

THE USE OF CANDLES AS A SYMBOL
IN WORSHIP

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Summary:

This paper surveys the use of candles and the related symbolism of light in Christian history. Included is an appendix identifying candle types and their uses.

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Light is not a specifically foundational symbol of the Christian faith, such as Communion or baptism, or even the cross. Yet, while we often take it for granted, light is a fundamental part of life.¹ Further, it has and continues to occupy a significant role in the worship of Christians, practically and symbolically. Candlelight is the particular facet of light to be examined within this discourse; while the predominant focus will be on light, other properties include fire and, therefore, heat, warmth, and ambient movement of the flame. The following question is what initially prompted and has been the underlying motivation for this study: in a culture where the use of candles is extremely popular, is there a way to redeem, to add meaningful truth to what is on one hand, simply a popular decorating trend and, on the other, a prolific part of mystical spiritual expressions, especially non-Christian spirituality such as the New Age movement? The Biblical and historical precedents, along with current practices, will be examined to consider what windows of meaning might be opened.

As we turn to Biblical considerations, it must be noted that the Roman record of candles can only be traced back to the first century CE.² The precursor to candles in Biblical times is lamps set on lampstands—at first clay and subsequently metal vessels that contained oil into which a wick was placed.³ Biblically, the prominent object pertinent for this study is the lampstand or candelabrum of the Old Testament tabernacle and later the temple—its Hebrew name, the *menorah*. Placed on the south wall of the Holy Place in the tabernacle, the *menorah* was made of pure gold; three branches extended on either side of a central shaft for a total of seven lamps.⁴ It functioned practically to light the tabernacle. Symbolically, it has theological

¹ <http://www.stjamescolumbus.org/useofcandles.htm>

² Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 134.

³ Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), 34 & 158.

⁴ Exodus 25:31-40; 31:1-11

significance in pointing to the “light of divine revelation”.⁵ With the writings of Zechariah, near the end of the sixth century BCE, the *menorah* gains “cosmic significance” as a vision of the temple is perceived to be God’s heavenly temple.⁶ As outlined in Zechariah 4, the golden lampstand symbolizes the “continuing witness of the covenant community.”⁷ The Revelation of John, closing out the New Testament, is rich with lampstand imagery: seven lampstands represent seven churches with Christ in their midst;⁸ seven lampstands burn before God’s throne, the seven spirits of God;⁹ and two lampstands accompany two olive trees as “heavenly witnesses.”¹⁰ Thus there is a clear progression toward the lampstand gaining further “cosmic symbolism... reflected in the use of the *menorah* in Jewish art from the Roman period to the present day as a symbol of God’s living presence and redemptive power.”¹¹

Christianity, with its roots in Judaism, may also consider the following Jewish uses of lights. Within the Synagogue, one of the attempts to maintain a connection to the ancient Temple includes the presence of the *Ner Tamid*, that is the Eternal Light, which hangs above the Torah Ark, shining continuously as a symbol of the eternal presence of God.¹² The synagogue may also feature candelabra—*menorah*-type structures.¹³ The Jewish Sabbath likewise incorporates religious symbolism related to light. Some speculate that the blessing and entry of light from the Sabbath observance was carried into the Christian agape feast and may in fact

⁵ Andrew Hill, *Enter His Courts With Priase: Old Testament Worship for the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1993), 168.

⁶ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Volume Three* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 71.

⁷ Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Baker Encyclopaedia of the Bible: Volume Two* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2016.

⁸ Revelation 1:12-13, 20; 2:5

⁹ Revelation 4:5

¹⁰ Revelation 11:4

¹¹ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Volume Three* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 71.

