

The battle for Christmas

by Mathew Block



'T WAS THE NIGHT BEFORE—X-MAS? WINTER FESTIVAL? DECEMBER HOLIDAYS? FESTIVUS?

As Canadian society moves in an increasingly secular direction, public disagreement over what to call the season becomes more common. But even when we retain the historic title Christmas, the average person's thoughts run along the lines of Santa Claus, family dinners, taking time off work, and gift-giving (or getting). The birth of Jesus, if remembered at all, is at best an afterthought. While perhaps the third most important day in the Christian calendar (after Good Friday and Easter), it appears Christmas has lost much of its religious significance for the world around us.

That realization lies behind a recent question posed to members of Lutheran Church–Canada's Facebook group. "There is a trend," Ian Adnams, director of communications wrote, "for churches to differentiate themselves from the secular 'Christmas' by holding services which celebrate 'The Nativity of our Lord.'" He then asks, "Do you support this change in name?"

A number of people responded, with most giving a decided negative. Many suggested the name change would hinder outreach to non-Christians. "Do we wish to come across as loving and inviting?" one respondent asked. Of the options "Come to my church on Christmas Eve" and "Come to my church tonight, as we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord," he clearly preferred the first. "I think if I pitched the latter to non-believing friends," he continued, "they'd look at me like they'd eaten some bad fish, or something!"

Another agreed the new name would be jargon to non-Christians. While such jargon is useful inside the church (as a sort of "shorthand ... to communicate complex ideas quickly"), he feared its use outside the church would act as "a barrier to initiation and participation." "Now is not a time for exclusivity," he writes. "It is a time to do everything in our power to communicate effectively and clearly with the lost."

The concern about using Christmas as an opportunity for evangelism has been part of the celebration since its beginning. Truth be told, Christmas is a somewhat late addition to the Christian calendar.

For the first few centuries in the Church, the birth of Christ was not an official holy day. Some early theologians like Origin of Alexandria and Arnobius of Sicca condemned the celebration of birthdays in general and divine birthdays in specific. However others, such as Clement of Alexandria and Hippolytus of Rome, thought the Incarnation should be celebrated and so began attempts to determine the precise date of Christ's birth. A number of dates were suggested, but in 336 A.D. the

Church set Christmas Day officially as December 25.

Today, scholars disagree over whether the Church truly thought December 25 marked the birth date of Christ; whether it was trying to displace a pagan Winter Solstice festival in honour of the Sun the same day; or whether both were elements in their decision. Regardless, the fact the pagan and Christian celebrations coincided became an opportunity for the Church to reach out to non-believers. The Romans were used to worshipping the sun on December 25. Now, Christians invited them to worship the Son.

Still, evangelism is effective only if the people you are trying to reach understand what you are saying. And according to a number of respondents to Lutheran Church–Canada's online question, the word "Christmas" is so

misunderstood among non-Christians today that, by itself, it no longer communicates effectively. But instead of replacing it with "the Nativity of our Lord," some writers felt a compromise was in order; we should use both titles: "Christmas: The Nativity of our Lord." One pastor explained it this way:

Words communicate; less helpful words obfuscate. Wanna know what's in a can? Read the label. The word "Christmas" used to actually mean something ("Christ's-Mass"), now its meaning is both obscure and co-opted—so it's a good time to expand (but not necessarily replace

it) to make the words mean something again.

By joining "Christmas" with "The Nativity of our Lord," Christians can remind the world around them there is a deeper meaning to "Christmas" than they generally remember.

The changing meaning of "Christmas" is not a new problem. The popular Christian author C.S. Lewis, writing half a century ago, noted that even in his time Christmas had come to mean a number of different things. There was still the religious meaning for practicing Christians, but he also highlighted an additional, deviant meaning gaining ground: Christmas as a commercial event. Lewis warned that people were forgetting the religious significance of the day in the midst of the hustle and bustle of gift-giving and receiving. Previously, he reminds us, "the interchange of presents was a very small ingredient in the older English festivity." By contrast, his contemporaries seemed to think gift-giving was *all* that Christmas entailed.

Exasperated with the "very commercialized and vulgar fuss," he would eventually remove himself from the entire process: "I send no cards," he writes to an American friend, "and give no presents except to children." While most Lutherans today would likely take a less reactionary position, it is hard to argue with Lewis' criticisms. Today, gift-giving is undoubtedly the primary meaning of Christmas among non-Christians.

