

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, November 29, 1992, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **1 CORINTHIANS 10:31**

“So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all  
to the glory of God.”

### **CHRISTMAS AND THE CHRISTIAN**

Well, the December madness, the Yuletide season is upon us, and whether we like it or not, we're forced to reckon with this indisputable reality. The crowded stores, the children queued up to sit on the knee of the big red-coated “Gimme” man called Santa Claus, the gaily-lighted and ornately decorated public places, the Hollywood crooners with their tear-jerking renditions of the Christmas carols – these are all grim, hard-nosed facts that we cannot avoid. The Christmas season is upon us!

Now, since a Christian is called upon to glorify God in the real world in which we live, and since Christmas is a part of that world, the child of God must wrestle with this matter, and come to some definitive position with respect both to his attitudes and his actions in this season of the year. You just can't close your eyes and hope the whole thing will go away.

Now, I would like to begin by enunciating three very cogent facts relating to the celebration of Christmas.

#### **1. There is no biblical warrant for the remembrance of the day of Christ's birth as a day of special religious celebration.**

Note carefully, I did not say that there is no biblical warrant for the remembrance of Christ's birth. I hope you remember and reflect upon the wonder of the Incarnation many, many times throughout the year; and stand amazed that He Who is the Eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. As Christians, we are convinced that all religious ceremonies must be expressly commanded by just and necessary inference from the Word of God. When it comes to religious ceremonies, we look for command, or precedent, or example from the Scriptures; and as Christians, we will not allow our conscience to be bound by any tradition of men, of society, or even of mother church.

We are commanded to remember Christ's death in the Lord's Supper. We are commanded not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together for corporate worship. We are commanded to remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy. We are commanded to make disciples, and to baptize them. Therefore, these religious ceremonies – Baptism, Communion, Public Worship, Lord's Day observance, and so on – are not traditions of men; they are laid upon our consciences by the explicit command of God and by the apostolic precedent. But, there is no command in Scripture to remember the day of Christ's birth as a day of special religious celebration.

**2. The setting apart of December 25 as a day of special commemoration of Christ's birthday is rooted in a pagan tradition.** As a matter of fact, the December 25 date comes from a pagan observance of the birthday of the unconquered Sun. Two weeks of festivities were highlighted by feasts, parades, special music, gift giving, lighted candles and green trees. In A.D. 336, a year before his death, the Emperor Constantine declared December 25 an official Roman holiday to celebrate the birth of Christ. (His philosophy was, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em!") Some godly church members objected to the observance. Tertullian, the Church Father, denounced it as pagan in its origin. Chrysostom, the silver-tongued preacher of the 4th century, rebuked weak Christians for adopting such worldly customs. The protests were overruled, and for centuries since, Western nations have revered December 25 as the anniversary of the birth of our Lord. Of course, in the Eastern Orthodox churches, January 6 is the day of Christmas celebration. So, the practice of setting apart December 25 is of pagan origination.

**3. The current celebration of Christmas is essentially pagan, humanistic and ungodly in all its ramifications.** This is true of other "holidays" also. I remember vividly President Carter's last Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1980 because it was so appalling. No doubt some young White House staffer wrote it, but it staggers the imagination that a born-again President could sign it. Listen to these gems: "The greatest bounty of our nation is" – the goodness and mercy of the Lord our God? No! "The greatest bounty of our nation is the bounty of our heritage – our diversity as immigrants and descendants of immigrants, our common identity as Americans... Thanksgiving is more than just a day of celebration. It is also a commemoration" – of the goodness of God? Oh, no! It is, "a commemoration of the day America's earliest inhabitants sat down to table with European colonists[!]. That occasion was historic not only because it established a national holiday, but because it marked the start of a national tradition of cooperation, unity and tolerance." Pure unadulterated humanism. Man is the measure of all things.

Now, the Christmas celebration at the highest national level is also humanistic; that is to say, it begins with man and ends with man. For instance, the New York Life Insurance Co. takes a full page in Time magazine every year to present, "A Christmas Prayer". Listen to this: "Let us pray that strength and courage abundant be given to all who work for a world of reason and understanding. Let the good that lies in every man's heart be magnified day by day, that men may come to see more clearly not that which divides them, but that which unites them; that each hour may bring us closer to a final victory, not of nation over nation, but of man over his own weaknesses." [They're praying, you see, that man may be his own savior!] It continues, "that the true spirit of this Christmas season, its joy, its beauty, its hope, may live among us; that the blessings of peace be ours, the peace" – that comes to us through the incarnate Savior? Oh, no indeed! "The peace to build and grow, to live in harmony and sympathy with others, and to plan for the future with confidence." "Bah! Humbug!", as Scrooge would say! You see, God doesn't enter into the whole thing. Man's betterment by his own unaided efforts, is the beginning and the end of the whole thing.

