

TEN REASONS

WHY WE OBSERVE
THE SABBATH DAY

&

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WHY WE DO NOT
CELEBRATE 'HOLY DAYS'

JJ LIM

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by

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As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in His Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, He hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto Him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week; and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord's Day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.

Westminster Confession of Faith 21.7

TEN REASONS WHY WE OBSERVE THE SABBATH DAY

1. It is a Moral Law

The first and most obvious reason why Christians should still keep the Sabbath holy today is that it is part of God's Moral Law as summarized in the Ten Commandments. Of all the words and laws recorded in the Scripture, only the Ten Commandments were addressed audibly and personally by God to the entire church. Only the Ten Commandments were inscribed on stone with the finger of God, and that not once but twice. Only the Ten commandments, of all the laws of God, were kept in the holy Ark of the Covenant. The Fourth of these Ten Commandments read:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidervant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it (Ex 20:8–11).

The word *sabbath* is related to the Hebrew word for *seventh*. The word *holy* means “set apart” or “sanctified unto God”. So the Fourth Commandment teaches us that it is God’s will for all men throughout all ages to set apart one day in seven as holy unto Him. Notice the LORD’s emphasis on the universality of this law as He insists that the servants, the strangers, and even the cattle must rest. Just as it is God’s will that all men should not murder, so it is God’s will that all men

should keep the Sabbath holy. Just as it is a sin for anyone, whether he is a Christian or not a Christian to murder, it is a sin for anyone, whether he is a Christian or not a Christian to break the Sabbath.

The Lord Jesus says, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (Jn 14:15); and John says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous” (1 Jn 5:3). If we love God, we must keep the commandments He has appointed for us, including observing the Sabbath Day.

2. It is a Creation Ordinance

The second reason why we must observe the Sabbath is that it is a Creation Ordinance. A Creation Ordinance is something ordained of God for man when He first made man. Marriage is a good example of a Creation Ordinance. Every culture and civilization since the beginning of human history recognises the validity of marriage and engages in some form of marriage custom.

The Sabbath is a Creation Ordinance in that it was instituted when God created the world. God created the world in six days and ceased from creating anything more on the seventh day, wherefore the Lord sanctified the seventh day, and required that all men should keep it holy unto Him (Gen 2:2–3).

The descendants of Abraham, no doubt, kept the Sabbath day according to the weekly cycle that began with Creation Week. However, the children of Israel

lost track of which day they ought to observe the Sabbath during their four hundred years sojourn in Egypt. This is because the Egyptians were known to organize their time into ten-days cycles known as decans. As a result, after Israel came out of Egypt, God had to indicate which day they should observe the Sabbath by giving a double portion of manna on the day before. Instructively, in response to the surprise of the rulers of the congregation, Moses explained: “This is that which the LORD hath said, Tomorrow is the rest of the holy sabbath unto the LORD” (Ex 16:22–23).

Notice how this was before the Ten Commandments were announced. The Sabbath was not just a moral law but a Creation Ordinance appointed for all mankind in all ages. Therefore, the Sabbath is clearly not only for the Jews, but for Christians as well. Indeed, today both believers and unbelievers are obliged to observe it.

3. It is a Christian Ordinance

Not only is the Sabbath a Creation Ordinance and a Moral Law, it is also a Christian Ordinance. We see this in Mark 2:28 where the Lord Jesus asserts that He is “Lord also of the sabbath”. He came not to destroy the Sabbath, but to fulfill the Sabbath (Mt 5:17) and to be Lord of the Sabbath. We must not think that to fulfill the Sabbath would be to abrogate or cancel it. In the case of ceremonial laws, to fulfill would indeed involve abrogating them for the ceremonial laws were shadows pointing to Him and His work. There is no more need of the shadow since the substance has come. However, the Fourth commandment is not ceremonial but moral. As the Lord of the Sabbath, He taught His people how it ought to be kept. It is to be kept as the Lord’s Day—a day belonging to Him!

Thus, the apostle to the Hebrews reminds us “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of

God” (Heb 4:9). In the context, the apostle is dealing with the theology of rest. We will look at that in a little more detail later; but for now, it is important for us to note that there are three Greek words translated ‘rest’ in this passage (Heb 3–4). Two of them are closely related, being the verb and noun of the same root. These are the noun *κατάπαυσις* (katapausis) and the verb *καταπαύω* (katapauō). These account for ten of the eleven occurrences of the English word ‘rest’ in this passage. The word in Hebrews 4:9 is the only exception. It is the word *Σαββατισμός* (sabbatismos). It occurs only once in the New Testament and may be better translated “sabbath-rest”. The apostle is saying, “There remaineth therefore a [sabbath-rest] to the people of God”. God’s people even in the New Testament must observe a weekly Sabbath rest. It is, in other words, a Christian ordinance.

