

**from *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity****John Milton (1608–1674)*

He feels from Juda's land  
 The dreaded Infant's hand,  
 The rays of Bethlehem blind his dusky eyn;  
 Nor all the gods beside  
 Longer dare abide,  
 Not Typhon huge ending in snaky twine:  
 Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,  
 Can in his swaddling bands control the damned crew.

So when the Sun in bed,  
 Curtain'd with cloudy red,  
 Pillows his chin upon an orient wave,  
 The flocking shadows pale  
 Troop to th'infernal jail,  
 Each fetter'd ghost slips to his several grave,  
 And the yellow-skirted fays  
 Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-lov'd maze.

But see, the Virgin blest  
 Hath laid her Babe to rest:  
 Time is our tedious song should here have ending.  
 Heav'n's youngest-teemed star,  
 Hath fix'd her polish'd car,  
 Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;  
 And all about the courtly stable,  
 Bright-harness'd Angels sit in order serviceable.

**ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ*****In the Nick of Time*****A Christmas Canard***Kevin T. Bauder*

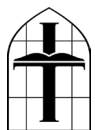
Certain professing believers are detractors of Christmas observance. They insist that real Christians must not celebrate Christmas in either their homes or their churches. The objections that they raise fall into two broad categories.

The first category is grounded in the Regulative Principle of Worship. This principle teaches that, since Christ is the only head of the Church, He alone has the authority to define its nature, mission, function, and worship. To introduce forms of worship that Christ has not authorized through His apostles in the New Testament is to become guilty of the sin of idolatry. Since the New Testament nowhere authorizes Christmas, then it must be seen as forbidden.

This argument initially sounds persuasive, but it really hinges upon a misapplication of the Regulative Principle. Christians of the New Testament did in fact celebrate the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, as Paul does in Philip-pians 2:5-8. Indeed, Christians ought to celebrate the incarnation regularly. This celebration may rightly be incorporated into any service of the church, and it ought to be incorporated into many of them. Furthermore, what may rightly be celebrated at any time can also rightly be made a focus of celebration at a specified time. If by *Christmas* one simply means the recognition and celebration of Jesus' birth, then Christmas observance is fully justified.

So much for the argument from the Regulative Principle of Worship. The other objection, or set of objections, however, is more serious. Some detractors of Christmas observance argue that the celebration has its roots in pagan traditions. They point out that no one truly knows the date of Jesus' birth. They insist that the Midwinter observance of Christmas (December 25) is borrowed from the Roman *Saturnalia*, or maybe from ancient observances in honor of Mithra or *Sol Invictus*. To celebrate Christmas, they insist, is to participate in these pagan and perhaps devilish rituals.

This objection poses a bigger question than can be addressed adequately in a short essay. Certainly some of the customs of pre-Christian cultures (for example, the observance of Yule) were retained in local celebrations of Christmas, and perhaps some of those have been passed down to the



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present day. Nevertheless, this consideration should not carry great weight in itself, certainly no more weight than Christians using the names of days dedicated to the Sun, the Moon, or gods such as Tyr, Woden, Thor, Frigga, or Saturn. Likewise certain months are dedicated by name to Janus, Mars, Maiesta, and Juno, all of whom were pagan gods. The irony is that people who object to Christmas because they believe that it preserves the *Saturnalia* still render honor to Saturn every single week.

The larger question, however, is whether the Christian observance of the incarnation (Christmas) was truly borrowed from the Roman *Saturnalia* to begin with. The theory is that Christians took over the patterns of *Saturnalia* after Constantine made Christianity respectable in the empire during the Fourth Century. In answer to this speculation, good reason exists to believe that Christians were already commemorating Jesus' incarnation. Equally good reasons indicate that they connected the birth of Jesus with a date in late December or early January.

There are certain chronological markers in the New Testament that provide clues. One has to do with the timing of Zacharias's service in the temple, near which time John the Baptist was conceived. It is possible to calculate the timing of John's birth and, once this calculation is made, to extrapolate the timing of Jesus' birth. Two dates are possible: one near the feast of Tabernacles and one in late December or early January. Another chronological marker involves the death of Herod, from which some have attempted to calculate backwards. This event also points to a Midwinter date for the birth of Jesus.

One objection raised against the winter date is that, according to Luke 2, shepherds had their flocks in the fields. The objection states that flocks were brought in from the wilderness during the winter months. Even if that information is accurate, however, fields are not necessarily wilderness, and during a mild winter shepherds from Bethlehem may well have ventured out into the fields with their flocks. This objection is far from decisive.

Some early Christian authors expressed uncertainty about the date of Jesus' birth. For example, Clement of Alexandria (early Second Century) juggled multiple dates in his speculations. The first reference to December 25 comes from an author of the late Second Century, Hippolytus. During the Third Century December 25 appears to have become the agreed-upon date in the West, while January 6 was given more prominence in the East. Thanks to Chrysostom (Fourth Century), however, the December date was eventually accepted even in the East.

The importance of these dates is that the Roman *Saturnalia* was a relatively minor event during the Second Century; it only began a transformation during the Third Century, by which time Christians were already observing the birth of Christ in late December. It is at least possible that the Romans were

the ones who imported certain Christian elements (such as gift giving) into their *Saturnalia* rather than the other way around.

In short, December 25 is as good a day as any to observe the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether this date is exact is a matter of indifference, but it is perhaps the most likely date for the birth of Christ. Furthermore, the evidence for Christmas being copied from the Roman *Saturnalia* is suspect at best. Such arguments will seem interesting only to those with a conspiracist mindset.

Christmas is not pagan. Christmas is not idolatry. Christmas is a day that some Christians set aside to commemorate, reflect upon, and celebrate one of the most important events in the progress of God's plan: the incarnation of the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not obligated to observe this event, but we would be wrong to discountenance it.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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