

# Easter as an Ecumenical Conundrum

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Questo sicuro e gaudioso regno  
frequente in gente antica e in novella,  
viso e amore avea tutto ad un segno.

O trina luce che ‘n unica stella  
scintillando a lor vista, sì li appaga!  
guarda qua giuso a la nostra procella!<sup>1</sup>

This article examines the Easter festival from an ecumenical point of view, focusing on the Patristic period and the so-called “Easter Controversies” in the Early Church concerning the date on which the Resurrection should be observed, as a means of assessing both the validity of the resolution of such controversies and the possibly continuing impact of that resolution on the Church today. I will divide this examination into four parts.

First, I will consider what guidance we have from the Scriptures as to how, if at all, the Church is to celebrate the Resurrection. Second, I will focus on the Easter Controversies, and in particular the quartodeciman position, in the context of the Council of Nicaea and Nicaea’s resulting decision concerning the need for a uniform date on which to celebrate Easter. Third, I will note the disputes that remained within the Church concerning the observance of Easter after Nicaea, notwithstanding the attempt at reaching full unity on this issue. Finally, I will attempt to gauge whether any failure to reach unity on the question of when to observe the Resurrection has any continuing impact on the Church today.

## I. The Easter Festival from a New Testament Point of View

This is not the place for an extended treatment of worship practices in the New Testament, let alone for how such practices might be informed by Old Testament practices. That

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<sup>1</sup> Dante, *Paradiso* XXXI, 25-30.

question is, of course, an important one and there are numbers of recent moves towards enriching worship practices not only by efforts to glean from Acts and the Letters just what it was that the first Christians did when they gathered, but also to suggest themes and overtones that might carry over from the Church in the Wilderness, *i.e.*, Biblical Israel.<sup>2</sup>

For present purposes, however, it will suffice to examine something of the beginnings of what for many Christians is the Church's central festival, that of the Resurrection, and its relationship to the Old Testament feast of the Passover. But while the Scriptures seem quite clear as to when the Resurrection occurred – the third day following Jesus' death during a Passover feast – it is remarkable that *nowhere* in the Scriptures is the Resurrection, let alone the Passover, enjoined upon the Church as a separate festival, or feast day, to be observed. Indeed, Jesus' only command to his disciples about a continuing observance is His direction that after His death, the disciples break bread and drink wine together “in remembrance of me.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, there is no set time for observance of even *this* memorial feast. Paul, for example, gives guidelines on the form of proper observance of the Lord's Supper, but simply states: “For *as often as you eat* this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”<sup>4</sup>

That the Apostles may have had a more Latitudinarian stance towards the particular timing or mode of such observances than is now found may seem counterintuitive, in that if any group of Christians was ever likely to have achieved and called for uniformity in worship, one would suppose it was they. And yet, Paul – who can be rather precise on such matters as the length of men's hair or the role of women in worship services – seems to regard it as a light

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., C. Bechtel (ed.), TOUCHING THE ALTAR (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008).

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 26:26-28 Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22: 19-20. (All quotations from Scripture are from the English Standard Version (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> I Cor. 11:26 (emphasis added).

matter whether one or another festival day is observed or none at all: “Therefore, let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food or drink, or with regard to a festival of a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”<sup>5</sup>

Against that background, there is nevertheless considerable evidence that it soon became a custom in the Early Church to meet together on the first day of the week for fellowship, including but not limited to the sharing of this memorial meal, a meal with a necessary historical and theological<sup>6</sup> relationship to Passover.<sup>7</sup> Sunday of course is not the day of the week on which Jesus ate a last Passover meal and/or that on which He died, but that on which He rose from the

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<sup>5</sup> Colossians 2:16-17.

<sup>6</sup> See Melito of Sardis, *Peri Pascha*, available at <http://www.kerux.com/documents/KeruxV4N1A1.asp>, ¶ 103: “Therefore, come, all families of men, you who have been befooled with sins, and receive forgiveness for your sins. I am your forgiveness, *I am the passover of your salvation*, I am the lamb which was sacrificed for you, I am your ransom, I am your light, I am your savior, I am your resurrection, I am your king, I am leading you up to the heights of heaven, I will show you the eternal Father, I will raise you up by my right hand.” (Emphasis added). And thus we say in our own liturgy, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.”

<sup>7</sup> See Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread....” See also I Cor. 16:2: “On the first day of every week....” There also appears to be solid evidence of authority among the early Church fathers for observing the first day of the week as the ordinary meeting day among believers. See, e.g., *The Didache*, § 14:1, reprinted in J.B. Lightfoot, J.R. Harmer, trans., and M. Holmes, eds., THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS (2d ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 157; Ignatius, "Letter to the Magnesians," § 9, reprinted in *ibid.*, 95; and Dionysius of Corinth, as quoted by Eusebius, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, Vol. I, H. Lawlor and J. Oulton, trans. (New York: S.P.C.K., 1927), Book IV.23.11. There is also an obvious practicality in selecting at least one day for common worship, given most believers’ need to work. Nothing, however, suggests that the Apostles set one day aside as the equivalent of a legally compelled form of replacement “Sabbath.” It is noteworthy, for example, that no such rule was proposed or announced at the Council of Jerusalem. Acts 15:19-20. Moreover, there is no suggestion that *other* days are not also appropriate for worship services. And Paul also instructs us not to impose a rule that suits our conscience on another believer who may “honor the Lord” at a different time or in a different manner. See Romans 14:1-23. Indeed, Paul does not speak well of those who would enjoin a rigid worship calendar on the Church. See Gal. 4:10: “You observe days and months and seasons and years! I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.”

dead.<sup>8</sup> And it was on the first day of the week that John received the Revelation.<sup>9</sup> But again, if anything, this custom suggests that the Resurrection was marked *not* with any particularity on the calendrical day annually corresponding to the Resurrection, but on *every* Sunday, at which time the Church generally came together not only to “proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes,” but also “for building up” with “a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation.”<sup>10</sup>

In short, while the Scriptures state when the Resurrection occurred, they do not provide any guidance *whether*, let alone when, to celebrate it as a particularized feast.

