

# The Church Liturgical Calendar and Spiritual Formation

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This paper will address the historic Church liturgical calendar, sometimes called the “Church Year” as a means of spiritual formation. I will consider the biblical roots of the Calendar, some historical objections to its use in the evangelical/protestant context and some observations for the current appropriation of it with the goal of spiritual formation within Christian communities.

## Three Observations about the Character of our Faith

In Kenneth Boa’s text book on Spiritual Formation, *Conformed to His Image*, he observes that while “religion is out spirituality is in.”<sup>1</sup> What sort of spirituality is consistent with biblical faith and life? I observe three facets of our faith that issue forth which should be present in our means of spiritual formation. Each of these show the need of a Christian approach to time and have implications for a Christian Calendrical outlook. The character of our faith is 1) historical, 2) creational and 3) eschatological. I will provide a short summary of these and then elaborate an argument for the use of a Christian Liturgical Calendar.

1) The historical dimension of our faith is very well rehearsed. Jesus was incarnate in history, in time and space. His people inhabit history with the promise that the Church shall mature over time (Eph. 4). Christianity, unlike many religions, can have a philosophy of history. The Christian faith is *dated*. The truth claims of our faith require that certain events happened in history. Luke dates the birth of Jesus. He writes, “And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus ...while Quirinius was governing Syria” (Luke 2:1-2) and “in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea . . . the word of God came to John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness” (Luke 3:1-2). “It was the day of Preparation of Passover Week . . . ’Here is your king,’ Pilate said to the Jews” (John 19:14). Time is of the essence, since “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son” (Gal. 4:4). We confess in the most ancient creed: “I believe in Jesus Christ . . . who suffered under Pontius Pilate.”

2) The creational aspect of our faith has always been “credo-ed,” “I believe in God the Father maker of heaven and earth... and in the resurrection of the body.” Unfortunately, our spirituality often has sounded rather gnostic as though we were in our fondest desires trying to escape with Socrates from the prison house of the body. Yet in our day there is a resurgence of a creation-affirming vision both for now and a future new creation cosmos.<sup>2</sup> We must see creation as good and the goal of consummation as the restoration of a new heavens and earth which is no less

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<sup>1</sup> Zondervan (2001), 18.

<sup>2</sup> See NT Wright’s, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (Harper 2008).

physical and material. Thus spirituality should not be reductionistic, seeing man at base as a non-physical, non-material being. Rather, spirituality consistent with the creational aspect of our faith sees “spiritual” is an integrated whole of non-material and material. It is personal and relational, not metaphysically non-material. Creation is not static but temporal and the cosmos cannot be without time. Our world specifically is punctuated in time with seasonal variation.

3) By “eschatological” I mean that our faith has a future hope of consummation even while we participate in that future in various ways now. There is an “already/not yet” facet to many of the loci of New Testament theology. Tom Schreiner has observed:

Looking at inaugurated but not yet consummated eschatology in Paul is akin to looking into a kaleidoscope. As we shake the kaleidoscope, we get a different picture, but the same thought is expressed from a different point of view. To shift the analogy, if we consider Paul’s theology from the perspective of an archaeological dig, wherever we dig a shaft, we find the already–not yet, even though the precise terms in which this theology is expressed may differ. It seems, then, that inaugurated but not yet consummated eschatology belongs to the fundamental structure of Paul’s thought.<sup>3</sup>

The Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemman astutely observed that even a weekly day of celebration anchors Christianity in time.<sup>4</sup> A gnostic religion would not need a particular day or recurring events related to a creational calendar. This leads me to observe that the function of a religious calendar is very consistent with the historical, creational, and eschatological aspects of the faith.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Church Calendar**

This general perspective on the historicity of our faith comes into sharper focus when we realize that often the key events of the life of Christ are related to seasons of the Jewish calendar. For in the Hebraic foundations of Scripture, time is divided not only into evening and morning, but also into seasons in the Bible. In the eras before Christ came, God's people Israel were given calendar celebrations which foreshadowed Christ, such as Passover (Unleavened Bread), Pentecost (Feast of Weeks), the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles. In fact, Genesis 1:14-15 shows that some seasonal calendar was even hardwired into creation. “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years.” The Hebrew word *mo‘ed* [seasons] is used over 200 times in Scripture to mean “religious festival.” After the Exodus, the Lord gave his people a festival calendar synchronized with the (created) seasons of the year (Lev. 23).

