

# A Treatise on Birthdays and Associated Traditions

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All Scriptures are from the New King James translation unless otherwise noted.

Many have wondered if Christians should celebrate birthdays. Some believe that birthdays are pagan. Some have thought that the mysticism of Astrology, and use of the Roman calendar itself, would be reason to reject birthdays. It has also been asserted that the Bible itself teaches that birthdays are not to be kept.

Though the ministers who made this claim were well intended, we found that past and present suppositions making similar claims are incomplete and, in some ways, inaccurate. Such views do not include a comprehensive review of related material in the Bible. We have also found a lack of extensive research about the birthday activities of ancient times. We have attempted a more thorough study of this subject and present our findings in this treatise.

## ***Feasts, Observances, Celebrations, and Acknowledgments***

We are instructed by the Apostles Peter and Paul to show honor to those we love and respect, and those in positions of authority (1Pet. 2:17; Rom. 13:7). To give honor does not have to mean that we hold a social gathering on their birthday and present them with a gift. However, whether or not birthdays are observed and considered a feast or celebration is a matter of semantics when we consider that the terms can be used to describe many different activities. As stated in 1975 by the Worldwide Church of God doctrinal committee, “Each of us has taken note of the fact that we are one year older on a given calendar date.” In fact, it is impossible not to acknowledge our own birthday in some shape or form. Age has always played an important role in human development.

Children mature as they age. Kids currently move from one grade to another based on a combination of age and developed skills. The ability to be employed at most businesses depends on your age. We cannot drive an automobile until a certain age is reached. Many anticipate the age when they can legally purchase and drink alcoholic beverages. This is noted by Hizky Shoham who wrote an extensive article about birthdays as modern rites of temporality.

Contemporary historians have recognized the increasing importance of numerical age during the 19th century as a necessary prerequisite for the popularization of the birthday. Once age became a central psychological, medical, political, and educational principle, facilitating the reorganization of society according to peer groups, modern societies began to develop age-stratified social institutions—most notably the education system. Corresponding bureaucratic organizations registered the exact age and date of birth of its citizens, so as to concretize issues of criminal responsibility, civic rights and responsibilities, and population records (Chudacoff, 1989), leading to the life course becoming both historicized and mathematized (Kohli, 1986, 2007). More than ever before, ordinary people began to count years and mark anniversaries and jubilees of all sorts—not

only personal dates of birth but also marriage, life-changing events, the births and deaths of their dearest, and so on.

However, it was not only individual human beings whose life courses were mathematized and historicized; this was also the case for groups, institutions, settlements, memories, and so forth. Toward the end of the 19th century, during the urbanization that accompanied the Industrial Era in Europe and North America, more than ever before people counted years and marked the existence of an important institution, a city, a nation, or the birth or death of people of note past and present (*It is about time: Birthdays as modern rites of temporality*, Time & Society, Vol. 30, pp. 86-87).

Shoham pointed out that nations and organizations also celebrate the day of their figurative birth. Most have no problem attending a company dinner on the day of its founding or a fireworks event in honor of a nation's day of independence. And yet those days are considered observances and a type of birthday. Notice what the rector of Leiden University said in 1624 during a speech given on the 49<sup>th</sup> year of its founding:

The Greeks and Romans formerly observed their birthdays with great scrupulousness as solemn feast days, each in the company of his household and friends, so that they could offer their yearly gift (munus) to their tutelary spirit (genius) and say and do all those things that seemed to be of good and favourable omen... This custom seemed proper for private birthdays, in which it was, so to speak, a gift of piety gratefully to number the ever-returning years of life. And thus on the birthdays of states or cities or other large bodies, there was all the more reason for this sort of observance, for those things that are public and pertain to a kind of corporation (universitas) of a great many men together are of greater weight (*Calendar Dates and Ominous Days in Ancient Historiography*, Hebraist Petrus Cunaeus, February 8, 1624, p. 39).

The Greeks and Romans that Cunaeus spoke of were not the ones who created the observance of birthdays. Nor were they a people who designed a commemoration of the formation of states, cities, nations, or universities. It has long been practiced by people throughout history. God even gave us a rainbow so that we would all remember the covenant after the great flood of Noah's time (Gen. 9:12-17). If birthdays were solely for pagans, then observing anything similar would also have to be rejected.

A "celebration" is another subjective term that is contextual. Any joyful or festive event can be considered a celebration. This includes wedding anniversaries, family reunions, the night to be observed, and birthdays. Many compare the term to the celebration of Christmas or Easter which are observances that did originate in the pagan world. However, celebrating a particular day or occasion does not have to mean that it is likened to a religious rite or holiday. The term is loosely used to describe a variety of occasions.

### ***Observers of Times***

A scripture that some refer to when considering birthdays to be a pagan custom is found the Torah. While instructing Israel not to follow the abominations of the people in the land of Canaan, God said:

For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners... (KJV, Deuteronomy 8:14).

Some have thought that the reference to observing times includes annual celebrations such as birthdays. However, the King James translation is referencing the fortune-telling of soothsayers. Many heathen tribes believed soothsayers could predict the future and would proceed to base their activities on what they were told would come to pass. The New King James translators recognized the actual meaning of the Hebrew word *anan*, and rendered the scripture in the following way:

For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners (Deuteronomy 8:14).

God's holy days are referred to as times that should be observed annually. They are truly prophetic and directed by the only being that can determine the future. They are called "feasts of the LORD" and we are told to "rejoice" in those days. The reason for the enjoyment is far different from all other observances. They are special times set apart from any other feast or celebration.

