

Introduction

- Why do we celebrate Christ's birth on December 25th?
- Should Christians celebrate Christmas?
- Is it just a pagan holiday Christians coopted?

Early History (1st-2nd Centuries)

- There is no record of the early church celebrating Christ's birth.
- They primarily focused on observing Easter, though there was slight disagreement on the best day to observe the date.
- Origen, in the 3rd century, mocked the Roman practice of observing birthdays.
- Clement of Alexandria notes that there is some Christian disagreement on the exact date of Christ's birth and mentions several options.

Later History (3rd-6th Centuries)

- Bishop Hippolytus of Rome (204 AD) says Christ was born on December 25th.
- The Filocalian Calendar, a personal calendar made by an illustrator, records December 25th as the birthday of Christ in Bethlehem.
- By the 4th century, two primary dates have emerged.
- The Western church recognizes December 25th, the Eastern church January 6th.
- The Council of Tours 567 recognized the time between December 25th and January 6th as one continuous festival, or Christmastide, or the twelve days of Christmas.

Origin

- The exact date of Christ's birth was calculated based on his death.
- It was a popular Jewish idea that the great prophets and patriarchs died on the same day of the year that they were conceived.
- This idea continued to Jesus, whose date of crucifixion was well known.
- The Eastern church believed it was April 6th, and the West March 25th.
- The Donatists observed Christmas on the 25th and refused to celebrate Epiphany on January 6th because they believed it was an innovation.

Pagan Takeover?

- The idea that Christmas was a conquest of Pagan festivals did not emerge until the 12th century and did not become a popular idea until the 18th century.
- Emperor Aurelian established a feast to the unconquered sun on December 25th in 274 AD.
- Christianity at this point was still a minority and a persecuted religion that tried to avoid paganism and Judaism in every way. They would not have copied paganism.
- The early church was strongly against any idea of innovation and newness.

Can We Observe?

- There is no Biblical command to observe the birth of Jesus on December 25th.
- There are some who fear pagan origins and believe observing is idolatry.
- I believe this is an overreaction and misguided.
- However, we should do our best not to cause our weaker siblings to sin.
- I also would not demand that all Christians observe the day.
- It would be foolish to demand that new converts in a foreign country begin to recognize this holiday as an essential part of their faith.

Advent

- By the 6th century, the several weeks leading up to Christmas became known as Advent, which is latin for coming.
- It was seen as a time of preparation for the birth of Christ, much like Lent.
- It became more developed as the Christian calendar became more filled out.
- Later on in the Middle Ages, pagan holidays are repurposed to remember saints.

Biblical Commands

- The Old Testament calendar was filled with regular festivals and times of remembrance, like Passover.
- Believers are clearly commanded to gather for worship on Sunday.
- Believers do not need to follow the OT calendar of worship.
- There is Biblical freedom for what Sunday worship can look like.

Takeaway

- Christmas does not trace back to the New Testament, but is a very old Christian tradition.
- I think observing the Christian calendar is helpful and sanctifying.
- It seems strange to me to refuse to intentionally remember Christ's birth.