

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #51

The Truth about Our Savior's Birth

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As each Gregorian calendar year comes to an end we are overwhelmed by the holidays of Christmas and New Year. These holidays touch the entire secular world; not just Christians. The past several Sabbaths I have been discussing the many myths and falsehoods within the current celebration of Christmas as a "holy day" by Christians and Churches which purport to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world, Jesus, the Christ.

I have tried to explain why I no longer look forward to celebrating Christmas as December 25 rolls around. Can Christians bring glory to God by combining His Truth about the miraculous birth of His only Son with intentionally told lies and celebrations full of pagan customs? I don't think so; regardless of how good our intentions might seem. I think the people of God can and should do better than that by following the word of God, every jot and tittle.

I am not aware of any Bible scholar who seriously claims that Jesus was born on December 25. Not even the Emperor of Rome, or the Church of Rome, who originated it claimed that. It is an acknowledged lie. Should Christians be promoting a lie and making a "holy" day out of that lie because of some man-made decrees and traditions? What has become of the truth in the church of God? His word is TRUTH, not man's notions!

How can we as Christ's disciples personally be sure that Jesus was not born on December 25? We go to the Bible and read the account in Luke 2: 8:

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

No one knowledgeable of the climate in the land of Israel, and specifically in the little town of Bethlehem, would expect to find a shepherd living in the field and watching his flock at night in the winter in what we now call the month of December. Why? There are no green pastures outside of Bethlehem in winter for sheep and goats to graze. Shepherds at the time of Christ, and even still today, typically bring their flocks from the field into sheltered pens in October or, at the latest, in early November where they can be fed.

One example of Church reasoning for a celebration of the birth of our Savior in winter is that since no month or day is given explicitly in scripture, December 25 is simply a date selected to celebrate His birth. So, what's the big deal if it's wrong and off a few days or months? The big deal is that if God wanted us to celebrate this event as a holy day, the date WOULD be given explicitly as they were for the seven true holy days of the LORD. If God did not want His people to celebrate the birth of Jesus at all, it only adds insult to

injury to hold that celebration on a day which everyone agrees is wrong!

It is more ironic how many Bible teachers and Christians will proudly admit that they know Christ was NOT born on December 25, but they can offer no clue on when He was born. I can. I am certain about the month and pretty sure even of the day. Of course, it is a month on God's calendar, not on Pope Gregory's calendar.

To discover that month takes some in depth Bible study: the kind that God expects of His people. We need a double bank shot. First, we need to recognize a link between the birth of John the Baptist and his cousin Jesus. Second, we need to glean when John was conceived or born. And, no exact month and day is directly given for his birth either.

Let's start with a clear indication from scripture of when Jesus was conceived. We find that in Luke 1: 26-28:

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!"

Now, to what calendar month is this "sixth month" referring to when the angel Gabriel informed the betrothed Mary of her pending conception? It is clear from Luke 1: 35-38 as Gabriel answers a number of Mary's questions:

And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now, indeed, Elizabeth your relative also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible."

Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Now, we can see that the "sixth month" corresponding to the time when Jesus was conceived in Mary's womb by the Holy Spirit was NOT the sixth month of the yearly calendar, but the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. Occasionally, you will hear a claim that Jesus was born in the spring of the year rather than in the winter. This error originates in thinking the conception of Jesus was in the sixth month of the sacred calendar year, sometime in the early fall of the year resulting in a spring birth.

However, if we can find in scripture a basis for when John the Baptist was conceived, or born, we can determine what calendar month corresponded to the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. With that month identified, we can estimate the month of not only the conception of Jesus, but His birth month as well! Are you ready for true good news?

Here is where a detailed Biblical study is needed to find out in just what calendar month John the Baptist was conceived. The critical clue to this Bible puzzle is found in Luke 1: 21-25 referring to the time that Elizabeth's husband, Zacharias, a priest of the Lord, had completed his service in the Temple:

So it was, as soon as the days of his service were completed, that he departed to his own house. Now after those days his wife Elizabeth conceived; she hid herself five months, saying, "Thus the Lord has dealt with me, in the days when He looked on me, to take away my reproach among the people."

To continue to unravel the mystery of what month Elizabeth conceived John, we must discover the time when Zacharias' service in the Temple was completed. This is found in Luke 1: 5:

There was in the days of Herod, the kind of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

You could study the Bible in detail, and often, and miss the significance of this clue to the month that Jesus was born. The key is to know that Zacharias was of the priestly division of Abijah. We have to go all the way back to the days of King David to find out how the divisions of the Levitical priests for service at the Temple were determined.

King David, on God's instructions (1 Chr 28:11-13), had divided the sons of Aaron into 24 groups or divisions (1 Chr 24:1-4), to setup a schedule by which the Temple of the Lord could be staffed with priests all year round in an orderly manner. While all the priests would serve at the Temple during the three annual pilgrim Feasts of the LORD, the service between those feasts would rotate among the 24 divisions named by King David for the sons of Aaron. Each one of the 24 "courses" of priests would begin and end their service in the Temple on the Sabbath, a course of duty being for one week.

