

IS IT A SIN TO OBSERVE BIRTHDAYS?

To many a churchgoing, professing Christian, the question above appears ludicrous. To suggest that something so innocent appearing as birthday observance is sinful is like attacking America, Mom and apple pie! Yet there are those who insist there are Bible grounds for avoiding parties, gift-giving, cakes and candies and singing "Happy Birthday." "Impossible!" you might say. But read on. You may be surprised!

By Garner Ted Armstrong

Happy birthday to you! Happy birthday to you." How many times have you heard it? The lilting little ditty that is sung as a congratulatory song on the occasion of the anniversary of one's birth is heard continually in restaurants as serving personnel gather around a table carrying a small cake with candles, briefly interrupt everyone else's meal and depart amid a smattering of applause

Who has not seen the shy, smiling face of a child presented with a single scoop of ice cream and a lighted candle light up with barely suppressed glee when his parents wish him a happy birthday in a restaurant?

But where did the custom originate?

Are its roots buried in pagan antiquity? Is it another deception Of SATAN, who seeks to delude sincere people into believing in and accepting the practices of this world which block out of their minds the customs and practices enjoined by the Creator God in the Bible?

The Earliest Birthdays

Have you ever researched the subject of "birthdays"? Few have. If you do, be prepared for a surprise. Very little is available outside of Bible encyclopedias!

Naturally, customs vary widely from culture to culture. Birthdays are not celebrated in the same way universally. The Bible history books and encyclopedias invariably refer you to the most ancient birthday celebration of which there is mention, that of one of the Pharaohs of Egypt, during Joseph's time.

The account is found in Genesis the 40th chapter.

Two of Pharaoh's personal servants had incurred his wrath in some way—both had been thrown in prison, where they encountered Joseph, who had been railroaded into prison by the wife of Potiphar, whose advances Joseph had spurned (chapter 39).

Both had a disturbing dream.

Notice the account:

"And they said unto him, We have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter of it. And Joseph said unto them, Do not interpretations belong to God? tell me them, I pray you.

"And the chief butler told his dream to Joseph, and said to him, In my dream, behold a vine was before me: "And in the vine were three branches: and it was as though it budded, and her blossoms shot forth; and the clusters thereof brought forth ripe grapes:

"And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand: and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand.

"And Joseph said unto him, This is the interpretation of it: The three branches are three days:

"Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thine head, and restore thee unto thy place: and thou shalt deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand, after the former manner when thou wast his butler.

"But think on me when it shall be well with thee, and shew kindness, I pray thee, unto me, and make mention of me unto Pharaoh, and bring me out of this house:

"For indeed I was stolen away out of the land of the Hebrews: and here also have I done nothing that they should put me into the dungeon.

"When the chief baker saw that the interpretation was good, he said unto Joseph, I also was in my dream, and, behold, I had three white baskets on my head:

"And in the uppermost basket there was of all manner of bakemeats for Pharaoh; and the birds did eat them out of the basket upon my head..

"And Joseph answered and said, This is the interpretation thereof. The three baskets are three days:

"Yet within three days shall Pharaoh lift up thy head from off thee, and shall hang thee on a tree; and the birds shall eat thy flesh from off thee.

"And it came to pass the third day, which was Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast unto all his servants: and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants.

"And he restored the chief butler unto his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand:

"But he hanged the chief baker: as Joseph had interpreted to them.

"Yet did not the chief butler remember Joseph, but forgot him."

A birthday of a king, prince or ruler was viewed as an occasion of state. Some scholars had assumed the custom was only found among Persian kings, but the famous "Rosetta Stone," a trilingual archaeological find unearthed in Egypt, which led to the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics, mentions birthdays in a decree concerning the observance of a birthday feast for Ptolemy Epiphanes (one of the later, lesser kings of Egypt).

In Genesis 41, you see that two full years passed before the butler remembered his promise to Joseph. Pharaoh had a vivid dream, called all his counselors, and wanted to know the interpretation. The butler heard of it (verses 8, 9) and informed Pharaoh of Joseph's plight in prison.

Joseph interpreted the dream informing Pharaoh it was from God, and not from man (verse 16) and was appointed virtual ruler of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself.

Read the following chapters—the moving account of how God used the occasion of Pharaoh's birthday celebration to spare the butler—who remembered Joseph—who was used to save Egypt from famine which saved the family of Jacob and all of Joseph's brothers—which resulted in the birth of a great nation which was born out of captivity, sent into Sinai, and then into the promised land!

