

## The Church Ethic 312: Celebrating Christmas



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### Should Christmas Be A Litmus Test?

*Should we be concerned when Christians don't celebrate Christmas?*

(NOTE: As is documented in the article above, the specific title "Christmas" does not emerge until the eleventh century. But for the purposes of simplicity and conceptual continuity, in this segment the term "Christmas" is summarily used to denote the holiday assigned to the birth of Christ in late December, even before the emergence of that title in the eleventh century.)

Today, it seems like almost everyone celebrates Christmas both around the world and especially here in the United States. It is both a religious and a secular holiday, celebrated by Christians and non-Christians, and celebrated for both religious and non-religious reasons. Conversely, in light of the seemingly universal acceptance of this holiday by such diverse groups, there has arisen a stigma attached to those who choose not to celebrate it. While conversations about the topic typically start with justifications for why it's acceptable to celebrate Christmas, often the reality is that most Christians view it as unacceptable for believers not to celebrate Christmas. In this way, celebrating Christmas has become a sort of "litmus test" for orthodox Christianity in modern times.

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines a "Litmus Test" as follows:

**Litmus test** - NOUN: **1.** A test for chemical acidity or basicity using litmus paper. **2. A test that uses a single indicator to prompt a decision.** - The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000.

Although "litmus test" is the term used to denote a specific scientific test for determining if a substance is an acid or a base, it has also taken on a much wider meaning in common speech to denote a single test by which we can declare something good or bad, etc.

The common line of thinking is usually as follows.

It might be perfectly expected for non-Christian Jews to celebrate Hanukkah and reject Christmas or for atheists to reject Christmas, but shouldn't every Christian celebrate Christmas? Doesn't it just seem inherently bizarre or alarming for a

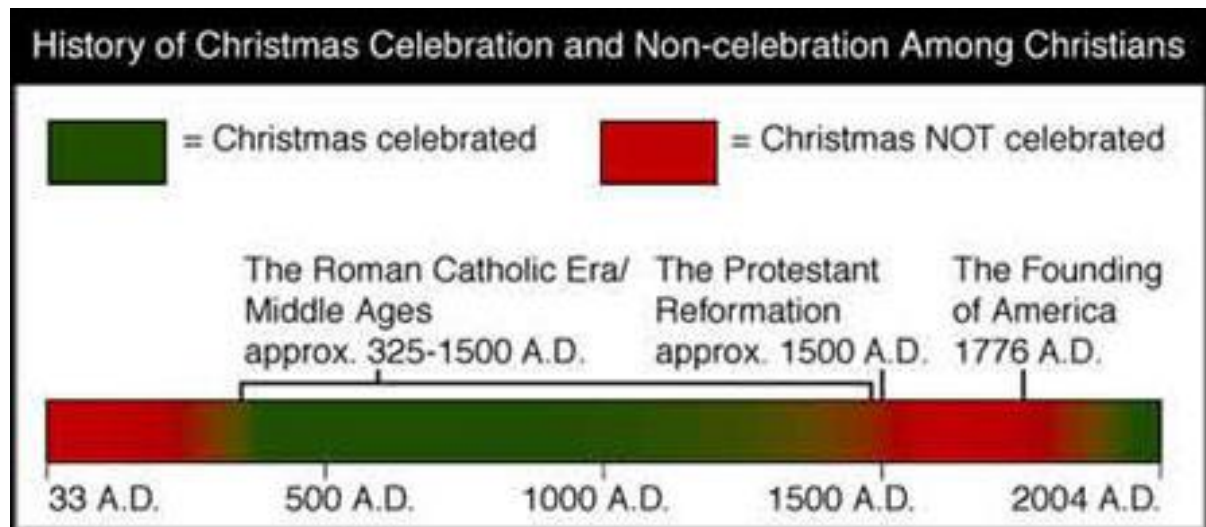
Christian not to celebrate it? The Jehovah's Witnesses don't celebrate Christmas, so not celebrating Christmas is a mark of a cult, right?

These are the types of questions and ideas that often come to mind when Christians who do celebrate Christmas come across Christians who don't. And in this way, whether or not a Christian celebrates Christmas has become a sort of modern litmus test for determining the orthodoxy of someone's Christianity. If someone does celebrate Christmas, then that's perfectly normal. But if you come across a Christian who does not celebrate Christmas, be careful. They are weird, legalistic, possibly part of a cult, and certainly on the fringe of Christian orthodoxy – or at least that's the perception.

