



Holidays or Holy Days

**Does It Matter Which
Days We Observe?**



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Crucial Questions

We pride ourselves on being rational, thinking people. We think of ourselves as up-to-date in our thoughts and actions. We try to have good reasons for everything we do. Why, then, do we do some of the things we do?

Consider, for example, Christmas. Why do we pretend that a jolly old man in a red suit who lives at the north pole rides around in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer and drops down chimneys to leave toys (made by elves) for good boys and girls on one night of the year?

Then, at Easter, why do we pretend that rabbits lay brightly colored eggs?

Ask yourself: Do these myths and customs make any sense? Yet we persist in perpetuating them to our children. Oddly enough, we also attach great religious significance to some of these practices. Many are integral parts of celebrating the most sacred days of traditional Christianity.

Why do so many professing Christians, seeking to follow the One who said, "I am the light of the world" and "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness" (John 8:12), perpetuate such strange customs whose origins come not from the Bible but from the dark, dim mists of antiquity?

Why do we pretend that a jolly old man in a red suit drops down chimneys to leave toys for good boys and girls on one night in the year? Why do we pretend that rabbits lay brightly colored eggs? Ask yourself: Do these myths and customs make any sense?

It's not that the origins of such customs cannot be determined. Often, around the time of these holidays, newspapers and television shows describe the origins of some of these practices. Encyclopedias and other books often help paint a picture of the passing of these customs down to us from ancient cultures. All too often the picture isn't a pretty one.

After all, what do a bearded man in a red suit, brightly decorated trees, mistletoe, holly and candles have to do with the birth of Jesus Christ? Why is December 25 assumed to be the day of His birth when the Bible itself nowhere gives the actual date and, in fact, gives strong indications that Jesus *could not* have been born at that time of year? These are crucial questions.

The true worship of God

Worshipping God is the most honorable endeavor any human being can

undertake. Some 3,000 years ago King David of Israel, on the joyous occasion of bringing the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, wrote a psalm of praise and instruction for his people. His words included: “Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come before Him. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness!” (1 Chronicles 16:29).

David gave this instruction because God alone embodies perfect holiness (Psalm 99:5, 9; Revelation 15:4). Part of the reason for our existence is to worship Him forever (see Psalm 22:27; 86:9). The Bible reveals no future for people who refuse to honor their Creator. Indeed, He says that eventually “all flesh shall come to worship before Me” (Isaiah 66:23).

Jesus Christ adds that “true worshipers will worship the Father in *spirit* and *truth*” (John 4:23-24, emphasis added throughout). He warns that some will worship God in vain, because their practices are rooted in mankind’s traditions and edicts rather than biblical truth. He labels such worship unacceptable and hypocritical, saying such people “draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me” (Matthew 15:7-9; Mark 7:6-9).

Given these biblical statements and instructions, does it matter which religious holidays we observe? Our world is filled with religious celebrations. Among the most popular are Christmas and Easter. Christmas is so popular that it forms the basis for a significant portion of the worldwide economy. Easter is often considered to be just as important as Christmas, if not more so.

But where did Christmas and Easter really come from? The Bible doesn’t tell us to celebrate these festivals, yet they are an integral part of the Christian mainstream. Why are they so popular?

What does God think?

Most important, what does God say about such customs? Does He want us to worship Him however we see fit? Does the Bible tell us whether God expects Christians to worship Him on specific days and at specific times? What can we learn from the example of Jesus Christ, in whose footsteps God expects us to follow? (1 John 2:6; 1 Corinthians 11:1).

In contrast to the popularly celebrated holidays, the Bible informs us of specific days of worship—God’s annual “feasts” (Leviticus 23)—that are unknown to most people. Why have these celebrations been replaced?

In the pages that follow, we will compare these various observances with the instructions about worship found in the Bible.

These are crucial matters with far-reaching implications for our relationship with our Creator. Join us as we embark on a historical and biblical journey to discover the truth about *holidays and Holy Days*. The facts documented here will open up a much greater opportunity for true worship than you ever thought possible.

Christmas: The Untold Story

People almost everywhere observe Christmas. But how did Christmas come to be observed? How did the customs and practices associated with Christmas make their way into traditional Christianity’s most popular holiday?

Did you know December 25 has a checkered past, a long and contentious history? This should come as no surprise given that Christmas and many of its popular customs and trappings are nowhere set forth in the Bible.

Our Creator’s view of this popular holiday is ignored or not even considered by most people. Yet His perspective should be our main consideration. Let’s examine the history of Christmas and compare it with God’s Word, rather than our own ideas and experiences, to discover His opinion regarding this nearly universal holiday.

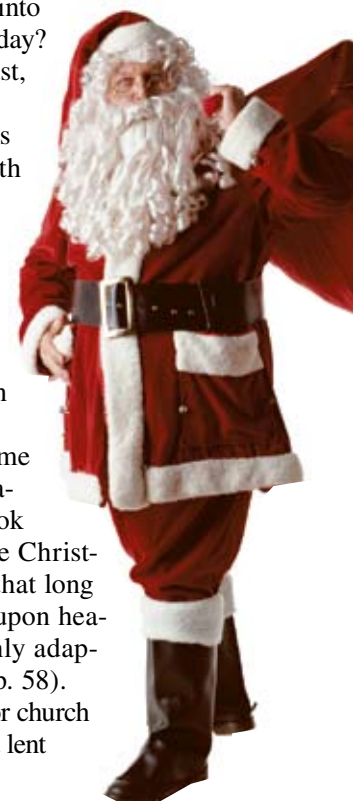
Historians tell us the Christmas celebration came from questionable origins. William Walsh summarizes the holiday’s origins and practices in his book *The Story of Santa Klaus*: “We remember that the Christmas festival ... is a gradual evolution from times that long antedated the Christian period ... It was overlaid upon heathen festivals, and many of its observances are only adaptations of pagan to Christian ceremonial” (1970, p. 58).

How could pagan practices become part of a major church celebration? What were these “heathen festivals” that lent themselves to Christmas customs over the centuries?

The ancient origins of Christmas customs

During the second century B.C., the Greeks practiced rites to honor their god Dionysus (also called Bacchus). The Latin name for this celebration was Bacchanalia. It spread from the Greeks to Rome, center of the Roman Empire.

“It was on or about December 21st that the ancient Greeks celebrated what are known to us as the Bacchanalia or festivities in honor of Bacchus,



the god of wine. In these festivities the people gave themselves up to songs, dances and other revels which frequently passed the limits of decency and order” (Walsh, p. 65).

Because of the nocturnal orgies associated with this festival, the Roman Senate suppressed its observance in 186 B.C. It took the senators several years to completely accomplish this goal because of the holiday’s popularity.

Suppressing a holiday was unusual for the Romans since they later became a melting pot of many types of gods and worship. Just as the Romans assimilated culture, art and customs from the peoples absorbed into their empire, they likewise adopted those peoples’ religious practices.

In addition to the Bacchanalia, the Romans celebrated another holiday, the Saturnalia, held “in honor of Saturn, the god of time, [which] began on December 17th and continued for seven days. These also often ended in riot and disorder. Hence the words Bacchanalia and Saturnalia acquired an evil reputation in later times” (p. 65).

The reason for the Saturnalia’s disrepute is revealing. In pagan mythology Saturn was an “ancient agricultural god-king who ate his own children presumably to avoid regicide [being murdered while king]. And Saturn was parallel with a Carthaginian Baal, whose brazen horned effigy contained a furnace into which children were sacrificially fed” (William Sansom, *A Book of Christmas*, 1968, p. 44).

Notice the customs surrounding the Saturnalia: “All businesses were closed except those that provided food or revelry. Slaves were made

Our Creator’s view of this holiday is ignored or not even considered by most people. Let’s examine the history of Christmas and compare it to God’s Word, rather than our own ideas and experiences.

equal to masters or even set over them. Gambling, drinking, and feasting were encouraged. People exchanged gifts, called *strenae*, from the vegetation goddess *Strenia*, whom it was important to honor at midwinter ... Men dressed as women or in the hides of animals and caroused in the streets. Candles and lamps were used to frighten the spirits of darkness, which were [considered] powerful at this time of year. At its most decadent and barbaric, Saturnalia may have been the excuse among Roman soldiers in the East for the human sacrifice of the king of the revels” (Gerard and Patricia Del Re, *The Christmas Almanac*, 1979, p. 16).

Winter-solstice celebrations

Both of these ancient holidays were observed around the winter solstice—

the day of the year with the shortest period of daylight. “From the Romans also came another Christmas fundamental: the date, December 25. When the Julian calendar was proclaimed in 46 C.E. [A.D.], it set into law a practice that was already common: dating the winter solstice as December 25. Later reforms of the calendar would cause the astronomical solstice to migrate to December 21, but the older date’s irresistible resonance would remain” (Tom Flynn, *The Trouble With Christmas*, 1993, p. 42).

On the heels of the Saturnalia, the Romans marked December 25 with a celebration called the *Brumalia*. *Bruma* is thought to have been contracted from the Latin *brevum* or *brevis*, meaning brief or short, denoting the shortest day of the year.

Why was this period significant? “The time of the winter solstice has always been an important season in the mythology of all peoples. The sun, the giver of life, is at its lowest ebb. It is [the] shortest daylight of the year; the promise of spring is buried in cold and snow. It is the time when the forces of chaos that stand against the return of light and life must once again be defeated by the gods. At the low point of the solstice, the people must help the gods through imitative magic and religious ceremonies. The sun begins to return in triumph. The days lengthen and, though winter remains, spring is once again conceivable. For all people, it is a time of great festivity” (Del Re, p. 15).

During the days of Jesus’ apostles in the first century, the early Christians had no knowledge of Christmas as we know it. But, as a part of the Roman Empire, they may have noted the Roman observance of the Saturnalia while they themselves persisted in celebrating the customary “feasts of the LORD” (listed in Leviticus 23).

The Encyclopaedia Britannica tells us that “the first Christians ... continued to observe the Jewish festivals, though in a new spirit, as commemorations of events which those festivals had foreshadowed” (11th edition, Vol. 8, p. 828, “Easter”).

Over the following centuries, new, nonbiblical observances such as Christmas and Easter were gradually introduced into traditional Christianity. History shows that these new days came to be forcibly promoted while the biblical feast days of apostolic times were systematically rejected. “Christmas, the [purported] festival of the birth of Jesus Christ, was established in connection with a fading of the expectation of Christ’s imminent return” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 499, “Christianity”).

The message of Jesus Christ and the apostles—“the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14-15)—was soon lost. The Christmas celebration shifted Christianity’s focus away from Christ’s promised return to His birth. But is this what the Bible directs Christians to do?

How the Christmas date was set

Gerard and Patricia Del Re explain the further evolution of December 25 as an official Roman celebration: “Saturnalia and the kalends [new moon, in this case of January] were the celebrations most familiar to early Christians, December 17-24 and January 1-3, but the tradition of celebrating December 25 as Christ’s birthday came to the Romans from Persia. Mithra, the Persian god of light and sacred contracts, was born out of a rock on December 25. Rome was famous for its flirtations with strange gods and cults, and in the third century [274] the unchristian emperor Aurelian established the festival of Dies Invicti Solis, the Day of the Invincible Sun, on December 25.

“Mithra was an embodiment of the sun, so this period of its rebirth was a major day in Mithraism, which had become Rome’s latest official religion with the patronage of Aurelian. It is believed that the emperor Constantine adhered to Mithraism up to the time of his conversion to Christianity. He was probably instrumental in seeing that the major feast of his old religion was carried over to his new faith” (*The Christmas Almanac*, 1979, p. 17).

