

SANTA CLAUS

To write about Santa Claus is to go back to the story of Saint Nicholas for they are synonymous. Even though many of the customs related to Nicholas can be traced back to the Roman and Germanic people, the reality is that the name Santa Claus is the offspring of the name Saint Nicholas. Note that this tract will be focused on accounts of this historical figure so it will have little in way of biblical texts since Saint Nicholas was not a biblical personage. We will look at the practices of various peoples over the centuries that are associated with Christmas, with which Saint Nicholas is associated. We will see how these old heathen customs are still being followed by today's churches, with the only difference being that many of the so-called Christian names substituting old heathen names.

The life of Saint Nicholas is very obscure. When reading books pertaining to the life of this historical figure, one must remember what they are reading is mostly legendary and fable. The following is the basic factual information that we know about him: he was a bishop of Myra of the province of Lycia which was located in Asia Minor. It is believed he was born into a wealthy Christian family and died in 326 A.D., however, it is not known when he was born. The date of his death is believed to have been December 6th and was celebrated annually by the Catholic church. He has been represented since early times as having given gifts to children. In England in the past, a feast was celebrated in solemnity in public schools; in Germany, on the eve of December 6th, a person from a family or a school dressed in a bishop's costume and gave children nuts, candy and small gifts for being good. In different parts of the world, the day of Christmas is held at different times by different religious groups: the Greek Orthodox, Syrians and Abyssians observe Christmas on January 6th while the Armenians observe January 18th as compared to December 25th for the rest of Christendom.

Symeon Metaphrastes, a Byzantine writer who lived in the latter half of the 10th century A.D. and wrote about the lives of saints, said Saint Nicholas was imprisoned under the reign of Diocletian and released under Constantine. It had been stated that Saint Nicholas convened at the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., however, this might be improbable being he may have died December of 324 or 325 A.D. The date of 326 A.D. was once the most commonly used date for his death, but in more recent years, different sources suggest he died in the 340s or even 350s A.D. The truth is, no one knows for sure when he died. Saint Nicholas is the patron saint of Russia, and he was canonized and made a saint in the sixteenth century by the Roman Catholic Church. It was alleged that on May 9th, 1087, Saint Nicholas' bones were dug up and sent to the city of Bari, which was then the kingdom of Naples in Italy. In the Russian Orthodox Church, the anniversary of this transition is still observed as a festival.

After the death of Nicholas, legends abounded about his life. The people were very superstitious during that time, and it would seem the Catholic church perpetuated these folk tales. The pagan religions that the Catholic church desired to convert strongly resisted the relinquishing of their festivities which contained much in the way of merriment and revelry. To understand this strong opposition which actually began before the time of Nicholas, we have to look into the mythology of the gods of these heathens, particularly, Saturn and Odin. Beginning with Saturn, who was the ancient Roman divinity over agriculture, was the god who blessed the labours of the sower. The rural festival of "Saturnalia" was held in his honour and commemorated the husbandmen of the ingathering of the harvest and man's delight in the cessation from the toil of work for the year being over. During this festival, distinction of rank disappeared: slaves were allowed to wear *pileus*, the mark of freedom, and wore their masters clothes at the banquets, as their masters waited on them at the tables. The people crowded the streets and roamed about the city in peculiar dress going from house to

house in a joyful mood and shouted **"Io Saturnalia!"**. Friends exchanged gifts during this time of revelry. During the Roman Republic, the Saturnalia proper was for one day, the 19th of December. When Julius Caesar reformed the calendar, it caused the festival to fall on the 17th of December. This date change caused much confusion so Emperor Augustus ordained the Saturnalia to be held for three days: the 17th, 18th, and 19th of December. Subsequently, the number of days of celebration were extended to five days, and even to seven days.

The Saturnalia actually celebrates three distinct festivals, though the week was devoted to the Saturnalia. There was the festival of Opsia, which was in honour of Saturn's wife Ops. The other festival was Sigillaria, at which time little earthenware figures were given to children as toys. Christmas came to represent many of these customs: the revelry, the dinner, the exchange of gifts, the giving of toys to the children. All such customs pertained to the pagan festival of the Saturnalia of the Romans.