The New Testament teaches us that the meaning and purpose of these festivals is properly understood, remembered, and to whatever extent appropriate - even celebrated in Christ (Col.

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<sup>3</sup> *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker 2008), 30.

<sup>4</sup> *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (St Vladimirs Seminary Press, 2nd ed 1997), 51

2:17, Acts 2:1, 1 Cor. 5:7, 16:17). Paul, in Acts 20:16, “had decided to sail past Ephesus so that he would not have to spend time in Asia; for he was hurrying to be in Jerusalem, if possible, on the day of Pentecost.” He marked time with Pentecost in 1 Cor. 16:8: “But I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost.” Acts 20:6 refers to the days of Unleavened Bread saying, “We sailed from Philippi after the days of Unleavened Bread, and came to them at Troas within five days...” David J. Williams in the New International Bible Commentary notes, “He still observed the old ritual, but from 1 Corinthians 5:7f. we can see something of the new content he gave it—the Jewish Passover was becoming the Christian Easter” (in loc in NIBC).

It would be odd to think that Christ “tabernacled” among us in His birth (John 1:14), that His death fulfilled Passover and Atonement (1Cor. 5:7), and that He sent the Spirit to empower the Church at the festival of Pentecost (Acts 2), but that in the subsequent development of the Church, His disciples should abandon all considerations of a recurring seasonal celebration. While we are warned not to misuse the Jewish festivals (Gal. 4:9, Col. 2:18), the historic Church and ancient Church Fathers deemed it proper to use a renewed old creation calendar, a Christian Church calendar, drawn around the major events of Christ's life and work.

### **The Weekly Observance of the Lord's Day**

In Genesis, we first find the idea of sabbath. “And on the seventh day God ended His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made” (Gen. 2:2-3). Right away it appears that this is God's example for our benefit.

It is surprising to think through the creation pattern. Adam's first day was a day of rest. He was created on the sixth day, thus his first full day of life was not a day of labor, but a day of sabbath. Unlike the day of sin when they “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God” (Gen. 3:8), after the first man and woman were created, they awoke to a day in their Maker's presence. Originally it was not a six-then-one day pattern for Adam, it was a one-then- six pattern. This should remind us of the structure of salvation. It is redemption then service. The order is always grace — then faithful obedience — not works, then grace. The sabbath gift was certainly not a meritorious reward of rest for Adam's works.

Later in the Old Testament, the sabbath commandment was expressed in the fourth commandment. It is striking that among many, “Thou shalt nots”— the form of this command is, “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy”(Ex. 20:8). The Jewish sabbath observance included their synagogue convocations (Lev 23:3). That is, they were to gather in congregations. This seems to be the origin of the Jewish synagogue. But it is important to note that there is an explicit connection to table celebration. The next verse says, “These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times” (Lev. 23:4). It goes on to reference, the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and Pentecost, which begin with a day of celebration. The sabbath was for instruction and rest in the presence of God and His people.

The very heart of the sabbath is “remembering.” The word here (zakar in Hebrew) means “call to mind” or “recall.” What do we recall? This is a little clearer in the second giving of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy. The sabbath was a memorial occasion for the emancipation proclamation of Israel. They were to remember their release from bondage by the power of God. “And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day” (Deut. 5:15). This release from bondage even applied to the land, which also was to be given sabbaths (Lev. 25:4). It applied to debtors in the cycle of restitution, the Jubilee, which is called a sabbath (Lev. 25:8-10).

The fulness of this rest and release from bondage is the work of Jesus (Col. 2:16-17). Jesus is our sabbath rest. “For we who have believed do enter that rest...”(Heb. 4:3). We can see this in the anticipation of His coming. The very paradigm of time leading to the “fulness of time” (Gal. 4:4, coming of Messiah ) is a sabbatical pattern (“seventy sevens,” Dan. 9:24).

The sabbath, resurrection, and communion are woven together into the new wine skins of the Church. Given that the first recipients of the gospel saw the weekly Sabbath pattern of worship as divine law and yet the Church emerged from the first century worshipping on the first day of the week — how might this be reasonably explained? The Lord's Day is the first day of the week, the numerical “eighth day” when one counts from the first creation day. Viewed with the typological aspects in mind, one can see that this “eighth day” of creation was the first day of the new creation. It was the day of resurrection, of new life.

