

# Christian Festivals and Holidays

## A study tool

### How to Study the Question of Christian Holidays

Questions about holidays, feasts, and special seasons have existed in Christianity since the earliest days of the church. While modern discussions often focus on alleged pagan origins, that question alone is too narrow to produce a fair or biblical conclusion. To understand whether Christians should observe holidays—and which ones—it is necessary to step back and ask deeper questions about Scripture, worship, history, and purpose.

The goal of this study is not to defend tradition or to reject it reflexively, but to arrive at a conclusion that is **biblical, historically honest, and spiritually thoughtful**, rather than sensational or reactionary.

**The following questions are designed to guide that process.**

#### 1. Begin with Scripture, Not History

Before asking *where* holidays came from, ask *what God commands*.

- What feasts, fasts, or sacred times are **explicitly commanded** in Scripture?
- Which of these commands are given universally, and which are given specifically to Israel under the Mosaic covenant?
- What principles does Scripture give regarding worship, remembrance, fasting, and celebration?

This establishes a biblical foundation before engaging later historical questions.

#### 2. Understand the Role of the Jewish Festivals

Christianity emerges from a Jewish context, so understanding how the Bible treats Jewish festivals is essential.

- Which Jewish festivals were fulfilled in Christ, and in what sense were they fulfilled?
- Are any of the biblical festivals presented in the New Testament as binding on Gentile believers?
- How did Jesus and the apostles relate to Jewish feasts after the resurrection?

This helps distinguish between **fulfillment, continuation, and freedom** in Christ.

#### 3. Examine Extra-Biblical Holidays within Scripture Itself

Not all biblical celebrations were commanded by God directly.

- How did the Jewish people relate to extra-biblical festivals such as **Purim** (Esther 9) and **Hanukkah** (John 10:22)?
- Were these celebrations condemned, tolerated, or affirmed?
- What characteristics made them consistent—or inconsistent—with biblical principles?

This step is crucial, because it shows how God's people handled commemorations that arose from historical events rather than divine command.

#### 4. Consider When and Why God's People Mark Special Times

Throughout Scripture and church history, God's people have set aside special times in response to significant events.

- Under what circumstances is it appropriate to call for a feast or a fast?
- How did groups such as the Puritans approach special days of thanksgiving or fasting?
- What distinguishes a spiritually meaningful observance from a merely cultural one?

This helps identify the **purpose** of sacred time, not just its form.

## 5. Ask Whether Ongoing Celebrations Can Be Legitimate

Not all commemorations are meant to be one-time events.

- Is there biblical or historical precedent for **repeating, ongoing celebrations** that are not explicitly commanded?
- If so, what qualifications should such a celebration meet?
  - Does it point people toward God rather than away from Him?
  - Does it teach truth rather than superstition?
  - Does it encourage gratitude, humility, repentance, or love?

This question guards against both uncritical tradition and unnecessary rejection.

## 6. Identify Events Worthy of Long-Term Remembrance

If ongoing celebrations can be legitimate, then the next question is historical.

- Which events in redemptive or church history might reasonably justify repeated remembrance?
- How did early Christians commemorate major events such as Christ's death, resurrection, and incarnation?
- What evidence exists for early Christian observance before later institutional developments?

This separates **early Christian practice** from later ecclesiastical excesses.

## 7. Distinguish Early Christianity from Later Church Accretions

Church history includes both faithful development and genuine abuses.

- How did early Christians observe special days before the rise of extensive church calendars?
- How and why did later traditions expand the number of required holy days?
- Why did groups such as the Puritans reject many of these practices, and were their objections theological, pastoral, or political?

This prevents false "all-or-nothing" conclusions about church history.

## 8. Evaluate the Spiritual Impact of a Holiday

Ultimately, the question is not only historical, but spiritual.

- What purposes and practices would make a holiday beneficial for a Christian?
- What attitudes or behaviors might make it harmful—to the believer or to others?
- Does the observance promote Christ-centered worship, or does it encourage excess, pride, or division?

This keeps the focus on discipleship rather than argument.

## A Guiding Principle

Good theology does not begin with suspicion or sensational claims. It begins with Scripture, moves carefully through history, and evaluates practices by their **fruit**.

If a conclusion is true, it will withstand careful questioning, honest sources, and biblical principles. The goal of this study is not to win an argument, but to understand how faithful Christians can worship God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24).

# Biblical Themes for Studying Holidays, Worship, and Syncretism

## 1. God's Concern for *Who* and *How* We Worship

### Why this matters:

The Bible consistently teaches that God cares deeply about both the object of worship and the way worship is expressed.

### Questions to explore:

- Who alone is worthy of worship?
- Does good intention make wrong worship acceptable?
- How does God respond when worship mixes truth and error?

### Key passages:

- Exodus 20:1–6
- Deuteronomy 6:4–5
- Matthew 4:8–10
- Revelation 14:6–7

## 2. The Difference Between God's Commands and Human Traditions

### Why this matters:

Not all religious practices are commanded by God, but not all traditions are wrong either. Scripture helps us learn how to tell the difference.

