



# Tudor Christmas Traditions



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- As you know, we have recently been studying the English (and Scottish) Reformation – which began during a period in England known as the ***Tudor Period*** – a period that:
  - ***Began*** with the reign of Henry VII (1485)
  - ***Ended*** with the death of Elizabeth I (1603).
- Besides being the time period in which the Reformation began to take strong root in England, it turns out that the Tudor period was ***also*** the time when many of our favorite Christmas traditions were developed.
- Carol-singing, present-giving, mulled wine and mince pies were all part of the festive fun – and even Father Christmas and roast turkey have their origins in Tudor England.

# Tudor Christmas Traditions

- And because this is the Sunday that I normally do a special Christmas lesson, I thought this year might be a good time to go back and look at some of those **Tudor** Christmas traditions.
- But **before** I do that, in order to set the **context** for how Christmas was celebrated during this period and why this period was so influential in setting some of our **present** Christmas traditions, I would like to give a **brief overview** of the different ways Christians have viewed the celebration of Christ's birth **prior** the Tudor period – starting with the early church.

# Christmas in the Early Church

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- We are not given a ***date*** for the birth of Christ in scripture. And we are not given a ***command*** to observe the date.
- Where did the December 25<sup>th</sup> date come from? What is the earliest mention by Christians as to the date of Christmas?
- In the early church, there was a ***difference*** between the churches in the ***East*** and the churches in the ***West*** as to when Christmas was celebrated.
- As in the Quartodeciman controversy (over when Easter was to be celebrated), the East claimed to have ***apostolic*** direction as to when to celebrate the birth of Christ which they did for some time on January 6<sup>th</sup> (12 days after our Christmas).

# Christmas in the Early Church

- In the **West** you begin to see evidence that Christians believed that Christ was born around December 25<sup>th</sup> as early as the **second century**:
  - **Theophilus, Bishop of Caesarea (A.D. 115-181)** – “*We ought to celebrate the birth-day of our Lord on what day soever the **25th of December** shall happen.*” (*Magdeburgenses, Cent. 2. c. 6. Hospinian, de orign Festorum Chirstianorum*)
  - **Hippolytus of Rome (A.D. 170-240)** - “*The first coming of our Lord, that in the flesh, in which he was born at Bethlehem, took place eight days before the calends of January [= **December 25<sup>th</sup>**], a Wednesday, in the forty-second year of the reign of Augustus, 5500 years from Adam.*” (*Commentary on Daniel 4:23*)

# Christmas in the Early Church

- Often, when early church fathers gave a rationale for a December 25<sup>th</sup> date for the birth of Christ, it was based on the traditional dating of the annunciation of the Angel to Mary which was believed to be March 25<sup>th</sup> (nine months before December 25<sup>th</sup>).
- There is ***no*** evidence that early Christians set the date for Christmas for around the same time as the pagan celebrations (that also occurred around the time of the winter solstice) in order to fit in better with the pagans.
- It seems ***inconceivable*** that the early Christians who suffered so much persecution for faithfully resisting pagan worship would suddenly adopt a pagan holiday on which to celebrate the birth of their Lord.
- As Augustine (AD 354-430) put it: “We hold this day holy, not like the pagans because of the birth of the sun, but because of Him who made [the sun].”

# The Reformer's View of Christmas



# The Reformer's View of Christmas

- When it came to celebrating Christmas, leaders of the 16th-century Protestant Reformation were divided on whether followers of Jesus should say “bah humbug” or “joy to the world.”
- Among the Reformers, differing views of **Christmas** stemmed **largely** from differing views of **worship**:
  - Luther held the “**normative principle**” — the belief Christians may worship God in any way not **forbidden** by Scripture
  - Zwingli and Calvin held the “**regulative principle**” — the belief Christians may **only** worship God in ways **commanded** by Scripture.

