



Origin and Meaning of Christmas Customs



Are You Sure That You Really Know?

Christmas Holiday ('Christ's Mass' 'Holy Day')

Christmas is the celebration of the holy birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem in approximately 6 B.C., who - according to Holy Scriptures - was sent to Earth as a man, yet fully God, to pay the penalty for mankind's rebellion and sin against God. The actual day of Christ's birth is in question but Bible scholars generally agree that it was probably in early September. The current 'day', December 25, was reset by Christian Europeans within the past thousand years because of their concern over pagan celebrations during the winter solstice.

Santa Claus, *aka* Saint Nicholas, *aka* Kris Kringle

Santa Claus is commonly thought to be a mythical figure, but his character is actually rooted in a real person. During the fourth century A.D., Nicholas was Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor (Greece), the city now known as Demre, Turkey. Living his whole life centered on Jesus Christ, Nicholas worked for justice and cared for those in need. He was so committed to serving and pleasing His Lord and Savior that he sought ways to "sell what he owned and give the money to the poor" – that meant all his earthly goods which had been bequeathed to him by his wealthy parents. Bishop Nicholas defended the doctrine of the Holy Trinity during the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.. Later, he was given status as a Saint because of the many miracles attributed to him and because of his inspiring witness as a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries Saint Nicholas was revered and modeled during annual celebrations of Christ's birth. German Christians were so concerned about the developing 'materialism' at Christmas that they renamed Saint Nicholas, 'Kris Kringle', meaning 'Christ Child'. This 'additional name' for Saint Nicholas became 'Kris Kringle', and 'Saint Nicholas' developed into Sinter Klaas, Sante Klaus, and Santa Claus.

Christmas Stockings, Gifts and Giving

Bishop Nicholas had used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. One story tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value - a dowry. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home-providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas. That is why three gold balls, sometimes represented by oranges in one's stocking, are one of the symbols for St. Nicholas. And so St. Nicholas, *aka* Santa Claus, is a gift-giver. Over time, Christmas giving not only came to represent the greatest gift given to mankind in the name of Jesus Christ, but also the 'giving to others with compassion' as modeled by Saint Nicholas, *aka* Kris Kringle, *aka* Santa Claus. Do you know anyone who should know this real history?

Christmas Tree, Candles and Ornaments

Evergreens have been a symbol of rebirth from ancient times. Bringing greenery into one's home, often at the time of the winter solstice, symbolized life in the midst of death in many cultures. The Romans decked their homes with evergreens and other greenery during the Kalends of January. Living trees were also brought into homes during the old German feast of Yule, which originally was a two-month feast beginning in November. The Yule tree was planted in a tub and brought into the home. However, the evidence just does not exist which shows that Christians first used trees at Christmas as a symbol of rebirth, nor that the Christmas tree was a direct descendent of the Yule tree. On the contrary, the evidence that we have points in another direction. The Christmas tree appears to be a descendent of the Paradise tree and the Christmas light of the late Middle Ages.

From the eleventh century, religious plays called "mystery plays" became quite popular throughout Europe. These plays were performed outdoors and in churches. One of the most prevalent of these plays was the "Paradise play." The play depicted the story of the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin, and their banishment from Paradise. The play would end with the promise of the coming Savior and His Incarnation (cf. Gen. 3:15). The Paradise play was simple by today's standards. The only prop on stage was the "Paradise tree," a fir tree adorned with apples. From this tree, at the appropriate time in the play, Eve would take the fruit, eat it, and give it to Adam.

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Because of abuses that crept into the mystery plays (i.e. decadent behavior), the Church forbade these plays during the fifteenth century. The people had grown so accustomed to the Paradise tree, however, that they began putting their own Paradise tree up in their homes on Dec. 24. They did so on Dec. 24 because this was the feast day of Adam and Eve (at least in the Eastern Church). The Paradise tree, as it had in the Paradise plays, symbolized both a tree of sin and a tree of life. For this reason, the people would decorate these trees with apples (representing the fruit of sin) and homemade wafers (like communion wafers). Later, candy and sweets were added.

Another custom was to be found in the homes of Christians on Dec. 24 since the late Middle Ages. A large candle called the "Christmas light," symbolizing Christ who is the light of the world, was lit on Christmas Eve. In western Germany, many smaller candles were set upon a wooden pyramid and lit. Besides the candles, other objects such as glass balls, tinsel, and the "star of Bethlehem" were placed on its top.

Though we cannot be certain, it seems highly likely that the first Christmas trees that appeared in Germany in the early sixteenth century were descendants of both of these customs: the Paradise tree and the Christmas pyramids and lights. The Paradise tree became our Christmas tree. Decorations that had been placed on the pyramids were transferred to the Christmas tree.

For many Christians the Christmas tree still represents the Paradise tree. The tree reminds us of the tree in Eden by which Adam and Eve were overcome and which thrust them into sin. But more importantly, the tree reminds us of the tree by which our sin was overcome, namely the tree upon which Christ Jesus was crucified. Is it a stretch to refer to the cross as a tree? Hardly, for this is the language of the New Testament itself! For example, Paul writes in Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree" (quoting Deut. 21:23). And Peter writes, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Therefore, the Christmas tree is a wonderful symbol and reminder of our salvation and forgiveness through Jesus Christ!

Candy Cane

Many sources mistakenly speak of a faithful Indiana candy maker who developed the candy cane as a witnessing tool: hard candy standing for 'The Rock', white for Jesus's purity (or his virgin birth), peppermint as a reference to cleansing hyssop, red stripes standing for Christ's blood, three stripes representing the Trinity or the stripes by which we are healed, and curved to represent a shepherd's staff and/or the letter "J" for Jesus. But even though Christians might want to believe this story, further objective in-depth research seems to discount it.

So then, where did candy canes come from? Tradition holds that in about 1670, the choirmaster at Cologne Cathedral, frustrated by fidgety kids in the living Nativity, had some white sugar-candy sticks made (curved like shepherds' staffs) to keep the youngsters quiet. This idea caught on all over Europe, then later in the United States when a German-Swedish immigrant named August Imgard put candy canes on his Christmas tree in Wooster, Ohio in 1847. So yes, the candy cane's origin was Christian, and while it was almost certainly not originally designed to be the theological treatise as commonly purported, its physical attributes can still be used to clearly explain the Good News.

Christmas Wreath

The wreath has significant meaning for the season. It's circular shape represents eternity, for it has no beginning and no end. From a Christian perspective, it represents an unending life in Jesus Christ. The evergreen, most frequently used in making wreaths, symbolizes growth and everlasting life. Holly branches have thorns. When used in a wreath it represents the thorns on Jesus' crown when he was crucified. Bright red holly berries symbolize Jesus' blood that was shed for us... He the only One in the entire universe Who could pay the penalty for our deadly sin against Him.

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