



Living 4 Three Ministries

Should Christians Celebrate Christmas?

Introduction

"Should Christians celebrate Christmas?" or, "How should a Christian celebrate Christmas?" These are questions of concern for many sincere believers. In fact, many believers dislike the season and have refused to celebrate it at all. I must say that I can be counted among those who had a disdain for the season for a long time. There are a number of reasons for this attitude, and while I might agree with some of the concerns and some of the reasons offered against the observance of Christmas, after careful study, much consideration, and a massive amount of prayer, I am convinced that I do not necessarily agree with the negative conclusions.

One day I happened to catch a TV preacher denouncing the celebration of Christmas. He was saying it is pagan holiday, and that Christ could not have born in December. At the time, I agreed and listened eagerly to his words. He used some Old Testament passages to show how the Christmas tree was idolatrous and an abomination. He quoted Jeremiah 10:2-4 which reads:

² Thus says the LORD, "Do not learn the way of the nations, And do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens Although the nations are terrified by them; ³ For the customs of the peoples are delusion; Because it is wood cut from the forest, The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. ⁴ "They decorate *it* with silver and with gold; They fasten it with nails and with hammers so that it will not totter.

Then he quoted Isaiah 44:14-15:

Isaiah 44:14-15 Surely he cuts cedars for himself, and takes a cypress or an oak, and raises *it* for himself among the trees of the forest. He plants a fir, and the rain makes it grow. ¹⁵ Then it becomes *something* for a man to burn, so he takes one of them and warms himself; he also makes a fire to bake bread. He also makes a god and worships it; he makes it a graven image, and falls down before it. (NASB)

Finally, he quoted Jeremiah 3:13:

Only acknowledge your iniquity, That you have transgressed against the LORD your God And have scattered your favors to the strangers under every green tree, And you have not obeyed My voice,' declares the LORD.

It seems that the points of reference for this preacher were to "wood cut from the forest," "they decorate it with silver and gold," "he plants a fir" (an evergreen tree), "scattered your favors . . . under every green tree," and "falls down before it." The preacher went on to say, that at Christmas people take an evergreen tree cut from the forest; they decorate it with ornaments of silver and gold, and then fall down before it when they place their presents under the tree. His conclusion was that this is idolatry.

After much prayer, it dawned on me that if this weren't so sad, it would be hilarious. But sincere people hear this and become concerned. As a minister, I have had people ask me questions such as, "Are we wrong to celebrate Christmas?" "Is this idolatry?" "What should we do about celebrating Christmas?"

I myself have asked these questions and for a long time have answered that Christmas is a horrible insult to God, and to the wonderful gift of His son. It is this mentality that I will address in this study. How

should believers respond to such questions and to the criticism leveled against the celebration of Christmas and the Christmas season? Is it scripturally wrong to celebrate Christmas? Is it pagan?

Everywhere we go during the season, the signs of Christmas are there with all their glitter, tinsel, lights, greenery, cards, festivities, carols, bells, Santas, manger scenes, angels, trees and presents--and the push by Madison Avenue, and the gimmicks of the retailers. It's an economic fact that the Christmas season either makes or breaks many businesses.

Should we play the part of Scrooge and say, "bah humbug!?" Should we call attention to the fact that certain of our Christmas traditions such as the yule log, the decorated tree, and mistletoe each have their roots in pagan festivals? Should we assert that to celebrate Christmas is to promote paganism and materialism and thus is just not the biblical thing to do?

I personally no longer agree with that conclusion. In this short study, we will take a look at some of the arguments and issues, and consider some of the biblical options open to us as believers.

Arguments Against the Celebration of Christmas

Argument Number 1: Christmas is Commercialized and Materialistic

It is said that because the birth of Christ has been commercialized and secularized the real, intended meaning of the season has been lost. For the most part this is true. Even the story about the birth of Christ is often distorted, mocked, or misrepresented. The meaning of Christmas is said to be the spirit of giving. However, the giving of the Son of God who became the babe of the cradle that He might become the man of the cross and one day reign on earth with the crown is forgotten, rejected, or ignored.

