

## **A Note about Easter**

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Should we participate in Easter celebrations? What is the history of Easter and where did celebration of the day originate?

The name "Easter" never appears in the Greek New Testament. It is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *Eostre*, the name of the goddess of spring. By the 8<sup>th</sup> century this name had come to be applied to the anniversary of Christ's resurrection. With the passage of time the connection with the goddess was lost, the only remaining meaning being associated with Christ's resurrection. To ask where and when practices originated is only partially valid, for most of our practices in everyday life have antecedents in the ancient world, often from nonbelievers. Over the centuries meanings change. Even the 60-minute hour came from the pagans of ancient Babylonia, and such time calculations play a part in our worship services today as we sense the passing of time.

Easter commemorates the resurrection of Jesus. Unquestionably the resurrection was of enormous importance to the apostolic church, for it figures prominently in the evangelistic messages from the apostles as recorded in the book of Acts. No issue is made about the date when it occurred, however, other than to note in a factual manner that the resurrection occurred on the first day of the week. There is no suggestion that the resurrection made a new day holy. In the Bible is to be found only one holy day of the week, the Sabbath, formed as a part of the creation process by God Himself, and never suspended. For that reason we observe only the Sabbath as sacred or holy time.

It is to be noted that the apostolic church never gave attention to either the date of Christ's birth or the date of His resurrection, other than to note that the latter occurred on a Sunday.

Neither of these days was observed by early Christians and if our model is that of the apostolic church we will be guided by the New Testament reports. Indeed, in the third and fourth centuries a tremendous debate arose among Christian churches as to when Easter is to be observed. For the Roman Catholic branch it was largely settled at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325) with a rather artificial formula still followed to this day, which cannot possibly be commemoration of the actual resurrection. In current practice Easter always falls on a Sunday and the Sunday chosen wanders over a period of four weeks ranging from March 22-April 25. The eastern branch of Christendom selected a different system, so that in the Eastern Orthodox tradition both Christmas and Easter fall on different dates from those in the Western Catholic and Protestant tradition. The point is that the early Christians gave no attention to commemorating the resurrection day of Christ. If they had been serious they would be observing the 17th day of the Jewish month, Nisan, which begins with the first new moon following the spring solstice. Passover among the Jews begins with the 14th day of Nisan. It would not be possible to commemorate the actual day of the month and have it always on Sunday, so the choice was made to have it on Sunday, adjusting the day of the month for convenience.

Given this information, although the resurrection of Jesus is a historical event of huge importance, we have no biblical precedent for making it a special day of celebration. That came in later centuries of Christian history. For this reason Seventh-day Adventists have never given the attention to Easter that other churches do. Our interest is to return to the practices and faith of the early Christian church.

However, we live in a society saturated with celebration of Easter. To a large degree this is driven, as with Christmas, by an opportunity to sell goods to people to mark the day. Clothing, in particular, is associated with Easter, as are toys with Christmas. In an effort to convey the idea that Adventists are believers in the resurrection, a few of our people have introduced Easter observances. They are fearful we will be misunderstood, and for them it is

important that we be seen as orthodox and acceptable to the society around us. They conform to customs around us, at times unthoughtfully. Actually this practice conveys another misunderstanding — the idea that we give special significance to Sunday because it was the resurrection day. A few of our churches have introduced Sunday morning services for Easter, which for many Adventists creates problems. We recognize that we are not treating Sunday as holy time, but the public may not catch the subtle difference.

It is important that we encourage the leaders of our congregations to consider all the factors involved when they decide what to do with Easter. Several things are involved and need to be considered before making decisions. Often choices on matters such as this are made with minimal forethought. Always it is appropriate to allow the Scriptures to be our guide and to think carefully about the direction our actions will lead the church.

Although there exists no clear biblical reason for observing Easter as a religious festival, in parts of the world the public is so oriented to Easter observance that it is a time of year when they become open to special studies in the Bible. An opportunity opens to reach out to the public with the fuller message of Christ, often with good response. Under such circumstances Easter and its surrounding events can lend themselves to evangelistic outreach without, however, assigning any special religious meaning to the day itself. Wherever there is opportunity to advance the message of Christ without compromising biblical truth, the "wise as serpents, harmless as doves" counsel of Christ is appropriate.