

The Discerner

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A QUARTERLY EXPOSING
UNBIBLICAL TEACHING & MOVEMENTS

Volume 32, Number 3

July • August • September 2012

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*"Hereby know we the spirit of truth
and the spirit of error" 1 John 4:6*

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Religion Analysis Service

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Religion Analysis Service

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RAS CHANGES

We are pleased to announce that we have added three more excellent men to our board of reference. They are Dr. Ron Rhodes, Robert Bowman, and M. Kurt Goedelman. Each is an active and well-respected leader in the area of counter-cult and apologetics ministries. They join Dr. Norman Geisler, James K. Walker, and Don Veinot on our board of reference.

With these three additions (six in all) we feel we have an excellent board of reference.

Our New Board of Reference Members

Dr. Ron Rhodes is the President of Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries, (www.ronrhodes.org). He is the author of over 60 books including: *5-Minute Apologetics for Today*; *Answering the Objections of Atheists, Agnostics, and Skeptics*; *Find It Quick Handbook on Cults and New Religions*; *The Ten Things You Need to Know About Islam*; and *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses*.

Dr. Rhodes has both a Th. D. and a Th.M from Dallas Theological Seminary and a B.A. from Houston Baptist University. He was a regular guest on the Christian Research Institute's radio program, the Bible Answer Man, and is a popular speaker at conferences across the United States.

Robert M. Bowman, Jr., is Director of Research for the Institute for Religious Research (www.irr.org). Rob Bowman earned the M.A. in Biblical Studies and Theology from Fuller Theological Seminary in 1981 and completed doctoral studies (all but dissertation) in Apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary. He is currently pursuing the completion of his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. He is the author of over 50 articles (e.g., in the *Christian Research Journal*, *Moody Monthly*, *Pastoral Renewal*, *Mission Frontiers*, and *Journal of Evangelism and Missions*) and 12 books pertaining to apologetics, religion, and biblical theology, including two winners of the Gold Medallion Award, *An Unchanging Faith in a Changing World* (1997) and *Faith Has Its Reasons* (2001; 2d ed., 2006). His most recent book (co-authored with Ed Komoszewski), *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (2007), has received numerous endorsements from such scholars as Ravi Zacharias and Richard Bauckham.

Rob and his wife, Cathy, have been married since 1981 and have four children, three of them still living at home

M. Kurt Goedelman is founder (in 1975) and executive director of Personal Freedom Outreach (www.pfo.org), and oversees much of the ministry's operations including its St. Louis office responsibilities and production of its resource materials, books, and newsletter publication, *The Quarterly Journal*.

Board Changes

Two board members have recently resigned:

Rick Dack, after three years, Rick will be pursuing his own apologetics ministry.

Ronald B. Anderson, after 19 years, is retiring. Ron has given immeasurable counsel and service to RAS. He has served as secretary, treasurer and office manager for many years.

George Welshons, a former Jehovah's Witness, has been accepted as a board member

RAS Team

DEAR READER

Dear Reader,

Recently I attended the dedication of a Baptist Church in Latvia. It was a most satisfying experience. Among the 250 people present were over a dozen pastors from various countries such as Norway, England, Germany, Czech Republic, Latvia, and the USA (yours truly). A large group of Norwegians sang and gave testimony as to the wonderful time they had helping to build the church. The pastors encouraged the church, which is almost 12 years old now, to hold fast to the Scriptures and to the proclamation of God's Word.

What a witness to the community this church has already become! Think about this – the church property was once a storage building for the Russian army, then it became a pile of rocks and stones when Russian troops withdrew from the area in the early 1990's. In the year 2000 a few Minnesotans and Latvians began the construction of the church. Over the next 10 years or so workers from several countries supplied money and personnel. Today this church can accommodate around 350 people, has a choir loft for 80 singers, and has an abundance of rooms for instruction, a large fellowship hall, and a pastor's study, etc. And everything's paid for!

It is especially gratifying for me since Pastor Viktor Kotkov once was a student in my classes at the Riga (largest city in Latvia) International Bible Institute where I taught for 16 years. Pastor Kotkov is a model for an effective leader – is homespun and humble (has a small greenhouse where he often holds his personal devotions). He carefully details the growth and concerns of the flock. He chuckles and grins at the inconsistencies of Communism and his own personal foibles, and loves his many foreign friends. Best of all, he honors God through the heralding and exposition of His infallible Word.

A younger pastor has just succeeded Viktor as the senior pastor. The church has a great vision for missions that extend into Estonia, Ireland, and Belarus. God bless this sister church in Latvia!

Laurence J. Sutherland

WITH THIS ISSUE

You may wonder why our lead article concerns itself with Christmas. After all, Christmas is still over two months away. Why is Christmas an issue at all? Haven't we reflected on the meaning of Christmas many times over? The Christmas stories from Matthew 1 and Luke 1 and 2 are well known, memorized and dramatized in parts, and the carols are so replete with Gospel truth. But do we really understand the evolution of Christmas, the exotic backgrounds, the symbolic implications, in their panoramic formations? This article by our prolific writer and researcher, Steve Lagoon, goes a long way toward a full, holistic understanding of this great holiday for Christians. You will be astounded to know, for instance that Jehovah's Witnesses once celebrated Christmas, etc.

In our second article, Richard Bennett, a convert to Protestantism, submits a scathing and hard-hitting exposure of Pope Benedict XVI as he copes with corruption in the highest echelons of the Roman Catholic Church. Personally I became familiar with the Pope's writings and influence when he was professor at the University of Munich in the 70's. At that time he was already known as a zealous guardian of Catholic dogma. Vatican 1 bothered him as the Roman Catholic Church softened its position toward "other brethren", meaning Protestants. Later Professor Joseph Ratzinger became Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and still later Pope Benedict XVI on April 19, 2005.

This article is a call to repentance for the highest authorities of the Roman See to get their house in order. It behooves Protestants in high positions to do likewise. 1. Peter intones solemnly that "judgment must start in the house of God". In this sense the whole true church of God, all believers in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world, must forsake moral and ethical transgressions of all manner and degree.

Laurence J. Sutherland

CHRISTMAS AND THE CHRISTIAN

By Steve Lagoon

Introduction

This article is a response to those who argue that Christians should not take part in the celebration of the Christmas holiday. We recognize the sincerity of those who draw back from the celebration of Christmas. This article will make the case that while the celebration of Christmas is not commanded for Christians, yet it is quite within the spirit of the Scriptures to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ.

Ultimately, this question is a conscience matter for each individual Christian to decide, rather than something that should cause divisions among Christians. Let us each honor the Babe of Bethlehem in the way that seems appropriate to us during the Christmas season, and throughout the year.

Robert Myers tells us the meaning of the word Christmas: “The word Christmas comes from *Christes Maesse*, an early English phrase that means Mass of Christ.”¹ Christmas, then, is the celebration of the birth of Christ

The Biblical Basis and Significance of Christmas.

There are important biblical and theological truths related to the theme of Christmas and the birth of Jesus Christ, most importantly the virgin birth of Christ and the deity of Christ. Indeed, it was the very Lord and God of the universe that was born that first Christmas. The virgin birth stands in support of Christ’s deity, for Jesus was not the offspring of a human father (which would mark him as merely human), but rather he was conceived by a miraculous act of God.

As the great Presbyterian theologian Gresham Machen argued,² any attack on the virgin birth is an attack on the whole of the Christian faith itself. Christians must stand upon the Word of God rather than compromising on this essential doctrine.

