

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #2

Jeremiah 10:1-2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

August 2, 2015

Greg L. Price

There are two primary ways in which those who profess Christ and who celebrate Christmas seem to be practicing Christmas these days: (1) as a **religious Christmas** (in which the holy day on December 25th celebrates the nativity of Christ with manger scenes, wise men, shepherds, and Christmas carols); (2) as a **“secular” Christmas** (in which all references to Christ’s nativity are removed from the festivities on December 25th and only “cultural” activities are included—like a decorated Christmas tree, stockings, gift-giving, mistletoe, Santa Claus, and reindeer). While some Christians seem to want to put Christ back into what has become a secularized Christmas, other Christians seem to want to take Christ out of a religious Christmas in order to celebrate a secular Christmas. I submit that both views are wrong—both views are contrary to Scripture and contrary to the practice of our Protestant forefathers.

Last Lord’s Day we began with the question: Why we should not celebrate a religious Christmas? The three responses given were (1) Because a religious Christmas celebration is not authorized in Scripture; (2) Because a religious Christmas celebration is actually a Roman Catholic holy day and is the celebration of the Mass; and (3) Because a religious Christmas celebration was prohibited by our Protestant forefathers in Europe and in early American Colonies. If you missed that sermon, it would be important for you to review it as this series continues.

But perhaps you would say, “I don’t want to celebrate a religious Christmas in the context of public worship. I don’t want my church to acknowledge the celebration of Christmas, but what about a private, family celebration of a religious Christmas at home? Dear ones, if the reason why we are not to celebrate a religious Christmas is for the above stated three reasons, then whether it is celebrated in the Church or in the home does not change the fact that it is not warranted by Scripture, that it is a high holy day and worship of the Mass in the Roman Catholic Church, and that it was forbidden by our Protestant forefathers for the above reasons. Unbiblical worship is unbiblical whether it is performed publicly or privately. Consider that Jesus condemned the unbiblical religious ceremonies of the Jews in cleansing their hands of pollution (not for hygienic reasons but for religious reasons). Now these unbiblical religious ceremonies (which Jesus places under the category of worship) were not practiced in the temple or in the synagogue, but were practiced at home, and yet Jesus condemns all such private religious practices that have no warrant from Scripture as the mere “tradition of men” rather than as the “commandment of God” (Mark 7:1-13).

This Lord’s Day we now turn to the Old Testament as we consider the question, Why shouldn’t we celebrate a “secular” Christmas? The two main points of the sermon are these: (1) What about the Pagan Origins and Practice of Christmas Celebration? (2) What the Lord Says about Associating with Pagan Practices of Worship (Jeremiah 10:1-2)?

I. What about the Pagan Origins and Practices of Christmas Celebration?

A. There sadly exists a division among Reformed Christians who profess to uphold and apply the Regulative Principle of Worship to all acts of worship, including holy days. As already indicated, some of these brethren renounce the celebration of a religious Christmas as a holy day, but celebrate a “secular” Christmas (or Xmas), deprived of all references to Christ’s nativity. Whereas other Reformed Christians who profess to uphold and apply the Regulative Principle of Worship not only renounce a religious Christmas, but also

renounce a “secular” Christmas, among whom I count myself (as I believe was also true of our forefathers in Scripture and our Protestant forefathers who prohibited the celebration of Christmas, both religiously and secularly). Thus, it is my hope and prayer that the Lord would use these sermons to bind not only our hearts together as one, but our practice as one in regard to holy days as well.

B. How did it come about that the annual celebration of Christ’s birth was settled on December 25th? This day was selected not because the Scripture gives us the month of the year and the day of the month that Christ was born (there is no record in Scripture of Christ or the apostles setting down a time when Christ’s nativity occurred or was to be celebrated). December 25th was not selected because the ancient church found some biblical reason to so celebrate it or found some ancient manuscript that settles the day of Christ’s birth (they are not even agreed as to which season of the year Christ was born). So why was December 25th selected as the annual celebration of Christ’s birth? What I am about to say is not a pretty picture, but it is the truth.

1. December 25th was chosen to celebrate the birth of Christ each year because that was the date upon which the pagans in Rome (and many other parts of the Roman Empire) celebrated the birth of the invincible sun-god (*natalis solis invicti*).

