

Celebrating Holidays

Here we are again, approaching the end of another year.

In the English speaking World, the year end is celebrated with several Holidays, especially the one that until recently was universally called "Christmas."

In these days, there are several controversies going on over this Holiday.

Some call it the "War on Christmas."

Businesses that want to profit from the Holiday have replaced any reference to "Christmas" with politically correct generic phrases like "Seasons Greetings", "Happy Holidays".

Many of them have retreated from this position as a result of boycotts organized against them for doing so.

Some people take Christmas pretty seriously.

The disgrace that the Secular Christmas has taken on is worth discussion, but I will try to avoid this subject today.

We are not experiencing a War on Christmas, the War being waged is against Religion.

Christianity and Christmas are innocent bystander casualties.

In our fellowship, we have a wider range of controversy concerning Christmas.

All churches of Christ that I am aware of observe the Resurrection of Jesus Christ every Sunday.

Many believe that it is wrong to observe any other Christian Holidays.

Many would like to see observance of widely recognized Christian Holidays in both regular weekly and special Worship Services.

A very large number observe a secular Christmas while disconnecting Christ from their celebration.

Dispute among Christians over Holidays is not a recent development.

In the early Church, the Resurrection was celebrated every Sunday.

We do this because they did and because we share their motivation.

John 20:1 states explicitly that Jesus was raised on the first day of the week.

Acts 20:7 tells us that the Disciples met on the first day of the week to break bread.

1 Cor 11:17 ff gives more insight; this breaking of bread was the Lord's Supper and not just a meal.

At some point Christians also began to celebrate the Resurrection as an annual Holiday. The most common observance was on the Sunday following Passover.

Exodus 12:14-15 explicitly ordains the Passover as an annual observance. The Scriptures established several other annual observances for the Jews and they added others to memorialize important events. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, it was within his explicit observance of the Passover. It would be difficult to condemn anyone for observing an annual memorial.

In the United States, we also have many such annual memorials recognizing significant people and events. It is possible that Christians observed both a weekly and annual memorial of the

Resurrection from the very beginning. We know for certain that observing the Resurrection both weekly and annually was common by the 4th Century.

There were some peculiarities of the Jewish Lunar Calendar that lead to disputes over the date even of Passover. Many non-Jews celebrated a Pagan Fertility festival called Easter at about this same time to celebrate the Spring Equinox and the arrival of Spring. (the name Easter, incidentally, is derived from a word that means "to shine." The names Esther and Ashtoreth found the Old Testament are both forms of this word. So is the modern English term "Star", as is Aribic "I shtar")

All the things the World associates with Easter; Rabbits, Eggs, Flowers, and dressing up young girls , have their roots in the celebration of the Easter Fertility Festival

One of the outcomes of the 325 A.D. Council of Nicaea was the decision to make the annual celebration match the date of Easter instead of the Sunday after Passover. The biggest advantage to this was that the Christian Holiday pre-empted the pagan festival. Hence redefining the pagan name of Easter rather than a name referring to the Resurrection or Passover.

The adoption of Christmas as an annual celebration of Christ's birth is more obscure . The Catholic Encyclopedia is a source that should know who did what and why, but it admits that the history is vague. Here are two direct quotes:

"there is no month in the year to which respectable authorities have not assigned Christ's birth."

"The well-known solar feast, however, of Natalis Invicti, celebrated on 25 December, has a strong claim on the responsibility for our December date".

It is surprising to me that this Encyclopedia makes no secret of listing many pagan festivals and citing the practices originating from them that are observed in the secular Christmas celebration of today: trees, gifts, lighting of houses, decoration with greenery, a mysterious visitor who leaves gifts for children, cards, abstaining from work, feasting were all things that were part of the Winter Solstice celebrations, predating the celebration of Christmas.

The Catholic explanation is that all of these things were "baptized." The analogy being that what was once sinful was made righteous by its being converted to godly purpose by the Magisterium.

The principle at work in Christian Holidays co-opting pagan celebrations is to take something that presents a temptation to sin and convert it to a wholesome purpose.

On the one hand, one might condemn this for having been done without Scriptural Authority.

On the other hand, one might acknowledge to good intentions of removing temptations from the weak.

What is certain is that the pagan world resents Religion for taking their festivals and they want to return them to their original ungodly purposes.

