

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #6

Romans 14:5-6
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There is nothing wrong with or sinful about establishing family traditions that bring your family together at a particular time of the year in order to enjoy one another’s company—provided moral principles from God’s Word are not violated or compromised.

One of those times of the year in which various family traditions have been established and continued from year to year (or perhaps from one generation to the next) is that of Christmas. Schools are vacated for a couple weeks if not longer; most businesses close down for at least that day (December 25th), if not longer. Vacations and family reunions are scheduled around this holiday, and many sentimental memories are wakened by certain sights, sounds, smells, and tastes associated with Christmas.

Even for those Christian families that refrain from celebrating Christmas as a religious memorial of the birth of Jesus Christ (because it has never been so appointed by God in Scripture to be celebrated), yet they have made Christmas (Xmas) into a family day of festivities with a decorated Christmas tree, mistletoe, holly, stockings hanging from the fireplace, and gift-giving. Thus, these Christian families have celebrated what some of them have called a “secular Christmas”.

But does the celebration of a secular Christmas violate moral principles found in Scripture? If it does not, then there is no reason to forbid it. If, however, a secular Christmas does violate moral principles that God has given to us in His Word, then as Christians who want above all else to please Jesus Christ, we must not join ourselves with the idolatry and

superstition associated with the celebration of Christmas—even if it is not our intention to celebrate a religious holy day or to practice idolatry. Just as the Corinthian Christians were prohibited by Paul (1 Corinthians 10:19-20) from eating meat offered to idols in the pagan temple restaurant—even though these Christians did not go there to practice idolatry, they just went to have a secular family celebration—Paul forbids them from doing so because they were associating themselves with the idolatry and superstitions of the pagans (who viewed the meat as set apart to their god or actually to demons as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:20). In this brief series of sermons we have noted moral principles from both the Old Testament and from the New Testament that prohibit us from celebrating either a “religious Christmas” or a “secular Christmas”.

In this final sermon of the series, I would like to consider some objections that are raised against the prohibition of celebrating a secular Christmas and questions that might be raised in regard to celebrating a secular Christmas.

I. **Romans 14:5-6.** From this passage it is argued that the Apostle Paul allows for the celebration of holy days (including Christmas). Paul (it is claimed) does not forbid a Christian from esteeming one day above another (such as Christmas), but rather encourages such a person to do so to the glory of God.

A. The Apostle Paul (in Romans 14) is addressing problems which arose between fellow Christians (some are described as “**weak**”, 14:2, while others are said to be “**strong**”, 15:1). It is particular Jewish Christians that are herein referred to as “weak”; and they were called “**weak**” because they believed they were yet obligated to obey various ordinances in the Old Testament ceremonial law (with regard to food,

drink, and holy days, Romans 14:14 [*koinos*=common]; Romans 14:20 [*katharos*=clean]; Acts 10:14 [where the two Greek adjectives used to describe food that was not allowed under the Old Testament ceremonial law; *koinos*=common, *akathartos*=unclean).

a. The “**weak**” did not yet fully realize that Christ had fulfilled those ceremonial laws in His person and work and that Christians were no longer obligated to follow them. Their “weakness” was not due to their practicing a holy day that was instituted by man’s mere authority, but rather their “weakness” was due to their not understanding how Christ had already fulfilled those God-ordained holy days of the Old Testament ceremonial law (like Passover, Tabernacles, and Pentecost).

b. The Apostle Paul says that this “weakness” on the part of these Jewish Christians was to be temporarily tolerated because they did so “unto the Lord” (i.e. with a conscience that desired to please the Lord based upon the fact that God had commanded these holy days in the Old Testament Scripture) and because these Jewish Christians were in transition in their thinking and practice from Old Testament ceremonies to New Testament realities. These “weak” brethren were not introducing a man-made religious celebration that had no divine warrant (like Christmas, Easter, Lent etc.), but rather were continuing the religious celebration of Old Testament holy days that had divine warrant (although they were fulfilled in Christ as Paul taught in Colossians 2:16-17).

c. For the “**weak**” brother the issue of holy days was not a matter of preference (i.e. “I just want to celebrate the Feast of the Passover”), but rather a matter of obligation (i.e. “God yet requires me to celebrate the Feast of the Passover”). Thus, it is so important to recognize that Paul is not granting a liberty to the “weak” brethren to celebrate just any holy day, but a concession (for a brief transitional period of time until the destruction of the temple in 70 a.d.) to observe divinely authorized holy days from the Old Testament and during that time they were to be instructed that these shadows have legally passed away within the

Christian Church (this was also the case in the Churches of Galatia, Galatians 4:10 and the Church of Colossae, Colossians 2:16-17).

