

The Seasons of Our Lives

Editorial by

Richard A. Rhem
Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

Published in
Perspectives

A Journal of Reformed Thought
December 1988

Perhaps the most frequently heard expression this month will be “Merry Christmas and a happy New Year.” The order is dictated by the fact that Christmas is celebrated on December 25, followed one week later by ushering in of the new year. We speak of the period we are entering as the holidays. *Holiday* is derived from “holy-day.” The definition of holy-day is a day set aside for religious observance, but the dictionary notes that the derivative form, holiday, is now usually restricted to the sense of “day of recreation.” In our popular expression we combine a holy-day and a holiday. Although Christmas has been co-opted by the world at large and transformed into a holiday, it still retains its spiritual connection; it is still a holy-day. New Year’s Day, however, is a purely secular observance of the beginning of the new calendar year, a calendar year whose beginning and ending are quite arbitrarily set signifying nothing beyond the regular cycle of 365 days.

It is not so with the calendar kept by the church. Although no one would argue for the exactitude of the specific date designated for Christmas, December 25; nonetheless it does point to a concrete event within our space and time—the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnation of the Word of God. So it is with the days that mark the critical moments in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord and the pouring out of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The Christian calendar keeps before us the landmarks along the path of redemption wrought in our history in Jesus Christ, and the annual observance of holy days gives a rhythm to our Christian existence, rehearsing for us the events which ground our hope.

There is an increasing use of the Christian year in Reformed congregations. This value of such observance is being increasingly felt. As we are regularly involved in the drama of redemption, we are caused to remember what God has done and are stimulated to hope for what God will yet do.

The religious observance of holy days is deeply rooted in the Old Testament community of faith. Sabbath observance was the weekly celebration of God's work of creation (Exodus 20:8-11) and gracious redemption (Deut. 5:12-15). The feasts of Passover, Unleavened Bread, Weeks, and Tabernacles punctuated the ordinary existence of God's people with the dimension of eternity.

The Christian church moved naturally to the observance of the first day of the week as the Lord's Day, a weekly festival of Easter, and gradually the feast days of the Christian calendar took shape. This was a natural development because the redeeming God had moved into our historical reality, supremely in the Word made flesh.

The observance of the Christian calendar gives shape and meaning to our existence and a framework for our corporate worship. Lessons, preaching, hymns, and liturgy whose themes are determined by the Christian year tie us to the central realities of Christian existence. Our spiritual formation is fundamentally shaped by the rhythm of the life of the worshiping community, and the growing observance of the Christian year is a source of great enrichment to the experience of worship.

Religious observance is not a means of salvation; rather, it is an instrument by which we are reminded of a salvation which has been effected beyond us, for us, freely given to us in Jesus Christ, eliciting from us grateful worship of the eternal God whose redeeming grace has come to expression within our history.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis's satire in which Screwtape, a senior devil, gives his nephew, Wormwood, a junior devil, an advanced correspondence course on how to corrupt human souls, Screwtape recommends that Wormwood work on Christians' "horror of the Same Old Thing." But, he acknowledges God's wisdom in that all the same:

He has balanced the love of change in them by a love of permanence. He has continued to gratify both tastes together in the very world He has made, by that union of change and permanence which we call Rhythm. He gives them the seasons, each season different yet every year the same, so that spring is always felt as a novelty yet always as the recurrence of an immemorial theme. He gives them in His Church a spiritual year; they change from a fast to a feast, but it is the same feast as before.

In his *Letters to Malcolm*, Lewis wrote:

It is well to have specifically holy places, and things and days, for, without these focal points or reminders, the belief that all is holy and "big with God" will soon dwindle into a mere sentiment.

Religious observance is not an end in itself but can be a powerful instrument for the personal and corporate appropriation of the good news that was announced

at the Savior's birth. Our observances always fall short of giving adequate expression to the mystery of God's grace, yet pointing beyond themselves, they give us a glimpse of the grandeur and glory of the grace of the God of our salvation. There are those moments in our corporate worship when the glory breaks through and we are lost in wonder, love, and praise.

May Advent well-kept issue in a Christmas observance filled with the glory of God bringing the water of life to our often arid lives.