

CHAPTER SIX: THE CHURCH CALENDAR

THE church follows a liturgical calendar. The calendar details the various seasons, feasts, fasts, saint's days and celebrations of the church year. The church does not experience time merely in terms of the movement through winter, spring, summer and fall, with various "holidays" mixed in. The church experiences time in an annual cycle that moves through the major events in the life of Christ and the drama of our redemption.

The use of a calendar is rooted in the creation narrative. In Genesis 1:14, "God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years." God created the division of time for the observance of significant events pertaining to creation, redemption and judgement. These observances give meaning to time. God saves his people by acting in time. Then God establishes memorial days that look backward to his saving acts and forward to their future consummation.

In Leviticus 23, God commanded Israel to mark the passage of time by the observance of specific days and feasts. The following is a summary of these days and feasts followed by a summary of their fulfillment in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Old Testament Days and Feasts

1. Sabbath. The Jews observed the seventh day (Saturday) as the Sabbath each week. God commanded Israel to work six days and rest on Sabbath according to the pattern established by God at the creation (Genesis 2:2, Exodus 20:9-10).

Spring Feasts:

2. Passover. The Passover commemorated Israel's redemption from slavery by the blood of the Lamb (Exodus 12:1-27). The Passover also celebrated the **Feast of the First Fruits** of the harvest. The first sheaf of grain was offered in the temple (Leviticus 23:12). This feast began on the fourteenth day of the first month (Leviticus 23:5).

3. Pentecost. The Feast of Weeks. The completion of the grain harvest was celebrated on Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. Two loaves of baked bread were offered (Leviticus 23:17). Pentecost was also the day on which Israel commemorated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

Fall Feasts:

4. Rosh Hashanah. Rosh Hashanah means, literally, "head of the year." This is a "new year" celebration, which is curious since it took place on the first day of the seventh month. The trumpet (a ram's horn, or *shofar*) was blown.

5. Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16 for details). This was the one day of the year when the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies to offer the sacrifices which atoned for the sins of the people for the whole year. It was observed on the tenth day of the seventh month.

6. Succoth, Booths or Tabernacles. This was the celebration of the fall harvest of tree fruits. It was also a time when God commanded Israel to dwell in booths to remember the wilderness wanderings. It was a seven day feast, which began on the fifteenth day of the seventh month.

Each of these observances commemorated something God had already done for Israel and also looked forward to a future time when God would do a greater work.

New Testament Fulfillment

1. Sabbath. The Sabbath rest is fulfilled in the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross and also in his resurrection, which is beginning of the new creation (cf. Hebrews 4:1-10). Jesus died on Good Friday. His last words were, "It is finished" (John 19:30). He was buried and he rested on the Sabbath in the grave, in fulfillment of the Sabbath day commandment. We rest in Christ because he has finished the work of our salvation. We begin new life in him. We gather around that altar on the Lord's Day to mark the beginning of the new creation. In the church, Sunday, the Lord's Day, replaced the Saturday Sabbath as the central day of worship. Sunday is the first day, the beginning of the new week, the time of the new creation.

2. Passover. Jesus is the Lamb of God, whose blood saves us from slavery to sin. God saved Israel from Egypt by the lamb's blood. This freed a particular nation from slavery at one point in time. God saves his people from slavery to sin and death by the blood of the Lamb of God (John 1:29). This frees God's people from sin and death for all time. The Feast of the First Fruits is fulfilled in the resurrection. Jesus is the first-fruits of God's harvest of souls (1 Corinthians 15:20).

3. Pentecost. The gift of the Holy Spirit completed the harvest of souls because we are raised from the dead through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to us in baptism (cf. Romans 6:2). The gift of the Holy Spirit also fulfills the Law given to Moses. In the Old Testament the law was written in stone. In the New Testament the law is written in our hearts through the Holy Spirit (Jeremiah 31:33).

4. Rosh Hashanah points to the end of time. The trumpet, or *shofar*, of Rosh Hashanah is the trumpet of the end of time in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 15:52, 1 Thessalonians 4:16, Revelation 8:2). This explains why the new year occurs in the seventh month, at the end of the harvest. The new creation will be completed at the end of time (cf. Revelation 21:5).

5. Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement. The annual sacrifices on the Day of Atonement were fulfilled by the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Jesus offered himself on the cross and now presents himself in the Holy of Holies in heaven as the sacrifice that takes away sin once and for all so that no further sacrifices are necessary. Read Hebrews 9 and 10 for an extended discussion of how Jesus fulfills the various details of the Yom Kippur observance. This observance also points forward to God's final act of redemption at the end of time when God's people will be completely cleansed of sin.

6. Succoth/Booths/Tabernacles points to final gathering or harvest of souls at the Second Coming of Jesus.

A note on the later Jewish feast of Hanukkah. In time between the end of the Old Testament and the coming of Jesus (c. 170 B.C.) Israel was invaded by a Syrian general named Antiochus who desecrated the temple with pagan sacrifices. Certain valiant Jews fought back and won independence for Israel. They rededicated the temple. This rededication is celebrated on the feast of Hanukkah, which is also called the “Feast of Lights” (cf. 1 Maccabees 1-4).