Biblical Support for the Virgin Birth.

“All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ‘The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and

¹ Robert J. Myers, Christmas, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 528

² J. Gresham Machen, *The Virgin Birth of Christ*, 1930

they will call him 'Immanuel'--which means, 'God with us'" (Matthew 1:22-23).

"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel" (Isaiah 7:14).

"Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ" (Matthew 1:16).

"In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.' Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.' 'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?' The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.' 'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.' Then the angel left her" (Luke 1:26-38).

"Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry. He was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph" (Luke 3:23).

The Deity of Christ

The baby born of the virgin in Bethlehem was also the eternal Son of God as the following Scriptures make clear:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and

the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3).

“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Indeed, the testimony of Scripture is clear that a lowly manger in Bethlehem held the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords!”

Questions and Answers about Christmas

Should Christians celebrate Christmas?

The celebration of Christmas and other holy days (holidays) are a conscience matter. The apostle Paul addressed how to handle situations in which sincere Christian brothers did not agree in disputable matters that are not specifically addressed in Scripture. The solution was that each Christian was to follow his own conscience while also graciously agreeing to disagree with his brother rather than attack each other and unnecessarily divide the house of God as the following Scriptures show:

“Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17).

“Are you to judge someone else’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God” (Romans 14:4-6).

These statements by the apostle Paul make it clear that the celebration of holidays (like Christmas) are a conscience matter, and therefore Christians should not be judging each other for our sincerely held beliefs about Christmas.

Some note that there is not a specific command in the Bible to observe the celebration of Christ’s birth. This we do not deny. This reminds me of those in some churches (i.e. *The Churches of Christ*) who do not use musical instruments in their worship services because there is no record in the New Testament that Christians in the early church used

instruments. However, this is an argument from silence.

There is, of course, no command or example of Christians building and meeting in church buildings, but our friends in the *Churches of Christ* do just that. Indeed, just because the New Testament does not specifically command Christians to use instruments or meet in church buildings does not mean they were or are prohibited. And just because the New Testament does not specifically command or establish the Christmas holiday does not mean it is prohibited.

In the same way, just because there is no specific command to celebrate Christ's Birth, this does not mean Christians are prohibited from such observance. There is no specific command or example in the New Testament of Christians worshipping in Church buildings. Would anyone thus argue that Christians are not free to worship in Church buildings?

The Jews celebrated the holiday Hanukkah—the Feast of Lights—without a specific command from God to do so. In fact, rather than condemning the practice, our Lord Jesus Christ joined in on the celebration (John 10:22ff.), most appropriate for one who was and is the light of the world (John 8:12).

This is quite relevant because it shows that it is acceptable for devout believers in God to celebrate a holiday that is not specifically commanded in the Scriptures, the very thing that the Christian church has always done with the celebration of Christmas.

We also note that the angels rejoiced at Christ's birth, and if it was acceptable for angels to celebrate Christ's birth, why shouldn't we?

“This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests’” (Luke 2:12-14).

The shepherds also rejoiced at Christ's birth. Again, why shouldn't we?

“When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told” (Luke 2:17-20).

God instituted a number of festivals and holidays for Israel in the Old Testament, for instance, The Passover and Feast of Unleavened bread, the Day of Atonement, the Feast of Tabernacles, and Pentecost. I think that this shows that holidays and traditions are good for us, just as they were for Israel. They offer a special time to reflect on and worship God. They also provide wonderful times for families to spend together.

Isn't it true that there are pagan origins for many Christmas customs and practices, so much so that even the Puritans would not celebrate it?

Robert Myers provides a typical explanation of the relationship between Christmas and certain pagan festivals:

The ancient Romans held year-end celebrations to honor Saturn [Saturnalia December 17-27], their harvest god; and Mithras, the god of light. Various peoples in northern Europe held festivals in mid-December to celebrate the end of the harvest season. As part of all these celebrations, the people prepared special foods, decorated their homes with greenery, and joined in singing and gift giving. These customs gradually became part of the Christmas celebration.³

Myers shows that it is quite likely that at least some of our Christmas traditions have a pagan origin, but I shall argue that this need not discourage the celebration of Christmas for Christians today because Christmas has lost the pagan meaning of these customs.

Myers (and others) goes on to show the connection between the pagan origin of some Christmas customs and the negative opinion of Christmas held by the Puritans:

During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs. During the 1600's, because of these feelings, Christmas was outlawed in England and in parts of the English colonies in America.⁴

The following quotes show that it was more than just the pagan origin of some Christmas customs that lead to the Puritan's rejection of Christmas:

The Puritans suppressed the celebration of Christmas for the first two centuries of white settlement. Not only was it suppressed, but in Massachusetts the celebration was illegal

³ Robert J. Myers, Christmas, The World Book Encyclopedia, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 528

⁴ Robert J. Myers, Christmas, The World Book Encyclopedia, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 528

from 1659 to 1681. Puritanical resistance stemmed partly from the English tradition of Christmas celebrations: excess use of alcohol, overconsumption of food and a general state of rowdiness. Accounts abound in the 1600s here and in England of roving bands of young lower-class men who gained entrance into upper-class homes and demanded the highest quality of food and drink. If they didn't get their way, they trashed the place. . . To bring home the above point, Cotton Mather of Boston wrote in 1712: 'The Feast of Christ's Nativity is spent in Reveling, Dicing, Carding, Masking, and in all Licentious Liberty . . . by Mad Mirth, by long Eating, by hard Drinking, by lewd Gaming, by rude Reveling.'⁵

The first thing you do is get some friends together and get stagger-through-the-snow drunk. If you're male, you'll want to get dressed up as a woman or a bishop. Enact lewd scenes in public. Beg for money from prosperous looking individuals. Beat them if they don't respond. Sing loudly, blow horns, bang pans. Everyone then gathers at a wealthy family's house and sings about sharing the food and wine. The family will probably welcome you in, but if they don't, break in. Eat your fill. Eat like you may never see this much food again. Repeat as needed, through New Year's Day.

That probably doesn't sound like Christmas to you. . . But that's because most of the customs we associate with Christmas were invented in America about 150 years ago. . . Our cozy, domestic and increasingly secularized Christmas was fabricated precisely to supplant those earlier revels, says Stephen Nissenbaum in his new book, 'The Battle for Christmas' (Knopf). Nissenbaum, who teaches history at the University of Massachusetts, notes . . . It was that Christmas that the Puritans banned for 22 years in America, beginning in 1659. . . As late as the 1850s, gangs of young men called 'callithumpian bands' wandered New York, playing and singing, demanding money, smashing windows and beating people. Whatever its complex origins and social meanings, Christmas had clearly broken down. Enter the Big Guy in red.⁶

We can see that the Puritans had good reason to reject Christmas in the degenerative way it was practiced in their day including groups of hoodlums stealing, extorting, and beating people while ignoring the very spirit of the Christmas season.

5 Deborah Locke, *Frenetic, Materialistic, Yes-- But Come Eve, Season Quiets, Softens*, Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 12/24/1997

6 Jerome Weeks, *Christmas Customs Invented to Quell Past's Rowdy Rituals*, Dallas Morning News, as published in the Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 12/21/1996

Pagan Origin of everyday customs

Further, it might surprise some to find that many practices of everyday life also have a pagan origin. If Christians cannot take part in anything that has some connection to a pagan origin, we might be surprised at the many changes we would have to make. It seems better to realize that whatever the origin of various customs, we need not be concerned because they no longer have that meaning today. The following are examples of everyday customs and their pagan origins.

