

Why Do We Keep the Passover?

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Most Churches that claim to be Christian keep as holy days festivals that Jesus never kept. At the same time, they don't keep the holy days he did keep. One of those festivals kept by Jesus that ceased long ago to be observed within popular Christianity is the Passover. Today I want to address the question why do we — the Church of God — keep Passover? It's very important that we fully understand why we do what we do with regard to the festival called the Passover.

So why do we keep Passover and not Easter?

In this sermon I want to discuss three basic reasons. The first reason is that in keeping Passover we are following the example, teaching and command of Jesus Christ.

The most common term used in the New Testament for a follower of Jesus is *disciple*. (Greek: *mathetes*, a *learner*; from a root *math*, indicating *thought accompanied by endeavor*; see *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, p. 171). "A 'disciple' was not only a pupil, but an adherent; hence they are spoken of as imitators of their teacher..." (*Vine's*, p. 171). They were students--but more than students. They were adherents-- imitators--of their teacher. Their commitment to him was to be absolute, and they were to not just hear, but to follow his example and *abide* in his word (Luke 14:26-27; John 8:31).

Luke 22:7-19. Jesus ate the Passover, and said we are to do it in remembrance of him (verse 19).

John 13:2. He got up during supper (as in ASV, Darby's, and a number of other translations). The context shows that the supper was the Passover, a festival of God (Leviticus 23:4-5).

I Corinthians 11:23-28. Paul gives the Corinthians instructions on how to eat the "Lord's supper," the Passover, not as a riotous banquet but as a solemn remembrance of his suffering and death. This was a predominantly Gentile church.

I Corinthians 5:7. Jesus is our Passover. The lambs slain for the Old Covenant Passover were emblematic of Jesus Christ, who is referred to as the lamb numerous times in the New Testament, hearkening to the significance of the Passover sacrifice of Jesus Christ for Christians.

1 Peter 1:18-19. It is through his blood that we have been purchased, redeemed from the death penalty, that we might be saved and receive the gift of eternal life.

So following the example of Jesus Christ our savior and in obedience to his command we keep the Passover, understanding its significance as a memorial of the willing sacrifice of his life to save our lives.

A second reason we keep the Passover is because in doing so we are following the example of the apostolic, New Testament Church of God.

Ephesians 2:19-22. The Church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone. Part of our mission as a Church is to restore true apostolic Christianity. All of the original New Testament apostles followed the teachings and example of Jesus Christ in keeping the Passover. None of them kept Easter, nor would they have countenanced the idea for even an instant.

The historical record is clear on this point. The apostolic Church continued to keep the Passover annually after Jesus' death and resurrection. And it was not only Jewish Christians, but Gentiles also, who kept the Passover. Paul gave detailed instructions to the Gentile Corinthian Church regarding how to properly keep the Passover. The service he discusses in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 is the ordinance of the New Covenant Passover. In the same context, Paul wrote to the Corinthians concerning the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately follows on the heels of the Passover (1 Corinthians 5:8). "Let us keep the feast" (from *eortazo*) is in the Greek in the form of the hortatory subjunctive; it's an *exhortation* -- virtually a command -- to *keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread* with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. And this letter, I emphasize, went to *Gentile* Christians. So it's clear they kept the Passover and then the Feast of Unleavened Bread in accordance with the command in Leviticus 23:4-8, excepting the portion pertaining uniquely to the service of the physical Tabernacle. They did not offer lambs for the Passover (which could only be offered lawfully in Jerusalem at the Temple, anyway), but partook instead of the symbols of unleavened bread and wine given renewed meaning by Jesus' sacrifice.

The practice of keeping a Christian Passover on the fourteenth of Nisan continued in the east for several centuries. In the second century in the west, a growing apostasy engulfed the Church and the Sunday Easter service, adapting many pagan influences (cf. Deuteronomy 12:29-32; 1 Corinthians 10:14), supplanted the Passover. It's widely acknowledged among Bible scholars and historians that the Easter tradition was not widely practiced before the second century. "The earliest Christians celebrated the Lord's Passover at the same time as the Jews.... By the middle of the 2nd century most churches had transferred this celebration to the Sunday after the Jewish feast" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Christianity: The Church and Its History: Church Year: History of the Church Year: Easter," Multimedia Edition, 1998). "In the 2nd century, the Christian

[Passover] celebration was transferred to the Sunday following the 14-15 Nisan, if that day fell on a weekday" (*The New Grolier Multimedia Encyclopedia*, "Easter," 1993).