But is there more specific warrant for this change of worship-day? It does not stand out in red letters, or does it? Jesus taught us that He had authority over the sabbath, the day of remembrance, “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:8). When He instituted His new passover supper, He said, “This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me” (Luke 22:19).

Jesus required His disciples to remember His work of redemption, the antitype of the Exodus. However, His work of redemption was not complete until the first day of the week. Only after His redemptive work was complete, He met with His disciples. And His disciples continued to do this: “on the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread . . .” (Act 20:7). When the new covenant people meet on the eighth day sabbath, they meet with Him in the breaking of the bread.

One should not hesitate in admitting that the explicit Biblical material is meager regarding the question of worship, including the Table, on the first day of the week. But, what the Scriptures suggest in seed, the universal church demonstrates in full bloom. The voice of these verses is joined by the deep chorus of the theological importance of the Resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week and with the specific requirement of the Lord's Supper: “Do this in remembrance of Me.” His disciples should thus remember in Eucharistic participation His redemptive acts on the day that they were demonstrably complete: the Lord's Day. Thus, the

same warrant to worship on the Lord's Day compels us to break bread on the Lord's Day. The same kind of warrant exists for a renewed old creation calendar as in the Liturgical Church Calendar.

### **Historical Considerations for the Church Calendar**

For those who have grown up in evangelical circles, there has been a strong reaction to being Catholic with a big “C.” Many have thrown out the baby calendar with the bath water. The mere reference to historic seasons such as Epiphany or Lent may conjure images of a corrupt Church withholding the cup of gospel wine from the people. The Protestant heritage is mixed on the question of the Church Calendar. Lutherans and Anglicans never abandoned the Christian timing of time in the calendar and neither did many in the Reformed Church, though it was less robust.

I recently received a book on the history of the German Reformed Church in our area (Lancaster, Penn.) and noted that in keeping with the Continental Reformed churches, they celebrated the “five evangelical feast days.” These were Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost. The Reformed churches of Berne, Strasbourg, and Zurich also celebrated these. The Calvinistic, “Second Helvetic Confession” chapter 24, says, “Moreover, if in Christian liberty the churches religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, and of his ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, we approve of it highly.”

However, in the Reformation, well-meaning Reformers in the later Puritan movement sought to purge the Church of excessive ceremony. In the English Reformation, especially, this resulted in the Presbyterian and Congregational movements which condemned all celebrations other than the Lord's Day (called the Christian Sabbath). George Gillespie's, *A Dispute Against the English-Popish Ceremonies, Obtruded Upon the Church of Scotland* (1637) urges:

That which has been said against all the controverted ceremonies in general, I will now instance of festival days in particular and prove, both out of the law and gospel, that they take away our liberty which God has given us, and which no human power can take from us. Out of the law we frame this argument: If the law of God permits us to work all the six days of the week, the law of man cannot inhibit us.<sup>5</sup>

Standing in the same tradition, for example, the great Princeton Presbyterian, Samuel Miller (1769-1850) argued, “We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days, but that they positively discountenance it.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to argue that Galatians 4:8 and Colossians 2 refute the practice of recognizing any holy days, except the Lord's Day.

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<sup>5</sup> (Naphtali Press, reprint, 1992), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Available online: [http://www.fpcr.org/blue\\_banner\\_articles/miller\\_on\\_holy\\_days.htm](http://www.fpcr.org/blue_banner_articles/miller_on_holy_days.htm)

## **Objections to Christian Calendar Observances**

How might we address objections from the Bible to the use of Church Calendar? Some specific passages have been used. Galatians 4:10 - "You observe days and months and seasons and years." And Colossians 2:16-17 - "So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

