

# THE TRUTH ABOUT BIRTHDAYS AND RELATED TRADITIONS

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Many believe that Christians should not celebrate birthdays. It has been said that birthdays originated in the pagan world, and some have thought that the mysticism of astrology, and use of the Roman calendar itself, is reason enough for God fearing folk to reject birthdays. It has also been asserted that the Bible indicates birthdays are not to be observed.

While those who have made such claims are well intended, an in-depth study of the subject finds that past and present arguments claiming birthdays are pagan, and that the Bible teaches against their acknowledgment, stem from assumptions resulting in mistaken assertions. Such views come to conclusions without accurately acknowledging what the Bible indicates, and what it does not specify, about birthdays. We have also found that there is a lack of extensive research about birthday traditions and certain activities that date back to ancient times. For these reasons, we have completed a thorough study of this subject and present our findings in this dissertation.

## ***Observances, Celebrations, Feasts, 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 must hold a social gathering on their birthday and present them with gifts. 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 are expected to mature as they get older. In the last several centuries, kids move from one grade to another based on a combination of age and developed skills. We cannot drive an automobile until a certain age is reached. The ability to be employed at a business or company depends on age. Many anticipate the age when they can legally purchase 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 Feb. 8<sup>th</sup> 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 munus (gift) to their tutelary genius (spirit) 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, 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 anniversaries, reunions, graduations, and birthdays. Many will liken the term to a celebration of

Christmas or Easter which are observances that originated in the pagan world. However, celebrating a particular day or occasion does not automatically mean that it is likened to a religious holiday. The term is loosely used to describe a variety of occasions.

### *Observers of Times*

A scripture that has been used to consider birthdays a pagan custom is found in 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 18:14).

Some have thought that the reference to observing times refers to annual celebrations such as birthdays. However, the translation is speaking of soothsayers—aka fortune-tellers. Many heathen tribes believed soothsayers could predict the future and inquiring minds would base their activities on what they were told would come to pass. The New King James translators recognized the actual meaning of the Hebrew term translated as “observers of times” and rendered the scripture more accurately:

For these nations which you will dispossess listened to soothsayers and diviners (Deuteronomy 18:14).



God is against those who claim that they can determine the future through horoscopes, palm reading, tarot cards and other

means of sorcery. That does not mean He is against acknowledging annual events outside of His holy days. That is evident by Christ's presence at the temple during the celebration of dedication (John 10:22-23). That day was a Jewish national holiday, and not an observance commanded by God. It was instituted to remember an important event that took place in Jerusalem (1Maccabees 4:52-59). Even though God did not establish the holiday, He did not reject it. If Christ did not approve, He would not have been at the temple during the time of its celebration. Jesus walked the courts and offered no words of rebuke. His very presence gives the holiday a stamp of approval.

The annual Sabbaths are prophetic and commanded 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 enjoyment is far different from all other observances. They are special times set apart from any other celebration.

The exceptional meaning of God's feast does not mean that we cannot rejoice for any other reason or at other times of the year. There are many occasions mentioned in the Bible where people of God had a celebration 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) when she sought the King's favor. Thousands 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 pagan customs, and it was also not a religious holiday. It commemorated something significant in the history of God's people. Therefore, Purim was acknowledged and observed by future generations—but not meant to be kept as a religious rite.

Many others in the Bible rejoiced and observed events that were not pagan and it was not considered sin. We do something similar today when acknowledging the anniversary of a nation. Most Americans observe the 4<sup>th</sup> of July which represents the figurative birth of America. People celebrate mothers and fathers on holidays that were instituted to honor their important roles in the family. Couples acknowledge wedding anniversaries with special meals, activities, and gifts. These are just a few examples of observances, celebrations, and feasts that are not sinful 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. In other words, it does not have to be a party with gifts and activities to be something joyful. Many go out to a restaurant on certain days of the year. Some have annual family gatherings to acknowledge 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 about a birthday feast mentioned in the Bible.