¹² <http://www.jewishmuseum.net/Permanent/Synagogue.htm>

¹³ <http://www.kolshofar.org/PRAYERSSERVICES/objects.html>

provide the origins for the ancient Greek vesper hymn ‘Hail, gladdening Light’.¹⁴ Several Jewish festivals also include “light” elements. *Yahrzeit* candles are lit during Yom Kippur as memorials for the dead.¹⁵ The Festival of Tabernacles evolved to include two new symbolic rituals by New Testament times.¹⁶ The first involved water, the second light. The latter saw four massive candelabra set up in the Court of Women of the Temple; the light could be seen throughout Jerusalem and symbolized the “revelation and truth of the Jewish faith.”¹⁷ *Hanukkah*, also known as the Festival of Dedication or Lights, has as its central symbol a nine-branched *menorah* commemorating the miracle that a single day’s worth of oil for the lampstand lasted for eight days after the temple was reclaimed in 164 BCE.¹⁸

Appropriately, it was in the context of the celebration of the Festival of Tabernacles¹⁹ that Christ boldly claims: “I am the light of the world.”^{20 21} He reiterates the statement as he proceeds to heal a blind man in John 9:5.²² Some typological application has been made between the tabernacle *menorah* as a type of Christ and his mystical body: the central shaft (Christ) in union with the branches (His followers).²³ And so when Christ declares to His followers: “You are the light of the world,”²⁴ there is an understanding of their light source being Christ Himself. It is these two facets—Christ as *the* light and his followers likewise charged to illuminate the world—that would become the basic and recurring symbolic understanding for the

¹⁴ Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold S.J., eds. *The Study of Liturgy* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1978), 43.

¹⁵ http://www.shofar.org/shalom/8611_menorah.htm

¹⁶ James M. Freeman, *Manners and Customs of the Bible* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1972), 72, 425-6.

¹⁷ Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1987), 358-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 360-61.

¹⁹ John 7:2

²⁰ John 8:12

²¹ Ross Augustus Tunnell III, “The Use of Light in the Gospel of John” (M.Th. thesis, Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, 1973), p. 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 31.

²³ Benjamin Keach, *Preaching from the Types and Metaphors of the Bible*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1972), 985.

²⁴ Matthew 5:14-16

use of lights as we continue our examination in church history. Ultimately, in the new heaven and earth, there will be no need for external light or lamps since Christ will be the light.²⁵

The first record of lights being used in New Testament worship²⁶ was probably related to a practical need for light since the meetings took place at night.²⁷ While this is a major factor in the pre-electricity centuries, the symbolic aspects will rather be the focus in tracing some of the historical developments. The first two or three centuries of Christian worship were in some ways rather “homely and unadorned, but this was due to force of circumstances.”²⁸ There is little definitive evidence concerning the origins of “triumphalism,”²⁹ that is to say the ceremonial aspects which began to be associated with Christian worship from the fourth century onward. What has been ascertained is that there are many parallels between the customs and rules of the imperial Roman-Byzantine court and that of the papal mass.³⁰ Such information confirms the opinions of many that Christianity began to adopt and redeem cultural symbols when it went ‘public’ in the fourth century following the conversion of Constantine.³¹ Included in this development was the introduction of lights, of candles—in procession as a mark of honour to reflect the significant social rank now held by the bishops.³² However, throughout the course of history, this symbolism evolved:

The insignia and privileges which were once the symbol of secular power have been so transformed that they now suppress the individuality of the human person who

²⁵ Revelation 21:23

²⁶ Acts 20:8

²⁷ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume IV: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship Book 2* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 634.

²⁸ A. E. Welsford, *Life in the Early Church A.D. 33 to 313: Volume II* (London, UK: The National Society and S.P.C.K., 1951), 243.

²⁹ Louis Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 46.

³⁰ Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy*, trans. John Halliburton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 33.

³¹ Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold S.J., eds. *The Study of Liturgy* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1978), 35.

