Confusion Over ‘Easter’

ACTS 12:4

‘And when he 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.’ Acts 12:4
‘Confusion over Easter’

‘Easter’ Sunday is being celebrated by widely in different ‘Christian’ denominations throughout the Western World, but, although ‘Easter Eggs’ are on sale even before the ‘Christmas Trees’ had been dismantled and the remains of the turkey had been disposed of, ‘Easter’ will once again pass off with little notice being paid to it by society at large.

After the merry Ho! Ho! Ho! of the commercially exploited ‘Christmas Holiday’, the ingenious devisers of commercial advertising-campaigns have not yet managed to invent a way of ‘selling’ ‘Easter’ to a population which appears to be becoming more and more irreligious. I suppose that the business-world’s marketing-managers find it far easier to deal with a Baby in a Manger, than with a Man on a Cross.

This doesn’t surprise me at all, because the Easter period, in which the crucifixion of Jesus is central, reminds us grimly of the terrible consequences of sin, and what it has cost to make salvation possible. Indeed, some calendars and diaries don’t even mark the day, although I must say that, whilst the diary I am using at the present time makes no mention of ‘Easter Sunday’. It does tell me that ‘Easter Monday’ is a Bank Holiday! But ‘Easter’ will no doubt remain on the religious calendar, and, therefore, I think its worthwhile sharing a few thoughts on the topic.

What does the New Testament tell us about ‘Easter’, and, should Christians celebrate it? Well, the simple answer is, the New Testament tells us nothing at all about an annual celebration of ‘Easter’. In fact, the only place where the word ‘Easter’ can be found in the New Testament Scriptures is in the ‘Authorized’, or ‘King James’, version of Acts 12:4, where it shouldn’t even be, because it’s a mistranslation of the Greek word ‘Pascha’, which, in all later revisions, is correctly rendered ‘Passover’.

Acts 12:4 ‘And when he 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.’

To put that in its context, Acts 12 records that king Herod Agrippa 2nd, the grandson of the Herod who killed the babies after the birth of Jesus, had already executed James, the brother of John, and, because he saw that it pleased the people, he imprisoned Peter, intending after ‘the feast’ to put him to death also. That ‘feast’ was the Jewish Passover, and the word used is the word ‘Pascha’, and is a very plain reference to the Jewish Passover feast and has nothing whatsoever to do with the ‘Easter’ celebrated by denominational churches today.

Easter’s origin

Indeed, the origin of ‘Easter’ has remained a debating point for centuries. It’s generally believed that William Tyndale was the first to use the word in his English Translation of 1525, but, much earlier than this, ‘the Venerable Bede’, who is remembered as a great theologian and historian, and who was born in 673 A.D., offered what is still the most likely explanation when he claims the word is of pagan origin.

This man was a remarkable scholar who knew Greek, Latin and Hebrew, whose greatest work was his ‘ecclesiastical history of the English people’. The original was written in Latin, but translated into Anglo-Saxon at the request of king Alfred. Bede declared that the word is derived from ‘Eastre’, which was the name of an early, now-forgotten pagan ‘Dawn goddess.’

And there is good reason to believe that he was correct, because even the Roman Catholic Church admits this non-Christian origin, when it states. In the catholic encyclopaedic dictionary, that the familiar ‘Easter Eggs’, ‘may possibly be a ‘baptized’ pagan custom; because they are ‘an obvious symbol of fertility’ connected with the worship of this pagan goddess.

These admissions, however, have not lead the church of Rome to reject either Easter or Easter Eggs, because, although it also declares that, ‘Chocolate eggs and such like fooleries are a degeneration of no significance, it speaks approvingly of the bringing of baskets of eggs to church for a blessing, before or after Mass.’

