

The Most Wonderful Time of the Year? A Defense of Christmas

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For a few Presbyterians this is not the season to be jolly; rather, it's open season on churches and Christians that celebrate Christmas. Almost every year about this time I get handed or emailed the same anti-Christmas essays. Well-meaning brothers are "concerned" that we have a Christmas tree in the foyer of our church, light Advent candles in December, and decorate the church with garland and holly for the season.

Yes, we do these things. We also arrange our Scripture readings to highlight the themes of Advent, use prayers and hymns that focus the church's petitions on the coming of the Lord, and actually encourage our members to rejoice and feast during the holiday season to commemorate our Lord's incarnation and birth. All of this, I am solemnly warned, is either blatant anti-Christian paganism or quite un-Reformed and therefore an offense to God.

Consider this author's summary judgment:

This may be a shocking thought to some: but . . . I have come to the conclusion that there is nothing Christian about Christmas; that in its present observance, as well as in its origin, Christmas is basically and essentially pagan.¹

Another internet essayist, in an article called "'Tis the Season . . . FOR Pagan Worship," intensifies this indictment:

What many in Christendom have been celebrating—Christmas—is a thoroughly pagan holiday—in its origin, in its trappings, and in all its traditions . . . The modern conservative cry to put Christ back into Christmas is absurd. Jesus Christ was never in Christmas.²

I'll admit upfront that I am angered by this kind of rhetoric. Let me be clear. I'm not angry with people who don't celebrate Christmas. Individuals and churches have the liberty to celebrate or not. What is troubling is to hear those of us within the Reformed church that do commemorate the incarnation of the Son of God at Christmas labeled as compromisers, crypto-Romanists, idolaters, second-commandment breakers, and worse. Beyond that, the anti-Christmas rhetoric is inflammatory, but the reasons offered are pitiful.

If we were bowing down to Christmas trees, praying to or lighting candles before icons of St. Nicholas, or adding some strange ceremonies to the Sunday morning service, I might understand these sorts of accusations. But as it is, all we are doing is ordering our Scripture readings to highlight the theme of Jesus' coming, focusing

our prayers on the faithfulness of God and his covenant promises, meditating on the significance of the Son of God's incarnation, and decorating our homes and churches with symbolic reminders of these themes. Does an annual focus on the theme of the Lord's coming warrant the charge of idolatry?

I will do my best to refrain from impugning the motives of these anti-Christmas crusaders, but I honestly don't know what is gained by making such provocative accusations. Some of them, no doubt, actually believe that Christians who simply celebrate Christmas are "idolaters," that we violate the second commandment when we decorate Christmas trees, trim the house with holiday decorations, erect manger scenes, and exchange gifts. For them Christmas is a "monument to idolatry"!³

Christians who read these inflammatory accusations against Christmas and see their own churches enacting and encouraging these "idolatrous" activities are quite understandably bewildered. What faithful Christian wants to be called an idolater? It's only natural that an accusation of idolatry should cause the accused to pause and reflect on the practices that are labeled as such. But if the accusations turn out to be false, then a degree of righteous anger is surely justified.

Is there really nothing Christian about Christmas? Is it true that Christmas is essentially pagan? Should we believe that "God is offended" by Christians celebrating Christmas? That God commands loyal Christians to get rid of Christmas because it is a wicked "monument to idolatry?" Do the fiery warnings of the Old Testament prophets against compromise and religious syncretism apply to simple Christians who enjoy decorating their Christmas trees with lights and ornaments?

I believe the answer to all of these questions is a resounding "No!" I hope the reader will come to understand my reasons at the end of this essay.

We can conveniently subsume most of the arguments against Christmas under the following 4 categories:

1. Arguments based on the supposed historic practice of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.
2. Arguments based on the alleged Roman Catholic character of Christmas.
3. Arguments based on presumed pagan roots of Christmas symbols and ceremonies.
4. Arguments based on the so-called regulative principle of worship and the absence of a biblical commandment to celebrate Christmas.

The first three arguments, usually the most prominent with anti-Christmas crusaders, all turn on a proper understanding of history, both the history of Reformed worship and liturgy as well as the history of the development of Christmas celebrations in church history, especially the development of the church year in the early centuries of

the post-apostolic church. The fourth depends on a proper understanding of how the Bible informs and regulates our worship and devotional practices.

I will work my way through the arguments using a question-and-answer format. Hopefully, this will allow the reader to navigate the whole with greater ease.

I. Anti-Christmas Arguments Based on the Supposed Historic Practice of Presbyterian and Reformed Churches.

Q. 1. Have Protestant churches historically celebrated Christmas?

Answer. I'm on safe ground saying that historically most Protestant churches have cheerfully celebrated Christmas. Of course there are some that have not. But those who have not are in the minority.

So what do we do with Kevin Reed's astonishing claim?

Following an initial look at the origins of Christmas, we will note historic opposition to its observance, with special emphasis on Protestant objections to the holiday. We will see that Protestants, and especially Presbyterians, have rejected Christmas celebration . . .⁴

Well, there's only one thing to do with it. Denounce it as a blatant falsehood. The facts are spread all over the history of the Protestant church. How can any one dare suggest that *Protestants* have rejected Christmas celebrations? The author is either ignorant or deliberately twisting what is readily available from the historical record.

The Reformers and their churches were first called Protestants at the council of Speyer in 1529. They were mostly followers of Luther's reforms. Even so, the term Protestant has come to refer to those churches in opposition to Rome and associated with the Reformation. This includes Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, and independent churches. Even if one finds cause to dismiss the Lutheran churches as "compromising with Romanism"—as is often done in anti-Christmas fundamentalist literature—they are the original Protestants! And Luther and the Lutherans have never had any problems with Christmas. They glory in Christmas! This is so well known that a citation proving it is unnecessary.

This is to say nothing of the other Protestant churches that use a church year calendar and observe Christmas—Anglicans, Methodists, and yes, even Reformed and Presbyterian churches, as we shall see.

Reed's assertions are simply erroneous, if not downright ridiculous. Protestants as a whole have not rejected Christmas celebrations.

Q. 2. *But what about Reformed and Presbyterian churches? Have they historically observed Christmas?*

Answer. Yes, the majority of Reformed churches have indeed observed a moderate celebration of Christmas. This is especially true for what has been called “the continental Reformed tradition.” Since the 16th century, most Reformed communities have celebrated Christmas. This would include the German Reformed, the French Reformed, the Dutch Reformed, the Swiss Reformed, and the English Reformed churches.

Q. 3. *Has the celebration of Christmas ever been a test for orthodoxy in the Reformation tradition?*

Answer. I can’t say that it has never been, because presently there are some Reformed authors that indeed believe that it should be. And they can refer to individual authors in the past that spoke as if the observance of Christmas ought to function as a litmus test for orthodoxy. There are tracts and pamphlets, mostly from the 17th and 18th century Scottish Presbyterians, that seek to persuade churches to condemn, even discipline those who practice the celebration of Christmas. But *officially* the church has never taken this radical stand.

Unfortunately, Reed writes as if opposing Christmas has always been a mark of Reformation orthodoxy:

The Protestant Reformers summoned us back to the scriptural law of worship which allows us to admit only those institutions in worship that possess express scriptural warrant. To take a stand in support of Christmas is a repudiation of this legacy of the Reformation. It is a retreat from a hard-won point of orthodoxy.⁵

Once again, please remember that phrase “the Protestant Reformers” includes Luther and the Lutherans who have never repudiated Christmas celebrations as such. Nevertheless, the repudiation of Christmas has never been “the legacy of the Reformation.” This is a shameless untruth. But even if we narrow the horizon and include only Reformed and Presbyterian traditions, Reed’s categorical pronouncements are simply untrue. Most Reformed churches have not considered Christmas observance a matter of “hard-won” orthodoxy. At the most, it is the legacy of a very small selection of radical Puritans and some Scottish Presbyterians.

