

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your correspondence to the Al Denson Show and for tuning in every week to our program. My prayer for you is to be encouraged in your daily walk with Christ through the words of this booklet. Our hope is that in turn you will tell others of what God is doing through our ministry to youth and parents on TV. I am convinced you will not find another program on any network anywhere that deals with issues today's youth and their parents are facing, and provides answers from a Godly perspective.

In addition, we would love for you to help us by going to our web site at [www.aldenson.com](http://www.aldenson.com). Here you can write to us, order additional material like this booklet, check out all my music, have a daily bible study, and stay up to date on the ministry. You can also send us a prayer request and questions for the TV show. But more importantly, please continue to be in prayer with us as we work together to help those that are in need.

Thanks for watching and God Bless!

Sincerely,



**An Outreach of Celebration Ministries**

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Most artists create for only a brief moment in time. That phenomenon was once known as “15 minutes of fame”. Yet even in a fickle world, there still emerge a talented few that transcends time and trends. With nearly 15 years as a major label recording artist and seven hit

albums to his credit, Al Denson is that kind of artist.

But the attention and acclaim his artistry has brought him over the years are anything but the routine rewards of worldly success. Rather, they are the fruits of a life of purpose and passion, and a mission that has always reached far beyond merely making music.

The millions of young people Al has performed for, befriended, counseled, consoled and clowned around with in his career already know that. And thousands more are finding out every day.

This past year has seen Al expand his efforts to a global audience through the reach of his daily syndicated television production, “The Al Denson Show.” “You’ve got to reach out to people where they are with the most powerful means and this form of media allows you to build trust and a rapport,” says Al. “This has all been so amazing. I can’t imagine what lies in store when the Lord finally calls me home, but I don’t have to wait for heaven to receive rewards. I get them every time a kid comes up to me and says, ‘I heard what you said, and I accepted Christ.’ You can’t ask for anything more or better than that.”

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## Celebrating The Christ Of Christmas

Christmas should be a time to honor the Christ whose birth we commemorate by being a season of giving, sharing, love, peace—the most joyous of holidays. But for many Americans all Christmas has come to represent is a time of frenzy, a time when people get frantic, frazzled, and frustrated, when their patience and credit cards are stretched as far as they can go.

Steve Russo gives these facts in his book, *Keeping Christ In Christmas*:

- Ninety-six percent of Americans say they celebrate Christmas in some form.
- Seventy percent of Americans—including 62 percent of those who attend church regularly—say they consider Christmas the most significant Christian holiday.
- Eighty percent of Americans decorate for Christmas.
- More than 36 million Americans have real Christmas trees.
- The weeks leading up to Christmas are the biggest shopping weeks of the year. Many retailers make up to 50 percent of their annual income in the month preceding Christmas.
- Many Americans think Christmas is too commercial, and 48 percent say the Santa Claus tradition and the gift-giving detract from the religious celebration.

- 44 percent of Americans think they spend too much money on gifts at Christmas.

It is easy to see that many Americans have mixed emotions about the way Christmas is celebrated in this country. So, how did a

celebration meant to honor the birth of our Lord become what it is today? Again, Steve Russo helps us answer that question.

The celebration of Christmas is something which has evolved over time. Early Christians did not observe Christ’s birth in any significant way for about 300 years, mainly because of the tremendous persecution they suffered at the hand of

the Roman Empire. In A.D. 306, when Constantine became Emperor, the primary religion in the Roman empire was Mithraism, which was the worship of the Persian sun-god. Mithra, the god of light and wisdom was said to have been born from a rock on December 25. When Constantine was converted to Christ, he made Christianity the state religion, but remnants of his old religion remained throughout his empire.

The Bible doesn’t give us the exact date of Jesus’ birth, but we do know that it could not have been in winter. Shepherds would not have been out in the hills at night during the winter with their sheep. Most scholars believe that more than likely Jesus was born in the spring or summer.

