

Is Christmas a New Testament Holy Day? #3

Romans 14:5-6a
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Is Christmas a New Testament holy day? Our brief study has led us to the conclusion that Jesus did not appoint such a holy day in Scripture, that the apostles did not celebrate such a holy day in scripture, and that for the first 300 years after the resurrection of Jesus there is no record of the celebration of Christmas as a holy day.

The silence is deafening. Holy days of which God approves are specifically authorized in Scripture (like the Passover in the Old Testament and like the weekly Lord's Day in the New Testament).

Though what is stated above is true, there are objections that some Christians will offer from Scripture that we should carefully consider. For the next couple weeks we will consider some of these objections. The objections we will address today are: (1) Holy Days Are Indifferent (Romans 14:5-6a); (2) Celebrating Christmas Is Not Worship; (3) Christmas Celebrations Include Biblical Practices.

I. Holy Days Are Indifferent (Romans 14:5-6a).

A. From this passage it is argued that even though God ordained specific holy days in the Old Testament, in the New Testament the Apostle Paul teaches that holy days are indifferent. Paul allows for the celebration of various holy days (like Christmas) if Christians desire to do so, but if Christians do not desire to do so, they are not obligated to do so. In either case, the celebration of holy days is between the Christian and the Lord. Let us see if that is indeed what the text teaches.

B. The Apostle Paul (in Romans 14) is addressing problems in the Church of Rome that arose between fellow Christians (some are described as "weak", 14:1, while others are said to be "strong", 15:1).

1. It was Jewish Christians that were referred to as "weak" (not because they were not sincere nor because they did not love Jesus), but because they believed they were still obligated to follow dietary laws and holy days (like the Passover) that were instituted by God in the Old Testament. They did not yet understand that Jesus had fulfilled those ceremonies in His person and work on the cross and that Christians were no longer obligated to follow them (nailed to the cross, Colossians 2:14).

a. Their "weakness" was not due to their practicing a holy day that was instituted by man's mere authority (like Christmas), but rather their "weakness" was due to not understanding how Christ had fulfilled those God-ordained holy days of the Old Testament ceremonial law. The Apostle Paul says that this "weakness" on the part of these Jewish Christians was to be accommodated temporarily because they did so "unto the Lord" believing that they were being obedient to God's commandment in the Old Testament. These "weak" brethren were not introducing a man-made holy day that had no divine warrant (like Christmas), but rather were continuing the religious celebration of holy days that had divine warrant in the Old Testament (although they were fulfilled in Christ as Paul taught in Colossians 2:16-17—Let no one judge you by requiring you to keep the dietary laws/holy days of the Old Testament which were shadows for the Jewish Church in its childhood). In the Book of Acts, Paul and other apostles attended the synagogues of the Jews on the Jewish Sabbath and attended Old Testament holy days, not because they were obligated to do so, but to minister to Jews that were gathered there and to help guide them into the liberty of Christ.

b. For the "weaker" brother the issue of holy days was not a matter of preference ("I might or I might not celebrate the Passover—it's indifferent whether I do so or not), but rather it was a duty to do so ("God requires me to celebrate the Passover"). Thus, Paul is not accommodating the "weaker" brethren in celebrating any holy day that he wants to celebrate (like Christmas), but is temporarily accommodating the "weaker" brother in celebrating divinely instituted holy days from the Old Testament until Jewish Christians might be properly instructed as to their freedom in Christ and led away from Old Testament

ceremonies.

2. On the other hand, the Christians in Rome who were “strong” (Paul classifies himself among these in Romans 15:1) were not free spirits who believed they could worship God or celebrate holy days without God’s institution in His Word. Rather they correctly understood that God’s Word freed them from the ceremonies and holy days of the Old Testament. Their Christian liberty was not a license to celebrate whatever holy days they desired or the Church established, but a freedom from the Old Testament ceremonies/holy days and a freedom to worship God according to His commandments in the New Testament (but there is no divine command to celebrate Christmas or apostolic example).

a. If in the New Testament holy days were indifferent (as this objection maintains), why were there none practiced and why was only the weekly Lord’s Day kept by the apostles and the Church?

b. Jesus condemned in Mark 7 the worship of the Pharisees because it was based upon the traditions of men (“will worship” Colossians 2:23) rather than upon the commandment of God. If even the apostles of Christ never viewed it as a liberty to introduce a man-made tradition into the Church’s worship or a Christian’s worship, why should we think we have such a liberty?

c. Paul states in Romans 14:23, “for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.” How could a Christian celebrate Christmas out of faith or out of conviction when the Lord never authorized it in His Word as a holy day to be observed in the first place? Only that which God has revealed and authorized in Scripture can be of faith in matters of doctrine or worship (including holy days). If Christmas celebration is not found in Scripture, it should not be celebrated because it cannot be celebrated as a matter of faith in that which God has revealed in Scripture. Nowhere in all of Scripture are man-ordained holy days approved by God.

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

The Apostle comports with [accommodates] the observation of days in the weak Jews, who understood not the fullness of the Christian liberty, ESPECIALLY SINCE THOSE DAYS [the holy days of the Old Testament—GLP], 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).

