

TAFE, and if we do not seize the marvellous learning available, then is it not a mockery of the institution and a mockery of the Placer of the institution of learning?

Further, and on a more practical note, being a Christian doesn't mean you have to 'throw out your brain', because in Proverbs God tells us to, above all, get wisdom. Granted, the wisdom will come through the working of the Holy Spirit and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, but God allows us the joy of thinking through things, mulling over problems, making wise decisions and making sense of the intricacies of His creation; the creation which, 'Day unto day utter speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard'. God's glory will be declared (Psalm 19)! What a joyous discovery! It would be wise to not let this joy slip away, as it may come to you at a secular institution, but to recognize it as coming from God. Especially (for

those of you who can relax over the summer) don't forget this joy once you leave an institution of learning, but become involved in learning in the lab of creation wherein God has placed you; and not only in this life do we find understanding and insight, but God has prepared for us eternal lifelong learning.

Hurry to class, it has already started!

~ LAURENCE HUIZINGA

Aim:

Romans 12:2 teaches all of God's people: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

This magazine will encourage its readers to earnestly contend for the faith, and to think and act biblically, in the good traditions of the Church of all ages. Its basis is God's word, as the Church confesses in the Three Formd of Unity. It is intended for the younger members of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, and is produced in co-operation with the Una Sancta. Subscription to the Contender is automatic with subscription to the una Sancta.

It is not meant to be exclusively for unmarried members who still attend the Youth Bible Study Clubs, but for all those who fit within the loose parameters of 16 to 30 years of age.

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*"contending earnestly for the faith ..." Jude :3*

## CHRISTMAS

Do you get excited about Christmas? I mean, sure, you may have time off work during the Christmas period, time to relax. On Christmas Day you might go to the beach following church in the morning or you may have family and friends over in the afternoon. This is all very enjoyable but do you get excited - not just about the Christmas period- but about Christmas for what it really is?

It is good to ask ourselves this question. If we have been brought up with God's Word as the focus of our lives from a very early age, it is very easy to take this Word for granted. This is also what is revealed on the topic of Christmas.

But through His coming into the world, and especially in His suffering and death, Christ gave us everything. He gave meaning to our lives once again. As Paul says in Philippians 3:8, "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ." In other words, Paul is saying here that in the light of the knowledge of Christ, everything else pales into insignificance. Our whole life has a new focus.

The knowledge of Christ, and therefore also the topic of Christmas, cannot leave us untouched. To many people Jesus is simply a remarkable man who lived many years ago. To many others He is not even that. But we know that Christ was true man and true God. He needed to be both in order to save man from his sins. Let us therefore never take lightly the words of John 3:16 'For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.'

Let each of us then remember and meditate on this at Christmas. Not only at Christmas, for it should be remembered each day. Christ should be the focus of our life. This will translate into how we live our lives- in true joy and obedience.

Since the end of the year is approaching, this will be the last edition of the Contender for this year. We can thank God for His blessings in the past year also in allowing quite a number of Contender editions to be published.

Further, Mick TenHaaf has resigned as Editor-in-chief of Contender and we thank him very much for his time and effort over the past years. At the same time we can welcome Eric Dekker as the new Editor-in-chief. We thank him for taking on the job and hope he can continue where Mick has left off.

Wishing you all a blessed Christmas and New Year.

~ LINDSAY BERGSMAS

By request from West Albany, West Kelmscott will be organising the Easter congress here in the Perth metro area. This will be the first congress since September 2002 to be held in Perth. We hope to see you all there. Watch this space for further details.

The Congress Committee;  
Ashley Diek, Frank Janssen, Jeanette Janssen,  
Tim Kramer and Alyce Sibum

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# The trees

the sun and christmas day

The year was 1788, the day the 25th of December and a certain Martha Pugh was not a happy woman. She was down a pound of flour.

A certain Michael Denison was a somewhat happy convict. He had stolen that pound of flour but, as it was Christmas Day, the officials relented and only sentenced him to 150 lashings instead of 200!

Far away from this cranky woman and flour-fingered man, along the harbour in Sydney Cove, a Rev. Johnson led a Christmas Service and afterwards, the governor Arthur Phillips, along with his officers, ate well, put down their chunky knives and forks, wiped their mouths on heavy napkins and toasted the King.

