



Christmas Was Not Always Like This: A Brief History

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In modern America, Christmas is a beloved holiday, but it is also an occasion for great gnashing of teeth. Something seems to have gone terribly wrong. We complain that Christmas is too commercialized, too hectic, and not spiritual enough, that people often forget about the baby Jesus. In response, we launch campaigns to “keep Christ in Christmas” and yearn for a return to the spiritual, wholesome, family-centered Christmas of bygone days. However, these sentiments tend to idealize the past, creating a golden age that never was. The actual history of how Christmas has been celebrated in Christian history contains surprises for most of us. It is a fascinating story in its own right, but it also offers background that can influence our struggles with Christmas today. If we seek a more meaningful Christmas, it is not especially helpful to base our solutions upon unrealistic nostalgia.

My life, like that of many others, is filled with fond personal Christmas memories, but a few years ago I started to give more scholarly attention to the topic when representatives at my college asked me to give a presentation about the history of Christmas for a daylong celebration that included our annual holiday concert. Once I started I could not stop, and one result became a brief book for general audiences, *Christmas: A Candid History*. My research and writing demonstrated that many of my prior assumptions about Christmas were historically inaccurate. In this essay I summarize and discuss three of those assumptions, which I find rele-

Our longings for a more spiritual, family-centered celebration imagine a golden age that never was. From the beginning, Christmas has had mixed meanings and been the center of cultural and ecclesiastical controversy.

vant as we seek more fulfilling Christmas experiences individually and as Christmas becomes drawn into social and political arguments as part of today's "culture wars."¹ At the end of this essay I will offer a few of my personal conclusions, and I invite readers to formulate their own as well.

BEGINNINGS OF CHRISTMAS

The first assumption of many Christians is that Christmas and Easter are the two most important observances of the Christian year. It was not always that way.

The fact is that, for the first few centuries of early Christianity, there was no annual celebration of the Christ Child's nativity at all. The focus instead was on the death and resurrection of Jesus. The expectation that Jesus Christ would return soon, at any time, and the examples of Christian martyrdom in times of Roman persecution helped accent an emphasis on death and resurrection themes.

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As evidence of what was emphasized in the early church and what was not, compare the emphasis given to Christmas and to Easter in the four gospels of the New Testament. Only two of the four gospels give any significant attention to a nativity story. The Gospel of Mark begins with John and the baptism of Jesus, who by that time was already an adult. It totally skips a Christmas story. The Gospel of John includes an elegant passage declaring that "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14), but it contains no story of a baby in a manger, no shepherds, and no wise men.

I was well into adulthood before it dawned on me that virtually all of the New Testament readings at Christmastime came from only two of the four gospels, and even then, they told two stories with quite different details. Matthew's account includes the star, the wise men, and the flight to Egypt, but no shepherds. Luke's version has the shepherds and the multitude of angels, but no star or wise men. And except for Paul's one comment about Jesus being "born of a woman" (Gal 4:4), the entire New Testament contains no additional references to the nativity story. Because Christmas has become such a major Christian celebration today, it is difficult for us to step back and realize how little attention the New Testament gives to the birth of Jesus. When Christians eventually began an annual nativity observance, they had to bring together the tidbits in Matthew and Luke and then add all sorts of later traditions in order to create a full story.

In contrast, consider how many chapters in all four gospels are devoted to the death and resurrection of Jesus, and how much attention Paul gives to these

¹More detail about the history of Christmas can be found in Bruce Forbes, *Christmas: A Candid History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), in sources listed in the book's annotated bibliography, and in other references cited in this essay.

themes. Most Christians would agree that this is the heart of the gospel message. The New Testament itself demonstrates that the early church was Easter-centered, and that any significant focus on Christmas was a later development.