4. It is Appointed for us to Remember our Creator & our Creatureliness

It is clear that God intends for us to remember that He is our Creator by observing the Sabbath. Indeed, this is the most obvious reason for keeping the Sabbath since it is given in the Fourth Commandment itself (see Ex 20:11).

But closely related to remembering that He is our Creator and celebrating His greatness, power and majesty, the Sabbath is also a reminder of our creatureliness and our need for bodily rest. This is the way that God has designed us.

An average person spends a third of his lifetime resting and recuperating. God does not need to rest, but we are told He rested on the seventh day. Why? So as to give us a pattern to follow and rest from our usual labours once every seven days! This is what we

must do if we want to avoid abusing our God-given bodies.

Our Creator has our interest in mind when He instituted the Sabbath. “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” says the Lord (Mk 2:27). Keeping the Sabbath ensures that we do not endanger our own health. Our Creator knows best!

*5. It is Appointed for us to Remember
our Redeemer & His Work of Redemption*

The Ten Commandments were recorded twice by Moses. The first time was when God spoke it in the hearing of His people at Mount Sinai (Ex 20). The reason given there for keeping the Sabbath is that God rested after He created the world in six days and so we are to keep the Sabbath in remembrance that God is our Creator. But about 40 years later, after the first generation of the Jews who left Egypt had died, Moses

repeated the Ten Commandments for the new generation about to enter the Promised Land (Dt 5).

If you compare the two passages, you will realise that Moses has repeated 9 of the 10 commandments almost word for word. But He changed the words substantively for the Fourth commandment. What is changed is the reason for keeping the commandment.

Keep the sabbath day to sanctify it, as the LORD thy God hath commanded thee... And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day (Dt 5:12-15)

What is the new reason? Redemption! The Jews of old had two reasons for keeping the Sabbath: creation and redemption. And likewise for us! Israel's re-

demption from Egypt is a type of the church's redemption from sin and Satan—a redemption accomplished by Christ and sealed upon his Resurrection on the day in which the stone rejected by the builders was made head corner stone (Ps 118:22–24; cf. p.16).

As New Testament saints, we are not only to remember our Creator and His work of Creation, but we must remember especially the greater work of Redemption that is wrought by Christ. The apostle to the Hebrews draws these two great works of God together when he explains to us what is the purpose of the Sabbath for us who live under the New Covenant:

There remaineth therefore a [sabbath-rest] to the people of God. For He [Jesus] that is entered into His rest [from His work of redemption], He also hath ceased from His own works [of redemption], as God did from His [work of Creation] (Heb 4:9-10).

In other words, the Sabbath remains for Christians to commemorate not only Creation but our Redemption. And since our redemption is not complete until we see our blessed Lord face to face, the Sabbath serves as an emblem of the eternal rest. That is why the apostle continues by exhorting: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest [i.e. heavenly rest], lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief” (Heb 4:11).

Therefore, it behooves us on every Sabbath day to reflect on Christ our Redeemer. We ought to spend the day as grateful, redeemed persons, preparing for our eternal rest by using the means of grace: worship, prayer, reading, hearing sermons, etc.

6. *It is a Covenant Sign for God's People*

God has appointed the Sabbath as a kind of insignia for His people to bear. More specifically, early in the history of Israel, the LORD declared unto them:

... the children of Israel shall keep the sabbath, to observe the sabbath throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between me and the children of Israel for ever... (Ex 31:16-17; see also v. 13).

Centuries later, when the people had rebelled against Him, God would again remind them of this perpetual covenant and the appointed sign. He recalls the words that He said unto them:

I said unto their children in the wilderness... I am the LORD your God; walk in my statutes, and keep my judgments, and do them; And hallow my sabbaths; and they shall be a sign between me and you, that ye may know that I am the LORD your

God. Notwithstanding the children rebelled against me... (Ezk 20:18-21).

Israel's neglect of the Sabbath grieved the LORD and became one of the reasons for their exile.

The nation Israel, of course, was the church underage. Today, the Israel of God (Gal 6:16), the church of Christ must continue to bear the sign, seeing that it is a perpetual covenant. It is God's will that by keeping the Sabbath holy, we distinguish ourselves from the world, and testify that the LORD is our God who sanctifies us. If this is so, then Christians and the church, who would be salt that has not lost its saltiness and light not hidden under the bushel, must keep the Sabbath. As much as we fail to keep the Sabbath, so much do we fail in our witness for Christ to the world!

