

# Churches Celebrate

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It seems to be within human nature to lean to one extreme or another. As a result, some churches have added so much ceremony and ritual to their services that they have left no room for the moving of the Holy Spirit. Others, on the other hand, have declared freedom from all ceremony and would not so much as sing from a hymnal. But the freedom we have in Christ allows for a balance between ritual and free form worship. This balance can be achieved in other church celebrations as well.

Churches celebrate with a variety of ceremonies and meaningful festivals. No doubt you have attended a beautiful wedding, a touching baby dedication, or a sad but celebratory funeral of a church member who passed away into God's presence. Christmas, Palm Sunday, Good Friday, Easter, and Thanksgiving are some favorite festivals celebrated in church. These and other ceremonies and festivals should be done as a remembrance of the Lord.

## ***The Plan***

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- A. Church Ceremonies
- B. Church Festivals
- C. Ritual or Free Form Worship

## ***The Goals***

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1. Describe the variety of church ceremonies.
2. Identify the great festivals of the church.
3. Explain what place both ritual and free form worship have in the church.

## **A. CHURCH CEREMONIES**

**Goal 1.** Describe the variety of church ceremonies.

The great day has arrived for Timothy and Mary—their wedding day. Both of their families are involved in the planning and preparation. All their church friends are invited to attend the ceremony performed by the pastor. Afterwards refreshments will be served in the fellowship hall.

Mary is starry-eyed, but she also feels awed at the solemnity of the occasion. She wants to be the wife that God intends her to be. Timothy is excited, yet he has considered seriously the vows he will take—to love and provide for his bride, and to be the spiritual head of his home. They have had several counseling sessions with the pastor and realize that a solid marriage does not just “happen”—it is built. With Christ as the center of their relationship, their love will grow deeper with the years. And they are so happy about the church they will be married in! The congregation sharing in their joy will make it complete.

We have already discussed water baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These are known as ordinances because the Bible tells us to observe them. These we studied in Lessons 5 and 6. The church also conducts ceremonies with definite scriptural basis,

such as weddings. Others, like the dedication of a new home, are optional. That means we may have them if we wish, or we may not—the choice is ours. We will look at some of the rites that help us to share in both the joys and the sorrows we all may experience.

1. *Performing marriages.* Because God himself instituted marriage, it is most appropriate to have weddings in the church. The ceremony centers around a promise made between a man and a woman to be true to each other as husband and wife as long as they live. In some countries ministers are recognized as legal officers with authority to perform weddings. In other lands a civil marriage must be conducted first and a church wedding may then follow.

2. *Dedicating children.* Christian parents may bring their babies or young children forward in a church service to present them to the Lord in a public act of consecration. The pastor takes the infant in his or her arms and offers prayer for both the child and the parents who promise to bring up the child in the fear of the Lord. The whole congregation enjoys this lovely custom.

3. *Praying for the sick.* Often in a meeting people who are ill ask for special prayer. One of the church leaders may anoint them on the forehead with a touch of oil before praying for them. It is not unusual for healings to take place. It may come instantly or gradually. The sick may also be prayed for in their homes or in the hospital. Jesus said that believers “will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well” (Mark 16:18). See also James 5:14–15.

4. *Dedicating homes.* When someone moves into a new home, he or she may want a ceremony of dedication. Church leaders and friends gather for this happy occasion to dedicate the house to the Lord, to invite Christ as head of the home. Christians have also asked for a dedication service when opening a new place of business, a school, an activity center, or a church, because they want to honor Christ in all that they do.

5. *Conducting funerals.* Everyone needs the church when there is a death in the family. A funeral ceremony with believers to help share the burden can do much toward lifting sorrow. The pastor speaks comfort from God’s Word, reminding the family that we are not sad as those who have no hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13). We have the glorious hope that our loved ones in the Lord have been received into the presence of Jesus where they will suffer no more. The Bible assures us that we shall see them again.

At funerals, people who never go to church otherwise are presented with an opportunity to hear the gospel and accept Christ. Christians can also minister to the family by preparing food or offering to help in other ways. Sometimes a family likes to have a special service to remember the departed loved one on the anniversary of his or her death. They may give an offering to the church as a memorial. This is a good substitute for the ancestor worship formerly practiced by some new converts.

