



On Easter

NKJ Exodus 32:1 Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him."

2 And Aaron said to them, "Break off the golden earrings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me."

3 "So all the people broke off the golden earrings which were in their ears, and brought them to Aaron.

4 And he received the gold from their hand, and he fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molded calf. Then they said, "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!"

5 So when Aaron saw it, he built an altar before it. And Aaron made a proclamation and said, "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

6 Then they rose early on the next day, offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.

7 And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves.

8 "They have turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!' "

9 And the LORD said to Moses, "I have seen this people, and indeed it is a stiff-necked people!

10 "Now therefore, let Me alone, that My wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them. And I will make of you a great nation."

The people then were content to have Moses intercede for them with God. But now a long time has passed, and Moses, the mediator, has not reappeared. The last time they saw him he was walking into the consuming fire of God almighty. Maybe they believed that Moses had indeed been consumed by this fire from the Lord, but regardless they thought they were rid of Moses, out of sight was out of mind. What happens next is that the leaders of the rebellion gather together and come against Aaron, Moses' brother. They speak contemptuously of Moses calling him in effect "that guy Moses" saying that he has disappeared and the obvious implication is that he is not coming back. Then they demand from Aaron a God to go before them.

Aaron at this point has a choice, he can try to talk them out of their monstrous idea. After all, when they had arrived at the mountain, God himself had commanded them "do not make for yourselves gods of silver or gods of gold" or he can cave in. Aaron, who was probably frightened of the mob and desiring to please them, caves in immediately asking them to strip of their earrings, he then fashions for them an idol in the form of a Golden calf.

What is sometimes taught in Sunday Schools is that the Golden Calf that Aaron made was a false god, and that the people literally thought that the image that Aaron made was a god. Therefore in worshipping it, the people were breaking the First Commandment. But that's not true. Even back then people were not so naïve as to think

that the object made of wood, or stone, or precious metal was itself a god anymore than the later Israelites literally thought that the Ark of the Covenant was Yahweh. They also knew that the God who had brought them out of Egypt was still at the top of the Mountain. They didn't want a new god to worship. They wanted to worship the same God who had delivered them a new way. The Golden Calf either symbolized Yahweh, or they viewed it as his throne or footstool in the same way that the Ark of the Covenant was his "mercy seat". Therefore in making the Golden Calf, they weren't breaking the first commandment, they were breaking the second commandment by making an image of God.

Then Aaron having given in to their desire for an image, compounds their sin by declaring that tomorrow will be a feast day to Yahweh. Not only does he give them an image of God to be the center of their worship, he creates a brand new uncommanded Holy Day. So the next day, like children who can't wait for Christmas, they get up early to celebrate "Deliverance Day." They offer sacrifices to the Lord and then after a huge feast they begin to party. If you are trying to imagine what is meant here by "revelry", think of the way St. Patrick's day is celebrated in New York, lots of wine, women, and song to say the least.

1) Men's hearts are as prone to idolatry as dry wood is to fire. Moses only has to be gone for a little while before the Israelites are breaking God's explicit commandments and creating new ways of worshiping and that in spite of the fact that God Himself was visibly present at the top of the mountain. What was true then is just as true now. We do not want to worship God the way he commands, we want to devise new methods, images, ceremonies, holy days, whatever excites our sinful imagination, and we always want to go to God via symbolism rather than revelation.

1 Cor. 10:6 Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted.

7 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play."

8 Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell;

9 nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents;

10 nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

11 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.

13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

14 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

Now this was not an image of a false God, but a false image of the true God, which is why Aaron declares in Exodus 32:4 "This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" That phrase was carefully chosen. By it he is saying, this calf which looks like the kinds of idols that the cultures they lived amongst produced, is an image of Yahweh who delivered you and who declared in the introduction to the Ten Commandments: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2)

Then he goes further and declares the first uncommanded Holy Day saying "Tomorrow is a feast to the LORD."