I remember seeing a commercial for Hallmark Christmas cards. A little boy climbs on Santa's knee, and presents him with a beautiful and expensive Christmas card. Santa opens it, smiles in gratitude and says, "He knows the real meaning of Christmas!" It's laughable if it weren't so pathetically blasphemous. An expression of human friendship in the giving of an

expensive Christmas card – that – the real meaning of Christmas? No way!

Now, that's the kind of humanism that pervades Christmas at the highest level. Then you descend to the Christmas office party, the pinching of secretaries, the half-drunk revelers kissing under the mistletoe, and at that point you witness the orgiastic nature of this type of celebration. Then when you descend to the bed-rock programmed spirit of covetousness and commercialism symbolized by Santa Claus, I don't believe any intelligent person, Christian or non-Christian, would dispute this fact – that the current celebration of Christmas is essentially pagan, humanistic and ungodly in all its ramifications.

This being so, a Christian knows that he is faithfully and forcefully to resist everything that is humanistic, pagan and ungodly. A Christian is not indifferent to humanism. In Ephesians 5:11 we are told to “reprove the unfruitful works of darkness”.

Well then, in the light of these three facts, what shall a Christian do about Christmas? Let me give you a simplistic answer.

- All Christians should have nothing to do with the day and see to it that no one else does either! No gifts, no cards, no trees, no carols, no nothing. And, if you get anywhere near someone who holds this view, he will probably hand you a tract on why no one ought to have anything to do with it.

We are told that in 1644 the English Puritans forbade the observance and made December 25 a regular market day. They even passed a law making it illegal to bake a plum pudding because they considered it a pagan food made in celebration of that pagan day! Now, that is a very self-consistent position, but I believe it is a simplistic answer to our question.

Now, let me be up front with you and say that all Christians should seek to capture Christmas for Christ. Make every gift speak of God's great gift. Make the tree remind you of the tree upon which our Savior hung. As the Christmas tree is the place from which the gifts are distributed, so God's gifts are given on the basis of the death of Christ upon the tree. If we don't try to reclaim Christmas for Christ, I believe we are guilty of sinful retreat. We are, in fact, giving up the day and the season to the devil.

However, I want briefly to direct your attention to three fundamental biblical principles which, I believe, will help you to see this whole thing in perspective.

We turn to Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 because these are the passages we must wrestle with in treating a subject of this nature. You remember that Paul was dealing with two things.

- a. the observance by Christians of certain religious “days” that were a carryover from the Jewish calendar; and

b. the eating or non-eating of meat. Most meat sold in an ancient butcher shop had been offered as a sacrifice in a pagan temple to a pagan god. Now, it was certainly pagan to offer a slain cow to an idol; and yet, Paul says that in certain instances Christians could eat that meat to the glory of God, regardless of why the animal was butchered. I must confess that I have little patience with those tracts that say, “If you only knew the origin of Christmas celebration, you’d have nothing to do with it”.

Let me ask you men a simple question: Do you know the origin of buttons on a man’s coat? Suppose I were to tell you that it goes back to a day when people thought that demons could come in under your coat unless you buttoned it down. Would that knowledge keep you from wearing a coat with buttons on it? Now, I’m not saying that is the origin of coat buttons, but suppose it were! You see, you don’t know! There are many things we engage in, the origin of which we know nothing. Paul says, “the origin of that butchered meat is temple worship of a pagan idol”. And yet, he goes on to say that a person may eat that meat to the glory of God.

Now to our three principles:

**1. We must recognize that nothing of this nature is intrinsically evil,** Romans 14:14 says, “Nothing is unclean in itself.” People were thinking in terms of the evil being in the meat itself – the meat offered to an idol. Paul says, “No. Nothing is intrinsically unclean. No material object is unclean because it is the creation of God.” Therefore, when we address the question, “Shall I or shall I not celebrate Christmas with a Christmas tree and gifts and cards and turkey?”, remember – a Christmas tree is a creation of God, and there is nothing intrinsically evil in it. Is there anything intrinsically evil with a colored light? Are only pure white lights virtuous? Is there anything intrinsically evil in a parent giving a gift to his child? Of course not. The Bible says that desire to give good gifts to your children is a faint reflection of the benevolent heart of God Who delights to give good gifts to His children. “If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give good gifts to those who ask Him.” (Matt. 7:11) Is there anything intrinsically evil with a turkey? (You may say, “It depends on who the turkey is!!”)