Furthermore, celebrating Christmas is not a “retreat” from orthodoxy. How can we retreat from something that was never advanced? The majority of Reformed churches have never made the presence or absence of Christmas a matter of orthodoxy! As far as I know, Christmas has never been a litmus test for orthodoxy in any official Reformed or Presbyterian confession, catechism, or book of church order. You will find nothing of the sort in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Church of England’s

Thirty-nine Articles, the First or Second Helvetic Confessions, the Scot's Confession, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, or even the Westminster Standards.

One of the most respected and widely received Reformed confessions in the 16th century was the Second Helvetic Confession (A.D. 1566). It explicitly *praises* the celebration of the central feasts of the church year.

The Festivals of Christ and the Saints. Moreover, if in Christian Liberty the churches religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, and of his ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, we approve of it highly.

I commend to you Mark Horne's excellent little article called "Celebrating a Calvinist Christmas with a Clear Conscience."⁶ Some of the historical data is there for you to see. He discusses the Westminster Assembly, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), the Synod of Dortrecht (1619), the great Genevan Theologian of the 17th Century, Francis Turretin, and others.

Q. 4. What did John Calvin think about Christmas?

Answer. If one is going to mount an argument based on Reformed tradition, one may as well go back to one of the initial sources of Reformed tradition—John Calvin himself. He approved of Christmas celebrations as long as they were purified from superstitious and idolatrous accretions.

Calvin did not condemn the annual celebration of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. Furthermore, he believed the church has liberty to establish such feast days. In fact, it was Calvin's predecessor in Geneva, Farel, who had banned all such observances in the city. But when Calvin came he convinced them to reinstate the celebration of the five evangelical festivals (Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost).

Later the Genevan council decided to abolish these observances. Calvin was blamed for this action, even though he had nothing to do with it and he himself objected to the decree. Nevertheless, inflammatory accusations were circulating about Calvin's indefensible rigorism, which forced Calvin to respond. People were accusing him of backing the prohibition against these feasts.

Calvin's first response was to write a letter to his friend Haller, a Reformed minister at Berne. His letter makes it very clear that he did not support the city council's decision to ban Christmas celebrations.

Since my recall [from Strasbourg] I have pursued the moderate course of keeping Christ's birthday as you are used to doing. [The Reformed churches of Berne, Strasbourg, and Zurich celebrated the five evangelical feasts.]

There were even extraordinary days of prayer on other days; the shops were shut in the morning, and every one returned to his individual calling after dinner. There were, however, in the meanwhile, certain inflexible individuals who did not comply with the common custom from some perverse malice or other. . . . Let me say this, that if I had got my choice, I should not have decided in favor of what has now been agreed upon. There is no reason why men should be so much provoked, if we use our liberty as the edification of the church demands.

Those of you familiar with his writing will recognize this as classic John Calvin. We can sum up Calvin's position like this: churches have liberty to celebrate these festivals with moderation, as long as the practice will genuinely edify Christian people.

Of course, Calvin had serious reservations about the way in which Christmas and other Christian celebrations were conducted in his own day. Late medieval Roman Catholic superstitious and even idolatrous practices often mucked up what might otherwise be a rather simple and joyous feast of Scripture, hymns, and prayers commemorating the birth of our Lord. If the annual celebration of the incarnation of our Lord could be stripped of late medieval piety's unedifying and silly excesses, they might be observed with moderation and great benefit.

Calvin also wrote to Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1574), Zwingli's successor and city pastor of Zurich. In that letter he carefully distances himself from the rash decree of the city fathers in Geneva. Once Bullinger heard that Calvin had not slipped into the cultish repudiation of the great feasts of the church, he was relieved. Bullinger wrote back:

You have just given the answer that I expected, my dear brother. For I know that in matters of this sort, where duty is but little heeded, and much ill-will is engendered, you have never been morose. I am anxious, indeed, in such matters, to see that liberty preserved, which I perceive to have flourished in the churches from the very days of the apostles.

It is a matter of historical record that some of the churches under Geneva's jurisdiction observed the Lord's Supper on December 25th, even when it did not fall on the Lord's Day. And whatever one makes of the ambiguous record that remains of the complex political and ecclesiastical struggles over the church calendar in Geneva during Calvin's time, one thing at least is clear from the record of Calvin's preaching schedule. On the major feasts days, like Christmas, he interrupted his normal practice of preaching through books of the Bible in order to preach on passages and themes related to those feasts.

My point is not to elevate Calvin to the level of a doxological litmus test. Just because Calvin did it, doesn't mean we should. But when the anti-Christmas crusaders cry "Reformed Tradition! Presbyterian Tradition!" I reply: What Reformed

tradition? Which Reformers? What Presbyterians? Which Reformed theologians? If you want to appeal to the Reformed tradition, at least be honest about the diversity of opinions held on this subject.

Yes, certain Scottish Presbyterians opposed Christmas and all annual celebrations. One of the most referenced is George Gillespie's *A Dispute Against the English-Popish Ceremonies, Obtruded Upon the Church of Scotland* (1637). But there are all sorts of issues that called forth Gillespie's polemic that do not apply to most of our Reformed churches today. Neither the Church of England nor the Roman Catholic Church seeks to impose unwanted ceremonies on our churches. Protestant churches are able to celebrate Christmas without all the superstitious paraphernalia that clung to the festival in the 16th and 17th centuries. We don't say a mass, pray to any saints, or make Christmas "a holy day of obligation." Abstaining from celebrating these feasts was for some Scots and Reformed English of that day a way of distinguishing themselves from the hated Romanists and the persecuting establishment of the Church of England.

The bottom line is that our Reformed tradition is divided on this issue, and the divide is by no means down the middle. The majority of Reformed churches have celebrated Christmas joyfully and with moderation.

II. Arguments Based on the Alleged Roman Catholic Character of Christmas.

Q. 5. Doesn't the very word "Christmas" prove that the holiday is a Roman Catholic holy day?

Answer. Well, I guess I better surrender and admit that the word "Christmas" is a combination of the words "Christ" and "mass." Aha! You see. Christmas is about celebrating mass! What more proof do we need? So says one Presbyterian Pastor:

Think about the name Christmas itself. What does it mean? Many people do not even know that it is a combination of Christ and mass. Christmas is the Roman Catholic celebration of a particular mass in honor of the birth of Christ. Perhaps it would impress on our minds the real meaning of Christmas if we would refer to it as Christmass. What is the significance of the mass? At the heart of the Roman Catholic mass is a denial of the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. It professes to be a reenactment of the sacrifice of Christ for sin. It is a denial of the gospel. The Roman Catholic Church has many other masses, such as Michaelmass, but it is their Christmass that Protestants have singled out for observance.⁷

Where do I begin with this? First, this kind of argument assumes that the meaning of a word can be defined by analyzing its constituent parts. This is almost too easy to refute. Does “Thursday” mean Thor’s day? Is Wednesday *really* Woden’s Day?

This kind of analysis is erroneous. The meaning of words is found in their usage. Let me illustrate this with the word “Chapel.” What does this word *really* mean? And why do Reformed Christians continue to use it? Presbyterian day schools even have “chapels.” Well, don’t they know the original meaning of the word “chapel”? It comes from the Latin word *capella*, and refers to a “cape.” And, oh, what a cape it was.

According to legend, St. Martin of Tours once saw a cold beggar shivering at the city gate. Wanting to help the man, Martin ripped his military cloak (*cappa*) in two, giving one half to the beggar and draping the other half around his shoulders, making it into a *capella* or a cape. (The letter “c” in this Latin word should be spoken as “ch,” according to its usage in ecclesiastical Latin).

St. Martin’s cape was then preserved by the medieval church as a relic. French kings would take this cape with them in their military campaigns to insure their success. They transported it in a small, portable tent-like structure that they called a *capella*, because it housed the cape of St. Martin of Tours. And so, in time, the word *capella* or chapel came to describe a small building used for religious worship.