It has been suggested that, since the baker was hanged, the occasion of Pharaoh's birthday was an EVIL event. Linking this with the only other mention of a "birthday" celebration, that of Herod during Christ's time, a case has been made against birthday celebration. The reasoning is as follows:

"Since 'birthdays' are only mentioned twice in the whole Bible—and since both are in connection with PAGAN kings, and since, on each occasion, a death (murder) occurred, it is obvious birthdays appear in a pagan, EVIL context in the Bible, and are to be avoided by Christians."

But is this really a fair understanding of these events?

"Read all of Genesis 39 through 50! You will come to see that the Pharaoh of that time was quite an understanding, generous man—that he provided the family of Joseph with protection; with plenty of land (Goshen), and that the Egyptian people made great mourning for Jacob (Israel) when he died (Genesis 50:3, 4).

It is extremely unfair to link the birthday celebration of Pharaoh only with death. Remember, the butler was spared: One life was saved. One life was lost! But wait! The sparing of the butler's life led to the sparing of Joseph's life—which led to the sparing of the WHOLE FAMILY OF ISRAEL, AND THE BIRTH OF GOD'S OWN NATION!

This was all as a direct result of God's gift to Joseph of the interpretation of dreams. The argument that a great deliverance—a great and generous saving and preserving of life—occurred as a result of Pharaoh's birthday celebration is actually a stronger argument than the negative reasoning that, since a death occurred, the occasion of birthday celebration is pagan, and should be avoided: One life lost, countless lives saved.

But what about Herod's birthday?

Turn to and read all of Matthew 14:1-13.

Herod, befuddled with wine, became obsessed with lust over Salome, following her sensuous dance. Notice that he "would have put him to death" (John the Baptist) much earlier, but "...feared the multitude" (Matthew 14:5).

This is an important point, for it renders entirely incidental and coincidental the events that transpired on his birthday.

Herod had already plotted to murder John. It remained for him to bolster his courage, and find some excuse or other with which to allay the anger of the people, who looked to John as a prophet.

Herodias was not unaware, no doubt, of Herod's attraction to her daughter, Salome. The mother and daughter plotted to play upon Herod's lust, and his wine-induced magnanimity, to kill John.

Was Herodias secretly hoping the masses would be so incensed it would result in Herod's overthrow or murder—In order to punish him for his lustful attitude toward her daughter? The account does not say, but it is instructive to notice Herod promised Salome "up to half the kingdom" (Mark 6:23).

Was this merely a form of speech, or was Herod so infatuated he was hinting to the girl she would replace her mother?

Mark's account adds details not included by Matthew (Mark 6:16-29), showing that Herodias was far more the instigator of John's murder than Herod.

Herod's birthday was completely incidental, providing merely an opportunity for Herodias' plan. Note that the celebration of Herod's birthday is explained as a generous gesture on his part—that OF GIVING a party for others, not "having" a party for himself. "And when a convenient day was come, that Herod on his birthday made a supper to [for] his lords, high captains, and chief estates of Galilee . . ." (Mark 6:21).

Historical evidence firmly proves that birthday celebrations among rulers were universally used as a time for

magnanimity; for generosity—even for the release of prisoners (as in the case of the butler, and, later, Joseph), rather than as a time for death, or murder.

If the strongest "proof" that birthday celebration is "wrong" is the argument that a death took place on that day—then **WHY DO CHRISTIANS OBSERVE THE PASSOVER—The "LORD'S SUPPER"—THE OCCASION OF CHRIST'S DEATH?**

The "Birthday" of Jesus Christ

The "greatest" Christian holiday is "Christmas," which allegedly celebrates the birthday of Jesus Christ. The real truth about Christmas will **SHOCK YOU**. It long antedates Christianity; the origin of all its accoutrements and trappings, including Santa Claus, reindeer, the yule log, the holly wreath, Christmas trees and ornaments are entirely pagan. For years, God's church has shown the world the real truth about God's annual Holy Days as opposed to the purely pagan days revered by the Christian-professing world such as Christmas, Easter, St. Valentine's Day, New Year's and others.

Could it be, however, in the sincere and zealous attempt to prove the pagan origins of Christmas that some have, unintentionally, tended to minimize the greatness of the **EVENT** of Christ's birth?

Remember, Christ had a "birthday"! That is, there was a day on which Christ was born!

