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Formed By Time: Living the Liturgical Year

S. Wesley Horn

We all measure time. While some might measure from summer to summer like teachers, others might follow time like businesses by dividing a year into quarters. Athletes and sports fanatics might choose to measure time based on sporting seasons or schedules, while farmers are bound by the seasons of nature. Some might measure time paycheck to paycheck while others mark their calendars based upon their television schedule. No matter how a person does it, they mark time. Even nature marks time from night to day and through the changing of the seasons. All of creation marks time.

Even though time has become a measureable object, we are also the object of time. Time forms us. Physically, we can see the effects of time on our skin as it wrinkles and in our hair as it grays. Time also shapes us mentally and emotionally, and our spirituality does not escape time's effect either. It has been said that we can know what is important to us by how we spend our time.

Why is Time Important?

Time is not static. Nor is it valueless. We have all heard the saying, "Time is money." Really? Time equals money? One is so physical while the other is temporal—and yet we easily understand what the saying means. We say, "I don't have enough time," or "I have too much time on my hands." We tell our children, "Stop wasting time," and those in our Bible class, "Be on time." Time is important. Time means many things to us.

Time shows us our priorities. In our busy lives, we may think that two things are equally important. We can claim that our family is a higher priority than work. But when we find ourselves double-booked for a meeting at work and a family outing, time forces us to choose between the two. When we do this, time displays our priorities for all to see. Since we cannot be in two places at once, time forces us to make choices. In this way, time shows us our priorities.

Time determines our focus. Tim McGraw's song, "Live Like You Were Dying," suggests that we should live every moment like it is our last. And indeed, we should not take time for granted. James writes that we do "not even know what tomorrow will bring" (Jas 4.14). Parents understand that they should spend as much time as possible with their quickly growing children at home. Time tells us that we should not wait to tell someone we love him or her. We should not wait to train up our children in the Lord. And that if we want a lower fare on a plane ticket, we should not wait until the last minute to make a reservation! Because we have a limited number of hours in the day, we can't accomplish everything. In this way, time helps us determine the things that are most important so that we can focus on them.

Time gives us limitations. As we get older, we realize that we cannot keep doing all the things we once did. We cannot run as far, jump as high or see as clearly as we once could. Time points out to us our limitations. Just as television producers are limited to 30 minutes or an hour to tell a story, we too are limited in how long we have as we live out the story of our lives. It is realizing these limitations that help create our priorities, guide our focus and shape who we are and who we are going to become. Time forms us.

The same can be said for the church. Through the years, one way that the Christian church has tried to allow time to be spiritually forming is by following the liturgical Christian year. The Christian year helps set priorities for the church. It also keeps the important things in focus within the life of the congregation.

However, not all Christian churches have been quick to follow the Christian year. Many have been hesitant, believing it is simply a “Catholic tradition” or something only high churches do. The truth of the matter is that for the past few decades, low churches, or free churches, have begun to notice the Christian calendar and implement parts of it into the worship life of their churches.¹

The church where I serve as a minister, the Orient Street Church of Christ in Stamford, Texas, is one of these churches. The past three years we’ve acknowledged Advent as we prepared for Christmas, yet that was the extent of our experience with the Christian calendar or liturgy. Starting this past November, at my request, we decided that as a congregation we would follow the whole Christian year and attempt to measure the benefits for our church. I have personally been following the liturgical Christian year through the use of prayer books and lectionary readings for almost seven years. When I started work on my Doctor of Ministry, I knew that I wanted my final project to deal with the incorporation of the Christian year within the worship life of Churches of Christ. My congregation was gracious enough to be a test case. Thus far, the results have been very positive. Though there was a small bit of resistance when we began, as the year went on participation in and expectation for the next season grew. Our Good Friday service ended up being one of the most well-attended services of the year. One of the blessings of the Christian year comes through years of repetition. We are still trying to decide as a congregation if we will continue following the calendar in the future. But for now, our journey into the liturgical year has opened us up to new ways of being formed into the image of Jesus through worship.

