

Chronicles of Diversity

Your leadership weekly



A winter bridge

Christmyth

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Well it looks like we may have a white Christmas in Seattle after all these years. Of course this isn't the real Christmas, but the Christmas celebrated by the Orthodox churches. Which brings up the questions, which is the real Christmas, or is there a real Christmas at all?

I received a comment after last week's message that jokingly said that they were very happy with the "Twelve Days of Christmas" and saw no need to develop another holiday.

My response was to ask what he did with his "Partridge in a Pear Tree" but more importantly for a married man, what about his "Eight Maids a Milking?" But did you know the song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" really refers to the twelve days of Christmas in the Church Calendar?

Having been raised in a church which followed the church calendar, I was aware that after Christmas came Epiphany, but it really made no impression on my young mind, that there were actually twelve days from Christmas to Epiphany.

As I grew, I learned that sometime in early January, some churches in certain locations celebrated a day when the "Three Wise Men" came. I never did get a good answer to how these wise guys got from a long distance away, to Bethlehem in just a few days. Especially when it says in the Bible that Herod killed all the male children less than two years old. So did the wise men come in January the year after Jesus' birth, or was it two years later? And if we really didn't know the year in which they came, how did we know what date they arrived, and how long did they stay, and where? Was there no room in the inns in Bethlehem for three kings?

The response to those questions was: "The Wise Men probably didn't come on that particular day, it was just on that day that the church celebrated the day that the Wise Men came. You ask too many questions?"

So on this Epiphany, as heavy snow falls outside my window, I write these words to answer my own questions, and perhaps yours, on what is up with Christmas? After all these wise men were really

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gentiles, who knew about the coming of Messiah, and wanted to see him in person. But in able to see that truth for ourselves, we must look at the myth of Christ's birth to gain some context.

Myths are really stories of the distant times we use to help us remember our past or give us some insight into our humanity. There are many myths based on some historical event or happening, some are pure fiction. Some we can't tell. What separates Christmyth, from other myths is there is no doubt it was a historical event. Not only in prophesy, but in actual history, the coming of Messiah, or Jesus, was foretold and happened. The only problem is whether you believe that Jesus really was Messiah, or Immanuel. That decision is based on religious faith, whether that faith be of God, or naturalistic wisdom of man.

There is a popular myth circulating that the folk song "The Twelve Days of Christmas" was written during the time in England when the Roman Catholic Church was being persecuted by the Protestant Church of England, which may be true. In the song myth, the twelve days of Christmas stand for parts of the Roman Catechism. The problem with this myth is that those same twelve days and presents are also a symbolized part of the Episcopal catechism as well, and do not in any way signify the doctrinal differences between the two churches.

My myth making opportunity here is to say, I believe (You have to believe, you can't start a myth on a hunch.) that the author of the twelve days of Christmas song thought there needed to be a song to celebrate Christmas for the whole twelve days, and not just one. Whether the author was Catholic, Episcopal, or some other Protestant sect, does not matter. If you want to make some religious significance out of those gifts on each of the days, I will leave this in your own myth making power.

During the church calendar (Lutheran version) for the twelve days of Christmas you have December 25th Christmas; December 26th, the commemoration, or feast of St. Steven, Martyr; December 27, St. John, Apostle, Evangelist; December 28, The Holy Innocents, Martyrs, and January 1, The Circumcision and the Name of Jesus.

I got so bogged down in what follows that I didn't have the opportunity to see if those holy days, except for New Years, predated the Christmas celebrations. If that is the case, we have, besides the partridge, two turtle doves, three french hens, four calling birds, and a myth of Catholic penance and piety.

As I researched this season I started with Epiphany. Why does Christmas end with Epiphany? Does anybody really believe that the Three Wise men actually came on January 6th? Well, not really. But on that day through "The Three Wise Men, the church as actually celebrated that the gospel was given to the gentiles and Jesus became their eternal king. That's not a bad thing to celebrate sometime in the year by a special occasion.

