

Why No Christmas Or Easter?

UNBIBLICAL ORIGINS

“Put Christ back into Christmas” is now a well-worn cliché. Sincere people tell us that a Christian should observe “the church calendar” such as Christmas and Easter in a Christian way rather than the commercial way of the world. The problem is that this overlooks a preliminary question; are these festivals right at all? There can be no Christian way of doing what is wrong in itself. There is no Christian way of robbing banks or vandalizing bus shelters, so we cannot speak of the right spirit with which to observe these things unless they are legitimate to begin with. There was no right way to worship the golden calf, even though Aaron called it “a feast to the Lord” (Exodus 32/5).

So where did these festivals come from? The Bible knows nothing of Christmas and the only reference to Easter (Acts 12/4 A.V.) is a translation of a word that is simply rendered 'passover' in many other places.

The origin of Christmas seems to lie in the pagan festival of Saturnalia which in turn goes back to the supposed birth date of Tammuz (Ezek. 8/14) the sun-god. Saturnalia was abhorrent to Christians until around 300 A.D. when the Roman Church endeavoured to change the pagan festival into a Christian one claiming that it was to mark the birth of Christ, albeit he was not born on 25th December. Many of the original pagan customs remained however, and are still practised to this day.

O.K., you say, but surely its pagan origin is irrelevant now. After all, we don't worry about the pagan origin of the names of the days of the week - Monday, Tuesday etc. - so why worry about the pagan origin of Christmas? Surely, the pagan religion involved is no longer seriously practised. The problem is that Christmas is linked to a false religion that is very much alive and well. As the name suggests, it is part of the Roman Catholic system as a “mass” commemorating the birth of Christ. Roman Catholicism teaches that the mass entails a priest re-offering the body and blood of Christ in sacrifice to God in direct opposition to the Biblical teaching that Christ offered himself once for sin (Heb. 10/10-12). So, not only are the origins of Christmas in paganism, but it has been incorporated into another false religion (albeit professedly Christian) which is very much with us today.

Easter, likewise, has an equally unsavoury origin and is derived from Aristarte or Ashtaroth (Judges 10/6), the Babylonian queen of heaven in whose honour an annual festival was held in April. Hot-cross buns and dyed eggs are of Chaldean religious origin yet quite easily assimilated into Roman Catholicism though not compatible with Biblical Christianity.

WHO DECIDES?

Even if the pagan associations of the past or the current association with Roman Catholicism in the present were absent, the very fact that the Bible does not teach the observance of Christmas or Easter should be enough for us to avoid it. In the Old Testament, when God told the people of Israel exactly how to worship him, including the special days they were to observe, he also said, “what thing soever I command you, observe to do it; thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it”. (Deut. 12/32 cf Lev. 10/1-2) In the New Testament Christ taught the same thing: - “In vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandment of God, ye hold the tradition of men” (Mark 7/7-8). The Apostle Paul also warns against “will worship” (Col. 2/22-23), that is worship that originates in what man wants to do rather than what God requires him to do. We may like to say to others, “you worship God your way, I'll worship him mine”, but God actually requires us to worship him neither your way nor my way, but his way. The “church calendar” was never appointed by God.

This scriptural teaching that whatever Scripture does not warrant is to be excluded from worship is known as the "regulative principle". The exclusion of the church calendar, uninspired hymns, musical instruments, vestments and unscriptural ceremonies as well as more modern encroachments such as drama and dance, all stand on this same principle. Acceptance of this principle is a mark of a Reformed Church.

But you ask, does this mean that Christians are not free to worship God any day? No, this is not what we are saying. The New Testament church did meet on other days for worship than the weekly Lord's Day appointed by God. And certainly we may observe special times of prayer and thanksgiving as circumstances would suggest. To respond appropriately to special providences is entirely legitimate (e.g. Acts 4/24 and 12/5). "Nevertheless, it is lawful and necessary, upon special emergent occasions, to separate a day or days for publick fasting or thanksgiving, as the several eminent and extraordinary dispensations of God's providence shall administer cause and opportunity to his people" (Westminster Directory For Publick Worship), but the same document states, "festival days, vulgarly called 'Holy-days', having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued".

Providential circumstances vary, the facts of redemption accomplished do not. The facts of redemption to be specifically commemorated are the Lord's death and resurrection through the Lord's Supper and the Lord's Day respectively. No legitimate addition can be made to these Divine ordinances and so Christmas, Easter, Whitsun etc. should be entirely rejected by the people of God.

