

## PRACTICE OF CELEBRATING "CHRISTMAS" - PRACTICALLY SPEAKING

(...a work in progress...a life in progress...)

Some more thoughts on the subject. As always, keep or toss...

I suspect that most people who practice the celebration of "Christmas" would say that "Jesus is the reason for the season" and that they wish to celebrate -- in some way -- the advent of Jesus as Savior of the world. On some level, in their own way of thinking and in their own hearts, this is truly what they believe and how they feel. The deep desire and intention to honor Jesus is precious and good and real. Those who desire this indeed endeavor to give glory to the True and Living God. Those who are a friend of Christ are also my friend. I do not wish to alienate, or argue, or cause bad feelings -- even if we may choose different paths on this subject. I thank God for all who love Jesus with all their heart!!! I believe that, "Wherever God has a child, I have a brother." I do not seek to separate myself from brothers or separate brothers from each other in any way. I merely seek to distinguish between *things of God* and *things of man*; and especially things of man that *masquerade as the things of God*.

I was without God and without hope in the world until Jesus saved me. How I truly celebrate and thank God for the Good News of Jesus Christ! I delight in the fact that "the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world!" Even so, *HOW* I delight in this fact, *the WAY I do it*, is meaningful to me. It is important to me to walk as I sense God would have me walk. It is also important to me to not walk in ways that have merely been "handed-down" to me from history without first examining them for meaning and relevance and validity. So I have a few additional thoughts I would like to think aloud if you're willing to go through this with me...

I would like to first talk a little bit about "things" and idols and idolatry. In the next few paragraphs I hope to establish that I do not believe that Christians who only want to celebrate the advent of Jesus are guilty of idolatry. By this, I specifically mean those true believers who DO NOT celebrate the lie of Santa Claus!

Concerning the history of the practice of celebrating "Christmas", some researchers have traced certain people, places and things back to ancient religious rituals that were once performed in worship of false gods, attributing modern day "Christmas" practices to these things. Let's take the "tree" as an example. It is well known that "trees" have been used throughout history in the worship of false gods (just as many things in nature have: the sun, the earth, the stars, animals, etc.) While correctly pointing out that a tree was used in ancient rituals to worship false gods, some researchers incorrectly go on to interpolate that the presence of any tree within a context where people endeavor to honor the True and Living God is actually the unwitting worship of false gods, and thus they imply that people who own a tree are "duped" and ignorantly honoring ancient false gods. The suggestion seems to be that by using certain names, dates, things, and benign practices that have once been used by idolaters, people today are actually perpetuating idolatry.

I do not agree with this line of thinking.

I believe that worship is created by the motives and intentions of people's hearts, but not by physical objects or things found in "nature". If it is in a man's heart to bow before and worship a block of carved wood, it is not the block of wood that causes or creates idolatry, but the evil and

idolatrous heart of man. Another man, in the purity of his heart can own a similar block of wood and have no guilt, no blasphemous intentions, and no association with demons. Man looks on the outward, but God looks on the heart. If people genuinely desire to give glory to God and serve Him only, then that is what is in their heart. "To his own Master a servant stands or falls" and God knows what is in our hearts.

I understand the concern about God's people *not* adopting the evil ways of unbelievers around us.

"They did not destroy the peoples, concerning whom the LORD had commanded them, but they mingled with the Gentiles [idolatrous people] and learned their works; they served their idols, which became a snare to them. They even sacrificed their sons and their daughters to demons, and shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and daughters whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan; and the land was polluted with blood. Thus they were defiled by their own works, and played the harlot by their own deeds. Therefore the wrath of the LORD was kindled against His people, so that He abhorred His own inheritance. And He gave them into the hand of the Gentiles and those who hated them ruled over them." Psalm 106.34-41

In the Old Testament, God made it clear that Israel was not to learn the evil works/ways of the idolatrous Canaanites and peoples around them. They were not to worship the True and Living God using their evil ways. Their evil ways.

By saying that Israel should not learn or do the ways of the idolatrous peoples around them, it is not meant that they should not learn or do anything that idolatrous people do, but rather that they should not learn or do evil ways: idolatry, human sacrifice, cruelty, immorality, nakedness, sexual immorality, lewdness, lawlessness, pride, arrogance, rebellion, sorcery, etc. These things are specifically and explicitly forbidden by God.

I do not believe that God meant Israel could not, for example, breathe air because idolatrous people breathe air. There are some ways and some things that are shared by all people who live on earth. A literal interpretation of "separation" and "don't do what they do" would leave us dead! Paul indicated that he did not mean that we should not keep company with the sexually immoral of the world, or else we would have to go out of the world.

