

The Christian Year

An excursus on the use of the Church Calendar in appraisal of "The Evolution of the Christian Year," by A. Allan McArthur, B.D., Ph.D., published by the S. C. M. Press, Ltd., 1953 (Price—Fifteen Shillings).

THE "Noblemen, Barons, Gentlemen, Burgesses, Ministers and Commons" who subscribed the National Covenant of 1638 because they felt the "true reformed religion" to be in danger and jeopardy, attacked the "Roman Antichrist" for his "dedicating of Kirks, Altars and Dayes" and deplored his "observing the Festivall days of Saints, and such other superstitious and Papisticall Rites, to the dishonour of God, contempt of true Religion, and fostering of great error among the people". That was the extremity to which our beloved *Ecclesia Scoticana* was driven by medieval abuse, by Roman intransigence, and finally by prelatric and royal stupidity. While the Continental churches of the Reformation abolished the preposterous medieval accumulation of saints' days and gave more distinction to the great festivals commemorating the Life of our Lord and the Founding of the Church, the Kirk alone abandoned any kind of Church Calendar, other than the observance of Sunday.

This extreme position in regard to the Christian Year is neither implicit in the Reformed position nor particularly loyal to John Calvin's intentions, but it has made it very difficult for later generations in our Church to overcome century-old prejudices and misunderstandings, in order to re-introduce an observance of at least the main Christian Festivals in the Church of Scotland. That so much has been achieved in less than a century past, reflects great credit on the courage, zeal, imagination and devotion of such churchmen as Lee, Story, Sprott, Cooper and others. The Church Service Society founded in 1865 and the Scottish Church Society founded in 1892 have both played a notable part in this revival of the observance of the Christian Year.

A further stage in this revival and restoration would seem to have been reached with the publication of *The Evolution of the Christian Year*, by the Rev. Dr. A. Allan McArthur, of Peterhead Old Parish Church, an active

parish minister's thorough and competent research thesis on the origins and development of the Church's Calendar. This timely book should help to save our Church from certain bogus features and misguided efforts in the restored observance of the Christian Year. It may bring us to a more truly evangelical rhythm and sequence in the use of the Calendar.

One would wish to congratulate Dr. McArthur on his study of "The Fathers". This patristic field of Christian writing has been too long neglected in the Reformed Churches since the days of the greatest patristic scholar of the modern world, John Calvin. Is it not a sign of renewed life in the Reformed tradition when our younger theologians, like Professor Torrance, and our liturgical experts are at such pains to discover afresh the mind of the Church in the early centuries?

Dr. McArthur's book finds its point of departure in a study of Sunday, the Lord's Day, that superseded the Jewish Sabbath. The observance of Sunday is fundamental to any Church Calendar. It is in this field of Christian origins that the Sunday must be reconsidered to-day, and the Sabbatarian question resolved. We can agree that "the whole spirit of the primitive Sunday was something far removed from the gloomy faith and gloomy faces of many latter-day Christians, who will scarcely find themselves in agreement with the attitude which looks on every Lord's Day as in a real sense a little Easter". Again, "it is only when we properly appreciate the Eucharistic unity of the Passion and Victory of Christ Jesus that we can really understand the uniqueness of Sunday. . . . It was on the Lord's Day, the Day of Jesus the Victor, Jesus the King, and on the morning of that day, that the central common worship of the Church took place".

Most of this book is taken up with the origins of the three main groups of Christian festivals, Epiphany, Pascha or Easter, and Pentecost. Epiphany, known first in the Eastern Roman Empire from the close of the first century, is anterior to Christmas, and arose as a unitive commemoration of the Birth and Baptism of Jesus. It included reference to the birth of light and the turning of water into wine. The first two chapters of the Fourth Gospel provide the key to an understanding of the primitive Epiphany, for the author holds that "it was against the liturgical background of this festival that John i, 1—ii, 11, was written".

The beginnings of a separate Christmas are traced to 4th century Rome, where the dogmatic task of opposing the Arian heresy required a special occasion for celebrating the specific theme of the Incarnation. All the most significant developments in the Church Calendar had a dogmatic rather than a merely commemorative interest. It is such doctrinal interest that should determine our attitudes and decisions to-day.