But there are two other generally recognized reasons for the Feast of Epiphany. One was the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1). In His baptism Jesus' sonship with God is recognized as manifested into this world. Now this raised a question in my mind of the significance between a new years circumcision feast and a potential regenerative baptism five days later. But I don't think anyone but me would be troubled by this tension. But it is important to know that Jesus was not official until He was circumcised on the eighth day and given His name.

Finally, was the miracle at Cana (John 2) Jesus' divine prerogative to perform miracles was first manifest at this time. Historically, Epiphany is the third most important feast in the church calendar, ranking behind Easter, and Pentecost respectively, and before Christmas.

So what happened to Christmas? My research, into not the pagan roots of Christmas this week, but Christmas in church history was down right depressing at first reading. For instance, I found out that those fundamentalist, calvinist, Scotch Presbyterians didn't celebrate Christmas until the 19th century. I mused that was probably why my Irish, Scotch ancestors came to America. The more I read, the more I learned that I had been taken, and you my dear readers had been fooled. The Christmas we all loved as children, and still love as adults was nothing but a myth, or Christmyth.

But that changed when I stumbled across a documentary on the life of C. S. Lewis on public television. Along with his friend J. R. R. Tolkien, they were the best fictional myth writers of the 20th century. Both of them in their works mythologized and personalized the great battles between good and evil, finding audiences well beyond any Christian genre.

In their myths, both authors wrote about a king that was real and saved the land and the good people from destruction by outside evil and evil men. These myths contain elements of the gospel of Jesus Christ, hidden in the literature, myth, stories, and symbolism.

I can remember my mother telling me when I was a wee lad, that it was all right for her to give me gifts that I didn't and shouldn't expect any other day of the year, because we celebrated Christmas to understand a gift that was priceless. Even in my young years I was taught, by a miracle of God, because in those days we really were not considered church people, that this priceless gift was the person of Jesus. The baby in a manger.

Myths based on God's eternal truths are powerful. If in doubt, just read some internet reviews of the movie the Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King. To paraphrase a Beatles statement, "It is more popular than Jesus!" But the Lord of the Rings can lead to deeper eternal truths. The Beatles can only lead you to them, which in the end might produce a deeper search, but that can only come through God's grace also.

My Christmyth, and probably yours also, is based on a nice story. But that is OK, provided you know that all the Christmas facts don't always line up. This leads to the question: What is the future for Christmas as we know it?

When I was a kid, Christmas presents had to do with the coming of baby Jesus, the greatest Christmas present. In a society in which Jesus is just at best a good moral teacher, there is no reason to celebrate Christmas, unless of course you are a retail merchant. In that case where half of your annual sales are recorded in the Holiday season, Christmas is essential, it is the essence of your life, your reason for living, your religion.

Who knows, soon instead of pre Christmas sales, stores will be holding seances to bring in winter shoppers. A chance to get the winter karma in line with the winter solstice, thereby enkindle all into a festive season, Stuff and parties are the answer to your winter problems. Buy now, eat, drink, and watch football while it is dark and dreary, long before spring brings growth and fertility and we can have another pagan feast. Then, you could look back at January 2004 as the year when there were two collegiate football champions and the Seahawks almost made it out of the wild card round, and you gained another five pounds.

In our current Christmyth where does God get any glory? Perhaps in the wishful thinking of evangelical Christians. But is it really wishful thinking or is it nostalgia? The Christian Christmas has evolved to such a state that we need to develop another myth than what has served us for a few hundred years. As we discussed last week in the Festival of Immanuel, there is a hope and a contrast to a dying Christmyth. In the Festival of Immanuel, Christmas returns as I remember it as a youngster, a night of sleepless anticipation. Redemption of all my longing desires lay under the Christmas tree, as soon as I think I can get up and not get yelled at. Simple, but not a bad myth.

So as a point to ponder. How will Christmas be celebrated during the coming Great Tribulation? What kind of celebration will it be? From an ancient source from the middle east, is found this reference to an early Babylonian religious festival:

*For the customs of the peoples are futile;
For one cuts a tree from the forest,
The work of the hands of the workman, with the ax.
They decorate it with silver and gold;
They fasten it with nails and hammers
So that it will not topple.
They are upright, like a palm tree,
And they cannot speak;
They must be carried,
Because they cannot go by themselves.
Do not be afraid of them,
For they cannot do evil,
Nor can they do any good."*

Have you ever heard anything that bizarre? It sounds like a discussion of a Christmas tree doesn't it? But Christmyth trees date to Germany in the middle ages. Or do they? Perhaps I can add a little context:

Jeremiah 10 1-11

Hear the word which the LORD speaks to you, O house of Israel.