Pagan origin of marriage customs

“The ring, now an essential for the wedding ceremony, is just over 1000 years old. It was adopted by the Christian Church in the 9th century, from the pagan world.”⁷

“The choice of the ring finger is of unquestionable pagan origin.”⁸

“Rice-throwing at weddings is a survival from ancient Hindu and Chinese religious rites.”⁹

Pagan origin of birthday customs

“The pleasing custom of blowing out the candles with a single puff in order to make a wish come true was originally a rite to gain the favor of the goddess Artemis.”¹⁰

Pagan origin of the days and months of the calendar¹¹

“The month [January] is named for Janus, a Roman god.”¹²

Janus . . . in Roman mythology, was a god who had two faces that looked in opposite directions. One face looked into the past, and the other looked into the future. Janus served as the god of gates and doors and of entrances and exits. His name comes from the Latin word *Janua*, meaning gate. The Romans prayed to Janus at the beginning and end of any important action, especially a war. . . The Romans called on Janus at the beginning of every prayer, even ahead of Jupiter, the King of the gods.¹³

7 R. Brasch, *How Did It Begin?*, Pocket Books, New York, 1st printing, August, 1969, p. 37

8 R. Brasch, *How Did It Begin?*, Pocket Books, New York, 1st printing, August, 1969, p. 39

9 Julie Forsyth Batchelor and Claudia De Lys, *Superstitious? Here's Why!* Scholastic Book Services, New York, Second printing, September 1971, p. 82. Of course, this custom itself has fallen on hard times in light of concern for the health of birds!

10 *Origins: Superstitions and their Meanings*, Readers Digest, Readers Digest Association, Inc., 1978, p. 8

11 Some Puritans also rejected the use of modern calendars.

12 Sharron G. Uhler, *January*, *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1998 edition, Volume 11, World Book, Inc, p. 30

13 C. Scott Littleton, *Janus*, *World Book Encyclopedia*, 1998 edition, Volume 11, World Book, Inc, p.

Q. Where does the word ‘January’ come from? A. The Romans had gods for nearly every purpose, including one for gates and doors-- and that was Janus. He’s depicted on ancient Roman coins as having two faces, making him a natural deity for whom the first month of the year should be named. He was, in a sense, guarding the portal of the year, looking back at the old year with one face, ahead at the new one with the other.¹⁴

“Its name [March] honors Mars, the Roman god of war.”¹⁵

“Mars was the god of war in Roman mythology. . . Originally, Mars was a god of farmland and fertility. . . In time, the Romans associated Mars principally with war. Before going into battle, Roman troops offered sacrifices to him.”¹⁶

“The most widely accepted explanation is that it [May] was named for Maia, the Roman goddess of spring and growth. Her name seems to be related to a Latin word that means increase or growth. The ancient Romans held ceremonies in Maia’s honor in May 1 and again on May 15.”¹⁷

“Monday is the second day of the week. The word comes from the Anglo-Saxon *monandaeg*, which means the moon’s day. In ancient times, each day of the week was dedicated to a god or goddess. Monday was sacred to the goddess of the moon.”¹⁸

“Wednesday is the English name for the fourth day of the week. This day gets its name from Woden, or *Ordin*, the chief god in Teutonic mythology, to whom it is sacred.”¹⁹

“Thursday is the fifth day of the week. The ancient Norseman considered the day sacred to Thor, the Teutonic god of thunder. The name means Thor’s day. This is probably a translation of the Latin *Dies Jovis*, meaning Jove’s day, for Jove, or Jupiter, the Roman god of thunder.”²⁰

“Friday is the sixth day of the week. The name comes from the Anglo-Saxon word *frigedaeg*, which means Frigg’s day. Frigg was a goddess of love in Norse mythology.”²¹

“Saturday, called *Saeter-daeg* by the Anglo-Saxons, is the seventh day

14 unsigned, Saint Paul Pioneer Press, 1/11/1998

15 Sharron G. Uhler, *March*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 13, World Book, Inc., p. 194

16 E. N. Genovese, *Mars*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 13, World Book, Inc., p. 222

17 Sharron G. Uhler, *May*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 13, World Book, Inc., p. 320

18 Jack Santino, *Monday*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 13, World Book, Inc., p. 702

19 Grace Humphrey, *Wednesday*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 21, World Book, Inc., p. 179

20 Jack Santino, *Thursday*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 19, World Book, Inc., p. 273

21 Grace Humphrey, *Friday*, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 7, World Book Inc., p. 532

of the week. It is named for the Roman god Saturn and is the only day named for a Roman god.”xxii ²²

Jehovah’s Witnesses are among those who are most notorious in rejecting the celebration of Christmas especially raising objection to the pagan origins of Christmas customs. However, they also participate in many practices and customs (such as the above mentioned) that have a pagan origin. When this is pointed out to them (Jehovah’s Witnesses), they respond by noting that although such customs do have a pagan origin, this is not the meaning they hold today, and therefore such customs are now acceptable. But this is just our point. It is certainly true that many Christmas customs had a pagan origin, yet those meanings have been lost in time.

We note the following articles in the publications of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, in which they note the pagan origins of such things as rings, yet defend the practices for the reasons just mentioned.

It must therefore be admitted that in the stream of time the pagans were the first and the so-called Christians were the last to make use of the ring as a symbol of marriage. But this fact alone should not condemn the wedding ring any more than other accessories of dress; for example, sandals were first used by the heathen and later by professing Christians. . . . Then will such persons say that the custom of worshipping the true God wrong because the heathen have a similar custom of worshipping false gods? Is the custom of offering sacrifices to the true God wrong because pagans are accustomed to offering sacrifices to their gods? Was the use of the tabernacle altar wrong just because the heathen nations round about used similar structures for their offerings of abominations?²³

Their logic is sound. But by using the same line of reasoning, how can Jehovah’s Witnesses condemn Christmas customs, when they also have long ago lost the pagan meanings once associated with them?

The Jehovah’s Witnesses’ argument continues:

As it is, however, God-fearing people have no such heathen ornamentations on their wedding rings, and of course they do not believe or associate any of the ancient myths with their rings. Of a truth, very few people today even know what fictitious legends and mysticisms were woven around wedding rings by the pagans of past ages.²⁴

²² Jack Santino, Saturday, World Book Encyclopedia, 1998 edition, Volume 17, World Book, Inc, p. 150

²³ Awake, 10/8/1951, p. 22

²⁴ Awake, 10/8/1951, p. 22

Again, the logic is solid. But by using the same argument, Christians today don't attach the same meaning to the customs of Christmas as pagans may have had, and "Of a truth, very few people today even know what fictitious legends and mysticisms were woven around" the customs of Christmas in the past.

Finally, the Jehovah's Witnesses argue:

Manifestly, in view of the foregoing facts, the wearing of rings presents no great issue for the faithful Christian to face, for certainly there is nothing socially, morally or Scripturally wrong in wearing rings if one chooses to do so.²⁵

It is hard to understand how Jehovah's Witnesses can miss the ramifications of their own argument regarding the celebration of Christmas.

