

What About Celebrating a ‘Secular’ Christmas? #3

Deuteronomy 12:1-3; Zechariah 13:1-2

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If you do not bow down and worship before a Christmas tree, or do not use it in celebration of Christ’s birth, but rather use it as a focal point of family fun and festivities on December 25th, how have you engaged in an unbiblical practice? This is the question that occupies us in this sermon series at the present time.

By way of review, we have noted that an annual religious celebration of Christ’s birth never entered into the mind of God as an authorized holy day, otherwise the Lord would have instituted such a holy day somewhere in the pages of the New Testament. That the Holy Spirit has not done so, not even giving to us in the New Testament Scriptures precisely the month or day of Christ’s birth, only confirms the fact that it was not God’s revealed will. Thus, an annual holy day instituted and designated as Christmas by the Roman Catholic Church has no place within the churches or homes of anyone (but especially of Protestants who “protested” against all such traditions of men into our faith and practice as Christians). God has given us in Scripture one day in seven, the Lord’s Day, as His weekly appointed holy day to celebrate the birth, life, death, bodily resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We have also noted that December 25th was appointed as a pagan day of celebration to the sun god (Mithras) by Emperor Aurelian (274) before we ever read of Christmas being designated as a holy day to celebrate the day of Christ’s nativity. In fact, the Philocalian Calendar (354), a Roman religious calendar,

Contains the earliest reference to the celebration of Christmas as a holiday or feast (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chronography_of_354).

Not only is the day (December 25th) an instance of the Roman Catholic Church trying to Christianize a pagan holy day at the time of the winter solstice, but likewise various pagan practices and customs were assimilated into the celebration of Christmas. Thus, even when we do not celebrate a religious Christmas on December 25th, we are yet symbolizing (using the symbols and customs) of the pagans in a “secular” celebration of Christmas or Xmas on December 25th. Bowing down to idols is not the only way in which idolatry is committed—symbolizing with idolaters and idolatry is likewise a way in which we learn the way of the heathen and accustom ourselves to their idolatrous customs and practices. For the celebration of pagans on December 25th is not simply something of the past, but is also something that pagans celebrate every December 25th in their Yule celebration with the very same idolatrous and superstitious customs that Christians use in their celebrations on December 25th.

So the first reason why we are not to celebrate a “secular” Christmas is that the Holy Spirit has commanded us, His people, “learn not the way of the heathen” (Jeremiah 10:2)—neither by bowing down to their idols nor even by attempting to secularize their superstitious customs and ways in your own celebrations.

The second reason we are not to celebrate a “secular” Christmas is because God does not want us to keep alive and well the idols or the superstitious places, celebrations, and customs of idolaters in our possession, sight, or affections. He wants us to destroy them and to remember them no more. The main points for the sermon this Lord’s Day are the following: (1) God Commands that All Idols and Monuments to Idolatry Be Destroyed and Forgotten (Deuteronomy 12:1-3); (2) Our Protestant Forefathers Removed the Entire Celebration of Christmas (Both Religious and “Secular”) from Their Churches and Kingdoms.

I. God Commands that All Idols and Monuments to Idolatry Be Destroyed and Forgotten (Deuteronomy 12:1-3).

A. It should be very clear to us that if God calls for the complete destruction of idolatry and all monuments to idolatry, and also all the holy days and customs associated with those holy days, then the secular celebration of any such holy day would likewise come to an end. For if that holy day is destroyed within a nation in all of its pagan and religious celebration and if all of the customs associated with its celebration are destroyed, it would become just another ordinary day of the year, and there would no longer be a “secular” celebration of that holy day (whether Christmas, Lent, Good Friday, Easter, or any saints’ days). Thus, I submit to you, dear brothers and sisters, that when God’s command is truly carried out by us within the realms of our own responsibility (whether church, home, or work [if we own a business]), there will not only be no religious celebration, there will also be no “secular” celebration as well (for there is then nothing to secularize—you can’t secularize something that no longer religiously exists). This is what I believe God calls us to do and is certainly what our Protestant forefathers practiced in their churches and nations when Christmas and all other holy days were entirely banned from those realms.

