

Should Christians Honor Mother's Day?

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On the second Sunday of May, in the year 1914, President Woodrow Wilson declared Mother's Day a national holiday. Since that time, Mother's Day has been observed by Americans of all races and creeds. However, some have wondered if this holiday should be observed by Christians. They question the origin of Mother's Day believing that this holiday was derived from pagan sources. Is there any evidence indicating that this could be true?

Those who object to celebrating Mother's Day claim the observance can be traced to ancient Greeks and Romans who held festivals to honor the pagan mother goddesses Rhea and Cybele. Others claim that America's holiday is simply another version of Mothering Sunday—a religious holiday observed by many Catholics and Protestants throughout various parts of Europe. Are such claims legitimate?

Mothering Sunday occurs three weeks before Easter on the fourth Sunday during Lent. The first records of this observance are from the 16th century. At that time, adherents were instructed to visit their mother church or cathedral where they were baptized. Most people simply went to a local parish or the cathedral nearest their home. Those who observed this day were said to have “gone a-mothering.” But where did the Catholic Church derive the observance?

During ancient Roman times, there existed a holiday known as Lady Day that was observed on the vernal equinox. Lady Day was kept in honor of the mythical resurrection of Attis who was the Phrygian god of vegetation and the son of the Greek goddess Cybele. Romans also created the Feast of Hilaria. The holiday was an extended celebration dedicated to the goddess said to be both the mother and lover of Attis. Both observances were adopted by an apostate organization and became the Feast of the Annunciation, Lent, and Mothering Sunday. Incorporated into their observance was the fact that the angel Gabriel visited Mary to inform her of her future motherhood of Christ.

Mothering Sunday became a day when domestic servants were also given time off to visit their “mother church.” It was not long afterward that celebrants included their own mothers into the event. One story tells of children who would pick wild flowers along the way to place in the church or give to their mothers on Mothering Sunday. Eventually, the custom became a tradition of giving gifts to mothers on that day.

Because the terms Mothering Sunday and Mother's Day sound similar, some have tried to link the American observance to one or more of these Catholic holidays that are derived from pagan sources, but there is no tangible evidence to support a connection.

For example, Christmas, Easter, Halloween, and Saint Valentine's Day clearly have direct ties to pagan traditions. The modern customs of those holidays can be traced back to their origin—even to the same date. On the other hand, Mother's Day, as observed in the USA, does not have a date, rite, or custom that came from pagan holidays.

The North American holiday derives from the year 1908 when a woman by the name of Anna Jarvis held a memorial for her mother—Ann Reeves Jarvis. Anna’s mother was a peace activist noted for her service to wounded soldiers on both sides of the American Civil War. Anna’s mother also founded work clubs for mothers that were held periodically to address public health issues.

Anna deeply desired to honor her mother by continuing the work Ann had started. As a result, shortly after Ann’s death, Anna attempted to convince state and national officials to mark a day in which America would honor all mothers. There were never any religious connections to the day in question. The only association antagonists can produce is a memorial that Anna held at the Methodist Church where her mother attended.

The United States Congress initially rejected the proposal to make Mother’s Day a national holiday. Nevertheless, the campaign began by Anna Jarvis took hold and quickly gained momentum. By 1911 all 46 states celebrated Mother’s Day with some officially recognizing the holiday. Finally, Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation in 1914 designating Mother’s Day as a national holiday.

Although Anna Jarvis was successful in her endeavor, by the 1920s she was extremely disappointed with widespread commercialization of the day. Hallmark and other companies began mass producing Mother’s Day cards and Jarvis vehemently argued that people should appreciate and honor their mothers through handwritten letters expressing their love and gratitude instead of buying gifts and pre-made cards. In her *New York Times* obituary, she was quoted as saying, “A printed card means nothing except that you are too lazy to write to the woman who has done more for you than anyone in the world.”

Carnations had become associated with Mother’s Day when American War Mothers (AWM) sold them in an attempt to raise funds for their organization. This angered Jarvis who was arrested for disturbing the peace at a meeting in 1925. Later, she verbally attacked First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt for using Mother’s Day as an occasion to raise money for charity.

By the 1940s, Jarvis had disowned the holiday and even lobbied the government to see it removed from the calendar. In a *Reader’s Digest* article printed in 1960, a reporter recounted visiting Jarvis on her last Mother’s Day in her Philadelphia home. The reporter wrote, “She told me, with terrible bitterness, that she was sorry she ever started Mother’s Day.” Jarvis explained that she hated what it had become. As the day grew in popularity, she committed the last 40 years of her life to protecting its original principle of observing a day that personally and respectfully honored mothers. Jarvis spent four decades defending the holiday from anyone who tried to co-opt Mother’s Day for their personal cause or financial gain.

