



Resolutions Worth Keeping

by Chris Armstrong

Like other Christian festivals, the celebration of New Years Day in the West started before the church came into existence. At first, **the Romans celebrated the beginning of the new year on March 1st, not January 1st.** Julius Caesar instituted New Year's Day on January 1 to honor Janus, the two-faced god who looks backwards into the old year and forwards into the new. The custom of "**New Years resolutions**" began in this earliest period, as the Romans made resolutions with a moral flavor: mostly to be good to others.

When Rome took on Christianity as its official faith, the Christians kept New Years Day. Only, they traded the vaguely moral emphasis for a practice of fasting and prayer aimed at living the New Year in the New Life of Christ. Soon, however, the new year celebration reverted to March 1, and this early emphasis on spiritual things dissolved.

Or rather, it shifted to a new celebration on January 1st. Beginning in the middle of the sixth century, parts of the church began to set aside January 1st as the **Feast of the Circumcision**, commemorating Jesus' circumcision. As with other Jewish boy babies, Jesus was circumcised eight days after his birth (**Luke 2:21**, "when eight days were accomplished").

But the pagans had apparently spoiled January 1st for many Christians: the Roman church did not accept this feast day until the 11th century.

It was finally in 1752, when Britain and its possessions adopted the Gregorian calendar, that January 1st again came to be recognized and celebrated as the first day of the year.

Some Christians, however, still hesitated to celebrate the day. **The Puritans**, for example, were leery of the associations of January 1st with the pagan god Janus—they preferred not even to say the name of the month, referring to it rather as "First Month." And of course they stood against the dissipations usually indulged during the celebration.

Instead, the **Puritans** urged their young people, especially, to skip the revelry and meditate on the year past and the year to come. Always ready to introspect—in famously excruciating detail—**they adopted again the old custom of making resolutions.** They vowed to take more care against their

besetting sins, make better use of their talents and other divine gifts, and treat others with Christian charity.

Today, some Christians may be inclined to follow the Puritans' lead, at least absenting themselves from the festivities: January 1st has clearly continued to be a day dedicated more to godless indulgence than to meditative fasting. But many have also seen, as the Puritans did, a divine opportunity in the longstanding practice of making resolutions.

In fact, this practice even harmonizes with **the Feast Day: circumcision is a symbol of sanctification—that is, the "setting aside" of persons and things for God's purposes.**

With or without such historical understandings, many of us may have taken New Years Eve and New Years Day as God-given opportunities. We have taken at least a few minutes to reflect, pray, and dedicate ourselves anew to our Lord—whether at a "Watch Night Service" or in private, with pen and journal (or word processor) in hand.

If you are one of these, you may wish to extend your meditations this week by reviewing a very famous list of Resolutions. This is the list created by the American Puritan divine [Jonathan Edwards](#). He penned them, not on a single New Years' Day, but throughout two pivotal years after his graduation from Yale, during which he entered his first pastorate, in Northampton, Massachusetts.

During these years, Edwards intensely considered his spiritual state and devised ways he could improve himself as a Christian. The resulting list of resolutions reminded him to dwell each day on his own death and eternal destiny and to bring his every emotion, thought, and action in line with the Word of God:

"48. Resolved, constantly, with the utmost niceness and diligence, and the strictest scrutiny, to be looking into the state of my soul, that I may know whether I have truly an interest in Christ or no; that when I come to die, I may not have any negligence respecting this to repent of."

Though I sometimes find the Puritans scary in their spiritual intensity and wonder if their strict practices sometimes erred on the side of works-righteousness, I always find this list of Edwards's not only challenging but inspiring. I am sure that, like New Years resolution-makers throughout history, he often failed to come up to the grand aspirations enshrined in these resolutions. But I also suspect he benefited greatly from the exercise of writing them and trying to live by them.

To read Edwards's full list of resolutions, click [here](#).