

Brian Abshire's Justifications for Christmas Refuted

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Today we are going to critique an article by Rev. Brian Abshire entitled "Rethinking the Pagan Origins of Christmas." I have chosen an article by Brian Abshire out of the dozens of pro-Christmas articles on the web for the following reasons.

(1) Abshire is a Presbyterian and a theonomist. Presbyterians claim to believe in the regulative principle of worship and theonomists claim that the family, church and state must turn from human autonomy to theonomy; that every area of life must be in subjection to God's law-word. Given these noble claims, Abshire's article will be very useful in identifying how modern Presbyterians justify current declension. (I say declension because, as we will see in this paper, the word of God is silent about Christmas. It is not commanded, taught or even implied in the Bible. We are taught to celebrate the birth, life, death, resurrection, ascension and kingship of Christ *every Sabbath day*. Moreover, contrary to Abshire's claims, Christmas is syncretistic to the core.)

Perhaps because he is a Bible-believing conservative Presbyterian and a NOTABLE theonomist, Abshire's website carries the statement, "Laying the Foundation for the Reformation." Does not our church and nation need of the whole moral law, even the case laws and the penalties? Do not churches today need to understand that there is no neutrality and that human autonomy in ethics is a disaster? Well, it certainly does. But sadly, generally speaking, the modern theonomy movement has in fact sought human autonomy in worship. They have strictly applied no neutrality and *sola Scriptura* to the state, while they have advocated human autonomy and neutrality for the church. (This has been especially true of James Jordan, Peter Liethart, David Chilton, Steve Schlissel, Andrew Sandlin and others who reject *sola Scriptura* in favor of an Eastern Orthodox, Anglo-Catholic conception of worship.) Brian Abshire's views on worship are much better than the admirers of Rome and Canterbury. He still reflects modern compromised Presbyterianism, however. Because (in general) theonomist popularizers have had a love affair with human autonomy and church traditions, they often actually have been antinomian in the sphere of worship. (We must keep in mind that Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32 are crucial aspects of God's law.) The theonomy movement has been self-defeating. With one hand they build the walls of Zion, while they dismantle them with the other hand. Perhaps it is for this reason that so many followers of theonomy are so undependable when it comes to truly advocating reformation.

(2) Abshire is an intellectual with a PhD who is very intelligent and a competent writer. It is usually the case that, on any given theological topic on the Internet, 95% of the articles are on scholarly rubbish. It is more of a challenge and more edifying to critique the best unbiblical attempts than the silly nonsense written by evangelicals on this topic. I would like to make it clear that I agree with most of Abshire's theology and have enjoyed many of his articles over the

years. This critique is not a personal attack. Abshire has actually been one of the more dependable Presbyterian theologians. Keep all this in mind as we examine his monograph.

Abshire begins by pointing out that “Reformed believers have never liked Christmas. The Regulative Principle states that what God has not commanded in worship, is forbidden” (p. 1, paragraph 1). This statement is not accurate, in that the Continental Reformed churches made peace with man-made holy days quite early. Note, for example, the Second Helvetic Confession (1566): “Moreover, if the Churches do religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord’s nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, and of His ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit unto His disciples, according to Christian Liberty, we do well approve of it. But as for festival days, ordained for men or saints departed, we cannot allow of them” (xxiv. “Of Holy Days, Fasts and Choice of Meats,” 3). The Dutch and German Reformed churches adopted the regulative principle but *arbitrarily* placed man-made holy days related to Christ’s life within the realm of *adiaphora* or things indifferent. Thus, they adopted a limited church calendar which has been in practice to this day. (Note, one cannot order churches to follow a man-made church calendar and claim that it is a matter of liberty or *adiaphora* at the same time. The fact that it is required by Dutch churches proves they have adopted an excuse for a man-made tradition that is not a matter of liberty at all. The Episcopal churches are more consistent and simply declare in the Thirty-Nine Articles that churchmen have the right to make up church ordinances out of thin air if they think they are beneficial. (When Abshire says Reformed he means the Reformed on the British Isles. They achieved a more thorough and consistent reformation than their Dutch brethren.)

The next statement that cannot be passed over without comment is, “Most of the reasons given against Christmas are misinformed at best; and sometimes are mere rationalizations to justify something a bit unsavory in our characters” (pp. 1-2, paragraph 5). Although this is carefully worded, the underlying thought here seems to be that a number of people who argue against Christmas are *arrogant and self-righteous*. We would ask Rev. Abshire if he has the charismatic special gift of knowledge that enables him to read hearts. Ministers and Reformed denominations who speak against Christmas do serious damage to their future career possibilities and are usually very unpopular. Some have been asked to find another church. Others have been fired. I remember candidating in RPCNA churches many years ago and church sessions asking about my views on Christmas. When they were informed that, in accord with the Westminster Standards, I did not believe that such an extra-biblical holy day is authorized by the word of God, I would find out that I did not get the job even before they had heard me preach. The idea that Christmas is no big deal, that it is simply *adiaphora* or something indifferent is not true theologically or in practice. The idea that Christmas is something neutral is simply untrue. Reformed pastors who do not believe in celebrating Christmas are frequently persecuted in Reformed denominations. While it is certainly true that impure motives can be found in people in virtually every category of theological discussion and debate, Abshire’s statement is a low blow that is likely intended to poison the well. I find it arrogant and unsavory.

We now come to the main argument of Abshire's article. This first argument is as follows:

First, some writers seem to jump between what may have been certain Celtic traditions and Roman ones without really thinking about the differences. The Mediterranean winter is considerably different than the ones experienced in northern Europe and it is unlikely that different environmental factors would have resulted in similar social customs; i.e., there is a big difference in surviving a frozen winter in northern Germany and a wet, but reasonably warm winter in Rome! Yet, debunkers switch between the two traditions without really seeming to appreciate the differences between the cultures.

