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On Christmas Matters

Part of this treatise is from Dr Diego Sausa with additions and final edition by Pastor Dan Majaducon

There are two conflicting statements during this particular season: First, “Christians should not celebrate Christmas because of its pagan origin.” Second, “Christians should celebrate Christmas because it commemorates the incarnation or the birth of Christ.” Which one is correct?

The truth is, there is no biblical mandate that we should or we should not celebrate the birth or the incarnation of Christ. One cannot be dogmatic of whatever position he or she holds.

Is the 25th December Celebration a Pagan Original?

The popularly known first recorded celebration of Christ's Incarnation or birth on 25th December was the date AD 336, an official proclamation at the time when the Roman Emperor embraced Christianity. But what is not known to many, is that primary patristic historical accounts predate AD 336 by almost 200 years. The traditional date 25th December, was based on earlier patristic estimation, although there is no exact biblical data to back up, they assumed that the angel's announcement to Mary that she would conceive the Messiah, happened on March 25, hence, nine months later, that is, on December 25, must have been, in their estimation, the birth of Christ.

In other words, whatever form of celebration or commemoration by patristic fathers and the earlier Christians had about the birth of Christ, it was established way before AD 336. Here is the historical evidence:

In his work "Chronographiai" dated in AD 221, which predates Emperor Aurelian's decree (Roman Empire was still pagan at this time) to celebrate 25th of December as a pagan festival by more than half a century, the Christian traveller writer-historian, Sextus Julius Africanus, indicated that the Incarnation of Christ by way of Mary's virgin conception was on March 25 and, hence, it follows that nine months after that, it is calculated that Christ's birth was on December 25 (Iulius Africanus, Sextus. Chronographiae, AD 221, Tractate 92, Martin Wallraff, ed., Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co. GK, Berlin, 2007, p. 274).

Another primary patristic evidence, is from the church Father Hippolytus who lived from AD 170 to AD 235, and who had a direct link to the last surviving apostle of Christ, John the Beloved Apostle, the author of the book of Revelation, the Gospel of John and the three additional epistles. Hippolytus was a disciple of Irenaeus, who was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of John the apostle.

Hippolytus writes in AD 204 in his "Commentary on Daniel" (which was 70 years before the Pagan Emperor Aurelian in Pagan Rome decreed in AD 274 that December 25 was the feast of Sol Invictus):

“For the first appearance of our Lord, in the flesh, in which he was born in Bethlehem, took place eight days before the Kalends of January [December 25], on a Wednesday, while Augustus was reigning in his forty-second year, and from Adam, five thousand and five hundred years. He suffered in his thirty-third year, eight days before the Kalends of April [March 25], on a Friday, in the eighteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, while Fufius and Rubellius were Consuls” (Hippolytus, “Commentary on Daniel,” IV.23.3, AD 204, translated by T.C. Schmidt).

Further, an earlier primary patristic historical account is by Church Father Theophilus, Bishop of Caesarea (A.D. 115-181), who lived even earlier than Hippolytus during the time of Emperor Commodus (before pagan Rome became Christian) and within 17 years of the last apostle, and was bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, already testified that Christians celebrated Christ's birth on December 25, he says,

“We ought to celebrate the birth-day of our Lord on what day soever the 25th of December shall happen” (Magdeburgenses, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, de origi Festorum Christianorum).

And so, in the Christian world, that is, during the post-apostolic Christian era, before the period of centralised world dominance of the Roman Catholic Church, it was a tradition established by the patristic Christian community to commemorate the Advent of our Lord as a Man to save the world.

But of course, it has to be made clear here that the date is only based on their estimation. Could the patristic community be wrong about the date? Certainly! Any date can be wrong! To add with no ambiguity, any current scholarly argument regarding the exact date is simply an educated conjecture. We can find different theological scholarly works from different authors with different estimation of the month Jesus was born ranging from March, April, September, October and December—all with brilliant theological and historical sources provided. However, still the Bible does not reveal the exact date.

But the fact remains, that an attempt to observe the Lord’s Advent by Christians with their own estimate of the date was therefore a Christian original and not a pagan copycat as floated around hundreds of years later mostly by critical scholars and non-believers in the 1600s to the 1800s and is continuing on today.

There is no question that Rome later on paganised the celebration of the Advent of Jesus; and as to how Christmas is celebrated today as a result, is a different matter altogether. But the idea that Christians copied from the pagans is, therefore, falsehood, and is a myth. It is the other way around. What has become so pagan about Christmas started only later and not earlier.

Are All Traditions Bad?

Many man-made traditions are bad, but, likewise many man-made traditions are also good. Every culture has good and bad traditions. In

Afghanistan for instance, tribes have very strong culture that when a stranger who needs help comes to their house or community, it is the obligation of the people not only to help, and feed that stranger, but likewise, it is their duty to protect him from any possible harm while he is in their custody. They would be willing to die trying to protect that stranger. Of course, there are also bad heathen traditions. But the point is, there are good traditions.

