

QUANTOCK MINISTRIES

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*A Bible teaching and preaching ministry
for the Christian community*

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CHRISTIAN VIEW OF FESTIVALS, HOLIDAYS & CELEBRATIONS

Some years ago, a Christian lady sought my advice on the rightness of Christians celebrating Christmas. She had come under the influence of some who took the view that we should have nothing to do with an occasion which is not sanctioned in scripture, was certainly not on 25 December originally, was grafted onto a Roman midwinter festival geared for general debauchery, now has many pagan elements, and has become horribly over-commercialised. Her non-Christian husband, normally tolerant of her beliefs, felt her new view was one belief too far and told her to choose between her beliefs and him. That made me realise this is an issue of some importance. Also, there has been a profound change of attitude in my lifetime among evangelicals in particular towards this side of our Christian life. We have moved from an attitude where anything of levity or physical and artistic enjoyment is either ignored or even frowned upon, to the present condition where there seem to be few markers for Christian social behaviour.

In Deuteronomy 16 v 1 - 17 we find a summary of the three great God-given festivals in Israel's annual calendar; Passover (Easter, or thereabouts), Weeks (Pentecost) and Tabernacles (September/October). These festivals and others, such as the annual presentation of the family tithe, the Year of Jubilee, etc, are therefore an expression of the heart and will of God for His Old Testament people. They show God's view of human beings as holistic; we are mind, body and spirit and He makes provision for our enrichment in each of these spheres of our existence. The Greek concept of "body bad, spirit good" is not scriptural at all but lies at the root of Christian asceticism, which has taken some bizarre forms over the years and has generally left Christians with a reputation as killjoys.

A useful and concise summary of the New Testament position is found in Colossians 2 v 16 – 17, where Paul is addressing the twin pressures at Colossae of early Greek Gnosticism and Judaic legalism. Here we are reminded that we can continue to enjoy New Testament freedom in the matter of celebrations, etc, but as the Church is not Israel the Old Testament festivals and special days are not obligatory for Christians, and in any case these three great Jewish festivals have been fulfilled in Christ. The New Testament Church is designed to exist within an infinite variety of cultures and situations, whereas Israel was a theocracy under the direct rule and law of God. Therefore, we need to apply the basic principles of the Old Testament festivals to whatever celebrations and festivities we have in the culture in which we find ourselves. That is how I believe we are to be both scriptural and free at the same time, which is the New Testament way. The one constraint on our freedom is, as always, the moral need to avoid sin and even the appearance of sin. But the enjoyment of the physical side of our lives is not, in itself, sinful. After all, we will have a physical dimension in Heaven, and we will certainly be enjoying that, for all eternity!

I suggest the principles we find in this Deuteronomy passage, and in others that have a bearing, include:

1. Unity. The celebrations were to be held at a central location (eventually Jerusalem) so that there was a visible coming together. Our celebrations should be occasions to show our unity with family or friends, as appropriate, and often we, too, travel a long way to be present. By contrast, the world's celebrations are often the cause of disunity and disaster.

2. Separation. The Old Testament celebrations displayed the distinctive national and spiritual character of Israel as the people of God, as opposed to the pagan festivities of surrounding tribes. The way we as Christians conduct our celebrations should show a separation from the standards of the world. We can enjoy ourselves without the sins of drunkenness, gluttony, debauchery, or over-spending.

3. Thanksgiving. This was a prominent feature of all the Old Testament celebrations, acknowledging total dependence on the grace of God. It is good when we are able to use our celebrations as a witness to unbelievers present, by saying Grace for example, or in some other way showing our indebtedness to God.

4. Remembrance. There were also planned occasions for looking back in each festival, as an antidote to forgetfulness and pride. In our own festivities it is good to take the opportunity to remember the grace and providence of God that have granted us such times of refreshing and enjoyment and brought us to that point in time.

5. Spiritual (or Heavenly). The Jewish celebrations were a demonstration of the spiritual reality of life, where what we do here displays the greater fulfilment in Heaven. There is so much in our own times of relaxation that should remind us of God's provision to "come apart and rest awhile". True Christian festivities should be a foretaste of Heaven and should also refresh our spirits here and now.

6. Joyful. Another essential hallmark of Old Testament celebration was a time of relaxed enjoyment, with food, drink and even dancing (of the right kind) in a holiday environment. God has given us all things richly to enjoy (I Timothy 6 v 17), and the Puritan reputation for unalleviated hard work and seriousness is not biblical at all.

7. Worship. In all the celebrations they continued to be in fellowship with God, making this a part of their life of worship (I Corinthians 10 v 31). For us, Christ must always be the "unseen guest".

When their celebrations lost these distinctive principles, God called Israel to account, as in Isaiah 1 v 10 - 20, and He will do the same with us. We have the New Testament requirement to obey the law of love, so that the exercise of our freedom does not become a stumbling block to others (Romans 13 v 8 - 10 and 1 Corinthians 8). In our culture today, celebrations may include events like Christmas and Easter, church lunches, social evenings or weekends, holidays, and family landmarks such as birthdays, weddings, anniversary events, hobby, and leisure activities, etc. As God's people of the New Testament age, we are quite free to celebrate, but we should seek to adopt these Old Testament principles as we do so and, in this way, we will be completely biblical.