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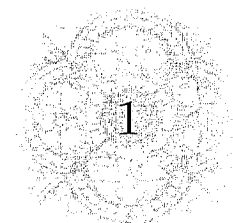
ANCIENT-FUTURE SERIES

ANCIENT-FUTURE
TIME

Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year

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Grand Rapids, Michigan



ORDERING YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

If we can speak so emphatically of the intrinsic value of the liturgical year, it is because we celebrate it together with Christ himself. The special nature of the church year is entirely due to the fact that the Lord himself presides over it and that he celebrates his mysteries with the church for the glory of the Father.

Adrian Nocent

I often talk with my wife about the advertising we see on television. It seems to us that advertising appeals to the “you can get something for nothing” mentality of our culture. Buy this hair product, this juicer, or this car and it will change your life. The product doesn’t sell itself as much as the fulfilled life it will bring.

In this way advertising suggests that the good things of life simply fall into one’s lap. But experience teaches otherwise. We have to work for what we want. An education, for example, requires years of committed study and discipline. Likewise, character comes from choosing what is right. The virtues of honesty, integrity, and fidelity, for example, require sustained choices of the will. Most of us know that if we are to attain anything that is good, we must do so through disciplined work. What is true about life in general is equally true about spirituality. But what is spirituality?

What Is Spirituality?

Objective Spirituality

At the outset we need to distinguish between objective and subjective spirituality. Objective spirituality, which is our standing before God, is a *given* spirituality. It comes to us as a gift. Because of our sinful condition, we cannot earn or acquire a relationship with God. It is God and God alone who establishes a relationship with us through the work of Jesus Christ. God became man to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. As incarnate God in Jesus Christ, God paid the penalty for sin, overcame the power of evil, destroyed death, and began the new creation. By his death and resurrection he has rescued us from our alienation to God and restored our relationship with him. This is the gospel preached by Paul, the early church fathers, the Reformers, and the leaders of evangelical awakenings such as St. Francis, John Wesley, and Billy Graham.

This objective spirituality is best described by Paul:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. *For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.*

Ephesians 2:4–10, italics added

Subjective Spirituality

Subjective spirituality, on the other hand, is a spirituality that arises out of our response to God's grace. The Holy Spirit, whom the Nicene Creed calls the "giver of life," quickens our will to embrace disciplines that express our relation to God. Through these disciplines we *experience* our union with God, a union that God himself has established through the work of Christ and the life-giving power of the Spirit.

The biblical teaching that subjective spirituality is a response to God's grace can scarcely be denied. The apostle Paul made it the central theme of his life when he said, "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). He wanted his life to be conformed to Christ by dying to self and rising to new life in him (Col. 2:12–13). Because Paul saw Christ as the second

Adam, the definitive reality of redeemed human nature (Rom. 5:12–21), he claimed that we who are in him are to be like him. We are to share in his sufferings. We are to become like him in his death. We are to know the power of his resurrection (Phil. 3:10).

The key to the experience of subjective spirituality is expressed by Paul when he adds the word *with* to several compound verbs. I suffer *with* Christ, am crucified *with* Christ, die *with* Christ, am buried *with* Christ, am raised to live *with* Christ, am carried off to heaven and sit at the right hand of the Father *with* Christ (Rom. 6:3–11; 2 Cor. 1:5; 4:14; Gal. 2:19–20; Eph. 2:5–6; Col. 2:20). What Paul is describing here is a profound experience of a relationship with Christ that comes as a result of the choices we make. Tersely put, the message is this: I must "put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). That is, I am to assimilate Christ; I am to pattern my life in, with, through, and by Christ. I am to experience what Paul experienced when he testified, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). But where do we find the metaphor, the image of our union with Jesus Christ?

Baptism: The Image of Objective and Subjective Spirituality

Both objective and subjective spirituality are brought together by Paul in the image of baptism. In Paul's writings baptism discloses God's grace in which we are united to Jesus and reveals the pattern for Christian living in which we walk in continuous union with him.

We are baptized into the very death and resurrection of Jesus. By his death he overcame death. By his resurrection he makes all things new. Baptismal spirituality is to die to sin and be resurrected to the new life. Paul writes, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may have a new life" (Rom. 6:4 NIV). Think of it! In the simple act of baptism made in faith, we enter into the profundity of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. Christ enters into us and we into him. We are now called to live in the pattern of his death and resurrection. And it is Christian-year spirituality that helps us live in our baptism, for it is ultimately an ordering of our lives into the pattern of dying to sin and being raised to the new life in Christ.

