

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #50

Unwrapping Christmas

Kenny Kitzke

LawstSheep Ministries

Have you noticed the intensifying attack by non-believers in the Lord of the Sabbath against Christmas and especially against those Christians trying to put Jesus back into the holiday? I do not claim to be a prophet of God, but I do predict that the United States government holiday of Christmas observed on December 25 will eventually be declared unconstitutional. And, it could happen far sooner than anyone can imagine.

Perhaps a politically correct holiday will take its place? Something called “Winterfest” that is not “offensive” to anyone could become the new December 25 national holiday in America. Of course, for all those who celebrated Christmas for decades who were void of any connection to the birth of our Savior, they will miss nothing. They can still send Happy Holidays greetings cards which also wish their friends a Happy New Year!

They can still decorate their houses with evergreen trees, plants and wreaths. They can string colorful lights along their roofs and in, or around, their windows. They can decorate their front door with red foil and pinecones and put a flood light on it each night of the holiday season. Some may put up elaborate lawn displays with statues or blown-up plastic figures of Santa Claus, a reindeer, Frosty the Snowman or the Little Drummer Boy.

They can still have all their usual holiday parties with great food and plenty of beer, wine and whiskey to raise everyone’s spirit in the joy of the season. Perhaps the entire week between Winterfest Day and New Year’s Day will be a favorite time for family vacations, travel and continuous celebrations and joy-filled activities as winter ends like it once was done in Rome. Their thoughts can turn to the new year as they welcome the arrival of spring as the sun returns from its solstice to warm the earth a little bit more each day.

Christians won’t mind the change too much. They can still gather in Churches and homes to have their own celebrations on the Winterfest holiday related to their “old-fashioned” Christmas customs they related to the birth of Jesus. They’ll readily admit that Christmas had gradually become mostly a secular holiday anyway. Christmas just became overrun by commercialism missing the “true reason for the season.”

Christians may even acknowledge that their attempts to force Christmas into a national HOLY day just made them look foolish to a world full of “Christmas” revelers. Don’t forget, two out of three people in the world do not follow Jesus and regard His birth to a virgin as scientifically ludicrous.

In retrospect, some Christians will reluctantly admit that their own ways of celebrating Christmas led to its commercialization...and its demise. And, nothing did more to bring

that on than their own fixation and custom of present-giving and gift-exchanging.

When the department stores had their Christmas decorations up right after Thanksgiving, or even earlier, they never complained. It was a longer opportunity to show Christ to the world, or so they reasoned. It gave them more time to make and fill their own Christmas present lists for their dearest family and friends. And, the more presents under the Christmas tree, the merrier Christmas would be...or, so they hoped.

So, what did you get for Christmas last year? Can you remember all your gifts and who gave them to you? How important are they to you today? How long did the joy of opening those brightly wrapped Christmas presents last? Do you remember the run-up credit card bills that hurt your budget halfway into the new year? Have you forgotten the return lines for gifts that you can't believe anyone would buy you or think you would appreciate? Can you remember the parking hassles and the stampedes as the "On Sale" doors at stores were unlocked on December 26?

What does any of this gift buying, giving, exchanging and returning have to do with rejoicing over the birth of Jesus? One friend told me his answer. I give gifts to my children because God gave us the gift of His Son. Well, that sounds good; except that it is NOT consistent with the Bible. Jesus is NEVER referred to as a gift to mankind, or even to Christians. Salvation through belief in Christ's atoning death is the gift of God by grace to all men. And, the Holy Spirit of God is a gift that believers in Jesus as Savior receive.

How often have you heard the idea that "Peace on Earth" related to what His birth signifies? Well, again, it sounds good to the ears of babes in the word of God, but, it happens to contradict the very words of our Savior found in Mat. 10: 34:

Do not think that I came to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.

Are you surprised? Do you send Christmas cards saying "Peace on Earth" despite what Jesus said? Well, okay Kenny, perhaps Christmas is not the time to celebrate peace among all the nations of the world after all. But, I celebrate Christmas for the peace He brings to my family. I am sorry once again to spoil your misconception of another popular reason to gather the family on December 25 to rip open those Christmas presents in a frenzy of activity. In this very same chapter, in Mat. 10:35, we find that the true followers of the Lord of the Sabbath do not necessarily even generate peace within their families:

For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law and a man's enemies will be those of his own household.