## ***A Biblical Birthday Celebration—Pharaoh***

To say that something is biblical does not have to mean that it is sanctioned by God. It can simply mean that it something mentioned in the Bible. Such is the case with a significant celebration that took place while Joseph was imprisoned in Egypt. The Egyptian king is recorded to have celebrated his birthday by sponsoring a grand feast. Because Egypt is well-known to have been rife with paganism, it is thought that the celebration must be related to heathen religion. Origen made it sound as though the celebration of birthdays were sinful in the third century AD. However, there are several things that should be considered about that supposed infamous celebration.

First, keeping track of the day that someone was born was not common among lower classes, but has long been practiced among royalty. This may be due to the fact that the teeming masses did not have consistent access to calendars. The unknown factor would itself be a reason why observances were not widespread at that time.

Second, we must be honest and admit that this first mention of a birthday celebration in the Bible does not condemn the occasion. Nor does it say that the event was pagan. It is simply recorded as a matter of fact leading up to 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, that cannot be proven. In fact, it is unclear whether or not this pharaoh was pagan. There is historical evidence indicating that

many of Egypt's leaders/pharaohs were not Egyptian. There were 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):

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 (Harry Rimmer, *Dead Men Tell Tales*, p. 70).

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. Therefore, it is possible that the pharaoh responsible for Joseph's rise to prominence was not Egyptian.

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 hearing him explain how Egypt could be saved from ruin:

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. It is possible that he even had a measure of respect for the God of Israel. That does not mean we believe this pharaoh was faithful or that he worshipped the true God, but it appears that he had some understanding of who the God of Joseph was.

The next supposed infamous activity of pharaoh's birthday feast is the fact that the chief baker was killed. Some attribute the

execution to a wicked deed and murder, but was it really? After all, the baker was guilty of a capital crime. Exactly what that crime was is not said, but it was a capital offense nonetheless. Who are we to say that the baker was undeserving of the death penalty, and that pharaoh's sentence was unjust?

We must 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. It is not written that the baker did not deserve to die. Nonetheless, there isn't a stamp of approval on the birthday feast either. Therefore, we cannot claim that the birthday celebration is infamous as many have said. God orchestrated events while Joseph was in prison that led to the very occasion where the baker's dream came true. God used that birthday feast to bring Joseph out of prison to a position of high-authority in one of the greatest empires in the world.

### ***A Biblical Birthday Celebration—Herod***

Another example of a birthday celebration in the Bible 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 to sites in and around the second temple of Jerusalem, it is clear that this man had little respect for the law of God. One of his most despicable acts took place on Herod's birthday after he had imprisoned John the Baptist:

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 cruel and wicked act of murder that was a result of activities on Herod's birthday. Nonetheless, let's be honest and consider this question. Does that event condemn the observance of birthdays? Does Herod's infamous activity mean that birthdays should be associated with death?

Because a chief baker was executed on pharaoh's birthday, and because John the Baptist was executed on Herod's birthday, some feel that these two killings are similar. 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 out by revealing the meaning of the baker's dream (Gen. 40:16-19). The death penalty appears to have been justified and therefore would not fall into the category of murder. Therefore, the birthday feast of pharaoh cannot be categorized as an infamous event.

Herod's feast is another story. John the Baptist was innocent of any wrongdoing and was murdered. This event should forever be considered infamous. Nonetheless, it is inaccurate, and an exaggeration, to say that those who observe birthdays are celebrating death.

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

The day that a child is born is a joyous event. It is a God-given miracle of life, and every life is precious in this way. Ironically, many of those who reject acknowledging birthdays say 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 insinuates that we should rejoice the day people die, but that is contrary to our innate emotion to grieve the loss of someone that

we love—an emotion displayed many times by faithful people in the Bible.

The illogical belief that death is better than birth likely stems from a misunderstanding of something written by in the book of Ecclesiastes. King Solomon was one of the wisest men who ever lived. Before he fell from grace, God blessed him with wisdom that few have experienced. His insight led to many writings of prophecy, proverbs, and a book of lament called *Ecclesiastes*. Solomon fell away and experimented with all sorts of sinful behaviors. He began to come to terms with what he had done and wrote, “Vanity of vanities, all *is* vanity.” Within the pages of his final work, the king also wrote:

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

Is it accurate to use this verse to say that God believes the day of our death is better than the day we were born? Absolutely not! 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 meaningless—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 and 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, 7:1-3).

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 experiencing deep depression. 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 woes lay ahead. However, after death, it is all behind. This is why Solomon's perspective cannot be used to say that God favors the day of death over birth.

