

# Christmas traditions

By KEN HORN

**Christmas** is a Christian holiday. Though many non-Christian traditions have grown up around this celebration of the birth of Jesus, there are still many remnants left of its original intent. Nativity scenes, the singing of carols, and other traditions are reminders of its true meaning.

Many traditions that don't seem to have any connection with the Bible's Christmas story actually began — or were adapted — to point to Jesus. Knowing a little bit about the symbolism of Christmas traditions helps us understand what Christmas is really about. Here are the stories behind some of our Christmas traditions.

**The date:** Was Jesus really born on Dec. 25?

In ancient Rome, there was a pagan festival celebrated on this date. Courts and schools were closed, there was no military activity and slaves were even freed temporarily.

When Emperor Constantine became a professing Christian, he was influential in instituting the Christian feast of "the birthday of the Sun of righteousness" (Malachi 4:2) as an alternative to the pagan festivities then in practice. This points to the Christian triumph over paganism. By the end of the fourth century, the "Feast of the Nativity of Christ" or the "Christ Mass" was celebrated throughout most of the Christian world.

Secular traditions and excesses eventually dominated, causing Christians to be wary of the cel-

ebration. In the 1640s, Puritans in England actually outlawed the celebration of Christmas.

Today some Christians in other parts of the world celebrate Christmas on Jan. 6. We don't know when Christ was actually born. But it is good to have a set time to honor such an important event.

The Bible says, "Some of the Lord's followers think one day is more important than another. Others think all days are the same. But each of you should make up your own mind. Any followers who count one day more important than another day do it to honor their Lord" (Romans 14:5,6, CEV). It is not the day, but the honoring of Christ that is important.

**Santa Claus:** A fourth-century bishop in Myra, Turkey, was named Nicholas. He supported the doctrine of the Trinity at an important church council. He also was extremely generous and loved children. Legend says he rode a white horse and threw coins through open windows to impoverished families.

After his death, he was eventually sainted by the Catholic church and from then on was known as Saint Nicholas. On the eve of Saint Nicholas Day (Dec. 6), some came to believe he visited children with admonitions and gifts, in preparation for the gift of the Christ child. Some even thought he had a companion who carried switches and promised sweets to good boys and girls, but threatened punishment to the bad.

(That's the source of, "You'd better watch out, better not pout ... .") This legend spread throughout the Old World. In other countries he became known as the Christmas Man, Father Christmas, Father January or Grandfather Frost.

The Dutch added customs, such as leaving hay for his horse (later hot chocolate and cookies in the U.S.), and putting out a wooden shoe to be filled by "Sinter Klaas" (the source of our stocking tradition).

When the Dutch settled in New Amsterdam (now New York), they brought these traditions with them. In America, Sinter Klaas became "Santa Claus." The mythos grew here. The red suit today's Santa wears is actually a poor copy of the bishop's clothing the original Saint Nicholas would have worn.

The name Kriss Kringle is a corruption of Dutch words meaning Christ child (who some said brought gifts on Christmas Eve). By 1842 Kriss Kringle was identified with Santa Claus.

On Christmas today the focus should be on the true story of Christ more than the legend of Santa Claus.

**Christmas tree:** The use of the evergreen probably began in the eighth century when Saint Boniface brought Christianity to Germany. One variation of this story says he cut down a so-called sacred oak tree to convince the pagans he was preaching to that it was not sacred. When it fell, behind it he found a

Their future,  
your purpose

TEACH

Assemblies of God  
faculty positions  
now available

Assemblies of God Higher Education continues to develop a national database of all interested persons who would like to be considered for faculty positions at endorsed AG colleges and universities.

The greatest area of need is in the non Bible and theology disciplines, particularly math, science, behavioral science, business, and music. However, all interested persons are encouraged to apply regardless of discipline.

Previous college teaching experience preferred but may not be required in all situations.

Requirements for database eligibility:

Be Pentecostal ●

Member of Assemblies of God with faithful attendance at an AG church ●

AG pastor's recommendation ●

Doctorate preferred, ●  
Master's degree minimum

Online application available at  
[www.colleges.ag.org](http://www.colleges.ag.org)

For further information, please contact:

Christian Higher  
Education Department

1445 North Boonville Avenue  
Springfield, MO 65802

(417) 862-2781, ext. 3315  
[colleges@ag.org](mailto:colleges@ag.org)

[www.colleges.ag.org](http://www.colleges.ag.org)



# Christmas traditions

small fir sapling and dedicated it to the Holy Child.

