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# THE CHURCH YEAR

*Erling Lindstrom*

## I

The background of our Church Year is the Jewish observance of a weekly sabbath and annual festivals; both were adapted by the early church for the Christian celebration of the Resurrection. Annual festivals were widely kept in the ancient world, but the first ones kept by Christians grew out of Jewish tradition. It was while Jesus was in Jerusalem with his disciples to keep the Jewish Passover that he was arrested and put to death; our hymns accordingly refer to Good Friday and Easter as a type of Passover experience.

Less common than annual festivals was the seven day week ending with the sabbath. The Roman week had eight days, and in Greece three ten day cycles made up a month. The week with seven days seems to have originated in Babylonia from observation of the stars; the sabbath as a non-work day existed there and in Canaan prior to the settlement of the Israelites following their exodus from Egypt. To the day of rest Israel added the dimension of worship, making the day "a sabbath to the Lord." The importance of this weekly cycle in Jewish tradition is evident from the fact that it is the only ritual observance mentioned in the Ten Commandments, the core of the Law:

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh is a sabbath to the Lord, your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maid-servant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

(Exodus 20:8-11)

The week in Exodus 20 provides for work and "rest" alike; not only is work prohibited on the sabbath, it is prescribed on the other six days. Certain factors in modern life, shift work, Sunday shopping and the like, act against this cycle by tending to make all days the same. But it is wise to retain the ancient structure of a week in which work alternates with rest: cultural development in general requires leisure time for its

nurture; the human body and mind function best when the rhythm between work and rest is right; and worship, like any other corporate activity, takes place at a special time.

## II

Christian tradition began with Easter, the basis of our weekly worship and our highest festival alike. The Gospels draw attention to the special place of Sunday in the New Testament church by noting that Jesus' resurrection took place on the "first day of the week" (Mark 16:2). Change from observance of the Sabbath to Sunday was evidently gradual; in the book of Acts there is evidence of both days being observed. Peter and John are shown keeping the hours of prayer in the temple and Paul, feeling a compulsion to preach first to the Jews, frequently attended worship in Synagogues (Acts 3:1; 13:46). In addition Acts reports Christians gathering together on Sunday, the time specified in the familiar incident where Paul spoke at length, putting Eutychus to sleep: "On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul talked with them, intending to depart on the morrow; and he prolonged his speech until midnight" (Acts 20:7).

The work of evangelism, meanwhile, went on daily, as when Paul visited the churches and when he argued in the school of Tyrannus each day for two years. One assumes this work sometimes included worship on various days of the week. Yet by the early second century the usual day of worship was Sunday, now called "the Lord's day." About this time Bishop Ignatius of Antioch wrote of Christians, "They ceased to keep the Sabbath and lived by the Lord's Day."<sup>1</sup> A church manual from the same period, "The Didache," urged Christians to come together for worship "on every Lord's Day."<sup>2</sup> Since Sunday was then a regular work day, Christians gathered for worship either early in the morning or in the evening after work. Paul's sermon lasting until midnight was no doubt at an evening service and, in the second century, Justin, the Martyr, referred to Christians coming together around dawn. When Sunday became the official day of rest in the Roman Empire, 325 AD, it was no longer necessary to worship at unusual hours. Sunday observance was later spread around the world by Christian missionaries.

In addition to being the basis of our weekly worship, Easter is the high point of the Church Year. It is difficult to date the first observance of Easter as an annual festival but, as it took place during Passover, it was probably celebrated early as a Christian observance at Passover time. In Acts there is a reference to Paul hastening to be in Jerusalem by Pentecost (20:16); Easter cannot have been less prominent. Like Sunday, the annual festival is an occasion to give thanks for the redemption we have through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

## III

The observance of Easter was gradually extended backward and forward to cover what became the Lent and Easter seasons. Quite appropriately, the first season of the

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1. Cyril C. Richardson (ed.), *Early Christian Fathers* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), p.96.

