

2014-12-13

Should we have a Christmas tree? #1

Hi all,

When I was the Director for a Bible school in Tulsa I'd often take students to lunch at a nearby Mexican restaurant after classes, and it was always a time of rich questions and answers. One December some of the students were sharing how they were raised without a Christmas tree though they gave gifts, and another was raised just ignoring the holiday altogether.

Now that they were out in the 'real world' they wanted to know balance concerning the holidays because there were so many voices saying so many things about what honored God and what was an abomination to Him.

A history

I shared a little history with them before going on to New Testament truths, so we'll start there as well. Christmas began as a pagan festival, Saturnalia. Saturnalia was celebrated by the Romans from roughly December 17-25 in the belief they were banishing the forces of darkness. Remember the shortest day of the year is December 21, and after that date the earth adds roughly 1 minute per day of daylight to the longest day on June 21, when days begin shortening again by roughly that same amount. (Northern Hemisphere)

Saturnalia comes from Saturn, 'to plant', and marked the end of the fall planting season. It was a time when the wealthy exchanged clothes with the poor, gifts were given, human shaped baked goods were given and sold, and dice games were played. At its worst, Roman communities chose 1 poor victim, man or woman, and forced them to a week of overeating and sexual acts, and then on December 25 the person would be offered as a human sacrifice. They believed doing so appeased the forces of darkness and the 'Lord of Misrule', and the sun would begin warming the earth again as a result.

Fill those auditoriums

In the 4th century Roman church leaders tried to gain members to fill their auditoriums (they had recently called people out of home based meetings and into former pagan auditoriums to gather for 'church') and so tried to make Saturnalia a Christian festival, choosing to celebrate the birth of Jesus at that time.

The word Christmas is short for 'Christ-mass' or the 'Mass of Christ'. A 'mass' at its root is anything with body and density, so a gathering of people is called a mass of people. In the Roman church it is a gathering of the people in the auditorium to worship Christ, therefore Christ-mass. Christmas. Thus the celebration of Saturnalia was merged with the celebration of supposed birth date of Jesus. (He was born in either spring or fall, but that's for another discussion perhaps)

Abuse of Jews

Saturnalia didn't disappear entirely however. In 1466 Pope Paul II forced Jews to run naked through the streets of Rome after having been force fed to the point of being stuffed. By the time of the Pilgrims in America, Christmas was banned until about 1681. As late as the 18th and 19th centuries Jews were abused and Rabbi's were dressed up as clowns and paraded around cities. In 1881 in Poland it escalated to attacks against all Jewish citizens, with many women raped and many men killed. That was only 133 years ago!

The holiday is filled with pagan roots

Saturnalia as mentioned above is just one example of pagan roots. Evergreen trees were brought indoors and worshipped as not dying in winter like all other trees, as part of the Asheira religion. They danced around them, adorned them with ornaments, and that practice was sanctioned by the church as a Christmas tree in order to further merge Christianity with pagan practices.

Mistletoe was used by Druids to poison their human sacrifices, and kissing under the mistletoe is a blending of the sexual excesses after coming under the influence of food and drink at Saturnalia with the Druid's human sacrifice at that time, watered down to our day of coming 'under' its spell and being kissed.

The god of Santa Claus

Many know of Nicolas of Parara, Turkey, made a saint in the 1800's. He became the Bishop of Myra and died on December 6, in the year 345. He was generous and idolized for centuries, and his bones were eventually moved to Bari, Italy.

Bari had a local goddess honored every December called 'the Grandmother', who used to fill children's stockings with gifts, and was blended with the worship of Nicolas to be celebrated on December 6, the date of Nicolas' death. The cult of Nicolas worship moved north into Europe and was adopted by the Germans and Celts and blended with the Norse god Woden, father of Thor. Woden had a long white beard, wore a heavy winter robe, and rode a horse across the sky one night each autumn, so when blended with the Nicolas cult his flight took place on December 6.

And once again the Roman church stepped in to include the Nicolas cult so that the giving of gifts, filling of stockings, and him riding a horse across the sky were moved to a couple of weeks later, December 25.