Although it is difficult to determine the first time anyone celebrated December 25 as Christmas, historians are in general agreement that it was sometime during the fourth century.

This is an amazingly late date. Christmas was not observed in Rome, the capital of the empire, until about 300 years after Christ’s death. Its origins cannot be traced back to either the teachings or practices of the earliest Christians. The introduction of Christmas represented a significant departure from “the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3).

European influences on Christmas customs

Although Christmas had been officially established in Rome by the fourth century, later another pagan celebration greatly influenced the many Christmas customs practiced today. That festival was the Teutonic feast of Yule (from the Norse word for “wheel,” signifying the cycle of the year). It was also known as the Twelve Nights, being celebrated from Dec. 25 to Jan. 6.

This festival was based on the supposed mythological warfare between the forces of nature—specifically winter (called the ice giant), which signified death, vs. the sun god, representing life. The winter solstice marked the turning point: Up until then the ice giant was at his zenith of power; after that the sun god began to prevail.

“As Christianity spread to northern Europe, it met with the observance of another pagan festival held in December in honour of the sun.

This time it was the Yule-feast of the Norsemen, which lasted for twelve days. During this time log-fires were burnt to assist the revival of the sun. Shrines and other sacred places were decorated with such greenery as holly, ivy, and bay, and it was an occasion for feasting and drinking.

“Equally old was the practice of the Druids, the caste of priests among the Celts of ancient France, Britain and Ireland, to decorate their temples with mistletoe, the fruit of the oak-tree which they considered sacred. Among the German tribes the oak-tree was sacred to Odin, their god of war, and they sacrificed to it until St Boniface, in the eighth

How Christmas Grew

In view of centuries of criticism of the commercialization of Christmas, it is interesting to note that the holiday’s secular, not its religious, aspect, has been most responsible for its popularity. In the United States “retailers have come to count on yuletide sales for up to 50 percent of their

that, since the 1870s, merchants have vigorously promoted Christmas. Initially they even laid out their stores with more religious trappings, such as pipe organs, choirs and statues, than some churches could muster. Convinced of the economic impact of Christmas, President Franklin Roosevelt moved Thanksgiving from Nov. 30 to Nov. 23 to add another week of shopping before Christmas (p. 62).

“What many historians find most fascinating about the reinvention of Christmas is that its commercialization, now so frequently denounced, is what spawned the transformation in the first place. The ‘commercial forms’ associated with Christmas and other holidays, says Schmidt of Princeton [Lee Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites*, 1995], ‘have become integral to their survival.’ The consumer culture ‘shapes our holidays,’ Schmidt says, ‘by taking in diverse, local traditions and creating relatively common ones.’ To turn Christmas into a purely religious celebration now might cheer those who want to ‘take back Christmas,’ he says. But such an observance ‘would lack the cultural resonance and impact of a holiday deeply rooted in the marketplace.’ If Christmas came to that, adds Restad [Penne Restad, *Christmas in America*, 1995], ‘we probably wouldn’t keep it as a society’” (p. 64).



annual profits. The shopping season now pumps an estimated \$37 billion into the nation’s economy—making the American Christmas larger than the gross national product of Ireland” (Jeffery Sheler, “In Search of Christmas,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 23, 1996, p. 64).

The lure of profit has proven so strong

century, persuaded them to exchange it for the Christmas tree, a young fir-tree adorned in honour of the Christ child ... It was the German immigrants who took the custom to America" (L.W. Cowie and John Selwyn Gummer, *The Christian Calendar*, 1974, p.22).

Instead of worshipping the sun god, converts were told to worship the Son of God. The focus of the holiday subtly changed, but the traditional pagan customs and practices remained fundamentally unchanged. Old religious customs involving holly, ivy, mistletoe and evergreen trees were given invented "Christian" meanings. We should keep in mind that Jesus Christ warns us to beware of things that masquerade as something they are not (Matthew 7:15; compare Isaiah 5:20; 2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

The roots of modern customs

Many of the other trappings of Christmas are merely carryovers from ancient celebrations.

"Santa Claus" is an American corruption of the Dutch form "San Nicolaas," a figure brought to America by the early Dutch colonists (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition, Vol. 19, p. 649, "Nicholas, St."). This name, in turn, stems from St. Nicholas, bishop of the city of Myra in southern Asia Minor, a Catholic saint honored by the Greeks and the Latins on Dec. 6.

How, we might ask, did a bishop from the sunny Mediterranean coast of Turkey come to be associated with a red-suited man who lives at the north pole and rides in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer?

Knowing what we have already learned about the ancient pre-Christian origins of Christmas, we shouldn't be surprised to learn that Santa Claus is nothing but a figure recycled from ancient beliefs tied in with pagan midwinter festivals.

The trappings associated with Santa Claus—his fur-trimmed clothing, sleigh and reindeer—reveal his origin from the cold climates of the far North. Some sources trace him to the ancient Northern European gods Woden and Thor, from which the days of the week Wednesday (Woden's day) and Thursday (Thor's day) get their designations (Earl and Alice Count, *4000 Years of Christmas*, 1997, pp. 56-64). Others trace him even farther back in time to the Roman god Saturn (honored at the winter Saturnalia festival) and the Greek god Silenus (Walsh, pp. 70-71).

What about other common customs and symbols associated with Christmas? Where did they originate? "On the Roman New Year (January 1), houses were decorated with greenery and lights, and gifts were given to children and the poor. To these observances were added the German and Celtic Yule rites ... Food and good fellowship, the Yule log and Yule cakes, greenery and fir trees, gifts and greetings

all commemorated different aspects of this festive season. Fires and lights, symbols of warmth and lasting life, have always been associated with the winter festival, both pagan and Christian" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Micropaedia, Vol. 2, p. 903, "Christmas").

"In midwinter, the idea of rebirth and fertility was tremendously important. In the snows of winter, the evergreen was a symbol of the life that would return in the spring, so evergreens were used for decoration ... Light was important in dispelling the growing darkness of the solstice, so a Yule log was lighted with the remains of the previous year's log ... As many customs lost their religious reasons for being, they passed

Christmas vs. the Bible

How well do the customs and traditions of Christmas match the biblical account of Christ's birth? An objective look shows that many traditions supposedly rooted in the Bible don't match the biblical account.

Did three wise men travel to see Jesus?



The Bible doesn't say how many there were. There could have been more. We are told only that they gave Jesus three kinds of gifts: "gold, frankincense, and myrrh"

(Matthew 2:1, 11). Did everyone exchange gifts when Christ was born? Gifts were presented to Jesus because He was born "King of the Jews" (verses 2, 11). This was the expected custom when appearing before a king, thus the wise men brought gifts fit for a king: gold and valuable spices. Jesus alone was the recipient of the gifts; others did not exchange gifts among themselves.

Did the wise men, as nativity scenes often depict, arrive to find Jesus in a stable manger, there having been "no room in the inn"? (Luke 2:7). No. When the wise men arrived, apparently some time after Christ's birth, Joseph's family was residing in a house (Matthew 2:11).

Did the writers of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) consider Jesus' birth to be one of the most significant events for Christians to acknowledge or celebrate? Mark and John do not even mention the event. Although Matthew and Luke do, neither gives the date. None of the biblical writers says anything about commemorating Christ's birth.

Did Jesus Christ tell us to celebrate His birth? No. He left explicit instructions regarding how His followers are to commemorate His death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26), but nothing about His birth.

Biblical Evidence Shows Jesus Wasn't Born on December 25

History convincingly shows that December 25 was popularized as the date for Christmas, not because Christ was born on that day, but because it was already popular in pagan celebrations as the birthday of the sun.

But is it possible that December 25 could be the day of Christ's birth?

"Lacking any scriptural pointers to Jesus's birthday, early Christian teachers suggested dates all over the calendar. Clement... picked November 18. Hippolytus... figured Christ must have been born on a Wednesday... An anonymous document[,] believed to have been written in North Africa around A.D. 243, placed Jesus's birth on March 28" (Jeffery Sheler, "In Search of Christmas," *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 23, 1996, p. 58).

A careful analysis of Scripture, however, clearly indicates that December 25 is an unlikely date for Christ's birth. Here are two primary reasons:

First, we know that shepherds were in the fields watching their flocks at the time of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:7-8). Shepherds were not in the fields during December. According to *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" (Robert Myers, 1972, p. 309).

Similarly, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* (1980) says this passage "would argue against the birth's occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted" shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.

Second, Jesus' parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census (Luke

2:1-4). Such censuses were not taken in winter, when temperatures often dropped below freezing and roads were in poor condition. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

Given the difficulties and the desire to bring pagans into Christianity, William Walsh says, "The important fact then which I have asked you to get clearly into your head is that the fixing of the date as December 25th was a compromise with paganism" (*The Story of Santa Klaus*, 1970, p. 62).

If Jesus Christ was not born on December 25, does the Bible indicate when He was born? The biblical accounts point to the fall of the year as the most likely time of Jesus' birth, based on the conception and birth of John the Baptist.

Since Elizabeth (John's mother) was in her sixth month of pregnancy when Jesus was conceived (Luke 1:24-36), we can determine the approximate time of year Jesus was born if we know when John was born. John's father, Zacharias, was a priest serving in the Jerusalem temple during the course of Abijah (Luke 1:5). Historical calculations indicate this course of service corresponded to June 13-19 in that year (E.W. Bullinger, *The Companion Bible*, 1974, Appendix 179, p. 200).

It was during this time of temple service that Zacharias learned that he and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child (Luke 1:8-13). After he completed his service and traveled home, Elizabeth conceived (verses 23-24). Assuming John's conception took place near the end of June, adding nine months brings us to the end of March as the most likely time for John's birth. Adding another six months (the difference in ages between John and Jesus) brings us to the end of September as the likely time of Jesus' birth.

into the realm of superstition, becoming good luck traditions and eventually merely customs without rationale. Thus the mistletoe was no longer worshiped but became eventually an excuse for rather nonreligious activities" (Del Re, p. 18).

"Christmas gifts themselves remind us of the presents that were exchanged in Rome during the Saturnalia. In Rome, it might be added, the presents usually took the form of wax tapers and dolls—the latter being in their turn a survival of the human sacrifices once offered to Saturn. It is a queer thought that in our Christmas presents we are preserving under another form one of the most savage customs of our barbarian ancestors!" (Walsh, p. 67).

When we see these customs perpetuated today in Christmas observance, we can have no doubt of this holiday's origin. Christmas is a diverse collection of pagan forms of worship overlaid with a veneer of Christianity.

Accommodating a pagan populace

How, we should ask, did these pagan customs become a widely accepted part of Christianity? We should first understand what a strong hold these celebrations and customs had on the people of those early centuries. Tertullian, a Catholic writer of the late second and early third century, lamented the fact that the pagans of his day were far more faithful to their beliefs than were the compromising Christians who were happily joining in the Roman mid-winter festival that eventually evolved into what is now Christmas:

"By us [Christians],...the Saturnalia, the feasts of January, the Brumalia, and Matronalia are now frequented; gifts are carried to and fro, new year's day presents are made with din, and banquets are celebrated with uproar; oh, how much more faithful are the heathen to *their* religion, who take special care to adopt no solemnity from the Christians" (Tertullian in *De Idolatria*, quoted by Alexander Hislop, *The Two Babylons*, 1959, p. 93).

It wasn't long before such non-Christian rites and practices were assimilated into a new church religious holiday supposedly celebrating Christ's birth. William Walsh describes this process and the rationalization behind it: "This was no mere accident. It was a necessary measure



at a time when the new religion [Christianity] was forcing itself upon a deeply superstitious people. In order to reconcile fresh converts to the new faith, and to make the breaking of old ties as painless as possible, these relics of paganism were retained under modified forms ...