If we start from the premise that the Resurrection is not enjoined upon the Church to be observed as a separate feast day at all, let alone a feast to be observed at a particular time of the year, then what are Easter’s<sup>11</sup> origins? The earliest indications in Acts are, as suggested above,

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew 28:1: “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week....” Mark 16:1-2, [9] (same); Luke 24:1-2 (same); John 20:1 (same). Of course, the fact that the third day following Jesus’ Passover death in a given year (whether 30 A.D. or thereabouts) was a Sunday does not itself answer the question whether the Resurrection ought to be celebrated on a Sunday regardless when the third day following Passover in some *other* year might occur, since by definition it will not occur on the same day of the week in every year where the determining calendar is lunar.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. 1:10: “I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day....”

<sup>10</sup> I Cor. 14:26. The Roman Catholic Church takes the position that Sunday is a form of weekly celebration of the Resurrection. “‘We celebrate Sunday because of the venerable Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we do so not only at Easter but also at each turning of the week.’ So wrote Pope Innocent I at the beginning of the fifth century, testifying to an already well established practice that had evolved from the early years after the Lord’s Resurrection. Saint Basil speaks of ‘holy Sunday, honored by the Lord’s Resurrection, the first fruits of all the other days,’ and Saint Augustine calls Sunday ‘a sacrament of Easter.’” Pope John Paul II, *Dies Domini*, § 19, available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_05071998\\_dies-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html) (footnotes omitted).

<sup>11</sup> Use of the term “Easter” in English to refer to the celebration of the Resurrection is itself problematic. As explained below, the word “Easter” is derived from one or another pagan fertility goddess. But the etymologically – and, one might suggest, theologically – sound name probably ought to be some form of “Pesach,” which is derived “from the Latin *pascha* and the Greek πάσχα. These words in turn apparently come from the Chaldee or Aramaic form of the Hebrew name of the Passover festival, meaning ‘he passed over,’ in memory of the great deliverance, when the destroying angel ‘passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians’ (Exod. 12:27).” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “Easter,” by T. Fallow (Cambridge: The University Press, 1910).

that the Church in effect celebrated the Resurrection at every gathering, typically on the first day of the week, but effectively whenever believers shared a communion meal in obedience to the Lord's command. There is also evidence, however, that the Jewish members of the Early Church – the dominant constituency at the outset – continued to observe the Old Testament feasts of Israel as they came due during the year.<sup>12</sup> The principal feasts commanded in the Law of Moses were the Sabbath, Passover, Firstfruits, Weeks (or Pentecost), Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and Booths (or Tabernacles).<sup>13</sup>

While the Early Church may well have observed some or all of these during the Church's formative period when there were uncertainties as to which commandments of the Law, if any, had continued validity,<sup>14</sup> the Jewish members of the Church could defensibly continue to observe such feasts *not* as a matter of compulsion, but: (1) with the enhanced perception that these prophetic feasts were fulfilled in Christ; and (2) as a testimony to their non-believing Jewish brethren.<sup>15</sup> Regardless of the reasons for differing approaches, they soon enough led to controversies within the Church at large as to how and when the Resurrection ought to be celebrated.

## **II. Nicaea and the Separation of Easter from Passover**

Among several controversies concerning the proper date on which to observe the Lord's Resurrection as a Christian holiday, perhaps the most interesting is the so-called Quartodeciman Controversy. The term "quartodeciman" is simply the Latin word for the ordinal "fourteenth"

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<sup>12</sup> P. Bradshaw, L. Hoffman, eds., *PASSOVER AND EASTER: ORIGIN AND HISTORY TO MODERN TIMES* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 81 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Leviticus 23.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., the events leading to the Jerusalem Council as described in Acts 15.

<sup>15</sup> Thus it was, for example, that the Apostles and the 120 were in one place together in Jerusalem on the feast of Pentecost; at which point the prophetic type of the harvest festival of Pentecost was fulfilled with the giving of the Holy Spirit and the resulting founding of the Church as the ingathering of all those whom God was calling. Acts 2:1.

and in this context refers to the 14<sup>th</sup> day of Nisan. Nisan, in turn, is the first month in the Jewish lunar calendar<sup>16</sup> and the day of that month ordained to Israel by God for the killing of the Passover lamb, thus marking the commencement of the Passover Feast.<sup>17</sup>

In its earliest form, the question was not so much when to celebrate the Resurrection as when to begin a overnight fast and vigil that would end with the dawning of Easter morning. The ending of the vigil/fast would mark both His death and the Resurrection, a tradition preserved today in Easter Vigil services.<sup>18</sup> It thus appears that the earliest form of the Church's celebration/remembrance of the Lord's death and resurrection may have involved a single festival beginning on what is now Holy Saturday rather than, as is now the case, several festal days separated by a gap, *i.e.*, that from Maundy Thursday to Easter Sunday.

Broadly speaking, then, the quartodecimans were those who asserted that because Jesus was killed on a Passover, any Church festivals celebrating His death, and thus, upon breaking the fast, His Resurrection, must be tied to the Jewish lunar calendar as movable feasts. Accordingly, they looked to the date set each year by the Rabbis in Jerusalem for the commencement of the

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<sup>16</sup> The Jewish calendar is based on 30-day months, each beginning with the arrival of a new moon. As a result, the Jewish year is 360 days long, rather than a solar-based 365 day year.

<sup>17</sup> The Passover Feast has its origins in the Law of Moses and marks the deliverance of the Children of Israel from slavery in the Egypt. The Israelites were enjoined in the Law to celebrate the feast annually in remembrance of this central event in their history. Exodus 12:6: "...and you shall keep [your lamb] until the fourteenth day of this month, when the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel shall kill their lambs at twilight." Following the killing of the lamb, the congregation was instructed to eat the meat that same night. Beginning on the following day, the congregation commenced observance of a weeklong Passover feast. See Leviticus 23:5-6: "In the first month, on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight, is the Lord's Passover. And on the fifteenth day of the same month is the Feast of Unleavened Bread to the Lord; for seven days you shall eat unleavened bread;" and Exodus 12:18: "In the first month, from the fourteenth day of the month at evening, you shall eat unleavened bread until the twenty-first day of the month at evening."