The response to this objection is, "So what?" How a pagan practice developed in history and its relationship to the weather is irrelevant. The point of those who argue against Christmas is that nearly all the customs associated with Christmas had their origins in pagan idol worship, not the word of God. How the pagans arrived at their religious customs is immaterial. The important question is: Is it appropriate or biblical to worship or honor Christ with practices from pagan superstition? The word of God says that it is indeed totally inappropriate. When Jacob set out to purify the camp (i.e. his household and attendants) the earrings were removed as well as their foreign gods (Gen. 35:1-4) because their earrings were associated with their false gods. They were signs of superstition. When Elijah went to offer his sacrifice, in his contest with the prophets of Baal, he did not use the pagan altar. He did not take something made for idols (e.g., Saturnalia) and attempt to sanctify it for holy use (e.g., Christmas), but instead he rebuilt the Lord's altar (1 Kgs. 18:32). Christians should not take the pagan festival of Yule or Saturnalia and dress it with Christian clothing, but rather sanctify the Lord's day, as did the apostles. When Jehu went up against the worshipers of Baal and their temple, did he save the temple and set it apart for holy use? No! He slaughtered the worshipers of Baal and then "broke down the sacred pillar of Baal, and tore down the temple of Baal, and made it a refuse dump to this day" (2 Kgs. 10:27). "Moreover, we have the example of good Josiah (2 Kgs. 23), for he did not only destroy the houses, and the high places of Baal, but his vessels also, and his grove, and his altars; yea, the horses and chariots which had been given to the sun. The[re is the] example also of penitent Manasseh, who not only overthrew the strange gods, but their altars too (2 Chron. 23:15). And of Moses, the man of God, who was not content to execute vengeance on the idolatrous Israelites, except he should also utterly destroy the monument of their idolatry."¹

God does not want His church to take pagan days, and those pagan and popish rites and paraphernalia that go with them, and adapt them to Christian use. He simply commands us to abolish them altogether from the face of the earth forever. You may not be offended by the Yule log, the Christmas tree, the mistletoe, the holly berries and the selection of a pagan day to celebrate Christ's birth, but God is offended. God commands us to get rid of the monuments and paraphernalia of paganism.

¹ George Gillespie, *English Popish Ceremonies*, (1637), 3:19.

If your wife was promiscuous before you married her, would you be offended if she had pictures of her old boyfriends on her dresser? Would it bother you if she celebrated the various anniversaries relating to her past relationships? Would you be offended if she kept and cherished the various rings, jewelry and mementos given to her by her old boyfriends? Of course you would be offended! The Lord God is infinitely more zealous of His honor than you are; He is a jealous God. Could Israel take festival days to Baal, Ashteroth, Dagon and Molech and alter them to make them pleasing to God? Of course not! The Bible makes very clear which kings of Judah pleased God the most. God is pleased when idols, their temples, their religious dress, earrings, sacred houses, sacred trees, poles, ornaments, rites, names and days are utterly cut off from the earth, never again to be restored. God wants His bride to eliminate forever the monuments, the days, the paraphernalia and the mementos of idolatry. “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them. For the customs of the people are futile...” (Jer. 10:2-3). “You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD, which he hates they have done to their gods...” (Deut. 12:31).

Christians must not only put away the monuments of past idolatry, but also everything associated with present idolatry. Christmas is the most important holy day in Roman Catholicism. The name Christmas comes from Romanism: Christ-mass, or the mass of Christ. The name Christmas unites the name or title of our glorious God and Savior with the idolatrous, blasphemous mass of popedom. Christ-mass is a mixture of pagan idolatry and popish invention. Abshire will attempt to circumvent this argument and we will deal with it in a moment.

Abshire’s second argument is that the whole idea that Christmas is rooted in paganism is a mistake. He writes,

Secondly, the assumption that Christians “baptize” a pagan holiday appears to be the work of two scholars who each had an ax to grind. Paul Ernst Jablonski, a German Protestant, wanted to show that the celebration of Christ’s birth on December 25 was one of the many “paganizations” of Christianity transforming “pure” apostolic Christianity into Roman Catholicism. Since he was already predisposed to hate Christmas (and Catholicism), he sought arguments why Christians should not celebrate it; attributing its origins to paganism is an effective way to poison the well. The second scholar was a Roman Catholic, Dom Jean Hardouin, a Benedictine monk, who tried to show that the Catholic Church adopted pagan festivals for Christian purposes without paganizing the gospel.

This aspect of Abshire’s argument is so obviously historically inaccurate that I am baffled as to why someone as well-read and intellectual as Abshire could make such a blatant error. He appears to be saying that these two early scholars came up with the pagan origins paradigm and others after them just blindly accepted it and perpetrated it. This scenario is clearly false for the following reasons.

First, the idea that Christmas originated in paganism existed *before* both of these men were born. Paul Ernst Jablonski was born on December 28, 1693 and died in 1757. Jean

Hardouin was born in 1646 and died in 1729. Therefore, they could not have had any influence over the church of Scotland that explicitly condemned all holy days except the normal first day Sabbath in 1560 (In *The First Book of Discipline*, Christmas is specifically condemned.); 1566 (the General Assembly of Scotland to Theodore Beza); 1575 (General Assembly, *Articles to be Presented it to my Lord Regent's Grace*); 1580 (National Covenant; or, the *Confession of Faith*). The company of pastors at Geneva condemned all festival days except Sunday—the Christian Sabbath—in 1550. The following Protestant authors condemned Christmas before Jablonski and Hardouin were born: Thomas Cartwright (1618); William Bradford (1621); William Ames (1623); David Calderwood (1628); Edward Calamy (1645); Westminster Assembly (1645); the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1645) and Samuel Rutherford (1646). David Calderwood, William Ames, George Gillespie, Alexander Henderson, Edward Calamy, Samuel Rutherford and the General Assembly of Scotland all appeal to the papal origins argument before the birth of the men mentioned by Abshire. One could mention the confessions of the Waldenses (1120, 1532) and the many books condemning Christmas before the works of Jablonski or Hardouin were available (e.g., James Stirling, James Durham, Samuel Sewall, Increase Mather, John Flavel, Thomas Vincent, John McMillan, Robert Woodrow, Robert Wiley and James Pierce). Were all these giants of the Reformed faith stupid; were they all simply reflecting a prejudice against Romanism? Abshire's historical scenario is false; it explicitly contradicts the historical record.

