

CHRISTMAS: THE GREAT EXCHANGE

All of the shopping is done. All the gifts have been opened. Some of the exchanges or returns have even been made. Christmas is behind us. In the eyes of many in our culture this is case. Once all of the wrapping paper has been discarded and the holiday meal has been eaten on December 25, then Christmas is officially over. But on the Christian calendar—the calendar which, in effect, declares Jesus’ lordship over time by defining time according to his life—Christmas has only *begun* on December 25.

For retailers the Christmas season begins about July as they seek to improve over last year’s receipts and make 20% to 40% of their annual budget during their “Christmas season.” Retailers and their marketers play off of Americans’ insatiable desire for stuff. Gift-giving, something that should be a joyful time of self-sacrifice and expressing love to others, many times becomes a drudgery of fighting crowds in order to get everyone “checked off the list.” More than likely having taken December 25 from the pagans in order to proclaim the supremacy of Christ, it looks as if Christians of the last couple of generations are now giving it back to the pagans. The pagans have even taken a godly Christian example of selflessness, St. Nicolas of Myra, a fourth-century bishop in Asia minor, and made him a fat elf who exists to help children indulge themselves with the latest fads in toys and trinkets. Christians, in many cases, have not helped the situation. We have fallen in with our culture and find ourselves doing the same things. As long as we are insistent upon saying “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays,” we believe that we are fighting the anti-Christ trend that is prevalent in our culture. All the while we have many of the same attitudes as the world about Christmas. Our understanding of the message of Christmas is certainly different. But we find ourselves getting caught up in all of the same cultural traffic. The only difference is that we have “Keep ‘Christ’ in ‘Christmas’” and little fish all over the vehicles we are driving.

Contrary to what you might think at this point, this article is not a treatise against exchanging gifts at Christmas. There is certainly nothing wrong with exchanging gifts (as long as you are following Biblical principles in your finances). When God won a great victory for his people through Esther, this became the basis for sending gifts of food to one another and giving gifts to the poor (Esther 9.20-22). In the coming of Christ, God won the ultimate victory so that exchanging gifts and giving gifts to the poor are certainly appropriate. This article is about what the whole Church Year is about: the supremacy of Jesus Christ over time. It is about the Church defining the calendar for itself and the world in terms of *the* event that transforms time. For this reason, I am encouraging us as Christians to refuse to give this season to the pagans who, in our country, define all of their religious seasons in terms of their god: money. If understood properly and lived out consistently, the Christmas season remains a powerful means to bring the message of Jesus Christ to the world in word and deed.

While specific days within the year other than the Lord’s Day are not “mandated” in Scripture and we can’t judge one another by the observance of these days, wise and mature people want to do what is best, not just what we need to do to get by. Mature and maturing Christians are not minimalistic in their approach in working out their salvation. Recovering the Christmas season in the Church would be extremely helpful for the Church and through the Church for the world.

Most all who read this are probably already quite familiar with the message and meaning of Christmas. But I not only want to bring these things out. I also want to bring out the place that Christmas occupies within the Church Year.

THE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS WITHIN THE CHURCH YEAR

Like the life and ministry of Christ himself, the Liturgical Year, based upon the life and ministry of Jesus, is all inner-connected. Each part forms part of the nexus. Any major part taken out is like ripping chapters out of a novel. At the core of this story of Christ is the event of the resurrection. The Church celebrates this event in the Pascha or Easter season, that great fifty days of celebration. Every other event within the Liturgical Year finds its meaning through the lenses of the resurrection. Without the resurrection historically, there is no Christianity. Without Pascha in the Liturgical Year, all other celebrations are at best misunderstood, and at worst completely unbiblical.

The Christmas season is no different. Without the resurrection, the birth of Jesus is just another story within the long line of human stories. Certainly the events that surround the birth of Christ are a bit odd. But how suspect would these unique events be without the resurrection? Matthew and Luke tell us of a young virgin who conceives. But how many young ladies, seeking to salvage their reputations (and in Mary's case possibly her life), might tell you that they don't understand how this happened because they are still virgins? If Jesus had not risen, the virgin conception would be suspicious at best *if* record of the story had survived to this day.