Answers and Considerations:

If we use this argument as a legitimate reason for discarding the entire celebration of Christ's birth at Christmas, it would follow that we would end up having to throw out everything--even our Bibles and our wives or husbands. Why? Because Satan and man distort and ruin everything in life--the Bible, sex, marriage, the church, food--everything. Name one thing that Satan doesn't ruin. We don't throw things out just because the world misuses or distorts them.

To best discern the truth of the scriptures used in this study, we must use more than one translation. For this reason, as well as many other reasons which I won't go into at this time, I strongly object to the use of just one bible translation in one's study of God's word, and even in preparing a sermon or lesson to be given to others. So, using this premise, let's take a look at the verses which apply to this study of the Christmas season.

In 1 Thessalonians 5:22 Paul says, "*abstain from every form of evil*" (NASB). Because of the translation of the KJV, "*every appearance of evil*," some have taken this to apply to anything that even looks like it might be evil. As the NASB translation makes clear, however, Paul's meaning is "*to abstain from every genuine form of evil*," **not** what might simply **appear** to be evil. We are to abstain from what is genuinely evil or wrong according to the index of the Word of God. To abstain from the mere appearance of evil would seem to contradict what the Apostle says in the second passage important to this discussion.

In Titus 1:15 the Apostle also warns against those who see evil in almost anything and condemn it. For these people, a lot of things have the appearance of evil, but purity is first of all a matter of the mind and conscience, not merely the external. "*To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled.*" (NASB).

Just because the world distorts something does not make it evil if we avoid the distortions and use it as God intended or in a way that does not go contrary to God's character and holiness. A good illustration is the beauty of sexual love within the bonds of marriage. Sex, perhaps more than anything else, is grossly perverted by Satan and man, but is not only acceptable in God's eyes, but was actually commanded by God.

Argument Number 2: Scripture Doesn't Authorize It

The argument is that since we are not clearly authorized by the Bible to celebrate the birth of Christ during such a season, we should have no celebrations or even special services to commemorate the birth of Christ. On the other hand, Scripture does tell us to remember His death in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper, and we celebrate His resurrection by assembling on the first day of the week, but there is no precedent for celebrating His birth.

Answers and Considerations:

This is what we could legitimately call **hyper-literalism** in the use of Scripture. Such an approach completely misses the spirit and intent of the Bible. Hyper-literalism (or letter-ism) is an intense devotion to the details of the Bible in such a way that one misses the spirit and essential thrust of a passage. Mountains are made out of mole hills and the truth is missed. One is busy counting the number of letters in a sentence rather than listening to its instruction.

If we applied this argument consistently, we would need to discontinue the use of overheads, musical instruments, hymnals, chorus books, the church building, pews, Sunday school, Christian schools, and many other things. Further, there could be no special services or seasons to commemorate things God has done as with Thanksgiving or a dedication service for a new building. Why? Because the only illustrations of such things are found in the Old Testament and not the New Testament. If the New Testament had clearly spoken on this matter, this argument would be correct because the New Testament does take priority over the Old Testament. However, since it has not, the argument from silence is not sufficient reason.

Some would argue that the New Testament has not been silent, and this is the third argument we need to consider.

Argument Number 3: Scripture Forbids It

Colossians 2:16-17 *“Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day-- things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ”.*

Using this passage, it is claimed that Scripture actually warns and forbids the observance of any special months, seasons, days or religious festivals.

Answers and Considerations:

What Colossians 2:16-17 forbids is the celebration of religious seasons or holy days when they have been prescribed as religious duty and necessary for holiness or spirituality.

In this passage, the Apostle is talking about the Old Testament festivals which were shadows of the person and work of Christ--but Christ has now come. To continue to celebrate them is to dishonor the fact of His coming, or to act as though He were not enough for salvation or spirituality. Note what the Apostle says, *“let no one act as your judge in regard to . . .”* He is saying don't let anyone tell you these things are requirements for fellowship with God. They were only shadows of the person and work of Christ, and He has not only come and fulfilled those shadows, but He is totally sufficient.

This is pertaining to the fact that the “requirements of the law” (the physical requirement) was nailed to the cross with Jesus. It doesn't mean the spirit of the law (or the law itself) was done away, but the physical aspect of keeping these holy days and ordinances is no longer required. The best example I can think of is using what Paul said in Galatians.