### Questions to explore:

- When does tradition support faith, and when does it replace obedience?
- How did Jesus respond to religious traditions?

### Key passages:

- Deuteronomy 12:32
- Mark 7:7–13
- Colossians 2:6–8

## 3. Biblical Feasts, Fulfillment, and Freedom in Christ

### Why this matters:

Understanding biblical festivals helps clarify how Christians relate to sacred times after Christ.

### Questions to explore:

- What were biblical feasts meant to teach?
- How does the New Testament describe their fulfillment?
- What does Christian freedom look like?

### Key passages:

- Leviticus 23
- Hebrews 8:1–6; 10:1
- Colossians 2:16–17
- Romans 14:5–6

## 4. Cultural Practices vs. Religious Worship

### Why this matters:

Christians live in cultures shaped by many beliefs. Scripture teaches discernment, not fear.

### Questions to explore:

- Can something be culturally common without being spiritually meaningful?
- How did God's people live faithfully in pagan cultures?

### Key passages:

- Daniel 1
- Acts 17:22–28
- 1 Corinthians 10:25–31

## 5. Intent, Meaning, and the Heart of Worship

### Why this matters:

God evaluates worship by the heart, not just outward actions.

### Questions to explore:

- What role does intent play in worship?
- Can the same action be faithful or sinful depending on purpose?

### Key passages:

- 1 Samuel 16:7
- Isaiah 1:11–17
- John 4:23–24

## 6. Remembering God's Saving Acts

### Why this matters:

God repeatedly calls His people to remember what He has done.

### Questions to explore:

- Why does God command remembrance?
- How did Israel use memorials and special times?

### Key passages:

- Exodus 12:24–27
- Joshua 4:1–7
- Psalm 77:11–12
- Luke 22:19

## 7. Warnings Against True Syncretism

### Why this matters:

The Bible clearly condemns blending pagan worship with devotion to God.

### Questions to explore:

- What practices does God explicitly forbid?
- Why are some actions beyond redemption?

### Key passages:

- Exodus 32
- Deuteronomy 12:29–31
- 1 Kings 18
- 2 Corinthians 6:14–18

## 8. Christian Freedom and Responsibility

### Why this matters:

Not every issue has a universal rule. Scripture teaches responsibility, love, and conscience.

### Questions to explore:

- How should Christians handle differences of conviction?
- When should personal freedom be limited for others?

### Key passages:

- Romans 14
- 1 Corinthians 8
- Galatians 5:1, 13

## 9. The Fruits of Worship

### Why this matters:

Jesus taught that truth is known by its fruit.

### Questions to explore:

- Does a practice lead to love, humility, and obedience?
- Does it distract from Christ or point toward Him?

### Key passages:

- Matthew 7:15–20
- Galatians 5:22–23
- Micah 6:6–8

## A Simple Method for Studying These Passages

1. Read the passage slowly.
2. Ask: What does this teach me about God?
3. Ask: What does this teach me about worship or obedience?
4. Compare Scripture with Scripture.
5. Pray for wisdom before forming conclusions (James 1:5).

The Bible does not call Christians to fear history or culture, but to **test everything carefully** (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Holidays, traditions, and cultural practices should always be evaluated through Scripture, not through assumptions or internet claims.

The goal is not to prove others wrong, but to learn how to worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24).

## What about Jewish Festivals?

Questions about Jewish festivals have been part of Christianity from the very beginning. In the days of the apostle Paul, this issue became especially intense. Some Jewish Christians believed that Gentile believers needed to follow the same religious practices they had grown up with—things like ritual washings, feast days, fasting, and even circumcision. The early church had to deal with this question directly, and we can read their response in Acts 15. After prayer, discussion, and listening to testimony, the church concluded that Gentile Christians were not required to take on the full ceremonial system in order to be saved (Acts 15:1–11, 19–20).

Paul later referred to those who pushed these requirements as “Judaizers,” because they were trying to add Jewish ceremonial laws to the gospel (Galatians 2:14–16; 5:1–4). For Paul, the concern wasn’t about respect for Jewish heritage, but about protecting the truth that salvation comes through faith in Christ, not through religious observances.

A key idea in the New Testament helps explain why the church reached this conclusion. Scripture teaches that the Old Testament sanctuary system was designed as a model—or “shadow”—of the saving work Jesus would one day accomplish (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1). The sanctuary wasn’t the point; it was a teaching tool. The sacrificial lamb pointed forward to Jesus as the Lamb of God (John 1:29). The priest represented Christ as our mediator (Hebrews 4:14–16). The lampstand, the bread of the Presence, and even the veil all symbolized different aspects of who Jesus is and what He would do for us (John 6:35; 8:12; Hebrews 10:19–20). Because the sanctuary pointed to Christ, the festivals connected to it did the same. Each feast highlighted a different part of God’s plan of salvation and found its deeper meaning in Jesus (Colossians 2:16–17). Once Christ fulfilled what these symbols pointed to, believers were no

longer required to observe the festivals as religious obligations—though understanding them still helps us better appreciate what Christ has done.

