

Easter Observance And Special Services

Intro: For years the denominational world has engaged in special celebrations for “holy days” such as on Easter. The Lord’s church has historically refused to observe such “holy days.” Times have changed in the Lord’s church. Many congregations are now engaging in “Sunrise Services” on Easter.

Attitudes in the church have changed. Brian Jones reports of a survey published by Abilene Christian Press which asked the question: “Is it acceptable for a congregation to observe religious holidays like Christmas and Easter through special worship experiences?” 38% agreed with the statement while 56% disagreed (nothing is stated about the other 6%). What should our views be concerning special services to observe religious holidays like Easter?

I. AUTHORITY.

A. We must have authority for all we do: religiously or otherwise.

1. Col. 3:17 “And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”
2. “In the name of” is a statement of authority.
 - a. The sanhedrin wanted to know by what authority the apostles had healed the lame man and preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead; Acts 4:7 “And when they had set them in the midst, they asked, By what power, or by what name, have ye done this?”
 - b. To do something in the name of someone is to do it by their authority.
 - c. A power of attorney gives the attorney the right to operate in the name of that person.
 - d. If a policeman orders someone to stop in the name of the law, he is ordering him to stop by the authority of the law.
3. To be pleasing to God, everything one does must be done by the authority of Jesus.

B. Authority originates from either God or man.

1. Mat. 21:23-25 “And when he was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said, By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority? ²⁴And Jesus answered and said unto them, I also will ask you one thing, which if ye tell me, I in like wise will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him?
 - a. The baptism of John either had the authority of God or man.
 - b. The chief priest and elders realized the truthfulness of this; Mat. 21:25-26 “The baptism of John, whence was it? from heaven, or of men? And they reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? ²⁶But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.”
 - c. If authority originated from someplace else, the would have given it as the answer; Mat. 21:27 “And they answered Jesus, and said, We cannot tell. And he said unto them, Neither tell I you by what authority I do these things.
2. If our authority does not come from God, then it comes from man.
 - a. If our authority comes from man; Mat. 15:9 “But in vain they do worship me, teaching *for* doctrines the commandments of men.”
 - b. If we have authority from God, we please God; if not then we sin.

- C. Authorization comes in one of three ways.
1. Direct statements.
 - a. There are 11 different types based on the Greek New Testament.
 2. Examples.
 - a. These are accounts of action which constitute a pattern we must follow.
 - b. An account of an action constitutes an example that we **must** follow when we find the church with general apostolic approval and teaching (authority) practicing whatever it may be that is right within itself and essential to Christianity.
 - c. Roy Deaver wrote, "Determining when the account of an action constitutes an example requires (1) application of the principles of Biblical **hermeneutics**, (2) application of the principles of **logic**, and (3) due consideration of the **totality** of the Bible teaching with regard to the subject at hand."
 3. Implication.
 - a. Something not directly stated but is when an action, fact, or teaching is absolutely demanded by the statements found within God's Word.
 - b. Geometry example: a square where one side is 4 inches.
 - (1) We now know many things (implied):
 - (2) the perimeter is 16 inches.
 - (3) the area is 16 square inches.
 - (4) there are 4 right angles (90 degrees), etc.
 - c. Biblical example: in becoming a Christian Saul of Tarsus repented of his sins:
 - (1) The Bible never states that Saul repented.
 - (2) The Bible does teach that to become a Christian one must repent of his sins.
 - (a) Luke 13:3 "I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish."
 - (b) Luke 24:46-47 "And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: ⁴⁷And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem."
 - (c) Acts 2:38 "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."
 - (d) Acts 22:16 "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord."
 - (3) Saul became a Christian.
 - (4) Thus, not directly stated we still know Saul repented.
 - d. Those things implied by the Bible are just as true and binding as those explicit statements of the Bible.

II. BIBLE AUTHORITY FOR OBSERVANCE.

- A. There is no Bible authority for special services for the observance of Easter.
1. There are no direct statements.
 2. There are no examples.
 3. There are no implications.