## ***Application***

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**1** Look up each Scripture (left column) and write the number that represents the ceremony or custom it refers to (right column).

- |                               |                             |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ... <b>a</b> Genesis 50:1–14  | 1) Wedding                  |
| ... <b>b</b> 1 Samuel 1:27–28 | 2) Funeral                  |
| ... <b>c</b> 2 Chronicles 7:9 | 3) Baptism                  |
| ... <b>d</b> John 2:1         | 4) Praying for the sick     |
| ... <b>e</b> Acts 28:7–9      | 5) Dedication of children   |
|                               | 6) Dedication of a building |

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Two other ceremonies relating to the church and conducted in the church are customary.

6. *Receiving new members.* After instruction in membership classes, candidates for membership are extended “the right hand of fellowship” by the pastor and the board. This ceremony

should be conducted when most of the other members can be present. It is a beautiful way to say “Welcome!”

7. *Installing officers and teachers.* Some churches conduct installation services for those who are taking on new duties in the church. The pastor exhorts them to carry out their responsibilities in a way that would please the Lord. Usually the congregation stands as the pastor prays for the new officers and teachers. More than a custom, this short ceremony encourages the leaders and assures them of the support of the whole body.

### Application

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2 Circle the letter in front of the correct completion to the sentence. According to Romans 12:15, we should share

- a) mostly in other people’s sorrows.
- b) mostly with others and their happiness.
- c) when a particular need touches us.
- d) both in happiness and in sorrow that comes to others.

3 Write the word *ordinance* after each of the following ceremonies about which the Bible gives definite instructions.

- a) Water baptism .....
- b) Receiving of new members .....
- c) Installation of officers .....
- d) The Lord’s Supper .....
- e) Funeral .....



## B. CHURCH FESTIVALS

**Goal 2.** Identify the great festivals of the church.

A church festival is a special time of celebration, usually one of rejoicing, in memory of a great event in the life of Christ or the history of the church. Most church calendars highlight

four major festivals: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, and the Day of Pentecost (Whitsunday). Others are Palm Sunday, Ascension Sunday, and the Lord's Day.

Christmas is a festive occasion. Churches usually have a program for which there is much preparation. The young people practice carols while children learn verses to recite and songs to sing. Perhaps they will act out the Christmas story. Candies or other treats may be given out. Whatever the church plans, simple or elaborate, it is all done to commemorate the birth of Christ, the Savior who is God's gift to the world. Parents and unsaved friends may, through the program, be introduced to the gospel message.

Palm Sunday recalls the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. Crowds waved palm branches, spreading them on the road before Him. They praised Him, shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Matthew 21:9). Palm Sunday begins the Holy Week, when churches remember the last week of Christ's life before His crucifixion and burial.

Good Friday reminds us of the sufferings of Jesus and His death on the Cross. Some churches open their doors all day for prayer; others celebrate three hours by meditating on the seven last words of Jesus and having appropriate hymns and a time of prayer.

Easter is a day of special rejoicing because Christ is risen from the dead. People like to decorate the church with flowers. Some choose to wear bright, new clothes. It is a time of gladness as pastors preach the resurrection of Jesus. Without this truth all church celebrations would be meaningless. Instead, we rejoice because we know that Jesus lives. Not only do we have scriptural proof (1 Corinthians 15:20), but also inner assurance that by His Spirit He is living in us.

Ascension Sunday comes the sixth Sunday after Easter. The Ascension actually falls on Thursday, 40 days after Easter, but most churches observe it the following Sunday. We must never forget that Christ literally left this earth and ascended into

heaven. He sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12), as head of the church and our Great High Priest again, just as He promised (Acts 1:11).

Pentecost comes 50 days after the Crucifixion. It coincides with the Jewish Harvest Festival that came 50 days after their Passover. Pentecost also celebrates the birthday of the church, when the Holy Spirit came upon believers who met in Jerusalem. They were gloriously filled with power and joy and began to talk in other languages as the Spirit enabled them to speak. In explaining the Pentecostal experience to those standing around, Peter quoted from Joel, ““In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people”” (Acts 2:17).

The Lord’s Day, the usual day of worship among believers today, is the only festival known to be observed by the early church. Christians then celebrated a “weekly Easter,” to remind themselves of Christ’s resurrection. They kept this “Christian day,” the first day of the week, by praying, preaching, teaching, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper.

