

Understanding: The Church Calendar

Calendars are not silent; they always tell a story. It's not surprising then, that when God first gathered a people to himself, he took over their calendar by insisting it be shaped according to a series of feasts and rituals which celebrated his saving actions on their behalf. (See Exodus 12.) In his power and wisdom God used days and weeks and months and years to herald his Truth.

In his birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, and pouring out of the Spirit, Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, fulfilled and transformed the ancient Jewish feasts and rituals. (See Matthew 5:17.) Having learned over the course of centuries that God made us to be shaped by the shape of our year, the early Christians developed a yearly calendar with regular memorials of how Jesus Christ 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.

Unfortunately, there have been times in which the Church calendar has been understood in inappropriate ways, and even used as a bludgeon with which to abuse people. When Christ died, we died with Him, and when He was raised and ascended into heaven, we were raised and seated with Him in the heavenly places. (See Colossians 3:1 and Ephesians 2.) This means that together with Christ, the saints are the rulers of time and space. We have all been established in Him as lords of the Sabbath, to rule time according to the wisdom of the Spirit. (See Romans 8:14 and Galatians 4:6–7.) We are not under days, but now the days are under us. In contrast to the yearly calendar for the Jewish people before the coming of Jesus, the Church calendar is voluntary, freely offered, and no one may judge or be judged on the basis of whether or not they follow it. (See Romans 14:5–6 and Colossians 2:16.)¹

Many of us, therefore, follow the Church calendar without any sense of obligation. First, we see the Church calendar as one way of giving a glorious testimony to the victory and rule of Christ over time. Rightly understood, His life celebrated and remembered in our days, weeks, and years is a continuation of the triumph of Christ. Second, the Church calendar is a very good application of something God so clearly taught Israel: a fundamental fact of our embodied lives is that architecture always wins (and this includes the architecture of time). Our memorials in time form us into people who embrace the Lordship of Christ. The Lord's Day is the chief glory of these privileges and gifts; it is the Old Testament Sabbath raised from the dead, transfigured, glorified, and grown up into maturity. It is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, our weekly Easter, and the only feast day which must be honored and kept. (See 1 Corinthians 5:8.)

We need to define our year in terms of the life of Christ. The Church calendar is one deep-rooted, time-tested way of doing this. Can you imagine how powerful it is to inhabit the Christian story through the Church calendar so fully that the rhythms of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter become more basic to our lives than the start of the school year, or the opening of hunting season, or the 4th of July? Through the Church calendar we are making cosmic claims we believe to be true, and we are driven back again and again to Jesus Christ to be formed in His death and raised in the hope of His resurrection and return.

THE 2017 CHURCH CALENDAR AT A GLANCE (DEC. 2017–NOV. 2018)

It is not sinful to have a civil year start in January, or a fiscal year in the summer, or an academic year in the fall. It is foolish, however, to forget that all these different kinds of years are telling a story. The Church calendar tells the story God has given the Church to tell.

ADVENT

The Church year begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day. These weeks leading up to Christmas are called Advent. During this time we prepare to celebrate the greatest gift the world has ever known—the actual physical birth of Christ 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem. Walking through Advent we learn to yearn for His return when He will consummate His work, put away forever the powers of evil, and gloriously restore our bodily life in the midst of a renewed earth. *Dates this year: December 3–December 24, 2017.*

CHRISTMAS

We rejoice with angels and shepherds that “a Savior is born” (Luke 2:11), and this celebration overflows Christmas Day. In fact, the party lasts twelve days. A single day cannot do justice to the glorious impossible: God taking on flesh to rescue us from slavery to sin and death. *Dates every year: Sundown on December 24, 2017 until January 6, 2018.*

EPIPHANY

The word “epiphany” means “appearing” or “manifestation.” Those who saw Jesus saw the Father! When the Wise Men brought gifts to the child Jesus, they were the first non-Jews to acknowledge Jesus as the King. Their act of worship was one of the first manifestations of God’s work in Christ as a work for all people, of all nations and races. During this season we pay attention to how God is manifested to us and through us. *Dates this year: January 6–February 14, 2018.*

LENT

The season of Lent begins with Ash Wednesday. This is the long period of slow and sustained preparation for Easter. It is a time to repent, to die to sin and to the power it holds on our lives. *Dates this year: February 14–April 1, 2018.*

EASTER

The Church year climaxes on Easter day. The eternal God lived and died as a vulnerable human being and was then raised from the dead—He has prevailed over death! This is the heartbeat, the center–point of Christianity so we celebrate it for 50 days! *Dates this year: April 1–May 21, 2018.*

ORDINARY

The second half of the Church year is named “Ordinary Time.” (The name can be misleading; it comes from the word “ordinal” because the Sundays are named with ordinal numbers “1st Sunday after Trinity,” “2nd Sunday after Trinity,” etc.) During this time we focus on ways that our lives are to be built on the foundation of the historical events we marked and commemorated in the first half of the year. *Dates this year: May 27–December 1, 2018.*

THE DATES FOR BAPTISMS

The baptism dates for 2018 are January 7 (The Baptism of Our Lord Sunday), April 1 (Easter Day), May 20 (Pentecost), and November 4 (All Saints’ Sunday). If you would like to be baptized, or if you have a child whom you would like to have baptized, please contact Aubrey Spears to talk about beginning the preparation.

¹ This entire paragraph and part of the paragraph that follows have been copied, nearly verbatim, from, “Christ Church and Trinity Reformed Church Joint Statement on Holy Days,” accessed online.