

Christmas Perspectives

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Move One – Giving Thanks and Giving Stuff

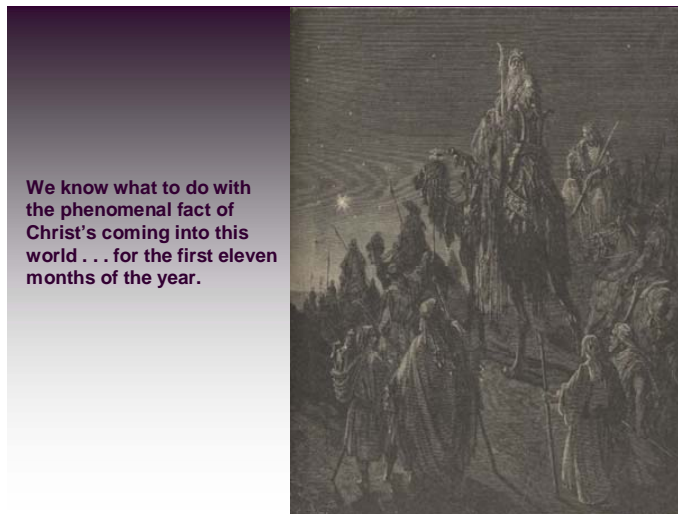
We have arrived at a point on the calendar that some of us love and some of us dread. Here we sit full of Thanksgiving stuffing. While at the same time, we may be on the brink of an anxiety attack over “giving stuff.”

Christmas propaganda has already been in full retail bloom for weeks. Black Friday, the biggest shopping day of the year, put many retailers in the fiscal black two days ago. And many of us are making our lists and checking them twice – without giving much thought to who has been naughty and who has been nice.

And so begins the inescapable cultural phenomenon of Christmas traditions and expectations. It will be impossible to miss and difficult to avoid. Some of us thrive on yuletide traditions. Others of us have blue Christmas's filled with dread, stress, and even depression. And many of us may not have a clue about what, if any, spiritual or religious meaning should be associated with Christmas.

So every few years, I share some *big picture* biblical perspectives on Christmas, because, quite frankly, many Christians are confused about Christmas. And it makes sense that we might be confused about Christmas. After all, it is primarily a religious holiday – which is jam packed with myths and symbols of pagan idolatry, while at the same time driven by retail economy and the traditions of twentieth-century Americana. What's not to be confused about? That which has become the Christmas of our culture today is perhaps the most confusing modern invention ever to ride in on the coat tails of the Christian religion.

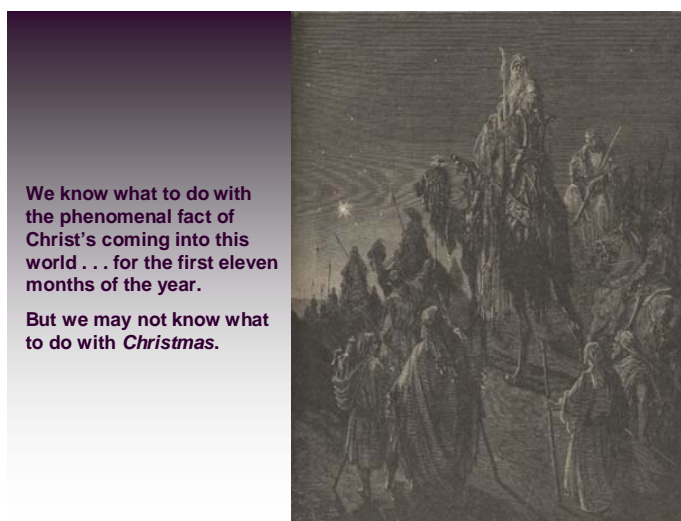
So here is our dilemma . . .



We know what to do with the phenomenal fact of Christ's coming into this world . . . for the first eleven months of the year.