“Thus we find that when Pope Gregory [540-604] sent Saint Augustine as a missionary to convert Anglo-Saxon England he directed that

so far as possible the saint should accommodate the new and strange Christian rites to the heathen ones with which the natives had been familiar from their birth.

“For example, he advised Saint Augustine to allow his converts on certain festi-

vals to eat and kill a great number of oxen to the glory of God the Father, as formerly they had done this in honor of [their gods] ... On the very Christmas after his arrival in England Saint Augustine baptized many thousands of converts and permitted their usual December celebration under the new name and with the new meaning” (p. 61).

Gregory permitted such importation of pagan religious practices on the grounds that when dealing with “obdurate minds it is impossible to cut off everything at once” (Sansom, p. 30).

Tragically, Christianity never accomplished the task of cutting off everything pagan. According to Owen Chadwick, former professor of history at Cambridge University, the Romans “kept the winter solstice with a feast of drunkenness and riot. The Christians thought that they could bring a better meaning into that feast. They tried to persuade their flocks not to drink or eat too much, and to keep the feast more austere—but without success” (*A History of Christianity*, 1995, p. 24).

Early contention over Christmas

In the beginning, Christians were opposed to Christmas. Some of the earliest controversy erupted over whether Jesus’ birthday should be celebrated at all.

“As early as A.D. 245, the Church father Origen was proclaiming it heathenish to celebrate Christ’s birthday as if He were merely a temporal ruler when His spiritual nature should be the main concern. This view was echoed throughout the centuries, but found strong, widespread



advocacy only with the rise of Protestantism. To these serious-minded, sober clerics, the celebration of Christmas flew in the face of all they believed. Drunken revelry on Christmas! The day was not even known to be Christ’s birthday. It was merely an excuse to continue the customs of pagan Saturnalia” (Del Re, p. 20).

The Encyclopaedia Britannica adds: “The [church] Fathers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries, such as Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Epiphanius, contended that Christmas was a copy of a pagan celebration” (15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 499, “Christianity”).

The decision to celebrate Christ’s birth on December 25 was far from universally accepted. “Christians of Armenia and Syria accused the Christians of Rome of sun worship for celebrating Christmas on December 25 ... Pope Leo the Great in the fifth century tried to remove certain practices at Christmas which he considered in no way different from sun worship” (Robert Myers, *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, 1972, p. 310).

Indeed, of all times of the year suggested as the birth of Christ, December 25 could not have been the date (see “Biblical Evidence Shows Jesus Wasn’t Born on December 25” on page 12).

Again, the idea of celebrating Christ’s birthday on any date was initially problematic—to say nothing of celebrating it on a date derived from paganism.

“To the early Christians the idea of celebrating the birthday of a religious figure would have seemed at best peculiar, at worst blasphemous. Being born into this world was nothing to celebrate. What mattered was leaving this world and entering the next in a condition pleasing to God.

“When early Christians associated a feast day with a specific person, such as a bishop or martyr, it was usually the date of the person’s death ... If you wanted to search the New Testament world for peoples who attached significance to birthdays, your search would quickly narrow to pagans. The Romans celebrated the birthdays of the Caesars, and most unchristian Mediterranean religions attached importance to the natal feasts of a pantheon of supernatural figures.

“If Jesus Christ was born in Bethlehem, and his purpose in coming was anything like what is supposed, then in celebrating his birthday each year Christians do violence, not honor, to his memory. For in celebrating a birthday at all, we sustain exactly the kind of tradition his coming is thought to have been designed to cast down” (Flynn, p. 42).

Christmas: a banned celebration

In England “the Protestants found their own quieter ways of celebrating, in calm and meditation,” while “the strict Puritans refused to celebrate

at all...The Pilgrims in Massachusetts made a point of working on Christmas as on any other day. On June 3, 1647, Parliament established punishments for observing Christmas and certain other holidays. This policy was reaffirmed in 1652” (Del Re, p. 20).

Even colonial America considered Christmas more of a raucous revelry than a religious occasion: “So tarnished, in fact, was its reputation in colonial America that celebrating Christmas was banned in Puritan New England, where the noted minister Cotton Mather described yuletide merry-making as ‘an affront unto the grace of God’” (Jeffery Sheler, “In Search of Christmas,” *U.S. News and World Report*, Dec. 23, 1996, p. 56).

The reason Christmas has survived and grown into such a popular holiday—being observed by 96 percent of Americans and almost all nations, even atheistic ones (Sheler, p. 56)—is because of economic factors (see “How Christmas Grew” on page 9).

Christmas evaluated

We cannot escape that Christmas is rooted in ancient customs and religious practices that had nothing to do with Christianity and the Bible. Tom Flynn summarizes the issue: “An enormous number of traditions we now associate with Christmas have their roots in pre-Christian pagan religious traditions. Some of these have social, sexual, or cosmological connotations that might lead educated, culturally sensitive moderns to discard the traditions once they have understood their roots more clearly” (p. 19).

Originally envisioned as a way to ease converts’ transition from heathen worship to Christianity, in more recent years the holiday’s observance has been driven by economic forces. *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* observes that the traditional Christian holidays have “undergone a process of striking desacralization and—especially Christmas—commercialization. The Christological foundation of Christmas was replaced by the myth of Santa Claus” (15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 499, “Christianity”).

Even with its failings, Christmas remains an entrenched tradition. Although some recognize the intrinsic paganism of the holiday, they believe people are free to establish their own days of worship. Others cling to the naïve and biblically insupportable belief that paganism’s most popular celebrations have been won over by Christianity and therefore are acceptable to God.

Human reasoning aside, we need to consider God’s opinion about such celebrations. We need to look into God’s Word to see how He views mixing pagan practices and customs with worshipping Him. But first let’s examine the other major holiday of the Christian world, Easter.

Easter: Masking a Biblical Truth

In contrast to the general public, which considers Christmas the most important Christian holiday, many theologians regard Easter as the preeminent celebration because it commemorates Jesus’ resurrection. As with Christmas, we find that the popular customs associated with the Easter celebration—rabbits, Easter-egg hunts and sunrise services—have nothing to do with the biblical record of Christ’s life, in this case His rising from the dead.

Where, then, did these practices originate?

The Encyclopaedia Britannica tells us, “As at Christmas, so also at Easter, popular customs reflect many ancient pagan survivals—in this instance, connected with spring fertility rites, such as the symbols of the Easter hare or rabbit” (15th edition, Macropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 605, “Church Year”).

The word *Easter* appears once in the King James Version of the Bible, in Acts 12:4, where it is a mistranslation. Reputable scholars and reference works point out that the word *Easter* in this verse comes from the Greek word *pascha*, meaning *Passover*. Modern translations correctly translate this word “Passover”—as even the King James Version does in other verses (see Matthew 26:2, 17-19; Mark 14:12; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Notice what *Vine’s Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* says about the term *Easter* here: “*Pascha*... mistranslated ‘Easter’ in Acts 12:4, KJV, denotes the Passover... 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. The festival of Pasch [Passover] held by Christians in post-apostolic times was a continuation of the Jewish feast... From this Pasch the pagan festival of ‘Easter’ was quite distinct and



was introduced into the apostate Western religion, as part of the attempt to adapt pagan festivals to Christianity” (1985, p. 192, “Easter”).

Easter’s ancient history

The roots of the Easter celebration date to long before Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection. Various Easter customs can be traced back to ancient spring celebrations surrounding Astarte, the goddess of spring and fertility. The Bible refers to her as “Ashtoreth the abomination of the Sidonians” (2 Kings 23:13) and, as *Vine’s* mentions, “the Queen of Heaven,” whose worship God condemned (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:24-28).

Francis Weiser, professor of philosophy at Boston College, provides these facts: “The origin of the Easter egg is based on the fertility lore of the Indo-European races . . . The Easter bunny had its origin in pre-Christian fertility lore. Hare and rabbit were the most fertile animals our forefathers knew, serving as symbols of abundant new life in the spring season” (*Handbook of Christian Feasts and Customs*, 1958, pp. 233, 236). (For

The popular customs associated with the Easter celebration have nothing to do with the biblical record of Christ’s rising from the dead. Where, then, did these practices originate?

more information about these symbols, see “Fertility Symbols: Beneath the Dignity of God” on page 22).

Fertility rites and customs were incorporated into religious practices early in history. After Adam and Eve rejected God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3), humanity looked for other explanations for life. Forces of nature and seasons that could not be controlled began to be viewed as gods, goddesses and supernatural powers to be worshipped and feared. Man soon created his own gods, contradicting God’s instruction against idolatry (Exodus 20:3-6; Deuteronomy 5:7-10).

“The pagan nations made statues or images to represent the powers they worshiped. Most of these idols were in the form of animals or human beings. But sometimes the idols represented celestial powers, like the sun, moon, and stars; forces of nature, like the sea and the rain; or life forces, like death and truth . . .

“In time an elaborate system of beliefs in such natural forces was developed into mythology. Each civilization and culture had its own mythological structure, but the structures were often quite similar. The names of the gods may have been different, but their functions and actions were often the same. The most prominent myth to cross cultural lines was that of the fertility

cycle. Many pagan cultures believed that the god of fertility died each year during the winter but was reborn each year in the spring. The details differed among cultures, but the main idea was the same” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1995, “Gods, Pagan,” p. 508).

In pagan mythology the sun represented life. The sun supposedly died around the winter solstice, the shortest day of the year. (As discussed earlier, the date set for Christmas celebrations is rooted in this myth.) Complementing the rebirth of the sun were spring fertility rites, whose surviving symbols thread their way throughout Easter celebrations.

In addition to rabbits and eggs, another popular Easter custom had pre-Christian origins: “Also popular among Europeans and Americans on Easter is ham, because the pig was considered a symbol of luck in pre-Christian European culture” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 558, “Easter”).

Sex rites in ancient cultures

Ancient fertility rites revolved around overt sexual immorality and perversion. Such rites are referred to throughout the Bible under a variety of names and descriptions.

The Babylonian and Assyrian fertility goddess was *Ishtar*, from which derives the names *Astarte* and *Ashtoreth* and very likely the Anglo-Saxon *Eostre* or Germanic *Ostara*, goddess of spring, the origin of the word *Easter* (this also giving us the word *east*, the direction of the sunrise).

Ishtar symbolized Mother Earth in the natural cycles of fertility on earth. Many myths grew up around this female deity. She was the goddess of love, and the practice of ritual prostitution became widespread in the fertility cult dedicated to her name.

“Temples to Ishtar had many priestesses, or sacred prostitutes, who symbolically acted out the fertility rites of the cycle of nature. Ishtar has been identified with the Phoenician Astarte, the Semitic Ashtoreth, and the Sumerian Inanna. Strong similarities also exist between Ishtar and the Egyptian Isis, the Greek Aphrodite, and the Roman Venus.

“Associated with Ishtar was the young god Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14), considered both divine and mortal. In Babylonian mythology Tammuz died annually and was reborn year after year, representing the yearly cycle of the seasons and the crops. This pagan belief later was identified with the pagan gods Baal and Anat in Canaan” (*Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, “Gods, Pagan,” p. 509). It was believed that Ishtar brought about the rebirth or resurrection of Tammuz in the spring, coinciding with the blossoming of nature. (For more details, see “The Resurrection Connection” on page 20).

Throughout the Old Testament, God expressed His anger with His people when they served these false gods (Judges 2:13-14; 10:6-7; 1 Kings 11:5-11; Ezekiel 8:14-18).

The Resurrection Connection

How did worship of an ancient god and goddess come to be associated with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Although the details are lost in time, a closer look at the ancient mythology surrounding their worship will help us understand how pagan practices have survived in popular Easter customs.