II. Celebrating Christmas Is Not Worship.

A. Some have sought to justify the celebration of Christmas on the grounds that religious holy days are not formal worship and therefore are not regulated specifically by God’s commandment in Scripture.

1. Did God regulate all holy days in the Old Testament as special times appointed for worship? Absolutely! Consider the holy days or holy convocations listed in Leviticus 23:1-2—Sabbath, Passover, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Tabernacles—Numbers 28-29; Deuteronomy 16). Where did anyone in the Old or New Testament establish a new holy day without God’s specific authorization (King Jeroboam did so in 1 Kings 12:33, but God judged him for doing so).

2. What holy days in the New Testament are instituted without Christ’s authorization? Can we name any? No, because it’s not man’s prerogative to do so (that is “will worship”). It is Christ’s right alone to establish holy days. The only holy day sanctioned in the New Testament by Jesus Christ (wherein we celebrate His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension) is the Lord’s Day—the Christian Sabbath.

3. How is it even possible that the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ the Savior/King could not be worship? That’s like saying the angelic hosts that sang in honor of Jesus Christ at His birth were not worshipping Him (Luke 2:13-14); or that the gifts of the wise men were not acts of worship to Christ, the King (Matthew 2:11)? In fact, I dare say that Christmas is sadly viewed by most professing Christians as more of a holy day for the worship of Jesus than the Lord’s Day. Most professing Christians view Christmas as a religious holy day of worship of Christ.

III. Christmas Celebrations Include Biblical Practices.

A. "Gift-giving is patterned after the wise men (Matthew 2:11)."

1. As to the giving of presents by the wise men, to whom did they give the gold, frankincense, and myrrh? To Jesus, not to Joseph and Mary. How did they give their presents to Christ? They gave them acts of worship. That is not to whom presents are now given at Christmas, nor is it how gifts are now given. To justify gift-giving to one another from the wise men giving gifts to Christ as King is at best misguided/distorted.

2. In fact, the present practice of gift-giving on December 25th does not find its origin in Matthew 2:11, but rather in the religious celebrations of the pagans that were carried over into Christmas.

The Romans ornamented their temples and homes with green boughs and flowers for the Saturnalia, their season of merry making and the giving of presents; the Druids gathered mistletoe with great ceremony and hung it in their homes; the Saxons used holly, ivy and bay (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5:643).

3. Of course, it is biblical to show mercy to others by our giving at any and at all times, so why associate our acts of mercy with a holy day whose origin is both pagan and popish?

B. "Christmas carols are simply worship patterned after the singing of the angels at Christ's birth (Luke 2:13-14)?"

1. Some of the most cherished Christmas carols contain unbiblical lyrics.

a. In the carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are", the singer gives worship (in the form of a prayer) to the star which was in the sky, "O star of wonder, star of might. Star with royal beauty bright. Westward leading, still proceeding, Guide us to the perfect light."

b. In the carol, "The First Noel", we find these words, "If we in our time shall do well, we shall be free from death and hell." Is our doing well what sets us free from death and hell?

c. In the carol, "Little Drummer Boy", the little boy appears before baby Jesus and has no gift to give to Him, and so he plays his drums as his gift to Jesus, to which baby Jesus smiles with approval. Here a myth is joined to the historical birth of Christ. So why not view the birth of Jesus as a myth (like Santa bringing a gift to baby Jesus)?

2. I could go on, but you get the point—Christmas carols often distort the biblical account of Christ's birth (like movies) and in people's minds than become associated with the biblical account. Moreover, it is not man-produced Christmas carols (hymns) that are to be offered to Jesus in worship, but the inspired hymnbook of the Psalter.

C. Application

1. Do we praise the Lord for the indescribable gift of His only begotten Son? Absolutely, and we shall do so for all eternity. Do we rejoice in the incarnation of the Son of God—the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us? Most definitely! Daily we do so. But especially we do so every Lord's Day. Our concern is with establishing holy days by man's authority which only Christ has a right to appoint, not about praising God for His glorious and most precious gift of His beloved Son.

2. Another great danger that becomes lodged in people's minds (especially in the minds of the world) is that Jesus is just an innocent little baby lying in a manger being adored by His parents in a very difficult situation. People seem very content to keep baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by barnyard animals, but Jesus Christ is Savior and King—He is fully God and fully man. If we do not receive Him as our personal Lord and Savior from sin, we will stand before Him as a righteous Judge. The birth of Jesus is a reason for great joy to those who trust Him by faith alone, but at the same time, the birth of Jesus is a reason for great fear to those who will not receive Him or submit to Him.

3. How I so much appreciate Paul's love to maintain the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church in calling us to love the weak and the strong. None of us like to think of ourselves as weak, but we are

all weak in various ways. And we should not despise one another for weaknesses (even sinful weaknesses), but rather we should be those who pray for, encourage, and bear the weaknesses of one another. I pray you will do that for me as I do so for you, and as we do so for each other.

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