Can anyone read the Bible accounts without coming to the realization that this was a **STUPENDOUS** event in heaven and on earth? Perhaps too many have glossed over these portions of Scripture, turning from them with the barest reading and little appreciation, because of oft-repeated maudlin sentimentality connected with the commercialized "Christmas season."

Read Matthew's first two chapters; Luke's first two chapters; and the many prophecies concerning the birth of Jesus Christ!

The Bible shows myriad's of angels rejoicing in heaven, shouting out their joyous announcement that the Savior of all mankind was born! They said, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace among men of good will" (as the original should read) (Luke 2:14).

God caused the Magi, perhaps representative of a mystic sect of Persia (some speculate they were students of Zoroaster) to come and do obeisance before the babe, Jesus Christ, perhaps thus symbolizing that all classes, all peoples, all races, and even the religions of this world had to acknowledge that Jesus Christ of Nazareth was truly the very Son of God!

There is still a good bit of mystery surrounding the purpose of the visit of the Magi, but it is obvious that whoever they were they came a long distance to acknowledge Jesus as King!

Think of it!

Mary was informed by a great angel she would become the mother of Jesus Christ. Zecharias' dumbness, the "magnificat of Mary," the rejoicing of the angels, the visit of the Magi (there may have been 12, 20 or more than 100—the Bible does not specify three), the visit of the shepherds, plus rejoicing in heaven above, all give testimony to the greatness of the **EVENT** of Christ's birth!

Even though the exact date of Jesus' birth is carefully obscured, two of the Gospel writers go into great detail about the utter magnificence of the **EVENT**! Let's face it: The fact of the birth of your Savior is one of the most important central facts for your eternal life! For, if Jesus Christ had not come into the flesh as a human being, born of the virgin Mary in a manger in Bethlehem, you would have **NO SAVIOR**!

God nowhere commands us to celebrate the date of Jesus' birth! Rather, the Bible is silent on this point.

Certainly, however, the Bible gives us the picture of great rejoicing in heaven; the details of the angelic announcement to Mary; the visit of the Magi and the shepherds in order that we can profoundly rejoice in, and appreciate the fact of, Jesus' birth—the momentous event in history when VERY CREATOR GOD life was born as HUMAN life! Surely this will always be the GREATEST "day of birth," or "birthday," IN ALL HISTORY

Is it wrong to celebrate birth? Is it wrong to celebrate LIFE? What about the birth of a future KING? What about the birth of the future KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS?

One thing is sure. The angels greatly rejoiced!

Notice! "And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not: for, behold, I bring you GOOD TIDINGS Of GREAT JOY, which shall be to ALL PEOPLE.

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.'

"And suddenly there was with the angel A MULTITUDE OF THE HEAVENLY HOST, praising God, and saying, GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST, AND ON EARTH, PEACE, GOOD WILL TOWARD MEN [among men of good will: margin]" (Luke 2:10-14).

Obviously, the angelic hosts in God's own heaven were rejoicing—celebrating—this greatest of all human births.

Does this imply Christians should have large, lavish "birthday parties"?

Of course not! It does not relate at all to human practices and customs.

The Bible neither enjoins birthday celebrations upon Christians, NOR does it condemn them!

There is no such thing as even a veiled reference to Jesus Christ condemning social and cultural customs such as certain banquets and festivals on important occasions. Rather, the first miracle of Jesus is performed in the context of supplying additional wine for a great "wedding feast" at Cana, in Galilee!

Jesus, by His presence at this feast (it may well have been the marriage of a close family member, and Mary may have been involved in its preparation), distinctly shows it is perfectly acceptable for Christians to take part in such social customs.

Surely it is not wrong to give gifts! No Christian believes it "wrong" to give a gift to his or her children, husband or wife, loved ones or friends, or, for that matter, completely unknown poor people.

The occasions for such gift—giving? Perhaps one of God's annual Holy Days, such as the Feast of Tabernacles (a good time to give your children a gift!). Perhaps at the beginning of school; on one's anniversary, at a wedding or a baby shower, a "going-away" present, or when one moves into a new home.

WHY, if all of these occasions are perfectly "right" and "Christian" occasions to give a gift, is it taboo, and viewed by some as a SIN, to give your child a gift on the anniversary of a certain number of years of life?