In addition, it is well known among historians that the papal church has from its earliest days incorporated pagan days and practices into its religion as a deliberate missionary tactic. In A.D. 601, Pope Gregory I wrote in his instructions to missionaries, "Because they [the pagans] were wont to sacrifice oxen to devils, some celebration should be given in exchange for this... They should celebrate a religious feast and worship God by their feasting, so that still keeping outward pleasures, they may more readily receive spiritual joys" (from Bedes, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* [quoted in Encyclopedia Britannica [1961], 5:643).

Moreover, Abshire's argument is *self-refuting* because, on the one hand, we are told that we cannot trust Jablonski because he was a Protestant who had an ax to grind against Roman Catholicism and Christmas. On the other hand, Abshire also points to the influence of Jean Hardouin, a Jesuit scholar and a librarian for a large Benedictine monastery from 1683-1729. Hardouin, a thoroughgoing Romanist, had no ax to grind against Roman Catholicism. The fact that two prominent scholars, one a Protestant and one a Roman Catholic, studying the same topic independently of each other came to identical conclusions is strong evidence that their historical sources were teaching the same thing. I highly doubt the Benedictine library where Hardouin did much of his research had any books by George Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford or the Puritans.

Abshire follows up this wishful thinking with his main thesis, which is that professing Christians did not get the date and the customs associated with Christmas from the surrounding heathen culture but rather the heathen culture borrowed the idea of winter solstice festivals from the Christians. He writes,

However, there is now available from good evidence that rather than Christians copying a pagan festival, that the Romans actually copied the celebration of Christmas from Christians! The below quote is quite long but well worth the read.

“But in fact, the date [December 25th] had no religious significance in the Roman pagan festival calendar before Aurelian’s time, nor did the cult of the sun play a prominent role in Rome before him. There were two temples of the sun in Rome, one of which (maintained by the clan into which Aurelian was born or adopted) celebrated its dedication festival on August 9th, the other of which celebrated its dedication festival on August 28th. But both of these cults fell into neglect in the second century, when eastern cults of the sun, such as Mithraism, began to win a following in Rome. And in any case, none of these cults, old or new, had festivals associated with solstices or equinoxes.

As things actually happened, Aurelian, who ruled from 270 until his assassination in 275, was hostile to Christianity and appears to have promoted the establishment of the festival of the “Birth of the Unconquered Sun” as a device to unify the various pagan cults of the Roman Empire around a commemoration of the annual “rebirth” of the sun. He led an empire that appeared to be collapsing in the face of internal unrest, rebellions in the provinces, economic decay, and repeated attacks from German tribes to the north and the Persian Empire to the east. In creating the new feast, he intended to begin the lengthening of the daylight, and the arresting of the lengthening of darkness, on December 25 to be a symbol of the hoped-for “rebirth,” or perpetual rejuvenation, of the Roman Empire, resulting from the maintenance of the worship of the gods whose tutelage (the Romans thought) had brought Rome to greatness and world-rule. If it co-opted the Christian celebration, so much the better.”

Thus rather than Christians co-opting some pagan festival, it looks as if the pagans stole one from us! The old evolutionary assumption of primitive, superstitious pagans creating a festival back in the dim dawn of human history in response to misunderstood environmental forces must give way to an advanced culture intentionally creating a religious celebration for purely civil purposes. Therefore the widespread assumption is [sic] that Christmas is just a baptized version of “Saturnalia” is not historically maintainable.

There are a number of problems with Abshire’s statement that merit our attention.

First, he tells us that we now have *good evidence* that Christians have had it backwards when it comes to pagan origins and then demonstrates it with *one quote* from a secondary source which is not even footnoted or end-noted. Is the quote from a classical scholar such as Edwin Gibbon or a notable church historian such as Philip Schaff or is it from a crackpot (e.g., a follower of James Jordan)? Since this new theory contradicts the historical scenario of virtually every Protestant, Roman Catholic and secular historian who has written on this issue, it would be good if Abshire or his source provided some proof. I have read Edward Gibbons’ whole section on Aurelian and have seen evidence which does not support Abshire’s quote. According to Gibbons, Aurelian was a generous supporter to all the gods and temples of Rome, especially the chapel of the sun (his mother had been a priestess in the chapel of the sun; see Gibbons, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1:279-280). Moreover, according to Edward Gibbons,

the heathen (at least the intellectuals and philosophers) held Christians in contempt. He writes, “Those among them who condescend to mention the Christians consider them only as obstinate and perverse enthusiasts, who exacted an implicit submission to their mysterious doctrines, without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning” (2:144-145).

Second, Abshire’s scenario does not make a lot of sense given the fact that during the time period when the heathen were supposedly adopting this allegedly Christian practice, Christianity was against the law and much of the time functioned underground when it came to worship and the sacraments. In times of severe persecution, they met for public worship in catacombs. In addition, Christianity did not become acceptable, or the popular thing to do, until after Constantine’s conversion in 312. By this time, the worship of the church was compromised in a number of areas (e.g. the adoration of saints and relics, praying to saints, the veneration or worship of the virgin Mary, the use of icons and statues, etc.). Consequently, if the heathen did borrow a practice from the church at this time, that does not necessarily imply that the practice was biblical or authorized by Scripture.