Without going into the details of the Temple service for Zacharias, it can be determined that his service would have been completed on the third Sabbath of the month of Sivan. Upon his return home, scripture makes it clear that his wife Elizabeth conceived John the Baptist in the later part of the month of Sivan. Therefore, the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy would be late in the ninth month of the yearly calendar; the month of Kislev.

If Jesus was conceived in the month of Kislev, He would be born full term approximately 40-weeks later, late in the month of Tishri. If you are not familiar with the Biblical calendar, the month of Tishri corresponds to the fall season of the sacred agricultural year in the months of September or October on our modern Gregorian calendar.

The month of Tishri, the seventh month of God's sacred calendar, is also the time of the LORD'S Feast of Tabernacles after the fruit harvest. If you wanted to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I can't think of a better time of the year to do so. The fall is already a holy and

joyful feast time of the LORD! It is when I rejoice in the birth of our Savior.

Christian friends will sometimes express sorrow for me that I no longer observe the Christmas holiday as though I am missing out on a great Christian holy day. The truth is that I rejoice in the birth of the Savior during an eight-day, commanded, holy feast of the LORD. We eat and drink and rejoice not for only one day a year, but for eight days!

We not only buy gifts for our children, we take the children out of school for eight days of worship...and, they love that gift a lot! We travel like a pilgrim away from home to a lovely venue in God's glorious creation for what you may consider an extraordinary, or even exotic, vacation. While my Pennsylvania Christian friends are trying to enjoy celebrating Christmas in a frigid snowstorm, I am celebrating the birth of our Savior for eight days in September in Hawaii, Bermuda or at a luxurious resort at a Florida beach or at a beautiful Colorado ski resort experiencing a Rocky Mountain high all week!

In addition, I have no bills or charge cards to pay off when I return from celebrating the birth of our Savior. I save up a tithe of my increase all year to enjoy this one holy week. I celebrate according to my blessings, sometimes on a first-class flight to England, and other times on a drive in the family car to the nearest city placing God's name at a feast site. Wherever I go, I provide treats to the less fortunate brethren, whether it is buying them a meal or taking them to an entertainment site. Usually the entire feast assembly takes up a free-will offering for a food bank or some other local Christian charity.

Without trying to prove it to you in this program, I can confirm that it is very possible that Jesus was conceived on or about December 25, but was born on Tishri 15, the first holy day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Besides playing with dates and gestation times to get a specific day for the birth of Christ, there are several other credible reasons from scripture to support the idea that Jesus was born on Tishri 15.

One is the obvious link of Jesus coming to tabernacle with men during the Feast of Tabernacles. Consider the words of the Apostle John in Chapter 1, Verse 14:

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

The word in the Hebrew for dwelt is *succah* and the name of the Feast of Tabernacles in Hebrew is Sukkot, a festival of rejoicing and celebration in temporary dwellings before the LORD. Would God want us to rejoice about the birth of His Son at the very time He commanded His people to come and rejoice before Him? It seems obvious to me once I grew in the knowledge of these things, and of Him.

Dear disciples of Jesus, please consider the precious prophecy of Isaiah concerning the birth of the Son of God in Isa. 7: 14:

Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Immanuel means "God with us". The Son of God would indeed come to dwell with, or *tabernacle* on earth with, His people. One of my favorite songs for celebrating the birth of our Savior is titled "Immanuel" as sung by Kathy Mattea in her album *Good News*:

Chorus:

Emmanuel, Emmanuel
A child is born
A child is born
Sing glory unto God on high
Joy to all the world this night
And to all people, peace
And to all people, peace

Remember Him, o little star
Remember Him and shine
Around the world
In every heart
On this holy night
Lead us to His light.

Repeat Chorus

Remember Him, the angels sing
And do not be afraid
Into this world
Good news we bring
Love has overcome
Behold a Son

Repeat Chorus and Fade

The good news was not about a baby being born in a manger, or about instituting a birthday party, it was about the Son of God, our Emmanuel, God Himself, coming to tabernacle with man for a short time. I rejoice in that fact during the Feast of Tabernacles.

A friend Dewey, who enjoys this Lord of the Sabbath series, asked me if I celebrate Chanukah, the Jewish Feast of Dedication. I assume he wonders why I would keep the Feasts of the LORD which Jesus kept, but not keep Chanukah which apparently Jesus experienced as we read in John 10: 22:

Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch.

Is this equivalent to saying that Jesus kept or observed this feast and included this verse

so that all of His disciples would know to do the same? I have not been led by the Holy Spirit to conclude this. That this feast celebrated an important event in the history of Israel, including specifically the use of the Temple of God, is undeniable. To conclude from this verse that Jesus kept this feast in a way equivalent to the commanded Feast of Unleavened Bread seems to be quite a stretch.