B. As we now turn to our text (Deuteronomy 12:1-3), Moses begins a new section in the Book of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy means “a Second Law” i.e. a second giving of the Law) before God’s people cross the Jordan River and enter into the Promise Land. Deuteronomy is actually a renewal of God’s National Covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 29:1). In the previous chapters of Deuteronomy there is both a brief historical overview given to the reader of what God has miraculously accomplished in bringing His people to the brink of entering the land promised to them, and there are also general laws given by the Lord through Moses. But beginning with Deuteronomy 12:1, there are more specific laws given to God’s people. And not surprisingly, those laws begin with the destruction of idolatry from the land, which they are about to enter and to possess. From these verses, there are moral principles that always pertain to our duty before God in the various spheres of our responsibility, which we may also apply to the question of celebrating a “secular” Christmas. Let me say, however, that we are to obey these moral commandments of the Lord not in order to be justified before God, but because we have been justified before God (Deuteronomy 5:6—The Preface to the Ten Commandments is first given as God’s gospel message of deliverance before the Law is given).

1. **Israel was bound to remove all idolatry and anything pertaining to idolatry from their land (Deuteronomy 12:1).** However, not only Israel, but all nations are bound to remove all idolatry from their borders, for idolatry is rebellion against the King of the nations (Deuteronomy 5:7; Psalm 2:10-12; Isaiah 19:1; Jeremiah 10:7). Now though idolatry, false religion, and false worship are not removed from our land (but are rather protected and promoted by the Constitution), there is a “land” over which you and I have a responsibility to remove all idolatry and all monuments to idolatry: within our hearts, within our homes, and within our businesses that we own and operate. Thus, we cannot escape the moral principles herein given to God’s people, for we all have a “land” over which we are responsible to show our love for the Lord by removing all the remnants of idolatry.

2. **Israel was bound to utterly and completely destroy all idols and all that pertained to the idolatry of the pagans of Canaan—all holy days, all customs, and all practices (Deuteronomy 12:2-3).** God’s people were not to take some of the holy days of the pagans, some of the customs and practices of the pagans, some of the monuments to idolatry of the pagans, and simply remove them from the context of the worship of idols so that they might use them in some secularized way in their own celebrations on the very same days and in the very same seasons in which the pagans celebrated their gods with their customs and practices. There is nothing in Scripture of which I am aware that would teach such a secularizing practice in regard to the holy days or customs associated with pagan worship and religion.

a. Note that it is not only the idol itself that God commands to be utterly

destroyed, but also “the places” where they worshipped: whether “upon the high mountains”, “upon the hills”, and “under every green tree” (Deuteronomy 12:2). By inference, if “the places” of the pagans were to be utterly destroyed, then certainly the special day(s) that were set aside and devoted to the worship and celebration of the Canaanite gods should likewise be entirely destroyed (so likewise the 25th of December should be entirely destroyed as a day of celebration because it commemorates and celebrates both a pagan holy day and a Roman Catholic holy day). There is no biblical example to which we may appeal for taking a pagan (or Roman Catholic) holy day, and secularizing it so that we might have our own family celebration on the same day (simply because it is popular to do so in the culture in which we live). However, there is clear biblical warrant for destroying “the places” of false worship (and therefore “the days” associated with false religion by a sound inference).

b. Note also under this second moral principle that it is not only “the places” (or by inference “the days”) that must be utterly destroyed, but all of the monuments to idolatry that the pagans have used in worshipping, serving, and celebrating their gods as well (Deuteronomy 12:2-3): “every green tree” (which represented fertility and life like the Christmas tree), altars for sacrifice (including child sacrifice), pillars (which were large stones representing their gods), groves (literally, *asherim*; trees dedicated to Asherah, a Canaanite goddess), and graven images. Whatever the association with the pagan celebration or holy day was to be broken down, shattered, burnt, cut down, and removed—no secularizing of anything used in pagan worship (at the same location or by sound inference at home on the very same day as the pagans celebrated).

(1) Not only did Jacob (in Genesis 35:1-4) require his family to put away all the household idols that were brought with them from Laban’s house in Haran of Syria, but he also took the earrings that were worn by family members and buried them because they too had a past association with idolatry (no secularizing, but destroying the monuments to idolatry).

(2) What are the monuments associated with past and present idolatry in Christmas celebrations? Have we not seen in the previous sermon that such is true of ornamented Christmas trees, mistletoe, holly, an omniscient Santa Claus with flying reindeer, yule logs, candles, and gift-giving? Then, dear ones, these likewise become monuments to idolatry that must be utterly destroyed in celebrating the pagan and Roman Catholic holy day on December 25th.

