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The Gospels do not indicate when Christ was born. That the shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields at night (Luke 2:8), eliminates December. Because of cold weather and chilling rains at that time, sheep would not be unsheltered in the open at night.

The date, December 25, goes back to Roman festivities in connection with renewal of the Sun at the winter solstice. The feast of Saturnalia in honor of Saturn, the god of sowing or seed, was held from December 17-24. It was a time of merrymaking and celebration. Work was suspended so people could feast, gamble, dance, exchange gifts, and generally enjoy themselves to the fullest. Connected with this festival were hopes for peace, happiness, and goodness.

December 25 was celebrated as the birthday of Mithra, the Iranian god of light. Mithraism, Christianity's most serious rival in the early centuries of the Christian era, emphasized worship of the *Sol Invic-*

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tus—the invincible sun. In A.D. 274 Emperor Aurelian capitalized on the heathen worship of the Sun by declaring December 25 as the birthday of the Unconquered Sun. During the fourth century the church in Rome designated the date as the Feast of the Nativity of the Sun of Righteousness.

The earliest mention of December 25 for the birth of Christ is in the Philocalian Calendar (an almanac for Christian use) from the year 354. By the middle of the fifth century, it replaced Epiphany (January 6) as the day of Christ's birth, and was generally observed throughout the Christian world.

Various Christmas customs come from different sources. The exchange of gifts goes back to the feast of Saturnalia, the greenery and lights come from the Roman New Year, and Santa Claus derives his name from *Sinter Klaas*, the Dutch form of Saint Nicholas, a Christian bishop in Asia in the fourth century, who supposedly gave away all the money he had

inherited from his wealthy parents.

The name *Christmas* comes from the Roman Catholic medieval custom of celebrating a midnight mass on the eve of Christ's birth. In the course of time, Christmas, as the day on which Christ's birth was celebrated, became the most important Christian festival, and its pagan origins became lost in history.

Despite its pagan origin, however, Ellen White did not reject the celebration of Christmas. Her balanced counsel on how Seventh-day Adventists can incorporate Christmas into their lives is found in the book *Adventist Home*.

"As the twenty-fifth of December is observed to commemorate the birth of Christ, as the children have been instructed by precept and example that this was indeed a day of gladness and rejoicing, you will find it a difficult matter to pass over this period without giving it some attention. It can be made to serve a very good purpose.

"The youth should be treated very carefully. They should not be left on Christmas to find their own amusement in vanity and pleasure seeking, in amusements which will be detrimental to their spirituality. Parents can control this matter by turning the minds and the offerings of their children to God and His cause and the salvation of souls.

"The desire for amusement, instead of being quenched and arbi-

trarily ruled down, should be controlled and directed by painstaking effort upon the part of the parents. Their desire to make gifts may be turned into pure and holy channels and made to result in good to our fellow men by supplying the treasury in the great, grand work for which Christ came into our world. . . .

"It is right to bestow upon one another tokens of love and remembrance if we do not in this forget God, our best friend. We should make our gifts such as will prove a real benefit to the receiver. I would recommend such books as will be an aid in understanding the word of God or that will increase our love for its precepts. Provide something to be read during these long winter evenings."¹

Though sacred and even lighted trees were found in some ancient religions, the Christmas tree as we know it today is historically attested only from the 16th century onward. From the *Beckschen Chronicle* (c. 1600) we learn that Christmas trees were decorated with apples and consecrated wafers. Toward the end of the 17th century, Christmas trees in addition to fruits and wafers were also decorated with candles, although candles as such were part of any Christmas celebration since the days of the early church. From Germany, the Christmas tree conquered the world, primarily during the 19th century.

When Ellen White was asked about the use of the Christmas tree,

she responded by saying, "God would be well pleased if on Christmas each church would have a Christmas tree on which shall be hung offerings, great and small, for these houses of worship. Letters of inquiry have come to us asking, Shall we have a Christmas tree? Will it not be like the world? We answer, You can make it like the world if you have a disposition to do so, or you can make it as unlike the world as possible. There is no particular sin in selecting a fragrant evergreen and placing it in our churches, but the sin lies in the motive which prompts to action and the use which is made of the gifts placed upon the tree."²

The inspired counsel can be summarized as follows: Christmas can be observed to serve a good purpose; minds can be directed heavenward to Christ's sacrifice for sinful humanity; and offerings should be given to the Lord's work. In other words, Christmas can be made a blessing for Seventh-day Adventist families and churches.

In a *Review and Herald* editorial,³ Kenneth H. Wood made two practical suggestions as to how Seventh-day Adventists can celebrate Christmas Christian-style: First, he suggested giving priority to others over self. Visit the old and the lonely. Invite someone who cannot repay you your hospitality for a meal, or take a

Christmas basket to someone in need. Second, he suggested selecting a project in the church such as Investment, Adventist World Radio, *Voice of Prophecy, It Is Written*, ADRA, evangelism, etc. Then cut back on something this season (fewer cards, fewer gifts, no tree, etc.) and contribute that amount to the selected project.

This is in harmony with Ellen White's counsel when she says, "Let there be recorded in the heavenly books such a Christmas as has never yet been seen because of the donations which shall be given for the sustaining of the work of God and the upbuilding of His kingdom."⁴

Christmas should be celebrated in harmony with Christian principles. In providing for the poor and lonely, and by giving gifts to God's work at Christmas, we honor Christ. Above all we should take care not to lose sight of the fact that Christmas calls attention to Christ's first advent. A daily study of His life and work here on Earth during the Christmas season would be particularly appropriate. Children can be taught that, although the date of Christ's birth is unknown, we can celebrate the event intelligently and in proper taste.

REFERENCES

¹ *The Adventist Home*, pp. 477, 478.

² *Ibid.*, p. 482.

³ November 18, 1971.

⁴ *The Adventist Home*, p. 483.