We are told that Jesus “walked” in Solomon’s porch. Nothing is said about Him worshipping in the Temple because of this Jewish feast. Further, Solomon’s porch is a gentile area of the Temple where worship is not even conducted. If Jesus went into the Temple for worship, He would go into the areas reserved for the Israelites. Since it was winter, it would be reasonable to assume that while in Jerusalem, perhaps Jesus simply went into this covered area of the temple for protection from the weather.

If Chanukah was to be a true holy day for the people of God in all generations, you would surely think that we would have other examples of Jesus, His hand-picked apostles, or His disciples observing this day say at a synagogue in Corinth. We do not find any other confirmation that this was a day set aside as holy even for Israel and Judaism, much less for the disciples of Christ. Like Christmas, it is not clear that Chanukah is holy time.

Further, we have Jesus informing the Samaritan woman at the well that a time was near when the true worshippers would not worship in Jerusalem at all. No physical temple would be needed for true worship in the future. So, I find that while keeping an historic celebration highly associated with the Temple, Israel and Judaism may be worthwhile, it is certainly NOT required as worship before God by the disciples of Christ.

One fascinating aspect of Chanukah is that it is celebrated on Kislev 25 sharing not only a number with Christmas, but also possibly being the day that Christ was conceived. Plus, the focus on the light that burned on the menorah could be associated with Jesus as the “light of the world.” Can this all be coincidence? Perhaps not. Right now, however, I feel no need to keep this festival of Judaism. But, I certainly am neither dogmatic about my belief nor opposed to its celebration, especially by Israelite Christians.

Now, a second reason for associating the birth of our Savior with the Feast of Tabernacles is that the feast concludes with an Eighth Day, which is commanded as holy by God and occurs on Tishri 22. Isn’t it amazing that Jesus was circumcised on the eighth day? Was that a new beginning for Jesus as He complied with the Torah as a child of Abraham?

And, finally, during the Feast of Tabernacles, all Israelites were commanded to come to Jerusalem with their families. This explains why there was no room at the inn in Bethlehem which is only about five miles from Jerusalem. Every room for miles around Jerusalem would have been already taken by pilgrims, so all that Mary and Joseph could find for shelter was a stable. It would seem unlikely that since Bethlehem was always a tiny town, that families returning for the Roman Empire census would fill it to capacity.

So, the real problem facing the disciples of Jesus is NOT in putting His birth into a winter

holiday as a “reason for the season,” it is putting His actual birth in the right season!

My time is running out. I hope you have gained some understanding of the many reasons that celebrating Christmas as a holy day no longer makes sense to me. I am not opposed to celebrating the birth of our Savior during the Feast of Tabernacles. I recommend it as a way to praise and worship God. I also have shared some different approaches to the celebration that leaves out all the secular aspects of the world’s observance of Christmas such as Santa Claus, Christmas trees, decorations and gift-giving to friends and family.

I have urged pastors to grow in their knowledge of the LORD’S holy days and the ways that God seeks worshippers. How long before these shepherds will discard the holidays invented by men and celebrated in ways devised by pagan cultures related to false gods and the natural progression of seasons? I have urged fathers to teach their children to GIVE gifts to less fortunate children whom they should love as Christians (but typically ignore) rather than expect to GET a bevy of gifts from those who already love them.

You probably know there are professing Christians and teachers who no longer believe that this babe born in a manger to a virgin by the Holy Spirit was the divine Immanuel. These men will be happy to celebrate “Christmas” with you. But, they won’t with me.

There is another song I enjoy during the Feast of Tabernacles. It is all about the truth of this miraculous birth of the promised Messiah of Israel, the future King of kings. It is about a new kid who came to tabernacle with us and show us a new way to live and to worship God. It is titled “There’s a new kid in town” and is also sung by Kathy Mattea:

We’re looking for the King
The new Messiah
We’re following the star
Shining brighter
Old man won’t you help us if you can
He shook his head but he pointed his hand

Chorus:
There’s a new kid in town
And he’s lying in a manger down the road
There’s a new kid in town
But He’s just another baby I suppose
Heaven knows
There’s a new kid in town
Here in Bethlehem

I see you traveled far
Bearing treasures
You say these gifts are for
The new King’s pleasures
I’ve heard that a King might come

But up 'til now there hasn't been one.

Repeat Chorus Twice.

My friends in Christ, Jesus came in the flesh as God, a long-awaited new kid in town. He is God's only begotten Son, the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world who came to tabernacle with us for a short time. He is the Lord of the Sabbath, and was probably born on the high Sabbath during the fall Feast of the LORD. It fits like a glove. December 25 does not. Rejoice in this good news. Halleluyah!