

Introduction to the Church Year – A Brief History

The Lordship of Christ

This we can call Jesus' catholicity.

When we stop and take the time to celebrate specific events in the life of Jesus every calendar year, what are we saying?

- 1) These events actually happened in history!
- 2) These events of Jesus' life are the climactic events of world and church history!
- 3) Therefore, God means for us to act accordingly and redeem the time he gives us.

The Catholicity of the Church

In addition to the Lordship of Christ being demonstrated by the public faith of the Church throughout Christendom, it is also worth noting that we also practice the Church year and celebrate the Church seasons and festivals because we are Reformed Catholics (emphasis on the catholic).

The Creation's Calendar

Genesis 1:14 – And God said, “Let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night. And let them be for signs and for seasons, and for days and years.”

What does the pre-fall world teach us about a yearly calendar?

The New Covenant Calendar

The Old Covenant calendar with its sacrificial system and memorial events of days long past have been fulfilled in Christ. (Hebrews 8:13) Hebrews 9:10 speaks of this as the “time of reformation.” That means that the annual or yearly calendar of events for Old Testament Israel needed to be changed. And so, what did the New Israel, who is the Church, do to liturgical calendar of God's people?

Duane Garner, in his book *For Signs and Seasons*, states, “Because Jesus has now fulfilled all the things to which those Old Testament feasts pointed, and because the Church has been designated as the new humanity with and under Jesus, we have taken dominion over time with new festivals and feasts that celebrate the fulfillment of the old covenant” in the life of Christ.

The Development of the Church Year

A brief history:

- 1) In her earliest days after Jesus' Ascension, the Church began meeting on the "first day of the week" (Sunday), which was also called the Lord's Day (Mark 16:9, Acts 20:7, 1 Cor. 16:2, Revelation 1:10) Also read Justin Martyr and the Epistle of Barnabas for confirmation after the Canon's completion.
- 2) Other weekday practices appeared for fasting (Didache says Wednesday & Friday by the late first century (rather than fasting on the Jewish days) & explanations were developed for fasting - Wednesday (Judas' betrayal) and Friday (Jesus' Crucifixion).
- 3) What was explicitly inherited from the Old Testament, but transformed in the New Testament, was Passover week which commemorated the events leading to the Exodus (now they became Holy Week because Christ was the Passover lamb, leading to a new Exodus from slavery to sin) and Pentecost (meaning 50 days) which commemorated the giving of the Law (but now remembered the giving of the Spirit).
- 4) Another century goes by and we start to see the practice of Epiphany (2nd/3rd Century), then by the 4th Century we also see Christmas season (the date affirmed at Nicaea was December 25th) and Lenten season (stated at Nicaea as a period of 40 days). Lent also likely arose from the practice of Easter baptisms, in which the candidates went through 40 days of rigorous preparation for their Baptism on Easter morning.

James F. White noting, after mentioning Augustine's confirmation of the seasons, that "we can regard [the] development of the Christian year as virtually complete by the fifth century." – A Brief History of Christian Worship, White, James F., Abingdon Press, 1993.

Concluding Thoughts

Now that we have considered the Biblical data, the theological intent of seasons and rituals, and the history of the Church's development of the calendar and our catholicity with her, I want to conclude with the application and benefits:

1. Following the calendar of feast days disciplines us in joy and festivity.
2. This calendar gives us an identity and a culture.
3. Our calendar tells us and the world the story of the Gospel.

So, when you think of the Christian calendar, the Church's year of feasts and seasons, rejoice and be happy that you belong to King Jesus and his kingdom, which cannot be shaken, for there is no greater joy than to be with God's people, celebrating God's Son, filled with God's Spirit as we share in a culture and a calendar that will echo into eternity.