

## Is Christmas Really Christian?

A conversation with a fellow passenger on a recent flight from Winnipeg to Kelowna gave me pause to stop and ponder anew the season which is upon us. Most Christians in North America and Europe recognize December 25<sup>th</sup> as the birth date of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. However, my traveling companion reminded me that there are many inside and outside the church who question whether the Christian Church should celebrate Christmas at all. My companion caused me to investigate why we celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Scholars generally agree that the church in Rome began to celebrate Christ's birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> by the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD. It was Bishop Julius of Rome (337-352 AD) who determined that Christ was born on December 25<sup>th</sup>. The church father John Chrysostom claimed in a sermon that Bishop Julius, acting on a request by Cyril of Jerusalem, had the official records of the Roman census examined and determined that December 25 was the correct date for Jesus' birth. (John Chrysostom, *Homil. Diem Natal.*, 2; PL, 49, 552ff). Many criticised Julius for his reliance on evidence outside the Scriptures for determining the date of Jesus' birth.

Church leaders subsequently justified December 25<sup>th</sup> on other grounds. The account of creation found in Genesis 1:1-2:4 states the universe was created in six days marked by evening and morning or day and night. It was reasoned that creation must have begun with the spring equinox, when night and day are equal in length. This occurs March 25<sup>th</sup> on our calendar. It was further reasoned that the birth of Jesus heralded the beginning of a new creation and therefore must have been conceived in the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the date of the spring equinox. As a consequence, March 25<sup>th</sup> is now celebrated as the festival of the Annunciation and as the anniversary of the Incarnation. The date of Christmas was calculated as nine months after the date of the Annunciation/Incarnation. While many Christians find this theory enlightening, some question the witness of the church when we celebrate the birth of the Son of God on December 25<sup>th</sup> as a fact, knowing that December 25<sup>th</sup> may or may not be His actual birth date.

In 1743, German Protestant scholar Paul Ernst Jablonski was one of the first to link the date of Christmas December 25<sup>th</sup> to a pagan holiday. During the reign of the Emperor Aurelian (270-275 AD), the Roman Empire worshiped a sun god they referred to as "Sol Invictus," the "unconquerable sun." The Romans believed the sun god was born on the date of the winter solstice, which they thought was December 25<sup>th</sup>. Christianity was legalized by the Romans by 325 AD. For many decades thereafter, Christian and pagan religious rites were practiced throughout the empire

side by side. It is argued that when Christianity became the dominant religion of the Empire, the church sought to undermine the pagan festival which celebrated the birth of the sun with a celebration on the same date celebrating the birth of the Son of God. Jablonski and many after him argued that it was wrong for the Church to use a pagan holiday to celebrate the birth of our Savior and represented "paganization" that debased the true Church.

Some inside and outside the Church challenge the celebration of Christmas as a church festival on grounds that Scriptures do not mandate the celebration of the birth of Jesus; therefore, the church should not celebrate a mass or service in honor of the birth of Jesus. So what are we to do in the face of all this evidence?

The Apostle Paul reminds us that there is freedom in the Christian life. Even in Paul's day, Christians began to set certain days apart as special days for worship and celebration. The special days caused arguments in the first century church. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul quelled these arguments with these words: "One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord" (Romans 14:5-6). I am fully convinced in my mind that, Christians who choose to are justified in celebrating Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

Luke's Gospel declares that immediately following Jesus' birth, an angel of the Lord went into the fields around Bethlehem and announced Jesus' birth to a group of shepherds encamped there. The angel announced that the Savior of the world was born that night. Immediately, the angel was joined by a great company from heaven which gave glory to God in response to Jesus' birth. (Luke 2:8-22) All heaven rejoiced at the birth of Jesus. The joy spilled out to the earth. When the shepherds came into the presence of Jesus they felt compelled to go out and share the news with others. If God, all the angels in heaven and certain shepherds celebrated the birth of Jesus, I feel free to celebrate Jesus' birth as well.

Jesus' incarnation, that is His immaculate conception in the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, and birth in Bethlehem of Judea, is foundational to the faith in Jesus confessed by the Holy Christian Church. We confess that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ touched each and every part of what it is to be a human being, from conception through birth, maturation and finally death. At Christmas, we remember that in the Incarnation, the divine Son of God took on human flesh without changing or transforming His human flesh. What better way to witness to the world that Jesus really came from heaven to earth, took on human flesh and dwelt among us, than by celebrating his birthday?

I believe that the events around Jesus' birth, as described in Luke's Gospel, foreshadowed Easter Sunday. Speaking through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord God promised: "I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing," declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 23:3-4) The Lord declared He would accomplish this through a descendant of King David (Jeremiah 23:5-6). The new king, like David, was to be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:6). In His birth narrative, we see God calling shepherds to come to His Shepherd King. God permitted them to see their savior in the Christ child. God sent them out to declare to God's people that they no longer needed to be afraid, inasmuch as a savior has been born to them to save them. I believe these events foreshadowed and pointed to God's plan of salvation. Jesus' nativity, His birth as a human being, was testimony that God's plan of salvation was based on His Son's humanity and mortality. Salvation would come from mortality, from His Son's human death. Jesus called shepherds to Him during His earthly life, namely, His disciples. They scattered at Jesus' death. Following His resurrection, the disciples were drawn once more to their Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd empowered them to go out into the world and announce that the one born in Bethlehem has come back to life, born again, and that all who believe in Jesus would be resurrected and born to new life. The disciples and their successors have called hundreds of millions into God's flock in Jesus' name and shepherded them by Jesus' grace.

December 25<sup>th</sup> signals a change in our world. The preceding months' daylight hours grow ever shorter. However, all that changes on the 25<sup>th</sup> of December: the sun begins pushing back the darkness. It begins as a little light and grows each day until daylight hours exceed the hours of darkness. Jesus began as a little light and as He matured, His light shone brighter and brighter, like the midsummer sun. What better day to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the source of our faith, the light that shines into our darkness, than the day that the sun pushes back the darkness in the world around us?

If you want to join God, the angels in heaven, and the shepherds, in celebration of Jesus' birth on Christmas Eve and/or Christmas Day, go to a church near you.

In Christ's service,

Pastor Ed Skutshek