Two of the earliest recorded deities were the Babylonian fertility god Tammuz and the goddess Ishtar. Every year Tammuz “was believed to die, passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy subterranean world” (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1993, p. 326).

The seasonal cycle came to be connected with Tammuz’s supposed annual death and resurrection. “Under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life . . . which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same” (p. 325).

Many of these rites revolved around inducing the return of Tammuz from the dead. One of these ceremonies is recorded in Ezekiel 8:14, where Ezekiel saw in vision an abominable sight: women “weeping for Tammuz” at the very temple of God.

The Expositor’s Bible Commentary says regarding this verse: “Tammuz, later linked to Adonis and Aphrodite by name, was a god of fertility and rain . . . In the seasonal mythological cycle, he died early in the fall when vegetation withered. His revival, by the wailing of Ishtar, was marked by the buds of spring and the fertility of the land. Such renewal was encouraged and celebrated by licentious fertility festivals . . . The women would have been lamenting Tam-

muz’s death. They perhaps were also following the ritual of Ishtar, wailing for the revival of Tammuz” (Ralph Alexander, Vol. 6, 1986, pp. 783-784).

As worship of Tammuz and Ishtar spread to the Mediterranean region, including the territory of biblical Israel, the pair came to be worshiped under other names: Baal and Astarte (Ashtoreth), Attis and Cybele, and Adonis and Aphrodite. God heatedly condemned the sensual, perverted worship of Baal and Astarte, the “Queen of Heaven” (Judges 2:11-15; 3:7-8; 10:6-7; 1 Kings 11:4-6, 31, 33; 16:30-33; 22:51-53; 2 Kings 23:13; Jeremiah 7:18).

Pre-Christian customs linked to Christ

In ancient worship we find the mythology that would ultimately link these ancient customs to Christ’s death and resurrection. Says Alan Watts: “It would be tedious to describe in detail all that has been handed down to us about the various rites of Tammuz, Adonis, . . . and many others. . . But their universal theme—the drama of death and resurrection—makes them the forerunners of the Christian Easter, and thus the first ‘Easter services.’ As we go on to describe the Christian observance of Easter we shall see how many of its customs and ceremonies resemble these former rites” (*Easter: Its Story and Meaning*, 1950, p. 58).

Watts describes some of the similarities and parallels: “Shortly before the vernal [spring] equinox . . . the members of this cult [of Tammuz-Ishtar, Attis-Cybele and Adonis-Aphrodite] began a fast—as Christians also have the fast of Lent, beginning forty days before Easter.”

He tells how some worshippers would cut down a tree, then carry it “with reverence and ceremony to Cybele’s temple and set it up in the central sanctuary” There, “upon its

central stem [trunk], was hung the figure of the young god” (p. 59).

“Here, for the remaining days of the fast, the worshipers gathered to sing hymns of mourning for the dead Attis . . . And to this day, on Good Friday at the Veneration of the



Astarte figurines such as this are commonly found in the Middle East and testify to the popularity of the worship of this ancient fertility goddess and Tammuz, her consort. Tammuz was believed to have been resurrected in the spring, and rites associated with his worship were incorporated into Easter.

Cross, Christians sing their hymn of mourning for another and greater one who died on a Tree . . .” (p. 59).

As the fast drew to an end, a remarkable rite took place: “The figure of the dead Attis was taken down from the tree and buried under the twilight sky. Far into the night his devotees stood around the grave and sang hymns of mourning. But as dawn approached, a great light was kindled, as today Christians light the Paschal Candle on Easter Eve as a symbol of the risen Christ” (pp. 61-62).

Frazer describes the idolatrous worship this way: “The sorrow of the worshippers was turned to joy . . . The tomb was opened: the god had risen from the dead; and as the priest touched the lips of the weeping mourners with balm, he softly whispered in their ears the glad tidings of salvation. The resurrection of the god was hailed by his

disciples as a promise that they too would issue triumphant from the corruption of the grave. On the morrow . . . the divine resurrection was celebrated with a wild outburst of glee. At Rome, and probably elsewhere, the celebration took the form of a carnival” (p. 350).

An ancient celebration adopted

In its various forms, worship of Tammuz-Adonis-Attis spread around the Roman Empire including to Rome itself. As Christianity spread through the empire, religious leaders apparently merged customs and practices associated with this earlier “resurrected” god and applied them to the resurrected Son of God.

Says Frazer: “When we reflect how often the Church has skilfully 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” (p. 345).

In this respect Easter followed the pattern of Christmas in being officially sanctioned and welcomed into the church. As Frazer goes on to say: “Motives of the same sort may have led the ecclesiastical authorities to assimilate the Easter festival of the death and resurrection of their Lord to the festival of the death and resurrection of another Asiatic god which fell at the same season. Now the Easter rites still observed in Greece, Sicily and southern Italy bear in some respects a striking resemblance to the rites of Adonis, and I have suggested that the Church may have consciously adapted the new festival to its heathen predecessor for the sake of winning souls to Christ” (p. 359).

To discover what God thinks of merging customs associated with worship of other gods with worship of Him, be sure to read “Does It Matter to God?” beginning on page 38.

Easter was no part of early Church worship

The New Testament does not mention an Easter celebration. Early Christians had nothing to do with Easter. Instead, they kept the Passover, instituted by God centuries earlier at the time of the Exodus (Exodus 12:13-14; Leviticus 23:5). Jesus Christ personally kept this festival (Matthew 26:17-18) and gave it a clearer meaning under the New Covenant with His institution of the symbols of bread and wine for His beaten body and shed blood,

Fertility Symbols: Beneath the Dignity of God

Because reproduction in nature is critical for food and perpetuation of life, mankind has long been intrigued by fertility. Have you ever wondered why eggs and rabbits—the popular hallmarks of Easter—were selected as symbols of fertility?

“In traditional folk religion the egg is a powerful symbol of fertility, purity and rebirth. It is used in magical rituals to promote fertility and restore virility; to look into the future; to bring good weather; to encourage the growth of crops and protect both cattle and children against misfortune, especially the dreaded evil eye. All over the world it represents life and creation, fertility and resurrection... Later [customs concerning eggs] were linked with Easter. The church did not oppose this, though many egg customs were pre-Christian in origin, because the egg provided a fresh and powerful symbol of the Resurrection and the transformation of death into life” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1987, p. 37, “Egg”).

The Easter Bunny is the modern replacement for “the hare, the symbol of fertility in ancient Egypt” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Micropaedia, p. 333, “Easter”). It’s no secret that rabbits are extremely prolific. Their does (females) bear several litters of two to eight young each year, and gestation takes about a

month. Contrary to God’s instruction, these pagan fertility symbols credit divine powers to the creation (rabbits and eggs) instead of the Creator (Romans 1:21-25).

In contrast to pagan celebrations, God promised to bless His people with abundance in return for their love and obedience. Notice Moses’ words of encouragement to Israel shortly before his death:

“Then it shall come to pass, because you listen to these judgments, and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flock, in the land of which He swore to your fathers to give you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be a male or female barren among you or among your livestock” (Deuteronomy 7:12-14).

People have the choice of looking to God as their Creator for reproductive blessings or looking to the creation. Given the history of rabbits and eggs as pagan fertility symbols, do you think God is pleased when people include these as symbols of their worship? For the answer, see “Does It Matter to God?” beginning on page 38.

signifying His suffering and death on our behalf (verses 26-29). He is the Lamb of God, offered as the true Passover sacrifice for the sins of the world (John 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:7).

Jesus told His followers to continue this observance in remembrance of Him and His death (1 Corinthians 11:23-26). Soon, however, pressure to replace Passover with popular Easter customs began to build. This movement was the basis for much contention over the next three centuries.

Notice how *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes this period:

“The earliest Christians celebrated the Lord’s Passover at the same time as the Jews, during the night of the first full moon of the first month of spring (Nisan 14-15).

By the middle of the 2nd century, most churches had transferred this celebration to the Sunday after the Jewish feast. But certain churches of Asia Minor clung to the older custom, for which they

were denounced as ‘judaizing’ (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 5, chapters 23-25). The first ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 decreed that all churches should observe the feast together on a Sunday” (15th edition, *Macropaedia*, Vol. 4, pp. 604-605, “Church Year”).

“After long and fierce controversies over its date (which is governed by the lunar calendar), the date for Easter set by the Council of Nicaea in 325 is the first Sunday after the full moon that follows the spring equinox. Easter became the centre of a fixed liturgical structure of times and festivals in the church year” (*ibid.*, p. 499, “Christianity”).

Pressure against the biblical Passover

Why did Easter replace the Passover?

Though Easter was clearly pagan in origin, Christian leaders of the first two centuries after Christ’s crucifixion employed the same philosophy in establishing the new holiday that they later applied to Christmas. Believing that people are free to select their own times and customs of worship, they went about gradually replacing the biblically commanded Passover with their humanly devised celebration of Easter.

It was easier to draw pagan worshippers into Christianity and maintain their devotion by identifying the time-honored spring resurrection feast of the pagan mystery religions with the resurrection of Christ.



Anti-Jewish prejudice also seems to have been a major factor in the church leaders' decision to make such changes. According to R.K. Bishop: "The early development of the celebration of Easter and the attendant calendar disputes were largely a result of Christianity's attempt to emancipate itself from Judaism. Sunday had already replaced the Jewish sabbath early in the second century, and despite efforts in Asia Minor to maintain the Jewish passover date of 14 Nisan for Easter [or, rather, the true Passover] (hence the name Quartodecimans [meaning 'Fourteeners']), the Council of Nicaea adopted the annual Sunday following the full moon after the vernal equinox (March 21)" (Walter Elwell, editor, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1984, "Easter").

Before A.D. 70, Christianity was "regarded by the Roman government and by the people at large as a branch of the Jewish religion" (Jesse Lyman Hurlbut, *The Story of the Christian Church*, 1954, p. 34). Christianity and Judaism shared the biblical feast days, although Christians observed them with added meanings introduced by Jesus and the apostles.

However, two Jewish revolts against the Roman Empire, in 64-70 and 132-135, led to widespread persecution of Jews and suppression of Jewish religious practices. Jews were even driven from Jerusalem and forbidden to return on pain of death. As pressure mounted, some Christians began to abandon beliefs and practices perceived as being too Jewish. Over time many abandoned their weekly Sabbath day of rest and worship in favor of worship on Sunday, the pagan day of the sun, and abandoned the Passover in favor of Easter to distance themselves from Jews.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia explains: "Originally both observances [Passover and Easter] were allowed, but gradually it was felt incongruous that Christians should celebrate Easter on a Jewish feast, and unity in celebrating the principal Christian feast was called for" (1967, Vol. 5, p. 8, "Easter Controversy").

Passover-Easter debate

Acceptance of Easter over Passover did not come without resistance. Two religious leaders of the mid-second century—Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna in Asia Minor, and Anicetus, bishop of Rome—debated this very point.

Anicetus argued for Easter while Polycarp, a student of the apostle John, defended observing "the Christian Passover, on the 14th of Nisan, the first month of the Jewish ecclesiastical calendar, regardless of the day of the week" (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Micropaedia, Vol. 8, p. 94, "Polycarp").

Polycarp taught observance of the Passover as the early Church had observed it. Eusebius said Polycarp did so because this was the way "he had always observed it with John the disciple of our Lord, and the rest of the

apostles, with whom he associated" (*Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, 1995, pp. 210-211). These Christians of the second century were still following the example of Jesus Christ in observing the Passover (compare 1 Corinthians 11:1; 1 Peter 2:21; 1 John 2:6).