It is precisely because we read the Gospel stories backward through the resurrection that we understand the virgin birth. The accounts of angels singing, a great star appearing, etc. all would be suspect and probably relegated to ancient myth had not the resurrection occurred. The importance and centrality of the resurrection to the Christian faith cannot be overstated. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is an article upon which the Church stands or falls. Because of the resurrection of Christ, we can begin to understand the meaning and message of Christmas. All other events in Christ's life and ministry being interpreted by the resurrection for the Liturgical Year means that beginning of the Year is *not* Advent/Christmas but Pascha (Easter).

As we peer back through the lenses of the resurrection, the story of God's self-giving love comes into focus in the birth of our Lord. This conception and birth are what we call the *incarnation* or the "*in-fleshing*" of the second Member of the Trinity. This is not meant to be a full discourse on the theological import or mystery of the incarnation. The depths of the meaning of the incarnation cannot be plumbed by the human mind. But we can know enough to cause us to stand in awe, wonder and worship of the Word made flesh.

John, taking a different route than Matthew and Luke and going beyond them in his narrative, goes behind the events of the first century birth of Jesus, making us understand the greatness of his birth. The incarnation of the Second Member of the Godhead is cannot be reduced to mere sentimentalism. In fact, as Stanley Hauerwas poignantly comments, "One of the great enemies of the gospel is sentimentality, and the stories surrounding Jesus's birth have proven to be ready material for maudlin sentiment." (*Matthew, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*, 35) The incarnation is about God "enfleshing" himself and entering into the pain and misery of this world to deliver the world from its sin by taking it upon himself, putting it to death, and bringing it to new life. The incarnation is about God being God in a way that shocks and surprises a sinful and selfish world. The incarnation is about a self-emptying that shows us what it means to be truly human, which means living as the image of God. The Word who became flesh who is the image of the invisible God shows us what that means. The world stands amazed because privilege, position, and power in our sin-twisted world means anything but self-emptying. Yet this is exactly what the God who created everything does in Jesus Christ. Laurence Stookey speaks of the wonder of the incarnation:

The marvel is that the creator of the cosmos comes as creature for the purpose of setting right all that has gone wrong on this tiny planet. The wonder is that Eternal One who can be neither created nor destroyed willingly becomes subject both to birth and to death ... Christmas is about the enfleshment of God, the humiliation of the Most High and divine participation in all that is painful, ugly, frustrating, and limited. Divinity takes on humanity, to restore the image of God implanted at creation but sullied by sin. Here is the great exchange Christmas ponders, that God became like us that we might become like God. (Christ Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church, 105, 106)

Christmas is about the realizing the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, though he was rich became poor so that through his poverty we might be made rich (2Cor 8.9). Christmas is about the One who, being in the form of God did not regard equality with God something to be tenaciously grasped. Rather he humbled himself and took upon himself the form of a servant (cf. Phil 2.6-7). Though there were many spectacular events that surrounded his birth, he himself did not display any kind of pomp that would allow people to know the fullness of his identity until after the resurrection. To all those around him, Jesus was a man, just like all the other Jewish men that surrounded him. As Isaiah prophesied, "He has no form or comeliness; And when we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him" (Isa 53.2). He is, in many ways, the hidden God, giving himself for others.

This cardinal teaching of the Christian faith is not some abstract doctrine that floats around out there somewhere that we sometimes plug into and contemplate. The incarnation, seen in the conception and birth of Jesus and interpreted by the cross and resurrection, is a call for the church to be the *body* of Christ in the world. We are called to take up the vocation of Christ and give ourselves to one another, for one another and for the world. The incarnation of Jesus is a *vocation*, a calling, a mission as much as it is anything else. And that mission is ours also. As Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, so send I you" (John 20.21).

Celebrating Christmas should be a time of great joy in the Christian Church. God has come in the flesh to deliver us from our sin and misery. But true joy can never be self-absorbed. Self-absorbed delight is as fleeting as the dusk that quickly turns into the night. Sad to say, but the delight of Christmas for some Christians goes in the garbage with all the used wrapping paper. The joy of Christmas is known in its depths as we take on the vocation of Jesus in the world. As the Church celebrates Christmas year after year, we are consistently being reminded of self-giving love of our God which calls us, in turn, to give ourselves for others.

