

Pastor's Pen #2 "What's In a Name?"

Where did the word "Easter" come from? It is not of biblical origin, yet it is the name the Church has assigned to the single day of the year, most believers would agree, stands alone in importance to the Christian faith. It might surprise you to learn that the word "easter" has come down to us through many traditions, none of them Christian.

Ishtar and Astarte were Babylonian goddesses who were worshiped in a fertility cult which dates back to the days of the ancient Chaldeans – even before the time of Abraham. The great Babylonian empire spread this cult and its practices throughout their world, including Jerusalem, which it conquered in BC 586. The influence of this cult wormed its way into the hearts and minds of God's chosen people, some of whom began to offer sacrifices to the "Queen of Heaven", as Astarte had become known. God spoke through His prophet to condemn the idolatry of the people of Judah, singling out the rites attached to the worship of the pagan goddess:

The children gather wood, the fathers kindle the fire, and women knead the dough and make cakes of bread for the Queen of Heaven. They pour drink offerings to other gods to provoke Me to anger.

- Jeremiah 7:18 NIV

The fertility cult of Astarte survived the demise of the Babylonian empire, spreading into what is now central Europe, where the Festival of "Eostre" – as she came to be known in the Teutonic tongues – was celebrated with the coming of Spring each year. The fertility rites included baby chicks, bunnies and yes, brightly-coloured eggs. Hmmm.....

The original Christian celebration of our Lord's resurrection was never called "Eostre" or "Oster" (old German) or "Easter" (the eventual Anglo-Saxon derivation). That would have been unthinkable! From the earliest days of the Church, the celebration of Christ's victory over the grave was called *Pasch*, a term borrowed from the Hebrew word "*Peshach*", rendered in English as "Passover". In modern Greek that word has evolved into *Pascha*, the name still given by Eastern Orthodox Christians to the most important day in the Christian Calendar. It is unclear how or exactly when the Church appropriated a form of "Easter" for its celebration of our Lord's resurrection, but the term appears to have been a part of the Christian lexicon by the time of the earliest Reformers. I'm not sure that's a good enough reason to keep it around.

No need to "get all religious" about this, but I have decided to distance myself from the word "easter" in the context of the Church, since what Christians celebrate on the first Sunday after the full moon (the *pascha moon*) after the vernal equinox is NOT the power of the pagan goddess Oster to make women and farm fields fertile, but the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth – the Christ, the son of the living God – who died on Calvary's cross as God's perfect *paschal* Lamb and then rose from the dead, conquering sin and death and hell. His death and resurrection ensured the eternal salvation of all who, by faith, would receive Him as Saviour and Lord. That really is something to celebrate!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! **Happy Resurrection Day!**

Pastor's Pen #3 "Mind Renewal"

The *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* defines belief thusly: "[Biblical] belief conveys the thought of a movement of trust going out to, and laying hold of, the object of its confidence".

When a person comes to God through faith in Jesus Christ, this definition describes exactly what transpires: the essential element of trust for one's life is detached from that to which it was formerly affixed and transferred to a new object of confidence – Jesus Christ, God the Son – upon which it is to be fixed permanently. The belief exercised in this manner is more – *much* more – than the mere intellectual acceptance of the Bible stories about the life of Jesus. Mere "thought-driven" belief that Jesus lived, even that He was crucified and risen from the dead, is a belief born of facts – the simple, basic kind of belief we routinely exercise every day about this or that. It does not require this "movement of trust" to embrace Christ – the belief born of divine faith. That kind of belief is life-changing, completely transformative. It is *spiritual* belief. And it is holy belief, in that it is "altogether other": a belief sent from God. In our sinful spiritual ignorance, we are not able to "*believe in the Lord Jesus Christ*" in this way. The faith required for the belief that moves one's trust toward and onto the Son of God is not of this world; it is supplied by God Himself. It takes us beyond mere belief to the mysterious status of being "in" Christ, and that is what initiates real, even radical, change.

*Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation;
old things have passed away; behold, all things are become new. (2 Corinthians 5:17 KJV)*

It's a familiar, beloved verse of Scripture – one which I have *hid in my heart*. But maybe it's a little too familiar. Maybe it rolls off our tongues too easily. Over the years I have come to realize that one of the great mistakes of the church is to regard this verse as a snapshot of the finished work of Christ.