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Keeping Christ in Xmas

To many, Xmas is clear evidence that people are taking “Christ” out of “Christmas.” But does anyone ever ask what the “X” in “Xmas” actually means? There’s nothing inherently anti-Christian about the expression. In fact, its origin is Christian in nature.

In New Testament Greek, Christ is spelled Χριστός. Notice that the first letter, a “chi”, looks exactly like our “X”. Christians have used this “X” for nearly two thousand years as part of Christian symbols representing the name “Christ.”

Even today, many Lutheran congregations display the Chi-Rho throughout their churches. This symbol, Ϟ, looks to English speakers like a “P” superimposed on an “X.” In biblical Greek, however, these symbols are the first two letters of Christ’s name.

In the same way, the Christian fish symbol —which dates back to the first century A.D.—is also based on an abbreviation of Christ’s name. In New Testament Greek,

“fish” is spelled ΙΧΘΥΣ (ichthys). The “I” is the first letter of “Jesus” in Greek. Likewise, the “X” stands for “Christ,” “Θ” for “God’s,” “Υ” for “Son” and the “Σ” for “Saviour.” Altogether it abbreviates “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, [Our] Saviour.” Note here how the “X” stands for “Christ”.

This type of abbreviation entered our language about a thousand years ago when monks and scribes began using “X” as an English shorthand for “Christ.” That tradition has continued to the present day, most notably in the term “Xmas.”

So don’t be afraid to wish your friends a “Merry Xmas!” Not only can you explain to them what the “X” in “Xmas” means, you will have the far more important opportunity to share with them the Good News which Christmas is all about: the birth of Jesus signalling God’s first earthly step towards the cross—in other words, his first earthly step towards our salvation.

M.B.

Not that giving gifts is a bad thing. As Lutheran scholar and writer Gene Veith writes, “One could hardly imagine a more apt practice to proclaim the meaning of Christmas.” As he explains, the entire Christian faith is built on the story of God’s gift of grace to sinful humanity. “Jesus Himself is a gift,” he writes, “all wrapped up in swaddling clothes.” Likewise, “salvation is not something we have to earn or deserve, but a gift, all wrapped up in the empty grave clothes of Jesus.”

For Veith, that unbelievers participate in gift-giving at Christmas is a foretaste of things to come. Scripture teaches that some day, “at the name of Jesus every knee [will] 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” (Phil. 2:10-11). “During the Christmas season,” Veith writes, “practically the whole world celebrates the coming of Jesus Christ, including those who do not believe in Him.” Christmas remains a fundamentally Christian event even if many of those participating do not recognize it now.

A number of Lutheran Church–Canada’s people apparently feel the same way, according to responses received on line. For them, Christmas is about Christ whether the world recognizes it or not. As long as the Church “knows what Christmas is about,” writes one, “why change the name?” For her and others, changing the name for the birth of Christ to “The Nativity of our Lord” would be the same as admitting defeat in the cultural war currently raging over Christmas.

It’s a war that has raged for some time—much earlier than us, much earlier than C.S. Lewis. Centuries ago, English Puritans argued that the religious significance of the holiday had been sacrificed for drunken revelry. In fact, when England came under the control of the Puritan Oliver Cromwell in the 17th century, he banned all

Christmas celebrations. Drunkenness and gluttony would have no part in the religious observations. The people were instead ordered to hold somber fasts. Feasting and decorating became legal offenses; in the city of London at least, soldiers took to the streets to enforce the ban.

Few today would suggest Christians go so far. The birth of Christ is, after all, a joyous event, and wanting to celebrate it with family and friends is both natural and good. That said, the Puritans still remind us of one thing: Christmas is, at its core, not about feasting. It is not merely an occasion for a family get-together. And as Lewis reminded us, it is not about people giving each other gifts for the sake of giving gifts. Instead, it is about Christ. It is about celebrating the mystery of the Incarnation: God becoming man. And while we rejoice over that event, we do so in the knowledge that Christmas is but a precursor—a precursor to the sorrow of Good Friday, the joy of Easter morning and to our salvation.

We thank God for that incredible gift of grace at Christmas time. But even while we do so, we remain aware that, for most Canadians, December 25 remains a purely secular event—even as they call it “Christmas” Day. We can only hope the words Christian author G.K. Chesterton wrote in 1928 will come to pass in our time.

The great majority of people will go on observing forms that cannot be explained; they will keep Christmas Day with Christmas gifts and Christmas benedictions; they will continue to do it; and some day suddenly wake up and discover why.

Whatever we call our celebration of Christ’s birth this year, let that be our constant prayer for the world around us.

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