NO SCHISM

It is common to hear Christians who want only the Lord's ordinances in the Lord's worship being accused of divisiveness. The opposite is the case. Christ required only whatsoever he had commanded to be taught for our observance (Matt. 28/20 cf. Rom. 16/17). True unity is when the people of God rally to the ordinances of the Lord and refrain from trying to bring one another into bondage by imposition of their particular preferred man-made ordinances. Human innovation divides the flock. The Lord's ordinances should attract all the Lord's people.

History illustrates this point. One of the earliest discussions in the church after the Apostolic age involved the question of the date on which Easter was to be observed. Neither side of the dispute was so irresponsible as to claim merely human authority for their position, but both appealed to supposed oral tradition of Apostolic practice, the Eastern Church claiming John and Philip and the West, Peter and Paul. William Cunningham concludes that "in God's providence there was a great beacon erected to warn men that no reliance is to be placed upon any pretended apostolical traditions, unless they are contained in the canonical Scriptures" (Historical Theology, Vol. 1, p. 146). Once we move outside the realm of Biblical precept, the Church's practice is determined by the law of the jungle, the strongest personalities and voices prevail or divide.

NO COMPROMISE

So what are we going to do with Christmas and Easter? It would be a bold and perhaps foolish man who would claim perfect consistency in this as in any other area of Christian living. But we must "press toward the mark" in this as in all areas of life. And the "mark" to which we must aim in this is consistent non-acknowledgement of these festivals except by way of condemnation.

(a) The Church

These festivals know no place whatsoever in the life and worship of the church. Ministers need to avoid any positive reference to them and should not deliberately preach on related themes because they are topical. If systematic exposition of a part of Scripture is in progress, let it continue from December into January unabated, or if a topical theme is really desired, let it be to expose the evil of these elements of man-made religion. No attempt should be made to meet the Christmas (or Easter)-observing churches half-way. For a Reformed psalm-singing church to attempt this is a sad affair. It will neither satisfy the enthusiast who craves “carols by candlelight”, nor the Reformed Christian who desires to stick close to the Word of God.

(b) The Home

It hardly need be said that no Christian parent should convey the Santa Claus lie to his children, but what of the less obviously ungodly social customs? That which is offensive to God in his worship is no cause for celebration in the home. Why should a Christian acknowledge in his home an anti-Christian festival? Would the Lord have approved domestic acknowledgement of the feasts of Baal in Israel provided there were no outward acts of worship? The social customs cannot be divorced from the anti-Christian festival which is the very cause of their existence, however convenient we may find the idea. Romans 14:5 does not apply here since this refers to days once appointed by God in the Old Testament but done away with in the New but the observance of which was tolerated during the transition period from Old to New. The church calendar has never had Divine approval.

(c) Society in General

Those seeking to give no positive acknowledgement of these festivals amidst all the complexities of life at the office, the factory or the campus should receive the sympathetic encouragement of all their brothers and sisters in the Lord. This path, which the Word of God requires, is a difficult one, but certainly not as difficult as that of Christians in Muslim countries who suffer violence for refusing to observe Ramadan, for example. Should we be less zealous than they to reject the high-days of Antichrist when it is likely to cost us only a few strange looks and sharp words? The liberty our Covenanting forefathers suffered and died to give us was not that false liberty to compromise, but freedom to engage in Biblical worship without civil interference. And we can still reject Christmas and Easter without being arrested. Be thankful. It should also be said that our non-observance can bring an abundance of evangelistic opportunity.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Man-made religion tends not to rest content alongside the true ordinances of God. Mountains of Christmas cards are delivered on the Sabbath before 25th December. If “Christmas Day” is a Sabbath, many churches cancel evening services and have a minimal morning one. Why? Because man’s ordinances inevitably tend to “make the commandment of God of none effect” (Matt.15/6).

But the heart of the matter is this; does God, because he is God, have the right to tell us how to approach him? Surely he has the right to prescribe the outward form of worship, the Mediator through whom we should come and the state of heart (repentance and faith) with which we should come. From the inside out, God must be acknowledged as God, as being both the object and prescriber of worship. The issue is ultimately between man-made religion and Biblical Christianity. If we believe the latter should be closely adhered to in doctrine, let our worship and practice be equally conformed to the Word of God. Biblical doctrine and Biblical practice must stand together. The neglect of the latter invariably tends to undermine the former, however slowly and imperceptibly.

“Doing our own thing” in worship, even in observing Christmas and Easter, if followed through to its full conclusion, is subversive of only one thing - the Gospel.

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