

you have the warrant of Scripture for the observance of such days? You are a Biblical Christian, aren't you? You claim to go by the Bible, don't you? Is it too much to ask, then, that you give a Biblical reason for observing Romish sacred days?

The writer of this tract is still waiting for someone—anyone—to show the Scriptural warrant for the observance of such sacred days as Easter, Good Friday, or Christmas. Why is it that no one is willing to do this?

**VI—We conclude with a brief summary:**

- 1) The great Reformed Confessions acknowledge the Bible alone as the only infallible rule of our faith *and practice*.
- 2) The Bible does not even *mention*—much less *command*—the observance of these days.
- 3) What the Bible *does* say about burdening God's people with a sense of duty to observe days not commanded by Him is negative (Gal. 4:9,10).
- 4) Such days were not observed in Apostolic churches.
- 5) Such days were at least discouraged—if they could not be completely eliminated—in early days, by the Reformed Churches.
- 6) The observance of these special days was brought back into the Reformed Churches by way of reluctant concession.
- 7) We, like the Apostle Paul, should be patient with weakness on this matter in individual Christians.
- 8) The Church should not provide an atmosphere in which people will be led to think they have a duty to observe such days corporately.
- 9) The common practice of an annual observance of such days, by the Church, is harmful in principle.
- 10) Those who disagree with the above points, and claim to be Biblical, ought to be ready to show from Scripture, that these sacred days were commanded by Christ.

**ON THE**  
**OBSERVANCE**  
**of**  
**ANNUAL SACRED DAYS**

**+**

**by**

**G.I. Williamson**

The purpose of this tract is to answer a simple question: Is the observance of special sacred days acceptable and pleasing to God? Does God approve the observance of such days as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter?

### **I—What is our Authority?**

It is important, first of all, to clearly define what our authority is. The writer of this tract accepts the Bible alone as the final authority. As the Westminster Larger Catechism (Q.3) puts it: *“The Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God, the only rule of faith and obedience.”* We do not agree with the Roman Catholic Church, for example, when it calls tradition a source of truth along with the Bible. Nor can we go along with the idea that the Church has authority to add to, or take away from, what God commands. Against such views, we are in full agreement with the Belgic Confession of Faith (Art. 8) when it says the Scriptures *“fully contain the will of God”* and that we must not *“consider custom, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God.”* No, we accept the Bible alone as our final authority, and *“therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule.”*

It must be noted that we believe the Bible to be sufficient. It does not need to be supplemented by our wisdom. No, as the Belgic Confession again so clearly states it: *“We ought to rest satisfied with the ordinances which Christ and His apostles have taught us”* (Art. 35) and *“reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever”* (Art. 32).

We must understand two things clearly: (1) Scripture is our sole authority, and (2) Scripture is sufficient. Therefore the only real question is this: does the Bible teach us to observe Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter? The question is not: how popular are these days? Nor is it: what do most churches do? Neither is it: how do I feel about the observance of such days myself? No, the one legitimate question is: what does the Bible say about the observance of these days?

### **II—What Does the Bible Teach?**

There is a sense in which the Bible says nothing about these special sacred days. By this we mean that there is no mention of such days as Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter in Scripture. The reason is quite simple. The writers of the Bible knew nothing of the observance of these days. In the book of Acts, for ex-

cial sacred days, then why may it not do as it pleases with respect to this question? The answer is that many Churches today are doing just that; they are disregarding what the Bible says on many subjects. Having learned to say “Never mind what the Bible says,” in one important area, it is hardly surprising if it is now said in many other areas too. (2) A second evil is that *when the Church observes these days the system of doctrine taught in the Bible is seriously distorted.* In most Reformed churches today the story of the birth of Jesus is magnified out of all proportion to the emphasis it receives in Scripture. Every year there is a kind of ritual beginning several weeks before Christmas. Many sermons are preached about “the true meaning of Christmas.” One would never know from prevailing church practices that the Lord himself never commanded any such observance, or that the Apostles never observed any such day, or that such days are, in fact, a purely human invention. The result is that God’s people receive a distorted view of the Biblical system of doctrine. Things invented by men receive too much attention. The consequence is that the things God has appointed tend to be somewhat neglected. (3) *The final result is that the Lord’s people are burdened with a yoke of bondage.* They are made to feel that they have a duty “to keep Christ in Christmas.” So they labor hard to find “the true meaning of Christmas.” It is a difficult task, because Christmas never came from God in the first place. The truth is that Christ never was in Christmas in the sense usually intended by that remark. In fact Jesus himself warned against just such man-made traditions (Mk. 7). What He desires of us is not the observance of things He did not command, but the things He *did* command. *“Go...make disciples...teaching them to observe all things that I commanded you...”* (Matt. 28:19, 20).