Their exceptional meaning does not mean that we cannot rejoice for any other reason. There are many occasions mentioned in the Bible where people of God had a feast that was not considered a religious observance and it was not an abomination to the LORD. Consider the example of Purim. Thousands of Jews were saved by the efforts of Hadassah (Queen Esther). Many gathered in Shushan "and on the fifteenth of *the month* they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness" (Esther 9:18). Shortly afterward:

Mordecai wrote these things and sent letters to all the Jews, near and far, who *were* in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, to establish among them that they should celebrate yearly the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the month of Adar, as the days on which the Jews had rest from their enemies, as the month which was turned from sorrow to joy for them, and from mourning to a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and joy, of sending presents to one another and gifts to the poor. So the Jews accepted the custom which they had begun, as Mordecai had written to them... So they called these days Purim, after the name Pur. Therefore, because of all the words of this letter, what they had seen concerning this matter, and what had happened to them, the Jews established and imposed it upon themselves and their descendants and all who would join them, that without fail they should celebrate these two days every year, according to the written *instructions* and according to the *prescribed* time, that these days *should be* remembered and kept throughout every generation, every family, every province, and every city, that these days of Purim should not fail *to be observed* among the Jews, and *that* the memory of them should not perish among their descendants (Esther 9:20-28).

There is nothing in the Bible declaring that this observance was something that God abhorred. The reason is because it did not originate in the pagan world, and it was also not a religious holiday. It commemorated something significant in the history of God's people. It was acknowledged, observed, and celebrated, but not to be kept as a religious rite of passage.

Many others in the Bible rejoiced and observed events that were not pagan and it was not a sin. We do something similar today when celebrating the anniversary of a nation. Most Americans observe the 4<sup>th</sup> of July which represents the birth of that nation. People celebrate mothers and fathers on holidays that were instituted to honor these important roles in the family. These are just a few examples of feasts, observances, and celebrations that are not pagan because they did not originate in a heathen community and they are not kept in a religious manner.

Even though an observance can be defined in a variety of ways, the modest approach is generally not considered celebratory. And yet it does fall into that category when regularly noting

a particular event. It does not have to be a party with gifts and activities to be joyful. Many go out to a restaurant on their wedding anniversary and calmly rejoice. Husbands and wives frequently exchange gifts on the day that they were legally bound. Some have annual family gatherings to celebrate their relatives and ancestors, and yet nobody seems to have a problem with those occasions. It is only birthdays that are controversial. Some of the controversy comes from differing views of the first birthday feast mentioned in the Bible.

### ***A Biblical Birthday—Pharaoh***

To say that something is biblical does not always mean that it is something sanctioned by God. The term can simply mean that it is a person or event mentioned in the Bible. In that context, while there are many births documented in the Scriptures, there are only a few that include a birthday festivity. The giving of gifts in honor of the birth of Jesus was already mentioned. We do not know if that was a festive occasion or not, but the Magian honored the birth of the prophesied King, and we also rejoice in the fact that our Savior was born. Nonetheless, to celebrate His birth after the fact is not proper for a number of reasons including the fact that a preconceived date of birth has been associated with the pagan Saturnalia.

On another note, one of the pharaohs during the time of Jacob is recorded to have celebrated the day of his birth in a festive manner on a regular basis. Egypt is well-known to have a long history of paganism, and that alone is thought to be a deterrent to the celebration of birthdays. However, there are several things that should be considered about that supposed infamous celebration.

Keeping a record of the day a person was born has long been common among royalty, but it was not something common among lower classes. This may be due to the fact that the teeming masses did not have consistent access to calendars and therefore little notion of their birth date. This unknown factor would itself be a reason why the practice was not widespread at that time.

Second, we must always be entirely honest and recognize the fact that this first mention of a birthday in the Bible does not condemn the occasion, nor does it say the event was evil. It is simply written as a matter of fact while explaining the remarkable story of a champion of faith—Joseph. Notice the account:

Now it came to pass on the third day, *which was* Pharaoh's birthday, that he made a feast for all his servants; and he lifted up the head of the chief butler and of the chief baker among his servants. Then he restored the chief butler to his butlership again, and he placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand. But he hanged the chief baker, as Joseph had interpreted to them (Genesis 40:20-22).

Even though there is no condemnation of the pharaoh's birthday feast, some claim that there are two points taken from this account that indicate we should not observe birthdays.

It is first assumed that pharaoh was a pagan. While it is believed that all leaders of Egypt participated in the worship of idols, it is actually unclear whether or not this particular pharaoh was pagan. There is historical evidence supporting the fact that many of Egypt's leaders/pharaohs were not Egyptian. There were previous Semitic invasions of Egypt on at least two known occasions where Semites took control of the empire. Semites are related to the people of Ur from whence Abraham came. That may be the reason why Abraham was not killed when he entered Egyptian territory seeking to feed his flocks (Gen. 12:10-20). Author Harry Rimmer wrote:

Thus, when Abraham entered Egypt, he found that it was ruled by his relatives! Thus we have an explanation of the cordial welcome that a Sumerian from Ur received from a pharaoh in Egypt (*Dead Men Tell Tales*, p. 70).

This introduces a possibility that the pharaoh responsible for Joseph's prominence was not Egyptian. That may also be the reason why the book of Genesis makes it known that Joseph was purchased as a slave by "Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, captain of the guard, an Egyptian..." (Gen. 39:1). If all dignitaries of Egypt were Egyptian, there would be no need to mention that Potiphar was a native of the land.

It is also worth noting that the pharaoh who had a birthday feast during the imprisonment of Joseph appears to have recognized the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Notice what he said about Joseph after receiving the God inspired advice:

And Pharaoh said to his servants, "Can we find *such a one* as this, a man in whom *is* the Spirit of God?" Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, *there is* no one as discerning and wise as you" (Genesis 41:38-39).

The pharaoh in question appears to have had knowledge of Joseph's God. He may have even had a measure of respect for the God of Israel. That does not mean that we believe this pharaoh was faithful or that he worshipped the true God, but it appears that he had a measure of understanding of who this God claimed to be.

The second supposedly infamous activity of pharaoh's birthday feast is the fact that the chief baker was killed. Some attribute the execution as murder, but was it really? After all, the baker was guilty of a capital crime. Exactly what that crime was is not stated, but it was a capital offense. Who are we to say that the baker was undeserving of a death penalty?

So, let's all be entirely honest about the account of pharaoh's birthday feast. It is not something that is condemned in the Scriptures. God does not say that the activity was pagan or evil. Nonetheless, there is not a stamp of approval for the feast either. Either way, we do not agree that the birthday celebration is infamous as many have claimed. God orchestrated many events while Joseph was in prison that led to the very occasion where the baker's dream came true. God used that celebration as a tool to bring Joseph out of prison and to a position of authority as second in command of one of the greatest empires in the world.