<sup>18</sup> See A. Stewart-Sykes, THE LAMB'S HIGH FEAST: MELITO, *PERI PASCHA* AND THE QUARTODECIMAN PASCAL LITURGY AT SARDIS (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 148 ("Although ... Pascha is not precisely a festival of resurrection, a synoptic basis to the celebration would indeed make sense of an act of commemoration which holds both the passion and the resurrection in view.").

Passover and began their celebration of the Passion at that time. As a result, the Passion celebration could fall on any day of the week, thus obviating the need to designate a “Maundy Thursday,” “Good Friday,” or even an “Easter Sunday.” And it followed that when, over time, celebration of the Passion and celebration of the Resurrection were observed on distinct days, the Resurrection feast could fall on *any* day of the week, whether on the first day of the week, *i.e.*, a Sunday, or not.

It is important to note that those holding to the so-called quartodeciman view were not "judaizers," such as concerned Paul in the Letter to the Galatians,<sup>19</sup> nor did they link their celebrations of the Resurrection to the Jewish Passover as a basis for salvific justification or for other legalistic reasons. Rather – and this is a key point – the quartodeciman view as to when the Passion and Resurrection should be celebrated was the *dominant* view in the Early Church.<sup>20</sup> As the Gentile composition of the Church increased, however, alternative dates for a Resurrection celebration were advanced, all tending towards a date coinciding, every year, with the first day of the week. The view that the Resurrection should be celebrated on a date tied to celebrations beginning at the Jewish Passover was ultimately condemned as heresy at the 4<sup>th</sup> century Council of Nicaea in an effort to find a fixed date acceptable to the Church as a whole. One incidental question posed in this paper is thus whether the quartodeciman position was justly condemned as heresy; and, if not, what consequences the Church may now suffer as a result of any wrongful condemnation and resulting rejection of that tradition.

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<sup>19</sup> See, e.g., Gal. 2:14: “But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”

<sup>20</sup> P. Hoffman and F. Bradshaw, *op. cit.*, at 82. See also Stewart-Sykes, *op. cit.* at 19 (“The point is that the Quartodecimans were not consciously imitating the Jews but derived their paschal practice from their Johannine Christian roots, and that what holds good of their paschal practice holds good for all aspects of their faith and cult.”)

There should, of course, be no “controversy” as to the date of commencement of the Passover feast, because that date is clearly set forth in the Law of Moses.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, there should not be a meaningful controversy as to the date Jesus celebrated His last<sup>22</sup> Passover meal with his disciples: He shared that meal with them on 14 Nisan, as the Law also commanded.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, there should be no controversy as to the date of Jesus' Resurrection: it was on the third day following His death, which the Scriptures uniformly state fell on a first day of the week, *i.e.*, on the day we now call Sunday, in the particular year of His death.<sup>24</sup>

It is important in this connection to note that numbered Hebrew “days” were reckoned from twilight to twilight, not from midnight to midnight as we do.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Jesus ate the Passover meal in the evening – that is to say, at the start – of 14 Nisan; was betrayed that same night; was tried and crucified the next morning; and died at about the 9<sup>th</sup> hour, or 3 p.m., of the daylight period of 14 Nisan. All these events therefore occurred *during* 14 Nisan itself because they took place *before* the beginning of the twilight commencement of the next day, which was 15 Nisan.

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<sup>21</sup> Exodus 12:1-28; Leviticus 23:4-8; Numbers 28:16-25; Deuteronomy 16:1-8.

<sup>22</sup> Last, that is, until celebrating it anew in the Kingdom of God. Matthew 26:29; Mark 14:25; Luke 22:16.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 26:17 ff.; Mark 14:12 ff.; Luke 22:7 ff. Notwithstanding the uniformity of the Synoptic Gospels on this point, there have nevertheless arisen several “Easter controversies” over the question whether Jesus’ last meal was in fact a Passover meal, or whether it was a unique form of the traditional Passover meal adopted by Him one day prior to the actual Passover in order to prefigure His death, and whether there are thus inconsistencies between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John as to the date of the meal. *See generally* A. Edersheim, THE TEMPLE: ITS MINISTRY AND SERVICES (updated edition) (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), Appendix at 310-18 (“Did the Lord Institute His ‘Supper’ on the Paschal Night?”); J. Jeremias, THE EUCHARISTIC WORDS OF JESUS (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966); R. Clover THE FESTIVAL AND SACRED DAYS OF YAHWEH (Garden Grove: Qadesh La Yahweh Press, 1998), 223 ff., available at <http://www.yahweh.org/publications/fsdy/festivals.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Matthew 28:1: “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.” *See also* Mark 16:1-2, [9] (same); Luke 24:1 (same); John 20:1 (same).

<sup>25</sup> R. Clover, *op. cit.*, 223 ff.; *see, e.g.*, Leviticus 23:5 n. 1 (the Hebrew text translated as “at twilight” means “between the two evenings”).

Having died on 14 Nisan, Jesus was raised from the dead “on the third day.”<sup>26</sup> But when was that? The answer would appear to be found in Jesus’ own words: “For just 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.”<sup>27</sup> A fair reading of the text would be that the remaining daylight portion of 14 Nisan after 3 p.m. and the ensuing nighttime portion of 15 Nissan was His first “day and night” in the heart of the earth;<sup>28</sup> that the daytime of 15 Nisan and the nighttime of 16 Nisan, a Sabbath, was the second “day and night;” and that the daytime of 16 Nisan and the nighttime of 17 Nisan was the third “day and night.” On this reading, the “three days and three nights” ended with the dawning of the daytime hours of 17 Nisan. And Jesus’ tomb was in fact discovered empty “toward the day[time],” which was of course still 17 Nisan.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, if 17 Nisan in the particular year of Jesus’ death happened to occur on the first day of the week, or a Sunday, then 14 Nisan *necessarily* ran from the evening of the day we now call Wednesday through the daytime of the day we now call Thursday. That Jesus died on a Thursday is also clear from the story of Nicodemus and Jesus’ burial. The Synoptic Gospels uniformly record that “evening had come” by the time that Nicodemus “went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus” in order to bury him in his

<sup>26</sup> 1 Cor. 15:4: “For I delivered to you...what I also received...that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day....”