We know what to do with the phenomenal fact of Christ's coming into this world . . . for the first eleven months of the year. Jesus came to save us, and as Christians we have accepted God's grace through His Son Jesus Christ. Because He came, we live for Him. Because He came, we will live forever with Him.

In fact, we are gathered here today in Jesus' name – seeking His presence, praising Him, praying through Him, adoring and worshiping Jesus – because He came. So, yes, we know how to respond to Jesus' coming. But now that we are a month away from what the world (and many religious groups) call Christmas, we may not know quite how to balance the fact of Jesus' coming with the fictitious and materialistic aspects of Christmas.



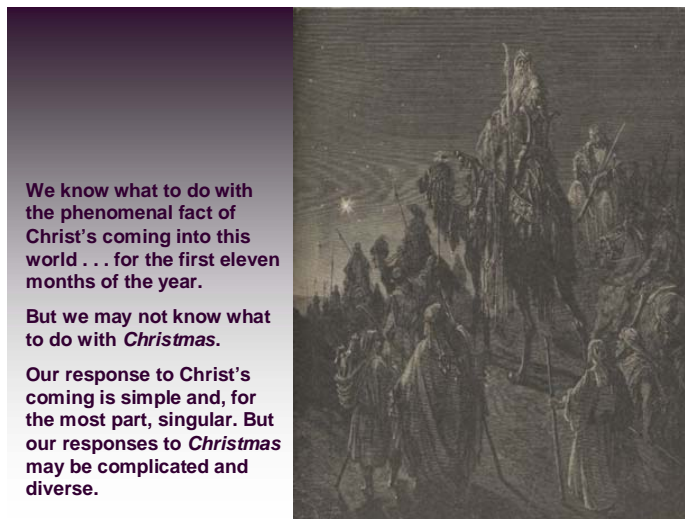
We know what to do with the phenomenal fact of Christ's coming into this world . . . for the first eleven months of the year.

But we may not know what to do with *Christmas*.

Some of us just do not know what to do with Christmas. We want to be true to God's will. We want to honor Jesus at all times, but what is God's will regarding Christmas? And maybe we're just not sure Jesus is actually honored by the holiday.

We come from different family backgrounds and different religious backgrounds, approaching Christmas from a variety of perspectives. Some of us were called out of Catholicism or denominations that make much of Christmas as a religious holiday. Others of us came to this congregation from groups that refused to acknowledge Christmas in any way, including other Churches of Christ. A few of us came from very different cultures on the other side of the world where we knew little or nothing of Christianity, much less Christmas. Others yet come from a background of cultural and religious confusion – not accepting Christmas as having any religious meaning – but probably participating in some

form of secular, cultural, traditional or family celebration (this may fit most of us). And, finally, some of us may be in a group that wonders, "What's the big deal?"



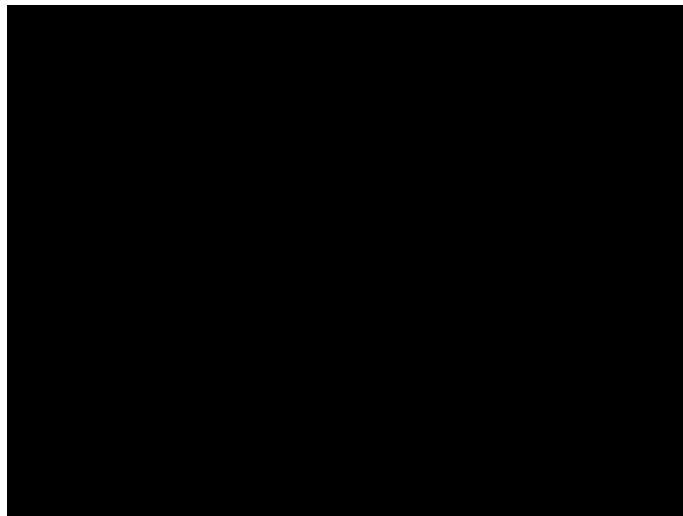
Our response to Christ's coming is simple and, for the most part, singular. We share a common faith in and appreciation for Jesus coming and saving us. But our responses to "Christmas" may be complicated and diverse. So we need to be aware of and sensitive to our diversity. And I do not think there is any need to try to alter our diversity. In such matters, the Scriptures demand unity, not uniformity.

