

# The Great Christmas Exchange

by Kenneth Westby

**Q** "Doesn't our celebration of Christmas have some roots in pagan religious practices? How do you feel about Christians participating in that sort of thing?"

Actually, the above question wasn't asked of me or of *The New Millennium*, the journal I edit. It was the lead question from Dr. James Dobson's Q & A column in a recent issue of *Focus on the Family* magazine. It's a good question, as is Dr. Dobson's fair, honest, and reasoned answer. I challenge his conclusion, but admire his candor. Here is the entirety of his answer, followed by my comments.

**A** "It's true that the timing of our modern Christmas season coincides with that of an ancient Roman festival, the Saturnalia. There's even an historical connection between the two. In the fourth century, Emperor Constantine declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire and outlawed all pagan religious practices.

"But it seems Constantine also had a fair understanding of human nature and was something of a diplomat. He didn't want the public outcry that would be sure to result if he simply banned the Saturnalia. He declared that the festivities should continue from year to year, but be given a new meaning. The old pagan holiday was transformed into a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ - the most important event in human history! In time, the old pagan associations faded and were eventually forgotten.

"Despite the secular origins of the Christmas holiday, I am not troubled by its celebration. I understand why other believers are, and I respect their point of view. To my mind, it's what you make of the event that counts -- as the old Emperor seems to have understood so well.

"I seriously doubt that any of us today are in much danger of being lured into the worship of Roman deities. For us, a much more serious threat is posed by the gods of materialism and secularism, who have so successfully established themselves on what Constantine intended to be holy ground.

"But it doesn't have to be that way. For our family, Christmas has traditionally been one of the spiritual highlights of the year, as well as the focal point of many treasured memories. It is my opinion that this holy holiday can be the same for any family that chooses to make it so."

I believe Dr. Dobson's response to the question of Christmas' pagan roots and practices reflects a widely held view among Christian teachers. Much more could, of course, be brought up on the historical roots of this pagan religious celebration.

Quick research will reveal that Christmas and its most popular practices predate the Roman deities Dobson mentions, taking us back to its religious genesis among Babylonian sun and fertility (sex) worship. A few days before Christmas in 1993 Pope John Paul II admitted that the 25th of December date didn't come from the Bible: "On that day in pagan antiquity, the birthday of the 'Invincible Sun' was celebrated to coincide with the winter solstice. . . . It seemed logical and natural to Christians to replace that feast with the celebration of the only and true Sun, Jesus Christ."

Apparently, establishing a false and fabricated date for the birth of Christ and then merging true worship with pagan customs seemed quite "logical and natural." It didn't to the early Christians. But then as a Vatican press release stated: "The festival of Christmas appeared for the first time [as a official church celebration] in 354 [AD]" -- three centuries after Christ.

### **THE EXCHANGE**

It is important to understand that Christmas, and Easter, modern Christianity's other major religious holiday, did not enter our calendar in isolation. They were not simply inserted into a blank calendar in want of religious holidays. These holidays are replacements for other *holydays* that were once part of a biblically based calendar of celebration and worship. What Constantine did for the empire on a grand scale had already begun centuries earlier on a smaller scale. Namely, the transformation of the traditions of the early church.

The traditions of the first century church, which were closest to the teachings and practices of its founder, Christ, were very Jewish. Or, more accurately put, *very biblical*. The church Jesus, the original apostles, and Paul (all Jews) built was for the most part a continuation of Yahweh worship as practiced by the Old Testament faithful. The traditions and celebrations were largely the same, but now enlivened by the life and resurrection of the very Son of God and his Kingdom message. The New Testament Sabbath, Passover, and Pentecost are clear examples of the Savior's influence upon these ancient celebrations. Christ added greatly to their sacred traditional meanings by his miraculous appearance as God's Son in human flesh, his death and resurrection, and by his call to us for sonship and eternal life. Please understand, these celebrations were not the exclusive property of the Jews, as Christ reminded the Pharisees; rather, like the Sabbath, these are God's and he made them for all mankind -- especially for his spiritual people, the Church (Lk 2:27).