# The Reformer's View of Christmas

- Luther *delighted* in celebrating Christmas. He retained many of the Roman Catholic traditions of Advent and Christmas and may have been among the first people to decorate a Christmas tree with candles.<sup>1</sup>
- In John Calvin's Geneva and Ulrich Zwingli's Zurich, *only Sundays* were observed as days of worship; the other feast days and saints' days ordained by Rome were *abolished*.<sup>2</sup>
- Calvin's disciple John Knox, who founded the Presbyterian movement in Scotland, followed the same path.<sup>1</sup>
- Preaching on Christmas Day 1551, a Tuesday, Calvin noted, "*I see here today more people than I am accustomed to having at the sermon,*" according to Calvin's *Sermons on the Book of Micah* translated by Benjamin Wirt Farley.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.baptistpress.com/resource-library/news/reformers-disagreement-on-christmas-yields-lessons/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.deseret.com/2017/12/22/20624542/christmas-after-the-protestant-reformation>

# The Reformer's View of Christmas

- Then Calvin warned, *“When you elevate one day alone for the purpose of worshiping God, you have just turned it into an **idol**. True, you insist that you have done so for the **honor of God**, but it is more for the **honor of the devil**.”*
- Still, Calvin's admonition seemed to be a **caution** rather than a **prohibition** of Christmas.
- In a 1551 letter, Calvin said he *“pursued the **moderate** course in keeping Christ's birthday.”*
- Similarly, in a 1555 letter he noted, *“A church is not to be despised or condemned because it observes more festival days than the others.”*

# The Reformer's View of Christmas

- At first, Christmas faced relatively few challenges in England.<sup>1</sup>
- When the Anglican Church split with Rome over Henry VIII's marital issues, it remained relatively Catholic — retaining not only priests, bishops, archbishops and cathedrals but choral music and feast days.<sup>1</sup>
- Consequently, many of our Christmas traditions and much of our Christmas music today is from England.<sup>1</sup>
- Nearly a century later, the **Puritans**, who drew theological inspiration from Calvin among other sources, took his view a step further, formally **outlawing** Christmas in England in 1647.<sup>2</sup>
- Caution about Christmas in British territories prevailed until the 1800s because of a desire not to return to Roman Catholic practices.<sup>2</sup>

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# Tudor Christmas Traditions



# The Twelve Days of Christmas



# The Twelve Days of Christmas

- For the Tudors, the 40 days **before** Christmas – sometimes known as “Advent” – was a season of **atonement**, in which good Christians **prepared** themselves spiritually for the coming of Christ.
- The devout were supposed to do penance and **fast** – avoiding meat, cheese and eggs.
- Then the **celebrations** began on **Christmas Day**, and continued for 12 days: from December 25 to January 6.
- The three **biggest** celebrations fell on:
  - Christmas Day
  - New Year’s
  - Epiphany or Twelfth Night on January 6 which honors the arrival of the three kings or three wise men (Magi) to see the baby Jesus.

# The Twelve Days of Christmas

- Though people in Tudor times marked the beginning of the year on **March 25** (when they held the Feast of the Annunciation), celebrating and exchanging gifts on **January 1** was a holdover from Roman times, when **that** date was considered the beginning of the year.
- All work (except taking care of animals) would stop during the 12-day stretch, as everyone from laborers to noblemen devoted themselves to the enjoyment of the Christmas season.
- Work began again on the first Monday after Twelfth Night, known as **Plough Monday**.

# Father Christmas



# Father Christmas

- The tradition of Christmas being personified by one person, such as ***Father Christmas*** or Santa Claus, was well established by the Tudor period.
- In great households of the Tudor period, the 12 days of feasting, banqueting, pageantry and merrymaking were presided over by a person called the ***Lord of Misrule***.
- There was also sometimes a specific character called “***Captain Christmas***” or “***Prince Christmas***”, whose role was to ensure that everyone made merry at Yuletide.
- A favorite character in Tudor folk plays was called “***Father Christmas***”. Clad in green, and wearing a grotesque mask and a wig, he would rampage about, shouting and brandishing a great club.

# The “Kissing Bough”



# The “Kissing Bough”

- The Christmas *tree* tradition as we know it likely began in Germany during the 16th century, but it didn't become widespread in England until some 300 years later.
- Before then, the most popular decoration in people's houses during the Yuletide season was the *kissing bough*.
- Kissing boughs were woven wooden hoops hung with evergreens like holly and bay leaves and suspended from the ceiling.
- Of course, a sprig of *mistletoe* was a *must* for any kissing bough.
- The tradition of kissing under that parasitic plant goes back as far as ancient Greece, due to mistletoe's association with *fertility*.