Any mentality, therefore, which looks upon the thing itself as evil, is an anti-biblical mentality. The origin of a thing has nothing to do with its being evil or not evil. Is the thing itself a gift from God? Friendship, the desire to share with one another, the desire to enjoy food and fellowship around a table – these things are not evil; they are the gifts of God.

**2. We must come to individual convictions under the Lordship of Christ.** Look at Romans 14:5, “One man esteems one day as better than another while another man esteems all days alike. Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind.” Here is a converted Jew in Rome who still finds great meaning in remembering some of the old Jewish feast days. Here’s another Jewish Christian who says, “Look, Caleb, I’ve got the real thing now. I don’t need types and shadows. Every day is now a Passover Day, a Day of Jubilee, a Day of Atonement.” And Caleb replies with a smile, “Well, blessings on you, Jonathan, but I still like to remember the special days!” And what does the Scripture say? “Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind.” I can’t legislate for you, nor you for me. Jesus Christ is Lord of every day of the year including December 25, and what I do on that day must be done recognizing that Jesus Christ is Lord of

every day in the calendar. The money I spend for Christmas gifts is His money. I am His steward, and gift spending must also be engaged in under the Lordship of Christ. It would be a poor, and indeed a shameful stewardship of His money to spend more on Christmas than I would spend in a year for the relief of world hunger, for example.

My body belongs to God too. Therefore, it must not be defiled through gluttony or drunkenness during December or any other month. If I feast, it must be as under His eyes. “Lord Jesus, thank You for the bounty You have provided.” As long as we have the record of our Lord attending special feasts, no one can say that feasting in itself is a sin. He was “holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners” (Heb. 7:26), but when a man was gloriously converted, and the only way he could show his joy was by having a feast, and calling in his friends, Jesus went along, and He didn’t sit there as a party-pooper. He didn’t sit there with a hyper-spiritual look on His face. Think of Him at the marriage at Cana, He really got that party going! Things were beginning to wind down, and the Lord took care of the situation!

**3. We must not stand in judgment over those whose persuasion and activity are different from ours.** Look at Romans 14:3, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else’s servant?” We must never imagine that we have a greater spiritual sensitivity or comprehension than others because that could be carnal pride. Observing Christmas Day can be Christ honoring: But, if anyone has scruples about it and cannot engage in the festivities with a good conscience, then for him it is a sin, and he should abstain. But, we must allow each other the liberty of our integrity under the Lordship of Christ.

In closing, may I address some of you here this morning who may not know Christ as personal Savior. You may be saying, “What a kill-joy that preacher is! The world’s in a mess. And, here we’ve got a few days to forget everything and have a good old rip-snortin’ time, and you pour cold water on the whole thing!”

My friend, could it be that we Christians, weak and sinful though we be, have tasted realities that you know nothing of? We don’t need to chew the sawdust of office parties and spiked eggnog and a fat turkey, to find a little meaning in life. Christ has been born in our hearts, and He has brought to us what He said He would bring – “I have come that you may have life and have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). And that is why we find the modern pagan Christmas celebration so distasteful. Have you been offended at the thought that you shouldn’t have “a real Christmas”? Could it be that you know nothing of the reality of the Christ Who came to save His people from their sins? I plead with you, dear friend, lay hold of Him Who is God’s unspeakable GIFT – the Lord Jesus Christ, Himself – the GIFT which, instead of tarnishing with age, becomes ever more precious with each passing day. Oh, look to Him in simple faith, and be saved.

And to my fellow Christians I would say, “Don’t let this pagan and ungodly world around you squeeze you into its own mould. Don’t let it dictate what you will do.” You’re no slave to a pagan culture. Be sure that everything you do is done for Christ’s glory. And, be sure that whatever you cannot do as unto Him, is not done. That may mean a radical overhauling of

some of your Christmas priorities and practices. So be it. I plead with you, as a child of God, not to suspend the conscious recognition of the Lordship of Christ simply because it is the Christmas season.

These seem to me to be the great principles. Christmas – to celebrate or not to celebrate. The answer we thresh out will be one for which we can give a good account on the Day of Judgment. It's a wonderful thing to come through any special season, whether of trial or festivity, with a clean, clear conscience. Whatever else you've got at the end of it, if you don't have that, it wasn't worth it. May the Lord thus bring us through, to His glory and honor.

**AMEN.**