

Christmas Trees and Decorations: Should Christians Take Part?

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As we begin this journey we must understand that the discussion we are about to undertake is not a new one. In American, as early as 1747, Moravian Germans of Pennsylvania had a community tree decorated with candles in celebration of Christmas¹. But we should not be surprised that the Puritans believed that all of these Christmas celebrations that were adopted were unholy. Hence, a difference of opinion about these matters were as diverse as were the diversity of denominations within Christendom who named the name of Jesus as Redeemer.

So, we must be careful in how we exercise our right of freedom within the body of Christ. Without question, one person or one family will undoubtedly decide not to celebrate Christmas with trees and decorations while another may decide this to be important for their family's recognition of Jesus coming in the flesh and living among us (John 1:14). Therefore, we must exercise grace towards one another to allow the Spirit to work in the hearts of Jesus' disciples as He wills.

As an example, recall the sharp disagreement between Paul and Silas about John Mark.

"And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus."
(Acts 15:36-39 ESV)

Paul was absolutely certain he was right about John Mark's inner strength because he proved himself to be too timid for the demanding work of the ministry. On the other hand, Barnabas believed John Mark to be useful for the gospel. It seems as if Paul forgotten that Barnabas was the one who granted him entrance into the church body (Ac 9:26-27). At the end of his life, the Apostle Paul realized Mark was critical for the spread of the gospel and this is the reason he sent for John Mark while Paul was again imprisoned.

"Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry." (2 Timothy 4:11 ESV)

In differing of opinion, let us exercise charity and grace towards one another because one day the others who genuinely love Jesus Christ may be useful to you. It is difficult to see it in the moment, but time has a way of healing most people of stubbornness. For the few who

¹ <https://www.history.com/topics/christmas/history-of-christmas-trees>

still refuse to bow a knee to God's grace, the desperate need for His mercy will eventually manifest in them.

It is also true that no matter what a person may read in this article their minds will never be changed because they have already set in their hearts what to think.

ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

The following information is from History.com...

“Long before the advent of **Christianity**, plants and trees that remained green all year had a special meaning for people in the winter. Just as people today decorate their homes during the festive season with pine, spruce, and fir trees, many ancient peoples hung evergreen boughs over their doors and windows. In many countries it was believed that evergreens would keep away witches, ghosts, evil spirits, and illness.

In the Northern hemisphere, the shortest day and longest night of the year falls on December 21 or December 22 and is called the **winter solstice**. Many ancient people believed that the sun was a god and that winter came every year because the sun god had become sick and weak. They celebrated the solstice because it meant that at last the sun god would begin to get well. Evergreen boughs reminded them of all the green plants that would grow again when the sun god was strong and summer would return.

The **ancient Egyptians** worshipped a god called Ra, who had the head of a hawk and wore the sun as a blazing disk in his crown. At the solstice, when Ra began to recover from his illness, the Egyptians filled their homes with green palms and papyrus reeds, which symbolized for them the triumph of life over death.

Early **Romans** marked the solstice with a feast called **Saturnalia** in honor of Saturn, the god of agriculture. The Romans knew that the solstice meant that soon, farms and orchards would be green and fruitful. To mark the occasion, they decorated their homes and temples with evergreen boughs.

In Northern Europe the Druids, the priests of the ancient **Celts**, also decorated their temples with evergreen boughs as a symbol of everlasting life. The **Vikings** in Scandinavia honored the evergreen mistletoe for its role in the death of the Balder, a god of light.”

The remainder of documents and information surrounding the origins of the Christmas tree is pretty much the same with some slight variations for all sources. In other words, the material is simply repeated with added nuances which may not be based in actual history.

“When reading most historical sources on the origin of the Christmas tree, it is almost universally and offhandedly mentioned that it was borrowed from pagan religious festivals and adapted into Christianity. But when one closely examines these claims, they seem to have little basis in fact. Most of the traditions associated with pagan festivals are only remotely similar to Christmas celebrations.”²

After reviewing many sources, I am convinced, at this point, to understand there’s just a rehashing of the same information over and over again. As you know, sometimes websites and social postings are in competition with one another to gain greater viewership. This includes You Tube “ministers.” One such preacher goes as far as saying, “Christmas is of the Devil.”³ Well, this preacher also denies the Trinity as a biblical description of the relationship between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.⁴ The Trinity also came to be as a response to the heretical teaching about the Godhead, specifically called the Arian Controversy.⁵ As you can possibly imagine, there is not any scholarly work completed on the origins of Christmas trees and decorations mainly because, though cultural and traditional in nature, are primarily preferential in practice. At this point individuals, ministries and churches have added their own spin on the Christmas tree and decorations. It includes possible demonic influence at the root of celebrating in such fashion. “Holiness” churches were well known for prohibiting trees, decorations, Halloween candy, costumes, playing cards, dice, going to the movies and anything else that the culture created for entertainment.