So, therefore, chapels are obviously Roman Catholic in origin. Protestants that have chapel services must be secretly venerating some relic. We must write letters to our Christian schools, seminaries, and churches that use the name “chapel” in order to warn them of their Romanism. Maybe some of these places are surreptitiously hiding sacred capes as relics.

What’s the point? One cannot simply ignore how these words are used today and then point to some primitive meaning to accuse people of being pagan and idolatrous or Romanists. This is not the meaning of the word “chapel” today. To determine the meaning of the word today, one examines the way the word is used—what happens in chapels—and not the origin of the word. The same is true for the word “Christmas.” The genesis of the word itself tells us little or nothing about the meaning of the word today. To know what Christmas means to Protestants we have to ask what they do on this day. The answer is not that they “celebrate a mass in honor of Jesus.” Rather, Christmas means reading Scripture, praying, singing, feasting, and fellowship—all of which is tied together by a focus on remembering our Savior’s birth.

(This chapel illustration comes from Ralph Woodrow’s helpful little book *Christmas Reconsidered*.⁸ What is fascinating about Woodrow’s defense of Christmas is that he changed his mind. His earlier book *Babylon Mystery Religion—Ancient and Modern* has been a favorite citation of the anti-Christmas crusaders for many years. In this *new* book he confesses his error and tries to correct the damage he did with his silly arguments in his earlier work. I commend him for his honesty. Although he

is writing for independents and fundamentalists, his book is still worth reading.)

Simply put, in the 21st-century the word Christmas does not mean “a Roman Catholic mass celebrated to honor the birth of Jesus.” Rather, it refers to the time of year when Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus. Of course, for some it’s just a holiday when people exchange gifts and pretend to believe in the Santa Claus fairy tale. Even so, the most common meaning of the word today relates to the commemoration of Jesus’ birth. Yes, Roman Catholics perform a mass on Christmas. But Protestants who observe Christmas do not do so.

Q. 6. But what about the word “mass” in Christmas? Surely the presence of that word alerts us to the tainted Papist origin of the celebration of Christmas.

Answer. We won’t give an inch here. Anti-Christmas radicals don’t even get the meaning of the word “mass” right, according to their own methodology. Those who argue against Christmas, because it contains the word “mass” might want to go back a little farther in history, back to the original use of the word mass in the early church. Christmas did not originate as a Roman Catholic holy day.

In their zeal to be “historical” our anti-Christmas crusaders don’t go far enough back in history. Two can play at this game. Sure, the term “mass” was used in the pre-Reformation, medieval church to refer to the sacrifice of the mass. But what was the earliest meaning of the word “mass” in the Christian church? As it turns out, the word was not originally used this way.

Initially, the word “mass” had no connection with the doctrine of transubstantiation or the repeated sacrifice of Christ on the altar by the priest. Before the A.D. 1000, the theory of transubstantiation was unknown and the word *mass* was used as a simple shorthand description of the Christian worship service.

The English word "mass" is an Anglicized way of writing the Latin word *misse*. From our earliest records of Christian worship, the service ended with the dismissal: *Ite misse est*. Translated somewhat woodenly this means: "Go, it is the dismissal" or possibly "the sending"--from the Latin verb *mittere*, "to send." And the word *missa* also seems to have been connected with the word *missio* (mission) in the 4th century. For early Christians, the service concluded, even culminated, with a *missa* as the worshipers departed. In time the Christian worship service as a whole came to be designated from its final act of blessing the congregation as she leaves the church to perform her mission in the world. *Misse. Missa. Mass.* Go forth into the world with the blessing of God and make disciples of all nations.

Even at the time of the Reformation, to designate a Christian worship service as a “mass” was not necessarily to give away the farm to Roman Catholics. Luther called his liturgies the *Formula Missae* (1523) and the *Deutsche Messe* (1526). This illustrates that the word mass, in Latin and German, only gradually came to be

associated exclusively with Roman Catholic worship over against Protestant services.

So at the time when the church began to celebrate Christmas—in the fourth century A.D.—the word *mass* simply referred to a Christian worship service. The doctrine of transubstantiation and notion of the re-sacrificing of Christ on the altar by the priest were still six centuries or more in the future. Christ-mass meant a worship service that celebrated Christ's incarnation and birth.

Did I miss something? Do we perform a Roman Catholic sacrificial mass on Christmas in honor of Jesus in our churches at Christmas? No. For Presbyterian Christians Christmas certainly does not mean a Roman Catholic mass celebrated in honor of Christ. We perform no mass—as this is understood by the Roman church. This kind of argumentation is not only fallacious; it is irresponsible and misleading.

We do nothing distinctively Roman Catholic when we celebrate Christmas. Unless, of course, we are condemned simply because we do something that the Roman Catholics do. Catholics celebrate Christmas, and so do we. But then where will this end? Shall we stop reciting the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds, catechizing, praying the Lord's Prayer, reading Scripture, and calling the sky "blue" because Roman Catholics do these things?

Q. 7. But why do Presbyterians celebrate "holy days" at all? Why should we adopt the Roman Catholic practice of observing holy days?

Answer. We don't and we shouldn't. Reformed and Presbyterian churches do not observe Christmas as a "holy day." Celebrating Christmas is one thing; treating it as a "holy day" is something entirely different—unless by "holy" one simply means set apart or special. But that's not the way the Roman church uses the term. Holy days are known as "holy days of obligation." What this means is "these are the days on which it is required that members of the Catholic faith who have attained the age of reason rest from servile work and attend Holy Mass" (Robert C. Broderick, ed., *The Catholic Encyclopedia: Revised and Updated Edition* [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1987], p. 267). According to the Apostolic See, Christmas is one of these holy days.

Failure to attend a mass held on a "holy day" is a mortal sin, given, of course, that there are no extenuating circumstances. If a Catholic transgresses with "full knowledge and free consent" of his will the result is the loss of sanctifying grace, the loss of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, remorse, and the punitive effect of eternal separation from God. If the Catholic wishes to avoid these consequences after a mortal sin is committed, he or she must make use of the Sacrament of Penance in order to return to the love of God. (I've tried to stick to the language that the RC church uses to describe matters like this. See the *Code of Canon Law*, Canons

1244-1253, and the new *Catechism*, para. 2180-2183; thanks to Dr. Joel Garver for these references).

This is not our understanding or practice. This is why it is so ridiculous when some of our more radical Presbyterian brothers accuse those of us who celebrate Christmas of keeping "holy days." There's nothing meritorious about attending a Christmas Eve vespers service. Neither is it a sin to fail to attend. For Presbyterians, Christmas services, unless they fall on the Lord's Day, are entirely optional. We believe it is *beneficial* for people to gather to celebrate and remember our Lord's birth, but it's certainly not *mandatory*.

Furthermore, not only do individual Christians have liberty in this matter, but we believe particular churches also have freedom to observe or not observe Christmas. I think churches that don't observe Advent and Christmas and don't follow a simplified church year calendar are missing out on a wonderful opportunity to instruct their people in the life of Christ. But I don't believe that they are in violation of any commandment or obligation from God. God has given us freedom in these matters.

Moreover, quoting Galatians 4:9-11 is beside the point. The author of "Is Christmas Christian" gets it all wrong:

Paul wrote to the Galatians in dismay, "Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years! I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain" (Gal. 4:10-11). He wasn't condemning them for observing those institutions commanded by God, but for observing those of man's making, contrary to God's law.⁹

Paul most certainly *was* condemning the Galatian Christians for observing institutions commanded by God! The "days, months, and years" refer to the Jewish festival calendar consisting of weekly, monthly, and annual feasts commanded by Yahweh (Lev. 23). But these festivals have been made obsolete with the coming of Christ. The Christians of Galatia were being seduced by erring Christian Missionaries from Jerusalem who taught them that faith in Jesus Christ was not sufficient to be justified before God. Only observing the distinctives of the Torah (circumcision, Sabbaths, feasts days, food laws, etc.) would guarantee their justification.