Several decades later another church leader in Asia Minor, Polycrates, argued with a new bishop of Rome, Victor, over the same issue. Eusebius wrote of the continuing debate:

"There was a considerable discussion raised about this time, in consequence of a difference of opinion respecting the observance of the paschal [Passover] season. The churches of all Asia, guided by a remoter tradition, supposed that they ought to keep the fourteenth day of the moon for the festival of the Saviour's passover, in which day the Jews were commanded to kill the paschal lamb...

"The bishops... of Asia, persevering in observing the custom handed down to them from their fathers, were headed by Polycrates. He, indeed, had also set forth the tradition handed down to them, in a letter which he addressed to Victor and the church of Rome. 'We,' said he, 'therefore, observe the genuine day; neither adding thereto nor taking therefrom. For in Asia great lights have fallen asleep, which shall rise again the day of the Lord's appearing, in which he will come with glory from heaven, and will raise up all the saints...

"Moreover, John, who rested upon the bosom of our Lord;... also Polycarp of Smyrna, both bishop and martyr. Thraseas,... Sagaris,... Papius; and Melito... All these observed the fourteenth day of the passover according to the gospel, deviating in no respect, but following the rule of faith. Moreover, I, Polycrates, who am the least of all of you, according to the tradition of my relatives, some of whom I have followed. For there were seven, my relatives [who were] bishops, and I am the eighth; and my relatives always observed the day when the people (i.e., the Jews) threw away the leaven.

"I, therefore, brethren, am now sixty-five years in the Lord, who having conferred with the brethren throughout the world, and having studied the whole of the sacred Scriptures, am not at all alarmed at those things with which I am threatened, to intimidate me. For they who are greater than I, have said, 'we ought to obey God rather than men'" (pp. 207-209).

Regrettably, people's reasoning won out over the directions of God and the example of Jesus Christ and His original disciples.

A new worship theme

As Easter replaced Passover, not only was a new *date* selected (the Sunday after the spring equinox rather than the biblically directed Nisan 14), but a new *theme* was introduced. Rather than commemorating Christ's death as directed by the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 11:26), the new holiday

was designed to celebrate His resurrection. This new theme easily accommodated the pagan fertility symbols. It also helped distinguish the Christian community from the Jews, a major goal of church leaders of the time.

Although Christ's resurrection is an important basis of our hope that we, too, can be resurrected (1 Corinthians 15:17; Romans 5:10), and it was critical for God's plan of salvation to continue, neither God the Father, Christ nor Scripture has ever explicitly directed us to celebrate this event.

Indeed, the love of God is primarily expressed to all humanity through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (John 3:16; Hebrews 9:28). His death, through which our sins may be forgiven, is the primary focus of the Passover, not His resurrection. Many precise details of His death and events leading up to and encompassing it were prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures hundreds of years in advance.

The decision of God the Father to willingly give His only begotten Son—and of Jesus Christ to surrender His life to torture and execution as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity—were far more demanding than the demonstration of God's power over death through the resurrection.

Mankind's need for a Savior

There is more to consider. The Bible discusses sin and our need for forgiveness and reconciliation to God (the theme of the biblically commanded Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread) far more often than the subject of the resurrection. Within the King James Version of the Bible, the word *sin* is used 447 times compared with the word *resurrection* being used only 41 times. Don't forget that sin was the cause of Christ's death. Only by repenting of our sins and being reconciled to God by the death of Christ can we be assured of being resurrected (Acts 2:38; John 5:29; John 11:25).

This is not to minimize the importance of Christ's resurrection. It, too, is a crucial step in the salvation process (1 Corinthians 15). After being reconciled to God the Father by the death of His Son, ultimately we are saved by Christ's life as He pleads for us in the role of our High Priest and lives in us through the Holy Spirit, helping us to overcome sin (Romans 5:10; Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1; Galatians 2:20). The process of our coming out of sin is pictured in the biblical feast immediately following Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, during which Christ's resurrection occurred.

Again, though, the Bible nowhere instructs Christians to keep a special celebration of Christ's resurrection, nor is there a biblical record of early Christians doing so. But it is clear that both Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul expected Christ's followers to commemorate His sacrificial death on our behalf in a special ceremony (Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 5:7; 11:23-28).

Nonetheless, the celebration of Easter prevailed. Those who remained faithful to Christ's example of keeping the Passover and the Days of Unleavened

Bread decreased in number and were persecuted by those favoring Easter.

Although how God views humanly devised changes in the worship He commands will be considered in a later chapter, let's now examine how the traditions of this holiday fail to match the biblical record.

Sunday morning resurrection?

The choice of a Sunday date for Easter is based on the assumption that Christ rose from the grave early on a Sunday morning. The popular belief is that Christ was crucified on a Friday and rose on a Sunday. But *neither* of these suppositions is supported by the biblical record.

Matthew 12:38 shows some of the scribes and Pharisees asking Jesus for a sign to prove He was the Messiah. Jesus told them that the only sign He would give was that of the prophet Jonah: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be *three days and three nights in the heart of the earth*" (verse 40).

But how can we fit "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth" between a Friday-afternoon crucifixion and a Sunday-morning resurrection? The traditional view of the crucifixion and resurrection allows for Jesus to have been entombed for only *a day and a half*.

Some try to reconcile Christ's words with their belief in a Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection by rationalizing that Christ's "three days and three nights" statement does not require a literal span of 72 hours. They reason that a part of a day can be reckoned as a whole day. Hence, since Jesus died in the afternoon—around "the ninth hour" after daybreak, or about 3 p.m. (Matthew 27:46-50)—they think the remainder of Friday constituted the first day, Saturday the second and part of Sunday the third.

However, they fail to take into consideration that only *two* nights—Friday night and Saturday night—are accounted for in this explanation. After all, the Bible is clear that Jesus had already risen *before* the daylight portion of Sunday (John 20:1). Something is obviously incorrect in this common conclusion regarding when Christ was in the tomb.

Jonah 1:17, to which Christ referred, states specifically that "Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights." We have no reason to think these days and nights were fractional. Nor is there any basis for thinking that Jesus meant only two nights and one day, plus parts of two days, when He foretold the length of time He would be in the grave. Such rationalization undermines the integrity of Jesus' words.

Was Christ's sign fulfilled?

If Jesus were in the tomb only from late Friday afternoon to sometime early Sunday morning, then the sign He gave that He was the prophesied Messiah was not fulfilled. The claim of His Messiahship rests on the fulfillment

of His words; it’s that serious a matter.

Let us carefully examine the details of those fateful days. Each of the Gospel writers gives an account of the events, but each presents different aspects that need to be correctly synchronized and harmonized to produce a clear sequence and understanding of what happened. We will see that, when each account is considered, the chronological details mesh perfectly.

For instance, John 19:31 preserves a crucial point that provides insight into the other narratives. The preparation day on which Jesus was crucified is described as the day before the Sabbath. But John clarifies it by stating that this approaching Sabbath “*was a high day.*” This does not refer to the weekly Sabbath (Friday sunset to Saturday sunset) but to the first day of Unleavened Bread, which is one of God’s annual high, or Sabbath, days (Exodus 12:16-17; Leviticus 23:6-7), which could—and usually did—fall on other days of the week.

Some believe that this high day fell that year on the seventh day of the week, making it coincide with the weekly Sabbath, with the preparation day being on Friday. But Luke’s account shows that this was not the case. Notice the sequence of events outlined in Luke 23. Jesus’ moment of death, as well as His hasty burial because of the oncoming Sabbath, is narrated in verses 46-53. Verse 54 then states, “That day was the Preparation, and the Sabbath drew near.”

Two Sabbaths mentioned

Many have assumed that it is the weekly Sabbath mentioned here. But that’s incorrect. Instead, it was a Sabbath that occurred on a *Thursday*, since verse 56 shows that the women, after seeing Christ’s body being laid in the tomb, “returned and prepared spices and fragrant oils” for the final preparation of the body.

Such work would not have been done on a Sabbath day since it would have been considered a Sabbath violation. This is verified by Mark’s account, which states, “Now *when the Sabbath was past*, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices [which they would not have purchased on the high-day Sabbath], that they might come and anoint Him” (Mark 16:1).

The women had to wait until this Sabbath was over before they could buy and prepare the spices to be used for anointing Jesus’ body. Then, as Luke 23:56 says, it was after purchasing and preparing the spices and oils on Friday that “they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.” This second Sabbath mentioned in the Gospel accounts is the regular weekly Sabbath, observed from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset.

By comparing details in both Gospels—where Mark tells us the women bought spices *after the Sabbath* and Luke relates that they prepared the

spices and *then rested on the Sabbath*—we can clearly see that *two different Sabbaths* are mentioned. The first was a “high day” (John 19:31)—the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread—which in that year, A.D. 31, fell on a Thursday. The second was the weekly seventh-day Sabbath. (See “The Chronology of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection” below.)

Sign of the Messiah

After the women rested on the regular weekly Sabbath, they went to Jesus’ tomb early on the first day of the week (Sunday), “while it was still dark” (John 20:1), and found that He had already been resurrected (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:1-3). When we allow the Scriptures to interpret themselves, all four Gospel accounts accurately harmonize and attest to the validity of Jesus’ promise that He would be in the grave three days and three nights—not just part of that time.

Several Bible translations recognize that more than one Sabbath is discussed in these events. In Matthew 28:1 some Bible versions, including Alfred Marshall’s Parallel New Testament in Greek and English, Ferrar Fenton’s Translation and Green’s Literal Translation, properly translate this phrase as “after the sabbaths.” Young’s Literal Translation and *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (1992, p. 1270) similarly acknowledge that multiple Sabbaths are intended here.

The wording of Mark 16:1-2 is confusing to some because it seems to suggest that the spices were purchased after the weekly Sabbath rather than before it, on Friday. However, this is explained by Luke 23:56, which

The Chronology of Christ’s Crucifixion and Resurrection					
Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Jesus Christ ate an evening Passover meal with His disciples and instituted the New Covenant symbols (Matthew 26:26-28). Jesus was then betrayed by Judas, arrested and during the night brought before the high priest.	Jesus died around 3 p.m. (Matthew 27:46-50). This was the preparation day for the annual, not weekly, Sabbath, which began at sunset (Mark 15:42; Luke 23:54; John 19:31). Jesus’ body was placed in the tomb just before sunset (Matthew 27:57-60).	Wednesday sunset to Thursday sunset was the high-day Sabbath, the first day of Unleavened Bread (John 19:31; Leviticus 23:4-7). It is described as the day after the “Day of Preparation” (Matthew 27:62).	The high-day Sabbath now past, the women bought and prepared spices for anointing Jesus’ body before resting on the weekly Sabbath day, which began at Friday sunset (Mark 16:1; Luke 23:56).	The women rested on the weekly Sabbath, according to the Fourth Commandment (Luke 23:56; Exodus 20:8-11). Jesus rose near sunset, exactly three days and three nights after burial, fulfilling the sign of Jonah and authenticating the sign He gave of His messiahship.	The women brought the spices early in the morning while it was still dark (Luke 24:1; John 20:1), finding that Jesus had <i>already</i> risen (Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:2-6; Luke 24:2-3; John 20:1). He did not rise on Sunday morning, but near sunset the day before.

clearly shows that the women bought the spices before, and not after, the weekly Sabbath, “and they rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment.” Mark did not mention this weekly Sabbath rest in his account, but Luke, who wrote his account of these events later, did.

Some also stumble over Mark 16:9, not taking into account that there is no punctuation indicated in the original Greek. Therefore, to be in harmony with the material presented in the other Gospels, a better translation would be: “Now having risen, early the first day of the week He appeared first to Mary Magdalene . . .” These verses are not saying that Jesus rose early on Sunday morning, but that He *appeared* early on Sunday morning to Mary Magdalene, having already risen some time earlier.

