

Biblical Backgrounds of Current Christmas Customs & Symbols

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Note-Taking Guide to Accompany PowerPoint Presentation

INTRODUCTION

- A. The Bible is the background and foundation of much of our culture in the western hemisphere.
 - B. The Bible has also given the basis for many current Christmas customs that have become long-standing traditions.
 - C. We can keep Christ in Christmas, and thus increase our joy at this time and throughout the rest of the year, by associating the many common Christmas customs and their symbols with their biblical connections and backgrounds as expressed in historic Reformed theology. In these traditional Christmas customs, we have the essence of the Gospel on display, *if we use them as symbols of events and teachings in the Bible.*
 - D. The following presentation organizes the customs and symbols according to the three-fold structure of the biblical teaching in the *Heidelberg Catechism* concerning our guilt, grace and gratitude.
- I. Guilt is the result of our sin.
- A. The historic liturgical color for Advent is purple. This color signifies penitence for our sin and preparation for the coming (advent) of the King. (John 19:2, Mark 1:1-5, 7-8)
 - B. The Messianic rose has its roots in the Old Testament. (Isaiah 35:1)
- II. Grace is the unearned blessing of God whereby he has taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.
- A. The use of the poinsettia grows out of the Old Testament's great redemptive prototype of freedom from bondage in the Exodus event that Christ was to do most completely in his redeeming us from our bondage to sin. The poinsettia, especially one with several red leaves, represents the flames of fire in the burning bush, where God came to Moses, and thus offers a graphic depiction of God's descent to us in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord, Immanuel, God with us.

Nurture your poinsettia at least through Easter to remind you and others as to the link between Christmas and Easter, why Jesus Christ came to earth in his first advent. Remember to thank him for doing so!

B. The manger symbolizes Christ's humble birth. (Luke 2:7)

1. Theologically, it is the beginning of his state of humiliation, when he laid aside his divine majesty, took on our human nature, and began his ministry as an obedient and suffering servant. (Philippians 2:6-11)
2. Careful attention to the Greek New Testament and life in first century Bethlehem indicates that the "inn" which was too crowded for baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph was most likely the lodging area of a house or probably a cave where their relatives lived. This explains why no innkeeper, especially a greedy or angry one (as often portrayed in contemporary Nativity plays), is mentioned in the text. (Luke 2:7)

C. Bells announce the birth of Christ and call his people to worship.

1. Using bells to celebrate the birth of Christ is thought to have begun by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania, Italy, who died in AD 431.
2. Bell ringing to celebrate Christ was used to eclipse a pagan superstition in the Middle Ages.
3. God told Moses to have bells put on the robe of the High Priest's ephod.
 - "And upon its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet, all around its hem, and bells of gold between them all round...And it shall be upon Aaron when he ministers, and its sound will be heard when he goes into the holy place before the LORD and when he comes out, that he may not die." (Exodus 28:31-35)
4. Matthew Henry observed that the bells of Aaron's robe "typify the sound of the gospel of Christ in the world, giving notice of His entrance within the veil for us," which is what he came to do. He finished that work on Calvary. (Matthew 27:51)
 - "When Christ came as high priest...he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle...he has appeared to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself." (Hebrews 9:11-28)

- D. The Crèche: To inspire and to teach the meaning of the birth of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi built a life-size stable in a cave in Graecia, near Assisi in 1223.
1. The crèche came to be used in homes as well as in churches.
 2. While uncertain, the Wise Men may have visited while Jesus was in the manger (the crèche) but likely in a house sometime later. (Matthew 2:11)
- E. During the season of Advent, when we celebrate the first coming of Christ, we notice all the beautiful lights. We also consider the colors. They significantly represent and remind us of who Jesus is and what he came to do:
- blue signifying his royalty, kingship;
 - red signifying his shed blood for the redemption of our sins;
 - green signifying the resultant life eternal for all who believe and do God's will;
 - white signifying purity, victory, holiness, perfection (cf., e.g., Revelation 3:4-6; 7:14; 19:11-16).
- F. Candles symbolize the light Jesus brought to the world. (John 8:12) The fourth and fifth century scholar, Jerome, who translated the Bible into Latin (the *Vulgate*), said that candles were also to express Christian joy.
- G. The colors at Christmas are very significant. Use them for talking with family members, or with people in a witness for the Lord, about why Christ came. When looking at a Christmas tree or driving by a beautiful display, as in this photo in a mall in our city, ask, "Have you ever thought about what the beautiful Christmas lights signify?" Questions, especially when timely asked, motivate further thought. Notice how Jesus often used questions.
1. Remember what Jesus said, "I have come as a light for the world in order that everyone believing in me may not remain in the darkness." (John 12:46, my translation) Jesus, here saying he is a light, is referring also to the prophets who testified about him, who thus were also lights pointing to the Christ to come: Jesus, THE light of the world. (John 8:12). The Greek word for world (κόσμος [*kosmos*]) in 8:12 refers to the whole world, including all the spiritual darkness in it now. Jesus later said, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome [Greek: νενίκηκα (*nenikēka*) conquered] the world" with all its evil. (John 16:33) What comfort and