Additionally, the same people who misuse Ecclesiastes 7:1 also say that birthdays celebrate death. Why, then, claim that the 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 examining the plain truth about the reasons some say birthdays are evil and pagan.

### ***Did Job Think That Birthdays Are Wrong?***

Some believe there is a biblical example against celebrating birthdays found in the book of Job. The belief comes from a concern that Job had about his son's activities during certain social gatherings:

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" (Job 1:4-5).

This account does not use the term "birthday," but the expression "his *appointed* day" could be referring to the observance of birthdays. However, it is just as likely that the sons were accustomed to traditional family feasts at each son's monthly

or annually. In either case, it cannot be known if Job's concern was the reason that his sons and daughters were feasting. It is more likely Job was concerned about some of the activities during these gatherings. That is why he made offerings on behalf of his children after "the days of feasting had run their course." If Job was certain that the celebration itself was wrong, he would not wait until the feast 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, but made an offering just in case.

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

### ***Job's Affliction and Lament***

Some say that Job's lament while afflicted is another reason why we should reject birthdays. But we must be honest and consider the mindset of Job when lamenting his life. The account indicates that he lost family, friends, property, and became painfully 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).

Job did not indicate that all days of birth should be cursed. He cursed the day of his own birth, but understand that this man was not thinking clearly. The extent of Job's curse shows that he was falling into the 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 this was God's intent? Should we all curse the day that we were born?

In our opinion, Job's words are not because birthdays are evil. Our conclusion is in consideration of the context. When we consider what happened to Job in a short period of time, the reasons for his sentiment are better understood. Job was suffering, he was depressed, he was using literary dramatic effect to express his deep emotional despair. We have all said things in heat of the moment that we really did not mean, or only meant in part. Job was not commenting on the celebration of birthdays—he was lamenting what appeared to be the conclusion of his pitiful life and thinking it would have been better if he had never lived.

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. These verses cannot be used to say that the Bible indicates birthdays are wrong.

### ***Childbirth Is Not Abhorrent!***

Some have also said that similar sentiment of Job can be found in the writings of Jeremiah, and this prophet also 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).

To comprehend why Jeremiah said such things, we need to again follow the first rule of thumb when attempting to understand any scripture—consider the context! Jeremiah was a prophet sent by God. His status causes some to think that every word the prophet spoke is golden. If that were the case, then God must 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).

Origen’s opinion of Jeremiah’s lament is inaccurate on several levels. The first, and most obvious, is the same reason that Job cursed the day of his birth. Jeremiah was utterly miserable at the time that he had spoken these words.

Called from his youth, Jeremiah was sent to indict the northern kingdom of its transgressions. He preached many details to them about their wickedness and the severity of the coming anguish, destruction, and death. Jeremiah lamented over his extensive testimony that he was required to preach over a period of years. In fact, his personal torment 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 contemporary 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 heartache swelled. He began to openly speak of his own sorrow saying, “I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me,” but his affliction was more than verbal ridicule. The people wanted the prophet to visibly 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 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 all of us. We can be certain that self-loathing and feeling like a curse to his own people was the reason why Jeremiah lamented the current state of his life when we read the sentence following the 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 of Jeremiah’s lament differs from what Origen had written, and from what many others have also thought. The day of our birth is not something that is evil and to be

abhorred. God designed life to begin in this way. He created humankind so that people could have a 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? Without birth, there would not be an opportunity for God to know us, and for us to know Him.

God is in the process of building a family. He desires to share His kingdom with sons and daughters who will inherit the earth and have eternal life with pleasures forevermore. The day of our birth foreshadows that day when God’s children will be born again (John 3:3). To begin this journey, we must first be born of a woman. How could we sincerely curse the day that presents us with a transcendent opportunity when this is the only way that a person can have the potential to become a future child of God (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. Continually seeking His righteousness is pleasing to God. He is not abhorred at the birth of those who strive to become His future sons and daughters.

### ***Noteworthy Ages in the Bible***

There are many faithful people in the Bible who are admired by all who genuinely revere God. 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 various people.