Now let me ask you, if it was ok for the people to determine how they were going to worship the Lord, what would God's response have been to all this? Hey, the important thing is that they are worshipping me and enjoying themselves in a culturally relevant fashion that seems to really appeal to all kinds of

Israelites. Instead God is furious, and it is only the intercession of Moses on their behalf that saves them from being utterly destroyed.

Now is it just making images that God, was concerned about? Not at all. He was concerned that they not adopt any worship practices that he had not commanded, especially by borrowing from the surrounding cultures.

He says to them in Leviticus 26:1 'You shall not make idols for yourselves; neither a carved image nor a sacred pillar shall you rear up for yourselves; nor shall you set up an engraved stone in your land, to bow down to it; for I am the LORD your God.

2 You shall keep My Sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary: I am the LORD.

In fact throughout the first five books of the Bible God strives again and again to tell his people, the nation of Israel, the church in the Old Testament that they are a peculiar people. Yes, that made the people of Israel really weird and different from the surrounding people, but God knew all too well what the practice of adopting their worship practices – which is a process we call syncretism – leads to:

Deut. 12:28 "Observe and obey all these words which I command you, that it may go well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the sight of the LORD your God.
29 " When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land,

30 "take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, 'How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.'

31 "You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

32 "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.

He knew that what they would do is start by adding a little here and a little there. "O look what they do in Moab on March 12th, isn't this a cool ritual, wouldn't our God be pleased by it?" And gradually you run with your preferences, your imaginations and inventions, and then after a while you don't hesitate to add even abominations like temple prostitution or child sacrifice that go directly counter to God's moral law.

So God says, don't even start down that road, I will show you how I desire to be worshipped in my word, by commandment and example so just be careful to observe it; you don't need to add to it nor take away from it. This is what pleases me.

Ok that was the church in the Old Testament, but what about the church in the New Testament? Well when the Son of God, Jesus Christ came to dwell with men, they were at it again. O not with anything as crass as idols, but our Savior could barely move without offending the Pharisees by violating one of their made up worship traditions. Gradually over hundreds of years a body of uncommanded Rabbinic worship practices had developed and the Pharisees and Scribes taught that men must obey them.

So Jesus said to them - Matt. 15:8 'These people draw near to Me with their mouth, And honor Me with their lips, But their heart is far from Me.

9 And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' "

Ok well Jesus taught that our made-up worship traditions are vain, no matter how old they are, if they aren't God's commandments, God is not pleased by them. Paul calls them will-worship or self-imposed religion in Col. 2:23 and says they have no value.

So from that time on, the church never got it wrong again, right? From that point on the worship of the church was simple and biblical and we said "If the Apostles didn't do it, we don't need to either." I wish that had been the case, but almost as soon as the Apostolic age was over we started borrowing from the culture, adding rituals, garments, feast days, even images of Saints and the three persons of the Trinity. By the time of the Protestant Reformation, it had gotten to the point where the simple worship commanded in scripture had been entirely jettisoned in favor of a highly stylized melange of cultural worship. So at the heart of the Reformation was the desire to get rid of all these unbiblical traditions getting back to the commands and teaching of the Bible. To get back to the Great Commission Jesus gave the church in all things:

Matthew 28:18 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

20 "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; (not what you have made up or what seems like a good idea) and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

So what applications do we have for this commandment today?

The festival of Easter, no doubt, was introduced in the second century, in place of the Passover, and in accommodation to the same Jewish prejudice which had said, even during the apostolic age, "Except ye be circumcised, after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." Hence, it was generally called pascha, and pasch, in conformity with the name of the Jewish festival, whose place it took. It seems to have received the title of Easter in Great Britain, from the circumstance, that, when Christianity was introduced into that country, a great Pagan festival, celebrated at the same season of the year, in honour of the Pagan goddess Eostre, yielded its place to the Christian festival, which received, substantially, the name of the Pagan deity. The title of Easter, it is believed, is seldom used but by Britons and their descendants.

