

Stealing for the Glory of God

Mr. Andrew Clarke

Presbyterianism and Christmas have never been terribly friendly. To Scrooge's "Bah, humbug", we tend to reply, "Amen". Part of this unease stems from concern over the purity of worship, and opposition to special days being made holy for observation *by the church*. This is a valid concern and still of relevance today. What I want to do is look at Christmas as a cultural event celebrated *by families* and the nation as a whole. How are we to regard the traditional celebrations at Christmas - gift giving, trees, card sending, turkey dinners, holly, etc.? Should the dubious origins of these customs worry us?

First, we should realise that there is nothing wrong with feasts, celebrations or commemorations as cultural events. Culture does not consist just in reading Proust or listening to opera music, or even the two combined. It refers to how we order our lives - what time we get, how we work, what we eat, the clothes we wear, and what we do to relax. It also involves commemorating major events in our lives, such as noting marriages or deaths in various wedding and funeral ceremonies. This varies from country to country, and is often the product of many preceding centuries. In virtually every culture, there are times when it is customary to remember or celebrate some historical event or person of importance to that cultural group. This is natural and wholesome, and the Bible gives us examples of the people of God developing such traditions. In Judges 11:39-40, we read:

And it was a custom in Israel, the daughters of Israel went yearly to lament the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite four days in a year.

In Esther 9, after Haman's plot had been foiled, it is written,

The Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they would keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year; and that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed (v. 27-28).

Elsewhere there are examples of commemorative acts such as the giving of place names (Gen. 22:13; 26:22; 28:19), the erecting of monuments (Josh. 4:1-7), composing songs and poetry (Gen. 2:23; Judg. 5; Ex. 15:1-9), and partaking in dancing and music (Gen. 15:20; 2 Sam. 6:14; 1 Sam. 18:6).

Church history, too, abounds with godly people celebrating God's mercy and deliverance, whether Thanksgiving Day in America, The Twelfth of July in Northern Ireland, or Guy Fawkes Night in England. It seems fairly clear that if we wish to celebrate on the 25th of December - whether in obedience to God's feasting command (Ecc. 9:7-10) or simply the fun of it! - or to commemorate the Incarnation, one of the greatest acts of God in history, we may do so with merry hearts.

The next question to be asked then centres on the *means* of doing so. Let us ignore the fact that much of modern Christmas celebrations are Victorian or medieval, and assume that they were all once used in pagan worship. Does that invalidate their use now?

I suggest the Bible answers this with a very clear "No." In 1 Corinthians 8-10, Paul addresses the issue of eating meats offered to

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idols. There he lays down the principle that the abuse of something does not prohibit its legitimate use by Christians. Remember the circumstances in which Paul is saying this: he is addressing relatively young Christians, with the constant threat of relapse, in a culture steeped in idolatry. In those circumstances, he says that elements used in devil worship can be put to sanctified use by believers, since the objects in themselves are not sinful. Would his answer be any different in a culture where paganism has been dead for hundreds of years, and the threat of tree-worship among Christians not so very pressing?

What Paul is teaching here has sometimes been referred to as the “plunder principle,” albeit when viewed from a slightly different point of origin. It takes its name from the story of the Exodus from Egypt: before leaving, the Israelites plundered the Egyptians of their valuable possessions. We can use this as a picture of the Christian’s interaction with the world. He neither withdraws from it, nor is absorbed by it. Instead, with the guidance of the Spirit, he can use the artistic, intellectual and technological products of ungodly men in the service of God. Such an approach does not have to see such pagan treasures as evidence of God’s grace to the ungodly, but rather His mercy to His people in providing such things for their use. Of course, such plundering must be done wisely, and sometimes the only good use for a worldly thing is as bonfire fuel. But when applied to Christmas, this means that we may legitimately use once-pagan customs in our celebrations.

Let us suppose that Christmas derives from ancient rituals celebrating the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year, after which the sun returns and the days lengthen. Although it is difficult to trace such a direct link from these cultic rites to what we today know as Christmas, it is established that the Romans celebrated the festival of the Unconquered Sun near the time we celebrate Christmas. In a similar way, the Vikings are thought to have looked on the evergreen tree as sacred, a promise that the decay of winter would be banished by the energy of spring, and that life itself might be eternal. What these have in common is a fear of

death and darkness. When spreading the gospel in such a culture, what would be more natural than to direct them to the true hope of eternal life, and the source of life in this life? Scripture itself describes the Incarnation in terms of light dispelling darkness:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light:
they that dwell in that land of the shadow of death, upon them
the light has shined. (Is. 9:2)

Christ's birth was heralded by a star in the dark sky, and announced by the glory of an angelic host in the middle of the night. If one wished to commemorate this, what better time than when the sun begins to vanquish the dark of winter? If the Vikings saw hope of eternal life in the evergreen tree, must Christians then blind themselves to God's revelation in nature, and "abstain" from all contact with "unholy" fir trees? That would be a twisting of the antithesis. Was Paul wrong in using the altar TO THE UNKNOWN GOD of Athens in his evangelism? Did Jesus get mixed up when using cultural patterns to illustrate truth in his parables?

The fact that some Christmas traditions were once associated with idolatry testifies not to some shabby compromise by an apostatising church, but to the redeeming power of a transforming gospel. While our brothers who abhor the trappings of Christmas are to be commended for their zeal towards the purity of *God's church*, extending abstinence to *family life* amounts to little more than a form of Protestant asceticism. It should be consigned the same place as teetotalism, forbidding recreation on the Sabbath, enforcing celibacy, self-whipping, and other legalisms.

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