
ON KEEPING CHRISTMAS | *By Samuel Davies*¹

REMEMBERING THE BIRTH OF JESUS

This is the day² which the church of Rome, and some other churches that deserve to be placed in better company have agreed to celebrate in memory of the Prince of Peace, the Savior of men, the incarnate God, Immanuel. And I doubt not, but many convert superstition into rational and scriptural devotion, and religiously employ themselves in a manner acceptable to God, though they want the sanction of divine authority for appropriating this day to a sacred use. But, alas! it is generally a season of sinning, sensuality, luxury, and various forms of extravagance; as though men were not celebrating the birth of the holy Jesus, but of Venus, or Bacchus, whose most sacred rites were mysteries of iniquity and debauchery. The birth of Jesus was solemnized by armies of angels; they had their music and their songs on this occasion. But how different from those generally used among mortals! “Glory to God in the highest, on earth, peace, good will to men!” This was their song. But is the music and dancing, the feasting and rioting, the idle songs and extravagant mirth of mortals at this season, a proper echo or response to this angelic song? I leave you to your own reflections upon this subject, after I have given the hint; and I am sure, if they be natural and pertinent, and have a proper influence upon you, they will restrain you from running into the fashionable excesses of riot on this occasion.

To remember and religiously improve the incarnation of our divine Redeemer, to join the concert of angels, and dwell in ecstatic meditation upon their song; this is lawful, this is a seasonable duty every day; and consequently upon this day. And as Jesus improved the feast of dedication,³ though not of divine institution, as a proper opportunity to exercise his ministry, when

¹ The following is the prefatory portion of a sermon on Luke 2:13-14. The sermon was printed as “A Christmas-Day Sermon,” in *The Sermons by the Rev. Samuel Davies, A.M.* 3 vols. (London, 1770); reprint of the 1854 Philadelphia ed. (Pittsburgh, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 3:562-571. Samuel Davies (1723-1761) is often referred to as the founder of Southern Presbyterianism, or as the “Apostle” of Virginia. He planted congregations throughout central Virginia and south into North Carolina, almost persuading Jonathan Edwards to come to Virginia to help with the work, offering to give up his own place of service to Edwards if he would do so. Davies was a champion of religious liberty, the Hanover Presbytery, largely made up of churches he planted, played a central role in the adoption of the Virginia Statue for Religious Freedom. He became president of the College of New Jersey (Princeton) after the death of Jonathan Edwards, whom Davies was soon after to follow into glory—a life of extraordinary accomplishment pressed into his 38 years. The late Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said to an audience in the United States, “You Americans do not know one of your greatest preachers.” He then pronounced the name—“Samuel Davies.” One American, at least, shared Lloyd-Jones’ opinion: revolutionary hero Patrick Henry claimed that he was “first taught what an orator should be by listening to Davies preach.” On a note close to home, Davies is the author of the poem “Great God of wonders” used as the text for one of the Davide Marney songs that New Hope sings. Sub-headings, paragraph divisions, and footnotes have been added or elaborated according to contemporary standards by the editor of this version.

² EDS. NOTE: this sermon was preached at the very end of Davies’ life, at Nassau Hall, College of New Jersey (Princeton), Dec. 25, 1760.

³ John x.22. This festival was instituted by Judas Macabæus in memory of the restoration of the temple and the altar, after they had been profaned by their heathen enemies; the original account of which we have, 1 Macabees iv. 56, &c. [EDS. NOTE: “And so they kept the dedication of the altar eight days and offered burnt offerings with

crowds of the Jews were gathered from all parts; so I would improve this day for your instruction, since it is the custom of our country to spend it religiously, or idly, or wickedly, as different persons are differently disposed.

MAN'S "HOLY-DAYS" AND GOD'S HOLY DAY

But as the seed of superstition which have some times grown up to a prodigious height, have been frequently sown and cherished by very inconsiderable incidents, I think it proper to inform you, that I may guard against this danger, that I do not set apart this day for public worship, as though it had any peculiar sanctity, or we were under any obligations to keep it religiously. I know no human authority, that has power to make one day more holy than another, or that can bind the conscience in such cases. And as for divine authority, to which alone the sanctifying of days and things belongs, it has thought it sufficient to consecrate one day in seven to a religious use,⁴ for the commemoration both of the birth of this world, and the resurrection of its great Author, or of the works of creation and redemption. This I would religiously observe; and inculcate the religious observance of it upon all. But as to other days, consecrated by the mistaken piety or superstition of men, and conveyed down to us as holy, through the corrupt medium of human tradition, I think myself free to observe them or not, according to conveniency, and the prospect of usefulness; like other common days, on which I may lawfully carry on public worship or not, as circumstances require. And since I have so fair an opportunity, and it seems necessary in order to prevent my conduct from being a confirmation of present superstition, or a temptation to future, I shall, once for all, declare my sentiments more fully upon this head.

