

STRAIGHTWAY

“And straightway they forsook their nets, and followed him” [Mark 1:18].

CHRISTIAN PURITIES FELLOWSHIP

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The Celebration of Christmas Calmly Considered from a Christian Perspective

by Dr. H. T. Spence

It is that time of the year when the controversy over the celebration of Christmas arises from the ashes of history and tradition, often leaving a not-so-christmasy spirit in its wake. Sometimes the controversy is so pressed by a few individuals that it is made to be a fundamental doctrine of the Christian Faith, causing a breakage of fellowship among the brethren and engendering bitterness within the Body of Christ. It reminds us of the 1700s, when a variety of strong theological voices, which at times produced adamant and boisterous debates over theological matters, brought great animosity, hatred, and strife. Because of this militant approach without the spirit of

Christ, John Wesley often entitled his treatises on certain theological subjects with the added phrase, “Calmly Considered.” Likewise, this controversy over the keeping of Christmas has known its casualties among the brethren and probably will never be resolved in the minds of some this side of eternity. Every heart and conscience must work it out with fear and trembling. It is our humble prayer that this unpretentious treatise will present a few simple observations that will bring honor to our Lord Jesus Christ in this ongoing and often over-rated debate.

A Doubtful Disputation

To this writer the celebration

of Christmas falls under the heading of a “doubtful disputation” as principled in Romans 14, for the Scriptures have nothing to say, either for or against, the Church’s celebration of Christmas itself. Therefore, it becomes a matter of conscience in the light of how one will view the principles and patterns of Scripture in other categories relating to celebrated days. It is not my desire in this treatise to establish who is the weaker brother or the more mature one in this controversy, seeing that Christ is Lord of both. The principles of “doubtful disputations” in Romans 14 need to be carefully read and understood by all Christians, for they guard the “spirit” and “attitude” between the brethren in these matters. There are specific words in this chapter relating to the controversy at hand:

One man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind. He

that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it” (Romans 14:5,6).

Some may say this passage is only referring to the Sabbath, but it does not say that. This passage is in reference to *any* day I regard to the Lord, versus *any* day I do not regard to the Lord. In either position one would take concerning a particular day, it is to be as unto the Lord. Therefore, it is wrong for me to condemn a brother who celebrates Christmas, for he is truly regarding that day as *unto the Lord*. If another brother regards it not, then we trust and pray it is *unto the Lord* that he does not regard it; otherwise, he is self-opinionated and his motive is wrong in his *not* regarding the day. But, according to this passage, and the spirit of the entire chapter, it is a sin to pit one against the other or to believe one is more spiritual than the other.

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Why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. . . . So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God (Romans 14:10,12).

Paul goes on to state in this chapter:

I know, and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus, that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him that esteemeth any thing to be unclean,

to him it is unclean (Romans 14:14).

This chapter concludes with these words:

Hast thou faith? Have it to thyself before God. Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth. And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin. (14:22,23).

These final verses are indicating that the things which fall under this category of doubtful disputations must be worked out by the individual, and only then will his conscience view it as sin or not. But I must be very careful in how I treat this matter with others who see it differently, for they do it as unto the Lord just as I profess to do what I believe as unto the Lord.

The question of whether I am to acknowledge the Christmas season or not depends on how I view it. From what perspective does the “brother” view this matter? Both see it as unto the Lord. Some will say Christmas has fallen among rogues and rascals of traditions and legends; thus, it must be condemned. Others believe it must be rejected because the honoring of holy days is part of the “rags of Romanism.” Yet, there may be from the hearts of others the desire to discard the collected debris around Christmas and truly honor Christ, reflecting

upon what commenced all His blessings of the Atonement—His coming into the world. Dare we “calmly consider” this subject with Christian candor and delicacy?

Is “The Day” Mentioned In Scripture?