3. The third and final moral principle from our text is this: **The very memory of these idols, places, holy days, monuments to idolatry, customs, and practices associated with the Canaanite gods are to be destroyed, not secularized (“and destroy the names of them out of that place” Deuteronomy 12:3).** How will we destroy the name and memory of the celebration of Christmas as long as we secularize Christmas. Secularizing what is a religious holy day does not destroy the name or memory of Christmas; on the contrary it perpetuates the name and memory of Christmas. Dear ones, I submit that the only way to utterly destroy the memory of these **religious** holy days is not to symbolize with them and not to seek to secularize them, but rather to destroy them in our own hearts, our families, our church, and our nation (as was once practiced by our Protestant forefathers). The learned and godly George Gillespie has left us with a faithful expression of this truth:

Those relics therefore of idolatry, by which succeeding generations, as though by a memorial, may be warned (as Wolphius rightly says), are to be quite defaced and destroyed, because they serve to honor the memory of cursed idols (George Gillespie, A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies, p. 160, Naphtali Press).

[W]hereby we are admonished, as Calvin says, how detestable idolatry is before God, *whose memory a repentant man wants to be erased so no trace of it may be seen afterward.* Yea, he [i.e. God—GLP] requires, *that the memory be erased of all those things which were at anytime*

consecrated to idols (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, p. 160, Naphtali Press).

C. Thus, in summary, dear ones, the evidence we have from the Old Testament does not allow us to take the bond fires or cakes of the pagans (as we saw in the previous sermon) or the places, holy days, green trees, or earrings of the pagans (as we have seen in this sermon) and to secularize them in using them in a family celebration at home or on the same day as pagans (past and present) and as Roman Catholics (past and present and sadly along with many other churches and professing Christians that have learned the way of the heathen). The command of the Lord is to utterly destroy them and to remove them from your memory. Gillespie writes as I conclude this first main point:

[S]uch idolatrous remainders move us to turn back to idolatry. For we have experience of their use, **even after the superstitions might have been cast out**, if there were left any reminder of them, not only would the memory of those very superstitions continue among men, but in the end to [the—GLP] effect that they would resume the practice... (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, p. 160, Naphtali Press, emphases added).

II. Our Protestant Forefathers Removed the Entire Celebration of Christmas (Both Religious and Secular) from their Churches and Kingdoms.

A. How did our Reformed and Protestant forefathers apply these moral principles in the removal of Christmas (and other holy days)? Did they only ban the religious celebration of Christmas or did they ban all celebration and festivities (religious and secular) associated with the celebration of Christmas on December 25th?

1. Though historical testimony is not the supreme judge in matters of controversy (as it is in the Church of Rome—only Scripture is the supreme standard for faith and practice), nevertheless, faithful historical testimony confirms Scripture and is a subordinate standard to that the supreme standard of Scripture, which Christ has given to His Church in the faithful, scriptural testimony of pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-15).

2. The following is a brief history of the extirpation of Christmas in England.

They [i.e. the Puritans in England—GLP] were determined to abolish Christmas altogether, both as a religious and **as a popular feast**.... Pamphlets were published denouncing Christmas as pagan, and its observance was declared to be sinful.... When the Puritans finally came to political power in England, they immediately proceeded to outlaw Christmas. The year 1642 saw the first ordinances issued forbidding church services **and civic festivities on Christmas Day**.... Parliament on June 3, 1647, ordained that the Feast of Christmas (and other holidays) should no longer be observed under pain of punishment.... Slowly and relentlessly, the external observance of Christmas was extinguished (Francis X. Weiser, *Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, pp. 64,65, emphases added).

B. When was the celebration of Christmas restored to both church and home in England? It was not restored under the Covenanters, or even under Cromwell. It was restored when the monarchy was restored under the covenant-breaking and persecuting Charles II in 1660. It was banished in both England and Scotland by faithful covenanting Parliaments and Churches who upheld the scriptural commands of God against idolatry and monuments to idolatry in the celebration of Christmas, but the celebration of Christmas was restored under a king who was heavily influenced by Roman Catholicism.

C. Consider the following declarations by Protestant nations and churches in entirely removing the celebration of Christmas.

1. The Pastors of Geneva (1550), including John Calvin, state in their *Register of the Company of Pastors* (emphases added):

Abrogation of Festivals. On Sunday 16 November 1550, after the election of the lieutenant in the general Council, an edict was also announced respecting **the abrogation of all festivals**, with the exception of Sundays, which God had ordained.