If you want to explore this idea further, here's a clear and accessible study on the sanctuary as a system of symbols:

<https://amazingdiscoveries.org/read/articles/the-symbolic-sanctuary>

For a more detailed look at how the sanctuary festivals fit into this picture, Ministry Magazine has a helpful article that begins a short series on the Levitical feasts:

<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/2010/04/levitical-festivals-1>

## What about Paganism?

Concern about paganism is not new, nor is it unique to Seventh-day Adventists. Throughout Scripture and church history, God's people have wrestled with how to remain faithful to Him while living in cultures shaped by other religious beliefs. The Bible consistently warns against blending the worship of the true God with practices that belong to the worship of other gods (Exodus 20:3–5; Deuteronomy 12:29–31).

One of the key dangers Scripture identifies is syncretism—the blending of pagan religious worship with the worship of God. Syncretism occurs when practices that are explicitly tied to the worship of other gods are brought into the worship of the true God and rebranded as “Christian.” The Bible treats this very seriously. For example, when the Israelites made a golden calf and then claimed they were worshiping the God who delivered them from Egypt, God did not accept that explanation (Exodus 32:1–8). The problem was not only what they were worshiping, but how they were redefining God according to pagan ideas.

Seventh-day Adventists have historically pointed out that certain practices adopted by the medieval church—such as prayers to saints, veneration of relics, images used devotionally, and replacing clear biblical commands with human tradition—reflect this kind of syncretism. Scripture consistently rejects worship directed toward anyone or anything other than God Himself (Isaiah 42:8; Matthew 4:10; Revelation 19:10). When human traditions override a clear “thus says the Lord,” Jesus warned that worship becomes distorted, even if God's name is still being used (Mark 7:7–9).

Understanding syncretism is essential because not everything associated with pagan cultures is automatically pagan worship. This raises an important question.

### Does Pagan Use Automatically Make Something Pagan?

If pagans use an object, practice, or symbol in their worship, does that mean it is forever off-limits for Christians? Scripture suggests the answer is no.

Many everyday human activities were part of pagan worship and part of faithful worship of the true God. The key issue is meaning, purpose, and object of worship, not mere association.

Here are a few examples:

#### Food

Pagans ate food in connection with their worship, and so did God's people. God gave food to humanity in Eden (Genesis 1:29), regulated eating practices for Israel, and even commanded meals as part of worship (Exodus 12; Leviticus 7). Jesus Himself instituted the Lord's Supper

as a Christian ordinance (Luke 22:19–20). Eating food does not become pagan simply because pagans also ate food in religious contexts (1 Corinthians 10:25–26).

### **Posture and Seating**

The Israelite temple did not include seating for congregational worship, and Scripture often describes standing during prayer or Scripture reading (Nehemiah 9:5; Luke 4:16). During the Babylonian exile, synagogues developed as places for teaching and prayer, adopting some architectural features common in the surrounding culture, including seating. Early Christians inherited and expanded these practices. The fact that pagans also sat during worship does not make sitting itself a pagan act. Scripture never defines posture as the defining issue—obedience and reverence are (Psalm 95:6).

These examples illustrate an important principle: shared human behaviors are not the same as shared worship.

### **How Discernment Works**

Discernment is essential when evaluating cultural and religious practices. Pagans wear clothes. Pagans raise their hands. Pagans bow down. Yet Scripture commands God’s people to dress modestly (Genesis 3:21), lift hands in prayer (Psalm 134:2), and bow before the Lord in worship (Psalm 95:6).

The question is never simply what action is being performed, but who is being honored and why.

Some practices are clearly incompatible with biblical worship because they directly contradict God’s commands. Human sacrifice, ritual prostitution, necromancy, and idol worship were common in ancient pagan religions, and Scripture explicitly forbids them (Leviticus 18; Deuteronomy 18:9–14). These practices cannot be “redeemed” or repurposed for Christian worship because they oppose God’s revealed will.

### **A Helpful Modern Example**

Missionaries working in non-Western cultures often face this same issue. In India, for example, traditional weddings include a mixture of cultural customs and explicitly religious rituals tied to Hindu worship. Careful study has shown that while some elements are overtly religious and must be rejected, many others are simply cultural. Christian converts were not required to adopt Western wedding customs in order to be faithful Christians; they were asked to reject practices that involved worship of other gods while retaining culturally neutral traditions (cf. Acts 15:19–20).

This approach reflects the biblical principle that becoming a Christian does not require abandoning one’s culture—only abandoning idolatry.

### **Applying This Principle Today**

The same principles apply to modern life. Much of contemporary culture is religiously neutral. Some practices are clearly incompatible with Christian faith and should be avoided. Other practices may not be pagan worship but may still be unwise or harmful, based on biblical principles (1 Corinthians 10:23).

Still others—such as many customs, holidays, and cultural traditions—are neither acts of pagan worship nor violations of Scripture. These require thoughtful discernment rather than blanket acceptance or rejection.