Relevant to our discussion are the heathen Teutonic people, namely, the Scandinavians, and the Celts, who regarded the winter solstices as the turning point of the year of renewed life and activity of their gods. It was a time of rebirth to these people from the oldest times, who celebrated the midwinter season with the greatest of festivities. One of the main reasons for the church fixing this period for Christmas celebrations was that all the heathen Teutonic people had strong attachments to the winter festivities.

It was at the winter solstice when the Norsemen held their great Yule-feast to commemorate the fiery sun-wheel, relating to their belief that they could trace the movements of their gods Odin and Berchta. Their custom of decorating their holy places with holly and ivy was duplicated by the Christian churches as was their celebration of trees. Feast cakes and a main dinner course of a boar's head is echoed today by turkey or ham as part of a traditional Christmas dinner.

With northern peoples, celebration of the winter solstice was one of their greatest feasts, a time of drinking and revelry, and of giving gifts. It was to the northern people as the Saturnalia was to the Romans. The giving of presents during this winter season (ie. December) is an ancient tradition. According to their mythology, the gods of the Germans brought gifts to their people riding across the snow-covered land, in the middle of winter as did Berchta, the hearth goddess, who also visited in December.

One can see why the church of that day saw a way to 'Christianize' the pagans through their customs. Saint Nicholas became the obvious Christian replacement for both Odin and Berchta because of the legends surrounding him that related to children. In Catholic countries, he became known as the patron saint of children, which in time spread to other countries. As previously mentioned the northern Teutonic people strongly resisted in giving up their heathen religious customs of worship and revelry for the teachings of Roman Catholic missionaries, despite the fact that the church had already become infected with traditions of Eastern heathen customs. The Catholic church eased the conversion of the Scandinavian and Germanic people by incorporating the pagan traditions into the church traditions.

Saint Nicholas was a church figure that little is known about his life with the exception that he was a devoted person. The Catholic church, however, built legends and fables around Saint Nicholas all to give the heathen festival that he became associated with (ie. Christmas) a Christian appearance by substituting church personages to replace the pagan gods. Saint Nicholas became well-known for gift-giving.

Let us look into a few more legends attributed to Saint Nicholas. The legend of the Rescue of the Boys involved boys named Timothy, Mark and John. The story goes that Nicholas was on his way to the Council of Nicaea, and was approached by three mothers, whose sons had been stolen. Just before nightfall, he reached an inn built on the side of a mountain, ran by an ugly landlord. While being served from a huge wooden dish of steaming meat, Saint Nicholas, seeing the dish, suddenly seized the landlord with words of exorcism, and while struggling with him against the door, with a thrust, he hurled the landlord out of the inn who fell down the mountain side to his doom. Then Saint Nicholas went to three pickling barrels used by the inn for salting meats, raised his hands and said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, come forth Timothy! Come forth Mark! Come forth, John!" To the amazement of the mothers and all who were there, the three small boys arose, one from each barrel, who had previously been murdered by the innkeeper.

Another legend relates to when Nicholas was chosen Bishop of Myra. Two ponies were found dead by Stellus, a priest. He picked up the head of one of the animals and asked Stellus to raise the head of the other, and at a sign from Nicholas, the two ponies came to life and rose to their feet.