³² Louis Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 44.

temporarily holds the office and brings to the forefront of our attention the spiritual nature of the high office which he holds.³³

Nevertheless, this initial symbolism was also applied to forms of Eucharistic worship; using candles was understood to be “the proper way in which the King of Kings should be honoured.”³⁴ Within the Gallican Rites, candles as symbols of honour likewise began to accompany the Gospel Book, seen as “a symbol of Christ’s presence in His Word.”³⁵ Later in the fourth century saw the Eastern churches adopting many rich ornaments and vessels. For example, the church in Antioch, during the time of John Chrysostom, possessed many fine pieces including candelabra.³⁶ While lamps and candles hung or stood near the Communion Table, they were not actually placed *on* the altar in either the East or the West until the 12th century.³⁷ In current practice, most commonly two candles are placed on the Table, symbolizing the two natures of Christ—human and divine.³⁸ After the 13th century in the West, the *pulpitum* like the altar was decorated with a crucifix flanked by two burning tapers.³⁹

Returning to the rites of the early Church, we discover that light was also a feature in baptisms—the neophyte was given a burning taper to symbolize passing from “darkness to light” and as a reminder to “shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.”⁴⁰ This element continued even as infant baptism gained momentum.⁴¹ In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the clergy and sponsors of the infant would encircle the font three times while holding burning

³³ Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy*, trans. John Halliburton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 35-6.

³⁴ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967), 164.

³⁵ Marion J.Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 68.

³⁶ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1967), 267.

³⁷ Theodor Klauser, *A Short History of the Western Liturgy*, trans. John Halliburton (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), 101.

³⁸ Dr. Bruce Barton, Dr. Robert Webber and J. Michael Kendrick, eds. *Praise and Worship Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1997), 1176.

³⁹ Louis Bouyer, *Liturgy and Architecture* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 72 & 74.

⁴⁰ Michael Marshall, *Renewal in Worship* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 81.

⁴¹ Marion J.Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 84-5.

candles, to symbolize “unbroken and eternal union with Christ.”⁴² In the Reformation, one of the many ceremonial aspects rejected was the giving of candles at Baptism.⁴³ The Reformers’ protest against lights was aimed at those uses that had promoted superstition, especially the practice of burning lights before images.⁴⁴ Likewise, Anglicanism, under Elizabeth I, removed all but the two altar candles.⁴⁵ The beginnings of the Episcopal Church in the colonies reflect this, with little in the way of ornaments or candle usage. This was due to the economic pressures but also to the trend of “religious simplicity.”⁴⁶ However, in the 19th century, the ceremonial and processional use of candles and crosses was re-introduced into Anglican churches.⁴⁷

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that the symbolic use of candles belongs almost exclusively to liturgical denominations, especially the Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. Several of the services observed throughout the liturgical day and year incorporate the use of candles in symbolic ways. Some of the most prominent of these will be examined, both their historical roots and current usage.

The daily and weekly rhythm of worship life incorporates a “light” focus. The liturgical day, beginning in the evening with Vespers,⁴⁸ may begin with a blessing of the light (*Lucernarium*) that accompanies the lighting of candles.⁴⁹ Among other anthems (*Lucernaria*) for this occasion, the ancient candlelighting hymn, *Phos hilaron*,⁵⁰ from the Eastern Church

⁴² W.K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, eds. *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1959), 843.

⁴³ Marion J.Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 100.

⁴⁴ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume IV: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship Book 2* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 635.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Barbara Gent and Betty Sturges, *The Altar Guild Book* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1982), 20.

⁴⁷ Marion J.Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 158.

⁴⁸ Michael Marshall, *Renewal in Worship* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 84.

⁴⁹ Marion J.Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 44.