These texts are not addressing the right use of such events as Old Covenant Pentecost. Clearly God gave these festivals in the anticipation of Christ. The apostles themselves were to wait for the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1). Paul used Pentecost in his missionary witness as referenced in Acts 20:16. Paul's objection to those in Galatia and Colossae have to do with the superstitious legalism using "days and months and seasons and years" in contradiction to their justification by faith in Jesus. In both contexts it is not mere Old Testament calendar practices being discussed, but practices distorted by a Judaizing (and perhaps even a pagan mystery religion) misuse of these practices. In Galatians 4:9, he refers to the "weak and beggarly elements, to which you desire again to be in bondage." Thus redeemed pagans are being exhorted not to return to their false religious practices which have now been shrouded with a Judaistic veil. In Colossians 2:18, he goes on to speak of "taking delight in false humility and worship of angels" This is clearly not mere Jewish celebration. This seems to refer to the syncretism of their pagan background which amassed superstitious uses of astrology and everything else but the salvation in Christ alone. They were tempted to accept Judaistic legalism to be approved, rather than being accepted in Christ. Contextually consider, these texts are far from a repudiation of any seasonal considerations of Church Calendar in Christ, celebrating His completed work.

The text of Colossians 2:16 teaches what I have already indicated is necessary in a Christian Calendar: that Christ fulfills any legitimate anticipations in festivals and seasons of the Old Testament. It is also interesting that this is not a condemnation of any celebration, per se. He writes, "let no one judge you." Romans 14:5 would seem to be a parallel, "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." Calendar considerations are a matter (like others in Rom. 14) of culture, maturity, and bearing with one another through differences.

The Puritan reading of these texts, requires a prohibition of any feast days other than the Lord's Day, the Christian Sabbath. But if these texts and principles refute days like Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost, then they also, on the same principle, refute the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath. In fact, Colossians 2:16 says nothing about Christmas or Lent, but expressly mentions the Sabbath.

The basis for annual events in Christ in the Church Calendar is drawn from the very same principles as the Sunday-Sabbath: tradition of the early church, theological principle, and a very thin example (Acts 20:7, "meeting on the first day of the week in order to break bread"). Let me be clear, I believe that the first day of the week is the Lord's Day and it is the new Sabbath to be celebrated in light of the Resurrection. But just as we hold convocation to commemorate rest

from our labors in a risen Christ weekly, all the Old Covenant calendar may be renovated in Him. This would lead us to a very similar pattern as we find in the historic Church cycle of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost.

The basic Puritan argument is that the people of God may not legitimately add to a previously revealed calendar. Since there is no revealed Christian Calendar, thus our only celebration is the Lord's Day. The basis of this is a strict adherence to follow in worship only what is expressly prescribed in Scripture (the so-called Regulative Principle of Worship). This argument, augmented by past abuses of the Church Calendar (such as excessive feast days where saints are venerated), seems to be the primary basis for denying the use a Church Calendar and the associated celebrations.

However, the main premise is faulty because it overlooks much biblical information. Is it true that the people of God may not legitimately add to a previously revealed calendar?

The Jews added many calendar events and we have evidence that Jesus Himself participated in at least two such added festivals. He attended the Feast of Dedication (Hebrew word, "Hanukah"), instituted in 164 B.C. by Judeas Maccabeaus who cleansed the temple (John 10:22). And He attended the Feast of Purim instituted in Esther's day (Est. 9:22) (see John 5). We have no warrant to say that Jesus disapproved of these additions to the Scriptural Calendar, though He often condemns other man-made traditions which contradict Torah (Matt. 15:3, Mark 7:9). The Jews also added fasts; for example on the 17th of Tammuz, repenting for the day the Israelites made the golden calf. They added a fast for the day Jerusalem was sieged by Nebuchadnezzar and another when the Second Temple was destroyed by Titus. There were local observances, such as the Feast of Acra, the Feast of Nicanor, the Feast of Woodcarrying, along with a "New Year for trees" ("Feasts" in the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia). In other words, the Jews never thought that their Mosaic festivals were the only legitimate celebrations or commemorations. Apparently Jesus agreed with them on this point.

The argument here is not that we do exactly what pre-Christ, Old Covenant Jews did. Pentecost cannot be the same after the pouring of the Spirit. Passover cannot be the same since Christ is our Passover (1 Cor. 5:7). The Day of Atonement certainly cannot be the same. The Church historically has seen the value of renovating these events in light of Christ.