### ***Another Biblical Birthday—Herod***

Another biblical example of a birthday celebration is King Herod. Herod's father was an Edomite, but Herod was raised as a Jew. His rise to power as steward of Judea is largely due to his father's relationship with Julius Caesar. Though Herod was responsible for many additions and restorations to sites in and around the second temple of Jerusalem, it appears that this man had little respect for the law of God of which the temple was to stand for. One of his most despicable acts took place after he had imprisoned John the Baptist. The following horrendous deed took place on Herod's birthday:

Then an opportune day came when Herod on his birthday gave a feast for his nobles, the high officers, and the chief *men* of Galilee. And when Herodias' daughter herself came in and danced, and pleased Herod and those who sat with him, the king said to the girl, "Ask me whatever you want, and I will give *it* to you." He also swore to her, "Whatever you ask me, I will give you, up to half my kingdom." So she went out and said to her mother, "What

shall I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist!” Immediately she came in with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” And the king was exceedingly sorry; *yet*, because of the oaths and because of those who sat with him, he did not want to refuse her. Immediately the king sent an executioner and commanded his head to be brought. And he went and beheaded him in prison, brought his head on a platter, and gave it to the girl; and the girl gave it to her mother (Mark 6:21-28).

This was a terrible and despicable act of murder. The atrocity occurred as a result of activities on Herod’s birthday. Nonetheless, let’s all be honest and consider this question. Does that event condemn the observance of birthdays? Does Herod’s truly infamous celebration mean that birthdays should be associated, not with life, but with death?

Because a chief baker was executed for a capital offense on pharaoh’s birthday, and because John the Baptist was executed on Herod’s birthday, some feel that these two killings are similar and good reason to associate birthdays with death. However, we must be clear about a few things.

First, the baker was guilty of a serious crime against Egypt’s highest dignitary. God foretold that the transgression would be found by revealing the meaning of the baker’s dream to Joseph (Gen. 40:16-19). The baker would be executed for his offense. The death penalty appears to have been deserved and would not fall into the category of murder.

Second, John the Baptist was innocent of any wrongdoing and was murdered. It was unjust to kill a man compared to Elijah, and the one born to prepare the way of the Lord (Mat. 3:3). The feast of pharaoh cannot be considered infamous, but the second should go down in infamy. This shows us that it is not accurate to say that those who observe birthdays are celebrating death.

### ***Is Death Better than Birth?***

Ironically, many of those who say that birthdays should be entirely avoided also believe that God has more joy in the day of our death than when we were born. It was even written by one minister “Why celebrate the day all your troubles began? Far better to celebrate the day they ended in victory!” (*Celebrating Birthdays*, Martin G. Collins). Such a belief seems to insinuate that we should celebrate the day of our death—as if that were even possible since those who are alive do not know when they will die. The illogical belief that death is better than birth likely stems from a misunderstanding of something written by King Solomon in the book of Ecclesiastes.

King Solomon was one of the wisest men that has ever lived. Before he fell from grace, God blessed him with wisdom that few have experienced. His insight led to several writings of prophecy and proverbs as well as the king’s final composition considered to be a book of lament called Ecclesiastes. Solomon fell away and experimented with all sorts of wrong behaviors. He was coming to terms with all that he had experienced beginning the book by saying “Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.” Within this work, the king wrote:

A good name *is* better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth (Ecclesiastes 7:1).

Would it be accurate to use this verse to say that God believes the day of our death is better than the day we were born? As with any scripture, we must consider the context in order to know how it should be understood.

The book of Ecclesiastes begins by expressing how vain Solomon felt life was. He had experienced all that he had sought to do calling it “everything under the sun.” Solomon considered most of his efforts to be empty and a waste of time—like chasing the wind. He had once worshipped God, but then dabbled in idolatry. He had sex with a thousand different women (1Kin. 11:3). Nothing appeared to satisfy his lust of the eyes and flesh. He became deeply depressed. Solomon then wrote:

For who knows what *is* good for man in life, all the days of his vain life which he passes like a shadow? Who can tell a man what will happen 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; Better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that *is* the end of all men; and the living will take *it* to heart. Sorrow *is* better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better (Ecclesiastes 6:12-7:3).

There is much wisdom to what Solomon had written, but we can see that it was penned by a man who appears to have been losing all hope. That explains why he felt like the day of death was better than birth. Looking back at his life, the day of birth meant that all of his current woes lay ahead. However, after death, all of that is behind. Therefore, Solomon’s evaluation cannot be used to say that it is God who favors the day of our death over birth.

Additionally, it would be ironic to claim that birthdays represent death, and we should not celebrate death, but then quote Ecclesiastes 7:1 saying that our day of death is better than birth.

It would be just as hypocritical to honor the death of God’s firstborn by observing Passover if death should not be observed. While the Passover ceremony is not a festive occasion, it is an observance held in remembrance of what God did for Israel by killing untold thousands of the firstborn in Egypt. It came to include the remembrance of what Christ endured for each of us so that we may have the opportunity of salvation.

None of this means that we advocate the celebration of birthdays. We are simply considering the plain truth about the reasons some say birthdays are evil or pagan.

### ***Did Job Object to Birthdays?***

Some believe there is a biblical example against the acknowledgment of birthdays found in the book of Job. The belief comes from a concern that Job had about his children’s activities during some family gatherings. As was written about Job’s children:

And his sons would go and feast *in their* houses, each on his *appointed* day, and would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. So it was, when the days of feasting had run their course, that Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings *according to* the number of them all. For Job said, “It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.” Thus Job did regularly (Job 1:4-5).

Even though this account does not use the term “birthday,” it may be that the expression “his *appointed* day” is referring to the observance of birthdays. However, that cannot be proven. It is just as likely that the sons were accustomed to celebratory feasts at each sibling’s home weekly, monthly, or annually. In either case, was Job’s concern about the reason that his sons and daughters were feasting? No. Job was worried about possible activities during the gathering. That is why he made offerings on behalf of his children after the days had ended. If Job was sure

that the feast itself was wrong, he would not have waited until the gathering was over to make an offering.