What is the response of some of those outside the church about Christmas trees and decorations? Take Saudi Arabia as an example. Foreigners with a Christian belief system are allowed to celebrate Christmas privately and only in their own homes. Therefore, they place their Christmas trees in a discreet location inside the home. Christmas lights? Not tolerated in this Islamic nation. If it is not yet clear to you know that they make the connection between the Christmas tree and Christ. Enough said. Let’s move on.

MOVING ON

As we look at the history of this tree or as we call it, a Christmas tree, over the centuries it has taken on various meanings depending on the context. Does this mean that for each cultural context that those people automatically accepted the previous meaning of this tree or evergreen? The clear answer of course is no. Each culture established its own benchmark and meaning. That means they used something from another culture and placed new meaning on it without subjecting the new meaning to the interpretations of the other societies.

² <https://answersingenesis.org/christmas/do-christmas-trees-have-pagan-roots/>

³ https://youtu.be/XNfW_QHDJD0?si=86sRDcuEV_N38Yix

⁴ Gen 1:26; Mat 3:16-17; John 10:30; John 16:13-15; Mat 28:19; 1 Cor 8:6; 2 Cor 13:14.

⁵ The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. “First Council of Nicaea.”

Some will undoubtedly say Christians are therefore of a higher spiritual authority, mandate, call and truth than those who have created their own gods. To that the response is, “Yes. Absolutely correct.” But even in Christianity we have been able to commandeer some generalities of other ideas and bring clarity to them or to shed light on our own faith directly. For this we can appeal directly to Scripture.

“So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: ‘Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription: ‘To the unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.’” (Acts 17:22-23 ESV)

Here, Paul used a pagan’s rendering of an unknown god and gave it meaning. Not only did the pagans not have the Lord God in mind when they created that relic, but many of them also rejected it outright through their mocking of Paul’s reasoning (Acts 17:32 ESV). But wait one minute. Paul goes even further by using one of their pagan quotes and give it new meaning. This is what he said,

“For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring.” (Acts 17:28 KJV)

So, Paul says that the glimmer of hope you have found in your unknown god; the glimmer of hope you grabbed hold of through the words of your poets; all refer to Jesus Christ. In essence, Paul gave it new meaning.

SHOULD WE BE CAREFUL WITH OUR LIBERTY IN CHRIST?

Paul gave new meaning to cultic symbols and parabolic sayings by pagan poets. Could we do the same? A quick and non-nuanced answer is yes. But we should always be on the lookout for getting entrapped by secular symbols and catch phrases. For this we must be discerning. We should be careful not to fall prey to statements that contradict the Word of God.

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.” (1 Jn. 4:1-3 ESV)

In the meantime, there are those who are not in a place where engaging in Christmas celebrations, and/or decorations, which honor Christ, have issues with it. With them we demonstrate charity and a level of empathy towards them. This was an issue that the early church faced. How would you feel about eating food that was offered to idols? There are Christians today who refuse to eat food where there are statues of foreign gods decorating a restaurant. Their conscious will not allow it. But look at how Paul dealt with the situation.

“But if someone says to you, “This has been offered in sacrifice,” then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience--²⁹ I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience?” (1 Cor. 10:28-29 ESV)

It is clear under normal circumstances the believer would abstain from eating this food. But also note in the passage that this was meant for the conscience of the unbeliever. Paul did not have another believer in mind. We can assume that the believer would need to grow in their faith as they encounter such issues. Again, Paul was not saying he had a problem with how the food was presented. Instead, it was in deference to the unbeliever whom a disciple could be trying to reach with the gospel.

WHAT NOW?

It's up to you. This was a long way around to end up with the answer, “It's up to you.” But it's important for us to engage in such conversations due to the various spiritual needs we have within Christendom. But here are a few principles to keep in mind.

- During the Christmas season, make sure both your heart and decorations are centered on Christ.
- Keep your heart close to Jesus Christ and don't get trapped by the commercial aspect of the season.
- Those who are at liberty to decorate and give gifts, do not disparage those who don't.
- Those who are not at liberty to decorate or give gifts, do not disparage those who do (*There are no biblical prohibitions unless your actions and heart are misguided*).
- When you give, don't expect a gift in return.
- When you receive a gift, be grateful.

Christmas is a wonderful way to display the message of God's love for the world. Every time we give we demonstrate our thoughtfulness of another. If someone were to ask you why you gave a gift say, “*It is an illustration of God's love for us through Christ.*” The Christmas season is a time we could use as an opportunity to share Christ. It may require less effort with your evangelism if you care to take advantage of the moment.

“Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven” (Mt 5:14–16 MESS).