

IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME

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Sharing a calendar can allow communities to teach, remember, and proclaim what is important to them. Christmas is a good time to reflect on what sort of calendar, if any, Christians should observe.



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To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heavens (Ecc 3:1)

When I was a kid, going to a small primary school in the Snowy Mountains of southern New South Wales, there was a girl in my class who didn't celebrate Christmas. Does that sound like the beginning of a tragic fairy

tale? Well, maybe... It was a small place, we didn't do minorities well and she was unquestionably weird, so everyone let her know it. The fact that I can still remember this girl, and in particular, that I remember this detail about her, though I have no recollection of her name, and only a very vague sense of what she looked like, tells you the impression that this weirdness made on me.

This girl (from a family of Jehovah's Witnesses) who left a trace in my memory was peculiar in a way that placed her outside the boundaries of my community. I mean this quite literally, she experienced physical separation, she was removed from the class whenever the topics of Christmas and Easter were addressed. She went

somewhere else during school scripture. She achieved this 'otherness', not through any immediately observable physical or even social difference, at least as far as primary schoolers could observe. Her difference was calendrical, it was a matter of the observation and practice of time. But that was more than enough.

Over the course of this article I'm hoping to persuade you of the value of some form of observance of the traditional liturgical calendar of the Christian church. This is not because I'm a 'traditionalist'—nothing could be further from the truth. Neither am I merely being sophistic—running an interesting argument simply to see where it goes. If my reasoning is sound, then consider this an appeal for practical, community level change. Ultimately, I'm motivated by the intuition that sharing a calendar is a foundational mode of being together in the world that defines a group of individuals as a 'community'.¹

Before we unpack this claim, a quick note about terminology. It must already be obvious from the previous sentences that I'm using the term 'calendar' slightly differently than our common daily usage. We tend to use the word 'calendar' to refer to a physical device for keeping track of time in units greater than hours. More broadly, we might use 'calendar' to refer to the segmentation of time in units greater than the day, and our use of this segmentation as a reference system for co-ordinating activity. The etymology of the word suggests an origin in the world of accounting: a calendar co-ordinates the payment of debts, and for most of us, the pay-day and the due date remain our most quintessentially calendric experiences.

When I referred to a 'shared calendar' above, I wasn't envisaging the type of shared calendar that one creates using



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The observance of a communal calendar is an element in

Google or Outlook. It isn't foundational to a community to have a shared physical (electronic) calendar. What is shared is the basic segmentation of time, and the symbolic value attached to the different portions. Most Australians 'share' a calendar which includes the knowledge that the 25th of April each year is 'Anzac Day' and that this segment of time has a special significance tied up with 'being Australian'. When we think of 'calendar' in these terms, it becomes much easier to see the way in which it connects closely with how we understand our personal and communal identity. Just as a community can be identified by 'sharing a language', although this abstract concept is only ever observed in specific practices of speaking words, so also, a community can be identified by 'sharing a calendar', which is demonstrated in specific practices of co-ordinated, temporally referenced activity. Rarely do we reflect upon the idea that this practice is entwined within a system which is not

merely about 'getting stuff done', but intrinsically related to 'being who we are'.

My argument has three broad stages: first, we explore in more detail the connection between calendar and community; secondly, we address the history of the decline of the Christian liturgical calendar; and thirdly, I outline some reasons why the celebration of a revived Christian liturgical calendar would be of profound benefit to Christian communities.

Calendar and Community

We live in time—it holds us and moulds us—but I've never felt I understood it very well. And I'm not referring to theories about how it bends and doubles back, or may exist elsewhere in parallel versions. No, I mean ordinary, everyday time, which clocks and watches assure us passes regularly: tick-tock, click-clock. Is there anything more plausible than a second hand? And yet it takes only the smallest pleasure or pain to teach us time's

malleability. Some emotions speed it up, others slow it down; occasionally, it seems to go missing—until the eventual point when it really does go missing, never to return.²

Our experience of the phenomenon of time is rooted in the created order of the universe God made. Nothing is as plausible as a second-hand, but time is not merely a quantitative experience (the addition of seconds to our total stock); it is always thoroughly qualitative as well (hence its malleability). We do not experience 'bare' seconds, we experience boredom, exhilaration—durative qualities. It is largely the qualitative experience of time that accounts for our sense of its 'passing'. It is one of the peculiarities of modernity that we are so obsessed with measuring and economising 'bare' time that we pay little disciplined attention to the qualities of the time we spend.