The problem was not that the Galatians were observing their own special festival days (like Christmas and Easter) not commanded by God, but that they were acting as if the old law was still in force and that Jesus had not yet come to fulfill it. Paul's words must not be taken out of context and made into some sort of abstract prohibition against all extra-biblical celebrations.

III. Arguments Based on The Presumed Pagan Roots of Christmas Symbols and Ceremonies.

Q. 8. But surely you must admit that the origins of Christmas, especially the symbolism and ceremonies associated with it, are rooted in Paganism. How do you answer this?

Answer. This is a common sentiment. Consider Rick Meisel's confident claim in "Tis the Season. . . FOR Pagan Worship":

What many in Christendom have been celebrating--Christmas--is a thoroughly pagan holiday--in its origin, in its trappings, and in all its traditions.

The modern conservative cry to put Christ back into Christmas is absurd. Jesus Christ was never in Christmas.¹⁰

Stop and take a breath. Okay, let's review what we know about the origin of the annual celebration of Christmas.

First, we have reliable records from the middle of the fourth century indicating that Christians celebrated Christmas in the churches of Rome. The earliest record of Christ's birth being celebrated on December 25th is A.D. 354 in a work called *Chronography*. The *Chronography* documented the various seasons and festivals of the churches in Rome, most of them commemorating the death of Martyrs. By A.D. 398 Christ's birth was being celebrated on December 6th all across the empire—except in Armenia (January 6th).

Second, the story of how December 25th was chosen has been caricatured for many years. The Christian leaders who gave us the great Trinitarian and Christological Creeds of the fourth and fifth century were not so theologically naïve as to simply import a pagan feast into the church wholesale in order to pacify some recently baptized and nominally Christian pagans. This is absurd.

On the contrary, the facts suggest it was the pagan Roman emperor Aurelian in A.D. 274 who introduced the pagan feast of the "invincible Sun" (*sol invictus*) in order to counteract the influence of the growing Christian population and their celebration of the birth of Jesus during this time of the year. Pagans were imitating and aping Christians, not visa versa. If you want to learn more about this, read William J. Tighe's excellent article "Calculating Christmas: The Story Behind December 25." His summary is worth quoting:

Thus, December 25th as the date of the Christ's birth appears to owe nothing whatsoever to pagan influences upon the practice of the Church during or after Constantine's time. It is wholly unlikely to have been the actual date of Christ's

birth, but it arose entirely from the efforts of early Latin Christians to determine the historical date of Christ's death.

And the pagan feast which the Emperor Aurelian instituted on that date in the year 274 was not only an effort to use the winter solstice to make a political statement, but also almost certainly an attempt to give a pagan significance to a date already of importance to Roman Christians. The Christians, in turn, could at a later date re-appropriate the pagan "Birth of the Unconquered Sun" to refer, on the occasion of the birth of Christ, to the rising of the "Sun of Salvation" or the "Sun of Justice."¹¹

Third, there is sufficient historical evidence that the church's choice of December 25 as the festival of Christ's nativity was reached by independent calendrical calculation on the part of Christian scholars and pastors. It was chosen for symbolic and chronological purposes as believing scholars reflected on the symbolism of the seasons and the chronological information available to them.

They believed that God initiated the new creation on the same day in which the old creation was made and redeemed the world on the same day as well (Spring). The new creation began with the incarnation of the Word at the annunciation (March 25). Add nine months to this and you get December 25th.

Whatever you think about this line of reasoning, it is anything but pagan! The church deliberately chose December 25th because 1) they believed that Jesus was born sometime in the winter, and 2) having Christmas around the time of the winter solstice would enable the church to highlight the themes of darkness and light so prominent in the Gospel records. The pagans did not own the seasons; they tried to commandeer them from God and his people. And so in order to reclaim the seasons from the pagans, the church chose December 25th. This would counteract whatever pagan winter festivals were out there that honored various sun gods and turn people instead toward "the Sun of righteousness arising with healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2; Luke 1:78). We have sermons from this time (Augustine's #202, for example) that argue this way.

Now, again, whatever you think of the early church's reasoning, it is distinctively Christian and not in any way a syncretistic incorporation of paganism. The idea that Christians in the fourth and fifth century were so compromised and stupid that they just thought up a way to bring a pagan celebration into the church so as to keep the nominally baptized pagans happy is a vicious lie.

The early church Fathers were not as dumb as we often think. Ponder what has happened since that time. For centuries every year throughout the world the story of Jesus' incarnation and birth has been told. And the old sun gods (Sol, Osiris, Horis, and Mithra) are forgotten. Does anyone think that we are still commemorating these false gods? Phooey. Even if December 25th was a date that pagans in pre-Christian history worshiped some sun god or other, does it matter one wit? Does it mean that

we still worship them? That Christmas is a pagan holiday? The true Sun of Righteousness has vanquished the old, impotent gods.

Q. 9. Okay, but you didn't deal with all the pagan symbolism used in Christmas celebrations, especially the Christmas tree.

Answer. One Reformed Pastor warns Christians:

What could seem more harmless than the beautiful Christmas trees that light our homes during the Christmas season? But do you know why we have trees in our homes? From ancient times trees have played an important role in pagan religion, and were even worshipped. Norsemen, celts, and saxons used trees to ward off witches, evil spirits, and ghosts. In Egypt the palm tree was prominent; in Rome it was the fir. Because of this association, idols were often carefully carved from trees. Jeremiah warned the Old Testament people of God: "Thus saith the Lord, Learn not the way of the heathen, and be not dismayed at the signs of heaven; for the heathen are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are vain: for one cutteth a tree out of the forest, the work of the hands of the workman, with the axe. They deck it with silver and with gold; they fasten it with hammers, that it move not" (Jer. 10:2-4).¹²

This is ludicrous. Jeremiah condemns gilded, carved images that are erected for idolatrous worship. There is nothing here about using trees to decorate one's home during a holiday. The prophet condemns "carved images" (*pesel*, 10:14). The "axe" used by the workman (10:3) on the tree refers to an instrument to carve the wood, a chisel. Literally v. 3b says that the tree is "worked by the hands of an engraver with a tool." Using this carving tool the worker makes an idol in the likeness of men and beasts, which is then "clothed with violet and purple" (10:9, 14). They cannot walk or speak and have no power to do good (10:50). Jeremiah 10 is a sarcastic indictment of pagan idolatry along the lines of Psalm 115 and Isaiah 40 and 44. The prophet says absolutely nothing about the modern practice of using cut fir trees to decorate one's home.

Well, then, *do* we Christians "know why we have trees in our homes"? Is it to worship them? Do they ward off witches, evil spirits, and ghosts during the Christmas holidays? I want to say, "of course not," but I suppose that there may be someone out there who brings an evergreen tree into their home in order to perform such rituals. If so, then that person is using the tree in an idolatrous manner.

But there is a difference between symbolism and idolatry. In the light of Jeremiah 10 and the danger of "carved images," it is instructive to note that God ordained all sorts of carved and embroidered images for the Tabernacle and Temple—even trees!

Around all the walls of the house he carved engraved figures of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, in the inner and outer rooms (1 Kings 6:29).

Moreover, these carved trees are plated with gold!

He covered the two doors of olivewood with carvings of cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers. He overlaid them with gold and spread gold on the cherubim and on the palm trees (1Kings 6.32).

If any Christian bows down to the tree, seeks advice from it, attempts to communicate with God or the devil through it, or worships it or God through it as a medium, then that Christian is an idolater. But using a tree for such things is a far cry from the way Christmas trees function in a faithful Christian's home. Christians decorate trees with lights and ornaments because it brings them joy and delight as they commemorate the birth of Jesus. If you don't like it, then don't buy a tree. But don't accuse another believer of idolatry based on the supposed pagan origin and function of Christmas trees.