In A.D. 274, Emperor Aurelian decreed December 25—the solstice on the Julian calendar—as *natalis solis invicti* (“birth of the invincible sun”), a festival honoring the sun god Mithras (Jeffrey Sheler, “In Search Of Christmas”, *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 23, 1996, p. 56).

The choice of December 25 was influenced by the fact that the Romans, from the time of Emperor Aurelian (275 [274—GLP]), had celebrated the feast of the sun god (*Sol Invictus*: the Unconquered Sun) on that day. December 25 was called the “Birthday of the Sun,” and great pagan religious celebrations of the Mithras cult were held all through the empire. What was more natural than that the Christians celebrate the birth of Him Who was the “Light of the World” and the true “Sun of Justice” on this very day [shouldn’t we be scriptural not natural—GLP]? The popes seem to have chosen December 25 precisely for that purpose of inspiring the people to turn from the worship of a material sun to the adoration of Christ the Lord (Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, p. 61).

2. Pagan religions had long associated the winter solstice in December, which marks the shortest day and the longest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere, with the birth of the Sun god whom they worshipped.

Early in the fourth century (before 354) the Roman Church seems to have selected the feast of Christmas to offset the great pagan festival of the Unconquered Sun (*Sol Invictus*) and from Rome the celebration spread eastward. Thus devotion to Christ, “the Sun of Righteousness” (Mal. 4.2), supplanted the commemoration of the cult of the Unconquered Sun (P.R. Coleman-Norton, *Roman State & Christian Church*, Vol. 2, p. 425).

3. The substitution of the birth of Christ for the birth of the invincible Sun on the same precise day that the pagans already recognized (December 25) was not coincidental or unique to this one case of syncretism by the Church of Rome (syncretism is joining one religion to another—in this case paganism to Christianity). It has been the practice of the Church of Rome to assimilate various customs and practices of pagan religions into its celebrations as a means of “evangelism.” In fact, this was the stated policy of the papacy as noted in a letter from Pope Gregory I (601 a.d.), which addresses the assimilation of heathens into the Church of Rome (Bede, *A History of the English Church and People*; Book 1, Chapter 30):

And because they [pagans—GLP] used to slaughter many oxen in sacrifice to devils, some solemnity must be given them in exchange for this, as that on the day of the dedication, or the natiivities of the holy martyrs, whose relics are there deposited, they should build themselves huts of the boughs of trees about those churches which have been turned to that use from being temples, and celebrate the solemnity with religious feasting....

C. Just as December 25th was chosen as the day to celebrate the birth of Christ because it was already celebrated as the day of the birth of the invincible sun-god (Mithras), so likewise the various customs, traditions, and practices associated with the birth of the invincible Sun were incorporated from paganism into the celebration of Christmas.

The feast of Saturnalia in early Rome... was celebrated for seven days from the 17th to the 24th of December and was marked by a spirit of merriment, gift giving to children and other forms of entertainment. Gradually, early Christians replaced the pagan feast with the celebration of Christmas; but many of the traditions of this observance were assimilated and remain to this day a part of the observance of Christmas (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:804,805).

When the pagans of Northern Europe became Christians, they made their sacred evergreen trees part of the Christian festival, and decorated the trees with gilded nuts, candles (a carry-over from sun worship), and apples to stand for the stars, moon, and sun (*World Book Encyclopedia*, [1955 ed.], 3:1425).

The Romans ornamented their temples and homes with green boughs and flowers for the Saturnalia, their season of merry making and the giving of presents; the Druids gathered mistletoe with great ceremony and hung it in their homes; the Saxons used holly, ivy and bay (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, 5:643).

D. Most of you were probably aware of the pagan origins of the December 25th celebration and the pagan customs associated with it, but I want you to know that December 25th not only had (in the past) pagan origins along with pagan customs and traditions that became incorporated into the celebration of Christmas, but this is an ongoing practice among both religious pagans and professing Christians. In other words, the association of December 25th with various forms of paganism is not a long forgotten origin and practice, but is the continued practice among both religious pagans and professing Christians.

1. I believe it is important to emphasize this because some Christians who celebrate a “secular” Christmas tend to emphasize only the pagan origin and pagan customs associated with Christmas (as if this was a problem of the past). But dear ones, it is not a mere problem of the past which our biblical forefathers and Protestant forefathers faced and prohibited—it is also a present problem with religious paganism ever growing in the United States, and with the celebration of the winter solstice on December 25th with the evergreen tree, with holly, mistletoe, gift giving ever increasing in practice among religious pagans.