Such are the accounts of the first Christmas in Australia.

There are many accounts of Australian Christmases experienced between then and now. Immigrant children give account of it having been 42 degrees even before their mother stoked up the woodstove to cook the Christmas dinner, and of eating dripping mangoes and being hosed down afterwards.

The Christmas of 1974 is a memorable one for many Australians. That was the year Cyclone Tracey ripped through the township of Darwin in the Northern Territory, leaving 60 persons dead and its signature on every frayed tree root, tangled mass of debris and damaged building. God allowed the natural elements to take over that day, interrupting the holiday celebrations.

In fact, it is the natural elements that often create the associations we have with different occasions. In the Northern Hemisphere, the Christmas season is associated with snow - delicate petals of white flitting down past street lights against the velvet night - fire-lit rooms and stark branches covered with an icy frosting. Heavy coats and boots are donned as folk rug up for church or Christmas concerts and venture into the cold, wintry air.

In Australia, however, while we might experience the icy trappings of a Northern Christmas buying toilet paper in a local air-conditioned grocery store, we will emerge with all eight rolls into a furnace. More often than not, around Christmas we find ourselves squinting against the mean rays of the sun, breathing dry air and gathering in the shade of the nearest shrubbery...

So far we've gone back over a few Australian Christmases, and acknowledged the power of association, particularly that of the natural elements.

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'... christmas season is associated with snow - delicate petals of white flitting down past street lights against the velvet night ...'

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In this article I would like to outline how many of today's Christmas traditions find their origin in the elements of the natural world of the first Christmases ever. And how these elements have shaped the responses of Christians to the celebration of Christmas ever since.

Every year, just before the 25th of December (between the 17th - 24th), we experience a solstice. For people in Australia, it means that this is the longest day and shortest night of the year.

This year it will occur on December 22 at 07:04 Universal Time, making that 15:04 (3.04pm) our time. The earth, leaning on its axis, gives us our variety of climate and determines how many hours and minutes of light each hemisphere receives.

However, while we below the Tropic of Capricorn are basking in a long summer's day, people in the northern hemisphere have their red flannel pyjamas on under their galoshes and overcoats to save time - as this day is the shortest in the whole year!

going out and visiting people's homes and spreading what they believe is the true gospel. We are encouraged to evangelise as much as we can, whether it be at TAFE, University or Work, and to spread the Gospel (which is why it is important we know our Bible). However, when it comes to mission work, this is done by a more responsible, mature brother of the Congregation who is deemed suitable and willing to accept this task.

### Future?

Given the many issues and concerns raised earlier, many feel the Brethren will not last and fade away eventually. Yet because of the fact that entry into other Christian denominations is not an option for many, people feel it will be around for some time to come.

It is not for us to say whether they will or will

~ KIERAN DIEK

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a note from the tertiary students club

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## TSC

studies on life for everyone

Do you think you are a student? To be a Christian is to be studious. We have a brain and a God given capacity to use it as an instrument to His glory. Psalm 119 is full of the ways we should be studious of His word. The author of this psalm speaks of our walk of life and an understanding of God's law, ordinances, testimonies, precepts, statutes, commandments, judgments and word. Life and the Word of God are coupled together! Are our brains too full to use it to this glory of God?

You may say that a brain becomes over used and after much thought becomes full of facts you deem useless to your plan in life. Perhaps you only take in what you think you want to know, throwing all the stuff out which you find taking up valuable space (a wise student you may perhaps be).

However, is the principle of block filtering out ideas biblical? Yes! In the letter of Paul to the Ephesians he talks about putting off the old man and putting on the new man: 'being renewed in the spirit of your mind' (Eph 4:22). We should thus take in things beneficial to man and to the glory of God not forgetting to throw out those things offensive to God.

Further on, Paul says to 'redeem the time, because the days are evil'. In practical terms, this

not. However, we know that we believe the true Gospel and true doctrine in Jesus Christ. We will all keep fighting for the Christian faith together with the help of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the true Gospel. We know in our hearts that the true Gospel is being preached to us, in our Congregation, and our Christian faith will never fade away, but will keep on growing more and more until the number of God's elect is complete. We must all strive together to fight the good fight of faith, and pray for the return of Christ. With regards to the other Christian denominations, such as the one highlighted in this article (The Brethren), we can only leave it up to God to judge them, as we are not the ones to judge. We place our trust firmly in God, for He controls everything and everyone in this world, and without Him they can do nothing. Trust in God and He will provide!

may mean that when one comes into contact with offensive ideas, one must reject them (television is an example). Is this not a reason to be studious together, but also discerning between ideas that are beneficial and those not beneficial? Is it not time to come together, to talk and share in positive discussion about our role as students of God's world?