Jehovah's Witnesses originally celebrated Christmas

Interestingly, Jehovah's Witnesses originally had no problem with the celebration of Christmas as the following quote shows:

Even though Christmas day is not the real anniversary of our Lord's birth. . . nevertheless, since the celebration of our Lord's birth is not a matter of divine appointment or injunction, but merely a tribute of respect to him, it is not necessary for us to quibble about a particularly date. We may as well join with the civilized world in celebrating the grand event on the day which the majority celebrate--Christmas day.²⁶

This early quote shows that the Jehovah's Witnesses didn't think it necessary to "quibble" about the particular day of Christ's birth. Later Watchtower literature was all too ready to do just that! The next quote shows that the early Jehovah's Witnesses were even encouraged to give Watchtower literature away as Christmas Gifts!

Scripture Studies' As Christmas Gifts. Dear Friends: It might interest you to know that we are already offering the books for 'Christmas gifts.' We find that many secure their Christmas presents several months ahead, and that this month is the one in which many are pleased to secure 'such a beautiful, appropriate, and above all such a reasonable in price gift.'²⁷

The irony is that the Watchtower teaches its adherents to avoid

25 Awake, 10/8/1951, p. 24

26 Zion's Watch Tower, 12/1/1904, p.364

27 Zion's Watchtower, 11/15/1907, p. 351

Christmas because of its pagan origins, and yet they also celebrated it. Perhaps this means Jehovah's Witnesses should leave their organization due to its "pagan origins." Indeed, the early Watchtower organization was notorious for its prophetic speculation based upon pagan pyramidology.²⁸

Aren't 'Christmas Trees' forbidden in the Bible?

Those opposed to the celebration of Christmas, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, have pointed to verses in the Bible that they claim condemn the practice of Christmas trees. For example, note these passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah

"A man too poor to present such an offering selects wood that will not rot. He looks for a skilled craftsman to set up an idol that will not topple" (Isaiah 40:20).

"For the customs of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter." (Jeremiah 10:3-4)

Upon a cursory reading of these verses, one might make the mistake of thinking they are discussing Christmas trees, but nothing could be further from the truth. The contexts of these passages make it clear that it is idolatry and idol worship that is forbidden, not Christmas trees. Further, Christmas trees have a decorative and symbolic purpose and are not placed as an object of worship.

More interesting is the fact that evergreen trees actually served as a sign for God in the Bible. Such is seen in the following biblical texts:

"The glory of Lebanon will come to you, the pine, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn the place of my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place of my feet" (Isaiah 60:13).

"I will put in the desert the cedar and the acacia, the myrtle and the olive. I will set pines in the wasteland, the fir and the cypress together, so that people may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, that the Holy One of Israel has created it" (Isaiah 41:19-20).

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will

²⁸ The Watchtower, beginning under its founder Charles T. Russell based many of its prophecies on pyramidology. See Edmond C. Gruss, *Monuments to False Prophecy*, Clayton CA (Witness Inc. 1997)12. See the Watchtower's own partial admission of this history in *Jehovah's Witnesses: Proclaimers of God's Kingdom*, Brooklyn New York USA, (Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1993) 21.

clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed" (Isaiah 55:12-13).

These verses show that evergreens have served as a sign of God's renown and have adorned His very own sanctuary. If they can adorn the Lord's house, why shouldn't they also serve as a sign of the Lord in our own homes?

The historical origin of the modern Christmas tree

Furthermore, the actual origin of the modern Christmas tree appears to be quite in keeping with the Christmas theme. There are many legends that trace their use to the middle ages in Germany each with a devout purpose. It is probably impossible to know which legend or theory is correct. Perhaps the strongest candidate for the origin of the modern Christmas tree is the "Paradise Tree."

The Christmas tree probably developed in part from the 'Paradise Tree.' This was an evergreen decorated with apples used in a popular play about Adam and Eve held on December 24 in medieval Germany. By 1605, some Germans decorated their homes with evergreens for Christmas. They trimmed the trees with fruits, nuts, lighted candles, and paper roses.²⁹

Another source agrees: "The Christmas tree appears to be a descendent of the Paradise tree and the Christmas light of the late Middle Ages."³⁰

Brasch explains two other common theories for the German origin of Christmas trees:

Germans explain the introduction of the Christmas tree by an incident said to have taken place when Christianity was first brought to their country. When St. Boniface arrived from England to convert the pagans, he was determined to root out all that was heathen. In the city of Geismar he cut down a sacred oak. The felling, which took place on Christmas eve, angered many people and, to pacify them, St. Boniface gave the city a fir tree as a symbol of the new faith he preached.

Another German tale links the first Christmas tree with Martin Luther, the great reformer. The story says that one Christmas

²⁹ Robert J. Myers, Christmas, The World Book Encyclopedia, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 535
³⁰ Pastor Richard P. Bucher, The Origin and Meaning of the Christmas Tree,
<http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/chrtree.htm#Anchor18>

Eve Luther was returning home through the snow. He was deeply moved by the beauty of the sky with its thousands of glittering stars. Later, he wanted to describe the spectacle to his wife and children, but words seemed inadequate. Suddenly, he had an idea. He went into the garden and cut down a small fir tree. He put it in the nursery and lighted its branches with many candles so that it presented a lovely picture of God's glory as it had been revealed to him in the heavens on that cold winter night.³¹

The preceding indicates that the historical origin of the Christmas tree is far from clear, yet the likely origin is Christian rather than pagan. Whatever the historical origin of Christmas trees and other holiday greenery, Myers explains the meanings associated with them in the modern celebration of Christmas:

The traditional colors of Christmas are green and red. Green represents the continuance of life through the winter and the Christian belief in eternal life through Christ. Red symbolizes the blood that Jesus shed at his crucifixion . . . Holly is an evergreen tree with sharply pointed glossy leaves and red berries. It is used in making Christmas wreathes and other decorations. The needle-like points of the leaves were thought to resemble the crown of thorns that Jesus wore when he was crucified. The red berries symbolized the drops of blood He shed.³²

Is it true that Jesus was not even born on December 25, but rather the date December 25th was adapted from a pagan celebration?

Even if Christ was not born on this date (or even in December), but rather the date was chosen as a carryover from pagan celebrations, it no longer has that meaning for today. Rather, we celebrate Christ's birth at Christmas.

The day on which we celebrate Christmas is ultimately not that important. We often celebrate holidays (and birthdays) on days different than the actual day being commemorated. The early church purged pagan elements of Christmas practices and customs that have had a pagan origin, and gave them Christian meanings. Even today the church offers alternatives to pagan holidays such as Halloween. Christianity (and its celebration of Christ's birth) was victorious over and replaced Sol-Invictus (the Birth of the conquering sun).³³

31 R. Brasch, *How Did It Begin?*, Pocket Books, New York, 1st printing, August, 1969, pp. 324-326

32 Robert J. Myers, *Christmas*, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 535

33 Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Grand Rapids MI (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 396.

Is it possible that Jesus actually was born on December 25th?