⁵⁰ The hymn appears in: Charles M. Guilbert, (Custodian of the Standard Book of Common Prayer). *The Book of Common Prayer according to the use of The Episcopal Church* (Kingsport, TN: Church Hymnal Corporation Kingsport Press, 1977), 112.

tradition, may also be sung.⁵¹ This practice probably emerged from the following custom of the early Church. By at least the third century, the lighting of the evening lamp(s) at home or in a gathering of the church was understood to be a symbol of the light of Christ, often accompanied by a prayer and/or a hymn.⁵² I would further muse that perhaps this early tradition gave rise to icon corners within homes, containing symbols to encourage “tangible prayer.”⁵³ Usually part of an Orthodox home, an icon corner would ideally include a perpetually burning vigil lamp or candle; if this is not possible, candles would be lit during prayer.⁵⁴ Information to trace the practice of lighting candles to accompany prayer was meager at best. Yet it remains a prominent feature of devotion in both home and church. The following symbolic ideas have been attached to the practice of lighting votive or prayer candles, especially when lit within the church. Leaving behind the burning candle represents that the prayer continues before God; it also reminds us that our souls are constantly in the presence of God and His saints.⁵⁵ Candles are usually lit on behalf of others—significant since it demonstrates that prayer is not self-centred, but God-centred.⁵⁶

In the liturgical year, the Cycle of Light encompasses Advent, Christmas and Epiphany; its name underscores the celebration of “the coming of the light of Christ to dispel the darkness of the world and the manifestation of the light of Christ to the whole world.”⁵⁷ Currently, one of the most commonly used candlelight symbols across the spectrum of denominations, including

⁵¹ Marion J. Hatchett, *Sanctifying Life, Time and Space* (New York, NY: The Seabury Press, 1976), 170.

⁵² Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume IV: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship, Book 2.* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 634.

⁵³ <http://www.byzantines.net/prayer/prayerInHome.htm>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ <http://www.stjamescolumbus.org/useofcandles.htm>

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Robert Webber, *Signs of Wonder* (Nashville, TN: Abbott Martyn, A Division of Star Song Publishing Group, 1992), 102.

evangelical, is found in this time frame—the Advent wreath. Its specific origins are unknown⁵⁸ although we do know that its roots lie in pre-Christian customs surrounding the Yule tradition of northern Europe⁵⁹ that were adapted and developed by Christianity by the 16th century.⁶⁰ There is symbolism attached to the structure of the wreath, as well as to the colours of the candles it contains. The colours may vary. One common usage includes three dark blue or purple candles—representing solemn preparation—and a rose-coloured candle—symbolic of joy. These four outer candles are lit progressively on each of the four Sundays of Advent. Gradually, the increased light marks the “growing anticipation of the birth of Jesus”⁶¹ symbolized at last by the lighting of the central white Christ candle on Christmas Eve or Day; white being the symbolic colour of festivity.⁶² The Advent wreath, as a symbol of Christ’s entry into the world, is not to be placed on the altar, where we remember His suffering and death.⁶³ In practice, however, this is not always followed—in fact, in every evangelical church in which I have seen the wreath used, the communion table is the “functional” location for it. Perhaps we need to think through this one a little more (?!).

Some Anglican churches use a significant array of candles to celebrate Epiphany. One possible arrangement includes some 15 candles: a large one represents Christ; 12 smaller ones in front of that represent the 12 Apostles; and two additional of the smaller candles flank the 12, symbolic of the apostolic succession of bishops and the diocesan bishop respectively.⁶⁴ From the latter candle—symbolically the last in a progression of passing along the light—candles in the

⁵⁸ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 131.

⁵⁹ http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/faq/worship_space/advent_wreath.html

⁶⁰ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 131.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/faq/worship_space/advent_wreath.html

⁶⁴ Dorothy C. Diggs, *A Working Manual for Altar Guilds* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1968), 36.

congregation are lit and carried from the church as people leave, “carrying the Light of Christ into the darkness of the world.”⁶⁵