This is no simple matter.

Some of us could say that these celebrations have pagan origins and seem to be leading back to where they came from. Citing the admonition found in 1 Cor 6:14 to "not be bound together with unbelievers", one might say that no Christian should celebrate these Holidays. Several religious reformers have taken exactly this position. Puritan England, for example, outlawed Christmas. Businesses were required to remain open on December 25th unless it was a Sunday. The Pilgrims and others brought this belief to America. Before 1900 Christmas was rarely celebrated except by Catholics, Anglicans, and Lutherans.

Somewhere along the way, a peculiar compromise took root in churches of Christ in America. That is to celebrate the pagan Christmas at home and pretend it doesn't exist while they are at church. It seems to have been in place somewhere about the time of the First and Second World Wars. I think it was a result of government coercing Christians to violate their conscience that resulted in this double identity way of life, but let's save that for another day.

I grew up in this environment. I want to make sure this point does not get missed. I think it is dead wrong. Christians should not lead double lives.

I am sure everyone here has an opinion on whether and how a Christian should celebrate Christmas. I am equally sure that the opinions would vary across the full spectrum. Each of us are entitled to our own opinion.

But ... what does the Bible say about it ?

The word Christmas is not found. The explicit listing of commanded observances and their dates found for the Jews under the Law of Moses is not found in the New Testament. What is found is guidance on the observance of Holidays and other worldly influences.

This subject is addressed directly in Romans 14:, 1 Cor 10:23-31, Colossians 2:16-17

I won't read the complete texts today, but each of these passages are part of a much bigger discourse, much of which is found in many of the Epistles of Paul.

In these extended texts:

Romans 13:8 – 15:2, 1 Corinthians 8:1 – 10:31, Galatians 1:6-7, 5:13-14, 6:3-5, Ephesians 4:15-32, Philippians 2:1-4, Colossians 2:1-3:24

I would like to dissect the passages a little to make the point that the four points are common to several Epistles. I will preserve the context. You have the passages so you can read them in their entirety.

Four points are presented.

Motivation of Love – doing what is best for others

Arrogant Knowledge – Knowledge is useless if it negates Love

The Principle of Individual Conscience – as it applies to Holiday observance

Necessity to glorify God – Does what you do glorify God?

The first point is that Love must be the motivation that governs the actions of each Christian in relation to others.

Romans 13:8-10, 1 Corinthians 8:1-3, Galatians 5:13-14, Ephesians 4:15-16, Philippians 2:1-4, Colossians 2:1-3

Romans 13:8-10

⁸Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. ⁹For this, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder,

You shall not steal, You shall not covet,”

and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” ¹⁰Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law.

Galatians 5:13-14

¹³For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do* not *turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

Ephesians 4:15-16

¹⁵but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Colossians 2:1-3

¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ²that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

In each of these the common factor is Love. Freedom comes from no other source.

I have something to say that might be hard for some of you to hear. The only way you will be able to do so is by knowing that I am saying it out of love.

You have probably heard the military slogan "Freedom is not Free" with the implication that you personally are only free because of the actions of the military. This may make someone who was conscripted and trained to kill on command feel better about what happened to him, but it is simply not true !

For all the bravado declaring that America is the "Land of the Free", America is a place where the people live in slavery to lust, to greed, to arrogance, to a false sense of security, and to a false sense of freedom itself.

If this were a free country, then children could pray, sing spiritual songs, and wear clothing that proclaimed Jesus to school. If this were a free country, memorial scenes from Jesus' life could be displayed in public.

And let me share a well kept secret with you, if we are truly free we still can do all those things.

Jesus Christ was free when the Roman Army killed him.'

Paul was free when he was in prison.

Christians all over the world and through the ages were free when they were persecuted and even murdered because they were Christians

Love has freed us from Sin and Death.

If our lives are ruled by Love, we have a freedom that no Army gave us and that no one can take away from us.

We are freed from law-keeping because being motivated by love for others meets the intent of the law. Law is needed to govern those who don't.

Avoid Arrogance

1 Corinthians 8:1-3, Galatians 6:3-5, Philippians 2:1-4

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

¹Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge.

Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. ²If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; ³but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

Galatians 6:3-5

³For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have *reason for* boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. ⁵For each one will bear his own load.