Critics of birthdays must be honest about what this account says as well as what it does not say. It does not say that the sons and daughters of Job observed birthdays. Nor does it say that Job was concerned about the *appointed* day itself. Job said, “It may be that my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts.” In other words, Job did not know whether they had sinned or not. He was uncertain if any transgression had occurred.

The expression also means that his children may have shown some form of disrespect toward God. The disrespect could have been disregarding or violating any number of righteous standards such as drunkenness, consuming unclean meats, promiscuity, or some other immoral activity. The ambiguity of the possible offense makes it next to impossible to determine the exact sin that Job was concerned about. Those who claim that the offense was celebrating birthdays are jumping to a conclusion that cannot be proven by the Scriptures.

### ***Job’s Affliction***

Some say that Job’s lamentation while afflicted is another reason why we should reject birthdays. But we must be entirely honest and consider the mindset of Job while lamenting his life, and also what Job actually said. The account indicates that he lost property, family, friends, and became severely ill. Job’s pitiful condition caused him to pronounce a curse on the day of his birth. In other words, Job said that it would have been better if he was never born:

May the day perish on which I was born, and the night in which it was said, “A male child is conceived.” May that day be darkness; May God above not seek it, nor the light shine upon it. May darkness and the shadow of death claim it; May a cloud settle on it; May the blackness of the day terrify it. As for that night, may darkness seize it; May it not rejoice among the days of the year, may it not come into the number of the months. Oh, may that night be barren! May no joyful shout come into it! May those curse it who curse the day, those who are ready to arouse Leviathan (Job 3:3-8).

We must admit that Job did not indicate that all birthdays should be cursed. He cursed the day of his own birth, but he was not thinking clearly. The extent of Job’s curse shows that he was starting to move toward depths of despair. Those who use these verses to say that Job was thinking clearly, and speaking righteously, would have to believe that God requires all of us to make a similar statement about our own day of birth. Does anyone truly believe that was God’s intent? Should we all curse the day that we were born?

Job’s words are not because he abhorred birthdays. Consider the context. When we recognize what happened to Job in a short period of time, the reasons for his sentiment is better understood. Job was suffering, he was depressed, he was using literary dramatic effect to express his deep emotional despair. Job was not making a comment about the celebration of birthdays.

We have all said things in heat of the moment that we really did not mean, or only meant in part. This passage was not recorded for a doctrinal position on birthdays. It was written so that we would understand the depths of Job’s emotional state. Our conclusion is that these verses cannot be used to say that the Bible indicates birthdays are wrong.

### ***Is Childbirth Abhorrent?***

Some have likewise said that similar sentiment from the Prophet Jeremiah indicates that childbirth is to be considered wicked and abhorrent:



Cursed be the day in which I was born! Let the day not be blessed in which my mother bore me! Let the man be cursed Who brought news to my father, saying, “A male child has been born to you!” Making him very glad. And let that man be like the cities Which the LORD—overthrew, and did not relent; Let him hear the cry in the morning and the shouting at noon, because he did not kill me from the womb, that my mother might have been my grave, and her womb always enlarged with me (Jeremiah 20:14-17).

Jeremiah was a prophet sent by God. His status has led some to think that every word the prophet spoke is as good as coming from the mouth of God. If that were the case, then God must also detest the day every person is born. Such an opinion was shared by an ancient theologian that many have quoted while asserting that this is God’s opinion of birthdays. The 3<sup>rd</sup> century theologian Origen wrote:

For also such a great prophet—I mean Jeremiah who “in the womb” of his mother “was sanctified” and “was consecrated as a prophet for the nations”—would not have composed something useless in the books destined to be eternal he could preserve some secret, full of profound mysteries, where he says “Cursed be the day in which I was born, and the night in which they said, behold a male child. Cursed be he who announced to my father, saying, ‘A male child was born to you.’ Let that person rejoice as the cities which the Lord destroyed in anger and did not repent it.” Does it appear to you that the prophet could have invoked such severe and oppressive things unless he knew that there was something in this bodily birth that would seem worthy of such curses and for which the Lawgiver would blame so many impurities for which he subsequently would impose suitable purifications? (*Origen Homilies on Leviticus*, The Fathers of the Church Series, translated by Gary Wayne Barkley, 1990, p. 156-157).

This opinion of Jeremiah’s lament is inaccurate for many reasons. The first, and most obvious, is the same reason that Job cursed the day of his birth. Jeremiah was miserable at the time that he had spoken these words. Consider the context.

Jeremiah was called from his youth to indict the northern kingdom of its transgressions. He preached many details about their wickedness and the severity of the coming suffering, destruction, and death. Jeremiah lamented over his extensive testimony that he was required to preach over a period of several years. In fact, his anguish was recorded in a previous chapter when the prophet said, “Woe is me, my mother, that you have borne me...” (15:10).

Jeremiah was eventually seized by order of Pashur, the current priest and governor of the temple. The prophet was bound and put on display in stocks at the gate of Benjamin near the temple. After being released, Jeremiah continued to speak of God’s coming curse on the people—including specifics about Pashur and his family. Jeremiah’s grief swelled, and he began to openly speak of his sorrow saying, “I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me,” but the affliction of the prophet was more than mere words. The people wanted to see the prophet suffer. As noted in Chapter 20:

All my acquaintances watched for my stumbling, saying, “Perhaps he can be induced; Then we will prevail against him, and we will take our revenge on him” (Jeremiah 20:10).

This is what led up to the statement in question about the day of Jeremiah’s birth. Though he was a prophet sent from God, Jeremiah was human. His thoughts and feelings were not always

on the right track just like the rest of us. We can be certain that self-loathing and feeling like a burden to his own people was the reason why Jeremiah lamented about his life when we read the next sentence after of his emotional outburst:

Why did I come forth from the womb to see labor and sorrow, that my days should be consumed with shame? (Jeremiah 20:18).

Our conclusion differs from what Origen had written, and from what others have thought. The day of our birth is not something that is evil and to be abhorred. If we were never born, then we would never have had an opportunity to know God. Is it not God who created birth. Did He not create humankind so that people could have a loving relationship with Him? “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son... (John 3:16). Would God create something abhorrent to Him?

