

Preparing the Church for Christmas

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How do I, a minister of the Gospel, having my roots in the Reformation (in particular the Reformation under John Calvin) prepare my congregation for the celebration of Christmas? At first I felt that such a question placed me in somewhat an awkward position; especially considering that John Calvin among other prominent Reformers encouraged a rejection of Christmas along with all the other holy days sanctioned and celebrated by the Roman Catholic Church. Now, here I am being asked, how do I prepare the church to celebrate this occasion? This prompted me to do a little more research into the whole subject of the celebration of Christmas in order to give a proper answer to the question asked.

Rev. Gerald Vanden Berg in his rubric of the Standard Bearer, "Decency and Order" (volume 38, p. 114) cites the reasons our Reformed fathers felt the celebration of Christmas ought to be abolished in the church.

It was not that the Reformed fathers felt that the celebration of these days was in itself wrong, but they favored setting them aside for these reasons: (1) These days are institutions of men, but not God. There is no injunction in the Word of God requiring the church to observe them. (2) These days tend to force aside the Sabbath and cause it to lose some of its significance. It is more important that the proper commemoration of the Sabbath be retained than anything else. If these special days detract from it in any way it is better that they be abolished. (3) These days tend toward looseness of morals and heathen modes of feasting.

Now, rather than simply giving these reasons a wave of the hand and simply going our merry way, we ought to give them some serious consideration. One need only to look around us today at the way Christmas is being celebrated by many in the church world and it is not hard to see that our Reformed church fathers were correct in their assessment.

There is no evidence that Christ's birth was celebrated by the Apostolic and early post-Apostolic church. This celebration began, as close as one can tell, in the fourth or fifth centuries when the Roman Catholic Church began to formulate its religious calendar of holy days. At that time the church felt that just as the nation of Israel had celebrated festal days throughout the year so also should the New Testament church celebrate certain days throughout the year. So the church set itself to the task of dividing the year into days and seasons in which were to be celebrated various events that took place in the life of Jesus (e.g. His birth, passion week, death, resurrection, ascension, etc.). Christmas was one such holy day. It, along with the other special holy days, was sanctioned by the church, that is, they were declared sacred and therefore a binding part of Christian worship. If one would not keep the celebration of these days they were declared accursed!

The date for the celebration of Christmas, December 25, was made to coordinate with the Roman pagan holiday of Saturnalia and Brumalia. This pagan holiday was meant to celebrate the shortest day of the year (Brumalia) followed by the beginning of the lengthening of days (Saturnalia). The celebration of Christmas therefore, was confused with this pagan festival. This did not seem to disturb, however, the majority of the laity. The pagan festival with its riot and merry-making was so popular that Christians were glad for an excuse to continue its celebration with little change in spirit or in manner" (The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Volume 3, p. 48).

To corrupt the celebration of Christ's birth even more the Romish Church declared that on that day there be a special celebration of the mass. We need not go into a description of the "popish mass" and its error since we do this every time we study Lord's Day 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism. But it was on account of this special celebration of the mass on this day that it became known as Christmas (Christ – mass).

We can well understand why the early Reformers wanted to do away with these man-made celebrations of the Roman Catholic Church! They represented practices which were "founded on the imaginations or institutions of men!" ("Heidelberg Catechism," Lord's Day 33, Q and A 91); and were, therefore, exemplary of the work-righteousness of the Romish Church!

So why then do we celebrate Christmas? What would I as a Reformed preacher attempt to prepare the church for a celebration of this sort?

Because the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches requires it of me. Article 67 reads:

The churches shall observe, in addition to the Sunday, also Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, the Day of Prayer, the National Thanksgiving Day and Old and New Year's Day.