One legend resulted in a logo used by pawn brokers. It is the legend of Saint Nicholas and the Three Purses of Gold. The story goes that when Nicholas' father, Nicomedius, died, his son became the master of the farm. One night, he dreamed about three sisters which had been students of his: Sarah, Selima and Sella. They were in chains, looking old, and beside them stood their father, an ill old man, offering his daughters for sale to the highest bidder. Nicholas tried to rescue the girls in the dream but while doing so, the platform collapsed. Nicholas awoke, very disturbed by the dream. While it was yet dark, with a few hours to dawn, Nicholas hurried to the slum district of town. When he came to the hut of the girls' father, Nicholas peered in the window, and saw the father and the three young spinster daughters laying on the floor, covered with rags to keep them warm. His heart was touched by the poverty of their father, who could not afford their dowries. He immediately rushed back home and filled three purses with gold coins, taking them from the wages of the farm. Saint Nicholas hurried back to town, and again, looking through the window while yet still dark, he tied a thin string to each purse, lowering each purse gently through the window and as each purse touched the floor, he let the string drop. Saint Nicholas never let it be known to the family, who their benefactor was that supplied the dowries, saving the daughters from a wretched life. This is why some pawn-brokers and money lenders have Saint Nicholas as their patron saint (although not so much with Protestant pawn brokers). At one time, it was common for them to have three golden bags as their logo sign. It was also common for most European banks to use the three bags of gold as their logo.

Saint Nicholas is also the patron saint to seafarers and merchants.

There are other tales about Saint Nicholas. So why all this background? We are doing it to show the reader the connection between the pagan customs of the Roman "Saturnalia" celebration and similar pagan customs of the Teutonic and Scandinavian people with their winter solstice to that of the Catholic Saint Nicholas. It seems that whatever your pagan tradition might be, the Catholic church is willing to assign a saint for it and incorporate the related customs into their church to add the numbers.

It has been said that Saint Nicholas is representative of the god Odin since both were travelers, wandering about and checking out the deeds of the people whether they were good or bad. Most people know that 'Saint Nick' always rewards those who are good.

The modern day version of Saint Nicholas did not always look as he does now, nor was the old name of Saint Nicholas to remain prominent in Christmas celebration. However, the present day Santa Claus was derived from Saint Nicholas by gradual changes over time. The United States was a country that was, at first, settled by religious people (eg. Quakers, Puritans, etc) and because of their disciplined, righteous lifestyle, there arose many false fables attached to these people, especially by today's irreligious media and anti-fundamentalists. The Puritans had come from Britain and an interesting part of their history is the fact that many of these people had observed the 7th day Sabbath as had been consecrated by God Himself. Not long after the Puritans arrived in America, the colony of Massachusetts had a law which prohibited the observance of festivals of heathen origin, such as Christmas, for 20 odd years. The later settling of other colonies brought in large numbers of immigrants from European countries who celebrated Christmas. It was not long before the Puritans were the minority of the population and the law prohibiting pagan observances fell by the wayside.

The bringing in of the modern version of Santa Claus to North America can be attributed to the Dutch settlers of New York (originally called New Amsterdam) who brought their version of Saint Nicholas to the colony. The Dutch name Sint Nikolas was corrupted to become Sante Klaas and at a later date, the Americans changed the name to Santa Claus, which is the name we know today. In their homeland of Holland, the Dutch children waited patiently for Sante Klass, and put their wooden shoes before the fireplace, having filled their shoes with hay, water and carrots for Sante Klass' horse. When the children awoke in the morning, their shoes had been filled with all sorts of sweets and little presents, if they had been good. If they had been bad, their shoes were filled with birch rods. In later years, Sante Klaas was said to be accompanied by a small elf that would slide down the chimney for Sante Klaas to deliver his goodies and retrieve the food for the horse. Today, children are told the elves are busy working in Santa's workshop at the North Pole all year long, preparing the toys for Christmas night. The Dutch Sante Klaas soon became the basis for the more traditional Christmas we know, being that both versions were figures associated with gift-giving. So, the name Santa Claus is derived from Sante Klaas, which comes from Sint Nikolas, which is the Dutch form of Saint Nicholas.

An American author, Washington Irving (1783 to 1859), who was born in New York, is credited with describing Saint Nicholas riding over the trees and housetops with a sled filled with gifts and being pulled by a single reindeer. His 1809 writing was the first to describe Saint Nicholas traveling through the sky on a reindeer-pulled sled. We can assume but don't know for sure if he received his idea from some of the old sagas of the Teutonic god Odin, riding through the sky on his horse, visiting the good and bestowing gifts and good fortune upon them until the next winter solstice.