How much later? The Eastern church began January 6 Epiphany observances sometime in the third or fourth centuries, lifting up many ways that Jesus Christ was made manifest in the world. Such Epiphany celebrations variously emphasized Jesus' baptism, public miracles by Jesus early in his ministry, and yes, his birth.² The earliest church in the West, centered in Rome, had no equivalent Epiphany observances. The first documented mention of the celebration of Jesus' birth by the Western church appears in the Philocalian Calendar, also known as the Chronograph of 354. It is a collection of documents, something like an almanac, and some of the included texts may date back to 336. Thus, by either 336 or 354, Christians in Rome were celebrating Jesus' birth on December 25. The practice may have begun somewhat before that, but this document is our earliest surviving evidence.³

Why did Christians eventually add a celebration of Jesus' birth, and why on December 25? We have no clear answer, but one would guess that theological reasons were at least a factor. In the Constantinian period and thereafter, an era of ecumenical councils with theological disagreements about Jesus' nature, a birthday celebration could be very useful to declare that Jesus was divine from the moment of his birth or even before, not merely at some later point during his earthly lifetime. The date for such a birthday observance was a problem, however, because neither New Testament passages nor other external evidence clearly indicated the month or day when Jesus was born. Various attempts at calculating Jesus' birth arrived at dates like March 25, March 28, April 19, April 20, May 20, and November 18, with no consensus.

Whatever the theological reasoning or the calendrical calculations, one reality is clear. With the choice of December 25, the Western church settled on a date that was precisely in the middle of three wildly popular Roman midwinter festivals. The first was the Saturnalia, an agricultural harvest festival that varied in duration over the years, commonly from December 17 to 23, with a legendary reputation for excessive partying. A few days later came the New Year's festival (Kalends) that lasted for as many as five days. Between these two celebrations fell December 25, the winter solstice by calendars of that time. Romans celebrated December 25 as the birthday of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun, a god whose devotion had been merged with worship of the warrior god Mithra. Given that all three festivals (Saturnalia, Kalends, and the birthday of Sol Invictus/Mithra) pervaded Roman culture, it seems unlikely to have been simply accidental that Christianity chose to place the birthday observance for Jesus in their midst.⁴ No document exists in which the

²Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) 103–121; Roland H. Bainton, "The Origins of Epiphany," in *Studies in Early Christianity: A Collection of Scholarly Essays*, vol. 15, ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland, 1993).

³Susan K. Roll, *Toward the Origins of Christmas* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1995) 83–86.

⁴Forbes, *Christmas*, 7–10, 28–31.

bishop of Rome or someone of Constantine's stature announces the beginning of an annual observance of Jesus' birth, explaining how and why they added it. Yet it is reasonable to assume that Christian leaders of the time consciously tried to co-opt the already existing midwinter celebrations, either to tame them, transform them, or to take advantage of the popularity of the winter parties in order to promote the acceptance of Christianity—or perhaps all three. Whatever the motivations, Christians gave an overlay of Christian meaning to some preexisting winter festivities. The cultural and spiritual aspects of the celebration have contested with one another ever since.

Two obvious implications of this brief summary of the beginnings of Christmas come as a surprise for many Christians today. First, Christians in the first two or three centuries after Jesus' lifetime had no annual celebration of the nativity of Jesus. Second, when Christmas observances eventually arose, they were *from the very beginning* a combination of midwinter cultural parties and Christian celebrations. There never was an earlier golden age of a purely spiritual Christmas.

CHRISTMAS IN EARLY AMERICA

Although it took a few centuries for Christians to begin an annual observance of Jesus' birth, the celebration became popular over the years. As Christianity spread from the Mediterranean region into Europe, the Americas, and elsewhere in the world, Christmas festivities spread with it, influenced in part by local customs. By the time Christmas reached the American colonies and the new nation of the United States, we tend to assume that almost all Christians embraced it as a generally shared celebration, that citizens of the United States were united in their celebration of Christmas, and the whole culture recognized it without question.

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Yet it was not that way in the colonies and the early nation. Everyone did not celebrate Christmas, and the entire culture did not stop to recognize the holiday. The reason for this was not some early appearance of religious pluralism; the differences about Christmas in early America were among Christians themselves.

The explanation extends back to the Puritan Revolution in England in the 1600s. In the Reformation a century earlier, many Protestant groups were concerned that Christmas contained too many Roman Catholic elements. However, through minor revisions of Christmas practices, Protestants usually were content to continue the nativity observances and their accompanying cultural elements. The English Puritans, however, along with Presbyterians in Scotland, disapproved of Christmas altogether. They said that it was a Catholic innovation not practiced in the early church, and complained that the winter partying provided too many

excuses for licentious behavior. Thus, in 1644 the English Parliament, controlled by Puritans, declared Christmas a day of penance instead of a feast day, and in 1652 it banned any observance of Christmas, inside or outside of churches. Even though Puritan control was short-lived, their actions helped break the Christmas tradition in England, with New Year's Day and Valentine's Day becoming more important for many people. Christmas did not come back to prominence in England until the mid-1800s, partly through the influence of Charles Dickens, Queen Victoria, and Prince Albert.