7. The Day-Change was Prophesied and Effected by the Lord

This may not sound like a reason at first sight but consider the fact that if God did not intend for the Sabbath to remain for His people today, then any suggestion of a change in the day of observance will be quite meaningless, if not misleading.

We disagree with some, such as the Seventh Day Adventists, that worship on the first day of the week arose out of tradition rather than Scriptural obedience. We see rather that it was God's intention all the while that the Christian Sabbath should now be on the first day of the week rather than on the seventh day.

This change in day was anticipated a thousand years earlier in Psalm 118:

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing;

it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 118:22-24).

What is the stone which the builders refused but Christ? When did He become the head stone of the corner but when He was resurrected from the dead? And when was He resurrected from the dead (Acts 4:10–11)? On the first day of the week!

Even more remarkably, more than four hundred years before this prophecy, God had already set the ground for this change of day by giving Moses a different reason for keeping the Sabbath when He reiterated the Ten Commandments. Remember how the second reason is on redemption?

From hindsight, it is clear that God intended for His people in these Last Days (cf. 1 Cor 10:11b) to observe the Sabbath on a different day—the day of the

Resurrection—in order that we may celebrate redemption in Christ over and above our creation in Him. Such is the wisdom of God who has ordained that the Gospel of Christ, much more than the message of creation, should be the means of calling the world to Himself for salvation. It is no wonder that the church so quickly and willingly began to keep the first day of the week as the day of worship, and no doubt as the Lord's Day or the Christian Sabbath (see Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10).

8. *The Scripture Taught and Christ Affirmed* *the Manner of its Observance*

The instruction not to do any ‘work’ on the Sabbath (Ex 20:9) must be understood to be a prohibition of work *that is not appointed by the LORD for the day*. This agrees with God’s word through the prophet Isaiah:

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD... (Isa 58:13–14a).

The word translated ‘pleasure’ (חֶפֶז, chêphets) carries the meaning of ‘purpose’ (cf. Ecc 3:1; 8:6). God is saying that we keep the Sabbath when we seek God’s purpose or pleasure rather than our own.

Legalistic Jews in the days of the Lord had misunderstood the intention of the Sabbath when they apparently attempted to define ‘work’ according to the amount of energy expended rather than the purpose of the deed.

The Lord Jesus, however, demonstrated in His own earthly ministry that acts of necessity, mercy, emergency, and piety are all allowed on the Sabbath day (Mt 12:3–4, 11, 13) and that Sabbath-keeping is not as unreasonable and restrictive as it is often portrayed to be.

The care with which the Lord has taken to make sure that New Testament saints may know how to observe the Sabbath should, at the very least, provoke us to consider seriously whether we are being obedient to God’s will.

9. *The LORD Promised His Blessings
on All Who Observe the Sabbath*

God's words in Isaiah 58 does not only remind us how we are to keep the Sabbath but goes on to promise His blessing on all who would do as He urges. The whole statement reads:

If thou turn away thy foot from the sabbath, from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the LORD, honourable; and shalt honour him, not doing thine own ways, nor finding thine own pleasure, nor speaking thine own words: Then shalt thou delight thyself in the LORD; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it.

Here are three blessings promised for all who observe the Sabbath by faith and with love and gratitude.

First, “thou [shalt] delight thyself in the LORD”. As we seek to glorify God by delighting in His Sabbath, we shall enjoy Him more. Need we wonder why we and our children should find more delight in the things of the world than in God, if we do not make it a point to delight in His Sabbath?

Second, “I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth”. High places were greatly valued in ancient days both for military and religious reasons. To ride (upon horses) on high places would be to have possession and dominion over the land.

As ancient conquests were to serve as types and spiritual lessons for spiritual conquests to all upon whom the ends of the world are come (1 Cor 10:11), God’s second promise to us would be that we will have spiritual victories. Those who delight in the Sabbath can expect victory in the spiritual battles they have to fight.

Thirdly, “and [I will] feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father”. The heritage of Jacob typified the blessings that Christ procured for us. This is why the Holy Spirit is known as “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Eph 1:14). Thus, the promise would be that we will have greater interest in our spiritual inheritance, whether it be of assurance of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Spirit, increase of grace or perseverance unto the end (WSC 36).

