

Observance of Days

In the senseless move to dissociate all religion from the government, greetings like “Merry Christmas” are being replaced by such greetings as “Happy Holidays.” I wonder what will happen when they begin to realize that “holiday” means “holy day!”

My generation in the Church of Christ was indoctrinated very convincingly that the religious observance of any special day is a sin. Most of them had their origin in paganism and became “Christianized” by the Catholics. Christmas (Christ’s Mass) headed the list. It was a religious mass celebrating the birth of Jesus. So our people exercised caution to “keep Christ out of Christmas,” as one of our mottoes urged. We could enjoy the festive traditions as long as we did not associate them with the birth of Jesus! If we want to keep Christ out of Christmas, we will appreciate that the sentiment has grown to keep both Christ and Christmas out of approval by government sanction.

Only this one text was needed to validate my entire prohibition against giving regard to Christmas: “You are observing special days and months and seasons and years! I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you” (Gal. 4:10-11 NIV). That text took care of Easter too! Who could want more negating proof than those words from Paul?

Yet, I had another devastating proof, not a text, but a logic (illogic!) from my inherited hermeneutic -- the “law of silence.” There is no command, example, or inference that indicated the annual observance of the birth of Jesus. If the Lord had intended that we have such a season, he would have told us. He did not instruct us; so it is wrong!

Of course, the date of Jesus’ birth is not revealed, but it was an event in time which God has revealed to us at length in dramatic presentation by Matthew and Luke. If we are to read about it, meditate on it, enjoy it, and proclaim it, is it sinful to do so more on one day than on others? We do not use that sort of reasoning concerning any other desirable activities like singing, preaching, teacher training, or fellowship. We may rightly do those things daily, but we also have special times of singing, preaching, training sessions, and fellowship gatherings

Since the delightful account of Jesus’ advent into our world is written for our benefit, and since no special day or season is specified for our giving attention to it, does that not mean that we are free to give special proclamation of it whenever we wish? Or must we just keep silent about it when others are celebrating when God became man?

Paul was concerned that the Galatian disciples were turning back to the Law with its “weak and miserable principles” of rituals and observances for justification instead of holding on to faith in Christ as the sole source of justification.

In my prohibitive lessons, I dared not introduce Romans 14. In fact, for most of my career I did not know what to do with Paul’s instructions there. There he plainly states: “One man esteems one day as better than another, while another man esteems all days alike. Let every one be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. He also who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; while he who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. ... Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God...” Please read the chapter again.

Some say that these were just “opinions” about foods and days. Not true. They were told to be convinced in their own minds. That made them “convictions.” And they did not stop there. They were “practices” which Paul said should be respected. They were practices of conscience through which persons honored God with no thought of gaining justification through them.

It is not the day but the event that is celebrated during what we call the Christmas season. We may celebrate the event every day and any day. Days are not holy enabling them to be defiled or profaned. Disciples are holy.

That brings me to a shocking discovery about my own belief and practice. While pointing my accusing finger at others for observing special days for many years, I finally realized that I had three fingers pointing at myself. I was among the chief observers of “holy days!” I had never questioned that which I had been taught that there were 52 sanctified days each year in which I must assemble with the church, partake of the Communion, and “lay by in store.” I had been taught that Sunday, the first day of the week, is “the Lord’s day.” It was even profaned if given over to secular activities, and Communion, giving, and the essential assembly were to be done only on that day.

Ever so slowly, I learned that the same objections that I had about Christmas applied equally to the observance of the first day of the week. As it was true in many cultures, so the Romans worshipped the sun-god. Devoting the first day of the week to sun worship, they gave it the name of Sunday.

In pre-Christian times in the Roman Empire, “kuriakos” (the lord’s) signified “imperial” or “belonging to the lord,” the emperor. As the empire became Christian, it is not surprising that they would modify “belonging to the lord” to relate to Christ, calling it the Lord’s day, as part of the protest against Caesar-worship. At the end of the persecutions in 325 A.D., because the first day of the week was so special to Christians, Constantine, the Emperor, made it a holiday (holy day) throughout the empire. Since that time throughout the Western world, Sunday has been observed generally as a special day observed in honor of Christ. While it is agreed that Christ is honored by this, there is not scriptural instruction or precedent for it.

This lesson is intended as suggestive of more investigation rather than being a full treatment of the subject. For fuller consideration read these other references. Free As Sons, Ch. 15; “Christmas.” Free To Accept, Ch. 17, “Thursday Is The Lord’s Day Too!”; Ch. 18, “Not Forsaking The Assembly”, and Ch. 19, “Acts 20:7 One More Time.”

Even though our people have observed Sunday as a special day -- even believing it is The Lord’s Day -- none have even hinted at sun-god worship. Sunday to us in our time and culture suggests no belief in or relationship with worship of the sun or emperor. It is just the name of the first day of our week.

Non-Catholic believers around the world have given special recognition of the birth of Jesus on December 25, Christmas Day, but never took part in Christ’s Mass one time in their lives. Their celebrations have nothing to do with Christ’s Mass. To them, Christmas does not mean Christ’s Mass, a ritual celebration of the Mass, but it is simply the name given to the date assigned as the birthday of Jesus.

Not all persons who celebrate this season honor Christ in doing so but, according to Paul’s own words, we are at liberty to honor Christ in observance of such a day.

So, I wish you a traditional “Merry Christmas” as you honor him in this season.

(Cecil Hook; December 2001) []