Our Pioneers and the spirit of benevolence at Christmas

Our pioneers exercised this spirit of benevolence and liberality at all times, but especially at Christmas. Uriah Smith, editor of the Review and Herald, recalled what the Christmas tree at Battle Creek bore in Christmas, 1879:

“Our Christmas tree was kept standing till the evening of New Year’s, when another meeting was held in the Tabernacle. The object of the occasion was to bring in gifts, in money, in clothing, or provision, for the poor. The exercises consisted of prayer, and address by sister White, choice selections of vocal music, and the gathering of the fruit of the tree. And this is what the tree bore:

“Cash, $67.83; orders on groceries and provision stores to the amount of $14.50; and articles of clothing, including 25 coats, 2 overcoats, 21 pairs of pants, 22 vests, 30 shirts, 27 pairs of ladies’ and children’s hose, 12 ladies’ sacks, 17 dresses, beside boots, shoes, hats, caps, mufflers, [scarves], sacks, items of provision, etc. etc., too numerous to mention, amounting in value to $169.92. The total contributions amounted $252.25. Some of the citizens of the place, not connected with our denomination, added their offerings to the general store. It was left with the committee to the Maternal Association and the deacons of the church to see that the articles were judiciously distributed among the needed.” (Smith, Uriah.

“What the Tree Bore,” Review and Herald, January 8, 1880).

Ellen White wrote that, “Christmas and New Year celebrations can and should be held in behalf of those who are helpless” (Manuscript No. 969). Let us also exercise a spirit of benevolence this season.
Has Ellen White any statement regarding the 25th of December? Ellen White wrote: “The twenty-fifth of December is supposed to be the day of the birth of Jesus Christ, and its observance has become customary and popular. But yet there is no certainty that we are keeping the veritable day of our Saviour’s birth....The Bible does not give us the precise time” (Adventist Home, 477). However, “the 25th of December has long been commemorated as the day of Jesus’ birth, and...it is not my purpose to affirm or question the propriety of celebrating this event on this day, but to dwell upon the childhood and life of our Saviour....Although we do not know the exact day of Christ’s birth...let the hearts of all respond with exceeding joy for the priceless gift of the Son of God” (Review and Herald, December 17, 1889).

Many of our readers may ask the question, how should Seventh-day Adventists celebrate Christmas?” Here are some practical counsels from the writings Ellen White:

1. Present the attractions of the Christian Life: “Let us remember that Christmas is celebrated in commemoration of the birth of the world’s Redeemer” (Messages to Young People, p. 311). “I entreat you, my brethren and sisters, to make...Christmas a blessing to yourselves and others” (Reflecting Christ, p. 373), “may the coming Christmas be the best one you have ever enjoyed, because you have brought gifts to Jesus, and given yourselves and your all without reservation to Him who has given all for you” (Bible Echo, December 15, 1892).

2. Make Christmas a season to reflect in Jesus’ life and sacrifice: “Christmas day, precious reminder of the sacrifice made in man’s behalf” (Review and Herald, December 11, 1879). “Tell the children of the great missionary field and talk to them of the love of Christ, of the great sacrifice made because He loved us and wanted us to have a home with Him in His kingdom” (Review and Herald, December 11, 1888).

3. Put under your “Christmas Tree” offerings for God’s cause: “In every church let your smaller offerings be placed upon your Christmas tree. Let the precious emblem “evergreen” suggest the holy work of God and His beneficence to us, and the loving heart-work will be to save other souls who are in darkness” (Review and Herald, December 9, 1884).

4. Bring special offerings to God and show gratitude for His mercies: “We advise all our brethren and sisters to make decided reform in regard to these feast days. Those who appreciate the gift of God’s dear Son to save them from ruin, now have a favorable opportunity to give tangible proofs of their gratitude by rendering to God their thank offerings (Review and Herald, December 11, 1888).
5. Make Christmas an enjoyable time, especially for children and youth: “[The youth] should not be left on Christmas to find their own amusement in vanity and pleasure-seeking, in amusements which will be detrimental to their spirituality. Parents can control this matter by turning the minds and offerings of their children to God and His cause...The desire for amusement, instead of being quenched and arbitrarily ruled down, should be controlled and directed by painstaking effort upon the part of the parents” (Adventist Home, p. 478).

6. Make Christmas a time for personal reflection: “We are nearing the close of another year. Christmas and New Year’s will soon be here. Let us candidly and carefully review our life during the year that is about to pass, with its burden of history, into eternity, and consider the many tokens we have had of the favor of God in the blessings he has bestowed upon us. The most unspeakable gift which God could bestow upon the world was the gift of His beloved Son” (Review and Herald, December 9, 1884).

7. Make gifts that would lead to Christ: “It is right to bestow upon one another tokens of love and remembrance if we do not in this forget God, our best Friend. We should make our gifts such as will prove a real benefit to the receiver. I will recommend such books as will be an aid in understanding the Word of God, or that will increase our love for its precepts” (The Publishing Ministry, 345).

8. Lay aside worldliness: “The various amusements of society have been the ruin of thousands who, but for these devises of Satan, might be servants of the living God....Now let us turn the current heavenward instead of earthward....Let there be recorded in the heavenly books such a Christmas as has never yet been seen, because of the donations which shall be given for the sustaining of the work of God and the upbuilding of His kingdom” (Review and Herald, December 9, 1884).
Did you Know?

On Christmas Day, 1886, Ellen White spoke in a large Baptist church at Basel, Switzerland. The reason for this service during the Christmas season was to secure financial help for the colporteurs in Russia. Their ministry was made difficult by the fact that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was not recognized by the government. The threat of imprisonment hung over their heads, and their labors were performed with enormous difficulty. Then an evergreen was brought to collect gifts to the Saviour. The tree bore 429 francs for their support. Quite a harvest! (Delafield, Ellen G. White in Europe, 253).

Seventh-day Adventists and Christmas
By Basil A. Reid

The many secular activities with which Christmas is associated, are still fresh in our minds from the last Christmas. And another festive season has come and the cycle continues. It is imperative that Christians see the reality of Christmas and not choked by the things that symbolize the end of the year.

Among the many events in the life of Christ, His birth is foundational. The Christian world commemorates this is December of each year. Christmas closes the door of the old year and opens the door to a New Year.

As we wish you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year, the question is should Seventh-day Adventists celebrate Christmas? Incidentally, one of my students in the “God and Human Life” course I just taught, just came to my office. Upon leaving she caught herself and apologized for wishing me “Merry Christmas,” “because,” she said, “Seventh-day Adventists do not believe in Christmas.” I showed her this article I was preparing and it was a great revelation.

In this issue of the Spirit of Prophecy we will use quotations from the E. G. White’s writings to answer the question, “Should Seventh-day Adventists celebrate Christmas?” I hope most of your questions will be answered.

Have a blessed Season and a Happy New Year!