

Christmas Controversy

by Frederick Wickert



There is a great amount of controversy over Christmas swirling around our country these days. We have schools banning Christmas Trees and changing from Christmas to "Holidays." Stores are prohibiting their employees from telling customers "Merry Christmas," but "Happy Holidays," is acceptable. Crosses and nativity scenes are being banned from all public properties. The list goes on and on.

The surprising thing about it is that it is nothing new. It has been going on for a very long time and the tide of anti-Christmas anti-Christian ebbs and flows. As early as the year 245, the theologian Origen denounced the idea of celebrating the birth of Christ. He contended that only sinners, not saints, celebrated their birthdays.

Christmas was promoted in the east as part of the revival of Catholicism in 378. In the Middle Ages Christmas was a public festival, incorporating ivy, holly, and other evergreens, and the practice of gift giving. During the Reformation, some Protestants condemned Christmas celebration as "trappings of popery." The Catholic Church responded by promoting it in an even more religious form.

In 1647 Puritan rulers of England banned Christmas, and Pro-Christmas rioting broke out in several cities and Christmas decorations were seen everywhere. The restoration of 1660 ended the ban, but many non-conforming clergy still disapproved of Christmas. In early colonial America, the Puritans disapproved of Christmas and it was outlawed in Boston from 1659 to 1681. Christians in New York and Virginia celebrated Christmas freely.

After the American Revolution, Christmas fell out of favor because it was considered a British custom. By the 1820's, Christmas in England also was dying out. In 1843, Charles Dickens published his story, "A Christmas Carol," and the book played a major role in renewing interest in Christmas as a holiday, both in England and the United States. In 1850, Harriet Beecher Stowe in her book, "The First Christmas in New England," created a character that complained the true meaning of Christmas was being lost in a shopping spree.

The meaning of Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. The December 25th date is not the actual birth date of Jesus Christ, but for the sake of political correctness was combined with other traditional winter festivals. The Bible does not reveal the actual date of his birth.

To further complicate the issue, a Santa Clause character has become prominent. The basis for Santa Clause is Saint Nicholas of Myra in Lyria, a province of the Byzantine Anatolia, now in Turkey. He was famous for giving gifts to the poor. The word for Saint Nicholas in Dutch is Sinterklaas. In America in English, it became Santa Clause.

A poem published in 1822, by Clement Clarke Moore, "A Visit From Saint Nickolas," better known as "Twas The Night Before Christmas," was published. The popular poem did more than any other thing to create the myth of Santa Clause and his reindeer. Later a new lead reindeer was added, when the song recorded by Gene Autry, written by a Montgomery Ward copywriter, called "Rudolph, The Red Nosed Reindeer," became one of the most popular Christmas season songs in history.

Many in recent decades believe too much emphasis is placed on Santa Clause and not enough emphasis on Jesus Christ. I have to agree with that. Many fear that Christmas as a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ will be lost.

I recently received an e-mail in which someone had written a letter allegedly from Jesus himself. It was the writer's idea of what Jesus might say about the situation. The letter suggested that if we are all that concerned about nativity scenes that perhaps we should all put a nativity scene in our yards. That way there will be so many of them; there will be no need for any on public property.

I find the idea a good one and highly recommend it. In my own case, I do not have a nativity scene, but I have for a number of years had a large cross erected in my yard for the Christmas season. I think that is equally acceptable, as there is also an effort to remove the cross from public property.

In the final analysis, knowing that Christmas as the celebration of the birth of our savior has been attacked from the beginning, and has continued to survive all this time, tells me Christmas, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ will survive and will overcome all attacks against it as it has for twenty centuries.

I heard a report on the radio this afternoon that Germany is complaining about the shortage of Christmas trees this year. The cause of the shortage is the high demand for Christmas trees that are being delivered to Communist China and to Moslem Dubai. They have become highly popular in those two countries. Imagine that.