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# About Christmas

*by: Ronald L. Dart*

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What did the first Christians believe about Christmas?

Now I know that that's a loaded question because people will say "What do you mean, there's nothing in the New Testament about Christmas." Yes, that's quite the point! You don't find any reference, such as we sailed away from Troas after Christmas, and you don't find any reference about any kind of a big Christmas celebration in Corinth. If you had mentioned Christmas to a first century Christian, they would have said "What? What's that?" They would have had no idea what you were talking about. In fact, not only did they not believe anything about Christmas, they did not practice anything remotely like it.

Now one reason for this may be that among many Jews, birthday observance is eschewed as originating in Egypt, and that may have influenced many first century Christians, most of whom were Jews and it may not have crossed their minds to observe the birthday of Jesus, much less Christmas per se.

So, there's not a hint in the New Testament about believing in Christmas or celebrating Jesus' birth.

It could be argued that this fact does not militate against modern celebration, but that's not what interests me at this point. We can argue about that later.

My question is: What did the first Christians believe and practice relative to Jesus' Nativity. The word 'Nativity' just means the circumstances of one's birth.

## **When Was Christ Born?**

Now I came across an interesting item published by the American Presbyterian Church. Apparently, it was published shortly after Christmas a few years ago. They said, "In the recent holiday season, many Christians have merrily, joyously and some perhaps even seriously, solemnly, and reverently, celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ. However, one wonders how many give any significant thought to the issue of when Christ was born. If they had, they would quickly have discovered that despite all the mythology and legend that surrounds this holiday season, we really do not know when Christ was born. We know neither the year, nor the month, nor the day. For that matter we don't know the time of day either. God in his wisdom has chosen not to reveal to us anything concerning the exact date of this momentous event, so long foretold by the prophets, and awaited by the faithful."

And of course, they are dead right. That said, though, I think we can safely assume that the first Christians knew when Jesus was born. They did not see fit to record it for us. I think they must've known roughly and the reason I say that is because, Luke records events that at least seasonally place Jesus' birth.

### **Luke's Gospel is in Order**

Luke begins his gospel with the story of another birth and you might wonder in a way why, and we will talk about that. His name was John the Baptist. The story begins in the very first verse of Luke one, "Forasmuch as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things that are most surely believed among us."

Now before I go on, I take this to mean that we can safely consider that in Luke's gospel, we have a statement of things that were widely reported among the first Christians. "Many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which are most surely believed"

So, Luke then has taken pen in hand, or whatever he used for writing tools, and being a good reporter, a good historian, put the whole thing together for us, so we then can safely consider that Luke's gospel will give a good rundown of things that were believed among the first Christians.

Luke seems to imply that while he was not an eyewitness of all these events, he had systematically collected them and set them in order. This is important when you sit down to read through Luke.

Luke says in verse 2, "Even they from the beginning were eye witnesses and ministers of the word delivered them to us."

Luke got his works from eye witnesses. There were 120 disciples on the first Pentecost. Most of them had probably seen everything, experienced everything, and so he had a good set a record to work from.

Let's continue in verse 3, "It seemed good to me also, having had perfect understanding of all things from the very first, to write to you in order, most excellent Theophilus." So, the Gospel according to Luke is actually a letter to a man named Theophilus who commissioned Luke to write his account.

Now verse 4, "That you might know the certainty of those things, wherein you have been instructed."

### **Oral Traditions and Good Memories**

Luke is beginning to try to nail down his gospel at about the same time that Matthew and Mark were writing. I am persuaded, that they had a very strong oral tradition in the Church of God. For many, many months after the ascension of Christ, they stayed in Jerusalem. They listened to the apostles. They questioned the apostles. Every issue was examined, right, left, sideways, up and down.

Most of those people had better memories than we do today. I remember being kind of surprised as I was reading an historical account of the invention of printing. The gentleman said, human memory has been degraded since the invention of printing, because now we have it all in books on the shelf and we don't have to worry about remembering. We can look it up, and it's even worse now because you can look up anything on the Internet and have an answer in seconds or minutes, at the longest, on just about anything you want to find. So, there's no need to memorize anything.

