

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #1

Colossians 2:16-17; Mark 7:6-8

July 26, 2015

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What should we think about celebrating a “secular” Christmas?

“Pastor, perhaps you haven’t noticed that this is mid-summer rather than winter. December 25th is yet months away.” I know, but my thinking has run along the lines that perhaps a discussion about this topic might be best addressed at mid-summer long before we are facing the holiday season and before holiday sentiment and plans are already burning brightly.

“Pastor, what do you mean by celebrating a “secular” Christmas?” What I mean is, what should we think about celebrating Christmas without including any religious themes at all—not celebrating Christmas as a religious holy day in commemoration of the birth of Christ, no manger scene, no angels, no wise men, or no Christmas carols; removing Christmas from the church calendar and making December 25 a mere secular holiday?

Perhaps that is not a question you have ever considered, but it is a matter of some controversy among some Christians and Pastors who would not think of celebrating a religious Christmas as we shall see, but who propose celebrating a “secular” Christmas that avoids the violation of scriptural principles concerning religious holy days. And because it is a question that you will likely encounter (or have already encountered), I thought it would be profitable to spend some time over the next few sermons addressing this question with you (even if it is mid-summer).

I submit and will seek to demonstrate in this brief series of sermons that we ought not to celebrate either a religious Christmas or a secular Christmas. In future sermons we will address the question, Why we should not celebrate a secular Christmas. However, in the sermon this Lord’s Day, I want to begin by answering the question, Why we should not celebrate a religious Christmas. And I propose the following three reasons: (1) It Is Not Authorized in Scripture (Colossians 2:16-17); (2) It Is a Roman Catholic Holy Day and Celebration of the Mass; (3) It Was Prohibited by Our Protestant Forefathers.

I. Why Should We Not Celebrate a Religious Christmas? It Is Not Authorized in Scripture (Colossians 2:16-17).

A. How would the Church of Jesus Christ know if God wanted us to celebrate a religious Christmas, i.e. an annual celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ? God would have to tell us in Scripture, right? We certainly have the true account of Christ’s birth recorded for us in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, but where do we find in the New Testament Christ authorizing (either in word or in practice) an annual celebration of His birth? Nowhere—it is not there. Where do we find in the New Testament the apostles declaring (either in word or in practice) an annual celebration of Christ’s birth? Nowhere—it is not there.

1. Thus, without some word from the Holy Spirit in Scripture, we must assume that God does not want the Church (or us as Christians) annually to celebrate a religious Christmas, otherwise He would have told us to do so—just as He commanded Israel in the Old Testament annually to celebrate the Feast of the Passover, the Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles. Had the Spirit of God wanted us to celebrate each year the birth of Christ, He would have also included the date of His birth (but biblical scholars are deeply divided over even the season of the year in

which Christ was born, let alone, the day and the month of Christ's birth).

2. The Lord has left no doubt as to how He is to be worshipped and how the one true religion of the Bible (whether in the Old Testament or in the New Testament) is to be practiced (Exodus 20:4-6). This biblical principle of worship (known as the Regulative Principle of Worship) is accurately summarized for us in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (21:1):

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by himself, and so limited by his own revealed will, that he may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

3. In other words, we might simplify this biblical principle of worship this way: What Scripture does not authorize it forbids. Most churches sadly operate on an altogether different principle from the one just stated. The principle they are operating on is this: What Scripture does not expressly forbid it permits. Thus, since Christ in the New Covenant has not expressly forbidden the use of incense in worship, holy water, crossing oneself with the sign of the cross, praying to dead saints, holy days dedicated to Mary, Joseph, the apostles, or other "saints", all these practices would be perfectly acceptable as acts of worship or as holy days. Why? Because they are not expressly forbidden in the New Testament! However, the biblical principle of worship (the Regulative Principle of Worship) would not allow any of the above practices into the worship of God because they are without the authorization of Christ and the apostles in the New Testament (likewise there is no New Testament authorization for man-created hymns, instruments).

4. Jesus condemned the worship of the Pharisees because it was worship according to the tradition and commandments of man, rather than according to the commandments of God (Mark 7:6-8). And so the question is asked again: Where did God in Scripture authorize the annual celebration of Christ's birth? If it is not authorized by the Lord in the New Testament Scriptures, it is prohibited by the Lord.