This is what the Apostles did. They taught “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). But that “whole counsel” did not include Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter, because these were not commanded by Christ. So, the one who understands “the true meaning of Christmas” (or Good Friday, or Easter) is precisely the one who realizes the human origin of these days. And in order to honor Christ as the only King and head of the Church, such a person will not submit to any obligation to observe these man-made additions to what our Lord commanded. A person such as this may be out of step with a very popular custom. The important thing is that he will be in step with Christ and the Apostles.

### **V—Conclusion**

Perhaps you’ve been in the habit of celebrating Romish “sacred days.” If so, then you ought to face up to this question: Why do you do so? Is it because you believe Christ commanded it? Can you show that He commanded us to observe these days, or that the Apostolic churches observed them? In other words, do

what we have read in Romans 14. In Romans 14 Paul is teaching the strong to be patient with the weak because they do not yet understand the liberty we now have in Christ. That liberty includes freedom from any required observance of special sacred days (such as were formerly required under the ceremonial system). When an individual member of the Church was afflicted with this lamentable weakness, Paul was willing to bear with such a person. But in Galatians 4 it is another principle which is at stake, because the whole Galatian church was submitting to this *“yoke of weakness.”* And when the Church as a corporate body does that, Paul says he is afraid that he may have been wasting his time with such people. The point is that it is one thing to tolerate weakness in individuals who belong to the Church. It is quite another when the wrong view of these weak members is imposed on the entire Church. Yet this is what has happened in most Protestant and Reformed denominations today. People who are strong in faith, who realize that special sacred days such as Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are not God-ordained, are often under considerable pressure to take part in the observance of these days. This is wrong. It opposes the clear witness of Scripture. And no amount of unscriptural argument can make it right.

By all means let us have patience with the weak brother or sister. If they feel that they ought to observe Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter, let them do so. But remember that they are weak—even weaker than the people in the Church of Rome were in Paul’s day. They at least had the excuse that they felt obliged to do something God had formerly required. That is something the weaker brother of today cannot say concerning Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter. These days never were commanded by God. So, above all, their weakness must not be imposed on God’s people by way of required observance of such days.

#### **IV—But What Harm Is It?**

It is a sign of the low state of spiritual life in the Church today that so few seem prepared to consider this question on the basis of Scripture. When they are confronted with a request for Biblical proof for their practice, most will simply shrug it off, saying, “But what harm is there in it?”

The fact is that there is harm in it, even if we are not aware of it. (1) First of all, *it tends to weaken the authority of the Bible.* If the Church can disregard the clear warning of the Apostle on this matter (Gal. 4:9,10), then it should come as no surprise when it does the same with respect to other matters. Why, for example, should the Church listen to Paul when he speaks about the proper role of women in the Church (telling us, for example, that women are not to be teaching elders)? If the Church can do as it pleases with respect to the observance of spe-

ample, we have the inspired record of the Apostolic Church. But there is nothing to suggest that the Church in that period observed any day except the weekly Lord’s Day. Now this is truly a remarkable fact. In many churches today, these annual sacred days receive greater emphasis than the weekly Lord’s Day does. Yet in the Apostles’ time these days were unknown. This is evident not only from the book of Acts, but from all the Apostolic writings. There is no evidence in the New Testament that any such annual sacred days were observed by any of the churches founded by the Apostles.

At the same time, there is also a sense in which the Bible does speak about this subject. But what it says is not favorable to the observance of such days. On the contrary, it quite clearly opposes such observances. Galatians 4:9-11 states the following:

*“But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how is it that you turn back again to the weak and worthless elemental things, to which you desire to be enslaved all over again? You observe days and months and seasons and years. I fear for you that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.”*

It is possible, of course, to invent various arguments to soften the force of these words. Yet the plain fact is that they witness against any mandatory observance of Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter. The people to whom Paul wrote this letter were probably observing the sacred days and seasons appointed by God in the Old Testament ceremonial system (Ex. 23:14-17, 34:18f, etc.) But this only makes the force of these words stronger still, when we apply them to the special sacred days that Christians now observe. The reason is (as John Calvin pointed out long ago) that the people in Galatia could at least prove that the days they wanted to observe had once been appointed by God. Christians today cannot show that God ever appointed Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter. When Christ came, the ceremonial system passed away. Included in the ceremonial system were annual sacred days. For the Galatians to go on celebrating these days was, in effect, to act as if they were still waiting for the Messiah to come. Yet even so they could at least claim that the days they were observing originated by divine institution. Christians can make no such claim for their sacred days. If Paul, then, was afraid that he might have labored in vain among the Galatians because of what they did, what would he say about people today who observe special sacred days God never commanded?

