

Born to Win

About Christmas

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about Christmas? Now, I know 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, I think. You never find any reference to, "We sailed away from Troas after Christmas." You don't find any reference to, "Well, we have 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 had no idea what you were talking about. In fact, not only did they not believe it, 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 might have influenced many of the first Christians (most of whom were Jews) and it may not have *crossed their mind* 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 the first Christians believed and practiced relative to Jesus' nativity. (The word "nativity" just means the circumstances of one's birth.)

Now, I came across an interesting item published by the American Presbyterian Church. Apparently it was published shortly after last Christmas. They said:

In the recent holiday season many Christians have been merrily, joyously, and some perhaps even seriously, solemnly, and reverently, celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ. However, one wonders how many gave any significant thought to the issue of when was Christ 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.

American Presbyterian Church - Christ's Birth

And they are, of course, dead right. That said, though, I think we can safely assume that the first Christians knew when Jesus was born. We don't. They did not see fit to record it for us, but 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 begins his gospel with the story of *another* birth. (And you might wonder, in a way, "Why?", and we'll talk about that.) His name was John the Baptist. The story begins in the very first verse of Luke 1:

Luke 1

AKJV

¹ For as much as many have taken in hand to set forth in order a declaration of those things which 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 and pad (or whatever he used for writing tools) and he—good reporter, a good historian—put the whole thing together for us. So we can then safely consider that Luke's gospel will give a good rundown of the things that were believed among these people. He seems to imply that, while he was not an eyewitness of all the events, he had *systematically* collected them and set them in order. This is important when you sit down to read through Luke. He says:

Luke 1

AKJV

² Even as they delivered them to us, which from the beginning were eyewitnesses, and ministers of the word;

So he got his works from eyewitnesses. You know, there were a 120 disciples there on that day of Pentecost—most of whom had seen everything, experienced everything—and so he had a good set a records to work from.

Luke 1

AKJV

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,

Oh, so the *Gospel According to Luke* is actually a letter to a man named Theophilus who, I guess, commissioned Luke to do this.

Luke 1

AKJV

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

Luke is beginning to try to *nail down* what, up until just about the same time when Mark and Matthew were writing, was merely an oral tradition in the church of God. And I am persuaded that they had a *very strong* oral tradition. 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. And those people had better memories than we do.

I remember being kind of surprised...I was reading a historical account of the invention of printing, and the gentleman said that human memory has been *degraded* since the invention of printing, because now we can have it all in books on the shelf. We don't have to worry about remembering it; 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*—minutes at the longest—to just about anything you want to find. And so there's no *need* to memorize stuff. Well, those first Christians had a *very strong* need to memorize stuff; and memorize they did, and repeat it they did.

So here's a man who went all among these people, and pulled all the story together, and laid it out—“in order”, he says. Now, 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? Well, the only one I know for sure that said he wanted to put it in order was Luke. Why would the others have had a different order of events? Well, the reason might be because they were trying to set their points in order that would make sense; they were trying to develop a theme in theirs; so they just put the events together with no attention to chronology. But I think Luke must've done precisely that. So he begins his story:

Luke 1

KJV

⁵ There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judaea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the course of Abia [*actually, in Hebrew it's "Abijah"*]: and his wife *was* of the daughters of Aaron, and her name *was* Elisabeth

This man being of the course of Abijah you would think, reading through this, would be basically irrelevant. Why do we need to know what course of the priesthood he was in? He was in the Temple, he doing his service, and so forth. Maybe it's not irrelevant, though. The priestly courses (if you are of a mind to study this sort of thing) are carefully laid out in **1 Chronicles 24**. It appears that lots were cast among the priests who were eligible at the time. The eighth lot fell to a priest named Abijah, who was a descendant of the priestly line. So 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 about eight weeks, probably, 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 is the month of Nisan, which Passover follows) is the beginning of one of the cycles, and then the Feast of Trumpets, in the autumn, begins another cycle. So eight weeks after one or the other of these makes that clear.