During the Christmas season of 1822, Dr. Clement Clarke Moore, wrote a poem for his children, that he titled "The Visit of St. Nicholas". It began *"Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house..."* Moore's poem was published in 1823, and immediately gained great popularity with the general public. His poem describes St. Nick as a *"jolly old elf"* with dimples and large sparkling eyes and *"A broad face and a little round belly that shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly, he was chubby and plump..."* It also described him as a sturdy man who smoked a pipe. In all probability, Moore's description was inspired by the earlier description of St. Nick by Washington Irving, who had described him as a chubby Dutch man, smoking a pipe and from an illustration published in 1821, showing a reindeer pulling a sleigh filled with gifts. In much earlier times, St. Nicholas was described as a tall and distinguished looking person.

Thomas Nast, the well-known illustrator of political cartoons, who drew the donkey and elephant symbols of the American Democratic and Republican parties, also gave us his version of St. Nick, which now was depicted as a happy old gentleman, with a long, bushy white beard and a red robe trimmed in white ermine. The cartoon appeared in "Harper's Illustrated Weekly" in 1863. As years went on, other features have been added to St. Nick's appearance, such that today's St. Nick or Santa Claus does not resemble the description of Saint Nicholas of a few centuries ago.

Even though most customs of Christmas originates from heathenism and superstitiousness, some people have used this time of gaiety and solemnity when most people are in a spirit of giving, as a time to raise money for benevolent causes. It may seem good in a sense, but it is sad that good works have to be attached to festivities with pagan origins to raise money for benevolent causes. One such case is with the Christmas Seals. In 1903, a Danish postal clerk, Einar Holboell, while on his way to work one day, had stopped to watch a funeral procession of a neighbour's child, who had died from tuberculosis. At work, he brooded about the tragedy of a young child dying, unable to fulfill their life's ambitions. An idea came to him which was to get the Post Office to sell a special Christmas stamp to build a hospital for those with tuberculosis. This was the beginning of Christmas Seals being sold around the world. In Canada, Christmas Seals is now associated with the Lung Association. As Christians, we should support benevolent causes, however, we must not use evil means to achieve a good result. In other words, we should not appeal to pagan practices in order to perform good works.

We must remember that the exploits and character of Saint Nicholas are mostly fabricated fables, with the exception of knowing that a man did exist by the name of Nicholas and that he was descended from Christian parentage. Beyond this fact, most stories about his life are fables and even the date of his death is not known. Some people may question: what is wrong with the fable of Santa Claus, if it is only fantasy and it is known to be so? The answer is there is not as much concern of it being a fantasy, but of all the numerous customs originating from paganism, which we are specifically instructed not to observe. Read Jeremiah 10:2 to 5, which tells us to "*Learn not the way of the heathen...*"

The following event is a good example of the deception of the fabled Santa Claus. Over 125 years ago, on September 21, 1897, there appeared an article in the New York Sun, which was an editorial response to a little girl who wrote a letter to the editor. The editorial writer was Francis Pharcellus Church, who died in 1960, 63 years after writing the editorial. His editorial had become world famous and had become the most reprinted of any known editorial, appearing in books, on stamps and in movies. Most persons probably would not have related the name of the editorial writer Francis Church with the famous reply letter of "*Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus*". The young child who wrote the letter to the Sun's editor was Virginia O'Hanlon of New York City and this is the letter she wrote to the editor, which at the time was Edward P. Mitchel: "*Dear Editor: I am eight years old. Some of my friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, 'If you see it in the Sun, its so.' Please tell me the truth: is there a Santa Claus?*" Before we go into the reply letter of Francis Church, it is important to note that the letter came from an 8 year old child. Virginia was at a vulnerable age when fantasizing is common. It is also an age when the mind is curious and a child is querying about their surroundings, an age when the mind is expanding into areas of thought it has not known before. When looking at Virginia's letter again, we can see the maturing mental faculties of the young girl, wherein she was questioning whether a subject was based on fable or in reality. Virginia had turned to her father seeking a truthful answer but was not given one based on his response of "*If you see it in the [New York] Sun, its so*". Virginia, in her childhood innocence, takes her father's answer seriously and writes the Sun newspaper, seeking an honest answer. The sad part of the story is Virginia pleads for the

