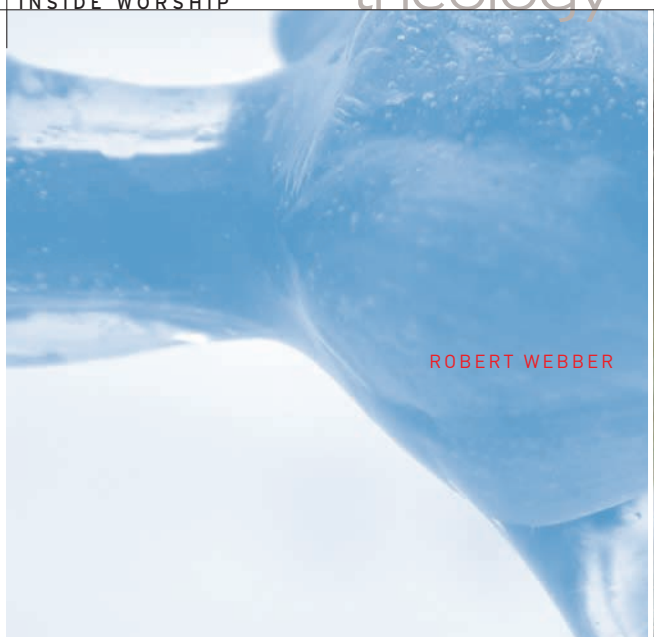
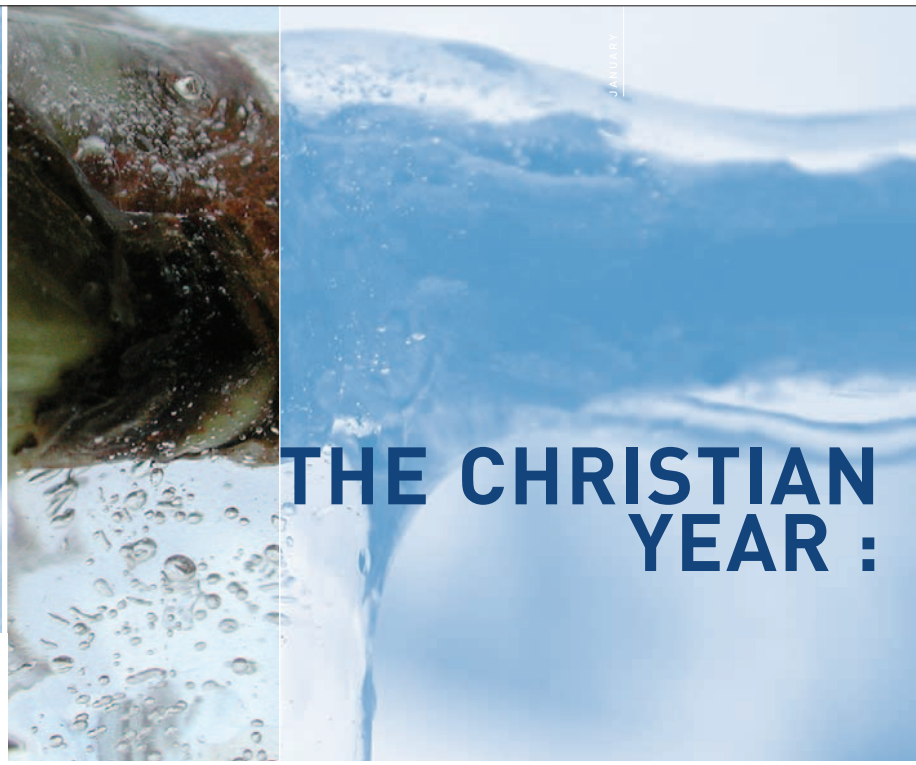




THE CHRISTIAN YEAR :

ROBERT WEBBER

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Regulating the life of the Church today by the Christian calendar is no easy task. Life-long habits need to be re-oriented to this way of marking time. If churches are to accomplish this task, worship leaders and planners must learn a great deal about the history and theology that have shaped the Christian calendar. The great benefit of the Christian year is that the worshiping church is able to follow a rich and meaningful way of orienting its life around the work of Jesus Christ. Studying the history and theology of the Christian year can only help the Church do justice to the profound implications of each aspect of Jesus' life.

WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN YEAR?

The Christian celebrates the saving events of God in Jesus Christ by marking those particular events in which God's saving purposes were made known.

The most common term for the yearly celebration of time in worship is the *Christian Year*. The Christian year, developed in antiquity, was a vital part of worship until the Reformation, when Protestants abandoned much of it because of the abuses attached to it in the late medieval period.

