

Symbols and Traditions of Christmas

We all celebrate things differently and Christmas is no different. In this teaching about celebrating Christmas, we are discussing the symbols and traditions in celebrating Christmas around the world.

Instead of discussing the standard Advent topics leading up to Christmas, we decided to do something different. We're talking about different aspects of celebrating Christmas. Last week we talked about the idea that Celebrating Christmas is like an altar of remembrance. Each year as we celebrate we are reminded of the birth of God's Son, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. This reminder allows us to share why God sent His Son to us. It also allows us to share the life and ministry of Jesus and ultimately the price He paid for our sin so that we could return to a right relationship with God.

Introduction

Most of the world celebrates Christmas and Christians almost have a free pass, so to speak, to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with people. This helps us fulfill the great commission found in Matthew 28:19-20 which says:

Matthew 28:19-20

(19) Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, (20) and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

Celebrating Christmas gives us all sorts of ways to share the gospel of Jesus Christ and aspects of his story with the whole world. Today we are going to talk a little bit about the history of Christmas and some of the symbols and traditions and how they relate to Jesus. We will also point out some of the world's traditions that are baseless and serve no spiritual purpose.

There is one main theme that runs like a thread through all the celebrations of Christmas and that is joy. The joy began with an angelic proclamation found in Luke 2:8-14.

Luke 2:8-14

(8) And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. (9) An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (10) But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. (11) Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. (12) This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (13) Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, (14) "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

The angels told the shepherds to not be afraid. They were bringing good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ should always be a joyful celebration. God's plan for the redemption of mankind was taking shape and the chief component of that plan, our Savior had been born.



If we continued reading we would see how the shepherds ran into town and saw things just as the angels said they would. There was great rejoicing.

Traditions

Traveling Home

It is interesting to note that one of the most common traditions of celebrating Christmas around the world mimics the situation in Bethlehem at that time. Mary and Joseph were traveling back to their homeland where their family was for a census. Everyone had to travel at this time back to where they were from to be counted by the government. A common tradition today around the world is for people to travel home for the holidays. Christmas is one of the most traveled times of the year and most return home to where their families are to celebrate.

Giving Gifts

In many cultures around the world today there is a tradition of giving gifts. This stems from the Wisemen who traveled from the east to give gifts to the newborn King of Israel. They followed the Star of Bethlehem until they came to the place where the baby was. Matthew 2:11 records this:

Matthew 2:11

(11) On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

By giving gifts today at Christmas, it is remembering the Magi who came and presented gifts out of their treasure to the Christ child. It is this gift-giving that in some places is also extended to help provide much-needed things for widows and orphans. This is also where Saint Nicholas fits into Christmas traditions.

Saint Nicholas/Santa Claus

Nicholas was a bishop in the 3rd century in what is now modern-day Turkey. There are many stories about him, but something most agree with is he was drawn to helping the needy. He was known to give gifts of food and money to those in need but would do it in secret. Nicholas was a very pious man and took his faith seriously.

The world has since taken this story and built upon it, creating all sorts of tales and customs. The secular Santa Claus has almost no connection to Bishop Nicholas who took care of children and widows. We see the world taking something good and then capitalizing on it. This has led to the multibillion-dollar gift giving industry around the world.

Symbols

Christmas Trees and Lights

The use of evergreens in the celebration of Christmas was something Christianity took from the world. Before Christianity, many societies decorated with evergreen boughs, bushes, and trees. Because they stayed green all year round the paganistic cultures thought they were magical and warded off evil spirits.



It was the 16th century Germans who took evergreen trees and started to decorate them in their homes in celebration of Christmas. They wanted to take this tradition and dedicate it to God instead of what the solstice worshippers did. It is widely believed that Martin Luther, the reformer, first decorated a tree with candles. The story goes that he was walking home one winter night composing a sermon in his head and he saw all of the stars twinkling through the trees of the forest. He wanted to replicate that for his whole household to see, so he decorated their tree with lit candles.

Much like God's rebuke to Peter found in Acts 10 when God told Peter do not call that which God has made clean unclean, we can take something of the world, and dedicate it to God and use it to celebrate all God has done for us. That is the symbol of the Christmas tree and lights. Depending on where you are in the world, different greeneries are used. In Kenya, banana leaves are used. In Pakistan, every Christian home places a large lighted star on their roof proclaiming the birth of Jesus. A few years ago after a prayer meeting with Cell Life Church in Pakistan, Brother Tahir took his laptop up on his roof and showed us all the lit stars across his city in Pakistan signifying all the Christian homes. It was beautiful!

Candy Canes

Candy and other sweets are an ever-present symbol of the Christmas season. This is mostly because the world focuses Christmas on children more than any other single group. Children like sweets. Everybody likes sweets. There is one candy that is uniquely Christmassy though; candy canes.

Legend has it that what we know as candy canes were started in 17th century Germany at the Cologne Cathedral. During the Christmas ceremonies, the choir director would hand out sugar sticks to his young choir to keep them quiet during the times they were not singing. For the occasion he had the candymaker form them into a shepherd's crook, or cane, as an homage to the shepherds in the fields the angels visited.

This has been built on over the years and the typical candy cane is a shepherd's hook, or some say a letter "J" for Jesus. The red and white stripes are to symbolize Christ. The white symbolizes his purity and the red symbolizes his blood that was shed for all mankind.

Either story points the symbol right back to Jesus. The next time you see a candy cane, share the origin and what it means with someone.

Conclusion

Whatever the traditions or symbols, the point is they point to the birth of Jesus Christ and the redemption of mankind. We encourage you not to get caught up in the commercialization of Christmas, but by all means, celebrate Christmas. In some of the countries where Cell Life Church ministers people stay up all night celebrating. Let the joy of Christmas that comes through the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ shine from you.

One tradition that our family has is holding a birthday party for Jesus on Christmas Eve. We purchase a birthday cake from a bakery, which allows us to share Jesus' story with the baker and we invite people to our home for Jesus' birthday party. We read the Christmas story out of Luke chapter 2 and then sing Happy Birthday to Jesus. The youngest person gets to blow out the candles. Maybe you can do that too. What are some of your traditions? Share them with us in the comments below.

