

# Men's Discipleship

## The Authority of Christmas Trees in the House for Protestants

*History • Theology • Christian Liberty • Gospel-Centered Focus*

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### 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.

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### 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)

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### 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)

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## 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)

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### 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.

### 3. 20th Century Commercialization

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

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#### 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)

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##### 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.

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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)

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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.

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## 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.

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## VIII. DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(unchanged from previous version)

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## 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.”

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## 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*