

# The First Church Christmas

By Paul Kroll

“Joy to the world!” That glorious Christmas worship season Christians look forward to each year is here. Yet, surprisingly, for the first 300 years of the church’s life there was no Christmas celebration of Jesus’ birth. Possible reasons include:

- The apostolic church had expected that Christ’s coming in glory was just around the corner and its worship pointed to that event.
- The church’s primary focus was on Christ’s death and resurrection and his presence through the Spirit, which were celebrated during Easter and Pentecost.
- Epiphany, or “manifestation,” another early church festival, afforded a remembrance of Jesus’ Incarnation and birth.
- There was no corresponding Old Testament festival from which Christmas could emerge, as there had been for Pasha or Easter (Jewish Passover) and the Christian Pentecost (Feast of Weeks).
- The date of Jesus’ birthday was, perhaps, not known.

## First Christmas at Rome

In A.D. 336 the church at Rome proclaimed December 25 as the *dies natalis Christi*, “the birthday of Christ.” An entry in the Chronograph of A.D. 354, or the Philocalian Calendar, records, “Our Lord Jesus Christ was born on the eighth before the calends of January,” or December 25. It doesn’t state



25, the day of the winter solstice in the old Roman calendar. The cult of the Sun was of grave concern to the church at Rome. It was introduced in A.D. 218 when the teenager, Elagabalus (c. 203-222), became the new emperor of the Roman Empire. Elagabalus venerated the Sun god and introduced his cult into Rome under the title *deus Sol invictus*, that is, the invincible, undefeated or unconquered Sun god.

Emperor Aurelian, Roman emperor from A.D. 270 to 275, decreed the Unconquered Sun as supreme god of the Roman Empire. Mithra, a god of Persian origin, was part of the Sun cult worship. Mithra’s birthday was also on December 25. The Roman



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that Christmas was being observed on that date, but we can be reasonably certain the observance began at Rome around this time.

A generation after the Chronograph was published, church father John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) wrote that Rome was celebrating a December 25th Christmas: “On this day also the birthday of Christ was lately fixed at Rome in order that while the heathen were busy with their profane ceremonies, the Christians might perform their sacred rites undisturbed.”

The “profane ceremonies” referred to by Chrysostom centered around the birthday of the “Invincible Sun,” or Sol, which was also celebrated on December

Emperors Diocletian and Galerius, who ruled prior to Constantine the Great (306-337), venerated the *Sol Mithras Deus invictus* cult. Constantine himself, acknowledged as the first Christian emperor, was a devotee of the Sun cult for a good part of his life.

## Struggle against Sun worship

A December 25th birthday celebration for Christ served to compete with and counteract the festival of the pagan devotees of Sol-Mithra. The church was able to challenge the worshippers of Sol Invictus with Jesus Christ, whom they proclaimed as the true Son of God and the Sun of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2; Revelation 1:13, 16).

Christmas celebration was an effective evangelizing event for turning the hearts and minds of people to Christ and away from worship of Sol. It also provided church members with a safe, Christ-centered worship alternative to other heathen festivals, such as the late December Saturnalia. Simultaneously, the Roman church could promote prayerful and moral behavior, in sharp contrast to the licentiousness that accompanied the pagan festivals.

Celebration of Christmas (or Advent, a term referring to Christ's coming) also was effective in combating heresies about Jesus, pointing to his incarnation as a real human being.

It's not surprising that the December 25th Christ-

mas celebration quickly spread from the congregations in Rome to churches throughout the empire. From the fourth century on, every Western calendar assigns Christmas to December 25. By the middle of the fifth century, most of the Eastern churches had adopted the Christmas festival, and by the time of Jerome (347-420) and Augustine (354-430), it is everywhere established in Christendom.

Over the next thousand years, Christmas observance followed the expanding community of Christianity around the world. Today Advent-Christmas is one of the church's most important worship seasons. Have a joyful Christmas celebration and a blessed new year. •

## Speaking of Life...



with Joseph Tkach

**In the Broadway play, *A Raisin in the Sun*,** a father dies and is survived by his wife, a son and a daughter. Each one of them has a different idea about how to use the inheritance from the father's death.

The widowed wife wants to buy a new home. The daughter sees it as an opportunity for her to go to medical school. The son wants to go into business with a friend.

The son persuades them to see it his way. "Don't you see," he says to his mother and sister, "if I take this money I can do all these things for you." So, the son gets the money, and gives it to his friend to start their business. His dream is smashed when the friend absconds with the money and skips town.

Now the son has to tell his mother and sister that all the money is lost. Their reactions are interesting. The mother responds sympathetically. She hugs her son, rubs his neck and says, "Honey, I know you feel so bad!"

The sister is astonished and asks the mother, "How can you love him after what he has done? He doesn't deserve to be loved!"

That's the reaction a lot of people have to the gospel. It's hard to believe that God forgives us and loves us after everything we've done.

Listen to how the mother in *A Raisin in the Sun* replies to her daughter's harshness:

"Honey, when do you think is the time to love somebody? Is it when they get a big promotion? Is it when they're successful? Is it when all their investments pay off? Is that the time you love somebody? Honey, the time to

love someone is when they are down and out. The time to love someone is when they've made a mistake in their life and they feel bad. The time to love somebody is when they have nobody to reach out to. The time to love somebody is when life has whipped and beaten them. That's the time to love somebody."

Isn't that exactly what God does? Jesus described the Father's love for us in these words:

"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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son" (John 3:16-18).

When we believe and embrace God's love, we have new life in Jesus Christ. Our fear, our grief and our anguish about all our failures are lifted off our shoulders and we can rest in his love, knowing we're clean and forgiven and accepted and loved. And knowing we are safe in his loving embrace, we can extend his love to those around us.

It's a new life, a life of believing what God has done for us through Jesus Christ, and there's nothing else like it. •

**This article is derived from *Speaking of Life*, a weekly video program presented by Joseph Tkach on the *Worldwide Church of God* website. You can watch it online, listen online, or download the video, audio, or text. For all these options, go to [www.wcg.org/av/spol.htm](http://www.wcg.org/av/spol.htm).**