What is the Liturgical Christian Year?

The liturgical Christian year goes by many names or descriptions, but the purpose is the same for all. The Christian year “is essentially the cycle of days and seasons that mark occasions of special devotion in the Christian faith.”² In the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” for the Second Vatican Council, the cycle of the liturgical year is said to unfold “the whole mystery of Christ, from the incarnation and birth until the ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the coming of the Lord.”³ Mark Galli notes that the living out of the liturgical Christian year “allows people to enter into an enduring story that makes sense of life, and allows them to enter into communion with God in a way that touches body, mind, and soul.”⁴

Liturgy is more than just intellectual worship; it is designed to engage the whole person. Joan Chittister describes the liturgical year as “an adventure in bringing the Christian life to fullness, the heart to alert, the soul to focus.”⁵ Through the use of special and ordinary days, colors and religious symbols, the liturgical Christian year draws the whole person into the life and mission of Jesus. When practiced in its fullness, the Christian year engages the mind through the ministry of the Word; the senses through the use of specific colors, sounds, and smells of the seasons; and the heart through the retelling of the narrative of God’s work in the world. By

1. For a brief description and history of low and high churches, see Dennis Bratcher, “‘Low Church’ and ‘High Church’” at *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians* at <http://www.crivoice.org/lowchurch.html> (accessed June 24, 2013).

2. Vicki K. Black, *Welcome to the Church Year: An Introduction to the Seasons of the Episcopal Church* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse Publishing, 2004), 2. Other descriptions for the liturgical Christian year include the *Christian calendar*, the *liturgical year*, the *church’s feasts and fasts* or the *seasons of the church*.

3. *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy Solemnly Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963*, The Second Vatican Council, Chapter 5, Section 102, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html (accessed June 10, 2013).

4. Mark Galli, *Beyond Smells & Bells: The Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2008), 11.

5. Joan Chittister, *The Liturgical Year: The Spiraling Adventure of the Spiritual Life* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2009), 4.

living out the life of Jesus through the liturgical year, the church can “remember the presence of God in the past, celebrate it in the present, and anticipate the presence of God in the days to come.”⁶

The liturgical year is divided into two halves. Seasons of Holy Days make up the first half of the Christian calendar. The liturgical year is launched with Advent, which begins four Sundays before Christmas and continues until Christmas Eve. Robert Webber calls Advent “a time when God breaks in on us.”⁷ The word Advent comes from the Latin word *adventus*, which means “arrival” or “coming.” Advent is the time when the church celebrates the coming Jesus into the world, and remembers that Jesus is coming again. Advent guides the church into the season of Christmas, which begins on December 25, a celebration of God’s gift of his son, and continues until the Feast of Epiphany on January 6. The days following Christmas, or the twelve days of Christmas, lead into the season of Epiphany.

Epiphany, from the Greek word meaning “appearance” or “manifestation,” lasts until Ash Wednesday. Epiphany, often associated with the arrival of the Magi, celebrates the incarnation and God’s announcement of his invasion of creation. It is about God’s revelation of the Word made flesh. For the church, Epiphany is “a time to Manifest Christ.”⁸

Epiphany ends on Ash Wednesday, which is the beginning of the season of Lent. Ash Wednesday has been called a “thoroughly unpleasant reality.”⁹ This “unpleasant reality” is, as God reminded Adam, “that you are dust; and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3.19). Ash Wednesday, by reminding the church of its mortality, prepares the congregation for the 40-day period of Lent. Many think of Lent as a time of fasting. However, it is more than that. It is “a season of dying, of giving up, of clearing out, of emptying.”¹⁰ This wilderness journey opens the eyes and heart of the congregation to see more clearly those things that need to be confessed and repented of. Lent ushers the church into Holy Week, the week leading up to Easter. Consisting of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the special days of Holy Week are designed to remind the church of the suffering and death of Christ. Lent and Holy Week reach their conclusion on Easter Sunday.

