



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Article:

📖 The Birth of Christmas  
(*Christmas and Epiphany*,  
pp. 11-18)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

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# The Birth of Christmas

Christmas enjoys such a prominent place among modern believers that only with difficulty can we picture an age when Christians did not celebrate it. How did a feast commemorating and honoring Jesus' birth come into being, and what elements of that feast can we draw upon?

### Prayer

**Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 9:2-7

### Reflection

The gradual development of distinctively Christian seasons like Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany were a sign the Church was maturing in two significant ways: Gentiles from many cultures were being evangelized, and most believers realized the Body of Christ would sojourn in this age for an indeterminate time. The annual celebration of Christmas helped believers across diverse cultures to build their lives together around the Incarnation.

No one just "invented" Christmas. The festival emerged from worship practices over hundreds of years. Joseph Kelly highlights these steps in its development:

- ▶ *The Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke guided Christian thought* because the four Gospels were recognized as Scripture in all canon lists by the mid-second century. As believers gathered for meals to honor the anniversaries of martyrs' deaths, they were celebrating the martyrs' "true" birthdays into the afterlife. This practice, along with the establishment of Easter, encouraged scholars' growing interest in finding a date to celebrate Christ's birth in Bethlehem.
- ▶ *A fictionalized account, PROTOEVANGELIUM OF JAMES, shaped popular views.* "Never a serious candidate for the New Testament canon," Kelly notes, it filled in details for the curious minded about Mary and Joseph's lives before Jesus' birth.
- ▶ *December 25 entered the scholarly discussion* in an odd way. In Jewish tradition, great figures were born and died on the same calendar day; thus, scholars hoped to determine Jesus' birthday by finding a date for his crucifixion near the time of Passover. Some settled on March 25, the spring equinox on the Julian calendar, when pagans marked the anniversary of the world's creation. Christians instead celebrated Jesus as the new Adam and harbinger of re-creation. In a variation, other scholars took March 25 to be the date of Jesus' conception in the womb, which put his birth nine months later on December 25—the winter solstice when the sun is weakest, but growing in strength, like a newborn child.
- ▶ *Celebrating Christ's birthday on December 25 directly opposed pagan feasts.* The cult of Deus Sol Invictus (the Unconquered Sun God) celebrated the Sun's birthday on that day. "Furthermore, many Roman soldiers and other men venerated a Persian virility deity named Mithra, whose birthday fell on December 25. To this can be added the festival of Saturnalia (December 17 to 23), a week of vigorous drinking, eating, sexual misconduct, and the overturning of social and even gender roles," Kelly writes.



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► *December 25 gradually caught on for Christ's birth.* In the early 300s, the Roman church settled on this date, and within a century it found favor throughout the empire. The Jerusalem church resisted, however, keeping the traditional Eastern date of January 6 for Christmas until about 575.

► *The Christmas season was filled out with Epiphany and Advent.* January 6 transitioned to become Epiphany, marking the date of the Magi's visit and of Christ's baptism by John. In fourth-century Gallic and Spanish churches, the time during which baptizands prepared for their baptism on Epiphany was moved up to become a preparatory period for Christmas. By the sixth century, this time was called Advent in northern Italy and Rome.

Kelly notes three trajectories in this history that should shape our celebration of Christmas. First, "ancient writers took Scripture very seriously," keeping close to the Bible when determining the date and filling in details about biblical figures. Further, they "showed respect for the differing cultures within their own faith," he observes. "We can extend such understanding not just to those who celebrate Christmas differently but to those who do not celebrate it at all." Finally, they "used the contemporary culture where appropriate" to extend their theological concerns.

### Study Questions

1. How is the emergence of Christmas related to changes in the early Church—the growing prominence of Gentile believers and a new sense of time—according to Joseph Kelly?
2. In the birth of Christmas, Kelly notes, early Christians tended to keep close to the Bible, respect differing cultures within their own faith, and include contemporary cultural practices when appropriate. Examine one or two instances of each trajectory in the history that he traces. How might that trajectory guide our celebration of Christmas today?
3. What theological signals were Christians sending with the choice of December 25 to celebrate Jesus' birth?
4. Could we live without Christmas? What would we miss in our formation as disciples if we dropped the celebration?

### Departing Hymn: "Oh, Wondrous Name, by Prophets Heard" (vv. 1 and 2)

Oh, wondrous name, by prophets heard  
long years before his birth;  
they saw him coming from afar,  
the Prince of Peace on earth.  
*The Wonderful! The Counselor!*  
*The Great and Mighty Lord!*  
*The everlasting Prince of Peace!*  
*The King, the Son of God!*

Oh, glorious name the angels praise  
and ransomed saints adore,  
the name above all other names,  
our refuge evermore.

