

Q. Should Christians Celebrate Easter?

A. Each year, millions of people observe Easter. They believe they are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Probably few wonder whether the Bible tells them to do so or even whether the Bible approves the celebration. I will answer the question as briefly as possible.

1. Easter is not the day Jesus was resurrected. In A.D. 325, the First Council of Nicaea was convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine I. Among many other matters, this council decided that Easter would no longer be calculated using the Jewish calendar, but would be calculated independently. That decision virtually guaranteed that Easter would never fall on the day of Jesus' resurrection. Various controversies and settlements arose through the centuries that followed. Things seemed to have settled down when, in 1582, the western Catholic Church adopted the Gregorian calendar while the Eastern Orthodox and most Oriental Orthodox Churches continued using the Julian calendar. This means that, in most years, these churches observe Easter on different days. Non-Catholics should note that, by celebrating Easter, they are following the authority of either the Catholic or the Orthodox churches. Protestants and Baptists say that they follow Scripture alone. If they are going to be consistent with that, then they have no reason to celebrate Easter.

2. The Bible never says to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ *with a day*. It says that we show the Lord's *death* until He comes every time we partake of the Lord's Supper: "For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Notice that this instruction says, "as often." What it means is that the Bible does not tell us to eat the Lord's Supper on a particular day. Nevertheless, it gives us this teaching to remember the Lord's death. But you will search in vain for any instruction to celebrate any day to commemorate His resurrection.

3. The New Testament never tells Christians to celebrate any days, and, in fact, specifically tells Christians that the keeping of days for

religious reasons runs contrary to the Gospel of grace. Under the Old Covenant, God instituted the observing of new moons, holy days, and Sabbaths for the Israelites to observe (see Leviticus 23; new moon observation is implied in Numbers 28:11, "the beginnings of your months"). Their observing these days was part of the types and shadows of the Old Covenant that also included the sacrifices, the dietary laws, and so forth. With Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Covenant and institution of the New Covenant, these things have passed away. Jesus Christ is the reality that these shadows pointed to.

Colossians 2:16-17 teaches, "Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: Which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ." In other words, Jesus Christ is the body that was casting the shadows that only roughly pictured His incarnation and work on the earth. Now that we have the reality of His coming, there is no longer a need for the shadows. Now that the true substance of what these things pictured has come, the shadows have passed away. While Colossians 2:16-17 is specifically addressing the days God instituted in the Old Testament, the principle of this Scripture has broader application. It is simply not possible for there to any longer be a need to keep days.

This is brought out further in Galatians, beginning with chapter 4, verse 9: "But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage?" The Galatians had been pagans. They had never been under the Old Covenant law. They were only now, under the influence of Jewish legalists (Judaizers), starting for the first time to turn to the law. Yet Paul says they were *returning* to the "weak and beggarly elements." This can only mean that Paul was putting the Old Testament laws—including, as we will immediately see, the laws that deal with the keeping of days—in the same category as the pagan rules and regulations the Galatians had once been under.

"Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of [for] you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain" (4:10–11). The Galatians were turning to the keeping of days. Paul, saying he was afraid for them because they were starting to keep days, indicated that his labors in preaching the Gospel of grace to them might have been in vain. Why? Because keeping days for religious reasons, whether they are the days prescribed in the Old Testament or any others, is contrary to the grace of the New Covenant. Paul saw their turning to the keeping of days as a possible symptom of a turning from grace.

Of course, you might counter this argument by saying that you do not keep Easter to earn salvation or gain merit with God. You are simply showing your joy over the resurrection of Christ. My answer is, Why do you pick one day out of the entire year to do so? Our entire Christian life is to be a celebration of Jesus' resurrection. By our baptism, we show that we died and were buried with Christ and, like Him, we were raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father to walk in newness of life (see Ephesians 2:4-6; Colossians 2:12-13; 3:1; Romans 6). Absolutely nothing in the Bible tells us to celebrate Jesus' resurrection on only one day of the year. So, why do you put yourself under the ordinances of men and limit yourself to only one day of the year? (see Colossians 2:20-23).

4. Much that is associated with celebrating Easter—including its name—is derived from paganism. Many say that when they use the name Easter, they are not thinking of the Germanic pagan goddess Eostur. When they dye eggs and give their children chocolate bunnies, they are not thinking of fertility rites. The problem is that all these activities have become associated with Christianity in the popular mind.

I recently received an email from the American Family Association. This association claims that its mission is "... to strengthen the moral foundations of American culture, and give aid to the church here and abroad in its task of fulfilling the Great Commission" (<http://www.afa.net/Detail.aspx?id=31>). Yet, in this email, the American Family Association was asking the trustees of Munson Township, Ohio, to reverse their decision to not use the word "Easter" in the community's annual egg hunt. Now think about this. A group whose mission is to aid the church in fulfilling the Great Commission is asking its followers to tell a township in Ohio to put "Easter" back in their egg hunt. But, as we have seen, Easter is a pagan word, and egg hunts are based on pagan fertility practices. None of this has anything to do with Christianity or the Great Commission. It would seem that the American Family Association has become so confused by the common, pagan-derived practices of Easter, that it really believes that it is somehow defending Christianity by preserving the use of the word Easter for an egg hunt. And that is the danger.

When we participate in pagan or any non-Christian celebrations thinking that we are observing them for Christian reasons, we run the risk of losing our focus, taking our eyes off Jesus Christ, and forgetting the truth. We forget what is important. Not only that, but we become a

terrible witness. We confuse unbelievers by giving them the impression that such things as Easter egg hunts are an important part of Christianity. Thus, we give a completely wrong idea of Christianity, which is another way of saying that we are preaching a false gospel. If we are going to call ourselves Christians, we should educate ourselves about what that really means and stop settling for popular counterfeits.

Nevertheless, with all of this in mind, I will also point out the principle I explain in my article, "Should Christians Keep Christmas?" Refusing to have absolutely anything to do with Easter can also unnecessarily separate us from loved ones and make us a bad witness. My wife and I do not keep Easter. Nevertheless, when extended family members invite us to a dinner on that day, we usually attend. We simply see it as a time to spend with loved ones. For us, Easter has nothing to do with it. But, if we were to know the family were planning an Easter egg hunt or something similar for the kids, we would not go (thankfully, we have not had this problem). Each Christian must decide what to do in such circumstances based on his or her particular situation, as Paul exemplifies in his writings about meat offered to idols.

Peter Ditzel