

Towards a Common Date for Easter

In most years Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians celebrate Easter on one date, and Orthodox Christians on another (the year 2007, and again in 2011, will be an exception). This text, prepared by Faith and Order in collaboration with the Middle East Council of Churches, examines the reasons for this and offers a proposal for reckoning a common date of Easter.

World Council of Churches/Middle East Council of Churches Consultation
Aleppo, Syria
March 5 - 10, 1997

*"Christ, our paschal lamb,
has been sacrificed.
Let us therefore
celebrate the festival."
1 Cor. 5:7-8.*

I. The Issues

Background to this consultation

1. In the 20th century the churches have rediscovered a deep concern for Christian unity. They have expressed this in their efforts to find common ground on theological issues that have long divided them. They have learned to give common witness in a variety of ways. But despite this progress towards visible unity, many challenges remain. One very sensitive issue, with enormous pastoral consequences for all the Christian faithful, has taken on growing urgency: the need to find a common date for the celebration of Easter, the Holy Pascha, the feast of Christ's resurrection. By celebrating this feast of feasts on different days, the churches give a divided witness to this fundamental aspect of the apostolic faith, compromising their credibility and effectiveness in bringing the Gospel to the world. This is a matter of concern for all Christians. Indeed, in some parts of the world such as the Middle East, where several separated Christian communities constitute a minority in the larger society, this has become an urgent issue. While there has been some discussion of this question, it still has not been given the serious attention that it deserves.

2. While the question of a common date for Easter/Pascha has been addressed at different times since the earliest Christian centuries, a renewed discussion of this issue has arisen in the present century in the churches of both East and West. It also has emerged in significant ways in the secular world. The question was put to the wider Christian world in a 1920 encyclical of the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople and addressed in a 1923 Pan-Orthodox congress, whose decision to revise their calendar unfortunately led to several schisms within the Orthodox churches. Around the same time, discussion was beginning in secular circles especially in Western Europe concerning the possibility of establishing a fixed day for Easter, such as the Sunday following the second Saturday in April, so as to facilitate commercial planning and

public activities. In addition, proposals for introducing a new fixed calendar were being advanced, for similar utilitarian reasons. After World War II the context for discussion of such issues changed in several ways. International secular initiatives received little support. The churches were especially opposed to any calendar reform which would break the cycle of the seven-day week. On the other hand, many churches continued to express interest in the idea of a common day, whether movable or fixed, for the celebration of Easter/Pascha. The Orthodox returned to the paschal question from 1961 onwards, in the context of preparations for the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church; the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of the Second Vatican Council (1963) gave renewed impetus in the Roman Catholic Church to discussion of this issue; and since 1965 the World Council of Churches has taken up the subject on a number of occasions.

3. In recent years, concrete steps have been taken in the Middle East, where Christians of so many traditions live closely together in a largely non-Christian society. The Middle East Council of Churches has been particularly active in encouraging and facilitating the celebration of Easter/Pascha on a common day. Two recent WCC consultations have taken up this concern. A consultation on "Christian Spirituality for Our Times" (Iasi, Romania, May 1994) proposed that "*a new initiative be taken towards the common celebration of Easter.*" Even more striking are the conclusions reached by a consultation "Towards Koinonia in Worship" (Ditchingham, England, August 1994):

Besides the work already done on baptism, eucharist and ministry, the churches need to address the renewal of preaching, the recovery of the meaning of Sunday and the search for a common celebration of Pascha as ecumenical theological concerns. This last is especially urgent, since an agreement on a common date for Easter - even an interim agreement - awaits further ecumenical developments. Such an agreement, which cannot depend on the idea of a "fixed date of Easter", should respect the deepest meaning of the Christian Pascha, and the feelings of Christians throughout the world. We welcome all initiatives which offer the hope of progress in this important area." (T.F. Best/D. Heller, eds., So We Believe, So We Pray: Towards Koinonia in Worship, Faith and Order Paper No. 171, WCC Publications, Geneva 1995, pp. 9-10.)