"I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from evil. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Set them apart by Your truth. Your Word is truth. As You sent them into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I set Myself apart, that they also may be set apart by the truth." --Jesus, from John 17.15-19

Here is a saying that you can test: "Evil has come near to me, but I have not come near to evil."

A man who has been named after a false god or false prophet by his parents does not need to feel guilt or change his name.

Daniel was taught the "language and literature of the Chaldeans." (Daniel 1.4). Let no one think that Daniel did NOT memorize and speak the names of the false gods of the Chaldeans. The name that was given to Daniel "Belteshazzar" means "Beltis protect the king". Beltis is a false god (some have said Beltis is a female god, other have said Beltis is a form of Bel or Baal).

Daniel could have refused to be called by this name, he could have run away into the desert, he could have gone on a hunger strike, he could have cursed the Babylonian gods aloud; all to separate himself from evil. But there was no need to do these things because Daniel, in his heart, never came near to evil, even though evil surrounded and came near to Daniel. Daniel was pure in heart. Even when Daniel cried out in the courtly custom, "O king, live forever!" (Daniel 6.21) he was not forsaking the Eternal King. He was simply speaking the local dialect.

Daniel eventually came to rule over Babylon, ruling over a land full of false gods and idolaters:

"Then the king promoted Daniel and gave him many great gifts; and he made him [Daniel] ruler over the whole province of Babylon and chief administrator over all the wise men of Babylon." Daniel 2.48

Idolatry continued to abound under Daniel's rule. It was after Daniel was appointed ruler and administrator, while continued to pray to God -- the True and Living God -- that he was eventually thrown into the lion's den for not honoring the gods of the king (Daniel 6.12,13). This means that Daniel actively worked to maintain an idolatrous culture. He didn't simply endure it or wait it out until it died, but rather he nurtured, fed, funded, and administrated it.

There is not doubt in my mind that if Daniel could have snapped his fingers to rid Babylon and its people of false gods he would have. If Daniel could have put the love of God into the hearts of the Chaldeans and Medes he would have done so and then together *perhaps* they would have purged every hint of the names of false gods from the language of their day. But that is not what we see is happening in the Scripture. The Scripture itself eternally records the names of false gods. Thus it is not names and language that God would destroy, but the wickedness of idolatry itself within the hearts of men.

We can learn from Daniel and many other godly men in Scripture that one can live immersed in a foreign and idolatrous culture with pure hands and a clean heart, never drawing near to evil though evil draws near to us. Names and language and symbols are a very superficial crust that forms on the outside of spiritual wickedness and idolatry, and a great many godly people justly use the language and culture of their day without regard to spiritual wickedness. That is, as long as they themselves give their hearts fully to God and not to false gods.

Both Israel and the idolatrous people around them lived on earth and used the natural resources of the earth to honor their respective deities:

- they made fire for cooking;
- they became skilled woodworkers and metalworkers;
- they developed technologies;
- they made tents and clothing and footwear and pottery;
- they studied warfare and created weaponry,
- they washed in the local rivers,
- they kept cattle, grew crops;
- they lived in buildings, organized themselves in cities and sustained governments, etc.

Rather, than reject any and *everything* the idolatrous peoples did, God meant for Israel to reject their evil ways and "turn from their wicked ways and live." God meant for men to make use of the resources of the earth, appropriating them in ways pleasing to Him.

God wants me to circumcise my heart. "Keep yourselves from idols" means I should keep my heart from idols; it does not mean I should leave the world. So things -- a certain day, a decorated tree, a feast -- do not cause or create idolatry in my heart. An evil heart causes and creates idols and idolatry. This is a very important distinction to make. This distinction prevents us from entering into harsh judgments about people, for God knows their hearts.

Now I am not saying that everyone who has good intentions does the right thing. Sometimes a good intention can end in a wrong action and sin. But how I thank God for His mercy and patience and for looking first on our hearts. "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy" (James 2.13). Therefore I do not seek to judge anyone, for I am nothing and have no righteousness of my own with which to justify myself. Nevertheless, each of us must walk according to God's ways, and not according to the "well meaning intentions" of our hearts.

More about ancient gods and modern practices that refer to them...

There are a lot of modern things that have come to us from idolatrous and erroneous origins. A quick example of a modern practice that originated in antiquity is the *gold wedding ring* which most married people today wear. Gold wedding rings were first used in ancient Egypt to symbolize the Egyptian belief in the concept of *never-ending marriage* (i.e. marriage that lasts throughout eternity in the after-life). The wedding ring, representing a never ending circle, was worn by the Egyptians to reverence this belief. Of course, we know from Jesus' teaching that human marriage is not eternal as there will be "no marriage or giving in marriage" in heaven but rather Jesus says we will be "like the angels". I believe most Christians wear a wedding ring with no thought of this false doctrine or its spurious Egyptian origins.