Another extensive article regarding Ann Jarvis’ life stated that she urged sons and daughters to visit their mothers or at the least write home on Mother’s Day. “Live this day as your mother would have you live it,” Jarvis instructed in her letters. Her vision for the day focused on a mother’s role within the family. Being highly sentimental, she asked that the day be celebrated “in honor of the best mother who ever lived—your own.” In all of her work there was never any mention of ritual or religion that she felt should be associated to Mother’s Day.

It is also important to note that the history of Mother’s Day never mentions Mothering Sunday, Lady Day, the Feast of Hilaria, or a need to mark the observance during the spring equinox. There is no tradition found in the American observance that can be traced to pagan, Catholic, or Protestant holidays. Neither Anna nor the U.S. government stated that the observers should attend a church service on Mother’s Day. Like the national observance of Father’s Day,

Sunday was chosen because it is the one day of the week when most people are not required to work and are able to set aside time be with their mothers.

The fact that Anna Jarvis was affiliated with the Methodist Church is truly irrelevant to any question of pagan relations. Like most of America's founding fathers, Anna lived a life based on religious beliefs that were connected to the Bible. However, she never tried to make Mother's Day a religious holiday. Her desire was simply that everyone should pause one day a year and deeply consider their mother's contribution to their lives

The assertion that Mother's Day in America reflects a pagan religious celebration is without merit. This fact was recognized by the Church of God under the leadership of Herbert W. Armstrong. This great man of true Christian faith never condemned the observance of Mother's Day in the U.S. It was determined by a council of elders that the European celebrations related to pagan holidays were in no way connected to Mother's Day as observed in the United States. Mother's Day in America was deemed a secular holiday of relatively recent origin and "not fundamentally religious in character in the United States" (Letter L069, dated May 1987). Nonetheless, the Church of God did caution European brethren against choosing to honor their mothers on the Catholic observance of Mothering Sunday.

Since its creation, the American observance of Mother's Day has been adopted by dozens of countries and cultures. In differing parts of the world, the date was changed to fit celebrations already in existence. People from Ireland and the United Kingdom started celebrating Mother's Day on the same day of the Catholic's Mothering Sunday. In some parts of Europe, many believe that Mothering Sunday and Mother's Day were always one and the same. However, in America it was never so.

Another argument against Christians observing Mother's Day comes from the thought that believers should not participate in ANY holiday unbelievers might observe—no matter what the source. But such a belief disregards the fact that Christians do many things unbelievers do that are not wrong.

For example, pagans danced during their celebrations. While some forms of dancing today are inappropriate, does this mean that Christians refrain from ALL forms of dance? Unbelievers have fall harvest festivals, but does this mean that Christians should never enjoy a cheerful meal with family and friends during the fall? Brides and grooms have exchanged rings long before the birth of Christ. Does this mean that Christians not wear wedding rings? The point is clear! Though the Scriptures tell us not to learn the way of the heathen, God's instruction is in direct reference to honoring false gods (Jer. 10:2). As the Eternal declared:

Take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them... saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise" (Deuteronomy 12:30)

Mother's Day in America is not observed in honor of false gods. It is not pagan or a holiday created by an apostate church. Therefore, God's admonition cannot be rightly applied to Mother's Day. To answer this question, we should sincerely ask what Jesus would have us do. An answer can be derived when considering a holiday instituted by Jews that was observed during the time of Jesus' ministry. This Jewish holiday was known as the Feast of Dedication.

The building of the second temple was a significant event in the history of God's people. It took 20 years to complete, and during those two decades the returning Jews experience periods of zeal mixed with frequent episodes of indifference. After the temple was finished, it stood strong for hundreds of years. During this time, the temple was besieged and desecrated by

Antiochus Epiphanies in 168 B.C. The Jewish people suffered enormously during his attacks. Many were viciously persecuted, tortured, and murdered.

An uprising led by Judas Maccabeus took hold and quickly turned into a significant movement. It was a monumental turning point in the history of God's people. These zealous and faithful freedom fighters reclaimed the temple and cleansed it with a rededication taking place on the 25th of Kislev 164 B.C. Notice what the first book of Maccabees documents:

Early in the morning on the twenty-fifth day of the ninth month, which is the month of Chislev, in the one hundred forty-eighth year, they rose and offered sacrifice, as the law directs, on the new altar of burnt offering that they had built. At the very season and on the very day that the Gentiles had profaned it, it was dedicated with songs and harps and lutes and cymbals. All the people fell on their faces and worshiped and blessed Heaven, who had prospered them. So they celebrated the dedication of the altar for eight days, and joyfully offered burnt offerings; they offered a sacrifice of well-being and a thanksgiving offering. They decorated the front of the temple with golden crowns and small shields; they restored the gates and the chambers for the priests, and fitted them with doors. There was very great joy among the people, and the disgrace brought by the Gentiles was removed. Then Judas and his brothers and all the assembly of Israel determined that every year at that season the days of dedication of the altar should be observed with joy and gladness for eight days, beginning with the twenty-fifth day of the month of Chislev (1Maccabees 4:52-59).

