



# HISTORY INTEGRITY TRUTH SCRIPTURE



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## December/January 2018/19 Newsletter Two Christmases



It's that time of year again. The time when people around the world notice this little thing called Christmas. Even among people who have no idea of Christianity, the Christmas tree, the ornaments, even some songs which allegedly have something to do with Christmas may be drafted into use.

My social media feeds have been replete with voices making claims about Christmas and Christianity lately. The true spirit of Christmas should give tax relief. No, it should raise taxes and provide a social welfare state. It should allow for the distinctives of nationalism. It should open borders. And yes, I've seen the obligatory pieces today repeating the old, tired fallacy that Jesus was an illegal immigrant when his parents fled to Egypt with him (He wasn't, as the Roman world allowed free movement among the territories for all the residents of the different territories, rather like movement within the European Union today. His mother and stepfather, for that matter, had gone to register with the government in the census as required by law at the time he was born.). And this year we're even hearing questions about whether Mommy gave Santa Claus consent to kiss her, suggestions that a White Christmas is racist (though snow always appears that color), and the occasional comment about the fact that Frosty the Snowman has no pants and smokes a pipe. This substitute for intelligent discourse makes me want to shake my head and retreat into a closet with a gallon of egg nog, a big bag of cookies, and come out later. Maybe at Pentecost?

Thankfully, we also hear about all the meaningful celebrations around the time of Christmas. And some of those celebrations are really neat. I love the idea from Iceland of giving books and spending time reading them. I think chocolate is involved also. That's a great idea! Families get together for a special meal. I can find no fault with that idea at all. People give gifts to each other. Sometimes the taste or usefulness of those gifts is questionable. Then again, I have been to several people's fiftieth birthday parties. Frankly, compared to a bag of Depends for a continent person, a bottle of Geritol for someone with no iron deficiency, a bunch of black balloons, and an electronic fart generator, I haven't received many tasteless and useless Christmas presents. Those who know me best give me books or fun food items I can share with them.

In historic Western practice, this time of year has often been referred to as "the holidays." The reason for that, within Christianity, is that from November 30 through January 6 there are

lots of special commemorations. In my church body, there are no less than ten holidays in that time period, plus nine lesser days of remembrance. Other liturgical traditions will have even more. Then we hear about all sorts of alternative celebrations in addition to the old observances around the solstice. These celebrations have been multiplying in recent years. What intrigues me the most about these is that many are reactions to (and against) a traditional celebration of Christmas. While there may be some which would be founded to take issue with the actual central proclamation of the Christ, it really seems that more are based on a rejection of some of the cultural trappings of a winter celebration that has grown up in the last few hundred years. Others are an attempt to celebrate Christmas without the burden of a religious figure such as the Christ. Sorry, but these look like a consolation prize, a vegan steak dinner.

There's a difficulty at the center of all this. It's that there are really at least two different holidays called Christmas. One is primarily a religious holiday and the other is primarily a secular holiday. A group of friends gathered around my dining table asked about this one year and helped me start thinking more carefully. Several of those friends were from a culture where there is very little exposure to Christianity. They were curious, especially since they were being exposed to Christmas for the first time ever in a North American setting.

I pointed out to them that many in the Western world have a celebration called Christmas. It culminates on December 25 with a family gathering and giving of gifts. Marketers, retailers, and the entertainment industry have tried to make the most of this celebration. They are able to generate a large portion of their annual sales in the four to six weeks leading up to the holiday. It's easily understood as a cultural civic holiday, similar to Independence Day and Thanksgiving.



What was confusing was the fact that, as a Christian, I also celebrate a holiday called Christmas. This one is a religious holiday. It celebrates the Christ, who is God incarnate. Very regularly since about the beginning of the fourth century, and by some prior to that time, Christians would have a special assembly on or about December 25. The date, by the way, was not chosen to imitate Saturnalia or the Winter Solstice. Christians aren't stupid. They have always known how calendars work. And when the holiday rose to prominence they were making every effort to avoid association with Roman paganism. The date has never lined up with those other celebrations. This was on purpose. It is a different holiday, and everybody knew that until fairly recently. The observance of Christmas fairly quickly became a twelve day observance, beginning on December 25, lasting into the first week of January.

The Christian holiday of Christmas makes special mention of the Christ who became incarnate, taking on human form, to live under God's law, but without sin, so that he could take the sin of the world upon himself and provide forgiveness. Christ became flesh and blood so as to give his life, a very human life, as a ransom for all humans who will die in every age. This is a realization of great importance, second in the Christian calendar only to the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus, which completes his saving work.