In view of the concerns expressed at these consultations, the Executive Committee of the WCC, meeting in Bucharest, September 1994, recommended that Unit I, "*especially the Ecclesial Unity/Faith and Order stream and the Worship and Spirituality stream, give renewed attention to the subject of the common celebration of Easter, keeping in mind that in the year 2001, the dates of Easter according to both Eastern and Western calendars coincide.*"

4. The present consultation, meeting in Aleppo, Syria, March 5-10, 1997, comes in response to this request. Sponsored jointly by Unit I of the WCC and by the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), it brings together representatives of a number of communions which participate in the annual meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of Christian World Communion, representatives of the Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Churches, representatives of the MECC, and invited experts and staff. Together participants in the consultation enjoyed the hospitality of the Syrian Orthodox Archdiocese of Aleppo and experienced first-hand the commitment to unity of the Christian communities of this city. At a meeting with members of these communities, they listened to a call for removal of the painful sign of separation which

differing dates for Easter/Pascha constitute. In an atmosphere of prayer and common study, participants considered the problem of a common day for the celebration of Easter/Pascha from various perspectives - theological, historical, liturgical, catechetical and pastoral. The consultation offers to all the churches the following observations and recommendations.

Christ's resurrection, basis of our common faith

5. The apostolic faith of the Church is based on the reality of the resurrection of Christ. As St. Paul says: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain." (1 Cor. 15:12-14) Viewed as the ultimate victory over the powers of sin and death, the resurrection of the Lord is not only an historical event but also the sign of God's power over all the forces which can keep us from his love and goodness. It is a victory not only for Christ himself but also for all those united with him (1 Pet. 1:3f). It is a victory which marks the beginning of a new era (Jn 20:17). The resurrection is the ultimate expression of the Father's gift of reconciliation and unity in Christ through the Spirit. It is a sign of the unity and reconciliation which God wills for the entire creation.

6. As the apostles began their missionary activity, the resurrection was at the heart of their preaching (1 Cor. 15: 1-17, Acts 2:22-36, 1 Pet 1:3), and as the evangelists began to record aspects of the Lord's teachings and ministry, the resurrection comes as the culminating event in their gospels. In every aspect of her life, the early Church was first and foremost the community of the resurrection. Thus the early Church's life of worship focused on God's reconciling love as manifested in the saving passover of Christ's death and resurrection. The first day of the week became the preeminent day of the Christian assembly because it was the day on which the Lord rose from the dead (Jn 20:1, Acts 20:7). At the same time, this came to be known as the "eighth day," a day of new creation and ultimate fulfillment. Each year too, Christians both remembered and experienced the continuing power of Christ's passion and resurrection in a single but multifaceted celebration. This celebration also became the occasion for baptism, in which Christians shared in Christ's passage from death to life, dying to sin and rising to new life in him. Therefore the behavior of Christians was rooted in their relationship with the risen Lord and reflected the new reality inaugurated by him (Col. 3:1-11).

Historical background to the present differences

7. The New Testament indicates that Christ's death and resurrection were historically associated with the Jewish passover, but the precise details of this association are not clear. According to the synoptic gospels, Jesus' last supper was a passover meal, which would place his death on the day after passover, while according to John his death occurred on the day itself, indeed at the very hour, when the paschal lambs were sacrificed. By the end of the 2nd century some churches celebrated Easter/Pascha on the day of the Jewish passover, regardless of the day of the week, while others celebrated it on the following Sunday. By the 4th century, the former practice had been abandoned practically universally, but differences still remained in the calculation of the date of Easter/Pascha. The ecumenical council held at Nicea in 325 AD determined that Easter/Pascha should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon. Originally

passover was celebrated on the first full moon after the March equinox, but in the 3rd century the day of the feast came to be calculated by some Jewish communities without reference to the equinox, thus causing passover to be celebrated twice in some solar years. Nicea tried to avoid this by linking the principles for the dating of Easter/Pascha to the norms for the calculation of passover during Jesus' lifetime.

8. While certain differences in the mechanics of determining the date of Easter/Pascha remained even after Nicea, which occasionally resulted in local differences, by the 6th century the mode of calculation based on the studies of Alexandrian astronomers and scholars had gained universal acceptance. By the 16th century, however, the discrepancy between this mode of calculation and the observed astronomical data was becoming evident. This led to the calendar change introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in 1582. Since that time, western Christians have come to calculate the date of Easter on the basis of this newer Gregorian calendar, while the eastern churches generally have continued to follow the older Julian calendar. While calendrical changes in some of the Orthodox churches in 1923 affected fixed-date feasts, the calculation of the Easter date remained linked to the Julian Calendar. Our present differences in calculation of the date of Easter thus may be ascribed to differences in the calendars and lunar tables employed rather than to differences in fundamental theological outlook.