Monsma and Van Dellen in their Church Order commentary (Third edition) uncover the reason for such an article in our Church Order. They tell us that the churches in the Netherlands did not want these days given over to the "danger of abuse and frivolity." It was felt if worship services were held on these days that this could "turn a fruitless and harmful idleness into a holy and profitable exercise." We certainly cannot disagree with this reasoning especially since celebrating this Christian holiday is a matter of Christian liberty. There is no law of God that dictates against celebrating it and if celebrating it in a proper, spiritual way can benefit the church then why not? This is certainly the opinion of Rev. G. Ophoff an early Protestant Reformed minister (1921-1959) when he writes in his "Church Right," p. 149:

Certainly, there can be no objection to Christian holidays if they be rightly kept. The Old Testament Church had her religious holidays on which the people of God concentrated on the salutary works of God that had taken place on those days. Such was Jehovah's will. The Old Testament holy days were His institutions. The Old Testament holy days waxed old and vanished away with the law. The realities of the kingdom are now before us in the Scriptures. For God has sent His Son in the flesh and through Him has wrought salvation. Christ suffered and died for the sins of His people, was raised unto their justification and they with Him were set in heaven and blessed with all spiritual blessings. These works of God took place in time, were wrought on certain days of twenty-four hours and with these days they are associated in the mind of the church, associated with dates, points of time, in the year. And though there is no express command, yet certainly there can be no objection to God's people repairing to God's house at the annual return of the dates or days of those events to be occupied in their mind with those events. The idea is not certainly that Christian people have before their mind these events only at the annual return of the day on which they took place. We must have God's works before our mind always, for then only do we have God before our mind – the God and Father of Christ – for through His works God revealed Himself. It is only in these works that we see Him and through these works that we know Him.

For these reasons, then, we as churches today celebrate Christmas and other religious holidays.

And in them I find how I as a minister am able to prepare the church for the celebration of Christmas. Even before this holiday arrives I begin preaching a number of sermons (no set

amount needed) which stress for God's people the wonder work of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Attention is drawn to Old Testament prophecy and therefore the hope of God's people in the Old Dispensation. Historical accounts of Christ's birth are preached on recounting for the congregation the events which surrounded Christ's birth. The preaching turns the attention of the church to the gift of salvation found in the very Person of the Son of God, and it directs us to the covenant faithfulness of God as He fulfills all the covenant promises in the very birth of our Savior into this world. On the other hand, the minister from the pulpit and in the catechism room reminds the people of God that when this day is celebrated it is not done so because the day itself is sacred and holy. We are not slaves to the celebration of sanctioned holidays. We need not follow set times and seasons or be declared cursed in God's eyes. We celebrate Christmas as a special day in which we remember the wonder of God in the birth of our Savior.

And more, the church is prepared also when it is reminded that Christmas is not to be remembered for the same reasons the heathen celebrate it; that is, in order to enjoy the wanton reveling of the flesh – eat, drink and be merry. We do not fill our celebration with emotionalism and sentimentality with which so many wish to remember Christ's birth. The story of the birth of the Christ child is not to us just one, or even the best, of many stories that are told around Christmas time – stories which speak of the inherent goodness of fallen man. This too is the calling of the church toward its members in preparing them to celebrate Christmas in the proper sense of the word. This must be emphasized because it is better not to rate this day at all than to do so improperly. We agree with A. H. Newman (The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge, Vol. 3, p. 48), when he writes:

The religious significance of Christmas has been too commonly minimized among Christians, the day among adults being degraded into one merely for the exchange of presents, often neither given or received in affection, but out of a sense of obligation or barter. In too many homes the children, whose day it more particularly is, are not taught to link their merrymaking on Christmas with the gift of God to the world in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.

If this was true back when this book was published in 1950, then certainly it is true today the more. We live in a world that commercializes every holiday, especially Christmas. Some people spend so much money that it takes them all year to pay back. And in doing, so they forget completely about the true, spiritual celebration of Christmas. The church, in preparing its members for the celebration of Christmas must point this out in order to avoid the frivolous, materialistic spirit that possesses our world.

May our celebration of Christmas this year remind us of two truths. First, let it remind us of the marvelous grace of God, Who provided for us unworthy sinners, salvation in the Person of His only-begotten Son. And second, may it remind us that this Christ Who was born in the fullness of time will come again...soon, when all things are ripe for His coming. Then we will receive fully the salvation Christ has already merited for us on the cross.

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