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 12:40; *see also* John 2:19: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.”

<sup>28</sup> On this reading, Jesus’ statement that he would spend “three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” referred *not* so much to his physical burial in the tomb as to his preaching of the gospel to the souls in prison (1 Peter 3:19), which could have commenced from the moment He “yielded up his spirit” at about 3 p.m. on 14 Nisan (Matthew 27:50). There is also support for this view in the Early Church’s explanations of the observance of the Easter vigil. *See, e.g.*, Amphilius of Iconium, Oration 5: *For Holy Saturday*, 1, reprinted in R. Cantalamessa, ed., EASTER IN THE EARLY CHURCH (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1993), Document 73, p. 77; and Chromatius of Aquileia, Sermon 17A: *On the Pascha*, 1, reprinted in *id.*, Document 121, p. 107.

<sup>29</sup> The resurrection had thus already occurred by the dawn; hence the angel who greeted the women inside Jesus’ tomb said, “He has risen; he is not here...[H]e is going before you to Galilee.” Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:6 (same).

own tomb.<sup>30</sup> As Mark explains, this occurred in the evening commencement of “the day of Preparation, that is *the day before the Sabbath.*”<sup>31</sup> In other words, Nicodemus obtained Jesus’ body during what we refer to as a Thursday evening, but which in the Hebrew calendar was the beginning of Friday, in this case 15 Nisan.

Notwithstanding the plain language of the texts, the majority of Christians currently celebrate the Last Supper during the evening of “Maundy Thursday;” observe Jesus’ death on “Good Friday;” observe a fast and vigil on “Holy Saturday;” and celebrate the Resurrection on “Easter Sunday.” They therefore apparently count “Good Friday” as the first of the “three days” that Jesus was “in the heart of the earth,” while ignoring the required “three nights.” On no calculation, however, can “three days and three nights” be found between Jesus’ supposed death on a Friday and His Resurrection on a Sunday.<sup>32</sup>

How did this mathematically impossible set of observances come about? The explanation possibly lies in the changing composition of the Church. Thus, as the Church expanded to include both Gentile and Jewish Christians, the question arose as to how, if at all, to integrate the facts of Jesus’ death as the true Paschal Lamb and His subsequent Resurrection into the existing Mosaic framework for celebrating the Passover feast, the resurrection of course being that “new thing”<sup>33</sup> done by the Lord which gives completed meaning to the sacrifice.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mark 15:42-43; Matthew 27:57-58 (same); Luke 23:50-54 (same).

<sup>31</sup> Mark 15:42 (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Indeed, it appears that the entire notion of a “Good Friday” observance did not appear until “towards the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century in Jerusalem.” F. E. Brightman, “The Quartodeciman Question,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1924), 257, reprinted in E. Ferguson, ed., STUDIES IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY, Vol. XV (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993), 322-338.

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 43:19.

<sup>34</sup> These debates were thus not about “merely technical” issues, as James Campbell points out in his commentary on the Venerable Bede’s report about the Easter controversy at the Synod of Whitby, but concerned central symbols of the faith. BEDE: THE ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE (J. Campbell, ed.) (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1968), xviii,

There were several logical possibilities as to when to observe a Death and Resurrection feast as such, but three emerged initially as the principal options and each seemed to have some adherence at one time or another: (1) celebrating the Resurrection as an integrated part of the sacrificial Passover meal on 14 Nisan; (2) celebrating the Resurrection as a separate event “on the third day” thereafter, regardless of the day of the week on which it fell; or (3) celebrating the Resurrection on the first day of the week occurring after 14 Nisan, but still within the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread beginning on 15 Nisan and ending on 21 Nisan.

The first option became known as the pure “quartodeciman” position; the other two are really variants of that position because they are also tied to 14 Nisan and are therefore referred to as “quasi-quartodeciman.”<sup>35</sup> While none of these variations prevails in the Western Church today, it appears from recent scholarship that one or another form of quartodecimanism was, as noted, the dominant position in the Early Church as a whole, not limited to the Jewish believers.<sup>36</sup> For the first few centuries at least, members of the Church thus maintained a clear link to Passover, not only through their communion meals on the first day of the week, but also through annual Paschal celebrations tied in some way to the Passover celebrations commencing on 14 Nisan both in Jerusalem and elsewhere.<sup>37</sup> That there was a richness to such observances

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*reprinted with permission in J. R. Wright, A COMPANION TO BEDE* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 135.

<sup>35</sup> R. Clover, *op. cit.*, 275 ff. (describing several variations on the same theme, all based on 14 Nisan).

<sup>36</sup> P. Bradshaw and L. Hoffman, *op. cit.*, 82 (suggesting that “quartodecimanism is not some local aberration from a supposed normative practice dating from apostolic times, but is instead the oldest form of the Easter celebration”); T. Talley, “Liturgical Time in the Ancient Church: The State of Research,” *Studia Liturgica* 14 (1982), 34-35, reprinted in E. Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 304-321. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the different *forms* these early Easter celebrations took, *i.e.*, whether they involved fasts, vigils, quasi-Passover meals, or the like; it will suffice for now to establish a continuing relationship between the Jewish Passover and the Church’s celebration of the Lord’s Death and Resurrection.