However, this kind of "litmus test" view of Christmas is entirely a byproduct of a short-sighted tunnel-vision of history. What destroys this litmus test is a fact that might take most modern Christians by surprise. The fact is that before the last century, it was not uncommon to find a significant number of Christians, especially in America, who did not celebrate Christmas. Perhaps equally startling is the fact that outside of the last century, there have been significant periods of time throughout history when celebrating Christmas was quite out of vogue for many normal Christians. For this reason, the subtle association of Christians who don't celebrate Christmas to cult groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses falls apart in the presence of so many historic Christian groups that also did not celebrate Christmas, especially because many, modern Christians who celebrate Christmas have such high regard for these very same historic Christian groups.

And this fact alone completely erases any validity for perceiving Christmas as a litmus test for someone's orthodoxy. Instead, what we find is that historically speaking it is perfectly normal for Christians not to celebrate Christmas. And the perception that not celebrating Christmas is a good indicator of heretical or cult doctrine can only be maintained by this tunnel-vision understanding of history and Christmas that defines truth solely in terms of what's been going on for the last two or three generations.

As an overview, plotting the nearly two millennia of Christmas celebration and non-celebration on a timeline would look like this.



The timeline above illustrates the following facts:

**1. The celebration of Jesus' birthday was not celebrated by Christians at all for the first 300 years of Christianity. In fact, it was not widely celebrated by Christians until the fourth century.** (Below are a few quotes supporting this historical fact. For a more detailed look at this subject see our study entitled "Celebrating Christmas.")

**Christmas - Christmas was not among the earliest festivals of the Church. Irenaeus and Tertullian omit it from their lists of feasts;** Origen, glancing perhaps at the discreditable imperial Natalitia, asserts (in Lev. Hom. viii in Migne, P.G., XII, 495) that in the Scriptures sinners alone, not saints, celebrate their birthday; Arnobius (VII, 32 in P.L., V, 1264) can still ridicule the "birthdays" of the gods. Alexandria. The first evidence of the feast is from Egypt. About A.D. 200, Clement of Alexandria (Strom., I, xxi in P.G., VIII, 888) says that certain Egyptian theologians "over curiously" assign, not the year alone, but the day of Christ's birth, placing it on 25 Pachon (20 May) in the twenty-eighth year of Augustus. - The Catholic Encyclopedia, newadvent.org

**A brief history of the holiday - The first time the birth of Jesus Christ was attributed to the date December 25 was in the 4th century,** according to early Roman history. - CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/EVENTS/1996/christmas/history.html>

**Christmas - The first mention of December 25 as the birth date of Jesus occurred in A.D. 336** in an early Roman calendar. - World Book 2005 (Deluxe), Copyright 2004 World Book, Inc. and its licensors.

**Christmas - The actual observance of the day of Jesus' birth was long in coming. In particular, during the first two centuries of Christianity there was strong opposition to recognizing birthdays of martyrs or, for that matter, of Jesus. Numerous church fathers offered sarcastic comments about the pagan**

**custom of celebrating birthdays...** - Encyclopedia Britannica

**Christmas - The observance probably does not date earlier than A.D. 200 and did not become widespread until the 4th cent.** - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

As we can see, if you were a Christian in the first two to three hundred years of Christianity, it was by no means unusual or unorthodox not to celebrate the birth of Christ. In contrast, the United States of America has only existed for just over 2 centuries. This means that in the earliest times Christmas was not widely celebrated or even celebrated at all by Christians for longer than the United States has been a country!

As the quotations above also attest, the popular celebration of Christmas finally emerged alongside Roman Catholicism as a development of the fourth century. Likewise, the celebration of Christmas remained a status quo throughout the Middle Ages as a facet of Roman Catholic tradition. That is, until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's.