Another example is the names of the days of the week which are named after pagan gods. Sunday, for example, "dies solis", means "sun's day" and refers to the Roman god of the sun. Saturday, "Saturni dies", means "Saturn's day", and refers to the Roman god "Saturn". All the names of the days of the week can be traced back to men's desire to honor false gods. It is not evil to use these names and the language of our day, for we who love the Lord give no credit to false gods!

There is nothing wrong with learning about origins. I personally think origins are fascinating and more people should spend time researching why things are as they are. It's eye opening! But how far should we go?

Whoever begins down the path of *reacting* against ancient pagan origins of everyday things must be prepared to spend an enormous amount of time excavating ancient error and then strictly obeying a complex code of reactionary laws governing all things anti-pagan. Wow! It seems to me that there has to be a better way.

I like Paul's approach. Paul didn't seem to panic about the existence of pagan Gods. He even used one of the pagan monuments "to the unknown god" to reveal the True and Living God to a group of idolaters.

"Then Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus [the place of the council of elders of Athens Greece] and said, "Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription:

#### TO THE UNKNOWN GOD

Therefore the one whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you: God Who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands..." see Acts 17.22-34

Thank God for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ! And the freedom that Paul had to be all things to all people, while in his heart remaining 100% true to God. God knows that altars and idols are nothing and not worth our time (His time). All the nations are as a drop in the bucket to God. How much less than a drop in the bucket are the false gods of the nations! God is not giving a great deal of thought to the imaginations of men and their false gods. But rather He is seeking the hearts of men (even idolaters) who will turn to Him when their hearts awaken to serve Him only. "Let God be true and every man a liar."

Did you ever know a Christian named Diana or Diane? Diana is the name of the Roman goddess of fertility. Did you ever know someone named Dylan? Dylan is the name of the Celtic god of the sea. Do you remember Apollos from Acts 18.24? His name derives from the name Apollo which is the Roman sun god (see Strongs 624 & 625). Do you remember Epaphroditus, Paul's "brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier" from Philippians 2.25? Epaphroditus means "devoted to Venus" who was the Roman goddess of love (see Strongs 1891). The believers seemed to have no problem referring to these brothers by their names of pagan origins. They were obviously not required to change their names. And Jesus seems to have no problem using their names because Apollos and Epaphroditus are recorded in Scripture forever.

Should people be required to change their names? Should we refuse to speak someone's name because of pagan origins? Should we stop referring to the days of the week by their common names? Should we stop wearing wedding rings? Is the long term goal of the Spirit of Liberty to draw us into a lifetime of legalism, rigidity and reactivity?

May God forbid it.

I believe God wants His children to "go in peace" just as Naaman the servant of the king of Syria was told to "go in peace". When Naaman was healed he turned to the LORD with all his heart and abandoned his former idolatry:

"Indeed, now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, except in Israel" (2 Kings 5.15)

"Yet in this thing may the LORD pardon your servant: when my master goes into the temple of Rimmon to worship there, and he leans on my hand, and I bow down in the temple of Rimmon -- when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the LORD please pardon your servant in this thing. Then he [the prophet Elisha] said to him, 'Go in peace.'" (2 Kings 5.18,19)

God looked into Naaman's heart and knew he was no longer an idolater... even though he lived in a world full of idolaters and assisted them in *their* idolatry (*not his*) and walked in *their* temple to a worthless idol. The fact is that we too live in a huge world full of idolaters, and we too should go in peace if we, as Naaman, can say, "I know that there is no God in all the earth, except the True and Living God!"

Evil would come near to Naaman, but Naaman would never again come near to evil. Do you see the difference?

OK, back to the practice of celebrating "Christmas"...

The point I am trying to make is that people can potentially own a "Christmas" tree and have a celebration on December 25th and exchange gifts, and not be idolaters. They may be *mistaken about the value and importance of such things in God's eyes*, but they may not be pagan idolaters.

I personally believe that the practice of celebrating "Christmas" is erroneous, having no Scriptural revelation and no practical precedent by the Apostles or early church to support it.

It is my hope that you also will at least be open to such a possibility.

As you can probably see, I believe that for true Christians, the sins that can be related to the practice of celebrating "Christmas" are not the worship of false gods or the adoption or perpetuation of ancient pagan rituals.