No one knows for sure the actual date Christ was born. However, many are surprised to learn that there is evidence that points to the traditional date of December 25th as the correct date of his birth as the following sources show:

“The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336 in an early Roman calendar.”³⁴

Harold Hoehner discusses the evidence in support of the traditional date:

The traditional date for the birth of Christ from as early as Hippolytus (ca. A.D. 165-235) has been December 25th... Chrysostom (A.D. 345-407) in 386 stated that December 25th is the correct date and hence it became the official date for Christ's birth. The one objection raised for the winter date is the fact of the shepherds attending their flock in the night. (Luke 2:8) Usually, it is noted, the sheep were taken into enclosures from November until March and were not in the fields at night. However, this is not conclusive evidence against December being the time of Christ's birth for the following reasons. First, it could have been a mild winter and hence the shepherds would have been outside with their sheep. Second, it is not at all certain that sheep were brought under cover during the winter months. Third, it is true that during the winter months the sheep were brought in from the wilderness. The Lukan narrative states that the shepherds were around Bethlehem (rather than the wilderness), thus indicating that nativity was in the winter months. Finally, the Mishnah implies that the sheep around Bethlehem were outside all year, and those that were worthy for the Passover offerings were in the fields thirty days before the feast-- which would be as early as February-- on one of the coldest and rainiest months of the year. Therefore, a December date for the nativity is acceptable. In conclusion, the exact date of the birth of Christ is difficult to know with finality. However, a midwinter date is most likely.³⁵

Church historian Philip Schaff also discusses the evidence for the traditional date:

It was at the same time, moreover, the prevailing opinion of the

³⁴ Robert J. Myers, Christmas, *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, 1998 Edition, World Book, Inc. p. 528

³⁵ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects Of The Life Of Christ*, Grand Rapids MI (Zondervan Publishing House, 1977), pp. 25-27

church in the fourth and fifth centuries, that Christ was actually born on the twenty-fifth of December; and Chrysostom appeals, in behalf of this view, to the date of the registration under Quirinius (Cyrenius), preserved in the Roman archives.

But no certainty respecting the birthday of Christ can be reached from existing data.³⁶

By the way, though most reference sources suggest a fourth century date for the beginning of the historical celebration of Christmas, it should be noted that the feast of Epiphany (which also celebrated Christ's birth) was earlier and partly accounts for the delay in the development of Christmas itself.³⁷

Were the Wise Men or Magi from the East astrologers and if so why did God use them?

We have all probably wondered what astrologers or even “three kings from the orient” are doing in the Christmas story. We can be sure that they were not in fact kings at all, but advisers to kings. Their official title is “Magi” and they would be from the area of ancient Persia and Babylon (modern day Iran and Iraq).

In regards to their names, Bucher relates: “Do we know the names of the magi? No. The Scriptures are silent on this. The traditional names, dating from about the 7th Century A.D., are Gaspar, Melchior, and Balthasar. This is the western tradition. Eastern Christians have other names.”³⁸

The Magi were able in the practices of astronomy and astrology, but they were also political advisers and teachers. We do not know how many there were (tradition tells us that there were three), but almost certainly their entourage was quite large with some estimates suggesting that there were hundreds of men in their party as they came in search of the newborn King of Israel.

Originally, a Median tribe, the Magi were an hereditary priesthood. . . The early Magian system was decreed to be the state religion of Media by Cyaxxes, king of the Medes, late in the 6th cent. B.C., after some Magi who were considered to be expert in the interpretation of dreams had been attached to the Median court. It was in this dual capacity, whereby civil and political counsel was invested with religious authority, that the Magi

36 Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Grand Rapids MI (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 397.

37 Philip Schaff, *The History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Grand Rapids MI (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979) 395,399.

38 Pastor Richard P. Bucher, January, 1998, *The Magi / Wise Men FAQ*, <http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/magifaq.html>

became powerful figures in the empire.³⁹

Bucher offers further insight into the Magi:

[The] “magi were priests, serving an ancient priesthood, astrologers, interpreters of dreams, and government officials who had the authority to elect the Parthian king. In the context of the times, because they served these roles and had such amazing knowledge of mysteries as these, they were considered to be the scholars of the day”⁴⁰

With this background, we can now ask why the Magi were interested in the birth of Jesus Christ.

At this point in time it was entirely possible that the Messianic prophecies of the OT, culminating in the writings of Daniel, one of their own chief Magians, was of profound motivating influence. The promise of divinely-imposed world dominion at the hands of a Jewish monarch was more than acceptable to them.⁴¹

In other words, the fact that Daniel was a chief Magi is crucial to understanding why they came to Israel at the time of Christ’s birth. Scripture affirms this role for Daniel: “Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men” (Daniel 2:48; see also Daniel 5:11-12).

Because of Daniel’s influence, the Magi would have been aware of the biblical prophecies concerning the coming messianic king of the Jews. For instance, they would have been familiar with the prophecy in numbers 24:17: “I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near. A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel.” (Numbers 24:17). This prophecy ties the birth of the special king in Israel with the appearance of a special star.

The Magi would also have been familiar with the many other prophecies concerning Israel’s coming king such as Isaiah’s familiar prophecy:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase in his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing

39 D. W. Jayne, Magi, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 4, Grand Rapids MI (Zondervan, 1976) 31.

40 Pastor Richard P. Bucher, January, 1998, The Magi / Wise Men FAQ, <http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/magifaq.htm>

41 D. W. Jayne, Magi, The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 4, Grand Rapids MI (Zondervan, 1976) 34.

and upholding it with justice and righteousness (Isaiah 9:6-7).

Indeed, Daniel's own prophecy of the seventy weeks would tip off the Magi as to the specific time period in which to expect the appearance of the star and the King: "Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens'" (Daniel 9:25). That is, there will be a total of 69 weeks of years (or 483 years) from the time of the Medo-persian ruler's decree to rebuild Jerusalem until the arrival of the messiah.

Scholars debate whether it was a decree that was issued in 457 B.C. or one in 444 B.C. that is the starting point of the prophecy. They also debate the length of the years involved. But no matter how one runs the numbers, Daniel's prophecy definitely points to a time in the early part of the first century for the arrival of the messiah.⁴²

So the Magi knew the general time and place of the arrival of the messianic king. They also knew that the sign of a star in the heavenlies would announce his birth. They knew that the child born was divine. The above facts explain why the Magi marched across the fertile crescent to ask: "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:2).

Jehovah's Witnesses and the Magi

In light of the biblical evidence concerning the Magi, it is difficult to understand why the Jehovah's Witnesses advance a more sinister understanding of the Magi, believing that they were actually instruments of the Devil. For instance, the Jehovah's Witnesses state:

Who do you think made that new star to shine? . . . Satan the Devil wanted to kill God's Son, and he knew that King Herod of Jerusalem would try to kill him. So Satan is the one who must have made that star shine"⁴³

But if the Magi were part of a satanic plot to kill Jesus, why did they heed the warning from God and return home in a way as to avoid King Herod (Matthew 2:12)? If they wanted Jesus dead, why didn't they attempt to kill him (they almost certainly had a large and powerful entourage), or at least rush to Herod and report on Jesus 'whereabouts'?

42 For detailed discussion of the issues involved with interpreting Daniel's seventy-weeks prophecy from a dispensationalist position, see the following: John Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, Wheaton IL (Victor Books, 1990) pp. 248-259; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Daniel, The Bible Knowledge Commentary—Old Testament*, Wheaton IL (Victor Books, 1985) 1361-1365;

43 *My Book of Bible Stories*, Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, New York, 1978, p. 86

While I can understand the Watchtower's reluctance to embrace the "Magi" due to concerns about astrological and occultic connections, nevertheless, it should be pointed out that in distinction from ancient astrology, the Magi did not worship the star, but in fact came to worship the one "who has been born the King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2). Norman Geisler points out that "this star was not used to predict the future as in astrology, but to announce the birth of Christ."⁴⁴

Furthermore, though Daniel was without a doubt a most holy and dedicated servant of the Lord God, who had proved that he would not compromise his faith, yet, the fact remains that he not only served as a Magi, but as we have already noted, was the chief of the Magi.