Worship on Sunday, and Saturnalia and Ishtar (Easter) celebrations were not found in the early church of Christ and the Apostles. Instead of coming from Babylon, the religious calendar of the early (can we say "the not yet corrupted") church came from Genesis and Exodus and the rest of *Torah* (meaning God's *teaching/instruction*). It is this venerable, ancient, and biblical tradition that was exchanged in the centuries following Christ for a far inferior religious tradition.

This *new* tradition, which of course was also an ancient tradition among the idolatrous pagan world, was gaining some acceptance by the close of the first century as Christianity rapidly expanded into the Roman Empire. In the third and fourth centuries a new church began to emerge; one that was Hellenistic, gentile dominated, and contained a syncretistic blend of pagan and biblical practices. In name it was Christian; in many of its practices, neo-pagan. What Constantine did when he declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire was not "outlaw" the practices of Saturnalia, but rename them to make the exchange easy. By his time, a similar transition into these practices within the church was well under way. The church of Jesus and the Apostles, now centuries later, had a totally different look, tradition, and calendar. Was it even the same church? This transformation should not be considered progress.

Let's look more closely at the other part of this equation which has brought our modern culture these Roman/Babylonian holidays. What were the festivals of the early church that were replaced? As we briefly mentioned above, there exists a rich biblical history of God's people, in Old Testament times as well as in the early church, celebrating a totally other set of religious holidays/holydays. These were not the religious festivals of sun-worshipping pagans, but "the Feasts of God."

History records that these biblical festivals (Sabbath, Days of Unleavened Bread, Passover, Pentecost, Trumpets, Atonement, Tabernacles) were deliberately set aside by later church officials in favor of "baptized" pagan holidays. The motive? There are probably several, but an important one among many 2nd-4th century church leaders was an abiding anti-Jewish bias and the desire to unlink the new Christian religion from its Jewish/Old Testament foundation. For over a century leaders debated the Passover/Easter question. The *quartodeciman* controversy which festered during the second century is a case in point. *Quartodeciman* means *fourteenth*, the day on which Passover was celebrated according to the Hebrew calendar. Irenaeus (115-202 AD), who was taught by Polycarp, John's disciple, fought for a fourteenth day of Nisan observance, "arguing that the practice was an old one in western Asia Minor that went back to the time of the apostles" (*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Everett Ferguson, Editor, Garland Publishing, NY, 1990, p.107). Irenaeus was a powerful fighter against Gnosticism in the early church and is regarded as the first great Catholic theologian. Later Emperor Constantine, the same one who brought us Christmas, summoned the council of Nicaea in 325 AD to do the business of establishing a uniform observance throughout the empire of Easter on a Sunday. One of his purposes was to do away with the still lingering practice of observing the Passover.

To insure that Easter in no way could harmonize with the "Jewish" Passover (which is the day on which captive Israel was spared by the lamb's blood and on which Christ was crucified, both events integral to Salvation History), church officials devised a rotating date for Easter, the substituted celebration for the biblical Passover. They did this by concocting an elaborate calendar formula pegged to Passover that would never allow the two celebrations to occur on the same day. Such was the bitter bias against the early church's "Jewish" traditions. It also forced the remaining Passover observing Christians, of which there were many, to forever choose which tradition would be theirs. Active persecution of those that didn't bend to Rome's direction followed.

This important historical story should be told side by side with the one Dr. Dobson summarizes for us. We will save a more detailed recounting of it for another time.

From the first century on, Christians have had options concerning the days they choose to celebrate. They could observe the "baptized" pagan events or they could celebrate the biblical festivals -- but not both. I say not both because we are discussing two different and opposite traditions -- poles apart. The biblical festivals came directly from God and were part of his plan for his people's worship -- his way for their coming to know him and his plan. In fact, these days came from the mind of God and are his unique creation. From creation onward they memorialize the mighty works of Yahweh -- past, present, and future. The prime way for the created to come to know its Creator is by what he has said and done. The biblical celebrations enshrine that fundamental information in annual remembrances done as celebrations.

The holidays mainstream Christianity got in the exchange for these noble biblical events, came indisputably straight from rank sun and fertility worship -- which idolatry God has everywhere condemned as sin. In their origins and practices these two holiday/holyday traditions are philosophically and theologically opposites.