Gal 3:24 *Thus the law had become our guardian until Christ, so that we could be declared righteous by faith.*

Gal 3:25 *But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.*

Gal 3:26 *For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith.*

Gal 3:27 *For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.*

The best way I can think of to take what Paul is saying and relate it to our lives today is this. When we are raising our children, we know they are not mature enough to make their own decisions, so we set down rules which they are required to obey. Some of these rules may be to keep their rooms clean, take out the trash, be home by a certain time and others. The point of these rules is not just for their safety, but also to teach them something they need to understand as they grow up. Our intent is for them to learn to take

responsibility. The rules are still there, but are kept with a different attitude and frame of mind. The idea of a curfew should teach them to be responsible about scheduling their time so they get enough rest for work and such. Staying out late, though they can do that as adults, will make them tired and cause them to not do well at their jobs or schooling, but the physical requirement of a curfew and being in bed by a certain time, though still applicable is not a physical requirement. God expects us to take responsibility as Christians, and to be able to look back at his written codes and discern valuable lessons from them. They were in place to prepare us for the time when Christ would come and the original promise, given to Abraham, would be in effect. The intent was that by the time Christ arrived, we would be ready to accept the responsibility of living a life of faith, and not have to be told to “do this” and “do that” in order to live a life of obedience.

Therefore, Colossians 2:16 and 17 in no way forbid believers from commemorating something such as the birth of Christ if it is done out of love, devotion, and the joy the season gives when used as a way of focusing on the Savior and not as a religious duty. The issue is not the observance, but the **reason**, the **attitudes** and the **spirit** in which it is done.

Furthermore, I believe there is scriptural precedent for commemorating and remembering the birth of Christ. This is in keeping with the events that occurred around the time of Christ's birth. These include:

1. The appearance of the angel of the Lord with the glory of the Lord to announce the birth of Christ to the shepherds (Lk. 2:10-12).
2. The response of the angels at the announcement of Christ's birth (Lk. 2:13-14).
3. The actions of the shepherds who left their flocks to go and see which was nothing short of a celebration (Lk. 2:15-20).
4. And the arrival of the men from the east bearing gifts as much as a year to two years later (Matt. 2:1-12).

There is, of course, the New Testament precedent for believers meeting together on Sunday. In essence this is a celebration of the Lord's resurrection. Again, the physical keeping of the seventh day Sabbath is no longer required, so any day of the week is fine. The early church automatically conducted services on Sunday, but Scripture does not command us to do so and neither does it forbid it. In fact, the early church at first met daily and took the Lord's Supper daily, but we don't do that today. Why not? Because these are not binding. We are not under the Law. Believers meet on Sunday because of its significance and because the early church set a precedent for it, but it was never commanded in the Bible. Believers did it out of love and adoration for the risen Savior.

The point is this: If the early church could celebrate the resurrection without a specific command from God, only the spirit of legalism or the letter of the law would forbid the celebration of Christ's birth as a special season of joy and adoration. Ultimately, the issue is not the season, its the attitude and reason behind it and the distortion of it. Let's not throw out the baby with the wash.

Argument Number 4: Christmas Traditions are from Paganism

Another argument against the celebration of Christmas, and perhaps the most popular one, as it has been done for years is the claim that many of the traditions found in the celebration of Christmas were brought over into Christianity from pagan practices. These include the yule log, the tree, special feasts or meals, and mistletoe. How can we justify these things? Isn't it just like celebrating Halloween? A number of Old Testament passages are sometimes used to condemn the use of Christmas trees such as: Jeremiah 10:2-5; Isaiah 40:19-20; 44:14-17. (See verses in introduction above.)

Answers and Considerations:

Some Historical Facts about our Traditions

The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says:

Gradually a number of prevailing practices of the nations into which Christianity came were assimilated and were combined with the religious ceremonies surrounding Christmas. The assimilation of such practices generally represented efforts by Christians to transform or absorb otherwise pagan practices.