One criterion used in the denial of Christmas has been the fact it is not mentioned in Scripture; there is no commandment by God to celebrate such a day. Well, we must state at the outset that the “birth” of Christ is definitely seen in the Scriptures, and there was a definite celebration at His birth. There is clear evidence of celebration at His birth by the shepherds’ response (Luke 2), in the Wise Men’s response (Matthew 2), among the angels (Luke 2), and even noted with Simeon and Anna (Luke 2). So, at this point of our treatise, we do read of individuals who made a joyous celebration at His birth. We do not read of a celebration at every incident in the life of our Lord, but we definitely read of it at His birth. Therefore, it is not improper for men to celebrate the birth of Christ. This birth fell on a day, whatever day that was, and they were glad for it. We read of joy surrounding His birth (Matthew 2:10; Luke 1:44, 47; 2:10, 20) *and* on the day of His Resurrection (Matthew 28:9—“All Hail” is “O Joy!” The prophecy of Psalm 118:22-24 refers to the day of His Resurrection). These are two definite days in Scripture where God encouraged people to be joyous for the event happening in the earthly journey of His precious Son.

Another observation which must be made is that God does not deny days that He did not initially appoint in the Jew's history. We see this in the matter of the feast days. Leviticus 23 is the classic chapter which unfolds the seven feasts God appointed for the Jews. Yet, there are two additional feasts which came later in the history of the Jews that were not part of the seven originally given by God. One, found at the end of the book of Esther and initiated by the Jews themselves, is called the Feast of Purim. Another did not come into existence until the time period between the two Testaments. Called the Feast of Lights or Dedication, it was prompted by the opening of the Temple after Antiochus had closed it in defiance of the Jews and their God. Both of these feasts are found in the New Testament (John 5:1 and 10:22; the second one held on the 25th of Kislev or December). Although the Lord did not give the latter two feasts (which were prompted by historical incidents in the lives of the Jews), yet He did not condemn these days, for the Lord Jesus Himself participated in those two feasts during His ministry on earth. We cannot say, simply because God did not personally "institute" a day of honor or celebration ("feast" or "festive"), that He is against any other day of heart celebration unto Him. Of course, the festivity must be likewise honorable in its tokens of celebration.

Another point of observation that must be made: there are a number

of ingredients in worship today that are not found in Scripture concerning the early Church. We do *not* read of the Church singing in their services; this is never mentioned in the book of Acts or in the Epistles. We do read of Christ and His disciples singing a hymn at the end of the Lord's Supper (this was from the Old Testament tradition of the Passover), but there is no mention of music in the Apostolic Church liturgy. This has only been handed down through Church tradition, and later congregational singing implemented through the Protestant Reformation. There are also "preliminaries" given in church services today that include announcements, taking of collection, choir specials, other musical specials; none of these are to be found in the New Testament. I am not stating there is anything wrong with these "preliminaries"; I am simply pointing out that they are not mentioned in the New Testament. The "mode" of Water Baptism has been a controversy for centuries: is it to be immersion, or effusion, or sprinkling? All three opinions have biblical scriptures used to prove their point. Not even archaeology can assist us in finding which mode was first, for all three are found in the earliest of Church antiquity. Some churches have choir robes; others provide robes for their ministers to wear during the service. But none of these ingredients are to be found in the New Testament Church. If we dare state that "these pieces of religious paraphernalia are found in

the Protestant Church beginnings,” then are we stating that the Protestant beginnings are more of God than the New Testament Church. Yet, how often those who dismiss Christmas as an “unauthorized” day of celebration do wear the robe, and sing, and partake of other liturgies which are not ascribed by the Early Church. Consistency must be evident no matter what position we take.

The Date Of Christ’s Birth

One of the great arguments against the keeping of Christmas is the date itself; many view its origin as pagan rather than Christian. But let us note the facts of history in this matter. The earliest presentation of the birth of our Lord is not given by a pagan or Rome itself, but by Hippolytus (who lived sometime around the turn of the third century—AD 180-236?). Although it must be admitted that no one can know the exact month and day of our Lord’s birth (and that is not important), yet Hippolytus was one of the earliest of the Fathers to calculate a date from a rational perspective of the Lord’s birth and not from a pagan holiday. He came up with the date of December 25th by taking Zacharias’ ministration and combining this with the “sixth month” mentioned in connection with the annunciation to Mary (Luke 1:26). Hippolytus had reached the conviction that Jesus’ life from conception to Crucifixion was precisely thirty-three years and that both events occurred on March 25th.

