

Judaizers and Silver Bells

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INTRODUCTION:

The Christmas story is in the Bible, but there is no command given to us to make it a holiday. But now that we have made it a holiday, we have plenty of material to work with because the birth of Jesus is described in such great detail in both Matthew and Luke. But is that all there is to it? The central point of this message can be stated right up front—in order to get to the right kind of *ho, ho, ho*, it must be preceded by the right kind of *bah, humbug*.

THE TEXT:

“And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father. Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain” (Gal. 4:6–11).

SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

We have been adopted as the sons of God. Because we are His, the Spirit of God comes into our hearts, crying out Abba, Father (v. 6). We are not slaves of God. Or, more accurately, we *were* slaves (*doulos*) who were then adopted into the family of God (v. 7). Before, when we did not know God, we “did service” (the verb form *douleia*) to entities which by nature were not gods (v. 8). But everything is different now. Now that we know God (or, more accurately, now that we are known *by* God), why on earth would we return to that earlier form of bondage? Why would we go back to such weak and beggarly elements (v. 9)? But how would such a return be manifested? Paul says that the Galatians were observing days, months, seasons and years (v. 10). In other words, their bondage was a calendar-driven bondage. And Paul adds that this was a big enough deal that it threatened to undo all his work among the Galatians (v. 11). This means that the wrong kind of calendar observance is a *gospel* issue.

TEMPTATIONS TRANSLATE:

But whatever the Galatian calendar included, it most certainly did not include Advent and Christmas. The Judaizers were not walking around humming *Silver Bells*. So why should we be concerned? We are talking about something completely different, right? The answer is to be found in the fact that sinful Galatian hearts bear an uncanny resemblance to contemporary sinful human hearts. We share *that*, at any rate. When the constant is the sinful heart, the externals can look completely different and yet be expressing the same

problem.

ONE CALENDAR OBLIGATION:

As Christians, we have only one calendar obligation, and that is to worship the Lord on the Lord's Day. The Fourth Commandment has not been set aside, and so the obligation to worship God is not a legalistic binding of the conscience. God's authoritative Word obeyed does not so much bind the conscience as it liberates the conscience. But when men substitute their own words, *as though they were God's words*, the result is always, necessarily, bondage. Please note the italicized words.

“But he answered and said unto them, Why do ye also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?” (Matt. 15:3). “For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers” (Matt. 23:4).

In our liturgical calendar here at Christ Church, we basically have 54 *worship* services a year. This is not counting events or programs, like Psalm sings or the Winter Feast. The two extra ones are the Good Friday service and the Christmas Eve service. All are welcome and encouraged to attend, but these are services grounded in the word of man, and not the Word of God. That means if you skipped 10 Christmas Eve services in a row, and did it on purpose, none of the elders would say anything whatever to you about it. You are warmly invited to suit yourself. But if you skipped ten Lord's Day services in a row, and did it on purpose, we would in fact talk to you about it. Christians don't get to do that.

THE WORD OF MAN?:

If something is based on the word of man, why do it at all? In the Old Testament, the annual festivals required by God's Law were the Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, the Feast of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and the Feast of Tabernacles (Lev. 23:1-44). Also required in Lev. 23 was the weekly Sabbath observance.

Days that were added *without* being required by the Law were memorial days for the fall of Jerusalem, Purim (commemorating the deliverance of the Jews recorded in Esther), and Hanukkah (commemorating the cleansing of the Temple, which happened between Malachi and Matthew). On top of that, the Israelites also observed the feast of the New Moon every lunar month. Out of these festivals *not* required by the Law of God, we know that Jesus observed at least one of them—Hanukkah (John 10:22-23).

And we know that the theologians of the Westminster Assembly, who were scrupulous about such things, allowed that the church had the authority to set aside particular days of observance. They say the church can mark “thanksgivings upon special occasions (Est. 9:22), which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in an holy and religious manner” (WCF 21.5). The text they used to establish this was the occasion when the Jews

established Purim, an *annual* festival.

LEX ORANDI, LEX CREDENDI:

We are shaped by our calendar observances. What we do helps shape what we become. The law of prayer is the law of what we believe—*lex orandi lex credenda*. The upshot is that we *must* distinguish the word of God from the word of man, even when the word of man is good — but especially when the word of man is bad (*e.g.* penitential seasons). In other words, Christmas celebrations are a function of the word of the church, and can only be as healthy as the church is. In other words, when the church thinks we should spend a couple of months every year “afflicting our souls” when Israel in the old covenant only had to do that for *one day*, something is cockeyed. And what that something is ties in directly to our text.



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