

# IS CHRISTMAS PAGAN, CHRISTIAN, OR JUST CONVENIENT?

## ROMAN, EARLY CHRISTIAN HISTORY REVEAL ROOTS OF DECEMBER 25 CELEBRATION

By Andrew Willis

Is the celebration of Christmas on December 25 really a pagan custom that early Christians borrowed?

Atheists often mock Christians for celebrating a "pagan" festival and some Christians decline to celebrate Christmas, while others argue that regardless of its origins, Christmas is a good evangelistic opportunity. Who is right?

To answer that question we need to go to North Africa at the end of the 3rd Century.

In AD 284, Diocletian became emperor. Under his rule, the early Christian church suffered some of the harshest persecution in its history. Many Christians, including some church leaders, renounced their faith in the face of persecution. Later, with the abdication of Diocletian, persecution stopped in the West and Christians returned to a life of peace and security. This left one problem: should those Christians who gave up their faith under duress be allowed back? Could the leaders who left be allowed to take office again?

Following their Savior's example, the church said "yes," giving them the chance to start over.

In North Africa, however, there was a movement in the church that rejected this idea. There, Christians believed that if members who'd turned their back on their faith were allowed back, it would contaminate the church. They were concerned with the purity of the church and wanted to avoid any pagan influences. This group became known as the "Donatists," named after their leader Donatus.

What does this have to do with Christmas? The Donatists celebrated the birth of Jesus on December 25. This group, who were studious in their avoidance of anything that even resembled compromise with the world or hint of paganism, was following an old tradition of remembering the birth of Jesus on the same date most Christians still celebrate today.

So where did some get the idea that celebrating on December 25 has pagan roots?

Some claim Christians borrowed the day from those who celebrated the winter solstice. But the solstice is actually a few days earlier than Christmas. Some suggest that it's because of the Saturnalia festival, but that runs from December 17 to 23.

Others claim it corresponds with sun worship, citing the festival of "Sol Invictus" (Unconquered Sun) that Emperor Aurelian instituted on December 25 in AD 274. However, upon closer examination, this was not a traditional day of sun worship. The two sun temples in Rome celebrated their feasts on August 9 and 28, and even that had fallen into neglect by the time of Aurelian. By then, the new sun god Mithras was growing popular.

Although long thought of as a development of eastern sun worship, historians now believe Mithras worship to be a Roman invention—a cult created by and for the imperial bureaucracy. But even Mithras did not have any feasts associated with solstices or equinoxes until a hundred years later.

So it appears that Aurelian, who was hostile to Christianity, picked a date with no pagan sun worship and created one. Why? Some suggest that he was trying to create a pagan alternative to another festival on that day to help unite his empire. That other festival was the celebration of Jesus' birth. In fact, in spite of Aurelian's declaration, there is no record of celebrating Sol Invictus on December 25 until AD 354/362, much later than the Christian celebration in Africa and elsewhere.

It was only in the 17th and 18th Centuries that secular enlightenment scholars started to suggest that Christianity had borrowed the date of Christmas from pagans.

Yet this leads to another problem. We know from the accounts of Jesus' birth in the gospels that it was unlikely he was born in December, so why had the church chosen to celebrate it then?

The answer is twofold: the date of Jesus' death, and Jewish tradition. For early Christians, celebrating the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus was very important. The church worked hard to determine the date of this events, a calculation made more difficult by having to work out which year it was, and which calendar to use -- Jewish or Roman. After much research, the church in the West and Africa settled on March 25 as the date of Jesus' crucifixion.

This was important in determining the date of Jesus' birth because in Jewish tradition it was thought that prophets died on the same day as they were born. This idea may seem strange to us, but was understood and accepted by the early church. Jesus was different from the prophets, however—his life didn't start at his birth, rather it began when the angel spoke to Mary. This is why early Christians celebrated the annunciation (or announcement to Mary that she was carrying the child) on March 25. Add nine months of pregnancy and you arrive at a birth date of December 25.

Today, we know Jesus wasn't born on Christmas day, but the church chose to celebrate it on this day. Even though they didn't know the real date of Jesus' birth, early Christians -- following Jewish traditions—chose a date to celebrate the fact God loved the world enough to send his Son as a baby.

This date had no connection to pagan gods or ideas—these were invented years later.

So how should Seventh-day Adventists respond to Christmas? First, we should understand that it is not a pagan festival "borrowed" by Christians. Rather, it is a very early Christian memorial. Second, we should focus our attention on the event it celebrates and witness to the world about our Savior. Finally, following the example of Adventist Church co-founder, Ellen G. White, we can use this opportunity to respond to the needs of the world around us.

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