The Jewish-Christian leaders of Palestine kept the Passover on the 14th of Nisan until the remnants of the original apostolic Church were driven out with the other Jews after the Bar Kokhba revolt (135 A.D., cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.5). Epiphanius of Salamis, in arguing against a sect he called "Audians," wrote of them that "they choose to celebrate the Passover with the Jews," meaning not on the same day as the Jews, but once a year at the Passover season according to the Hebrew calendar. He goes on to say, "And indeed it is true that **this used to be the church's custom....**" But, he explains that confusion and disagreement over the Passover observance, "...has been the situation **ever since the church was thrown into disorder after the time of the circumcised bishops [of Jerusalem].**" In describing what transpired prior to the Jewish revolt, Epiphanius writes, "And there were altogether fifteen bishops from the circumcision. And at that time, when the circumcised bishops were consecrated at Jerusalem, it was essential that the whole world follow and celebrate with them, so that there would be one concord and agreement, the celebration of one festival" (*The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, trans. Frank Williams, vol. 2, pp. 410-412).

After the Jewish revolt the circumcised leaders at Jerusalem were replaced by apostate Christians of Gentile origin who rejected the Passover, substituting the "Easter Sunday" tradition. Though it may have originated elsewhere, after its adoption in Palestine this apostasy gained added momentum and was especially strong in North Africa and Rome. Rome thence used its influence to persuade nominal Christians in other areas to abandon the Passover in favor of the Easter Sunday observance.

While churches in the west succumbed to the pressure and adopted Easter Sunday in place of the Passover in the second century, churches in Asia resisted. Eusebius (c. 260-340 A.D.), writing of events occurring in the last decade of the second century, declares, "For the parishes of all Asia [western Asia Minor], as from an **older tradition**, held that the **fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb**, should be observed as the feast of the Saviour's passover" (*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.23). Churches elsewhere in the east also were holding fast to the Passover. Athanasius (c. 290-373 A.D.) wrote that the Council of Nicaea (325 A.D.) was summoned in part because "they of Syria, Cilicia and Mesopotamia differed from us, and kept the [Passover] feast at the same season as the Jews" ["To the Bishops of Africa" (*Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*), 1]. The historical record indicates that until the Council of Nicaea, "In Asia Minor most people kept the fourteenth day of the moon...." But, "...others in the East kept that feast on the sabbath [Sunday] indeed, but differed as regards the month" (*Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*, 5.22). That the majority in the East kept the fourteenth Passover until the Council of Nicaea is further evidenced by

Constantine's letter to the Churches on the subject, wherein he states, "It [Easter Sunday in place of Passover] is a becoming order which all the churches in the Western, Southern, and Northern parts of the world observe, and some places in the East also" (*ibid.*, 1.9; 5.22).

It's interesting that the areas holding most tenaciously to the Biblical Christian Passover were among those where Paul and Peter, as well as other New Testament era apostles, had been most active. This further belies the false claim that the Easter Sunday tradition opposing Passover is somehow linked to Peter and Paul. Paul and Barnabas were based in Syrian Antioch and spent much time there (Acts 13:1-2; 14:26-28; 15:22-23). Paul also evangelized in Cilicia and spent ample time in proconsular Asia (western Asia Minor). "Paul spent three years ministering in Ephesus 'to the Jews first but also to the Greeks,' and it is very probable that he or his converts carried the gospel message to additional cities in Asia. Certainly many of the churches in the Asian cities addressed by John in the first three chapters of Revelation — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea — were founded and/or nurtured by Paul" (Carl Rasmussen, *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*, p. 185; cf. Acts 19:1, 8-10, 22, 26; 20:17, 31). Peter's first epistle was written from Babylon in Mesopotamia (1 Peter 5:13) to Israelite Christians in portions of Asia Minor where descendants of Israelite tribes were numerous at the time (1 Peter 1:1-2).