Between 1990 and 2000, the number of Wiccans in the United States increased from 8,000 to 134,000 according to the United States Census Bureau. That’s an increase of 1600%! Between 2001 and 2008, the number of Pagans over all (Wiccans included) doubled, so that’s a growth rate of 200%. That’s an increase greater than almost anything seen among the other religions! The number of Christians overall, in comparison, only experienced an 8% growth rate between

2001 and 2008, which is actually a decrease when you account for population growth (<http://metal-gaia.com/2013/05/21/is-paganism-the-fastest-growing-religion-in-the-united-states/>).

This website suggests that with the great dissatisfaction of the young people with biblical Christianity and its ethical standards (against homosexuality, abortion, feminism), and with the increase of environmentalism as the worship of mother earth, paganism will continue to increase exponentially.

2. Why is all this important? I submit it is important because that places us in a similar situation as God's people found themselves in biblical times in facing the false religion of paganism (not to the same proportion perhaps, but in substance still the same battle).

II. What the Lord Says about Associating with Pagan Practices of Worship (Jeremiah 10:1-2)?

A. Note first the divine prohibition: "Learn not." Whatever God here forbids, it should be understood that He wants no toleration of it at all. There is to be no compromise, no mixture, no association, and no assimilation with what is here forbidden by the Lord.

1. The Hebrew verb for "learn" (*lamad*) may mean learn, but may also mean "accustom"—"Learn not; accustom not yourself." As Matthew Henry has noted in his *Commentary* on Jeremiah 10:2:

[D]o not approve of it, no, nor think indifferently concerning it, much less imitate it or accustom yourselves to it.

2. What is here forbidden is not simply bowing down before false gods and worshipping them, but also learning and following their customs that they have used in worship. Thus, to imitate what is here forbidden (even with the best intentions) is to violate the express commandment of God. Sincerity or good intentions on our part are no warrant to make an exception to an express prohibition of the Lord God. Dear ones, obedience to God's Word is better than the unwarranted sacrifices of good intentions and efforts to "secularize" what the heathen in the past and the heathen in the present use as customs and monuments to their idolatry.

B. Secondly, observe what is expressly forbidden by the Lord: "Learn not THE WAY OF THE HEATHEN" (or "Accustom not yourself to THE WAY OF THE HEATHEN").

1. What is "the way" of the heathen? The Hebrew noun (*derek*) means way, road, manner. It is the heathens' manner of practicing their customs in the worship of their gods.

2. Again, the Lord is not simply condemning the bowing down to idols, but is also condemning more broadly the manner or way (the customs and traditions) used in the worship of their gods. The monuments to idolatry that are used by the pagans in their celebration of the Yuletide on December 25 is a particular application of what the Lord is here forbidding (whether decorated evergreen trees, holly, mistletoe, gift-giving, and other festivities associated with December 25th). Now, what I would like to know is why (according to Scripture) pagan customs used to celebrate a "secular" Christmas on December 25th would not be included in what God here forbids His people to learn or to accustom themselves to?

C. Thirdly, in Jeremiah 10:2, the Lord forbids those who trust in Him from being "dismayed" (or "shattered") by the signs of heaven.

1. The "signs of heaven" point to the pagan's worship of the sun, moon, and stars to which the pagans looked for guidance, help, knowledge, and strength. The pagan religion of the Canaanites (and surrounding nations) looked to the sun and moon (in particular) as gods (Jeremiah 8:1-2).

2. This pagan worship of the sun and the moon was also identified as worship to “the queen of heaven” (Jeremiah 7:17-18; Jeremiah 44:17,18,19,25). The sun god of Canaan was Baal, and the moon goddess was Astarte. Child sacrifice was also offered to Baal (Jeremiah 19:5). John Peter Lange writes in his *Commentary* (p. 94) on Jeremiah 7:18 in regard to the identity of the “queen of heaven” the following.

The expression “heaven’s queen” points to the worship of the stars, and indeed the moon as the feminine potence (together with the sun as the masculine) appears not seldom under this name.... To the further question, what deity is represented by the moon, we can only answer that since it, as the female principle of fructification [fertility—GLP], corresponds to the sun-god Baal as the male principle, the feminine deity corresponding to Baal, i.e. Astarte, must be represented by the moon.... On the heathen custom of celebrating the new moon with fires kindled in the street and sweet cakes, comp. SPENCER, *De Legg. Hebr. ritual.* L. III. Diss. IV. Cap. 3.