As we have explained for years, the wise men, when arriving at the bedside of Jesus Christ, gave to Christ their gifts! Simply because there were three categories of gifts given—frankincense, gold and myrrh—many have assumed there were only three wise men. Not so. There may have been many more than that, or there could

have been only two.

However, it is obvious they gave gifts OF GREAT value!

One could argue until he is blue in the face that these were "Persians," and therefore pagan! They may even try to distort and twist the Bible to the point they deny that the family of Jesus used the valuable gifts for His clothing, education or their own personal needs.

But this would, in fact, be twisting and wresting of the Scriptures—would be utter nonsense—and would deliberately ignore the FACT that on the occasion (it could easily have been one year after His birth) of Jesus' birth, gifts of great value were given!

There is a familiar argument that, since Jesus was a KING, and since it is "custom" never to appear in the presence of a king without a gift, the Magi brought gifts!

However, this is not merely a casual visit to a king at any month, during any season, or on any day. It was the fact and occasion of His birth! No amount of reasoning can do away with the fact that these gifts were BIRTHDAY GIFTS!

Remembered Family Examples

One of the biggest birthday parties I ever attended was one arranged and paid for by my father, Mr. Herbert W Armstrong. It was on the occasion of my grandmother's 80th birthday. "Grandma" was born the year after President Lincoln was shot. She had lived from 1866 to 1946; an age that saw the invention of the automobile, the invention of the airplane and the beginning of the atomic age!

Grandma had never been inside an airplane. In order to bring her to Portland, Ore., to the home of my aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Don Edmundson, my father paid for her airline ticket aboard a Douglas DC-3.

My sister and I still have motion picture footage of that birthday party; virtually all her living children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren were present—there was a big cake with plenty of candles, gifts, a big banquet-type meal, games in the backyard, much picture taking, and of course a lot of love, affection and congratulations toward Grandma, who was now an octogenarian!

As I was a growing young boy, I was always wished a "happy birthday," and little gifts were given me. Nothing elaborate or expensive ever fell my lot; we were a very poor family, living in the midst of the Depression. However, my mother would prepare a special dish, or perhaps present me with a piece of cake or ice cream on my birthday.

The family never "celebrated" birthdays as a family; we never "threw a birthday party" for one another, or invited outside guests—the only "birthday parties" I ever attended of this nature were, as I said, that of my grandmother, or that of other school friends. However, through all the early years of God's Work "birthdays" were certainly not viewed as "pagan."

On the day I was 21, my father and mother, my brother, Richard David, my sister Dottie and her husband, Vern, all drove from Pasadena, Calif., to San Francisco, where I was stationed aboard an aircraft carrier at Alameda.

We were about to leave for Korea, and I had just turned 21.

On this occasion, my father and family took me to "The Top of the Mark," the fabulous restaurant atop the Mark Hopkins on Nob Hill in San Francisco. I was treated to a marvelous steak dinner; champagne, the well-wishes and love of my entire family, and my father handed me 21 crisp new \$1 bills! No big sum today, perhaps, but to a sailor in 1951 it meant a lot!

During all the early years of Ambassador College, my father would continually tell the church, where we met in the old "Shakespeare Club," how he would send my grandmother "two dozen long-stemmed red roses" together with a card or a brief note, perhaps taking them over in person, on the occasion of her birthday!

The church always congratulated my grandmother, for she attended church up until the very last, and was much admired and loved as she gradually reached the ripe old age of 96, before she died.

Was this a pagan practice? IS it EVIL, and "satanic," to graciously, generously and in love congratulate a loved one upon reaching certain important plateaus of age?

Let's look, now, at the "overview" revealed in the Word of God.

The Bible Records

Have you never noticed the remarkable number of chapters in the Old Testament which had to do with the ages of patriarchs, kings, military leaders and prophets?

Each generation is painstakingly recorded, genealogically, with the age of each man at the birth of his firstborn son carefully noted.

The Bible keeps careful records of the age of certain righteous men when they were called; the age of kings when they were anointed; the duration of the reign of a king, patriarch or prophets; the age at death, and even the place of burial! Moses was 40 when he was called; led the children of Israel for 40 years (symbolic of the time of testing), and died at age 80 in the wilderness,

The combined time of David's reign over both Judah and Israel was 40 years.

A Levite had to be 40 years of age before joining the temple choir.

The age of Abraham and Sarah when Isaac was born is noted.