The Birth of Jesus (Christmas) has theological correspondence with the Feast of Lights or Hanukkah. Christ is the new and rededicated temple of God. He is the place where the glory of God now dwells among mankind (cf. John 1:14). His advent renders the old temple obsolete and replaces it with a new and better temple, the temple of his body (cf. John 2:19-21). This fulfills the promise of the rededication of the temple at Hanukkah.

Through the church calendar, the church celebrates the feasts of Leviticus in the light of their fulfillment in the revelation of God in Christ. We celebrate the Eucharist on the first day of the week, the Lord’s Day, in fulfillment of the Old Testament Sabbath. Time begins and ends in Christ. He is the alpha and omega (cf. Rev. 1:8, 17). Thus we worship on the first and eighth day.

The calendar sets forth the seasonal observances of the major events of our redemption from Advent through Trinity (See chart on next page). Advent anticipates Christ’s coming. Christmas celebrates the Incarnation, God become man. Epiphany celebrates the revelation of Christ as the Son of God. Lent is a season of fasting that prepares us for the cross. During Holy Week, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday commemorate the last days of Christ’s life and then his death and burial. Easter celebrates the Resurrection. Forty days later, on Ascension Day, Christ ascends to heaven. On Pentecost, fifty days after Easter, the Holy Spirit comes. Finally, we celebrate Trinity, the revelation of one God in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Sanctification of Time

We do not live merely through winter, spring, summer and fall—an endless cycle of time. We live through Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity—an annual cycle that points backwards to God’s saving acts and forward to their fulfillment at the Second Coming of Jesus. Our corporate observances and the prayers, lessons and themes of daily prayer cause us to experience time in terms of our redemption. Our personal life stories are transformed by our connection with God’s story. Our minds are transformed and renewed (Romans 12:2, Ephesians 4:22-24) by constantly remembering and experiencing again the drama of our redemption.

This relates to the Jewish understanding of a Memorial Day. The Jews believed that in remembering the saving acts of God through memorial observances, each generation participated anew in the original event. This is how God could be said to have “saved” from Egypt a generation that was born hundreds of years after the Exodus. They experienced the past redemption through the annual feasts that united them with God’s saving acts. We participate in God’s redemptive work through our seasonal observances. We experience again each year the drama of incarnation, revelation, death, resurrection, ascension and the coming of the Spirit.

Rather than merely trying to bring a Christian emphasis into secular time, the church transforms the day, the week and the year into the very means of experiencing God's saving work. Apart from Christ, time is merely a countdown to the day of our death. In Christ, time is a way of experiencing God's redeeming work in the world. In Christ, time continually looks backward to what God has done, and forward to what God will do. Time itself become a means of grace.

An Outline of the Church Calendar

<u>Season</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Color</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Advent	Getting ready for the coming of Jesus at Christmas and at the end of time.	Violet	Begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas.
Christmas (Dec. 25)	The birth of the Son of God. The Incarnation.	White	A twelve-day season, 12/25-1/5 inclusive. Meditation on the goodness of creation.
Epiphany (Jan. 6)	Manifestation (revealing) of Christ to the Gentiles and as the Son of God.	White on the feast and through the octave. Subsequent Epiphany Sundays are green.	Magi appear in (and shepherds depart from) our manger scenes and remain through octave.
Pre-Lent Septuagesima Sexagesima Quinquagesima Pre-Lent ends on Shrove Tuesday	Focus shifts away from Incarnation and towards the cross and Easter. Party before the fast.	Violet Violet	Eases us into Lent. A call to get ready. Origin of Mardi Gras Carnival, "Fat Tuesday."
Lent begins on: Ash Wednesday	Cross & penitence. Fast commences.	Black	40 day fast (w/o Sundays) Day of complete fasting.
Holy Week: Palm Sunday	Triumphal Entry	Red/Violet	Palm procession.
Maundy Thursday	Last Supper / Betrayal	White (for Last Supper)	Foot-washing and stripping of altar.
Good Friday	Cross	Black	Good Friday Liturgy preceded by day of complete fasting.
Easter Even	From death to life.	Violet to White	Easter Vigil. Renewal of baptismal vows.
Easter	Resurrection	White	Christ is risen! A forty-day season.
Ascension	Christ ascends to heaven.	White	Acts 1 Chronology, Forty days after the Resurrection.
Pentecost	The Holy Spirit comes.	Red (tongues of fire)	Acts 2
Trinity	Doctrine of Trinity	White for day, green for season.	Climax of the revelation, a season of teaching.

Questions for Review

1. How does the life of Jesus fulfill the main Old Testament feasts and how is this reflected in the church calendar?
2. How does the calendar takes us through the drama of redemption each year?
3. What is meant by the term “the sanctification of time” and how does the calendar accomplish this?
4. What are the four main liturgical colors and what does each symbolize?
5. When is the color black used and what does it symbolize?
6. What is the difference between a solar and a lunar feast? What is the main solar feast? What is the main lunar feast?