If God abhorred birthdays, then there would be no need to mention age. It must have been a common practice to keep track of birthdays or birthyears. Admittedly, this does not mean that these people celebrated birthdays. It simply means that the time of birth was noteworthy.

## *The Importance of Age*

A mature age has always been an important factor in determining various responsibilities. God indicated that age had to be considered when determining who would be soldiers in the armies of Israel. Notice the directive given 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 value has increased over the last few centuries. The structure of modern living requires us to keep track of our birthdate. This point was made in a previous section of this dissertation titled *Observances, Celebrations, Feasts, and Acknowledgments*.

Everyone would agree that knowing our age is helpful and even necessary. 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. Birthdays of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and others would have become national holidays leading to a stumbling block for Israel. For example, Judaism has added many holidays to the Hebrew calendar that are not found in the Bible. Many of their days are considered religious rites and are frequently kept with the same kind of honor and respect as God's holy days.

Catholic fathers 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." While not to be considered holidays, we must admit that the importance of knowing our age is noted even in the Bible.

## ***A Great Feast***

The bible does contain one example of a faithful man's celebration of his son's maturity. When Isaac was ready to be weaned, Abraham celebrated the passing stage of his 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 observed Isaac's birthday, and yet he did celebrate this notable age of life. It was a festive event, and there was no objection from God about the great feast. This does not mean God's people were accustomed to having parties when children were weaned, but the record of this event shows us that years of maturing were not only noted, but sometimes celebrated.

## ***The Hebrew Calendar***

A professor at Ambassador College claimed that the Hebrew calendar was designed in a way that would make the observance of birthdays difficult to manage. According to the teacher's 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).

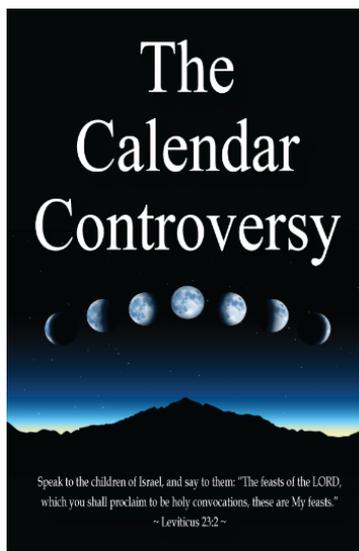
The Calendar in use today for holy day observance is not exactly the same as the one God showed to Moses. It is believed that there was a celestial event altering the earth's rotation around

the sun leaving the calendar with a need for 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). 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 like there was during the time of Noah (Gen. 7-8). Intercalations became necessary. If adjustments were not made, the holy days would slowly fall back on the calendar over a period of decades. Eventually, we would be observing Passover in the winter, then fall, and summer, until it made its way back to spring every 100 or so years.

The Hebrew calendar in use today is similar, if not identical, to the one used by Moses and the temple priests. Initially, God simply numbered the months and names were added by the Jews later. We know this from the use of several Babylonian terms adopted while in exile. For example, Tammuz means “sprout of life” and the term was once used for a Sumerian deity of vegetation (*Brown, Driver, Briggs*, Eze. 4:17, H8542). Tammuz became the name of the 4<sup>th</sup> month in the Hebrew calendar after the Babylonian captivity. This is the same situation for other terms adopted by the Jews such as Nisan (Est. 3:7). Nonetheless, the Hebrew calendar in use today is legitimate. And these facts present a problem for those who think that God designed a calendar to be unfriendly for keeping track of birthdays. For further information about the Hebrew calendar, please read our booklet—*The Calendar Controversy*.

Another problem with the belief that God tried to hinder birthdays is the fact that nothing like that is said. If acknowledging the day of one’s birth were so offensive, God would simply say so. Some might claim that He did by saying “Learn not the way of the heathen,”

but we have learned that birthdays cannot be traced to pagans alone. A simple “Thus says the LORD...” would have been a



forthright 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 odd times.