The Christian Year as a Pattern of the Spiritual Life

Ancient-Future Time presents the historical understanding of the Christian year as life lived in the pattern of death and resurrection *with* Christ. This spiritual tradition was developed in the early church and

has been passed down in history through the worship of the church. It enjoys biblical sanction, historical staying power, and contemporary relevance. Through Christian-year spirituality we are enabled to experience the biblical mandate of conforming to Christ. The Christian year orders our formation with Christ incarnate in his ministry, death, burial, resurrection, and coming again through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost. In Christian-year spirituality we are spiritually formed by recalling and entering into his great saving events.

This book not only describes the Christian year but prescribes how the Christian year can form the spiritual life and shape congregational spirituality. It shows how the practice of the Christian year organizes our internal spiritual experience and brings our everyday experience into union with Christ.

Failed Attempts to Form the Spiritual Life

Before I develop the theme of ordering the spiritual life through the Christian year, I want to reflect on my previous experience of seeking a way to turn my life into a life *with* Christ. My impression is that my own floundering experience is common to most of us. Consequently, I suspect you will be able to identify with some of the examples from my own experience.

As far back as I can remember I was told that Christ should be at the center of my life. As a child I had a plaque on my bedroom wall that proclaimed, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." A day never went by without my seeing these words, without them registering on my life their demanding message and making a lasting impression. This message was reinforced by the church, especially the Sunday-night sings that included songs such as, "Be like Jesus, this my song, In the home and in the throng; Be like Jesus, all day long! I would be like Jesus."¹ I was called into a continuous relationship with Christ, but I was also told that the way to attain spirituality was through the behavior code: "Don't do anything that you would be ashamed to do in front of Jesus, and don't go where you can't take Jesus"—an older version of "What would Jesus do?" Of course these are fine admonitions, and I don't deny their value. But how do you work them out in your life? How can you "be like Jesus"? How is your life a life *with* Christ?

In the fundamentalist tradition in which I grew up, this meant that you didn't go to the movies, smoke, drink, play cards, tell dirty jokes, or hang out with non-Christians. On the positive side it meant that you were to be chaste, honest, obedient, thrifty, and courteous, and you were to work hard at everything. While I now look at this list of *do's*

and *don'ts* as rather superficial, I do sense and honor what was at work in these instructions. The truth these admonitions sought to teach was the Christian calling to moral uprightness and to the simple and basic virtue of being a good person. Certainly there can be nothing wrong with that basic message. And when we live by Christian virtue, there is a sense in which we are living with Christ.

As I grew older and attended college and graduate school, my concern to be like Jesus continued to focus on the moral relationship with Jesus, but it grew to include an intellectual pattern of spirituality. For me, being with Jesus became learning to think out of a Christian worldview.

Truths about the origin, meaning, and destiny of life were to inform my worldview and make me a Christian in my mind, in the pattern of my thoughts, and then in my lifestyle. I embraced Jesus as the ultimate source of meaning in life, the one through whom existence was defined. He became the integrating core of my studies, the center for faith and learning, the beginning and end of knowledge. Today I continue to appreciate this emphasis. I confess that Jesus Christ is the cosmic center of the universe, the one in whom all things consist (Col. 1:17–20), the one through whom meaning is derived.

But I still looked for more, much more. What I longed for was something that went deeper than pious ideas on morality or intellectually stimulating thoughts about the meaning of human existence, as good as these were. I wanted something that actualized the pattern of being in Christ. I wanted something that worked in my life, something that brought a realistic spirituality into being. I wanted something that ordered my life into the pattern of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and coming again.