You can probably think of many other examples. Question: WHY? Why, if noting the anniversary of one's birth is absolutely pagan, unimportant, something we might as well forget, does the Bible take such pains to preserve exact ages, the duration of the reign of a king, the age of a prophet at the beginning of his ministry, even certain important years of Jesus' life? Remember, God is the author of time!

Time and distance are actually one; "time," being measured by the distance the moon travels around the earth, the distance the earth with its moon travels around the sun, and the daily revolutions of the earth on its axis. Almighty God set all this in motion.

It has been observed that God always does things "on time."

Through the weekly cycle, we can come to understand a type of the overall 7,000-year plan of God. God has allotted 6,000 years for man to "do all his labor"; to strive to find the ways and means of governing himself apart from his God, but has allotted the seventh 1,000-year period for the millennial reign of Jesus Christ!

The week is not a casual period of just "any seven days," but is a divinely ordained unit of time!

Believe it or not, so is the year!

GOD set the earth on its axis. It is God who designed the seasons, causing all of nature to respond to spring, summer, autumn and winter.

Almighty God begins to reveal to man the use of time very early in the Bible.

When God first called Israel it was to reveal to Israel the "beginning of months" and to wean them away from the purely PAGAN calendars of heathen races (Exodus 12:2).

Then God began revealing His annual festivals! (Leviticus 23).

Please notice the great importance Almighty God places upon annual events! By reminding ancient Israel once each year of the Passover, Days of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks (Pentecost), Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, Feast of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day, God continually ensured Israel would not forget that HE was their Savior, Protector and Provider, and HE would set up His future government on this earth!

Every time ancient Israel lost sight of these annual anniversaries of God's great events of the past, or the annual forerunners of great events of the future, Israel degenerated, descended into moral, spiritual and economic chaos, was attacked by enemies and suffered from war.

In the great restorations of the Bible, a righteous king would rediscover those annual Holy Days, rededicate the people to keeping those annual events, and God would once again begin to BLESS His people! (2 Chronicles 29 and 30).

The point?

It is GOD, not some pagan king, who set before His people various anniversaries—perennially kept, ANNUAL, "once-yearly" events which were to be observed!

What does this prove? Merely that the observance of certain important events on a once-a-year basis are decidedly NOT pagan, but were instituted of God!

Almighty God is the "INVENTOR" of time! It is HE who marks the human life span according to a certain number of "years."

Is there ever a single day of your life that goes by but that you know "how old" you are? How many times have we asked little children their age to see them smile shyly, perhaps put three fingers in the air and then tell us they are "two"? What parent has not instilled in a child the consciousness of his annual cycle of growing one year older—reminding the child of his birthday? What's yours? Immediately a certain date of the calendar comes to mind. Is this PAGAN? Would God rather you FORGOT how old you are? Is it evil, satanic, pagan and WRONG for someone to congratulate, wish good health and long life to a person who has become an octogenarian?

What about a child of 5; a young person who has reached teenage; a son or daughter who has become of legal age; or someone who does not like to be reminded he is now 50?

It is God who gives the human life span. "Threescore and ten" is considered the normally allotted life span given of God—and there is no scripture from Genesis to Revelation which says it is a sin for us to keep track of the passing years. Neither is there a single scripture which says it is a sin for families to rejoice at a patriarchal father reaching a great age; or hugging and loving a child, giving them a gift and congratulating them on the occasion of a birthday!

Is Dead Better Than Alive?

Some have thought to use the lament of Job, during his incredible sufferings, as a "proof text" that "birthdays" are not to be observed.

Job said, "Why died I not from the womb? Why did I not give up the ghost [expire] when I came out of the belly? Why did the knee prevent [come before, so as to meet] me? Or why the breasts that I should suck? For now should I have lain still and been quiet, I should have slept: than had I been at rest ... or as an hidden untimely birth I had not been: as infants which never saw light" (Job 3:11-16).

Obviously, Job, in his self-righteousness, unable to see the real sin within him, is feeling deep self-pity. He is "wishing he had never been born"! Millions have experienced the feeling.

But is the extreme depression of acute human suffering; the moribund desire to cease to exist—to have never been—biblical grounds for condemning the celebration of LIFE and of the significant years of a human life?

Some have tried to pair Job's statement with that of Solomon, concerning the day of one's death. He said, "For who knoweth what is good for man in this life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell a man what shall be after him under the sun? A good name is better than precious ointment; and the day of death than the day of one's birth" (Ecclesiastes 6:12; 7:1).

