

Christmas is less than 15 weeks away. There are many things that will happen between now and December 25. Some will be stressful, and some will be joyful. But I suspect that one of the things we'll hear about between now and then is the so-called "War on Christmas." I don't want to get into our 21<sup>st</sup> century controversies about whether our culture is Christmas-friendly or not—let's bracket that off and leave it to one side. Instead I want to talk about a time when there was a real war on Christmas.

400 years ago, Christmas was very much under attack, and it was successfully banned at various times. And the opposition to Christmas 400 years ago did not come from secularists or atheists. It came from fellow Christians.

In the 1600's the Christian movement of Puritanism was on the rise. And the Puritans were notoriously anti-Christmas. Now to be fair, Christmas celebrations in the 1600's were very different from our current celebrations. Our modern conceptions of Christmas as more of a family holiday are only about 170 years old. 400 years ago Christmas used to be a riotous affair characterized by lewd behavior and copious consumption of alcohol. The closest 21<sup>st</sup> century parallels would be Mardi Gras in New Orleans or Spring Break on South Padre Island.

But the Puritans also opposed Christmas for other reasons too. The word Christmas doesn't appear in the Bible, they said, which is true. And they said that there is no command in the Bible to set aside one day each year to celebrate Jesus' birth. This is also true. And so they refused to celebrate Christmas. And in those places and during those periods that the Puritans were in political control, they banned Christmas outright.

They also destroyed church stained-glass windows as examples of idolatry. And they banned musical instruments in church and took an axe to many fine church organs. The Puritans were not a fun bunch.

Which reminds me of the old joke:

Q. Why was the United States settled by Puritans while Australia was settled by convicts?

A. Australia got first choice.

So Christmas was controversial for some Christians. There were even vestiges of this in our living memory. Some of the old timers at St. Paul's remember when Episcopalians and Roman Catholics and Lutherans would be the only churches in Lubbock to have Christmas services.

And I remember debates with fundamentalist friends in junior high and high school who maintained, like the Puritans, that any celebration of Christmas was non-Biblical.

One of the arguments I would use in those debates was our Epistle lesson for today, from the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. Paul is trying to deal with divisions between different groups of Christians.

There were some in the early church who wanted to observe Jewish holidays and Sabbaths, and others that say that's non-Christian. There were some who ate a vegetarian diet in order to avoid inadvertently eating any meat that had been offered as a sacrifice to a pagan god in a pagan temple.

And in response to these divisions, Paul makes a remarkable argument. He says, "Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike. Let all be fully convinced in their own minds. Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. Also, those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God."<sup>1</sup>

So, for Paul it all comes down to intent. If you make a conscientious decision to observe special feast days in God's honor, you're doing the right thing. Or if you make a conscientious decision not to observe such special days, as long as you're doing it to honor God, you're also doing the right thing. And if you want to observe certain dietary restrictions for religious reasons and feast or fast or abstain from certain foods at certain times, as long as you're doing it to honor God, you're doing the right thing.

Paul sums it up by saying, "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall."<sup>2</sup>

So, if some Christians in Lubbock only want to praise God by singing without instruments in their worship, while we use instruments, that's fine, as long as we're all trying to honor God. And if some traditions have a complex calendar of observances like we do, while others don't, we don't need to criticize them, and they don't need to criticize us. As long as we're trying to honor God with these practices, that's the most important thing. It's not for any of us to pass judgment on fellow Christians with differing worship practices.

But Paul also says that we all need to "be fully convinced in (our) own minds" as to why we're doing the things we do. In other words, we need to be intentional about what we're doing and have good reasons for doing it.

Take the calendar for instance. I find a cycle of observing various festival days throughout the church year to be very helpful. Yes, every time I say the creed, I proclaim that I believe that Jesus Christ came down from heaven, and by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and became man, became truly human. I say that every week. But it's also helpful to set aside a time to really focus in on the Incarnation, and to celebrate it specifically, which is one of the reasons I value Christmas so much.

And I have to add parenthetically that in a few months I'm not going to worry about whether store clerks are wishing me "Happy Holidays" or "Merry Christmas." Christmas is a holiday, a holy day that I'm celebrating, and the greeting they choose to give me doesn't change my celebration of Jesus' birth one iota.

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<sup>1</sup> Rom 14:5-6

<sup>2</sup> Rom 14:4

The important thing is keeping my motivations straight. It's not for me to judge the decisions made by others.

I simply have to make sure that I'm trying to honor the Lord. That's what really matters.