Philippians 2:1-4

¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

Knowledge is useful. I must confess that I enjoy study; learning new things. Sharon likes to travel. She likes to tell people about the places she has been and the well known places we have visited. I am always wandering off to learn some detail about the place that you can't learn anywhere except being there. She is trying to get out picture taken with the Eifel tower in the background and looking for me. I will be off in the historical room, reading about why did they build it. (the answer is that it was a public works project to combat un-employment, instill public pride, and create a tourist attraction.)

But, here is what I have learned. The more I learn, there is a lot more that I don't know. If every time I learn something, I discover ten new things that I don't know. [use hands to illustrate]

The problem is with anyone who thinks they know all there is to know.

They probably do know a large percentage of what they are aware of.

They just haven't discovered how much they don't.

When Paul spoke in the Epistles about arrogant knowledge, this is what he was talking about.

Knowledge is completely useless if the person who has it demonstrates arrogance and contempt instead of love toward others who might benefit.

The Principle of Individual Conscience

Which brings us to the observance of Holidays.

Romans 14:5-6, Romans 14:16-18, 1 Corinthians 10:23-30, Colossians 2:16-17

Romans 14:5-6

⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:16-18

¹⁶Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

This teaching could not be more direct and to the point of today's topic.

Some people seem to want and need the observance of Holidays and days of Memorial.

Others just like to enjoy every day just the same.

Annual observance is a way some of us pick one of the things important to us every day and focus on that one thing above other things for one day of the year.

You might have guessed this already – but we have one of each in the Burk household.

Sharon is in to special occasions She likes to decorate the house for and have a big celebration.

When it is over she crashes and rests up for the next time.

If there is an occasion, you have never seen such a “hostess with the mostest.”

I like to know what's for supper and when are we having it every day of the year.

I think like Elvis sang, “Why can't every Day be like Christmas.” I could live without the event things, but wouldn't it be grand if love and peace, and being with the ones you love were our daily routine ?

I must admit that the climate of endless “Events” and “deadlines” I get at work has affected me in this. So has the profound sadness I see in those that the Holidays remind of whatever is missing in their lives.

Paul is telling us that there are people like Sharon and I. Neither is Right. Neither is Wrong. We are just different. Sharon and I have learned to respect that in each other. I appreciate when she goes all out and the event results in seeing many loved ones. I enjoy seeing her happily serving others. I think she appreciates me putting food on the table all the other 360 days of the year.

The important thing regarding Holidays is that each person not violate his or her own conscience. If someone thinks it is wrong to celebrate a Holiday, for them it is wrong, and people who think it is good to celebrate it should not try to force them to violate their conscience.

Conversely, if someone thinks that it is right to celebrate and they are not violating their own conscience, people for whom it would be wrong should not try to prevent them from celebrating.

Colossians 2:16-17 echoes this thought.

Colossians 2:16-17

¹⁶Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ.

Pay attention to exactly what was said. Paul did not say whether the event should be observed. He said not to let someone else place themselves in position to judge your choice.

1 Corinthians 10:23-30 deals with something just a little more complicated.

1 Corinthians 10:23-30

²³All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. ²⁴Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. ²⁵Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; ²⁶for the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. ²⁷If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. ²⁸But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake; ²⁹I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? ³⁰If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?

This is the hardest concept to grasp. Sometimes there is something that is not a problem for you personally, but it is for someone you know. What do you do when you are with them?

Paul wrote several times on this subject with regard to what Christians eat and drink. His point was that each of us are completely free in this regard. But there are occasions where we should give up our freedom when we are with someone who we know is not living free. If someone thinks that steak you'd like on your plate used to be his grandfather, eating a vegetarian meal when you are with him is what you will do if you love him.

These passages tell us that it is not universally right or wrong to celebrate Holidays.

It depends on the conscience of each person.

If it is wrong for you, it is wrong.

If it is not wrong for you, it is not wrong.

Each of us should respect the conscience of the other.

If we are ruled by Love, Love will find a way.

Necessity to glorify God

Finally, just as we have individual freedom, we also have individual responsibility.

Romans 14:22-23, 1 Corinthians 10:31, Colossians 3:17, Colossians 3:23-24

Romans 14:22-23

²²The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

1 Corinthians 10:31

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Colossians 3:17

¹⁷Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:23-24

²³Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

These statements tell us that a Christian should not do anything unless it glorifies God.

