

Baptizing Buddhist Holidays with Biblical Meaning

In June 2005 the new Buddhist Background leaders decided to adapt the Buddhist calendar instead of blindly following the Greco-Roman animistic calendar. The leadership took note that Christmas was not Jesus real birthday. The first churches decided to reclaim the animist holidays in the name of Christ so that the faithful would not be tempted to fall back into their old lifestyle of attending pagan worship and pagan ceremonies on those days. The first believers' grace-filled example ought to be claimed by new Asian churches as the right way to be a truly indigenous church and not a mere syncretistic copycat of the western church.

New Year's Celebration

The Water Festival is the time of year when Theravada Buddhists celebrate New Year's Day. This holiday does not have a direct connection with Buddhism but rather with Brahmanism. This weeklong celebration usually takes place in March or April and is a cool welcome in the midst of the hot and dry season. The Buddhist Background network of churches have decided to claim this holiday as their Easter Week. These believers have not thrown out the Christian calendar but are adjusting and augmenting it. It was pointed out to them that the church celebrated New Year's day on Easter for thousands of years on the day that Christ rose from the dead, and that New Year's day was only changed to January a few hundred years ago.⁵⁰ It is yet to become clear how the church will appropriate other ceremonies like the harvest ceremony and other Buddhist ceremonies in the name of Christ outsiders will have a lot to learn from this indigenous approach.

⁵⁰ Brian Hogan. 2004. Perspectives Lectures. <https://www.cpcaches.org>. (accessed June 1, 2004).

October New Moon Festival

The Myanmar Buddhist full moon festival of *Thadingyut* is annually celebrated to mark the end of the Buddhist lent and the end of the rainy season. On October 6, 2006 the new Buddhist background house church networks decided to use their old forms but redeem these forms with a new hope for this ancient festival. It can be said that *Thadingyut* has three parts.⁵¹ The day starts off with Buddhist devotees attending an early meeting at the monastery with sermons about the teachings of the *Abidhamma* (The third basket, and most philosophical, of Theravada Buddhist scriptures). Most attendees do not understand the chanted Pali scriptures. At this time believers in Christ meet together to read or recite Matthew 24:1-51, which describes the signs of the return of Christ at the end of the age.

Although there will be bad times in the last days, Christ's commands His disciples to have the hope of His coming. Another sign of the last days should be read along with the previous passage which is 2 Timothy 3:1-5. This scripture reminds us that in the last days before Christ's return that people will be disobedient to their parents and this leads to the next ceremony.

The third ceremony usually takes place in private between parents and their children, abbots and their monks, and teachers and their students. *Gau doubt Bwe*, as it is called in Burmese, allows the participants to offer and receive forgiveness. This has not been forbidden for believers in Christ but has been encouraged. The only stipulation was that believers do not worship others but honor them. Believers read Ephesians 5:8-33, 6:1-4 which describes the new system for relationships for children of the light.

⁵¹ Khine Maung Nyunt, Myanmar Traditional Monthly Festivals, (Inwa Publishing House, Yangon, Myanmar 2001), 79-91.

The last ceremony is the best known part of the day the Festival of Lights. This ceremony is practiced to commemorate Buddha's descent from the *celestial abode of Tusita*. This *abode* is very different from the Christian doctrine of heaven and is still part of the thirty-one levels of the Theravada Buddhist cosmos. Candles are lit to light the way for Gotama's return. When he died, the Buddha told his followers that he would not be returning from *Nibbana*. However, our Lord Jesus commanded His disciples that they should keep watch for His return. He said that when He returns, He will take us back to His Father's house. His Father's House is in heaven, which is described as a golden city where there will be no more tears, suffering, and sin. Believers bring one candle and sit in a circle. After an invitation prayer, the facilitator lights a candle and perform the passing of the light, while someone reads John 9:1-5, and Matthew 5:14.

Jesus told His disciples that while He was in the world He would be the Light, but that they would also be lights, which cannot and should not be hidden. While lights are burning and placed on plates on a stand in the middle, the circle of believers observe the Lord's Supper. It is explained that the multiplication of lights represents the multiplication of witnesses that bring light to this dark world. They have also told the story of the Ten Bridesmaids who were told to keep watch for the Bridegrooms return.⁵² (Matthew 25:1-13; Matt. 5:14).

Believers held a feast to commemorate the feast that we will have together in heaven when the Lord returns. "I say to you that there will be many who come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the (*Golden*) Kingdom..."⁵³ (Italics mine). In Theravada Buddhism, monks blow a conch shell to trumpet the return of Buddha from the *Tusita* (celestial abode, not heaven). If believers in Christ are comfortable with this they should be encouraged to do the same,

⁵² Matt 25:1-13; Matt. 5:14.

⁵³ Matt 8:11.

for Our Lord is coming with the trumpet call of God and the voice of the archangel.⁵⁴ If time does not permit, then believers can just combine all three meetings together into one and read Matthew 25:1-13. There may have never been a holy day in the history of Christianity that looks forward to the return of Christ. If there was any people and country that needed to hear the message of this hope, it surely is the peoples of Myanmar.

⁵⁴ Matt 24:31.