2. On the other hand, the Christians who were “strong” (which is the group among whom Paul classifies himself in Romans 15:1) were not free spirits who believed they could worship God or celebrate holy days without God’s approval from His Word. Rather they correctly understood that Christ’s death legally freed them from the specific ceremonial forms of outward worship and celebration of holy days as authorized in the Old Testament. Their Christian liberty was not a license to celebrate whatever holy days they desired (whether Christmas, Easter, etc.), but a freedom from the ceremonial law of the Old Testament and a freedom to be bound by God and His Holy Word alone as stated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

God alone is lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in any thing contrary to his word, or beside it, in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience (20:2).

B. Furthermore, Romans 14:23 states, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” How could the celebration of Christmas be of faith or of conviction when the Lord never authorized it in His Word as a holy day to be observed in the first place? Dear ones, only that which God has revealed in His Word can be of faith in matters of doctrine or worship (including holy days). Christmas celebration is therefore a sin against God since it cannot be of faith in His Word.

1. Dear ones, if this passage authorizes the celebration of man-made holy days (like Christmas), why is there no apostolic record of such a celebration of Christmas and why is there no evidence of such a celebration until the fourth century (approximately 300 years after the death of Christ)?

2. George Gillespie, faithful minister and commissioner to the Westminster Assembly clears the matter in Romans 14 when he states:

The Apostle comports with [bears with—GLP] the observation of days in the weak Jews, who understood not the fullness of the Christian liberty, ESPECIALLY SINCE THOSE DAYS, HAVING HAD THE HONOR TO BE ONCE APPOINTED BY GOD HIMSELF, were to be honorably buried (*A Dispute Against English Popish Ceremonies*, p. 38, emphases added).

C. I submit there is no warrant for celebrating Christmas, Easter, or any other man-appointed holy day from Romans 14. However, what about a secular Christmas rather than a religious Christmas?

1. Since the Scripture calls God's people to destroy all religious celebration of holy days appointed by man (rather than by God—like Christmas), then it would follow that if we as Christians are to treat such a man-appointed holy day as dead, as destroyed in our minds, in our convictions, in our homes, and in our churches, there would be nothing religious left to secularize, and thus no secular celebration of Christmas or other holy days.

2. If that which is superstitious (and places the will of man above the will of God, as man does with Christmas) is to be extirpated (according to Deuteronomy 12 and our Solemn League and Covenant), then taking monuments of idolatry from that day and using them in our own "secular" celebration is not removing Christmas from our memory, but is rather continuing the memory of Christmas.

II. It is claimed by some proponents of Christmas that it was not Christians that imitated the pagans in celebration on December 25th, but that it was pagans that imitated the Christians. In other words, it is claimed that Christians first began celebrating the birth of Him who was the Son of God on December 25th early in the third century and that in the latter part of the third century Emperor Aurelian (in 274 a.d.) subsequently imitated the Christians by decreeing December 25th as the birthday of the invincible sun god (*natalis solis invicti*). Thus, the claim is that the pagans high-jacked the celebration of Christmas on December 25th from the Christians, rather than the Christians high-jacking December 25th from the pagans.

A. According to Andrew McGowan (McFaddin Professor of Anglican Studies at Yale Divinity School and Dean of the Berkeley Divinity School at Yale), writing for the Biblical Archaeology Society in his article entitled “How December 25 Became Christmas” (August 12, 2014):

There is no mention of birth celebrations in the writings of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus (c. 130–200) or Tertullian (c. 160–225) ... [or—GLP] Origen of Alexandria (c. 165–264). As far as we can tell, Christmas was not celebrated at all at this point.