It is a real stretch to think that the celebration of the birth of Jesus at Christmas somehow brings peace to the world, or even to families. A careful study of the Bible will show that

the peace that passes all understanding is ONLY for His true disciples; not for nations who reject Him or for families who do not understand His Father's will for worship.

Yes, Jesus is called the Prince of Peace. But the peace He will bring to the world is not until He returns as King to reign for 1,000 years. That is one reason that I rejoice in His birth during the LORD'S Feast of Tabernacles which pictures His millennial reign.

Another often cited reason for our highly materialistic gift-giving custom at Christmas is the precious gifts brought by the Magi for Jesus, the King of the Jews. How many Gentile Christians worship this new-born babe as "King of the Jews?" How many Christmas cradles contain a baby doll looking like a Caucasian with white skin, light brown hair, and perhaps even blue eyes without ever considering how He may have actually looked being of Semitic stock and of the Israelite tribe of Judah?

What Christian or Church will remove the Magi figurines from their manger scene acknowledging that they were not even there at His birth or brought or sent any gifts for Him on His subsequent birthdays? When they were led to the King of the Jews perhaps a year later (the number of three is added to scripture) they brought presents fit for a king, not toys for a child. And, unless scripture omitted it, the Magi neither exchanged gifts between themselves nor give gifts to their own children, family and friends.

Dear disciples of Jesus, if you can't help but buy and give a gift to someone to celebrate the birth of Jesus, how about putting Him first on your gift list? How about giving your Christmas gifts ONLY to Jesus instead of to each other? But, Brother Kenny, how can we give a gift to Jesus? He told you how. He said that what you give to the least of your brothers, you have given to Him. How about giving your gifts to your neighbors in need rather than to your own children who may already have far more mammon than they need?

When will we find a Church pastor who will cut through the rank religious traditions of Christmas and lead his flock in bringing ALL their charity, and the gifts they would otherwise give to one another, into the sanctuary so to be given to the needy? I believe that that local shepherd will please the Great Shepherd in this, as His sheep will be led on the path of righteousness to honor the babe born in a manger. By such deeds the disciples of Christ will bring glory to the Name that is above all names. And, perhaps this kind of charity will bring respect for Christians and Christ even from the most worldly people?

Now, regarding you Christian fathers. I challenge you to pray to the Father regarding what gift to give to your child for a Christmas present. I wonder what your child would say if instead of a material gift, you gave them the gift of your TIME. Time with your human father. Time to work together, time to play with one another, time to laugh with each other, time to cry on each others shoulders, time to learn about the purpose of life and WHY our Savior was born and why He is the Lord of the Sabbath. Surveys show that fathers today on average spend less than one minute a day with their children.

Christ loved the little children and had his disciples bring them to him. Should we

Christian fathers not do the same with our children rather than give them presents to occupy themselves as we watch a football game? I would hope we can give our children the gift of our time and much more often than once a year on Christmas.

Also, dad, how about teaching your child to set aside and save some of their allowance, secular gifts, or wages from chores each week, so that they can buy a truly special gift for a less fortunate child at Christmas? Can you imagine the joy in your child's eyes, and the pride in your heart, as your child brings their own precious gift of any size to the sanctuary of the Church for Jesus our King? What a Christian example we and our own children would set if the first question our children asked their friends on Christmas morning was, "What gift did you GIVE to Jesus this year?"

Now it may appear that I am suggesting stripping the celebration of Christmas of all its fun and meaning. How could you still be a Christian and not celebrate Christmas like in days of old? Well, you might be surprised how many sincere Christians and major Church denominations not only did NOT celebrate Christmas, they spoke adamantly AGAINST it. In fact, Christmas was banned in Boston! And, you may be even more surprised by how recently Christians in America got along just fine without ANY celebration of Christmas, or even celebrating the birth of Jesus!

Let's start with some historical facts. According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "In England, Christmas was forbidden by Act of Parliament in 1644." This makes it easier to understand why groups such as the Puritans when they landed in the "new world" of America also banned the celebration of Christmas in Boston. In 1659, the Puritan colony in Massachusetts passed a law that anyone 'found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing labor, feasting, or in any other way, shall be fined five shillings.' Many early Americans who refused to work on Christmas either went to jail or paid fines."