Those who used this scripture to condemn birthdays were truly "broadminded," like the river that was so broad it became only one inch deep! Their shallow reasoning did not see the fallacy of attempting to wrest this easily understandable lament into some vague condemnation of remembering "the day of one's birth."

Should one, then, celebrate, instead, the day of the DEATH of a loved one? How ludicrous it would be to see a family enjoying a special meal, celebrating and giving gifts to commemorate the day of the DEATH of a family member.

No, Solomon was lamenting the terrible trials and troubles of this vain life. His book is written from man's point of view, and it shows Solomon became a candidate for suicide. To him, life was futile at best! (Ecclesiastes 2:17).

Perhaps one could understand the scripture better in the context of Paul's statement, "To die is gain," and his desire to be securely in the hands of God, in death, knowing He was going to be in God's Kingdom in the resurrection!

On the other hand, God does not want a Christian to hate his life!

He wants us to hate SIN! And He wants us to hate sin within US, but the Holy Spirit is to impart unto us LOVE, JOY, PEACE! (Galatians 5:22), God's Spirit gives us happiness; the literal "CELEBRATION OF LIFE," life MORE ABUNDANTLY—and LIFE FOREVERMORE!

God does not intend we spend our allotted time on this earth in misery, hopelessness, futility, shame, fear, inferiority and self-hatred!

Jesus said, "I am come that they might have LIFE, and life MORE ABUNDANTLY" (John 10:10).

The Age of Responsibility

All societies have recognized that children and adults are different—that adults, who have become educated, mature and who have accumulated wisdom and understanding with age, should do the decision making.

It is universally understood that children are not of sufficient mental development and capacity to vote, to enter the military service, to drive an automobile, to serve on a jury, to be licensed to carry a firearm or to be elected president.

Generally, age 21 has been universally considered as the first year of true adulthood—two years past "teenage,"

in English parlance.

Laws concerning the consumption of alcoholic beverages, voting, etc., have changed now and then. In the main, one must be 18 prior to being legally able to purchase alcohol—some states require youths to be 19.

But in Judah, during Jesus' time, a young lad was considered to become a member of the adult community at age 12!

Notice the account of what happened when Jesus turned 12!

"Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when He was 12 years old [He was then entering his first 'teenaged year'] they went up to Jerusalem after the custom of the feast" (Luke 2:41-52).

Read the entire account to verse 52, and notice how God specially inspired Jesus, even at age 12, to astonish the learned doctors of Jewish law by His understanding.

How did Jesus know He was 12?

Was it PAGAN to keep track of His age—to remember the day of His birth? The Bible obscures it from us—but surely His mother and physical, foster father, Joseph, did not conceal the date from Him. Incidentally, it may be that Jesus was born on or near one of the autumnal Holy Days! He was born in the late autumn, and not in December! Was He exactly 12 1/2 at this Passover? Remember, He was cut off in the middle of His 34th year, age 33 1/2, approximately. His ministry began when He was "about 30," and lasted 3½ years. For approximately the next 18 years, after He was said to be "twelve years of age," the Bible is silent about His life. Neither is Joseph ever mentioned again. Perhaps he died soon after Jesus and the family returned to Galilee.

But notice the Word of God does inform us of certain years during Jesus' life; tells us "how old" He was!

This was not hazy guesswork—there may have been a family celebration, according to custom, on His 12th birthday. But the Bible is silent on this point—just as it is silent on whether or not "birthday observance" is of any consequence, one way or the other.

We have covered, thoroughly, the only two places in the entire Bible where the word "birthday" is used.

As you have seen, in the case of the Pharaoh of Egypt there were countless lives SPARED; the butler had his job restored and his life spared, though the baker was, indeed, hanged.

In the case of John the Baptist's death, the birthday celebration was largely coincidental to the death—for Herod wished for John's death long prior to his birthday, and Herodias plotted it, merely using the occasion of the birthday celebration to entrap Herod.

Remember the release of Barabbas?

It became custom among many societies for the birthday of a king to become a national holiday. Usually, the birthday of the ruler was accompanied by some act of great generosity or magnanimity. Notice that Herod threw a banquet for all of his officials they did not throw a banquet for him! However, among the Jewish leadership in the temple, the occasion for a great gesture of magnanimity became the Passover! Notice. "Now at that feast [the Passover] the governor was wont to release unto the people a prisoner, whom they would.