Finally, in about 200 C.E., a Christian teacher in Egypt makes reference to the date Jesus was born. According to Clement of Alexandria, several different days had been proposed by various Christian groups. Surprising as it may seem, Clement doesn’t mention December 25 at all. Clement writes: “There are those who have determined not only the year of our Lord’s birth, but also the day; and they say that it took place in the 28th year of Augustus, and in the 25th day of [the Egyptian month] Pachon [May 20 in our calendar] ... Further, others say that He was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmuthi [April 20 or 21].”

By the fourth century, however, we find references to two dates that were widely recognized—and now also celebrated—as Jesus’ birthday: December 25 in the western Roman Empire and January 6 in the East (especially in Egypt and Asia Minor).

The earliest mention of December 25 as Jesus’ birthday comes from a mid-fourth-century Roman almanac that lists the death dates of various Christian bishops and martyrs. The first date listed, December 25, is marked: *natus Christus in Betleem Judeae*: “Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judea.”

B. From the scholar’s research just cited, the celebration of Christmas was not noted until the fourth century, whereas the celebration of the birth of the sun god was officially appointed by Emperor Aurelian in the third century.

Early in the fourth century (before 354) the Roman Church seems to have selected the feast of Christmas to offset the great pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*) and from Rome the celebration spread eastward. Thus devotion to Christ, “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4.2), supplanted the commemoration of the cult of the Unconquered Sun (P.R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 425).

C. Thus, it is by no means obvious or even chronologically likely that early Christians began celebrating December 25th as the nativity of Christ before the pagans began celebrating December 25th as the nativity

of the sun god, Mithras. Even if (for the sake of argument) the Christian celebration preceded the pagan celebration, the celebration of Christ's nativity on December 25th was still never sanctioned by Christ or the apostles in the New Testament, but rather became a high, holy day known as the celebration of the "Mass of Christ" (Christmas) filled with the superstitions and blasphemies of the Roman Catholic Church.

III. It is claimed by proponents of a secular Christmas that if we can use in a non-religious way the days of the week (which are named after pagan gods), and months of the year (which are likewise named after pagan gods), then we can also use Christmas as a non-religious secular Christmas.

A. It should be noted that there are no religious celebrations (of which I am aware) each day of the week to religiously celebrate Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, etc. Likewise, there are no non-religious or secular celebrations because it is Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday etc. There is no equivalent religious celebration for every day of the week and for every month of the year as there is a religious celebration filled with superstition and idolatry on December 25th. The days of the week and the months of the year are universally recognized in Western societies of the world as being civil and not religious in nature.

1. A ship was named after a pagan god (as in **Acts 28:11**), and yet it did not prevent Paul from sailing on it (because the ship was of civil use and Paul did not celebrate either religiously or secularly the ship with the pagan names, but merely used it in a civil manner for transportation). J.A. Alexander remarks about the twin pagan gods on this ship:

The ancient ships, besides the image of some tutelary [patron—GLP] god upon the stern, bore a carved or painted figure-head upon the prow, which gave name to the vessel (*Acts*, p. 478).

2. Cities in Canaan bore the names of false gods, like Beth-

shemesh. The ancient city of Beth-shemesh ("temple of the sun") was originally named after the Canaanite sun-goddess, Shemesh. It is used 19 times in the Old Testament of one of the cities that God gave to Israel and concerning which city there is no record that the name was ever changed, because the city with its name was not celebrated either religiously or secularly, but was used in a mere civil manner.

3. Must you immediately move out of the city you live in if it bears the name of a saint (Santa Maria, St. Joseph, Santa Barbara, etc.) or is named after a pagan god, like Zeus, Mars, or Mercury? Of course not, because the city with its name is not celebrated by you either religiously or secularly, but is used in a mere civil manner (just like the meat offered to idols was not celebrated by the Corinthian Christians religiously or securely, but was merely eaten).

B. Samuel Rutherford states that the days of the week (though having pagan origins) are not used for religious and superstitious celebrations, but only for civil purposes. Therefore, they are lawful for us to use.