Remarkably, the LORD does not merely state these promises, but solemnly affirms He will surely bestow them on all who delight in the Sabbath by concluding with the words, “the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it”. O how could any serious Christian refuse these promises?

10. *Sabbath Observance is not Abrogated*

By Seemingly Contradictory Verses

Essentially three statements of the apostle Paul have been raised as objections against keeping the Sabbath.

The first is Colossians 2:16, which reads, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days”.

Notice that Paul speaks of “Sabbath days” (plural) rather than “Sabbath day” (singular). This is significant because there were many festival days under the Old Covenant which included rest days called by the generic term “Sabbath” (See for example, Lev 16:31; 23:24, 32; 25:6; Isa 1:13; cf. ISBE, s.v. “Sabbath”). The plural “Sabbaths” used in conjunction with terms ‘new moon’ and ‘holyday’, would no doubt refer to these ceremonial feast days which were abrogated with the coming of the Messiah. Had the apostle Paul

intended to refer to the weekly Sabbath, he would no doubt have used the singular ‘Sabbath.’ Moreover, the Sabbath of the Fourth Commandment is usually referred to with the definite article (‘the’) in the New Testament, even when it is a general reference, i.e. not referring to a particular Sabbath day (e.g. Mt 12:8, 11, 12; Mk 2:28, 3:4; Lk 4:31, 6:2, 9; 13:15, 16 etc.). In this verse, Paul switches from the collective singular for “holyday” (ἑορτῆς, *heortēs*) and “newmoon” (νεομηνίας, *neomēnias*) to the plural “Sabbath days” (σαββάτων, *sabbatōn*)¹ and each term is anarthrous (without the definite article). This wording appears to be a conscious choice of Paul to ensure that no one mistakes him to be referring to the Fourth Commandment.

¹ Had Paul intended to refer to the Sabbath, as some assert, then he would have used σαββάτου (*sabbatou*, see Mt 12:8) regardless of whether he was transliterating from the Aramaic or otherwise.

The second text is Galatians 4:9-10, “But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and seasons, and years”.

The problem with thinking that Paul is objecting to Sabbath-keeping are threefold:

First, it is more likely that Paul is speaking against the superstitious observance of special days with the purpose of securing divine favour. This would be a natural development in view of Paul’s sustained attack against salvation by works leading up to this point (Gal 2:16, 19; 3:2, 5, 10-13, 17, 21; 4:5).

Second, by “days, and months, and seasons, and years,” Paul may be referring to all sorts of Jewish festivals without having in mind any particular observance. If this is the case, then the use of this

verse against the Christian Sabbath would be irrelevant.

Third, if Paul meant to include the Sabbath, then it would mean that Christians should not even set aside any particular day for worship, which would prove too much even for anti-sabbatarians!

The third text raised by objectors is Romans 14:5, “One man esteemeth one day above another: another esteemeth every day alike. Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind”.

Anti-sabbatarians frequently appeal to this verse to suggest that Sabbath-keeping was, for Paul, a matter of indifference, and therefore the principle of Sabbath-keeping could not be part of the mandatory Moral Law of God. However, it is clear from the context that Paul is dealing with matters of indifference during a transitional period rather than on matters

that are clearly prescribed in the Law. Thus, this verse is clearly not about doing away with the Sabbath principle. Rather, Paul is asserting that believers had the liberty whether to observe or not to observe the Jewish Sabbath Day during the period of transition to the New Testament economy.

Conclusion

We considered ten reasons why we must still observe the Sabbath today. What more can we say?

O may the Lord in His mercy cause us to realise how we have sinned against our God by profaning the Sabbath, and may He grant us, as those who have been justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, that we may out of love and gratitude for Christ seek to observe the Sabbath that He has appointed for our good and for His glory!

Amen.

There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath.

Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.

Westminster Directory for the Publick Worship of God (1645)

TEN REASONS WHY WE DO NOT CELEBRATE ‘HOLY DAYS’

1. *God must be Worshipped in the Way He has Appointed*

The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches us that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture” (21.1). This is based on God’s instruction regarding His own worship both in the Old and New Testament. We read in Deuteronomy 12:29–31 God’s instruction

to His people not to imitate the heathen in their worship no matter how appealing or how sensible it may seem. Would not sacrificing one's child rather than an animal to the LORD make sense if the intent is to show how much He is revered and loved? But God hates such innovations. "What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it", He declares (Dt 12:32). Whatever is not appointed of God for His worship is forbidden even if He has not explicitly forbidden it.

The New Testament affirms this doctrine in Hebrews 12:28–29—

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.