A few church celebrations have developed in recent years. Both Mother’s Day and Father’s Day honor our parents. New Year’s Eve celebrates the arrival of a new year in an atmosphere of prayer, worship, and dedication. Churches may also hold a Thanksgiving service or a Harvest Festival in the autumn. Or believers might ask for a special service of thanksgiving in gratitude for something the Lord has done for them. It may be a definite answer to prayer, or some achievement through God’s help. At such times they might want to give a special “thank offering” to the Lord through the church.

Your church may celebrate some or all of these special days or some others not mentioned. What is important to remember is that the day must not be celebrated for its own sake, but as a remembrance of the Lord’s work and presence with us. Keep this in mind and your celebrations will not become empty rituals without spiritual meaning.

## Application

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**4** For the descriptions in the middle column, write the number that represents the festival described (right column).

- |              |                                    |                   |
|--------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| ... <b>a</b> | The birth of Jesus                 | 1) Palm Sunday    |
| ... <b>b</b> | The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem | 2) The Lord's Day |
| ... <b>c</b> | The Crucifixion                    | 3) Good Friday    |
| ... <b>d</b> | The Resurrection                   | 4) Christmas      |
| ... <b>e</b> | Jesus' return to heaven            | 5) Easter         |
| ... <b>f</b> | "Birthday of the church"           | 6) Pentecost      |
| ... <b>g</b> | Weekly remembrance of Easter       | 7) Ascension Day  |

**5** Circle the letter in front of each correct completion to the sentence. The festivals we studied are valuable to the church because they

- a)** remind us of important spiritual or biblical events.
- b)** help us hold to tradition.
- c)** give us something interesting to do.
- d)** provide a way for us to witness to others.

**6** List at least three church celebrations that have developed in recent years.

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## C. RITUAL OR FREE FORM WORSHIP

**Goal 3.** Explain what place both ritual and free form worship have in the church.

Ritual worship in a religious ceremony uses an orderly, set pattern of words and actions. Free form worship includes more



spontaneous (natural) wording and action. Both of these play a role in the church.

Reading about the early church, you will discover a lack of rigid forms and rituals. Their informal ministry and worship allowed the Spirit to work and the people to respond. Since then, however, many churches have become too formal or ritualized and, thereby, have restrained the moving of the Holy Spirit. The rituals have remained but their meaning has been lost.

Is there a place, then, for ritual in our churches? Yes, there is. On occasions such as weddings, funerals, and the communion service, ceremony with its planned wording and procedure lends dignity and ensures that nothing will be forgotten or left out.

Reciting church creeds and repeating Scripture also has value, especially for those who cannot read. Moreover, Scripture teaches that worship should be “done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40). Such forms, however, must not be used so much that we become dependent upon them. A balance should be sought between ritual and free form, remembering that the ceremony is not as important as the meaning behind it.

In contrast to the dress required for Old Testament priests, no mention is made of special clothing for pastors or other church leaders in the New Testament. Status and position in the church were not emphasized since there was no longer a wide distinction made between clergy and laity. Instead, we read of simple worship, rich Christian fellowship, vibrant faith in Jesus Christ, and humility of ministry and service.

Churches must celebrate! What events could be more exciting to celebrate than what we have in the drama of redemption?

## Check Your Answers

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- 1**   **a** 2) Funeral  
      **b** 5) Dedication of children  
      **c** 6) Dedication of a building.  
      **d** 1) Wedding  
      **e** 4) Praying for the sick.
- 4**   **a** 4) Christmas  
      **b** 1) Palm Sunday  
      **c** 3) Good Friday  
      **d** 5) Easter  
      **e** 7) Ascension Day  
      **f** 6) Pentecost  
      **g** 2) The Lord's Day
- 2**   **d**) both in happiness and in sorrow that comes to others.
- 5**   **a**) remind us of important spiritual or biblical events.  
      **d**) provide a way for us to witness to others.
- 3**   **a**) Water baptism  
      **d**) The Lord's Supper
- 6**   You could have listed Mother's Day, Father's Day, New Year's Eve, Thanksgiving, Harvest Festival, or another celebration important to your town or country.