From there you can follow the line quite easily: Washington Irving wrote a popular satirical American article in 1809 entitled 'A History of New York' or 'Knickerbocker History' which poked fun at Dutch culture who were the aristocrats at the time in NYC, and mentioned several times their white bearded, horse flying through the sky giver of gifts, using the Dutch name Americanized, Santa Claus.

(Knickerbocker was the last name of some of the founding Dutch families of NYC. The Dutch founding of NYC is why we have for instance, the New York Knicks NBA team, and numerous organizations to this day including 'Knickerbocker' in their name,)

Modern Santa Claus

Less than 13 years later, in 1922 Dr. Clement Moore read 'Knickerbocker History' and made a poem for his children, published in December of 1823 which we know as 'The Night Before Christmas'. In the poem he brought these elements together, but made Nicolas flying by 8 reindeer instead of a horse .

Illustrator Thomas Nast worked for the US magazine, Harper's Weekly from 1862-1886, and based on Dr. Moore's poem over the years gave us our modern Santa Claus, including his list of good and bad children, his workshop at the North Pole using elves to make gifts, and so on.

In 1931 the Coca-Cola company contracted Swedish artist Haddon Sundblom to create a Coke drinking Santa Claus. Drawing from elements above, and asking his friend Lou Prentice to model due to his cheerful and chubby face, Sundblom completed the blending of the once pagan god to the modern Santa Claus.

What is a Christian to do?

As I shared many of these things with the students and they shared other details their parents had taught them of the evils of Christmas (and Easter, but that's for another time perhaps), I noted the ingredients in our food: beef, chicken, vegetables, grain, dairy, oil, salt.

I asked them if they realized everything they were eating had at one time, or were in our day and age considered holy or sacrificed to various gods. They looked at me like I'd slapped them across the face.

The beef we ate was considered holy by Hindus and beef offerings are common in many religions. Catholic/native religion blends in Central and South America offer beef, goat, chicken, grains, vegetables to the various gods and idols. They realized that various people in the past and present make idols of everything from food to animals to figurines of owls, frogs, cattle, elephants and more - so that having even a figurine in their house could mean they had an idol on their shelf.

Where to draw the line? What does God expect of us since we are surrounded by idols? The answers are found in the pages of the New Testament, and that is where I'll pick it up next week. Until then, blessings,

John Fenn

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2014-12-20

Should I have a Christmas tree? #2

Hi all,

Last week I shared how modern Christmas came to be; born of many different pagan rituals, 'Christianized' and monetized, and asked how modern Christians should act in the midst of it all.

I have no problem celebrating the birth of our Lord, but what I detest is the perversion of the message of Luke 2:13. It records that after the lone angel brings word of the Savior's birth to the shepherds...

"Behold! Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army praising God (Father) and saying; 'Glory to God (Father) in the highest, and on earth, peace (He has) good will towards men.'"

The message isn't mankind having good will towards each other, but rather the armies of heaven came to earth in full battle array, then stopped short as their Captain lay in a manger a short distance away, communicating the message from the Father to mankind - We haven't come to destroy you! The Father has peace and good will towards you! He sends His Son, our Commander, as a Shepherd for mankind and a peace offering to mankind!

THAT is the message of Luke 2:13. How sad that the Father's good will towards mankind has been removed and replaced with a simple 'You all play nice with each other'. ARRGGGGHHHH!

Pagan festivals galore

In the days the New Testament was written there were many more pagan celebrations Christians had to deal with than merely our Easter, Halloween, and Christmas. Each city had its patron god and therefore idol and temple, Roman culture had their gods and temples, Greek culture had their gods and temples.

And they were far more advanced in their occult practices than most in the west have ever seen. (Remember the burning of occult books in Acts 19, Ephesus) There are today places in the world where the occult is strong enough that demonic miracles are commonplace, including things like healing (which opens the person to a worse ailment weeks later) shape-shifting, Bible type miracles, people transported here and there by demonic power, and so forth. That is the world Paul also lived in, and many Christians today live in cultures with similar demonic manifestations, even some who are reading this.

