

Excusing Paganism In Christmas

'Redeeming the Culture For Christmas'

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This Monday is the annual celebration of Christmas, as you well know—how could you not? The world, whether it is Christian, agnostic, atheist, Muslim, Hindu, Shinto—all the pagans go whole hog for Christmas and its glitzy lights and special foods and carols and parties and gift giving. By this time, though, we are oversaturated with Christmas cheer and all of its trappings. We just want it to be over.

As a church, we tend to combat the observance of Christmas with apologetic articles that attempt to prove that while we believe that God did indeed become flesh, and that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and yes, indeed, He was laid in a manger, and angels sang and all of that happened, it was not on December 25. Many—most, I should say—of the customs and traditions of Christmas have pagan origins. That is just the truth of the matter.

We also argue that God, in the Bible, never commands a festival of His birth on that date—December 25—or on any date of the year. Instead, we are to commemorate His death. That is something that we are instructed to do, which the Christian world out there does not do. We do that each year by observing the Passover. We say we cannot "return Christ to Christmas," because He was never there in the first place! So, we argue, seemingly *ad nauseum*, in that vein.

Plenty of professing Christians out in the world—many of them learned leaders of churches and seminaries—write apologetics from the opposite viewpoint. They are attempting to show in their articles that it is perfectly acceptable before God to celebrate Christmas. These articles take various forms, they make various arguments, but a general theme that tends to arise from them is that Christmas—in whatever form, it seems—is okay, because it "honors Christ." That is just the bottom line for them. That is all that matters.

Some try to get historically technical about the whole matter, in terms of December the 25th being the day to observe it, saying that the earliest dates put forth in church history for Christ's birth are December 25 and March 25. They argue that an ancient scholar—a man you may have heard about, John Chrysostom—calculated that Zacharias' second course of service in the temple—you understand the courses of the priesthood. You can look at that in I Chronicles 24 if you want. By the way, the course of Abijah was the eighth course of the year.

They say that Zacharias' second course fell on the Day of Atonement and then John the Baptist was conceived immediately thereafter, and since Jesus' conception was six months later, as we find out in Luke 1, then His conception fell on March 25. If you do the math, you add nine months to March 25, and you get December 25. It is all very exact and very convenient.

But I should tell you, Crysostom miscalculated Zacharias' second course of service. There were twenty four courses of priests that worked at the temple. And they started Nisan/Abib 1, and because there were twenty four courses, that means that they had to serve at least twice in the year. The Hebrew calendar normally has fifty one weeks in the year. And then, if you had add intercalary months and such like that, it can go further.

But in a normal year, there were fifty one weeks, which meant that there were two sets of courses, so that brings us up to forty eight weeks, and that leaves you three weeks left over. What are those three weeks? Well, this is what Crysostom missed, because he was not a Sabbath keeper. He did not keep the holy days. He missed the fact that every course of priests was supposed to perform its duties during the holy days, specifically the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the feast of Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles, which means that you cannot just say that the 32nd week was the second course of Abijah. It was not. You have to add the three weeks in there, because of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost and Tabernacles. So it was actually the 35th week that would have been the second time that Zacharias served during the year, during his normal course, which means that put it at the end of October.

If you do all the math, it actually comes out that Jesus' conception would be at the end of April, not the end of March, and so it messes everything up. By that calculation, we should be keeping Christmas at the end of January, but that's not how it how it works. Scripture contains much better evidence of all of this, though.

Zacharias' first course—week eight—fell in late spring. If you do it from from Nisan 1 and then you have to add a week in there for the Days of Unleavened Bread, that means the eighth course would have worked in the ninth week of the year, which is just before Pentecost. Then he would have had to have stayed there in Jerusalem, and served during the Pentecost week, because all priests were supposed to do that, which makes me wonder if the angel came to Zacharias on Pentecost day. I'm just throwing that out there because I do not know, but it would work out with all the timing.

But since that happens—Zacharias going home and John being conceived—that would

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have happened then mid- to late June, somewhere in there. Start doing the math, and you find out that Jesus' conception was in December, and therefore He was born during the fall holy day season, somewhere in there.

They do this kind of fudging—I am talking about the the way that these Christian scholars fudge this evidence because they want to minimize the embarrassing fact that December 25 sits right in the middle of the pagan Saturnalia, which Roman Christianity—as we heard from David—hijacked from paganism for its own purpose, just as it accepted and syncretized so many other pagan customs from various people in order to bring them into their church.

So, how do they explain this away? If you get them in a corner somewhere, then say, "OK, let's, throw out all of these so-called arguments you have. Why do you think that Christians should celebrate Christmas?" Well, I will give you John Piper's answer. John Piper is founder of DesiringGod.org and a chancellor of Bethlehem College and Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is also the author of more than 50 books that many, many people have read, and he is a major light these days in American Christianity. So here is his excusal of these pagan elements. He's answering the question, "Should Christians celebrate Christmas?":

I sympathize with those who want to be rigorously and distinctly Christian, who want to be disentangled from the world and any pagan roots that might lie beneath our celebration of Christmas. But I do not go that route on this matter because I think there comes a point where the roots are so far gone that the present meaning doesn't carry the pagan connotation anymore. I'm more concerned about a new paganism that gets layered on top of Christian holidays.

Here is the example I use. All language has roots somewhere. Most of our days of the week, if not all, grew out of pagan names, too. So should we stop using the word "Sunday" because it may have related to the worship of the sun once upon a time? In modern English, "Sunday" doesn't carry that connotation and that's the very nature of language.

In a sense, holidays are like chronological language. Christmas now means we mark in Christian ways the birth of Jesus Christ. I think the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ are the most important events in human history. Not to mark them in some way, by way of special celebration, would be folly, it seems to me. Some things are so good and precious like anniversaries,

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birthdays and even deaths that they are worthy of being marked. How much more the birth and death of Jesus Christ? It is really worth the risk, even if the date of December 25 was chosen because of its proximity to some kind of pagan festival. Let's just take it, sanctify it, and make the most of it, because Christ is worthy of being celebrated in His birth. There is no point in choosing any other date. It will not work.

Like I said, this is one of the leading lights of Protestant Christianity in the United States. To me, what he said is a bald statement of acceptance of pagan customs and traditions, essentially saying they are fine because **we** have laid a different, better meaning on them. Notice his words, right there at the end: "Let's just take it, sanctify it, and make the most of it," not realizing that he has no authority to sanctify anything. Not even authority—he doesn't have any *standing* to sanctify anything. What *God* sanctifies—His truth; what He has set forth in His word—doesn't matter to them. All that matters is what *they* sanctify, or, as another man put it, what *they* redeem from the culture for Christianity. And that, sadly, is pretty much how they feel about everything.