In the early '70s I came upon an ancient discipline for ordering the Christian life. It is the spiritual discipline of living in the pattern of Jesus' saving life throughout the year. This discipline is so filled with depth and so challenging to the spirit that I feel I have, after a number of years, only begun to scratch the surface of its potential. It has the power to call ethical behavior into conformity with the pattern left us by Jesus. It has the power to construct a view of reality that is thoroughly Christian. But more, it compels us to live, die, and be raised with Christ. Through the discipline of the Christian year we can experience the power of Christ within the community of the church, through its worship and in our lives twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Now the question is: How can the discipline of the Christian year do this? How can the Christian year order our entire lives—our values, worldview, and personal relationships; our struggles with lying, cheating, lust, jealousy, anger, and such; our ambitions and drive for success, material wealth, power, and recognition; our complicity with the hunger,

injustice, and pain of the world? How can the discipline of the Christian year lift us up into Christ so that the cry of Paul, "For to me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21), is fulfilled in greater measure within us? I want to answer that question by looking first at the nature of the Christian year and then showing how the church and its worship is the context for ordering the discipline of a Christian-year spirituality.

At this point you may be saying, "You're attaching too much significance to the Christian year. It is impossible for the discipline of the Christian year to accomplish so much for my spirituality." This objection has validity if the Christian year is seen as an end in itself. However, if we see the Christian year as an instrument through which we may be shaped by God's saving events in Christ, then it is not the Christian year that accomplishes our spiritual pilgrimage but Christ himself who is the very content and meaning of the Christian year.

Christ: The Source of Christian-Year Spirituality

As we think of our spirituality shaped through the practice of Christian time, it is of utmost importance that we begin with Christ, who is the source of our spirituality and the one who gives meaning to time. Without Christ there could be no Christian time. It is Christ who determines the Christian year, and it is through the practice of Christian-year spirituality that Christ is formed within us.

By *Christ* I mean the mystery of Christ born, living, dying, and being raised again for the salvation and healing of both creature and creation. Therefore, what gives rise to the Christian year is the *paschal mystery* (the oldest term used for Easter). The church is called to proclaim continually and act out this central mystery of God's reconciling work in Jesus Christ as it journeys through time from year to year, month to month, day to day, and hour to hour. For this reason the Christian year has been defined by Adolf Adam as "the commemorative celebration, throughout a calendar year, of the saving deeds God accomplished in Jesus Christ."²

The saving deeds that God accomplished in Christ are historical events. They are not mythical ideas or powerful stories but true, real, concrete events through which the God of creation acted within history to rescue the fallen world. The very heart, center, and focal point of all God's saving activity is the passion and resurrection of Christ. Consequently, the very heartbeat of time, the source of meaning and power for the cycle of all time, *derives from* and *returns to* the death and resurrection of Christ in which God was uniquely active reconciling us to himself (2 Cor. 5:18). It is Christ in his saving event who is the source, the summit, and the very substance of both objective and subjective spirituality.

This principle, that one *primordial* event shapes spirituality, reaches back into the Jewish tradition as well. Even though Jewish spirituality is marked by a number of events commemorating God's action on behalf of Israel (Feast of Weeks, Feast of Succoth, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Hanukkah, and Purim), it is above all else the Passover feast that is central for Jewish spirituality. This feast remembers Israel's deliverance from Egypt. In this exodus event God acted decisively to liberate Israel from the clutches of the enemy, to bring them out of their oppression, to constitute them as his people, and to lead them into the Promised Land.

Moses was told that when the children asked about the meaning of Jewish spirituality, the story of the exodus was to be told. "Then you shall say to your son, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt; and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the LORD showed signs and wonders, great and grievous, against Egypt and against Pharaoh and all his household, before our eyes'" (Deut. 6:21-22). The source, the summit, the very substance of Jewish spirituality is grounded in the exodus event.

Consequently, the later development of the Passover seder as a way of recalling God's redemption for Israel was more than a desire to tell the story again. What is behind the Passover seder is a concern to *experience* the redemption, to enter into a relationship with the Redeemer, and to serve the Redeemer by keeping his commandments. So the story is relived not simply for the sake of the story but for the purpose of living an exodus spirituality.

The relationship between Jewish and Christian spirituality is obvious. It is no accident that Christ was crucified during the Passover season. Consequently, the early Christians quickly saw the relationship between the redemption of Israel and the new redemption in Christ. Paul spoke of "Christ, our Passover lamb" (1 Cor. 5:7 NIV). Here we have the earliest record of the Easter celebration. But this early Christian feast was no mere recollection of a historical event as an end in itself. Like the Jewish Passover seder, *it recalled an event to transform life.*

The Christian Passover is a passage from the clutches of the evil one. The evil one would have us, as an ancient baptismal catechesis warns us, to live by the works of the flesh—"fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing and the like" (Gal. 5:19-21). The Christian Passover celebrates that to which we have been transformed. So the same ancient baptismal catechesis describes our new life as: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). This transformation is a transition from allegiance to the evil one to an allegiance to Christ.