A good steak, gods, and conscience

Paul addresses the gods and their celebrations in I Corinthians 8, 10, and Romans 14, with the core message consistent throughout.

Paul begins I Corinthians 8 with: "Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.

I love the literal of "Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies" in 8:1. The Greek word translated here as 'puffs up' is from 'physa' which is a 'bellows' - used by blacksmiths to fan a fire. It means therefore to inflate or blow air into. By contrast, the word 'edify' literally means 'to build the house'.

Paul said therefore, "Knowledge makes you full of air, but love builds the house. If you think you know something to the point you become full of air, you don't know it as you should." (I Corinthians 8:1-2)

He follows with: "Therefore concerning the eating of those things that were sacrificed first to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in this world, and there is but one God (Father). For though there are many called gods, whether in heaven or in the earth, indeed there are many gods and demonic authorities, to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things and we in Him (the Father); and one Lord Jesus Christ by whom are all things, and we by Him."

"We know that an idol is nothing...However, not everyone walks in this knowledge. For some if eating it would have their conscience defiled since it had been first offered to an idol." 8:7

Sensitivity and responsibility

His focus for the rest of the chapter and also in chapter 10 was being sensitive to the conscience of others concerning eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. In Corinth they had the central temple

where the sacrifices were made, then the meat was sold to meat markets and restaurants for sale to the public. Paul would later say in chapter 10 that if you are having a meal at one of those restaurants with a brother whose conscience would be defiled if you ate a steak in front of him, then eat something else for the sake of the weak conscience of your brother in the Lord.

Paul placed the responsibility upon those who walk in freedom to be sensitive to those who have are weaker in the faith that they are in direct contact with. That is an important point. Paul didn't say for all believers not to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols, he said if you are with a brother who would be defiled, then refrain from your freedom and for his sake eat something else. If you are by yourself or with others who have no issue with where the meat came from, then you can walk in your freedom and eat.

They didn't have to worry about someone with weak conscience walking along outside the restaurant and 'OH no, what if they see me eating a steak' - a chance encounter is not something they could control, therefore they had no responsibility to be on the lookout for weak conscience believers, nor did they have to eat in a back room lest someone see their freedom in Christ.

He said 'All things are lawful for me, but not all things are expedient (suitable). All things are lawful, but not all things build the house.' Do what is suitable considering the conscience of your friend. (1 Cor10:23)

For us in our day and Christmas

As it pertains to this subject, some of our brethren have their conscience defiled in the celebration of the Lord's birth because they cannot get over the fact its roots were pagan. What they do is unto the Lord, so we should not try to 'convert them' to the freedom we have, though we should answer their questions honestly.

Love builds the house, and the house they are building in the Lord we are not to hinder. If they ask, we respond, but we aren't to evangelize our freedom by force, for they must respond to revelation themselves.

But the reverse is true as well. If you have a Christmas tree up and the house decorated, and you have a friend who doesn't celebrate Christmas coming over for a party or meal, you don't have to remove the tree and decorations just because they are coming to your home.

It is up to them to walk in love towards you, even if they think you are an idolatrous Christian who may be doomed to hell or at least are opening the door to demonic activity due to your Christmas tree. ha!

As I shared with my students at that lunch time, most all we eat at one time or another, and even in our day and age somewhere in the world, is food sacrificed to idols. And for some, Christmas is about everything except celebrating the Lord coming to earth. But for most of us, what we do we do unto the Lord, surrounded by messages of His love and eternity future.

What Chris said sums it up

On Saturday the 6th I was driving Chris back to his group home - we have him Fridays and Saturdays when we are in town - and neither of us were talking, just watching the landscape pass by, when he spoke up and said with a smile in his voice: "I'm just so happy with Jesus." I was so blessed he had been thinking about the Lord in our silence and asked, "Why are you happy with Jesus?" He replied: "He lives in my heart!"

I'm happy with Jesus for the same reason - all else is fluff. Focus on Christ in you, and to the degree you celebrate this season or not, do so unto the Lord and love one another. From me, Barb, and Chris, Merry Christmas and blessings, new subject next week.

John Fenn

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