New England was the home of English Puritanism in the American colonies, and the Puritan disapproval of Christmas extended to the New World. In 1659 the Massachusetts General Court ordered a five-shilling fine for persons who observed Christmas in any way, although the law was repealed by 1681. In general, many of the English-speaking colonists who were dissenters from the Anglican Church tended to ignore or at least deemphasize Christmas when they came to the colonies. That included Congregationalists (the name for Puritans in the American colonies), Presbyterians (members of the Church of Scotland who settled in the colonies), Quakers, Baptists, and Methodists. For example, Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies, who eventually became president of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), in 1758 said this about Christmas: "I do not set apart this day for public worship, as though it had any peculiar sanctity; or we were under any obligations to keep it religiously."⁵

Other Christians in the colonies came from backgrounds that did not include the Puritan suppression of Christmas. Catholics from several nations, the Dutch Reformed, Lutherans from Scandinavia and Germany, and other small German sects all brought their Christmas traditions with them. The Church of England continued somewhat restrained Christmas observances in spite of the history of Puritan opposition. This meant that Christmas celebrations in the early United States were something of a patchwork, with many variations depending on family, denomination, and region. Some Christians celebrated Christmas, and other Christians did not. Those who wanted to observe Christmas were free to do so, but shops and government offices remained open, and the general culture continued on with business as usual. Many people are surprised to learn that the United States Congress met on Christmas Day every year from 1789 to 1855, with only three exceptions. Public schools met on Christmas Day in parts of New England at least until 1870. It is simply not true that virtually all Americans celebrated Christmas throughout this nation's history until recent years.

Parallel to the revival of Christmas in England, Christmas became a more widespread cultural phenomenon in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century, but with an additional, specifically American contribution: the development of Santa Claus. There were earlier traditions about Saint Nicholas, but

⁵Quoted by Robert Doares, "Colonial Church Christmases," in *Colonial Williamsburg*, ed. Wim Colman and Pat Perrin (Berkeley Heights, NJ: MyReportLinks.com Books, 2005) 29.

it was in the United States during the 1800s, and especially in the city and state of New York, that Nicholas (Sinter Klaas) transmuted into Santa Claus. For reasons that need more study, Christmas grew in the mid-1800s to be a more central observance in the overall American culture. States began declaring it a legal holiday, and Christian denominations that previously had resisted began to join the bandwagon. However, when Christmas became more central to American culture, it was not principally as a result of a campaign by churches or other organized Christian groups. More important was the encouragement of Christmas by business interests, and that leads to our third assumption.

CHRISTMAS AND GIFT-GIVING

It is often stated that we exchange presents at Christmastime because the wise men brought gifts to the baby Jesus. Have gifts always played such a central role in Christmas celebrations? The simple answer is no. While earlier observances at times involved token gifts, Christmas gift-giving came to special prominence in the 1800s, for several complicated reasons.

In the early, medieval, and Reformation eras Christmas was not primarily about families and children but about the activities of adults, in the church or in the village. Pre-Christian Roman winter activities included small token gifts, and various early Christmas traditions may have included little gifts as well, but for the average person, most money and energy was spent on food, alcohol, games, and general frivolity, plus worship attendance. In the Reformation era, adults gathered in local churches for special Christmas Masses, and villagers also enjoyed boisterous times of feasting and drinking in the community taverns. In medieval England peasants would bring a portion of their harvest as an offering to nobility who controlled the land, and in return the lords sponsored Christmas feasts, but these exchanges of social obligation were unlike today's gifts of personal affection. In general, gift-giving was not a central part of Christmas.

