



**CHRISTMAS
WITH THE FOUR
DISCIPLINES
(PRACTICAL)**




WARM UP

Did you ever have a role in a Christmas play/program? If so, what was the role?

PRACTICAL DISCIPLINE

Our final theological discipline that we are using to look at Christmas is the “practical theology” discipline. Practical theology is defined as “the academic discipline involving the theological examination of the church in its worship, administration, pastoral ministry, fellowship, outreach, Christian education, and counseling.”

Given this discipline, it is somewhat difficult to see all of these points in terms of Christmas. For example, Christian counseling is an important thing in the Christmas months especially for those from conflicted family systems, but it may be difficult for us to unpack that in this study. Largely, we will focus on worship and fellowship in this study for that reason.



Practical theology is a study of what the church does. What does the church do?


THE CALENDAR

Without practical theology, we wouldn't know when to celebrate Christmas. The lectionary/liturgical calendar determines the time of Christmas and is very clearly a matter of practical theology.

In Western Christian churches, the “time of Christmas” or “cycle of Christmas” begins in Advent and ends with the Transfiguration, roughly $\frac{1}{4}$ of the year.

This “time of Christmas” is based on Christmas Day being set as a non-moveable feast (happens on the same calendar day every year) on December 25th. This was formalized by Pope Julius I in 350 AD. This date had been suggested about 100 years earlier by Hippolytus of Rome as the day of Jesus' birth.

The “math” of the date depends on the belief that Jesus died on the day that He was conceived, March 25th, moving that date forward nine months would suggest His birth on the 25th.



When do you think early Christians celebrated Christmas before 350 AD?


THE CALENDAR – BIRTHDAY?

There are, of course, plenty of people who argue that the early Christians and Julius I were simply choosing a date that would fall on “Saturnalia” and “Sol Invictus” – two celebrations of the pagan religions that rivaled Christianity at the time.

So when was Jesus *really* born? We don’t necessarily know. The text of Luke’s Gospel does not necessarily give us many clues.

Some will say that shepherds would not have been in the fields in December due to cold, and that it was likely that shepherds would have been in the fields during the autumn months after harvest, allowing the sheep to graze on the remnants of the harvest.

Some astronomers feel that they might have a clue based on what could have been the possible “Star of Bethlehem”, but even these are divided between an event in June or an event in August.




If it were up to you, when would the world celebrate Christmas and why then?

CHRISTMAS HYMNS AND CAROLS

While not technically a “Christmas” hymn, “O Come O Come, Emmanuel” is one of the oldest Christmas time songs, dated around the 700’s AD.

In around the 1300’s, a rash of Christmas hymns were written. This may have coincided with the “Avignon Papacy,” a period in which the Roman Catholic church moved headquarters for about 75 years from Rome to Avignon in France.

Whatever the reason, this time gave rise to clearly Christmas-themed hymns and songs such as “O Come All Ye Faithful,” “Good King Wenceslas,” “Christ was born on Christmas Day,” and “Good Christian Men Rejoice.” The Victorian Period (roughly 1800s) also brought several popular Christmas hymns into being.



What are some of your favorite Christmas hymns?

MIDNIGHT AND CANDLELIGHT MASS

Christmas Eve has become more popular in many countries than Christmas Day. In certain countries, especially those in Hispanic cultures, the Christmas Vigil mass at Midnight is “the” traditional family service.

This tradition actually began as a vigil for Epiphany (January 6) not Christmas, but dates back to 430 AD, recorded by a pilgrim named Egeria who recorded many early church festivals.

This Christmas Vigil mass is the reason that we celebrate a “candlelight” mass or a time of candles, since electric lights were not common in many churches. Like the candles on Christian altars which initially had a practical purpose (letting the priest see the words of institution and of the liturgy), these handheld candles have taken on a symbolic meaning for many people.



What are your traditions around Christmas Eve vs. Christmas Day?

CHRISTMAS VISITORS AND OUTREACH

More recently in practical theology, the notion of Christmas as an evangelistic event has come forward. Many Christian churches see Christmas as a time to engage with potential new members or reconnect with lapsed Christians.

This can be tied historically to the Lateran Council of 1215 that stated that if someone did not take communion at least on Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, that person could not consider themselves a Christian. Later forms dropped Pentecost from this list, but threatened excommunication for anyone who did not show up for church on Christmas and Easter.

With this in mind, a tradition for attending only on Christmas and Easter developed among some families, creating an opportunity for re-engagement.



What do you think of the idea of Christmas being a time of outreach to the lapsed?



MERRY CHRISTMAS!

We will be taking a break from Bible study until we reunite on January 8th for “Stump the Pastor”