The apostle is here expounding Deuteronomy 4:23–24, showing that the Old Testament principle of

worship which is based on a proper interpretation of the Second Commandment is still applicable in the New Testament economy.

Contrary to popular understanding, Christian worship and religious exercise is not a matter of indifference. We must worship God “in Spirit and in Truth” (Jn 4:23-24), not according to human traditions and inventions (Mt 15:9).

Thus, we should only celebrate the traditional Christian holy days like Christmas, Easter and Good Friday if we are convinced that God has appointed these days for our observance. But as we shall see, there is no hint in Scripture that any of these days should be observed.

2. God Has Appointed Only One Perpetual Holy Day

A holy day is a day that God has set apart for His own worship, which He alone has the sovereign right to do. The weekly Sabbath is a holy day because God had sanctified it (Gen 2:3). God had also appointed several holy days under the Old Covenant, such as the Passover (Ex 12:1–14), the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex 12:15–20), the Feast of Firstfruits (Lev 23:9–14), Pentecost (Num 28:26–31); Feast of Trumpets (Lev 23:23–25); the Day of Atonement (Lev 16) and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev 23:33–36a).

But of all these special days, only the weekly Sabbath remains obligatory to God's people. The apostle to the Hebrew says: "There remaineth therefore a [sabbath-rest] to the people of God" (Heb 4:9). All the other days were ceremonial and therefore fulfilled in Christ and abrogated.

This is an important observation in our consideration of whether we should observe ecclesiastical holy days: because if He intended for us to observe them, He could easily have instituted them as He did the Old Testament feast days. But contrary wise, it appears that it is His will that we focus our attention only on one day, namely the weekly Sabbath.

3. Christmas is a Lie

Christmas is the day that the Church traditionally celebrates the birth of Christ. However, the Bible does not enjoin us to celebrate the birthday of Christ and there is no evidence that anyone celebrated it for the first three centuries after. The Church Father Origen (A.D. 185–254) even preached in a homily on Leviticus that it would be wrong for the church to celebrate the birthday of Christ to honour Him in the same way that Pharaoh and Herod were honoured.

It is also unlikely that Christ was born on 25 December as it was wet and cold and the shepherds would no longer be abiding in the field with their flocks (Lk 2:8). Nevertheless, since the actual date of Christ's birth is not mentioned in the Scriptures, there were those who speculated on it. Polycarp (A.D. 69–155) suggested that Christ's birth and baptism most likely occurred on Wednesday, because the sun was created on the fourth day. A Latin treatise written A.D. 243 used pretty much the same argument and arrived at March 21 because it was believed that God created the sun on that day. Many other dates were argued for, such as January 2, March 25, April 18, April 19, May 20, May 28, November 17 and November 20. By the second half of the 3rd century, it became common to observe the Epiphany on January 6, but the celebration of Christ's birth by itself did not become popular until the 4th century.

In AD 313, after Emperor Constantine issued the edict of Milan, by which Christianity became the favoured religion of the Roman Empire, there were many attempts by church leaders to Christianise pagan idols, rites, symbols and festivals. Eventually, the Western Church began to celebrate the birth of Christ on 25 December 336, the year before Constantine died. The reason for choosing that day was not because the church believed that Christ was born on that day, but because it was a religiously significant day for the pagans. The Saturnalia or the *Dies Natalis Solis Invicti* (“birth of the Unconquered Sun”) was celebrated by the Romans on that day to mark the winter solstice (the sun’s triumph over darkness); as was the birthday of Mithras, the Iranian Sun of Righteousness. What the church did was simply to Christianise the pagan holy days in an attempt to assimilate the pagans into the church.

This syncretism is the reason why Roman Catholicism has retained many pagan practices; and it is also the original reasons for many of the customs and decorations of Christmas. For example, the Christmas tree came into use because sacred evergreens were important aspects of pagan worship during the winter solstice; the Yule Log probably originated from Druid sun worship; and the practice of giving presents was probably imported from Saturnalia where small dolls were a popular gift because Saturn was supposed to have eaten all his male children at birth in order to fulfill a pledge that he would die without heirs (see Brian Shwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* [Reformed Witness, 1996], 22-3).

So we see that God has not ordained that the birth of Christ be celebrated; the date of His birth was not even preserved by the Early Church; and the festive decorations still in use today have pagan origins. And we have not even begun to talk about Santa Claus and

the worldly commercialism that is now associated with the day. Is it no wonder that conservative churches that still celebrate Christmas would often be apologetic about it and try to anticipate objections to it while trying to promote any benefit of doing so.