peace this reality provides! We celebrate now his first coming; in his second coming, our celebration will be huge and eternal!

2. For your sake, for your loved ones' sake, and for all others, the Lord has called us to proclaim his Good News; don't neglect to point them beyond Santa, gifts, digital devices, and the other temporal and short-lived delights of the season. Point them to the One it is all about, and with his help you can all do far more than just cope...you can rejoice and thank God! As you look at the beautiful lights, think about Jesus, and contemplate the eternal light and joy who will not fade, the One who conquers all darkness, Christ the Lord!
- H. The color green symbolizes life which has been given by Christ to people who have been dead in sin. (1 Corinthians 15:22)
- I. The color red symbolizes the blood Jesus shed for the complete remission of all our sin and sins. (Colossians 1:20)
- J. The wreath, made of evergreen, symbolizes life and, being circular, the eternal life which is ours as a result of Christ. (John 11:25-26a)
- K. Holly with its sharp points on the glistening green leaves and bright berries on a wreath reminds Christians of the joyous salvation that is ours in Jesus. The wreath helps us recall Jesus' crown of thorns, with the red berries portraying the blood he shed as he redeemed us from our sin in this most wonderful demonstration of love ever! (Luke 22:44, Romans 5:6-11)
- L. The red bows remind us of the blood Jesus shed to redeem us, which is the reason for his first Advent. Long streamers on the bows graphically depict the streams of Jesus' blood. (Colossians 1:20)
- M. The Advent wreath has been used by many Christians to symbolize several aspects of the Scriptural teaching about Christ. One of the most well-known symbolisms given is as follows:
1. The first candle (purple) represents promise. (Isaiah 9:6)
 2. The second candle (purple) represents waiting. (Isaiah 7:14)
 3. The third candle (purple) represents peace. (Micah 4:3-4)
 4. The fourth candle (purple) represents hope. (Luke 1:31-33)

5. The fifth candle (white) represents joy, adoration, and the purity, and victory of Christ. (Luke 2:10b-11, 14; Revelation 19:11-16)
 - Christ's purity is credited to us by faith which alone makes us worthy of being in the presence of God who is most holy. (Romans 1:17; 4:18-25; 10:9; Ephesians 2:8-10)

N. The exact date of Jesus' birth is uncertain.

1. The Bible does not give a date for the birth of Jesus the Christ.
2. The great 19th Century Biblical scholar, Rev. Alfred Edersheim, D.D., Ph.D., who converted from Judaism to Christianity, explains in his classic text, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, why it is reasonable to hold that Jesus could have been born on the date of December 25. (Vol. I, p. 187)
3. Others say early Christians set that date to eclipse the pagan festivals of Saturnalia and *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquerable Sun) pertaining to the change of the seasons at the winter solstice, as early Christians did with the same rationale to set the dates for celebrating other New Testament holy days, such as Epiphany. The excellent Lutheran professor of history, Paul Maier, explains that "Christianity sought to replace these pagan festivals with a Christian celebration honoring the "sun of righteousness," a common epithet for Jesus as Messiah [who being the Second Person of the triune God of all creation is truly unconquerable, sovereign, and all powerful, and whose hands govern the seasons and all else]." (*First Christmas: The True and Unfamiliar Story*, p. 43.)
4. Maier also explains that it was "a sixth-century Roman monk-mathematician-astronomer named Dionysius Exiguus (Dionysius the Little) who unknowingly committed what became history's greatest numerical error in terms of cumulative effect. For in reforming the calendar to pivot about the birth of Christ, he dated the Nativity in the year 753 from the founding of Rome, when in fact Herod died only 749 years after Rome's founding [in 4 B. C. (cf. Matthew 2:15)]. The result of Dionysius' chronology, which remains current, was to give the correct traditional date for the founding of Rome, but one that is at least four or five years off for the birth of Christ." (p. 40)