Note also that Abshire’s theoretical chronology of events falls apart under close scrutiny. He argues that we do not find records of the church celebrating Christmas for centuries because of persecution:

Furthermore, if a festival appears suddenly with traditions and customs, then it is highly unlikely that it is something new. Most likely, the festival had been celebrated quietly for a long time BEFORE it became publicly acceptable. Remember, the real reason why Christianity was suppressed under the Roman Empire, was for civil, not theological reasons. Rome required an annual sacrifice to the Emperor recognizing him as “Lord;” the ultimate connection between heaven and earth. Christians could not in conscience offer a pinch of incense to a statue of the Emperor and call him “Lord” because Jesus, and Jesus alone was Lord. Thus, Christianity was seen as a revolutionary movement and its members as traitors to the Empire.

Celebrating the birthday of the King or Emperor was more than just a social custom, but an important political reality; it demonstrated one’s allegiance and submission to the civil order. Thus for Christians to openly celebrate the birth of Christ would have been to invite intense persecution BECAUSE the culture of the day would have seen it as a treasonable act. Hence, the nativity was NOT openly celebrated for several hundred years.

Yet, the church fathers in the fourth century, when Christianity became legal, openly acknowledged that Christmas HAD BEEN recognized and celebrated for a very long time-and that December 25 was widely held to be the Lord’s birthday (and thanks to Valerie Jacobson for doing the research on these).

In other words, the Christians were all celebrating Christmas in secret because they did not want to be turned in by their pagan neighbors. The problem with Abshire’s use of this argument (which is a classic case of an argument from silence) is that earlier he argues that the festival of

the “Birth of the Unconquered Sun” was not made a big deal until Emperor Aurelian, sometime after A.D. 270. This late date is supplied as evidence that the Christians were not influenced by Saturnalia but rather Saturnalia was influenced by Christmas. But as Abshire admits, if the Christians were celebrating Christmas, they were doing it in secret. Thus, we see that his paper suffers from a blatant internal contradiction. On the one hand, Saturnalia celebration came late (c. 270) and thus was supposedly Christian-influenced; but, on the other hand, we do not find Christmas as a holy day until around 354 long after the persecution ends. Therefore, according to Abshire’s own paper, the various customs associated with Saturnalia could not have been borrowed from the Christians.

Third, it is not necessary to assume that the pagan superstitions involved in Christmas derived solely from the Saturnalia. The Roman Empire consisted of many nations, tribes and cultures. It was an essentially pluralistic Empire and was, to a degree, a melting pot of philosophical and religious ideas and practices. The winter solstice was a sacred time among the Druid Celts since at least 2500 B.C.. (At this time the Scandinavians worshiped Odin. Among the northern tribes of Europe, at the winter solstice the festival of Yul was held.) “The holly, the mistletoe, the Yule log, and the vassail bowl are relics of pre-Christian times” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* [1961], 6:623). The church historian Philip Schaff writes,

The Christmas festival was probably the Christian transformation or regeneration of a series of kindred heathen festivals—Saturnalia, Sigillaria, Juvenalia, and Brumalia—which were kept in Rome in the month of December, in commemoration of the golden age of universal freedom and equality, and in honor of the unconquered sun, and which were great holidays, especially for slaves and children. This connection accounts for many customs of the Christmas season, like the giving of presents to the children and to the poor, the lighting of wax tapers, perhaps also the erection of Christmas trees, and gives them a Christian import; while it also betrays the origin of the many excesses in which the unbelieving world indulges at this season, in wanton perversion of the true Christmas mirth, but which, of course, no more forbid right use, than the abuses of the Bible or of any other gift of God. Had the Christmas festival arisen in the period of the persecution, its derivation from these pagan festivals would be refuted by the then reigning abhorrence of everything heathen; but in the Nicene age this rigidness of opposition between the church and the world was in a great measure softened by the general conversion of the heathen.²

Fourth, even if we accept Abshire’s speculations; even if we believe that Christmas was celebrated very early and the pagans liked what they saw and adopted a number of Christmas customs, this does not prove that Christmas is biblical or authorized by the word of God. Even if we accept the idea that churches had adopted an annual celebration of Christ’s birth as early as the second century and even if we fully accept the idea that churches very early really believed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem on December 25, all of this argumentation is still only based on evidence *outside of the Bible*. All of this raises some crucial questions. Where did they get the

² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [1910]), 3:398.

date and where did they get the *idea* to have an *annual religious holy day*? I raise these questions because Abshire claims to believe in the regulative principle of worship. We know for *certain* that they did not get the date from the word of God because we are *not* told when Jesus was born. (In fact, given the climate of Palestine, it is very unlikely that our Lord was born in December. According to the writers of the Talmud, who were much more familiar with Jewish practices at that time than we are, “the flocks in Palestine were brought in at the beginning of November, and not driven to pasture again till toward March” [Schaff, 3:395].) Moreover, if God wanted us to have an annual celebration of Jesus’ birth on December 25, then would He not have told us the *exact date* of His birth? The whole point of the regulative principle is that we do not have the authority to simply make things up or follow human traditions when it comes to religious ordinances or holy days. In addition, has God revealed to us in His word when He wants us to celebrate the birth of Christ and our Lord’s *whole work of redemption*? Indeed He has. The Sabbath day, which in the New Covenant era is on the first day of the week, is the only authorized holy day. (We will deal with Abshire’s attempts to circumvent the regulative principle a little later.) James Bannerman’s comments on this topic are excellent:

In keeping the last day of the week as a day of religious observance, the Jews, by the very act, expressed their religious acknowledgment of God, who had appointed it, and did an act of worship to Him as its author, in the character of the one Creator who made the heavens and the earth. In keeping the first day of the week, Christians, by the very act, recognize Christ as the author of it, and do an act of religious homage to Him as the one Redeemer, who on that day rose from the dead, and secured the salvation of His people.... And who does not see, that upon the very same principle the observance of the holidays appointed by the Church, as ordinary and stated parts of Divine worship, is an expression of religious homage to man, who is the author of the appointment, –an unlawful acknowledgment of human or ecclesiastical authority in an act of worship. In keeping, after a religious sort, a day that has no authority but man’s, we are paying a religious homage to that authority; we are bowing down, in the very act of our observance of the day as part of worship, not to Christ, who has not appointed it, but to the Church, which has. We are keeping the season holy, not to God, but to man.³

The regulative principle of worship (properly understood) alone renders all of Abshire’s arguments from silence, historical speculations and unwarranted conclusions irrelevant. It is not in the Bible; therefore, we should not be doing it.