Somewhat less well known to evangelicals is the annual festival of Candlemas on February 2 to commemorate the purification of Mary, 40 days after the birth of Christ, as well as the presentation of Christ in the Temple and his meeting (*hypapante*) of Simeon as recorded in Luke 2:22-38. Early references to this feast include: Jerusalem late in the fourth century, Eastern cities in the fifth or sixth century, and instituted as a feast by Rome late in the seventh century.⁶⁶ The name of the feast emerged from the custom of blessing candles and distributing them to the faithful who then processed through the church and out into the city.⁶⁷ There is discrepancy as to the dating of this (candle) practice: from as early as the mid-fifth century⁶⁸ to the eleventh century.⁶⁹ The symbolism of the candles during this festival, that marks the end of the Christmas cycle, highlights the *light* theme of the Christmas feasts: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to thy people Israel.”⁷⁰ The true Light has entered the world and gradually the world is being illuminated by Him.⁷¹ It has been speculated that the theme of purification and use of candles was perhaps a transformation by Christianity of heathen Roman practices.⁷² In

⁶⁵ Ibid., 36-37.

⁶⁶ “Candlemas,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed. and John G. Davies, , ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 254.

⁶⁷ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity A.D. 311-600* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 426.

⁶⁸ “Candlemas,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed.

⁶⁹ W.K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, eds. *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1959), 732.

⁷⁰ John G. Davies, ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 254.

⁷¹ W.K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, eds. *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1959), 732.

⁷² Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church Volume III: Nicene and Post-Nicene Christianity A.D. 311-600* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 426.

modern liturgies, this feast is known as The Presentation of the Lord and occurs in Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox churches;⁷³ in Greek churches it is known as the *Hypapante*.⁷⁴

Some of the most dramatic symbolic uses of candles developed surrounding Holy Week, as the Church recalls the foundational events of the death and resurrection of our Lord. *Tenebrae*—meaning “darkness” or “shadows,”⁷⁵—is the name applied to the service of Matins and Lauds for the last three days of Holy Week.⁷⁶ It features the gradual extinguishing of candles to represent the snuffing out of Christ’s life. Historically, there is evidence of the practice as early as the fourth⁷⁷ or fifth century;⁷⁸ however, the word *tenebrae* itself only appears after the 12th century to refer to this service.⁷⁹ The significant furnishing is the Tenebrae Hearse,⁸⁰ a triangular candlestick, whose use dates back to at least the seventh century. The number of candles used has varied throughout time and history, from as many as 72 to as few as seven.⁸¹ Presently, 15 candles is the norm. Various explanations have been offered for the symbolism of the tenebrae hearse and its candles. One Roman Catholic viewpoint understands the triangle to represent the Trinity, the highest candle to represent Christ, and the 14 remaining candles to represent the 11

⁷³ J.D. Douglas, Walter A. Elwell, and Peter Toon, *The Concise Dictionary of the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library of Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 76.

⁷⁴ “Candlemas,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th ed.

⁷⁵ <http://www.worshipandchurchmusic.com/tenebrae.html>

⁷⁶ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14506a.htm>

⁷⁷ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 356.

⁷⁸ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14506a.htm>

⁷⁹ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 349.

⁸⁰ As an interesting aside, the name, *hearse*, was derived from the French *herse*, meaning a harrow. Originally, the funeral hearse was a candelabra structure on top of the coffin; its many prickets that held candles resembled the teeth of a harrow, hence the name. The term subsequently evolved to be applied to any holder of the coffin. Likewise the tradition of a slow speed for a funeral procession finds its origins here—necessary to keep the candles burning! From: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07162c.htm> and Charles Panati, *Extraordinary Origins of Everyday Things* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1987), 37-38.

⁸¹ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14506a.htm>

apostles and the three Marias.⁸² In such an interpretation, the extinguishing would then represent the desertion of Christ by His followers and their waning belief in the face of His trial and sufferings.⁸³ As the *tenebrae* service progresses, only one candle is left burning; however, it is hidden and then returned to the top of the stand after a *strepitus* (loud noise) signals the congregation's departure. This symbolism points very vividly to—

the death of our Lord with the physical and spiritual darkness and disturbance which accompanied it. The one candle concealed yet still alight seems to typify the descent of His Soul into Hades, and its restoration to the top of the candlestick may be a foreshadowing of the Resurrection.⁸⁴

In speaking with a local Roman Catholic priest, he noted that the symbolism of this service might become confusing and even contradictory [lights all relit after darkness of the previous day] if observed on all three days; his recommendation was to limit it to one day.

