



The Background of the "Holy Days"

Other days?

There is an obligation for public worship on Sunday, even twice. But what about the other days of public worship?

In article 53 of the Church Order we read about 'Days of Commemoration', and there it says: "Each year the Churches shall, in the manner decided upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit." But we do not read there that these facts of salvation must be celebrated on special days besides the Lord's Day. No, there must be a commemoration of these facts, but 'in the manner decided upon by the consistory.' We see the same in article 54 about "Days of Prayer": "In time of war, general calamities, and other great afflictions the presence of which is felt throughout the Churches, a day of prayer may be proclaimed by the Churches appointed for that purpose by general synod." (Interesting to know that the Church of Burlington-West is one of these Churches, appointed to this purpose, the other one is the Church of Edmonton Providence). But again: one can not read in this article that a special day must be chosen for this purpose besides the Lord's Day. In article 65 we read that funerals are not ecclesiastical but family affairs, and should be conducted accordingly. That means: without a special public worship on a work day.

And what about marriages? Well, there may be a choice, according to article 63; "The solemnisation of a marriage may take place either in a private ceremony or in a public worship service." The conclusion is that neither confession (c.q. Heidelberg Catechism) nor Church Order point to many services on work days, but that on the contrary both of them stress the celebration of the Lord's Day as the day of rest, the day of public worship.

Scriptures about festivals

But I can imagine that one says: all right, confession and Church Order do not point to any services on work days, but ultimately they are based on Scriptures. So the question is: what do Scriptures say about this?

My answer is: the Bible does not tell us so much concerning special days and special services. There were in the Old Dispensation special days and times. But that is not decisive for our days, because we confess in article 25 of the Belgic Confession that Christ is the fulfilment of the law: "All shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians."

In the New Testament, the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, we read about Passover (Acts 12:4) but not in the context of celebration of that day as a special day for the Christian Church, but only as an indication what time is mentioned ("intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people").

We read also about the day of Pentecost (Acts 20: 16, 1 Cor. 16:8), "*Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.*" I agree with Calvin in his commentary on this text: "There is no doubt that Paul had strong and important reasons for hurrying to Jerusalem, not because the sacredness of the day meant such a lot to him, but because strangers were in the habit of flocking to Jerusalem from all directions for the feast days."

So it concerned Jewish feast days!

And as for the second text: *"But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries"* — it is remarkable that Paul only mentions Pentecost in connection with a time-schedule, but that he is writing in the same chapter about the first day of the week as a special day concerning worship. He points to one of the elements of public worship, namely the collection (verse 2): *"On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up."*

Indeed the first day of the week was a special day. We read in the last book of the Bible that this day even received a special name. John writes (Revelation 1:10): *"I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day."* The Lord's Day, that means without any doubt the first day of the week, the day of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What about other special days?

We can only read in the New Testament a reproach of Paul to the Galatians (4:10): *"You observe days, and months, and season, and years!"* Paul lists there what is involved in living by the Mosaic law; days (Sabbaths, fast days, feast days, new moons), months (particularly observed during the Babylonian exile, Isaiah 66: 23), times or seasons (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacle feast, Dedication days), and at last: years (the sabbatical year every seventh year and the year of Jubilee).

Calvin asks in his commentary on this text: "What sort of observance did Paul reprove?" And he answers: "It was that which would bind the conscience by religion, as something that was necessary to the worship of God, and which, as he says in Romans 14:5.f, would make a distinction between one day and another. So we can understand the admonition of Paul to the Colossians:

"Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are only a shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ." So, for instance, festivals had been prescribed in the Old Testament, but now in the New Testament after Christ's coming in the flesh one can not be obliged to observe them.

I quote Calvin again: "Those who make a distinction of days, separate, as it were, one from another. Such a partition was suitable for the Jews, that they might celebrate religiously the days appointed, by separating them from others. Among Christians such a division has ceased. But someone will say, 'We still keep some observance of days.'

"I answer", Calvin says, "that we do not by any means observe days, as though there were any sacredness in holy days, or as though it were not lawful to work on them, but this is done for government and order, not for the days."

Calvin respected the decisions of the government, and I shall come back to that point.

So it is quite understandable that the early Church celebrated only one Christian feastday, namely the Lord's Day.