In the 16th century, Martin Luther popularized decorating trees. One night while walking home shortly before Christmas, he felt a strong love for God and His creation. He placed tapers on a little evergreen to symbolize the forest and the stars.

The custom of decorating the tree spread throughout Europe, reaching England in 1841 and the U.S. in 1851. A young pastor named Schwan in Cleveland, Ohio, created a furor by bringing a lighted tree into his church. People thought it was a pagan custom. Later research proved this to be a Christian tradition.

Today, the evergreen Christmas tree represents the Holy Child in His everlasting nature — and the eternal life available to all through Christ.

**Presents:** Merrymaking and gift giving were originally a part of the ancient Roman celebrations. Only in the last century or so has the tradition of gift giving increased to current proportions. Previous Christian cel-

ebrations focused on a giving spirit, with token gifts of food and so forth. The commercialized giving of today neglects the true association of gifts with Christmas. The Christ child received gifts from the Wise Men. We must not forget to give to Him.

The best gift you can give is yourself — a commitment to serve Jesus Christ with your whole life. Another Christian way of giving at Christmas was stated by Jesus himself: "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). We should not exchange gifts, but give them. Giving to the needy is one way to do that.

**Today:** Though these and other customs have obscure origins, their importance is in what they mean today. Christmas is about the Son of God who came to earth to save sinful man. Let's do our best to keep Christ in our celebration of Christmas. **tpe**

KEN HORN is managing editor of *Today's Pentecostal Evangel*.

E-mail your comments to [tpe@ag.org](mailto:tpe@ag.org).

## ABCs OF SALVATION

To know God and be ready for heaven, follow these steps:

**A. Admit you are a sinner.**

"There is no one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Romans 3:10,23 (See Romans 5:8; 6:23.)

**Ask God's forgiveness and repent of your sins.**

"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Romans 10:13 (See Acts 3:19.)

**B. Believe in Jesus** (put your trust in Him) as your only hope of salvation. "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 (See John 14:6.)

**Become a child of God by receiving Christ.**

"To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." John 1:12 (See Revelation 3:20.)

**C. Confess that Jesus is your Lord.**

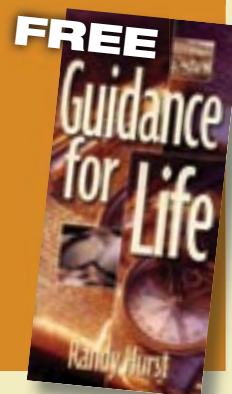
"If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Romans 10:9 (See verse 10.)

For further help, contact the Assemblies of God church near you.

If you would like someone to pray with you concerning your decision to follow Jesus Christ, please contact the church indicated on the back cover or call:

**1-800-4PRAYER**

Assemblies of God National Prayer Center



# Steward Insurance Partners With Church Mutual

Steward Insurance and Risk Management is pleased to partner with Church Mutual Insurance Company in offering the Assemblies of God Church Program. With this program, you receive all of the Assemblies of God customization benefits of Steward Insurance such as broader coverage, lower pricing, and additional value-added services, with the strength and credibility of Church Mutual protection.

Since 1897, Church Mutual has been dedicated to protecting religious organizations. Today, Church Mutual is America's leading church insurer, protecting more than 95,000 worship centers and related organizations nationwide. That's more than twice the number of any other insurance company and includes a large number of Assemblies of God churches and district offices.

"We are thrilled with the response of our churches to the Assemblies of God Church Program. Through this program, we are extremely pleased to offer our churches the insurance expertise provided by Church Mutual."

— Thomas E. Trask  
General Superintendent  
General Council of the Assemblies of God

"We are delighted to be a part of the Assemblies of God family. We promise you superior service and the best insurance value."

— Gerald Whitburn  
Chairman, President and CEO  
Church Mutual Insurance Company

The Assemblies of God Districts Association gives its endorsement to Church Mutual. In arriving at its official endorsement, the Association performed thorough due diligence. It compared policies, service, expertise and financial strength. Church Mutual was found to be the best insurance value.



Listening. Learning. Leading.®

### CONTACT STEWARD INSURANCE AND GAIN THE SECURITY YOU NEED TODAY

To learn more about the Assemblies of God Church Program or to request a free on-site needs analysis for your church, call Steward Insurance at 1.877.242.8116 or visit [www.Stewardins.com](http://www.Stewardins.com).