

Is Christmas a New Testament Holy Day #2

Jeremiah 10:1-7

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What can we say about the origin of the celebration of Christmas? First, there is no New Testament evidence that Christ or the apostles celebrated or authorized the celebration of Christmas. Second, there is no evidence for the celebration of Christmas for the first three hundred years after the resurrection of Christ (the earliest evidence for the celebration of Christmas is in the year 354 A.D.). Third, the universal testimony of both Christian and non-Christian scholars is that both the date (December 25th) and various practices associated with Christmas originate in paganism.

How was December 25th determined to be the day on which Christmas was celebrated? It was not chosen due to December 25th being found in the New Testament as the day of Christ's birth. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (<https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=2933>) states:

[T]here is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ's birth.

Matthew Poole in his Commentary on Luke 2:8 notes that a date in December is most unlikely because:

[I]t is hardly probable that our Savior was born in December in the midst of winter, that being no time when shepherds used in the night to be keeping their flocks in the field.

At least we may ask, if the celebration of Christ's birth was a day which the Lord wanted us to remember each year, why didn't He record that date for us? The fact that it is nowhere mentioned in Scripture provides a strong presumption that Jesus did not want His birth celebrated each year as a part of a religious calendar. Quoting *The Catholic Encyclopedia* once again:

Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus [130-202] and Tertullian [155-220] omit it from their lists of feasts.

Though I believe that Christmas was not ordained by Christ or practiced by the apostles as a New Testament Holy Day and that is the most important reason why we should not presume to celebrate Christmas (but rather celebrate only the weekly Lord's Day), I do believe added weight for not celebrating Christmas also comes as we consider the pagan origins of the day (December 25th) and other practices associated with it.

Our main points are: (1) Learn Not the Way of the Heathen (Jeremiah 10:1-7); (2) Origin of Customs Associated with Christmas.

I. **Learn Not the Way of the Heathen (Jeremiah 10:1-7).**

A. First, carefully note the divine prohibition: "Learn not." Whatever God here forbids, He wants no mixture, no association, and no assimilation of it with the true biblical religion. As Matthew Henry has noted in his Commentary on Jeremiah 10:2:

[D]o not approve of it, no, nor think indifferently concerning it, much less imitate it or accustom yourselves to it.

To imitate what is here forbidden (even with the best intentions) is to violate the express commandment of God. Sincerity or good intentions on our parts are no warrant to make an exception to an express prohibition of the Lord God. Obedience to God's Word is better than the unwarranted sacrifices of good intentions.

B. Secondly, observe what is expressly forbidden by the Lord: “Learn not THE WAY OF THE HEATHEN.” What is the way of the heathen? It is the heathen’s way of deriving truth and his way of worshiping God.

1. According to Jeremiah 10:2, the heathen seek God’s revealed will from astrologers who look to the stars/constellations (and other sources) rather than from Holy Scripture (God’s infallible Word).

2. God is clear as to where His revealed will for faith (including holy days) and life is to be sought: Isaiah 8:20.

3. When are asked, How do you know the celebration of Christmas pleases Christ since He did not authorize it (like the holy days of the Old Testament) and since the apostles did not celebrate it (nor did the Church for the first three centuries)? They must ultimately fall back on some alleged authority given to the Church by way of oral tradition and to their own desires to celebrate it (remember Mark 7:9—we believe in oral tradition, but only while the apostles lived and could confirm it).

C. Third, note that God forbids us from imitating the way of the heathen in worship (which includes holy days). In Jeremiah 10:3, the Lord declares, “For the customs of the people are vain” (same Hebrew word is used in Leviticus 20:23). That is, their religious customs are unprofitable to themselves and worthless forms of worship before God (even if they are sincere or have good intentions).

D. Fourth, God forbids us to learn the way of the heathen by making images out of wood, gold, and silver for worship and religious celebration. The Lord forbids His people from worshiping Him by way of introducing anything into worship and religious celebration that is man-made (will-worship, Colossians 2:23) and not authorized by God in Scripture (Regulative Principle of Worship). Many of the practices associated with Christmas have been learned from heathen customs.

E. But someone may respond by saying, “What God forbids in Jeremiah 10:3-5 is not specifically a Christmas tree, but the making of images/idols of the heathens.” I agree that Christmas trees are not the explicit item prohibited here (cf. Jeremiah 10:14). Nevertheless, if we can demonstrate that the origin of the Christmas tree and other customs associated with Christmas were derived from pagan religious celebrations, does not Jeremiah 10:2-3 yet condemn all these practices as those that have been learned from the heathen?

F. Where in all of Scripture do we find God authorizing the people of God to replace a heathen religious celebration with a “Christian” religious celebration on the same day and even assimilating some of the heathen symbols into the newly appointed “Christian” celebration? He doesn’t. God tells His people what they are to do with all such heathen symbols/practices in religious celebrations: Deuteronomy 7:25-26.

G. This was in fact also the attitude of our Protestant/Reformed forefathers in regard to the celebration of Christmas.

1. The Pastors of Geneva (1550), including John Calvin, state in their *Register of the Company of Pastors*:

Abrogation of Festivals. On Sunday 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Council, an edict was also announced respecting the abrogation of all festivals [i.e. all religious holy days—GLP], with the exception of Sundays, which God had ordained.

2. The Church of Scotland in its *First Book of Discipline* (1560) includes the following statement concerning the abrogation of Christmas:

[W]e understand whatsoever men, by laws, councils, or constitutions have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as... keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of apostles, martyrs, virgins, OF CHRISTMAS, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm.