# Mince Pies



# Mince Pies

- After fasting for four weeks, and abstaining from all meat, eggs and cheese, Tudor-era Britons would have been *ravenous* come Christmas Day.
- Mince pies (or “*pyes*”) were such common fare during the 12 days of celebrations that they were known as Christmas pies.
- Stuffed with meat—particularly mutton, which signified the *shepherds* who visited the infant Jesus—the pies were also made with suet, sugar, spices and dried fruit.
- Ideally, they were supposed to contain 13 different ingredients, to symbolize Christ and his 12 apostles.

# Tudor Christmas Pie

(the Original “Turducken”)



# Tudor Christmas Pie

- The historical record shows the first turkeys arriving in England from the New World in 1526, or right in the middle of Henry VIII's reign.
- Though the most common celebratory fare for Christmas during Tudor times remained the boar's head, usually displayed on a platter with an apple stuffed into its mouth, wealthier diners could enjoy a particular delicacy of the time: the Tudor Christmas Pie.
- This creation, which was not for the faint of heart, consisted of a turkey stuffed with a goose, which was stuffed with a chicken, which was stuffed with a partridge, which was stuffed with a pigeon—all baked inside a pastry "coffin."

# Wassail!



# Wassail!

- Today we may recognize the word from classic Christmas carols like “The Wassail Song” and “Here We Come A-Wassailing,” but what did it mean to go wassailing in Tudor times?
- During the Christmas season, and particularly on Twelfth Night, groups of people traveled from house to house singing to their neighbors and wishing them good health.
- As they did, they passed around the communal wassail bowl, a vessel filled with warm ale, wine or cider mixed with spices and honey.
- The word “wassail” is believed to come from the old Anglo-Saxon toast *waes hael*, meaning “be well” or “be in good health.”

# Caroling



Bless ye  
Master of  
this house  
Likewise  
ye Mistress  
too, & all ye  
little children  
that round  
ye table go.

# Caroling

- Made popular in Italy in the 13th Century and first recorded in English in 1426, Christmas carols involved **dancing** as well as singing.
- Secular themes such as feasting, hunting and general merry-making became more popular under the Tudors, although carols remained predominantly religious.
- Many carols – such as *the Coventry Carole*, recorded in 1534 – were composed for **Mystery Plays**, a form of open-air religious theatre that was banned under Henry VIII and restored under Mary I, before eventually declining in popularity sometime around 1600.
- 16th Century Christmas carols still sung – albeit with revision – today, include “*We Wish You a Merry Christmas*”, “*The First Noel*” and “*Good King Wenceslaus*”.

# Holy Innocents' Day (December 28<sup>th</sup>)



# Holy Innocents' Day

- This was in remembrance of King Herod ordering the slaying of all infant boys under two years of age, in an attempt to destroy the infant Christ.
- Due to its somber associations, Holy Innocents was a day of fasting for adults, and sometimes, when children woke up, they were whipped – perhaps not too hard – as they lay in bed, to remind them of the suffering of the murdered innocents.
- However, for the rest of the day, they were allowed greater license and even permitted to play in church.
- It was, essentially, a children's feast.



# The Coventry Carol

## (Sung by King's College Choir)

Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child,  
Bye bye, lully, lullay.  
Thou little tiny child,  
Bye bye, lully, lullay.

O sisters too, how may we do  
For to preserve this day  
This poor youngling for whom we sing,  
“Bye bye, lully, lullay?”

Herod the king, in his raging,  
Charged he hath this day  
His men of might in his own sight  
All young children to slay.

That woe is me, poor child, for thee  
And ever mourn and may  
For thy parting neither say nor sing,  
“Bye bye, lully, lullay.”

**(Repeat first verse)**

# Class Discussion Time



# \*Class Discussion Time

- We saw that among the Reformers, differing views of Christmas stemmed largely from differing views of **worship**:
  - Luther held the “**normative principle**” — the belief Christians may worship God in any way not **forbidden** by Scripture
  - Zwingli and Calvin held the “**regulative principle**” — the belief Christians may **only** worship God in ways **commanded** by Scripture.
- Those who lean towards the **normative principle** tend to cite the principle of Christian liberty: that which is not explicitly forbidden in scripture is allowed.
- Those who lean toward the **regulative principle** tend to cite passages where God condemned those who did not follow his instructions in worship:
  - *Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered **unauthorized fire** before the LORD, **which he had not commanded them.** <sup>2</sup> And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. (Lev 10:1-2)*
- Which view do you lean toward? Explain your answer.
- Do **you** have a topic or question that **you** would like to see us to discuss?