The historic truth is that when, early in the 300’s, when Constantine, called The Great, was preparing to battle for the throne of the Roman Empire, he had the vision of a blazing cross, inscribed with words which may be translated as, ‘In This, Conquer’, which he took to be a message from the God whom his mother Helene worshipped. After he had won that battle, the Battle of Milvian Bridge, outside of Rome, later in 324 A.D. Constantine granted the Christians, who had formerly been persecuted because they refused to honour the gods of Rome, the full privileges of citizenship.
He went farther and banned Paganism and decreed that Christianity, his mother Helene's religion, should be recognised as the official religion of his Empire. He later took even more drastic action and commanded that all pagan temples and the images of the pagan gods and 'holy pictures' they contained, should be handed over to the church of Rome. Whereupon, at the Council of Nicea, in 325 A.D., the church rulers quickly set about the task of giving the names of 'Saints' to the pictures and statues of pagan deities, in a movement which has been described as 'baptizing' or 'Christianising'.

Both the pagan gods and the festivals which the citizenship had enjoyed were banned, but, in what can only be described as a diplomatic move, because to ban the festivals and deprive the pagans of their 'holy-days' we speak of holidays! would have resulted in public unrest, after fairly minor changes were made, pagan festivals became Christian festivals, and in this way, the festival honouring Eastre, the goddess of the Dawn, became Easter, and declared to 'represent the birth of new life', and 'the memorial of the death, burial and rising again, of the Lord Jesus'. And this is the church which officially declared that 'Easter Eggs' are a baptized pagan custom!

Incidentally, we may mention that although Constantine is usually described as 'The First Christian Roman Emperor', the fact is that he wasn’t ‘baptized’ until he was on his death-bed, when it was considered impossible to baptise him in the proper manner, by immersion; instead, they poured water on him as he lay in bed and called it a baptism.

He was 63 years old when he died, about 40 years after he began to favour Christianity whilst not really having obeyed the Gospel. The church of Rome doesn’t recognize him as a ‘full Christian’, but describes him as a ‘catechumen’, which it defines as ‘an unbaptized adult under instruction’.

We also have trouble with the date!
For almost the first three centuries, Christians didn’t know any sort of annual observance of the Lord’s death and resurrection, but, having created this new festival, the Roman Church authorities then had to decide on a date for its celebration, and it was the same council of Nicea, in 325 A.D., that settled the matter.

The Council ruled that ‘Easter Sunday’ should be designated ‘the day of the Lord’s resurrection’, and celebrated on ‘The first Sunday after the Full Moon occurring on, or near to, March 21st’. In other words, the full moon after the vernal, spring, equinox. As a result of this ruling, ‘Easter’ became a ‘moveable feast’, which can occur between March 22nd and April 25th, both dates included.

For example, this year ‘Easter Sunday’ happens to fall on April 8th. But last year, it was April 17th. This ruling brought ‘Easter’ into line with the Jewish Passover, which is celebrated on the 15th of Nisan, the first month in the Jewish religious calendar, the month which corresponds to our March-April. There is always a full-moon at Passover-time, and Jewish Christians had no problem with the date. They knew that this was the time when Jesus was arrested, tried, crucified, buried and raised from the dead.

Conflict of calendars
However, the Nicean Council’s decision created a problem which was neither appreciated nor accepted by many of the divisions of the Christian world outside of Italy, because churches in different parts of the ancient world used different calendars.

For example, since the establishment of the church in Jerusalem, history records that believers outside of Italy have used different calendars. There have been:
1. The Armenian calendar, which still celebrate ‘Christmas’ on January 6th.
2. The Byzantine calendar, according to which the year begins on September 1st.
3. The Coptic, Syrian, Chaldean, Julian and the Gregorian calendar, authorised, as the name reveals, by Pope Gregory, which we have followed in the West since 1582, although, oddly enough, we still follow the Julian calendar for income tax returns and national accounts, which are made up on April 5th.

Furthermore, there is another complication, because the Jewish year runs according to two calendars. The older Jewish civic year has a calendar which begins with the month called Tishri but they also have a calendar for the
religious year, which, according to Exodus 12:2, and at the command of God, was adopted in the time of Moses and which begins with the month of Nisan.

Exodus 12 states, ‘In the FIRST MONTH, - (Nisan) - on the fourteenth day of the month in the evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the 21st day of the same month in the evening’. Commenting on this passage, the Jewish historian, Arthur Hertzberg, tells us that ‘Passover begins on the 15th of Nisan’. The 14th of Nisan, in the evening, is when the Passover Meal is eaten, followed by the Passover’s seven days of unleavened bread You will remember that Matthew 26:2 records the words of Jesus spoken to His apostles. ‘You know that after two days is the Passover, and the Son of man is betrayed to be crucified’.