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Christmas was first celebrated on December 25 in Rome in A.D. 336 and in A.D. 350. Pope Julius I declared December 25 as the official date of Christ birth. By the end of the fourth century, most other forms of worship were banned and Christianity was spreading rapidly across the Roman Empire. In 529 Emperor Justinian declared Christmas a public holiday.

The decision to celebrate Christ's birth in December was not one which was randomly chosen. It was a political decision made to pacify the non-Christian cultures in Europe and Asia to whom the celebration of winter solstice festivals was extremely important. People believed in those days that the days grew shorter in December because the sun was dying, so they held festivals right before December 21 which had ceremonies designed to appease the sun and convince it to return. After the solstice, the days got longer again and the people celebrated the

sun's return. They also celebrated rebirth, light, and harvest. The celebrations were very different, depending on the particular customs of the country in which it was held. The celebration that had the most influence on Christmas was the Roman Saturnalia.

This celebration was held to honor several different events, including the victory of Saturn over Jupiter and was held December 17-24. Candles were used to scare away the darkness and to celebrate the sun and the light. There was feasting, dancing, gambling, and partying. There was also gift-giving, done in honor of the goddess of vegetation, Strenia. The church was completely against the immoral practices that took place during these celebrations and fought to have these changed. As a result, the church finally came to a compromise. They agreed to adapt certain pagan symbols and ceremonies to their Christmas tradition so the Christian and the non-Christian population would be happy.

The church felt they were able to justify the compromise they made because the Mithraic religion had many customs which had Christian significance. Since Jesus represented life,

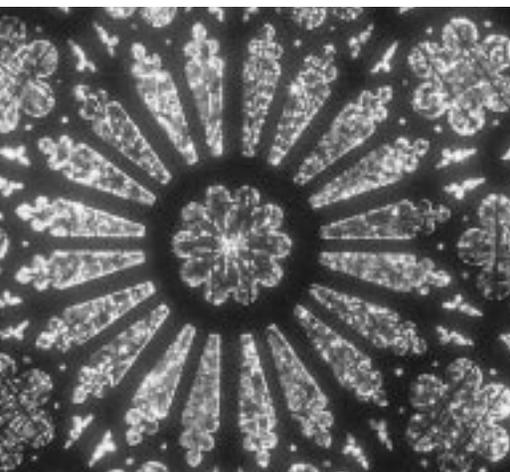
triumphed over death and darkness, and restored hope and light to the world, the birth of Christ simply replaced the birth of the sun in their celebration. Now, rather than celebrating the sun, they would be celebrating "the" Son. Many components of the old festival were altered to honor Jesus' birth and others remained unchanged. Some which are still with us today are greenery, candles, feasting, singing, and tree decorating.

When the Roman Empire was invaded in the fifth century, the Nordic and Germanic peoples came into contact with Christianity and Christmas for the first time. So, as Christianity spread across Europe, Christmas celebrations were introduced as well. By the end of the ninth century, Christmas was celebrated all over Europe with trees, gifts, feasts, and lights.

Anything left over from the old pagan religions was either altered to fit into a Christian context, or done away with.

In medieval England, after 1066, Christmas was celebrated by Christians with caroling and Nativity plays, while unbelievers celebrated for twelve days by partying, gambling, wearing masks and costumes, and even singing off-color songs. In 1377, King Richard II of England, set a new record for Christmas extravagance by having feast for 10,000 people. King Henry VIII, declared himself the supreme head of the Church of England in 1533 and took over the power to regulate religious holidays. While Henry was on the throne, Christmas celebrations became a national obsession which included much dancing, drinking, and gluttony.

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The church was not happy about how Jesus' birth was being celebrated and they wanted the celebrations to be more spiritual. The old concerns they had about the pagan elements which had been allowed in the Christmas celebrations begin to be brought up again. The Protestant Reformation supported these concerns and attacked religious feasts as sinful practices. Scotland outlawed Christmas in 1583. Protestants observed Christmas as a quiet day of reflection and Puritans did not observe it at all. Both groups in England condemned the drinking, gluttony, and partying that were a part of these Christmas celebrations, and some even wanted to do away with all pagan customs.