Fifth, a careful examination of early church history does not support Abshire’s historical scenario. Listen to the notable second century Christian apologist Tertullian. Note that he denigrates the idea of yearly festivals and praises the weekly Lord’s day:

The Holy Spirit upbraids the Jew with their holy-days. “Your Sabbaths, and new moons, and ceremonies,” says He, “My soul hateth.” By us, to whom Sabbaths [i.e., the Jewish sabbaths] are strange, and the new moons and festivals formerly beloved by God, the Saturnalia [i.e.,

³ James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1960 [1869]), 1:416.

Yule] and New-year's and Midwinter's festivals and Matronalia are frequented—presents come and go—New-year's gifts—games join their noise—banquets join their din! Oh, better fidelity of the nations to their own sect, which claims no solemnity of the Christians for itself! Not the Lord's day, not Pentecost, even if they had known them, would they have shared with us; for they would fear lest they should seem to be Christians. We are not apprehensive lest we seem to be heathens! If any indulgence is to be granted to the flesh, you have it. I will not say your own days, but more too; for to the heathens each festive day occurs but once annually: you have a festive day every eighth day [i.e., the Lord's day] (*De Idololatria*).

Does this statement sounds like Tertullian was celebrating special annual Christian holy days such as Christmas?

We know that Christmas was not celebrated by Christ or the apostles. The evidence that it was not celebrated in the first two centuries is quite strong. As late as A.D. 245 the famous church theologian Origen (Homily 8 on Leviticus) repudiated the idea of keeping the birthday of Christ, “as if he were a King Pharaoh.” The consensus of reputable church historians, whether Reformed, Lutheran, Episcopal, Roman Catholic and even secular, is that while Christmas did not originate overnight, it is still a relatively late institution. For example Philip Schaff writes,

Notwithstanding this deep significance and wide popularity, the festival of the birth of the Lord is of comparatively late institution.... The feast of Epiphany had spread from the East to the West. The feast of Christmas took the opposite course. We find it first in Rome, in the time of the bishop Liberius, who on the twenty-fifth of December, 360, consecrated Marcella, the sister of St. Ambrose, nun or bride of Christ, and addressed her with the words: “Thou seest what multitudes are come to the birth-festival of thy bridegroom.” [Ambrose, *De virgin* ii. 1.] This passage implies that the festival was already existing and familiar. Christmas was introduced in Antioch about the year 380; in Alexandria, where the feast of the Epiphany was celebrated as the nativity of Christ, not till about 430. Chrysostom, who delivered the Christmas homily in Antioch on the 25th of December, 386, already calls it, notwithstanding its recent introduction (some ten years before), the fundamental feast, or the root, from which all other Christian festivals grow forth.⁴

During the 5th century, Christmas became an official Roman Catholic holy day. In A.D. 534, Christmas was recognized as an official holy day by the Roman state. An expert in ancient church worship concurs. Herman Wegman writes,

The oldest mention of Christmas (December 25) as a Christian feast is found in the west at Rome in the *Chronography* of 354, based on a calendar that goes back to about 336. Thus, Christmas may have been known in Rome by 330 or earlier. There may have been some connection with the building of St. Peter's on the Vatican hill where in one of the tombs, a mosaic of Christ as the *sol iustitiae* (sun of righteousness) has been discovered. The texts of Christmas often refer to Christ the light of the world and the sun of righteousness. In any case, it

⁴ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989 [1910]), 3:395-396.

is practically certain that Christmas in Rome originated as a Christian appendage to (or perhaps replacement of) the pagan *Natalis Invicti*, the festival of the unconquered sun at the winter solstice. The syncretistic ideas of the emperor Constantine may also have been related to this development.... It appears that the festival of Christmas was adopted in the east from Rome, probably in the last quarter of the fourth century in Constantinople and in the middle of the fifth century in Egypt.⁵

What historical evidence does Abshire appealed to as proof that Christmas has no origins in paganism? He quotes from Augustine. Abshire writes,

Augustine (354-430) of Hippo, *On the Psalms*, Psalm 133 “For from Christ comes the dew. No light is set on a high place, save Christ. How is He set on high? First on the cross, afterwards in heaven. Set on high on the cross when He was humbled; humbled, but His humiliation could not but be high. The ministry of man grew less and less, as was signified in John; the ministry of God in our Lord Jesus Christ increased, as was shown at their birth. The former was born, as the tradition of the Church shows, on the 24th of June, when the days begin to shorten. The Lord was born on the 25th December, when the days begin to lengthen”

Augustine also specifically titled one of his points of Sermon 22, “The Festival Has Nothing to Do with the Sun-worship, as Some Maintain.” Thus in the fourth century, Augustine both refuted that Christmas had its origins in Saturnalia while also clearly attributing the Lord’s birth to December 25th as the “tradition of the church.” Why December 25? Well, the argument is too long and complex to go into here except to say that it had to do with trying to reconcile Roman and Jewish calendars; a headache for everyone involved. Furthermore, Christians at the time had certain theological presuppositions that governed how they actually dated certain events; they assumed a relationship between the death of the Lord Jesus and when He would have been born; and by carefully calculating the dates of certain “known” events, they arrived at December 25th as the day of His birth. Whether their calculations were based on a sound basis is really immaterial; the point is that the Lord’s birth was NOT celebrated just because it coincided with a Roman pagan festival. Their calculations might have been wrong, but they were not blindly being subverted by pagan influences or accommodation to cultural norms.

