

The Presbyterian Church and Church Festivals

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The worship of the Presbyterian Church

A fundamental principle of the Presbyterian Church in forming her "Directory" for the Worship of God is, that here as in everything else, Holy Scripture is the only safe guide. One of the earliest practical errors which gained ground in the Christian community was the adoption of the principle that the ministers of religion might lawfully add at their pleasure to the rites and ceremonies of the Church. In consequence of the admission of this error, Augustine complained as early as the beginning of the 5th Century that for one appointment of God's, ten of man's had crept into the Church and formed a burden greater in some respects than was the ceremonial economy of the Jews. The fact is, for the sake of drawing both Jews and Pagans into the Church, many rites and ceremonies were adopted from both that they might feel more at home in the Christian assemblies. This evil increased until before the Reformation it had reached that revolting amount of superstition which now distinguishes the "Church of Rome".

It was in reference to this point that our fathers both in Scotland and England had many conflicts when their respective Churches in those countries were organised and settled in the 16th Century. On the one hand, the prelates and on the other, court clergy were in favour of a splendid ritual and were disposed to retain a large number of the ceremonies which had been in use in the "Church of Rome". On the other, the Puritans in England and the corresponding body in Scotland contended that the Scriptures being the only infallible rule of faith and practice, no rite or ceremony ought to have a place in the public worship of God which is not warranted in Scripture either by direct precept or example or by good and sufficient inference. In Scotland the advocates of primitive simplicity prevailed and established in their national church the same mode of worship which we believe existed in the apostolic age and which now obtains in the Presbyterian Church in that country and in the United States.

In England our fathers, the Puritans, were not so happy as to succeed in establishing the same scriptural system. Under the influence of the monarch and the court clergy they were outvoted. Still it is undoubtedly certain that a large portion of the most pious and devoted of the clergy of the Church of England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth and some of her most worthy dignitaries, when the character of that church under its reformed regimen was finally fixed, did importunately plead for laying aside in public worship everything to which Presbyterians at the present day object as having no warrant in Scripture. And although they failed of securing their object in the national church, yet the descendants of the Puritans both in that country and our own have been permitted to realise their wishes as to most of the particulars. It is proposed now to dwell and to assign with regard to each our reasons for adhering to them in our system of worship. But before we proceed to this detail it may be useful to offer a general remark or two which will serve to show why we object to all human inventions and additions in the worship of God.

(1) Christ is the only King and Head of the Church. His word is the law of His house. Of course the Church ought not to consider herself as possessing any power which that Word does not warrant. If therefore she cannot find in Scripture authority direct or fairly implied in the amount contended for, she does not possess that authority.

(2) We believe that such inventions and additions are expressly forbidden in Scripture. The significant question asked by God of his ancient people when speaking on this very subject, Isaiah 1: 12, "Who hath required this at your hand?" seems to be decisive. "Teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" is spoken of in Matt. 15: 9 by our blessed Saviour as highly offensive to Him. It would seem tacitly to imply that we are wiser than God and understand the interests of the Church better than her Head and Lord.

(3) If we once open this door, how or when shall it be closed? The Church we are told has power to decree rites and ceremonies; that is a majority of the ruling powers of the Church have power at any time as caprice or a love of show or superstition or any other motive may prompt, to add rite after rite and ceremony after ceremony at pleasure to the worship of God. Now if this power be really inherent in the Church, what limit shall we put to its exercise? If she has power to add 10 or 20 new ordinances to her ritual has she not equal power to add a 100, or 500, if a majority of her ministers should feel inclined to

do so? And was it not precisely in this way and upon this very principle that the enormous mass of superstitions which characterises the Papacy gradually accumulated? Surely a power which carries with it no limit but human caprice and which has been so manifestly and shockingly abused in past ages ought by no means to be claimed or exercised in the Church of God. (At this point Dr Miller descended into particulars and we quote him from pp. 73 to 78 on.)

Presbyterians do not observe Holy Days

We believe and teach in our public formularies that "there is no day under the Gospel dispensation commanded to be kept holy except the Lord's Day which is the Christian Sabbath. We believe indeed and declare in the same formula that it is both scriptural and rational to observe special days of fasting and thanksgiving, as the extraordinary dispensations of Divine Providence may direct. But we are persuaded that even the keeping of these days when they are made stated observances recurring of course at particular times, whatever the aspect of Providence may be, is calculated to promote formality and superstition rather than the edification of the body of Christ. Our reasons for entertaining this opinion are the following:-

(1) We are persuaded that there is no scriptural warrant for such observances either from precept or example. There is no hint in the New Testament that such days were either observed or recommended by the Apostles or by any of the Churches in their time. The mention of Easter in Acts 12: 4 has no application to this subject. Herod was a Jew (sic) not a Christian and of course had no desire to honour a Christian solemnity. The real meaning of the passage is as the slightest inspection of the original will satisfy every intelligent reader "intending after the Passover to bring him forth to the people."

