



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Articles

Christmas

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An angel announced to the shepherds, “unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). When was that? Craig Blomberg reminds us that it “was probably sometime between 6 and 4 BC,” and then adds, “The day of Jesus’ birth is even more uncertain.” Some historians suggest a spring birth; that’s when “shepherds would have watched their flocks at night (Luke 2:8) . . . when most lambs were born” (*Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd edition, 222-223). But, we have no way to know for sure.

Encyclopaedia Britannica adds that “December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus’ birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date” (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115686/Christmas>; accessed Dec. 9, 2013). That was in the Western Roman Empire; in the East, it was January 6. Why December 25? Probably because it was a convenient holiday already set aside “for worshiping *Sol Invictus* (‘the unconquerable sun’)” (Blomberg, 222).

Over time, Christmas customs multiplied, many with no “theological or liturgical affirmations.” Repulsed by the secularity of many of these things, groups like the Puritans, in both Old and New England, banned its observance. Many now would little notice such a ban because in the West, “since the early 20th century, Christmas has been a secular family holiday, observed by Christians and non-Christians alike . . .” (*Britannica*).

So, what do we do about Christmas? Do we refuse to participate at all? Do we observe it only as a secular holiday, a time for family and to unwind? Or, to help our culture “put Christ [back?] in Christmas,” do we join in, whether little or much, the religious observances that celebrate Jesus’ birth? As we deliberate, I propose that we remember at least three things.

First, Jesus' birth is a Bible subject, and so should be studied sometime, staying true to what the Bible says and as part of the larger story of the good news.

Second, how much one chooses to focus on Jesus' birth (assuming other teachings are rightly honored) is a matter of judgment. If Paul could allow "one person [to] esteem one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike" (Rom. 14:5), then it would seem there is room for us to allow people – and churches – latitude regarding Christmas.

Third, more secular people may be conscious of hearing the name "Christ" spoken in adoration this week than in all the next fifty-one. Consequently, some might for the first time begin to hear that they need to learn of him. Without ignoring what the Bible says and doesn't say about his birth, or violating conscience, we do well to ponder the opportunity this might present for the reign of God.

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