

Let's Count the Days!

Merry Christmas and a happy New Year! How many times have you heard that greeting? Today is the first day of 2017, which is also in the church calendar the eighth day of Christmas, when we celebrate the circumcision and naming of Jesus. Remember our short Gospel today, Luke 2:21? (It's printed above).

Eight days. The eighth day of Christmas. What does eight days mean? According to the Law of Moses, every male child of Israel had to be circumcised eight days after his birth. Circumcision was a mark on the body that he and his children belonged to the God of Israel. Therefore, the Christ-child's parents took Him eight days after birth to be circumcised and named Jesus.

But why do we celebrate the circumcision of Jesus eight days after December 25? We do not find in Scripture the precise date of Jesus' birth. According to Luke, Jesus was born when Augustus Caesar was the Roman emperor and Quirinius was governor of Syria. But he did not note the exact date. Therefore, some people today say that the date of December 25 is unbiblical and we should not celebrate the birth of Jesus on this date. In addition, they claim December 25 was the date of the worship of pagan gods.

If the Bible does not say that Jesus was born on 25 December, why do we celebrate Christmas on this date?

Joshua 24:14 says: *"Now therefore fear the Lord and serve Him with integrity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the river and in Egypt; and serve the Lord."* The first commandment says as well, *"You shall have no other gods before Me."* It is against the will of God to worship pagan gods, and the early Christians knew this.

The Church did not develop its calendar to conform to pagan customs. A calendar is a tool to count the days, to mark the passage of time - to remember the past and anticipate the future. For the church calendar, the goals are to remember the wonderful deeds of the Lord and anticipate His second coming in glory.

The anchor of the church calendar is Holy Week, when Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again the third day. The Bible tells us when the events of Holy Week occurred: During the week of Passover. That festival is the celebration of the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt by Moses as God's instrument. Moses parted the Red Sea for the Israelites escape, but before this, by the command and power of God, he struck the Egyptians with 10 plagues. The last plague, which convinced Pharaoh to free the people, was the death of the firstborn in Egypt. However, by God's command, the Israelites sacrificed lambs and painted the doors of their homes with the blood of the lambs, and avoided this plague.

Every year since, Jews have celebrated their release at Passover time. The feast of the Passover always begins on the fifteenth day of Nisan. But the month of Nisan is not in our calendar. The Jews have their own calendar. Our calendar, the calendar most widely used in the world, is a variation of the Roman calendar, which is based on the movements of the sun. The Jewish calendar is based, on the other hand, on the movements of the moon. Therefore, days and months does not correspond exactly. Even so, the events of Holy Week are linked with the Passover, so we celebrate Easter at the same time of Passover. For us, therefore, the dates of Easter change every year.

But Holy Week is always in the spring in the northern hemisphere. For those who developed a calendar to rehearse all life and deeds of Jesus Christ in a year, it made sense to put the conception of Jesus in the same season as His death. So the day of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would conceive a child through the Holy Spirit, is March 26. Nine months after March 26 is the 25th of December.

So the church calendar that we have has no roots in the worship of other gods. The Bible does not mention the date of December 25, but does not prohibit the Christmas celebration on this date and everyone knows on December 25 as Christmas. No problem, then.

In Galatians 3:23-26, Paul speaks of Christian freedom, ²³ *Before the faith came, we were being imprisoned by the Law, locked up until the faith came, which was about to be revealed.* ²⁴ *Therefore the Law was our guardian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith.* ²⁵ *However, now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.* ²⁶ *For you are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.*”

God gave Moses the Israelites rules to live by as His people, based on the moral law. The moral law is universal and unchanging. For example, in the beginning the Lord instituted marriage, a man and a woman committed for life. Also the commandments say, “Do not steal,” “Do not kill,” etc. The Law of Moses also included rules to make the Israelites a nation worthy of receiving the Saviour of the world among them. These rules covered all aspects of life, such as the worship of God.

We are justified by faith in Christ, so we are free from the condemnation of the moral law. We are free also of the rules that were part of the covenant with Israel, because we have a new covenant in the blood of Christ, not in the blood of lambs.

Why do we not sacrifice a lamb on this altar every year like the Israelites in the Old Testament? Because the sacrifice of Christ on the cross forever satisfied the justice of God. The rules of Old Testament worship do not apply to us, because they pointed people to Christ and Christ has fulfilled the promises to Abraham, Moses and King David. We do not have to gather on Saturday, as Adventists say.

As Paul says: *“There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither slave nor free. There is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”* Christ was circumcised according to the law of Moses, because He not only fulfilled the moral law, but all the rules in our place. We are now free in the baptism of Jesus Christ. Baptism, the seal of our pact, is not only for men, but also women and anyone who believes in Christ.

We retain the customs of the ancient church, such as the date of Christmas, for good order and solidarity with past believers. Also, we obey the moral law, not by fear of the wrath of God, but by the love that God has shown us in Christ Jesus. This is our greatest gifts: the love of God, Christian freedom and the peace that passes all understanding.