CHRISTIAN FORBEARANCE, LIBERTY & TRUTH

But I must premise, that it is far from my design, to widen the differences subsisting among Christians, to embitter their hearts against each other, or to awaken dormant controversies concerning the extra-essentials of religion. And if this use should be made of what I shall say, it will be an unnatural perversion of my design. I would make every candid concession in favor of those who observe days of human institution, that can consist with truth and my own liberty. I grant, that so many plausible things may be offered for the practice as may have the appearance of solid argument, even to honest inquirers after truth. I grant, that I doubt not but many are offering up acceptable devotion to God on this day; devotion proceeding from honest, believing hearts, and therefore acceptable to him on any day—acceptable to him, notwithstanding their little mistake in this affair.

I grant, we should, in this case, imitate the generous candor and forbearance of St. Paul, in a similar case. The converts to Christianity from among the Jews, long retained the prejudices of their education, and thought they were still obliged, even under the gospel dispensation, to observe the rites and ceremonies of the law of Moses, to which they had been accustomed, and particularly those days which were appointed by God to be religiously kept under the Jewish dispensation. The

gladness, and sacrificed the sacrifice of deliverance and praise. . . . 59 Judas and his brethren with the whole congregation of Israel ordained, that the days of the dedication of the altar should be kept in their season from year to year by the space of eight days, from the five and twentieth day of the month Casleu, with mirth and gladness." 1 Mac. 4:56-59]; where what is called τὰ ἑγκαίνια by the evangelist, is called τὸν ἑγκαίνισμον (v. 56) and αἱ ἡμέραι ἐγκαίνισμου.— See also Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, 1. xii. c. 11.

⁴ EDS. NOTE: i.e., the Lord's Day, or the Christian Sabbath. For an exposition of Scripture setting forth a view similar to Davies' see Jonathan Edwards, "The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 2 vols. (London, 1834); reprint (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:93-103.

Gentile converts, on the other hand, who were free from these early prejudices of education and custom, and had imbibed more just notions of Christian liberty, looked upon these Jewish holy-days as common days, and no longer to be observed. This occasioned a warm dispute between these two classes of converts, and St. Paul interposes, not so properly to determine which party was right, (that was comparatively a small matter), as to bring both parties to exercise moderation and forbearance towards each other, and to put a charitable construction upon their different practices in these little articles; and particularly to believe concerning each other, that though their practices were different, yet the principle from which they acted was the same, namely, a sincere desire to glorify and please God, and a conscientious regard to what they apprehended was his will. “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations—one man esteemeth one day above another; another esteemeth every day alike. He that regardeth the day, regardeth it unto the Lord; and he that regardeth not the day, to the Lord he doth not regard it,” Rom. 14:1, 5-6; that is, it is a conscientious regard to the Lord, that is the principle upon which both parties act, though they act differently in this matter. Therefore, says the apostle, “Why dost thou judge thy brother?” why dost thou severely censure him for practicing differently in this little affair?—“Hast thou faith?” says he, hast thou a full persuasion of what is right in these punctilios and ceremonials? Then, “have it to thyself before God;” verse 22. Keep it to thyself as a rule for thy own practice, but do not impose it upon others, nor disturb the church of Christ about it.

It becomes us, my brethren, to imitate this catholicism⁵ and charity of the apostle, in these little differences; and God forbid I should tempt any of you to forsake so noble an example. But then the example of the same apostle will authorize us modestly to propose our own sentiments and the reasons of our practice, and to warn people from laying a great stress upon ceremonials and superstitious observances. This he does particularly to the Galatians, who not only kept the Jewish holy-days, but placed a great part of their religion in the observance of them. “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years;” therefore, says he, “I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain.” Gal. 4:10-11. The commandments of God have often been made void by the traditions of men; and human inventions more religiously observed than divine institutions; and when this was the case, St. Paul was warm in opposing even ceremonial mistakes.

WHY NOT OBSERVE HOLY-DAYS OF HUMAN APPOINTMENT

Having premised this, which I look upon as much more important than the decision of the question, I proceed to show you the reasons why I would not religiously observe days of human appointment, in commemoration of Christ and the saints. What I have to say shall be particularly pointed at what is called Christ-mas day; but may be easily applied to all other holy-days instituted by men.

