

HOW TO CELEBRATE CHRISTMAS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 19, 1965 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Webster's Dictionary gives the following definition of Christmas: Christ + Mass. An annual church festival, kept on December 25 in memory of the birth of Christ, celebrated generally by special gifts, greetings, etc." Because I have long conceived it to be a responsibility of those who preach to deal with current issues affecting the lives of those who listen, because I feel that preaching in order to be of any real value must be relevant, I have chosen as my theme for this occasion, "How To Celebrate Christmas." While I do not wish to be negative nor to dampen the legitimate enjoyment of any, I feel that it is time to speak out concerning some of the things that are being said and done in America today concerning Christmas. Especially do I feel that our children need to know the facts concerning this mushrooming aspect of our national life.

An Annual Church Festival

Christmas, as an annual church festival, creates a very real problem for many of us. We are committed "to speak where the scriptures speak and to remain silent where the scriptures are silent." We are committed to "have a 'Thus saith the Lord' for everything that we do in religious faith and practice." In other words, we realize that we do not have the authority to add to nor to take from the things written in God's inspired word.

In this connection we look in vain in the Bible for any mention of Christmas, or any celebration of the birth of Christ by the early church. Instead of an annual religious festival to celebrate the birth of Christ, we find in the New Testament that the emphasis is upon his life, his teachings, and his sacrificial death. Neither the scriptures nor the early centuries of church history indicate that the apostles or any of those who immediately followed the apostles celebrated Christ's birth.

The Encyclopedia Britannica, Eleventh Edition, Vol. VI, p. 293, tells us of the origin of Christmas. "The great church adopted Christmas much later than Epiphany; and before the fifth century there was no general consensus of opinion as to when it should come in the calendar, whether on the sixth of January, or the twenty-fifth of March, or the twenty-fifth of December. The earliest identification of the twenty-fifth of December with the birthday of Christ is in a passage, otherwise unknown and probably spurious, of Theophilus of Antioch (A.D. 171-183) ... As late as 245 Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Christ 'as if he were a king Pharaoh.' The first certain mention of December 25 is in a Latin Chronographer of A.D. 354, first published entire of Mommsen. It runs thus in English: 'Year one after Christ, in the consulate of Caesar and Paulus, the Lord Jesus was born on the twenty-fifth of December, a Friday and fifteenth day of the new moon.' Here again no festal celebration of the day is attested."

The fact is that after Easter, Pentecost, and Martyr's Days, the church leaders of the fourth century added Christmas and Epiphany. These all became festivals and feasts in the Roman Catholic Church. Christmas originated in Rome and the date selected for it was December 25, a date which had long been a holiday throughout the Roman Empire known as Sol Invictus, a festival honoring the sun. This came out of Mythraism, a Persian religion. Because it was already widely respected as a holiday, this date was given a Christian explanation and adopted as the birth date of Christ.

Since the scriptures suggest no special day celebrations, since we cannot possibly know with certainty the exact date of Christ's birth, and since so much of the religious practice of Christmas is pagan rather than Christian, we must pass it by as a religious festival. We do not celebrate Christmas as a religious festival just as we do not light candles, burn incense, christen babies, or keep Lent. We are reminded of a passage in Paul's letter to the Galatians, "Howbeit at that time, not knowing God you were in bondage to them that by nature are no gods: but now that ye have come to know God or rather to be known by God how turn ye back again to the weak and beggarly rudiments, whereunto ye desire to be in bondage over again? Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years. I am afraid of you, lest by any means I have bestowed labor upon you in vain." (Gal. 4:8-11).

A Happy, Generous Holiday Season

Christmas as a happy, generous holiday season of the year we can heartily commend. It is a time for family reunions. It is a time for giving gifts. It is a time for sending greetings. It is a time for remembering the poor. All of these are fine, wholesome activities, and do not involve any special religious celebrations or festivals. These are activities that ought to be commended at any season of the year, activities in which Christians may participate and should participate often.

The use of the name Christmas is legitimate even for those who do not celebrate it as a religious festival nor carry in their minds any connotation of Christmas + Mass. Like many other terms in our language, it has lost its original meaning and has come merely to suggest a certain period of the year. It has come to be an acceptable handle by which to refer to the December holiday season. We have many terms, widely used by everyone today, of which this same thing must be said.

For example, Sunday no longer suggests the day of the sun; Monday no longer suggests the day of the moon; Thursday no longer suggests the day for honoring the god Thor; Friday no longer suggests the day for honoring the goddess Fria; June no longer suggests the month of the god Juno; September no longer suggests the seventh month of the Roman Year; nor do a host of other names have any connection with their original meanings. Similarly, when we refer to Mr. Green, Mr. Black, Mr. Smith, Mr. Baker, and other such names we do not have any thought of the original meaning of these words. In like manner we do not designate a religious festival when we say Christmas, but merely refer to a time of the year.

Not A Time For License

Many Americans celebrate Christmas by over-spending, over-eating, heavy drinking, and by general self-indulgence. To engage in sensual living under the guise of celebrating the birth of Christ is sheer profanity. The commercial greed that has promoted Christmas to the point that it is an economic burden of shocking proportions upon the average American family, together with the loose living seen in office parties and other aspects of present day celebrations, is as foreign to real Christianity as sin is foreign to righteousness.

