

Christmas and its History

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The word “Christmas” has sometimes become a controversial and politically incorrect term these days. This year several well known retail companies completely removed any use of the word “Christmas” from advertisements of their products. Some companies also stopped using the term “Christmas Trees” and called them “Holiday Trees.” This type of thing may sometimes be inadvertent, but sometimes it is a deliberate avoidance of the word Christmas to avoid offending people who are against Christianity. Though Christmas has a number of meanings, the best and primary meaning of it is about the historical birth of Jesus Christ. I do not like to see it become politically incorrect or unrespectable somehow to mention God in public affairs. But the thing that is disturbing to me about a negative view of the word “Christmas” is the way it disregards so many good traditions in our country.

I decided to find out about the history of Christmas as a holiday. Christmas was first started as being on December 25th by Pope Julius I, who lived in the 300's A.D. It was done at that time to coincide with a Roman holiday called Saturnalia. Saturnalia was a very raucous time of excessive partying which came to have a bad reputation, similar to Mardi Gras today. It also involved things that led to conflicts between rich and poor and sort of turned upside down social order. Christmas eventually came to have a bad reputation in some parts of the world, and there were problems of violence and crime in some places. This was true in spite of the fact that the Catholic church tried to spiritualize it and bring into the holiday a celebration of Christ's birth. By the 1600's, after the Christian reformation in England, Christian groups led by Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans cancelled Christmas for a while to deal with the social problems associated with it. Christmas came back to England, but in the 1600's when many Puritans were moving to America, Christmas was frowned on in many communities. In fact, from 1659 to 1681 it was illegal to celebrate Christmas in Boston. It was celebrated in some other American cities. But, many Americans thought of it apparently as an “English” holiday and thus, after the Revolutionary war, Christmas fell out of favor in America.

In the 1800's Americans basically reinvented Christmas. In 1828, the first police force was instituted in New York City in response to a Christmas riot. In 1819 author Washington Irving wrote a series of stories about the celebration of Christmas. Christmas began to be thought of as a family-centered holiday, a peaceful time valuing charity and goodwill, rather than as a kind of carnival. Americans have pulled together a variety of Christmas traditions that come from different countries and cultures. An example is decorating Christmas trees, which was first commonly practiced in Germany in the 1700's.

Back to the present. After retailers took out references to the word “Christmas” some family-supporting organizations complained and threatened to boycott certain companies products. After this some companies reversed their practice or promised to bring back the word Christmas for next year. My point in all this is that some traditions are worth holding onto. Americans took a holiday that was much like a festival connected to Roman idol worship, something that caused a lot of problems, and turned it into something good for society. There are a variety of interesting traditions related to Christmas in other countries. The Biblical story of the birth of Christ has become a part of Christmas traditions in every country.

I made a trip to Houston in November (2005). In a shop in Galveston, amidst all sorts of novelty items there was a marvelous collection of manger scenes. I'm not sure why, other than being a Christian, but I really like Manger Scenes. I've included a close up photo of one of these, one that was made in Poland. The shop in Galveston had dozens of manger scenes from many countries around the world. Jesus' birth is remembered all around the world.

This is a reminder that Christ really did come for all people. He came in a humble way, spending his first night in a feeding trough. But, he came to suffer to pay for the sins of the world and give people the power to overcome personal sin and have a relationship with God. God has done a lot for me. This is why Christmas means something to me. More than the fun parties, gifts, and great food. God gave the best gift in His own Son.



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