Now go back to Exodus 12, where we read that the Passover lamb was killed and its blood applied to the doorposts and lintel of each house, and the people made themselves ready for departure, and ate the roast lamb, as part of the special meal commanded by God. It was then, after God, not ‘the Angel of Death’! had passed over Egypt, that, having been saved by the blood of the Passover lamb, they left Egypt and entered upon their freedom.

It’s here that we see how and why the Lord’s death corresponds with the Passover celebration, and we are able to understand why He chose to die at that time. Paul writes, in 1 Corinthians 5:7 that ‘Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed for us’.

On the 10th day of the seventh month, Tishri, the Jews observed the Day of Atonement, ‘Yom Kippur’, the most solemn day in their religious year, when the High Priest offered a sacrifice, first for his own sins, and the sins of the priesthood, and then those of the people.

But Jesus didn’t choose to be sacrificed on the Day of Atonement, important though it was. He chose the Passover. The reason? The Day of Atonement had to be an annual event, because the people’s sins were recurrent and on the Day of Atonement there was a remembrance of sin every year. Hebrews 10:3.

The Passover, on the other hand, occurred only once - never to be repeated. ‘He appeared once, at the end of the age, to put away sin by the offering of himself’. Hebrews 9:26. And, when He had, ‘by the offering of himself, purged our sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.’ Hebrews 1:3.

‘So, Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many, and to those who look for him, he shall appear the second time, without sin, unto salvation’. Hebrews 9:28.

Over the date of the Lord’s birth there will, in this life, always remain a question mark, with a very strong case to be made against the notion that He was born on December 25th. So, if there is one good thing that ‘Easter’ does for us, it’s to remind us that we can, with accuracy, fix the time of the year when He went to the cross and when He arose from the dead.

Why did the early Christian not have an annual celebration of his death, burial and resurrection? Because they didn’t need it! They celebrated it every Lord’s Day when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper. 1 Corinthians 11:26 states ‘as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup.’

Of course, people may mistakenly suppose that we don’t care about the events that occurred at this time of the year because we don’t celebrate the Annual Easter festival but, in fact we care more about it than they do, because we recognise the supreme importance of the Lord’s resurrection from the dead.

Furthermore, unlike religious bodies who hold monthly, quarterly or annual celebrations of the Lord’s Supper, we have no need for an annual commemoration of the His atoning work.

1. We know that the resurrection of Christ from the dead is the foundation on which our faith rests. Romans 1:4 states that He ‘is declared to be the Son of God With power, by the resurrection from the dead’.

2. We know that the proclamation of His resurrection became the theme of apostolic preaching after the Church was established on the Day of Pentecost. His miracles needed no further proof, they were well known and well attested. The people needed to understand that the crowning evidence of His Sonship was His resurrection. Peter declared this fact on the Day of Pentecost.
3. We also know, as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 15 that if Christ didn’t rise from the dead:

- a. The apostles were liars!
- b. Our faith is worthless.
- c. We have no forgiveness of sins.
- d. Our Hope is vain.
- e. Our loved ones who have died have perished.
- f. We shall never see them again.

Light after light goes out and we are enshrouded with darkness! In fact, if Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, Joseph’s tomb isn’t merely the tomb of a man, it’s the tomb of a religion and all the hopes that have been built upon it.

4. But in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul exclaims, ‘But now Christ IS risen, and has become the first-fruits of those who sleep!’

5. And We know that when we meet at the Lord’s Table, week after week on His own day, and in obedience to His clear command, request, we ‘proclaim the Lord’s death, until he comes again’ 1 Corinthians 11:26.

So, ‘let us not neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.’ Hebrews 9:25. The writer of the Hebrew letter isn’t thinking of the Day of the Lord’s return, He is thinking about the coming of the ‘Lordian Day’, that is the first day of the week.

Do you want to celebrate the Lord’s death, burial and resurrection and return? Then at the Lord’s Table every Lord’s Day!