“The names of days to signify civil times and things out of religious state is necessary now: and the Holy Ghost doth use for civil signification such terms, as Mars-street to signify civil and merely historically such a place. And the ship whose sign is Castor & Pollux [the twin gods regarded as special patrons of sailors—GLP], yet these were heathen names, and most superstitious, and cannot be used in a religious state” (*The Divine Right Of Church Government and Excommunication*, Samuel Rutherford, 1646, “A Dispute Touching Scandal and Christian Liberty”, p. 54. Spelling has been modified to conform to contemporary standards).

IV. Application

A. The principles that have been presented in this series as reasons that prohibit our religious or secular celebration of Christmas, likewise apply to our religious or secular celebration of Easter, Lent, Good Friday, Pentecost, St. Valentine’s Day, St. Patrick’s Day, Halloween, or even Thanksgiving. Why? Because our celebration of such days has us

associating with superstitions not appointed in God's Word and false worship forbidden in God's Word. I will not comment further on Easter, Lent, Good Friday, or Halloween (which is not simply the Roman Catholic celebration of one saint, but the veneration of all saints—not to mention its association with the occult), but perhaps a word would be helpful about day devoted to saints in the Roman Catholic Church.

1. **St. Valentine's Day (the patron saint of love) or St. Patrick's Day (the patron saint of Ireland).** Patron saints in the Roman Catholic Church are regarded as heavenly advocates and intercessors for a nation, family, or person to whom prayers are authorized to be directed (contrary to the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father who art in heaven"). Thus, to celebrate St. Valentine's Day or St. Patrick's Day in a secular manner is yet associating with superstition and idolaters who are actually praying to St. Valentine as a heavenly advocate rather than to the "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). As Protestant Christians, we must treat these saint's days as just ordinary days (our Reformed forefathers included the celebration of saint's day among those holy days that were forbidden), not celebrating (even secularly) anything associated with these days—not sending cards celebrating the day, nor wearing green to celebrate the day.

2. **A National Day of Thanksgiving** is not sinful in itself, but it is sinful in a nation which officially calls all religions to offer thanks to their own god (regardless of the god). This is a clear violation of the First Commandment ("Thou shalt have no other gods before me" Exodus 20:3). Even if we say we do not personally acknowledge the many false gods of others in this nation, we are acknowledging (by honoring this Day as a National holiday) that everyone within the nation is free to interpret for themselves who their god is or is not. The Triune God of the Bible alone must be allowed to tell us who He is (and He has done so in Scripture)—not the individual opinions of every person of that nation.

a. Can it be imagined for a moment that God (who

declares Himself alone to be the true God and prohibits the worship of any other god) would sanction a National Day of Thanksgiving within Israel in which those worshipping Baal, Asherah, Molech, etc. would be joined together with those worshipping Jehovah in a Proclamation to set aside a particular day for Thanksgiving, encouraging its citizens to gather in their various houses of worship devoted to other gods and religions? It is absolutely unthinkable! And yet this is precisely what occurs every year within this nation when all religions are invited to set aside one day to give thanks, each one to his/her own god (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

b. This is typical of the Thanksgiving Day Proclamations of U.S. Presidents:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim Thursday, Nov. 25, 2004, as a National Day of Thanksgiving. I encourage all Americans to gather together in their homes and **places of worship** to reinforce the ties of family and community and to express gratitude for the many blessings we enjoy.

Dear ones, when we seek to be faithful to our God who prohibits us from associating with and symbolizing with the superstitions, the idolatries of all manner of holy days, we find ourselves not greatly different from what the Christians of the first three centuries were faced with by way of false religion, superstition, idolatry all around them in their pagan temples, their pagan holy days, and their pagan celebrations. Dear ones, we are the children of the living God, and He calls us to have nothing to do associating with and symbolizing with idols and idolatry. Is it hard? It certainly is, especially when it comes to family gatherings. We must speak the truth in love to them, and look for and plan times in which we can gather with our family that have no associations with these days given to superstition. Jesus never called us to a comfortable, easy Christian life without trial (Matthew 16:24). Christmas (and all such holy days) are not our friends, they are snares that will entrap us—they are idols because they are holy days not appointed by God, but rather appointed by man

(1 John 5:21—*apo* “away from’ not *ek* “out of”). Keep yourself “away from” idolatry, and you will not have to take yourself “out of” idolatry. I submit that John tells us what idolatry is in 1 John 2:15-18.

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