Abolishment of festivals

In the beginning of the Christian Church there were no special services of public worship besides the services on the Lord's Day. The congregation held her meetings, often early in the morning and in the evening. There was a festal celebration of the Lord's Supper as well. But there were no other festivals.

When later on the reformers of the 16th century fell back on the early Church, they would have liked to abolish the many festivals beyond the Lord's Day.

In 1520 Luther sighs that the Lord's Day might be the only feast day. When Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536 he stressed from the very beginning of the reformation the Lord's Day as the only feast day. Farel and Vinet were not inclined to acknowledge any human institution, but to respect only the Lord's Day.

Even the matter of the celebration of festivals was one of the reasons of Calvin's and Farrell's banishment. After their return the council of Geneva instituted four feast days; Christmas-day, Circumcision-day, Mary-Annunciation-day and Ascension-day. To work on these days was forbidden.

As for the reformation in the Netherlands: Synod of Dordt 1574 decided that one had to be satisfied with only the Lord's Day. Synod approved of preaching on the Lord's Day before Christmas concerning Christ's birth, of giving attention in the sermon on Easter to Christ's resurrection and on Pentecost to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

But these days might not be considered as festivals above the Lord's Day.

But this synodical decision was not appreciated by the civil government, which wanted to maintain some festivals, although not the same in all the provinces. So the next synod of Dordt 1578 decided that preaching should take place on those feast-days, which had been maintained by the government, "in order that people should not loaf."

That concerned then both Christmas days, which had been established again (although reluctantly), the days of Easter and Pentecost, in some regions New Year's day and Ascension day and sometimes some other festivals, not mentioned.

But it is very clear that there was much ecclesiastical resistance against special Christian festivals except the Lord's Day.

Oldest festival: Easter

So in the beginning of the Christian Church one celebrated only the Lord's Day. One considered the Lord's Day as the weekly commemoration of Christ's resurrection. Christ resurrected from the death on the first day of the week. So that was the festival, which was celebrated in the meeting of the congregation. Very early data is available to confirm that. Although the Jewish Sabbath had not been abolished right away in the beginning of the new dispensation of Pentecost, it was gradually abolished and substituted by the Lord's Day.

So for instance Ignatius writes in the beginning of the 2nd century that the Sabbath must not be observed any more by the Christians. He also uses in Rome the term 'Lord's Day' as a day of public worship. But besides the weekly celebration of Christ's resurrection, a yearly commemoration of it came up.

There are data which go back to the midst of the 2nd century and that is within one century after the apostles' death.

In the time of Tertullian, the old-Christian author of the end of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century, the celebration of Easter extended already more than one day. In the term 'Pascha' he summarises a period of fasting and administering baptism.

Also an Easter-sermon has been preserved, which was held very early, namely of Melito of Sardes, who lived in the last part of the 2nd century. We learn from it that there was in that time a kind of 'comprehensive' celebration of Easter. The suffering, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ were not separated, but considered as a whole. So there was not a special 'Good

Friday', on which especially Christ's death was commemorated and besides that an Easter-day on which only was preaching about Christ's resurrection, but it was considered in its entirety: the comprehensive, all-inclusive work of salvation of the Redeemer, summarised in 'Pascha'.

It would take too much time to explain how it was possible that besides the weekly Lord's Day there was also a yearly celebration of Christ's resurrection. It must be sufficient to know that this was connected with the Jewish calendar year. The Passover date was the 14th of Nisan to the Jews, but the council of Nicea 325 left that date over against the Jews as a fixed date for the celebration of Easter. It was decided then to celebrate Easter depending when there was new moon. Until now that decision is still executed, namely to celebrate Easter on the first Lord's Day after the first full moon of Spring.

Jerusalem in the 4th century

Starting with the rule of Constantine the Great important changes occurred in the Christian church. Simplicity was then replaced by abundance. The antithetical attitude of the church changed into one of accommodation. The doctrine of salvation acquired from pagan mystery-religions a mystical notion. Important ecclesiastical centres arose and also with respect to liturgical matters considerable changes came to pass.

After the council of Nicea 325, Constantine visited Jerusalem and the Church buildings which he and his mother Helena caused to raise, contributed greatly to the development of the liturgy of the Jerusalem-Church in the 4th century.

The pilgrimage of Helena to the holy city was taken as an example by many others.

So there was for instance a nun of Northern Spain, called Egeria, who visited Jerusalem in 381-384 A.D.