Putting the above and other details together, such as historical data pertaining to when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1-2), Maier states that "according to the best reckoning, Jesus may indeed have been born in the winter of 5-4 B. C." (p. 43) He states, "some time between the fall of 5 B. C. and March of 4 B. C." (p. 41)

- O. The Christmas tree has long been associated with Christ's birth.
1. In medieval times an apple-decorated fir depicted the Garden of Eden. The Paradise Play tied the evergreen to Christ's birth.
 2. Many people attribute bringing an evergreen tree into the house to Martin Luther (1483-1546). The light shining through these trees reminded him of Christ who came down from heaven. (John 3:13, 6:32-35; James 1:17)
 3. The color green is significant as we saw, and the evergreen tree points toward heaven, reminding us that there is more than this phase of life and that Christmas is primarily about God and his mighty acts in the reconciliation, the peace, and the eternal life he has provided for us in the coming of Jesus the Christ. (Luke 2:14)
 4. What will you do with your natural Christmas tree when it becomes time to put away all the Christmas decorations? Historic Trinity Lutheran Church in Detroit has made a cross, called the Tree Cross, from the trunk of a Christmas tree, symbolizing why Christ came in his first advent and helping people focus on the true and by far most important meaning of Christmas.
- P. Ball ornaments represent the world, created and redeemed by God in and through Christ.
1. The different colors symbolize the Gospel's being for "every tribe and language and people and nation" around the globe. **Ponder that purpose as you pause beside your tree this Advent season!**
 2. See Genesis 12:3; Luke 2:10, 14; John 3:16; Revelation 5:9.
- Q. Candy canes point back to the staffs of the shepherds' (Luke 2:8-20) and the newborn Babe who became the Great Shepherd. (Hebrews 13:20) Their white color symbolizes Jesus' purity and victory, and the red stripes depict his shed blood.

- R. The star is a symbol of the spiritual light Jesus brought into the dark world dominated by sin, the spiritual darkness having been caused by the disobedience of mankind. It also reminds us of the star the Wise Men followed. (Matthew 2:1-12)

 - S. The word angel means messenger, and angels sent by God with messages to humans have an important place in the Christmas narratives in the Bible. (Luke 1:11-20, 26-38; Matthew 1:20-24; Luke 2:9-15)

 - T. While too rarely seen as a symbol of Christmas, the cross is the reason Christ came at his first Advent. Forty days after Jesus' birth the Holy Spirit inspired Simeon to tell Mary what Jesus came to do. (Luke 2:34-35)

 - U. The cross is a symbol of God's great love for us. (John 3:16 [KJV], 15:13; Romans 5:8)
- III. Gratitude is always the biblical response believers' give for God's grace.
- A. The joy of our salvation moves us to sing! Carols are ancient means God's people have used to express joy, praise, and gratitude to God for his indescribable gift to us of Jesus.

 - B. Gifts reflect God's greatest gift, his only begotten Son, and the giving of the Wise Men. Gifts may have grown out of the desire to follow the unselfishness of Christ.

1. We keep in mind that Christ is God's greatest gift to us, and that we give out of gratitude, **never** with the motive of attempting to gain merit. This key teaching of the Bible, that we cannot earn our salvation, that it is a free gift of the God who loves (and is therefore also just and righteous), and that we simply obey and give out of gratitude, is unique to Christianity. All other religions outside the Bible are autosoteristic (lit.: self-saving), i.e., they involve different ways human beings attempt to save themselves.
2. The Magi (μάγοι, *magoi*) were wise men, likely priest-sages, who scholars believe came from any country East of Palestine, from Arabia (now mostly contemporary Saudi Arabia) to Persia and Media (now mostly contemporary Iran), since the Bible does not specify the country or countries of their origin. (Matthew 2:1-11) Maier explains that the "safest conclusion is that the Magi of Christmas were Persian, for the term originates among the Medo-Persians, and early Syriac traditions give them Persian names." (67) He also cites several other compelling reasons for drawing this conclusion.