We mark out time according to both quantities and qualities: a 'week' consists of 7 days of 24 hours (quantity); but it

also consists of ‘week days’ when we work and a ‘weekend’ when we don’t (qualities). The basic division of our week into periods of activity and rest is a deeply embedded form of ‘qualitative’ calendar. These qualitative distinctions are frequently not based on natural kinds: there is no underlying physical or material distinction that marks out a ‘weekend’ from a ‘weekday’.³ Nothing makes the

pay day. In many ways, these are the calendars we really care about, that really mark out the events which shape our lives.

Many of these calendars operate beyond the scale of interpersonal relationships, to mark out and confer qualities upon periods of time which hold significance for a whole community. These communal calendars step beyond the basic calendric function of co-ordinating

communicate it to others.⁵

Each of us has a story about how we came to be here, about how we came to be who we are, and about where we are going.⁶ In the same way, communities also have these stories, these ‘identity narratives’.⁷ The genius of the communal calendar is to take the great episodes of our communal identity narrative and make them episodes in our regular schedule. The communal calendar brings together the temporal markers (dates, events, memorials) of the great dramatic narrative that informs our sense of who we are with the ‘mundane’ time in which we act, rest, and pursue our daily bread.

The quintessential biblical example of the communal calendar functioning as an enacted identity narrative is the Passover. Each year the community of Israel was to affirm in actions, questions, food and words, that the exodus from Egypt was an event in the narrative life of the



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the moral/ethical formation of the members of a community.



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Australian weekend of Saturday and Sunday more properly ‘weekendish’ than the Saudi Arabian weekend of Thursday and Friday. Rather, the quality is conferred upon the time by the practice of a certain group of people. We come upon examples of this all the time: birthdays, wedding anniversaries, the fortnightly or monthly

activity and become just as much about communicating a world view. The minute that passes between 11:00 and 11:01 on the 11th of November each year is qualitatively different from the surrounding minutes for those who observe Remembrance Day. We want this moment to be silent. And from this silence we want you to learn (again and again) the importance to us of remembering the horror of the Great War, and to mourn the loss of those who died.⁴ We mark this time out and confer a qualitative difference upon it to express something we value as a community. We use our communal calendars as repositories for memories and expectations.

The observance of a communal calendar is an element in the moral/ethical formation of the members of a community. It is an education in the memories and expectations of the group that allows an individual to become the bearer of a communal identity: to ‘act out’ that identity and

current generation of God’s people:

In the future, when your son asks you, ‘What is the meaning of the stipulations, decrees and laws the LORD our God has commanded you?’ tell him: ‘We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand.’ (Dt 6:20–21, NIV11)

In this passage from Moses’ speech, neither the one answering the question and telling the story, nor the son who would eventually repeat it to the next generation, actually experienced the slavery or the rescue. But regardless, they were to say: ‘we were slaves’. The Passover, and the broader communal calendar within which Passover was situated, functioned to bring the identity-forming narrative of God’s salvation into the regular world of projects, anxieties, and expectations.

A communal calendar allows us to know who we are by announcing, with respect to our story, ‘we are here’. The loss of this calendar, brought about by

the death of memories and expectations among its keepers, is the loss of a communal identity; just as the formation of a new calendar signifies the rise of a new communal identity.

The twin celebrations of Christmas and Easter in our modern post-Christian society are the strange remainder of a Christian liturgical calendar that once encompassed the entire year and oriented individuals toward the nature and destiny of the Christian community. An account of the rise and fall of this calendar begins in the world of the later New Testament with the discussions over whether the Jewish calendar should be regarded as having ongoing significance for Christian communities (cf. Rom

established the theological underpinnings for the various events of the church calendar and how they should be celebrated.⁸

The Christian communal calendar grew in response to the rise of a new communal identity and supplanted earlier, rival calendars. Its decline came about, not due to a general decline in the observance of communal calendars, but because of a fracturing of the self-understanding of the Christian community and the rise of new, rival communal identities. Some of the factors in this process were entirely good and necessary (the Protestant Reformation). However, the end result was that for the contemporary post-Christian West the Christian liturgical

Sharing Time

Suppose that we agree upon the importance of shared calendars for the self-understanding of our community. What then? How does this realisation begin to shape the practices of remembering and anticipating? There are a number of alternatives. The first is to celebrate an 'anti-calendar', i.e. to refuse to celebrate the communal calendar of the society around us as a testimony to the different shape of the Christian narrative identity. As Anzac Day develops steadily into a rite of Australian civil religion it may eventually become important, perhaps even in the face of misunderstanding or persecution, for Christians not to observe Anzac Day, that is, to adopt an 'anti-calendar'. Similar things can (and have been) said of Christmas—that it has become so alienated from the gospel, so appropriated for the service of consumerism that it has become incapable of serving as a positive witness to the incarnation.