Origin of the Name *Easter* – *The Venerable Bede*

15. The English Months

In olden time the English people -- for it did not seem fitting to me that I should speak of other people's observance of the year and yet be silent about my own nation's -- calculated their months according to the course of the moon. Hence, after the manner of the Greeks and the Romans (the months) take their name from the Moon, for the Moon is called *mona* and the month *monath*.

The first month, which the Latins call January, is Giuli; February is called Solmonath; March Hrethmonath; April, Eosturmonath; May, Thrimilchi; June, Litha; July, also Litha; August, Weodmonath; September, Halegmonath; October, Winterfilleth; November, Blodmonath; December, Giuli, the same name by which January is called. ...

Nor is it irrelevant if we take the time to translate the names of the other months. ... Hrethmonath is named for their goddess Hretha, to whom they sacrificed at this time. Eosturmonath has a name which is now translated "Paschal month", and which was once called after a goddess of theirs named Eostre, in whose honour feasts were celebrated in that month. Now they designate that Paschal season by her name, calling the joys of the new

rite by the time-honoured name of the old observance. Thrimilchi was so called because in that month the cattle were milked three times a day...

As there were no holy-days, excepting the Lord's day, observed in the Christian Church while the Apostles lived; and no hint given, that they thought any other expedient or desirable; so we find no hint of any such observance having been adopted until towards the close of the second century. Then, the celebration of Easter gave rise to a controversy; the Asiatic Christians pleading for its observance at the same time which was prescribed for the Jewish Passover, and contending that they were supported in this by apostolic tradition; while the Western Church contended for its stated celebration on a certain Sunday, and urged, with equal confidence, apostolic tradition in favour of their scheme. Concerning this fierce and unhallowed controversy, Socrates, the ecclesiastical historian, who wrote soon after the time of Eusebius, 439 AD and begins his history where the latter closes his narrative; speaking on the controversy concerning Easter, expresses himself thus: "Neither the ancients, nor the fathers of later times, I mean such as favoured the Jewish custom, had sufficient cause to contend so eagerly about the feast of Easter; for they considered not within themselves, that when the Jewish religion was changed into Christianity, the literal observance of the Mosaic law, and the types of things to come, wholly ceased. And this carries with it its own evidence. For no one of Christ's laws permits Christians to observe the rites of the Jews. *Nay, the Apostle hath in plain words forbidden it, where he abrogates circumcision, and exhorts us not to contend about feasts and holy-days. For, writing to the Galatians, he admonishes them not to observe days, and months, and times, and years. And unto the Colossians, he is as plain as may be, declaring, that the observance of such things was but a shadow. Neither the Apostles nor the Evangelists have enjoined on Christians the observance of Easter; but have left the remembrance of it to the free choice and discretion of those who have been benefited by such days. Men keep holy-days, because thereon they enjoy rest from toil and labour. Therefore, it comes to pass, that in every place they do celebrate, of their own accord, the remembrance of the Lord's passion. But neither our Saviour nor his Apostles have any where commanded us to observe it.*" Socrates, Lib. 5, cap. 21.

Dr. Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton, New Jersey wrote confidently in 1835 that "Presbyterians do not observe Holy Days." Yet some 164 years after the book in which Miller made that bold declaration was published, an informal survey of 30 churches in the Presbyterian Church in America, the largest of the theologically conservative Presbyterian bodies in the United States, indicated that 83% of the churches do regularly celebrate Holy Days.

What happened in those intervening 164 years? Did the practice of Presbyterians change significantly in that time or was Miller's declaration inaccurate when he made it? What might have brought about such a radical change if it did in fact occur? This essay will seek to answer these questions. Because of space constraints, considerably more time will be spent examining the history of the development of Presbyterian practice in the United States regarding Holy Days than in examining the theological foundations for that practice. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to begin by discussing the theological reasoning behind Dr. Miller's declaration.

Presbyterians, and indeed most Christians who describe their theology as distinctively "Reformed", believe that the worship of the church is one of the most important aspects of the faith. Furthermore they believe that this worship must be guided by the theology of the Bible. What makes the worship of those whose theological roots are in the puritan wing of the Reformation, is their belief that the only worship that is acceptable before God, is that worship which is expressly commanded in his word, the Bible. This Puritan belief is succinctly summed up in the most important of the Puritan creedal documents, The Westminster Confession of Faith, in the first section of the twenty-first chapter:

“The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.”