<sup>37</sup> P. Bradshaw, L. Hoffman, *op. cit.*, 81 ff.

by the incorporation of the Gospel into existing Passover celebrations has now been well-established through recent examination of a Paschal liturgy attributed to Melito of Sardis.<sup>38</sup>

By definition, in each of these “quartodeciman” celebrations, there was thus a plain and visible, chronological connection between the celebration of Passover by non-believing Jews and the concurrent celebration of Christ as the true Passover by believing Jews and Gentiles. As noted, Passover commenced with the full – or “14<sup>th</sup>” – moon of the first month of the Jewish lunar year; that month in turn began with the rabbis’ first sighting of the new moon over Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> Given the relatively primitive state of astronomy in the first century, the start of the first month itself was not easily determined in advance. Moreover, the Jewish calendar periodically inserts an extra month in order to make up for the fact that the moon revolves around the earth only every 29 ½ days.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the rabbis did not always determine far in advance when the full moon of the first month – 14 Nisan – would occur, with the result that distant Jewish communities on occasion celebrated the Passover feast an entire month before the Jerusalem community because the news might take more than two weeks to reach them. The same result therefore obtained as well with respect to Passover/Paschal celebrations in more distant *Christian* communities, who were likewise dependent on travelers from Jerusalem informing them, in due course, of the rabbis’ determination when Passover commenced.<sup>41</sup>

In short, the Christian community – including of course both Gentiles and Jews – depended on the non-believing Jewish community to set the time for the Church’s central feast

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<sup>38</sup> A. Stewart-Sykes, *op. cit.* (linking the liturgy to Haggadah traditions, the Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation).

<sup>39</sup> P. Bradshaw and L. Hoffman, *op. cit.*, 91.

<sup>40</sup> G. Declerq, *Anno Domini* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2000), 60 ff.

<sup>41</sup> *Id.*, 91-92; For example, it was the prevailing custom in Asia Minor to let the feast “be governed by the day of the Jewish month on which [the Jewish Passover] was set regardless of the day of the week on which it fell.” K. S. Latourette, *A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1953), 137.

day; and that time was often uncertain. Apparently none of this sat well with the ascendant authorities in the Roman Church; and thus Constantine convened the First Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. to address, along with Arianism, the differing times at which the Pascha/Passover was observed. The Council recognized that while the feast was celebrated in the churches of Asia on 14 Nisan to coincide *with* the Jewish Passover, it was celebrated in the churches of the West (centered by then in Rome) on the Lord's Day *following* the Passover. To add to the complications, the Church in Alexandria had determined that the relevant full moon, and hence the Easter Sunday to follow it, should not occur prior to the vernal equinox.<sup>42</sup>

In one sense, these differences reflected an evolving shift in liturgical emphasis from Jesus' sacrifice as the Paschal lamb to an emphasis on His passage from death to life. That shift arguably mirrored the altered composition of the Church from its base in Jerusalem, where it was still closely tied to its roots in Judaism, to the broader, Graeco-Roman oriented Church, where Rome was first among equals. But by Constantine's time, the liturgical shift – whatever its genesis – had already given rise to a serious split between the Western and Eastern branches of the Church, as the latter still adhered to a more Passover-based celebration. As Eusebius writes:

A question of no small importance arose at that time. The dioceses of all Asia, as from an older tradition, held that the fourteenth day of the moon, on which day the Jews were commanded to sacrifice the lamb, should always be observed as the feast of the life-giving pasch, contending that the fast ought to end on that day, *whatever day of the week it might happen to be*. However it was not the custom of the churches in the rest of the world to end it at this point, as they observed the practice, which from Apostolic tradition has prevailed to the present time, of terminating the fast on no other day than on that of the Resurrection of our Savior. Synods and assemblies of bishops were held on this account, and all with one consent through mutual correspondence drew up an ecclesiastical decree that the mystery of Resurrection of the Lord should be celebrated on

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<sup>42</sup> G. Declerq, *op. cit.*, 50. Declerq also notes that in the third century, the Alexandrians developed their own methods, using both lunar and solar cycles, for determining the full moon of the first lunar month.

no other day but the Sunday and that we should observe the close of the paschal fast on that day only.<sup>43</sup>

While the nominal reason for fixing a single date for Easter was thus to achieve unity in the Church, the underlying motivation was plainly to distance the Church from its Jewish roots. The issue, in other words, involved more than the mere technical difficulties of determining when 14 Nisan would occur in any given year. Rather, what apparently grated on the Gentile Christians was their continued association with, and dependence upon, the rabbinic authorities in Jerusalem to make that determination. The clearest evidence of a harshly anti-Jewish motivation comes from Constantine himself, as convener of the Council:

At this [council of Nicaea] the question concerning the most holy day of Easter was discussed, and it was resolved by the united judgment of all present, that this feast ought to be kept by all and in every place on one and the same day. For what can be more becoming or honorable to us than that this feast from which we date our hopes of immortality, should be observed unfailingly by all alike, according to one ascertained order and arrangement? And first of all, ***it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews*** [that is, by celebrating it at the time of the Jewish Passover, on a Jewish calendar date, Nisan 14], who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul .... ***Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd;*** for we have received from our Savior a different way. A course at once legitimate and honorable lies open to our most holy religion. Beloved brethren, let us with one consent adopt this course [that is, the celebration of the resurrection, always on a Sunday], and withdraw ourselves from all participation in their baseness .... that this matter should be rectified, ***so that we might have nothing in common with that nation of parricides who slew their Lord*** ....<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Eusebius, *op. cit.*, Book V.23 (emphasis added). The dispute had in fact already boiled over by the end of the second century, when the Roman Pope Victor went so far as to excommunicate the Asian bishops and churches that adhered to 14 Nisan rather than a Sunday. *Id.*, Book V.9-11. That excommunication was rescinded at the plea of Irenaeus, but “long remained an unpleasant memory.” K. S. Latourette, *op. cit.*, 137.

<sup>44</sup> Constantine, *Letter to the Churches Concerning the Council at Nicaea*, quoted in Eusebius, THE LIFE OF CONSTANTINE, Book III.18, 19, pp. 524-25 (emphasis added), available at [http://www.tofm.org/HOLIDAYS/easter\\_controversy.htm](http://www.tofm.org/HOLIDAYS/easter_controversy.htm). See also Tertullian, *Against the Jews*, reprinted in R. Cantalamessa, *op. cit.*, Documents 98 and 99, at 92-93. Constantine’s manifest hostility towards the Jews should alone give one pause about his position. It is plainly an embarrassment to anyone seeking to defend the Council’s decision. Perhaps for this reason in many scholarly treatments of the subject the relevant text is only cited but not quoted. See, e.g..