Because the things we learn are often (especially in the present time) for our vocation/work in life, does it mean it is ok to study anything we like? Of course not, because it does matter what kind of life we live. To paraphrase Psalm 119 it matters that our walk is on the path of God with his word lighting the way. So it follows that it matters what we study. And thus, when we study it is good to take a stance, to be involved in the area that is to be your life. A TAFE, a university, a college or any other secular institution and its society will impact on our life during our time there, and it is important that we don't let this time of our life compromise our Christian integrity. However, do we not also see this as an opportunity to learn more about God in our area of life because these are institutions placed by God? Matthew 11 says that we will find rest if we learn and Isaiah 50 says that 'The Lord God has given me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary'. If we attend University or

**Brethren practices/beliefs**

*Meeting* - conduct many meetings on Sunday three times and during the week on weekdays, with meetings amongst the young and women being regular. Prayer, Bible teaching, and sometimes Bible studies, where all (men) would be invited to contribute, typically took place on at least two nights of the week. The preaching of the Word was given a prominent place, with male members, notably among the young, encouraged in their preaching endeavours. Many well known (and capable) preachers could identify their spiritual roots within the assembly movement. On the other hand, we as Christians believe that we hold two services per Sunday, morning and afternoon. We have one qualified and ordained minister to preach the Gospel, and have the weekly Bible Study clubs and Catechism instruction one night per week.

*Other Churches* - Many meeting patterns were similar to what one might find in other Evangelical set-ups; including a mix of hymns (and choruses), prayers, announcements, Bible readings, reports and testimonies, with a lengthy (Bible based) sermon, usually at the end. Other than strict observance of the Lord's Day, special days, including Christmas and Easter, tended not to be kept, although these days some assemblies are more in line with general Evangelical thinking when celebrating special days. However, we believe that as well as the order of worship, we should celebrate Christmas and Easter, which we do usually with a morning service, and then we have an Easter based sermon on a Sunday (morning or afternoon).

*Women issues* - were not allowed to exercise a teaching or a pastoral ministry or at any meeting or social event. They do however lead women's meetings and help with young children. There is a strict emphasis placed on entertaining and hospitality. Many provided significant (behind the scenes) assistance to their husbands in their more public ministries. Others observe with some irony that women through their husbands may run an assembly. It is the norm for women to wear head coverings especially during meetings. The issue of what roles women play in meetings etc is still open and contentious today. This is not the case for us Christians, as we, as a general rule, have no women lead meetings. Men take the central role in the meetings and at other such events. In addition, there is no need for women to wear head coverings at any time, even during meetings. However, some

women may wear a hat if they wish.

*Church Government* - Each assembly was usually led by a plurality of unpaid, often secularly employed (or retired from paid work) elders, who between them were responsible for its spiritual oversight, although there has been an increasing tendency to include paid elders, often taking on specific administrative, pastoral and ministerial duties. Our church Government consists of the minister, the Elders and the Deacons. They ensure that the flock is being looked after, homes are being visited and discipline is being exercised when necessary.

*Elders and leaders* - Many a new assembly (or mission) was led by a missionary, pastor, evangelist or brother from the nearby mother assembly. It would be wrong though to equate eldership with leadership for those who were not elders led many of the assembly activities and played vital parts in the life of the assembly. At their best, oversights encouraged and facilitated such activities and enabled individual members to fulfil their spiritual potential. Our Consistory meetings are led by the minister and the elders attend. The Consistory with the Congregation may appoint someone to take up mission work when and where it is needed and discuss other matters arising within the Communion of Saints and Sister Churches.

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'...many feel the Brethren will not  
last...'