With such historical evidence, it is much easier to understand why the founding fathers of America were adamant to not have a "Church of America" established similar to the Church of England which could dictate religious beliefs and practices. They made that clear in the Constitution of the United States while also prohibiting the government from restricting the free exercise of religion by its citizens.

But, within the church of God, the idea of celebrating Christmas as the birth of Christ was soundly criticized and rejected by major Christian denomination leaders and renowned preachers for over a hundred years AFTER the birthday of the United States at the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. As related on December 19, 1993, on page 4 of Rick Meisel's *The Origins of Christmas*, it is noted that, "A broad element of English Christianity still considered Christmas celebration a pagan blasphemy. The Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Calvinists and other denominations brought this opposition to early New England and strong opposition to the holiday lasted in America until the middle of the 18th century."

Key proponents from the Protestant Reformation did not think much of the celebration of

Christmas as a holy day on December 25. Listen to what Charles Spurgeon, the renowned Baptist Preacher and Calvinist from England said on December 24, 1871:

"We have no superstitious regard for times and seasons. Certainly we do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas. First because we do not believe in any mass at all, but abhor it, whether it be sung in Latin or in English: Secondly, because we find no scriptural warrant whatever for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior; and consequently, its observance is a superstition, because not of divine authority. Superstition has fixed most positively the day of our Savior's birth, although there is no possibility of discovering when it occurred. It was not till the middle of the third century that any part of the Church celebrated the birth of our Lord; and it was not till long after the western Church had set the example, that the eastern adopted it. Because the day is not known. Probably the fact is that the "holy" days were arranged to fit in with the heathen festivals. We venture to assert that if there be any day in the year of which we may be pretty sure that it was not the day on which our Savior was born it is the 25th of December. Regarding not the day, let us give God thanks for the gift of His dear Son.

How absurd to think we could do it in the spirit of the world, with a Jack Frost clown, a deceptive worldly Santa Claus, and a mixed program of sacred truth with fun, deception and fiction. If it be possible to honor Christ in the giving of gifts, I cannot see how while the gift, giver, and recipient are all in the spirit of the world. The Catholics and high Church Episcopalians may have their Christmas one day in 365 but we have a Christ gift the entire year. Upright men strove to stem the tide, but in spite of all their efforts, the apostasy went on till the Church, with the exception of a small remnant was submerged under pagan superstition. That Christmas is a pagan festival is beyond all doubt. The time of the year, and the ceremonies with which it is celebrated, prove its origin". ... "Those who follow the custom of observing Christmas, follow not the Bible, but pagan ceremonies."

Just as shocking to me was the discovery of how recently the Presbyterian Church refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of celebrating Christmas. Opposition to ecclesiastical holidays remained in American Presbyterianism through the latter half of the nineteenth century. Speaking of the South after the Civil War, one historian notes: There was, however, no recognition of either Christmas or Easter in any of the Protestant churches, except the Episcopal and Lutheran.

For a full generation after the Civil War the religious journals of the South mentioned Christmas only to observe that there was no reason to believe that Jesus was actually born on December 25; it was not recognized as a day of any religious significance in the Presbyterian Church. "If the exact date were known, or if some day (as December 25) had been agreed upon by common consent in the absence of any certain knowledge, we would still object to the observance of Christmas as a holy day. We object for many reasons, but at present mention only this one - that experience has shown that the institution of holy days by human authority, however pure the intention, has invariably led to the disregard of the Holy day - the Sabbath - instituted by God." Such was the

understanding of Ernest Trice Thompson as cited in the Southern Presbyterian (December 22, 1870; January 3, 1884). Now, isn't that what we see happening every day on our televisions?

Even as late as 1899, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Churches declared, "There is no warrant in Scripture for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holydays, rather the contrary (see Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed faith, conducive to will-worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ." This is Cited in Morton H. Smith, *How is the Gold Become Dim* (Jackson, Mississippi: Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, etc., 1973), p. 98.

I cite all these things so that we can cut through all the traditions and customs concerning a December 25 celebration of the birth of Christ. It is not some new revelation that has come to old Brother Kenny to unwrap Christmas. So if the message hurts a bit, please don't shoot the messenger.

There are two considerations that every follower of Jesus as Savior and Lord must make personally as they grow in both His grace and knowledge. One is whether to celebrate His birth at all? Does it bring glory to God? I think so. The second consideration is how and when to celebrate His birth.