*Refrain*

Fanny Crosby (1886)

Tunes: CLEANSING FOUNTAIN or FOREST GREEN

# The Birth of Christmas

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To trace the early development of the feast of Christmas.
2. To draw guidelines for our celebration of Christmas from three trajectories evident in the birth of the feast – adhering to Scripture, respecting differing cultures, and critically appropriating cultural practices.
3. To reflect on the importance of celebrating Christmas for our formation as disciples.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Christmas and Epiphany (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Oh, Wondrous Name, by Prophets Heard” locate one of the familiar tunes CLEANSING FOUNTAIN or FOREST GREEN in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Comment

“Christianity long ago made a wager on December, that it would be better to appropriate ‘pagan culture’ than try to eradicate it. But the pagan rootstock has proved remarkably persistent, and some wonder if we should now burn down the fields,” Donald Heinz has noted. “The Puritans were convinced Jesus would have disapproved of his birthday celebrations, that nothing in the Bible authorizes Christmas, that its ritualization lies hopelessly in an unreformed Catholic orbit, that a sufficiently determined prohibitionism might be able to eradicate an entire culture of excess going back hundreds, or thousands, of years.” (*Christmas: Festival of Incarnation, Study Guide for Adult Education/Small Group Discussion, 14*; available online at [fortresspress.com/media/downloads/0800697332Studyguideadulted.pdf](http://fortresspress.com/media/downloads/0800697332Studyguideadulted.pdf))

Though we are not ready to “burn down the fields” of modern Christmas celebrations, we might want to do some selective weeding. Joseph Kelly’s exploration of the origins of Christmas helps us understand how early Christians arrived at the date and some key details of the feast. From his review of that process he draws some important guidelines for our faithful celebration of the Incarnation today.

## Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to guide our understanding and celebration of the Incarnation.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Isaiah 9:2-7 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In this opening study we reflect with Joseph Kelly on the birth and early development of the Christmas celebration. (Kelly uses “Nativity” for Jesus’ birth and “Christmas” for the feast that celebrates that event.) Use his account of why and how the early Christians began celebrating Christmas to encourage members to reflect on the festival’s purpose in our discipleship. Keep the focus on the early Christians’ motives and decisions. In the next study guide, “Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations,” we will critically review more recent developments in the commercialization of the feast.

## Study Questions

1. Joseph Kelly notes that the first Christians relied heavily on their Jewish background: they worshiped in the Temple on the Sabbath as well as gathering with one another on Sunday; because they believed Christ would return soon, they had little reason to develop distinctive feasts and seasons of worship. Two things changed in the first hundred years: increasingly Gentiles were evangelized and became leaders in the Church, and believers recognized the Church would exist in this age for an indeterminate time. What would bind Christians from various cultures together, and how would they organize for a longer time of earthly ministry? Kelly explains, “Charisms such as prophecy and glossolalia declined as Christians established the necessary elements for an ongoing community – such as organized if uncharismatic offices, a canon of their own sacred writings, and specifically Christian feasts.” The widespread desire to honor the birthday of Jesus and proclaim to the world the radical nature of the Incarnation led scholars and ordinary believers alike to search for the date of Jesus’ birth and construct a proper season of celebration.
2. Form three small groups to investigate the trajectories in the birth of Christmas that Kelly identifies. There is some tension among the trajectories: can we keep close to the Bible while we are respecting different cultures and appropriating contemporary cultural practices? Discuss these tensions when the small groups report their findings.

Examples of the first trajectory, *keeping close to the Bible*, include reliance on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke, using allegorical themes from the Bible (the new creation and the sun-like divine glory of Christ) to guide selection of a date for Christmas, and appealing to biblical allegory and prophecy to fill in details about the Magi. Admittedly, popular imagination raced ahead to fill in other details with material from the *Protoevangelium of James*. Examples of the second trajectory, *respecting differing cultures*, include embracing the Jewish tradition of identical dates of birth and death for significant figures, and allowing Church groups to celebrate Christmas on different days and with different customs. Examples of the final trajectory, *including appropriate cultural practices*, include celebrations of martyrs’ “birthdays” based on Roman meals to honor the dead, and appropriation of March 25 and December 25 as feast days. Of course, these practices were greatly changed in order to provide a clear witness to the culture about the radical significance of the Incarnation.

3. December 25 marked the winter solstice (the day with the shortest time of sunlight in the northern hemisphere) according to the Julian calendar (a common reckoning of time begun in 45 BC by Julius Caesar). Choosing this date sent a positive signal: Jesus Christ is the true sun of righteousness (Malachi 4:2), the Logos that shines into the darkness (John 1:5). It also countered competing theological claims of the cult of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) that was popular in a revived official paganism that threatened to persecute Christians, the veneration of a Persian fertility deity Mithra, and the festival of Saturnalia – a week of licentious revelry (December 17-23) tied to the worship of Saturn which originally was intended to support the government and distract citizens from military defeat. Christmas announced the birth of Jesus Christ who is more real than idols and more important than the empire.
4. Answering this question provides a transition to the next study, “Christmas and the Clash of Civilizations.” Some group members may be fed up with the excessive consumerism and theological denudation of Christmas; for others, it has become a painful pretense that they and their families are successful and happy by cultural standards; still others may have doubts about the big theological ideas in Christmas, such that celebrating the Incarnation seems more than they can do. Yet the early Christians believed they really needed this feast; they sought to construct it from the stories in Scripture and the cultural fragments around them. How would we celebrate the Incarnation without Christmas? How would we announce it to our (sometimes doubting) selves and share it with a needy world? If theological Christmas were not shaping our lives each year, what would take its place?

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.