2. Richardson, p. 178.

Church Year to be observed was Easter, a joyful fifty days beginning with Easter Day and ending with The Day of Pentecost. As Easter Day was a Christian celebration at Passover time, Pentecost replaced a Jewish harvest festival, the Feast of Weeks. Lent developed gradually as preparation for Easter: A fast on Holy Saturday was lengthened, first to the forty hours Jesus spent in the tomb, next to observance of the events of Jesus' last week in Jerusalem, and then, by the fourth century, to forty days in remembrance of the time Jesus fasted in the wilderness. Following the Lord's example, candidates being instructed for Church membership at Easter were expected to fast these forty days.<sup>3</sup> Through the centuries Lent has remained a season in which Christians are urged to observe special discipline. Its length has also continued to be forty days excluding Sundays; as celebrations of the resurrection, they are exempt from fasting.

The other major early festival, extending back to the second century, was Epiphany; observed on January 6, it commemorated Jesus' birth and baptism. Christmas was introduced at Rome in the fourth century as a separate observance for the birth of Jesus. Unlike Easter and Pentecost which had Jewish precedents, Christmas replaced a pagan sun festival observed when the days began to grow longer. As Lent had earlier developed as a period of preparation for Easter, Advent originated in the sixth century to allow preparation for Christmas. Dr. Luther Reed rightly described it as "an expression of the natural principle of preparing the mind for any great event."<sup>4</sup> The emergence of Advent, understandably taken as the chronological beginning of the year, completed in brief outline the Church Year as it is still known. In Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, God's gift of His Son is anticipated, received, and proclaimed. In Lent and Easter, still the high point of the year, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are experienced and celebrated. During Pentecost, which completes the yearly cycle, Jesus' teachings are applied to our lives and that of the Church.

#### IV

The Church Year can be discussed in terms of its six seasons, its three festivals, or its two halves. To think of the year as having six seasons, Advent through Pentecost, has the advantage of following a chronological pattern from beginning to end. To study the year in relation to its three chief festivals also has a strength, that of drawing our attention to the highlights of the year. Though reasons can be given for using either the six season or the three festival approach, the year divides most immediately into two halves and that is how we will think of it here. The first half of the year takes us through the life of Jesus: the announcement of his coming is heard in Advent; his birth is celebrated at Christmas; in Epiphany, his presence is proclaimed to the world; the opposition and hostility hardens in Lent; at Easter, He rises victorious over the forces of evil and death. During the second half of the year, the long Pentecost season, the emphasis shifts to Jesus' teaching.

This two part rhythm is one that can be widely observed in life. Laura Beatrice Berton accordingly wrote of the indelible influence of climate on life in Dawson City

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3. Edward Traill Horn, III, *The Christian Year* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 23.

4. Luther D. Reed, *Worship: A Study of Corporate Devotion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 39.

during the early part of this century:

. . . our lives were ordered by the seasonal cycle of first and last boat, break-up and freeze-up, around which existence in Dawson revolved. Nature was our master, and we were prisoners of her rigid system. There were really only two seasons that counted in the Klondike, summer and winter.<sup>5</sup>

The Bible passages that refer to seasons also make a twofold division. God's covenant with Noah, for example, promised that a two part cycle of nature would endure to the end: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22).

To view the Church Year in terms of its two halves is also consistent with a two part rhythm apparent in features of the year, in Christian doctrine and experience. The Christian week is of two parts, one day of worship and rest followed by six of work. The high point of the year, Easter, is preceded by a forty day period of discipline and followed by another forty day period, this one joyful. Christmas is prepared for and celebrated in the same way. The two part rhythm of our year is even reflected in the liturgical colors: White, representing joy, for the first half of the year, except for the preparatory seasons when a contrasting purple is used; green, representing growth, for the second half of the year, except for special occasions. The central Christian doctrine, the Resurrection also consists of two parts, Good Friday and Easter Day; the One who died on Friday is the One who rose on Easter. In like manner our personal Christian experience is that of daily dying to the old life and rising to a new life with God.

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5. Laura Beatrice Berton, *I Married the Klondike* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Limited, 1954), p. 191.