2. The Church of Scotland in its *First Book of Discipline* (1560) includes the following clear statement concerning the abrogation of Christmas:

[The] keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of apostles, martyrs, virgins, OF CHRISTMAS, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, **we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm**; affirming further, that the obstinate maintainers and teachers of such abominations ought not to escape the punishment of the civil magistrate ("The First Head", emphases added).

3. The United Provinces of Holland enacted into law in 1625 declared the following (cited from *The Wonders of the Most High*, Abraham Van De Velde, ca. 1676, p.158, emphases added):

Let us like King Josiah take away from among us all these great sins. Among which sins that are seen in these lands the following are the most principal: ... In the first place the carnivals [i.e. festivals or religious celebrations—GLP], THREE KINGS AND THE ST. NICOLAS DAYS, AND OTHER FEAST DAYS which are held among us not without a show of public idolatry.

4. Next is this proclamation by the faithful Church of Scotland (1645) in its most pure days of biblical reformation.

The General Assembly taking to their consideration the manifold abuses, profanity, and superstitions, committed on Yule-day [the pagan name for Christmas—GLP] and some other superstitious days following, have unanimously concluded and hereby ordains, that whatsoever person or persons hereafter shall be found guilty in keeping of the foresaid superstitious days, shall be proceeded against by Kirk censures, and shall make their public repentance therefore in the face of the congregation where the offence is committed (General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, "Act for Censuring Observers of Yule-day, and other Superstitious days", 1645).

5. The Parliament of England during the great time of reformation when the Westminster Assembly met issued this ordinance (Ordinance of Parliament, June 8, 1647, emphases added):

Be it Ordained, by the Lords and Commons in Parliament assembled, That the said Feast of the Nativity of Christ, Easter and Whitsuntide [Pentecost—GLP], and all other Festival dayes, commonly called Holy-dayes, be no longer observed as **Festivals or Holy-dayes within this Kingdome of England and Dominion of Wales**, any Law, Statute, Custome, Constitution, or Canon to the contrary in any wise notwithstanding.

6. Finally, this spiritual zeal to walk in faithfulness unto the Lord in regard to abolishing religious holy days (like Christmas) was carried over to the Massachusetts Bay Colony (1659) established in the new world.

For preventing disorders, arising in several places within this jurisdiction by reason of some still observing such festivals as were superstitiously kept in other communities, to the great dishonor of God and offense of others: it is therefore ordered by this court and the authority thereof that whosoever shall be found observing any such day as Christmass or the like, either by forbearing of labor, feasting, or any other way, upon any such account as aforesaid, every such person so offending shall pay for every such offence five shillings as a fine to the county.” (From the Records of the General Court, Massachusetts Bay Colony, May 11, 1659).

7. *The Solemn League and Covenant of the Three Kingdoms* (1643) binds us by covenant with the One True Living God to extirpate (uproot—like uprooting a weed, not simply cutting down part of the weed) “Popery” (which surely includes all Romish holidays including Christmas), “superstition” (which surely includes all holy days of pagans and the Church of Rome that are instituted by man and not by the living God along with all of the customs and practices associated with Christmas), and “whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of Godliness” (which is true of Christmas or Xmas because it has no divine warrant and is symbolizing with false religions). Dear ones, our covenanted duties to God call us to make December 25th no different than any other day of the week (except the Lord’s Day).

Let me apply what I have said in a couple ways in closing.

First, consider what is said by the Lord will be true in the glorious millennium to come when Christ reigns from heaven over the world in glorious power (Zechariah 13:1-2). All idolatry (including holy days not appointed by the Lord, all superstition, all pagan customs) will be cut off and remembered no more. Dear ones, there will be no religious Christmas celebration; and therefore, there will be no secular Christmas celebration.

Second, extirpating (destroying) all such reminders of superstitious customs and practices of pagans or the Romish Church is like putting away a bracelet or ring you received from a former lover after you are married. To continue to cherish what a former lover gave to you says something about the purity of your love for your husband or wife. So likewise, dear ones, our cherishing any monuments to idolatry from the past or present (even if we think we can secularize it) says something about the purity of our love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, we must begin with the idolatry and lovers in our heart, but that love for Christ in putting away those idols in our heart will also lead us to put away, extirpate, and utterly destroy all monuments to past and present idolatry, all customs and practices to past and present idolatry, all holy days to past and present idolatry. Why? Because our Lord and Savior commands it, but also because our love for our Lord and Savior compels us to do so. “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). By application, “If ye love me, utterly destroy all monuments and customs to idolatry (past and present) and remember them no more.”

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