

“Liberation from a Toilsome Religious Calendar”

Galatians 4:9-11

“But now after you have known God, or rather are known by God, how is it that you turn again to the weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage? *You observe days and months and seasons and years.* I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain” (Gal. 4:9-11, NKJV, emphasis added).

John Calvin, one of the greatest theologians and expositors of Scripture in church history, explains this passage to us:

When he [Paul] calls the ceremonies beggarly elements, he views them outside Christ, in fact, opposed to Christ. To the fathers [of the old covenant] they were not only wholesome exercises and aids to godliness, but efficacious organs of grace. But their whole strength lay in Christ and in the appointment of God. The false apostles on the other hand neglected the promises and wanted to oppose them to Christ, as if Christ alone were not sufficient.¹

Calvin notes that Paul is *not* condemning the ordinary observance of seasons (that is, the division of time into its seasons—winter, spring, summer, fall—and days—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, . . .):

The order of nature is fixed and perpetual. How are months and years computed but by the revolution of the sun [Earth] and moon? What distinguishes summer from winter, or spring from harvest, but the appointment of God—an appointment which He promised to continue to the end of the world (Gen. 8:22)? This common observance serves not only for agriculture and public affairs, but even touches the government of the Church.²

What sort of observance, then, did Paul reprove in this passage?:

*It was that which would bind the conscience by religion, as something that was necessary to the worship of God and which, as he [Paul] says in Rom. 14:5ff, would make a distinction between one day and another.*³

When certain days are represented as holy in themselves, when one day is distinguished from another on religious grounds, when holy days are reckoned a part of divine worship, then days are improperly observed.

¹ John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance and trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 77.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., emphasis added.

Calvin revisits the question of the validity of Christians “observing” the days and seasons of nature (i.e., autumn, winter, Tuesday, Friday):

The false apostles advocated the sabbath, new moons, and other festivals, because they were observances of the law. When we today make a distinction of days [in terms of our secular calendar], we do not lay a snare of necessity on the conscience, or distinguish between days as if one were more holy than another, nor do we set them up as religion and the worship of God. We merely give heed to order and harmony. Among us the observance is free and void of all superstition.⁴

So in Calvin’s Reformed church, there was no *religious* or *superstitious* attachment to days and seasons. There was no binding of the *conscience* or *distinguishing between days as if one were more holy than another*. Rather, the Genevan church merely “gave heed to order and harmony” when they employed the secular calendar.

Calvin then condemns the Judaizers for setting up religious holidays as works of obligation and piety and thus a distortion of the Christian Gospel:

Some are surprised that Paul should be so upset by the observance of days as to call it a subversion of almost the whole Gospel. But if we carefully and rightly weigh the whole, we shall see that he had just cause. For *the false apostles* not only attempted to lay the Jewish bondage on the neck of the Church, but *filled their minds with wicked superstitions*. To force Christians to submit to Judaism was in itself no small evil. But it was a far more serious mischief when they set up holidays as meritorious works, in opposition to the grace of Christ, and *claimed that God was to be worshipped and propitiated in this way*. When such doctrines were received, *the worship of God was corrupted, the grace of Christ made void and freedom of conscience suppressed*.⁵

And Calvin saw the Roman Catholic Church, with its myriad of religious holy days, as a modern manifestation of the Judaizer heretics:

Do we wonder that Paul should be afraid that he had labored in vain? For of what value would the Gospel be any more? Since *that same description of ungodliness is now supported by the Papacy*, what sort of Christ or what sort of Gospel do they hold? *So far as binding the consciences goes, they enforce the observance of days no less severely than Moses did. They consider holy days to be part of the worship of God, just as the false apostles did, and even connect them with the devilish concept of merit.*⁶

⁴ Ibid., 77-78.

⁵ Ibid., 78, emphasis added.

The Judaizers were seeking to bind the consciences of the Galatians to Jewish holidays that has previously been ordained by God under the old covenant. However, the Roman Catholic Church had bound the consciences of Christians to religious holy days and seasons, as well as a myriad of saint days, which were never ordained by God in the New Testament. They were merely the invention of the church, according to the doctrines and commandments of men. The Pope of Rome had enslaved the consciences of the faithful to a religious calendar of his own invention. And the church taught that the faithful must observe these days, months, seasons, and years as part of the Christian religion. Calvin adds,

The Papists therefore must be held as much to blame as the false apostles. They are, in fact, worse. *Those men wanted to observe days which had been appointed by the law of God [for the Old Testament dispensation]; but the Papists command days to be kept as holy which they have rashly stamped with their own seal [of approval].*⁷

Paul was afraid that he had labored in vain among the Galatians because they were enslaving themselves to the observance of the annual sacred days of the old covenant system that had passed away. Calvin contended that Rome's strict adherence to its own invented church calendar of religious worship was proof that it did not live in obedience to the Christ of Scripture or the Gospel of Christ.

Calvin, along with the rest of the Reformed Protestants, separated from the Roman Catholic Church, which they regarded as the Antichrist.

They contended that only God is holy. In fact, God is infinitely holy. And we are holy only insofar as we are sanctified by the Holy Spirit and are conformed to the image of Christ. Therefore, the only time that is holy is the time that God declares to be holy. And the only time that God has set apart as holy for the Christian is the Lord's Day, which is the first day of every week.

Beyond the Lord's Day, any holy days are merely a modern manifestation of the issue Paul confronted in Galatia, a legalistic attempt to bind the consciences of Christians to manmade rules and requirements.

Reformed Christianity embraces liberty of conscience. Scripture alone is the only refuge from the oppressive and manifold attempts of religionists to impose their rules and "good intentions" on others.

Paul warned that "false brethren" seek to "spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage" (Gal. 2:4). Therefore, God exhorts us to "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1).

⁶ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁷ Calvin, *The Epistles*, 78, emphasis added.