

# Should Christians Celebrate Christmas and the birth of Christ?

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Tell the average guy on the street - one who actually realizes there is a connection between Christ and Christmas - that some Christians don't celebrate the holiday and you'll likely get a pointed question or two. "Isn't that the biggest church-going day of the year? Not to mention that Christmas is as American as apple pie! Why wouldn't a Christian celebrate [the birth of Christ](#)?" In actuality, the reasons are varied and the legacy long, going back to the Puritans and up to present day groups such as Advent Conspiracy.

Pam Ferris stopped celebrating Christmas when she became a born-again Christian. "I didn't see in the [Bible](#) a command to remember the birthday of Jesus," she told Crosswalk.com by phone. "He never told us when to celebrate it, plus, I don't think the apostles celebrated Christ's birthday." But, the main reason is "the ghost of Christmas past."

The Philadelphia resident grew up in a Catholic [family](#) that piled up mounds of debt each December. Her brothers and sisters tried to outspend each other in an attempt to gain their mother's approval, and one sibling even took to shoplifting - just to get the perfect gift. At the annual midnight mass outing, her uncles and dad staggered down the aisle after one too many whiskeys at Christmas Eve dinner. "I was disillusioned about the farce that Christmas became in my family," says Ferris. "So, when I turned my life over to Jesus at age 22, I turned my back on Christmas."

Ferris says she might be interested in finding a church that is part of Advent Conspiracy, an international movement "restoring the scandal of Christmas by worshipping Jesus through



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compassion, not consumption." The organization's mission, according to its website, is to encourage people to worship more, spend less, give more and love all. "Christmas was meant to change the world. It still can," is one of the group's mottos.

Until she takes the leap of joining Advent Conspiracy, Ferris's house is dark. There is no tree in the window and she doesn't give gifts to anyone on Dec. 25. Although her neighbors and even her own family think she is "an oddball for abstaining from Christmas revelry, I feel that if the Puritans could do it, I can too."

Christmas in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century puritanical America was outlawed by Protestant reformists as "another one of those idol-worshipping religious festivals well worth expunging," says Colgate University professor Anthony Aveni. According to Aveni, who wrote *The Book of the Year: A History of Our Holidays*, reformist Protestants levied fines on those individuals who dared to miss work on Christmas in 17<sup>th</sup> Century America.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the famous English preacher of the last century, wrote, "We have no superstitious regard for times and seasons. Certainly we do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas ... we find no scriptural word whatever for observing any day as the birthday of the Saviour; and consequently, its observance is a superstition, because (it's) not of divine authority ... probably the fact is that the 'holy days' (were) arranged to fit in with the heathen festivals." (Quoted from *Metropolitan Pulpit Series*, Pilgrim Publications: Pasadena, Texas, 1871, p. 1026).

Charles Halff, director of the Christian Jew Foundation, chooses to boycott Christmas because of the pagan connection. "Thousands of years before Jesus was born, the heathen in every country observed Dec. 25 as the birthday of a god who was called the sun god Tammuz." According to all the heathen religions of that time, writes Halff, "Tammuz had a miraculous birth; and for centuries his birthday was celebrated with feasts, revelry and drunken orgies. The heathen celebrated Tammuz's birthday according to the very example he set for them. He was the world's greatest lover of women, strong drink, dirty jokes, and other sensual fun."

But, for every person who chooses to abstain from celebrating Christmas, thousands more revere the holiday. According to the Associated Press, Gallup polls from 1994 to 2005 consistently show that more than 90 percent of adults say they celebrate Christmas, including 84 percent of non-Christians.

Some, like Claire Shipley of Orlando, downplay the commercial aspects of the holiday and focus on the joyous arrival of Christ "into a dark and sinful world." She says she knows Christmas has a "sordid history" but feels Jesus would approve of taking what once was a pagan feast day and redeeming it. "Isn't that kind of why He came? To save what once was lost?"

Kurt Fredrickson, director of Fuller Theological Seminary's Doctor of Ministry Program, said in a recent phone interview that he appreciates the people who are trying to downscale some of the commercial aspects of Christmas. "But," he adds, "to walk away from Christmas, at least what Christmas is really all about, is going overboard. Christ is central to Christianity. The incarnation



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is absolutely central to the life and ministry and work of Jesus. So, of course we have to celebrate it. We just need to be careful about all the crazy stuff we get caught up in."

Prior to coming to Fuller in September 2003, Fredrickson was on the pastoral staff of Evangelical Covenant Church in Simi Valley, Calif., for 24 years, 18 of which he served as senior pastor. "December was the dreaded month," he says, laughing. "We're supposed to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but you have programs and things to get ready for. It's exhausting. To walk away from some of that is not all that bad. Yet we still have to hold onto the central meaning of what Christmas is all about."

Fredrickson has heard all the objections and says, "Essentially, they are true. We adopted a Roman holiday, which was Dec. 25, and made that the celebration day for the birth of Jesus." He says we know from the New Testament that Jesus probably wasn't born in December. The phrase "the shepherds were out in the fields watching over their flocks by night" is not a wintertime experience, according to Fredrickson.

"We don't know the date," he says. "We don't have any birth records but I think we are fairly certain that it was most likely springtime. The fact that we don't know the exact date of [Jesus' birth](#), and kind of tied into this other holiday, for me doesn't lessen the celebration of Christmas because what we are really doing at Christmas time is celebrating the fact that God stepped into our world in the person of Jesus."

There is an underlying value to Christmas, Fredrickson adds, "which is this amazing sense of gift giving. God is a giving God and I think we get in trouble when we only emphasize that at Christmas time. You know, 'It's a season of giving so let's be nice to people.' That should be a value that people have throughout the year. If Christmas reminds us we are supposed to be like that all year long, great. But sometimes, people are nice only in December and can't wait for January to hit so they can get back to their own selves."

Greg Peters, an assistant professor at Biola University, says he too knows all the objections, but chooses to celebrate. An expert in early church history, Peters told Crosswalk.com that there are at least two theories about the way that Dec. 25 was decided on as the observation date of Christ's birth. "One is that Dec. 25 was this pagan feast. There is also a theory that Dec. 25 was picked based on some early Christian sources that say that Jesus' death would have been on March 25, based on the year and when the Passover happened."

Peters explains that according to ancient rabbinic practice, one's death date was one's birth date. In case of Jesus, it was March 25. Also in rabbinic tradition, birth is the same as conception. Therefore, if Jesus was "conceived" on March 25th, you add nine months and get Dec. 25.

"Some scholars believe this and say you don't have to see Christmas just as a Pagan feast day," says Peters. "It's also possible to read early Christian authors and see that early Christians appropriated pagan holidays for themselves. The fact that Dec. 25 was a pagan holiday and they could usurp a pagan holiday- I'm sure it wasn't far from their minds either."



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As for rejecting Christmas because of materialism, "Well," says Peters, "that is like rejecting Christmas because we are all sinners. It seems to me it's more a critique of churches than a critique of our culture, because Biblical teaching and example should be strong enough to counter the trend toward materialism."

The issue isn't whether to boycott or observe Christmas, Peters adds, "but to observe it properly, maybe recovering Advent or some sense of anticipation of the arrival of our Savior. Liturgically, Christmas is a season, not a day. It's important to keep in mind although Christmas Day or Dec. 25 may seem very materialistic, that the season itself doesn't have to be."

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