

## “Getting to Know COTR: Why do we follow the Church Calendar?”

(September 12, 2018)

Biblical religion is rooted and grounded in history. Our faith is a faith based on events that actually happened. Remembering this prevents us from allowing Christianity to become another philosophy, or morality, or set of abstract timeless doctrines that particular people believe and argue over. The Scriptures point to the importance of history by carefully marking out the time and place of the Jesus' birth (Matt. 2:1; Luke 2:1-2). Genuine Christian worship is not timeless worship. It is *not* an attempt to transcend the limitations of our creaturely existence, but an opportunity to consecrate our creaturely existence and our days and seasons to God.

Since this is true, we can say that the Church shows what is most important by the way she keeps time. God taught and sanctified Israel by the way He commanded them to mark time. **Each day** was set apart by morning and evening sacrifices and the daily prayers and Scripture readings that developed from the sacrificial liturgy in the synagogues. **Each week** there was the Sabbath. **The months** were marked by monthly assemblies as well, new moon celebrations. And through **the year**, God instituted feasts that were linked to the seasonal changes (Passover, Pentecost, Tabernacles) so that as the people lived through the year, they were reminded of the purpose God was accomplishing in history.

Jesus didn't change this. He didn't rescue us *from* time, but from sin and death so that we might properly consecrate our lives *in* time to the honor of the Father by the power of the Spirit. Since Jesus Himself is the Alpha and the Omega – all time is His and is to glorify Him. Everything, every moment, is to be dedicated to His honor and glory. Our experience of time is to be centered around the Lord Jesus.

The calendar orients our experience of time around the Lord Jesus who is the True and Faithful Man – and remind us of His life and work so that we might be conformed to Him. Living in Church Time reminds us of the centrality of Jesus who is our life. We don't mark our days by shopping seasons, national events, the commemoration of men, or tax day. Rather, our time is oriented around Jesus and His work in our behalf and for the world. The calendar helps us to fall in step with the God-created rhythm of creation – which declares the glory of God (Psa. 19).

Each day has a particular pattern that is repeated and in which we live out a mini-lifetime. Awakening from sleep. Preparing for our work. Working through the heat of the day and finishing as the sun sets. Returning to our homes tired but thankful and finally ending the day by falling asleep in Jesus. That's the pattern of our lives.

This is also true of each year as the seasons pass and we pass through them. We begin in the winter darkness and then are born into the bright light of the world. We spend our early Spring years in preparation for our callings. These years are followed by the intense labors of Summer when we do our most effective and fruitful work. Then we get to rejoice in the harvest and enjoy the fruit of our labors. And finally we reach the winter years when our work is done. Our lives follow the pattern of the seasons.

The creation week show us this same pattern: The world began in darkness and ended in rest. The entire creation is framed in such a way to reflect the outworking of God's purpose in history.

In Genesis 1 we are shown that this is no accident. On the fourth day, God creates the sun, moon, and stars and tells us that they are created for a certain purposes (Gen. 1:14-15):

1. They divide day and night
2. They for signs – they symbolize governors, rulers, and authorities, the angels, God Himself, and God's people.
3. They mark out specific seasons
4. They enable us to count days and years.
5. They give light on the earth.

The word “seasons” is used over 200 times in the Old Testament – primarily to refer to religious festivals which of course were connected to the specific seasons of the year (Lev. 23:2,4). From the beginning, God framed the cycles of the year point to the work He was working in the world. And the festival calendar He gives to Israel shows this.

God placed the major Israelite festivals precisely at points in the year that would correspond to their meaning:

1. In the Spring was the Passover, which commemorated Israel's deliverance/resurrection from Egypt, redemption from bondage and death and resurrection into new life;
2. The beginning of Summer marked the time of Pentecost, when the first fruits were brought in as a token of the full harvest to come. Pentecost commemorated the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai and the gift of the Spirit who would make His people into a new humanity so that they might be fruitful and grow to maturity.
3. In the Fall during the harvest there was the feast of Tabernacles, which commemorated God's gracious provision and guidance through the wilderness as well as His ingathering of all nations and it points toward the final harvest at the last day.

Of course, in addition to these three annual feasts, there were monthly new moon festivals, and various other feasts and celebrations that were added in the history of Israel to commemorate God's mighty works in their behalf (the feast of Purim and later, the feast of Hanukkah). And this isn't counting the other celebrations observed by communities and families (birthdays, anniversaries, harvest times, sheep-shearing times, etc) all of which pointed to the coming of Messiah and the blessings that would result.

With the coming of Jesus, we no longer follow this calendar but with the completion of His work, we mark the year around the great redemptive events in the life of Christ:

1. We begin the year in the bleakness and darkness of winter, when everything looks hopeless and dead. But in the time when the light seemed to be dying out and the darkness seemed to be conquering, the Lord of heaven came and began to conquer the darkness (so we celebrate the Feast of Nativity, the season of Christmas).
2. Then Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, in favor with God and man. He began revealing Himself to the world, proclaiming the gospel and sowing the seeds of the new Kingdom (this time is commemorated by the Feast and season of Epiphany).
3. But He had come to suffer for sin and so the time comes for Him to lay down His life for the sins of the world and during this time He faced the sin and rebellion of His own people (commemorated by the season of Lent).
4. Death could not hold Him, however. He was raised victorious over sin and death and vindicated as the Righteous One by His resurrection (the Feast of Easter).