The article by the American Presbyterian Church (which I'll have the link to on my website) offered other reasons that point strongly to the early summer course of the priests. And so we have Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth (who was a daughter of Aaron), who:

Luke 1

AKJV

⁶ [...] were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless.

⁷ And they had no child, because that Elisabeth was barren, and they both were now well stricken in years.

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

Luke 1

AKJV

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. [*That's his job. When he went into the Temple, he burned incense.*]

¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying without at the time of incense.

This was the custom of the time. So here is Zacharias standing in front of the altar of incense, tending to it—*all alone* in that room. Suddenly:

Luke 1

AKJV

¹¹ And 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 on him.

It would on me, too! I'm in a room. Nobody else is supposed to be here, by law. And I know I'm looking over there, and there's nobody there. And the next thing I know, somebody *is* there. I think that would scare me to death. The angel says:

Luke 1

AKJV

¹³ [...] Fear not, Zacharias: for 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. Well, Zacharias couldn't really believe who he was talking to. And so the angel said, “Okay”:

Luke 1

AKJV

²⁰ And, behold, you shall be dumb, and not able to speak, until the day that these things shall be performed, because you believe not my words, which shall be fulfilled in their season.

“You better believe me.” So he went out. The people realized he'd seen a vision or something in the temple because he couldn't talk.

Luke 1

AKJV

²³ And it came to pass, that, as soon as the days of his ministration were accomplished, he departed to his own house.

And 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, “No way!”, and may have not have been that enthusiastic about having a child—except it really was important to women in that time and generation that they have children.

Luke 1

AKJV

²⁴ And after those days his wife Elisabeth conceived, and hid herself five months, saying,

²⁵ Thus has the Lord dealt with me in the days wherein he looked on me, to take away my reproach among men.

This is a hugely-important event in Christian history, because John's role was *crucial* in the fulfillment of prophecy and in laying the groundwork for Jesus' work and ministry. The disciples of John formed a basis, in a way, that helped to jump-start 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 does he include the details that lead us to that conclusion?

Now, what is significant about placing the conception of John the Baptist in June is that the angel's visit to Mary to announce the birth of Jesus came in the *sixth month* of Elizabeth's pregnancy. That would be in December. And Jesus' birth, then, would be in late September/ 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? Well, apparently not much.

E.W. Bullinger, 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 of what we learn about this. It would not have been surprising to the first Christians that Jesus' advent would have coincided with a great feast. They knew well enough that the festivals of God were God's appointments with history, and he tended to act on those days in whatever it was that He was going to do. So a celebration of Jesus' birth would have, if anything, been subsumed into the Feast of Tabernacles.

Now, we can add to this that many Jewish rabbis teach that the only example of a birthday in the Bible is one observed in honor of Pharaoh [**Genesis 40**], and since the Jews were exhorted *against* observing the customs of the Egyptians, it was their custom not to observe birthdays. More important to Jews was the *Bar* or *Bat Mitzvah* celebration of coming of age (12 for girls, I think, and 13 for boys). So it's 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 that comments on Jesus' birth (Mark doesn't mention it at all) and Matthew's account is so brief that it leaves a lot of questions unanswered. On the other hand, Luke is *quite detailed* about the birth of Jesus. So before we go on there, we have to ask a question about John. Matthew was very brief. Mark doesn't mention it at all. What about John? Well, John begins his gospel by saying:

John 1

AKJV

- ¹ 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 All things were made by him; [...]

Whoops, wait a minute, made by who? If you study this carefully, you'll find it was made by “the Word”.

John 1

AKJV

- ³ [...] and without him was not any thing 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.

So here's his testimony about the coming of John the Baptist.

John 1

AKJV

- ⁷ The same 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—this “Light”, the “Word”—these are all *plainly*, to the first Christians, Jesus and no other.

John 1

AKJV

⁹ That was the true Light, which lights every man that comes into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world [*the Light was, the Word was*], and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not.

Now, I know that this gives some people a question: Was Jesus the one who made the world? Yes, that's what the first Christians believed. That's what they told Luke and John and what they all wrote. He goes on to say:

John 1

AKJV

¹² But 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 Which 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, and dwelled among us, [...]