The Magi followed the star to Jerusalem and inquired of King Herod the Great (37—4 B. C.) where they might find the king for whom they were looking. Thus, they went to his palace seen here. (36) The gifts we give also remind us of the gifts the Magi brought for the King of the Jews. (37)

Maier identifies the most important fact of Matthew's account of the Magi.

Whatever their origin, the visit of the eastern sages was of great significance for later Christianity: the wise men were pagans, not Hebrews, and the fact that gentile magi performed the same adoration as Jewish shepherds symbolized the universal outreach for future Christianity. "And gentiles shall come to your light," the prophet Isaiah had written, "and kings to the rightness of your rising." ([Isaiah] 60:3) [Maier 67]

This understanding, of course, was not new with the New Testament. Throughout the whole Bible, including the Old Testament, God's will is clearly seen to be that his people were to reach out to the whole world with his message of salvation. (E. g., Genesis 12:1-3; Jonah 3:1-3; Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 2:4; Revelation 7:9)

3. Frankincense is resin from trees of the genus *Boswellia*. It was burned on the altar of incense in the tabernacle's Holy Place. (Ex. 30:1-8) Frankincense is one of the gifts of the Magi (Matt. 2:11), which fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that gold and frankincense would be brought from the Gentiles to honor the heavenly king. (Isaiah 60:6) Frankincense is the purest incense. It makes a white smoke symbolizing the prayers of God's people. (Exodus 30:1-8; Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4)
4. The word, myrrh, refers to an aromatic gum, and the perfume extracted from it. Myrrh has been used from ancient times for medicinal purposes, including to heal wounds, and to prepare bodies for burial. Thus, the Magi's gift of myrrh points to Jesus' destiny to suffer and die a special death. (Cf. John 19:38-42, esp. v. 39; Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:4,8)
5. Some families arrange their gifts for giving to reflect the emphasis on the unselfish giving of Christ rather than on receiving. At the time for opening presents each person sits around the tree with the stack of gifts he or she is **giving**, instead of the ones he or she is receiving.

C. St. Nicholas was a fourth century A.D. Christian whose benevolence generated a legend that developed into the Santa Claus of today.

1. The real St. Nicholas was Archbishop of Myra and a delegate to the first general council of the early church, the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.
2. One of the main issues he addressed with his fellow delegates at that council was the question of Jesus' divinity. The council ruled that the Father and the Son share the same substance. Christ is not just like God; he is part of God and is fully (100%) divine as well as being fully (100%) human. (John 10:30) He is thus referred to as the Second Person of the triune God (together with the Father and the Holy Spirit).
 - Christ is the only begotten (original Greek, μονογενής *monogenēs*, only begotten, i.e., of the same substance) Son of God. (John 3:16) These two Biblical truths (that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully human), were believed by the early church and overwhelmingly affirmed by the Council of Nicaea (the vote was 300-2, hardly a squeaker as people read in the spurious novel, *The DaVinci Code*). Nicholas voted with the majority. This overwhelming vote, a strong testimony about Christ that defeated Arius and his followers

at the Council, needs to be understood by all of us and explained to Arius' present day followers, the Jehovah's Witnesses...and others!

- D. Ivy, because it is always green, is another symbol of eternal life. (John 11:25-26) Since it clings to its support, it also symbolizes attachment, undying affection, reliance on one stronger, and fidelity, four important responses of gratitude to God's grace in Christ for us. (Cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10)

CONCLUSION

- A. Let us not fear the attempt by some to "secularize" Christ out of Christmas. They can't do it anyway. The Triune God is sovereign!
- B. Let us transform the cultural trappings into the true meaning of Christmas.
- C. Let us keep in mind how in Christ God has removed our *guilt* by his *grace* in Christ Jesus, letting that understanding shape the perceptions and experiences we have, and then following Jesus Christ, acting in accord with his Word and will, out of *gratitude* for what he has done for us. In so doing, we will have a Christmas filled with joy that will last throughout the new year and far into the future, indeed forever!

church ministries worldwide.