In 1644, a law in England was issued during its Commonwealth period which outlawed all religious festivals. Churches were locked on December 25 and the singing of carols was illegal. In 1660, when the monarchy returned to power, Charles II legalized Christmas again.

Even though the Puritans were not longer in power, their influence still permeated the Church, and Christmas as a holiday didn't make a come back until the late seventeenth century. When the Industrial Revolution began, all the attention seemed to go toward work, money, and progress. The greed of the upper class and the poverty of the lower class made little room for holidays. This was a dark time in England that left her people feeling as if they had no reason to celebrate.

But in Germany they were enjoying huge Christmas celebrations whose traditions had been building up for hundreds of years, such as gingerbread houses, trees, feasts, cookies, carols, etc. Americans have German immigrants to thank for bringing Christmas to our country in the late nineteenth century. Victorian England also was greatly influenced by German Christmas customs. In 1840, Victoria married Prince Albert, after becoming Queen of England three years earlier.

He was of German descent and brought to England with him many of their marvelous Christmas traditions. Christmas became a very special occasion for the royal family. The English people copied most everything the extremely popular royal family did. During the reign of Queen Victoria, Christmas again became an important part of English life. The Victorians helped to shape the traditions that affected the way Christmas would be celebrated, not just in England, but in America and other parts of the world.

Many of the traditions that are such a favorite part of Christmas celebrations in American have roots which go back to ancient times. It wouldn't seem like Christmas without bells, especially church bells, but bell-ringing actually goes back to pagan times when they were believed to frighten away evil spirits and were a big part of the midwinter solstice festivals. Candles were also used during these festivals to ward off evil and convince the sun to return again. Candles now symbolize Christ, who is the light of the world.

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## The tradition of giving gifts goes back to ancient Rome, ...

The meaning of a carol is far different today than the one originally given. A carol was a secular dance that could be performed at any time of the year. It was done by people holding hands in a circle who would sing a song as they danced. This circle dance reminded people of a coronet, or corolla in Latin, so they called it a "carol." The name later came to refer to the song and not the dance. During the Middle Ages, groups of serenaders would travel from house to house singing ancient carols. The word came to mean "song of joy," and by the sixteenth century, carols had become a very popular part of Christmas celebrations. Most of the carols we sing today were written in the nineteenth century.

Christmas trees are relatively new in America. The tradition did not really catch on here until the 1830's. There are many legends surrounding the origin of the Christmas tree. The most popular one has to do with Martin Luther. The story

says that one Christmas Eve Luther was walking through the forest, when he became overwhelmed by the beauty of an evergreen that had starlight dancing off its branches. He wanted to duplicate the scene for his family, so he chopped the tree down and brought it home, where he lit the branches with candles. As sweet as this story is, the truth probably lies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when pine trees were used as a part of plays performed in European cathedrals at Christmastime. These trees, decorated with apples, would symbolized the Tree of Knowledge that God placed in the Garden of Eden. This tradition was later banned by the church, but was continued in homes where people began decorating their trees with food shaped to represent some part of the Nativity.

The tradition of giving gifts goes back to ancient Rome, where gifts were exchanged during Saturnalia. As with many of the pagan

customs, the gift exchange was hard to get rid of as Christianity spread. Early church leaders tried to ban the custom, but the people would not let it go. So the church leaders sought a way to give a pagan tradition a Christian meaning. They found their justification in the gifts brought to baby Jesus by the Wise Men, and from the concept that Jesus was God's gift to the world.