THE ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTMAS SEASON

While the incarnation of the Word has been a cardinal doctrine in the church from its beginning, the celebration of the season of Christmas was something that developed over time. December 25 as the celebration of Christmas Day began in the churches in Rome in the fourth century. By the middle of the fifth century the celebration of Christmas was practically universal (The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship, s.v. "Christmas."). While this much is clear in the history of the church, how December 25 became Christmas Day is not as clear. There are two theories that are usually put forward about the date of December 25.

1. *The date was chosen to oppose a pagan cult which celebrated the birthday of the invincible sun, Natalis solis invicti, established on that date in 274 by the Roman emperor Aurelian.*

This would be the case of the Christian church redefining the world and its calendar in terms of the life and ministry of Jesus. Early Christians would say that Jesus is the true Sun of righteousness which rises with healing in his wings according to Malachi 4.2. He is the invincible Sun whose birthday we celebrate.

2. The “calculation” hypothesis is another explanation of how the church arrived at the date of December 25.

The way that this hypothesis works will seem a little strange to us, but in the early church working with numbers was common. Some calculated the death of Jesus to be March 25. Possibly adapting some rabbinic practices which said that a martyr died on the same day of his birth, the Church said that March 25 was the day of Jesus conception. Nine months exactly from March 25 is December 25. Thus, the birth of Jesus is celebrated on December 25.

The first theory holds more sway in the Church. But both of these have their problems. Whatever the origins of the date of December 25, the church did begin to celebrate the birth of Christ in the fourth century (300's). Since then it has become almost the universal practice of the church.

THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Just as many in the Church have made the mistake that Pascha is only one day instead of fifty, so many people in the Church believe that Christmas is one day instead of an extended season. The twelve days of Christmas is not just a song that is sung about a number of gifts given to a true love. The twelve days of Christmas are the Christmas season which *begins* on December 25 and ends on January 6. (How the twelve days are calculated is a bit off. The season begins on Dec. 25 but this would make it end on January 5. January 6 is Epiphany, which is considered the end of the Christmas season. Nevertheless, Christmas is a season and not just a day.)

Unfortunately, many in the Church have allowed the commercial world to redefine the historical Church calendar. Everyone knows when the Christmas season begins in the U.S. It is when at the close of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade Santa comes riding through Manhattan on his particular float. That is the beginning of the Christmas season. The day after Thanksgiving, the biggest shopping day of the year, is *commercially* the beginning of the Christmas season. Though I know that this is not a matter of orthodoxy and does not determine ultimate destinies, it speaks volumes concerning the relationship between the Church and the present culture. We have allowed the pagan culture to take a purely Christian holiday and redefine it right in our faces.

As I said, I realize that this is not a matter of ultimate destinies, but it is a commentary on whose in charge of definitions. It is that underlying matter that should concern us. The Church as traditionally celebrated the Christmas season as the period between December 25 and January 6 (at least in the West). This should be the time of the festivities and celebration. But just when everything should be getting “cranked up” because we are celebrating the arrival of the Savior, we are winding down and spending our time in the Returns department.

The church has, through the centuries, established particular feast days. Again, these are not binding upon the people in that if you don't observe them you are disobeying God. But they are celebrations that proclaim and celebrate Jesus' lordship. There are certain feast days that are connected with the Christmas season.

Epiphany

Epiphany is the close of the Christmas season and is considered to be a part of the Christmas season. Epiphany in religious contexts speaks about the appearance of God or gods. In civic contexts it was used to speak about the birth or visit of a king. Since Jesus is God in the flesh and exalted Lord of the world, both really apply. And both are announced by the Gospel writers.

Epiphany can and does include several events in the life of Christ. Originally it began as a celebration of Jesus baptism. It came to include the visit of the Magi and sometimes even Jesus' turning the water to wine at Cana. Epiphany actually pre-dates the celebration of Christmas. The earliest evidence we have in Christian history is from Clement of Alexandria (Egypt) around the year 215.

Epiphany is about the manifestation of who this Jesus really is. In the visit from the Magi, the Gentiles, we see them coming with gifts for the King. In the baptism of Jesus we see the Spirit descending upon Jesus and the Father declaring who he is: his beloved Son in whom he is well-pleased. All of these instances in Jesus' life emphasize his *identity*. He is the One who is manifested to save the world.