*2. With the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's, the celebration of Christmas began to fall into decline among Protestants and remained out of vogue, particularly in England and America, for three centuries until the mid 1800's.*

**Christmas - By the Middle Ages**, Christianity had, for the most part, replaced pagan religion. **On Christmas, believers attended church, then celebrated raucously in a drunken, carnival-like atmosphere similar to today's Mardi Gras...In the early 17th century, a wave of religious reform changed the way Christmas was celebrated in Europe. When Oliver Cromwell and his Puritan forces took over England in 1645, they vowed to rid England of decadence and, as part of their effort, cancelled Christmas.** By popular demand, **Charles II** was restored to the throne and, with him, **came the return of the popular holiday.** - The History Channel, historychannel.com

(NOTE: Charles II, whose restoration to the throne of England marked the end of Christmas' abolition, was a Roman Catholic. This further ties the celebration of Christmas as being largely a byproduct of Roman Catholicism. "**Charles II, king of England, Scotland, and Ireland** - Charles also favored religious toleration (largely because of **his own leanings toward Roman Catholicism**)... - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.)

**Christmas - The popularity of Christmas grew until the Reformation, a religious movement of the 1500's.** This movement gave birth to Protestantism. **During the Reformation, many Christians began to consider Christmas a pagan celebration because it included nonreligious customs.** - World Book 2005 (Deluxe), Copyright 2004 World Book, Inc. and its licensors.

**Christmas - In England, Christmas was forbidden by Act of Parliament in**

**1644**; the day was to be a fast and a market day; shops were compelled to be open; plum puddings and mince pies **condemned as heathen**. The conservatives resisted; at Canterbury blood was shed; but **after the Restoration Dissenters continued to call Yuletide 'Fooltide'**. - The Catholic Encyclopedia, newadvent.org

**Christmas** - The practice of giving gifts, which goes back to the 15th century, contributed to **the view that Christmas was a secular holiday** focused on family and friends. **This was one reason why Puritans in Old and New England opposed the celebration of Christmas and in both England and America succeeded in banning its observance.** - Encyclopedia Britannica

**Once Upon A Time, When Christmas Was Banned...** Outlawing the celebration of Christmas sounds a little extreme, but it happened. The **ban existed as law for only 22 years, but disapproval of Christmas celebration took many more years to change. In fact, it wasn't until the mid-1800s that celebrating Christmas became fashionable in the Boston region.** The Puritans who immigrated to Massachusetts to build a new life **had several reasons for disliking Christmas.** First of all, it reminded them of the Church of England and the old-world customs, which they were trying to escape. Second, **they didn't consider the holiday a truly religious day.** December 25th wasn't selected as the birth date of Christ until several centuries after his death. Third, **the holiday celebration usually included drinking, feasting, and playing games - all things which the Puritans frowned upon...Fourth, the British had been applying pressure on the Puritans for a while to conform to English customs.** The ban was probably as much a political choice as it was a religious one **for many.** - Copyright 2001-2004 C. Danko, Massachusetts Travel, <http://masstraveljournal.com/features/1101chrisban.html>

**Once Upon A Time, When Christmas Was Banned...** **The ban was revoked in 1681 by an English-appointed governor Sir Edmund Andros, who also revoked a Puritan ban against festivities on Saturday night. But even after the ban was lifted, the majority of colonists still abstained from celebrations.** - Copyright 2001-2004 C. Danko, Massachusetts Travel, <http://masstraveljournal.com/features/1101chrisban.html>

**Christmas** - The pilgrims, English separatists that came to America in 1620, were even more orthodox in their Puritan beliefs than Cromwell. As a result, **Christmas was not a holiday in early America. From 1659 to 1681, the celebration of Christmas was actually outlawed in Boston.** Anyone exhibiting the Christmas spirit was fined five shillings. By contrast, in the Jamestown settlement, Captain John Smith reported that Christmas was enjoyed by all and passed without incident. **After the American Revolution, English customs fell out of favor, including Christmas. In fact, Congress was in session on December 25, 1789,** the first Christmas under America's new constitution. **Christmas wasn't declared a federal holiday until June 26, 1870.** - The History Channel, [historychannel.com](http://historychannel.com)

**Was Christmas celebrated throughout all the colonies? No. The celebration of Christmas was outlawed in most of New England. Calvinist Puritans and Protestants abhorred the entire celebration and likened it to pagan rituals and Popish observances. In 1659, the General Court of Massachusetts forbade, under the fine of five shillings per offense, the observance 'of any such day as Christmas or the like, either by forbearing of labour, feasting, or any such way.' The Assembly of Connecticut, in the same period, prohibited the reading of the Book of Common Prayer, the keeping of Christmas and saints' days, the making of mince pies, the playing of cards, or performing on any musical instruments. These statutes remained in force until they were repealed early in the nineteenth century.** - <http://www.history.org/>, David DeSimone, *Another Look at Christmas in the Eighteenth Century*(<http://www.history.org/almanack/life/xmas/xmasqa.cfm>)

