



Paganism

Where Should Christians Draw the Line?

Paganism is a controversial subject. Can we use pagan customs in the church of God? We already do. Simply because something has a pagan origin does not mean that it is sinful to use it, even for a religious use.

Wedding rings were and are a pagan custom, and there is no biblical command for them, but we use them in church-sanctioned ceremonies. Wedding ceremonies themselves were also a pagan custom, and are not commanded in Scripture.

Funerals include pagan customs, too, based on erroneous ideas about the afterlife. Scripture says nothing about putting flowers on graves, etc. Egyptian mythology said that the dead should be embalmed, and Joseph participated in this custom ([Gen. 50:2-3](#)) despite its pagan origin.

Pagans created statues — of animals and people, both life-size and miniatures. They had statues in their flower gardens and statues in their homes. But statues have lost their “pagan” connotations because people do not believe in such gods and goddesses anymore.

Money has pagan designs on it. Some U.S. coins used to have the goddess “Liberty” on them. Pagans assigned days of the week to different gods, and we still use these names.

So the question arises, How careful must we be in weeding paganism out of our lives? Where do we draw the line? The answer is, different Christians draw the line in different places. We need to allow some diversity on these issues.

Some conservative churches used to forbid wedding rings. Some forbid Christmas and Easter. They are careful to do what God says, and if God tells them to avoid paganism, then they carefully do it. Some are so careful that they err on the side of forbidding too much — but they err. They make commands about things that God doesn’t command. In their desire to avoid one sin, they commit another.

Example of the Corinthians

In the first-century Church, Gentile Christians were told to avoid meat that had been sacrificed to pagan idols ([Acts 15:29](#)). However, Paul told the Corinthians that they could eat meat sold in the public market even though that meat may have been sacrificed to an idol ([1 Cor. 10:25](#)). He told them not to eat in the pagan temple. In other words, he told them to avoid blatant paganism, but they did not have to superstitiously avoid everything that paganism might have touched at some time in the past.



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In Corinth, some Christians were more careful than others, and some more liberal than others. Paul told them they could eat the meat, but he also told them to be cautious about causing offense (verses 32-33). However, love does not mean that we all have to abide by the strictest person's conscience. No matter how many people think we ought to be circumcised and to keep the law of Moses, we don't have to (Acts 15). Even if some Christians think we should be vegetarians (and some do), we don't have to abide by their conscience ([Rom. 14:1-8](#)). Paul says that we have freedom, but we are to use our freedom in a sensitive way.

Now let us imagine a first-century potluck in the Corinthian church. Everyone has brought their food and everyone has eaten a little bit of everything. Suddenly some overly zealous convert, anxious to avoid the paganism he recently came out of, starts asking questions about the meat. The Smith family, he finds out, bought their beef from Marcus Agorus, and Marcus always has his cows killed at the temple of Zeus. The casserole has been filled with pagan-tainted meat, and everybody has eaten some of it!

What should the zealous convert do with this information? Should he announce it throughout the congregation, leading to an ever-more-diligent search for pagan-tainted foods? Of course not. The sensible (and the Christian) thing to do would be to keep quiet — but overly zealous converts sometimes aren't sensible. Their zeal overcomes good sense, and although they think they are acting in love, they are actually causing an unnecessary and unhelpful disturbance with their "knowledge." That's what happens today when people preach that wedding rings are pagan.

It is possible to be too zealous in avoiding things that have connections with paganism. Shouting about idol-tainted meat doesn't do anything to strengthen anyone's faith in Christ. All it would do is cause doubts and irritations. That is basically what some people do in their vociferous condemnations of Christmas. People today generally learn about Christmas as a Christian custom, not as a pagan custom. It's like they saw the meat in the market and there was a sign saying "Good for Christians." So they bought it, and then someone comes along and tells them it was tainted.

Some people don't think that the example of meat can apply to holidays; some people do. They draw their lines in different places. People generally consider themselves as strong and others as weak, but how are the weak and the strong to get along with each other? Not by enforcing conformity, but by allowing some diversity.

Consider the case of Christians in Korea, for example. December 25 was not a pagan holiday there. But Christians there now observe December 25. Why? Because missionaries introduced the holiday. For them, it has a Christian origin, not a pagan one. Should the scrupulous Christians go tell them that December 25 was once sacrificed to an idol and should therefore be avoided? That approach creates doubts, not dedication. It does not edify or encourage.

Scriptures

Two scriptures have often been used to argue against Christmas customs. Jeremiah 10 has nothing to do with Christmas trees. That custom originated in northern Europe and had nothing to do with Jeremiah centuries earlier. [Deut. 12:30](#) has also been appealed to, but the verse



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doesn't forbid everything the pagans did. God does not object to *all* worship practices of the pagans (such as prayer, sacrifices and temples), but only the abominations that they did in worship.

Basically, if it's wrong, it's wrong on any day of the year. That's the kind of customs we need to beware. But if a custom is harmless in July (decorating the house with colored lights, for example), then we needn't condemn it in December. We can't let centuries-dead pagans dictate what we can or can't do. They have no authority over our calendar.

Eastern Orthodox Christians observe January 6 as a festival for the birth of Christ. They were not influenced by Rome or Saturnalia. Does anyone feel a compulsion to dig into history looking for something bad about this day so it can be disqualified? Does anyone feel a compulsion to ask whether the date was once sacrificed to an idol? I hope not.

Let's summarize:

- It is not wrong to rejoice at the birth of Jesus.
- It is not wrong to do this every year.
- It is not wrong to add a religious festival.
- The date of Dec. 25 isn't necessarily pagan.

Even if the date is pagan, it isn't automatically wrong to use things that used to be pagan, such as wedding rings, funeral customs, statues, and the names of days. If the date is permissible and church services are permissible, but certain customs are not, then people ought to specify *which* customs are ungodly rather than just condemning everything associated with the date. If a fat man in a red suit is permissible, but fables about him are not, then we need to identify the sin without condemning the harmless. Different Christians will draw the lines in different places, and we need to get along with each other.

Conclusion

Paganism is an emotion-laden subject. Conservative Christians have a history of being dogmatic, legalistic, and of misusing the Scriptures when we argue our point. With that history, it is impossible to discuss this subject without somebody disagreeing. Each person thinks himself to be properly balanced — but each person's balance point is different. Equally sincere people draw lines in different places. What then are we to do?

Should the church legislate about which practices are OK and which are not? That is not our commission. We are not in the Talmud business. Each Christian should draw his or her own lines, and be tolerant of those who draw different lines. Do not judge your brother or sister, Paul says ([Romans 14:5-13](#)). That is one of the most difficult commandments in the Bible!



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No one has to participate in Christmas or Easter, but we should not condemn those who do. Some will do it one way and some will do it another. Whether you participate or whether you abstain, do it all to the Lord, and let him be the judge. This is the Christian approach to the cultural situation today.

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