Accordingly, the Council did not limit itself to determining whether Easter should be observed the Sunday following the Passover rather than on the Passover itself, but further determined that Easter should not be linked to Passover at all. The Council thus decreed that Easter should only be celebrated on the first Sunday after the first full moon succeeding the vernal equinox (March 21);<sup>45</sup> and that it “should under no circumstances coincide with the Jewish Passover (and thus with the day of the Paschal full or 14<sup>th</sup> moon), *even when* 14 Nisan happened to be on a Sunday.”<sup>46</sup> There is, of course, nothing in the Bible that ties anything to the vernal equinox; and no Biblical justification has ever been given for the Council’s decision in that regard.

In all events, based on the Council’s ruling, Easter would always occur at some point after the Jewish Passover; for example, if the full moon occurs on a Sunday, Easter is the Sunday after. By this arrangement Easter may take place as early as March 22, or as late as April 25.<sup>47</sup> Because the Jewish Passover is keyed to a lunar, rather than solar calendar, the Church’s Good

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P. L’Huillier, THE CHURCH OF THE ANCIENT COUNCILS (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1996), 23 and n. 49 (omitting the hostile words).

<sup>45</sup> The vernal equinox is one of two days during the year marking the moments when the sun crosses directly over the equator, such that the days and nights are of equal length. WEBSTER’S II NEW COLLEGE DICTIONARY (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995), s.v. “vernal equinox.”

<sup>46</sup> G. Declerq, *op. cit.*, 51. The records of the Council are apparently incomplete on this score. See The First Council of Nicaea, *Decree on Easter*, reprinted in R. Cantalamessa, *op. cit.*, Document 53, pp. 63-64. Nothing on this question appears, for example, in the Canons of the Council. See W. Bright, THE CANONS OF THE FIRST FOUR GENERAL COUNCILS OF NICAEA, CONSTANTINOPLE, EPHESUS AND CHALDEON: WITH NOTES (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1892). There are other witnesses, however. See, e.g., the description in Eusebius, *op. cit.*, Book V.23.

<sup>47</sup> G. Declerq, *op. cit.*, 51, 58-59. The Orthodox Church, however, alleges that the Western Churches do not accurately follow Nicaea; they read the Council’s rule as providing “that the Christian Easter shall never either precede or coincide with the Jewish Passover, but must always follow it. Easter *cannot fall earlier* than March 23....” I. Hapgood, SERVICE BOOK OF THE HOLY ORTHODOX-CATHOLIC APOSTOLIC CHURCH (New York: Association Press, 1922), xix (emphasis added).

Friday/Easter celebrations would henceforth only irregularly coincide with the Jewish Passover.<sup>48</sup>

The net result was that those who had previously focused their celebrations of the Lord's death and resurrection on 14 Nisan and/or the Sunday immediately following – *i.e.*, the quartodecimans and quasi-quartodecimans – were condemned as heretics by the Council; and their practices essentially faded away.<sup>49</sup> It would thus be fair to mark the decision of the Council of Nicaea as among the Church's most purposeful – and indefensible – separations from its Jewish roots.

### **III. Continuing Divergence within the Church after Nicaea**

If the Council's further goal was uniformity among Christians as to the observance of Easter, it failed miserably. For example while, as noted, the quartodeciman position faded relatively quickly in the Roman Church as a result of its condemnation as heresy, for some period of time into the 7<sup>th</sup> century, members of the Irish and Scottish churches adhered to a form of quartodeciman position, asserting that they did so in faithfulness to tradition originating with the Apostle John. Not surprisingly, this led to considerable conflict with missionaries from Rome, a conflict which was only resolved at the synod held under the decision-making authority of the King of Northumbria at the monastery of Streaneshalch (later called Whitby) in 664 A.D.

The leading account of the Synod is that of the Venerable Bede and he relates at some length the debate between Colman and Wilfrid on the subject, the former appealing to John as authority and the latter to Peter and Paul.<sup>50</sup> One cannot read Bede without being taken

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<sup>48</sup> Because the Jewish calendar is based on the rotation of the moon around the earth, individual dates within its 12 months of 30 days will only infrequently match dates within the 12 months of 28/29, 30 or 31 days in solar-based calendars such as the Julian and Gregorian calendars.

<sup>49</sup> *But see* the discussion in Point III, *infra*, concerning the maintenance of a quartodeciman position in the British Isles into the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>50</sup> Bede, ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND, Book III:25 (J. A. Giles, ed. and trans.) (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1847), 153 ff.

aback by the harshness of Wilfrid's rebukes of Colman.<sup>51</sup> At one level, Wilfrid seems to have ignored Paul's injunction in Colossians 2; at another, no good could come of an outcome imposed by the King, whereby the losing party seems not so much as to have come to agreement as a result of prayerful discourse, but to have left sulking back to Iona.<sup>52</sup> And, as has recently been observed, the debate whether Whitby's outcome was "positive or negative" continues

depending upon whether the "Roman" values of unity and centralization and hierarchical authority that it is thought to have affirmed are evaluated positively, or whether the "Celtic" values of diversity and freedom and so-called "creation-centered spirituality" that it is thought to have suppressed are considered to be more desirable, or vice versa.<sup>53</sup>

How might it be that despite the Council of Nicaea being one of the few Councils broadly accepted in the Church at large as authoritative, such disunity continued? First, the Council of Nicaea did not provide a table for computing the date of Easter.<sup>54</sup> As noted, the Alexandrian and Roman Churches used different methods, with the result that they set different dates for the vernal equinox and hence Easter. Nor did they agree what do when the full moon fell on a Sunday, *i.e.*, should Easter be celebrated then, or the following Sunday? Moreover, because the Council itself determined that Easter should not coincide with the Jewish Passover regardless when the first full moon following the vernal equinox should fall, those Churches adhering to its ruling *still* depended on the Jews' determination when 14 Nisan fell, if only in order to avoid it.

Paul Bradshaw illustrates the ensuing chaos by noting that "in the year 387, Easter was observed at Alexandria and in North Italy on April 25, in Gaul on March 21, and at Rome on

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<sup>51</sup> *E.g.*, *id.* at 159: "But as for you and your companions, you certainly sin [in your observances of Easter]...."