In accordance with their beliefs, the Puritans attempted to ensure that only those elements which were directly instituted by God were present in their worship. Their worship was distinctively different from that of other Protestants such as the Lutherans, Anglicans, who tended to believe that true worship consisted of that which was commanded by God and anything which was not specifically condemned. Accordingly, outside of the Puritan wing of the Reformation, many innovations in worship that had been adopted by the Church since the closing of the Canon were retained. The fact that the Anglican church in particular retained many of these innovations is particularly important, because it was in the attempt to thoroughly Reform the Anglican Church of England that the majority of the Puritan battles were waged, and it was out of these battles that the Puritan Confessional Standards came.

Amongst those innovations that continued to be practiced by the Anglican church, was the observance of what had come to be called the Church Year. The Church Year consisted of a series of festivals or feast days on which the church traditionally held special worship services and employed particular liturgies. While feast days were most commonly held to celebrate the birth or martyrdom of a Saint, the two most popular feast days in the Anglican Church were undoubtedly Christmas and Easter, which celebrated the birth and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Puritans did not observe Christmas and Easter because they did wish to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ but because they believed that God had not instituted a cycle of two special feast days, but fifty two holy days on which to glorify Jesus Christ and to preach on the importance of his birth, death, and resurrection.

These fifty holy days were, of course, Sunday called the Lord's day. The Puritans observed every Sunday as the New Testament continuation of the Old Testament Sabbath day of rest and worship:

“As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week, and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.”

For the Puritans, these Christian Sabbaths were the only days that were specifically set aside by the Lord for worship. There had indeed been specific feast days apart from the Sabbath in the Old Testament period, but the Puritans felt that these feast days were part of the Ceremonial Law, and as such had passed away when Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, appeared. The Sabbath, on the other hand, as both a creation ordinance (cf. Genesis 2:2-3) and part of the Moral Law (Exodus 20:8-11) was an occasion to be observed by all of the people of God throughout all the ages.

Part of the proof for the Puritans that new feast days were not to be created and observed was the fact that they had not been invented or observed by either the Apostolic or the early Church. The Scriptures contained no references whatsoever to the actual dates on which the events which were later celebrated were to be observed had occurred. The church did not begin to seriously conjecture as to when these events had taken place until the third century AD and it was not until the fourth century AD that the church began to celebrate the feast of the nativity (Christmas) for instance. The placement by the church of this event on December 25th had less to do with the date they felt was most likely for the birth of Christ, than the desire to undermine the celebration of the

Saturnalia, a pagan festival beginning on the December 17th, with a rival Christian holiday. The choice of December 25th, the winter solstice, was made because the Roman Emperor Auerlian, had decreed in 274 A.D. that December 25th was to be kept as a public festival in honor of the Invincible Sun. The choice of the 25th was therefore both an attempt to challenge the Pagan feast day and to maximize on the obvious metaphor between the “invincible sun” of Roman Paganism and the “Invincible Son” (Jesus Christ) of Christianity.

But more important than the questionable circumstance of their institution for the Puritans, was the simple fact that the celebration of these holy days had no warrant in the Word of God. On the contrary, the Puritans and their descendents were concerned that the Word of God forbade their celebration:

“We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days, but that they positively discountenance it. Let any one impartially weigh Colossians ii. 16 and also, Galatians iv. 9, 10, 11; and then say whether these passages do not evidently indicate, that the inspired Apostle disapproved of the observance of such days.”

It should be stressed that the Puritans and Presbyterians were not the only descendants of the Reformation who held to this belief. Even the inheritors of the radical reformation, the Anabaptists, Baptists, and Quakers loathed Holy days as Papist abominations without scriptural warrant. This united support for the abandonment of feast days was to prove particularly important in the colonies of New England, where the celebration of feast days was to become virtually unheard of outside of the few Anglican enclaves that existed.