Paul puts it this way: "Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal. 5:24).

Christian-year spirituality is nothing less than the calling to *enter* by faith into the incarnation, the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus. God's saving action is not only presented to us through the practice of the Christian year, it also takes up residence within us and transforms us by the saving and healing presence of Christ in our lives. As we enter the saving events of Jesus and especially the paschal mystery in faith, Christ shapes us by the pattern of his own living and dying so that our living and dying in this world is a living and dying in him.

I have found this spirituality to be an endless source of challenge, a rhythm for spiritual awakening, and a pattern for a daily dying to the power of evil and rising to the power of Christ. But we are not asked to do this spiritual calling alone. It is a calling for me, for you, and for all God's people that is accomplished in the context of a community—the church.

The Church: The Context for Christian-Year Spirituality

As we attempt to understand how our spirituality may be ordered by the discipline of the Christian year, we must keep in mind that the death and resurrection, which is the source and foundation of the Christian year, is not an event that is frozen in a particular historical moment. True, it is an event that happened at a particular time and place in history. But because it is an event of eternal significance, it transcends the particulars of time and space and relates to all of time—it reaches back to the purpose of creation and forward to the end of history. Now the question is: Where is this Christian discipline of the Christian year practiced? The answer: in the church.

Although there are many different ways to speak of the church, one of the most significant images of the church in the New Testament is "the people of God" (see Rom. 9:25–26). We, the people of the church who have been born into Christ, are the sons and daughters of God in whom the Holy Spirit dwells. We are the people of the Christ event. The church now lives on earth between the historic saving event of the death and resurrection and the future coming of Christ when the transformation of the world will be completed. The church has been entrusted with the meaning of all time. The world does not know the meaning of its own history, but the church does. Through the discipline of the Christian year, the church proclaims the meaning of time and of the history of the world.

Peter spoke directly to how the church witnesses to the meaning of time when he reminded the Christians of the dispersion, "You are a

chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, *that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*" (1 Peter 2:9, italics added). The purpose of the church is to be a sign of the redemption as it declares the wonderful deeds of God in Christ accomplished in history and fulfilled at the end of time.

The very nature of the church is defined by the saving deeds of God in Christ. The church, as the extension of Jesus in the world, is called to be an incarnational embodiment of Jesus' *way of being*. It is not just another institution in the world (although it allows itself to degenerate into that on occasion), but it is the *sign* of the historic redemption and of the coming kingdom. The church witnesses to God's saving deeds not only by its very existence in the world but also by its worship, which animates its life.

Worship Expresses Christian-Year Spirituality

How does the church express the spirituality of being *with* Christ in his incarnation, manifestation to the world, death, resurrection, ascension, and coming again? How can we as members of the church participate in a present spirituality that is rooted in past events and anticipates a future event? The answer to this question is that we are shaped and formed spiritually by Christ in the church through a worship that continually orders the pattern of our spirituality into a *remembrance* of God's saving deeds and the *anticipation* of the rule of God over all creation.

In order to help us understand how the church and its worship forms our spirituality through memory and anticipation, I will first define worship and then relate that definition to the practice of Sunday worship and of the Christian year.

Worship Defined

In its most simple and basic sense, worship is a celebration of God's mighty deeds of salvation culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ. Worship celebrates historic events that happened in the past and anticipates the eschatological event that will happen in the future. It does so in such a way that the meaning of both past and future is made alive in the believer's experiences now. Through worship the worshiper enters into God's saving deeds through which the entire history of the world is revealed.

Unfortunately, many churches have lost contact with this biblical and historical tradition of worship and have turned it into an invention of their own making. Some see worship as a school. Sunday morning

is primarily a time for teaching. What happens before the sermon is regarded as preliminaries or warm-up for the sermon. Recently I spoke to a very frustrated pastor from this tradition who now has a biblical understanding of worship and really wants to lead his people in worship. He said, "But what they want is a song, a prayer, and a fifty-minute teaching." He went on to say, "When I try to introduce the Christian year, they think I'm going liberal. They come to me and say, 'Drop all that stuff, pastor, and just get to the Word.' They don't seem to grasp that the Christian year is the Word proclaimed and enacted."