**After the Reformation, certain Protestant groups opposed Christmas celebrations.** Oliver Cromwell banned them in England. King Charles II restored Christmas when he ascended the throne. **In the American colonies, Puritans, Baptists, Quakers, and Presbyterians opposed the festivities, while Catholics, Anglicans (Episcopalians), Dutch Reformed, and Lutherans approved.** - <http://www.factmonster.com/spot/christmas1.html>, David Johnson, *Origins of the Christmas Holiday, World's biggest festival has varied roots*

**Christmas - In England after the Reformation** the observance became a point of contention between Anglicans and other Protestants, and the celebration of Christmas was suppressed in Scotland and in much of New England until the 19th cent. - The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition. 2001.

In fact, the article on Massachusetts Travel actually includes the text of the Boston laws forbidding Christmas.

**Once Upon A Time, When Christmas Was Banned...** 'For preventing disorders, arising in several places within this jurisdiction **by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others:** it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that **whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like,** either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shilling as a fine to the county.' From the records of the General Court, Massachusetts Bay Colony May 11, 1659'...' - Copyright 2001-2004 C. Danko, Massachusetts Travel, <http://masstraveljournal.com/features/1101chrisban.html>

Furthermore, it should be noted that not only was Christmas banned among Puritans in England and America, but among other denominations as well as Presbyterians under John Knox and in Geneva under John Calvin.

(NOTE: It should be noted that the mention of Puritans, Presbyterians, and such church leaders as Calvin and Knox in this segment is not for the purposes of

endorsing these persons or any particular points of their theology. As other articles on this website attest, we are most decidedly against the teachings of John Calvin concerning the concepts that have come to be known as “Calvinism.” However, although we ourselves do not necessarily have regard for these persons, a significant number of those Christians who celebrate Christmas do regard them and their teaching. Our intention here is simple. Because modern Christians who celebrate Christmas admire some of the very Christian leaders who did not celebrate Christmas, they cannot and should not assign a stigma to Christians today who do not celebrate Christmas.)

Subsequently, while John Calvin did not himself instigate the ban on Christmas in Geneva, Calvin did state after the fact that he was not opposed to the ban.

**“Besides the abolition of the feast-days** here has given grievous offense to some of your people, and it is likely enough that much unpleasant talk has been circulating among you. I am pretty certain, also, that I get the credit of being the author of the whole matter, both among the malevolent and the ignorant. But as **I can solemnly testify that it was accomplished without my knowledge, and without my desire...Although I have neither been the mover nor instigator to it, yet, since it has so happened, I am not sorry for it.**” - John Calvin, Letter, 1551

[**FOOTNOTES:** <http://www.rbvincent.com/BibleStudies/calvinxmas.htm>, (John Calvin, Selected Works of John Calvin, Tracts and Letters, Jules Bonnet, Ed., David Constable, Trans., Vol. 5, Letters, Part 2, 1545-1553, pp. 299, 300.) AND [http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/Xmas\\_ch2.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLS/Xmas_ch2.htm), Calvin, Letters, Vol. ii, p. 289; cf. George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English-Popish Ceremonies, Obtruded upon the Church of Scotland*(Geneva, 1637), Part 1, p. 34.]

And despite Calvin's hesitation about the creation of an outright ban (due to the upheaval it would cause), Calvin and Knox both shared the same personal view that all forms of worship, including holidays such as Christmas, which were not set forth in scripture itself should not be celebrated.

“I know how difficult it is to persuade the world that **God disapproves of all modes of worship not expressly sanctioned by His Word.** The opposite persuasion which cleaves to them, being seated, as it were, in their very bones and marrow, is, that whatever they do has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God. **But since God not only regards as frivolous, but also plainly abominates, whatever we undertake from zeal to His worship, if at variance with His command,** what do we gain by a contrary course? The words of God are clear and distinct, ‘Obedience is better than sacrifice.’ ‘In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,’ 1 Sam. 15:22; Matt. 15:9. **Every addition of His word, especially in this matter, is a lie.** Mere ‘will worship’ (ethelothreeskia) is vanity [Col. 2:23]. This is the decision, and when once the judge has decided, it is no longer time to debate.” - John Calvin, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*

[**FOOTNOTE:**[http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas\\_ch2.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas_ch2.htm), Calvin, *Tracts* (1844; rpt. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), Vol. 1, pp. 128-29.]

