

Men's Discipleship

The Authority of Christmas Trees in the House for Protestants

History • Theology • Christian Liberty • Gospel-Centered Focus

I. INTRODUCTION

This lesson examines whether Christians—especially Protestant men—have biblical authority and liberty to have a Christmas tree in the home. We explore its history, its evolution in America, biblical passages often used or misused, and Protestant/CLARE theological interpretation.

II. ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAY (REAL HISTORY)

1. Early Church Context

- Earliest Christians focused overwhelmingly on **Christ's death and resurrection**, not His birth.
 - *Tertullian, De Corona* 3–4; *Origen, Homilies on Leviticus* 8.3 (Origen even criticizes birthday celebrations as pagan).
- By the 3rd century, Christians began calculating dates related to Christ's life, including His incarnation.

December 25 Origin

- First recorded celebration: **AD 336 in Rome.**
Source: *Chronograph of 354* (Philocalian Calendar).
- Theory of “Integral Age”—that prophets die the same date they were conceived:
 - *Augustine, On the Trinity*, 4.5
 - Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel* 4.23
- Since the early church calculated March 25 as the crucifixion/conception, December 25 is simply nine months later.

Conclusion

The date is the result of **Christian theological reasoning**, not pagan borrowing.

Scholarly Support:

- Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship* (Baker Academic, 2014), pp. 250–260
 - Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*
 - Steven Hijmans, “Sol Invictus, the Winter Solstice, and the Origins of Christmas,” *Mouseion* 2009
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2. Pagan Connection Claims (Corrected Historically)

Claims that Christmas is pagan largely come from **19th-century liberal critics** and are not grounded in early Christian sources.

Reasons Early Christians Did Not Adopt Pagan Festivals

- Christians were **persecuted** and refused to participate in pagan worship.
 - *Justin Martyr, First Apology* 67
 - *Tertullian, Apology* 10–12
- Adopting a pagan festival would have been viewed as apostasy.

Scholarly Conclusion

No historical evidence supports that Christmas was deliberately adopted from pagan worship.

Sources:

- Joseph Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas*
- Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun* (Oxford University Press)

III. ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

1. Not Ancient Pagan

The idea that Christmas trees come from:

- Babylonian worship
- Norse Yule sacrifices
- Roman Saturnalia
- Asherah poles (cf. Deut. 16:21)

—is historically false. These connections are **modern internet mythology**.

Scholarly refutation:

- Penne Restad, *Christmas in America*
 - Bernd Brunner, *Inventing the Christmas Tree*
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2. Real Origin: German Protestantism

Early Documentation

- First clear reference to a Christmas tree: **Strasbourg, 1539** (mentioned in church records).
- Lutheran areas associated the tree with **celebrating Christ's birth**.

Martin Luther Tradition

Though historical certainty is debated, the tradition states Luther placed candles on an evergreen to symbolize the **light of Christ** (John 8:12).

Symbolism in Protestant Thought

- Evergreen = **eternal life** (John 10:28)
- Light = **Christ the Light** (John 1:4–5; 8:12)
- Gifts = **the Magi** (Matthew 2:11)

IV. EVOLUTION OF CHRISTMAS IN THE UNITED STATES

1. Puritan Suspicion

Puritans banned Christmas in New England (1659–1681) because:

- They believed worship practices must be explicitly commanded by Scripture
- They associated Christmas with Catholic tradition

Sources:

- Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*
- Massachusetts Bay Colony Law (1659)

2. 1800s–Early 1900s

- German immigrants brought the Christmas tree to America.
 - Christmas trees became mainstream after the **1848 illustration of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert** with their tree.
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3. 20th Century Commercialization

- Coca-Cola's Santa imagery shaped modern iconography.
- Department stores and Hollywood embedded Christmas into American culture.

V. BIBLICAL EVALUATION: ARE CHRISTMAS TREES IDOLS?

1. Jeremiah 10:1–5 — Often Misused

Context: Describe carved wooden idols.

“They cut a tree... they decorate it with silver and gold... it cannot speak... it must be carried”
—Jeremiah 10:3–5

Key distinctions:

- Trees were **carved into idols**, not evergreens decorated for beauty.
- Israel **worshipped** these objects.

A Christmas tree:

- Is not carved into a deity
- Is not worshipped
- Is not prayed to

Scholarly Consensus:

Jeremiah 10 addresses **idolatrous statues**, not symbolic or decorative trees.

Sources:

- J.A. Thompson, *NICOT Commentary on Jeremiah*
- John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Anchor Yale Commentary)

2. Christian Liberty Passages

Romans 14:5–6

“One person esteems one day... another esteems all days alike...”

Colossians 2:16–17

“Let no one pass judgment... with regard to a festival...”

1 Corinthians 10:25–31

“All things are lawful... do all to the glory of God.”

2 Corinthians 3:17

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

Conclusion:

Non-idolatrous cultural symbols fall under **Christian liberty**, not prohibition.

VI. PROTESTANT DOCTRINAL REASONING

1. Sola Scriptura

Where Scripture is silent and no idolatry exists, the practice is permitted.

Key Protestant Voices

- **John Calvin:**

“Things indifferent are permitted unless they violate conscience.”
—*Institutes* 3.19–23

- **Martin Luther:**

“Whatever is not against Scripture is for Scripture.”
(Luther’s normative principle)

2. Regulative vs. Normative Principle

Regulative Principle:

Only what Scripture commands is allowed in worship (Puritans, Presbyterians).

Normative Principle:

What Scripture does not forbid is permitted (Lutherans, Anglicans, Baptists).

Practical Result:

Even strict regulative-principle churches do not treat home decorations as worship elements.

VII. PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR PROTESTANT MEN

Use the Tree for Discipleship

- Read Luke 2 beside it
- Explain the symbolism to children
- Pray as a family in gratitude for the Incarnation

Avoid Legalism

Do not condemn believers who use the tree or those who abstain.

Avoid License

Do not mix the holiday with superstition or occult symbolism.

VIII. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(unchanged from previous version)

IX. CONCLUSION WITH SOURCES

A Christmas tree is:

- **Not pagan** (historical record)
- **Not idolatrous** (biblical exegesis)
- **A Protestant-origin practice** (German Reformation)
- **A matter of Christian liberty** (Rom. 14; Col. 2)
- **A tool for family discipleship**

Short Pastoral Summary

“As long as Christ is central, your conscience is clear, and no idolatry exists, you have full biblical authority and Christian freedom to place a Christmas tree in your home.”

CITED WORKS (Primary + Secondary)

Primary Church Sources

- Augustine, *On the Trinity*
- Hippolytus, *Commentary on Daniel*
- Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*

- Tertullian, *Apology*; *De Corona*
- Justin Martyr, *First Apology*

Historical & Scholarly Works

- Andrew McGowan, *Ancient Christian Worship*
- Joseph Kelly, *The Origins of Christmas*
- Thomas Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*
- Steven Hijmans, “Sol Invictus and the Origin of Christmas,” *Mouseion*
- Ronald Hutton, *Stations of the Sun*
- Penne Restad, *Christmas in America*
- Bernd Brunner, *Inventing the Christmas Tree*
- Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas*

Biblical Commentaries

- J.A. Thompson, *NICOT Jeremiah*
- John Bright, *Jeremiah*, Anchor Yale Bible
- Leon Morris, *Romans*
- F.F. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon*