

Christmas and Romans 14:5-6

Some believers think that Romans 14:5-6 warrants them holding special events to celebrate Christmas.¹ I wish to probe this claim.

Since I have already looked at Romans 14 and 15 in the round² – and it is vital to see the big picture in context – I now limit myself to quoting the two verses in question:

One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honour of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honour of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honour of the Lord and gives thanks to God (Rom. 14:5-6).

Let's state the obvious. And it is important not to miss the obvious. When he wrote to the Romans, the apostle couldn't have had any thought whatsoever of Christmas, since Christendom itself had not been invented, and it was only in the 9th century that Christendom really got a hold on Christmas. Let the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* explain:

December 25 was first identified as the date of Jesus' birth by Sextus Julius Africanus in 221 and later became the universally accepted date... Christmas began to be widely celebrated with a specific liturgy in the 9th century.

So, whatever Paul was referring to in Romans 14, he was not referring to the observance of Christmas. No such date, season, festival in connection with Christ, existed at the time. No believer would have had a clue about any such observance. It is surely straining the limits of credulity to argue for Christmas on the basis of Romans 14: a case of having blatantly read the festival

¹ See, for example, Alan Hill: 'The Feast of Purim and the Feast of Christmas' (*Evangelical Times*, 26th Nov. 2021).

² My 'A Disaster Averted: Romans 14:5-6' (on my sermonaudio.com page) should be read before this article.

back into the passage and reading it out – eisegesis not exegesis – and showing determination and presumption by clinging to the pre-conceived idea.

Of course, Paul was talking about ‘a day’ – unspecified – so it is, I suppose, possible to read any day into the passage – the day of Christ’s dipping by John in the Jordan, the day of his crucifixion, his burial, resurrection and ascension, for instance – if they can be determined, that is.³ But why stop there? Why not take on board the entire Christendom calendar of holy days, festivals, and the like, and say that observing such dates and seasons is warranted?⁴ And why not go further and embrace Valentine’s Day, April Fool’s Day, Mother’s or Father’s Day,⁵ or whatever? Where to draw the line? Is there any line to be drawn?⁶

Or does it, in any case, smack of a deep-seated carnal desire for a return to the deluding tomfoolery of mystery plays, stained glass windows, incense and the like? And who is to call a halt – if a halt is to be called – and where? Shall we see ‘The Jesus Jack-In-The-Green’, ‘The Jesus Mummers’, ‘The Jesus Morris Dancers’, ‘The Jesus Floral Dance’, ‘The Jesus Garden Fete and Cream

³ Christendom in what we now know as the British Isles had a long struggle over the date of Easter. Such things were – and still are – jam (with a hefty dollop of cream) for theologians, but it was the politicians who had to sort it out. As they duly did! ‘The Synod of Whitby was... held in... 664, wherein King Oswiu ruled that his kingdom would calculate Easter and observe the monastic tonsure [haircut] according to the customs of Rome rather than the customs practiced by Irish monks at Iona and its satellite institutions’ (Wikipedia). Theologians may pronounce, but ecclesiastical-politicians decide. Such is the way of Christendom.

⁴ I have just checked ‘Holy Days of Obligation 2023’. Quite a list!

⁵ Indeed, it was at a Mothering-Day’s Service in 1956 that I heard an Arminian preacher on Rev. 3:20. Nevertheless, God’s blessing and use of any scheme, as we all well-know, does not signal his approval of every aspect of the performance; our warrant must be plain Scripture teaching.

⁶ During the 1570s, when Elizabeth I cultivated the vision of herself as a goddess, the annual celebration of her Day of Accession outshone any remembrance of the old celebration-days when Rome held sway.

Tea’, ‘The Jesus Hog Roast’?⁷ Why not? All suitably sanctified by a having a special ‘Christian Service’ to mark The Event, all in the name of Jesus, of course! From time to time I see ‘Pimms & Hymns’ advertised locally in an Anglican church. Above all, think of The Opportunity for evangelism! Christmas, whatever else it is, above all is for evangelicals ‘An Opportunity’ – for what many evangelicals consider evangelism to be. And that, as I have tackled in several works, is fast becoming the virtual be-all-and-end-all for many evangelicals. So... on the matter of day-selection, when do we say enough is enough? I only ask – for the moment.

One thing we can be sure of; wherever we do draw the line, as noted above, theologians can always be relied on to come up with a theology to justify the wackiest of notions.⁸

But let me do more than ask or suggest: let me probe the way the passage from Romans has been used to try to justify Christmas observance. Use – or, abuse?

The first, the chief, thing to notice is that paying no attention to the big picture but just diving into the chapter and latching on to a few words is rather like plunging the hand into a barrel of sawdust in a fairground ‘lucky dip’ to see what you can come up with. The first step in applying Scripture must always be to make sure we are clear about the context. What is the big picture? As I have explained elsewhere,⁹ ignoring the big picture, though it is commonly done, is not only shoddy; it is highly dangerous.

The fact is, treating the Bible as a barrel of bran strikes me as a case of: ‘Have idea; find text!’ It is not just the obvious point already made that the observance of Christmas could not have

⁷ Long-established English folklore customs, festivals and rites often with pagan connections. Traditional dressing up by the characters is typical. The ‘Jack-in-the-Green’, a dancing figure in a foliage-covered wicker shell, is often centre-stage in contemporary May Day celebrations. The Floral Dance celebrates the end of Winter and the start of Spring. And so on.

⁸ Infant baptism is a classic. See my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

⁹ See my *False Brothers: Paul and Today*.

been in the apostle's mind when writing Romans 14 – it's not just a bare negative.¹⁰ As so often, Paul wrote to deal with a specific problem. His solutions and explanations, of course, have far wider application, but the primary issue, the apostle's primary purpose in writing, must always play a leading part in any application we make of what he said.

As I have explained in an earlier article,¹¹ I have become convinced that the issue in Rome, that which Paul was dealing with in Romans 14 and 15 – and it was a thorny problem within the *ekklēsia* at Rome – was to do with some converted Jews, who even though they were living in the day of the new covenant, felt they ought to keep alive some of their familiar (and, no doubt, well-loved) Jewish customs, traditions, prohibitions, and the like, vestiges of the old, Mosaic covenant.¹² That was the issue at Rome. This must play a vital role in our understanding and application of the passage.

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Let me tease out some of the consequences of applying Romans 14 and 15 to Christmas observance. We need to think about who are the 'weak', and who are the 'strong'. Clearly the 'weak' must be believers who would like to have Christmas in *ekklēsia* life, whereas the 'strong' must be believers who would not. Take this

¹⁰ I recall that when I gave a paper to dismiss covenant-theology's claim of an Adamic covenant – 'the covenant of works' – an objector expressed her distaste by posting a blog comment to the effect that I showed the weakness of my argument when I observed that 'covenant' did not appear – as a word – in Gen. 2 & 3. In truth, that was by no means a major part of my argument, but merely a passing factual comment, an incidental. True, nevertheless.

¹¹ As already noted, see my 'A Disaster Averted: Romans 14:5-6' on my sermonaudio.com page. That article should be read to give the background to this article.

¹² Hebrews was written to prevent Jewish believers leaving Christ, leaving the new covenant, and returning to the old covenant. That, it surely does not need to be said, would have been a disaster of the first magnitude. See the warning passages in Hebrews (Heb. 2:1-4; 3:6 – 4:13; 5:11 – 6:12; 10:19-39; 12:3-29).

a bit further: supposing, for sake of argument, that Paul's words *can* be applied to Christmas, it would mean that believers who do not want Christmas would tolerate it for the sake of those who do, but only on the clear understanding that this state of affairs was temporary until the 'weak' came to see that the festival should be stopped.

Is this how present-day evangelicals see Christmas? Is this the reason for having a Christmas Event – so that any superstitious clinging on to Christmas by some believers might gradually wither and die? That's the last thing most Christmas-advocates would want. Christmas has been invented. It has been part of the scenery for countless generations – indeed, for more than 1000 years. It has grown in importance. We like it. We can't imagine life without it. It is here to stay. To (lightly, but only lightly) accommodate scripture:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the [churches] [they set up Christmas Events]; [and] my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer. 5:30-31).

Again, the observances Paul spoke of in Romans 14 and 15, I suggest, almost certainly had some kind of scriptural warrant somewhere in the background. After all, old-covenant practices were right and proper – *in the days of the old covenant!* What scriptural warrant is there for the Christmas festival? It's basis is pagan!

And don't the following scripture passages rebuke any tendency to take pagan concepts and 'Christendomise' them?

[As God commanded his old-covenant people:] Learn not the way of the nations [pagans] nor be dismayed at the signs of the heavens because the nations are dismayed at them, for the customs of the peoples are vanity (Jer. 10:2-3).

This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men (Matt. 15:8-9).

[As God commands his new-covenant people:] Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. But now that you have come to know God, or

rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have laboured over you in vain (Gal. 4:8-11).

[Again:] See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits [principles] of the world, and not according to Christ (Col. 2:8).¹³

So much for my revisiting Romans 14:5-6 in connection with claims about Christmas. I remain convinced that those two verses really do not support its observance. And that – if you have not already worked it out – is a bit of an understatement!

¹³ Incidentally, Christ's strong rebuke in Rev. 2:20 seems to me to have within it some relevance to the observance of Christmas. The problem at Thyatira, it would appear, was eating idol-offered meat in connection with pagan festivals – not a million miles from current observance of Christmas, especially if we substitute 'religious-superstition' for 'idol-offered'.