

Lord of the Sabbath

Program #49

Myths About Christmas

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Last week I asked the question, “What would happen if Santa Never Comes?” I contend that the world would be a better place if we never heard of him ever again! Why? Because Santa Claus is a myth. A myth is something made up. He is not real. He does not exist. It is not true that if a child makes a Christmas list, gives it to Santa while sitting on his lap at a shopping mall, and is nice instead of naughty, that Santa will bring a bag full of presents from the list down the chimney.

Quite frankly, Santa Claus is one BIG lie. Oh, it is just a little white lie, Kenny. Look at all the joy it brings to the children! What can it hurt? How about asking a child in a poor family? Let them tell you how joyful they are when their richer friends or schoolmates tell them about the X-Box, camera cell phone or designer tennis shoes they received while the poor kid recalls the socks or jacket they found under their artificial, table Christmas tree.

If you profess to be a Christian father who even mentions Santa to your children, I would like you to give me a call. I will want to know if you are ever disappointed about the “commercialization” of Christmas? Have you bemoaned that Jesus has been removed as the “reason for the season?” And, be prepared to tell me exactly how telling this “Santa” lie has taught your child anything about the birth of our Savior, Jesus the Christ.

When I was a boy and kept the holiday called Christmas, I waited for Santa and his reindeer to come to my house. I left cookies and milk out for him as a treat if he was hungry after all that gift delivery work. I was so excited as I laid down in my bed that I could hardly sleep Christmas eve. But, sure enough, on Christmas morning, rubbing my sleepy eyes, I noticed the cookies were all gone! With great anticipation I ran to the sunroom where the Christmas tree stood. And, under it were presents wrapped in colorful paper and bows. Some must be for Kenny. Boy, there WAS joy at that moment!

All the presents had tags on them that Santa must have put there so we would know which one was meant for whom. Some said, “For Robert,” my older brother, and a few were for my Mom and Dad too. Strangely, some said “To Kenny, From Uncle Tony,” my “godfather.” There were even some for my parents from neighbors and family. I wondered how all those presents got there under OUR tree? Did Santa pick them up when he went to Uncle Tony’s house and to our neighbor’s houses and then bring them to our house? I guess if Federal Express can do it, so could Santa Claus!

But, why worry about such details? The thrill was in opening the presents to see what Santa had brought me. Sometimes he seemed to bring me things that Mom thought I needed, like winter gloves, instead of the toys and games on my Christmas list. But, it seemed that Santa always brought me something he saw on my list. He must be real!

Later that morning we would go for Christmas mass. We'd have to get there early or you could not find a parking place. The Church would be so full Christmas morning that all the pews were filled and the ushers would have latecomers stand in the back or in a side aisle for almost an hour of a spectacular Christmas pageant.

There was lovely music, hymns and carols, beautiful decorations of evergreens and poinsettias. And, of course, there was a creche, a manger scene with a flood light shining right on a baby Jesus in a cradle with the wise men standing by in wonder along with Joseph and Mary. Christmas was truly special, it was not like that any other day of the year, including any Sunday. As a child, it all looked pretty fine and memorable.

By the afternoon, I usually meandered down to my neighborhood friend's house, throwing a few snowballs at trees along the way. Roger was an only son. His father had a better job than my dad. His mother worked part-time while mine worked full-time. Their house was nicer than ours. It had a finished game room in the basement where we could play ping-pong, dart-ball and many other games. We had a musty cellar with a coal furnace. Roger had his own bedroom full of neat things. I shared a plain bedroom with Robert.

With great anticipation I would run down the snow covered street to the back door of Roger's house. I would yell, "Oh, Roger!" I guess this was just what kids did in the 1950's. Ah, life without cell phones. It worked pretty well in the summer when the windows were open. None of us had air conditioning in our homes back then.

There was a doorbell, but I seldom rang it. If I did, Roger's father might come to open the door thinking it was someone special. He seemed disturbed once to have been taken away from whatever he was doing, like watching the Milwaukee Braves baseball team on TV, or even just reading the paper. He seemed disgruntled to find out it was just Kenny for Roger. So, it was better to yell rather than to ring the doorbell.

When Roger finally opened the storm door, his face beaming with excitement, the first question on Christmas morning was etched in stone. I can't recall ever saying anything else except, "Hi, Roger, what did you GET for Christmas?" And, wow, he always got plenty of really exciting stuff that my parents either never thought about, or more probably, never had the spare money to buy.