The goal is not fear, but faithfulness. Scripture calls Christians to worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24), to test everything carefully, and to hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

### **Key References for Further Study**

Exodus 32; Deuteronomy 12:29–31

Mark 7:7–9

1 Corinthians 8–10

Acts 15

White, E. G. *The Great Controversy*, chapters 3–4

Hiebert, P. G. (1987). Critical contextualization. *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*

## **What Source Material is Legitimate for Research?**

When researching topics such as Christian holidays, alleged pagan origins, and early church history, the quality of sources matters far more than the quantity. Responsible research relies on **primary sources**, **peer-reviewed scholarship**, and **transparent historical methods**, not merely popular claims or repeated internet assertions.

### **Legitimate Sources for Research**

#### 1. Primary Sources

These are the most important materials for historical research.

- **The Bible**  
The foundational document of Christian faith and theology.
- Early Christian writings (Primary Patristic Sources)
  - Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post-Nicene Fathers (available through the **Christian Classics Ethereal Library**)  
<https://www.ccel.org/>
- **Ellen G. White’s writings**  
Particularly valuable for understanding Seventh-day Adventist theology and historical interpretation.  
Christmas-related material:  
<https://whiteestate.org/legacy/issues-christmas-html/>

*Note:* While Ellen White is not a primary source for early Christian history, her writings are authoritative for Adventist belief and helpful for theological framing and application.

#### 2. Scholarly Secondary Sources (Academic Church History)

These works analyze primary sources using established historical methods.

- Patzia, A. G. — *The Emergence of the Church*
- Latourette, K. S. — *A History of Christianity*
- Schaff, P. — *History of the Christian Church*
- Talley, T. J. — *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (excellent for holiday development)
- Bradshaw, P. F. — *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*

#### 3. Academic and Curated Digital Libraries

- Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL)  
<https://www.ccel.org/>
- **Fourth Century Christianity**  
<https://www.fourthcentury.com/>

- **Graduate Theological Union Research Guides**  
<https://libguides.gtu.edu/c.php?g=564397&p=3886923>
- Andrews University Digital Commons  
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/>
- **Ministry Magazine**  
<https://www.ministrymagazine.org/>

These resources are curated, transparent, and grounded in academic research standards.

#### 4. Reference Tools (Use with Discernment)

- **Wikipedia**  
Not a scholarly authority, but often useful for:
  - Identifying major scholarly debates
  - Locating citations and primary source references
  - Gaining an overview of a topic

Wikipedia should never be the *final* authority but can serve as a **starting index**, not a conclusion.

#### 5. Responsible Use of AI Tools

AI tools can be helpful for:

- Summarizing long academic texts
- Locating references within specific books or websites
- Organizing complex information

However, AI should never be treated as a source.

To use AI responsibly:

- Constrain it to specific books or websites
- Ask it to cite original sources
- Verify all claims by consulting the cited material directly

AI tends to reflect the assumptions built into the question. Poorly framed questions often produce biased or misleading results.

## Sources That Should Be Approached with Caution or Avoided

### 1. AI as an Authority

AI systems:

- Do not evaluate truth
- Can hallucinate sources
- Often reinforce the direction implied by the question

AI is best treated as a **research assistant**, not a historian.

### 2. YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and Social Media

While a few qualified historians and theologians exist on these platforms, most religious content found there is:

- Oversimplified
- Sensationalized
- Unsupported by primary sources

Red flags include:

- No citations
- Heavy emotional language
- Claims of “hidden truth”
- AI-generated visuals or scripts
- Youth or popularity presented as authority

If a claim is valid, it should be traceable to peer-reviewed scholarship or primary historical texts.

### 3. Random or Ideologically Driven Websites

Many websites repeat claims about “pagan origins” without engaging original sources.

Before trusting a website:

- Check whether it cites primary sources
- Examine whether those sources actually support the conclusions
- Be wary of sites that quote other blogs rather than historical texts

If sources are absent or misrepresented, the conclusions should be rejected.

### **A Final Guiding Principle**

Extraordinary historical claims require **extraordinary evidence**.

If a source asserts that:

- “Christmas was stolen from pagans”
- “Early Christians secretly knew this was wrong”
- “The church deliberately corrupted true Christianity”

...then it must provide **direct evidence from early Christian writings**, not speculation or repetition of modern myths.

Good historical research is patient, careful, and humble. It values truth over novelty and evidence over certainty.

# Essays on Holidays

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## Christmas

The holiday season evokes sharply contrasting experiences. For some, it is a time of joy, hope, and renewal; for others, it is marked by grief, strained relationships, or the weight of difficult memories. These mixed emotions often provoke deeper questions: Why do we observe this season at all? Is Christmas merely a product of consumerism or cultural tradition? Did it originate in pagan rituals, and if so, why should Christians continue to observe it?