5. Then, in triumph, He ascended up into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father and from there to pour out His Spirit in fullness so His word would produce much fruit through the witness of His people (the Feast and season of Pentecost)

6. There He reigns until the time of the great harvest of the last day (the season of Advent).

Like the calendar of the Old World, the New World's year is marked out by three great feasts:

1. Advent/Christmas/Epiphany focuses upon the coming of the King and the revelation of His glory.
2. Lent/Easter focuses is upon His sufferings and resurrection and this continues to the Ascension forty days later.
3. Fifty days after Easter, we observe Pentecost, the outpouring of the Spirit. Pentecost points us to look forward to the full harvest that is to come and thus, it goes through the time of growth in the summer to the time of harvest. And when the harvest is brought in, we are again readied to begin the cycle once more. The first half of the year focuses upon the life and work of Jesus and the second half focuses upon the application of that work by the Spirit.

And these seasons repeat themselves every year throughout the world. Again, this is no accident. The Lord by this repetition proclaims the realities of the gospel year by year. The seasons remind us that no matter what may be true of us at any particular point in time, we are headed for a glorious end and always have a reason to rejoice.

With the Christian calendar, the church takes advantage of the symbolic dimensions of creation – the seasonal changes – to remind ourselves of the life and work of our Savior. And we do that in part by having special commemorations and celebrations and feasting times to mark out these works.

Time viewed properly, strengthens and sanctifies us. Time seen and experienced in the light of Jesus conforms us to His image. Time seen and experienced in the light of Jesus conforms us to His image. Bobby Gross (*Living the Christian Year*, p. 36) has noted that marking time by the Christian calendar enables us to “inhabit the still-unfolding story of God and to have it inhabit and change us.”

Nehemiah reminds Israel of the proper perspective on time and life (Neh. 8:10). It is the joy of the Lord – the joy that God has in working His purposes in the earth that strengthens us and enables us both to rejoice and to work ourselves. Our work doesn't make celebration possible. Rather it is celebration makes our work possible. If we have no hope, we cannot work. Indeed, work is only justified if it is founded upon a deep and unshakable joy.

It is the celebration of God's works that gives meaning to our work. It is the fact that we have reason to feast that gives us reason to work and confidence that our work will not be wasted. It is the fact that our joy is founded upon world changing works of God which secure a glorious future for the world, that we are able to persevere in our work. Feasting gives meaning, direction, and purpose to our work. Feasting comes first.

Christian worship is not timeless worship. It is *not* an attempt to transcend the limitations of our creaturely existence, but an opportunity to consecrate our creaturely existence and our days and seasons to God. The Church calendar restores celebrations to their proper place:

**Celebrations are central to Christian maturity.** When we celebrate the mighty works of our Savior, we are not merely being *instructed* about the events of Jesus' life – we are being formed into a people for whom these events become the reference points of who we are as a people. Peter Leithart notes this was true of Israel: “Because they commemorated the events of the exodus, they became more and more defined by those events; to be an Israelite was to be among the people who were redeemed from Egypt. By celebrating Pentecost, they became more and more the people who received Torah. By celebrating Booths, they were trained to trust Yahweh's provision, and to look forward to a great harvest of nations at the end of the age.”

**The celebrations mold us into a people who know what is truly central to life** – i.e. the mighty works of God. The founding of this country, the birth of our children, our work, are all important but they are not as important as the work God has accomplished in and through His Son. It's not sinful to observe the 4<sup>th</sup> of July or Memorial Day or Veterans Day or any of our “days” – but these must be recognized as secondary. Doug Wilson says: “It is not sinful to have a fiscal year beginning in the summer, or an academic year beginning in the fall, or a civil year beginning in January. But it is wrongheaded and very foolish to forget that all these different kinds of years each have a story to tell. And if we listen to these stories long enough, and neglect the story that God has given the church to tell, we will succumb to idolatry.”

Calendars are inescapable, the only question is what kind of calendar will you have. If the church does not set up a calendar, somebody else will. And this is exactly what has happened. We now mark time according to the official holidays recognized by the secular State or the greeting card industry. No longer is time marked by commemorations of the great redemptive works of God in Christ, but by political, nationalistic, humanistic days, set apart by the State. The calendar has been not only de-Christianized and but politicized. Our calendars now serve not the living God but the god-like State.

An essential part of the work of reformation is the reclaiming of the calendar. Time must be redeemed, and redeeming it means that we must mark it and use it meaningfully. That begins with naming it properly and marking it in accordance with the days which identify us as a people. Thus, we need to retrain ourselves to think of the calendar in a Christian way.

We need the Church calendar because we need to be trained in the discipline of joy. Remembering, marking, and being molded by the things that have made us who we are – so that we can grow in conformity to Him who has subjected all of history to Himself – Jesus the Lord.