“By contrary Doctrine, we understand **whatsoever men**, by Laws, Councils, or Constitutions **have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word:** such as be...**keeping of holy days of certain Saints commanded by men, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the Feasts (as they term them) of Apostles, Martyrs, Virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our Lady.** Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, **we judge them utterly to be abolished from this Realm;** affirming further, that **the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the Civil Magistrate.”** - John Knox, First Book of Discipline, 1560

[**FOOTNOTE:**[http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas\\_ch2.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas_ch2.htm), Knox's History, Vol. 2, p. 281. Cf. John Knox, Works (David Laing, ed.; Edinburgh: James Thin, 1895), Vol. ii, p. 190.]

It should be noted that our intention at this point is not to necessarily agree with the specific reasoning or argumentation employed by either Calvin or Knox concerning why Christmas should not be celebrated. Our point here is simply to demonstrate yet another instance of historic opposition to Christmas among Christians, including opposition by prominent Protestant figures such as Calvin and Knox.

Additionally, the ban on holidays such as Christmas is also reflected in the Westminster Catechism, which is used and revered today by Presbyterians and some Baptists.

“**The sins forbidden in the second commandment are...all superstitious devices, corrupting the worship of God, adding to it, or taking from it, whether invented and taken up of ourselves, or received by tradition from others, though under the title of antiquity, custom, devotion, good intent, or any other pretence whatsoever...**” - Westminster Catechism, Larger Catechism no. 109; cf. Confession, chapter 21

[**FOOTNOTES:** a full copy of the Westminster Larger Catechism can be found at <http://www.opc.org/documents/WLC2.html>]

It is interesting to note that the Westminster Catechism was approved by English Parliament under Cromwell at the same time that Parliament under Cromwell also banned Christmas (1645). Both the Westminster Catechism and the ban on Christmas were repealed when Charles II, a king with Roman Catholic leanings, was restored to the throne in 1660.

“**Westminster Catechism - Written by the Westminster Assembly, which met regularly from 1643 until 1649 during the English Civil War, the catechisms**



were presented to the English Parliament in 1647 and were approved by Parliament in 1648. They lost their official status in England, however, in 1660, when the monarchy was restored and episcopacy was reestablished. The General Assembly of the Church of Scotland authorized their use in July 1648, and the Scottish Parliament authorized them in January 1649.” - Encyclopedia Britannica

Given that some Baptists also held to the Westminster Catechism, it is not surprising that famous American Baptist Preacher Charles Spurgeon also opposed the celebration of Christmas as late as 1871. Notice that the second half of the quote below mirrors the portion of the Westminster Catechism above.

“We have no superstitious regard for times and seasons. **Certainly we do not believe in the present ecclesiastical arrangement called Christmas: first, because we do not believe in the mass at all, but abhor it**, whether it be said or sung in Latin or in English; and, **secondly, because we find no scriptural warrant whatever for observing any day as the birthday of the Savior; and, consequently, its observance is a superstition**, because not of divine authority.”  
- Charles H. Spurgeon, Sermon, December 24, 1871

[**FOOTNOTE:**[http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas\\_ch2.htm](http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualNLs/Xmas_ch2.htm), C. H. Spurgeon, Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit (1871; rpt. Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications), p. 697.]

In short, for those who view not celebrating Christmas as weird, alarming, or unorthodox Christianity, let them likewise condemn John Calvin, John Knox, Charles Spurgeon, historic Presbyterianism and the Westminster Catechism as likewise being weird, alarming, and unorthodox. Furthermore, let them condemn all of the apostles including Paul as well as Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus and virtually every sincere Christian living in the first two or three centuries after Christ as being weird and unorthodox. And, for those who view not celebrating Christmas as weird, alarming, or unorthodox, let them in no way embrace the Pilgrim settlers of America, which were largely Puritans who rejected Christmas. In short, if someone is going to condemn modern Christians who don't celebrate Christmas as unorthodox, weird, or alarming, let them also condemn all of these persons as weird, alarming, and unorthodox and let them affirm only the Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and modern Christians of the last 100-150 years as acceptable and orthodox.