There are other ways contemporary churches fail to celebrate God's saving deeds as the central focus of worship. In some churches, as one pastor said, "We celebrate our own experience with Christ." Other churches have turned toward a psychiatric approach to worship, using worship as a time to help people discover themselves and their potential in life. Others lean toward entertainment or turn worship into an opportunity for evangelism.

You may respond, "If these are not appropriately biblical forms of worship, what is?" That is a fair question and one that must be answered if we are going to understand how a worship that follows the Christian year can shape our spiritual lives.

What does it mean to say, as I have stated above, that worship *celebrates God's saving deeds culminating in Christ*? To understand this statement, keep three things in mind. First, consider what God has done through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ has redeemed the world by his death and resurrection. Through Christ the power of evil has been overcome. Paul states, "[God] disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (Col. 2:15). In doing so, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Consequently, we know that both creature and creation "will be set free from [their] bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). This is the gospel. The message is that God has reclaimed his world and won it back from the clutches of the evil one. Jesus is the victor over sin, death, and hell. He is the second Adam. "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). So God is pleased with the work accomplished by the Son. There is nothing in this world that gives God greater pleasure—not the angels, not creation, not our faith in him, not our service. God's greatest pleasure is in his Son, who has accomplished the redemption of the world.

Second, what brings glory to God is to celebrate what gives God the greatest pleasure. Because God is most pleased with the work of his

Son, he loves to have us celebrate the mighty deeds of redemption. For this reason worship arises from the paschal (Easter) mystery. As author Robert Taft has written, "True worship pleasing to the Father is none other than the saving life, death and resurrection of Christ."³ In worship, then, we tell and act out God's saving deeds, culminating in the living, dying, rising, and coming again of Christ.

Third, we tell and act out God's saving deeds so that the power God exhibited through Christ in overcoming evil and reclaiming creation may take hold within our lives. The purpose of worship is not only to glorify God by celebrating the work of his Son but also to assimilate in our own lives the pattern of dying to the sin that Christ died to destroy and rising to the new life that Christ rose from the dead to inaugurate. Because worship celebrates Christ, worship calls us to put off the "old man" and put on the new. Worship calls us to "put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness" (Col. 3:5). Worship calls us to "put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience" (Col. 3:12; see also vv. 13–17). Worship recalls the Good News; it awakens faith within us; it stimulates us to die to sin and rise to the new way of life in Christ Jesus. In this way worship relates to all of life and extends into every relationship, every task, every attitude, every action, every day, and every hour of our lives. In this way we fulfill the admonition of Paul: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your *spiritual worship*. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:1–2, italics added).

To summarize, the impact of a worship that remembers God's saving deeds and anticipates God's ultimate reign over all creation orders our spiritual experience of being *with* Christ. The thankful recalling of God's saving deeds and the joyful anticipation of the new heavens and the new earth is the heart of weekly Sunday worship and the very substance of the pattern of Christian-year worship. Let me explain.

Sunday Worship: The Day to Remember and Anticipate

The early church set aside the day we now call Sunday as the day for the weekly recall of the living, dying, and rising of Christ and the day to anticipate the future kingdom. Robert Taft sums up the importance of Sunday for the early Christians and gives us an insight into the spiritual depth Sunday recalls.

To anyone beginning the study of Sunday in early Christian literature, the initial impression is one of confusion: Sunday is the first day, the day of creation, the day of light, the day of a new time. But it is also the last day, the eighth day, the day beyond days, the day of Jubilee, the day of the end-time. It is the day of resurrection, but also the day of the post-resurrection appearances and meals. It is the day of the descent of the Spirit, day of the ascension, day of the assembly, day of the Eucharist, day of baptism, day of ordinations—until one asks, “is there *anything* Sunday *doesn't* mean?” The answer, of course, is no. It was *the* symbolic day, sign of the time of the church between ascension and parousia, the time in which we are living now. It is the day symbolic of all days, for the purpose of all Christian liturgy is to express in a ritual moment that which should be the basic stance of every moment of our lives.⁴

The importance of Sunday as the day of God's saving deeds may be seen by noting the names given to Sunday by the early church. Probably the oldest name given to the day is “the Lord's day” found in Revelation 1:10. “The Lord's day” may have originated from the phrase “the Lord's Supper,” which was celebrated every Sunday in the early church as the central act of worship (see 1 Cor. 11:20).⁵ The Lord's day is his day because it is the day the church gathers to celebrate his death, resurrection, and anticipated return through the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper, the communion, or the Eucharist.