B. Objections.

1. Easter is found in the Bible; Acts 12:4 “And when he [Herod the king] had apprehended him, he put *him* in prison, and delivered *him* to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.”
 - a. Note:
 - b. This is a Jewish feast, not a Christian observance.
 - (1) Thus it is not something we would observe today since the Old Testament with all its observances have been taken way in Christ.
 - (a) Mat. 5:17-18 “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. ¹⁸For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”
 - (b) Eph. 2:15 “Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, *even* the law of commandments *contained* in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, *so* making peace;”
 - (c) Col. 2:14 “Blotting out the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross;”
 - (d) Heb. 10:9 “Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.”
 - (2) The Jews would not have been observing the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ.
 - c. The King James Version mistranslated the word.
 - (1) It is the Greek παῆσχα (*pascha*) and means Passover.
 - (2) All other translations I have access to:
 - (a) KJV is the only one which uses “Easter.”
 - (b) Others use either feast of (days of) Unleaven Bread or Passover.
 - (3) Possible reasons they used Easter.
 - (a) Adam Clarke suggested they were following “*Tindal, Coverdale, Becke, and Cardmarden*, following the old Saxon mode of translation, insert *Easter*.”
 - (b) Simply trying to give people an understanding of the time of the year.
 - i) Very few would know when Passover was.
 - ii) Just about all know when Easter is.
 - d. This passage offers no help for special services for Easter.
2. The idea of Easter is in the Bible.
 - a. They would try and parallel this to God’s providence.
 - (1) “Providence” is not used in the Bible with reference to God.
 - (2) The idea is throughout the Bible.
 - b. They would argue: The death and resurrection of Jesus is recorded and since the Bible records it, the Bible authorizes our observance of it.
3. What’s wrong with having special services for Easter?
 - a. This goes to the idea that the Bible does not say not to do them.
 - b. Authority and silence.
 - (1) Does the silence of the Scriptures authorize or prohibit?
 - (2) Roy Deaver wrote, “The Bible authorizes by what it says—not by what it does not say!”

- (3) This principle is seen in God's Word: 2 examples.
 - (a) Heb. 1:5 "For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?"
 - i) Proves the supremacy of Jesus over the angels.
 - ii) The Father did not say this to any angel (silence).
 - iii) No angel is His Son.
 - (b) Heb. 7:14 "For *it is* evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood."
 - i) The Law of Moses has been taken away proves that the priesthood must also be changed.
 - ii) Priesthood must have changed for Christ to be a priest.
 - iii) God only authorized priest from the tribe of Levi.
 - iv) Moses spake nothing concerning priest from any other tribe (silence).
 - v) The silence prohibited not authorized or permitted.
- (4) The Scriptures do not authorize the observance of Easter, thus they are prohibited.

C. What is their origin?

III. EASTER.

A. Events associated with Easter.

1. Easter is a celebration of the resurrection of Christ from the dead.
2. Lent
 - a. Forty day period excluding Sundays prior to Easter.
 - b. It begins with Ash Wednesday and ends at Holy Saturday.
 - c. K. W. Osbeck wrote, "The Lenten period should result in a spiritual self-examination and in rededicated living for each devout believer, preparing us for the celebration of our risen Lord."
3. Ash Wednesday
 - a. Ashes are placed on the forehead (usually in the sign of a cross)
 - b. It is to remind people that man is but dust and that the *faithful* must do penance.
 - c. Ash Wednesday is observed on the seventh Wednesday before Easter.
4. Holy Saturday: the day before Easter.
5. Passion Sunday, Palm Sunday
 - a. Achtemeir (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*) wrote, "Passion Sunday, in the liturgical year the second Sunday prior to Easter and the Sunday that begins the Lenten season of Passiontide. With the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the period of Lent was simplified, for the Roman Catholic church, and the Sunday prior to Easter, formerly known as Palm Sunday, was renamed Passion Sunday. Other churches have also made this change, and on occasion both names are retained as Passion Sunday (Palm Sunday), or Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday."