I. Celebration of Christmas Without Scriptural Warrant

The first reason I shall offer is, that I would take my religion just as I find it in my Bible without any imaginary improvements or supplements of human invention. All the ordinances which God has been pleased to appoint, and particularly that one day in seven, which he has set apart for his more immediate service, and the commemoration of the works of creation and redemption, I would honestly endeavor to observe in the most sacred manner. But when ignorant presuming mortals take upon them to refine upon Divine institutions, to make that a part of re-

⁵ EDS. NOTE: “catholicism,” a wide-embracing, generous, policy.

ligion, which God has left indifferent, and consecrate more days than he has thought necessary; in short, when they would mingle something of their own with the pure religion of the Bible: then I must be excused from obedience, and beg leave to content myself with the old, plain, simple religion of the Bible. Now that there is not the least appearance in all the Bible of the Divine appointment of Christmas, to celebrate the birth of Christ, is granted by all parties; and the Divine authority is not so much as pretended for it. Therefore, a Bible-Christian is not at all bound to observe it.

II. *The Early Church knew nothing of Christmas*

Secondly, the Christian church, for at least three hundred years, did not observe any day in commemoration of the birth of Christ.⁶ For this we have the testimony of the primitive fathers themselves. Thus Clemens Alexandrinus, who lived about the year one hundred and ninety-four, “We are commanded to worship and honor him, who, we are persuaded, is the Word, and our Savior and Ruler, and through him, the Father; *not upon* certain particular or *select days*, as some others do, but constantly practicing this all our life, and in every proper way.”⁷ Chrysostom, who lived in the fourth century, has these words, “It is not yet ten years, since this day, that is, Christmas, was plainly known to us;” and he observes, the custom was brought to Constantinople from Rome.⁸ Now since this day was not religiously observed in the church in the first and purest ages, but was introduced as superstitions increased, and Christianity began to degenerate very fast into popery; ought not we to imitate the purity of these primitive times, and retain none of the superstitious observances of more corrupt ages?

III. *The Day of Christ’s Birth Unknown*

Thirdly, if a day should be religiously observed in memory of the birth of Christ, it ought to be that day on which he was born. But that day, and even the month and the year, are altogether uncertain. The Scriptures do not determine this point of chronology. And perhaps they are silent on purpose, to prevent all temptation to the superstitious observance of it; just as the body of Moses was secretly buried, and his grave concealed, to guard the Israelites from the danger of idolizing it. Chronologers are also divided upon the point: and even the ancients are not agreed.⁹ The learned generally suppose that Christ was born two or three years before the vulgar reckoning. And as to the month, some suppose it was in September, and some in June. And they imagine it was

⁶ EDS. NOTE: Christmas, “the Christian feast of Jesus’ birth, celebrated on 25 Dec. Its observance is first attested in Rome in 336. Probably the date was chosen to oppose the feast of the ‘birthday of the unconquered sun’ on the winter solstice.” John Bowker, ed., *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (2000). “As late as 245, Origen, in his eighth homily on Leviticus, repudiates as sinful the very idea of keeping the birthday of Jesus “as if he were a king Pharaoh.” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1911), s.v.

⁷ EDS. NOTE: Clement of Alexandria (c.155-c.220), *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, Book VII, Chapter VII.

⁸ EDS. NOTE: This statement is widely quoted, but the source is uncertain. The saying is said to be quoted by Dom Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d’Archéologie chrétienne et de Liturgie*, article “Nativité de Jésus,” XII 918-919.

⁹ Clemens Alexandrinus mentions the different opinions about it in his time, especially among the heretics; for as to the catholics, they pretended to determine nothing about it in his day. “There are some,” says he, “who very curiously determine not only the year, but also the day of our Savior’s birth, which they say is the 28th year of Augustus, and the 25th of the month Pachon. The followers of Basilides celebrate also the day of his baptism, and say, that is the 15th year of Tiberius, and the 15th of the month Tabi. But others say, it is the 11th of the same month. Some of them also say, that he was born on the 24th or 25th of Pharmouthi.” But none of these computations fix it on the 25th of December. [EDS. NOTE: the quoted matter appears to be loosely translated from Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, Book I, Chapter XXI, near the end of the chapter.]

very unlikely, that he was born in the cold wintry months of December, because we read, that at the time of his birth, shepherds were out in the field, watching their flocks by night; which is not probable at that season of the year. The Christian epocha, or reckoning time from the birth of Christ, was not introduced till about the year five hundred; and it was not generally used till the reign of Charles the Great, about the year eight hundred, or a little above nine hundred years ago. And this must occasion a great uncertainty, both as to the year, month, and day.

But why do I dwell so long upon this? It must be universally confessed, that the day of his birth is quite uncertain: nay, it is certain that it is not that which has been kept in commemoration of it. To convince you of this, I need only put you in mind of the late parliamentary correction of our computation of time by introducing the new-style; by which Christmas is eleven days sooner than it was wont to be. And yet this chronological blunder still continues in the public prayers of some, who give thanks to God, that Christ was born *as upon this day*. And while this prayer was offered up in England and Virginia on the twenty-fifth of December old-style, other countries that followed the new-style, were solemnly declaring in their thanksgivings to God, that Christ was born eleven days sooner; that is, on the fourteenth of December. I therefore conclude, that neither this day nor any other was ever intended to be observed for this purpose.