Therefore, it is not my intention to sway your opinion of Christmas this morning. I have nothing to prove. And I won't even torment you with my own personal list of things that I do not like about Christmas, which prove that I really am Ebenezer Scrooge. But it may be helpful for us to take a step back and look at some broader concepts that can provide us with a spiritual perspective.

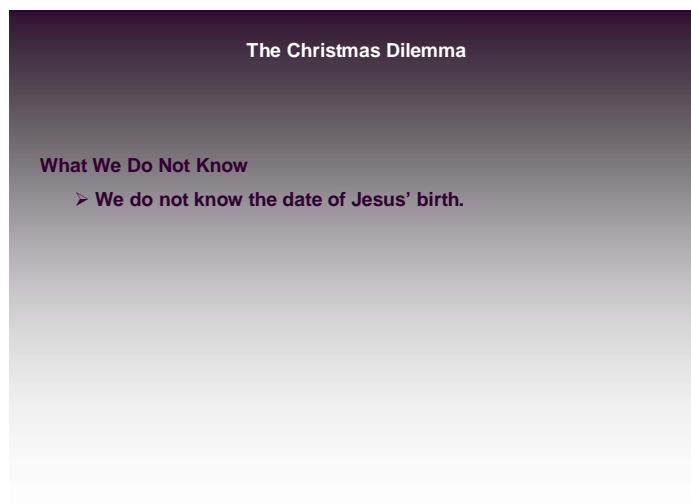


Move Two – What the Bible Says about Christmas

So what does the Bible say about Christmas? Let me assure you that I have researched and analyzed this thoroughly. So here is an outline of what the Bible says about Christmas. Are you ready? Watch the screens. Here it is . . . everything the Bible says about Christmas . . .



That's right, the Bible says absolutely nothing about Christmas. So I guess that's all. We're done. The sermon must be over. No wonder we're confused about Christmas . . . Sorry I couldn't help. Obviously, we cannot analyze Christmas as a specific biblical issue. That's why we need to consider it conceptually, approaching the Bible with an appeal for guiding principles.



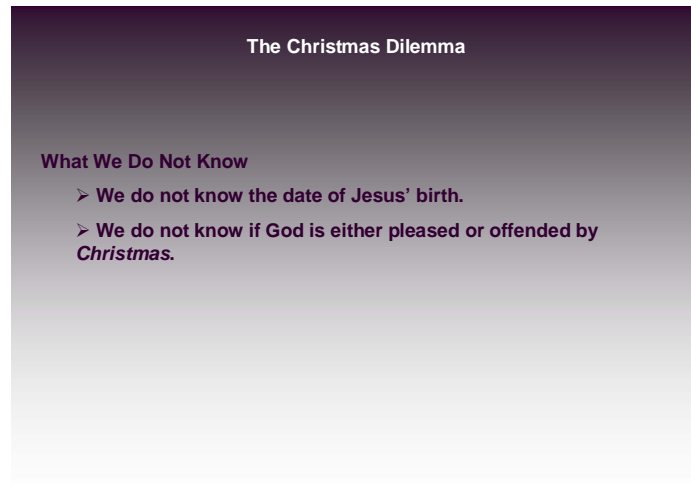
Move Three – The Christmas Dilemma

A. What Do We Not Know?

1. We do not know the date of Jesus' birthday.

Quite simply it has not been revealed to us. In fact, due to a mistake in the Gregorian calendar, at one time everybody was off by at least four years in trying to determine what year Jesus was born. Since Jesus was born before the death of Herod the Great, we know that he was born sometime prior to March or April of the year 4 B.C. But early Christians did not even have the year right. And nobody in their right mind today claims that December 25 is Jesus' actual birthday.