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*Community involvement* - They placed a strict emphasis on not associating with outside influences, namely other believers, and rejected the influence of televisions, radio, entertainment, etc. With regard to work complete honesty and commitment to employer was norm. Many of us may mingle and socialise with others not of our church group as some may attend University or TAFE or may find their task at the worksite. However, we do not involve ourselves in their worldly practices, even though many of us may have a television or radio. In regards to work, we too believe in honesty to the employer. We do not work on Sundays, or join the union.

*Evangelism* - Great emphasis is placed on

As God has determined the days and nights, as well as seasons since the beginning of the world, we can trace the acknowledgment of the winter solstice back to the earliest of times. Apart from God's own people, it seems that most early civilizations celebrated the solstice as it indicated the return of the sun and its power over winter.

In the Orkney Islands, just north of Scotland, stands the Sea Henge - built to receive sunlight into its central chambers at dawn on the winter solstice - which is meant to pre-date even the pyramids! Many seem to figure that the Biblical Nimrod and his wife had the honorary position of initiating this celebration of the winter solstice. Years later, Babylonians hanging around in their gardens seemed entrenched in the tradition of celebrating the winter solstice, and they, in turn, passed it on to many others. Indeed, there are hundreds of megalithic structures throughout Europe, Asia, Indonesia and Middle East connected with solstices and equinoxes.

The celebration of the shortest day of the year was still prevalent around the time that Rome was establishing its empire of gargantuan dimensions. They celebrated and honoured 'Saturnalia' (Saturn was the god of the harvest), partaking in the cult of *Sol Invictus*. This worship of the 'unconquerable' sun god was paralleled at this time in the pagan customs of the early Scandinavians. In the dead of winter, the poorer people (the rich had candles and oil-lit wick lamps) burned the *Yule log*. This was a symbolic warding off of evil spirits, and as logs were added to the bonfire, around which people danced and sang, winter was awakened from its sleep and the sun summoned to appear.

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'... many scholars have debated the  
accuracy of December 25 as the possible  
birth date of Jesus Christ.'

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So... we've found that back in the time of the Caesars, people associated the winter solstice with the cold of winter and thus worshipped the sun as a symbol of renewal, rebirth etc. Well, about this time, well after Jesus' death (about 245 AD) some disciples are said to have suggested that Christ's birth be honoured in a religious service. This sug-

gestion, however, seems to have been overshadowed by the much grander announcement that, as the solstice fell on December 25, in the year 247 AD, this date would annually become the 'Natas Solis Invicti' - *the birth of the sun*.

In the midst of all this, however, the idea of celebrating Christ's birth had not totally disappeared because in 320AD Pope Julius I specified this date as the 'official' date of the birth of Jesus Christ. In consolidation, when Constantine the Great became the first Christian emperor, he declared Christmas to be an 'immovable feast'. From here, we read of Christ's birth being remembered with minor celebrations in 382AD in Asia, in Alexandria and parts of Egypt by 420AD and being celebrated in and around Jerusalem by 440AD.

Now, we've seen that Christians and non-Christians of the Roman Empire chose the same date for their important celebrations. But this was to become a most unfortunate pairing.

Since that time, many, many scholars have debated the accuracy of December 25 as the possible birth date of Jesus Christ. Some argue that in all probability, there would be no shepherds out in the fields at this time of year as the sheep were normally kept in a corral during winter, not prone to the elements in the empty countryside. How much credence we can give to these arguments I'm not quite sure. It does seem verifiable, however, that no one is able to pinpoint the date with any precision.

This is where the trouble sets in with a capital T. Many Christians since that time have their suspicions about the assignation of Christ's birth to the same day as the 'Saturnalia' and this shapes their views on the celebration of Christmas.

You see, they think that Constantine found it all too *prudent* to introduce the celebration of Christmas during the feast of 'Saturnalia'. They accuse him of compromising his faith and only trying to lure new Christians away from the debauchery and bacchanalia of this heathen feast and sun worship.

Later on, the Puritans identified the embracing of Christianity by Emperor Constantine in the early 300s as the starting point of the degeneration and corruption of the Church. They believed that the corruption of the Church was brought on by the

interweaving of the Church with the pagan Roman State (i.e. the festival of Christmas).

In this so-called scheme, Constantine is depicted as someone who willingly mixed Christianity with paganism. As evidence is scarce, it's hard to say whether or not this is the truth. What we do know is that with fervour and zeal Constantine devoted himself to the faith, as well as removing traces of unbelief.