While it is impossible to avoid the season entirely—its lights, music, and greetings permeate public life—the significance of Christmas extends far beyond decorations or social customs. At its core, the season centers on a theological claim fundamental to Christianity: that God became human and dwelt among us. The doctrine of the Incarnation, captured in the biblical name *Immanuel* (“God with us”), provides the primary reason Christians have historically cared about this season.<sup>1</sup> This event—the entrance of the eternal God into human history—stands at the very heart of the Christian faith.<sup>2</sup>

### **Early Christian Interest in the Date of Christ’s Birth**

A common objection to Christmas asserts that December 25 was adopted by the church in order to Christianize pagan winter solstice festivals. While widespread, this claim oversimplifies the historical record. Long before the fourth century, Christians demonstrated a keen interest in determining the time of Christ’s birth, and they pursued this question using biblical chronology rather than pagan calendars.<sup>3</sup>

One of the earliest methods focused on the birth of John the Baptist, for which the Gospel of Luke provides detailed chronological information. Luke records that John’s father, Zechariah, served in the priestly division of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Jewish sources describe how priestly divisions rotated temple service according to a fixed schedule rooted in 1 Chronicles 24.<sup>4</sup> Based on this system, Zechariah’s service would have occurred either in late spring (Sivan) or late autumn (Kislev). Luke further records that Jesus was conceived approximately six months after John (Luke 1:24–27, 36). Accounting for a typical gestation period places Jesus’ birth plausibly in either early autumn (Tishri) or late December to early January (Tevet).<sup>5</sup> Although this evidence does not allow for certainty, it demonstrates that a late December birth was considered plausible by Christians as early as the second century— independent of pagan influence. The dating effort arose from theological reflection on Scripture, not cultural accommodation.

### **December 25 and Early Christian Tradition**

The specific date of December 25 was proposed by Christian writers well before the fourth century. Hippolytus of Rome, writing in the early third century, explicitly identified December 25 as the date of Christ’s birth in his *Commentary on Daniel*.<sup>6</sup> This testimony predates both Constantine and the formal establishment of Christmas as an imperial feast.

By contrast, the Roman celebration of the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (“Birthday of the Unconquered Sun”) appears to have been formally promoted during the reign of Emperor Aurelian in the mid-third century.<sup>7</sup> This celebration was based on the mistaken belief that December 25 marked the winter solstice. Early Christian writers who supported a December birth date did not regard the pagan festival as the origin of Christmas. Instead, they viewed it as an attempt by Roman religion to rival or imitate Christ’s significance. For these Christians,

Christ—not the sun—was the true source of light, the fulfillment of Malachi’s prophecy of the “Sun of Righteousness” (Malachi 4:2).<sup>8</sup>

By the fourth century, the Western church formally recognized December 25 as the Feast of the Nativity, while the Eastern church had long observed January 6. Over time, these dates came to commemorate distinct aspects of Christ’s manifestation: His birth and His revelation to the Gentiles. The period between them became known as the Twelve Days of Christmas.<sup>9</sup>

### **Theological Significance of Seasonal Celebration**

Scripture does not record Jesus commanding His followers to celebrate His birth. Nevertheless, the Bible affirms the importance of intentional seasons of remembrance and communal worship. The Sabbath stands as the primary, divinely mandated sacred time, yet Scripture also encourages believers to gather regularly for spiritual encouragement and renewal. Hebrews urges Christians to “consider how to stir up one another to love and good works... encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Hebrews 10:24–25).

Ellen G. White affirms the central importance of the Incarnation, describing it as “the mystery of all mysteries” and emphasizing that Christ’s birth reveals God’s self-sacrificing love for humanity.<sup>10</sup> While she cautioned against excess and commercialism associated with Christmas, she did not reject its observance. Instead, she encouraged believers to use the season intentionally—redirecting attention toward Christ, acts of generosity, and service to others.<sup>11</sup> Properly understood, Christmas provides an opportunity to focus the church’s attention on the humility of Christ and the divine initiative to save humanity.

### **Conclusion**

Although the precise date of Jesus’ birth remains unknown, historical and biblical evidence demonstrates that the celebration of Christmas did not originate as a pagan compromise but emerged from early Christian reflection on Scripture and theology. For nearly two thousand years, Christians have marked this season to remember the Incarnation—the moment when the Creator entered His creation.

Christmas, rightly understood, is not about indulgence or nostalgia but about worship. It is a time to remember that Jesus became a member of the human family, lived among us, died for our sins, and rose again. Embracing this season with spiritual intentionality allows believers to rediscover its true meaning: the self-sacrificing love of the Savior who gave everything so that humanity might be reconciled to God.

### **Footnotes**

1. Matthew 1:23; John 1:14 (New Revised Standard Version).
2. White, E. G. (1898/1940), *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.
3. Bradshaw, P. F., & Johnson, M. E. (2011).
4. 1 Chronicles 24; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*.
5. Hoehner, H. W. (1977).
6. Hippolytus of Rome, *Commentary on Daniel* 4.23.3.
7. Hijmans, S. E. (2009).
8. Malachi 4:2; cf. White (1898/1940), p. 465.
9. Talley, T. J. (1986).
10. White, E. G. (1898/1940), p. 21.
11. White, E. G. (1952), *The Adventist Home*, pp. 477–478.

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Bradshaw, P. F., & Johnson, M. E. (2011). *The origins of feasts, fasts and seasons in early Christianity*. Liturgical Press.

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Josephus. (c. 93). *Antiquities of the Jews*.