We have an opportunity to become a part of God’s family. The day of our birth foreshadows that day when God’s children will be born again (John 3:3). He desires to share His kingdom with sons and daughters who will inherit the earth and have eternal life with pleasures forevermore. How could we curse the day of our birth that presents us with a transcendent opportunity? In order to start this spiritual journey, we must first be born of a woman. This is the only way that a person can have the potential to become a future child of God; born of the spirit (John 3:5).

In our opinion, the opposite of what some think about childbirth is true. We should rejoice at the fact that we have been born and given a chance to know God. The way we live by seeking His righteousness is pleasing to God. He is not abhorred at the birth of those who strive to become future sons and daughters of God.

### ***Ages Noted in the Bible***

There are many notable people in the Bible that are of great interest to all who revere God the Father and Jesus Christ. Even though the Bible does not mention the birth dates for champions of faith, there are numerous examples indicating that it was customary to keep track of people’s age.

It is written that Adam was 130 years old when Seth was born. Abraham was 90 when circumcised. Moses was 80 and Aaron 83 when they spoke to pharaoh. Caleb was 40 when he was sent to spy out the land of Canaan. Males 20 years old and above were considered able to go to war. Dozens of people have their age at death documented in the Bible. In fact, there are at least 120 verses that mention the specific age of different people.

If there were no document of the day or year people were born, there would be no way to tell their age at various times in history. Therefore, authors and historians of Israel must have kept track of birthdays—or at least birth years. Admittedly, this does not mean that any of these people celebrated their birthdays. It simply means that the day of birth was something that was noteworthy.

### ***The Importance of Age***

A mature age has always been an important factor in determining various responsibilities. God indicated that age must be considered when determining the armies of Israel. Notice a directive God gave to Moses:

Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies (Numbers 1:2-3).

God also indicated that male and female servants had a particular value depending on their age (Lev. 27:2-7). In any society, it has always been necessary to be aware of our age. The importance has increased over the last few centuries. It is not only helpful to the individual; the structure of modern living requires us to keep track of our birthdate. This point was made in the previous section of this article titled *Feasts, Observances, Celebrations, and Acknowledgments*.

Everyone would agree that knowing our age is necessary and has significant value. Nonetheless, even though the ages of many are noted in the Bible, the actual dates of their birth are not included. We do not know exactly why this is the case as God does not declare a reason. Nonetheless, we can ponder a few possibilities.

It may be that God did not want continual celebrations in honor of men and women of faith. Perhaps they would have become national holidays leading to a stumbling block for Israel. Judaism has added many holidays to the Hebrew calendar that are not found in the Bible. Many of those days are considered religious rites and are frequently kept with the same kind of honor and respect as God's holy days.

Catholics also created days to honor dead saints. The most notable is an adaptation of the pagan observance of Hallowe'en in which bishops of Rome attempted to give Samhain a makeover by making it a "feast of all saints."

### ***A Great Feast***

There is one example of a faithful man's celebration that has to do with noting his son's development. When Isaac was ready to be weaned, Abraham celebrated this stage of his son's life:

So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned (Genesis 21:8).

This does not mean that Abraham celebrated one of Isaac's birthdays. Still, he honored his son at a notable age of life. It appears to have been a festive event, and there was no objection from God about the feast. We are not saying that God's people were accustomed to having parties when children were weaned, but the historical record of this event shows us that years of maturing were noted and sometimes celebrated.

### ***The Hebrew Calendar***

One teacher for Ambassador College claimed that the Hebrew calendar was designed in a way that would make an observance of birthdays difficult to manage. According to the article:

God's sacred Calendar committed to the Jews for preservation to our time has three months that vary in length from 29 to 30 days after a rather completed pattern... A still greater deterrent to annual birthday observance is the insertion of a 13<sup>th</sup> month in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 19<sup>th</sup> years of a 19-year cycle. Imagine the confusion of attempting to schedule birthday parties! ...What wisdom prompted God to give mankind such a calendar? It certainly discouraged the practice of observing birthdays and other anniversaries! The net result was to deprive mankind of the privilege of setting aside birthdays! (*The Plain Truth*, Vol. XXIV, # 12, p. 14, Dec. 1959).

The Calendar in use today for holy day observance is not exactly the same as the one God showed to Moses. It is believed that there must have been a celestial event altering the earth's rotation around the sun and the calendar needed periodic adjustments. This was foreseen by God which is why He gave charge over the calendar to Moses and the priesthood (Lev. 23:1-4). In order for the first month to continually occur in the spring, and the seventh month in the fall, there could no longer be 360-day years. Intercalations were necessary. If adjustments were not made, the holy days would slowly fall back on the calendar over a period of decades, and we would end up observing Passover in the winter, and then in the fall, and summer, until it made its way back to the spring every 100 or so years.

The Hebrew calendar in use today is an adaptation of the one used by Moses and the Levitical priests. God simply numbered the months, and names were added much later. Some of the months now have Babylonian terms (Eze. 8:14). For further details on this subject, please read our booklet—*The Calendar Controversy*. This presents a problem for those who think that God created a calendar to be unfriendly to keeping track of birth dates.

Another problem with the belief that God attempted to hinder birthdays is the fact that it is never stated. If acknowledging the day of one's birth were so repugnant, wouldn't God simply tell us? One might claim that He did by saying "Learn not the way of the heathen," but we have already learned that birthdays cannot be traced to pagans alone. A simple "Thus says the LORD" would have been a straightforward way of condemning the practice instead of going through an elaborate, and rather confusing, process of designing a calendar where the number of days in a particular year or month changes at infrequent times.

### ***The Roman Calendar and Astrology***

Because the Gregorian calendar used by most of the world today is a Roman creation, the names of its days and months reflect Rome's history that was centered on myth and folklore about false gods. Some have suggested that this is another reason why we cannot use it to note the date of our birth. However, even those who make this proposal admit that we can use the Roman calendar to plan for business and pleasure. We are in fact obligated to use it despite the source. If we chose to reject its months and days because of their names, we would be unable to function in this society. Those who claim that it cannot be used for birthdays would have to disagree that it is acceptable for planning for the future as well as remembering other dates of the past.