4. Easter is not Christian

Easter is the day in which the Church traditionally celebrates the resurrection of Christ. However, the word ‘Easter’ was probably derived from the name of an obscure Germanic goddess of spring (Eastre), to whom sacrifices of hare (emblem of fertility) were offered about the time of the Passover by the pagan Saxons. This is probably the reason why there are Easter Eggs and Easter Bunnies. Apparently, eggs were commonly regarded in ancient pagan cultures as symbols of continuing life and resurrection. As such, eggs were exchanged as gifts at the spring festivals of the ancient Persians and Greeks to celebrate the revival of nature

after the winter. To the early pagans converted to Christianity under Emperor Constantine's rule, eggs seemed the obvious symbols of the Lord's resurrection and were therefore considered appropriate gifts at Easter time. The origin of the Easter Bunny or more accurately 'hare' is even more overtly pagan. The hare was sacred to the Spring-Goddess, Eastre. Hares were sacrificed to her. The hare was an emblem of fertility, renewal, and return of spring to the heathen. Christians ought to have nothing to do with these pagan symbols which were nowhere appointed by God for His Church.

Thankfully, many conservative Christian denominations that still celebrate Easter would not indulge in these pagan symbols. But then, whether the date of the Resurrection accurately falls on the movable Easter Sunday each year is open to much dispute. The Jewish Passover occurs on the 14th day of Nissan, this date according to our Gregorian calendar can be on

any day of the week each year. The current date for Easter was determined during the council of Nicaea in AD 325, under the patronage of Emperor Constantine. The council decided that the Resurrection be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the vernal equinox of March 21. Easter, as such, can come as early as March 22 or as late as April 25. Moreover, the Eastern Orthodox Church, which is still using the old Julian Calendar, celebrates Easter on a day that can be as much as five weeks at variance with the Roman Catholic and Protestant Easter. 'However, most who celebrate Easter do not really bother with the accuracy of the date whatever might have been the formula of Nicaea. This is really a tacit admission that God did not require the Church to remember the exact day in the year when Christ rose; and has, therefore, not ordained that any particular day of the year should be regarded as holy by the Church for this purpose.

On the other hand, God has ordained that the Church should celebrate the day of the resurrection of the Lord on a regular basis. This is given in Psalm 118:22-24—

The stone which the builders refused is become the head stone of the corner. This is the LORD's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the LORD hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

When we gather each Sabbath for worship, we celebrate the Resurrection of our Lord. The Resurrection of Christ should be celebrated every Lord's Day, not once a year on Easter.

*5. God has Appointed an Ordinance,
not a Day for Us to Remember Christ's Death*

Good Friday (also known as Great Friday or Holy Friday) is the day of the year on which the Church has

traditionally commemorated the crucifixion and death of Christ. The actual date, as with Easter, however, varies from year to year and from tradition to tradition.

Although Good Friday is not usually attended with the same pagan and superstitious symbols as Easter and Christmas are, it has in many circles developed into a day of mystical rituals and observances. One needs only to check the entry on “Good Friday” in Wikipedia to be overwhelmed and amazed by what the day has become.

While it is commendable that there is generally an attempt to recreate or instill a sense of solemnity and lamentation through fasting and other devices, one wonders if this is what Christ himself wants the Church to do when He has declared that “they that worship [God] must worship him in spirit and in

truth” (Jn 4:24). Does not the attempt to stir the carnal senses in order to provoke spirituality remind us of the ministration of the Old Covenant which has passed? Does not it bring to mind the words of the apostle Paul in Colossians 2:16–23?

Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ. Let no man beguile you of your reward in a voluntary humility... Wherefore if ye be dead with Christ from the rudiments of the world, why, as though living in the world, are ye subject to ordinances, (Touch not; taste not; handle not; Which all are to perish with the using;) after the commandments and doctrines of men? Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body; not in any honour to the satisfying of the flesh.

Thankfully, many conservative evangelical churches do not include these carnal elements in their Good Friday observances. But the fact remains that if we seriously meditate on the death of Christ and engage in self-abasement and humiliation only once a year at Good Friday, then we have failed to do the will of God and are in danger of will-worship. It is, after all, the will of God that the death of Christ should be commemorated every time we observe the Lord's Supper, not once a year on a special holy day.

6. Scripture Does Not Sanction the Christianising of Pagan Religious Paraphernalia

Festive decorations have meaning. While those who decorate their houses according to the traditional festive moods and colours may not subscribe to the meaning behind the decoration, a pragmatic and cavalier attitude towards pagan superstitions can have serious implications for the people of God.