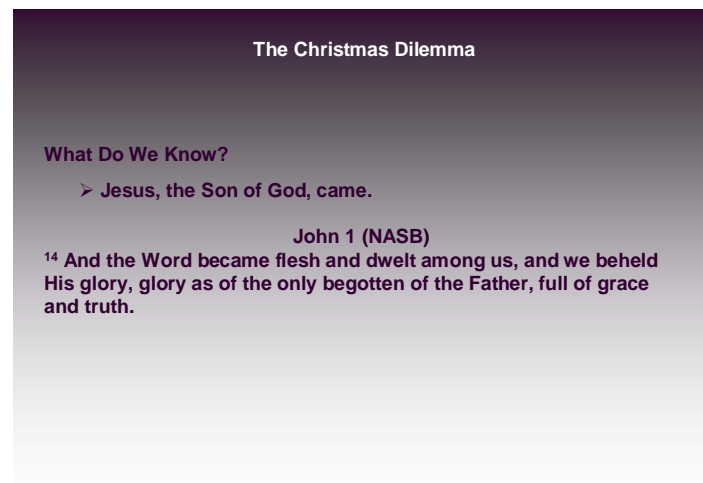
But none of that really matters. It does not matter, because God has not revealed it to us. If it did matter, God would have told us. What really matters is the fact of Jesus' coming, the results of His coming, and how we respond.



2. We do not know if God is either pleased or offended by Christmas.

Of course, Christmas, as we know it, did not exist when the Bible was written. And while the Bible does tell us a great deal about the birth of Christ, the word *Christmas* does not occur in the Bible. Moreover, the very idea of celebrating Jesus' birth is completely foreign to the Bible, which was not complete until about a century after his birth. Perhaps 100 years of opportunity for the concept of Christmas to enter the pages of the Bible before the Revelation was written . . . but not a word.

So, just as we do not know the exact date of Jesus' birth, neither do we know God's perspective of Christmas. We do not know if God is pleased by Christmas. And we do not know if God is offended by Christmas (although I think I could make a pretty good case for some of it violating God's will in principle).



B. What Do We Know?

1. We know that Jesus, the Son of God, came.

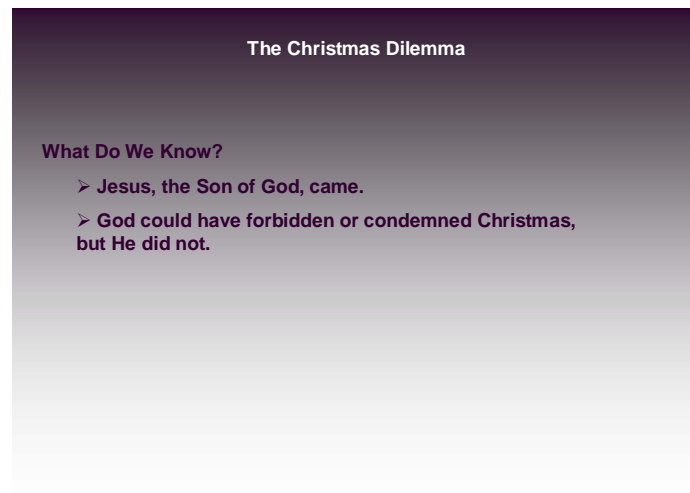
John 1 (NASB)

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

God came in human form. Everyday of our lives should be a celebration of His coming . . .

- His supernatural conception to be born of a virgin,
- His natural birth as a human into this world,
- His infallible fulfillment of prophecy,
- His perfectly sinless life,
- His astounding, life-changing words,
- His phenomenal powers,
- His sacrificial death,
- His glorious resurrection,
- His awesome ascension,
- and His promise to return and take us home.