<sup>52</sup> *Id.*, at 160. And ironically, it may well be that Colman had the better of the argument, if the links to John explored by Stewart-Sykes in his monograph on the Melito of Sardis' Paschal liturgy are credited, whereas there is no hard evidence of what Peter, Paul or any other Apostle did with respect to observance of the Passover and Resurrection.

<sup>53</sup> J. R. Wright, *op. cit.*, 83.

<sup>54</sup> G. Declerq, *op. cit.*, 52-53.

April 18.”<sup>55</sup> And to this day, East and West remain divided not only because, as noted, the Orthodox Church reads March 22 as an impermissible starting day but also because the Orthodox Church has never accepted the Roman shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, with the result that the Orthodox Easter is sometimes before and sometimes after, but rarely the same day, as the Roman Easter.<sup>56</sup>

Second, we cannot lose sight of the frankly pagan link that results from the Church’s explicit reliance on the vernal equinox as the reference point for determining the date of any Resurrection celebration. Because the vernal equinox marks the increasing lengthening of days and the return of Spring, it is a focal point for pagan fertility celebrations. Indeed, while the Church’s Resurrection feast still reflects its original etymology with names such as “Pasqua” (Spanish), “Paques” (French) or “Paaske” (Danish), the English word “Easter” is perhaps more to the point. The name Easter is derived from Eostre or Ostara, the Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>55</sup> P. Bradshaw, *op. cit.*, 93. Much of this is of course arcana and a full explanation would involve comparing the various mathematical tables devised for determining in advance when the full (*i.e.*, 14<sup>th</sup>) moon might appear during any given month, some of which are based on 19 year cycles, some on 84 year cycles, and some on 112 year cycles, but virtually all having the deficiency that at some point they diverge from the *observed* new moon marking the commencement of a lunar month. *See generally* G. Declerq, *op. cit.*, 54-55. The key point, however, is that the ultimate result of the Council of Nicaea’s decision on this issue was disunity *both* within the Church *and* as between the Church and the non-believing Jews.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*; *see also* T. Fallow, *op. cit.* The continuing division between East and West over the Council of Trent’s decision in 1563 A.D. to change the calendar base in order to correct for the multi-day errors that had arisen over the past 1000 years is beyond the scope of this article, though it does provide yet one more illustration of the virtually gospel-irrelevant issues that divide the Church to this day. For more detail on this calendar issue, *see* THE CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA (1908 ed.), Vol. III, s.v. “Reform of the Calendar,” by J. Gerard, available at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03168a.htm>. And for yet more (and admittedly excruciating) detail on the difference between astronomical moons and paschal full moons, *see* “How [the] Easter Date Is Determined,” available at <http://users.sa.chariot.net.au/~gmarts/easter.htm>.

goddess of Spring. It is also traced to Ishtar, the Babylonian and Assyrian goddess of love and fertility, as well as to a Phoenician goddess Astarte, sister to and lover of Baal.<sup>57</sup>

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that one motivating factor in shifting to a vernal equinox based celebration was that it provided a smoother entry way for pagan peoples who were already accustomed to celebrating some form of life-giving/life-returning feast at that time. Such a connection is hardly lost on modern day witches and warlocks, who time their own fertility “celebrations” to coincide with the vernal equinox.<sup>58</sup> This cannot be a link of which the Church should be proud. And again, it implicitly calls into question the correctness of the original decision of the Council of Nicaea.

#### **IV. Easter as an Ecumenical Conundrum**

There are several bad consequences from the Church’s decision to separate its celebrations of the Lord’s death and resurrection from the Jews’ continuing celebrations of Passover; and from the Church’s continued inability to reach harmony within itself even apart from the Jewish celebrations. First, at the most basic level – and despite the fact that Christianity, like Judaism, is a faith based on history not abstracted metaphysical principles<sup>59</sup> – the Church has lost an important historical mooring and deprived itself of the inherent benefit of an accurate and continuing tradition. Celebrating Jesus’ Resurrection in a manner that is keyed to the Jewish

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<sup>57</sup> See “Easter,” available at <http://www.echoedvoices.org/Apr2003/Easter.html>.

<sup>58</sup> In the witches’ hands, Easter is twisted as the feast of “[t]he Resurrection Full Moon … a time to celebrate the beauty and wisdom of the teachings of the Christ and the beginning of a new astrological year. Christ stood for the balance of the masculine and feminine and represented truth and wisdom.” *New Moon Rising: A Magickal Pagan Journal*, Issue 6, available at <http://www.nmrising.com/public/881.htm>.” Needless to say, this is nonsense, making it all the more peculiar that the Church’s central feast should be knit to an astrological coincidence rather than, for example, to the historical fact of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt.

<sup>59</sup> Islam is also a faith based on many historical facts; whether events such as Mohammed’s alleged nighttime trip to Mount Moriah actually occurred is a subject well outside the scope of this article.

lunar calendar places it squarely where it should be in relationship to Passover, maintaining not simply its historical but also its theological significance. In contrast, if my analysis is anywhere near correct as to the non-Biblical basis for current practices, the feast as now celebrated has lost a good deal of its Biblical moorings.

Second, even apart from the loss of the inherent value as a witness to the world of the truth of the Resurrection that would arise though a demonstrable continuity of historical practice, there is *still* no unity within the Church as a whole concerning the observation of its central feast. Thus, as noted, there remains a sharp divide between those Churches following the Roman custom of celebrating Easter on the first full moon following the vernal equinox as determined under a Gregorian calendar; and those following the Orthodox celebrations based on a Julian calendar. How weak indeed must the Church appear to the rest of the world when the Resurrection itself is a sign of division. Perhaps as a result, there have more recently been ecumenically-based calls for all Churches to reach common agreement on the date for Easter. The most notable is the Aleppo Statement, issued in 1997.<sup>60</sup> The Aleppo Statement received general support,<sup>61</sup> and yet for all that appears, the search for unity on this issue has essentially been put on everyone's back burner.<sup>62</sup> As noted in the response of the United States Conference

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<sup>60</sup> World Council of Churches, “Towards a Common Date of Easter,” available at <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-commissions/faith-and-order-commission/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/towards-a-common-date-for-easter/towards-a-common-date-for-easter.html>.