I remember when Roger showed me his fabulous new Lionel train engine or automated cars; like a barrel loading car. I had a train set too, but it was half the size. I felt happy to have one, smoke-pellet burning steam locomotive. Roger had switch engines and a Santa-Fe, diesel-powered, passenger train with a really neat horn instead of a steam whistle.

What really startled me one Christmas was when Roger got his very own 35mm camera. His dad was into photography and had wonderful equipment with a dark-room in the basement. All we had was an old Kodak box camera. My mom used it occasionally. I

don't think my father ever took a picture. He had no hobby. He did not play golf like Roger's dad. My father was mostly consumed by work to earn a living for his family. And, he spent the nights at our basement workbench fixing things for the house, and for neighbors, friends and family. He had little time to spend with me.

I do remember him making a few things in his workshop for me for Christmas. One was a big square wooden board game with drilled holes that you could play a game like "Sorry" on but by using dice and marbles. It was home-made but I liked that. Once he made a small banjo-type instrument, but it did not play very well and it did not have any frets on the neck. It was probably his most ambitious gift project for me ever. Roger had a professional Oboe and lessons and played in Church Christmas musicals and eventually the school band and orchestra in high school.

Roger's parents were both German and attended a Lutheran Church. They were quite strict with Roger compared to my Polish Roman Catholic parents. I remember seeing a Bible on their living room coffee table. We were not allowed to play in that living room but I walked through it a couple of times when my coat was put in the front door foyer closet. We had no Bible in my house. We did have a Christmas tree though.

I confess there were times I wished that Roger's parents were my parents. Christmas was always one of those times because of the nicer gifts Roger received. I always felt that they thought they were better than our family: including race, wealth, education and religion. It was not until years later that I realized how Lutherans, through the reformation and advent of Protestantism, had established religious divisions wide enough that even Christmas did not close the gaps. In fact, early Protestant Church teachings were against Christmas as a Roman Church holiday. In some ways, religious gaps became larger at Christmas time.

I pray that my experience with celebrating Christmas is abnormal. Perhaps few other Christian children's first question to their closest friend on Christmas Day is "What did you GET for Christmas?" But, if it is, if even half our Christian children behave this way, I hope every minister and father listening will seriously consider changing what they say, perceive and do about celebrating Christmas.

First, how about quitting telling lies to our children? Christians do value truth don't they? Getting Santa Claus out of Christian homes and families should be easy. Just be truthful about him being only a myth and something those who see Christmas as mainly a work holiday like to promote. And, unless you are just celebrating the winter season, perhaps a number of other popular Christmas symbols which have nothing to do with the birth of Jesus ought to head for Christian family dumpsters. How about Frosty the Snowman, sleigh bells, reindeers, decorated and lighted evergreen or artificial metal trees, Christmas cards that say Happy Holidays, and most of all, the EXCHANGE of Christmas presents?

And, while we shed these symbols unrelated to the birth of Christ, how about us Christians coming completely clean on the truth concerning that holy and blessed Biblical

event. There were no wise men or kings from the East at the manger who brought gifts to be presented to the newly-born, King of the Jews. They came later when Jesus was a child.

Similarly, there was no bright star shining over Bethlehem that night. Whatever the light in the sky was that the kings of the East followed, it brought them to Jerusalem long after the birth of Jesus. And, to be accurate, NEVER again refer to December 25 as the birthday of Jesus. The day is not revealed in scripture. It is pure fiction. What can be said truthfully is that most Churches celebrate the birth of Jesus on December 25.

And, in all honesty, Christmas is a holiday; NOT a holy day. God sanctifies days as holy and set apart to Him. God never sanctified the birth day of His Son as a holy time to be remembered or observed by all generations of Christians. God certainly NEVER sanctified December 25 as one of His holy days. Remember, Christmas is a creation of man. It was created as a holiday in the fourth century AD by the Roman Empire and the Church of Rome. It may be a wonderful idea to celebrate Christmas as a holiday, but to not realize who or what you are following, would that be considered noble or sacred?

We have an example in Acts 17 set by the Apostle Paul when teaching about Christ. In Thessalonica, Paul went into the synagogue to teach the Jews about Christ; that He had to suffer and rise from the dead. Notice that Paul does not mention teaching them about the birth of Christ from the Scriptures. We find that due to Paul's teaching in Thessalonica about Christ, some Jews, and many devout Greeks, joined Paul. But other Jews were not persuaded. They instigated a mob and attacked the house of Jason hoping to find Paul and bring him before the rulers of the city and accuse him of proclaiming Jesus as a king and acting contrary to the decrees of Caesar.