Opposition to communal calendars has a long tradition in Protestant Christianity. During the Middle Ages, many of the events of the church calendar degenerated into either an excuse for a good knees-up or a means of propagating pseudo-Christian superstition (veneration of relics, etc.) rather than being opportunities for Christian celebration and remembrance.⁹ Needless to say, the Reformers, and their evangelical descendants, tended to take a pretty dim view of it all.¹⁰

The most famous example of this 'evangelical' opposition to an established communal calendar is undoubtedly the Puritan 'war on Christmas'. During the period of the English Commonwealth, the Parliament, dominated by Puritans, voted to abolish the celebration of Christmas. Curious as it may seem, they even banned going to Church to celebrate Christmas. Philip Stubbes gave voice to the Puritans' reasoning, claiming '[m]ore mischief is that time committed than in all the year besides ... What dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used ...



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14:5-6; Gal 4:5; Col 2:16). Then, as later, the form of the calendar was an expression of how early Christians understood their relationship with Judaism, and of the kinds of events and memories they took to be foundational for the new 'Christian' communal identity. The Christian calendar was the subject of one of the earliest church-wide debates: the Quartodeciman controversy (from roughly 155AD onward) over the dating of Easter (finally only decided at the Council of Nicea in 325AD). Interestingly, the same great theologians, like Athanasius of Alexandria, who provided many of the theological frameworks by which we describe the relations of God-in-Trinity, also

calendar was transmogrified into a different form of communal calendar entirely: elements of civil religion, capitalist marketing strategy, and bald sentimentality were crudely stitched onto the sad rump of the Christian year.

This is an important point: the communal calendar never went away. For Australians it still consists of Christmas and Easter, along with Anzac Day and any number of 'minor feast days': Melbourne Cup Day, End of Financial Year, the Cricket Season, Grand Final Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day. Largely, Christians are uncritically accepting of this broader communal calendar. We rarely give a thought to the narrative identity it is intended to enact and reinforce.



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to the great dishonour of God and the impoverishing of the realm'.¹¹ Needless to say, the Great Big Law Against Christmas was about as popular in the 1640s as it would be today.

It's important to note though, that the opposition was always to the abuse of the church calendar rather than the concept itself. There is no question that it has been abused and can still be. But 'abuse does not remove use'. And the fact that the church calendar still has some use is pretty clearly illustrated by the fervour with which the heirs of this tradition celebrate Reformation Sunday at the end of October, even if nothing else.

I'm not convinced, however, that Christians can be content with only an anti-calendar. The Christian community

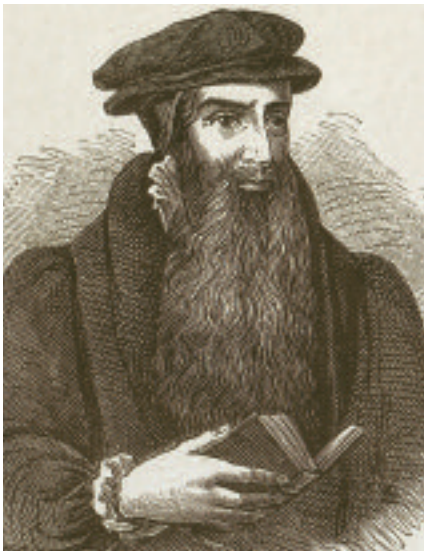


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is not founded purely on reaction, and an anti-calendar ties Christians implicitly into the ordering of time of a rival polity. The Christian refusal to observe the times and seasons of a rival community is based on the affirmation and confession of an identity as God's called people—an identity with its own narrative and thus its own calendar. Furthermore,

Christians should question the narrative identities enacted in both the communal calendars of our surrounding society and that which we have inherited from Christian tradition.

while the Quakers and radical Reformation sects are correct to testify that every day is sacred (or more precisely that the 'everyday' is a theatre for holiness, sanctity) because God created each and works in them all, this does not commit Protestant Christians to a completely undifferentiated calendar. The structures of the world God has created simply defy such a notion: there are seasons and years, variation within constancy. Refusing to elevate one day over another is a different proposition from treating every day exactly the same.

If, then, a Christian community were

to choose to embrace more than just an anti-calendar, what kind of calendar should it be? A second alternative is to simply revert to a more wholehearted appropriation of the traditional liturgical calendar of the Anglican, Catholic, Orthodox or other church. Again, however, for those of us who regard ourselves as heirs of the Protestant Reformation, we run into difficulty with this approach. While we cannot afford the temporal chauvinism of those who refuse to learn from the past under the spell of a modernist myth of progress, neither can we ignore the reality that we must act faithfully and obediently to the word of God in our own time according to conscience. Embracing an older liturgical calendar brings with it a new set of problems: what do we do with 'Saints' Days', how do we celebrate seasons like Lent (if at all), if we deny the role of penitence as understood in the Catholic doctrine of justification? There were good reasons for the Reformers to reject aspects of the older liturgical calendar. Ultimately, every Christian will be held accountable by God for their own faithfulness. Saying 'it was the tradition' is not an acceptable justification before

the judgement seat of Christ. We must, therefore, apply critical biblical reason and submit even our most precious traditions to the scrutiny of the word of God.