In stark contrast to the darkness of *tenebrae*, light is used liturgically perhaps “at its most powerful as a symbol in the first part of the paschal liturgy, the Easter vigil”⁸⁵—in the words of St. Augustine he refers to this as ‘the mother of all vigils’.⁸⁶ It is the foundational service for Christian worship throughout the year as well as the oldest service of the Church, with its origins all the way back to that first celebration following the Resurrection of Christ.⁸⁷ Possibly developed from the Jewish tradition of lighting lamps on the evening of Sabbath, the element of light was added to the first and second century core components of the Eucharist and Baptism respectively. By the end of the fourth century, the inclusion of the instruction of the word

⁸² <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07162c.htm>

⁸³ Dr. Bruce Barton, Dr. Robert Webber and J. Michael Kendrick, eds. *Praise and Worship Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1997), 1176.

⁸⁴ W.K. Lowther Clarke and Charles Harris, eds. *Liturgy and Worship: A Companion to the Prayer Books of the Anglican Communion* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1959), 741.

⁸⁵ Michael Marshall, *Renewal in Worship* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 81.

⁸⁶ St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo*, 219; quoted in Cheslyn Jones, Geoffrey Wainwright, and Edward Yarnold S.J., eds. *The Study of Liturgy* (London, UK: S.P.C.K., 1978), 410.

⁸⁷ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 381.

completed the four-fold focus.⁸⁸ Of importance to this study is what became the opening section, the Service of Light, comprised of three sections: the lighting of the new fire, greeting the light and praise of the light.⁸⁹ From the new fire set ablaze outside the darkened church, a massive single candle—the Paschal Candle—was lit and carried high as it led the procession into the church; this light would serve as the source to light individual candles of the congregation.⁹⁰ In addition to the obvious “light of the risen Christ” symbolism⁹¹, the paschal candle also represents the culmination of the deliverance and redemption of God’s people—a type of “pillar of fire” recalling God’s presence as He delivered His people out of Egypt to the Promised Land;⁹² the resurrection of Christ has triumphed over darkness and sin.⁹³ The medieval church actually applied symbolic meaning to all aspects of the paschal candle—

Unlighted, it represented Christ’s death and burial; lighted, it represented the splendor and glory of Christ’s resurrection. The wick represented Christ’s humanity, and the halo of flame represented his divinity. Other candles lighted from the paschal candle symbolized Christ giving the Holy Spirit to the disciples.⁹⁴

The paschal candle itself is often engraved with the following symbols as it is blessed, prior to it being lit: a cross; an *alpha* and *omega* and the current year to emphasize Christ’s presence with us now and eternally; and five grains of incense inserted into the cross to symbolize the five wounds of Christ.⁹⁵ Further symbolism in the function of the Paschal candle will be examined

⁸⁸ John G. Davies, ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 309.

⁸⁹ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 382.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 381-82.

⁹¹ Kevin Flynn, ed. *Let Us Keep The Feast Celebrating Lent, Holy Week, and Easter* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 92.

⁹² Michael Marshall, *Renewal in Worship* (Toronto, ON: Anglican Book Centre, 1985), 82.

⁹³ John G. Davies, ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 309.

⁹⁴ http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/faq/worship_space/paschal_candle.html

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

following a brief look at a slightly different directional flow of light in the celebration of the Resurrection—of the Greek Orthodox Church.