In comparison, Paul enters Berea and visit's its synagogue. He finds these Jews, and their reception of him and his teaching, quite different as we learn in Acts 17: 11-12:

These were more fair-minded (literally noble) than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few Greeks, prominent women as well as men.

Whether it is the Apostle Paul of the church of God, or some Pope of the Church of Rome, who comes to teach about Jesus as the Christ, it was noble to receive their words and then compare them daily to the Scriptures to find out if they were so, and true. The Scriptures Paul refers to can only mean the Old Testament whether available in Hebrew at the synagogue or in the Septuagint Greek translation which Paul probably possessed.

I can only conclude that God would consider us to be more fair-minded and noble if we carefully compared what Popes and other Church leaders teach about the birth of Christ to what the Old Testament scriptures reveal. Then, we can confidently weigh any additional New Testament teachings from the Apostles and disciples about the birth of Jesus. Of course, if we did, we would not find the celebration of Christmas on December

25 to be anything God or Christ or the Apostles ever intended be done to honor God.

What we can talk about truthfully and celebrate is the virgin birth by Mary of Jesus who was God in the flesh, incarnate, conceived of the Holy Spirit of God and not of man. He was sent to us as the anointed Savior who would die, be raised from the dead and will return as our King, the King of kings over all the earth before which every knee shall bow!

I would like to play for you a favorite song about the birth of Jesus titled *Mary, did you know?* written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Green and sung by Kathy Mattea:

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Would someday walk on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy
Would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has come to make you new?
This child that you delivered
Will soon deliver you.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Will give sight to a blind man?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Will calm a storm with His hand?
Did you know that your baby boy
Has walked where angels trod?
When you kissed your little baby
Then you kissed the face of God.

Mary, did you know...?
Mary, did you know...?
The blind will see, the deaf will hear
The dead will live again.
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak
The praises of the Lamb.

Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Is Lord of all creation?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy
Will one day rule the nations?
Did you know that your baby boy
Was heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding
Is the great "I AM."

What a beautiful anthem about what this baby wrapped in swaddling clothes would one

day do in His earthly ministry as the Son of Man and what He would later do in the Kingdom of God as only begotten Son of God.

Back to some other myths of Christmas-keeping that could be eliminated by Christians. I mentioned the elimination of putting up a Christmas tree or decorating it and your house with colored lights. Surely there is no one alive who thinks this activity has anything to do with the birth of Jesus? There were no evergreen trees in the stable and certainly no electric colored lights strung around the stable doorway.

So from where do such practices come? The truth should actually be embarrassing to a disciple of Christ. We can't find "Christmas" trees used in the Bible, so we have to turn to secular sources. This is what is written in the Encyclopedia Britannica about the custom of bringing an evergreen tree into your home and decorating it:

"A Christmas tree is an evergreen, usually a balsam or douglas fir, decorated with lights and ornaments as a part of Christmas festivities. The use of evergreen trees, wreaths, and garlands as a symbol of eternal life was an ancient custom of the Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews.

Tree worship, common among the pagan Europeans, survived after their conversion to Christianity in the Scandinavian customs of decorating the house and barn with evergreens at the New Year to scare away the devil and of setting up a tree for the birds during Christmastime; it survived further in the custom, also observed in Germany, of placing a Yule tree at an entrance or inside the house in the midwinter holidays.

The modern Christmas tree, though, originated in western Germany. The main prop of a popular medieval play about Adam and Eve was a fir tree hung with apples (paradise tree) representing the Garden of Eden. The Germans set up a paradise tree in their homes on December 24, the religious feast day of Adam and Eve. They hung wafers on it (symbolizing the host, the Christian sign of redemption); in a later tradition, the wafers were replaced by cookies of various shapes. Candles, too, were often added as the symbol of Christ.

In the same room, during the Christmas season, was the Christmas pyramid, a triangular construction of wood, with shelves to hold Christmas figurines, decorated with evergreens, candles, and a star. By the 16th century, the Christmas pyramid and paradise tree had merged, becoming the Christmas tree.