When we consider the details in all four Gospel accounts, the picture is clear. Jesus was crucified and entombed late on Wednesday afternoon, just before a Sabbath began at sunset. However, that was a high-day Sabbath, falling that year on the fifth day of the week, sunset Wednesday to sunset Thursday, rather than the weekly Sabbath from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset. He remained entombed from Wednesday at sunset until Saturday at sunset, having risen from the dead. Thus, when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on Sunday morning before sunrise, “while it was still dark,” she found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty.

We can be assured that the duration of Christ’s entombment before His resurrection, which He foretold as proof of His Messiahship, was precisely as long as He said it would be—equaling the “three days and three nights [Jonah was] in the belly of the great fish” (Matthew 12:40). Thus, Jesus rose late Saturday afternoon around sunset—not Sunday at sunrise—which was exactly three days and three nights after He was placed in the tomb just before sunset on Wednesday.

Christ’s prophecy of the time He would be in the tomb was fulfilled precisely. Because most people do not understand the biblical high days kept by Jesus Christ and His followers, they fail to understand the chronological details so accurately preserved for us in the Gospels.

A better way

As we have seen, Easter and its customs originated not from the Bible, but in pagan fertility rites. It is a curious mixture of ancient mythological practices and arbitrary dating that obscures and discredits the proof of Jesus Christ’s Messiahship and resurrection.

Having learned the sources and backgrounds of two major religious holidays, one might rightly wonder which days, if any, a Christian should observe. God in His Word shows a better way of life with better days of worship He has appointed for His people. The next chapter reveals the days God commands.

God’s Days of Worship

Since the Word of God doesn’t sanction the celebration of either Christmas or Easter and condemns the pagan embellishments associated with these humanly devised holidays, how should Christians worship God? Do annual celebrations exist that Christians *should* observe?

God has given us seven annual festivals, or feasts, on which to worship and honor Him. By observing them according to His Word, we can understand His ultimate plan for humanity. Let us now take note of the days *God* instructs us to formally worship Him on. His festivals are far

God has given us seven annual festivals, or feasts, on which to worship and honor Him. His festivals are far more significant than this world’s holidays because they reveal His plan for humanity.

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The first commanded day of worship

Leviticus 23 lists all of God’s commanded festivals in order. The first one is to be observed every week—the weekly Sabbath day (Leviticus 23:3).

In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we find that God created man on the sixth day of the creation week (Genesis 1:24-31). “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Genesis 2:2-3).

The Hebrew word for “rested” is *shabath* and is related to the word *Sabbath*. Literally, God *sabbathed*, or rested; He ceased from the work of creating (Exodus 20:8-11).

In resting, God also blessed and sanctified the seventh day as a gift for mankind (Genesis 2:2-3; Exodus 16:29). To *sanctify* something means *to set it apart as holy*. Since God made the Sabbath holy (Exodus 16:23; 20:11; Nehemiah 9:14), He instructed those who follow Him to remember *to keep it holy* by resting on it as well (Exodus 20:8-11; Deuteronomy 5:12-15). Keeping the Sabbath, then, reminds us that God is our Creator.

Besides making the Sabbath for rest, God also revealed that the Sabbath

is a day of worship. In Leviticus 23 He told Moses: “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be *holy convocations*, these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a *holy convocation*. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings’” (verses 1-3). Holy convocations are sacred assemblies for worship.

When Jesus Christ came to live as a human being on earth, He did not come to abolish or weaken God’s commands (Matthew 5:17). He came to “exalt the law and make it honorable” (Isaiah 42:21). Jesus kept the Sabbath (Mark 1:21; 6:2; Luke 4:16; 6:6), as did His apostles and other members of the early Church (Acts 13:14; 17:2). Gentile believers met with them on the Sabbath (Acts 13:42, 44; 18:4).

This blessing from God, enshrined in one of the Ten Commandments, did not change. The seventh day of the week—observed from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset—has continued as God’s commanded holy day for rest and worship. Even though misguided *people* later initiated a change to worshipping on Sunday, *God’s command* was never rescinded, nor was there biblical authorization for a change to the first day of the week.

This is only the briefest explanation of God’s Fourth Commandment. If you would like to discover much more about the biblical Sabbath, please download or request your free copy of our booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest*.

Besides the weekly Sabbath, God gave His people *yearly* festivals that correspond with the harvest seasons of Israel. These were also “holy convocations” to be observed at their appropriate times (Leviticus 23:4) and represent God’s master plan of salvation for humankind.

The Passover

Passover (Leviticus 23:5), which falls in early spring in the Holy Land, is a reminder of how God took the lives of all the firstborn Egyptian males (Exodus 12:7, 26-29) but *passed over* the Israelites’ homes because they had placed the blood of a sacrificed lamb on their doorposts.

The blood of the lamb foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which spares mankind from eternal death. In the New Testament, Christians came to understand that Christ is the true Passover Lamb (compare Exodus 12:21 with 1 Corinthians 5:7). In observing His last Passover with His disciples, Jesus explained that the symbols of bread and wine represent His body and blood, offered by Him for the forgiveness of our sins (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24).

The death of Christ then actually took place during the daylight hours that followed—which was still the same date according to Hebrew sunset-to-sunset reckoning. So He was sacrificed on Passover.

Our observance of this annual occasion marking Jesus’ death (1 Corinthians 11:26) reminds us that eternal life is possible only through Him (John 6:47-54; Acts 4:10-12). His sacrifice is the starting point for salvation and the foundation of the annual feast days that follow.

The Feast of Unleavened Bread

In conjunction with the Passover, God instituted the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread, which immediately follows (Leviticus 23:6-8). Historically it commemorates the ancient Israelites fleeing Egypt in such haste that they didn’t have time to let their bread rise (Exodus 12:33-34). This feast came in Israel at the beginning of the early spring barley harvest.

God commanded the Israelites to keep this festival by removing leaven (yeast) out of their homes for seven days. The first and last days of this week-long festival were specifically set apart as holy convocations—annual Sabbaths—days devoted to rest and assembly for worship.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus identified leaven as a symbol of sin (Matthew 16:6-12; Mark 8:15; Luke 12:1). Thereafter members of the early Church continued to observe this festival by putting leaven out of their homes for the week as a symbol of the clean minds and attitudes God desires of His people (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). After accepting Christ’s sacrifice for our sins, we must follow His example in practicing righteousness.

It was during this festival that Jesus was raised from the dead—a vital factor for us to be led out of sin and on to God’s Kingdom.

The Feast of Pentecost

The third annual festival is the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost (Leviticus 23:16-21; Acts 2:1). This festival, also called the Feast of Harvest or Firstfruits (Exodus 23:16; 34:22), corresponding with the start of the late spring wheat harvest in Israel, was the day God miraculously granted His Spirit to the New Testament Church (Acts 2).

Pentecost continues to remind us that God is the Lord of His harvest, choosing and preparing the firstfruits of His coming Kingdom by granting them His Spirit (Matthew 9:38; Luke 10:2; Romans 8:23; James 1:18). God’s Spirit empowers us with the love of God, the motivation to obey Him, and a sound mind to discern His truth (2 Timothy 1:7; John 15:26; 16:13). Only those led by God’s Spirit are called the sons of God (Romans 8:9, 14).

The Feast of Trumpets

The next feast day, in late summer or early fall in Israel, is the Feast of Trumpets (Leviticus 23:24-25). Ancient Israel understood that trumpets were used as a way of announcing special messages (Numbers 10:1-10).

The New Testament reveals a great event to be announced with the sounding of a trumpet—the return of Jesus Christ to the earth (Revelation 8:2, 11:15). This day also pictures the time when faithful Christians who have died will be resurrected to life (1 Corinthians 15:52; 1 Thessalonians 4:16) to reign with Christ for 1,000 years (Revelation 20:4-6).

Interestingly, it was around this time of year that Jesus was born—not in the dead of winter (see “Biblical Evidence Shows Jesus Wasn’t Born on December 25” on page 12). And the fall feast season represents the time when Christ will come to the earth again to reign in glory.

The remaining fall feast days describe steps in the establishment of the prophesied Kingdom of God on earth and judgment of humanity after Christ’s return.

The Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement is the next holy convocation (Leviticus 23:26-32). Observed by fasting (verse 27; compare Isaiah 58:3), refraining from eating or drinking (Esther 4:16), this day represents humanity’s need to be reconciled to God through the forgiveness of sin.

At the return of Christ, Satan the devil, who now leads mankind astray (Ephesians 2:2; Revelation 12:9), will be bound (20:1-3) so the nations can be reconciled to the Father through Christ. Luke referred to this observance as “the fast” in Acts 27:9.

The Feast of Tabernacles

The next festival period lasts for eight days (Leviticus 23:33-39) and pictures the final steps in God’s master plan to bring all of humanity into His eternal family. It includes the last two of God’s annual festivals and marks the celebration of the completion of a full year of harvests. The two festivals symbolize the last two great spiritual harvests of human beings under the reign of Jesus Christ.

The first seven days, the Feast of Tabernacles, also known as the Feast of Ingathering to mark this great harvest period (Exodus 23:16), pictures the 1,000-year rule of Jesus Christ immediately following His return to the earth (see Revelation 20:4-6) known as the Millennium.

Isaiah describes this future period as a time of peace when God’s law will go forth to all nations from Jerusalem (Isaiah 2:2-4). The fierce nature of some animals will change (Isaiah 11:6; 65:25), the earth will become highly productive (Isaiah 35:1), and, most important, “the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9). With Satan’s evil influence removed, all of humanity will at last learn God’s ways.

This perfect environment will be designed to offer all people the

opportunity to repent of their sins and come to God the Father through Jesus Christ. The Bible shows that Jesus attended this important festival (John 7:2, 10, 14).

The Last Great Day

The final step in God’s plan of salvation for all mankind is represented in a feast day at the conclusion of the Feast of Tabernacles (Leviticus

God’s Festivals in the New Testament

Biblical Observance	Commanded in the Old Testament	Observed by Jesus Christ, the apostles or the Church in the New Testament
Passover	Leviticus 23:5	Matthew 26:2, 17-19; Mark 14:12-16; Luke 2:41-42; 22:1, 7-20; John 2:13, 23; 6:4; 13:1-30; 1 Corinthians 11:23-29
Feast of Unleavened Bread	Leviticus 23:6-8	Matthew 26:17; Mark 14:12; Luke 2:41-42; 22:1, 7; Acts 20:6; 1 Corinthians 5:6-8
Feast of Pentecost	Leviticus 23:15-22	Acts 2:1-21; 20:16; 1 Corinthians 16:8
Feast of Trumpets*	Leviticus 23:23-25	Matthew 24:30-31; 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17; Revelation 11:15
Day of Atonement	Leviticus 23:26-32	Acts 27:9
Feast of Tabernacles	Leviticus 23:33-43	John 7:1-2, 8, 10, 14; Acts 18:21
Last Great Day	Leviticus 23:36	John chapters 7-9

*Although the Feast of Trumpets is not mentioned by name in the New Testament, the theme of the day—the sounding of trumpets announcing Jesus Christ’s return—is mentioned by several New Testament authors as noted in the references.

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23:39). Also called the eighth day or the Last Great Day, this festival pictures the great judgment of humankind described in Revelation 20:11-13. During this time all people who have died not knowing God's plan for them will be resurrected to life to be given an opportunity to respond to God's call. Thus it represents the completion of the spiritual harvest of mankind.

Our Creator wants "all men to be saved" (1 Timothy 2:4) and is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Through His wonderful plan everyone will have an opportunity to know His truth, repent and receive salvation.