Those first Christians had a very strong need to memorize things about Jesus and memorize they did, so they could repeat it, and repeat it they did.

### **Luke Recorded Chronologically**

Here's Luke who went all among these people and pulled all of the story together and laid it out in order.

I do notice that chronologically speaking, there are some things that are in a different order in Luke, from what they might have been in Matthew or Mark or John. Why? Which one do we follow?

The only one I know for sure that said he wanted to put it in order was Luke. Why would others have had a different order of events? The reason might be because they were trying to set their points in order that would make sense, since they were trying to develop a theme of theirs, so they did put the events together with no attention to chronology. But I think Luke must've done precisely that.

### **Zacharias was of the Course of Abijah**

Luke begins his story in Luke 1 and verse 5, "There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia (in Hebrew it is Abijah): and his wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elisabeth."

This man was of the course of Abijah. You would think as you are reading through this that this would be basically irrelevant. Why do we need to know what course of the priesthood he was in? He was in the Temple doing his service and so forth. Maybe it is not irrelevant though.

The priestly courses, if you have a mind to study these things are carefully laid out in first Chronicles 24. It appears that lots were cast among the priests who were eligible at the time, and the eighth lot fell to a priest named Abijah, who was a descendent of the priestly line. Zacharias then would have been serving in that period of time that the course of Abijah would have been serving. He, himself would have been there at about eight weeks after Passover, or perhaps eight weeks after the Jewish new year in the autumn, because that's the cycle that they followed. After the first day of the first month, which was the month of Nisan which Passover follows, which is the beginning of one of the cycles and then the other cycle begins at the Feast of Trumpets in the autumn, so eight weeks after one or the other, makes that clear.

The article by the American Presbyterian Church offered other reasons which point strongly to the early summer course of the priests.

So, in Luke 1 we have Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth, who was a daughter of Aaron, {6} And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. {7} They had no child, because Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years."

I know there's a lot of old people out there who know precisely what he's talking about, you younger people will find out soon enough.

Continuing in verse 8, "And it came to pass, that while he executed the priest's office before God in the order of his course, {9} According to the custom of the priest's office, his lot (his job) was to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord. {10} And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the time of incense."

This was the custom of the time. So here was Zacharias standing in front of the altar of incense, tending to it all alone in that room. Suddenly {11} "there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. {12} And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him."

Fear would fall on me too, if I were in my room and nobody else was supposed to be here and I'm looking over there and there is nobody there and the next thing I know somebody is there. I think that would scare me half to death.

### **John the Baptist**

The angel said, "Don't worry Zacharias, your prayer is heard; and your wife Elisabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John."

Oh man, the things he begins to talk about, about John are astonishing. He's going to be the one who goes before the Messiah, to prepare the groundwork for Him. Zacharias couldn't really believe who he was talking to, and so the angel said, "I am Gabriel." In verse 20 of Luke 1he said, "Behold, you are going to be dumb, and unable to speak, until the day that these things shall happen, because you didn't believe me." "You had better believe me."

So, Zacharias went out and the people realized that he must have seen a vision in the temple because he couldn't talk. {23} "And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he went back to his own house."

I wonder what in the world he told Elizabeth, because you have to do certain things in order for a child be born, and I can imagine when he spoke to Elizabeth about this, she was incredulous, doubtful, and may have not have been that enthusiastic about having a child at her age. Except it was important for women in that time and generation that they have children.

Verse 24, "And after that Elizabeth conceived and hid herself five months, saying, {25} The Lord has dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men."

### **Conception of John the Baptist was in June**

This is a huge event in Christian history, because John's role was crucial in the fulfillment of prophecy and laying the groundwork for Jesus's work and ministry. The disciples of John formed a basis in a way that helped to jumpstart Jesus' ministry much faster than it might have done. It also places the conception of John the Baptist in June. Now, why on earth does that matter, and why go into the details that lead us to that conclusion?

Now, what is significant about placing the conception of John the Baptist in June? The Angel's visit to Mary was to announce the birth of Jesus and it came in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy. That would be in December. Jesus' birth, then, would be in late September or early October of the following year. Did the first Christians know this? How could they not know it? Luke learned all of this from them in the first place.