As Christians, we live to celebrate Christ's coming every single day, and especially today, the Lord's Day – every first day of the week when God *does* call us to worship. We know that Jesus came and we should rejoice in His coming.



2. God could have forbidden or condemned Christmas in advance, but He did not.

How do we know this? Just read the Old Testament. It would be interesting to know how many times God told the Israelites something like this:

"Listen, Israel, I know that when you get into a certain situation, you're going to want to _____. So let Me tell you what will happen and how I will discipline you if that happens. I'm telling you not to do it. Sure, I know you're going to do it, anyway. But I'm telling you not to do it. I forbid it!"

Welcome to Judaism. That kind of divine rhetoric is common to the Old Testament Law and the prophets. God can foresee the behavior of His people and freely forbids whatever He condemns as sin. And, by the way, God is the only one who has a right to define sin.

Our omniscient God undoubtedly knew that Christmas would exist. God could have forbidden the very concept of celebrating Jesus' birth, in a general sense, as a prohibition of what would later become Christmas. And God could have condemned the diversity of culture that results in the keeping of traditions and the celebration of special days. But He did not.

The Christmas Dilemma

What Do We Know?

- Jesus, the Son of God, came.
- God could have forbidden or condemned Christmas, but He did not.
- Christmas falls into an area of divine silence.
 - ❖ Some people see divine silence as permissive. If the Bible doesn't forbid it, then it must be okay.
 - ❖ Other people see divine silence as restrictive. If the Bible doesn't permit it, then it must be wrong.
 - ❖ Ultimately, both of those philosophies fail miserably. Neither is foolproof or what some might call "safe."

3. Thus, we find that Christmas falls into an area of divine silence.

But what are we to do with biblical silence? Some people see Divine silence as permissive – if the Bible doesn't forbid it, then it must be okay. Other people see Divine silence as restrictive – if the Bible doesn't permit it, then it must be wrong. Ultimately, both of those philosophies fail miserably. Neither is foolproof or what some might call "safe."

Nonetheless our philosophical approach to Divine silence is part of our Christmas dilemma. So what are we to do with this one? Well, interesting, the Bible itself actually provides examples of Divine silence regarding special days.

The Christmas Dilemma

What Do We Know?

- Jesus, the Son of God, came.
- God could have forbidden or condemned Christmas, but He did not.
- Christmas falls into an area of divine silence.
- The Bible records two Jewish holidays which were neither commanded by God nor condemned by God.
 - ❖ Purim (Esther 9)
 - ²⁸ So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews.

4. The Bible records at least two Jewish holidays which were neither commanded by God nor condemned by God.

a. Purim

The 9th chapter of Esther, records how she and her uncle Mordecai – with only the authority of the Persian king Ahasuerus – and not a single word from God – instituted the feast of Purim.

It was a holiday meant to celebrate God's deliverance of the Jews from annihilation at the hands of the wicked Haaman. Haaman had ethnic cleansing in mind – kill all the Jews. But God's providence, through Esther, saved them. Purim was a man-made holiday.

²⁸ So these days were to be remembered and celebrated throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and these days of Purim were not to fail from among the Jews.

By whose authority? By the authority of Hadassah the Queen of Persia (aka Esther). Purim was a human institution. It was a memorial. It became a long-held tradition. It was not commanded by God. But neither was it condemned by God.

The Christmas Dilemma

What Do We Know?