I personally have never met a Christian who is a "Christmas enthusiast" who also has a heart motive to worship or honor a false god.

**That is to say, I believe this if their intention is simply to commemorate the birth of Jesus. I believe that honoring, venerating, worshiping Santa Claus is nothing less than idolatry and blasphemy against God! As I stand before God my spirit recoils at the thought of this taking place in Christian homes and hearts! And I grieve at the thought of precious children being deceived by this lie, robbed of the honor, veneration and worship they should have in their hearts for Jesus.**

But for those who merely seek to commemorate the birth/advent of Jesus, apart from the lies, I'm convinced that their thought is to simply use God's creation (lights, trees, gifts, food) to glorify God on some level. After all, the earth and everything in it belongs to God (including lights, trees, gifts, food).

God has not abdicated ownership of His creation and all things still exist in Him, including the movement of the solar system along with each and every "day that He has made". He has not relinquished ownership of anything. His children can make use of His creation innocently and without hesitation for His glory.

I think one should be slow to say that any of His children unwittingly worship a false god because of lights, trees, gifts or food. May I never insinuate that a born-again believer who is a "Christmas enthusiast" worships ancient false gods on these grounds alone.

Researches must be careful when they find themselves enveloped by mountains of historical facts or "truths".

A series of truths is not the same as Truth.

Paul noted that knowledge of mere facts or "being right" falls short:

*"Though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing." (1 Corinthians 13.2).*

Earlier in the same letter Paul says:

*"Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up/makes arrogant, but love edifies/builds up. And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him." (1 Corinthians 8.1)*

Where am I heading with all this? Sin (i.e. missing the mark; disobedience; not pleasing God; things not done in faith).

By God's grace and in a spirit of love, I would like to address some practical and specific problems related to the practice of celebrating "Christmas" as I see them. Not from the point of view of historical knowledge, but from the point of view of our own hearts and beliefs today, right now, you and me.

Today I find several sins entwined in the intents and motives of our hearts concerning the practice of celebrating "Christmas". These include:

- Valuing and emphasizing what God is not valuing or emphasizing. (There is no biblical precedent for the celebration of Jesus' birth day; "The things highly valued by men are not valued by God"; this high level sin is very disturbing. Where your heart is, there your treasure will be also. Is "Christmas" itself our treasure? If we lost "Christmas" but still had your God and our family, would we still be depressed? How many people experience disappointment around December 25th because their expectations for this one day is unrealistic? How many families fight and how many people become depressed because on this ONE DAY OUT of 365 things don't go "just right", they cannot be with family or they don't get a "present"?)
- Emphasizing the value of the message of "Christmas" (and even the lore of Santa Claus) over the value of the message of the Cross of Jesus; diminishing the Cross, death and resurrection of Jesus by falsely inflating the value and meaning of His birth into a mega "holy-day" -- when the truth is that men are called to first die with Jesus on His Cross, then be buried with Jesus, and then be born again with Him through His resurrection from the dead; *men are not called to be born with Jesus in His manger.* ("May I never boast except in the Cross of Jesus Christ for Whom I have been crucified to the world and the world to me.")

- Creating extra-biblical practices and traditions and *masquerading them as the things of God*, treating them as required and requiring others to hallow such practices. Coercion and contempt toward those who do not practice them ("The servant requiring things not required of him", "Traditions of men invalidate the commands of God")
- Selfish and lusty desires to *get* things ("Store up for yourselves treasure in heaven", "Where you treasure is there your heart will be also"; do we really need to save the poor from having a present-less "Christmas"? What about the other 364 days of the year?)
- Emphasis of worship through physical decoration vs. worship in Spirit and Truth ("man looks on the outward, but God looks on the heart", "What is seen is temporary, what is unseen is eternal", "do not cling to My body")
- Emphasis of religious devotion to a particular day vs. constant passionate devotion *every day* ("Do not let anyone judge you in eating or drinking, in respect of a feast, or the new moon, or of a Sabbath which are a shadow, but the substance is of Christ Himself!", "this is the day that the LORD has made"-- every day)
- De-emphasis or diminishing in value all other days of the year that God has made ("This is the day the Lord has made")
- The buying, selling, commercialization of "Jesus things" and "God things". Jesus cannot be bought, sold, commercialized and such things do not profit people spiritually, even if their external beauty elicits goose bumps and emotional feelings. ("Set your mind on things above, not on things upon the earth, for you are dead and your life is hidden with Christ in God", "Jesus drove the moneychangers from the temple")
- Attributing omniscience and supernatural powers to Santa Claus ("You shall have no other gods beside or before Me" see the ten commandments, "Look to the LORD and *HIS* strength and seek *HIS* face always" see Psalm 115)
- Lying to children ("Do not bear false witness"; e.g. Santa Claus)
- Lying to one another about the value and importance of the practice of celebrating "Christmas" ("Do not go beyond what is written")
- Valuing family time and status quo "on this particular day in this particular way" above and without respect for the jealousy and sorrow of God ("Assuredly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My sake and the gospel's who shall not receive a hundredfold... and in the age to come eternal life" Mark 10.29,30)