### **The Necessity of a Someone's Calendar**

Many who believe they are more spiritual and biblical than those in the historic Church object to the Calendar, while being swept away into a secular view of time. Remember a culture's calendar has political and world-shaping significance. Think of the French Revolution - what did they do (beyond thrusting upon us the devilish Metric System) - they tried to undo the seven-day, Christian Calendar with a ten-day week. The Bolshevik Revolution forming the USSR required atheistic, political holidays. In China there is the birthday (July 1) of the Chinese Communist Party and National Day (October 1). In the light of this, I cannot see how Christians can object to Christmas, Ascension or Pentecost.

A biblical use of the Church Calendar including the highlights of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost does not necessarily introduce new ceremonies or rituals to bind up men's consciences any more than a sabbath necessarily does. Rather, it organizes and directs our Scripture readings, prayers, hymns, and sermons according to the life of Christ. Such an organization must take place in any case. The historic Calendar gives us celebrations of redemptive significance. It organizes our worship around biblical themes and events rather than the whims of church staff. By this we enjoy a redemptive calendar which marks time under the Lordship of Christ. Jesus is Lord of Time!

Do we have a Christian view of time or is our calendar no better than communist statism - with independence day, labor day, memorial day, veterans day, and presidents day. Do we know "IRS day" (April 15) better than Ascension, Easter, or Pentecost? Do dates set by our tax-men loom larger than Jesus ascending to the right hand of God the Father? Probably so. This is an indication that we are lacking an important part of Christian spiritual formation.

### **Appropriating the Church Liturgical Calendar**

As noted the character of our faith has a temporal-creational foundation (e.g., 1) historical, 2) creational and 3) eschatological). Therefore, our spiritual maturity should involve a sanctification of time, not only in the weekly Lord's Day meeting "in order to break bread" (Acts 20:7), but also using an annual calendar which rehearses the fulfillment of the old covenant in the life of Christ.

In our own congregation, All Saints, we want to use, but not abuse the Church Calendar and associated practices. We enjoy its proper use when the Calendar organizes our liturgy, readings, public services and gives occasions for community-wide celebrations. By this we enjoy a Church Year which marks time under the Lordship of Christ precisely because Jesus is Lord of Time. Annual events which memorialize both the anticipation of the old covenant and fulfillment in light of the life of Christ. For example, we may consider Lent.

Many Christians in many different traditions today still observe, a time of focused devotion upon the Lord Jesus Christ during a season of repentance, struggle, and self-denial. This season is called "Lent" from the word meaning the lengthening of days as spring comes. Individually and corporately we have enjoyed benefits from observing this season which begins with Ash Wednesday. These days mark the forty days of Jesus in the wilderness in which Jesus faithfully relived the forty years of Israel in the wilderness. The Church begins this season forty days before Easter (not counting Sundays, which are never fast days but always the feast day of Resurrection). The faithful use of this time helps us strip away habits that may hinder us (even if not sinful, per se). It may help us exercise the muscles of abstaining from worldly lusts which wage war against the soul by training ourselves to be sensitive the Holy Spirit, to limit our appetites, to listen in quietness, to forsake anxieties, to yield ourselves more fully to live by faith. As the congregation enters into this season, we are aware of our community walking through these days together, just as when we hold a feast on Easter or Pentecost. This use moves us toward a communal participation rather than mere individual experience.

Therefore, for the purposes of spiritual growth, congregationally, the use of the Calendar provides a rich biblical framework to organize the public services of worship. This has a very useful function in terms of biblical literacy. It guards against a kind of hobby-horse approach to the themes of Christian worship. If the Calendar is utilized along with a coordinated lectionary (such as the Lutheran, Episcopal or Revised Common Lectionary), then a great deal of biblical literature is employed in the liturgy.

In conclusion, the character of our faith is 1) historical, 2) creational and 3) eschatological. Using the Calendar within a Christian community provides a solid basis for 1) historical commemoration within the liturgical organization of biblical material, as well as a connection to the historic Church. 2) Using the Calendar provides for a recognition of creational patterns of seasons integrated with liturgy and a sense that the faith we confess includes days and seasons and time. It is embodied in the life of the Church. It is incarnational. 3) The Calendar provides in the cycle of Advent to Christmas or Lent to Easter a means of practicing an “eschatological skill” by dramatic process of anticipation in terms. Therefore the use of the Calendar adds a needed incarnational dimension to spiritual formation and it does so within the experience of a shared community.