IV. *Superstition Tends From Small Beginnings to Dangerous Outcome*

Finally, superstition is a very growing evil; and therefore the first beginnings of it ought to be prevented. Many things that were at first introduced with a pious design have grown up gradually into the most enormous superstition and idolatry in after ages. The ancient Christians, for example, had such a veneration for the pious martyrs, that they preserved a lock of hair, or some little memorial of them; and this laid the foundation for the expensive sale and stupid idolizing of the relics of the saints in popish countries. They also celebrated their memory, by observing the days of their martyrdom. But as the number of the martyrs and saints real or imaginary, increased, the saints' days also multiplied to an extravagant degree, and hardly left any days in the year for any other purpose. And as they had more saints than days in the year, they dedicated the first of November for them all, under the title of *All-saints-day*. But if the saints must be thus honored, then certainly much more ought Jesus Christ. This seemed a natural inference: and accordingly, these superstitious devotees appointed one day to celebrate his birth, another his baptism, another his death, another the day of Pentecost, and an endless list that I have not time now to mention. The apostles also must be put into the Kalendar; and thus almost all the days in the year were consecrated by superstition, and hardly any left for the ordinary labors of life. Thus the people are taught to be idle the greatest part of their time, and so indisposed to labor on the few days that are still allowed them for that purpose.

This has almost ruined some popish countries, particularly the Pope's dominions in the fine country of Italy, once the richest and best improved in the world. Mr. Addison, Bishop Burnet, and other travelers, inform us, that every thing bears the appearance of poverty, notwithstanding all the advantages of soil and climate: and that this is chiefly owing to the superstition of the people, who spend the most of their time as holy-days. And if you look over the Kalendar of the Church of England, you will find that the *festivals* in one year, amount to thirty-one. The *fasts* to no less than ninety-five, to which add the fifty-two Sundays in every year, and the whole will make one hundred and seventy-eight: so that only one hundred and eighty-seven days will be left in the whole year, for the common purposes of life. And whether the poor could procure a subsistence for themselves and their families by the labor of so few days, and whether it be not a yoke

that neither we nor our fathers are able to bear, I leave you to judge. It is true, that but very few of these feasts and fasts are now observed, even by the members of the established church.¹⁰ But then they are still in their Kalendar and Canons,¹¹ and binding upon them by the authority of the church; and as far as they do not comply with them, so far they are *dissenters*:¹² and in this, and in many other respects, they are *generally dissenters*, though they do not share with us in the infamy of the name.

Now, since the beginnings of superstitious inventions in the worship of God are so dangerous in their issue, and may grow up into such enormous extravagance, we ought to shun the danger, by adhering to the simplicity of the Bible-religion, and not presume to make more days or things holy, than the all-wise God has been pleased to sanctify. He will be satisfied with the religious observance of his own institutions; and why should not we? It is certainly enough, that we be as religious as he requires us. And all our will-worship¹³ is liable to that confounding rejection, “Who hath required this at your hands?” Isaiah 1:12.

A CONCLUDING EDITORIAL NOTE

Samuel Davies’ Scriptural view of “Holy-days” was the view of the Presbyterian Church (US) into the 20th century. In 1899, in answer to an overture to the General Assembly asking for “a pronounced and explicit deliverance” against the recognition of “Christmas and Easter as religious days,” the following resolution was adopted: “There is no warrant in the Scriptures for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holy days, but rather the contrary (see Galatians iv. 9-11; Colossians ii. 16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed faith, conducive to will-worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” This view was upheld by the Assembly as late as 1916.¹⁴

Consistent with this biblical tradition, apart from the weekly celebration of our Lord’s resurrection on the Lord’s Day, it is the policy of the Session of New Hope Presbyterian Church not to follow any liturgical calendar. In particular, Christmas and Easter are not recognized as ecclesiastical holy-days at New Hope. Heeding Davies’ exhortation to imitate Paul’s catholic and charitable spirit, however, this policy is not understood to prohibit individuals, or New Hope members in privately hosted gatherings, from keeping such customs informally, and at times other than public worship services.

¹⁰ EDS. NOTE: The Church of England.

¹¹ EDS. NOTE: “Canons,” church law.

¹² EDS. NOTE: a term of derision used for non-Anglicans such as Presbyterian Davies.

¹³ EDS. NOTE: cf. AV translation of Col. 2:23: “Which things have indeed a shew of wisdom in will worship, and humility, and neglecting of the body. . . .”

¹⁴ See *A Digest of the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*. . . . G. F. Nicolassen (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1923).