Small gifts for children did arise in association with the annual remembrance of Saint Nicholas, but this was earlier in December and not on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Nicholas is a figure so shrouded in legend that it is difficult to tell what is historical and what is not, but he apparently was a bishop of Myra (present-day Turkey) in the early 300s. One of the best-known Nicholas legends claims that, over a series of evenings, he secretly delivered three bags of gold to the home of a poor family so that the three daughters might have dowries that allowed them to be married instead of being consigned to lives of slavery or prostitution. Augmented by other legends, Nicholas developed a reputation as a protector of children and youth and a generous benefactor. His feast day was December 6, and eventually some cultures celebrated this popular saint with token gifts on the eve or day remembering his death. In the 1100s French nuns secretly brought token gifts to poor children on Saint Nicholas Eve, and Saint Nicholas markets developed in late medieval Europe where parents could buy cookies, candy, and small toys for

their children. Again, keep in mind that this was in early December, in the season leading up to Christmas, not on December 25.

In the 1700s and 1800s industrialization led to the mass production of commodities and the development of a consumer culture, which inevitably had an impact on Christmas. A decisive shift came when businesses recognized the marketing possibilities associated with holidays. The previous business attitude was represented by Scrooge in Dickens's *Christmas Carol*, when he complained that holidays were simply a way of picking his pocket because he had to pay people for no work. However, with the recognition that holidays held potential for the sale of additional products, whether food, clothing, decorations, or gifts, businesses not only tolerated holidays like Christmas but actively promoted them.

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Regarding Christmas, gift-giving traditions already existed in association with both Saint Nicholas Day and New Year’s Day. In the United States in the 1800s, for reasons we do not yet fully understand, those gift traditions seem to have migrated across the calendar and both converged on Christmas. This can be seen especially in the American mutation of Saint Nicholas to Santa Claus, traced through the writings of Washington Irving, the poem “The Night Before Christmas,” and the illustrations of Thomas Nast. Saint Nicholas, a bishop and saint, was defrocked, losing his bishop’s robes and religious authority, to become a kindly, jolly grandfather figure who delivered presents at Christmas instead of in early December. The public embraced Santa Claus, businesses promoted him, and Christmas became a dominant, nearly universal cultural celebration in the United States.⁶

The late nineteenth century was also the time when handmade gifts gave way to manufactured goods. To trace the commodification of the holiday, we can chart the first appearances of many of the products we now associate with Christmas, most of which arose in the nineteenth century with further developments in the twentieth. The first Christmas card appeared in England in 1843, with widespread use in the United States in the second half of the century. Christmas trees were sold on the streets of New York as early as 1840, light bulbs for Christmas trees first appeared in the 1880s, and glass ornaments appeared in the 1890s. Wrapping paper appeared at the end of the nineteenth century and became more colorful in the twentieth. The list goes on and on.

Gifts certainly have become central to the modern American Christmas. Surveys indicate that ninety-seven percent of Americans buy Christmas presents, totaling more than \$200 billion annually. One estimate claims that twenty percent of

⁶Forbes, *Christmas*, chap. 4.

retail sales in the United States are for Christmas purchases of one kind or another.⁷ It is not hard to claim that gift-giving has become the major activity of the modern American Christmas season.

I find all of this historical information very provocative, and it causes me to rethink my understanding of Christmas and many of the issues swirling around it. Let me offer three personal observations, one for each assumption discussed above.

(1) I believe that Christians need to make their peace with the fact that Christmas is partly a winter festival, and that this is one of the reasons people love it. Especially for those who live in geographical settings where the dark and cold of winter can be a real challenge, a midwinter break featuring lights, evergreen decorations, feasts, and good times with friends is just what is needed for the sake of sanity. I do not want to lose the elements of Christian meaning, but expecting Christmas to be a purely spiritual celebration is a desire for something that never was. Further, if the message of Christmas is incarnation, when the Word became flesh, we should be more understanding about natural human needs for celebration and release in the middle of winter.

(2) The early American experience demonstrates that Christian families, local churches, and denominations can engage in meaningful Christmas observances without expecting that the entire culture join in with them.

(3) If we are concerned that gift-giving has overwhelmed the Christmas season, it is too easy simply to complain that we have been manipulated by commercial interests. When a practice becomes popular, it is because we in the general public have made it popular. (One axiom in the analysis of popular culture is that popular culture both influences us *and reflects us*.) So, why do we give gifts? What needs does it fulfill, that the public has embraced it so universally? Is it a way to share affection, express ideals, seek approval, fulfill obligations, or solicit gifts in return? Is it effective in fulfilling such needs and desires? Any wrestling with gift traditions, and proposals for changes, probably need to start with self-reflection. ⊕

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⁷Tanya Gulevich, *Encyclopedia of Christmas* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 2000) 147–149.