By calculating nine months from the annunciation or conception, he arrived at December 25th as the day of Christ’s birth. Yes, there were other dates being offered for the birth of Jesus Christ contemporary to Hippolytus, such as May 20th by Clement of Alexandria, Egypt, as well as the dates of April 18th or 19th and March 28th. But it must be acknowledged that the initial burden for the date of December 25th was from the Church (and keep in mind, Roman Catholicism was not in existence, so it cannot be blamed for the date). The Eastern section of the Church took the date of January 6th as the birth date of Christ; this was before the persecution under Diocletian and the legalization of the Christian religion by Constantine. Chrysostom (in A.D. 386) states that the celebration of Christmas was universal by AD 376 and that it was the fundamental feast from which all other Christian festivals came. Of course, back then it was not known as “Christmas” but simply “the birth of Christ,” the “feast of the birth of Christ,” the “birth festival of the Sun of Righteousness,” and the “birth festival of the Bridegroom.” It was not until the eleventh century that the question came up by an Armenian writer who claimed that the Christmas festival was invented in Rome by a heretic, Artemon. This Armenian writer placed the first Christmas in Constantinople in 373. He stated that it was based on the date of the festival dependent upon the pagan Brumalia (December 25th), following

the Saturnalia (December 17-24) and celebrating the shortest day in the year and the “new sun,” or the beginning of the lengthening of days.

Over the centuries there have been disagreements between the Occidental and the Eastern Churches concerning the date and motive of keeping Christmas. This was especially true when, after a number of centuries, unseemly frivolity began to accompany the celebrations of Christ’s birthday. Though the date may vary throughout history, it is not the critical issue; for what do we do with the proper first day of the week for worship? The calendar has changed over three times in the course of Western civilization; how do we know we are worshipping on the right day appointed in the New Testament? Persecuted Christians throughout history have written of seasons when they were thrown into the inner wards of prisons without clocks or hour glasses, losing track of proper days; they made their own day calendar and appointed a seventh day for their Sabbath. We dare not accuse them of worshipping on the wrong day, for they honored a Sabbath day unto the Lord though it may not have been the one on the formal calendar.

The Term “Christmas”

Another burden which hangs as an albatross around Christmas is the name itself. The term, appearing later in history, comes from “Christ’s Mass,” which refers to the high

mass given in the Roman Catholic church at this season. But we must remember, this is a later term and by no means the original burden for keeping of the festive day. Shall we throw something away simply because of later terms identified with it? How many of us have a calendar in our home with the days of the week printed on it. We use the terms every day when writing letters or paying bills. We even use the term “Sunday” on Sunday and no doubt the term is used in the Church services. Every one of the names of the days of the week come from pagan Rome: Monday (the astrological term for “Moon Day”), Tuesday (coming from “Tiu,” the god of war or the day of Mars), Wednesday (named after the day of Mercury), Thursday (named after Thurnor, the god of thunder), Friday (named after Frigg’s day), Saturday (named after Saturn), and Sunday (named after the Sun god). The same must be said of the names of the months. Yet, they are part of our daily life in the concourse of our generation’s existence. But to say, whenever a Christian uses the terms in conversation (“I will see you on Monday or Tuesday”) or lives by the concept of a heathen calendar, that they are caught up in heathen practice or following idolatry would be truly a false accusation.

I deeply apologize for bringing up this next observation, for it is not in my heart to pit God’s men of the past against one another. They all made their honorable contribution to

the cause of Christ of which we have been made the recipients. But we must acknowledge the differences between the first and second generation Reformers as well as those who followed them. Martin Luther was a first generation reformer and John Calvin was a second generation reformer. Some believe that the first generation (the Bible-based generation) are the only ones who gave truth and they are to be followed, for the second generation has nothing to contribute to the Truth; in fact, the second generation tends to compromise. I do not take that position, for it would destroy any contribution of Calvin and the Puritans. But we do observe that there was a difference of belief between Luther and Calvin in many ways, not only in theology but also in liturgy. If we take Calvin's full position of liturgy, there are to be no hymns played or sung in church services; only the Psalms are infallible and to be sung in church. This would also include the necessary exodus of the musical organ (and certainly the piano). Many of the Puritans, and more specifically the Non-conformists, were against Christmas for various reasons, including the "rags of Romanism" that were commonly attached to it in their generations. But again, it is the presupposition of the individual. Martin Luther believed there were precious and holy entities that had become encumbered with Romanism which if extricated and purified would be most honorable before the Lord. Handel's and Bach's sacred

