

Where is He? The Dilemma of Christmas

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As the year draws toward a close, the annual debate reignites among us over how we ought to relate to Christmas. Should we buy presents, send cards, attend the Christmas dinners, put up Christmas trees, allow our children to participate in nativity plays? The dilemmas come thick and fast. While some jump into the Christmas spirit with both feet, others wish to pull the covers over their heads until the season goes away.

Some basic facts are clear about Christmas. We know that the date, the 25th December and many of the traditional practices of Christmas have their roots in paganism. We also know that there is no biblical command to celebrate Jesus birth on a particular day. So should we take a firm stand and “touch not the unclean thing”? Or can we in all good conscience separate ancient pagan practices from the modern observance of the day?

The December 1996 issue of the SDA publication Signs of the Times, stated, “The major problem with Christmas in our day is not paganism, but materialism” (p. 14). Obviously no church members will be celebrating Christmas by bowing down to pagan gods. However, there is a strong argument that materialism is merely a modern form of paganism with many worshipping at the altar of consumerism. The ‘hard sell’ commercialization of Christmas seems to start earlier and earlier every year. News reports indicate that in this country the average household spend on Christmas will be around £900, with much of that spent on a fruitless pursuit of happiness.

The Christmas season is often described as ‘the season of goodwill.’ Undoubtedly many intentionally good things happen at Christmas, but if the statistics are to be believed there is often more bad will than good. The voluntary organization Lifeshare, which caters for the needs of homeless people, state that, “Whilst Christmas brings joy to many, for others it is a time of loneliness, hardship and depression - when the suicide rate traditionally peaks” (www.lifeshare.co.uk). The sad reality is that for many, Christmas only brings an increased sense of loneliness and isolation. There are more incidences of domestic violence; more alcohol related deaths, more relaxing of sexual morality, more financial difficulties and more marital breakups. All in a season supposedly celebrating Jesus.

When the Wise Men entered Jerusalem, they had one question on their lips which is of great relevance to us today as we debate the Christmas issue, “Where is He that is born King of the Jews? (Matthew 2:2). Whichever side of the debate we lean toward, the question is, “Where is Jesus?” In our attempt to promote our viewpoints, we can share a truth obnoxiously and we can embrace a lie graciously. The danger is that we can lose sight of He, who is supposed to be the ‘reason for the season’.

Ellen White took a very pragmatic view of Christmas. She stated, “As the 25th of December is observed to commemorate the birth of Christ, as the children have been instructed by precept and example that this was indeed a day of gladness and

rejoicing, you will find it a difficult matter to pass over this period without giving it some attention. It can be made to serve a very good purpose” (*The Adventist Home* p 478). Few would take seriously a suggestion that we should stop using the names of the days of the week because they are pagan in origin. It is possible to utilize Christmas without buying into its falsehoods and excesses.

Again Ellen White comments, “It is right to bestow upon one another tokens of love and remembrance if we do not in this forget God, our best friend. We should make our gifts such as will prove a real benefit to the receiver (*ibid.* p. 479). She emphasizes that Jesus should not be forgotten; that Christmas should be used as a time to honour God; we should turn the thoughts of the children toward unselfish service rather than personal gain, and that we should provide innocent enjoyment for the day.

Mark Finley comments that, “The Christmas season is a time to celebrate and rejoice. It’s a time to praise. We were not left alone in the depths of our sin. In the darkness of our rebellion, there is a light. Imprisoned in sin’s bondage, there is hope” (*Solid Ground*, 393).

Christmas, we are told, is all about giving. God has demonstrated the ultimate gift, “For God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Whether or not we choose to celebrate Christmas, our lives should be a celebration of the birth, death, resurrection and heavenly ministry of Jesus.