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## Easter

Few Christian holidays raise as many questions as Easter. For some, concerns center on the holiday's name, its timing in the spring, or familiar symbols that are often labeled "pagan." These concerns are understandable, especially for Christians who sincerely want their worship to honor God rather than borrow from other religious systems. Yet the question of Easter's origins deserves careful, historically grounded reflection rather than quick conclusions. The purpose of this discussion is not to "prove" that Easter has no pagan associations at all, but to show that association is not the same as worship, and that the Christian observance of Christ's resurrection predates—and is independent from—later cultural overlaps.

### **Easter, Passover, and Firstfruits**

The foundation of Easter is not springtime symbolism but biblical history. Jesus' death and resurrection occurred within the framework of the Jewish calendar. The Gospels make clear that Jesus was crucified during Passover (Matthew 26:17–19; John 19:14), the festival that commemorated Israel's deliverance from Egypt. Paul explicitly connects Christ's death to this feast when he writes, "Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7).

Equally important is the timing of the resurrection. According to Leviticus 23:9–14, the Feast of Firstfruits was celebrated on "the day after the Sabbath" following Passover. On this day, the first sheaf of the harvest was presented to God as a promise of the full harvest to come. The New Testament presents Jesus' resurrection as the fulfillment of this feast. Paul calls Christ "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20–23). In other words, Jesus rose precisely when the symbolism of Firstfruits pointed forward to new life.

Long before Easter had a name, Christians were already commemorating the resurrection as the central event of their faith (Acts 2:24–32; Romans 6:4–5). The celebration grew directly out of Scripture and salvation history, not seasonal mythology.

### **The Name "Easter" and the Question of Pagan Influence**

One of the most common objections to Easter concerns its English name, which some associate with a pagan spring goddess. It is important to recognize, first, that this concern applies primarily to English and Germanic languages. In most Christian traditions worldwide, the holiday is called Pascha, derived directly from the Hebrew Pesach (Passover). Early Christians used this term centuries before Christianity ever reached northern Europe. When Christianity eventually spread into Germanic regions, the local population already used a springtime month name associated with regional folklore. The church did not adopt Easter because of pagan worship; rather, the existing month name became attached to the already-established Christian celebration of the resurrection. This is a linguistic development, not a theological one.

A helpful comparison is our use of weekday names today. In English, we speak of Thursday (Thor's day) or Saturday (Saturn's day), not because Christians honor Norse or Roman gods, but because those names are part of our inherited language. Language reflects culture, not necessarily belief or worship. Scripture itself recognizes this distinction between words and worship (1 Corinthians 8:4–6).

Crucially, historical evidence shows that Christians were celebrating Christ's resurrection before Christianity encountered the pagan traditions often cited in these discussions. The observance did not arise from pagan worship and then get "Christianized." It began as a remembrance of a real historical and redemptive event.

## **Easter Symbols and Christian History**

Many popular Easter symbols are often said to come from ancient fertility rites. While it is true that springtime imagery can be found across many cultures, several commonly cited Easter customs actually have Christian—not pagan—origins.

### **Decorated Eggs**

Early Christians observed long fasting periods before Easter, especially during Lent, when foods such as eggs were prohibited. During this time, eggs accumulated and would spoil if not preserved. After the fast ended, eggs were cooked, decorated, and shared as part of the Easter celebration. Over time, eggs also became a Christian symbol of the resurrection—life emerging from what appears to be a sealed, lifeless shell. This symbolism reflects Christian theology rather than fertility worship.

### **The Easter Bunny**

The rabbit is often associated with fertility in popular explanations, but medieval Christian symbolism offers a different perspective. In parts of Western Europe, a certain type of hare was believed to be capable of conceiving while already pregnant. This unusual trait led medieval Christians to associate the animal with the virgin birth. As a result, rabbits appear in some medieval art depicting Mary, emphasizing Christ's incarnation rather than pagan fertility. These associations developed within Christian thought, not ancient ritual.

While some later cultural expressions of Easter became commercialized or detached from their original meanings, this does not mean they originated in pagan worship or were intended as religious substitutes.

## **Worship, Language, and Syncretism**

True syncretism occurs when worship practices that are explicitly devoted to other gods are incorporated into the worship of the true God. Scripture consistently condemns this (Exodus 20:3–5; Deuteronomy 12:30–31). But Scripture also distinguishes between using cultural forms and participating in false worship (1 Corinthians 10:23–31).

The early church navigated this tension carefully. They did not abandon the resurrection because of linguistic overlap or cultural coincidence. Instead, they continued to proclaim, celebrate, and teach the resurrection as the cornerstone of the gospel (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).

## **Conclusion**

Easter did not arise from pagan worship, nor was it created by blending Christianity with springtime religion. It arose from the historical reality of Jesus' death and resurrection, firmly rooted in the biblical feasts of Passover and Firstfruits. While later language and cultural customs became associated with the celebration, these associations are not the same as worship.

The question Christians must ask is not simply whether a word or symbol existed in another culture, but whether the meaning, purpose, and object of worship align with Scripture. When Easter is centered on the risen Christ—the One who conquered sin and death—it remains a proclamation of the gospel, not an act of syncretism.