9. In its study of the mechanics of the paschal calculation, the consultation took note of the fact that both the current eastern (Julian) and the current western (Gregorian) calculations diverge in certain respects from the astronomical data as determined by precise scientific calculation. As is well known, the Julian calendar at present diverges from the astronomical by thirteen days; the Gregorian at present does not diverge significantly, though it will in the distant future. Less well known is the fact that both Julian and Gregorian calculations rely upon conventional tables for determining the lunar cycle. For both modes of calculation, these tables at times give results that diverge from the astronomical data.

The continuing relevance of the Council of Nicea

10. In the course of their deliberations, **the participants in the consultation came to a deeper appreciation of the continuing relevance of the Council of Nicea for the present discussion.** The decisions of this council, rooted as they are in scripture and tradition, came to be regarded as normative for the whole Church.

(a) Despite differences in the method of calculation, the principles of calculation in the churches of both East and West are based on the norms set forth at Nicea. This fact is of great significance. In the present divided situation, any decision by one church or group of churches to move away from these norms would only increase the difficulty of resolving outstanding differences.

(b) The Council of Nicea's decisions are expressive of the desire for unity. The council's aim was to establish principles, based upon the scriptural data concerning the association of the passion and resurrection of Christ with the passover, which would encourage a single annual observance of Easter/Pascha by all the churches. By fostering unity in this way, the council also

demonstrated its concern for the mission of the church in the world. The council was aware that disunity in such a central matter was a cause of scandal.

(c) The Nicene norms affirm the intimate connection between the biblical passover (cf. especially Exod. 12:18, Lev. 23:5, Num. 28:16, Deut. 16:1-2) and the Christian celebration of "Christ our paschal lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7). While the council rejected the principle of dependence on contemporary Jewish reckoning, it did so on the grounds that this had changed and become inaccurate, not because it regarded this connection as unimportant.

(d) In the course of their discussions the consultation also gained a deeper appreciation for the wealth of symbolism which the Nicene norms permit. In the worship of many of the churches, especially in the biblical readings and hymnography of the paschal season, Christians are reminded not only of the important link between the passover and the Christian Easter/Pascha but also of other aspects of salvation history. For example, they are reminded that in Christ's resurrection all creation is renewed. Some early Christian sources thus linked the Genesis account of the seven days of creation with the week of Christ's passion, death and resurrection.

(e) The Council of Nicea also has an enduring lesson for Christians today in its willingness make use of contemporary science in calculating the date of Easter. While the council sought to advance the concrete unity of the churches, it did not itself undertake a detailed regulation of the Easter calculation. Instead it expected the churches to employ the most exact science of the day for calculating the necessary astronomical data (the March equinox and the full moon).

II. Two recommendations

First recommendation

11. In the estimation of this consultation, **the most likely way to succeed in achieving a common date for Easter** in our own day would be

(a) **to maintain the Nicene norms** (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon), and

(b) **to calculate the astronomical data** (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means,

(c) **using as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem**, the place of Christ's death and resurrection.

12. This recommendation is made for the following reasons.

In regard to point a:

(i) The Church needs to be reminded of its origins, including the close link between the biblical passover and the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ - a link that reflects the total flow of

salvation history. In the estimation of this consultation, a fixed date would obscure and weaken this link by eliminating any reference to the biblical norms for the calculation of the passover.

(ii) Easter/Pascha has a cosmic dimension. Through Christ's resurrection, the sun, the moon, and all the elements are restored to their primordial capacity for declaring God's glory (Ps. 19:1-2, 148:3). Easter/Pascha reveals the close link between creation and redemption, as inseparable aspects of God's revelation. The Nicene principles for calculating the date of Easter/Pascha, based as they are on the cycles of sun and moon, reflect this cosmic dimension much more fully than a fixed-date system.

(iii) In addition to underscoring many important symbolic aspects of the feast, a movable date for the observance of Easter/Pascha also indicates in palpable fashion the dramatic way in which the resurrection breaks into the comfortable routines of this world. While such a date may in some respects be less convenient than a fixed Sunday, it does call attention to a significant theological point which otherwise might be overlooked.