However, to this day, there are many types of Christians who avoid and even disallow the celebration of Christmas, because, based on the above, they believe that **essentially, Christmas is a pagan festival.**

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## 'Where do we get the authority from to celebrate Christmas?'

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They quote Deuteronomy 12 where God flatly forbids the adoption of pagan customs, and especially a mixing of faith with heathen customs. By them, Christmas-celebrators are reminded of Hezekiah's reformatory trashing of the idols created in the likeness of Moses' brazen serpent.

In particular, the American Protestant Reformed Churches and Presbyterian churches, as well as the Free Church of Scotland, maintain this line of thinking - seeing Christmas as mixed with a festival stemming from the godless Babylon - which stands in the Old Testament as a symbol of everything wicked and perverse!

In church each year we are reminded to steer clear of the crass, materialistic side of the Season. We even hear of non-Christians abandoning Christmas for social, economic, and environmental (35 million synthetic, non-bio-degradable Christmas trees used yearly) reasons, but never before had I learned about churches that disallowed Christmas!

Apparently, back in 1644, the English

Parliament, under duress from the Puritans, outlawed the celebration of Christmas in England and America for eight years. Again, from 1649-1660, Oliver Cromwell wielded his authority to grant Puritans religious freedom and simultaneously to ban all Christmas festivities during his rule as governor.

To digress somewhat, why did the English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians follow a different path from those on the Continent?

Well, first of all, they regarded it as a vulgar, pagan festival. Secondly, they believed that, as there is no biblical command or precedent for celebrating Christ's birth, it would be sinful to hold a worship service to commemorate Christmas.

This digression is interesting because the Old Dutch State Church, along with the forebears of these other churches, attended the international Synod of Dordt in 1618-1619. And our reasons for celebrating Christmas, and the basis of arguments forbidding the celebration of Christmas, both hark back to the same documents adopted at this gathering: **the Heidelberg Catechism** and **the Belgic Confession.**

Basically, the Puritans and the Scottish found that there was inconsistency between article 66 and 67 of the Acts of the Synod of Dordt - which talk of the consistory's right to hold a special service for particular events that occur (66) as well as the church's right to hold services on the four historical festivals (67) - and Q&A 96 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

They found that Q&A 96 comprehensively regulated how and when they could worship, and since God determined the Sabbath and the celebration of Lord's Supper, but *not* Christmas, this was making an idol of Christmas and serving God in a self-appointed manner.

This made me wonder about our reformed heritage and why we have the liberty and honour to hold celebratory worship services. Well, we certainly don't believe that Christmas is an idol, holier than any other day. But where do we get the authority from to celebrate Christmas? And, why do we have slightly different customs than, for example, the Canadian Reformed Churches?

# Brethren

an analysis of the brethren religion

**O**rigins? This religious movement traces back to Dublin around 1826-27 and a series of conferences at Powerscourt, County Wicklow. A few people met in a small private house (later, as numbers grew, it was in a hired hall) for the purpose of Christian fellowship. They, having a hunger for God, felt they needed to search and work together to satisfy their spiritual aspirations at any cost. Because they were not under any spiritual leader at that time, they all were at liberty to contribute and did so, for among other things, theirs was a reaction against clericalism or minister domination and a movement for spiritually empowering the people. After the renewed political tension surrounding Napoleon and the Industrial revolution, much interest was in the unfulfilled prophecy and belief in the imminent return of Christ. Some early leaders involved in these movements were J.N Darby, B.W Newton, George Muller and Henry Craik.

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## 'The early Brethren could be seen to be a product of their time.'

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Prominent among the movement was Darby, who wrote prolifically, and many of his writings have been preserved and are published and available today (thanks particularly to the efforts of his protégé, William Kelly, and to modern day devotees). He had connections in high places. His father was a wealthy landowner, his uncle, Admiral Sir Henry Darby, commanded the Bellerophon in the Battle of the Nile, and his godfather was the national war hero Lord Nelson (thus his middle name). Darby's brother-in-law was the Lord Chief Justice of Ireland and no doubt Darby too, who had an early promising legal career, could have risen to the top of that profession. Darby was no mean scholar, writing profoundly on many theological subjects as well as commentating on the entire Bible. He translated the original Hebrew and Greek text of the Scriptures into English, French and German. He wrote numerous hymns and kept up a voluminous correspondence throughout his life. He chose a simple lifestyle and had a particular empathy with the poor

and weak and children. He loved the Lord and His people and was tireless in His service. He travelled extensively and was instrumental in establishing some 1500 Brethren assemblies' world-wide. He held dogmatic beliefs and did not compromise (even over what many would consider inessentials or where a continuing relationship was desirable). As for those who did oppose him, he could be ruthless in his dealings.