The Feast of Saturnalia in early Rome, for example, was celebrated for 7 days from the 17th to the 24th of December and was marked by a spirit of merriment, gift giving to children and other forms of entertainment. Gradually, early Christians replaced the pagan feast with the celebration of Christmas; but many of the traditions of this observance were assimilated and remain to this day a part of the observance of Christmas. Other nations, the Scandinavians, Germans, French, English and others, have left their mark . . . as well (pp. 804, 805).

Concerning these ancient elements, *The Christian Encyclopedia* says:

Various symbolic elements of the pagan celebration, such as the lighting of candles, evergreen decorations, and the giving of gifts, were adapted to Christian signification. Later as Christianity spread into northern Europe, the Celtic, Teutonic, and Slavic winter festivals contributed holly, mistletoe, the Christmas tree, bonfires, and similar items.

Finally, Unger's Bible Dictionary adds:

The giving of presents was a Roman custom; while the yule tree and yule log are remnants of old Teutonic nature worship. Gradually the festival sank into mere revelry . . . The custom was forbidden by an act of parliament in 1555; And the reformation brought in a refinement in the celebration of Christmas by emphasizing its Christian elements.

But what about passages like Jeremiah 10? Some believe this condemns the celebration of Christmas and especially the use of the Christmas tree. Is Jeremiah telling us to avoid the customs of the nations? No. Jeremiah 10 is a denunciation of the making and worship of idols and not the decoration of evergreen trees in the home.

- This passage is not a categorical denial of all the customs of the nations. It is only a command to avoid those customs that are contrary to the revelation of God to Israel. There were many customs that Israel and the nations had in common that were not wrong.
- This passage in Jeremiah and others like it in Isaiah had to do with idolatry. First, Jeremiah warns against astrological worship--the worship of the sun, moon, and the stars. Second, he warns against going into the forest to cut down trees to be carved into an idol in some form whether human or animal, and then worshipped and prayed to for guidance, for protection, and blessing (cf. Isa. 44:14-17).
- Some have tried to tie the reference to the green tree in Jeremiah 3:6, 13 to the reference in 10:3f to further justify condemnation of the Christmas tree, but this refers to the idolatrous groves of trees used as a place for idol worship and revelry.

Issues Facing Us Today

(1) The pagan associations were lost long ago

The names of the days of our week also had their origin in pagan beliefs. Thursday originally stood for the Germanic god of the sky or of thunder. Tuesday stood for *Tiw*, the god of war. And Wednesday is derived from *Woden*, the chief god in Germanic mythology. Sunday and Monday were related somehow to the worship of the sun and the moon. Saturday is from Saturnus, or Saturn, and Friday comes from *Fria*, the goddess of love.

All of these ancient meanings with their beliefs and associations were lost long ago. When Friday roles around we don't think about *Fria*, the goddess of love. On Saturday we don't think about it as Saturn's day, but as our day off! The same applies to the traditions of Christmas. If one observed the days of the

week or the Christmas season with their ancient associations in mind, certainly it would be wrong. But many of these things, as with our Sunday, have been given Christian connotations.

- The evergreen tree is a symbol of the eternal life which Christ, the Son of God, offers to man via another tree, the cross (Rev. 2:7; 22:2, 14).
- The presents under the tree can remind us of God's gift and our need to give of ourselves to others as those who have received God's gift of life through Christ.

Even without seeking special significance in the traditions of Christmas, you could still celebrate this season for the joy and family fun the season can bring.

I would like to suggest that believers can capitalize on the Christmas season as a family tradition and as a learning experience much like the Old Testament Passover was to be used by Israel. It all depends on the spirit and attitude in which it is done. We can be very negative and critical, or we can be positive and use the season as a time to remember and commemorate the birth of the Savior. We can use it as a time to demonstrate love for others in a special way, and to be together as a family like we do on Thanksgiving, the Fourth of July, or New Years. We can make something evil out of it or something good.

(2) Facts of Scripture Concerning the Celebration of Christmas

In view of what we have seen, the Bible is silent from the standpoint of our Christmas traditions. However, because of our freedom in Christ under grace, we are at liberty to celebrate Christmas. The important point is that the Bible simply does not condemn the celebration of Christmas even in the traditional form and we have liberty in Christ to choose to do so.

Scripture does, however, set down principles which should affect the way we celebrate it. These principles warn and protect us from the distortions we find in the world. Some of these distortions are listed below, and should not be a part of a Christian's celebration of the season.

