

Why I Choose to Celebrate *Christmas*

The celebration of Christmas is not a subject that is of eternal importance to Christians. In other words, the Scripture does not give us specific direction to observing the birth of Christ. We do not even know what day of the year Christ was born. It is, however, a subject that is loaded with cultural and separational questions for us. Society seems to be infatuated with observing Christmas. Santa Claus, reindeer, and brightly-lit trees fill front yards and living rooms. Shopping malls are filled with colorful gadgets, costumes, and knickknacks that will probably end up in a landfill in a month or two. According to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, the U.S. may spend about 1.7 trillion dollars on Christmas holiday spending this year.

These customs raise the question of how Christians should respond. Obviously, the sinful customs of the world are to be shunned. This is the Christian's battle. We are in the world, but not of the world (John 17:11-16), therefore, as we live and move in the world, we make daily choices about what things are appropriate for Christians to do and what not to do. Relating to the excesses of contemporary Christmas customs is no exception.

In the Anabaptist community there are differing ways of answering the question of how we should respond. Some refuse to celebrate Christmas almost in any way; others celebrate it to the point of copying some customs to a lesser degree, i.e., snowmen instead of Santa, string lights without the varying colors, and Christmas trees without decorations. This article is not intended to be judgmental of any efforts to keep Christ in Christmas. Nor is it intended to provoke controversy or division. It is a caution against over-reactions on one hand and cultural assimilation on the other. In other words, just because modern contemporary culture distorts Christian ideals, ethics, and customs should not mean that we deal with that problem by trying to erase all customs. Christians need to respond to distortions by producing a clear alternative. The question then becomes: How should a Christian celebrate Christ's birth?— not how he shouldn't.

As already mentioned, Scripture is silent about observing Christmas. There are a few references to holydays in the New Testament. One is in Colossians 2:16-17: *Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ.* These verses, along with the exhortation of Romans 14, seem to say that the Old Testament focus on the type needs to pass away when the anti-type or the fulfillment of the type is revealed, which is Jesus Christ. For an example of these Old Testament celebrations, see Leviticus 23. These practices and celebrations were woven into the fabric of everyday life. *When I remember these things, I pour out my soul in me: for I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God, with the voice of joy and praise, with a multitude that kept holyday* (Psa 42:4). So taking the New Testament verses into consideration, we need to be careful to respect the traditions of others in relating to the celebration of holydays. In other words, selflessness and love need to rule. *Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing* (1Pe 3:8-9).

So back to our question: Why should I celebrate Christmas? The first answer is obvious: Christmas is about Christ. The glorious and miraculous advent of Jesus Christ as a baby in Bethlehem deserves our attention and consideration. This event was foretold in several Old Testament prophecies. *Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel* (Isa 7:14). *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace* (Isa 9:6). The incarnate birth of our Savior Redeemer, the One who by His shed blood now saves us and intercedes for His saved to the Father, deserves our focus and appreciation. The commemoration of Christ's suffering and death is commanded in Jesus' own words in Luke 22:19 and reinforced in 1 Corinthians 11:24-25. While His sinless blood offering providing salvation to all those who avail themselves of it is of tremendous importance and holds the key of everlasting life or everlasting death, it is incongruous to think that His first coming is unworthy of commemorating.

The second answer we would like to consider is about how Christians are to provide an answer to the excesses of the Christmas traditions surrounding us. A public church service on Christmas day turns our focus toward the spiritual aspects of Christmas and is very fitting for keeping Christ in Christmas. Families gathering from near and far for special activities and traditions produce pleasant memories that become a heritage that can be passed on from one generation to the next. We need to be honest and recognize that

some traditions like gift exchanges, cookie baking, and shopping can be easily overdone, however, turning our focus from a commemorative celebration of the real meaning of Christmas to a materialistic self-indulgent holiday.

Another answer to the excesses of our ungodly society is to use Christmas as a time to give, bless, and witness. It is a time to especially let our light shine—not the lights that shine in windows, doorways or trees, but the light that shines from a heart filled with the love of Christ. Christmastime is a good time for youth and families to carol to shut ins, neighbors and retirement communities. A time to spread good cheer, the gospel message in song and testimony. *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven* (Mt 5:16). As Anabaptist people, we have been taught that simplicity and modesty are to be characteristic of every facet of daily life. May our front yards and living rooms be a witness to those around us at Christmastime that Jesus is truly the “reason for the season,” and may we not contribute to the commercialization and prideful displays of “art” that contradict our humble lives of service to our Lord.

May Christ be celebrated this season, not only because it is Christmas time, but because Christ is dwelling in our hearts, bringing peace and joy because our sins are forgiven. We have a story to tell the nations— a story of redemption and hope through the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A story that does not need to be shared only at Christmas time, but is lived out for the world to see every day. May we celebrate Christ Jesus every day and hour of our lives.

~Dave Sweigart