Astrology is something related to the Gregorian calendar. Mystics and soothsayers of old associated celestial bodies to months of the year. They consider all people to be included in astrological categories dependent on their date of birth. These categories are believed to influence the course of natural earthly events and human affairs and would therefore give astrologists the ability to offer guidance for the future. Ralph and Adelin Linton wrote:

Birthdays are intimately linked with the stars, since without the calendar, no one could tell when to celebrate his birthday. They are also indebted to the stars in another way, for in early days the chief importance of birthday records was to enable the astrologers to chart horoscopes (*The Lore of Birthdays*, p. 53).

Since it was believed that the positions of the stars at the time of birth influenced a person's future, astrological horoscopes were created purporting to foretell the future. Such mysticism is contrary to the faith of saints (Deu. 18:10-12). Nonetheless, simply because the date of one's birth has been misused by people who do not walk the way of Christ, that does not mean that "birthdays

are intimately linked to the stars.” Astrology is not inherently connected to birthdates. After all, God set the moon and stars in their respective positions so that we would have an astronomical calendar (Gen. 1:14).

The Scriptures tell us to not learn the way of heathen (Jer. 10:2). This edict can be applied to astrology. However, the precept does not directly apply to using the Gregorian calendar for keeping track of our age.

### *A Jewish Perspective*

Josephus was a Jewish military leader born several years after Christ’s death. He was raised and served as a commander of the Judean army before the Roman destruction of the second temple. His upbringing and intimate contact with the priesthood and other Jewish leaders gave him much knowledge about the history of Jewish traditions. Many consider his writings to be accurate historical commentary regarding the beliefs and practice of Judaism. Within them, we find a single comment regarding a Jewish opinion of birthdays during his lifetime:

Nay, indeed, the law does not permit us to make festivals at the births of our children, and thereby afford occasion of drinking to excess (Apion, 2, 26).

Some believe this statement reveals that the Jews of Christ’s day knew that celebrating birthdays was forbidden according to God’s law. The problem with that belief is there is no law in the Bible forbidding the recognition of birthdays. In addition, the Jewish leaders of Christ’s day, Scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees, were notorious for keeping traditions outside of the law and making the law of no effect (Mark 7:13). Christ continually chastised them for holding their tradition above the law. Because Josephus’ comment does not indicate what law he was talking about, and an edict is not found in any of the Bible’s books of the law, writings, or prophets, we can only conclude that it must be a tradition of those who practiced Judaism—a religion that Christ did not approve of.

It is also worth noting that Josephus’ understanding of Jewish law is not the same as most Jews of recent history. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* says, “The celebration of birthdays is unknown in traditional Jewish ritual,” but their tradition has changed. Jews have long celebrated a *bar mitzvah* for boys at the age of 13 since the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Early in the 1920s, girls began observing a *bat mitzvah* at the same age as boys. Because Psalm 90:10 says that the average life span of life is 70 years, many elderly Jews, upon reaching the age of 83, consider themselves to be 13 in a second form of life, and they celebrate a second *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

There are also special events for many Jewish children. *Upsherin* is a haircutting ritual when a boy’s hair is cut for the first time at the age of 3. They begin to teach the child the five books of the law at this age, and, so the Torah should be “sweet on the tongue,” Hebrew letters are covered with something sweet such as honey, and the children lick them as they read. There are a few other traditional aspects of this event. However, Jewish scholars admit that there is no religious basis for the activities, and it is mainly a social function. Among some Sephardic communities, particularly in Jerusalem, the practice is called *chalaka* and is performed at age five. Among some Hasidic sects, the *upsherin* is held at age two based on the belief that Abraham celebrated his son Isaac’s second birthday with a great feast (Gen. 21:8).

At the age of 10, many Jews celebrate and begin to teach their children the *Mishnah*. Some have similar activities at the age of 15 when they begin to study the *Talmud*. The festivities and rituals during those events vary depending on family and Jewish tradition in their particular part of the world.

Our conclusion is that Josephus' comment about festive birthdays being forbidden according to "the law" must be referring to a traditional law that is not found in the Scriptures. It likely came from the pharisees and cannot be considered "God's opinion" regarding birthdays.

### ***Origen's View***

It has been said that a "forefather" of Christianity condemned birthday celebrations. The individual that has been quoted is Origen of Alexandria who was a 3<sup>rd</sup> century theologian. Origen wrote hundreds of assertions in multiple branches of theology, and has been well respected in both the secular and religious communities. One of his commentaries on the book of Leviticus states:

But Scripture also declares that one himself who is born whether male or female is not "clean from filth although his life is one day." And that you may know that there is something great in this and such that it has not come from the thought to any of the saints; not one from all the saints is found to have celebrated a festive day or great feast on the day of his birth. No one is found to have had joy on the day of his birth of his son or daughter. Only sinners rejoice over this kind of birthday (*Origen Homilies on Leviticus*, The Fathers of the Church series, translated by Gary Wayne Barkley, 1990, p. 156).

Origen claimed that "No one" who is considered a man or woman of God in the Bible had joy over the birth of a child. That statement is false and hard to believe when we consider the fact that conception, gestation, and birth is a God-given gift of life! Childbirth brings a sense of awe and wonder among those who acknowledge God as a creator who has given a husband and wife the opportunity to be a part of that process.

There is not a single scripture indicating that a man or woman of God lamented at the birth of a child. We also have evidence that people of God did in fact rejoice over childbirth. Abraham was grieved when he did not have a child of his loins as an heir. Notice what occurred when his wife Sarah finally gave birth. She recalled her previous disbelief at the ability to bear a child at such an old age and said:

"God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me." She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age" (Genesis 21:6-7).

Sarah was exceedingly joyful at the birth of Isaac. The remembrance of her previous sarcastic laugh reflected her former attitude when the Angel told Abraham that she would give birth to a son (Gen. 18:12). She was more than skeptical then, but God performed the miracle through her. The birth of Isaac gave rise to laughter of another kind—great joy and gratitude. Sarah then believed that all her friends who would hear this news would also rejoice because a promised son was born.