Mr. E. E. Bryan, long-time highly honored member of the Vanderbilt University staff, recently sent me the December 13 issue of the *Wall Street Journal*, which had a lead article on the front page concerning drinking. It reads in part: "Prosperity and pressures of urban living lift intake of alcohol. 'Tis the season to be jolly'--and judging by the way Americans have been laying in the liquor lately, there will be more ho-ho-ho in the holidays than ever before ... Some predict an increase of at least ten per cent over 1964 holiday sales, for the biggest year-to-year gain in at least fifteen years. Heavy holiday tipping will push liquor consumption for the full year to another record ... Two hundred ninety million gallons of liquor will have disappeared down the national hatch, fourteen million more than last year's previous record volume ... In the past decade alone liquor consumption in the nation has risen forty-five per cent while the population has increased only eighteen per cent."

At this point the writer then faced the question, "Why are we drinking more?" He gave four answers: (1) "Sheer affluence." (2) "We are becoming a nation of city dwellers, and the faster pace of urban life creates pressures relieved by many with a martini or two--or more." (3) "We have developed social patterns that strongly encourage drinking." (4) "And, of course, liquor is more readily available." Later in the article it was mentioned that U. S. citizens would spend about \$6.5 billion on liquor this year. It was also pointed out that about seventy-per cent of the adult population now drink while only sixty-five per cent or less did so in the late 1940's. The article did not mention but it is well to mention that there are today approximately five million alcoholics in the U. S.

I hold in my hand a copy of the December 17, 1965, issue of *Time Magazine*, which I suppose is still America's most widely circulated news magazine. Beginning inside the front cover and continuing throughout the magazine there are pages and pages of attractively displayed liquor advertisements. Notice that the bottles and the gift cartons are made unusually appealing by the use of skillful photography, and four color reproductions in these full-page appeals. As we turn through the pages feel the impact that this must have on the average reader of this issue of *Time Magazine*. Finally, when one has looked through the magazine, he finds that there are twenty full-page ads for liquor. The ads cover everything from "The brightest taste in bourbon" on through the whole range of liquors. They include the "champagne America loves best," imported whiskeys from Scotland and Canada, Puerto Rico rum, and finally a full page advertising wine from the Christian Brothers Winery in California. This latter full page shows "Brother Timothy," dressed in clerical regalia, candler a bottle of wine in the company's wine cellar and suggests that this product be used to "be sure your dinner will be a memorable one."

Only a few days ago one of the chiefs of the California Highway Patrol spoke on a major Los Angeles radio station. He said simply, "During the next ten days more liquor will be consumed in the United States than during any previous such period in the history of the world. Likewise, during the next ten days more people will die upon our highways than at any previous time in the history of the world." The parallel between these two striking facts ought to be significant to thinking people. He further pointed out that more people die at Christmas time on the highways than at any of our other annual holidays. Is it not barbaric as well as blasphemous to celebrate Christmas with a national drinking spree? (Note: The Associated Press on December 27 reported 720 killed on the nation's highways over the Christmas weekend--an all-time record--and then listed liquor consumption first as a contributing cause of this slaughter.

The Right Way To Remember Christ

Whenever we think of the birth of Christ, at whatever season of the year, we ought to show our deep gratitude for his having come to our world by doing something in keeping with his life and his teachings. Peter Marshall, noted chaplain of the U. S. Senate some years ago, preached a remarkable sermon entitled, "By Invitation of Jesus Christ," which suggests the kind of thing that we ought to do. He described a wealthy Washington businessman who lived in a large house on Massachusetts Avenue. One evening this man, a good man, was reading his Bible before retiring, when he chanced to read Luke 14:12-14, "And he said to him also that had bidden him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, nor thy kinsmen, nor rich neighbors; lest haply they also bid thee again and a recompense be made thee. But when thou makest a feast, bid the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: and thou shalt be blessed; because they have not wherewith to recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed in the resurrection of the just."

After reading this passage he could not sleep, until finally late in the night he made a decision. The following day he had some cards printed which bore the inscription, "Jesus of Nazareth requests the honor of your presence at a banquet honoring the Sons of Want on Friday evening, in a home on Massachusetts Avenue. Cars will await you at the Central Union Mission at six o'clock." He distributed these cards to the blind man who sold pencils downtown, the aged news butch, the lame beggar, and a host of others of the city's derelicts.

On the Friday evening cars pulled up in front of the mission, the men climbed in and were driven immediately to the great house on Massachusetts Avenue. There they enjoyed a wonderful evening of fine food, the singing of old familiar songs, and warm fellowship. After describing this scene in full detail, Peter Marshall closes by saying, "Of course, that never happened. It is only a piece of imagination. But why shouldn't it happen, on Massachusetts Avenue in Washington? on Park Avenue in New York? in Druid Hills in Atlanta? on the Gold Coast in Chicago? in Beverly Hills in Los Angeles?" Would not this be a better way to celebrate the birth of Christ than by overindulging ourselves?

Yes, we leave off the celebrating of Christmas as a religious festival for the simple reason that we find no such pattern in the Bible. Committed to speak where the scriptures speak and be silent where they are silent, we dare not add such festivals. Neither do we Christians celebrate Christmas by excessive drinking or licentious living. Whenever we remember Christ's birth we endeavor to show our deep gratitude for his love for us. We show that gratitude best by doing the kind of things that he did and by being the kind of persons that he wants us to be. This is our endeavor in December and in all other seasons of the year.