

TOWARDS A COMMON DATE FOR EASTER (1999)

The Faith and Order Committee has studied the report of the Consultation on the dating of Easter which took place in Aleppo, Syria, in March 1997, under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the Middle East Council of Churches. Through the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (as it was then known) and the Joint Liturgical Group, the Committee has also been made aware of other Churches' responses to the Aleppo report. All quotations which follow are from the Aleppo report.

It is a matter for regret that, by celebrating Easter, 'the feast of Christ's resurrection . . . on different days, the churches give a divided witness to this fundamental aspect of the apostolic faith.' The early Christian communities set a date for Easter in relation to the Jewish passover. The Council of Nicea in 325 determined that Easter should be celebrated on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon, 'linking the principles for dating Easter to the norms for the calculation of passover during Jesus' lifetime.' Since the 16th century, however, 'western Christians have come to calculate the date of Easter on the basis of the Gregorian calendar, while the eastern churches generally have continued to follow the older Julian calendar.' 'Our present differences in calculation of the date of Easter thus may be ascribed to differences in the calendars and lunar tables employed rather than to differences in fundamental theological outlook.'

The report argues for a common date for Easter. This concept should be carefully distinguished from a 'fixed' date (such as the last Sunday in March or the first Sunday in April). The latter would 'obscure and weaken the link between the biblical passover and the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ by eliminating any reference to the biblical norms for the calculation of the passover'. 'The most likely way to succeed in achieving a common date for Easter . . . would be (a) to maintain the Nicene norms (that Easter should fall on the Sunday following the first vernal full moon), and (b) to calculate the astronomical data (the vernal equinox and the full moon) by the most accurate possible scientific means, (c) using as the basis for reckoning the meridian of Jerusalem, the place of Christ's death and resurrection.' The Aleppo report recommends this way of achieving a common date.

The report invites responses from the Churches in time for a further consultation in 2001, and it is desirable that the Conference should express a view. When the Conference last discussed this matter, in 1965, it expressed its desire for a fixed Easter. Methodism was not the only church to express that desire at that time, but fortunately, not least in view of the current, much wider ecumenical developments, nothing came of the suggestion. The proposals which arise from the Aleppo Consultation have been welcomed in principle by those British churches which have so far expressed their mind, and the Faith and Order Committee recommends that the Conference should also welcome them and should make clear that the view expressed in 1965 no longer expresses the mind of the Conference.

RESOLUTION

The Conference, believing that a fixed date for Easter would weaken the link between the Jewish passover and the Christian Easter, but that a common date, established according to the recommendations of the Aleppo Consultation, *Towards a Common Date for Easter*, would preserve that link and be a valuable contribution to ecumenical relationships, expresses its broad agreement with those recommendations.

(Agenda 1999, pp.222-223)