I do not want to "make war on Christ Mass" nor do I want to neglect truth. I want to live every day for Jesus just the same. Constant and abiding. Not building myself up for one particular day of the year where I'll *really celebrate* Him. I long for us to love Jesus daily, 365 days a year, "seeking His face always". I long to put aside every weight and sin that so easily entangles, putting aside modern day "Christian religious rituals" that are not found in Scripture.



We do not draw near to God through such things. God has never been looking for such things. Such things do not "assist" with the acquisition of spiritually discerned knowledge. Instead, I believe unscriptural religious holy days create obstacles for those who are seeking the Entrance Way; who are seeking to depart from man-made religion and external trappings.

God is seeking worshippers who will worship in Spirit and in Truth. Let us not allow others to establish our righteousness in eating or drinking, in respect of a feast, or the new moon, or of a Sabbath which are shadows, but the substance is of Christ Himself ... every day of the year, every moment, every beat of our hearts. Let's be convinced that Christ Himself is our life and our life is hidden with Christ in God; not represented by painted decoration and flashing lights and gaudy tinsel. Let's not do our "Christian alms" before men to be seen by them. Let's go to our closet and close the door and be seen in secret by our Father in heaven. He alone can reveal His Son to a dying world.

When others have a strong negative reaction because I do not practice an unscriptural ritual, then I can't help but suspect that they are attempting to establish my righteousness on that thing, using it as a measure or standard for what is required to establish my righteousness and be pleasing to God. Sometimes it indicates how much they value a thing/practice over me as a person. Jesus made it clear... man was not made for the Sabbath, but rather the Sabbath was made for men. Man was not made for ritual but for *Relationship!*

Grace comes to mind...

Grace is a hard thing to understand. People generally want to buy or work their way to God (me included). It is natural for us to do so because that is all we have known in the world. But God does not accept payment from men for the right/freedom to approach Him. The rich [in money, intellect, strength, stature, power, emotion, health, beauty, you name it] attempt to use their riches to please God. But riches cannot purchase God or find Him out. Riches cannot advance the everlasting kingdom of God -- riches are temporary and God is working in eternity. Temporary and external things have little or no value in the eyes of God. "What is seen is temporary, what is unseen is eternal."

I suspect this is why we don't know what Jesus looked like. Jesus forbade the woman from clinging to His risen body. A big hug from Jesus' earthly body was not what she needed. She needed to come to the knowledge of her Eternal Savior in Spirit and in Truth. Worship takes place in the heart and true worshipers do not worship by special days or rituals or temples or geographic places. God has been longing for millennia for men to move beyond the idea of physical religious "things", but how hard it is for men to let go. God is Spirit, living and interactive and intimately Personal. The human body is the temple of God that He created for Himself with His own hands. I can imagine Jesus thinking, "Don't cling to My temple, woman, you yourself are now a temple of the Living God!" People with great riches (you pick the type of riches) tend to build great structures & monuments & practices for all to see. God is not building those things. God sees in secret. And His open reward is that He is sending forth the Spirit of His Son Jesus into thirsty hearts to make men like Jesus in word and deed *in all of life at all times*. (Mark 10.17-31)

Father, let those who can be stirred be stirred, I ask *in* and *for* the sake of the precious Name of Your Son Jesus. Holy Spirit, please lead & guide us into all Truth. We want to be of the Truth. We want to learn and come to the knowledge of the Truth. Please help us to go beyond mere

facts and "mind feats" and chiseling stones into the Living Truth. O Spirit of Truth, Spirit of Jesus, come into our hearts! Please pour out a spirit of repentance upon us. Please forgive us for being deeply satisfied with things and ignoring You. O Father hear the groaning of Your Spirit! Please come into us and revive us. Find in us a place that You can call Your own. A clean place. A place made of stones that have not been doodled on by the hands of men. Arise and enter Your temple, O Living God! Take us beyond mere knowledge that puffs up, to the Way, the Truth, the Life ... Himself. We are unprofitable servants. Father, please glorify Your Name.