(2) We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days but that they positively discountenance it. Let anyone impartially weigh Colossians 2: 16 and also Galatians 4: 6, 10, 11 and then say whether these passages do not evidently indicated that the inspired Apostle disapproved of the observance of such days.

(3) The observance of fasts and festivals by divine direction under the Old Testament economy makes nothing in favour of such observances under the New Testament dispensation. That economy was no longer binding or even lawful after the New Testament Church was set up. It were just as reasonable

to plead for the present use of the Passover, the incense and the burnt offerings of the Old economy which were confessedly done away by the coming of Christ as to argue in favour of human inventions bearing some resemblance to them as binding in the Christian Church.

(4) The history of the introduction of stated fasts and festivals by the early Christians speaks much against both their obligation and their edifying character. Their origin was ignoble. They were chiefly brought in by carnal policy for the purpose of drawing into the Church Jews and Gentiles who had both been accustomed to festivals and holy days. And from the moment of their introduction they became the signal for strife or the monuments of worldly expedience and degrading superstition.

As there were no holy days, excepting the Lord's Day, observed in the Christian Church while the Apostles lived and no hint given that they thought any other expedient desirable, so we find no hint of any such observances having been adopted until towards the close of the 2nd Century. Then the celebration of Easter gave rise to a controversy; the Asiatic Christians pleading for the observance at the same time which was prescribed for the Jewish Passover and contending that they were supported in this by apostolic tradition; while the Western Church contended for the stated celebration on a certain Lord's Day and urged with equal confidence apostolic tradition in favour of their scheme. Concerning this fierce and unhallowed controversy, Socrates, the ecclesiastical historian who wrote soon after the time of Eusebius and begins his history where the latter closes his narrative; speaking on the controversy concerning Easter expresses himself thus: "Neither the ancients nor the fathers of later times, I mean such as favoured the Jewish custom, had sufficient cause to contend so eagerly about the feast of Easter; for they considered not within themselves that when the Jewish religion was changed into Christianity the literal observance of the Mosaic law and the types of things to come wholly ceased. And this carries with it its own evidence. For no one of Christ's laws permits Christians to observe the rites of the Jews. Nay, the Apostle hath in plain words forbidden it where he abrogates circumcision and exhorts us not to contend about feasts and holy days. For, writing to the Galatians he admonishes them not to observe days and months and times and years. And unto the Colossians he is as plain as may be declaring that the observance of such things was but a shadow. Neither the Apostles nor the Evangelists have enjoined on Christians the observance of Easter but have left the remembrance of it to the free choice and discretion of those who have been

benefited by such days. Men keep holy days because thereon they enjoy rest from toil and labour. Therefore it comes to pass that in every place they do celebrate of their own accord the remembrance of the Lord's passion. But neither our Saviour nor his Apostles have anywhere commanded us to observe it." Socrates Lib. 5, cap. 21.

Here then is an eminent Christian writer who flourished early in the 5th Century who had made the history of the Church his particular study, who explicitly declares that neither Christ nor his Apostles gave any command or even countenance to the observance of festival days; that it was brought into the Church by custom and that in different parts of the Church there was diversity of practice in regard to this matter. With respect to Easter in particular this diversity was striking. We no sooner hear of its observance at all than we begin to hear of contest and interruption of Christian fellowship on account of it; some quoting the authority of some of the Apostles for keeping this festival on one day and others with equal confidence quoting the authority of other Apostles for the selection of a different day thereby clearly demonstrating that there was error somewhere and rendering it highly probable that all parties were wrong and that no such observance at all were binding on Christians.

The festival of Easter no doubt was introduced in the 2nd Century in place of the Passover and in accommodation to the same Jewish prejudice which had said even during the apostolic age "except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses ye cannot be saved." Hence it was generally called pascha and pasch in conformity with the name of the Jewish festival whose place it took. It seems to have received the title of Easter in Great Britain from the circumstance that when Christianity was introduced into that country a great pagan festival celebrated at the same season of the year in honour of the Pagan goddess Eostre yielded its place to the Christian festival which received substantially the name of the Pagan deity. The title of Easter it is believed is seldom used but by Britons and their descendants.