### Influences?

The early Brethren could be seen to be a product of their time. They were reacting against what they saw as a lack of life, and compromise and corruption within the Establishment and Dissent alike. They felt that their establishment too easily accommodated the outside influences of the world and took away the purpose of the Gospel. The Brethren were also being influenced by other radical evangelical movements around the world. Their belief in selfless abandonment from the world, and heroism, was unfound and unquestionable in their eyes. They would not subscribe to the view of the continuance of the Church when they believed they saw much falsehood being embraced by the major Christian groups.

### Developments!

The Brethren movement is based on the following texts:

Acts 2:42 - *And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. These principles were keenly practised.*

Acts 2:43 - *And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. While signs and wonders did not seem to feature much, there was godly fear.*

Acts 2:45 - *And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. There were many instances of possessions, such as jewellery, being placed in "collection box" and the proceeds from their sale being used to help the poor.*

These have developed into their beliefs and ideals today in how they live their lives and what they do and don't do.

confidence about these problems. Hebrews 4:15-16 says, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

That there were two natures in the one person of Christ is crucial for man's salvation. As Lord's Day 6 states about the mediator and deliverer that man needs to pay his debt of sin, "He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin". Also, "He must be true God so that... He might bear... the burden of God's wrath..." Man of himself could never stand up to God's judgement. Christ needed to have both of these natures of divinity and humanity therefore in order for man to receive salvation.

All we can do therefore is marvel at God's work in Christ and therefore marvel at His mercy. God could have left us on the path to eternal damnation but He chose to save some through Jesus Christ's coming into the flesh. We also therefore need to respond to this Gospel of salvation. For Christ, in His incarnation, also gave us an example of what we should be like. As we could read in Philippians, Paul says that we should have the mind that was also in Christ Jesus. He humbled Himself totally, and so we are commanded in Philippians 2:3-4, "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also the interest of others." Let us work at this therefore, and continue to live in thankfulness for what God has obtained for us in Christ.

~ LINDSAY BERGSMA

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## Poem

the one who noticed

A boy sits alone in the street at night.  
His mind so shy and scared.  
It's dark, on him no shedding light.  
Of those that passed, no soul cared.

A shivering body, no warmth at all.  
For a night on the street again.  
If he cries will one hear his call?  
His life that brings him endless pain.

Who will take his lonely hand?  
Is there one who knows he's there?  
His life as small as a grain of sand.  
Some pass, while others stare.

Lifting his head and seeing the light.  
All around he's flooded with love.  
Finally his life, a purpose in sight.  
This symbol of love, this turtle dove.

We are the boy, God is the light.  
For us He paid a heavy price.  
He took us from our gloomy plight.  
So we must remember Christ's sacrifice.

~ DEAN DIEK

## The Contender

it's on the web!!

next time you are surfing the net check out the contender website at:

<http://frca.org.au/contender/>

including recent and back issues of the contender available in pdf form and other useful links and information.

The Canadian Reformed Churches have the rule that: *Each year the churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ as well as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit* [Book of Praise: Anglo-Genevan Psalter. (Rev. Ed.) Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Printing Ltd., 1984, 1995, page 670]. We have the ruling in the Church Order for the Free Reformed Churches of Australia, as adopted at Synod Byford (1994): **ARTICLE 65- Ecclesiastical Feast Days.** *On Christmas Day, Good Friday, Easter Sunday, Ascension Day and at Pentecost the consistory shall call the congregation together for church services. The sacred events which the congregation commemorates in particular on these days shall therein be proclaimed.* The difference between the two is the apparent inclination of the Canadians to make it crystal clear that they do not observe 'days'. The article indicates that they *could* celebrate these occasions on the nearest Sunday, while the Australian church order stipulates that the celebrations of the four feast days should be held on those days specifically.