The Church of the first century followed Jesus' example of observing these days. Peter and John urged the brethren to walk in Jesus' steps (1 Peter 2:21), to "walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:6). They followed Christ's command to teach converts to "observe all things that I [Jesus] have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).

Obedience or idolatry?

Observances rooted in paganism break the first two of the Ten Commandments. Is God pleased when people claim to worship Him by adopting celebrations of pagan gods and goddesses in man-made

What About Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Purim?

Since the Jews added the feasts of Purim (the origins of which are described in the book of Esther) and Hanukkah, otherwise known as the Feast of Lights or Feast of Dedication (mentioned in John 10:22-23), some believe we are free to add any religious holidays and celebrations of our own choosing. Is this true?

Important differences in the background and intent of these observances are obvious when we compare them to Christmas, Easter and Halloween. The Jews instituted Purim to commemorate their deliverance during the time of Esther, and Hanukkah to celebrate the rededication of the Jerusalem temple after its defilement by the Syrian invader Antiochus Epiphanes.

Neither celebration originated in pagan-

ism, although over the centuries these celebrations have taken on some practices, like the Hanukkah bush, that are rooted in paganism.

In their original form, Hanukkah and Purim, like the American holiday of Thanksgiving, are celebrations of thanks and honor to God for His intervention and blessings. The way some Americans celebrate Thanksgiving is far removed from the original intent, but that does not alter the real meaning and significance of the day.

An important distinction between acceptable holidays and those rooted in paganism (like Christmas and Easter) is that they do not alter, replace or distort the meaning of a festival of God or other biblical truths.

holidays while they ignore His commanded days and ways of worship?

Celebrating the birthday of the sun god or adopting fertility rites to other gods and goddesses violates God's clear instruction: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

Inventing religious feasts to replace those given by God contradicts

Why would anyone choose to reject God's instructions and His marvelous feast days, especially since He gave them to us to reveal our ultimate destiny?

His teaching: "You shall not make for yourself an idol . . . You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God . . ." (verses 4-5, New International Version). Substituting pagan customs and practices for what God has commanded—regardless of how well intentioned it might be—is idolatry.

Why would anyone choose to reject God's instructions and His marvelous feast days, especially since He gave them to us to reveal our ultimate destiny? To discover more about these magnificent festivals and how to observe them, be sure to request your free copy of our booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. You will find further proof that Jesus and the apostles observed these days and will learn much more about their significance in helping us understand God's master plan for all of humanity.

Following the instruction and example of Jesus Christ, the apostles and the early New Testament Church, members of the United Church of God continue to observe these annual days. We welcome all who wish to join us in worshipping our Creator on these great festivals of hope. We invite you to contact our nearest office to locate a congregation near you.

Does It Matter to God?

Over the last two millennia, traditional Christianity has systematically laid aside the “feast days of the LORD” and established its own holidays. Christmas was established to enable pagan converts to come into church fellowship without forsaking their heathen customs and practices. Easter is a replacement for the biblical Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread.

Even the weekly Sabbath was abandoned in favor of Sunday, the pagan day of the sun, supposedly to commemorate Jesus’ resurrection (though, as we demonstrated earlier, it took place not on Sunday morning but at the end of the weekly Sabbath at sunset Saturday).

Although we should immediately recognize that overruling God’s instructions is dangerous behavior, let’s consider, from the biblical record, whether such inventions and alterations are acceptable worship to our Creator God.

Changing God’s instructions

When God began working with the ancient Israelites, He intended they set an example of obedience to Him for the nations around them (Deuteronomy 4:1, 6-8). They were to be a model nation, showing other peoples that God’s way of life produces abundant blessings. Their experiences serve as continuing examples for us (1 Corinthians 10:1-11).

During their years in Egypt, the Israelites were exposed to Egyptian culture and worship. Notice what *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* says about this culture: “The Egyptian religion was an utterly bewildering polytheistic conglomeration in which many deities of the earliest periods, when each town had its own deity, were retained...

“Every object beheld, every phenomenon of nature, was thought to be indwelt by a spirit which could choose its own form, occupying the body of a crocodile, a fish, a cow, a cat, etc. Hence the Egyptians had numerous holy animals, principally the bull, the cow, the cat, the baboon, the jackal, and the crocodile” (1966, p. 291, “Egypt”).

Shortly after miraculously delivering the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, God instructed them how He wanted to be worshipped. He gave them His commandments (Exodus 20), along with statutes and judgments detailing how to apply them (Exodus 21-22). God revealed His feast days (Exodus 23:14-17; Leviticus 23) and gave directions regarding a priesthood, tabernacle and offerings (Exodus 25-31). God told Moses to climb Mount Sinai and gave him two tablets of stone engraved with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 24:12; 31:18).

When Moses didn’t come down from Mount Sinai for some time (Exodus 32:1), the people prodded his brother Aaron into fashioning an idol for them to worship. They essentially mixed the Egyptian form of worship with the instructions they had just received from God. The practice of blending religious beliefs and practices is known as syncretism.

After creating a golden image of a calf, Aaron proclaimed the next day a holiday—“a feast to the LORD” (verses 4-5). They then “rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry” (verse 6, NIV). This celebration combined God’s instruction with Egyptian religious practice and tradition.

We are not told why the Israelites chose this mix of worship. Perhaps they thought it was not a good idea to abandon all the familiar forms of worship at once and they simply practiced what they were accustomed to from their years immersed in Egyptian culture. Whatever their thinking, God was not pleased. He told Moses: “Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, *have become corrupt*. They have been *quick to turn away from what I commanded them*” (verses 7-8, NIV).

God shows from His Word that He expects more from those who claim to follow Him. He wants people to worship Him “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24)—not with corrupted, vile practices rooted in the worship of other gods.

Consequences of futile worship

The Israelites were in no way justified in departing from the God-ordained instructions introduced in the wilderness. God was so angered by their actions that He was ready to destroy the nation (Exodus 32:10). Only on Moses’ pleadings did God relent and spare them (verses 11-14).

Ancient Israel’s experiment with combining parts of God’s instruction with pagan customs and elements was a disaster. In punishment for this sin, 3,000 men lost their lives (verses 27-28). Those who weren’t killed had to drink water polluted with the ground-up idol, pulverized into powder (verse 20).

Being presumptuous—taking unauthorized liberty to do things such as altering God’s instructions for worship—is sinful. The Bible describes the Israelites’ actions as “*a great sin*” (verses 21, 30, 31). God’s law is clear concerning presumptuous behavior (Numbers 15:30-31).

The principle holds true today among God’s people. Once we come to understand His truth, we have an obligation to take steps to obey Him. We recognize that the instruction and examples in His Word were recorded for our spiritual instruction and benefit (1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; Romans 15:4).

Halloween: A Celebration of Evil

What must an unfamiliar observer think of Halloween? Parents dress their children as monsters, vampires, devils, witches and ghosts and encourage them to approach total strangers to ask them for candy and other treats. Homeowners decorate their houses with images of black cats, ghosts, goblins and carved pumpkins and sometimes transform their yards into make-believe graveyards. Adults dress in similar strange and outlandish costumes and go to parties in rooms decorated like dungeons or crypts.

Why are such bizarre practices so popular? Why would anyone celebrate a holiday emphasizing the morbid and macabre? Where did such strange customs originate?

As with Christmas and Easter, we can trace the roots of Halloween far back into the pagan past. *The Encyclopedia of Religion* says, “Halloween, or Allhallows Eve, is a festival celebrated on 31 October, the evening prior to the Christian Feast of All Saints (All Saints’ Day). Halloween is the name for the eve of Samhain [pronounced *sow-en*], a celebration marking the beginning of winter as well as the first day of the New Year within the ancient Celtic culture of the British Isles. The time of Samhain consisted of the eve of the feast and the day itself (31 October and 1 November)” (1987, p. 176, “Halloween”).

Besides Halloween, the Celts observed many other holidays including the winter solstice (later transformed into Christmas), spring fertility rites (reborn later as Easter) and May Day as a harvest festival.

Concerning Halloween *The Encyclopedia of Religion* continues: “On this occasion, it was believed that a gathering of supernatural forces occurred as during no other period of the year. The eve and day of Samhain were characterized as a time when the barriers between the human and

supernatural worlds were broken. Other-worldly entities, such as the souls of the dead, were able to visit earthly inhabitants, and humans could take the opportunity to penetrate the domains of the gods and supernatural creatures.

“Fiery tributes and sacrifices of animals, crops, and possibly human beings were made to appease supernatural powers who controlled the fertility of the land . . . Samhain acknowledged the entire spectrum of nonhuman forces that roamed the earth during the period” (pp. 176-177).

On this holiday “huge bonfires were set on hilltops to frighten away evil spirits . . . The souls of the dead were supposed to revisit their homes on this day, and the autumnal festival acquired sinister significance, with ghosts, witches, hobgoblins, black cats, fairies, and demons of all kinds said to be roaming about. It was the time to placate the supernatural powers controlling the processes of nature. In addition, Halloween was thought to be the most favourable time for divinations concerning marriage, luck, health, and death. It was the only day on which the help of the devil was invoked for such purposes” (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Micropaedia, Vol. 4, p. 862, “Halloween”).

Ancient practices continued today

As with Christmas and Easter, church leaders adopted this ancient celebration to serve their own purposes. “Samhain remained a popular festival among the Celtic people throughout the christianization of Great Britain. The British church attempted to divert this interest in pagan customs by adding a Christian celebration to the calendar on the same date as Samhain. The Christian festival, the Feast of All Saints, commemorates the known and

unknown saints of the Christian religion just as Samhain had acknowledged and paid tribute to the Celtic deities” (*The Encyclopedia of Religion*, p. 177, “Halloween”).

Several ancient Halloween practices still exist in modern observances. Bobbing for apples was originally a form of divination (fortune telling) to learn of future marriages. The first person to bite an apple was predicted to be the first to marry in the coming



year . . . The jack-o-lantern . . . represent[ed] a watchman on Halloween night or a man caught between earth and the supernatural world” (Jack Santino, *All Around the Year: Holidays & Celebrations in American Life*, 1994, p. 26).

The Bible condemns the occult

Although some may dismiss the demonic symbolism and divination associated with Halloween as harmless fun, the Bible reveals the existence of evil spirits, led by Satan the devil, whom God holds responsible for great suffering and sorrow inflicted on the human race. Revelation 12:9 speaks of “the great dragon . . . that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan . . . [who] deceives the whole world . . .”

The name given him in the Bible, Satan, means adversary or enemy. The apostle John tells us that “the whole world lies

under the sway of the wicked one” (1 John 5:19). Satan and the other fallen angels (demons) constantly try to keep humanity spiritually blinded, turning them aside from their awesome destiny as part of the family of God.

As a loving Father, God commands us to avoid things that can harm us. Concerning the spirit world, notice what God says to His people: “Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:31).

In addition to this command to avoid practices that pertain to evil spirits, God warned ancient Israel to avoid any kind of occult practices: “There shall not be found among you anyone who . . . practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. For all who do these things are an abomination to the LORD” (Deuteronomy 18:10-12).

God has called His people to a different standard. Instead of superstitions and myths, God tells us to look to Him for our blessings, direction and future.

Modern celebrations of Halloween may appear on the surface to be quite harmless, but the spiritual implications of dabbling with the spirit world are extremely serious. Fortune-telling, Ouija boards, astrology, voodoo, clairvoyance, black magic and the like can all be related to occult, satanic forces or the worship of natural phenomena and are forbidden in Scripture.

Jesus Christ tells us that “the first and greatest commandment” is to love our Creator “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37-38). God alone is the giver of life and all good things. To give recognition to false gods, and to imitate practices that honored them, is unacceptable and idolatrous.