I think not. Being "born again" in Christ takes me through the door which leads from death to life and deposits me on the threshold of God's kingdom. Any further progress requires my knowing and believing the promises of God, then stepping out in faith, one day at a time, on the basis of what I learn as I "grow" in truth, and faith, and grace. Salvation, I have come to know, is not just a moment – the precise day and time when I repeated the confession of faith fed to me by my pastor – but a journey – a sacred journey. My *justification* is entirely the work of God through Christ., but my transformation into this "new creation" that anyone other than God Himself can see requires, as the apostle Paul also wrote, "*the renewing of [my] mind*" (**Romans 12:2**).

A good question for each of us to ask himself/herself is this: "How much of my conscious time do I devote to 'mind renewal'?" Those of us with the kind of balanced lives recommended by doctors spend 112 hours per week awake and, in varying degrees of intensity, actively thinking. How many of your 6,720 weekly "thinking minutes" are devoted to "mind renewal"? One forty minute sermon? How much of your thinking energy do you devote to engaging your thoughts with God in prayer – apart from asking God for something? How much of your thinking energy do you devote to engaging your thoughts toward God in worship – apart from 20 minutes or so during the Sunday service? How much of your thinking energy do you devote to actively engaging your thoughts with God in Bible study? In *conversation* about the things of God? In – dare I say it? – meditation on God's Word?

Our jobs, our careers, our families, our recreational interests, our homes and gardens, our kids' activities, even our work in the church – all keep our schedules packed and our energies engaged. Yet we are called by God to strive in thinking, too, in order that we continue in the "new creation" transformation process. By His grace we are partners with the Holy Spirit in our *transformation*.

Sunday School is one vehicle established by the church to help us in this endeavor. A Small Group Bible Study can be an even better, more thorough venue for striving in our thinking, and I wish that every member of our church were connected to one. But even these are not, in and of themselves, sufficient for meaningful progress in one's life-long "mind-renewal project". Each of us must appropriate time and energy to engage our thoughts with God by ourselves, in solitude. God knows your mind, and He knows that it must be continually renewed in order that His purposes for you – and you alone – will issue forth from your will, which He desires be transformed from selfish and trivial to purposeful and powerful. His vehicle of choice for your thinking, your brooding, for the *renewing of your mind*: His holy Word.

I encourage each member of the COS family to get seriously into Scripture. Get to Sunday School. Get your kids to Sunday School. Get involved in a Small Group Bible Study. But also read God's Word by yourself. You'll have to deliberately set time aside for that. Stop making excuses – you KNOW you could find time if you chose to. But don't just read your Bible. Study it – yes, you can study the Bible by yourself. Buy a devotional guide or a Bible commentary and use it to guide you through your study. It will be worth the effort. Next, sit quietly and listen to the words you've read. You could also pray, or even meditate over them. Yes, I said meditate. You won't understand everything you read in Scripture. No one does. But sit quietly and brood over what God has said, about what He is trying to tell you about Himself, about Jesus and the Church, about the Holy Spirit, and – most importantly – about you.

"We are to hear. All of us are. That is what the whole Bible is calling out. "Hear, O Israel!" But hear what? Hear what? The Bible is hundreds of voices all calling out at once out of the past and clamoring for your attention like barkers at a fair, like air-raid sirens, like a whole barnyard of cockcrows as the first long shafts of dawn fan out across the sky.

Some of the voices are shouting, like Moses' voice, so that all Israel, all the world, can hear. Some are so soft and halting that you can hardly hear them at all, like Job with ashes on his head and his heart broken; like old Simeon whispering, '*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace*'. The prophets shrill out in their frustration, their rage, their holy hope and madness; and the priests drone on and on about the dimensions and furniture of the Temple; and the law-givers spell out what to eat and what not to eat; and the historians list the kings, the battles, the tragic lessons of Israel's history. And somewhere in the midst of them all one particular voice speaks out that is unlike any other voice because it speaks to the deepest privacy and longing and weariness of each of us that there are times when the centuries are blown away like mist, and it is as if we stand with no shelter of time at all between ourselves and the One who speaks our secret name. "Come," the Voice says, "unto Me."

- Frederick Buechner: *A Room Called Remember*

Let the transformations begin.