The Circumcision of Jesus or The Name of Jesus

Other than Christmas Day and Epiphany themselves, the primary feast day within the season of Christmas is *The Circumcision of Jesus*, or, as it is now called, *The Name of Jesus*. The circumcision of Jesus falls on January 1, the eighth day after his birth. The account of his circumcision can be found in Luke 2.21. Of course Jesus circumcision has all sorts of implications. Jesus came as one born under the law so that he might deliver those who were under the law (Gal 4.4-5). It is at this time that he receives his name, Jesus, that was announced to Joseph earlier (cf. Matt 1.20-21) and Mary (cf. Luke 1.31). His name means "YHWH saves" or "YHWH is salvation." And so, we are reminded of Jesus' mission, his vocation, from the time of his infancy. We are reminded that God's intention all along was that through him we would be delivered.

Other Feast Days

Other days are recognized during this time also. There is the recognition of Stephen, the first Christian martyr (Dec. 26) as well as John the Apostle (Dec 27). Honoring our faithful fathers and mothers in the faith is not a matter of worship, but of respect and learning from their faithful lives; much like the writer of Hebrews implores us to do in Hebrews 11 and 12.

One other day of commemoration is observed during the Christmas season: Innocents' Day or the Slaughter of the Innocents. This day recognizes the time in which Herod, as a new Pharaoh, killed all the babies in Bethlehem and the surrounding region as he was seeking the life of Christ. This day is recognized on Dec. 28.

Dependent Feast Days

Dependent feast days are days that are not within the Christmas season itself but are associated with it. *The Annunciation*, celebrated March 25, commemorates the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary as recorded in Luke 1.26-38. With all the attention and adulation the

Roman Catholic Church pours upon Mary, Protestants have revolted almost to the point of despising Mary. When we do this, we reject what the Scriptures say about her. Mary was highly favored by God. She (like it is said about Noah) finds grace in the eyes of the Lord. Mary was a righteous woman, a faithful covenant-keeping woman. She is an exemplar of submission as she says, "I am the servant of the Lord, let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1.38). Mary is blessed among women. She is certainly not to be disregarded by the Church. She, of course, is not to be prayed to our through as some type of mediator. But neither is she to be despised and almost totally disregarded. In the Annunciation we see God's sovereign hand at work accomplishing his plan in and through humanity.

The Visitation, celebrated May 31, commemorates the visit of Mary with Elizabeth, her cousin and mother of John the Baptizer. This is recorded for us in Luke 1.39-56. What is celebrated during this visit is the fact that God remembers his covenant and is reversing the fortunes of his people in fulfillment of his promises. During this visitation Mary sings what has come to be called *the Magnificat* (Luke 1.46-55). He that is mighty has done great things and holy is his name.

Some of this theme is carried over into *The Birth of John the Baptizer*, celebrated on June 24 (six months before the birth of Jesus). Luke records this for us in Luke 1.57-80. John is the one who will be the forerunner of Christ in fulfillment of the prophecies of Scripture concerning Elijah who will come. He is the one who will point others to Christ. Zechariah, John's father, also prophesies (sings?) about God's covenant faithfulness in visiting his people and redeeming them (Luke 1.67-79).

The last major celebration connected to the Christmas season is *The Presentation of Jesus*, recorded for us in Luke 2.22-40. This is celebrated on February 2, the fortieth day after his birth. Joseph and Mary go to present the child Jesus at the Temple on this day in fulfillment of the law in Exod 13.2ff. and make atonement for herself to be purified from her uncleanness as it says in Lev 12.1ff. At this time is when we meet to faithful saints, Simeon and Anna. Both of these saints are examples for us in piety and patient perseverance. They are examples for us to follow as they point us to the faithfulness of God.

The Church has a rich history in the development of its life around the life of Jesus. Who Jesus is and what he did in history are the foundation of the Church. We are called to follow Christ in his vocation. He has given to us and for us. We are to give back to him and give to others and for others. The celebration of the Christmas season in the life of the Church is a yearly focus on the grace of our God and the mission of the Church. So, seeing that we are in the middle of the Christmas Season: Merry Christmas!