- Today in many companies and offices, Christmas is celebrated with wild, drunken parties where there is no regard for the reason for the season--the birth of the Savior of the World. It becomes just a time of merriment and a time to tie one on.
- Today people often spend lavishly on gifts and go deeply in debt. They buy things they can't afford, which nobody needs, and sometimes can't even identify. The response is "Hey, thanks. What is it?"
- Children get caught up with the gifts and the toys and lose sight of the Savior--or never hear about the Lord as God's gift of His Son that we might have life.
- Through the Christmas message, Parents often fail to teach the spirit of giving as an outworking of one's relationship with God through faith in Christ, God's gift to the world.
- Finally, some may observe the season as they would observe lent, as a religious holy day that must be observed to gain points with God, or to become more spiritual.

But it doesn't have to be like this. Even the gift aspect can be done in such a way that it is instructive, meaningful, in keeping with one's budget, and in keeping with biblical teaching concerning Christian stewardship.

(3) Ancient traditions are often distortions of original revelation

Many of the customs of Christmas originated in ancient Babylonian paganism and were related in various ways to the mother-child cult. But an important concept is often missed here.

Originally, many of the ideas of these pagan practices may have had their roots in the truth of the Old Testament or divine revelation from God as:

- In Genesis 3:15, we have the promise of the Savior through the seed of a woman.
- In Isaiah 7:14, we have the promise that this Savior will come through the virgin birth.
- A number of passages use the symbol of a tree to point to the promise of life through the Messiah. Genesis 2:9: 3:17, 22; Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14 all speak of a tree of life, some historic, some prophetic. Isaiah 4:2; 11:1; 60:21; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15 and Zechariah 3:8; 6:12 all speak of the branch of the Lord as the work of God.

These verses form a whole line of prophecies concerning the branch of the Lord, the shoot, that would spring forth and become a tree of life both to Israel and the nations. So, when we come to the New Testament, we find reference to a tree of life that is available to believers in Christ.

In view of these Old Testament prophecies, I believe four things are evident:

- These ancient customs of the nations were originally introduced into the religious life of the nations by Satan to distort the original promises and truth of God which these customs would portray. For instance, in the mother-child cult of ancient Babylon, the mother was the primary object of worship, not her son. This was a distortion of the promise of Genesis 3:15.
- These customs came from a basic need in man (one built in by God) for the truth and need of a Savior. The practices, though in perverted form, did portray a deliverer, the provision of eternal life, the gift of God through the seed of a woman, a divine branch from heaven as the means of reconciliation to God.
- The principle is that these customs cast surprising light on the revelation of God's grace as they originally came from God in the beginning of human history. As with the story of the flood, the temptation, and the fall of man, they all became perverted from that which we find in the inspired Word. However, in many cases, they did point to original revelation from God and maybe even customs that were originally pure.
- Today, our Christmas traditions have lost their original pagan significance or connotations. In some cases, the distortions were corrected by the reformers over two hundred years ago, but they did not see fit to condemn the celebration of Christmas.

(4) The celebration of Christmas falls under the category of doubtful things.

It is argued that since Scripture does not clearly rule out the celebration of Christmas; its celebration falls under the category of debatable or doubtful things covered by the principles of Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 9. In summary, these passages teach us the following principles:

- Every believer must become convinced in his or her own mind (Rom. 14:5).
- We must not judge or look upon other with contempt who do not come to the same conclusion that we do (Rom. 14:3, 4, 13).
- Just as there is nothing evil in meat sacrificed to idols, so there is nothing inherently evil in the traditional Christmas with the tree, presents, carols, and decorations. Such things become what people make them by their attitudes and beliefs (Rom. 14:22-23; 1 Cor. 8:4-8; 10:19).
- The ultimate issue is our attitude, the reasons, and how if one decides to celebrate the Christmas season in some fashion.

