

Holidays or Holy Days?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake)

Introduction:

- A. It is our purpose to consider the question of God's will in the matter of observing certain days as holy.
 - 1. Did God ordain certain days as sacred from others, requiring that faithful Christians engage in special observances of those days?
 - 2. Can Christians engage in celebration on those days without having fellowship with error?
- B. What is written?
 - 1. Jewish observance of religious feast and fast days ended with the beginning of the dominion of Christ.
 - a. Col. 2:14-17; Gal. 4:10-11
 - 2. God is indifferent toward a Christian's observance or non-observance of a day - Rom. 14:4-6
 - 3. Sundays are the only day where Christians must have a special observance - Acts 20:7; 1Cor. 16:2
 - 4. God's word is silent regarding Christmas, Easter, or any other day that has been elevated to the status of doctrine by humankind.
- C. Are you aware that:
 - 1. Christians in the NT did not celebrate the birth of Jesus as an annual observance?
 - 2. Most Protestant churches did not begin celebrating Christmas until the 19th century?
 - 3. Most churches of Christ still do not have annual observances of Christ's birth?

I. WHERE DID THE OBSERVANCE OF CHRISTMAS COME FROM?

- A. "The festival of Christmas became a regular practice about the middle of the fourth century, with the adoption of the December date that had previously been used by pagans as a celebration of the return of the sun after the winter solstice" (Christianity Through The Centuries, p. 160).
- B. "We need not shrink from admitting that candles, incense, and lustral water were commonly employed in pagan worship and the rites paid to the dead. But the Catholic Church from a very early period took them into her service, just as she adopted many other things indifferent in themselves, into the religious ceremonial. We must not forget that most of these adjuncts to worship, like music, lights, perfumes, ablutions, floral decorations, canopies, fans, screens, bells, vestments, etc. were not identified with any idolatrous cult in particular; but they were common to almost all pagan cults" (Catholic Encyclopedia, v. III, p. 246).
- C. "When we give or receive Christmas gifts, or hang green wreaths in our homes and churches, how many of us know that we are observing pagan customs? The god Woden, in Norse mythology, descends upon the earth yearly between December 25 and January 6 to bless mankind. But pagan though they be, they are beautiful customs. They help to inspire us with the 'spirit of good will to men' even as the sublime

service of our Church reminds us of the peace on earth which the babe of Bethlehem came to bestow” (Externals of the Catholic Church, p. 140).

D. “Many customs of pagan origin have become part of Christmas, e.g. the Christmas tree; but most of these no longer have a heathen connotation, but have acquired a Christian meaning (the Christmas tree points upward to God and reminds us of His gifts). The date of the birth of Christ is not known. The word Christmas is formed of two words: Christ and mass, meaning a mass or religious service commemorating the birth of Christ. Whether the early Christians thought of or observed Christmas is unclear” (Zondervan Bible Dictionary, p. 163).

E. When was Jesus born?

1. “The New Testament provides no clues in this regard” (Encyclopedia Britannica).
2. The NT simply states that it happened in the days of Caesar Augustus and while Quirinius was governing Syria - Luke 2:1-2
3. Most scholars place the year of Jesus' birth between 4-6 B.C. The actual year is uncertain, let alone the month and day
4. Sextus Julius Africanus popularized the idea that Jesus was born on December 25 in his Chronographiai, a reference book written in 221 AD. (Wikipedia, Christmas)
 - a. Based on the assumption that Jesus died on March 25
 - b. Based on a Jewish belief that prophets died on the same date as their conception
 - c. Thus if Jesus was conceived on March 25, then He was born nine months later

F. Why is His birth celebrated?

1. There is no instruction in scripture to celebrate it
2. “The identification of the birth date of Jesus did not at first inspire feasting or celebration” (Wikipedia, Christmas)
 - a. Tertullian does not mention it as a major feast day
 - b. In 245 A.D, Origen rejected of celebrating Jesus' birthday
 - c. The earliest reference to Christmas is in a calendar in 354 A.D.
 - d. Soon after it was introduced to Constantinople (379), Antioch (380), Alexandria (430)
3. Among Protestant churches, they condemned Christmas as “trappings of popery”
 - a. England's Puritan rulers banned it in 1647
 - b. Puritans of New England outlawed in 1659
 - c. Interest in Christmas in America was revived through novels by Washington Irving and Charles Dickens
 - d. Christmas was declared a U.S. federal holiday in 1870

