

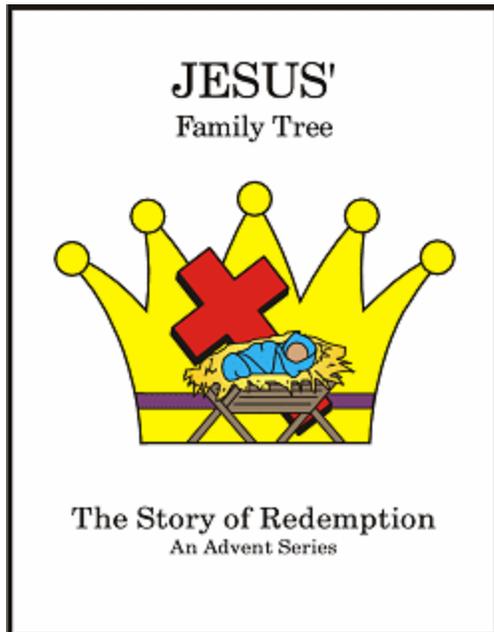


REACHING

CHILDREN'S MINISTRY INTERNATIONAL, INCORPORATED

REDEEMING CHRISTMAS

Brad Winsted



Have you ever thought about how much of the year is directly or indirectly affected by the year-end celebrations we call Christmas and New Year's (grouped together in "season's greetings")? Now that the reds and greens of the holiday season no longer wait for Thanksgiving to pass, but quickly move in and push away the oranges and blacks of Halloween, and can easily extend into mid-January, it turns out that as much as 20 percent of our year is taken up by this season. If you are like me, you quickly get tired of all the garishness and commercialism of the holidays, yet put up with it, longing for simpler times when family and friends would gather around Christmas trees and sing carols by the crackling fire.

It shouldn't come as a big surprise that much of this season is anything but Christian, even though Christmas is celebrated by most Christians. Christmas was imposed on the Christian world by an act of the Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century. After Constantine's conversion, he wanted nothing to do with the celebration of Saturnalia and the winter solstice of late December, where for many days the pagans would celebrate until the days started becoming longer again. For a superstitious bunch of people, this was very important, and the revelry and debauchery of that celebration would not readily be given up by the officially "converted" pagans of ancient Rome. A quick compromise was in order, and the celebration of Christ's birth was superimposed on the pagan holiday.

Nowhere in the Bible are believers called upon to celebrate Christ's birth. His resurrection, yes, "this is done every Sunday", but not his birth. Can you see why the Puritans were "down" on this holiday and prohibited the celebration of it? So what has happened? Why is it that even in most non-Christian nations, "Merry Christmases" are happily exchanged?

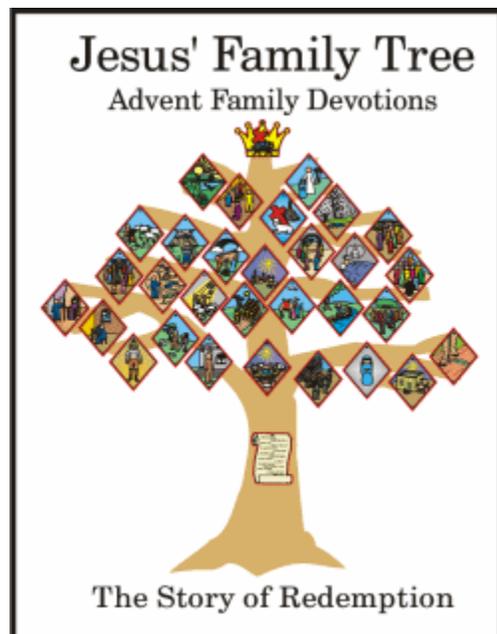
Most everyone loves a party, and thus Christmas became linked happily with the celebrations at the end of the year to form an elongated period in the Christian calendar. If Advent is added to Nativity and Epiphany, we easily end up with six weeks. Through it all, the shopping, the presents, Santa, parties, frivolity, and vacations can take away all or most of the significance of God's coming to earth as mortal man.

So what should a believer do? Christmas is clearly one of those days that can be ignored without incurring God's displeasure. Should we "pass it by" because of the irreligious activities that dominate it in the lives of others? (I asked the same thing about Halloween a few weeks ago, and I believe that this day can also be redeemed," but that will have to await another article.)

How We Redeem Christmas?

Right after my wife and I were married, we decided to try to insure that everything we did would somehow bring glory to God. Christmas was included. So we looked at our practices and decided that some aspects of traditional Christmas observance would go and others would stay. For instance:

(1) The Christmas tree (which probably had pagan origins in northern Europe) became a "Jesse tree," the family tree of Christ. We decided to add a family-made symbol to it every day, pointing to the coming of Christ. So after a few days it sports an ark, Joseph's coat, David's harp, and lots of other Old Testament symbols. Believe me, your neighbors will want to have some explanation, especially when these are the only symbols on the tree. This culminates on Christmas morning, when the "chi and rho" symbol of Christ as Savior is placed on top. (NOTE: CMI has two products to help you with your own



JESSE TREE.

(2) Santa Claus had to go. Too many divine attributes are given to him: omniscience (he knows who is naughty or nice), omnipresence (all homes are visited on the same night), spiritual transcendence (he is able to get into your home), omnipotence (he acts as the judge of all), etc. We didn't want our children to reject the One who truly has these attributes as being make-believe, like Santa.

(3) Christmas cards became an opportunity to present the gospel clearly, especially the need for a Savior. So the snowy Christmas scenes gave way to a family-designed card depicting spiritual truths. It's becoming so easy to send "customized" Christmas cards with real biblical messages of hope and salvation in the "Incarnation" of God to man.

(4) Carols and Christmas Eve services became opportunities to share Christ with our neighbors. Unbelievers will listen to Scripture and Christmas hymns at this time of year, so make the most of it! Your neighbors would really appreciate (even if they are unbelievers) your going over and singing Christmas carols and bringing some Christmas cookies to them. This is a great time for hospitality.

(5) Now about gift-giving (I know many of you are asking, "How did they get around this one?"): clearly the greed and anticipation of getting something can overshadow the indescribable gift of Christ, especially for children. So we don't give gifts on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. Instead, we use those times to have friends over and share a meal with them. Early on Christmas morning, I act out the Christmas story with hand puppets. I would have thought that this would get a little corny for my teenagers, but they still love it and look forward to it! Our living room is transformed into a little Christmas playhouse almost instantaneously. And as for the gifts, they get passed around on Epiphany (celebrating the coming of the Wise Men) in mid-January. And that way we get to take advantage of the post-Christmas sales!

A Warning!

There is a warning that comes with the above. Both my wife's parents and my parents were not excited about our efforts to reform their cherished holiday symbols (trashing Santa, reindeer, secular songs, Christmas cards, gifts on Christmas morning, the reading of "'Twas the Night before Christmas," etc.). And the perception of arrogance and self-righteousness on our part probably didn't help much, either. Family

traditions are "sacred" rites for many people... change them at your own peril, and do so only very carefully!

This is just the beginning of the way we have attempted to "redeem" this day for the Lord and add a godly tradition to our family. If you have some ideas, please contact me.

You must put Christ first in Christmas, if you decide to celebrate it, or else the world will hand you a big "season's greetings" devoid of Jesus Christ.

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