There are a number of reasons why this quote proves little to nothing. First, it is of such a late date that it really does not tell much of anything except what the church believed in the late fourth to early fifth century. Augustine was not converted until his late thirties and did not begin his amazing career as a theologian immediately. So we have a source from, at best, the late fourth century when churchmen were defending prayer to saints, the veneration of Mary, bowing to icons and statues, sacramentalism and defective views of justification. While on soteriology Augustine was a champion of grace, on the church and sacraments he has all the seeds of Romanism.

Second, it is noteworthy that people were objecting to Christmas in Augustine’s time on the basis that it originated with sun worship (i.e. Saturnalia). Who was objecting to Christmas on

⁵ Herman Wegman, *Christian Worship in East and West: A Study Guide to Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 103.

this basis in the fourth or fifth century? It is highly unlikely that the heathen were objecting to Christmas on that basis. It is probable that some believers were uncomfortable with the origins of Christmas or at least had a problem with the date. Augustine, being a bishop and a defender of the Catholic church, was simply defending the status quo.

Third, Abshire acknowledges that the date for Jesus's birth was arrived at by "theological presuppositions" and even admits that our Lord was probably not born on December 25. This raises the question that Christians who celebrate Christmas generally ignore. Do we glorify God our Savior by choosing a time to celebrate His birth date that is almost certainly false? No, we do not. (Remember Luke 2:8 says that, when Jesus was born, the shepherds were abiding in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. This means that the shepherds would actually sleep among the sheep to make sure they were not eaten by animals. The nighttime temperatures of Bethlehem in late December averages between around 38°F to 45°F. December also falls within Judea's rainy season. It is exceptionally unlikely that shepherds *without* good tents and sleeping bags, with only a cloak and perhaps an extra blanket or two, would be out at that time of year. [We have already noted that the Talmud, completed around A.D. 200, says the flocks are brought in before December.])

We do not exalt Christ and help the cause of the gospel by cooperating with and perpetuating a myth. It does not matter whether the day comes from heathenism (although all the evidence points in that direction) or the post-apostolic church arrived at the date because of some absurd, contrived, idiotic presuppositions. Our job as Christians is to believe the truth and teach it to others. Christianity is the religion of truth. God cannot lie. All truth and knowledge ultimately come from God. Jesus Christ is "the way, *the truth*, and the life" (John 14:6). The Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of truth" (John 16:13). The Gospel is called "the word of truth" (Eph. 1:13). God commands, "Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour" (Ex. 20:16). Paul tells us to be "speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), to put away lying and speak the truth to our neighbor in order not to grieve the Holy Spirit (Eph. 4:25, 30). Jesus Christ tells us that "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in *truth*" (John 4:24). Christians are to be light and salt to the world (Matt. 5:13, 16). They are to be a witness before the world by speaking the truth and living the truth. Is celebrating Christmas compatible with our responsibility to speak and live the truth before the world? No, because Christmas is a lie.

When I have witnessed to intellectuals, I have actually had men say to me, "Why should I believe in the resurrection of Christ? It is simply another Christian myth like Christmas, Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny." When we cooperate with and perpetuate something that is not true or, at best is very likely not true, whether it is pagan or simply an old church tradition made up out of absurd reasonings and wishful thinking, we *do not promote* the kingdom of God but a form of humanism. It is not rooted in Scripture but human autonomy.

I would like to ask Brian Abshire, how can something which is not true or, at best is very likely not true, edify the church or sanctify believers? Jesus said, "Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth" (Jn. 17:17). Paul said that we must "worship God in the Spirit...and have no

confidence in the flesh” (Phil. 3:3). He taught that the doctrines and commandments of men do not edify and are really in accord with the basic principles of this world (cf. Col. 2:8, 16). Paul warned, “These things indeed have an appearance of wisdom in *self-imposed religion, false humility*, and neglect of the body, but are of no value against the indulgence of the flesh” (Col. 2:23). The idea that the church can benefit from a human tradition is the path to Roman Catholicism. G.I. Williamson notes,

What Jesus desires of us is not the observance of things He did not command, but the things He did command. “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19, 20). This is what the Apostles did. They taught the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27). It did not include Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter, because they were not part of the things commanded by Christ. So, the one who understands “the true meaning of Christmas” (or Good Friday, or Easter) is precisely the one who realizes that they are human inventions. And in order to honor Christ as the only king and head of the church, *such a person will not 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.⁶

Abshire continues his article with more historical speculation designed to justify human traditions. He writes,

Despite this, many debunkers insist that when the gospel penetrated Northern Europe, many of THEIR winter solstice customs founded their way into Christmas celebrations, thus unwittingly introducing paganism into the church. Again, this is not quite so easy to determine as some have assumed. Granted, there was a tradition of a religious observance of Christmas AND a cultural custom of feasting and merry making that had long been a part of European culture, but how much of the actual customs and traditions actually derived from pagan sources just cannot be determined. Did the pagans influence Christians or did Christians influence the pagans? Which came first?