The commercialization of Christmas as we know it today, started in 1867 when Macy's Department store stayed open until midnight on Christmas Eve. Then in 1874, Macy's had its

first window displays with Christmas themes, and from that time on Christmas has grown into a major retail holiday. During World War II, it became necessary for Americans to mail their Christmas packages early for the troops overseas to receive them in time. So merchants joined the effort to encourage the public to shop early. That is when the prolonged shopping season first began. In 1941, Congress set the annual date of Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday in November to guarantee a four-week shopping season each year.



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The evergreen that is used today to decorate at Christmastime was first used by pagans. They considered it magical because it could stay alive in the winter. The greenery would be used to decorate inside and outside during the winter solstice festivals. Again the church officials tried to banish greenery but later decided to translate the custom into Christian terms. The evergreens came to symbolize Christ, who was victorious over death and gives eternal life.

Holly was also thought to be magical in ancient times because of the ability it had to produce fruit in the winter. Some people would hang it over their beds to help them have good dreams, and others believed it could cure coughs. When it finally came to England, it was considered sacred and became the subject of many Christmas carols in medieval times. Mistletoe was not just used in pagan festivals, it was actually worshiped by Romans and Druids who thought the plant could ward off evil, as

well as heal. Ancient Britons hung mistletoe in their doorways to keep evil away and everyone who safely entered the house was given a welcoming kiss. The tradition of kissing under the mistletoe has remained popular in America and in England.

The word noel is the French word for Christmas and comes from the Latin, natalis, which means "birthday." It can also be traced to nouvelles, the French word for "the good news." Red and green are the significant colors of Christmas, but no one is quite sure why. More than likely, green is the color of the evergreens, which symbolized life to the ancient Europeans, and red is the color of the holly berry which also lives through the winter and symbolizes life. Both colors have come to symbolize Christ, who is the Life.

The figure we know today as Santa Claus is primarily a product of the nineteenth and twentieth century media. Most notably, Clement C. Moore's poem, A Visit from St. Nicholas written in 1822 and the New

York Sun's response in 1897 to a little girl named Virginia O'Hanlon, who questioned his existence. The life of St. Nicholas, an early Christian bishop in Asia Minor, has more to do with the development of this character than anything else. He became a bishop while still in his teens and was nicknamed, "Boy Bishop."

St. Nicholas was a courageous and unselfish man whose generosity saved many people from famine and despair. He founded an orphanage and was known by all for his concern and love for children. The legend of St. Nicholas lived on, though most countries made slight changes in his name. To the English, St. Nicholas became Father Christmas. The Germans gave him the name for the Christ child—Christkindl, or Kris Kringle.

St. Nicholas came to America with the Dutch in the 1600s. Sinter Claes, was his name, and he was an important figure to the Dutch settlers. Christmas was illegal in New England until 1681 and then could only be observed in a strictly religious sense. After the Revolutionary War, Christmas slowly began to be celebrated in the United States, but it wasn't until the beginning of the nineteenth century that any reference to Santa Claus would appear on the scene in this country. The evolution of St. Nicholas to Santa Claus really began with Moore's poem, which portrayed St. Nicholas to be a friend to children and a generous gift-giver.

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In 1842, a popular children's book had illustrations of a stout, bearded character named Kris Kringle. In the middle of the century, the pronunciation of Sinter Claes was changed to Santa Claus. The New York Sun's piece in 1897 captured the hearts of all Americans. This gave publishers and marketers a figure with the appeal they could sell. In the 1920's, artist Haddon Sundblom, drew a Santa Claus that was used in a series of Coca-Cola ads. He wore a red gown with white trim, had red cheeks, and a warm smile. This seemed to finalize the picture of Santa Claus for Americans and the ads ran for thirty-five years.

Even though Santa Claus is known as a jolly, kind, and generous, old man to children everywhere, some Christian parents struggle with whether to allow their children to participate in this tradition. The choice can be made to leave Santa completely out of your family's Christmas celebration. If this option is

chosen, the decision needs to be made when children are very young—preferably before they are born. Santa Claus is a very large part of our culture in this country, and children will need to understand early on why Santa Claus isn't a part of Christmas in their home.