- b. Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter
 - (1) Observes the Lord's triumphal entry into Jerusalem
 - (a) Jews took branches of palm trees laid them in his path and cried Hosanna: Blessed *is* the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord.
 - (b) John 12:12-13 "On the next day much people that were come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, ¹³Took branches of palm trees, and went forth to meet him, and cried, Hosanna: Blessed *is* the King of Israel that cometh in the name of the Lord."
 - (2) With Palm Sunday we then have the beginning of Holy Week
- 6. During Holy Week
 - a. Holy or Maundy Thursday.
 - (1) Memory of the last supper Jesus ate with His apostles.
 - (2) Achtemeir (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*) points out, "'Maundy' comes from Latin 'mandatum (novum),' the words in John 13:34 (Vg) used in the service of foot washing observed in the Catholic Church on the Thursday before Easter."
 - b. Good Friday, memorializes Jesus' crucifixion.
- 7. Mardi Gras.
 - a. It means "Fat Tuesday."
 - b. Comes before Ash Wednesday (which is a period of sacrifice).
 - c. A day of fleshly satisfaction before giving up their luxuries.
 - d. It derived its name from the custom of leading a fat ox in a procession in celebration of the day.
- B. There is nothing of these things mentioned in the Bible as something we observe today.
 - 1. James Orr (*ISBE*) wrote, "There is no trace of Easter celebration in the New Testament."
 - 2. As such, we have no authority for observing these religiously.
- C. When should Easter be observed?
 - 1. There was extensive disagreement on this for centuries.
 - 2. Early Jewish "Christians" observed it on the specific date of Nisan 14: same as the Jewish Passover.
 - 3. Gentile "Christians" celebrated it on Sunday regardless of what day of the month it fell on.
 - a. As time passed more tended to observe it on Sunday instead of Nisan 14.
 - b. The Nicean Council (a.d. 325) determined Sunday should be the day.
 - 4. However, which Sunday?
 - a. No set Sunday was set and it was left to the bishop of the Alexandrian Church to determine the date each year.
 - b. Bromiley (*ISBE*) wrote, "By the 7th cent the practice of the Church had become reasonably uniform. The time agreed upon was the first Sunday following the full moon that comes on or after the vernal equinox. The date of the equinox was set at Mar. 21. This allowed for a variation in Easter dates from Mar. 22 to Apr. 25. The uniformity of practice which prevailed for a number of centuries was again disturbed for a time with the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1582."

- D. Origin of the term Easter.
1. There does not seem to be a consensus on the term's origin.
 2. Vine says "The term Easter is not of Christian origin. It is another form of *Astarte*, one of the titles of the Chaldean goddess, the queen of heaven."
 3. Easton says, "Originally a Saxon word (Eostre), denoting a goddess of the Saxons, in honour of whom sacrifices were offered about the time of the Passover. Hence the name came to be given to the festival of the Resurrection of Christ, which occurred at the time of the Passover."
 4. Achtemeir (*Harper's Bible Dictionary*), and most others, basically agrees with Easton by saying, "The name 'Easter' derives from the Anglo-Saxon goddess of Spring (Eostre or Ostara)."
 5. *Easter* is not a Bible term and originally had nothing to do with the Bible.
- E. Origin of Easter.
1. In the origin of the term *Easter* we find the origin of the celebration of Easter.
 2. Easter was a pagan festival held in the honor of the goddess of Spring, Eostre.
 - a. Vine sums it up by saying that Easter "was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt Pagan festivals to Christianity."
 - b. James Orr indicates how the Catholic Church was able to bring the pagan festivals into *Christianity* when he adds, "The Jewish Christians in the early church continued to celebrate the Passover, regarding Christ as the true paschal lamb, and this naturally passed over into a commemoration of the death and resurrection of our Lord, or an Easter feast."
 3. Thus, the origin of the Easter celebration was a combination of paganism and Judaism.
 4. Regarding Eostre (the goddess of Spring), since Spring was a time to celebrate the breath of new existence, there came an association with some other things:
 - a. Easter eggs symbolized new life.
 - b. Bunny rabbits who are prolific in reproducing represented fertility.
- F. Christians are commanded to observe Christ death.
1. The weekly observance of the Lord's Supper.
 2. It is to be observed on Sunday of every week.
 - a. Acts 20:7 "And upon the first *day* of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight."
 - b. 1 Cor 11:17-34
 3. Let us shun the apostate world and do what God commands.