But this is not the only example of a God-fearing person in the Bible rejoicing at the birth of a child. Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, was promised to give birth to a son who would prepare the way of the Messiah (Mat. 3:3). Notice the reaction of several people at the fulfillment of that prophecy:

Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her (Luke 1:57-58).

Most of us can relate to the joy of a mother giving birth. It is appropriate to be joyful when a child is born. Christ even said that it is a common emotion for women:

A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world (John 16:21).

The sorrow felt by most women who begin labor is the anticipation of pain and hardship during labor. However, that sorrow turns to joy when their child is born.

Another example is the mother of the Prophet Samuel. Hannah lamented being barren year after year and she fasted and prayed for a child. After God granted her request, Hannah was exceedingly thankful:

“O my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I *am* the woman who stood by you here, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition which I asked of Him. Therefore I also have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives he shall be lent to the LORD.” So they worshiped the LORD there. And Hannah prayed and said: “My heart rejoices in the LORD; My horn is exalted in the LORD. I smile at my enemies, Because I rejoice in Your salvation. No one is holy like the LORD, for *there is* none besides You, nor *is there* any rock like our God (1Samuel 1:26-28, 2:1-2).

Why was Hannah so thankful and joyful? It was because she had given birth to a son and she glorified God for His blessing of a child.

The Bible clearly shows us that it is not wrong to rejoice over the birth of a child contrary to what Origen had claimed. Nonetheless, to give him a benefit of doubt as to his intended meaning for that statement, it may be that Origen meant that no one in the Bible was found to be rejoicing on a birthday a year or more after that person was born. Origen continued to say:

For indeed we find in the Old Testament Pharaoh, king of Egypt, celebrating the day of his birth with a festival, and in the New Testament Herod. However, both of them stained the festival of his birth by shedding human blood. For Pharaoh killed “the chief baker,” Herod the holy prophet John “in prison.” But the saints not only do not celebrate a festival on their birth days, but, filled with the Holy Spirit, they curse that day... But if it pleases you to hear what other saints also might think about this birthday, hear David speaking, “In iniquity I was conceived and in sin my mother brought me forth,” showing that every soul which is born in the flesh is polluted by the filth “of iniquity in sin” (*Origen Homilies on Leviticus*, The Fathers of the Church series, pp. 156-157).

Origen mistakenly concluded several things about birth and birthdays found in the Bible. We had already discussed Jeremiah’s lament over his birth in the sub-header *Is Childbirth Abhorrent?* We also discussed the inaccurate conclusion that the death of pharaoh’s chief baker was something that was infamous in the sub-header *A Biblical Birthday—Pharaoh*. Next Origen claims that King David said childbirth was sinful. However, just as the emotional sentiment of Jeremiah during a time of wretchedness, and Solomon in a state of depression, David’s words cannot be considered an expression of how God thinks of childbirth. Consider the context of the Psalm in question.

King David wrote a song that stated a fact of our existence as human beings. We are innately tainted by sin from the day we are born due to the sin of Eve and Adam. Nonetheless, that does not mean that conception, gestation, and childbirth is innately immoral. God created that process of life even before Adam and Eve had sinned.

In addition, the psalm David composed was written after “Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba” (Psa. 51:1). David felt horrible about committing adultery, and being responsible for the death of Bathsheba’s husband Uriah. Even though David was ordained by God to become a great king, he was also subject to being tempted by sin. Every single man and woman will be subject to the same temptations. It is a fact of human life that begins as soon as the child exits the womb and takes their first breath. Attempting to use David’s lament as an indication that birthdays are evil is inaccurate.

Next, consider what Origen’s mistaken connection between sin and childbirth led to. It inspired a doctrine that violates the New Testament Church’s standards of repentance and baptism. As the theologian continued to write:

To these things can be added the reason why it is required, since the baptism of the Church is given for the forgiveness of sins, that, according to the observance of the Church, that baptism also be given to infants; since, certainly, if there were nothing in infants that ought to pertain to forgiveness and indulgence, then the grace of baptism would appear superfluous (ibid, p. 158).

Baptizing infants and children was never practiced by the apostles and Christ’s New Testament Church. The reason is, baptism requires repentance (Luke 13:5; 2Pet. 3:9; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 19:4). Infants and children do not understand what they are supposed to repent of. In fact, babies have not yet committed sins that truly need God’s forgiveness. Clearly the birth of children is not something evil that God finds morally grotesque.

Our examination of Origen’s opinion is not an attempt to justify celebrating birthdays. It is merely an honest consideration of his claims. What must be understood is, if we are looking for evidence to say that God thinks birthdays are evil, we cannot use Origen’s homilies to justify such an opinion. They are not biblically sound, and led him to endorse a false doctrine. His perspective comes from a man that is considered to be a father, not of true Christianity, but of Catholicism.

### ***Birthday Traditions—Cake***

There are many documents of birthdays celebrated throughout human history. According to Herodotus, a Greek historian and geographer of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., the Greeks adopted the custom of celebrating birthdays from Egyptians. But he also said that it originated in Persia. While mentioning other Persian customs, Herodotus wrote:

Among all their festivals each individual pays particular regard to his birthday, when they indulge themselves with better fare than usual... (Herodotus, v.1, p. 105).

In Rome, it was initially only the birthday of the emperor that was celebrated. This later included celebrations each month in honor of the twelve gods after which the months of the calendar were named.

The origin of a birthday cake is difficult to determine. This is in part due to the fact many cultures have long enjoyed sweet bread on numerous occasions. Even God’s gift of manna was



used to make wafers and cakes that were sweet (Exo. 16:31). To claim that cake is only connected to the celebration of a birthday would be inaccurate.

However, when we add candles to the cake, we can find a connection to the ancient worship of a Greek goddess called Artemis. Our conclusion is that eating cake on a birthday does not violate the Scriptures. It is a morally neutral act as far as God's law is concerned.

For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Romans 14:17).

### ***Birthday Traditions—Candles***

Philochorus was a Greek historian in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. Many fragments of his writings are scattered throughout quotes from other historians down through time. It is near impossible to locate complete translations of these fragments. Our research necessitated reading many other articles about birthdays that point to Philochorus mentioning an ancient pagan ritual kept by the cult of Artemis celebrating the false god's birthday on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the month with round cakes lighted with tapers. The origin of blowing out candles while making a wish is said to have come from this cult, but it is impossible to find actual proof. Therefore, we offer a summation of what many others have written.