Christmas, Good Friday, and Easter are Romish sacred days. By this we mean they have their source in Roman Catholic tradition, rather than in Scrip-

ture. The first recorded celebration of Christmas was on December 25, 345 A.D. in Rome under Pope Liberius. Since there is no data in Scripture to fix the date of Christ's birth, it was fixed by the authority of the Pope. Good Friday and Easter were also imposed on the Church by mere human authority. Yet how few there are in the Churches of the Protestant Reformation today who seem the least bit concerned about this fact.

The writer of this tract has served as a pastor for many years. One of the lessons he has learned is this: when it comes to the observance of special sacred days, very few are interested to know whether or not such days have biblical warrant. It is amazing, but it is true. Few are willing to say, 'Come, let us go to the Bible and find out what it says on this question.' Many times the writer has been under pressure to observe these humanly invented sacred days. Many times he has said, 'Where do you find these days authorized in the Bible?' or, 'Show me from the Bible that God wants us to observe these days, and that will be sufficient.' Yet in more than 50 years no one has ever done so. No, the argument is always shifted from what the Bible says to the way the respondent feels. They will say: 'I just don't feel that there is anything wrong with this custom.'

When people do this, they do not realize what they are doing. But in fact, they are acting as if the Bible isn't sufficient to tell us what God wants us to do in this matter. Or, even worse, they act as if it doesn't matter what God says. This shows the low state of spiritual life in most churches today. But it is refreshing to know that it has not always been like this. No, there have been times in the history of Reformed churches when the truth on the subject of sacred days received serious attention. Already, before John Calvin arrived in Geneva during the great Reformation, the observance of Romish sacred days had been discontinued there. This had been done under the leadership of Guillaume Farel and Peter Viret. But Calvin was in hearty agreement. It is well known that when these traditional days came along on the calendar, Calvin did not pay honor to them. He just went right on with his exposition of whatever book of the Bible he happened to be expounding. The Reformers, Knox and Zwingli, agreed with Calvin. So did the entire Reformed Church of Scotland and Holland. At the Synod of Dordt in 1574 it was agreed that the weekly Sabbath alone should be observed, and that the observance of all other days should be discouraged. This faithful Biblical practice was later compromised. But that does not change the fact that the Reformed churches originally stood for the biblical principle. The original stand of the Reformed churches was Scriptural. That is the important thing.

What was it, then, that brought about the gradual return of Romish sacred days? The answer is expediency. The Church follows the line of expediency

when it says, 'Yes, we know God did not command this in the Bible, but to keep peace, and please men, we will do it anyway.' This is what brought Romish sacred days back into Reformed churches. They were not brought back in because someone at last found authority for such days in the Bible. No, they were brought back despite the teaching of Scripture. The fact remains, however, that there is no Biblical basis for the observance of Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter.

### III—The Weak and The Strong

In light of the discussion above, it is now time to ask what Paul had in mind when he said: "*One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind*" (Rom. 14:5).

The Apostle, in this passage, is dealing with problems that arose between fellow Christians. Some are described as "*weak*" (14:2), while others are said to be "*strong*" (15:11). We cannot, in this brief tract, expound the entire passage. But it is clear that those referred to as weak were weak because they did not understand the Apostle's teaching correctly. If they had understood it correctly, they would have realized that the advent of the Messiah made obsolete the old distinctions of the ceremonial law concerning clean and unclean foods (See Acts 10:9-15; Rom. 14:14). They would also have realized that special sacred days of the pre-Christian era ended with the ceremonial system (Gal. 4:9,10; Col. 2:16,17). But the problem was that some members of the Apostolic churches did not understand these things clearly. They were weak in faith and therefore continued to think and act as if the Old Testament ceremonial laws were still obligatory. They were mistaken. But because they acted out of weakness, rather than wickedness, Paul said the strong should bear with them (Rom. 14:1).

What is the importance of this for us today? It means that we must not judge people to be unbelievers merely because they are weak. Many people today, even in Reformed churches, fail to make the Bible alone their rule of practice, when it comes to the observance of special sacred days. They allow themselves to be influenced by other things such as feelings, peer pressure, and tradition. We who realize that there is no scriptural basis for the observance of special sacred days should be patient with them. God alone is their judge. But (and this is the vital point) we should never allow them to impose their weakness on the whole Church. Yet this is exactly what has been happening in recent times. The weak have been insisting that the whole Church go along with their weakness.

The fact that the same problem was faced by the apostle explains the important distinction between (1) what we have already seen in Galatians 4 and (2)