The custom was widespread among the German Lutherans by the 18th century, but it was not until the following century that the Christmas tree became a deep-rooted German tradition. Introduced into England in the early 19th century, the Christmas tree was popularized in the mid-19th century by the German Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria. The Victorian tree was decorated with candles, candies, and fancy cakes hung from the branches by ribbon and by paper chains. Brought to North America by German settlers as early as the 17th century, Christmas trees were the height of fashion by the 19th century. They were also popular in Austria, Switzerland, Poland, and The

Netherlands.”

So, there you have it. That is how most customs and traditions develop as being fashionable. They are handed down from generation to generation. After many centuries, the original reasons are forgotten. New ideas and customs continue to develop.

Knowing the truth, it is difficult to look at the modern custom of bringing a Christmas tree into your house or church and decorating it in the same way. It is not about the birth of Christ at all. Can you imagine all the money spent on cut or artificial Christmas trees each year plus the cost of all their lights and fancy ornaments? I don't know what the annual tab is, but I suspect the commercial retail stores know very well. It is big business. No wonder Christians want these merchants, Christian or not, to continue to wish these holiday buyers a "Merry Christmas!"

I doubt that the tradition of the Christmas tree can possibly change in America any time soon. It is so embedded in our traditions. Can you imagine a church or rural community not having one? Can you envision a year when a Christmas tree is not lit up on the lawn of the White House by the President of the United States? However, the way the courts of America are ruling on removing symbols of God, Jesus, or Christmas from any public agency building or property, I suppose it could happen sooner than we think.

Can you imagine the fury in the nightly news if Christians decided to NOT have any more Christmas trees at their houses? The reason you could tell who the Christians were down the street was by their unlit and dark houses on Christmas eve. Why? They would be at their Church celebrating the birth of our Savior instead of lighting up trees. Houses all aglow with Christmas trees and colored light displays of Santa Claus and Snowmen would be only those celebrating the official holiday who were NOT Christians, just the partiers

At Church, the greatest story ever told could be read from Scripture. We could learn about the genealogy of Jesus as a son of David and a son of Abraham. We could see how it was all God's marvelous plan from the beginning to send us a "human" Savior, the Son of Man as He called Himself. Just think of the wonder of the following from Mat. 1: 17:

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations, from David until the captivity in Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the captivity in Babylon until the Christ are fourteen generations.

Now, tell me, when have you heard that scripture read or expounded on during one of your Christmas Church services? God put it there for a reason. Perhaps the precise plan of salvation that God is working out through His Son is way more important than having a birthday party celebration? Perhaps knowing Christ's Hebrew roots would help us know Him better and more intimately than a picture of a baby in manger or a plastic statue?

Do you know to whom Jesus was sent? Probably every Church Gentile thinks He was sent to himself. But, that is just another myth. For the truth, we must turn to Scripture. In Mat. 15: 24, as Jesus responds to a woman of Canaan (not an Israelite) who begged him for mercy for her daughter who was severely demon-possessed, we read:

But He answered and said, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Do you comprehend why Jesus said that? Do you realize what His mission from the Father was and how it relates to Gentiles and the people of God? Do you know what Gospel Jesus preached? We find it stated clearly in several verses. Hear what Jesus preached from the very start of His earthly ministry in Mat. 4: 17:

From this time Jesus began to preach and to say, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Note, that was the gospel preached BY Christ. There is another gospel ABOUT Christ that involves His death and resurrection. But, even that gospel ignores His birth! Amazing isn't it? These aspects of repentance and the kingdom are elevated in the Feasts and Holy Sabbaths of the LORD. How does what one learns from celebrating His birth at a typical Christmas mass or Church service featuring Christmas trees even compare; except in helping us feel good?

And, when we look as Bereans at all Scripture given by God for edification, we even find a rather disturbing verse of a heathen practice of idolatry by the Gentiles concerning decorating trees for idol-like worship which is condemned for Israel in Jer. 10: 1-5:

Hear the word which the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel, Thus says the LORD: Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the peoples are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the ax. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple.

I have cut an evergreen tree down with my ax. I have fastened it in a floor fixture with large hand-screws to stand up by itself. I have decorated it with silver tinsel and gold ornaments. I put a lighted star on top. I don't think I ever worshiped that tree, but surely I and my house guests have adored it in its splendor.

Next Sabbath we will focus on gift giving and some new ideas for celebrating the birth of the Savior that are more in line with God's commands and less aligned with man's traditions.