Did the Magi visit Jesus on the night of his birth?

Bucher relates the following:

How old was Jesus when the magi visited Him? The Biblical data to guide us in answering this is as follows. (1) We know from Luke's Gospel (2:21) that Jesus was circumcised at 8 days old; (2) We also know from Luke 2:22-24, that when the 40 days of Mary's "uncleanness" had passed (see Leviticus 12:1ff.), they presented Jesus, their first born son in the temple in Jerusalem, according to God's Law (Exodus 13:2ff.; Numbers 3:13, 8:17). (3) Herod asked the magi when they had first seen the star (Matthew 2:7) and on this basis later killed all of the male children in Bethlehem, age two and under. (Matthew 2:16) In addition to this, there is (4), that the magi came during the reign of King Herod, whom we know died in 4 BC.

On this basis we can lay out the following with a fair amount of certainty. Jesus was between 41 days and 2 years old when the magi arrived. The magi had to have come after Jesus' presentation in the temple, that is, after Jesus was 40 days old. Why? Because, Matthew's Gospel tells us that after the magi departed, an angel warned Joseph to flee to Egypt, since Herod would seek to kill Jesus. According to Scripture, Joseph left that very night and went to Egypt. (2:13-15) This would have left no time or opportunity for the presentation in the temple, which we know happened.⁴⁵

In other words, it seems impossible for the Magi to have arrived on the night of Christ's birth. It seems more likely that the star appeared at the time of his birth, and the Magi organized their mission to Israel at that time, arriving in Jerusalem no sooner than after Jesus

⁴⁴ Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When Critics Ask*, Wheaton, IL (Victor Books, 1992) 326-327

⁴⁵ Pastor Richard P. Bucher, January, 1998, *The Magi / Wise Men FAQ*, <http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/magifaq.html>

was 40 days old.

Just the same, I think it is most appropriate that the Magi's visit with the infant Christ child are included in Christmas plays and nativity scenes.

Was the star of Bethlehem a conjunction of planets or an asteroid?

While it is popular to look for a natural event to explain the "Star of Bethlehem" such as a comet or the conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in 7 B.C., it is impossible to conclude that the star of Bethlehem that guided the Magi was an ordinary star, planet, or conjunction. Rather, this was a special "star" or luminescent object in the sky that was placed there by God to guide the Magi to the Christ Child. No natural phenomenon could guide the Wise man to a specific house in Bethlehem.

Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, 'Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.'

After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed" (Matthew 2:7-10).

Further, even the year of Christ's birth is not firmly established, so suggesting that certain astronomical events were the star of Bethlehem is sheer speculation.

Why do we give gifts at Christmas? Isn't this a carryover from pagan holidays?

Of course, we don't have to give gifts on Christmas. Nonetheless, we can appeal to the example of the Magi who brought gifts for the baby Jesus: "On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh" (Matthew 2:11).

We can also appeal to the practice of the Jews as they gave gifts during Purim:

Mordecai recorded these events, and he sent letters to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Xerxes, near and far, to have them celebrate annually the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the

month of Adar as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor (Esther 9:20-22).

Conclusion

In closing let us learn from the example of the humility of the Son of God displayed in the incarnation. Wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger was Almighty God. That is real love!

Being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:6-11).

Let us humble ourselves to the Babe in the manger, yeah to the God of all creation. As God gave his Son for all of us, let us imitate God and give of ourselves to God and others as we walk our days on earth. Indeed, wise men still seek Him today!

IS THE POPE IN JEOPARDY?

By Richard Bennett

Amidst pictures of the ailing condition of the Pope, news of an intense power struggle within the Vatican has overflowed publicly. The serious difficulties reveal ongoing financial corruption amidst ruthless infighting. These latest revelations regarding the affairs of the Vatican Bank are not startling as the Papacy has a long, long history of financial scandals. The current one was reported in *The Australian* on June 18, 2012,

“In the latest scandal to engulf the Pope a church official has warned that a ‘time bomb’ is about to explode over mafia money allegedly invested in the Vatican bank. Prosecutors are investigating claims a Sicilian mafia godfather laundered cash through the Institute for Religious Works [IOR], as the bank is officially known. The move follows the arrest of the Pope’s former butler and the leaking of files outlining Vatican corruption, cronyism and infighting, in the worst crisis of the Pope’s seven-year papacy.”¹

Many in the Catholic hierarchy understand the seriousness of the scandal in regard to human life. For example, the *Financial Times* noted,

“Three weeks after he was dismissed as president of the Vatican bank and with a secret dossier he wrote now in the hands of Italian investigators, Ettore Gotti Tedeschi is said to be afraid for his life ... A veteran observer and friend of Mr Gotti Tedeschi confirmed reports that he feared for his life - not unjustly, the person said, given the bank’s murky history and mysterious death 30 years ago of Roberto Calvi, former chairman of Banco Ambrosiano, a bank partly owned by IOR that collapsed as a result of fraudulent bankruptcy. Mr Calvi - the so-called ‘God’s banker’ - was found hanging from Blackfriars Bridge in London, a presumed victim of the Mafia.”²

The real life drama that is happening has been called a time bomb about to explode. Yet, it is reported that the Pope seems not up to meeting the crisis, an opinion that recent photographs of him corroborate.

“The mood at the Vatican is apocalyptic. Pope Benedict XVI seems tired, and both unable and unwilling to seize the reins amid fierce

1 www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/mafia-vatican-funds-explosive/story-fmb64oi6-1226398035050 6/22/2012

2 www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/97dee988-b312-11e1-83a9-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1ySEGc4oQ 6/21/2012

infighting and scandal. While Vatican insiders jockey for power and speculate on his successor, Joseph Ratzinger has withdrawn to focus on his still-ambiguous legacy.”³

The Pope’s Depleted Legacy

The portrayals and descriptions of Vatican City and its Pope leave much to be explained. For example,

“Here are a few excerpts from the Reuters’ story: Call it Conspiracy City. Call it Scandal City. Call it Leak City. These days the holy city has been in the news for anything but holy reasons. ‘It is a total mess,’ said one high-ranking Vatican official who spoke, like all others, on the condition of anonymity.”⁴

On June 5, 2012, the *UK Telegraph* reported that,

“Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican’s Secretary of State and the Pope’s right-hand man, said the theft and leaking of compromising documents by unidentified whistle-blowers seemed to be part of a concerted campaign against the 85-year-old pontiff. ...Exactly who is behind the theft of the papers and letters remains a mystery, but there is widespread speculation in Rome that they are part of Machiavellian machinations at the very highest levels of the Catholic Church hierarchy.”⁵

Some news sources speak of various mysterious scheming against the Pope as the reason why these calamities have come upon Benedict XVI while others are adamant that the Pope should be using his power more actively by taking charge of the situation. *The Australian* reports that “...Benedict XVI, 85, implicitly denounced the leaks as the work of the devil.”⁶ The Pope is undoubtedly right on that score, but not primarily from the causes that are presently being named. Rather from a biblical perspective, the real starting point and reasons for the Pope’s woes are to be found elsewhere.