This is a rather bizarre argument that does not make any sense. Let’s see, the mistletoe, holly berries, wax tapers, the yule log, the wassail bowl, according to reputable secular historians, were all part of pagan celebrations associated with the winter solstice *before* Christianity came upon the scene. But let’s ignore what the historians and scholars have to say and simply ask the question: Did these customs, come from the word of God or did they originate in pagan culture? While the exact origins of these customs are generally lost in unrecorded history, one thing is absolutely certain: *They have nothing to do with the Bible*. They are not commanded. There are no good inferences for them and there are no historical examples in the word of God to prove them. This means they are not Christian in origin unless we define *a religious custom made up out of thin air* as Christian, which of course is human autonomy not theonomy, humanism not

⁶ G. I. Williamson, *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (Havertown: New Covenant Publication Society, n.d.), 9-10.

scripturalism and historically is one of the foundations of Romanism. On this issue, Abshire is an inconsistent theonomist.

Next, Abshire appeals to St. Boniface:

For example, St. Boniface is usually credited with the idea of “Christmas trees” as he cut down Druid groves and secured the decorated trees in Christian homes to prevent pagans from worshipping them. So, does the “custom” of having Christmas trees come from pagan, Druid tree worship, or is it a Christian custom? Or is there even another explanation altogether?

This kind of argumentation is also problematic for two reasons. First, it is obviously mythological. The Druid groves were not cute little pine trees that fit into a peasant’s living quarters. They were usually giant oaks or trees that were highly impressive. Second, as we have repeatedly noted, something made up out of thin air—a human tradition—is, strictly speaking, not a Christian custom. A genuine Christian custom is something based on the Bible, not human tradition. The fact that Christians simply do something does not make it Christian. The Jews of the old covenant offered their children to Molech and visited temple prostitutes. These customs were not according to the biblical worldview.

Abshire’s final argument based on history is essentially that almost all of what is part of modern American Christmas originated in the nineteenth century anyway and thus cannot possibly be pagan in origin. He writes,

Most people assume that our current Christmas customs come down from pagan history, passed down from generation to generation with their origins being lost in the mist of times (until the debunkers write articles exposing the pagan origins of Christmas). However, what few Christians seem to appreciate is that almost ALL of our modern day Christmas traditions only came into existence in the 19th century when Queen Victoria brought her new German husband, Albert, to England. Albert introduced Christmas trees to English and American homes.

While there is no question that many things associated with modern American Christmas were made up by businessmen and magazine writers, there are still some legitimate biblical questions about Christmas that we need to answer. How many pagan customs, do you think, will God allow Christians to associate with the sinless Son of God? Does He accept a little heathenism? In addition, does God have a problem with the many things that are associated with the birth of Jesus that were made up by magazine writers, editors, town councils and capitalists regarding Christmas to make money or to be more European or to promote the local economy, etc.? Abshire seems to think that, if one can cast some doubt on connections to ancient paganism, that Christmas is okay. But what about modern heathenism? Why is the mixing of a bunch of syrupy, modern mythology with the birth of Christ to make some cash acceptable? I thought theonomy taught that we are to take everything captive for Christ; that God’s law-word is to transform culture. Is not the widespread acceptance of Christmas by Reformed believers, with its paganism,

Romanism and rank consumerism, following our unbelieving culture? Should we not rather encourage Sabbath-keeping?

Christians must not only put away the monuments of past idolatry but also everything associated with present idolatry. Christmas is the most important holy day in Roman Catholicism. The name Christmas comes from Romanism: Christ-mass, or the mass of Christ. The name Christmas unites the name or title of our glorious God and Savior with the idolatrous, blasphemous mass of popedom. Christ-mass is a mixture of pagan idolatry and popish invention.

The Roman Catholic Church hates the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Roman church uses human inventions, such as Christmas, to keep millions of people in darkness. The fact that millions of Bible-believing Protestants are observing a Roman Catholic holy day, which has not been commanded anywhere in God's Word, reveals the sad state of modern evangelicalism. "We cannot conform, communicate, and symbolize with the idolatrous Papists, in the use of the same, without making ourselves idolaters by participation."⁷ Our attitude should be that of *the Protestant Reformer Bucer* who said, "I would to God that every holy day whatsoever besides the Lord's day were abolished. That zeal which brought them first in, was without all warrant of the Word, and merely followed corrupt reason, forsooth to drive out the holy days of the pagans, as one nail drives out another. Those holy days have been so tainted with superstitions that I wonder we tremble not at their very names."⁸

In Abshire's next argument we essentially get the idea that, back in the Old Days, Christmas was wrong but now things are different. It is no big deal. He writes,

So if Christmas is so innocent, why were the Puritans and Presbyterians in the 17th century so opposed to its celebration? We must never forget that we are all subject to historical conditioning; that the events we see around us can and do have a profound effect on our perceptions and ideas. For the English Reformers, Christmas was not to be celebrated PRIMARILY because they were trying to purify the worship of God from all the man-made rules and regulations that had grown up under the Roman church. Remember, the prime cause of division between Protestants and Catholics was the issue of authority. Rome insisted that authority was vested in the church and therefore could change doctrine and binds men's consciences at will. The Reformers insisted that final authority rested in the Word of God.

Therefore in the 16th and 17th century, men literally fought and died over this issue of authority. The Roman church had created all sorts of feasts and festivals demanding that Christians celebrate them or suffer temporal and eternal sanctions. The Reformers insisted that only God, through His Word had proper authority. Christmas, Easter and other feasts, fasts and festivals of the church calendar were infringements of the doctrine of the liberty of conscience. *Therefore, they denied that Christmas SHOULD be celebrated because there was no specific biblical warrant for doing so.* (emphasis added)

⁷ George Gillespie, *English Popish Ceremonies*, (1637), 146.

⁸ Martin Bucer, quoted in William Ames, *A Fresh Suit against Human Ceremonies in God's Worship*, (n.p., 1633), 360.