Many Christians do have very strong convictions about this and believe that the choice must be between Jesus and Santa. Other Christian parents think there is another way to approach the Santa tradition. They honestly believe that Santa can still be a part of their family's Christmas celebration without taking the emphasis off of the true meaning of Christmas. We must understand that there will always be differing opinions in the Christian community as to how a Christian should respond to the culture, so we must be careful not to judge other Christians if the traditions in their homes are different from ours.

Many American holidays, customs, and traditions have pagan remnants in their history. Even though some of those are still a part of the Christmas traditions in this country, the practices and anti-Christian beliefs once associated with Christmas have long since disappeared. Simply because Christmas traditions may have been used originally as part of ungodly practices shouldn't affect our attitudes about them today.

This may be much like the issue the apostle Paul faced

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of whether or not to eat meat that had been offered to idols. There were Christians in those days who believed that it was wrong to buy meat in the marketplace to eat which had been used as a part of a pagan ritual. Paul responds in I Corinthians 8:8 by saying, "But food does not bring us near to God. We are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." In other words, meat is just meat. It won't hurt you if you eat it, and you won't be any better off if you don't. Don't make a big deal out of something that is not a big deal to God.

Steve Russo wisely points out that sometimes all Christians are known for is what we are against. Our primary responsibility is to share the wonderful message of the Christ of Christmas. We should never compromise our Biblical values in any way, nor should we become stumbling blocks to those who are weaker in the faith (1 Corinthians 8:9), or offend those with opinions different from ours regarding how Christmas is celebrated.

Even though Paul personally didn't have a problem with eating meat which had been sacrificed to idols, he said he would willingly give up his freedom to do so, rather than offend a brother in Christ. Responding to the culture in which we live will always be an area where Christians will have different opinions. So we must guard our attitudes well, so the message we have to share is not overshadowed by controversy. As long as Christians make celebrating the Christ of Christmas our primary focus and determine that everything we do to celebrate the birth of our Lord honors Him, then everything else should fall into place.

It was a snowy Christmas Eve. Inside the warm house, the Christmas tree was ablaze with lights and surrounded by dozens of presents.

The man's wife and children were dressed and ready to leave for church. "Come with us," they urged, for they loved him.

"Not me," he snapped. "I don't believe in all that religion garbage." For many years the man's wife had been trying to tell him about Jesus Christ and the salvation He offers. How God's Son had become a human being to in order to show us the way to heaven. "Nonsense," the man always said.

The family left for church and the man was all alone in his cozy country home. He glanced out the window at the cold snowy scene outside. He turned to warm himself by the fire. But as he turned, his eyes caught a movement in the snow outside. He looked. Cats! Three young cats were walking slowly past his window.

"The fools," he thought. "They'll freeze for sure!" The man put on his hat and coat and opened the door. A blast of wintery air sent a shiver through his body. "Come here, cats! Come inside where it's warm and there's some food. You'll die if you stay out there." But the cats ran away, frightened by the stranger at the door.

The man walked outside. "Come back! Don't be afraid, I want to save you." But the cats were gone. It was too late. "Well, I did everything I

could for them," the man muttered to himself. "What more could I do? I'd have to become a cat myself in order to save them. If I became a cat, I could tell them and show them the way. Then they would have to believe me, unless they were complete fools."

The man turned to walk back to his house and just as he reached the door, the church bells rang in the distance. He paused for a moment to listen and then it was as if a knife pierced him in his heart. "O God," he cried as he fell to his knees and began to weep. "I am the fool. I understand, now. I understand."

That is what Christmas is all about. The great Creator of the Universe loved us so much, He was willing to become one of us, so that we might be understand and be saved. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

To learn more of the traditions and significance of Christmas around the world, please read Steve Russo's wonderful book, *Keeping Christ in Christmas* (Harvest House).

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