As Paul reminds us, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile” (1 Corinthians 15:17). Remembering and celebrating the resurrection is not a compromise—it is the very heart of Christianity.

## **Suggested References for Further Study**

Exodus 12; Leviticus 23:9–14

Matthew 26–28; John 19–20

1 Corinthians 5:7; 15:3–23

White, E. G. The Desire of Ages, chapters 71–74  
Talley, T. J. The Origins of the Liturgical Year  
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## Valentine's Day: Christian Legend, Pagan Festival, and the Question of Syncretism

Valentine's Day often raises questions similar to those surrounding other modern holidays: Where did it come from? Is it Christian, pagan, or something else entirely? And how should Christians respond to a day that blends romantic symbolism, ancient tradition, and modern commercial culture?

To answer these questions honestly, it is important to distinguish between historical evidence, Christian legend, and cultural development, and then to evaluate whether Valentine's Day represents syncretism—or simply cultural overlap that requires discernment.

### **The Christian Tradition of St. Valentine**

The figure known as St. Valentine is rooted in early Christian tradition, though the historical details are uncertain. Ancient sources suggest there may have been more than one Christian martyr named Valentine, most commonly associated with Rome and Terni in the third century A.D., during periods of Roman persecution of Christians.

According to Christian legend, Valentine was a priest or bishop who was imprisoned for his faith and ultimately executed. One popular account claims that while in prison, Valentine befriended—and possibly healed—the jailer's daughter, who was blind. Some versions of the story suggest that Valentine and the young woman developed a deep affection and that, before his execution, he wrote her a farewell note signed “from your Valentine.” Other traditions associate Valentine with secretly performing Christian marriages in defiance of imperial restrictions.

It is important to note that these stories come from hagiographical tradition—accounts written to honor martyrs rather than to function as strict historical records. While they reflect early Christian values such as faithfulness, compassion, and sacrificial love, they cannot be verified with certainty. Even so, the early church did recognize a martyr named Valentine, and his memory was commemorated in the Christian calendar by at least the fifth century. The Christian association of Valentine's Day, therefore, is not fictional, but it is legendary rather than fully historical. This distinction matters when evaluating claims about the holiday's meaning.

### **Lupercalia: The Pagan Festival**

Alongside the Christian tradition exists a well-documented pagan festival known as Lupercalia, celebrated in ancient Rome on February 15. Lupercalia was a fertility rite associated with the god Faunus (or Lupercus) and the legendary founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus.

The festival included ritual sacrifices of goats and a dog, followed by feasting and revelry. One of its more famous practices involved young men running through the streets striking women with strips of goat hide, which were believed to promote fertility and ease childbirth. The celebration was explicitly tied to pagan religious beliefs and ritual purity concepts.

By the late Roman period, Christian leaders openly opposed Lupercalia. In the fifth century, church authorities worked to suppress the festival as incompatible with Christian worship and morality. Over time, Lupercalia faded from practice, particularly as Christianity reshaped the public religious life of the empire.

While Lupercalia and Valentine's Day share a similar time of year, historical evidence does not demonstrate a direct transformation of Lupercalia into a Christian feast. Instead, the two

appear to have coexisted briefly before the pagan festival declined and the Christian commemoration remained.

### **Syncretism or Cultural Proximity?**

The overlap between Valentine’s Day and Lupercalia raises a familiar question: Does the presence of a pagan festival near the same date automatically make the Christian observance syncretistic?

Biblically, syncretism involves the blending of pagan worship practices or meanings into the worship of the true God (Exodus 20:3–5; Deuteronomy 12:30–31). Cultural proximity alone does not meet this definition. Scripture itself acknowledges that God’s people live among pagan cultures and inevitably share calendars, languages, and social customs (Daniel 1; Acts 17:22–28).

In the case of Valentine’s Day, the Christian tradition did not incorporate pagan rituals, deities, or worship practices. The martyrdom of Valentine and the later association with love and faithfulness developed within Christian moral teaching, not pagan theology. The modern holiday’s romantic focus owes more to medieval Christian literature and later cultural evolution than to ancient fertility rites.

This distinction matters. There is a difference between redeeming cultural space and absorbing pagan worship.

### **A Modern Christian Response**

Today, Valentine’s Day functions largely as a cultural celebration of romantic affection, often detached from both its Christian and pagan roots. This raises a practical question for believers: Should Christians reject the day outright, or can it be observed thoughtfully?

Scripture offers guiding principles rather than universal rules. Paul reminds believers that “all things are lawful, but not all things are helpful” (1 Corinthians 10:23). He also emphasizes that actions should honor God, build others up, and avoid participation in idolatry (1 Corinthians 10:31).

A Christian response to Valentine’s Day may vary by conscience and context. Some may choose to ignore it entirely. Others may choose to reclaim it by emphasizing biblical love—faithful, self-giving, and covenantal (1 Corinthians 13; Ephesians 5:1–2). What matters most is not the date on the calendar, but whether the celebration aligns with Christian theology and ethics.