The pagan origin of Christmas decorations is acknowledged even by the Encyclopedia Britannica: “The Romans ornamented their temples and homes with green boughs and flowers for the Saturnalia, their season of merry making and giving of presents; the Druids gather mistletoe with great ceremony and hung it in their homes; the Saxons used holly, ivy and bay” (5:643).

The Roman Catholic Church believes that these pagan paraphernalia may simply be Christianised. Pope Gregory I explains this reason in general terms in his instructions to missionaries in A.D. 601:

When you seek to bring the gospel to pagans, you must be exceptionally patient. Don't offend their beliefs but assimilate them. Don't pull down their temples or places of prayer, but little by little without their even knowing, you must Christianise their temples and replace their idols with the images of Christianity, their amulets with our sacred

relics, their festivals with our celebrations of the Lord and of the blessed saints...

Because they [the pagans] were wont to sacrifice oxen to devils, some celebration should be given in exchange for this... they should celebrate a religious feast and worship God by their feasting, so that still keeping outward pleasures, they may more readily receive spiritual joys.

This exhortation may sound reasonable and convincing but is clearly rejected by Scripture. The LORD warned the Israelites as they prepared to conquer the Promised Land:

The graven images of their gods shall ye burn with fire: thou shalt not desire the silver or gold that is on them, nor take it unto thee, lest thou be snared therein: for it is an abomination to the LORD thy God (Dt 7:25).

The children of Israel were not even to try to reclaim the gold and silver on the idols lest they be ensnared by them.

God's commendation of the good (or repentant) kings in Judah were also frequently tarred by their failure to remove the pagan high places to worship Him.¹ The only two exceptions were Hezekiah and Josiah, who God was more pleased with because they took steps to destroy the high places and to prevent the people from worshipping in high places (see 2Chr 32:12 and 34:3).

The incorporating of pagan religious paraphernalia and syncretistic celebration of holy days would clearly not have God's approval.

¹ We think of God's commendation of Joash (2Kgs 12:2-3); Asa (2Chr 15:17); Jehoshaphat (2Chr 20:33); Uzziah (2Kgs 15:35); Amaziah (2Kgs 14:3-4); Azariah (2Kgs 15:3-4); and Manasseh (2Chr 33:3, 17).

7. The End Does Not Justify the Means

One of the rationales for the observance of holy days is that it is a means of outreach. Using Christmas for gospel meetings seems to make a lot of sense as many people who would not normally come to church are quite happy to come for a Christmas service.

The problem with this approach to the celebratory holy days, however, is that no matter how we try to shake off their pagan associations, it is impossible to dissociate ourselves completely with those who embrace them. Indeed, while we may accuse others of deceptively abusing Christmas, perhaps we may be the ones doing so when we tell those who come that on this day Christ was born. He was not!

Moreover, the reason why many would come for Christmas services (who otherwise would not attend church) is often because there is an expectation that the service has some additional entertainment value.

Of course, a church may hold it as a purely gospel-preaching service. Even if that is so, the question needs to be asked: Why then do the people come? If they came because they want to hear the gospel preached, why would they not come on the regular Sabbath worship services? Is it because they think that this day is really a special holy day? If that is so, then are we not guilty of using a lie to draw sinners to Christ?

The point is: unless we believe that the slippery-slope principle that the end justifies the means, it will be difficult to argue for the validity of using the holy days for evangelistic purposes. The apostle Paul was accused of teaching this principle when it was slanderously reported that he had taught, “Let us do evil, that good may come” (Rom 3:8). But Paul denied it vehemently to the point of condemning those who attributed the idea to him. It is clearly a biblical principle that the end does not justify the means.

8. *Civil & Social Celebrations Differ from Holy Days*

It has sometimes been argued that if it is wrong to celebrate the holy days, then it would also be wrong to celebrate birthdays, new years, thanksgivings and national days.

But very briefly, we should note that ecclesiastical celebration of holy days differs from civil and social celebrations. The former relates to the worship of God and is regulated by the principle of worship that whatever is not appointed of God is forbidden, whereas the latter are matters of indifference for which the Scripture does not directly legislate.

During the days of Esther, Mordecai instituted Purim to commemorate their deliverance from their enemies. These were days of national celebration, “of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor” (Est 9:22b). These were not days with special religious significance. Mordecai

would have had no power to institute such holy days. Only God had the power to do so.