This significant triumph became a national holiday for the Jewish people. The Feast of Dedication occurs during the observance of Hanukkah today. While it was not an observance declared by God, Christ recognized it as a suitable holiday to acknowledge. Notice the words of the Apostle John:

Now it was the Feast of Dedication in Jerusalem, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple, in Solomon's porch (John 10:22-23).

The Feast of Dedication was a holiday created by the nation of Judah. It is considered a secular observance because it is not commanded in the Scriptures nor does it require a holy convocation (Lev. 23:2). It was instituted to remember an important event that took place in Jerusalem. Still, even though God did not institute this holiday, He did not reject it.

If Christ did not approve of acknowledging the Feast of Dedication, He would not have been at the temple during the time of its observance. Christ offered no words of rebuke and His presence gives the holiday a stamp of approval. The reason is because of its association with the activities of God's faithful people that greatly impacted the course of history. This combined with the fact that the Jews had not corrupted the observance by attempting to make it something holy. While this may no longer be said of some of the traditions found in the modern observance of Hanukkah, the celebration itself cannot be condemned.

Christ's presence supports the fact that some secular holidays can be observed by God's people. There are times to pause to remember significant events or people in history, but these moments should never be aligned with God's holy days. A few other examples are Thanksgiving Day, Independence Day, and Father's Day. These are not holidays of religious worship, but are significant dates of the American calendar that may be acknowledged by Christians.

Other examples of secular observances recognized by God are the various fasts that were observed by the nation of Israel in order to mark the solemnity of their suffering down through

the ages. These were manmade observances and God indicated that they will be kept after Christ returns, but with a different approach:

“Thus says the LORD: ‘I will return to Zion, and dwell in the midst of Jerusalem. Jerusalem shall be called the City of Truth, the Mountain of the LORD of hosts, the Holy Mountain... The streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets... The fast of the fourth *month*, the fast of the fifth, the fast of the seventh, and the fast of the tenth, shall be joy and gladness and cheerful feasts for the house of Judah. Therefore love truth and peace” (Zechariah 8:3, 5, 19)

This prophecy is speaking of the millennium after Christ returns. It mentions annual fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months that were not established by God, but were setup by men as a reminder of infamous events that took place during the Chaldean siege of Jerusalem (2Kgs. 25:3; Jer. 52:12-13; 41:1-2; 52:4). These fasts are still solemnly kept by some devout individuals today, but God declares that these days, created by men, will be retained, but kept in a new light. A reason is because none of them are of pagan origin, and they relate something significant in the history of Israel.

Understanding our biblical stance on the subject of secular holidays, we are not suggesting that God will either retain or reject Mother’s Day after Christ returns. The point is simply that the Almighty does not condemn all secular observances. The American observance of Mother’s Day is not the byproduct of a pagan festival and can be recognized by Christians. The final question to consider is should we honor mothers on this day?

The Bible explains that we should honor mothers and fathers all year long. The fifth commandment boldly declares “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the LORD your God is giving you” (Exo. 20:12). God also said, “You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I *am* the LORD” (Lev. 19:32). The sad truth is that many Christians do not fully obey God’s admonition. For this reason, Mother’s Day can serve as a reminder for families to set aside special time for the mothers in our lives.

On the other hand, even though there is a benefit to acknowledging the observance of Mother’s Day, Christians should be cautious and not take it too far. Many people turn this time into a party, and the day begins to lose its meaning just as Anna Jarvis discovered. But just because some might misuse the observance, or make erroneous claims about its origin, it does not mean that Mother’s Day is evil and should not be observed. Mother’s Day can be marked to honor our mother who God says deserve honor. Certainly, in our age, many do not honor their parents as often as they should. Therefore, on the secular day of Mother’s Day, it is appropriate to do something to show them that we are grateful for the sacrifices they made and the service they provided during our formative years. Even if our childhood was less than ideal, every parent deserves a measure of honor.

Observing Mother’s Day is a choice. If an individual believes that Mother’s Day should not be kept, then for conscience’s sake they should not keep it. As Paul wrote, “whatever is not done in faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23). However, our research and understanding of biblical mandates and principles led elders of the Eternal Church of God to believe that the observance of Mother’s Day is not a sin.