IV. WHY THE DESIRE TO HAVE SPECIAL SERVICES?

- A. To be like the other denominations.
1. 1 Kin. 8:4-5, 19-20 "Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, ⁵And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations....¹⁹Nevertheless the people refused to obey the voice of Samuel; and they said, Nay; but we will have a king over us; ²⁰That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles."
 2. The Lord's church is not a denomination.
 - a. When we add things to God's Word and the worship we become a denomination.

- b. Just because there is a sign on the door that says “church of Christ” does not mean that it is a church of Christ (the Lord’s church).
- B. It is sinful to fellowship denominations.
 - 1. Eph. 5:11 “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove *them*.”
 - 2. 2 John 9-11 “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into *your* house, neither bid him God speed: ¹¹For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”

V. NON-RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE.

- A. They have lost much of their religious significance, but culturally important.
- B. There is no sin in observing secular holidays (Independence Day, Thanksgiving, etc.).
 - 1. As long as no moral wrong is involved.
 - 2. As long as no religious significance is attached.
- C. Can we consider Easter in a secular way?
 - 1. If so, there would be no sin involved.
 - 2. Guy N. Woods speaking specifically concerning Christmas points out, “The argument, that Christmas (Christ’s + Mass), is of Catholic origin, and that the use of the term perpetuates the errors of this ecclesiasticism, lacks merit, for two reasons: (1) the word no longer conveys its exclusive earlier meaning, signifying to many of us no more than a holiday; (2) it is inconsistent to offer this objection and to refuse to use the word Christmas, because of its origin, while using, without question, many others of similar objectionable *origin*, but which have also undergone modification but no longer convey an improper sense. Sunday derives from *sacred* day of the sun; Monday, *sacred* day of the moon; Wednesday, ‘Wooden’s Day,’ (Wooden was one of the chief idols of mythology); Thursday designates the day of the war god, Thor; and Saturday comes from Saturn, the ancient god of seed sowing. To us the days of the week bear no resemblance to earlier usage and we use them in harmony with their meaning to us and not to others. Similarly, *Christmas* is not a ‘mass of Christ,’ but a day of joy, gladness, and warmth when friends and loved ones take occasion to meet and mingle, exchange gifts and good wishes, and relax in a season of happiness and good will.”
 - 3. To those who believe it is wrong:
 - a. Do you take the day off from your job, and with pay?
 - b. By taking the day off you enjoy the benefits of this holiday celebrating it to that extent.
- D. One cannot violate his conscience in this.
 - 1. If one cannot celebrate these days in a non-religious way, he should abstain from such.
 - 2. Rom. 14:23 “And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because *he eateth* not of faith: for whatsoever *is* not of faith is sin.”
- E. There is no authority for celebrating it religiously.
 - 1. Easter as the resurrection of Christ.
 - 2. We should enjoy the generosity, family togetherness and other aspects of the season, yet without placing upon it any religious connotation.

Conclusion: Christians walk by faith; 2 Cor. 5:7 “(For we walk by faith, not by sight:)” Faith comes by hearing God’s Word; Rom. 10:17 “So then faith *cometh* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” If there is nothing in God’s Word about something, then we cannot do such and walk by faith. There is nothing in the Bible about the observance of Easter in Christian worship, thus Christians cannot engage in a religious observance of it and walk by faith. Thus, let there be no special services for Easter among us: there will be no such thing among God’s people.