However, there was also another reason for the Puritan hatred of Christmas; Christmas as a feast, was well known for being a time of drunkenness and a debauchery, with the church often turning a blind eye. Even in the 19th century, “Christmas Carolers” or the “Here we go a wassailing gang” was not the innocent custom we have today. Gangs of rowdy young men were known to go house to house singing songs and demanding free drinks; sometimes roughing up those who refuse to “celebrate” the custom. Thus the Puritans and Presbyterians wanted to stamp out an ungodly practice that was associated with the worst sorts of behavior. It is just folly to look at our modern celebration of Christmas and assume that THIS was what the English Reformers were so concerned about. I doubt if there is an American evangelical alive today whose conscience is bound that if he does not celebrate Christmas, God will be displeased with him and he might lose his salvation. And the last time Christmas carolers came to my door, hardly any of them threatened to burn down my house if I refused to give them free booze!

Thanks to the sentimentality of the Victorians, Christmas was made into a family-oriented holiday, focusing on children. Because they were a religious people (and revivalism had deeply stamped all evangelical Christianity with a strong emotive cast by the end of the century) the Victorians made a clear connection between the birth of Christ and the strong emotional bonds towards their own families. Christmas thus was no longer an adult festival, but a family one.

Frankly, if I had lived in the 17th century I would have had no problem preaching against Christmas because at that time, it WAS a hindrance to sanctification. But that is NOT the case today; history has moved on and so should we. Granted, there is much today to criticize in the way that even Christians celebrate Christmas; for example, going into credit card debt to buy unneeded presents is pretty dumb. Materialism is of course a prevalent sin today and we often equate happiness with possessions. Christmas celebrations COULD become sinful if people spent money they did not have, or become absorbed with giving and receiving presents. Some people might find that they tend to get drunk at Christmas parties, or kiss other men’s wives under mistletoe; but then the problem, quite frankly is NOT Christmas, but a lack of basic Christian character.

There is a lot of stuff here, so we will take it these by piece. Note first that, contrary to Abshire’s shift to abuses of Christmas as a reason it was wrong, the central issue then, as today, is still biblical authority. Abshire admits, “They denied that Christmas SHOULD be celebrated because there was no specific biblical warrant for doing so.” This is the issue that Abshire cannot avoid and does not adequately answer. The Westminster Standards say, “Festival days, vulgarly called holy-days, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued.”

After making his statement about authority (i.e. whether something religious can be based on the human tradition or must be based on Scripture alone, the RPW), Abshire has three paragraphs that essentially argue that the problem at that time was not Christmas itself but rather was abuses of Christmas. Christmas was a time of drunkenness and debauchery; but, thanks to the sentimental Victorians, it is now a wonderful family day. It is no longer an “adult festival, but a family one.”

The problem with this argument is that it simply is false. If you go back and read Gillespie, Rutherford, William Ames, David Calderwood, Alexander Henderson, Edward Calamy, the Westminster Assembly and the other Puritans or early Presbyterians, you will see that the foundational issue, the central argument, the main point, is always *sola Scriptura*. Christmas is not authorized in the word of God for public worship, family worship or private worship. It is not authorized as a day of religious commemoration or as an adult or family day festival. If you are Presbyterian or Reformed, that is all you should need to hear.

The abuse of Christmas argument is found in some Puritan writers as a minor subsidiary argument. “By the way, look at how this day has been abused.” Arguments based on abuse are not the main argument because it is not a good argument. Anything can be abused: food, drink, marriage, church, sex, baseball. Do we banish marriage because most marriages in America are bad? Of course not! Abshire has subtly shifted the argument away from *sola Scriptura* or the regulative principle to a mediocre, unsound argument based on abuse. He has stacked the deck so that he can win the argument. The only problem is that the vast majority of Puritans did not play the hand that he implies they did.

We could also add that Abshire’s supposition that modern Christmas is acceptable to God is also completely false. Why would God be honored or glorified by something that He did not command or authorize? How would God be honored or glorified by something that is based on a lie? How would God be honored and glorified by something that professing Christians hold in common with sodomites, atheists, communists, Hollywood, etc.? “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4). “Do not love the world, or the things in the world” (1 Jn. 2:15).

Who leads whom? Is not the church of the Lord Jesus Christ supposed to be an example to the world? Is it not to be salt and light to the nations? Is it proper for the church to follow the pagan world-system? Christmas did not originate in the Bible or the apostolic church; it is pagan to its very core. The day, the tree, the exchanging of gifts, the mistletoe, and the holly berries all originated in the idolatrous pagan festivities surrounding the winter solstice. The compromised, apostatizing Roman church took what was pagan and attempted to Christianize it. Covenant-breaking, Christ-hating, idol-worshipping, pagan unbelievers love Christmas. Why? Because Christmas is not biblical! Christmas is not of God. It is a lie, and Satan, their master, is the father of lies. Atheists, homosexuals, feminists, wicked politicians, murderers, child molesters and idolaters all love Christmas. If Christmas were biblical, and if Christmas were commanded to be observed in the Bible, would the world love it so? Absolutely not! The world would hate Christmas. “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:14). Does the world love the Lord’s day, the Christian Sabbath? Of course not! The world hates it. Does the world love and obey the resurrected King of kings and Lord of lords? No! The world hates Christ. The world does love a plastic or clay baby in a manger. A plastic baby is not very threatening. However, Christ is no longer a baby. He is the glorified King who sits at the right

hand of the Father. “Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know we Him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16).

The Bible teaches that “the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Cor. 3:19). “Thus says the LORD: Do not learn the way of the Gentiles...for the customs of the peoples are futile” (Jer. 10: 2-3). The apostle Paul has in mind a much broader application than just marriage when he says, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? *Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?* And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?... Therefore come out from among them, and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you” (2 Cor. 6:14-17). When the church has something relating to worship and religion in common with the unbelieving pagan world, the church, in that area, is bound together with unbelievers. The church has no business celebrating a pagan holiday with the pagan world. What hypocrisy! What wickedness!

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[HOME PAGE](#)