In the Philippines, younger siblings or younger folks cannot call their older siblings, their parents-in-laws or their older folks by their first names, or address a female "woman," because that would be very disrespectful and insulting. There has to be a respect word like "pô," or "kuya" or "manong" or in the case of the parents-in-laws, they have to be called "Ma" (Mom) or "Pa" (Dad).

However, in Christ's time, calling a mother or a female person "woman" was a sign of utmost respect (see John 19:26–27). In the West, people call their older siblings and their parents-in-laws by their first names, a practice that is tantamount to insult and "blasphemy" in the Philippines.

So, there are good and bad traditions in every culture and a tradition that is bad in one culture may actually be good in another. The Christian tradition of celebrating the birth or Incarnation of Christ can be a good tradition because it celebrates the arrival and incarnation of the God of the universe on this earth to save humanity. It was the greatest act of God for the entire humankind that changed the course of man's ultimate destiny which made it possible for mankind to be saved from his default eternal death penalty and to live with God blissfully eternally.

However, the crucial questions that one would ask are 'what' and 'how'. What truly is the motive of the celebration; and that 'what' question would then inform the 'how' of the celebration.

God Himself Adapted to A Pagan Tradition Without Syncretizing

It is noteworthy that God Himself adapted to the pagan tradition of "covenant" (berit) as based on the Ancient Near-east Suzerain-Vassal covenant culture when He established His covenant with Israel.

There are two basic types of covenants existed in the ancient Near East: The parity treaty (between equal parties) and the suzerain-vassal treaty (between a greater and a lesser party). In suzerain-vassal treaties, the greater party (i.e., the suzerain) provided benefits such as military protection and land grants to the lesser party (i.e., the vassal). In response, the vassal owed the suzerain financial tribute and "consummate loyalty." Consequently, vassals could have only one suzerain, for to take another "lord" or "father" would be tantamount to treason.

The covenant Yahweh established with Israel at Mount Sinai exhibits striking parallels with Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties which had six basic features: 1) a preamble that identifies the suzerain; 2) a historical prologue that recounts the previous relationship between the parties; 3) covenant stipulations to which the vassal must agree; 4) provisions for periodic reading and safekeeping of the covenant; 5) witnesses to the covenant; and 6) blessings and curses should the vassal either keep or fail to keep the covenant. The covenant at Sinai contains all six of these characteristics.

In other words, God contextualised His truth to Israel by adapting to a pagan tradition that was familiar to the Israelites. Thus, not all pagan traditions are bad, and God does not prohibit something just because the origin of the tradition is pagan, He adapted to it Himself to communicate truth. Technically, this act of God of adapting to human culture is called contextualisation. His contextualisation, however, did not result in syncretisation, that is, it did not result in adapting to the evil and false practices of the pagans, instead, God communicated His truth by using a pagan tradition. So, Scripture does not prohibit a practice or tradition just because the origin is pagan.

In fact, the Filipino and Spanish word "Dios" is likewise of pagan origin, it comes from the Greek word Zeus who was the pagan main god of the Greeks (see Acts 14:13 where the anglicised name of the god "Zeus" comes from the original Greek word "Dios"). Does that mean that we should stop calling God "Dios" in Filipino or in Spanish just because the word has pagan origin? If that is the case, then we should start changing Scripture because one of the most common names by which God is being called, 'Elohim, is also the name of the pagan gods. See Exodus 20:3 where the word "gods" is also 'Elohim in Hebrew which refers to the pagan gods.

A Brief Summary on EGW'S Entire Statements Concerning Christmas

One of the pioneers of the church, Ellen G. White, aware of the world's custom of Christmas celebration that is so far away from the true meaning of the Advent of Christ, suggested neither alternative date to celebrate the Advent nor criticise the use of the word 'Christmas' like many today who think it to be a taboo to use the word. It is also noteworthy that she does not spend her energy complaining why the celebration is happening on December.

However, she fully exerted the effort to writing and admonishing believers to turn this particular season into a blessing and not a curse, and to make use of the occasion to magnify Christ as oppose to self. The entirety of her writing on the subject does not shun away from the celebration but on correcting the way it is celebrated. Therefore, I encourage you to read all her statements on the subject of Christmas and the celebrations surrounding it. Her statements are provided by the EGW Estate with no commentary on them but simply presents her writing as primary sources. Here is the link:

<https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-christmas-html/>

Conclusion

To conclude, there is no date for the birth of Christ from the Bible. There is no command to celebrate or not to celebrate it. No one can be so dogmatic about his or her position on this matter. However, the idea that the commemoration or celebration of the birth of Christ is of pagan origin is inaccurate. Historical evidences record that patristic community had a clear attempt to point the date of Christ's birth and commemorate it although there is no biblical data to back up their estimation. God uses pagan cultural practice when he established his Sinaitic covenant with his people. God contextualised His truth to Israel by adapting to a pagan tradition that was familiar to the Israelites. Could this be the reason why Ellen G. White has no qualms about the celebration except for the fact that the way the world celebrates it is extremely far away from the true essence of Christmas, thus, spend her time correcting the motive and how the season should be celebrated?

Lastly, are you **not** celebrating? That is perfectly fine. Are you celebrating? Please check your motive. This informs **how** one may do it.

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