This does not leave room for a compartmentalized life.

By this, I mean that we can't be a Christian believing that it is wrong to celebrate a spiritual Christmas from 9:30 to 12:30 on Sunday, and then at 12:31 go home and celebrate a secular one.

If Christmas for you is wrong, then it is wrong.

If Christmas for you is not about Christ, then the pagan part is all that is left. If it is only a pagan celebration, then the admonition to not be joined to evil found in 1 Cor 6:14 does apply.

This is not something a Christian should be having anything to do with.

"Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God"

If celebration of Christmas for you is right, then Christ should be at the center of it – in fact – Christ should be the center of your life in everything you do.

Has Christ's Love freed you from the Law of Sin and Death?

If you believe in him and need only to be baptized so that the Lord may add you to his Church – we stand ready to help you with that.

If you were freed by Christ's Love, but have become enslaved by a life of rule-keeping – we stand ready to help you regain your freedom.

Has knowledge made you arrogant?

Do you have a conflict in what you believe the right thing to in regard to Holidays?

Are you living a double life – doing one thing when you are with the Church and just the opposite when you are at home or at work?

Is God glorified in all you say or do?

If the Church can help you, please come.

References:

Romans 13:8-10

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law.

Romans 14:1

¹Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but* not for *the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions.

Romans 14:5-6

⁵One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God.

Romans 14:10

¹⁰But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.

Romans 14:13-14

¹³Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. ¹⁴I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.

Romans 14:16-18

¹⁶Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; ¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.

Romans 14:22-23

²²The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. ²³But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

Romans 15:1-2

¹Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. ²Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

1 Corinthians 8:1-3

¹Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but love edifies. ²If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; ³but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him.

1 Corinthians 10:23-30

²³All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. ²⁴Let no one seek his own *good*, but that of his neighbor. ²⁵Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; ²⁶for the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. ²⁷If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. ²⁸But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat *it*, for the sake of the one who informed *you*, and for conscience' sake; ²⁹I mean not your own conscience, but the other *man's*; for *why* is my freedom judged by another's conscience? ³⁰If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks?

1 Corinthians 10:31

³¹Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Omitted comment on 1 Corinthians 10:23-31

It was common for the meat markets in the first century to have meat that came from many different sources. Meat that had been part of an idolatrous sacrifice sometimes made it into the market. Paul was telling them that they did not need to research the history of each thing they bought to eat or that was served to them. If they were buying it with no significance attached, they were innocent, no matter where it actually came from. But on the other hand, if they went to someone's house and in the course of a meal the host told them that the meat had been from a sacrifice, don't eat it. The host has decided in his conscience that it would be wrong for you to eat it and is setting you up so he can accuse you. Just don't play the game.

1 Corinthians 6:15

¹⁵Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take away the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? May it never be!

2 Corinthians 6:14

¹⁴Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

Galatians 5:13-14

¹³For you were called to freedom, brethren; only *do* not *turn* your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. ¹⁴For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the *statement*, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Galatians 1:6-7

⁶I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; ⁷which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.

Galatians 6:3-5

³For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have *reason for* boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another. ⁵For each one will bear his own load.

Ephesians 4:15-16

¹⁵but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 4:31-32

³¹Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven ^εyou.

Philippians 2:1-4

¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ²make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

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¹For I want you to know how great a struggle I have on your behalf and for those who are at Laodicea, and for all those who have not personally seen my face, ²that their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and *attaining* to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, *resulting* in a true knowledge of God's mystery, *that is*, Christ *Himself*, ³in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:16-17

¹⁶Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day— ¹⁷things which are a *mere* shadow of what is to come; but the

Colossians 3:17

¹⁷Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

Colossians 3:23-24

²³Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, ²⁴knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

God ordained annual celebrations:

Exodus 12:14-15

'Now this day will be a memorial to you, and you shall celebrate it *as* a feast to the LORD; throughout your generations you are to celebrate it *as* a permanent ordinance.

'Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, but on the first day you shall remove leaven from your houses; for whoever eats anything leavened from the first day until the seventh day, that person shall be cut off from Israel.

Exodus 12:18

'In the first *month*, on the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread, until the twenty-first day of the month at evening.