Q. 10. *But we know that Christians incorporated the use of evergreen trees in their celebrations in imitation of the pagans and their festivals. How do you answer this?*

Answer. No, we don't know this. According to the Scriptures, God has made trees in such a way that they are richly symbolic. Woodrow summarizes the biblical data:

Inspired prophets often used the tree as a symbol of that which is good. A man who serves the Lord is "like a tree planted by the rivers of water (Psalm 1:3). The righteous flourish "like a palm tree" and grow "like a cedar in Lebanon" (Psalm 92:12). They are "trees of righteousness" (Isa. 61:3). Wisdom is "a tree of life" (Prov. 3:18). The blessing of long life is likened to a tree (Isa. 65:22). Those who overcome eat of "the tree of life" (Rev. 2:7). God's people are symbolized by an olive tree (Rom. 11:17). These and many more references show how trees can symbolize good things.¹³

Christians, recognizing the beauty and significance of God's handiwork in trees, began to use them as decorations to symbolize the good gifts of God given through his Son to us at Christmas. We don't have to believe the various Christian legends attributing the first Christmas tree to this or that Christian saint. For example, the folktale that Martin Luther was the first to erect a Christmas tree with candles on it finds no support in the historical record.

Even so, the best evidence is that the Christmas tree is a direct descendent of the Paradise tree used in paradise and passion plays in the middle ages. From about the turn of the millennium (1000 AD) these "mystery plays" were put on all across Europe. One of the most popular was the Paradise Play, which was the story of Adam and Eve and the two trees. The play ended with the promise of the coming Savior (Gen. 3:15). These were very simple traveling drama troupes with one

prop—a Paradise tree adorned with apples (and sometimes wafers). It symbolized both the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Tree of Life (Christ himself).

But historians are agreed that the practice of erecting and decorating Christmas trees arose in Germany in the early 16th century, at the beginning of the Reformation. The first record we have of a decorated evergreen tree being used for Christmas is in 1521 in Germany. A resident of Strasbourg writes in 1605: “At Christmas they set up fir trees in the parlors at Strasbourg and hang thereon roses cut of many-colored paper, apples, wafers, gold-foil, sweets.” Around 1700, Christmas trees were appearing in the new world as German immigrants came to America.

Pastor Richard P. Bucher’s conclusions are surely correct:

. . . I think it is abundantly clear that Christians who erect Christmas trees are NOT worshiping them as gods or goddesses, nor are they loving them more than their Savior Jesus Christ. They are simply using the Christmas tree as a fun custom, one that can remind them of Jesus who is the branch of David (Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15), the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1). One that can remind them of the tree that led Adam and Eve to sin, but more importantly, the tree on which Christ Jesus died to make atonement for the sins of the whole world (Acts 5:30; Gal. 3:13; 1 Peter 2:24).¹⁴

IV. Arguments Based on the Regulative Principle of Worship and the Absence of a Biblical Commandment to Celebrate Christmas.

Q. 11. Doesn’t Christmas violate the “regulative principle of worship”?

The argument runs something like this: we must follow only what the Bible mandates in our worship. Therefore, since the Bible says nothing about Christmas, we may not observe such a celebration. Kevin Reed writes:

A consistent application of Reformed and Presbyterian principles of worship requires the repudiation of Christmas. Answer 109 of the Westminster Larger Catechism forbids “any wise approving, any religious worship not instituted by God himself.” The issue is not a matter of indifference. Since Christmas was not instituted by God, it should not be approved or tolerated in the official practices of the Church. Ministers and church officers are not being true to their ordination vows, if they encourage or tolerate Christmas observance in their congregations.¹⁵

Excuse me, but where have we established or approved *worship* not instituted by God himself? What exactly is the new mode or manner of worship that has slipped in during Christmas?

Are any of us Presbyterians praying to or through our Christmas trees? Shame on us. Are we lighting votive candles as offerings to Christ for specific prayers? We should stop. Are we praying to St. Nicholas or to his image? I hope not.

What new worship practices have we instituted by celebrating the birth of our Lord? Not one. What do we do during Advent and Christmas? As I have indicated already we select Scripture readings that highlight the coming of Christ and tell the story of his conception and birth, we pray prayers appropriate to the theme of Jesus' coming, we sign hymns that celebrate his birth, and we decorate our homes and churches with symbols that help focus our attention on the light, life, and joy he has brought to us when he assumed our human flesh in order to die and rise for the salvation of the world.

Exactly what is the innovation in our manner of worship? Other than the fact that we have chosen a specific theme for a few weeks each year, what is the problem here? How is that idolatry? Popery? Paganism?

Q. 12. But this is an imposition on my conscience! I am being forced to worship in ways I don't agree with.

Oh really? Is it a violation of your Christian liberty to be forced to sit through the reading of Luke 1 and 2 every year? Is your conscience violated when the church compels you to sing with the entire congregation a joyful hymn of praise to God for the birth of his Son? Are you being coerced against your will to listen to sermons on the wonder of Jesus' incarnation and pray prayers that implore the Lord to come again and restore his kingdom? What more can I say?

Every church orders her Scripture readings, prayers, and hymns even though there are no explicit instructions on how to do this in God's Word. If our choosing the theme of the incarnation of Christ to order our worship, prayer, and singing is a violation of the regulative principle of worship, then so are all other ways in which pastors and churches choose themes and order their service. The pastor who preaches through the book of Isaiah for seven years and each week picks hymns and prayers appropriate to the sermon's topic is imposing extra-biblical worship on his parishioners.

For more on this see Chapter 18 in my book, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), pp. 331-336.

Q. 13. How can any Reformed pastor justify imposing these man-made annual observances on his congregation?

Answer. These next three questions concern the propriety of using a church year calendar. American Presbyterians have been and still are divided in their stance on the use of the church calendar. I noted in my answer to question #3 that we have a widespread tradition of observing a simplified church year calendar in the so-called “continental Reformed” churches.

Some American Presbyterians who are more comfortable with the Scottish and Puritan traditions have thought that annual church year celebrations are not only extra-biblical, but outright dangerous. One must be careful how the word “Reformed” is used. The designation “Reformed” refers to a much wider tradition than is commonly thought.

Q. 14. But don't these annual festivals smack of Old Testament religion?

Answer. Well, is “Old Testament religion” a bad thing? We are, after all, whole-Bible Christians and the Hebrew Scriptures have been given for our instruction (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-11).

As I have said above, if you are looking for a direct commandment or a law establishing the practice of an annual commemoration of Christ's birth, you won't find it in the Bible. Nevertheless, what we do have is plenty of biblical warrant for the post-Pentecost church's freedom to establish annual festivals to commemorate the great redemptive events accomplished in Christ's birth, death, resurrection, ascension, and the pouring out the Spirit on Pentecost. And is it not conceivable that the annual festivals of Israel might function as instruction for the church in the new age?

Unfortunately, this perspective barely gets a hearing in most contemporary Reformed circles. Consider Terry Johnson's otherwise good work on Reformed worship *Leading in Worship*.¹⁶ He has this advice for those considering the church year: “While the revival of the liturgical calendar has become popular in some circles, we recommend moderation or abstinence for several reasons” (p. 103). Four reasons are given, all of which are very weak.

1. Scripture doesn't warrant the creation of a church year calendar.
2. A calendar of special days deemphasizes the Lord's Day
3. Observing a church year calendar threatens the Reformed tradition of preaching through books of the Bible (*lectio continua*).
4. The church year has a dubious origin in church history.

Even though I am about to critique Johnson's four arguments against the use of a church year, I do not put him or his arguments in the same category as those that we

have been considering thus far in this essay. Johnson advances his arguments with evident hesitation. In the end, as we shall see, he recommends a simplified church year calendar!