Don't you owe it to yourself, and to your family, to give an honest answer as to why you celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25 recognizing that it is not identified or commanded in Scripture? So, let's try to grow in our knowledge, understanding and wisdom. These are all gifts of the Holy Spirit given to various disciples of Jesus.

According to The World Book Encyclopedia, Pope Liberius of Rome, in 354 A.D., ordered December 25th observed from that time forward as the birthday of Christ, and chose the date "because the people of Rome already observed it as the Feast of Saturn, celebrating the birthday of the Sun."

This is backed up in the Encyclopedia Britannica, which you can study yourself, like a noble Berean, by going to www.Britannica.com and check out "Christmas." The most probable reason Christmas came to be celebrated on December 25 is that early Christians wished the date to coincide with the pagan Roman festival marking the "birthday of the unconquered sun" (natales solis invicti); this festival celebrated the winter solstice, when the days again begin to lengthen and the sun begins to climb higher in the sky.

The traditional customs connected with Christmas have accordingly developed from several sources as a result of the coincidence of the celebration of the birth of Christ with the pagan agricultural and solar observances at midwinter. In the Roman world the Saturnalia celebration (starting December 17) was a time of merrymaking and exchange of gifts. December 25 was also regarded as the birth date of the Iranian mystery god Mithra, the Sun of Righteousness.

On the Roman New Year (January 1), houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites when the Teutonic tribes penetrated into Gaul, Britain, and central Europe. Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir trees, and gifts and greetings all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life, have always been associated with the winter festival, both pagan and Christian. Since the European Middle Ages, evergreens, as symbols of survival, have been associated with Christmas. Christmas is traditionally regarded as the festival of the family and of children, under the name of whose patron, Saint Nicholas, or Santa Claus, presents are exchanged in many countries.

One of the best-known festivals of ancient Rome was the Saturnalia, a winter festival celebrated on December 17-24. Because it was a time of wild merrymaking and domestic celebrations, businesses, schools, and law courts were closed so that the public could feast, dance, gamble, and generally enjoy itself to the fullest. December 25--the birthday of Mithra, the Iranian god of light, and a day devoted to the invincible sun, as well as the day after the Saturnalia--was adopted by the church as Christmas, the nativity of Christ, to counteract the effects of these festivals.

Further, from The Christmas Almanac, written by Gerard and Patricia Del Re, "Saturnalia and the kalends were the celebrations most familiar to early Christians, December 17-24 and January 1-3, but the tradition of celebrating December 25 as Christ's birthday came to the Romans from Persia. Mithra, the Persian god of light and sacred contracts, was born out of a rock on December 25. Rome was famous for its flirtations with strange gods and cults, and in the third century [274AD] the unchristian emperor Aurelian established the festival of Dies Invicti Solis, the Day of the Invincible Sun, on December 25.

Mithra was an embodiment of the sun, so this period of its rebirth was a major day in Mithraism, which had become Rome's latest official religion with the patronage of Aurelian. It is believed that the emperor Constantine adhered to Mithraism up to the time of his conversion to Christianity. He was probably instrumental in seeing that the major feast of his old religion was carried over to his new faith."

Perhaps that history, and all the traditions of men adopted since then for celebrating Christmas on December 25, does not bother you? But, it troubled my heart enough to look for the truth about our Savior's birth from the word of God. The real circumstances of His birth are so different than our celebrations. Something surely seems amiss.

I like the more realistic picture of this blessed and holy night in the song, The Star, that Kathy Mattea sings in her CD titled, "Good News." I believe it honors God and His only begotten Son. It helps us focus our celebrations on the homeless and downtrodden families living among us today.

Just another homeless family
Hoping for a stranger's charity
Just one night in one safe place to stay

Underneath the star so far away.

She carried everything they had and more
The little one the world was waiting for
And somewhere in the night her child was born
Into every heart so tired and torn.

Bridge:

And the light shining from that star
Will show you who you are
And His light shining with its might
Will lead you through your darkest night.

They couldn't find a room for Him back then
But He found a place in the hearts of men
The hope that all would come to know
Born beneath the star so long ago.

Repeat Bridge

Repeat First Verse

This is Brother Kenny praying that this Savior, born of a virgin, has found a place in your heart as Lord of the Sabbath.