Some Basic Reasons for Pope’s Afflictions

A basic reason for the Pope’s woes is to be found in his compilation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in 1994. Under the authority of Pope John Paul II, as Cardinal Ratzinger at the time, Benedict XVI held the office of Prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that capacity, he was responsible for oversight and publication of

3 www.spiegel.de/international/europe/pope-benedict-focuses-on-legacy-while-ignoring-vatican-power-struggle-a-838830.html

4 http://thenewcivilrightsmovement.com/monsignors-mutiny-shocking-report-details-vatican-pope-in-turmoil/politics/2012/02/14/34724_6/22/2012

5 www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/vaticancityandholyysee/9312016/Vatican-secretary-of-state-says-Pope-Benedict-XVI-victim-of-ferocious-attacks.html 7/3/2012

6 *The Australian*, op. cit.

the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994). This was the first universal Catholic catechism in nearly five hundred years, and in it is clearly stated the following dogma that Catholics must believe,

“...the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered.”⁷

Thus, the eleventh century claim of Pope Gregory VII that the Pope is Christ’s Vicar has been newly expanded in the 1994 *Catechism*. What Ratzinger has added is the claim for universal, absolute power for the Pope.⁸

The Lord Jesus Christ entrusted the universal care of redeemed souls into the safekeeping of the Divine Person of the Holy Spirit. That Ratzinger should lay claim to the office of Vicar of Christ is totally absurd and blasphemous. The Holy Spirit alone is the Vicar of Christ. Because there is a direct connection between the redemption of Christ and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, it is a soul-damning lie to credit the role of the Holy Spirit to the Pope of Rome. Nevertheless, Ratzinger spoke and taught publicly against the Holy Spirit when he claimed that the office of the Holy Spirit as Vicar of Christ is the office of the Roman Pontiff.⁹

Also in his *Catechism*, Ratzinger allowed an immensely significant statement concerning the grace of the Holy Spirit. The exact words of the salient statement are the following,

“The Church affirms that for believers the sacraments of the New Covenant are *necessary for salvation*. ‘Sacramental grace’ is the grace of the Holy Spirit, given by Christ and proper to each sacrament.”¹⁰

This identification of “Sacramental grace” with the Holy Spirit of God is a formal and explicit sin against the Holy Spirit and must therefore bear the consequences of such a sin. Ratzinger not only published the statement, he has taught the same publicly. For example, when he as Pope gave a message for World Youth Day in 2008, he said, “[T]he Holy Spirit is the ‘soul,’ the vital breath of Christian life itself, through the sacraments of Christian initiation – Baptism, Confirmation and the

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), Para. 882 Hereafter referred to as *Catechism*.

8 An example of his use of alleged absolute power was his denunciation of Reformation Churches on July 10, 2007. His authoritative statement stated that, “Christian Communities born out of the Reformation of the sixteenth century” cannot be “called ‘Churches’ in the proper sense.”

9 “Verily I say unto you, All sins shall be forgiven unto the sons of men, and blasphemies wherewith soever they shall blaspheme: But he that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost hath never forgiveness, but is in danger of eternal damnation.” Mark 3:28-29

10 *Catechism* Para 1129

Eucharist.”¹¹ Thus instead of teaching that salvation of God is directly given by grace alone, received through faith alone and in Christ alone, the Pope formally ascribed salvation as coming circuitously from the Catholic Church through three papal sacraments. In attributing to these three papal sacraments the Holy Spirit’s life-giving power of grace, the Pope has again blasphemed the Holy Spirit. The consequence of such an official dogma is inevitable. Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is by its very nature an eternal, damnable sin.

Why is this Pope in so much Turmoil?

Joseph Ratzinger was born into a traditional Bavarian farming family in 1927. At the age of 14, he joined the Hitler Youth, as was required of young Germans of the time. Later he was drafted into an anti-aircraft unit in Munich. He deserted the German army towards the end of the war and was briefly held as a prisoner of war by the Allies in 1945. He was ordained a priest of Munich in 1951. Later, he taught at the University of Bonn from 1959, and in 1966, took a chair in dogmatic theology at the University of Tuebingen. In 1969, he moved to Regensburg University in his native Bavaria and rose to become its dean and vice president. In March 1977, he was appointed Archbishop of Munich. Then in June 1977, Pope Paul VI appointed him Cardinal of Munich.

In Rome, 23 years later, he was appointed the head of The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.¹² In that position, Ratzinger issued an official Papal decree called “Dominus Iesus.”¹³ In Section 16 of “Dominus Iesus,” he asserted that, “[T]he fullness of Christ’s salvific mystery belongs also to the Church, inseparably united to her Lord.” And, “The Lord Jesus, the only Saviour, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a salvific mystery: he himself is in the Church...” Ratzinger’s claim that Christ’s salvation belongs to – and is “in” the Catholic Church – is a damnable lie.

Moreover, Ratzinger had already alleged that, “Justification is conferred in Baptism, the sacrament of faith. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy.”¹⁴ Such a concept of a supposed inner righteousness by means of a physical sacrament is a lie. The risen Christ proclaimed, “*He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved: but he that believeth not shall be damned.*”¹⁵ Faith is absolutely necessary for salvation; baptism is an ordinance that follows it. Thus, Ratzinger’s dogma in “Dominus Iesus,” that the

11 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20070720_youth_en.html 7/02/2012

12 Formerly known as the Office of the Inquisition, then the Holy Office, it is still housed in the same building in Rome as it had been during six horrendous centuries of torture and death when it carried out the Papal decrees.

13 www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html 7/02/2012

14 Catechism Para 1992

15 Mark 16:16

“fullness of Christ’s salvific mystery” belongs to the Church of Rome, was and is a soul-damning lie. He was again attempting to substitute the Catholic Church for the Person and saving work of the Lord Jesus.

Finally, at age 78, Ratzinger was elected Pope. Thus, on April 19, 2005, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. From the position of Supreme Roman Pontiff, he continued to decree dogma, while at the same time upholding the dogmas he had already published in the *Catechism*. One of these key dogmas is his alleged claim that the Catholic Church can forgive absolutely all manner of sins, no matter how serious. The exact words of his decree are, “There is no offense, however serious, that the Church cannot forgive.”¹⁶ While he still claims that his Church can forgive all offenses no matter how serious, a most pertinent question must be answered: can his Catholic Church forgive his own sin against the Holy Spirit? Or asked differently, can Ratzinger’s sin of blaspheming the Holy Spirit be forgiven by his decree that the Catholic Church can forgive all sins?

Dilemmas and Hazards ABOUND

Serious major problems have been stirring up intense turmoil within the Vatican. Many ask the question: how will Benedict XVI be able to survive? It may be that he is fearful for his life in a number of ways.