While the Reformers in the Anglican church corporately decided to retain these holy days in 1562 and endeavored unsuccessfully to gain control of them, the Puritans decided to strike them from their calendars entirely for the above stated reasons.

When the Puritans assembled at Westminster in the 1640s to draw up the Biblical Standards that would define Presbyterian belief for centuries to follow, they did not mince words regarding holy days. The Directory for the Publick Worship of God which was a part of the original Westminster Standards adopted by parliament, was intended to guide and inform (but not liturgically constrain like the Book of Common Prayer) the worship of the Church. Included in the Directory was the bold theological declaration:

“THERE is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath.

Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.”

The Puritans had declared Holy Days theologically unwarranted, and as they began to gain the upper-hand in the English Parliament, they moved decisively against both the public and ecclesiastical celebration of Holy Days. In 1642 Parliament outlawed the seasonal plays and pageants that proliferated around holy days and in purposely met on every Christmas from 1644 to 1652 to show their disdain for what they felt was an unwarranted innovation that produced nothing but moral abuses. Finally in 1652 after the Triumph of the Puritan Statesman Oliver Cromwell and the beheading of Charles I, the observance of Holy days was “strongly prohibited” and ministers who preached on the birth of Christ on Christmas risked imprisonment. Shops were required to keep open and Churches were heavily fined for attempting to put up decorations.

There is no warrant in Scripture for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holy days, rather the contrary (see Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed Faith, conducive to will worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity

of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. --General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterians), Deliverance on Christmas and Easter (1899).

There is a ritualism against which George Gillespie delivered a destructive blow by his work on "English-Popish Ceremonies Obtruded on the (Reformed) Church of Scotland"--the ritualism of saints' days and holy days--and in which he described these and other ceremonies as the "twigs and spriggs of Popish superstition." These and other similar rites and ceremonies have been repudiated by the Presbyterianism of this northern kingdom without a dissentient voice for the last 300 years. . . . If a number of ministers in Presbyterian charges where no ritualism exists were to resolve to ritualise and Romanise their congregations, could they adopt better measures than those in operation by ritualists? Their plan of campaign would be marked by the following stages at considerable intervals:--adverse comments on the simplicity of the worship observed; . . . introduction of saints' days and holy days, including Ash Wednesday, Maunday Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday; . . . Would they not be toying all this time with the trinkets of Babylon? --Dr. James Kerr 1895

In former times the Reformed Presbyterian Church was solidly opposed to the religious observance of Christmas, Easter and other special days of the same kind. . . . [W]e should realize that we Covenanters, in opposing the observance of Easter and other "holy" days, are only holding to the original principle which was once held by all Presbyterians everywhere. It is not the Covenanters that have changed. . . . [T]he apostle Paul regards this observance of days as a bad tendency: "I am afraid of (for) you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain." . . . Paul wondered what was wrong with their religious knowledge and experience, that they should have become so zealous for the observance of days. --J. G. Vos (minister, Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America), "The Observance of Days" in Blue Banner Faith and Life (1947).

It is just this attitude of indifference to the Constitution that has brought us to the state we are in in the P.C.U.S. Whereas, earlier, as is reflected in the 1899 deliverance about Christmas and Easter, there was meticulous concern for staying with the standards, and the strict interpretation of Scripture on even such a matter as these two days. Now there is a complete reversal to the point of adopting the liturgical calendar of past tradition, without any Biblical basis. --Morton Smith (professor, Greenville Theological Seminary, Presbyterian Church in America), How is the Gold Become Dim (1973).

Holy Days. The Free Presbyterian Church rejects the modern custom becoming so prevalent in the Church of Scotland, of observing Christmas and Easter. It regards the observance of these days as symptomatic of the trend in the Church of Scotland towards closer relations with Episcopacy. At the time of the Reformation in Scotland all these festivals were cast out of the Church as things that were not only unnecessary

but unscriptural. --Committee appointed by the Synod of the Free Presbyterian Church, History of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. 1893-1970 (ca. 1974).