So, what did they do about it? Apparently not much!

### **Jesus' Birth May Have Been on the First Day of the Feast of Tabernacles**

Bullenger in his Companion Bible places the birth of Jesus on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles and that may account for quite a bit about what we learned about this. It would not have been surprising to the first Christians that Jesus' birth would have coincided with one of God's great annual feasts. They knew well enough that the festivals of God were God's appointments with history and God tended to act on those days in whatever it was that He was going to do.

The celebration of Jesus' birth would have, if anything, been consumed into the Feast of Tabernacles.

### **Birthdays in the Bible**

Now we can add to this, many Jewish rabbis teach that the only example of a birthday in the Bible is one observed in honor of Pharaoh, and since the Jews were exhorted against observing the customs of the Egyptians, it was their custom not to observe birthdays.

More important to the Jews were the Bat Mitzvah and the Bar Mitzvah, the celebration of coming of age, 12 for girls and 13 for boys.

It is not unreasonable to assume that the first Christians being mostly Jews never gave it a second thought. Yet the birth of Jesus had to be a very big event in their minds, and we still have to wonder what they believed and what they did about it if anything.

Matthew is the only other gospel writer that comments on Jesus's birth. Mark doesn't mention it at all and Matthew's account is so brief and leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

On the other hand, Luke is quite detailed about the birth of Jesus. Before we go on with Luke's account, let's ask a question: What about John's gospel?

### **The Word**

John begins his gospel by saying, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. {2} The same was in the beginning with God. {3} Everything was made by him." Whoops, wait a minute, made by who? If you study this carefully, you'll find that it was made by the Word, "and without him was not anything made that was made. {4} In him was life; and the life was the light of men. {5} And the light shines in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. {6} There was a man sent from God, whose name was John."

Here's John's testimony about the coming of John the Baptist, {7} "He came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. {8} He was not that Light but was sent to bear witness of that Light."

Everything about this 'Light' and the 'Word' are all plainly, to the first Christians, Jesus, and no other.

Verse 9 John says, "That was the true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world. {10} He (the Light, the Word) was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not."

Now I know that this gives some people questions about Jesus. Was it Jesus who made the world? Yes, that is what the first Christians believed. That's what we are told by Luke and John.

John goes on to say in verse 12, "As many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: {13} Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. {14} And the Word was made flesh."

The word that was in the beginning with God, that was with God and was God became flesh "and dwelt among us."

The Greek word for 'dwelt' could just as easily have been translated 'Tabernacled among us.'

Why is that important? I'll explain. John said, "We beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

### **Harebrained Ideas and Heresies**

Now toward the end of the generation that had seen and touched Jesus, there were many harebrained ideas about Him that began to arise. You get hints of it in the New Testament

epistles, particularly what we call the general epistles, those beginning after the epistles of Paul in the New Testament.

The first generation of Christians had seen Jesus. Many of them had seen him crucified. Some of them had watched him bleed and had seen him buried.

There were witnesses who saw him as a baby. Why was this important? Well because heresies were beginning to rise even to the extent that Jesus wasn't flesh at all, that he was an apparition, or that He was a representation or that He came into the world like an angel who one day was not here and the next day he was. All these witnesses and all of the stories about Jesus is crucial.

### **The Birth of Jesus**

Luke begins his second chapter with the details about the birth of Jesus, "It came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2} (This taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3} And everybody went to be taxed, everyone into his own town. 4} Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5} To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 6} And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7} And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn."

The Presbyterian Church web article about this points out, that the only thing that is really consistent with the generalized customs was that this was the Feast of Tabernacle time and there was no place to stay anywhere around Jerusalem. It was only 5 miles on the Bethlehem. So not only Jerusalem was crammed full, but so was Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary were in a stable and she went into labor like all women do. She delivered this child. They wrapped him and laid him in a cow's feeding trough because there was no room for them in the inn

Let's continue in verse 8, "Now in the same country there were shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9} And, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and scared them half to death. 10} The angel said to them, Fear not: for I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11} For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. 12} And here is a sign for you." This is important. This is a sign and it is meaningful.