She wrote a travel story about that journey and delivered many details of the Jerusalem-liturgy of bishop Cyril of the 2nd part of the 4th century. Time and again she writes that in the services in Jerusalem hymns, antiphons and Scripture-readings were 'according to the day and the place.' Special attention is paid to Palm-Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, when the bishop enters Jerusalem like Christ did before, surrounded by the people, saying: Hosanna! Special attention is also paid to the many, many services in the so-called 'Great Week', the week before Easter, and in the Easter week itself.

The bishop again took Christ's place. He performed as a holy person, who impersonated Christ. All the services were conditioned by topographical factors. The places at which the bishop performed were carefully chosen, according to the requirements of the situation and the time. A dramatic repetition was staged of the things which happened when salvation was accomplished by Christ Himself.

But the frequent services were very tiring. So the people that followed the bishop from the one holy place to the other and from the one service to the other, were very weary at last. Egeria writes concerning the early morning of Good Friday: "the bishop addresses the people, comforting them, because they have laboured the whole night long and they are to work this whole day, encouraging them not to weaken, but to have hope in God, who will for this labour bestow on them an even greater reward. So comforting them as he is able, he addresses them: "Now go again, each one of you to your homes, sit there for a while, and be ready to be back here about eight o'clock, so that from that hour until about noon you may be able to see the holy wood of the cross, which we believe to be profitable to the salvation of each of us. And from noon on we must again assemble here, that is, before the cross, that we may devote ourselves to readings and prayers until the night."

Actually there was a whole Easter-cycle with many special days and special services. Rome itself adopted from Jerusalem the Palm-Sunday procession and the adoration of the cross. It was told

that Helena found the wood of the cross in the neighbourhood of Jerusalem, more than four centuries after Christ's death! Egeria is convinced too that that was the wood of Christ's cross. So on Good Friday, she writes, "the bishop's chair is set up on Golgotha behind the cross, which now stands there; the bishop is seated on the chair, and before him is placed a table covered with a linen cloth. The deacons stand in a circle around the table and the silver casket decorated with gold is brought in, in which is the holy wood of the cross. It is opened and taken out, and both the wood of the cross and the title are placed on the table. While it is on the table, the bishop sits and grasps the ends of the holy wood with his hands, and the deacons, who are standing around him, keep watch. Here is why they guard it so. It is the custom that all of the people here come one by one, the faithful and the catechumens, bowing before the table, kissing the holy cross and moving on. I was told that because of someone (I do not know who) bit off and stole some of the holy cross. Now it is guarded by the deacons so that it dare not be done by someone again.

So all of the people pass through one by one, bowing, first with their foreheads and then with their eyes touching the cross and the title, and so kissing the cross they pass through, but no one is permitted to put a hand on the cross. But when they have kissed the cross, they go on . . ."

The whole Easter-cycle is marked by a development according to this description of Egeria of the Jerusalem-model.

After the 4th century the church-calendar is gradually being filled up with festivals, feast days, days. In the 8th century 106 dates are occupied in the calendar-year as special days and festivals. In the 16th century, at the end of the Middle Ages, only four dates are still vacant . . .

The whole Christian year becomes a sacramental preaching of special services with a sacrosanct meaning.

Christmas

So there is a development from Jerusalem to Rome, and there is a development from one day, the Lord's Day, as a festival, to many days, almost the days of the year, with special services.

There are three main cycles: before Easter (the fasting time), then the time between Easter and Pentecost, and at last the Christmas-cycle. As for Christmas-day: it is remarkable that the Eastern Church celebrated Christ's birth on the 6th of January, the so-called Epiphany-day, while the Western Church since about 336 said: "No, it must be December 25th. But both dates originated in heathenism. In the East the Epiphany, the appearance of the godhead on earth played a big role in religion. It was a matter of showing the power of the godhead. In the East Epiphany-day became more and more the day of the appearance of Christ, a combination of His birth and His baptism.

In the Western world one celebrated the 25th of December as the day of Christ's birth. But this day originated also in heathenism as a festival. All kinds of calculation had been made in order to 'find' that date. The 25th of March was the Roman start of Spring, also the date of the creation of the world. So one said: that must have been the date of annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary.

A next conclusion was that the resurrection should have taken place on the same date, namely March 25th. That must have been exactly on the 30th birthday of Christ, because actually the new beginning, the start was His conception on the annunciation day. The last conclusion was: Mary was of course pregnant during nine months, so she gave birth to Jesus on December 25th . . .

