
Christmas Celebrations

The lyrics of the song, Happy Birthday, were written in the early 1900s, set to a tune which had been around for less than 50 years. Birthday cakes with candles were unheard of until the 1800s because the ingredients for such a luxury were too expensive for the common person to buy. It wasn't until the 1800s, after the industrial revolution had begun and manufacturing processes were streamlined, that the common person could afford a birthday cake. While it is true that some of the very rich and powerful did celebrate their birthdays, until less than two centuries ago, gathering for a birthday party for anyone but the most rich and powerful was unheard of. The only birthdays which were recognized were those of the ones who had made a difference.

It wasn't until Christianity became the preferred religion of the Roman Empire (the western world) in the middle of the 4th century that Christians began celebrating the birth of Jesus. They began celebrating his birthday, for it was widely recognized that Jesus had made a difference. The date of the celebration changed from March to September to December depending on when and where the church was celebrating. It is common knowledge that the date of December 25 is rather arbitrary and may have its roots in pagan celebrations rather than in the Christian faith. Good Friday and Easter, in sharp contrast, were celebrated by Christians from nearly the beginning of the Christian church. This was more in keeping with the tradition of remembering a person's death rather than celebrating their birthday. It is generally believed that Jesus was born either in the spring, around Easter, or in late September, around the Jewish celebration of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

We also don't know the year Jesus was born. Although we are soon to begin 2025, it is an undisputed fact that Dionysus, a monk who lived 500 years after Jesus was born, made some errors in his calculations when he first tried to pinpoint the year of Jesus' birth. Scholars recognize that he was off by about five years, placing the actual year of Jesus' birth sometime between 4 and 6 BC. Although he made some errors in his calculations, Dionysus' motivation was good. To that point in time, years were counted from the date of the founding of Rome circa 753 BC, and Dionysus believed that it was more appropriate to count the passing of years based on the date of Jesus' birth rather than on the founding of a man-made empire. Unlike the Roman Empire, the reign of Jesus Christ will continue forever, and it makes a lot more sense to count the years from his birth than it does to count the years of a now defunct political and national entity.

Despite the fact that Christians did not celebrate Jesus' birthday for the first 400 years of Christianity and despite the fact that the date of the celebration is somewhat arbitrary and despite the fact that few people celebrated birthdays at all until less than two centuries ago, what is absolutely true today is that there is no birthday that is celebrated in more places by more people than the birth of Jesus Christ. Yes, it is true that many have twisted the celebration of Christmas to include reindeer and Santas and consumerism, but it also remains true that the celebration of Jesus' birth has shaped the rhythm of our lives. While we may lament what Christmas has become for so many, we still should be amazed that it is celebrated at all. In fact, if it were not for the consumeristic takeover of the day, Christmas might have become as

unremarkable to many as the other important Christian celebration, Ascension Day. In fact, while the ascension of Jesus into heaven remains more significant than his birth, few give the day more than passing nod of recognition. If retailers had been able to commercialize Ascension Day, they would have, but it is much harder to twist a celebration of the coronation of the King of the universe than it is to twist the birth of a baby to use it for one's own economic gain. Perhaps God is using consumerism to keep alive the celebration of Christmas so that we do not forget the significance of the birth of Jesus.

One final comment: perhaps we should wonder if we have put too much emphasis on the birth of Jesus. Both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches have another celebration, called the Feast of the Annunciation. It is celebrated on March 25, nine months before Christmas is celebrated in the West, and it commemorates the announcement by Gabriel to Mary that she would become the mother of the Messiah and that the conception of Jesus would be by the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. After all, it is not the birth of Jesus that makes all the difference but, rather, it is the incarnation of God, when the eternal Son of God took on human flesh. In so doing, the eternal Son of God made himself available to give his life for us. That, more than anything else, makes a difference, for it is by that sacrificial act that we are saved.

Pastor Gary