Protestants claimed that nearly every day of the year had been named after a saint. The emphasis on these saints and the feasts connected with their lives overshadowed the celebration of the Christ-event in the more evangelical pattern of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost celebrations. Consequently Protestants discontinued observing the Christian year and lost its positive aspects as they attempted to remove Roman excesses. The current return to the Christian year among Protestants advocates a very simple and unadorned year that accents the major events of Christ, a Christian year similar to that of the early church.

ALL TIME HAS A CENTER

Contemporary liturgical scholarship has pointed out that the focal point and source of the Christian year is the death and resurrection of Christ. Even the earliest Christians recognized that the death and resurrection of Jesus began the "new time." The fact that two major events of the church took place during Jewish celebrations – Passover and Pentecost – helped the early Christians to associate themselves with the Jewish reckoning of time and yet dissociate themselves by recognizing that a new time had begun. Thus, like the Jews, the early Christians marked time but, unlike the Jews, they marked their time now by the events of the new age.

The unique feature of the Christian conception of time is the major moment (kairos) through which all other kairoi and chronoi find their meaning. This unique moment is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Christ. Thus, in Christianity, all time has a center. Paul developed this notion in his epistle to the Colossians declaring that Christ is the creator of all things (1:16), the one in whom all things hold together (1:17), and the one through whom all things are reconciled (1:20). Christ is the cosmic center of all history. Everything before Christ finds fulfillment in Christ. Everything since Christ finds its meaning by pointing back to Christ.

MARKING SEASONS OF WORSHIP

This Christian conception of time is important because it plays a significant role in the worship of the church. The historic and unrepeatable Christ-event is the content that informs and gives meaning to all time. Therefore, in worship we sanctify present time by enacting the past event of Jesus in time, which transforms the present and gives shape to the future. Because space does not permit a full treatment of the origins and development of the church year, the following summary will do no more than outline the church year and touch on the origin and meaning of each part.

Advent. The word advent means "coming." It signifies the period preceding



A PRIMER

the birth of Christ when the church anticipates the coming of the Messiah. Although it signals the beginning of the church year, it appears that Advent was established after other parts of the year as a means of completing the cycle. Its purpose was to prepare worshipers for the birth of our Lord. The Roman church adopted a four-week season before Christmas, a practice that became universally accepted.

Epiphany. The word epiphany means "manifestation." It was first used to refer to the manifestation of God's glory in Jesus Christ (see John 2:11) in his birth, his baptism, and his first miracle. Although the origins of the Epiphany are obscure, it is generally thought to have originated among the Christians in Egypt as a way of counteracting a pagan winter festival held on January 6. Originally it probably included Christmas (celebrated on December 25 to replace the pagan festival of the sun). This period ends with attention to the Transfiguration.

Lent. Lent signifies a period of preparation before Easter. The origins of Lent lie in the preparation of the catechumen before baptism. The setting aside of a time of preparation for baptism goes back as early as the Didache and is attested to in Justin Martyr and detailed in the Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus. Gradually the time of preparation was associated with the number forty: Moses spent forty years preparing for his mission; the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years; Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness. In addition, the congregation joined the catechumenate in preparation, making it a special time for the whole church.

Easter. The Easter season stands out as the time of joy and celebration. Unlike Lent, which is somber in tone, Easter is the time to focus on resurrection joy. Augustine said:
"These days after the Lord 's Resurrection form a period, not of labor, but of peace and joy. That is why there is no fasting and we pray standing, which is a sign of resurrection. This practice is observed at the altar on all Sundays, and the *Alleluia* is sung, to indicate that our future occupation is to be no other than the praise of God."

The preaching of this period calls attention to the post-resurrection appearance of Jesus and the preparation of his disciples to witness to the kingdom. It is fifty days in length.

Pentecost. The term Pentecost means "fifty," referring now to the fifty days after Passover when the Jews celebrated the Feast of Weeks, the agricultural festival that celebrated the end of the barley harvest and the beginning of the wheat harvest. In the Christian calendar the term is associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of the early church. Possible evidence of Pentecost in the Christian church goes back to Tertullian and Eusebius in the beginning of the third century.

EVERY YEAR IN EVERY AGE

In sum, the following excerpt from the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy captures the importance of celebrating the church year.

"The church is conscious that it must celebrate the saving work of the divine Bridegroom by devoutly recalling it on certain days throughout the course of the year. Every week, on the day which the Church has called the Lord's Day, it keeps the memory of the Lord's resurrection, which it also celebrates once in the year, together with his blessed passion, in the most solemn festival of Easter. Within the cycle of a year, moreover, the Church unfolds the whole mystery of Christ, from his incarnation and birth until his ascension, the day of Pentecost, and the expectation of blessed hope and of the Lord's return. Recalling thus the mysteries of redemption, the Church opens to the faithful the riches of the Lord's powers and merits, so that these are in some way made present in every age in order that the faithful may lay hold on them and be filled with saving grace (par. 102)."



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