Besides Peter and Paul, several other apostles were active in the above mentioned regions associated with keeping the Christian Passover into the fourth century. These include Andrew (Northern Asia Minor), Thomas (Syria), Philip (Phrygia), and Thaddaeus (Syria, Mesopotamia, cf. *Halley's Bible Handbook*, p. 427). Finally, by no means least was John, who spent his latter years in Asia, and according to tradition, died in Ephesus (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.1; 5.24). Later leaders in the area traced their practice of keeping the Passover on the fourteenth of the first month partly to the influence of John, the last of the original apostles to die.

When a controversy in the matter of Passover observance erupted in the last decade of the second century Irenaeus wrote to Victor, Bishop of Rome, who sought to excommunicate churches of Asia and elsewhere because of their adherence to the Passover. Irenaeus had been trained by Polycarp, a leading minister in Asia following the apostolic era. Polycarp was trained by John and other apostles, and ordained by them (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.20; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4). Irenaeus had gone on to become a pastor in Gaul, and although he himself had followed the general apostasy in rejecting the Passover in favor of Easter Sunday, he wrote letters to Victor and others defending the right of churches to observe the Passover in peace.

In his letter to Victor Irenaeus recounts an earlier dispute (c. 154) involving Polycarp and

Anicetus, pastor in Rome, over the Passover, “For **neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp not to observe what he had always observed with John the disciple of our Lord, and the other apostles with whom he had associated;** neither could Polycarp persuade Anicetus to observe it as he said that he ought to follow the customs of the presbyters that had preceded him” (Eusebius, 5.24). It’s revealing that in this account Anicetus does not defend the Easter-Sunday tradition on the basis of apostolic teaching, nor on Scripture, but on a custom handed down to him by his predecessors in Rome. In the same account Eusebius quotes Irenaeus naming only Anicetus’ predecessors Sixtus (119-128 A.D., fifth pastor of the Roman church after Linus, who was first to be ordained to that office by the apostles), followed by Telesphorus, Hyginus and Pius as having rejected the Passover (cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.3; *Halley’s Bible Handbook*, p. 875). Whereas Polycarp and Polycrates based their defense of keeping the Passover on the fourteenth directly on the teaching and example of the original apostles of Jesus, and Eusebius admits the latter is an older tradition!

Polycrates, leader of the churches in Asia, also wrote a letter to Victor: “We observe **the exact day;** neither adding, nor taking away. For in Asia also great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again on the day of the Lord’s coming, when he shall come with glory from heaven, and shall seek out all the saints. Among these are **Philip, one of the twelve apostles,** who fell asleep in Hierapolis; and his two aged virgin daughters, and another daughter, who lived in the Holy Spirit and now rests at Ephesus; and, moreover, **John, who was both a witness and a teacher, who reclined upon the bosom of the Lord,** and, being a priest, wore the sacerdotal plate. He fell asleep at Ephesus. And Polycarp in Smyrna, who was a bishop and martyr; and Thraseas, bishop and martyr from Eumenia, who fell asleep in Smyrna. Why need I mention the bishop and martyr Sagaris who fell asleep in Laodicea, or the blessed Papius, or Melito, the Eunuch who lived altogether in the Holy Spirit, and who lies in Sardis, awaiting the episcopate from heaven, when he shall rise from the dead? **All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover** according to the Gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. And I also, Polycrates, the least of you all, do according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have closely followed. For seven of my relatives were bishops; and I am the eighth. And my relatives always observed **the day when the people put away the leaven.** I, therefore, brethren, who have lived sixty-five years in the Lord, and have met with the brethren throughout the world, and have gone through every Holy Scripture, am not affrighted by terrifying words. For those greater than I have said ‘We ought to obey God rather than man.’”

A third reason that we keep Passover and not Easter is that Easter is a blend of corrupted Biblical and pagan traditions.