Johnson's first argument is that

. . . Scripture does not warrant the creation of a "church year," but instead warns against the observing of "days and months and seasons and years" (Gal. 4:10) (p. 103).

This first argument proves too much. Galatians 4:10 is quoted as warning Christians against the observance of "days and months and seasons and years." But what does this mean in Paul's argument with the Galatians? As we have seen above in my answer to Question #7, the "days, months, and years" refer to the Jewish festival calendar consisting of weekly, monthly, and annual feasts commanded by Yahweh (Lev. 23).

The Apostle Paul's point is that these festivals have been made obsolete with the coming of Christ. The Christians of Galatia were being seduced by erring Christian missionaries from Jerusalem who taught them that faith in Jesus Christ was not sufficient to be justified before God. Only observing the distinctives of the Torah (circumcision, Sabbaths, feasts days, food laws, etc.) would guarantee their justification.

The problem was not that the Galatians were observing their own special festival days (like Christmas and Easter) not commanded by God, but that they were acting as if the old law was still in force and that Jesus had not yet come to fulfill it. Paul's words must not be taken out of context and made into some sort of abstract prohibition against all extra-biblical celebrations. After all, an abstract prohibition against observing "days and months and seasons and years" would rule out a great deal more than the traditional church year festivals.

Confusion arises with statements like the following: "Our heritage is rightly suspicious of the creation of ceremonies and rituals not authorized in Scripture" (*Leading in Worship*, p.103). The problem with this is that technically the church year does not introduce new ceremonies or rituals; rather, it organizes and directs our Scripture readings, prayers, hymns, and sermons according to the life of Christ.

As I have said over and over again in this essay, I don't see how a church that celebrates Christmas, remembering Christ's birth by singing, praying, and learning more about this particular event in the life of Christ is introducing new "ceremonies and rituals." Now, there are a few traditional rituals associated with Christmas and Lent, like Advent candles and ashes applied to the foreheads of worshipers; but these need not enter into the discussion at this point, since they are not part of the essence of the celebration of the church year.

Johnson also warns “churches may not mandate or require such [annual observances] without destroying liberty of conscience” (p. 103). The question of liberty of conscience need not enter into the discussion at all. Why? Because members of the church promise to submit to their leaders in the area of worship.

Are pastors guilty of an “abuse of church power” when they regularly choose the hymns for the congregation, select prayers and Scripture readings, and arrange the order of their Sunday services according to their own preaching schedule? This is all that happens in most Presbyterian churches that observe Christmas—select biblical passages are read, seasonal prayers are prayed, and hymns about Jesus’ birth are sung.

If the “imposition” of these is a violation of “liberty of conscience,” then so is every worship service that is planned by church officers and “forced” on the people. Do church officers pick “themes” for various Sundays? Of course. Does this destroy liberty of conscience? If not, then what’s the problem with choosing to highlight the theme of Christ’s coming once a year? What’s the difference? Do the Scriptures mandate or authorize pastors to force such an order on their congregations? For example, why should the congregation have to submit to worship services where the singing, praying, and Bible readings are correlated to five years of sermons through the book of Romans and yet be free to reject a year of prayers, readings, and songs organized around the life of Christ? I don’t see any substantial difference between the two practices.

Johnson’s second argument concerns the danger of diminishing the importance of the weekly Lord’s Day. “Christian piety is better nurtured in the weekly Sabbath cycle of penitence and celebration than in periodic penitential seasons of Lent and Advent and occasional holy days. Fifty-two holy days is better than a dozen or so” (p. 103). First of all, if it’s about counting up the number of feasts, then Johnson needs a refresher course in math. If fifty-two holy days is better than a dozen, then sixty-four is better than fifty-two! Why can’t we have both the Lord’s Day celebrations and a dozen or so more days?

The real question, however, is must the Lord’s Day necessarily be “replaced” or “diminished” by the addition of an annual cycle? Might not the annual cycle support and enrich the foundational weekly cycle of worship? Why must this be an either/or proposition? Why can’t we have both?

The third argument against the church year is that it would surely interfere with the Reformed *tradition of lectio continua* preaching! But, now, surely we must ask *the* Reformed liturgical question: where is the *lectio continua* method of preaching and ordering Scripture reading sequences for the Lord’s Day services *commanded* or *mandated* in Scripture? What happens to the regulative principle of worship when Reformed authors begin to talk about preaching? There is no biblical command that mandates the method of continuous preaching through books of the Bible. Indeed, one might argue that there’s more biblical warrant for celebrating annual feasts than

there is for the *lectio continua* method of preaching so popular with Reformed pastors!

Furthermore, I am compelled to ask why everything the people of God do when they are gathered for worship must revolve around the texts that the preacher has selected for the day? Why must this concern for sequential preaching through books of the Bible be given such a large place in ordering our worship services?

I believe that the traditional method of preaching through books of the Bible is indeed the best method of preaching. I also agree that this is a wonderful tradition in the Reformed churches. But it is just that—a *tradition*. I see nowhere in Scripture where it is mandated or even exemplified! Furthermore, a moderate observance of the major festivals of the church need not threaten a pastor's regular preaching through books of the Bible. In fact, in my experience breaking in on a preaching series for Christmas often gives the congregation a needed and refreshing break.

Johnson's fourth argument is that "the church year is both of dubious historical origins and contemporary motivation" (p. 103). I think I have already dealt with this objection in my responses to earlier questions on the origin of Christmas.

It is rather telling that notwithstanding all of these arguments against the celebration of church year feasts Johnson recommends following the example

. . . of the Continental Reformed churches in limiting their church year to what has been called the 'five evangelical feast days': Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. Some might add Trinity Sunday to this list as well. In this way, the high points of the Gospel message would be commemorated in Reformed churches annually along with most of Christendom, without becoming entangled in the full calendar cycle (p. 104).

In the pages that follow this Johnson offers five sample services for Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost!

Q. 15. You have suggested that there is warrant from the Bible for such annual festivals that commemorate the historic acts of God's work of redemption for us. Where?

Answer. God has established the seasonal cycles for the purpose of religious festivals. A careful and literal reading of Genesis 1:14-15 will make this clear.

Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate between day and night, to be signs, to designate religious festivals, and to mark days and years.

The third purpose listed here has to do with "religious festivals [*mo'adim*]." The

Hebrew word *mo'ed* is used consistently throughout the Hebrew Scriptures to refer to religious festivals and feasts (over 200 times). Had he not fallen, Adam would have eventually figured this out. But he fell. When Yahweh redeemed Israel, his first-born son (Exod. 4:22), he gave to his people a festival calendar synchronized with the seasons of the year (Lev. 23).

Now, there is a sense in which the Church in Christ is restored to her Adamic lordship over all of creation, what God intended for humanity in the beginning. She has the right and power to establish festivals and feasts in conjunction with the symbolic dimensions of creation. She sees how God has done so in the Old Testament, when the people of God were children and were put under a schoolmaster to teach them the ABC's (Gal. 3:23-4:1-7). Now with one eye on the details of the old world's annual festivals and the other eye on the world-changing events of the incarnation, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ she exercises her wisdom, according to the biblical principles and patterns established by God, to institute new annual celebrations keyed to these great redemptive events in the life of Christ.

Surely Pastor Robert S. Rayburn is correct:

Now if you interrogate the Scripture as to whether God's people ought to celebrate the great events of their salvation with special feasts and holidays, the only answer that you will ever get is "YES! BY ALL MEANS, YES!" We are commanded in the Bible to remember the great works of God by which he has redeemed us from sin and death. These great events are to be kept alive in the consciousness of both the individual believer and the church. God taught his people in ancient times that one very important way to do that was the keeping of annual feasts commemorating those events (Sermon, Nov. 28, 1993, Faith Presbyterian Church).