## **OPTIONS**

Now getting back to the original Christmas-keeping question asked of Dr. Dobson. Using the example of Christmas and acknowledging its pagan religious roots, you as a Christian have certain options. You can:

Option # 1: Accept it. Hallow this historically pagan event by giving it a Christian meaning. Ignore its origins. Emphasize Christ's birth and family togetherness.

Option # 2: Reject the biblical holydays and don't celebrate them (which choice seems implicit to exercising option # 1). If one doesn't celebrate them one has in effect rejected them for whatever reason -- or ignored them, which amounts to the same. The common reason offered for rejection is their Jewish roots. Unfortunately, many who reject them for this reason take another step and judge those who continue to celebrate the biblical days as being Judaizers, legalists, and perhaps even anti-Christian.

Most Christians, including Dobson, have chosen both Option 1 & Option 2, although Dobson clearly has not engaged in judgment against those of us who celebrate the biblical festivals.

Option # 3: Celebrate both the Christianized pagan festivals and the biblical festivals. This would certainly make for a busy calendar. But practically, since each represents opposite and conflicting traditions, I doubt a serious and intellectually engaged Christian would be comfortable standing on both sides of this issue.

Option # 4: Acknowledge the pagan religious practices and origins of Christmas and choose not to get involved.

Option # 5: Acknowledge the divine origins of the seven biblical festivals and celebrate them as part of your Christian worship. Acknowledge that they commemorate the *magnalia dei*, the mighty salvational acts of God -- past, present, and future -- and include them in your yearly calendar to be shared with family and fellow Christians.

There are other options, but these are sufficient as my purpose here is to contrast two different approaches toward choosing which religious days to celebrate. Celebration of secular holidays is of no concern here, only days that have religious worship as an integral part of their significance.

Dr. Dobson is right to conclude that Christians today are not consciously (or unconsciously) worshipping Roman deities in their Christmas celebrations. God does look upon the heart of one's intellect, and in their hearts most people who give religious importance to Christmas give it to honor Christ. Whether Christ is pleased with this sort of worship is another question which should be considered. Of course, the majority of Christmas celebrators think little about Christ and a lot about everything else. But for those serious Christians, I think it wrong to judge their Christmas keeping as idolatry. (The sin of idolatry nevertheless does exist, note Dobson's concern above regarding materialism; and it comes in many manifestations and is probably one of the most common sins on earth.) It is also wrong to judge those who keep the biblical festivals as being legalists, Judaizers, or worse.

If idolatry, strictly speaking, is not involved in Christian Christmas keeping, bad judgment might be. We all make choices, some good, some not. Choosing a religious calendar of celebrations based on pagan deities over one based on the Bible and the One True God, is by any measure a bad exchange. Trading precious and stunningly beautiful jewels of truth by the whole carats, for fables, made-in-China plastic Santas and nativity scenes with light bulbs in them, is a bad deal.

Then why have so many intelligent and well-meaning Christians made just such an exchange? Ignorance of the facts might explain the most of it, but there is as well this fact of human nature: It is easier to go along to get along. Emperor Constantine figured that out. Baptizing paganism may be good, strategic public policy to "convert" an empire, but is it good theology? Is it a good exchange? Consider the exchange: An enlightened, unique package of biblical days which tell the orderly story of God's Grand Plan of Salvation, exchanged for days that must be constantly separated from their pagan baggage.

Dr. Dobson and many fine Christians like him work hard to put a Christian spin to Christmas, and they do a good job. And for their good intentions, I applaud them. But we should go beyond good intentions. There is a more God-centered option that affords us all the benefits of family togetherness around festive holiday seasons, while teaching the uncorrupted and pure message of salvation. If you would like to know more about the biblical festivals write us for Dr. Charles Dorothy's article *Rediscovering Biblical Celebrations*. It is time we Christmas-keeping Christians stand back and take a careful look at what we have *rejected* in favor of what we have accepted.

The wily Emperor's present of Christmas doesn't fit true Christianity -- it should be returned for a refund.