

The Safety Net

National Church Growth Research Center

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"May Day"

Dear ones,

Happy May Day anyone?

Growing up in Texas I never heard of May Day. But when I came to the Northwest as a boy I heard it depicted as an innocent celebration of the first days of Spring. Kids dancing around the Maypole, flowers, songs, etc. Edna Mae knew all about it and I remember her explaining it to me. Edna Mae didn't know the whole story and it was probably best that she didn't.

But, like it or not, here we are on the first of May. I hope it is a good day for you.

In pagan Europe, instead of saying "Happy May Day" they would have said "Merry Beltane." It celebrated the first spring planting. The ancient Celts and Saxons celebrated May 1st as Beltane, the day to honor Bel, the Celtic god of the sun. They started celebrating the night before. Torch-bearing peasants would wind their way up paths to the top of tall hills or mountain crags and then ignite wooden wheels which they would roll down into the fields.

Years ago, the 4th of July was celebrated the same way on Mt. Hood. Huge brush fires were started at timberline. It must have been quite a site. The Forest Service eventually stopped it but old people still talk about it. They just think it was pretty and exciting, they don't know the pagan roots.

Going back to pagan times, another aspect of May Day was the use of masks and masquerade. Not too different than our Halloween. The night before May Day was even called the "night of the witches."

With the passing of time, and the crossing of the English Channel, the focus on witches was replaced by focusing on beauty rather than ugliness. Young women wore their best, did their best hairstyles and make-up, in hope of being crowned "Queen of the May." It probably was the first beauty pageant. Historians argue that all modern beauty pageants (including American Idol) had their beginning with looking for the Queen of the May.

With the passing of time, and not wanting to leave anyone out, the English peasants also began seeking for an exceptional young man to be named on May Day. No, he was not gay and also called "queen of the May"; he was selected to symbolize success in manly virtues. She was tied to fertility; he was tied to hunting prowess. At first he went by the name "Herne," an ancient Greek name that had to do with hunting. But the British wanted a local name and changed "Herne" to "Robin Goodfellow" (a predecessor to Robin Hood).

Both the young man and the young woman were actually fertility symbols: one having to do with the fields and the other the forests.

With all these changes, the Catholic Church started to take a dim view of these celebrations. So the Catholic Church outlawed the May Day and May Eve celebrations. But they continued to be quite popular throughout the Middle Ages and on into the 1700's.

The Catholic Church tried to get its people to think of Saints rather than sinners. So all the Saint holidays were encouraged to replace the May Day stuff: St Patrick's, St John's, etc. Different saints were honored by people in various professions, like St. Crispin's, who was the Saint of shoemakers.

But some May Day celebrations continued; parades got bigger by adding floats and bands. But the celebrations began to focus more on craftsmen, and guilds, and working people of all sorts – production of another sort. In Canada, Dominion Day came to be so celebrated, and in America the 4th of July.

Our modern celebration of May Day as a working class holiday evolved from the struggle for the eight-hour workday in 1886. On May 1 of that year there were national strikes in the United States and Canada demanding the eight-hour workday. The Knights of Labor sponsored it in both countries.

In Chicago there were riots in which the police killed several demonstrators. That led to more riots on the next day in the Haymarket in which several more were killed and several buildings bombed. The so-called perpetrators were tried, convicted, and executed by Illinois officials. Thus encouraging the movement rather than stopping it.

Three years later in Paris, those killed in the Chicago riots and those executed by the courts were declared to be martyrs by the International Working Men's Association. Remembering them was called "May Day." So May Day was on again, and associated once more with the working people. In the late 1890's, Marx and Lenin called for the workers of the world to unite and let May Day be their holiday to build support.

For the next seventy years communism would champion May Day. In 1932 Alexander Trachtenberg published a 25-page tract about the origins of May Day. Any history buffs that might want to read it can still find it online at <http://marxists.org>. Many of us can remember seeing the news footage from Moscow of those miles and miles of parading troops and tanks and missiles. You can see the same footage from Red China today.

So May Day has some political overtones. It has also been tied to woman's suffrage, labor unions in general, and other labor issues.

Through the years, May Day, worldwide, has had much more to do with Labor than the Labor Day that we observe in this country in September.

So . . . where am I going with all this?

It may be easier to tell you where I'm NOT going.

Let me give you eight aspects of May Day that I'll NOT celebrate.

1. I'm not for communism, nor building up armaments in general.
2. I'm not into Celtic religion.
3. I'm not into witches, scary costumes, now, or any other time of the year.
4. I'm certainly not a sun worshipper of Bel, Ra, or even Coppertone. (I have a tendency toward skin cancers.)
5. I haven't participated in any riots lately, in Chicago or elsewhere.
6. I have not danced around any poles of any kind.
7. Lenin and Marx are not, and never have been, my heroes.
8. And finally, even though I might personally favor the eight-hour workday, I have never practiced it, nor know any preacher who has.

People in Biblical times got really caught up into "days." In Romans 14:5 the apostle Paul said, "*Some judge one day to be better than another, while others judge all days to be alike.*" Let's assume, for arguments sake, that he was including May Day in that statement. I don't think he was, but let's consider that.

So, some dance around the May pole, and some don't. Some parade through the streets and some don't. Some make political speeches and some don't. Some even riot and some don't. Each of us has our own view and practice.

I know what you're thinking. . . you're thinking, "this is ridiculous, why am I even reading it?"

Well, if you're thinking that, I don't blame you.

It IS ridiculous.

But some people think that I'm not a Christian because I go to church on Sunday rather than Saturday.

Still others think people are not Christians who DO go to church on Saturday!

There's been a whole riot caused in my fellowship in recent days because some churches are beginning to have Saturday night services in addition to Sunday morning. Frankly, I have an idea that early Christians assembled every day. And had communion also!

But that's another matter.

I'm not going to say much more. Why? Because Paul spoke to it in Romans 14 better than I ever could. Keep reading at verse 6 through verse 13.

"Those who observe the day, observe it in honor of the Lord. And those who eat, eat in honor of the Lord, since they give thanks to God; while those who abstain, abstain in honor of the Lord and give thanks to God. We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Why do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or why do you despise your brother or sister? For we all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, 'As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall give praise to God.' So then, each of us will be accountable to God.

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another."

What I get out of this is that God INSISTS on being Lord. And He will flatten anyone who doesn't recognize His lordship. Frankly, I'd rather flatten myself by dropping to my knees, than stand up smugly and be knocked flat on my back by an offended Lord.

I wonder if any churches have ever split over May Day?

I hope not. But they have split over Sunday, Saturday, Christmas, Easter, and Halloween.

Anybody want to lead the split over May Day? Where are guys like Lenin and Marx when you need 'em!

Even though it's May Day today, it looks like a beautiful day to me. I'm faced with all kinds of opportunity. I think I'll begin, down on my knees, worshipping God and taking communion, even though it's Tuesday.

Yours in Christ,

Silas Shotwell