christmas to Christianity, it had nothing to do with true Christianity at all. It was a ploy to win converts from paganism. It was a deliberate grab for power. From the beginning, Christmas, rather than promoting the true God and His way of life, has only led people away from the truth.

Peter writes that we are redeemed from these very traditions (I Peter 1:18). These traditions, inherited from our fathers, are a part of our culture. Jesus used His ministry to repudiate every addition, subtraction, and distortion that had attained any kind of specious, "divine" authority, and He did this by clarifying and magnifying the truth. Christmas seems to have "divine" authority because "Christians" are doing it, but it is part of a world that is anti-God, anti-Christ. It is not a part of what God has shown is true.

The theme of not adding to or subtracting from God's Word continues to the very end of the Bible. Jesus emphatically says:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star." And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. And whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book. (Revelation 22:12-19)

In calling Himself "the Alpha and the Omega," Christ indicates that He is the beginning, source, or author of truth, and He is also the end or judge of it. He determines the truth, and He is the One to whom we must give account of our use of that truth. Thus, it behooves us to listen carefully to what He says.

What He says is that anyone who "practices a lie" will be outside the gates of the Holy City. They will not be in His Kingdom. Is Christmas the truth? Not according to God's Word. Is keeping Christmas practicing a lie? Definitely!

In the law, God says do not add to it and do not take away from it. Do only what God has commanded. In the last few verses in the Bible, He says virtually the same thing. We can safely conclude that God does not want us to presume that we can add to or take things away from His Word. Adding what is not part of His revelation is syncretism, an attempt to merge foreign practices with the truth without determining if God would permit it.

Because Christmas came into Christianity hundreds of years ago, we may not be responsible for it, but we are responsible—once we know the truth—to step away from it. We cannot allow our minds to deceive us into thinking that it will be okay to continue because in our hearts we just want to worship God. Scripture clearly shows Christmas is a snare (Deuteronomy 12:30), vanity (Mark 7:6-9), and spiritual death (Revelation 22:15). We should not let the human proclivity to add to the worship of God lead us away from God and the wonderful future He has prepared for us!

We can conclude, then, honestly and rightly, that it makes a great deal of difference whether or not we keep Christmas.