The common theme among the various citations is that the candles represent the light of the sun, moon, and stars. Blowing them out while making a wish can be traced to prayers given during the ceremony and the smoke represents carrying prayer or "wishes" to heaven. Catholics have long prayed to dead saints using candles and they will blow them out after their prayer is over adopting this same ritual. The act can be compared to a charm or incantation which is obviously something that Christians should not practice.

For these reasons, while eating cake is not something that we can claim originated as a pagan activity, putting candles on a cake, singing a song, and making a wish afterward, is something that we would consider to be inappropriate. It appears to have its origin in ancient pagan rites.

### ***Birthday Traditions—Presents***

The most common activity during birthday gatherings is giving presents. Presents may come from friends and family of the person being honored. Even some businesses offer a present to their employees on their birthdays by giving them a day of paid leave. The question is, did giving someone a gift on their birthday actually begin with a pagan religious activity?

It is not accurate to say that offerings and gifts originated in the pagan world. Certainly, pagans did this, but giving a present to someone on a special day has been practiced by every race and creed—including the people of God. Cain and Abel brought firstfruit offerings to God annually (Gen. 4:3-4). We are commanded to present offerings to God three times a year (Deu. 16:16). The priests were required to give offerings daily, weekly, and on every holy day. These are presents offered to God on His special days.

Jacob gave several gifts to Esau hoping to assuage his brother's anger (Gen. 32:13-21). Kings of old were frequently given presents as a show of honor and respect. Solomon was given presents from a variety of world leaders most notably the queen of Sheba (1Kin. 10:2). Even the Magian who traveled a very long distance came to honor the birth of Jesus and present precious gifts:

And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh (Matthew 2:11).

If the giving of presents in order to honor a person's birth was strictly a pagan activity, then the wise men would have been an offense to God. However, there is no indication that what they did was abhorrent.

Nonetheless, one Church of God minister wrote, "A birthday celebration takes credit away from God, redirecting it to a physical human being. Birthday celebrations rob God of the honor and glory He is due as Creator and Sustainer of life" (*Celebrating Birthdays*, CGG, 1998). We do not agree with this statement for several reasons. First, the Bible tells us to honor those deserving of honor. The Apostle Paul wrote:

Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:7).

The Apostle Peter also said that we should "Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king" (1Pet. 2:17). Suppose that your workplace is having a lunch in honor of your boss. That person is directly responsible for your livelihood. Surely, they deserve some honor. If you chose not to attend it might create resentment leading to unnecessary persecution. There are some Church of God congregations that provide a cake for their members when one of their members is moving out of the area. This is done as a way to honor them and show love. Some congregations will also provide cake to a couple on their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. What needs to be determined is the kind of honor that due to each person.

Reverence in the way that we worship God is not suitable for any human being, but honoring someone with respect, kindness, and even an occasional gift, is something that is appropriate and has been practiced by all people—including the people of God. Gifts are fitting on certain occasions. Nobody would be opposed to giving a bottle of wine to the hosts of a dinner party. Who would disagree with sending a card or gift basket to a couple on their wedding day? Would we refuse to send our parents a gift on their anniversary? Many families will also give their children a few gifts during the Feast of Tabernacles. These are but a few occasions where gifts are appropriate.

For these reasons, we cannot claim that giving a present on someone's birthday originated in paganism. There is no evidence to support such a conclusion. We also cannot claim that a birthday gathering innately "takes credit away from God." That opinion has no biblical support. Honoring someone that we care about, and giving them a present, is a morally neutral act. It is not inherently sinful.

In regards to a child's birthday, would it not be appropriate to remind the child where they came from while giving God the credit for all life? Some would say that we could do something like that any day of the year, but the fact is most parents do not show their children the kind of love that they need. Those days could be used as a reminder to parents that God gave them this child as a gift, and children can also be reminded that their parents are God's gift to them.

### **Conclusion**

We are always honest in regards to what the Bible says. Honesty must include what the Bible does not say. As much as we might want it to, the Scriptures do not prohibit the observance of birthdays, but they do not encourage their celebration either. As another minister in the Church

of God wrote, “birthday celebrations do not have a God-ordained origin.” What most have failed to admit is that God does not condemn them either. What we do find in the Bible are many Scriptures expressing God’s disapproval of pride and self-exaltation while promoting the faithful quality of humility.

While some might like to think that every human activity is addressed in the Bible, not everything is specifically covered. The Bible was actually not designed to regulate every thought or behavior. We must learn from it and use God’s Spirit to make proper judgments based on what is written. Sometimes that requires what the Scriptures imply.

We must also acknowledge that there should be a modest approach to birthdays. Observing them with many guests, gifts, music, and festivities is not recommended. It can lead to the self-centered behavior that is contrary to God’s way of striving to serve others (Luke 22:26-27; Gal. 5:26; 1Cor. 5:2).

Certainly, there are a number of milestones in life that are significant; such as a teenager turning old enough to drive an automobile. A young adult turning 21, an adult turning 70, 80, or 90. These are times when it is not wrong for loved ones to acknowledge their age and display appreciation for their kinship. A simple recognition of age is not pagan or evil in and of itself.

Regardless of our conclusion, there are some who will continue to believe that birthday celebrations should be entirely avoided. Others might feel that some form of recognition is acceptable. We can sympathize with both perspectives. We respect the decision each person makes when it comes to birthdays. The elder James said, “Therefore, to him who knows to do good and does not do *it*, to him it is sin” (Jam. 4:17). Something similar could be said about believing that something is a sin even when it is not. If we think that something is a sin, then we should not do it. It is always best to not violate our conscience.

As ministers of Jesus Christ, we can only teach what God’s word says. Therefore, we cannot teach that people should abstain from birthdays, but we cannot teach that people should observe them either. Even though there are examples of people that have misused birthdays, and some cultures have adopted traditions of pagans, the date of one’s birth is not pagan. The fact that someone is a year older is not pagan. God provided us with the ability to keep track of our age. What we do with that knowledge is a choice that we all have to make.