### **Conclusion**

Valentine’s Day exists at the intersection of Christian legend, pagan history, and modern culture. Its origins are complex, but complexity does not equal corruption. While the pagan festival of Lupercalia was real and religiously incompatible with Christianity, the Christian remembrance of Valentine developed independently and long outlasted the pagan rite. The presence of cultural overlap does not automatically constitute syncretism. True syncretism involves adopting pagan worship itself, not merely sharing time, language, or social customs. Christians are called to discernment—to test everything carefully and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Valentine’s Day, like many modern holidays, invites believers not to fear history, but to understand it—and to decide thoughtfully how their faith shapes their participation in culture.

## **Suggested References for Further Study**

Acts 17:22–28

1 Corinthians 10:23–31

Deuteronomy 12:29–31

White, E. G. *The Great Controversy*, chapters 3–4

Butler, A. *Lives of the Saints* (Valentine entries)

Talley, T. J. *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*

Beard, M., North, J., & Price, S. *Religions of Rome*

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## Halloween: Pagan Origins, Syncretism, and Remembering Reformation

Halloween, celebrated on October 31, is widely recognized today as a night of costumes, candy, and spooky fun. However, its origins are deeply rooted in **ancient pagan practices**, and its adoption into Christian culture illustrates a classic example of syncretism—the blending of pagan and Christian elements.

### Pagan Roots: Samhain and the Dead

The festival that most historians identify as the ancestor of Halloween is **Samhain**, a major festival in ancient Celtic religion. Celebrated at the end of the harvest season, Samhain marked the boundary between the “light” half of the year and the “dark” half. The Celts believed that on this night, the veil between the living and the dead was thin, allowing spirits to return to the earth.

To protect themselves, people would light bonfires, wear costumes, and leave offerings for the spirits. Samhain was **explicitly tied to the worship of the dead** and involved rituals meant to honor or appease spirits rather than the God of the Bible (Frazer, 1922; Hutton, 1996).

### Christian Adaptation: All Hallows’ Eve

As Christianity spread into Europe, the church sought to redirect pagan festivals toward Christian purposes—a process called **syncretism**. In the 8th century, Pope Gregory III designated November 1 as **All Saints’ Day** (or All Hallows’ Day), a day to honor Christian martyrs and saints. The evening before became known as **All Hallows’ Eve**—eventually shortened to “Halloween.”

While the church intended this celebration to honor saints, the adaptation retained **many pagan elements**: bonfires, masquerades, and folk customs associated with spirits. The festival effectively blended **pagan ritual and Christian veneration**.

### Protestant Reflection: Reformation Day

October 31 is also historically significant for Christians because it marks the day Martin Luther **nailed his 95 Theses** to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany, in 1517. This act challenged practices in the Roman Catholic Church and ignited the **Protestant Reformation**, reshaping Christianity in Europe.

For Protestant believers, October 31 can therefore be remembered as **Reformation Day**, a celebration of God’s faithfulness, the return to biblical teaching, and the courage of believers to stand for truth. This provides a **biblically grounded alternative to pagan-rooted customs**, transforming the day from superstition or fear of the dead into a reflection on God’s Word and Christian witness (Psalm 119:105; Romans 1:16).

### Syncretism vs. Cultural Awareness

Halloween illustrates the tension between cultural overlap and true syncretism. True syncretism occurs when pagan worship is absorbed into Christian practice. Observing All Hallows’ Eve historically involved venerating the dead in ways that Scripture forbids (Deuteronomy 18:10–12; Leviticus 19:31).

By contrast, remembering the **Protestant Reformation** honors God, celebrates the work of Scripture, and encourages moral courage—without adopting pagan rituals. It demonstrates how Christians can **redeem a date in the calendar** for God, distinguishing cultural observance from worship.

## **Biblical Guidance**

Scripture calls Christians to worship God “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24) and to avoid practices that honor false powers or spirits (Deuteronomy 12:29–31). Believers are not condemned for living within a culture that has pagan roots, but they are called to **discernment**, distinguishing between neutral cultural customs, morally good traditions, and practices that compromise obedience.

Reformation Day offers an example of intentional Christian observance: it preserves historical memory, honors God’s Word, and directs attention away from superstition toward faithfulness and courage.

## **Conclusion**

Halloween serves as a historical lesson on **syncretism**. Its pagan origins in Samhain celebrated spirits and the dead; Christian adaptation into All Hallows’ Eve reframed it as veneration of saints, retaining some pagan forms. Today, believers can reflect critically on such customs.

For Protestants, October 31 can also be remembered as **Reformation Day**, emphasizing God’s work through Scripture, the courage of believers to stand for truth, and the importance of reforming the church according to God’s Word. Such reflection transforms a date with pagan and syncretistic history into an opportunity to celebrate God’s faithfulness and biblical truth.

## **References**

- Frazer, J. G. (1922). *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*. Macmillan.
- Hutton, R. (1996). *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain*. Oxford University Press.
- Deuteronomy 18:10–12
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- John 4:24
- Psalm 119:105
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