"And they had then a notable prisoner, called Barabbas.

"Therefore when they were gathered together, Pilate said unto them, whom will ye that I release unto you? Barabbas, or Jesus which is called Christ?" (Matthew 27:15-17).

Barabbas went free, and they crucified Jesus Christ!

Today, modern rules of nations have adopted different customs. No doubt you are familiar with the commutation of sentence granted long-term criminals at "Christmastime" by the president of the United States. It is not without precedent that, after having served a sentence of quite a number of years, even a person convicted of murder might find himself in receipt of a "presidential pardon" at Christmastime!

Some have reasoned that, because a death occurred on each occasion where the word "birthday" is mentioned in the Bible, this is obvious biblical implication that we should avoid celebration of the day!

The shallowness of this reasoning is immediately apparent when we look at the crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the Passover!

Christians are commanded to celebrate the event of Jesus' death, Annually! Rather than shun or avoid this day, we are enjoined to observe it!

"The Birthday of the Church"

WHY did Jesus command the disciples to "wait for the promise from on high" and require them to delay departure from Jerusalem until the Feast of Pentecost?

It is obvious that Almighty God was determined to bring about the "birth" of the New Testament Church of God on the very day among His annual Holy Days which symbolized the first- begotten from the earth; the Feast of the "Firstfruits"!

For years I have emphasized to the Church of God that the Feast of Pentecost is the "birthday" of the true church! It commemorates that great event nearly 2,000 years ago when the Holy Spirit came SUDDENLY, as with a mighty ROAR from heaven, lighting up the heads of the individual apostles as if with "equally distributed tongues of fire" like fiery crowns—and caused them to begin inspired messages, praising Almighty God and testifying concerning the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

This was the very day on which the "other comforter" of which Jesus spoke came suddenly upon the twelve! That same day 3,000 were converted and baptized!

Almighty God had determined that His church was to be "begotten" on that very day which signifies the "firstfruits" of the harvest!

This occasion is observed annually by God's people—It is a day of rejoicing; a "FEAST" to the Eternal, a day which symbolizes the greatest GIFT Almighty God could ever give humankind; the gift of His own divine nature the very Holy Spirit of God!

"Is Tradition a Sin?"

As the early New Testament church grew, Almighty God allowed the establishment of certain church traditions. These were oftentimes oral decisions made either by smaller groups of the apostles or the entire conclave.

One of the most outstanding examples of how God used His ministry to "bind" new traditions is found in the sixth chapter of Acts, when, "necessity being the mother of invention," the apostles ordained men to the "diakonate," and a new "function" was established in the ministry of the church.

The apostle Paul often referred to the "traditions" he had left behind, enjoining upon such churches as that at Thessalonica, and others, that they ". . . stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye had been taught, whether by

word [orally], or our epistle" (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Paul wrote: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourself from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which ye received of us" (2 Thessalonians 3:6).

It is not "sinful" for God's church to establish certain traditions. Likewise, it is not wrong or sinful for a family to establish certain "family traditions."

An annual family reunion; a birthday celebration for a much-loved and revered family member; an annual family camping trip or picnic—If such events become "traditional," and become a much-anticipated and deeply enjoyed family tradition, this is well and good in God's sight.

To this day, the Jewish race celebrates the "Feast of Purim," which began back in the days of Esther.

However, the origins of the festival are partially rooted in paganism.

This festival was observed during Jesus' day—no doubt was commonplace among the Jews—and yet not one word of condemnation is ever given. Neither does the Bible itself condemn the establishment of the custom among the Jews.

The name of the feast comes from the Persian word "pur," which means "lot." As you read in the story of Esther, "In the first month, that is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, that is the month Adar" (Esther 3:7).

Now notice Esther 9:26: "Wherefore they called these days 'Purim' after the name of Pur. Therefore for all the words of this letter, and of that which they had seen concerning this matter, and which had come unto them, the Jews ordained, and took upon them, and upon their seed, and upon all such as joined themselves unto them, so as it should not fail, that they should keep these two days according to their writing, and according to their appointed time every year;

"And that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, every city; and that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed."

Read the rest of chapter 9, and notice how Esther, who was then the queen, wrote a royal decree to confirm the practice of the observation of the feast of "Purim." Yet "pur" meant "the casting of lots" and was a heathen Persian custom in an attempt to find a "propitious time" by the practicing of casting lots.