Few festivals are celebrated in the Romish Church and in some Protestant Churches with more interest and zeal than Christmas. Yet when Origen about the middle of the 3rd Century professes to give a list of the fasts and festivals which were observed in his day, he makes no mention of Christmas. From this fact Sir Peter King in his "Inquiry into the Constitution and Worship etc. of the Primitive church" etc. infers that no such festival was then observed and adds,

"It seems improbable that they should celebrate Christ's nativity when they disagreed about the month and the day when Christ was born." Every month of the year has been assigned by different portions and writers of the Christian Church as the time of our Lord's nativity and the final location of this as well as other holy days in the ecclesiastical calendar was adjusted rather upon astronomical and mathematical principles than to any solid calculations of history."

But the motives and manner of introducing Christmas into the Christian Church speak more strongly against it. Its real origin was, like many other observances, borrowed from the heathen. The well-known pagan festival among the Romans distinguished by the title of Saturnalia because instituted in honour of their fabled deity, Saturn, was celebrated by them with the greatest splendour, extravagance and debauchery. It was during its continuance a season of freedom and equality; the master ceased to rule and the slave to obey, the former waiting at his own table upon the latter and submitting to the suspension of all order and the reign of universal frolic. The ceremonial of this festival was opened on the 19th of December by lighting a profusion of waxen candles in the temple of Saturn and by suspending in their temple and in all their habitations boughs of laurel and various kinds of evergreen. The Christian Church, seeing the unhappy moral influence of this festival; perceiving her own members too often partaking in its licentiousness and desirous if possible of effecting its abolition, appointed a festival in honour of her Master's birth nearly about the same time for the purpose of superseding it. In doing this the policy was to retain as many of these habits which had prevailed in the Saturnalia as could in any way be reconciled with the purity of Christianity. They made their new festival therefore a season of relaxation and mirth, of cheerful visiting and mutual presents. They lighted candles in their places of worship and adorned them with a profusion of evergreen boughs. Thus did the Romish Church borrow from the pagans some of her most prominent observances and thus have some observances of this origin been adopted and continued by Protestants.

It being evident then that stated fasts and festivals have no divine warrant and that their use under the New Testament economy is a mere human invention; we may ask those who are friendly to their observance what limits ought to be set to their adoption and use in the Christian Church? If it be lawful to introduce five such days for stated observance why not 10, 20 or five score? A small number were at an early period brought into use by serious men who

thought they were thereby rendering God service and extending the reign of religion. But one after another was added as superstition increased until the calendar became burdened with between two and 300 fasts and festivals or saint's days in each year; thus materially interfering with the claims of industry and loading the worship of God with a mass of superstitious observances equally un- friendly to the temporal and the eternal interests of men. Let the principle once be admitted that stated days of religious observance which God has nowhere commanded may properly be introduced into the Christian ritual and by parity of reasoning everyone who from good motives can effect the introduction of a new religious festival is at liberty to do so. Upon this principle was built up the enormous mass of superstition which now distinguishes and corrupts the Romish church.

The observance of un-commanded holy days is ever found to interfere with the due sanctification of the Lord's Day. Adding to the appointments of God is superstition and superstition has ever been found unfriendly to genuine obedience. Its votaries like the Jews of old have ever been found more tenacious of their own inventions of traditionary dreams than of God's revealed code of duty. Accordingly, there is perhaps no fact more universal and unquestionable than that the zealous observers of stated fasts and festivals are characteristically lax in the observance of that one day which God has eminently set apart for Himself and on the sanctification of which all the vital interests of practical religion are suspended. So it was among the Israelites of old. As early as the 5th Century Augustine complains that the superstitious observance of un-commanded rites betrayed many in his time into a spirit of irreverence and neglect towards those which were divinely appointed. So it is notoriously among the Romanists at the present day. And so without breach of charity it may be said to be in very religious community in which zeal for the observance of un-commanded holy days prevails. It is true many in those communities tell us that the observance of holy days devoted to particular persons and events in the history of the Church has a manifest and strong tendency to increase the spirit of piety but if this is so, we might expect to find much more scriptural piety in the Romish church than in any other since holy days are 10 times more numerous in that community than in the system of any Protestant church. But is it so? Let those who have eyes to see and ears to hear decide.

If the foregoing allegations be in any measure well founded; if there be no warrant in God's Word for any observances of this kind; if on the contrary the

Scriptures positively discourage them; if the history of their introduction and increase mark an unhallowed origin; if when we once open the door to such human inventions, no one can say how or when it may be closed and if the observance of days not appointed of God has ever been found to exert an unfriendly influence on the sanctification of that holy day which God has appointed, surely we need no further proof that it is wise to discard them from our ecclesiastical system.