"You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger," in the poorest of circumstances, not in a king's palace, this was the poorest circumstances of birth.

Continuing in verse 13, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14} Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. 15} And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, let us now go to Bethlehem, and see this, which God has made

known to us. {16} And they came in a hurry, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. {17} And when they had seen it, they made known abroad all that had been told them about this child."

Why is all this important? This is important for everyone to know that Jesus came into the world, just like they did. He was born. He was a baby. You could actually pick Him and hold him.

### **Jesus Was Flesh and Blood**

There are many seemingly small things in this story, but they're not small at all. If Jesus was born on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles then the day of his circumcision, eight days later, would have been on the last day, the great day of the feast. Is this important? Perhaps not, but nevertheless all this in the story including His circumcision underlines the fact of His being flesh and blood, coming into the world like we are, coming into the world like any Jew of his generation, and even to the point of being circumcised.

Now, while Joseph and Mary were in the Temple, bringing Jesus up to be presented before God, a gentleman came in, an old, old man, whose name was Simon and had been told by the spirit "that he should not see death, until he had seen the Lord's Christ." He came in, took the baby Jesus into his arms and held him up and blessed God, and said, {29} "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word" (Luke 2:28-29).

What a story! Verse 33, "Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken by the old man. {34} And Simeon, the old man, blessed them, and told Mary, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign that shall be spoken against; {35} (and a sword shall pierce your own soul also)."

A little later (Luke 2:36-38) there was a woman named, Anna, a prophetess, she was a widow about the age of 80 years old. She never left the temple but prayed all the time. She came in also and gave thanks to God and spoke of Him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

God only knows how many people actually got to hold this child in their arms. I can't even imagine the awe that one had felt in holding Him.

People come to me with their newborn baby and ask me "Would you like to hold him?" I generally say, "No, I don't think so," because I have no children of my own and I don't know where to put my hands. Many people held the reality of this little miracle and wondered at the time.

Later there came some people who did not believe that Jesus was truly flesh and blood. You get hints of it in later letters. For example, first John begins by saying, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life."

His point is that we have touched him. We were actually with Him. Now this is the same John, who introduced Jesus in his Gospel as the Word, but recorded nothing of His birth.



Later in 1 John chapter four, John says, "Beloved, don't believe every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. {2} Hereby you know the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God."

This is the importance of the Nativity of Jesus, not Christmas, but the birth of Jesus the son of God.

Verse 3, "Every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now is already in the world."

### **Christmas Is an Invention of Men**

It's incredible the number of different heresies that started popping up in the early church, like weeds in the latter part of the first century. I think we can safely conclude that the first Christians knew nothing of Christmas per se, as we know. It is a later invention, the date was a later invention, all of that is an invention of men.

However, they likely knew well enough that Jesus was born. The significance of that is that He came into the world just like all of us do, and they knew roughly when it happened. It was in the autumn, along about the time of the Feast of Tabernacles, which strangely, few Christians nowadays even notice.

Can you imagine the first Christians, with the legend of Santa Claus and Christmas trees? Neither can I. In fact, the first Christians gave great attention to the birth of Jesus for it was the moment of time when God entered the world as one of us.

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*The late Ronald L. Dart was a Christian evangelist whose teachings still inspire thousands of people around the world. His legacy spans decades. For more information about the teachings of Ronald L. Dart, visit [RLDEA.com](http://RLDEA.com) where you will find booklets, articles, sermons, Bible studies, and books by Mr. Dart.*

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. If Christmas was important, why is it not ever mentioned in the New Testament?
2. Which Holy Day Season, to you, would seem more likely for the birth of Christ?
3. What scriptures do you use to back up your idea?
4. Have you ever studied the priestly courses in Chronicles 24?

5. Do you think it is even important to know the date of Christ's birth?
6. Is it hard to imagine Jesus as a baby?
7. Do you know of Christians that keep Christmas, even though, they know it is not really Christ's birthday?
8. Why do you think they still keep Christmas?
9. How do they explain why so many non-Christians also keep Christmas?
10. Do you believe Jeremiah warned God's people about Christmas in Jeremiah chapter 10?