“Easter is a convergence of three traditions. (1) *Pagan*. According to the Venerable Bede, English historian of the early 8th century, the word is derived from the Norse *Ostara* or *Eostre*, meaning the festival of spring at the vernal equinox, March 21, when nature is in resurrection after winter. Hence, the rabbits, notable for their fecundity, and the eggs, colored like rays of the returning sun and the northern lights or aurora borealis. The Greek myth, Demeter and Persephone, with its Latin counterpart, Ceres and Persephone, conveys the idea of a goddess returning seasonally from the nether regions to the light of day” (*Encyclopedia Americana*, 1949 edition, “Easter,” vol. 9, p. 506). It also mentions Jewish and Christian elements that are part of the Easter tradition.

But the real root of the Easter celebration is pagan, not Christian. Jesus Christ never commanded the Church to have a festival observing his resurrection, but the Bible explicitly commands us to observe the Passover as a memorial of Christ’s death. It took the apostate Church several centuries to settle on a consistent date for the celebration of Easter, further evidence that it was not of apostolic origin.

There’s no doubt that the name Easter is ultimately derived from the Babylonian name (Ishtar) for the great mother goddess — the queen of heaven. This goddess was worshiped the world over under a variety of names.

In the Babylonian myths Tammuz and his consort Ishtar (Easter) were resurrected together each year “that with their return all nature might revive” (*The New Golden Bough*, p. 285). The name Tammuz is said to be a Sumerian term meaning “true son.” He was also known as *Adon*, or Lord, among the Babylonians, and the same deity came to be worshiped by the Greeks as Adonis (*ibid.*, p. 286). In various cultures at certain times of the year there were lamentations and weeping associated with the death of the god. In the Phoenician sanctuary of Astarte at Byblus the death of Adonis [or Tammuz] was mourned every spring with weeping, wailing and beating of the breast. But it was believed he rose from the dead the next day. Women celebrating this spring festival of death and resurrection were obliged to either shave their heads or serve a day as temple prostitutes (*ibid.*, p. 289). Temple prostitution was widely practiced in association with the worship of the mother goddess (*ibid.*, 298 ff.). And the worship of these gods was associated with the sun.

Ezekiel 8:13-16. Israel and Judah also blended the worship of such gods and goddesses with the worship of Yahweh. And he refers to such worship as an abomination.

Jeremiah 44:17-23. The Jews worshiped Astarte, the queen of heaven (cf. *The New Golden Bough*, p. 291). God condemns such worship.

“At the approach of Easter, Sicilian women sow wheat, lentils, and canary-seed in plates,

which they keep in the dark and water every two days. The plants soon shoot up; the stalks are tied together with red ribbons, and the plates containing them are placed on the sepulchres which, with the effigies of the dead Christ, are made up in Catholic and Greek churches on Good Friday, just as the gardens of Adonis were placed on the grave of the dead Adonis. The practice is not confined to Sicily.... The whole custom — sepulchres as well as plates of sprouting grain — may be nothing but a continuation, under a different name, of the worship of Adonis.

“Nor are these the only Easter ceremonies which resemble the rites of Adonis” (*ibid.*, p. 296-297).

The author goes on to describe various rituals practiced particularly in Catholic churches involving effigies of the dead Christ that parallel rites associated with the idol god Adonis and similar deities. “When we reflect how often the Church has skilfully [sic] contrived to plant the seeds of the new faith on the old stock of paganism, we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis, which... was celebrated in Syria at the same season” (*ibid.*, p. 298).

Where in the Bible do you read of rabbits, colored eggs, carrying idol images about in fake coffins, ham dinners, hot cross buns and the other traditions of Easter. The Bible sanctions none of the practices associated with Easter. What we do find, on the testimony of many sources, is that very clearly most of the customs associated with Easter are a continuation of idolatrous practices associated with the worship of various false gods. Deuteronomy 12:29-32.

We reject the false Easter tradition as heresy and apostasy. We keep the Passover because it is part of the true apostolic faith, the faith that Jesus Christ established through his example and command.