<sup>61</sup> See, e.g., Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, “Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha (July 13, 1999), available at <http://archive.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/orthodox/easter.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Well, not everyone's back burner. One Canon Andrew Dow, Dean of Cheltenham, with the support of several dozen General Synod members, has called on the Archbishop to fix a single date for Easter to fall on a given weekend in the Spring, without regard to such matters as equinoxes, full moons, Biblical texts or historical fact, solely in order to harmonize school vacations and thus to “make life easier for schools and end the disruption and confusion over the timing of bank holidays.” S. Doughty, “Church of England Clerics Want Easter Date Fixed for

of Catholic Bishops, this may well be because the Aleppo Statement would require “more perceptible” changes in practice on the part of the Eastern churches.<sup>63</sup>

Third, it is difficult to see how the Gospel is advanced for the celebration of Jesus’ death and resurrection to coincide with pagan celebrations; yet that is the necessary result to the extent that the Resurrection is described as simply one among a series of equinox-based rituals celebrating the return of Spring.

Fourth, and at the heart of this article’s thesis, by purposefully distancing itself from the Jewish Passover, the Gentile Church falls short in its mission to preach the Gospel to the Jews. In contrast, the link between Passover and the Gospel of Christ was maintained in the Early Church’s celebrations.<sup>64</sup> To be sure, a *Christian* remembrance at this season of the year must be entirely based on the truth of Jesus’ once and sufficient sacrifice as the Lamb of God;

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Every Year” (January 19, 2009), available at <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1123122/Church-England-clerics-want-Easter-date-fixed-year.html>. The vacant theology, indeed the very triviality and foolishness of that position, needs no further comment.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Common Response to the Aleppo Statement on the Date of Easter/Pascha” (October 31, 1998), available at <http://www.esccb.org/seia/orthodox.shtml>.

<sup>64</sup> See again Melito of Sardis’ *Peri Pascha*, which might be written in hymn form:

“Understand therefore, beloved,  
how it is new and old,  
eternal and temporary,  
perishable and imperishable,  
mortal and immortal, this mystery of the Pascha:  
old as regards the Law,  
but new as regards the Word;  
temporary as regards the model,  
eternal because of the grace;  
perishable because of the slaughter of the sheep,  
imperishable because of the life of the Lord;  
mortal because of the burial in earth,  
immortal because of the rising from the dead.”

R. Cantalamessa, *op. cit.*, Documents 20-24, at 41-46.

and any such remembrance necessarily has the Resurrection as its capstone. But that is precisely the point: when the Church proclaims Jesus as the true Paschal Lamb *concurrently* with the season of the Jewish Passover, it testifies to Jesus' accomplished work on the cross as salvation “to the Jews first and also to the Greeks.”<sup>65</sup> Moreover, by celebrating Jesus' resurrection on a date that appears to have been fixed by *animus* to the Jews, the Church flatly turns its back both on the importance of the Old Testament to the Early Church as its own Scriptures, while also implicitly disavowing God's unchanged promise of salvation to the Jews.

That such salvation remains God's purpose is clearly stated in Romans 11. There Paul admonishes the Gentile believers not to boast in their new-found favor with God, but rather to recall that they, being wild, were but grafted into the good olive tree, which is Israel, the natural branches being broken off when Israel rejected Jesus. Paul then prophesies that God will restore Israel when “the fullness of the Gentiles has come in,” thus bringing to perfection His plan: “For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”<sup>66</sup>

To the extent that the Church ignores – or worse, as evidenced by Constantine and others, demeans – its Jewish roots, the Church falls into precisely the snare of which Paul warned: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches.”<sup>67</sup> The Church thereby fails of an important charge of the Great Commission to the extent it fails to testify in its feasts, as well as through its teachings, that God's grace continues today for the Jew as well as for the Gentile.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Romans 1:16, 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 1:22-24.

<sup>66</sup> Romans 11:25-26, 32.

<sup>67</sup> Romans 11:18.

<sup>68</sup> Romans 2:9-10.

## V. Conclusion

Fortunately, of course, no ultimate doctrine turns on whether Jesus died on a Thursday or a Friday; or whether the Resurrection should be celebrated once a year, or every time communion is served; or whether, if celebrated once a year in a special way, that celebration must be tied to a third day following celebration of the Passover by ancient, medieval or modern-day Jews; and nothing in this paper is meant to suggest otherwise. The relevance of the kind of divergence from the Scriptural texts noted above, however, is that it demonstrates that the Church has departed from a reasonably clear Biblical interpretation of these events, and in particular from their historic and calendrical ties to the Jewish Passover. And the Church's decision over time to adhere to a mathematically impossible set of date observances – with Jesus dying during the daytime on a Friday and rising from the dead on Sunday morning, as though this were a full three days and nights after – suggests that something other than Biblical truths was at issue in coming to that position.

The historical record described above, measured against the Scriptures, thus lays bare a series of errors in the Early Church. Not only did the Council of Nicaea depart from what was in the Early Church the dominant time for observance of the Lord's death and resurrection, it did so out of hostility to the Jews, thus doubly-depriving its decision on that issue<sup>69</sup> of any validity. Thereafter the Church, by persisting in the Council's error and distancing itself from a Passover-linked festal calendar, at a minimum diminished, and for some most likely lost, the historical and theological moorings of the Resurrection. Further, while purporting to seek unity among the Churches in the observance of the Resurrection, the Council failed to achieve even *that* much,

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<sup>69</sup> There is no such problem with the Council's resolution of the Arian dispute. *See generally* R. Williams, ARIUS: HERESY AND TRADITION (revised edition) (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002).

with the unjustifiable result that the Western and Orthodox observances still diverge on the question, while deeply spiritual traditions such as those of the Celts were suppressed and submerged.

The Church, of course, should look to the Gospels and its own history, not to the stars, for its times of festal worship. And if true Christian unity is to be part of its mission, then the Church by definition should heed the call of Romans 11, which becomes increasingly imminent with the passage of time.