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XMAS or CHRISTMAS?

At this season of the year, I often hear people say something such as, *I tell you one thing for sure: I don't like them taking Christ out of Christmas by using XMAS. I think there is something sinister going on.* As a response to this substitution of the letter "X" for the name of Christ, one frequently sees signs and bumper stickers, which say, *Put Christ back into Christmas!* It seems to me that these folk are convinced Christ has been removed from Christmas by design. I have heard other people further elaborate on the use of XMAS, suggesting that it is a technique or fad used by non-believers to remove the reference to Christ. They say that this makes it convenient for them to express their seasonal good feelings toward others without sounding either religious or overtly anti-Christian. This brings us to this question, *What is the truth about using "X" for 'Christ' in Christmas?*

First, one needs to understand that it is not the actual letter "X" that is put into the words, XMAS and Christmas. Although we see the English letter ("X") there, in reality what it involves is the first letter of the Greek name for Christ.¹ The New Testament Greek word for Christ is *Christos*. What we see in English as the first two English alphabetical characters ("Ch" in Christmas or Christ) is really a transliteration (transliteration defined - *a transliteration is when the alphabetical characters of one language are transcribed into the equivalent characters of another language*). In this case, the English "Ch" is representing the Greek alphabetical character *chi* (pronounced "key" and written X). Thus, what we interpret as an "X" has come through church history to be a shorthand symbol for the name of Christ. This symbol has been used for centuries. The use of shorthand symbols as a designation of sacred names is not limited to the word for Christ. There were fifteen *nomina sacra* (sacred names) designated by abbreviations during the early church time-period,² names such as *God*, *Lord*, and *Jesus*.³ In fact, in the oldest Greek manuscripts of the Bible that we have, abbreviations were also used.⁴

How should a Christian respond about the use of "X" in XMAS? I realize that there is a long and sacred history of the use of "X" to symbolize the full name of Christ; and, from its origin, it has meant no disrespect. Therefore, I see no reason for discriminating against its use. However, there are others, who prefer not to use this abbreviation. These folk do not refrain from

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Now, That's a Good Question!* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1996), 364.

² This is particularly true of church history during the Byzantine period (A.D. 330 – 1452).

³ Bruce Metzger, *Manuscripts of the Greek Bible* (New York: Oxford Press, 1981), 36.

⁴ The oldest we have are the fourth century uncials, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus.

using it because there is something “evil” in its use, but do not use it out of courtesy for fellow Christians who are offended by its use. (Maybe, taking this last mentioned position is fulfilling in principle Paul’s admonishment to the Romans as recorded in Romans 14:1-8, 13-18.)

Although all Christians may not agree about the use of the shorthand word “XMAS,” there may be one area where most Christians do agree about Christmas. The area of agreement is that much too often Christ is almost completely removed from the celebration of the Christmas season. This is evidenced by the commercialization of both words, XMAS and Christmas. In reality, we need to put Christ back into both words—XMAS and Christmas.

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This ministry specializes in producing books and audio and video products
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