truth as to whether there is a Santa Claus, and seems to plead passionately in her childhood innocence by stating *"Please, tell me the truth."* Virginia did not seem to be looking for fabricated tales about Santa Claus but sought honesty from adult men. Unfortunately, her plea went unanswered and what she received was not the truth. The response to Virginia was a letter of elaborate wording, but they were not words of truth and honesty. The very first sentence of his letter to Virginia was deceitful: *"Virginia, your little friends are wrong"*. This adult's reply put doubt in Virginia's mind that her friends were right, making liars of her little friends. Then Mr. Church followed with another false sentence: *"They [ie. Virginia's friends] have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age"*. The children had been affected with the maturing of their minds and opening up to the realities of life, which should never be discouraged. Mr. Church went on to write yet another deliberate lie, misleading the young child: *"Yes, Virginia there is a Santa Claus"*. Then he justifies this lie by stating, how *"dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus"*. What Mr. Church seemed to imply to his readers was the falsehood that there would be no generosity, no love, no devotion, no childhood faith, no poetry, no romance, no enjoyment, if there wasn't a Santa Claus. It is a ridiculous, and potentially harmful notion to suggest to a child that all the good things in life could only come forth from a single source especially one which involves imaginary characters. Ask yourself: if a child has loving parents who demonstrate their love all year long but did not celebrate Christmas, does it make sense that the child would be harmed for life? It does not make sense since their love would be shown throughout the whole year, not just a few weeks in December. Further, one could argue that a child would appreciate parents that loved them enough to tell the truth and helped them avoid observance of pagan practices which the Bible tells us God hates. *"And ye shall know that I am the LORD: for ye have not walked in my statutes, neither executed my judgments, but have done after the manners of the heathen that are round about you..."* Ezekiel 11:12. *"And I will execute vengeance in anger and fury upon the heathen, such as they have not heard."* Micah 5:15. The remainder of Mr. Church's response to Virginia was filled with deception and would be overwhelming to a young child seeking truth from an adult: *"Not believe in Santa Claus? You might as well not believe in fairies, you might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas Eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if they did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawns? Of course not, but that is no proof that they are not there"*. One can only imagine that Mr. Church's deceptive reasoning could persuade Virginia's young and inexperienced mind that Santa Claus was real, despite the fact that he is a false character that has been invented by mankind.

As parents, we know that children or adults for that matter, can be moved by joy and excitement by receiving a gift, and are reluctant to give up traditions that seem steeped in love. So why the fuss over Francis Church's elaborately written letter? It could be that Mr Church really believed he was doing right by stating myths as facts. But for a maturing child that is pleading, wanting to know the truth, do we have a right to deny the child what they are seeking? As a parent, we should be looking for ways to protect a child and one of the ways in which that can be accomplished is by speaking truth to them and letting them know that they can rely on us to speak honestly. It is likely that the New York Sun was seeking to not offend the traditions of its readers and its commercial clients by responding to Virginia in the way they did. We know that newspapers do not always print the truth because their existence is sustained by commercial, public and government advertising so they will avoid offending their advertisers.

In conclusion, we have seen how Saint Nicholas had become associated with ancient pagan customs in order to convert the world masses. Despite all the justifications that are put forward to make Christmas traditions appear harmless to observe, we will never be justified in walking in the ways of the heathen when we know the traditions we observe to be pagan in origin. If we truly believe ourselves to be the children of God, we would not even be debating on whether to keep the festival of Christmas and glorifying its pagan origins. True Christians worship God the Father in spirit and in truth and will separate themselves from the heathen traditions and customs of our ancestors. *“But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.”* John 4:23, 24; *“And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”* John 8:32.