Here's my suggestion then: with disciplined, biblically informed critical reflection, Christians should question the narrative identities enacted in both the communal calendars of our surrounding society and that which we have inherited from Christian tradition, with the aim of developing a positive calendar appropriate to the community it unites. Such a calendar would be shaped by the desire to educate and discipline us in the

realities brought to light in the gospel of Jesus Christ (a bit like a doctrinal version of the traditional lectionary). We observe the Christian calendar to remind, encourage, train, and elaborate these realities, not merely as an intellectual discipline, but as an integrated intellectual-affective-practical activity. We are taught from the word of God, we lift up our hearts in songs and prayers and stories designed to move our affections—emotions, and we engage in a variety of symbolic actions and acts of care toward those around us.

By doing this in the form of a calendar we insist that we must all learn together (the whole church from the children to the elders); that we must think and feel and act together in response to who Christ is and what he has done; that our faith is rooted in history (the historical facts of Jesus' life, the growth of the early church, and the chain of remembrance and respect ('tradition') that embodies our claim that the fellowship of Christians is with far more than those who currently possess the present); and finally, that we are a community still waiting, and we engage in the discipline of truthful remembrance for the sake of the future. This revolving wheel of seasons keeps whispering to us, 'until he comes'.



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Each of our local gatherings belongs to God, who unites us in Christ and makes us members of the world-wide family promised to Abraham. And so it would be obvious and appropriate to share this calendar with that extended family—to listen and learn from each other. But each gathering of Christians is also uniquely 'the church of God' in such and such a place. It's not inappropriate for our local gathering to have a local calendar. We should celebrate the foundation of our gathering; the purchase of a place to meet; the anniversaries of those who God used to

spur us on in love and good deeds. All these are the normal celebrations of a family calendar: the markers in a year, and down the years that say, 'this is who we are' by reminding us, 'this is where we have come from and where we are going.' These threads of our common life are then woven into a larger tapestry of celebrations and remembrances: the calendar of our deeper story, the narrative of the God who walked in time; who makes time for us; and who will carry all things through to their completion on the Day of Christ Jesus.

Come Lord Jesus. ©

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Adopting a Christian communal calendar doesn't require a Pope or synod. We can begin in the life of our local gathering of believers. Obviously, if we're serious about respecting the wisdom of the past and linking our communal life with those who've gone before we might want some further understanding of the traditional liturgical calendar of the historic Christian denominations. Robert E. Webbers' *Ancient Future Time* is a helpful evangelical resource focussed on understanding the significance and practice of different seasons of the traditional liturgical year.¹²

ENDNOTES

- 1 To put it more rigorously, a shared calendar is analytic within those concepts of 'thick relations' which we fall back upon when we seek to describe belonging to a particular set of humans over against the biologically defined species. This concept of 'thick relations' can be found in a number of contemporary ethicists but I'm drawing primarily on the work of Avishai Margalit in *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2004).
- 2 Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011) p3.
- 3 Although this is not a requirement of a qualitative calendar, certain physical phenomena can be assigned symbolic values so that they are recognised as part of a qualitative calendar.
- 4 The fact that this observance communicates a world view can be seen from the fact that we choose to remember by keeping silent. A more triumphalist understanding of the role of warfare in human society would observe this remembrance distinctly differently.
- 5 Communal calendars certainly aren't the only means by which we engage in 'identity forming': this process is constantly occurring in families, schools, through music, stories, media, advertising, and myriad other media.
- 6 N.T. Wright gives a very helpful introduction to the concept of a narrative worldview in his *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). My argument is that the communal calendar is a place in which basic world-view stances become structurally encoded.
- 7 We don't make these stories up from scratch, instead we find ourselves within them.
- 8 Athanasius' Paschal Letters are still some of the best Christian literature on the significance of Easter (available at ccel.org).
- 9 In the late Middle Ages the number of 'feast' days and 'saints' days were so proliferated throughout the year it became difficult for anyone to get any work done. In various ways, the church tended to get a decent financial bump out of all these observances.
- 10 The Quakers, radical heirs to the Puritans, still make this a core element of their communal identity through the 'Testimony against times and seasons'.
- 11 Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses* 1st Ed. (London: Jones, 1583), p173. Available at <http://www.archive.org/stream/anatomieofabuses00stub>. This kind of reasoning led to anti-Christmas legislation when the Puritan party came to power in the 1640's.
- 12 Robert E. Webber, *Ancient Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2004).