Thus says the LORD:

*“Do not learn the way of the Gentiles;
Do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven,
For the Gentiles are dismayed at them.
For the customs of the peoples are futile;
For one cuts a tree from the forest,
The work of the hands of the workman, with the ax.
They decorate it with silver and gold;
They fasten it with nails and hammers
So that it will not topple.
They are upright, like a palm tree,
And they cannot speak;
They must be carried,
Because they cannot go by themselves.
Do not be afraid of them,
For they cannot do evil,
Nor can they do any good.”*

*Inasmuch as there is none like You, O LORD
(You are great, and Your name is great in might),
Who would not fear You, O King of the nations?
For this is Your rightful due.
For among all the wise men of the nations,
And in all their kingdoms,
There is none like You.
But they are altogether dull-hearted and foolish;
A wooden idol is a worthless doctrine.
Silver is beaten into plates;
It is brought from Tarshish,
And gold from Uphaz,
The work of the craftsman
And of the hands of the metalsmith;
Blue and purple are their clothing;
They are all the work of skillful men.
But the LORD is the true God;
He is the living God and the everlasting King.
At His wrath the earth will tremble,
And the nations will not be able to endure His indignation.
Thus you shall say to them: “The gods that have not made the heavens and the earth shall perish from
the earth and from under these heavens.”*

The context continues from there and you can be so edified. During the Great Tribulation, the God that created the universe and sent His Son to redeem fallen mankind from the curse of sin and death, will not be worshiped. However, during that time all gods, but one will cease to exist, because false gods are the creation of man, exalting his own self interest. Evergreen trees will be worshiped during the dark season of the year until the second coming of Christ. The question I have for myself this next week: After the Rapture, will fake Christmas trees be allowed? Maybe I can place mine next to a box of Bibles.

Seeds for Prayer

We have purposely not used this gift for some weeks now, because no matter how you look at it, prayers and prayer requests usually have directly to do with stuff, or their lack.

But at the beginning of a new year, it is a myth of ministry that you should share something about your vision or desires for the new year. My desire is still, to have the where with all to obtain a training facility for missionaries and community development workers going overseas. The cool phrase now used is Sustainable Development. Philosophically, a Fishers School that teaches people how to raise fish they eat. That vision requires helpers, both personal and in ministry, finances, and the faith that if we build it, they will come.

I talked with a real estate agent last night about a place in the Colville Valley. The short of it, is that I cannot support both myself and the payments with what I can earn in the area, little lone have finances available to provide ministry to those who might be going to a land with few material blessings. To use this particular place as an example, we are looking at a capital budget of about \$500,000. or monthly expenditures of about \$5,000. per month for the whole program. About \$300,000 for the place (\$2,000./ month) and the rest for ministry development and other expenses.

I have in my background of no fame and fortune, some wheeler dealer and OPM (Other People's Money) experiences, but I have never used them personally. Therefore, all I can say is that I think this potential property would work very well in the vision I believe the Lord has given me. It is only a piece of stuff however, and I am relying on His power to bring it into use for His glory.

The major hurdle for me is to get to where the ministry can become self supporting. I do not believe it would be all that long if the program were initially properly funded. That would include all the above expenses with a little left over to expand the ministry. In the past I have tried to offer the sellers of some properties, a draft drawn on my eternal account in heaven. But because of their lack of faith for some reason they want the fake money of this world. Of that worldly capital, this adventure is well beyond my own personal ability. It can be only of God, which is as it should be.

If you would be interested in taking a virtual tour of this 100 acre chunk of God's country, the following link will get you there:

<http://tours.tourfactory.com/tours/tour.asp?af=1&home=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Ecbseells%2Ecom&slink=%2D7&t=167113&sc=692400&s=1>