(5) Some Options to Consider

- If you have doubts or misgivings, do away with any observance of the Christmas season all together. But do not become a Scrooge and look down on those who do celebrate it (Rom. 14:-5).
- Cut out some or all of the traditional elements like the tree, presents, etc., but spend the season reflecting on the birth of the Savior through the Word and the singing of carols.
- Keep the season's traditions--the tree, presents, and decorations--but divorce them of any religious tones. Use this part of the season simply as a family tradition for fun and family togetherness. But remember the birth of Christ through carols, reading the Christmas story, and times with other members of the body of Christ.
- Keep the Christmas traditions and use them to illustrate and focus on the truth of Jesus Christ. (1) The tree speaks of the Lord and the eternal life which He gives; (2) The presents speak of God's love and gift to us of His Son and of our love for one another. Make the emphasis more on giving rather than receiving. (3) The mistletoe speaks of the gift of God's righteous branch, and the kiss or hug stands for kissing the Son in faith--an expression of faith in Christ as God's means of salvation and reconciliation (Psalm 2).

The problem is that many believers are already carnal or marginal in their spiritual life and they get caught up in the rat race and secularization of the season. People spend far more than they can afford. They seek relief from their burdens and seek happiness in the glitter and merry making of the holidays, rather than in the person of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. They look for the season to give joy, rather

than the Person of the season. They expect from the season what only God can give. As a result, depression and suicide reaches its peak during the Christmas season and immediately following it.

Argument Number 5: Uncertainty of the Date of Christ's Birth

As one who has specialized in biblical chronology, Dr. Harold W. Hoehner, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote:

Jesus Christ entered into the history of our world, Christianity, therefore, has historical basis. The backbone of history is chronology. Whereas history is a systematic account of events in relation to a nation, institution, science, or art; chronology is a science of time. It seeks to establish and arrange the dates of past events in their proper sequence. Thus chronology serves as a necessary framework upon which the events of history may be fitted (BIB SAC, Vol. 130, # 520, Oct.-Dec., 1973, p. 338).

The argument is that Christ could not have been born on December 25 or even in the winter, so the entire celebration is wrong, even the time of the year.

Answers and Considerations:

By considering the chronological notes in Scripture such as Luke 2:1, "it seems that the evidence would lead one to conclude that Christ's birth occurred sometime in the winter of 5/4 B.C." (Hoehner, p. 350). Our concern here is not with the year, but with the month Christ was born--or at least the time of year, i.e., winter or spring. Is a winter date out of the question? Is it possible or maybe even probable?

1. Hoehner points out that the traditional date for the birth of Christ as December 25th dates back to as early as Hippolytus (A..D. 165-235). In the Eastern church January 6th was the date used for Christ's birth. But this is still a winter date and not far removed from December 25th.
2. Chrysostom (A..D. 345-407) in 386 stated that December 25th is the correct date and hence it became the official date for Christ's birth except in the Eastern church which still retained January 6th.
3. One of the main objections has been that sheep were usually taken into enclosures from November through March and were not out in the fields at night. However, this is not as conclusive as it sounds for the following reasons: (a) It could have been a mild winter. (b) It is not at all certain that sheep were always brought into enclosures during the winter months. (c) It is true that during the winter months sheep were brought in from the wilderness, but remember, Luke tells us the shepherds were near Bethlehem rather than in the wilderness. This indicates, if anything, the nativity was in the winter months. (d) The Mishnah tells us the shepherds around Bethlehem were outside all year and those worthy of the Passover were nearby in the fields at least 30 days before the feast which could be as early as February (one of the coldest, rainiest months of the year). So December is a very reasonable date.

James Kelso, an archaeologist who spent a number of years living in Palestine and who has done extensive research there says this:

The best season for the shepherds of Bethlehem is the winter when heavy rains bring up a luscious crop of new grass. After the rains the once-barren, brown desert earth is suddenly a field of brilliant green. One year when excavating at New Testament Jericho, I lived in Jerusalem and drove through this area twice every day. At one single point along the road, I could see at times as many as five shepherds with their flocks on one hillside. One shepherd stayed with his flock at the same point for three weeks, so lush was the grass. But as soon as the rains stopped in the spring, the land quickly took on its normal desert look once again.

Since there seem to have been a number of shepherds who came to see the Christ child, December or January would be the most likely months (James Kelso, *An Archaeologist Looks At The Gospels*, p. 23-24).