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

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 acknowledge birthdays. However, those who suggest this will admit that we can use the Roman calendar to plan business and pleasure events. We are in fact required 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 said 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 dates on the calendar have been misused 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 and other pagan rites that are known. 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 served as a commander of the Judean army before the Roman destruction of the second temple in 70 A.D. His training and intimate contact with the priesthood and other leaders gave him much knowledge about the history of Jewish traditions. Josephus defected to Rome and was a prolific author of historical events. Most consider the majority of his writings to be accurate 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 knew 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. Therefore, Josephus must have been talking about laws outside of the Bible. In addition, the Jewish leaders of Christ's day were notorious for their high regard of traditions (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 such a mandate is not found in the Bible, 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. A comparatively late exception, however, is the bar mitzvah and the bat mitzvah (v. 3, p. 723).

From at least the second century AD, those ascribed to Jewish traditions have celebrated the *bar mitzvah* for boys at the age of thirteen. Early in the 1920s, girls began observing a *bat mitzvah* at the same age. Because Psalm 90:10 says that the average life span of life is 70 years, upon reaching the age of 83, many elderly Jews consider themselves to be thirteen in a second form of life; and they celebrate a second *bar* or *bat mitzvah*.

There are also other traditional events for many Jewish children such as the *upsherin*—a haircutting ritual when a boy’s hair is cut for the first time at the age of three. They begin to teach the Torah at the same age, and there are a few other traditional aspects of the event. However, Jewish scholars admit that there is no religious basis for the activity. 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 at the same age (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 part of the world.

Our conclusion is that Josephus’ comment about birthday celebrations being forbidden must be referring to a traditional law that is not found in the Scriptures. It likely came from a pharisaical view and cannot be considered God’s opinion.

### ***Origen’s View***

A man considered by many to be a “forefather” of Christianity condemned birthday celebrations. The individual 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,” considered to be a faithful man or woman of God in the Bible, had joy over the birth of a child. That statement is not just hard to believe—it is false! There is not a sentence in the Bible indicating that a man or woman of God lamented at the birth of their own child. On the contrary, there is evidence that people of God did rejoice over childbirth.

For example, Abraham was initially disappointed when he did not have a child from Sarah as an heir. Notice what occurred when his wife finally gave birth. While recalling her previous disbelief at the ability to bear a child at an old age, Sarah 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. Remembering her previous laugh when hearing that she would give birth to a son made the joy of laughter a reality (Gen. 18:12). Sarah also believed that her friends who heard this news would also rejoice. And there are other examples God-fearing people in the Bible who rejoiced at the birth of their 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 childbirth. It is a natural reaction to be happy 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).

Another example is the mother of the Prophet Samuel. Hannah lamented being barren year after year. 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).

Hannah was cheerful because she had given birth to a son, and she glorified God for His blessing of a child. It is natural for women and men to feel this way.

Contrary to what Origen said, the Bible shows that people have long rejoiced over the birth of a child. 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 during an annual birthday celebration. 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 mentioned in the Bible. We had already discussed Jeremiah’s lament over his birth. We also discussed the wrong conclusion that the death of pharaoh’s chief baker was something infamous. 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 extension of God’s thoughts about childbirth. Consider the context of the psalm in question (Psa. 51).

King David sang about a fact of our existence. 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 immoral. God created that process of life 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 at fault for the death of Bathsheba’s husband. Even though David was ordained by God to become a great king, he was subject to being tempted by sin. Like all of us, sometimes

we fail. We are all subject to similar temptations. This is a fact of human existence which begins as soon as the child takes their first breath. That is what David sang about. Attempting to use David's lament to say that birthdays are evil is incorrect.

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 he 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 the Church that Christ established. The reason is, baptism requires repentance (Luke 13:5; 2Pet. 3:9; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 19:4). Infants and children do not have the capacity to understand what they are supposed to repent of. In fact, babies have yet to commit sins that are worthy of repentance. Clearly the birth of children is not something evil.

Our examination of Origen's opinion of this matter is not an attempt to justify celebrating birthdays. It is merely an honest consideration of his assertions. What must be understood is, if we are searching for evidence that God thinks birthdays are evil, we cannot use Origen's homilies. They are not biblically sound, and led to an endorsement of false doctrine.

### ***Birthday Traditions—Cake***

According to Herodotus, a Greek historian and geographer of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., 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 gods after which their months and holidays were named. The observances would naturally include food and drink that were special for the occasion.

However, the origin of birthday cake is difficult to determine. This is in part due to the fact many cultures have long enjoyed round sweet bread on different occasions. Even God's gift of manna was used to make wafers and cakes that were sweet (Exo. 16:31). To think that cake is only connected to the celebration of a birthday would be inaccurate.