Even so, the Synod of Dordt seemed to have no qualms about this matter. In fact, the Heidelberg Catechism even *requires* that we dedicate certain Sundays to the topics outlined in the 52 Lord's Days. And despite the lack of knowledge surrounding the official date, and even though Christmas seems to stem from a pagan festival, our reformed forbearers seem to have stayed with the custom.

The observance of Christmas is then a legacy from the Synod of Dordt. In the spirit of our church order, we hold a celebratory public worship service on December 25th with the same elements of worship that make up the congregation's Sunday worship.

So, Christmas finds its roots in Roman times and was later endorsed at the Synod of Dordt. From the Roman 'Saturnalia' also came many customs still alive in the Christmas seasons of today. For example, they exchanged gifts like millions still do - complete with their *To:* and *From:* cards. Similarly, they worshipped the god of light (Mithra), the sun, resulting in the use of candles at Christmas throughout the centuries and still in evidence today.

These linkages bring us to the second natu-

ral element of this pagan feast connected with Christmas today and its traditions. It also brings us to another element that has shaped Christians' view of Christmas and its associated customs.

'The observance of Christmas is then a legacy from the Synod of Dordt.'

Therefore, along with the worship of the sun and light, it was also **trees** that were central to the festival of the Winter Solstice.

Evergreens and other trees were cherished at solstice as natural symbols of rebirth. It was palm fronds for the Egyptians and fir trees for the Romans, and they exchanged branches to wish each other 'good luck'. It is said that early Christians, in order to avoid persecution, decked their homes with 'Saturnalia' greenery. Again, while celebrating light with their *Yule* burning, Scandinavians also used the evergreen during feasts of the awakening sun.

Still adorning front doors today, wreaths made of branches became a Christian Christmas custom in Roman times as symbols of God's fulfillment and victory. But in the fourth century the Church responded by recognizing the mistletoe used to decorate wreaths as connected with the Roman gods of fertility. This resulted in the use of holly.

There are some interesting stories involving key figures from Church History, Christmas traditions ... and trees.

It is said that in the Middle Ages, St. Boniface, English missionary to Germany, came upon a throng of men in the process of felling a huge oak (symbol of the god Thor). The tree was to be used as a stake for the pagan custom of human sacrifice - customarily a young girl. With a swift and powerful thrust, the story goes, Boniface felled the massive oak tree and a beautiful young fir sprang up from its centre. The missionary told the rough German pagans that the lovely evergreen tree, with its branches pointing upward, was indeed a holy

tree, the tree of the Christ child, and a symbol of His promise of eternal life. Henceforward, he instructed them, they were to carry the evergreen from the wilderness into their homes and surround it with gifts, symbols of love and kindness.

True? Maybe. Theologically sound? No. But those were times when pagan customs integrated with new spiritual understandings and paved the way for the Reformation.

Here's one more story. Martin Luther, it is said, walked home alone one night after preaching a Christmas(?) sermon. The sky was clear; an expanse punctuated by scintillating, twinkling lights above the stately snow-capped evergreens and Luther was filled with joy at the beauty. Wanting to recapture the scene for his wife and family, legend has it, he brought home a felled tree that night and put candles on it to embody the lustre of the gleaming stars.

Is this true? I'm not quite sure. But many Germans who later settled in America followed this custom.

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### 'Christmas in our churches offers us a wonderful opportunity.'

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The use of trees (evergreens) to celebrate Christmas was spread to England when Prince Albert (by birth a German), husband of Queen Victoria, brought a tree to Windsor Castle for the Royal Family's celebration of Christmas. This custom spread to the working classes, who followed in this tradition, complete with a nearby water bucket and long stick with a rag on it!

While we celebrate Christmas with a worship service and feast day, despite the links between Christmas and an historical pagan festival, our reformed people as a general rule haven't taken to the tree-related decorating customs filtering down through the ages (i.e. wreaths, trees and holly).