Regarding corruption in financial matters, it is undoubtedly on his mind that Pope John Paul I was only one month in office when he died while addressing Vatican bank corruption charges at the time. Investigative reporter, David Yallop, alleges in his book, *In God’s Name*, that Pope John I, Albino Luciani was killed. Authors of books and articles continue to investigate his death. For example it is recently reported that,

“Yet another book has been written on the suspicious death of Pope John Paul I, this time by a Spanish priest named Father Jesus Lopez Saez. Building upon the work of David Yallop, Father Saez [states] ‘the precise circumstances attending the discovery of the body of John Paul I eloquently demonstrate that the Vatican practiced a disinformation campaign.’ The Vatican told one lie after another: ‘Lies about little things, lies about big things. All these lies had but one purpose: to disguise the fact that Albino Luciani, Pope John Paul I, had been assassinated.’”¹⁷

The Catholic New service Zenit reported that Ratzinger at the time said that, “his death was totally unexpected....at the time of his election, John Paul I seemed to enjoy good health.”¹⁸ Ratzinger was a key figure in the Vatican at the time and certainly knows the facts. He would

16 Catechism Para 982

17 <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120130151745AAg8rR7> 7/20/2012

18 <http://www.zenit.org/article-8353?l=english> 7/20/2012

also know of strange deaths of other popes. For example, just a few of the many alleged murders of popes include Stephen VII (896–897) strangled; Stephen IX (939–942) mutilated; John XII (955–964) murdered; Benedict VI (973–974) strangled; John XIV (983–984) starved or directly murdered; Gregory V (996–999) poisoned; Clement II (1046–1047) poisoned; Damasus II (1048) murdered; Pope Pius XI (1922–1929) assassinated.

It is reported that Benedict XVI has withdrawn himself from the infighting and power struggle in order to write his book on Jesus. One would hope that in doing so, he would find the true and living Lord Jesus Christ. In the meantime, on June 10 2012, the Salon Website reported that,

“A ‘reform of the Curia’ is probably a contradiction in terms. Its hierarchical, essentially medieval organizational model is incompatible with modern management. The Vatican is an anachronistic, albeit surprisingly tenacious system, in which pecking orders and an absurd penchant for secrecy and intrigue prevail.”¹⁹

The 605 years of the Papacy’s Inquisition shows the true character of the Papacy. The murders – even of its own popes – over the horrific years of its history demonstrate its moral fiber. The Vatican system has never brought even one soul to Christ. Rather Christ Jesus’ words are as true for Catholic prelates as it was for the Pharisees to whom He said, “*ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in.*”²⁰

Conclusion

The Lord withstood the fanatically devout Pharisees with a very strong warning. They were looking to their own traditions and self-righteousness as ground for acceptance with God. Because they did not believe that the Lord Jesus was the Savior, He confronted them with the words, “*ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins.*”²¹ Like the Pharisees, present-day Catholics keenly believe in the traditions of their Church and its dogmas, such as the dogmas of Pope Benedict XVI. Thus, like the Pharisees of old, the Lord’s warning applies to Catholics and all other unbelievers.

By the grace of God alone, true faith alone in Christ Jesus alone saves lost sinners from their sins and transforms their lives. If you do not have this true faith, you will die in your sins. Without true faith, which only God can give, you cannot be saved from the power of sin; therefore,

19 http://www.salon.com/2012/06/19/exhausted_in_the_vatican/ 7/21/2012

20 Matthew 23:13

21 John 8:24

most certainly, you will die in your sins. Your biggest question, therefore, is how can anyone be right with God since everyone is born with a sin nature? The answer is to trust on Jesus Christ's perfect life and sacrifice as the only remedy for your sin problem. The Lord Jesus Christ died in place of those who are trusting on Him alone. His life and finished sacrifice alone are the only ransom for the believer. *"The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister; and to give his life a ransom for many."*²² Jesus Christ was the supreme example of one who manifested true greatness. He who is God's Messiah, *"the Son of Man,"* might well have asserted His right to be ministered to by men. Instead, He came to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many. This was the price demanded by the All Holy God in order that justice might be satisfied for the forgiveness of sins. As a result of this payment, the believer is freed from the bondage of sin and given everlasting life. The gift of God is the sheer love, mercy, and grace of God. Because, as the Scripture so clearly states it, *"He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."*²³ *"He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."*²⁴

The Lord Jesus Christ was personally All Holy; yet as the substitute for the believer's sin, He rendered Himself legally responsible to the wrath of God. The purpose of Christ's faithfulness in all that He did, culminating in His death on the cross, was that His righteousness might be credited to the believer. God legally constituted Christ to be *"sin for us."* He was *"made sin"* because the sins of all of His people were transferred to Him. In like manner, God reckons to the believer Christ's righteousness. Quite clearly, salvation is a judicial and gracious act of God, whereby a believing sinner has legal right standing in Christ Jesus. Thus, by the abundant grace given in Jesus Christ, we are not only redeemed from sin, a believer can live without fear and experience daily joy and thanksgiving. More and more the believer realizes that he or she is a new creation in the Lord; as His word proclaims, *"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."*²⁵

22 Mark 10:45

23 II Corinthians 5:21

24 Mark 16:16

25 II Corinthians 5:17

Feedback

Larry,

Although I am not familiar with Murray's ministry, I appreciated the detailed information Steve put in his letter. After reading the statement on racism (page 24), I was anticipating an editorial comment.

Here is my comment.

There is only one race of people on the Earth, the human race or Adam's race. Modern racism is a by-product of Darwinism. Skin color does not define race, but it is the government standard for racial distinction. The Bible refers to mankind as Peoples, tongues and nations which came about as the world population increased after the flood. One of the standard biological tests for "race" is the ability to procreate. Humans, regardless of language or color, have that ability. There is still a small population of people that have dna for a broad spectrum of skin color. They live in the Fiji Islands. I learned this from Dr. Carl Baugh, director of the Creation Evidence Museum in Glen Rose, Texas. He helped found a Christian Mission in Fiji and has been there a number of times. He stated that children from the same family could be of a variety of skin color.

I saw a photo some years ago of twin boys. Their physical features were identical except for their skin color. One was white and the other was dark black.

B. H., Anoka, MN

Correction:

In our April-June 2012 issue a mistake in the quiz is obvious: The answer to question 10 is a) Bill Clinton.

The editor regrets the mistake. Please correct your test.

QUIZ: **BASICS ON ART, MUSIC AND ARCHITECTURE**

1. The Sistine Chapel is in:
 a. Amsterdam
 b. Dresden
 c. Rome
 d. Munich

2. Known for Methodist hymnology:
 a. Fanny Crosby
 b. Charles Wesley
 c. Henry Longfellow
 d. Marion Anderson

3. To see the Mona Lisa one would go to:
 a. Florence
 b. Paris
 c. Madrid
 d. St. Petersburg, Russia

4. Considered to be the greatest composer of sacred music:
 a. Johann Sebastian Bach
 b. Ludwig Van Beethoven
 c. Felix Mendelssohn
 d. Leonardo da Vinci

5. Which style of construction is the oldest?
 a. Gothic
 b. Baroque
 c. Byzantine
 d. Romanesque

6. Figures projecting upward from church buildings:
 a. Spires
 b. Gargoyles
 c. Turrets
 d. Naves

7. The greatest Finnish composer was:

- ___ a. Anton Dvorak
- ___ b. Jean Sibelius
- ___ c. Joseph Haydn
- ___ d. Frederic Chopin

8. David's choir leader was:

- ___ a. Abigail
- ___ b. Hiram
- ___ c. Bezaleel
- ___ d. Asaph

9. The number of keys on a standard piano:

- ___ a. 64
- ___ b. 76
- ___ c. 82
- ___ d. 88

10. Which musical instrument is not listed in the Bible?

- ___ a. Piccolo
- ___ b. Tambourine
- ___ c. Cymbal
- ___ d. Lyre

Answers:

1. (a); 2. (c); 3. (b); 4. (a); 5. (c); 6. (a); 7. (b); 8. (d); 9. (d); 10. (a)

Personal Notes on the Articles:

Please feel free to email us at info@ras.org or call us at (612) 331-3342 if you have any questions or comments.

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