B. **Colossians 2:16-17**

1. The emphasis of the great apostle throughout Colossians 2 is in regard to forsaking the traditions and commandments of men, and rather clinging to Christ and His commandments, for in Christ "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge . . . in Him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:3,9-10). Dear ones, you are not complete in yourself or in any man-made ceremonies in your worship. You are complete and made fully acceptable through the all-sufficient work of Jesus Christ on your behalf. He is the Head of the Church—not you or me, or the pope in Rome. He is our Prophet, Priest, and King. He alone is our Mediator and directs our worship and presents it acceptable to the Father—not Mary, Joseph, Peter or any "saint" in heaven (according to 1 Timothy 2:5).

2. Paul infers that to practice any "will-worship" or "self-imposed religion" (Colossians 2:23) "according to the commandments and doctrines of men" (Colossians 2:22) is to undermine the finished work of Christ (Colossians 2:11-23) and to seek to usurp the headship over the church that rightly belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:8-10,18-19). Will-worship (i.e. any religious act, gesture, symbol, or ceremony in worship, or any appointed holy day not authorized by Scripture) is expressly condemned by Christ and His apostles.

3. In this particular historical context, Paul faced Jewish converts in the Church of Colosse who believed that the holy days appointed by the Lord for the Old Testament Church were to be continued and observed as holy days in the New Testament (just as they also believed was true of circumcision, the dietary laws etc.).

a. Paul argues that the fullness of Christ (to which all of these ceremonies and holy

days pointed) has brought these holy days to an end (for they were simply temporary shadows, but the body that casts that shadow is Christ (his life, death, resurrection, and ascension). Once the body has come, the shadows cease.

b. Therefore, Paul clearly has in mind these Jewish converts who were bringing the ceremonies and holy days of the Old Covenant into the worship of the New Covenant in Colossians 2:16 when he issues this command. In other words, “Let no man (the Jewish converts or anyone else) act as your judge in imposing upon you the dietary laws, or annual holy days, monthly feasts, or the Jewish 7th day Sabbath (with its particular sacrifices etc.).” Now if the holy days of the Old Testament that were appointed by the Lord are no longer to be observed by New Testament Christians (according to Paul), then certainly holy days that do not have God’s appointment at all in Scripture (Christmas, Lent, Easter, saints days, etc.) ought not to be observed by God’s people in the New Testament (the Old Testament holy days were legally abolished by the death of Christ, though they were not immediately buried, but given an honorable burial during the lives of the apostles until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 a.d., Galatians 4:10-11).

c. If holy days appointed by God in the Old Testament ought not to be observed, then how much more holy days not appointed by God at all ought not to be observed (Matthew 28:19-20).

II. Why Should We Not Celebrate a Religious Christmas? It Is a Roman Catholic Holy Day and Celebration of the Mass.

A. Having noted firstly that there is a complete absence of God’s authority in Scripture to establish the annual celebration of Christ’s nativity, let us now consider that Christmas (or the Christ-mass) was established as and is one of the high Roman Catholic holy days.

1. In the Roman Catholic Church, “holy days of obligation” are described as follows in canon 1247 of the *Code of Canon Law* for the Roman Catholic Church:

On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass [Christmas and Easter (which always fall on Sunday) are the highest-ranking holy days of the Roman Catholic Church--GLP].

2. The celebration of Christmas as a holy day is first noted 300 years after the death of Christ (354 a.d.) by the Church of Rome.

The earliest celebrations of the Nativity were surprisingly late. There is no record of official observance of Christ’s birth until the fourth century, when Constantine, a Christian convert was emperor of Rome.... The first mention of a Nativity feast, scholars say, appears in the Philocalian calendar, a Roman document from A.D. 354, which lists December 25, as the day of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem of Judea (Jeffrey L. Sheler, “The Search for Christmas” in the *U.S. News and World Report*, December 23, 1996, p. 56).

3. The December 25th celebration of Christmas was then subsequently imported into the East from Rome. It is noteworthy then that the celebration of Christmas on December 25th began in Rome and is a high holy day of the Roman Catholic Church. I ask why would we who are Protestants want to celebrate a Romish holy day—“the mass of Christ”? The Roman Catholic Church, which is called the Mother of Harlots in Revelation 17:5, is not to be imitated or followed in her idolatrous worship or in her multiplying of holy days. To the contrary, we are commanded to come out from her and to come out from all her man-made innovations in worship (Revelation 18:4). You need look no further than Christmas to see the universal deception that the Roman antichrist has worked within even professing Protestant Churches.