Argument Number 6: The Timing of the Magi's Arrival

It has been claimed the Magi could not have arrived in Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth. It would have taken months to travel to Bethlehem from the East. The family was living in a house when the Magi arrived, and Herod had children killed up to two years old when he heard about the child.

While none of this really affects whether one should celebrate Christmas, this argument is often used to throw further doubt and contempt for the entire tradition of celebrating Christmas.

Answers and Considerations:

The argument concerning the time required to travel from the East assumes a great deal. It assumes they were in the East when the star was seen, or even that God had not revealed information to them which could have caused them to begin their journey before the star was seen.

Let me just quote Hoehner from BIB SAC again (Vol. 130, # 520, p. 349).

The question arises whether Matthew is speaking of the same time as Luke or a later time. Madison attempts to demonstrate that the Magi visited Christ when He was about two years of age by noting that the Lukan narrative uses the term *brephos* (2:12) which is used to refer to an unborn, a newborn child, or an infant whereas Matthew uses the words *paidion* (2:8, 9,11, 13, 14, 20, 21) and *pais* (2:16) which are used of a child that is at least one year old rather than an infant. The fact that the wise men came to the house (in Matthew's account) rather than a manger (in Luke's account) would also indicate that Jesus was older when Herod slew the children. Thus Luke is talking about the time of Christ's birth whereas Matthew is talking about two years after Christ's birth.

However, the distinction is not so clear-cut as Madison would have one to believe. The term *paidion* is used of infants (Luke 1:59; 66, 76; John 16:21; Heb. 11:23) and *brephos* is used of a young child (2 Tim. 3:15). The word *pais* is used in the N.T. of a child six out of twenty-four times (the other eighteen occurrences speak of a servant). In the O.T. the meaning "servant" is almost unanimous. In Matthew 2:16 *pais* would fall into the same age category as *paidion* since the latter term is used nine times in the same context. Furthermore, to say that Jesus was no longer an infant because the magi visited Him in a house rather than a stable is quite weak. Certainly they would have moved to a house as soon as it was possible. Indeed the tone of Matthew 2:1 is that the Magi visited Christ soon after His birth. That Herod killed children up to two years old was only to be sure he got Jesus. This is not out of character with Herod. Therefore, the slaying of the children soon after Christ's birth is tenable.

Please note what Charles Ryrie has to say on Matthew 2:11 in his Study Bible, p. 1447.

into the house . . . the Child. These words need not indicate that the wise men came some time after the birth of Christ. The family would naturally have moved into a house as quickly as possible after Jesus was born, and "child" can mean a newborn (John 16:21). We do not know how many wise men there were, gold and frankincense and myrrh. These were gifts worthy of a king. The early church fathers understood the gold to be symbolic of Christ's deity; the frankincense, of His purity; and the myrrh, of His death (since it was used for embalming).

These quotes above show many scholarly views of the part the Magi played in the events surrounding the birth of our Savior. Having researched the wording myself, I find it difficult to accept that they Magi were present the night Jesus was born, or that they even arrived in Bethlehem. Personally, I believe they found Mary and Jesus in Nazareth in Joseph's house at least eight days after the birth of Jesus.

My own reasoning is that the Magi may have left their respective homes long before Christ was actually born, thus accounting for the two year time, or may have been divinely informed as much as two years before the event and reported this time in their conversations with Herod. I also view the truth that if there was no room for Joseph and Mary that night, there would not have been the next day, but either way is just conjecture on anyone's part. The fact is that on the seventh day they took the baby Jesus to Jerusalem to be dedicated as the law prescribed, and immediately after that returned to their home in Nazareth, which would have been where the Magi found Mary and the child – not in Bethlehem. Also, as a side note, the

bright star (which can be translated as angel, as it is in other verses) was only visible to the Magi, and was not shining over the stable, because the shepherds had to ask people in town where the stable was located. Had there been a bright star, they would have known, and so would everyone else. And again, the Magi, after learning that the birth was to take place in Bethlehem, could have easily found the town and just as easily found the child. However, the star “reappeared” and led them to the house where Mary and the child were located; something that would have been totally unnecessary had Joseph, Mary and the child still been in Bethlehem. I believe this to be the true account, because everything God does is for a reason and not done “just because”, and this seems to be the only reason for the “star” needing to reappear for the Magi.