Nonetheless, when we add candles to the cake, we do find a connection to the worship of a Greek goddess called Artemis. In a votive ritual, a round cake was decorated with candles to shine like the moon. Some say that making a wish and blowing out the candles was a form of prayer to the goddess with the rising smoke depicting the words of appeal going up to heaven. Such a ritual sounds plausible, but it cannot be verified.

A later holiday in Germany was designed for kids and called *Kinderfeste*. Dating back to the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, that holiday continues to be observed once a year in honor of children. One of the customs include a cake for the child with a candle representing each year of their life. An additional candle is placed in the center to represent the hope of another year. Unlike a quick burn and blow in recent decades, a birthday cake with burning candles was an all-day affair. The candles were lit in the morning and not to be blown out. They would burn all day and cake could not be enjoyed until after the candles had run their course.

Our conclusion is that eating cake, without the use of candles, 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 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 solid evidence. Therefore, we offer a summation of what we have learned from documents that others have written.



A common theme among the various authors is that the candles represent the light of the sun, moon, and/or stars. Blowing them out while making a wish has been considered by many symbolizing a prayer that goes up to heaven along with the resulting smoke. Catholics have long prayed to saints using candles and they will blow them out after their prayer is over which may be an adaptation of an ancient ritual. This whimsical birthday tradition could be compared to a charm or incantation which is clearly something that Christians should avoid. Though seemingly harmless, it is likened to wishing upon a star.

For these reasons, while eating cake is not something that we can say originated as a pagan activity; the use of candles on a cake and making a wish over them is something that we would consider to be inappropriate. That activity likely comes from some form of pagan rite.

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

The most anticipated activity of birthday gatherings are presents. Presents come from friends and family, and even some businesses offer a present to their employees by giving them a day of paid leave. This too has been said to have originated in pagan religion. Certainly, pagans did this, but giving a present to someone on a special day has been widely practiced throughout history—even by God’s people. 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 offerings are the same as presents, but given 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. This is something still practiced today when certain people meet with national leaders. Solomon was given presents from a variety of people—most notably the queen of Sheba (1Kin. 10:2). Even the Magi who traveled a long distance came to honor the birth of Jesus and presented the family with gifts of great value (Mat. 2:11). If the giving of presents to honor a person’s birth was strictly a pagan activity, then the wise men’s presents would have been an offense to God. But we see no evidence of that. 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. This is the foundation of the 5<sup>th</sup> commandment. The Apostle Peter also said that we should “Honor all *people*. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the king” (1Pet. 2:17). Also, the Apostle Paul wrote that a measure of honor is appropriate behavior:

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).

Consider the following scenario. Your workplace is having a lunch in honor of your boss. That person is directly responsible for your livelihood. Surely, they deserve your respect. If you chose not to attend the luncheon, it could 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 to honor them and show that the congregation cares. Some congregations will provide cake, and/or gift, to a couple on their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. What needs to be considered is not if we should honor someone, but the kind of honor that is deserved.

Honor in the way that we revere God is not suitable toward any human being, but honoring someone with kindness, respect, or a gift, is appropriate. 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? Many families give gifts to their children during the Feast of Tabernacles.

We do not agree with the notion that giving a present to someone on their birthday originated in paganism. There is no evidence to support such a claim. We also do not concur with the idea that a birthday gathering “takes credit away from God.” That

opinion also has no biblical support. Honoring someone that we care about, and giving them a present, is not inherently sinful. It is a morally neutral act.

In regards to a person'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 that on any day of the year, but the fact is many parents do not show their children the love that they should. The day of one's birth 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.

### ***Birthday Traditions—Party Hats***

Head coverings have long been worn to shade from the sun, and there are many used to indicate rank, class, or the religion of individuals. Common party favors used during many birthday parties are pointy hats.

Tracing the origin of cone shaped caps is difficult due to several possible origins. One prominent theory points to



ancient Egypt where there are depictions of women wearing a cone-shaped cap. For centuries, it was thought that these hats may have never actually been worn and were purely symbolic. But in 2010, a few non-elite ancient graves were discovered with the remnants of cone caps made of beeswax found alongside the bones of two women. However, it is still not exactly known what purpose they served.