Greek Orthodox congregations gather in darkness, late on the Saturday night of Holy Week to participate in the Resurrection Service. At midnight all lights are extinguished, except the eternal vigil light on the altar from which the priest lights the Paschal candle and, similar to the process already noted above, the light is spread to individual candles held by the worshipers.⁹⁶ The worshipers emerge from the church, candles still ablaze; symbolically this is understood as an emerging from the tomb of Christ. Ideally these candles are to remain lighted for the journey home so that the flame may be used to trace the sign of the cross on the outside doorpost, a modified symbolism of the first Old Testament Passover,⁹⁷ as well as to light the “lampada” in front of their icons.⁹⁸ The flow of this liturgy thus differs from that above as the light processes *out* from, rather than *in* to the church.

Returning to the paschal candle, the symbolism continues throughout the Easter season when it is to remain in a prominent place near the altar with continuous light [or to avoid fire hazard issues, it should be lit and extinguished such that it appears to the congregation to be continuously lit]. Different practices surround when it should be extinguished—some traditions extinguish the light following the Gospel reading on Ascension Day, representing Christ’s 40 days on earth following His resurrection;⁹⁹ it is also common to wait until the conclusion of the

⁹⁶ <http://www.greece.org/gopatalex/sa/XMLdata/OrthodoxyLessons.html>

⁹⁷ <http://paulinema.tripod.com/assumption/id54.html>

⁹⁸ <http://www.holy-trinity.org/general/customs.html>

⁹⁹ John G. Davies, ed. *The Westminster Dictionary of Worship* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1972), 309; and Dorothy C. Diggs, *A Working Manual for Altar Guilds* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1968), 57-8.

Easter season at Pentecost.¹⁰⁰ In the latter practice, the symbolism conveys more “the presence of the Risen Christ in our time.”¹⁰¹ Once extinguished, the paschal candle is usually placed near the baptismal font; it is lit for each baptism and serves as the source for the smaller candles presented to the baptized or sponsor. For a funeral, the paschal candle is also lit and placed at the head of the casket.¹⁰² In both of these observances there is a vital connection with Easter: Christians are “raised with Christ,” He is victorious over death.¹⁰³ As the year progresses, the wax melts down representing the passing of time, of the progression of the church year, until Easter comes again and with it the blessing of a new paschal candle.

The evangelical world is hugely contrasted to the rich symbolic use of candles within liturgical traditions. In all fairness, it must be noted that evangelicalism developed in a post-candle-source-of-illumination era and so did not have the same need to add meaning to those early lights. Perhaps then the appropriate questions that emerge from this topic for today are: “How are we using today’s lights?” “In our use, what are we giving honour—that is, what are we putting the spotlight on?” “What message is communicated by what we illuminate?” “How can we emphasize the Biblical theme of light in our practice?” But that would be a study for another day.

Within my upbringing in evangelicalism, I do not recall much in the way of use of candles other than the annual carols-by-candlelight service on Christmas Eve. My recollections of such services are not of particularly meaningful symbolism, but rather nostalgic emotions amidst the

¹⁰⁰ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 384; and Barbara Gent, and Betty Sturges, *The Altar Guild Book* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1982), 21.

¹⁰¹ http://www.elca.org/dcm/worship/faq/worship_space/paschal_candle.html

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume V: The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 384.

flickering flames. However, as noted earlier in the discussion, the advent wreath is finding its way into more and more evangelical circles as part of the preparation for Christmas. Within my current church community, this is in fact the only use of candles I have observed. Increasing the (symbolic) use of candles at my church would most readily be understood in the context of a drama [of which we have very few]; there would be resistance to their appearance within especially the sacramental worship forms. In truth, my local church is not the ministry context in which I am particularly concerned about making suggestions for application of this study. Rather it is in my interactions with teens and young adults that I most see the potential for this medium of candlelight as meaningful. In youth/young adult worship events, I have at times included many candles. However, the symbolism was sometimes subconscious if present at all, often merely for the aesthetic effect and mystical ambience. Something that has emerged from this study is that I see an historical precedent in the Christian Church in the use of candles for transforming the meaning of cultural symbols. Indeed, one of the consistent traditions with the use of candles is that there really has been no consistent tradition!¹⁰⁴ And so, I suggest, that in today's era where a sense of spirituality and the supernatural already accompanies the lighting of candles, we face an ideal opportunity to incorporate some of the Christian symbolic meanings discovered throughout this study. The liturgical denominations, as demonstrated, provide ample resources to utilize, as is or with creative modifications. One idea is to develop a light-theme progression of services to track with the liturgical year. For example: a retreat from Good Friday to Easter Sunday, drawing on some of the uses of light as described above could be very meaningful. Likewise, in personal and/or group prayer times, the lighting of candles could assist

