

# Which Day Is Christmas Day?

By Richard Henry

Theologians have always been in a pre-occupation over the celebration of Christ's birthday. The New Testament nowhere says when it was.

The contemporary Roman regime was not very much concerned about recording births. Even Herod, who was furious, made no records which have survived.

For a time, it didn't matter much. For at least 300 years after Christ's death, no one ventured to make Christ's birthday an occasion of religious celebration or even to mark it by any special ceremonies.

In part the reason for the reluctance was theological. The significant event in Christ's life was his crucifixion and to follow St. Matthew or even St. Luke in glorifying his birth seemed out of place.

Moreover, early Christianity was in constant peril of being wiped out and its devotees saw no occasion for the sort of celebration which, later, was to become associated with Christmas.

Naturally, however, there was speculation on the date of Christ's birth.

A book written in 243 and ascribed to Hippolytus, then rated a scholar of outstanding repute, purported to lay down the date according to exact scientific principles. Other writings ascribed to Julius Africanus, another divine, followed his line.

The general tenor of the argument seems odd to us today, but it was taken with the utmost seriousness at the time and for long afterward.

Hippolytus first calculated that when the Book of Genesis said God created the world in six days, resting on the seventh, it meant that God created the world in 6,000 years; a 1,000 years being reckoned as a day to God.

He then established that the beginning of creation would have been at the spring equinox when all things sprang to life. This, reckoned Hippolytus would, in the relevant year, have been the 28 of March.

Now the coming of Christ would have marked the end of a further period of a similar period - it being the final fulfilment of God's plan. Therefore, Christ would have been born on March 28 in a year which fitted the theory (about 3 B.C.)

Literally then took over the argument. The day, they reckoned, could not actually have referred to the physical birth of Christ but to Christ's conception by the Holy Ghost.

By a complex calculation of physiology and theology, they reasoned that this must have taken place on December 25.

Other divines disputed this conclusion. The did not, however, question the basic principles. They asserted, merely, that the day of the beginning of creation would have been April 6 rather than March 25. That would have brought Christ's birth forward to January 6.

This they reckoned in terms of the traditional date of Christ's resurrection after His crucifixion. This event they believed must have taken place, according to the Divine plan, on the same date as the date of the beginning of creation.

There were therefore, two schools of thought: One which believed that Christmas Day must be December 25 and one which believed that it must be January 6.

There the matter might have rested with neither side achieving satisfaction, but for a quite extraneous fact.

The Church had begun to celebrate January 6 as the date of Christ's baptism. Most people held that Christ's baptism was synonymous with his birth, but those who held that his birth had taken place on December 25 did not seriously object to January 6 as a date for the baptism.

Then theologians began one of those delightful wrangles which, to them, involve questions of salvation and damnation but which, to the layman and even the ordinary clergyman, are virtually incomprehensible.

Some of them thought that Christ was not born the son of God but became the son of God upon being baptized. These were called Adoptionists. The rest - and the prevailing majority - believed that Christ was born the son of God.

The difference, in essence, was one between theologians who believed divinity to be a spiritual matter requiring some progress on the part of any human being and between theologians who took Christ's divinity literally as applying to Christ the man and not simply to Christ in His spiritual perfection.

The fact that His Baptism was celebrated while His birth was not was therefore, repugnant to the ruling majority who had branded Adoptionism a heresy.

Mainly for that reason Pope Liberius proclaimed Christmas an official feast and declared it to be December 25. The suggestion appears to have been regarded as sound by Eastern Orthodox leaders and it soon was adopted there, too.

It does not, however, seem to have caught on immediately among the general public.

In 389 the Emperor Valentinian published a list of public holidays. Among religious holidays only Sundays and Easter appear.

In part, this refutes the theory that Christmas was time for December 25 in order to compete with the old pagan holidays which had always marked the day on which days stopped getting shorter and began getting longer.

There seems to have been no immediate desire on the part of the public to adopt Christmas. (Indeed, in some Continental countries, January 6 which is both Epiphany and the day of Christ's baptism and the feast of the Three Wise Men is celebrated rather than December 25 - although December 25 is universally acknowledged to be the day of Christ's birth.)


Christmas, indeed, was a late comer in the Christian calendar and, in the days of the Reformation, it was, of course, held to be highly suspect and a Papist invention.

It had become a holiday only gradually and no doubt it replaced pagan celebrations just as gradually. Unfortunately, history tells us little about its early growth.

For that, of course, there is a very good reason: The history of the period was kept by theologians and monks. They celebrated Christmas as they had been commanded to and they were more than a little averse to admit on paper that their success in persuading the populace to do likewise was limited.

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