



Who defines the meaning of Christmas?

This question can be answered many ways both positively and negatively. As Christians we want the bible to define Christmas. The retail industry would also like to define Christmas. (They define it quite carefully: Christmas is about family and love, but you must express this through things you buy, if you don't you are failing as a good person). Ultimately you must define what Christmas means for yourself.



What are we celebrating when we celebrate Christmas?



What do you think God wants at Christmas?



As Christians what are the things that we should emphasis at Christmas time?



What things should we minimise at Christmas time?



How do you feel about "happy holidays?"



What do you most like about the way Christmas is celebrated in New Zealand?



What do you least like about the way Christmas is celebrated in New Zealand?



Does it worry you that people celebrate a Christian festival in distinctly non-Christian ways?



Is there anything you find offensive about Christmas?



What opportunities does Christmas give Christians? What should you avoid saying to your friends or colleagues? Can we force our view of Christmas on others?

What sort of attitude should you take into Christmas? What sort of attitude do you take into Christmas?



Complete the following sentence. Christmas should be.....

FREEDOM

Christian Church

The Gospel according to St. Nicholas



Merry Christmas.

Warning: this study may contain material unsuited for younger children and some adults. Discretion is advised. Some content may be controversial and today's group may contain nuts.



The origins of Father Christmas or Santa Claus as he is sometimes called are shrouded in the mist of time. The most commonly told account goes something like this.

Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in Lycia during the first half of the fourth century. Myra is in modern day Turkey. The strange clothes associated with Father Christmas are a corruption of a bishop's robes.

Nicholas came from a wealthy family.

Among the people of Myra was a poor Christian family who had three daughters. The family had no money to pay a dowry which effectively meant the daughters could not marry or only marry badly. This would put them in a very vulnerable position and open to exploitation. As each girl reach marriageable age Nicholas threw a bag of coins through a window and then on the last occasion, through the smoke opening in their roof. He did this in the middle of the night so as not to be discovered. On the last occasion, the father stayed up to discover his anonymous benefactor.

• In one version of the account, the gold landed in a legging.

Because of this and other stories told about him, Nicholas was canonised. Hence St. Nicolas.

• Most of the many stories told about him are probably legendary or at least exaggerated.

He died on December the 6th somewhere around 350 AD. St. Nicolas day is still celebrated in parts of Europe with gifts being given on this date not the 25th of December as in New Zealand. It is celebrated on the 5th in the Netherlands and on the 19th by those who do not follow the Gregorian calendar.

• Anonymous gifts were said to have come from St. Nicholas

• He is one of the original signatories of the Nicene Creed.

• At one point in his life, he had a tonsure. YES!

It is interesting that the above has very little to do with Christmas.



What characteristics did Nicolas show in the account above?

Why did he do what he did?

What do you think about him?

If we follow his example, how will we celebrate Christmas?

How will we live the rest of the year?



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 It is no secret that the author of these studies has not been on speaking terms with father Christmas for a long time. St Nicholas, I like.

Somewhere around the 12th century, a group of French nuns inspired by the traditions around St. Nicholas started giving gifts of fruit and nuts in stockings to the poor in their city. They did this on the 6th of December, the anniversary of St. Nicholas' death. It is from this that our tradition of giving gifts comes from.

 The reformation changed peoples attitude towards saints. It did this because of very real abuses around the veneration of saints and the relic industry. The abuses were both spiritual and financial and the whole system was distinctly unbiblical. Churches like ours don't do saints. We don't pray to them or venerate them. Technically we believe that all believers are saints. Cf Philippians 1:1 the word believers in Greek is saints.

People still wanted to give gifts and therefore in parts of Europe St Nicholas became Father Christmas. St. Nicholas got lots of new names to divorce the practice of giving gifts from what was perceived as the worship of saints. It is also because of this that the giving of presents moved from the 6th of December to the 25th of December and with it the reason gifts were given, not to emulate the saint, but because God gave us the greatest gift ever given.

Dutch immigrants to the US took their stories of St Nicholas with them. Here they morphed into Kris Kringle and Santa Clause. Most of our current ideas about Santa Clause; reindeer, the north pole, the naughty list and flights across the world, came a resurgence of interest in St. Nicholas in the 1800's. A series of books and poems turned St. Nicholas into the magical figure he is today.

 **How does all of this compare with a stable outside of Bethlehem?**

Our current ideas of how Father Christmas should look are based on an advertising campaign run by Coca-Cola in the 1920's. the 1931 version is our iconic father Christmas.

 **What is Father Christmas associated within our culture today?**

Coca-Cola not only came up with how Santa Clause should look but also what he should do. He exists to encourage us to buy. He is a consumer icon.

 **How does this compare with St. Nicholas?
What do you think the real St. Nicholas would say to the fictional Santa Claus if he had the chance?**

The contrast between the two characters could not be more pronounced St. Nicholas is about giving to the poor. Santa is about parting you with your money.

 **Why do you think society today is so in love with Santa Claus?
Why does our society feel the need to tell children Santa is real?
Are there good things about this?
Are there any risks to this?**

 From a physiological perspective, Santa brings a heavy sack. There is a need to hold on to something magical and to believe in something even though we know it not to be true. It is about finding innocence in a world that is bereft of innocence. Tradition in a world that is losing the concept of tradition. It is about the joy of giving but it is also about creating guilt and the need to give. As a society, we need the kind of things Christmas has to offer us. Other cultures also have festivals that meet these needs.

 **How is Santa Clause used to manipulate us?
Do we still use the idea of Santa to control children?
How do you feel about a fictitious character taking the credit for your presents?**

 **Do you find it ironic that "the birth of the Son of God Himself is celebrated in an orgy of consumerism?"
How should we react to this?**

 **Should we teach our children to believe in Father Christmas?
How should we handle Father Christmas?
What different possibilities are there?**

 **Should we give presents at Christmas?
Why do we give presents?**

 *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16*
Who is the real Father Christmas?

Is it wrong to eat great/more/too much food at Christmas?

 There are many aspects of our celebrations that have pagan roots.
**What should we do with them?
What are the issues?**

 This is a contentious issue with many different opinions. The New Testament times also faced these issues all be it in very different guises. Paul gave us considerable freedom but he also pointed out the dangers of causing others to stumble and the danger of taking freedom too far. He points out that different people will draw the line in different places at different times and in different circumstances.

Does anyone here worship their Christmas tree?

 It has been said that it takes a pagan to celebrate a pagan festival.
**What does this mean?
Do you agree?**

 The motivation here is important. It is not only what we do but why we do it. Every culture has:
Things that are in line with the gospel
Things that are neutral to the gospel
Things that are contrary to the gospel.
You must work out what is where.

 **Is Christmas in New Zealand a Christian festival or a pagan one?
What is truly pagan about the way we do Christmas?**

**What is more dangerous eating Christmas log or entering the spirit of consumerism?
How much materialism is too much?
How can you avoid excessive consumerism?**

What non-materialistic gifts can you give?

 The date of Christmas is quite uncertain.
Does it matter whether it is the 25th or not?