- Jesus, the Son of God, came.
- God could have forbidden or condemned Christmas, but He did not.
- Christmas falls into an area of divine silence.
- The Bible records two Jewish holidays which were neither commanded by God nor condemned by God.
 - ❖ Purim (Esther 9)
 - ❖ Hanukkah – *Feast of Lights or Dedication* (John 10:22-23)

b. Hanukkah

Another famous Jewish holiday, known as the *Feast of Lights* or *Feast of Dedication*, which is now known as Hanukkah, was established by Judas Maccabaeus in 164 B.C., again as a celebration of God's deliverance. On December 25, 167 B.C., the Temple of Jehovah in Jerusalem had been defiled by the henchmen of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, king of the Seleucid empire. Antiochus IV defiled the altar of burnt offerings and the Holy Place with swine soup, erected an altar for the Greek idol Dionysius (the god of drunkenness), and established the service of prostitutes with the Temple. This was his attempt to conquer and colonize Judah by turning the Jews away from monotheism, so that they might be like *good Greeks*.

For three years, the priestly Maccabaeus family and their followers tormented the Seleucids with the tactics of guerilla warfare, until they finally prevailed. Judas Maccabaeus heroically (and some say miraculously) liberated, cleansed and rededicated the Temple for the worship of Jehovah God. Thus began the *Festival of Lights* or the *Feast of Dedication* – the tradition of Hanukkah.

By whose authority? By the authority of Judas Maccabaeus and grateful worshipers. It was a human institution. It was a memorial. It became a long-held tradition. Not only did God not condemn this holiday of human origin, it is actually mentioned in the Gospels as a fact of Jewish life. And Jesus himself apparently kept (or at least was not opposed to) that particular feast.

John 10:22-23 records that Jesus was in Jerusalem, in the Temple, during the Feast of Dedication. Whether or not (or how) Jesus might have celebrated Hanukkah that day, we do not know. But we know that He was there. We know that Jesus, God in the flesh, was in the right place, at the right time, to condemn the holiday as *unauthorized* or *not specifically permitted* had He wanted to. But He did not.

Purim and Hanukkah are Biblical examples of God not condemning human institutions that were established within the vacuum of Divine silence. God could have condemned them either before or after the fact. But He did not. And since God is the one who defines sin, apparently neither Purim nor Hanukkah is sinful. Were they inherently sinful God would have said so.

Christmas in its purest form (apart from all the worldly baggage) simply as a celebration of Jesus' birth parallels Purim and Hanukkah. It falls into the category of "not commanded but not condemned." God has not defined it as sinful.

Now, let me restate emphatically that it is not my purpose to sway anyone in favor of Christmas. Because I could present a lengthy case for what is wrong and even sinful about the mythological, secular, pagan, deconstructed, materialistic, retail, Santa and Rudolph (don't even get me started) kind of Christmas that assaults our hearts and minds today. For much that the world calls Christmas today is biblically indefensible. But at the same time, it is my responsibility to provide you with the biblical big picture on the concept of celebrating the birth of Christ.

One more thing we know . . .

The Christmas Dilemma

What Do We Know?

- Jesus, the Son of God, came.
- God could have forbidden or condemned Christmas, but He did not.
- Christmas falls into an area of divine silence.
- The Bible records two Jewish holidays which were neither commanded by God nor condemned by God.
- God's will on disputable matters of preference and opinion.

Romans 14 (NASB)

⁵ One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

5. We know God's will on disputable matters of preference and opinion.

Does the Bible instruct us on how to respond to cultural and traditional diversity? Especially potentially divisive traditions and even special days? Yes, it does.

In fact, that is the context of Romans 14. Paul is trying to unify Christians who are more culturally and traditionally diverse than we can begin to imagine. People who not only insisted on doing things the way they were used to doing them – but also judged one another for doing anything different – and even regarded one another with contempt. Specifically, the issues that divided the Roman Christians were what could and could not be eaten. And what holidays could be celebrated. Here's the gist of it. Read it carefully.

Romans 14 (NASB)

⁵ One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind.

⁶ He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

So who was right? The carnivores or the vegetarians? The holiday celebrants or the holiday Scrooges? Yes. Potentially both. They could all be right, just so long as they were fully convinced in their own minds on such disputable matters and so long as they made their personal choices to honor God. If you do it, do it for the Lord.

And, I propose, that is right where we must leave Christmas.