B. But what is the mass that is observed in the Roman Catholic Church on Christmas as the most important part of its worship?

1. The mass of Christ is the alleged “miraculous” transformation of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ and eating and drinking of Christ’s sacrificed body and blood (transubstantiation).

In the Eucharist Christ gives us the very body which he gave up for us on the cross, [and] the very blood which he “poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1365).

2. The mass of Christ is said to be “the divine sacrifice” and in it “the work of our redemption is accomplished” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1068).

And since in this divine sacrifice which is celebrated in the Mass, the same Christ who offered himself once in a bloody manner on the altar of the cross is contained and is offered in an unbloody manner (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1367).

The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice* (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1367, italics are original).

The Eucharistic sacrifice is also offered for the faithful departed who “have died in Christ but are not yet wholly purified,” so that they may be able to enter into the light and peace of Christ (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1371).

In the liturgy of the Mass we express our faith in the real presence of Christ under the species of bread and wine by, among other ways genuflecting or bowing deeply as a sign of adoration of the Lord (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1378).

3. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) pronounced a curse upon anyone who says that the mass is not a propitiatory sacrifice (i.e. a sacrifice that removes the wrath of God and grants forgiveness of sin).

If any one saith, that the sacrifice of the mass is only a sacrifice of praise and of thanksgiving; or, that it is a bare commemoration of the sacrifice consummated on the cross, but not a propitiatory sacrifice; or, that it profits him only who receives; and that it ought not to be offered for the living and the dead for sins, pains, satisfactions, and other necessities; let him be anathema (“On the Sacrifice of the Mass”, Canon 3).

C. Dear ones, the Roman Catholic mass is an abomination, a continual sacrifice of Christ, a bowing down and worshipping the creature of bread and wine, and a destruction of Christ’s humanity in heaven (one sacrifice for all time—Hebrews 7:26-27; Hebrews 9:28; Hebrews 10:10-12; idolatry—Deuteronomy 4:15; Luke 22:19; John 15:5; humanity—1 Timothy 2:5; Philippians 3:21).

D. What faithful Protestant that protests against such abominable doctrines and practices in the Church of Rome and that detests what is proclaimed in the mass as a dishonor to Christ will want to participate in a holy day that is set apart to celebrate the abomination of the mass of Christ? None I believe

will want to do so who are faithful Protestants (faithful Protestants were burned at the stake for denying the bodily presence of Christ in the mass).

III. Why Should We Not Celebrate a Religious Christmas? It Was Prohibited by Our Protestant Forefathers.

A. Finally, let us not forget that our Protestant forefathers also condemned the celebration of the holy day of Christ's nativity (Christmas). Though historical testimony is not the supreme judge in matters of controversy (as it is in the Church of Rome—only Scripture is the supreme standard for faith and practice), nevertheless, faithful historical testimony confirms Scripture and is a subordinate standard to the supreme standard of Scripture, which Christ has given to His Church in the faithful, scriptural testimony of pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-15).

1. Martin Luther wrote in his *Address to the German Nobility* (1520):

One should abolish all festivals [i.e. all religious holy days—GLP], retaining only the Lord's day....

2. The Pastors of Geneva (1550), including John Calvin, state in their *Register of the Company of Pastors*:

Abrogation of Festivals. On Sunday 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Council, an edict was also announced respecting the abrogation of all festivals [i.e. all religious holy days—GLP], with the exception of Sundays, which God had ordained.

3. The Church of Scotland in its *First Book of Discipline* (1560) includes the following clear statement concerning the abrogation of Christmas:

[The] keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of apostles, martyrs, virgins, OF CHRISTMAS, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the civil magistrate ("The First Head", emphases added).

4. The United Provinces of Holland enacted into law in 1625 the following (cited from *The Wonders of the Most High*, Abraham Van De Velde, c. 1676, p.158):

Let us like King Josiah take away from among us all these great sins. Among which sins that are seen in these lands the following are the most principal: ... In the first place the carnivals [i.e. festivals or religious celebrations—GLP], THREE KINGS AND THE ST. NICOLAS DAYS, AND OTHER FEAST DAYS which are held among us not without a show of public idolatry.