oratorios would not be permitted by the Puritans because of Calvin's presupposition, yet they would have been accepted by the first generation Reformers. (Bach came from Lutheran stock, while Handel came from Reformed background; the latter's music was not played in a church during his lifetime.) Luther truly was the Father of Protestant Hymnody. The Puritans had a number of beliefs that today are not valid simply because they did not have all the light of insight back then. The Book of Revelation and the Prophecy of Daniel had not been opened by the Holy Spirit to their understanding back then; it was not God's timing. Therefore, their understanding of end-time prophecy was lacking in interpretation. I do not hold that against them, but I cannot accept all in their writing about eschatology simply because they were Puritans; they did not write for my generation, so there are certain things they did not see that are needed for me to see today. I can fully understand their exodus and the times in which they lived, how they rejected any form of music other than the Psalms, and how they rejected instruments in the church, believing these were papal debris. But had they known a greater balance, things may have been better in some areas. Certainly their spiritual offspring have changed from their spiritual fathers' viewpoint on a number of these items. Why do they sing hymns now? Why do they have an organ in their church? Why do they sing harmony now? Why

are there notes in the hymnbooks? If we are to follow the Puritans, we must be consistent in our following. Perhaps, the better way is to gain from their writings and their character, and yet acknowledge where they were not as balanced as they should have been. Some areas in which they were adamant would fall into the category of Romans 14. I do not question their motive or heart, for I believe it was honorable, but to throw everything away from the system without the hope to salvage or purify an honorable practice perhaps brought a deficit in some areas. Luther, the first generation Reformer, seemed to have at least desired to purge some things that had been so greatly stained by the Roman Catholic Church. Some of the things in the Church had a pure beginning in the Apostolic Church and were eventually made Romanist by excess baggage of apostasy. We are presently living in a generation that has greatly polluted a number of spiritual concepts, and instead of simply giving them up, we are trying to recover them from the abyss of apostate contexts. These would include terms such as “new birth,” “baptism with the Holy Spirit,” “sanctification,” et cetera.

The Christmas Tree

There is also the argument against the so-called Christmas tree. Several passages of Scripture in the Old Testament are quoted condemning the worship of a tree as the same as a Christmas tree. But this is not a fair statement to make and certainly

not a proper accusation against Christians who have one in their home. The tree used by the Protestant world has its origin with Martin Luther and his desire to present to his family the message of Christmas: the evergreen tree—a symbol of the everlasting life Christ came to bring; the tree itself—the symbol of the cross which He died upon (it is called a “tree” six times in the New Testament); the lights or candles Luther used—symbolize Christ’s being the light of the world; the fruit that Luther placed on the tree—symbolize the fruit of the Spirit to be in our life. He did not worship the tree in his home; he used it as a plenary visual aid to his children for the story of the Christ-child and His purpose in coming into the world. The world may make something else of this, but that is not to affect our own heart in the purpose of it.

The Giving of Gifts

As to the giving of gifts, its origin is found in the wise men’s bringing of gifts to the Christ-child in Matthew 2. We certainly do not place any stock in or encourage the Santa Claus concept which comes from the Latin for Saint Nicholas who gave gifts to both adults and children in need. Even this true character in history has been changed and secularized. I am sorry for that; the truth of history is often changed and even perverted over the centuries; there is nothing we can do about that except endeavor to keep it clear in our own

thinking. A case and example of this distortion of history is also seen in the character of another man who has been perverted and even "Romanized"; he is called Saint Patrick of Ireland. But you ask a godly Free Presbyterian, an anti-Romanist Christian of Ireland, today, and he will tell you the true story of that man of history who was a godly man used of the Lord *before* the Roman Catholic Church ever came into existence.