Several theories suggest a religious use in an attempt to establish a connection between the wearer and the afterlife. Others relate them to special occasions celebrating an Egyptian ruler or

god. Regardless of how they were used, the cone caps of ancient Egypt are very similar, but not identical, to birthday hats.

In ancient Greece, the pileus was a brimless, felt cap that too was conical in shape. Pointed hats were worn by ancient Scythians and are depicted in some Hindu temples as helmets or metal crowns. These can be also be in Hittite reliefs.



During the Japanese Heian period (794-1185 AD) tall cone shaped hats were worn by aristocrats to indicate rank. Even more prominent were pointed caps later worn by many Jews of the Roman Empire during the 12<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Referred to as a *judenhat*, a papal decree of that empire required them to be worn by Jews.

Popular among Burgundian and French noblewomen in the 15<sup>th</sup> century was tall conical headgear now called a *hennin*. Some quaker noblewomen of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were depicted with pointed hats & caps, and that style became associated with a stereotypical witch.



During the middle ages of Britain, a tall pointed hat was used to portray wisdom. This portrayal is connected to the belief of “funneling knowledge into the brain” as suggested by John Duns Scotus, a 14th-century Scottish philosopher. Much later, the pointed hat was relabeled a “dunce cap” and used to represent someone who did something foolish. A smaller version was later fashioned for circus clowns to coincide with their humorous antics.



The wide use of cone shaped caps that are now collectively known as birthday or party hats leaves room to doubt whether they can be considered a pagan practice.

### ***Conclusion***

Ministers of the Eternal Church of God strive to be honest about what the Bible says. That honesty must include what the Bible does not say. As much as some might want the Scriptures to confirm their convictions, the Word of God does not prohibit the observance of birthdays. However, the Bible does not encourage birthday celebrations either. As another minister in the Church of God wrote, “birthday celebrations do not have a God-ordained origin.” What most who reject birthdays fail to admit is that God also does not condemn them.

While we might want every human behavior to be addressed in the Bible, there are some things not specifically mentioned. The Bible was not designed to codify every behavior. We learn from its directives and use God’s Spirit to make proper judgments based on what is written. Sometimes that requires considering what the Scriptures do not say, but what they imply. This leads us to recognize that the Bible does not imply acknowledging birthdays is wrong.

What we find are many Scriptures expressing God’s disapproval of pride and self-exaltation while promoting the

characteristic of humility. It is our recommendation that, if birthdays are something that a Christian desires to acknowledge, a modest approach should be considered. As Paul said, “whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1Cor. 10:31).

There are a number of milestones in life that are significant: A teenager becoming old enough to drive an automobile. A young adult reaching the age of 21. An adult turning 70, 75, 80, or more. These are times when friends and family desire to acknowledge their loved one in a special way. This may be done as the Bible does not say that honoring a person by recognizing their age is pagan or evil. It is the type of behavior involved that decides whether or not it is fitting.

Regardless of our conclusion, there are some who will continue to believe that any kind of birthday celebration should be avoided. Others might feel that some form of acknowledgement is acceptable. We respect the decision each person makes. 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 also can be said about believing that something is a sin when it does not violate God’s law. In that case, Paul’s words would apply when he said:

All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify (1Corinthians 10:23).

Ministers of Jesus Christ are to only proclaim as doctrine what God’s word teaches. In matters that are not clear, we can offer an opinion. Therefore, the Eternal Church of God does not teach that people should abstain from birthdays, but we will not teach that people should acknowledge them either. Even though many have misused birthdays, and some cultures have adopted pagan traditions, 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 we all have to make.

The Eternal Church of God offers a variety of books, booklets, articles, audio, and video to help people better understand the Bible. Some of the printed material available includes:

*Evidence for Eras*

*Three Resurrections of the Dead*

*Satan's Fate*

*The Sabbath Test*

*The Unclean and the Clean*

*Three Times a Year*

*Beyond the Clouds*

*The Truth about Matthew 18*

*A Good and Faithful Servant*

*A Place of Safety*

*The Truth about Freemasonry*

*A Place of Safety*

*The 144,000*

*The Magnificent Meaning of God's Holy Days*

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