Easter is considered the most important Christian feast of the liturgical year. It is a time when the church remembers and celebrates the resurrection of Jesus Christ, a narrative that promises a new body for those who believe. Easter extends for fifteen days culminating on Pentecost Sunday.

The second half of the Christian year is known as Ordinary Time, which actually takes up more than half of the liturgical year. It takes place from Pentecost until Christ the King Sunday, which is the Sunday before the beginning of Advent.¹¹ During Ordinary Time there are no Holy Days for the church to celebrate.¹² However, as Chittister notes, “there is nothing ordinary—if by ordinary we mean inferior or less important—about a period such as this at all.”¹³ Ordinary Time should not be thought of as simply returning to life as usual. Instead, Ordinary Time is about the church living out in the world, through the power of the Holy Spirit, that which it just celebrated God doing in the world through Jesus.¹⁴ In Ordinary Time, the church lives out the narrative of the Holy Days.

It is important to note that Ordinary Time begins on Pentecost Sunday. Pentecost celebrates God’s outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon humanity. It is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the church is able to mirror the love of God to the world. Through the yearly observation of Holy Days and Ordinary Time, the

6. Martin F. Connell, *An Introduction To The Church’s Liturgical Year* (Chicago, Illinois: Loyola Press, 1997), v.

7. Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2004), 37.

8. Webber, 75.

9. Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ’s Time For The Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), 84.

10. Kimberlee Conway Ireton, *The Circle Of Seasons: Meeting God In The Church Year* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2008), 74.

11. Ireton, 11–12.

12. Stookey, 133. Although there are no Holy Days to celebrate, there are special days that honor different events in the life of Jesus—the Feast of the Transfiguration, for example—and, depending on the faith tradition, days that honor the lives and martyrdom of different saints.

13. Chittister, 184.

14. Bobby Gross, *Living The Christian Year: Time To Inhabit The Story Of God* (Downers, Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2009), 24–25.

liturgical Christian year seeks to remind the church of how God has broken into creation and offered the world life. It then challenges the church to do the same. So if in the first half of the liturgical year, the Holy Days are intended to draw the church into the mission of God in the world through the story of Jesus, then the second half of the calendar, Ordinary Time, is intended to allow the church to live out the story of Jesus in the world. In this way, the church continues God's work and mission through the leading of the Holy Spirit.¹⁵

Where Did the Christian Calendar Come From?

The Christian calendar, as we know it today, evolved over time.¹⁶ However, it is not surprising that the church would continue to mark time in the tradition of its predecessors in the Jewish faith. The Jewish calendar, like the contemporary Christian calendar, followed a rhythm of time that was both weekly (in the Jewish tradition, "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy," and in the Christian tradition, "On the first day of the week we came together to break bread), and annually (in the Jewish tradition, "Three times in the year you shall keep a feast to me," and in the Christian year, the seasons of Holy Days and Ordinary Time). As Galli notes, "it was only natural that, in light of the new creation in Christ, Christians would begin to rethink their sense of time."¹⁷

What are the Benefits of Following the Christian Calendar?

The liturgical year is designed to be lived out in the church. But what does that mean in terms of the ecclesiastical nature of liturgy? Or what effect does the practice of the liturgical year have on the spiritual nature and life of the church? Since ecclesiology deals with the nature of the church, a liturgical ecclesiology must move the focus away from the discussion being about the parts of the Christian calendar and move the dialogue toward what it means for the assembled believers to live out the cycles of the Christian year.¹⁸ The word *liturgy* comes from a Greek compound word meaning "people" (*laos*) and "work" (*ergon*). Thus a Christian liturgical ecclesiology has to do with the work that the assembled people of God are doing. This work is the worship of the congregation. Yet a liturgical ecclesiology is not only concerned with the "work" of the people; it is also concerned with how God interacts with and transforms his people through their worship. Lathrop notes that in addition to the attention given by the church to the preparation of their liturgical worship, recognition must also be given to the work that God does through our worship to transform us.¹⁹ A liturgical ecclesiology is one that sees the church's participation in the liturgical Christian year as worship that is designed to engage not only those assembled, but also the God who is the focus of their worship.