Pastor Rayburn has expanded his argument in his recent sermon "Is Christmas Christian."¹⁷

There's a smidgen of hyperbole in this, but Martin Luther's comments are worth noting:

We therefore have and must have the power and the freedom to observe Easter when we choose; and even if we made Friday into Sunday, or vice versa, it would still be right, as long as it was done unanimously by the rulers and the Christians. Moses is dead and buried by Christ, and days and seasons are not to be lords over Christians, but rather Christians are lords over days and seasons, free to fix them as they will or as seems convenient to them. For Christ made all things free when he abolished Moses. . . We know that we shall attain salvation without Easter and Pentecost, without Friday and Sunday, and we know that we cannot be damned--as St. Paul teaches us--

because of Easter, Pentecost, Sunday or Friday (*On the Councils and the Church*, 1539).

Q. 16. But what difference does it really make? Does the church *need* to have a church year calendar of annual feasts?

Answer. I don't think the church year is absolutely necessary, but it seems almost inescapable, given the fact that God has created us to live through these seasons. During the childhood of humanity, God tutored Israel by providing them with festivals keyed to the changes in the seasons. Since we are deeply affected by the change of seasons, it only seems right that the church make use of the symbolic dimensions of the seasonal changes in conjunction with the life of Christ.

First, the Christian faith takes time seriously. Christ did not *rescue* us from time, but from sin and death so that we might properly consecrate our lives in time to the Father by the power of the Spirit. We are not saved *from* time, but *in* time. Time is reclaimed for man. God takes up our time into his life. The man Jesus Christ is now part of the very life of the Trinity. Unfortunately, the early church Father Athanasius' maxim "God became man so that man might become God" (*On the Incarnation*) has been misunderstood. It might be more appropriate to say that God became man so that man might become man again. This was Luther's way of putting it.

The Christian faith, therefore, is not a "spiritual religion"—spiritual in the sense of non-material, ethereal—rather, it affirms space, time, body, and matter—everything as the good creation of God—and all of it to be used in his service. Walker Percy in his novel *Love in the Ruins* gives the church the role of restoring humanity to a proper earthiness. At one point, a major character has the Lord's Supper explained to her by her husband.

"This is my body given for you." The woman, who knows very little about the Faith is shocked: "My God, what do you do in Church?" The husband explains: "What she didn't understand, she being spiritual and seeing religion as spirit, was that it took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the Angels, that it took nothing less than union with the humanity of Christ to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning."

Thus, time and history are very important to Christianity, particularly Christian worship. Genuine Christian worship is not disembodied, timeless worship. It is *not* an attempt to transcend the limitations of our creaturely existence, but an opportunity to consecrate our creaturely existence to God.

Second, since this is true, Christians confess that the way we *use* our time is a good indicator of what we think is most important. We will always find time for what we think is most important. Our real priorities are revealed in the way we structure our

time. Time talks. Time is like money because it reveals where our hearts really are. When we give someone else our time, we give ourselves.

“What does this person believe?” we ask. To answer this we might best look at how a person uses his time. If you spend more time on the golf course on Sunday than you do with God’s people, you have made a statement about your real commitments. If you spend more time in front of the TV than you do with your children, then we know what really matters to you.

All of this is true for the church as well. The church shows what is most important by the way she keeps time. One way to answer the questions “What do Christians confess? What do they believe? What is important to them?” is to look at how they keep time.

Consider Ephesians 5:15-16, “See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time. . .” Do we believe that it is necessary to redeem the present moment and bring it captive to and for Christ? Of course. What about each day? Ought we to redeem the days for Christ? How was that done in the Old Testament? Morning and evening sacrifices and the daily prayers and Scripture readings that developed from the sacrificial liturgy in the synagogues set apart each day. What about each week? There are weekly Sabbaths. What about the months? The Hebrews had monthly assemblies as well. What about the years? God instituted yearly feasts (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) that were linked to the seasonal changes.

The annual calendar of feasts in Israel (Exodus 23:10ff. Lev. 23) was primarily a theological pedagogy—instruction centered on commemorating the great saving works of Yahweh. The seasons were made to serve a theological purpose in the life of Israel. They were catalysts to cause Israel to remember what Yahweh had done for her. Passover / exodus / new life / Spring (Lev. 23:4-8). Pentecost / Sinai / first fruits (Lev. 23: 15-21). Tabernacles / full harvest (seventh month) / fruitfulness / judgment (Lev. 23:33-43).

Man remains a seasonal, rhythmic creature. That has not changed since the coming of Jesus Christ. If the church does not set up an annual church calendar to mark time, somebody will! And somebody has—the modern secular State.

Redeeming the time for us means reclaiming the time from the tyranny of the modern state. It has only been since the French Revolution that the calendar has been secularized. No longer is it keyed primarily to the great redemptive historical events of Christ’s life, death and resurrection. The calendar is well on its way to being de-Christianized and correspondingly politicized

Like the pagan states of the ancient world, modern secular politics has again commandeered time for itself. Political holidays have slowly replaced Christian feasts in our land. Nationalistic holidays (e.g., Fourth of July, Veterans Day, Labor Day, Presidents Day, etc.) that celebrate national heroes are most prominent. This is

a contemporary form of Baalism, when the faith is subordinated to national, political interests. Don't be fooled, if Christ's life and Christian saints are not memorialized throughout the year, then others will take their place (Washington's birthday, Martin Luther King day). Our calendars have almost become thoroughly secularized.

People will simply use whatever pagan calendar becomes prominent in culture. Christians that attack Christmas and Easter as pagan holidays, usually go to churches that make a big to-do about New Year's day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and the Fourth of July. The annual cycle in America is truly becoming paganized. The Baalism of nationalism that commemorates the victories of the nation and celebrates all kinds of political "saints" (George Washington, Martin Luther King Jr., Christopher Columbus, etc.) is in the process of replacing the festivals of the church commemorating the life and work of Jesus Christ and the triumphs of his Church in history.

Some of these secular holidays may seem rather benign to us, but we are still living culture that is living on the borrowed capital of Christendom. Just remember the French or Bolshevik Revolution, where atheistic, political holidays were forced on the populace. Even today in nations like the Congo, political tyrants deliberately impose political holidays and ban Christian ones in order to claim dominion over all of life.

Q. 17. But aren't we giving in to paganism when we start talking about the symbolism of the seasons and all that? Isn't this nature worship?

Answer. According to I Timothy 4:4, "Every thing that God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified by the Word of God and prayer." God has created both us and the rest of his creation responsive to temporal rhythmic patterns (Gen. 1:14). There are certain temporal rhythms of life that are built-in to his creation and into us. Daily: Sun up, Sun Down. Monthly: the cycle of the moon. And yearly: the march of the seasons and the alternating of darkness and light, cold and warmth associated with the movement of the earth and Sun. We ignore these patterns and we suffer the consequences!

The sun governs not only the day, but also the year (Gen. 1:14). The solar cycles are inescapable. Our own rhythms of life are influenced by the progression of the seasons. God has created us enmeshed in the creation. Human psychology is affected by the seasonal changes. For example, studies have indicated a significant increase in crimes of violence during times of a full moon. 17-25% more babies are born during the waxing period of the moon than during its waning. All you have to do is ask any OB nurse.

During the winter, the days are short, the rays of the sun are more slanted, and the weather is cold. In the winter everything dies or at least *looks* and *feels* dead—insects, animals, vegetation—the whole world seems to shut down. It affects us too. The relative absence of sunlight and the dominance of darkness make us

melancholy or worse. We are psychosomatic beings. In the Spring, everything seems to come back to life—resurrected from the dead, as it were.

All of this is inherent in God's creation. The Bible recognizes this and builds on it. Of course, the pagans pervert it. They *worship* the sun and moon. They believe that fertility and life is somehow *resident* in nature. They deify the forces of nature. And if man would just manipulate nature correctly he can also gain life for himself. So you get pagan fertility cults and rites and other perversions.