Another term that captures the meaning of Sunday is the *eighth day*, a term frequently used by the early church fathers. The *eighth day* refers to the new day of the re-creation. God made the world in six days, rested on the Sabbath, and then on the first day of the week (Sunday), the day of the resurrection, began his work of re-creation. Thus the eighth day is the day of the recapitulation, the day that God makes all things new through Christ.

More recently the original meaning of Sunday as the day of God's saving deeds is being restored due to liturgical scholarship. This rediscovered meaning of Sunday is captured in the document on the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II:

The Church celebrates the paschal mystery every seventh day, which is appropriately called the Lord's Day or Sunday. For on this day Christ's faithful are bound to come together into one place. They should listen to the word of God and take part in the Eucharist, thus calling to mind the passion, resurrection, and glory of the Lord Jesus. . . . The Lord's Day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work. . . . Sunday . . . is the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year.⁶

The Christian Year: Unfolding the Whole Mystery of Christ

Everything said above about Christ as the source of spirituality, the church as the center of spirituality, and worship as the expression of spirituality pertains in an unequivocal way to the Christian year.

In the course of the year, moreover, she [the church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ from the incarnation and nativity to the ascension, to Pentecost and the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord.

Thus recalling the mysteries of the redemption, she opens up to the faithful the riches of her Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present for all time; the faithful lay hold of them and are filled with saving grace.⁷

The simple, unadorned purpose of the Christian year is to proclaim the gospel of God's saving deeds *with* Christ, especially in his death and resurrection.

The Christian year represents the historical unfolding of the life of Christ and his sure return. One may observe that Advent deals with the coming of Christ; Christmas, his birth; Epiphany, his manifestation to the Gentiles; Lent, his journey toward death; the Great Triduum, the last days of Jesus' earthly life; Easter, the time to celebrate his resurrection; and Pentecost, the time to experience life in the power of the Holy Spirit. According to this historical representation of the life of Christ, the Christian year begins with Advent and ends with Pentecost. Indeed, the practice of most Christians who follow the Christian year is to follow the chronological sense. Piety is then based on this pilgrimage throughout the year. That this historical representation of God's saving events has been of spiritual benefit to God's people cannot be denied.

However, when the Christian year is turned into a mere repetition of the past, we miss the point. The spiritual purpose of celebrating God's saving events is to be formed by Christ, to die with him, to be raised with him, to be born anew, and to live in the hope of his resurrection and return.

Again, let me take Christian-year spirituality back to its roots in Jewish spirituality. Adrian Nocent observed, “For the Jew, God is involved in history, but for God, the past, present and future coexist. . . . The Jewish liturgy is envisaged as an act that allows a being whose existence is transitory to come into contact with him who always is; he who always is comes into contact with him whose existence is transitory.”⁸

For the Jew to commemorate the past is not merely to recall it as a past event but to commemorate it in such a way that it gives the present new

meaning. Therefore the Jew is called upon to commemorate the Passover as though it is happening *now*. At the same time the commemoration of the past event has a future reference. The Passover, for example, looks forward to the day when all will gather in Jerusalem. Consequently, the past and the future converge on the present in *such a way that it makes a difference in the worshipers' experience now*.

This formative approach to God's saving events is shared by the early church fathers. For example, writing of the effect of the work of Christ celebrated in the Christian year, St. Leo stated: "Beloved, the remembrance of what the Savior did for mankind is most useful to us, provided that what we venerate in faith we also receive and imitate. For in the communication of the mysteries of Christ to us, there is present both the power of grace and the encouragement which teaching gives, so that we may follow by our deeds him whom we confess in the spirit of faith."⁹

Conclusion

Now we must ask: What does all of the above mean for those of us who wish to practice Christian-year spirituality? First and foremost, Christian-year spirituality drives us back to the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The source of spirituality does not lie in us. We cannot generate, create, or attain spirituality. Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, became one of us to pay the penalty for sin, to overcome the powers of evil and death, to rescue us from the evil one, and to restore our relationship to God. Everything that ever needed to be done to make us acceptable to God has been done by Jesus.