Argument Number 7: Christmas means "Christ's Mass"

The name Christmas is objected to because it means Christ's Mass. This is supposed to be a reference to the Roman Catholic ritual involving the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. Roman Catholic tradition holds that by the priest's consecration the bread and the wine are changed into the literal body and blood of Christ; that this consecration is a new offering of Christ's sacrifice, and that by partaking of the elements the communicant receives saving and sanctifying grace from God.

Answers and Considerations:

Christ + mass, can also mean "a large number or quantity." It can also mean simply a mass of religious services in commemoration of the birth of Christ. In other words, mass stands for festival involving a number of religious activities, and is not a reference to the Roman Catholic ritual of the Eucharist.

Further, even if the term originally referred to the Roman Catholic ritual of the Eucharist, it long ago lost that connotation and is really not an issue.

Argument Number 8: What about Santa Claus?

Christmas can involve children in the belief of Santa Claus, a mythical figure, which detracts from the person of Christ. The objection is that the emphasis is turned from Jesus Christ to Santa Claus as the giver of gifts for good behavior rather than God's gift of His Son by grace through faith.

Furthermore, young children sometimes confuse Santa with Jesus Christ since “he knows when you've been sleeping, he knows when you're awake, he knows if you've been bad or good, . . .”

The idea of gifts for good behavior can connote a “reward for good deeds” mentality which is opposed to God's gift of His Son **through faith. Scripture does promise rewards for obedience.**

Answers and Considerations:

The Santa Clause idea originated with a man by the name of St. Nicholas who was the Bishop of Myra in Lycia in the area of present day Turkey. He went about, often at night, giving gifts to poor and needy children. He later became the patron saint of children in the Roman Catholic Church. From here the story grew and became legend in country after country with various details being deleted and added as the legend of St. Nick grew.

So, how should believers handle it? Santa may be taken as a fairy tale idea like Alice in Wonderland, or Jack and the Bean Stalk. Children normally understand that Alice in Wonderland is only make believe--a fairy tale. However, for many children Santa is real. In many ways it is probably harmless from the human perspective, although God may not have the same appreciation for the legend, but to tell a child Santa is real is still a lie, no matter how “cute” it may seem. But because of the confusion between Santa and Christ, parents need to be careful in their use of this part of Christmas.

We also need to remember that Scripture does promise rewards for godly behavior or faithfulness for believers in Christ. Salvation is a gift through faith alone in Christ alone, but crowns, metonymy for rewards, are promised for faithful and obedient living (1 Pet. 5:4). Santa Clause should be seen as a fairy tale character who, perhaps, illustrates the benefits of being “good” to a child's mind.

Argument Number 8: What about Mistletoe?

Mistletoe was used by ancient cultures to entice people to kiss and party. The historical description of the purpose and events surrounding the use of this symbol have absolutely nothing to do with anything even closely related to Christmas.

The original ornament made from mistletoe had both red and white berries, and was hung in the doorway of the home in which the merriment was to take place. The red berries represented the menstrual cycle of the queen of heaven and the white berries represented the spermatozoa of the Sun God. Legend said that when a man and woman (any man and woman) kissed under the mistletoe, they were immediately inhabited by the sun god and the queen of heaven, and they used the human bodies they inhabited to have sex with each other.

Today, hanging mistletoe in one's doorway is considered a cute game, but one which can have disastrous effects on its participants. Far too many people kiss under the ornament who have absolutely no business doing so. Its used by young and old alike and is very popular at parties where the gaiety seems to hide the actual probably intention of the person who carries it around to get people to kiss them.

No matter how you look at it, mistletoe is not at all related to Christmas, has a negative effect on any meaningful worship of God and quite often causes many problems, whether openly or not. I firmly believe that this is one Christmas tradition that should be dropped from any Christian celebration, whether it be Christmas or any other time of year.

Conclusion

As with all of these doubtful things, each family needs to make up their own minds. In my opinion parents can explain the traditions and have fun with them, but make sure your children understand the historical roots and use these things to teach the truth behind the traditions. With a proper attitude and love toward God, Christmas can be a valuable and rewarding season of each year.