The Bible does not completely set aside the calendar cycles because pagans pervert the meaning. No, rather, as we have seen, God has placed the Sun, moon, and stars in the firmament to indicate festival seasons (Gen. 1:14).

The Israelite calendar did not attempt to disregard the symbolism and experience of the seasons of the year just because gentile nations perverted them. God placed the major Israelite festivals precisely at points in the year that would correspond to their meaning!

Passover takes place in the Spring because it celebrates the Israelites' resurrection from the death of Egyptian bondage. God gave them new life. And this new life is only possible because of the death and resurrection of the Messiah, typified by the Passover lamb.

Pentecost was held at the beginning of the summer harvest. Tabernacles was observed during the Autumn harvest to remind the people that the source of their blessings was Christ. God established the seasonal changes when he established the sun and moon as symbols (Gen. 1:14). The Bible indicates the value of arranging the worship of the people of God so that it is keyed into the seasonal changes (Song of Songs 2:10-12; Matt. 24:33-34; John 10:22-23; John 20:15). Recognizing these seasonal cycles and making use of them in the worship of the church is not "nature worship." If that is the case, then God was guilty of leading his people into idolatry when he ordered the feasts of Israel to coincide with the appropriate seasons of the year.

In John 10:22-23 Jesus attends the feast of Hanukkah. During this festival the Jews celebrated the restoration of the temple after the abomination of desecration by Antiochus Epiphanes. It was celebrated at the time of the winter solstice; just as the sun begins its annual rising (the nights are longest, the days are shortest, but that all begins to change at this point). It was a feast of lights! Now in Jesus, according to the Gospel of John, the light is dawning and Jesus is the light of the world.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that Hanukkah is nowhere commanded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet Jesus attends and explains it in terms of himself. Jesus sets his seal of approval on a feast celebrated during the winter solstice, commemorating the rebuilding of the temple and the beginning of the dawn of new light for the people of Israel.

But, now, we know that Christ himself is the new temple (John 2:19) and his birth was the beginning of God's "tabernacling" with men (John 1:16-18). His work was the prophesied dawn of God's great work of temple building. His birth was the beginning of the dawning of the true light that comes into the world and that gives light to every man. Remember the Star of Bethlehem in the *night* sky. The early church recognized these truths and turned the Feast of Hanukah into the celebration of the nativity of our Lord, the True Temple.

Therefore, just as the great redemptive events recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures were keyed to the changes in the seasons—Passover in the Spring means life from the dead—so also the church ordered her Scripture readings and prayers so that the life of Christ would be correlated to the symbolic changes evident in the seasons of the year. Easter, for example, is celebrated in the Spring when the entire created order is symbolically restored from death to life.

Consider how this works for Christmas. Why is Christmas celebrated on December 25th? Not so much because it has much of anything to do with the date of his actual birth—although as we noted above, the early church suspected a winter birth. Nor is it the case that the church gullibly adopted a pagan Roman holiday, the festival of the Invincible Sun (*Dies Natalis Dei Solis Invicti*). The early church was not so naïve. The date was picked for symbolic reasons.

The winter solstice occurs around December 25th (solstice from the Latin: *sol* = sun, and *sistere* = to stand still). This is the time of the year when the Sun reaches its southern-most extremity (or to put it another way, it is the point on the Sun's ecliptic at which it is the farthest south). The longest night and the shortest day occur at this point and from this day onward the days get longer and the nights get shorter. The darkness of winter begins to give way to the light and warmth of Spring and Summer. This continues until the summer solstice when the other extreme is reached.

What does this have to do with Christmas? Much in every way. Just as death and darkness give way to life and light in the yearly cycle of seasons, so also the death and darkness brought on by sin gives way to the life and light realized in the work of Jesus. Jesus birth is celebrated when the darkness of night has reached its peak, and once he is born the light begins to wax and the darkness wanes. As the hymn reminds us:

Behold a branch is growing
 As of loveliest form and grace,
 As prophets sung, foreknowing;
 It springs from Jesse's race
 And bears one little Flower
 In midst of coldest winter,
 At deepest midnight hour.

The purpose of the church year, therefore, is to redeem the time, to consecrate the various seasons of the year by the word of God and by prayer (worship), And to provide an opportunity for the people of God to give thanks and rejoice in what God has done in Christ and through his saints throughout history. Used in this way it can be a great educational tool to teach the people the Bible (lectionary) and especially the life of Jesus Christ.

We need not fear the Christian calendar. It has great didactic significance. The Christian year is ordered according to the life of Jesus Christ, from his birth to his ascension and pouring out of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us that as Christians we are in Christ. Each year we are reminded that the yearly cycle of our lives finds its true meaning and significance in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It gives us occasion to celebrate the mighty acts of God in the person of Jesus Christ! The Christian year reminds us that we are “in Christ,” our time is “in Christ,” and our lives are not our own.

Q. 18. Surely you can say more than that?

Answer. Yes, I certainly *can*, but I won't. I don't have any more time to give to this project and this essay is already long enough. Francis Turretin (1623-1687), considered by most to have been one of the finest Reformed theologians, will have the last word:

Hence we cannot approve of the rigid judgment of those who charge such churches with idolatry (in which those days are still kept, the names of the saints being retained), since they agree with us in doctrine concerning the worship of God alone and detest the idolatry of the papists (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 2, p. 104).

Q. 19. If you are not going to write more yourself, then point us to other essays that defend the moderate observance of Christmas.

Answer. Surely. Here are some articles, essays, and sermons available on the internet that I have found helpful:

Mark Horne, “Celebrating a Calvinist Christmas with a Clear Conscience”
http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/celebrating_a_calvinist_christmas_with_a_clear_conscience.htm

Robert S. Rayburn, “Is Christmas Christian?”
<http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Seasonal/advent95.htm>

William J. Tighe, “Calculating Christmas: The Story Behind December 25,”
<http://www.touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/16.10docs/16-10pg12.html>

Richard P. Bucher, "Christmas is Not Pagan"
http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/chrmas_pagan1.html

Endnotes

1. Michael Schneider, "Is Christmas Christian?" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch1.htm)
2. Rick Meisel (http://www.despatch.cth.com.au/Despatch/vol94_xmas.html)
3. Brian Schwertley, "The Regulative Principle and Worship" (<http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/CHRISTMAS.htm#C3S1>).
4. Kevin Reed, "Christmas: An Historical Survey Regarding It's Origins and Opposition to It" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch2.htm).
5. Ibid.
6. http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/mark_horne/celebrating_a_calvinist_christmas_with_a_clear_conscience.htm.
7. Michael Schneider, "Is Christmas Christian?" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch1.htm)
8. Ralph Woodrow, *Christmas Reconsidered* (Riverside, CA: Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, Inc., 1997).
9. Michael Schneider, "Is Christmas Christian?" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch1.htm)
10. Rick Meisel (http://www.despatch.cth.com.au/Despatch/vol94_xmas.html)
11. *Touchstone* (<http://www.touchstonemag.com/docs/issues/16.10docs/16-10pg12.html>).
12. Michael Schneider, "Is Christmas Christian?" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch1.htm).
13. Ralph Woodrow, *Christmas Reconsidered*, p. 50.
14. "Jeremiah 10 and the 'Pagan' Christmas Tree" (<http://users.rcn.com/tlclcms/jer10.html>).
15. Kevin Reed, "Christmas: An Historical Survey Regarding It's Origins and Opposition to It" (http://www.swrb.com/newslett/actualnls/Xmas_ch2.htm).
16. Terry Johnson, *Leading in Worship* (Oak Ridge, TN: The Covenant Foundation, 1996).
17. <http://www.faithtacoma.org/sermons/Seasonal/advent95.htm>