3. The United Provinces of Holland enacted into law in 1625 the following (cited from *The Wonders of the Most High*, Abraham Van De Velde, c. 1676, p.158):

Let us like King Josiah take away from among us all these great sins. Among which sins that are seen in these lands the following are the most principal: ... In the first place the carnivals [i.e. religious celebrations—GLP], THREE KINGS AND THE ST. NICOLAS DAYS, AND OTHER FEAST DAYS which are held among us not without a show of public idolatry.

4. On May 11, 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony Legislature officially banned the celebration of Christmas:

[W]hosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by for-bearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offense five shillings, as a fine to the county (Charters and General Laws of the Colony 119; Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay 366).

5. *The Directory for the Public Worship of God* (approved by the kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland in 1645) states the following:

There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days [which includes Christmas—GLP], having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.

H. Thus, the historical testimony of Protestant and Reformed Churches at the First and the Second Reformations is clear: Christmas has no warrant in Scripture and therefore should not be celebrated.

II. Origin of Customs Associated with Christmas.

A. Since Christmas does not have biblical warrant, it is no wonder that many of the customs associated with Christmas come not from any biblical celebration of Christmas as a holy day, but rather in many cases come from pagan religious celebrations at and around December 25th. There is much testimony associating the time chosen for the celebration of Christmas with the pagan feast of Saturnalia.

1. The testimony of Christian scholarship is summarized in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:804,805:

The feast of Saturnalia in early Rome... was celebrated for seven 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.

2. The testimony of non-Christian scholarship likewise confirms the pagan association of feasts days with Christmas as to the date chosen for its celebration:

In A.D. 274, Emperor Aurelian decreed December 25 ... as *natalis solis invicti* ("birth of the invincible sun"), a festival honoring the sun god Mithras (Jeffrey Sheler, *U.S. News*, "In Search of Christmas").

It is believed that the efforts of the early Christians in Rome to change pagan customs into Christian rites led, in the 4th century A.D., to the adoption of December 25 as the date of the Christ Mass, or feast, in honor of the birth of Christ. This day was probably chosen because, according to the calendar

then in use, December 25 was the winter solstice, the time when days begin to grow longer in the Northern Hemisphere. The sun-worshipping pagans had celebrated this day as the promise of spring (*The New Book of Knowledge*, 3:290).

B. What about the origin of various practices and customs associated with Christmas like the Christmas tree, gift giving, holly, and mistletoe?

When the pagans of Northern Europe became Christians, they made their sacred evergreen trees part of the Christian festival, and decorated the trees with gilded nuts, candles (a carry-over from sun worship), and apples to stand for the stars, moon, and sun (*World Book Encyclopedia*, [1955 ed.], 3:1425).

The Romans ornamented their temples and homes with green boughs and flowers for the Saturnalia, their season of merry making and the giving of presents; the Druids gathered mistletoe with great ceremony and hung it in their homes; the Saxons used holly, ivy and bay (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5:643).

Pagan customs centering round the January calends [January 1] gravitated to Christmas... survive as Christmas presents, cards, boxes (<https://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=2933>).

C. It may be asked, why did the Church of Rome assimilate the date and practices of the pagans into its Christmas celebration? It has often been the practice of the Church of Rome to assimilate various pagan customs and practices into its religious celebrations as a means of reaching pagans—that policy has been evidenced by the Vatican inviting many different religious leaders to share in religious ceremonies in Rome (syncretism). In fact, this policy is clearly stated by Pope Gregory I in a letter (606 a.d.) sent to the English Monk, Bede (called the Venerable Bede), addressing the assimilation of heathens into the Church:

And because the natives have been used to slaughter many oxen in the sacrifices to devils, some festival must be exchanged for them on this account. On the day of the dedication or the birthdays of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they may build themselves huts, of the boughs of trees, about those churches which have been turned to that use from temples, and celebrate the festival with religious feasting, and no more offer beasts to the devils, but kill cattle to the praise of God in their eating (<https://www.originalsources.com/Document.aspx?DocID=W4E1SJKYYA7L56D>).

D. And as if the pagan origins were not reason sufficient to refrain from the celebration of Christmas, I ask why would we who are Protestants want to celebrate a holy day called “the mass of Christ”? The Church of Rome (the Mother of Harlots in Revelation 17:5) is not to be imitated or followed in her idolatrous worship or in her multiplying of holy days that have no warrant in Holy Scripture. To the contrary, we are to come out from her (not to imitate her) and to come out from all her man-made innovations in worship: Revelation 18:4. You need look no further than Christmas to see the universal deception that the Papal Antichrist has worked within even professing Protestant/Reformed Churches, which now celebrate the Christ-mass.

E. Application

1. Please do not misunderstand if any might be hearing these sermons on this subject for the first time. We love the Gospel accounts of Christ’s glorious birth. We love the incarnation of the Word that became flesh and dwelt among us that He might become our sinless sacrifice to set us free from the guilt/condemnation/power of sin and that He might be raised from the grave and ascend into heaven to reign as King of kings. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest love story ever told. But that same Jesus that is King of the Church never appointed in the New Testament a regular occurring holy day other than the weekly

Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. That truth fills our weekly Lord's Day with even greater love. For this is His Day in which He comes to us to feed us and to commune with Him as a picture of our eternal Sabbath.

2. Our love for the Lord Jesus Christ must far excel any tradition we may have enjoyed in the past. I fear that all too often, Christmas has become one of the most subtle idols professing Christians embrace today. For they have convinced themselves that Christ is pleased with their celebration. And yet they cannot demonstrate from His Word that He is so pleased. Dear ones, you are complete in Christ (according to Colossians 2:10). Therefore, "beware lest any man rob you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the traditions of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ" (Colossians 2:8). The closing verses of our text declare to us why we must flee from all religious celebrations that are not authorized by God in Scripture and especially when various pagan customs have been joined with religious celebrations (Jeremiah 10:6-7). His Lordship over His own worship and religious celebrations trumps all our traditions, feelings, and memories.

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