But again, there is this question of giving gifts on Christmas. What is the reason for it? Is it biblical? I am sorry that many Christians actually give less of their money and other possessions to the Lord at this time of the year because of what they view as other monetary demands. This should be rather the contrary. But the giving of gifts to others, perhaps, is a needed expression of gratitude and love for those of family and acquaintance which we rarely see or hear from throughout the year. It was the heart of the wise men to express their love to the Christ-child. We live in a very busy world with little expression of love to others. It must be said that Christmas seems to assist in pointedly calling our hearts to concern for others, to express our love for others, and to cause some joy and happiness to come into another person's heart in this sin-darkened world. If we did more of it throughout the year, maybe this aspect of Christmas would not be as important as it is today. It is true that

the commercial world has both encouraged and taken advantage of this aspect of Christmas, but they have done that with every day of any precious emphasis: Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, personal birthdays, and others. I cannot stop the world from taking advantage, for its own personal gain, of the good things we enjoy in life. But I can carefully protect my own heart in how I approach those days and make sure they benefit me and my family in our walk with God.

Conclusion

It is not our desire to take up arms against all the frills and trappings which have made their way into Christmas. Our treatise would be most exhaustive and laborious to the reader if we listed them all. Yes, we do acknowledge the secular legends, symbols, and songs which have invaded the original nativity message. But a Christian must see another reason for keeping Christmas, especially in our lawless, crime-ridden, hostile generation. Christmas is one of only few remaining emphases which draw a man to that which is good and noble. How often we have entered grocery stores, department stores, malls, and restaurants with the rock and country/western music playing. Is it not refreshing to hear Christmas hymns now being played? The message of the birth of Christ is being thrown right into the market place where people walk in the daily concourse of life. It is a golden hour, yea, a most appropriate hour to speak to

people about the Lord, His birth, His life, and His death. It is rare in America today that we get such an opportunity to freely speak of the Gospel. We see change of spirit in the prisons when ministering there during the Christmas season; it truly does affect people for the better, even if it is for a short period of time. If America is in a bad situation spiritually and morally now, what would it be if Thanksgiving, Easter, and Christmas were taken off the calendar? If that were to happen, our country would have no days at all to call us to God or to prayer. I cannot afford, as a Christian, to throw such days away simply because others have treated these days erroneously in history. Yes, I must take advantage with cards, gifts, and tokens of visual-aids to witness at this time; this is a natural opportunity to speak of the Christ, even as an infant in a manger. It certainly helps to set the record straight, in contrast to the Charismatic philosophy, that God can be found in the lowly and the small. The message of the Infant-King is also needed for children. Are we not against enough things in this world without having to add to the list a few things that could be used in a noble fashion? I must do all I can to salvage what little remains in my country that calls us to God, His Son, and better living. If some parent who spends little time with his children, never providing a benefit for them, will see the need of giving at Christmas, then it will be a reprieve for some weary little ones in this evil world. To

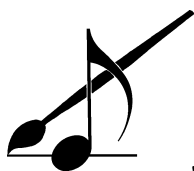
encourage our children to go and visit nursing homes, singing the Christmas carols, giving a bag of food or a toy to the underprivileged, is also part of Christmas. Yes, they need to have this desire and manner throughout the year, but this is a good season to teach them. There are some of us who do not give any tangible expression of love throughout the year to a friend or relative, other than *an appointed day* such as birthdays or Christmas. We tend to be selfish in life, and it is a day such as Christmas that pulls us out of such a carnal, self-centered hole. There is so much that could be said for the need of Christmas in our dark world.

Whatever your position may be on this day to honor Christ, remember Romans 14 and be of magnanimous heart to the other brother. For Christ is Lord of both, and both are to do or not to do “as unto the Lord.”

If you believe in honorably keeping the true purpose of Christmas, may you and your family have a blessed Christmas and a Christ-centered New Year. If you do not believe in the keeping of Christmas as a day unto the Lord, may the Lord’s blessings ever be upon you, for He was born in Bethlehem to die at Calvary for us all.

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Artistry In Voice



*by Joye S. Spence, D.R.E.
First Dean of School of Fine Arts
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