II. SHOULD CHRISTMAS BE OBSERVED BY CHRISTIANS?

A. Apostle Paul was not averse to observing certain feast days apart from the church and its work

1. He kept Jewish customs when expedient - 1Cor. 9:19-20
2. He had Timothy circumcised - Acts 16:1-3

3. He took a vow - Acts 18:18
 4. He kept a Jewish feast in Jerusalem - Acts 18:19-21
 5. He participated in purification ceremonies, which included sacrifices - Acts 21:17-26
- B. However, his teaching made clear:
1. It should be kept on an individual basis - Rom. 14:5-6
 2. It should not be bound on others - Gal. 2:3-5
 3. It had nothing to do with our justification in Christ - Gal. 5:4-6
 4. It should never mislead others or harm our influence - 1Cor. 8:7-13
- C. Jesus warned of the danger of human traditions...
1. He rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their traditions - Mark 7:1-13
 - a. They bound their traditions on others
 - b. In keeping their traditions, they laid aside the commands of God
- D. Applications regarding Christmas:
1. God and Jesus did not consider it necessary for Christians; otherwise, it would be in the Word
 2. Any observance is based upon human tradition, and therefore can be dangerous
 3. I am thankful every day that Jesus came to this world for our salvation. I observe the memorial God authorized each first day of the week
 4. Christmas to me is like Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July, a time to get together with family and friends to share our blessings together.

III. SHOULD CHRISTIANS CELEBRATE EASTER?

- A. Contemporary Easter observance is a compromise between the Catholic Church and Celtic pagans.
1. Annual celebration of the DBR of Christ did not first appear until the second century AD; officially accepted at the council of Nicea in 325 AD
 - a. An uninspired human development; an addition to the Word
 - b. Gal. 4:10-11; Col. 2:16-17; Gal. 1:8-9
 - c. We commemorate Christ's DBR every Sunday - Acts 20:6-7; 1Cor. 11:17-34
 2. Other celebrations came afterward; Lent, Holy week, Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, Candlemas.
 - a. By 600 AD, Catholicism began to get a foothold in British Isles
 - b. Not readily accepted by the Celts, Saxons and other Germanic tribes. Wanted old pagan traditions
 - c. Ancient pagan celebration of the vernal equinox, observed on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox
 - d. Ancient origins: Babylon - Ishtar; Assyria - Ostern; Canaan - Ashtarte; Philistia - Ashtaroth; Celts - Eastre. A "Christian" holiday named after the wife of Baal!
 - e. Popular one - annual dedication to Eastre, Saxon goddess of spring fertility, representative of sensuousness and sensuality. Anticipation of good crops, thanking her for the coming of the growing season; worship with fertility rites, fornication in open

fields around a bonfire or Maypole, and exchanging of gifts of symbols of fertility: eggs, rabbits and garlands of flowers

- f. Catholic compromise - "You do away with the fornicating and you can keep the rest as part of your Easter worship" Crystallized the practice by 700 AD
- g. Contemporary Protestants have forgotten the why, but they still keep the how.

3. Are you aware:

- a. That the church in the NT did not hold a yearly observance of the Lord's resurrection?
- b. The word "Easter" is found only once in the KJV Bible, and it is a mistranslation? - Acts 12:4. The word in the original is actually Passover
- c. That the word "Easter" actually comes from "Eastre" the Anglo-Saxon name of a Teutonic goddess of spring and fertility?
- d. That many of the customs of Easter have pagan origins?
 - 1) "The rabbit was sacred to the Germanic goddess 'Eastre', the goddess of fertility and springtime. Rabbits are an extremely appropriate symbol for springtime, because of what they are famous for--having more rabbits." (William Heim, associate dean of the College of Arts and Letters at USF, Orlando Sentinel, 4/15/87)
 - 2) "It appears there was a custom among ancient Egyptians and Romans to give eggs as presents at this time of year. That was intended to insure that the recipient would have a very fertile or productive year." (Helms, *ibid.*)

B. So when did people begin observing Easter?

- 1. The practice began early, in the form of a Christianized Passover. The Jews tried to keep their customs as Christians and equated the Passover with the DBR of Jesus
- 2. The yearly "Christian Passover" soon included other observances:
 - a. Palm Sunday, the day Jesus made His triumphant entry into Jerusalem prior to His death
 - b. Good Friday, the day He was crucified
- 3. The yearly observance of the resurrection originated from human tradition, not the Bible itself, and proved to be a source of turmoil among the churches over the centuries
- 4. Assimilation of pagan ritual into "Christian" observances was common when the Catholic missionaries went into a pagan area
 - a. "Many cultures celebrated the advent of spring down through history. When Christianity came along about 2,000 years ago, there were already a number of pagan celebrations in place. People rarely discard a holiday. When a new system of beliefs comes along, you simply come up with a new mythic structure to explain why you were celebrating that holiday in the first place." (Helms)

C. What must Christians understand?

1. The same principles apply with Easter as with Christmas:
2. The Bible is silent regarding any yearly observance of the resurrection; God instructed us to remember it weekly. The law of exclusion eliminates permissive authority in the presence of specific authority
3. Any observance of Easter is based on the tradition of men and not the word of God, as is therefore dangerous
4. While individuals have more liberty than the church does collectively, the church has no authority to engage in it at all.
5. Christians who do, risk misleading the weak and uninformed, and damage their own influence for the Lord.

Conclusion:

- A. I am going to remember and rejoice in the resurrection of the Lord every day.
 1. His resurrection has changed my life and keeps me looking forward to my own resurrection - 2Cor 13:4; 1Cor. 15:20-22