Additional warnings for Christians

The generation of Israelites who called for the golden calf apparently never learned to trust and obey God. Only a short time later, while preparing to go into the land God had promised them, they grew afraid of the land's inhabitants and refused to enter (Numbers 13-14). As a result, God told them they would wander 40 years in the wilderness until all those who had refused to follow His instructions had died (Numbers 14:33). After their deaths, God then began preparing the next generation to enter Canaan.

Part of God's instructions included an explicit warning against *incorporating pagan customs into their worship*. Here are His exact words:

“When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, *take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them*, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you *do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’*

“*You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they*

An Ancient Cultural Clash

Some 2,600 years ago, three young men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego, faced a cultural crisis when they were commanded to show honor to a false god.

After their native country of Judah was conquered by the Babylonian Empire, the three were taken to Babylon to be trained for service in King Nebuchadnezzar's government (Daniel 1:1-7). They were in a vulnerable position in a kingdom in which the monarch ruled with absolute power.

The king had an idolatrous image of gold built and commanded that everyone should show honor to his creation by bowing down to it (Daniel 3:1-7). Although some may have reasoned that they should show respect to the ruler by accepting some of his customs, Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego determined to show respect to God by refusing to comply with this decree.

They knew their decision was punishable by being thrown into “a burning fiery furnace” (verses 6, 12-15), but they remained firm

in their conviction. When the moment of decision arrived and the king personally commanded them to show honor to His idolatrous image, they replied: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. If that is the case, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us from your hand, O king. But if not, let it be known to you, O king, that we do not serve your gods, nor will we worship the gold image which you have set up” (verses 16-18).

These courageous young men were willing to give their lives, if necessary, to show loyalty to God alone. Appreciating their devotion, God spared their lives in a powerful and miraculous witness to Nebuchadnezzar (verses 19-30). The faith and faithfulness of these young men remains an enduring example of respect for God. Their example should inspire all of us to honor our Creator with a similar sense of loyalty and dedication.

burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. *Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it*” (Deuteronomy 12:29-32).

Regrettably, the Israelites often failed to heed God's warning. Time and time again they let their fascination with the religious practices of those around them get the better of them as they lapsed into idolatrous worship.

In the 600s B.C. God gave three more warnings against this kind of behavior. First, through the prophet Jeremiah, God said, “*Do not learn the way of the Gentiles*; do not be dismayed at the signs of heaven, for the Gentiles are dismayed at them” (Jeremiah 10:2). Here God cautioned His people against following the gentile (non-Israelite) practices of worshipping the heavenly bodies (like the sun on Dec. 25) and against astrology in general.

In the following verses (3-9), God describes some of their idolatrous customs. They cut a tree from the forest, prop it up and decorate it with precious metals.

Although this account is specifically referring to setting up an object of idolatrous worship (verses 6-8), God's command here, “Do not learn the way of the Gentiles,” applies to all pagan religious customs. Christmas trees, mistletoe and colorful lights that come from pagan winter-solstice celebrations, rabbits and Easter eggs as fertility symbols, and demonic concepts at Halloween, all fit this prohibition. Likewise a number of other modern traditions, such as New Year's Day celebration and Valentine's Day, also fit the prohibition—as they, too, originate in pagan worship. (You can search for more information on these at our Web site, www.ucg.org.)

In giving this instruction against learning the way of the gentiles, God wanted His people to avoid the type of sin their forefathers had committed with the golden calf.

A few years after the statement in Jeremiah, God again expressed His anger with His people: “For they have committed adultery, and blood is on their hands. They have committed adultery with their idols, and even sacrificed their sons whom they bore to Me, passing them through the fire, to devour them. Moreover they have done this to Me: They have defiled My sanctuary on the same day and profaned My Sabbaths. For after they had slain their children for their idols, on the same day they came into My sanctuary to profane it; and indeed thus they have done in the midst of My house” (Ezekiel 23:37-39).

Here it appears that Israel practiced one of the customs like those originally associated with the Saturnalia and worship of Saturn—the sacrificing of children—and then came to worship God on one of His Sabbaths!

Through the prophet Zephaniah God decried “those who worship the host of heaven on the housetops; those who worship and swear oaths by the LORD, but who also swear by Milcom” (Zephaniah 1:5). God is not

pleased when people are double-minded (James 1:8; 4:8) in their worship—accepting false religions and customs while professing to worship Him.

A consistent message throughout the Bible

Some people wrongly assume that Old Testament prohibitions against mixing paganism with godly worship were annulled during apostolic times. Nothing could be further from the truth.

To prove the continuity of God's teaching in the New Testament, let us consider the city of Corinth. Here we find one of the most instructive examples about incorporating paganism into Christianity.

Strategically located just south of the narrow isthmus connecting central Greece with the Peloponnesus, this city sat on an important trade route. Its inhabitants grew rich by transporting goods across the four-mile isthmus, which saved merchants a 200-mile trip by ship. Worship of Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) had long been part of the city's history. It also boasted a temple to Apollo, the Greek sun god.

What was Corinth like in the first century? “[Here] the apostle Paul established a flourishing church, made up of a cross section of the worldly minded people who had flocked to Corinth to participate in the gambling, legalized temple prostitution, business adventures, and amusements available in a first-century navy town...

“The city soon became a melting pot for the approximately 500,000 people who lived there at the time of Paul's arrival. Merchants and sailors, anxious to work the docks, migrated to Corinth. Professional gamblers and athletes, betting on the Isthmian games, took up residence. Slaves, sometimes freed but with no place to go, roamed the streets day and night. And prostitutes (both male and female) were abundant. People from Rome, the rest of Greece, Egypt, Asia Minor—indeed, all of the Mediterranean world—relished the lack of standards and freedom of thought that prevailed in the city.

“These were the people who eventually made up the Corinthian church. They had to learn to live together in harmony, although their national, social, economic, and religious backgrounds were very different” (*Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, “Corinth”).

Paul's instruction regarding other religious practices

Writing to this diverse group, primarily gentiles with a tradition of idol worship (1 Corinthians 12:2), Paul addressed the issue of whether outside religious customs and practices had any place among God's people:

“What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the

temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people.’

“Therefore ‘Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty.’ Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 6:14–18; 7:1).

Instead of renaming some of the pagan customs as Christian or allowing the new converts to retain some of their former practices, the apostle Paul commanded them to leave behind all of these forms of worship. He condemned the sexual immorality that was a common part of the fertility rites in honor of the goddess Aphrodite (1 Corinthians 6:13, 18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3). No doubt the new church did not participate in winter-solstice celebrations honoring the sun god Apollo. Nor did they imitate these to honor Christ—as this would not have honored Christ at all.

Christianity that is faithful to the Bible teaches its followers that “our old man was crucified with Him [Jesus Christ], that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin” (Romans 6:6). If someone is strongly committed to following Christ, “he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Paul explains that we are not to retain our favorite past religious traditions. Indeed, “all things have become new”! As part of the “old man”

The Delights of Obedience

A joy and peace of mind come from making right choices, from knowing you are conscientiously obeying God's instruction in the pages of the Bible.

Before the time of King Josiah of Judah, the scroll containing the Book of the Law had been lost, along with the knowledge of God's festivals. But Hilkiah, the high priest, found that scroll, and Shaphan the scribe read it in the presence of young Josiah. The repentant king quickly restored the true worship of God according to the instruction he found in the scroll.

One of Josiah's first steps in restoring

proper worship of God was observing the Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. For a time the whole country caught the righteous fervor of the youthful king, and a national festival observance ensued such as had not been seen for centuries (2 Chronicles 34-35).

Later that same spirit of obedience and joyful festival celebration swept the Jewish settlements in the Holy Land during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. Not only did the people enjoy the physical aspects of these days, but the nation gained renewed understanding of God's Word as well (Nehemiah 8:9-12).

(Ephesians 4:22; Colossians 3:9), our former styles of worship must go.

As Jesus taught, we simply cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13). We cannot simultaneously embrace two competing systems of worship.

We see the obvious continuity between the Old and New Testaments of the Bible; the new also forbids mixing pagan tradition with the “worship in spirit and truth” God commands (John 4:23-24).

Authority from man or God?

Since God is so strongly opposed to altering His revealed days of worship (Deuteronomy 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19), by what authority did human beings change the days we observe? Here is what *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* says about some early Christians: “Though many of [Jesus’] disciples continued to observe the special times and seasons of the Jewish Law, new converts broke with the custom because they regarded it as no longer needful or necessary” (15th edition, Vol. 4, p. 601, “Church Year”). Notice the lack of divine authorization. The *people* decided to make this change.

One humanly devised change in the early centuries after Christ was to worship on Sunday rather than the seventh-day Sabbath, the day authorized in the Bible. The same source acknowledges that “the New Testament writings do not explain how the practice began” (ibid., p. 603). Though some have theorized this change occurred in honor of Christ’s resurrection, we have already seen that this rationale is flawed because Christ was resurrected near sundown on Saturday rather than on Sunday.

Replacing God’s annual feast days with pagan holidays was also done in the same spirit. This same encyclopedia article makes this frank admission: “Unlike the cycle of feasts and fasts of the Jewish Law, the [modern] Christian year has never been based upon a divine revelation. It is rather a tradition that is always subject to change by ecclesiastical law. Each self-governing church maintains the right to order the church year” (p. 601).

When the kingdom of Israel divided after Solomon’s death, King Jeroboam of the northern 10 tribes soon changed the date of the annual autumn festival from the seventh to the eighth month of the Hebrew calendar (1 Kings 12:32-33). So the first king of the new northern Israelite dynasty established a corrupting pattern in the nation’s religious life, one that eventually helped lead to the northern tribes’ destruction at the hands of the Assyrian Empire.

Throughout the northern kingdom’s history, the political and ecclesiastical leadership stubbornly persisted in “the sins of Jeroboam” (1 Kings 13:34; 15:30; 16:2-3, 19; etc.), one of which was his unauthorized alteration of the date of a God-ordained religious festival.

Time to leave nonbiblical religious traditions behind

As creatures of habit, we can find ourselves following traditions that are contrary to God’s instructions. Almost 2,000 years ago Jesus Christ pointed out that a devoutly religious group, the Pharisees, was in just such a situation. He told them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, *teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.*’ For laying aside the commandment of God, *you hold the tradition of men* . . . All too well you reject the commandment of God, *that you may keep your tradition*” (Mark 7:6-9).

Just proclaiming that something is Christian does not make it so. No matter what our traditions have been or what rationalizations we may employ, the Bible is clear that we must follow our Creator’s directions on His days and forms of worship.

In Colossians 2:8 the apostle Paul warns, “Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ.”

Similarly, one of the last messages in the Bible reveals this warning for people caught up in a great worldwide system that established itself in opposition to God: “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues. For her sins have reached to heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities” (Revelation 18:4-5).

We have a choice. We can choose the feast days instituted by God or the holidays substituted by men unwittingly deceived by Satan. The choices we make affect our destiny and impact our relationship with our Creator.

We can take great comfort in the meaning of the days of worship revealed in the Bible, since they represent the magnificent plan of God, who will give every human being an opportunity to understand and accept His way of life either now or, for the majority of human beings, in an age yet to come. If your eyes have been opened, you have a clear responsibility to make the right choice today. Will you now act on what you know?

If You’d Like to Learn More

If you’ve finished reading this booklet, you’ve probably been surprised to discover the real origin of today’s popular holidays. But what about the days of worship given in the Bible? Does God expect us to keep these today? When and how should we observe them?

To discover the festivals of the Bible, be sure to request *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest* and *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. Contact our office nearest you on page 48 for your free copies, or request or download them at www.ucg.org/booklets.

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Cover: photo illustration by Shaun Venish/PhotoDisc

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