But this calculation is as fantastic as incredible!

How did one come to December 25th? The answer is not difficult, if we keep in mind that to the world of Rome in the 3rd and 4th century this 25th of December was called: "the day of the invincible Sun."

This Sun-service originated in the East as well, but it was extended to the whole Roman empire. In the background we must also see the influence of the mystery-religions, with which the Roman soldiers were involved, as for example in Persia. A kind of Sun-religion came about: the Sun, in its mild warmth and big scorching power, high above the earth, but powerful on earth, became a symbol of the godhead, who sees everything, but is not ruled by anything.

This Sun is called the conqueror of darkness. The victory of the Sun was especially celebrated on the day of the change of winter-season as the day of turning. The Sun, which in the preceding weeks always seemed to diminish, resumed then glorifying its power.

But how is it that about the year 336 in Rome the date came up as a Christian festival?

About this question a late Syrian text from the 13th century sheds some light. We read in it: "The reason, why the fathers changed the feast of 6th of January and shifted it to December the 25th, was this. The heathens were used to celebrate on December the 25th the feast of the birthday of the Sun, and to light lamps on that day. They let also participate Christians that feast of joy and that spectacle.

Because the teachers of the Church perceived that the Christians were attracted by that, they made precautions and celebrated on that day December 25th henceforth the feast of the true birth, the birth of Jesus Christ, but on January 6th the feast of His appearance.

Here is said clearly that the necessity of competition with a heathen festival caused the celebration of Christ's birth on December 25th. But the truth is that nobody knows on what date Christ was born, and the Holy Spirit, Who wrote the Scriptures, did not esteem it of that importance, that it should be mentioned in the Bible.

Anyhow, it could not have taken place on December 25th. I was told about that in Bethlehem itself when I was there 12 years ago. They said to me over there that in that time of the year it never happened that sheep were in the field. At least in the month December until the end of February the sheep were always inside the stables.

But after the year 325 when freedom had been given to the Church, Christendom had become the main religion. The world joined the Church, but then a great danger appeared that the Church would become worldly. Many people took their heathen pattern of life with them and all kinds of customs survived under the cloak of Christianity.

In this way all kinds of adoration of many female godheads were delegated to 'Mother Mary'.

On the same line we have to consider the maintaining of December 25th as the birthday of Christ. One was used to celebrate that day as the festival of the invincible Sun. The Christian leaders maintained now this day as birthday of the 'Sun of justice', and applied that to Christ.

So Christmas on December 25th became a Christian festival. But we can speak here of a concession to heathenism, at least of an accommodation to heathen date.

We have to keep that in mind when people sometimes consider December 25th as "the day of days" and Christmas as the most holy feast.

Abolition?

We do not plead for abolition of all Christian festivals. It is not possible to turn back the clock. Especially there is a social motive, in which the historical element is also playing a role.

But we plead for soberness. There is no reason for many festivals except the Lord's Day. There is also right soberness in the new version of the Church Order. Let us be sober in all kind of week day services. Then we have to do our daily work.

Maybe it will be good to mention that the weekly services, for instance in the refugee congregation of London, had the character of prophecy. It was more a matter of teaching and discussing a special passage of Scriptures. But therefore we have now our Christian societies for Bible studies, and I like to emphasise the importance of them! So the conclusion is: come and let us worship on the Lord's Day, the real and true Christian festival. Keep in mind that there are people, who are easily neglecting public worship on Sunday, but who do not want to miss one service on the "Christian festivals", and who would rather enlarge the number of them!

There is an abundant celebration of these special days, with all kind of connotations, in which soberness is totally missed.

There is much reason to consider the Lord's Supper as a festive celebration, in which the whole work of Christ's salvation is comprehensively surveyed: the purpose of His coming in the world, His suffering and crucifixion, His resurrection and ascension, His sitting on the right-hand of the Father, His return on the clouds of heaven.

There is no clear order to celebrate all kinds of special days: New Year's eve, New Year's morning. Good Friday, Ascension Day, Easter, Pentecost, Christmas even on second days, and so on. So let us be sober in it.

But there is a clear order of a regular and joyful celebration of the Lord's Supper by the words of Christ Himself: *"Do this in remembrance of Me."*

And we shall do that, until He comes.

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