There are at least three ways that living out the liturgical year is formative for the Christian and the community of faith:

The Recovery of the Trinity

The sequence of the Christian year is trinitarian. Advent and Christmas remind the church of the work of God in sending his son into the world. God broke into the dominion of humanity to continue his work of reconciliation. The seasons of Lent and Easter invite the church into the story of the redemptive work of Jesus in the world. Pentecost and Ordinary Time seek to unite the congregation with the Holy Spirit that is at work in the church for the sake of creation. Thus the church's calendar reflects the Trinity in this fashion: "belief in the Father made manifest, the Son risen, and the Holy Spirit indwelling the church."²⁰ By living out the Christian year, the church is better able to practice a trinitarian ecclesiology.

15. Gross, 227.

16. For an excellent treatment of the evolution of the creation of the liturgical calendar in the history of the church, see Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

17. Galli, 130.

18. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1999), 5.

19. Lathrop, 14.

20. Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey and James F. White, *The New Handbook Of The Christian Year* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1992), 17.

The Redeeming of Time

When the church follows the Christian year, it allows the story of God's work in the world to shape its life. By living out the Christian year, the symbols and the story of God's mission, instead of those of culture, are what orient the life of the congregation.²¹ We live in a culture celebrates time, both intentionally and unintentionally. When work or play is placed above living out the kingdom call of Jesus, time forms and shapes us according to that work or play. When the only holidays or special days celebrated are those given by governments and culture, we are formed and shaped by that time.

Consider how the celebration of Independence Day and Veteran's Day points us toward a nationalist formation. By participating in these patriotic celebrations, Americans are invited to remember, honor and imitate those who sacrificed for the creation of the nation. Likewise, when the church celebrates Advent, Christmas and Epiphany or Lent and Easter or Pentecost, Christians are invited to remember the working of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the world. We are encouraged to embody this story and make it our own. By following the Christian year, the church is formed by the story of God.²² With so many competing, and often conflicting, stories that arise within culture, the Christian year provides the church with a usable narrative for personal and congregational formation. The church will be formed by time. By choosing to follow the Christian calendar, the church determines which epoch narrative will define its story.

The Disarming of the Powers

The violent imagery surrounding the birth story of Jesus in the book of Revelation presents a picture that is radically different than what we traditionally see at Christmas on greeting cards and television specials. John presents a picture of Christ's birth where, unlike the shepherds and magi, the powers and principalities do not welcome Jesus into the world. Instead, from the very advent of God's inbreaking into creation, the powers are set at odds with Jesus. They seek his humiliation and his destruction. By journeying through the Christian year, the church joins Jesus on his precarious journey in a world where the powers and principalities oppose the expansion of God's kingdom. Advent, Christmas and Epiphany not only tell us the story of Christ's birth, they also remind us of the attempted assassination of Jesus (Matt 2.16–18). Lent, Holy Week and Easter take the church through the drama of how both human and spiritual powers seek to extinguish God's presence in creation, apparently succeed at the cross, and then dramatically fail in the revelation of the empty tomb. By participating in the Christian year, the church not only relives the conflict between the powers and Jesus, but the church is also reminded that it is empowered by the Holy Spirit as it goes forward with the expansion of the kingdom while living in the midst of the fallen powers.

Conclusion

"The church...shows what is most important to its life by the way it keeps its time."²³ Like all spiritual disciplines, the power behind the forming nature of the liturgical calendar comes in its repetition. Liturgy becomes forming when year after year, and season after season, the church remembers and participates in the life of Christ, the working of the Holy Spirit and the inbreaking of God into creation. Through modeling and living we transform ourselves into the image of Christ before a watching world so that they too may be invited into the life and mission of the transformative kingdom of God.

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21. Lathrop, vii.

22. Gross, 10.

23. Hickman, 17.