5. In the "Appendix" to the *Directory for the Public Worship of God* (1645), the following statement is made by the Westminster Assembly and approved by the faithful Church of Scotland:

There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.

6. Next is this proclamation by the faithful Church of Scotland in its most pure days of biblical reformation.

The General Assembly taking to their consideration the manifold abuses, profanity, and superstitions, committed on Yule-day [the pagan name for Christmas—GLP] and some other superstitious days following, have unanimously concluded and hereby ordains, that whatsoever person or persons hereafter shall be found guilty in keeping of the foresaid superstitious days, shall be proceeded against by Kirk censures, and shall make their public repentance therefore in the face of the congregation where the offence is committed (General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, "Act for Censuring Observers of Yule-day, and other Superstitious days", 1645).

7. The Parliament of England during the great time of reformation when the Westminster Assembly met issued this ordinance (Ordinance of Parliament, June 8, 1647):

Be it Ordained, by the Lords and Commons in Parliament assembled, That the said Feast of the Nativity of Christ, Easter and Whitsuntide [Pentecost—GLP], and all other Festival dayes, commonly called Holy-dayes, be no longer observed as Festivals or Holy-dayes within this Kingdome of England and Dominion of Wales, any Law, Statute, Custome, Constitution, or Canon to the contrary in any wise notwithstanding.

8. Finally, this spiritual zeal to walk in faithfulness unto the Lord in regard to abolishing religious holy days (like Christmas) was carried over to the Massachusetts Bay Colony established in the new world.

For preventing disorders, arising in several places within this jurisdiction by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others: it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmass or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shillings as a fine to the county." (From the *Records of the General Court*, Massachusetts Bay Colony, May 11, 1659).

Thus, dear ones, we must not join ourselves in the religious celebration of the birth of Christ (Christmas) because it is not authorized in Scripture, because it is a Roman Catholic holy day and is the celebration of the mass of Christ, and because it was prohibited by our Protestant forefathers.

B. Let me leave with you a couple applications before I close.

1. First, though all man-instituted holy days are unbiblical and ought to be discontinued in our desires, in our practice, in our family at home, in the Church of Jesus Christ, and in the nations of the world, nevertheless, there is a God-instituted holy day that continues until the coming of Christ—the Lord's Day (the Christian Sabbath). Every Lord's Day we celebrate the incarnation of Christ, the life of Christ, the death of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the ascension of Christ, the reign of Christ, and the coming again of Christ for His Church. Dear ones, to exalt Christmas, Easter, and other holy days always has the effect of

minimizing (if not destroying) the one divinely appointed holy day in Scripture (the Lord's Day on the first day of the week). When are churches usually the fullest? On Christmas and Easter—on days that God has not appointed. When are churches usually least attended? On the Lord's Day—the day of Christ's appointment, institution, and weekly celebration. We have a weekly celebration of Christ appointed by God in Scripture.

2. Second, let us not forget that true worship of Jesus Christ consists not only in the right outward forms of worship which God has appointed in His Word, but also consists in the right inward affections of God's grace. True worship must be concerned with worshipping God in spirit and in truth, just as true love is evidenced in inward affections as well as in outward deeds, and just as true faith is evidenced in not only inward conviction but in outward deeds. Dear ones, we are guilty of idolatry if we worship the living God using the right outward forms, but worship devoid of love, adoration, praise, and the fear of God. But we are also guilty of idolatry if we worship God with much love and praise, yet add to or subtract from the authorized forms of worship which God has appointed in His Word.

3. Remember, dear ones, true worship is only and ever acceptable before God on the basis of the finished work of Christ. Even when we come to the Lord bringing to Him what He has authorized in His Word with hearts filled with thankful praise and passionate faith, our offerings yet proceed from unclean hearts and hands. We can never offer to God a perfect act of worship that He would receive on the merits of our own righteousness. Our worship is only and ever acceptable unto God on the basis of a perfect Redeemer who makes intercession for us without ceasing. You are acceptable before God only because you are in Christ, and all your lawful worship is acceptable before God only because you are in Christ. We are insufficient in ourselves, but Christ is all-sufficient for us, and that is the message of Paul in Colossians 2.

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