



Here & Now

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An update for Florida Baptist Historical Society Board of Directors and Friends

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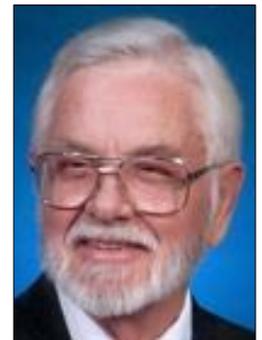
Dear Board Members and Friends of the Florida Baptist Historical Society,

My favorite times of the year are Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter. These are wonderful days for Florida Baptists to worship, rejoice and celebrate.

It is of some interest that Christians, Baptists and Florida Baptists have had a checkered relationship with Christmas. With a few historical dates and observations to set the tone note how Christians have reacted to December 25th as a Christmas date.

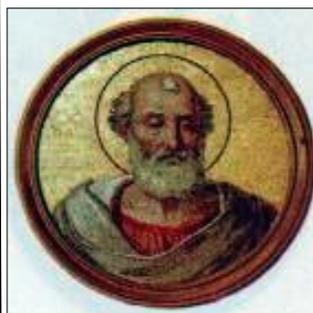
The word Christmas signifies "Christ's Mass," or the festival of the Nativity of Christ. Most Florida Baptists celebrate Christmas as a wonderful time of recognizing one of the most significant events of world history. Let's look at why the date of December 25th was chosen and how Christians and Baptists have reacted to that date.

There were early celebrations of the birth of Jesus but Leon McBeth (*Baptist Program*, December, 1965, p.3.) points out that Christmas was not pagan, and nor did it rise from pagan sources. Church historian McBeth noted that the Christmas festival came about in the early fourth century, as a way to emphasize the physical birth of Christ, and the divine incarnation. Therefore this birth of Jesus is a theological issue and not a date issue.



Leon McBeth

However a date was set. Irenaeus (130-200), Tertullian (160-225) and Origen of Alexandria (165-264) do not mention a specific date in their writings. However Augustine (354-430) did mention a December 25th birthdate of Christ celebration in his works *On the Trinity*. Therefore I think one could conclude that a Christmas date of December 25th, was set between 264-430 A. D. In 350 A. D., Pope Julius I (?-352) contended that December 25th was the birthdate of Jesus Christ. A case could be made that this 350 A. D. pronouncement was the first official citation of a December 25th Christmas.



Pope Julius I

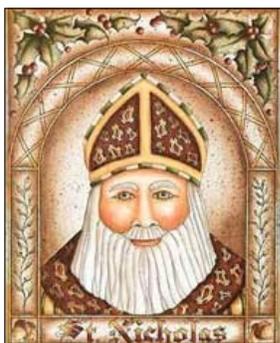
W. D. Turnley, wrote in the *Florida Baptist Witness* (January 11, 1923, p. 4), that Christmas was taken to England in 598 and to Germany in 813. There was eventual opposition in the English Parliament, for the observance of Christmas was banned in 1647 (*Florida Baptist Witness*, December 13, 1963, p. 5). This public ban came to America in 1659, when the Puritans in Massachusetts enacted a law that punished those who "kept Christmas." The law read, "Whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmas or the like, either by fore bearing of labor, feasting, or in any other way... shall be subject to a fine of five shillings." That law was repealed in 1681, but Puritans persisted in their resistance and Christmas celebrations were banned in Boston until 1856.

The secular influence of Christmas cards (1843), Christmas seals (1856), and "A Visit From St. Nicholas," by Clement C. Moore (1822), brought pressure on the American church to acknowledge a Christmas celebration date.

5400 College Drive ~ Graceville, Florida 32440

Telephone: 850-263-3261, Ext. 480 ~ E-mail: fbhspt1@baptistcollege.edu ~ web: floridabaptisthistory.org

Pre-Civil War sentiment, particularly in the east, was not inclined toward a Christmas Day celebration. On December 26, 1855, the *New York Daily Times* reported, “The churches of the Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists were not open on December 25 except where some Mission Schools had a celebration. They do not accept the day as a holy one...”



St. Nicholas

This anti-Christmas philosophy in the local church, was spoken to 100 years later in the *Florida Baptist Witness* (December 17, 1953, p. 2). Earl Stallings, pastor of First Baptist Church, Ocala, wrote “Christmas day is the day we celebrate as the birthday of Jesus. It is impossible for me to feel that I have adequately led my people to a proper observance unless we have a worship service in His church. So, every Christmas morning, the First Baptist Church of Ocala gathers for worship.”

In 1867, Basil Manly, Jr., wrote a letter to his children, explaining that his church had a decorated tree used in their Sunday School program and “inexpensive gifts were exchanged.” (*Baptist Press*, December 23, 2011).



First Baptist Church, Ocala

The missionary life and death of Lottie Moon led the W. M. U. to rename their Christmas offerings the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering, and in 2015, a goal of 175 million dollars has been set for this vital international missions gift opportunity.



Lottie Moon

The *Florida Baptist Witness* printed in 1909, that Jesus was not born on December 25th (November 25, 1909, p. 3). The *Witness* had written earlier that Christ did not intend to preserve a certain birthdate. (*FBW*, December 23, 1903) or it would have been properly recorded. By 1953, the *FBW* was emboldened enough to declare Santa Claus a “happy game of pretend” (*FBW*, December 17, 1953, p. 4), and announced that parents would be far better off to tell their children the actual source of their gifts, so children could learn parental appreciation.

By 1973, Southern Baptists had another Christmas concern in the matter of nativity scenes in the public domain. W. Barry Garrett announced (*FBW*, December 13, 1973, p. 3) that previously the federal government had paid for a nativity scene at a District of Columbia celebration; but henceforth the nativity cost and location would be under the auspices of private Baptist grants.

In 2008, the Southern Baptist Convention had its first Christmas themed resolution when Southern Baptists resolved to “affirm the use of the term Christmas “instead of the generic ‘holiday’ or ‘winter solstice’ in public pronouncements.

Richard John Neuhaus (*The Baptist Program*, December, 1969, pp.5-6) might have said it best. Neuhaus wrote “for those who repent, Christmas is hope.” He further stated, “The job is not to get Christ out of Christmas, but to get the real Christ, the whole Christ into Christmas.”

Honoring those who honor Christ,

Jerry M. Windsor
 Secretary-Treasurer
 Matthew 6:33
 jmwindsor@baptistcollege.edu