Most of the people who objected to Christmas on the basis of its connections with a pagan festival also judged the ensuing use of trees as decorations as a form of idol-worship. As biblical

endorsement of their point of view, they use Jeremiah 10:2-4, where it says: *Do not learn the way of the Gentiles ... For the customs of the people are futile; for one cuts a tree from the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They decorate it with silver and gold; they fasten it with nails and hammers so that it will not topple. They are upright, like a palm tree, and they cannot speak; they must be carried, because they cannot go by themselves. Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil, nor can they do any good.*

I'm sure that most of us would agree that the connection between this text and the use of Christmas trees is somewhat tenuous. Generally, people aren't bowing down to their synthetic trees as worshipping an idol. So why do we tend to shy away from evergreen boughs? Because Christ is to be the pivot of this celebration and too much thought given to the trappings will easily distract us from the reason for true celebration.

In conclusion, that's the connection between **the sun, the trees** and the celebration of **Christmas**.

At this time of year, we often focus on the 'secularisation' of this event. While our society is surely responsible for the modern, secular, commercial outfit, a study into the origins of Christmas indicate that our modern counter-parts are not solely responsible for all the prevalent traditions and tinsel. These have come about through a blending of national, cultural and historical beliefs, folklore and Christmas traditions over the years and centuries.

While there exist many dangers for Christians during this festive season, like overspending (being an unfaithful steward), aligning themselves with a materialistic mindset or maybe even forgetting that the holiday is not about taking time off from God, Christmas in our churches offers us a wonderful opportunity. We may give praise and thanksgiving for Christ's incarnation in song and worship and reflect on how blessed we are in Him.

... And even though our Australian Christmas finds us bathed in golden sunshine or maybe perched under the peeling ivory boughs of a tall eucalyptus tree, we will celebrate Christ's birth. Hosannah to the King of Kings!

~ GERRY HUIZINGA

# Christmas

## Belgic Confession articles 18 and 19

The topic of articles 18 and 19 of the Belgic Confession is basically the story of Christmas. Christmas today, for a lot of people, is simply a time for family and friends to come together to have a good time. Many think that Christmas is inherently lovely. But what they do not realise is that the message of Christmas actually repels the human heart (De Jong 1980). This is a part of what we will learn from this topic. However, for those who believe, there is also a lot of comfort and joy in the topic. As one author stated, "It is the most wonderful message that the world has ever heard, or will hear" (Packer 1973: 65).

Article 18 deals with the incarnation of Christ, that is, His "coming into the flesh" (Stam 1979:43). As it is stated in John 1:14, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us..." We cannot explain exactly what the incarnation was like. To our human minds the concept is incomprehensible. It is probably best summarised in the words of the Athanasian Creed. "For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man... Perfect God and perfect man... Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the manhood into God" (The Athanasian Creed: sections 30-35). Let us therefore not speculate in relation to the incarnation but, being content, marvel at God's work.

When thinking about Christ's incarnation, we should think of more than Christ simply coming down to earth. We should also think about what Christ laid aside, how He emptied Himself. He laid aside His glory and accepted hardship, isolation, ill-treatment, misunderstanding and finally had to die a death on the cross (which involved much agony; more spiritual than physical) (Packer 1973). This is summarised in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

After article 18 states that Christ came into the flesh as true man, article 19 confesses that Christ was still true God also. To our human way of thinking this is not possible. However, it is a matter of faith.

There is a lot of evidence in Scripture in relation to Christ being both true man and true God. It can be seen that Christ was true man in the descriptions of His birth. He is recorded in the genealogy of Matthew 1 and Luke 3. In other passages we read that, after Satan tempted Jesus for forty days, "...He was hungry" (Matthew 4:2). After Lazarus had died, it is recorded in John 11:35 that "Jesus wept."

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'... what they do not realise is that the message of Christmas actually repels the human heart.'

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There are also many Scripture passages in relation to Christ being true God. 1 John 5:20 states, "And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." Romans 9: 5 states, "...Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God..." These passages are just two of many that state that Christ was true God.

When Christ was born therefore, He was a real human baby. And although He was a real human baby, Christ did not cease to be God. He was no less God than before; but He had begun to be man. He was not now God minus some elements of His deity but rather God plus all that He had made His own by taking manhood to Himself. The God who had made man was now experiencing what it was like to be man (Packer 1973). This gives believers a lot of comfort. Since Christ became true man, he suffered and experienced the difficulties we face every day. As Hebrews 2:18 states, "For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted." Therefore in our burdens and worries today we may know that Christ has also suffered the same and therefore He knows what we go through. Therefore we may pray in con-