In summary, we can see that the occurrence of Christians opposed to celebrating Christmas was so strong that there were times in English, European, and American history when laws were passed against the celebration of Christmas. Moreover, as the quotes above indicate, even after those laws were repealed, Christmas continued to be largely out of vogue among Protestants until the 1800's. In large part, Christians who abstained from celebrating Christmas did so because the holiday was viewed as dishonoring to God and inherently non-Christian. As we can see, if you were a Christian in the first two to three hundred years after the Reformation, it was by no means unusual or unorthodox not to

celebrate the birth of Christ.

So, if it was not uncommon from the Reformation to the mid-1800's to find normal Christians not celebrating Christmas, when did this holiday begin to be celebrated by a majority of Protestant Christians, particularly in America?

**3.** *Only increasingly in the latter half of the nineteenth century did Christmas begin to become popular in America. The tunnel-vision perception of Christmas held by many (if not most) Christians in America today is a re-invention of Christmas from the holiday of debauchery it was known as for a long time prior to the mid-1800's.*

**Christmas - Christmas as we know it today is a Victorian invention of the 1860s.** - The History Channel, [historychannel.com](http://historychannel.com)

**Christmas - It wasn't until the 19th century that Americans began to embrace Christmas. Americans re-invented Christmas, and changed it from a raucous carnival holiday into a family-centered day of peace and nostalgia.** - The History Channel, [historychannel.com](http://historychannel.com)

**Christmas - As Americans began to embrace Christmas as a perfect family holiday, old customs were unearthed. People looked toward recent immigrants and Catholic and Episcopalian churches to see how the day should be celebrated. In the next 100 years, Americans built a Christmas tradition all their own that included pieces of many other customs, including decorating trees, sending holiday cards, and gift-giving. Although most families quickly bought into the idea that they were celebrating Christmas how it had been done for centuries, Americans had really re-invented a holiday to fill the cultural needs of a growing nation.** - The History Channel, [historychannel.com](http://historychannel.com)

As we have seen, outside of Roman Catholicism and the Roman-Catholic-dominated Middle Ages, the phenomenon of Christians widely celebrating Christmas is largely a product of the last 100-150 years, particularly in America. And during that 100-150 years, Christmas has been entirely re-invented from being known and rejected by many Protestants as a day of drinking, gluttony, and immorality, into the only perception of Christmas that most Americans know today - a family day with a myth of antiquity. In reality, in all of Christian history, there have been a total of over 600 years when celebrating the birth of Christ was not common at all or at least not common among Christians in the West. The periods when the birth of Christ and Christmas were not widely (or at all) celebrated by Christians include 30-350 A.D. and 1500-1850 A.D. approximately. In fact, it seems the only two exceptions to this are the intervening 1200 years under the ruling traditions of Roman Catholicism and the last 150 years.

One simple outcome of these historical realities is the startling realization that if you are a descendant of Protestant Christians who lived in America or England or came from western Europe in general, it is probably the case that your great-great-

great grandparents and several generations of their ancestors didn't celebrate Christmas. But you don't need to be concerned about this. It doesn't mean that they were weird or members of some cult. What they were doing is perfectly normal for good, bible-conscious Christians. At some point, one of their children or grandchildren broke from your family's long-standing traditions against celebrating Christmas, began participating in the holiday, and passed down their newly-adopted Christmas customs to you.

In light of the historic fact that many Christians in years past, both during the earliest church and since the Reformation did not celebrate Christmas, no suspicion or prejudice should be placed upon Christians today who don't celebrate Christmas. Not celebrating Christmas should not be a cause for alarm. Historically speaking, it is impossible to support the modern, tunnel-vision perception that celebrating Christmas is a litmus test for "normal" or orthodox Christianity. It is simply a matter of fact that outside of the last century there have been significant periods of time throughout history when celebrating Christmas was quite out of vogue for many normal Christians. There is no reason (other than name-calling) to associate Christians who don't celebrate Christmas with cult groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Unless one is imprisoned by the ignorance of tunnel-vision and a short-sightedness of history, it obvious that it is perfectly normal for Christians not to celebrate Christmas.