

## The Christmas Tradition

Most of you are probably aware that the custom of celebrating the birthday of Christ is not in the Bible at all, and the observance of Christmas as a Christian festival dates from the 4th century when it gradually superseded January 6th, the Epiphany, still kept as Christmas by the Armenian Church.

You may also be aware that the keeping of Christmas as a religious holiday was repugnant to the Puritans and was forbidden under the Commonwealth in 1644. Although the Church of England revived the festival, the Scottish Presbyterians and English Nonconformists both refused the observance. There are still millions who still rejoice in what is known as "The Spirit of Christmas" but do it in the same spirit they do "Thanksgiving" without trying in some way to relate it to a religious activity. Probably most persons connected with the church of the Lord understand Galatians 4:10-11 to refer to religious observances of days, not things like individuals observing birthdays and holidays as a matter of rest, recreation and happiness with families. The fact that we are to give thanks at all times does not make Thanksgiving a religious holiday. Neither does the fact that we use the Christmas season to get with our families and exchange gifts make Christmas a religious observance. One **may** make it such. The Moravian church makes drinking coffee and eating a cookie a part of their religious ceremony. This does not mean it must be such to the rest of us.

To most of us, it probably seems the height of foolishness to bring a lawsuit against a city or business, as is now being done, to prevent the putting up of a cross on the top of the courthouse at Christmas time. Those who bring such lawsuits claim it violates the concept of separation of church and state and is therefore unconstitutional. We would have to raise some questions about that. What church does a cross symbolize? What religious ordinance or biblical demand is made on anyone by looking at a cross? Where did the Constitution address that issue?

The truth of the matter is that the Constitution has nothing whatever to say about the separation of church & state, even if that practice violated the concept. The Constitution only stands opposed to the government having an official religion. The official statement is, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." How putting up a cross establishes a religion, no one has bothered to explain.

So, since the cross now universally stands for sacrifice and death, and since there is no law in any nation, pagan or otherwise, against the spirit of giving and sacrificing for those you love, there can be no logical reason for not using Christmas as a time for emphasizing the need to do as Jesus did. Without regard for any religious observance, no one—whether atheist, Jewish, Muslim or Christian, can successfully find fault with anything Jesus did or taught.

No one exemplified as he did that we should love and give. No one exemplified as he did that the greatest person of all is the one who serves humanity by giving himself for it.

One of the tragedies of the "Christmas Season" is that even those who use it as religious observance think of it primarily as "A Season to Be Jolly." The real truth is that the spirit that we call the "Christmas Spirit" is not just a religious observance to be practiced or given lip service just once a year but is the spirit that we should have in secular matters, in politics, in everyday life. We lose something wonderful if we think of it as a "religious" rite, and thus divorce it from everyday life.

*By T. Pierce Brown*