The feast of "Purim" is not condemned in the Bible, even though the name itself was derived from a heathen custom of attempting to "ascertain the most propitious times" by the casting of "lots," which may have been a form of throwing dice!

Those who believe Almighty God wants His church to compile talmudic liturgy; providing each professing Christian with literally tens of thousands of meticulous "dos and don'ts," are doomed to sad disappointment.

The Christian is NOT carefully buffered by 10,000 stamps of approval or disapproval on every conceivable human nuance of behavior, thought, act, deed or custom labeled "Approved/Disapproved by Spiritual Good Housekeeping"!

National Holidays Not Forbidden

Does it make any sense that some few would single out "birthdays" as being pagan, calling any birthday observance whatever a SIN, and yet cheerfully and freely observe other national holidays, including the "birthday" of the nation itself?

Think for a moment of some of the national "holidays" which are observed by God's people. There are no restrictions preached from any pulpits I know of concerning workmen taking a day off from their labors; families enjoying visits to relatives, picnics and recreation, going to parades or entertainment events on major national holidays!

Certainly, God's people everywhere join in and appreciate the symbolism of the day of their national independence! In France, it is "Bastille Day," and in the United States it is "the Fourth of July."

The birthdays of famous people are also celebrated. In the United States, many working people are given time off on the occasion of Washington's birthday.

Memorial Day, Labor Day, Father's Day and Mother's Day, as well as Thanksgiving—none of these carries "taboos."

Yet, in an obscure manner, celebrating the fact that a woman is a "mother," and a man is a "father," means celebrating the fact that he or she was responsible for giving birth to a child!

To those who believe it is a "sin" to hug your child, give him a gift, perhaps even including a candle in a cupcake and singing to him the well-known little ditty called "Happy Birthday," we must ask the question: "Does the Bible teach that the punishment for wishing your child a happy birthday is GEHENNA FIRE—loss of salvation, and destruction for all eternity?"

What a ludicrous contrast!

In a world FILLED with suffering and war, divorce, child abuse, homosexuality, venereal disease, incest, robbery, rape, murder, disease, malnutrition, poverty, squalor, racism, hatred and violence, it seems absolutely ludicrous that a "super-religious" people would put out the finger and condemn the practice of family members wishing their own child a "happy birthday"!

It is difficult for me to believe my father was guilty of a great SIN in staging a big birthday party for his own mother on the occasion of her 80th birthday! In the mid-1970s when I heard he had taken a special trip in the Gulfstream-II from Paris to Rome for a special dinner on the occasion of his fiancée's birthday, I realized he still felt birthdays were an important occasion. Certainly, a fabulously expensive trip from one famous world capital to another; a great meal in a world-famous restaurant and perhaps a gift given in congratulations was a "celebration" of some sort!

Strangely, there are those who have divided families over the nonsensical condemnation of birthday observance!

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, that HE has commissioned His church to do FAR GREATER DEEDS in this world than indulging ourselves in snatching away a moment of happy excitement from a beaming child who is about to start to school at age 6, and whose parents have just wished him a "happy birthday"!

There simply is no teaching in the Bible concerning birthday celebration one way or the other. Anything can be grossly overdone; any custom can become "paganized" by adding any number of pagan superstitions, like "wishing" when blowing out the candles of a cake.

An annual, lavishly expensive "party" with 100 guests to celebrate a birthday would seem greatly overdone. Christians are commanded to live their lives "in moderation," not ostentation.

Certainly, God has not commissioned His ministry to write a talmudic tradition of thousands of "dos and don'ts," stiflingly regulating every area of personal and family choice. The "leaven" of the Pharisees was SPIRITUAL PRIDE AND VANITY—SELF-righteousness! Strangely, there are those who believe in making "birthdays" a GREAT SIN—and who pride themselves on shunning what appears, to them, to be a "pagan" custom. How strange.

-End-

You may copy and distribute this information only to friends and family without changes, without charge and with full credit given to the author and publisher. You may not publish it for general audiences.

This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

The Garner Ted Armstrong Evangelistic Association
P.O. Box 747
Flint, TX 75762
Phone: (903) 561-7070 • Fax: (903) 561-4141

More FREE literature is available at our Internet Web Site:

www.garnertedarmstrong.ws

The activities of the Garner Ted Armstrong Evangelistic Association are paid for by tithes, offerings and donations freely given by Christians and co-workers who are dedicated to preaching the gospel according to Jesus Christ.