The Jewish festivals had had a very close connection with the cycle of the natural year, but were secondarily "identified with the great events of the salvation-history of the Old Covenant". The Christian Passover grew out of the Jewish festival, as the name Pascha suggests (*les Pâques*). From its origin, the celebration was inevitably a Jewish day running from evening to evening, Saturday evening to the evening of the Lord's Day, a vigil by night, followed by sacramental worship at dawn. "The Cross was the great motif of the vigil, and the Resurrection of the vigil's end, with the Sacrament of Baptism, followed by Holy Communion, celebrated at the point where the one yielded to the other". It was in the latter part of the 4th century that Good Friday developed in separation from Easter, and Lent arose as a six-week time of instruction for Paschal Baptism.

Dr. McArthur makes considerable use of the *Peregrinatio* of Etheria, a Spanish nun who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about the years 393-6. This 4th century churchwoman has left a most intriguing and colourful account of the already elaborate Holy Week rites and observances that had arisen round the sacred sites in her time, particularly at Constantine's three churches, "the Great Basilica or Martyrium, the Sanctuary of the Cross and the Anastasis, the Sanctuary of the Resurrection" at Jerusalem.

A similar history is traced in regard to Pentecost, as in regard to Epiphany and the Pascha. The development of what was originally a unitive commemoration of the Ascension of our Lord and the Descent of the Spirit, produced in time a separated Ascension Day, while Pentecost then became exclusively concerned with the Holy Spirit. One of the most thought-provoking pieces of Scriptural exegesis in this volume is the writer's treatment of the phrase "the finger of God" found in the Old Testament, and understood as "the Spirit of God" in the New Testament.

Our Church is deeply in Dr. McArthur's debt for collecting so much source material from different liturgical writings and making it available in a book that will for long be read and used by all who study the Christian Year. This tends to make it a scholar's book, competent and exhaustive, but difficult for the general reader. We should hope one day to have the results of such an enquiry in a simpler and more readable form.

The good impression left by this important book is slightly marred by a short concluding section entitled "The Christian Year, The Reformation and the Church of Scotland To-day", in which the author sets out to construct a calendar for present-day use. This is too large a theme to deal with adequately in ten pages! Dr. McArthur's judgement as to what have been and what have not been legitimate developments is rather arbitrary and personal, and his views seem to take too little account of "tradition". For instance, it is suggested that "Advent should have six Sundays"; but why, in spite of early practice, should an autonomous church like the Scottish depart from the widely followed custom of Western Catholic Christianity in the interests of historical antiquarianism? Dr. McArthur acknowledges our debt to Anglicanism for the preservation of the structure of the Christian Year in the English-speaking world, speaking of "our gratitude to the Church of England for the preservation of the precious gift of the Christian Year through the centuries of our neglect". Then surely only the gravest dogmatic reasons could make us depart from their practice! It is true that our indebtedness "does not mean that we can regard the authority of the sixteenth century as being adequate for our purpose"; and "new developments are admissible, for the Spirit of God guides and empowers the Church". But the unity of the Church and uniformity of Christian practice in the main essentials of the Church Calendar are important values.

A six-Sunday Advent "concerned with the Incarnation and the preparation for that in the Old Testament" may have historical precedent, but it does not seem an advance on the accepted four-Sunday Advent concerned with the Second Coming. Our revived Scottish observance of the Christian Year can remain in line with Catholic Christendom, and still be faithful to our Reformed tradition and fulfil Dr. McArthur's wise positive principle that "it is the whole Biblical revelation which should be manifested in orderly sequence throughout the Christian Year, including the work

of God the Father in Creation and Providence, and the work of God the Holy Spirit in the Church, and in the hope of the Kingdom of God. Thus the Year and the Creed would be linked with each other”.

It is good to be reminded of the Biblical and evangelical concern of the Church Calendar. Gradually, the greater seemliness of our church buildings, and now the rhythm of the changing seasons, are being used to proclaim the Gospel of the Sovereign Grace and Love of God in Christ Jesus in its *wholeness*. The use of the Christian Year ensures that every great theme of the Incarnate Life of Jesus and the Founding of His Church is proclaimed in the prayers, praise and preaching of the Church at least once each year. This is a vital evangelical concern.