(iv) An earlier WCC consultation on the date of Easter/Pascha (Chambésy, 1970) observed, "In any case the churches should arrive at a solution for reasons based entirely on the religious meaning of the feast and for the purpose of Christian unity rather than for the purpose of satisfying inherently secular interests." The present consultation wholly concurs with this sentiment.

(v) This recommendation maintains what, for most churches, is an important aspect of tradition. Adoption of a fixed Sunday approach would raise difficulties for many churches and, if introduced unilaterally by one church or group of churches, might well result in not two but three different dates for Easter/Pascha in a given year.

In regard to point b:

In recommending calculation of the astronomical data by the most accurate possible scientific means (as distinct, for example, from reliance on conventional cyclical tables or personal observation), the consultation believes that it is being completely faithful to the spirit of the Council of Nicea itself, which also was willing to make use of the best available scientific knowledge. We are fortunate that experts in astronomy have already provided these necessary calculations; they are conveniently presented in *Synodica V* (Chambésy - Genève, Les Editions du Centre Orthodoxe, 1981) 133 - 149.

In regard to point c:

Astronomical observations, of course, depend upon the position on earth which is taken as the point of reference. This consultation believes that it is appropriate to employ the meridian of Jerusalem, the site of Christ's passion and resurrection, as this necessary point of reference for the calculation of the March equinox and the subsequent full moon.

13. The recommendation just stated will have some different implications for the churches of East and West as they seek a renewed faithfulness to Nicea. Both will face the need for education of their faithful. For eastern churches, changes in the actual dating of Easter/Pascha will be more perceptible than for the western churches. Given the contexts in which these churches live, this

will require both patience and tact. For western churches, on the other hand, the challenge may lie in communicating deeper aspects of the Nicene principles for the calculation of Easter/Pascha, such as those sketched above, and in acquainting their faithful with the concerns and insights of the eastern churches.

14. The consultation is well aware of the particular circumstances of many eastern churches. In some countries in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, where the Christian churches have lived with the challenge of other religions or materialistic ideologies, loyalty to the "old calendar" has been a symbol of the churches' desire to maintain their integrity and their freedom from the hostile forces of this world. Clearly in such situations implementation of any change in the calculation of Easter/Pascha will have to proceed carefully and with great pastoral sensitivity.

15. To aid the churches in their discussion of the above recommendation, the consultation appends to this report a table of Easter/Pascha dates from 2001 through 2025, based on the astronomical specifications already indicated. For convenience of reference, the table also indicates the dates of Easter/Pascha according to the current Gregorian and Julian reckonings, the astronomically determined date of the first vernal full moon, i.e., the first full moon following the March equinox (cf. Exod. 12:18, Lev. 23:5, Num. 28:16, Deut. 16:1-2), and the date of passover according to current Jewish reckoning.

Second recommendation

16. This consultation also recommends **that the churches now undertake a period of study and reflection towards the goal of establishing as soon as possible a common date for Easter/Pascha along the lines set forth above.** In the year 2001 the paschal calculations now in use by our churches will coincide. Together, Christians will begin a new century, a new millennium, with new opportunities to witness to the resurrection of Christ and to proclaim their joy in his victory over sin, suffering and death. The unity that will be reflected as Christians celebrate Easter/Pascha on the same date will be for many a sign of hope and of witness to the world. This celebration of Easter/Pascha on the same date should not be the exception but the rule.

17. The way is now open for the churches to consider again their current practice for determining the date of Easter/Pascha. As a first step, in the interval between 1997 and 2001, this consultation encourages the churches to take up consideration of the recommendations here proposed, and, if they find them acceptable in principle, to explore ways of implementing them according to their own procedures, in light of their own opportunities, and within their own contexts. This consultation suggests that during these years the churches consult with each other on the ways in which a common date for Easter/Pascha can be implemented. In this interval also, the present consultation encourages continuation of existing local and regional initiatives, as interim measures, for observance of a common Easter/Pascha.

18. As a second step, the consultation suggests that **the year 2001 would also provide a good opportunity for the churches to review reactions and to assess progress made towards agreement on this matter. It recommends, therefore, that the World Council of Churches, in cooperation with its ecumenical partners and other Christian groups, organize then a**

consultation in which this assessment could be reported and implementation could be discussed.

19. It is the sincere hope of the participants in this consultation that the churches will give an early and prayerful consideration to the recommendations made in this report, as a step towards preparing for a united witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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