Second, to embrace Christian-year spirituality means that we must once again embrace the biblical image of baptism. Baptism is our identification with Jesus Christ. It is the metaphor of our union with his death and resurrection. Baptism calls us to die to sin and to be raised to the new life in the Spirit.

Third, Christian-year spirituality calls upon us to acknowledge that this new identity, this baptismal life, is not lived in isolation but in community. While we live our baptismal life in the world, the church is the context in which the baptismal life is nurtured. The baptismal life is birthed in the womb of mother church, nourished at her breasts, and animated by her spirit.

Fourth, to live a Christian spirituality the worship of the church must return to its biblical roots in the paschal mystery. While every Sunday is a remembrance of the death and resurrection and an anticipation of the end of history and the transfigured world, Christian-year spirituality is ordered

by the succession of Sundays that enter into the mystery of the incarnation, ministry, death and resurrection, and coming again of our Lord.

As we enter into the very life of Christ, his life interpenetrates our lives, and we learn to live in the pattern of his life and death as we die to sin and rise to new life in Christ. In succeeding chapters this theme will be developed in detail to show us how to be shaped by Christian-year spirituality personally and corporately.

Table 2: A Summary of Christian-Year Spirituality

Theme	Spiritual Emphasis
What is objective spirituality?	A relationship with God cannot be earned. It is the gift of God's grace.
What is subjective spirituality?	The disciplines of spirituality intensify our experience of living <i>with</i> and <i>in</i> Christ.
What is Christian-year spirituality?	A discipline of personal and corporate worship through which we are formed into Christlikeness. We intentionally enter into Christ by living in the pattern of his saving deeds and anticipating his rule over all creation.
What is the <i>source</i> of Christian-year spirituality?	The source is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
What is the <i>context</i> of Christian-year spirituality?	The context is the church.
What is the church?	The people of God's saving events who by their very existence witness to God's saving deeds.
How is Christian-year spirituality expressed?	It is expressed in worship.
What is worship?	The remembrance of God's saving deeds through proclamation and enactment and the eager anticipation for God's rule over all creation.
What is Christian-year worship?	The unfolding of the mystery of salvation.
What is the purpose of Christian-year spirituality?	To become so thoroughly identified with God's saving events that we live in the pattern of dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ.

A PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN-YEAR SPIRITUALITY

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: cleanse the thoughts of my heart by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that I may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name by the practice of Christian-year spirituality; through Jesus Christ my Lord. Amen.

Adapted from *The Book of Common Prayer*

Questions for Reflection

1. Describe how you currently practice time.
2. What steps do you need to take to practice a Christian-year spirituality?
3. What steps need to take place in your local church to incorporate the Christian practice of time?
4. What difference would it make in your personal spiritual life to practice Christian-year spirituality? What difference would it make in the life of your church?

Resources for Worship and Spirituality

At the end of each chapter I will cite the resources for each season contained in Robert Webber, ed., *The Services of the Christian Year*, vol. 5 of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994). This is a fairly exhaustive resource for all seasons of the Christian year. Available through www.ancientfutureworship.com or 630/510-8905.

PART ONE

THE CYCLE OF LIGHT

The primary focus of worship and spirituality during the cycle of light is the incarnation of God into our history to rescue creatures and creation. He was born to die that we might live.

The meaning of the incarnation does not stand alone. The connection between birth and death is confessed in the Nicene Creed (AD 325). The one who became incarnate is "God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God." The reason he became incarnate is "for us and our salvation he came down from heaven . . . for our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate."

Isaiah, the prophet of Christ's coming, puts it well: "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The LORD, the LORD, is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation" (Isa. 12:2 NIV).

While the incarnation is the central focus of the cycle of light, our worship and spirituality is characterized by three experiences that give fullness to the incarnation—Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany. Each of these periods of spiritual journey relate to the incarnation in their own special way.

During Advent we *wait*. In this time we recall Israel's longing for the Messiah, and we learn to yearn for the second coming—the eschatological end of history as we know it and the beginning of the new heavens and new earth.

During the days of Christmas we *rejoice*. The Messiah has come. The light of the world has been born. A new day has fallen upon us.

During Epiphany we *manifest*. We now know that this momentous new beginning is not only for the Jews but for