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Pagans, Puritans, and Putting Christ Back in Christmas

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JUSTIN ARIEL BAILEY

What we must recover is not Christian jargon, but Christian joy. The joy that the truth of the gospel is better than our wildest dreams.

President Donald Trump has a familiar trope: thanks to his administration, we are saying “Merry Christmas” again instead of “Happy Holidays.” The sentiment plays well with many Christians who have long felt angst over a perceived “war on Christmas” and have endeavored to somehow “put Christ back in Christmas.”

I don’t want to minimize the roots of the anxiety—which I take to be a concern for religious liberty and the lament of living in a post-Christian culture—even if I am disappointed by the way the angst is fueled and monetized by some media outlets.

But Christians have always had a complex relationship with Christmas. There has never been such a thing as a purely Christian celebration of the holiday, and there is no golden age of “biblical” Christmas celebrations to which we can return. (For a more complete history of the holiday, read Joseph F. Kelly’s *The Origins of Christmas* (St. Benedict, 2004).)

Indeed, those seeking a biblical basis for our Christmas customs might find themselves frustrated. Those willing to build on Christian tradition also will find contested narratives. Take, for example, the Christmas tree: Some believe the practice of bringing trees into our homes to celebrate the birth of Christ originated with Boniface in the eighth century; others say it began with Martin Luther in the 16th century. Still others argue the tree, a symbol of fertility, is as pagan a symbol as we could find. The pagan roots of this and other holiday traditions make many Christians uncomfortable, leading some to discontinue the celebration.

The Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony banned Christmas: “Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as [C]hristmas or the like, either by forbearing labour, feasting, or any other way upon such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending, shall pay for every such offence five shillings as a fine to the county,” reads *The Charters and General Laws of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*. The theological rationale for the ban was the desire to avoid idolatry and to live each day in disciplined diligence. War on Christmas, indeed!

Regardless of what we make of the roots of Christmas, contemporary celebrations should give us pause. The Christmas season often becomes the inverse of Advent. Rather than being a season marked by anticipation, wonder, and joy, it becomes an end-of-year blowout marked by consumerism, busyness, and sentimentality. If recovering Christmas is mostly a matter of what store clerks are allowed to say, that feels like a hollow victory if we still end the year lonely, exhausted, and deeper in debt. Maybe the Puritans were onto something.

It has been interesting to watch fellow Christian parents wrestle with what to do with the holiday. They want Christmas to be meaningful, but they also want to free it from its secular directions. So they teach their children the real story of St. Nicholas, the fourth-century bishop who served the needy and may or may not have punched Arius at the Council of Nicea. Other parents take their family to serve in soup kitchens, reminding their children, "It's not your birthday." Other parents limit gifts to three, corresponding to the gifts of the Magi in Matthew's gospel.

I admire the basic impulse to connect our celebrations to Scripture and Christian tradition. But I suspect that underneath that impulse is a posture that fails to take seriously our cultural embeddedness. Everyday life is composed of innumerable cultural elements, many of which have pre-Christian histories. The Quakers might have tried to rename the fifth day of the week, but most of us are untroubled by the pagan origin of Thursday (Thor's day).

The critical issue is whether we believe that the gospel replaces our cultural stories or fulfills them. Certainly, there are some stories that need to be replaced. The proclamation that Jesus is Lord challenges all cultural idolatries. Consumerism must be confronted. Busyness must be exposed as a false source of validation. Trees should be delighted in and stewarded, but not worshiped.

But no culture is so fallen that all of its stories need to be replaced. The gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is a sign of this. The Spirit made the gospel intelligible in numerous tongues, signifying that the cultural backgrounds of the hearers were being taken up and grafted into the story of Jesus. From the very beginning, Christian mission has endeavored to translate the Scriptures into every language, insisting that the Spirit has something to say to and through these people, too. Every tribe, tongue, and nation will be represented in God's kingdom in the end, and the kings of the earth will carry their cultural treasures into the new Jerusalem (Rev. 21:26). The gospel reframes but does not replace all our cultural stories.

That means that in what we might consider pagan traditions, we may find God-planted seeds of religion, misdirected but real longings that can be fulfilled only by the God who came near at Christmas. If the Christmas tree has a pagan origin, it is because Christ really fulfills the human longing to remain evergreen. If the dating of Christmas is due to the winter solstice, it is because Christ is the substance of which the solstice celebration is the shadow. I am speaking rather broadly, and discernment is needed, as in all things. But it is not for nothing that we sing, “The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

There is almost nothing like the joy felt by a child on Christmas morning, the magic of knowing there are gifts under the tree that were not there the night before. Santa Claus is, of course, a myth. Why then does the longing to believe in Santa Claus persist in secular culture? Call it nostalgia, call it sentimentality, call it a hunger to return to an enchanted world. As Christians, we can deny and demythologize this longing, casting Santa Claus as Jesus’ enemy. Or we can deepen the longing, showing that Santa is a shadow of the joy that finds its substance in Christ.

I was raised to disbelieve in Santa Claus. So I was surprised to find him as a character in C. S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* under another name: Father Christmas. In Narnia, Father Christmas serves Aslan and blesses the children in Aslan’s name. Lewis would later write that his friend J. R. R. Tolkien taught him this: the gospel has not abrogated legends but hallowed them.

What we must recover is not Christian jargon, but Christian joy. The joy that the truth of the gospel is better than our wildest dreams. The shock that God in miraculous grace has become human to reconcile the world to God. The astonishment of the opening of 1 John: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched ...” (1 John 1:1-2).

To recover Christmas is to recover our childlike wonder at the story that is still astounding, undaunted by all attempts to secularize it. So we keep singing familiar carols, cutting down trees and lugging them into our homes, and over-gifting our children, all in the hope that we can be surprised by joy again. And maybe Father Christmas can keep serving the Great Lion, not just in Narnia, but in our world as well.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of your favorite Christmas traditions or practices? Can you find biblical support for that tradition or practice?
2. How do you feel about the fact that Puritans banned the celebration of Christmas?
3. If some of our cultural Christmas practices can be reframed by the gospel, can you identify some other cultural practices where we can reframe with the gospel?
4. If our goal is to recover Christian joy rather than simply Christian jargon, what might you do differently this Christmas?