

A Theology for Holidays

Romans 14:1-8; Esther 9:18-28

Stuart W. Bryan

I. A Pilgrim Thanksgiving

We find ourselves on the cusp of celebrating the national Thanksgiving holiday and of the beginning of the Christian calendar with the First Sunday in Advent next week. As we're approaching this festal season, I thought it worthwhile to develop a theology for the holidays. Let us consider two questions:

- Is it _____ to celebrate such holidays? Does obedience to God consist in celebrating them?
- Is it _____, even *commendable*, to celebrate such holidays? If so, under what circumstances?

II. Theological Foundations (Romans 14:1-8)

¹Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. ²For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. ³Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. ⁴Who are you to judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand. ⁵One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. ⁶He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. ⁷For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. ⁸For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.

A. Liberty of Conscience (cf. Col 2:8, 16-23)

First, is it _____ to observe holidays? Romans 14 addresses how Jewish and Gentile Christians were to handle their different dietary and festal customs. The Jews had certain dietary customs and feast days that were part of the old covenant. Were they to be prevented from observing these now that they had come to Christ? Were Gentiles to be forced to observe them since these regulations were found in God's law? Paul's answer is, "No!" to both questions. Both Jewish and Gentile Christians had *liberty of conscience*.

B. Liberty to Celebrate

But what of our second question: Is it _____ to celebrate holidays? Well, what does Paul say? Does he compel the Jewish or Gentile Christians to abandon their dietary habits or festal celebrations? No. He grants them liberty in Christ to continue observing these things provided that (1) they were not binding the consciences of their brethren and (2) they ate and/or celebrated the day unto the _____. There is *liberty to celebrate* – provided the thing being celebrated is worthy of celebration!

It was here the Pilgrims stumbled. They were driven by an abstract principle rather than by Scripture itself. They were driven by the principle that *whatever is not directly commanded in worship is _____*. But notice that this is just as much a violation of *liberty of conscience* as making the feasts mandatory - it is just as much a violation of liberty of conscience *to forbid something that God has not forbidden* as it is *to mandate something that God has not commanded*.

III. Historical Foundations

A. History of Redemption (cf. Lev 23)

One of our nasty tendencies is viewing Scripture as a monolithic whole – as though it just plopped down from heaven all at once. But the Bible is not like this; it is a collection of books that were written by numerous authors over the course of thousands of years. Hence, we can learn from the way our fathers handled the Scriptures that had already been written in their day. In Leviticus 23, the Law mandated one weekly feast, the Sabbath, and three annual feasts with component parts: the Feasts of Unleavened Bread (Passover), of Weeks (Pentecost), and of Booths (Tabernacles). The law made no provision for additional feasts.

B. Feast of Purim (Esther 9:18-28 cf. Jn 5:1)

¹⁸But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day, as well as on the fourteenth; and on the fifteenth of the month they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness. ¹⁹Therefore the Jews of the villages who dwelt in the unwallied towns celebrated the fourteenth day of the month of Adar with gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and for sending presents to one another. ²⁰And Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, ²¹to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, ²²as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them, and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor. ²³So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them... ²⁷the Jews established and imposed it upon themselves and their descendants and all who would join them, that without fail they should celebrate these two days every year, according to the written instructions and according to the prescribed time, ²⁸that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city, that these days of Purim should not fail to be observed among the Jews, and that the memory of them should not perish among their descendants.

This text records the beginning of the Feast of _____. While the original celebration was spontaneous (19), Mordecai reckoned that it would be good to make this a regular holiday (20-22). The Jews accepted the custom (23) and imposed it upon themselves (26). *God had saved Israel. How could the Israelites do anything but celebrate and give thanks to God?*

IV. Practical Applications

A. Legitimacy of Celebrations (Mt 2:9-11; Lk 1:39-56; 2:8-20; 2:27-32)

If the Jews were free to celebrate their deliverance from the schemes of Haman, *how much more are we free to celebrate* the life and work of our Lord Jesus Christ who has rescued and delivered us from the schemes of the Evil One? After all, what happens when Christ is born?

B. Liberty of Celebration

- Observing the Lord's Day is a matter of _____.
- Observing holidays is a matter of _____ and thankfulness.

V. Conclusion

"Our fathers were Englishmen who came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity, &c. Let them therefore praise the Lord, because he is good, & his mercies endure forever. Yea, let them which have been redeemed of the Lord, shew how he hath delivered them from the hand of the oppressor. When they wandered in the desert wilderness out of the way, and found no city to dwell in, both hungry, & thirsty, their soul was overwhelmed in them. Let them confess before the Lord his lovingkindness, and his wonderful works before the sons of men." William Bradford