

Why Don't We Use the Church Calendar?

The church calendar follows the various events in the life of Christ. It begins on the fourth Sunday before Christmas; this season bears the title *Advent*. The Advent color is purple and lasts four weeks; it is preparation for *Christmas*. The Christmas color is white and is celebrated for twelve days beginning on December 25th. It is a time to remember the birth of Christ. The *Epiphany* colors are white and green and represent the visit of the Magi, who represent all nations. The following period is that of *Lent*. The color for Lent is purple and corresponds to the forty days of temptation of Christ in the wilderness. The time of Lent ends with Holy Week and the death of Christ on the cross on Good Friday. Following Lent is the time of *Easter*, which has white as its color and is observed for fifty days. After Easter is the period of *Ascension*, which has white as its color and commemorates the day Christ ascended to heaven. After Ascension, the period of *Pentecost*, literally *fifty*, is observed, which has red as its color. It commemorates the birth of the church and the tongues of fire that rested on the heads of the disciples, hence the choice of red, the color of the fire, is the color for this period. The last period is the *Sundays after Pentecost*, which has the color green; the church contemplates the teachings of Jesus, His ministry, and the revelation of God as Trinity. This is the Church Calendar. Let us explore the church calendar, its origins, presuppositions, and then answer the question of why we do not follow this practice. First, Why do Christians use the Church Calendar?

There are those who argue, even from within Reformed circles, that the Church Calendar is a great benefit to the body of Christ. For example, one author writes, "When all of God's people participate in the reading of His word in a systematic way, *i.e.*, the lectionary, and the church provides a calendar ordered around the concept of a liturgical year, the people of God are able to draw nearer to Him in a type of unity that can be done in no other way. God uses these means to help us focus our attention on Him rather than on the cares and worries of the world which can so easily draw us away from Him" (Duck Schuller, "Lectionary and the Church Calendar," *Credenda / Agenda* 14/3, Musica). So, then, is this author correct? Does the Church Calendar draw us closer to God "in a type of unity that can be done in no other way"? The answer to this question is, No.

On a cursory reading of the Church Calendar we should take note that it is marked by Roman Catholic theology. For example, Christmas is not simply December 25th, as is commonly celebrated in our own day. It was originally the celebration of the *Christ mass*, the mass that celebrated the birth of Christ. The first evidence of the celebration of this mass on December 25th was in 330 AD when the Pope designated it as the day to celebrate the birth of Christ. Space does not allow us to explore the problems involved in the Roman Catholic *mass*, a re-sacrifice of Christ; nevertheless it is a doctrine that is at odds with Scripture (Heb. 7.27). The same problem holds true for the period of Lent. Lent is supposed "to be a time of abstinence, prayer, and works of charity" (Erickson, *Dictionary*, p. 95). This, of course, is connected to the Roman Catholic understanding of works-righteousness. This is not the only connection to Roman Catholic theology. For example, the Roman Catholic Church writes that "in celebrating this annual cycle of the mysteries of Christ, Holy Church honors the Blessed Mary, Mother of God, with a special love. She is inseparably linked with the saving work of her Son" (*Catechism of the*

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Catholic Church, p. 303, § 1172). Some will argue that the Reformers were aware of these connections with Roman Catholic theology, yet they still retained some aspects of the Church Calendar. While it is true that it can be denuded of its Roman Catholic doctrine, the overall practice of observing the Church Calendar conflicts with two more important aspects of biblical teaching: the biblical views of worship and history.

The Church Calendar conflicts with the biblical view of worship and what the Reformed tradition calls the *regulative principle*. There is the constant theme in Scripture that God sets the standards for worship, not man (Deut. 12.32; Matt. 15.9; Lev. 10.1-2; 1 Cor. 14.1ff). For this reason the Westminster divines write that “the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will” (WCF 21.1b). God has not instituted the Church Calendar. Paul exhorts Timothy to “preach the Word” (2 Tim. 4.2); he does not give him a schedule to follow. Moreover, the previously cited author claims that the Church Calendar would bring about unity that nothing else can bring about. If this was the case, why did God in all of His wisdom not command the Church to do this? Moreover, the argument that the entire Church body needs to follow the same schedule flies in the face of the occasional nature of the New Testament epistles. A Church Calendar will not bring about greater unity, only Christ can bring unity through the work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace. If this is how the Church Calendar conflicts with the biblical view of worship, how does it conflict with the Bible’s view of history?

Note the language that is used to describe the Church Calendar: “In the liturgical year the various aspects of the one Paschal mystery unfold. This is also the case *with the cycle of feasts* surrounding the mystery of the incarnation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 303, § 1171; emphasis). Notice that the church calendar operates on a *cyclical* pattern. It is ancient pagan religions that have a cyclical view of history: “The world-cycle runs its course, obeys its stars, absolutes its round, and then the end links on to a new beginning, ushering in a repetition of the same sequence” (Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, p. 334). A cyclical view of history is at odds with the biblical view, which is linear—a definite beginning and end, not an endless repetitive cycle. The Church should not expect “a quasi-consummation, which would bear on its face the Sisyphus-expression of endless toil” (Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, p. 334). In other words, the Church Calendar repeats the same endless cycle, Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, only to start over again with Advent. The biblical view, on the other hand, recognizes that the events of Christ’s ministry are in the past and that we are moving forward to a goal—the consummation of history, the return of Christ, the final judgment, and eternity with our triune Lord.

God reminds us of this linear understanding of history, a beginning and an end, by the Sabbath. For example, the author of Hebrews writes: “There remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (Heb. 4.9). He reminds his recipients that just as God concluded His creative work and entered His Sabbath rest (Gen. 2.2; cf. Heb. 4.1-11), so too we must desire to enter God’s Sabbath rest. We get a foretaste of that final eschatological rest each and every Sunday. For this reason, OPC Minister and professor at Westminster Seminary, Richard Gaffin, notes that “the pattern of six days of activity interrupted by

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one of rest is a reminder that human beings are not caught up in a meaningless flow of days, one after the other without end, but that history has a beginning and ending and is headed toward final judgment and the consummation of all things” (“The Sabbath: A Sign of Hope,” OPC Position Paper, p. 6). In a sense, God *has* given the Church a calendar—observe a Sabbath rest and worship Him on this day (Exo. 20.8-11; cf. Acts 20.7; 1 Cor. 16.2). On the Sabbath we recall the great redemptive events of the past, namely Christ’s first advent, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension, and look forward to the consummation of the age and His second advent.

For these reasons, we do not observe the Church Calendar: (1) it is too intertwined with Roman Catholic teaching, which is at odds with the teaching of Scripture; (2) the Church Calendar conflicts with the Bible’s teaching that it is God who determines how He is to be worshipped, namely the *regulative principle*; and (3) it conflicts with the biblical view of history—a linear movement from beginning to end.

Man constantly believes that he is able to improve upon that which God has given to him. Instead, the Church should focus on being obedient to the simple things that God commands. As one recent book argues, “Observance of the Sabbath is another way of demonstrating simplicity in worship. Reformed believers do not need to observe other holy days in order to show their devotion and receive God’s blessing. Instead, by routinely observing one entire day out of every seven, believers are treated to the feast of God’s merciful provision in the outward and ordinary means of grace” (Hart and Muether, *With Reverence and Awe*, p. 185).