The absence of a Church Calendar may have mattered less in the immediate post-Reformation age, when, according to Calvin's precept and example, consecutive Biblical exposition formed the basis of the Church's Sunday worship, thus ensuring the proclamation of the *wholeness* of the Gospel. The circumstances and conditions of our age seem to preclude a return to any such comprehensive exposition of the Word of God. Then the only alternative for the Church in the discharge of its full evangelical responsibility is an observance of the Christian Year.

A responsible use of the Church Calendar can help to bring the Church back to the Bible and deliver us from the plethora of bogus celebrations, which grow in number from year to year: Temperance Sunday, United Nations Day, Empire Youth Sunday, Health Sunday, Old People's Sunday, Horse Sunday, etc. Even the more laudable of those "feasts" have their roots in the social and political world rather than in the Word of God. The Christian Year is a true handmaiden of the Gospel in helping to keep the Church's worship rooted in the Word of God and close to the Holy Scriptures.

This raises the problem of a Lectionary, to ensure that the Bible is read to the people on a comprehensive basis and not entirely according to the individual minister's whim. It would be regrettable if the Church of Scotland, with its precious tradition of freedom in worship, were to adopt an *obligatory* Lectionary. But the help of a Lectionary based on the Christian Year, such as is found in the *Book of Common Order* or *Prayers for the Christian Year*,

has great value in ensuring the presentation of the *wholeness* of the faith for which I plead.

I should wish for a somewhat richer and fuller Calendar for the Church of Scotland than Dr. McArthur suggests. Even although Trinity Sunday did not arise until about the 10th century, I should not agree with Pope Alexander II. (died 1073) or Dr. McArthur in excluding from the liturgical year a special day for emphasizing one of the most vital doctrinal concerns of our holy faith, a Festival of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Provided the standard of what is found in the Holy Scriptures and what truly edifies is exercised, the Church of Scotland could accept a rich and full Church Calendar as evangelically relevant and valuable.

A place must surely be found for all the feasts which proclaim Jesus Christ our Saviour: the Annunciation (March 25); Christmas (December 25), Epiphany (January 6), and Candlemas (February 2), which all glorify the Saviour born "to be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of God's people, Israel"; the Transfiguration (August 6) of Jesus, Lord of both Old and New Covenants; Palm Sunday, Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter, commemorating the events which wrought our salvation; and Ascension Day or the Sunday following to declare that "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead".

Pentecost or Whitsunday celebrates the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the New Birth of the Church, while Trinity Sunday calls the Church to worship before the Majesty and Love of the Triune God. In the Lenten Fast, the Church bewails her sins and turns to the Cross, while in the Advent Fast, the Church awaits her Coming Lord in hope and joy. At All Saintstide (November 1), the Church rejoices in the Communion of Saints.

Such occasions as the Feast of the Conversion of S. Paul (January 25), S. Columba's Day (June 9) and S. Andrew's Day (November 30) serve a missionary interest and remind our nation of its Christian origins. Michaelmas or the Feast of S. Michael and All Angels (September 29) turns the Church's eyes to the unseen world. Parishes with a genuine saint's reference in their original dedication might profitably observe that Saint's day in gratitude for their Christian inheritance (*e.g.*, S. Mungo's Day at Glasgow Cathedral: January 13). As long as they are sufficiently

related to the Word of God, those additional observances may have a useful place in a truly evangelical Church Calendar. They must never be uncritically increased in number at the risk of diverting emphasis from the occasions which witness directly to Jesus Christ, Sole King and Head of the Church.

These are difficult times in which to make the Gospel's intangible values real and relevant to a generation beset by such pressure from the material and economic sides of life. So we dare not neglect so useful a "help" in the service of the Christian Gospel as an observance of the Christian Year. Have we the vision and evangelical zeal to make the rhythm of the changing seasons into a veritable "*time-cathedral*" in which our people may worship the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with greater devotion and reality? If Frances Thompson's soul fled the Almighty "down the arches of the years", can our generation be made to meet Him under the arches of the succeeding years and changing seasons, because the very calendar proclaims His Saving Presence?

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