Thus the celebration of birthdays, Chinese New Year, National Day or Thanksgiving do not at all imply that it is right for believers to engage in the celebration of religious holy days. A church that wishes to have a day of fasting on the New Year or a day of Thanksgiving on her anniversary may do so, so long as the day is not made into a special religious day. The problem of using those established holy days for such purposes is that the connotations are so well established that they cannot easily be shaken off.

9. Observance of Other Ecclesiastical Holy Days Tend to Detract us from the Sabbath

This ninth reason is not based so much on biblical and ethical considerations as it is on simple observation. It has been regularly observed that churches which

celebrate holy days tend to be more crowded on such days than on regular worship services. As we have seen, the reasons are varied. Some may come because of the additional entertainment expected. But others, especially superficial professing believers, may come because they feel a need to fulfill their religious duty and to satisfy their conscience. Years ago, I ministered for a year in a beautiful church building in London that used to belong to a Presbyterian Church and was packed with perhaps two to three hundred worshippers in its heydays. But by the time I took up the ministry as the resident pastor, appointed by the denomination that bought over the building, there were hardly fifty in attendances. The congregation did grow as the word was preached, albeit very slowly. But remarkably on Christmas, the church hall was packed almost to the full! I remember standing at the door to greet one family after another which I had not met before and encouraging them to continue to come for

worship on the Lord's Day. Each one I spoke to claimed to be a Christian and that they are attending church when they can. But the sad truth is that none who came for the Christmas service came the next Sabbath or any other Sabbaths following. It became clear to me that these had come to fulfill their religious duties. Sadness filled my heart as it occurred to me that so many profane the Lord's Day each week and that we might have just helped them to feel better about it by providing an avenue to mollify whatever is left of their conscience in regard to their need to worship God publicly.

I was convinced after that experience and remain convinced today that if God has appointed a perpetual holy day, then we have no right to insist upon any other 'holy days' especially when they detract us from God's holy day.

10. *Observance of Many Holy Days Tends to Tempt towards Legalism and false Religiosity*

Many who disagree with us with the non-observance of these ‘holy days’ would charge us with legalism for our denial! But what exactly is legalism? Legalism involves deeds that are either not in accordance to God’s Word or are performed to procure God’s favour. Religiosity is similar. It involves religious acts and rituals that are designed to fulfill tradition or to fulfill what is perceived as being required of God. While we are convinced that a weekly observance of the Christian Sabbath is still required in God’s Moral Law, we are not convinced that any other days are to be regarded as special by God’s people. Listen to Calvin’s exposition of Galatians 4:10—

When certain days are represented as holy in themselves, when one day is distinguished from another on religious grounds, when holy days are reckoned a part of divine worship, then days are

improperly observed. The Jewish Sabbath, new moons, and other festivals, were earnestly pressed by the false apostles, because they had been appointed by the law. When we, in the present age, intake a distinction of days, we do not represent them as necessary, and thus lay a snare for the conscience; we do not reckon one day to be more holy than another; we do not make days to be the same thing with religion and the worship of God; but merely attend to the preservation of order and harmony. The observance of days among us is a free service, and void of all superstition.

Many churches and Christians who observe 'holy days' tend to do so at the expense of the Sabbath. And not only so, but they tend to find themselves busied around these days, and find their religious zeal and sensibility ebbing or flowing according to the coming and going of these days. Whereas God intended New

Covenant worship to be simple, spiritual and undorned so that faith and love for Christ may be provoked purely by the Word and Spirit, man has sought to return to the veiled glory of the Old Covenant (cf. 2 Cor 3:7). Yes, those elements of worship that provoked the carnal sense were necessary for a time, for the Spirit was not yet poured out and revelation was not complete. But now with the Spirit poured out and the canon of Scripture completed, these carnal elements, whether introduced or retained, serve only to veil Christ and to give a false sense of religiosity and piety. This is the new legalism that we fear is being surreptitiously introduced into Christian worship via ecclesiastical holy days and other inventions of men, however well-intentioned they may be.

Conclusion

If we have to state just one reason why we should not observe the ecclesiastic holy days like Christmas, Easter and Good Friday, our answer would be they are not appointed of God. But it is clear that this one primary reason does not stand alone but is supported by numerous other valid objections.

But let none of us rid ourselves of our love for these ecclesiastical ‘holy days’ and fail to fill the void in our souls with what is right and pleasing to God. O may we begin truly to delight in the Sabbath—the Lord’s Day—and through the means of grace appointed therein to “[behold] as in a glass the glory of the Lord” that we may be “changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18). Amen.

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