D. Let’s make some application from this passage of Scripture (Jeremiah 10:1-2) to a “secular” celebration of Christmas.

1. Is there any warrant in Scripture (from Jeremiah 10:1-2) for God’s people to secularize the customs of the pagans in making cakes to Astarte on her new moon celebration? The making of cakes and burning a bonfire are indifferent in themselves, are they not? Yet, where is the biblical warrant to make cakes as a “secular” festivity within the home on the very holy day that pagans were doing so in worship to Baal, the sun-god or Astarte, the queen of heaven? There is a clear prohibition against learning the methods, the customs, the traditions, the manners of the pagans in their worship of their gods, but where is the warrant to practice those very pagan customs in family festivities on the same day the heathens are doing the same thing in their pagan worship?

2. We as Christians are not to associate or participate with pagans or their monuments to idolatry in our own festivities (whether religious or secular). George Gillespie demonstrates that even those customs of the pagans that Israel did not imitate by way of falling down and worshipping a false god were still forbidden to God’s people.

For albeit the cutting the hair [“Ye shall not round the corners of your heads” Leviticus 19:27—GLP] is a thing indifferent, yet because the Gentiles used it superstitiously, therefore, Calvin says, albeit it was *of itself undetermined, nevertheless God did not want it to be allowable to His own people . . . and were very far aloof from their examples, but especially they should avoid all rites by which the religion (of those others) would be attested. So that from this law [Leviticus 19:27—GLP] it most manifestly appears that we may not be like idolaters, no not in things which are in themselves indifferent, when we know they do use them superstitiously* (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, p. 185, emphases added).

3. We are not to associate or to accustom ourselves to the practices and customs of idolaters in their monuments to their idolatry according to 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Where is a like biblical principle that would assure us that we can bring the pagan monuments to idolatry into our homes as customs of celebration? What about meat offered to idols in 1 Corinthians 8-10? We will look at that in a couple sermons to come, but I do not believe that supports the position that we may secularize monuments to idolatry in our festivities at home. What about the prohibition of bringing even the gold from an idol into our homes (Deuteronomy 7:25-26)? And what about not planting with two different kinds of seed, or sewing with two different kinds of garments, or plowing with an ox and an ass (Deuteronomy 22:9-11)? All these were

intended to portray our separation from and dissociation with the unclean practices of the pagans and world around us.

4. What God forbids in Jeremiah 10:1-2 is any monument to idolatry (even if it is indifferent in itself) to be used in our celebrations and festivities (whether in our homes, whether with others at an office party, even if we do not bow down to it, even if the monument to idolatry finds its pagan origin many years ago), for various false religions (especially paganism) presently do the same.

And, moreover, find we not in the canons of the ancient councils, that Christians were forbidden to deck their houses with green boughs and bay leaves [obviously indifferent in themselves—GLP], to observe the calends [first day] of January, to keep the first day of every month, etc. [or to observe December 25—GLP], because the pagans used to do so? (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, pp. 187,188)

5. Dear ones, we are not to be so sentimentally attached to such customs that we cannot let them go in order to demonstrate our supreme love for Christ and for one another. Thus, when our brethren speak of a “secular” Christmas, I truly doubt they can secularize Christmas (or Xmas) festivities, which are monuments to idolatry in paganism and other false religions.

In closing, since the abominable practice of not only murdering the unborn but of crushing, dismembering, and receiving blood money for their organs and limbs is very much on our minds presently (due to the release of certain videos that were in the news this past week), perhaps it would be easier to see the connection between the monuments of idolatry used by pagans (and other false religions) if we used the child-sacrificing found in the Canaanite religion of Baal and Astarte. Knowing these small children were burned to death on special holy days of Canaanite worship, would you want to identify yourself with such idolatry and murder on those holy days by seeking to secularize that particular holy day and secularize the custom of having a bonfire and making sweet cakes to the queen of heaven? Should not that pagan day be so despised that you would want nothing at all to do with it by having any festivity or celebration on it, or by taking any of those monuments to idolatry into your home on that holy day? Dear ones, in my judgment that is what Christians do when they attempt to celebrate a “secular” Christmas. It is yet an association with the monuments of idolatry (both the day—December 25—and the pagan customs). “Touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Corinthians 6:14-18).

Copyright 2015 Greg L. Price.