Mind you, 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” [skénoó, σκηνώω, Strong's G4637] could just as easily have been translated “*tabernacled* among us.” Why is that important? I'll explain. John says:

John 1

AKJV

¹⁴ [...] (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

Now, toward the end of the generation that had seen and touched Jesus, there were some *really* harebrained ideas about him that began to arise. You get hints of it in the New Testament epistles (in particular what we call “the general epistles”—those beginning after the epistles of Paul in your Bible.) But that first generation of Christians had *seen* Jesus. Many of them had seen him *crucified*. Some had watched him bleed and had seen him buried. And there were witnesses who saw him as a baby.

Why is this important? Well, because heresies were beginning to arise, even to the extent that Jesus wasn't flesh *at all*; that he was an apparition, or he was just simply a representation, or that he came into the world like an angel—who one day was not here and the next day he was. So all these witnesses and all this story about Jesus is *crucial*. Luke begins his second chapter with his details about the birth of Jesus:

Luke 2

AKJV

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, to 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.

Now, the Presbyterian Church web article about this points out the only thing that's really consistent with the generalized customs was that this was Feast of Tabernacle time, and there was no place to stay anywhere around Jerusalem. It was only about 5 miles down to Bethlehem, and not only was Jerusalem crammed full, so was Bethlehem. So they were in a stable. Mary 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.

Luke 2

AKJV

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ And, see, the angel of the Lord came on them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: *[And scared them slap to death. It would.]* and they were sore afraid.

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, Fear not: for, behold, 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 this shall be a sign to you; [...]

“This is important, now. This is a sign. It's meaningful.”

Luke 2

AKJV

¹² [...] You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

In the poorest of circumstances—not in a king's palace, not riding on horses, not any of this stuff. The poorest circumstances of birth.

Luke 2

AKJV

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. *[We've got some great songs from that.]*

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 even to Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

Why is all this important? Because it was 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.

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.

And while Joseph and Mary were in the Temple, bringing him up to present him before God, a gentleman came in there—an *old, old* man—who had been told by the Spirit:

Luke 2

AKJV

²⁶ [...] that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.

Luke 2

AKJV

²⁷ And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,

²⁸ Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,

²⁹ Lord, now let you your servant depart in peace, according to your word[.]

What a story!

Luke 2

AKJV

³³ And Joseph and his mother marveled at those things which were spoken of him.

³⁴ And Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;

³⁵ (Yes, a sword shall pierce through your own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

A little later, there was Anna, a prophetess:

Luke 2

AKJV

³⁶ [...] She was a descendant of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. She was very old, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage,

³⁷ and then as a widow for 84 years. She never left the Temple, but continued to worship there night and day with times of fasting and prayer.

³⁸ Just then she came forward and began to thank God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was waiting for the redemption of 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 would have felt. People will come to me sometimes with their little newborn baby and ask me, "Would you like to hold him?" And I generally say, "No, I don't think so", because I have no children of my own, and I just don't know where to put my hands. But so many people held the *reality* of this little miracle and wondered at by the time. Later there came some people who apparently did not believe that Jesus was truly flesh and blood. You get hints of it in later letters. For example, 1 John begins by saying:

1 John 1

AKJV

¹ That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked on, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life[.]

His point simply is: “We've 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 his fourth chapter, he says:

1 John 4

AKJV

¹ Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.

² Hereby know you the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God:

And *this* is the importance, folks, of the nativity of Jesus—not Christmas, but the birth of the Son of God.

1 John 4

AKJV

³ And 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 already is it in the world.

It's incredible the number of different heresies that started popping up in the church like weeds in the later first century. I think, though, we can safely conclude that the first Christians knew nothing of Christmas *per se*, as we know it. It was 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 a legend of Santa Claus and Christmas trees? Neither can I. And, in fact, they did give great attention to the *birth* of Jesus, for it was the moment of time when God entered the world as one of us.

Until next time.

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About Christmas

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