¹⁰⁴ Robert Webber, ed. *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume IV: Music and the Arts in Christian Worship, Book 2.* (Nashville, TN: Starsong Publishing Group, 1994), 635.

the sense of communion with God; accompanying prayers with a multi-sensory action. I would even suggest the setting up of a personal prayer corner [as a spin-off from the Orthodox icon corner]. Within a family home context, some of these ideas might also be applied: use of candles in a modified observance of the Sabbath,¹⁰⁵ use of the Advent wreath, and developing a family prayer corner. There truly are many possibilities with a little creativity. However, the activities must be accompanied by an understanding and communication of the deeper symbolism: the eternal presence of God; Christ the light of world who overcomes the darkness; and we, the followers of Christ, also lights in the world.

¹⁰⁵ A.H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples Across Cultures* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1997), 130-34.

Appendix: Glossary of Candle Types¹⁰⁶

The following list of candles shows the variety of candles that may be used within the Church and explains the terms applied to each. [Please note this list was taken from an Altar Guild Book for the Anglican Church.]

Single candlesticks and processional torches

Self-explanatory. These may be used in any multiple according to the direction of the priest and the tradition of the congregation.

Eucharistic candles

Refers to the two or more candles placed on the altar. It would perhaps be more accurate to term these “altar candles” since other candles alongside the altar may also serve as lights for the Eucharist. “Eucharistic candles” are lights for the Eucharist. In some churches, these are set on and cleared from the Table along with the Communion elements.

Office Lights

Originally, these were candles placed behind or beside the altar to be lit for Daily Morning or Evening Prayer (the “Office”). Since these do not have to be lighted for the Office and may be lighted for any service at all, the placement, rather than the use, makes them “office lights” today. Single candles alone or in groups, candelabra or pavement lights may serve the purpose.

Pavement Lights

Refers to the single, tall candles that usually stand on the floor of the sanctuary (pavement) although they may stand anywhere in the chancel. These lights probably originated from the two candles carried in processions of the early Church which were then used for reading lights.

¹⁰⁶ Barbara Gent, and Betty Sturges, *The Altar Guild Book* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1982), 21-2.

Bier lights

Tall candlesticks which stand on the nave floor at the chancel steps beside a coffin. There may be two, one on each side, or as many as six, three on each side.¹⁰⁷

Candelabra

Branched candlesticks that hold various numbers of candles, most commonly three, five or seven. Candelabra may be designed either to stand on the floor or to be placed on a table.

Paschal Candle

The tall (30+ inches), often decorated, candle lighted with the new fire at Easter Vigil and during the entire Easter season. It may stand at the baptismal font the rest of the year. Significant uses are during baptisms and funerals.

Advent wreath

Four outer candles are lit progressively on each of the four Sundays of Advent. The Christ candle is lit at the Christmas Eve or Day service. It symbolizes the coming of the light of Christ into the world.

Sanctuary lights (also called **vigil lights**)

Candles of various shapes and sizes, often encased in glass chimneys for long term burning. Originally, sanctuary lights were the several lamps hung across the sanctuary to light the altar. Eventually they came to signify God's presence in the church. This significance led to the practice of burning one night and day in front of the aumbry (a wall safe, usually in the sanctuary) or the tabernacle (locked box on the altar) in which the Sacrament is reserved.

¹⁰⁷ Dorothy C. Diggs, *A Working Manual for Altar Guilds* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1968), 108.

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