Want a great Christmas tradition? This one really rocks. Go to a church. Not Schlocko

Community Worship Center. A real church. Find one with a name like Christ the King, like Our Savior, like Emmanuel, like Redeemer, Trinity, or one named after an apostle other than Thomas. Find Christ in Christmas. On Christmas Eve hear and receive God's words of Law and Gospel. These are the messages that say on our own we are unable to live a life pleasing to the true God, so God himself took on flesh to be pleasing on our behalf. Gather with Christians who hear God's Word. See how they are nourished with the very body and blood of Jesus in the celebration of communion. Realize that Christians have gathered around the Word and Sacrament celebrated in almost exactly the same way for almost 2,000 years now. Remember that our confession is that God's proclaimed Word creates and nourishes our faith, by which we receive hope in this life and in eternity. Remember how we, along with the Christians of the first century, recognize that in communion God delivers his Word using physical means along with the proclaimed word. Sing some songs of the Christian faith. Real songs. Songs that have lasted hundreds of years and will certainly outlast you. Songs that remind you of life and hope. Words that you can cling to in your darkest hour, even on your deathbed. There's Christmas.

Want some good news for Christmas? It isn't just a day, or even a twelve day season. It's a life which can endure. That's the message that millions of people in this generation hear and believe. And those are people who live a life of service to others, who bring good and hope to the world. Would you like to reject Christmas? That's up to you. But please be aware of what you are rejecting. And let's not confuse the two different Christmases. Would you like to pursue Christmas? By all means, do it. Receive God's Word by faith. Pour yourself into the training pursued by new Christians. Look forward to receiving both Word and Sacrament. Keep Christmas from day to day, following the Christ.

A merry Christmas to all, and to all a good night!

### **Encouraging Healthy Churches**

You may or may not remember the picture below. It was my privilege to participate in the ordination and installation of the man in the middle, Alex McNally, as pastor for Faith Lutheran Church in Watseka, Illinois. Alex is one of the many men who have presented themselves to serve in pastoral ministry in The AALC in the past few years. He survived a gruelling course of study in our seminary and has done so in good order. Now we get to walk with him and with the congregation he serves as he gains in experience and builds up the body of Christ in Illinois. Welcome, Pastor McNally!



## Building Stability Update



Last month I spoke about our work to solidify the fundraising that keeps Wittenberg Door Campus Ministry active. Thanks be to God, in 2018 through the generosity of many, we were able to bring God's Words of Law and Gospel to many in our collegiate communities. It's our intention to continue in the next year. This past year, we brought in the basic ministry expenses and were also able to pay my family's utilities. Thankfully, we don't have a mortgage. Next year, we would like to add the cost of medical care for our family. This will relieve some of the burden I face with multiple jobs to keep things going. The Wittenberg Door 300 is our group of regular contributors. Some have stood with us for more than two years, helping on a monthly basis. We have plenty of room for more donors. I hope you'll consider helping us in this way. Additionally, I will always welcome your invitation to speak to a church congregation or community organization about our work. Look at our page at [www.wittenbergcomo.com](http://www.wittenbergcomo.com) for more details. With our help, we can make a great difference.



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## Uganda Update:

What's the latest on our friend Alice from Uganda? We had been eagerly awaiting a doctor's report from an MRI. The results are in at last. Although the MRI showed good progress, there's still plenty to be done to treat Alice's tumor. The medications she is taking are having a positive effect. The lead doctor is now talking about a complete recovery. How long will her treatment continue? At present we don't know. It will almost certainly be at least six more months. Thanks to the many people who have chipped in for her care. It is currently costing about \$2,200.00 per month. Please consider helping with Alice's ongoing treatment. The family would not be able to afford this care in any way without help. A link to give follows. <https://www.gofundme.com/alice-waako-brain-surgery>

Simon Peter continues to send me pictures of work he does to care for many orphans in a remote area of Uganda. In partnership with a group called Love Uganda, a subsidiary of Where We Begin Ministries <https://wherewebeginblog.wordpress.com> many of these poverty-stricken orphans will be able to have a solid and festive meal with adults who care for them. We're looking forward to hearing all the news from the Christmas dinner they will put on soon. Last month I made a comment about "gnut paste." Apparently it is similar to peanut butter. Stay tuned for more news!

## Upcoming Activities:

Mondays at 11:00 – Bible Study at Provision Living

Tuesdays at 5:18 pm – Heidelberg Colloquy at The Heidelberg Restaurant – starting again January 15

Thursdays at 12:00 – Bible Discussion at Mizzou Student Center – starting again January 10

Sunday, December 30 – Pastor Spotts at Family of Christ Lutheran Church, Ashland MO

Tuesday, January 1 – Pastor Spotts at St. John's Lutheran Church, Lohman MO

Sunday, January 6 – Pastor Spotts at Family of Christ Lutheran Church, Ashland MO

Sunday, January 13 – Pastor Spotts at Pilot Knob Lutheran Church, Forest City IA and Calvary Lutheran Church, Crystal Lake IA

Friday, January 18 – Big Welcome Event for Internationals – Games and Build Your Own Sub Sandwich at Trinity Lutheran Church, Columbia MO

**We always have something new at the website, the blog, and the activities calendar. Please be a friend on Facebook and follow us on Twitter. If you're in Columbia, let's get together on or near campus. Go to <https://www.wittenbergcomo.com/support-us.html> to provide financial support. The Wittenberg Door 300 needs you!**