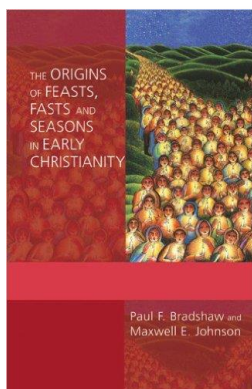


[Review] *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity*, by Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson

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Book review

It's Sunday morning and you make your way to a service of Christian worship. Why Sunday? You arrive at church and discover that the sermon is based on the magi's veneration of Jesus. Why is this story appearing in January? Your aunt from Romania is visiting and makes her way to church with you. She is expecting to hear the story of Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River. Why is she confused?

Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, in *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity*, provide authoritative answers and reasoned perspective on these and many related questions as they take the reader on a tour of the historical development of the significant days and seasons of the Christian narrative as celebrated in worship. In doing so, they give the academy and the church a valuable reference volume for piecing together the puzzle of the Christian year.

From the start, the authors dispel the popular myth that the liturgical year developed in a relatively orderly way—perhaps even with the intention of gradually filling in all of the gaps from primary to “secondary” events in the biblical narrative in order over time. Bradshaw and Johnson challenge this assumption in their introduction by forthrightly stating that the concept of the “liturgical year” is a relatively modern practice, the term itself originating in the sixteenth century. They assert that “Christians in antiquity did not view the



various festivals, fasts, and seasons that they experienced through each year as forming a unity, a single entity, and indeed those events themselves did not emerge in any planned or coordinated fashion but instead as a number of entirely unrelated cycles with the result that they tended to overlap or conflict with one another” (xiii).

So much for a grand orchestrated plan. But that is precisely the benefit of the authors’ work. This book is undertaken by two highly regarded liturgical historians who want to seek out the facts, not perpetuate erroneous assumptions. They do a reading *of* history, not a reading *into* history, and they do so with surgical precision. From beginning to end, the book lays out how various days and seasons developed independently of each other across Christendom, with regard both to geographical regions and to ecclesial bodies. The result is that this book often gives more questions than answers—which is often the case with serious scholarship. However, when *better* questions surface while in pursuit of accurate information, everyone benefits. Therefore, readers looking for succinct conclusions in this book, hoping to find a clear framework for putting the liturgical year into a conclusive historical order, will be disappointed. The closest the authors come to drawing conclusions is the general summary paragraphs at the end of each chapter. Even though these are not definitive statements about the historical development of the feasts, fasts, and seasons in early Christianity, these summaries are invaluable. The authors simply say what *can* be said, having provided a convincing argument along the way.

The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity is organized according to the order in which the various days and seasons came to be honored by the earliest Christian communities, not according to the order of the Christian calendar. It begins, therefore, with the Lord’s Day, rather than Advent. The primary sections of the book are organized accordingly: Sabbath and Sunday, Easter and Pentecost, Lent and Holy Week, Christmas and Epiphany, and Martyrs and Other Saints. I appreciate this approach not only for the historical perspective it lends to the liturgical year but also for the pastoral perspective; theoretically those events that developed first, middle, and late shed light upon how the ancient church understood the priorities of these events for worship.

Chapter by chapter, the authors provide a thorough examination of the people, places, and practices in the development of each aspect of the liturgical year in early Christianity. Their knowledge of the sources, both ancient and modern, is remarkable. What’s more, far from simply reporting their findings, they place their sources in a point–counterpoint dialogue that helps readers to see the delicate and complicated issues related to sorting the data out. Their widely acknowledged expertise is apparent, thereby convincing the reader of

precisely what can or cannot be claimed. The book concludes with a helpful index of modern authors and an additional index of ancient authors and subjects.

The book is compact in presentation and the type remains readable. Generous footnotes are used throughout, which keeps the information instantly accessible.

I recommend this book especially to those who work in the academy. It is of such historical detail that teachers and students who desire a serious examination of the topic will be more than satisfied. Its strength lies in its thoroughness of scope while remaining within one volume of reasonable length. I also recommend it for its ecumenical sensibilities. There was a time when the full practice of the liturgical year was thought to be limited to Roman Catholics and later, mainline denominations. The millennial generation's recent interest in story, cultural metanarratives, and ancient practices in worship has led to a widening appreciation for the Christian metanarrative as it is celebrated in weekly worship and crosses liturgical borders. A serious and approachable book is most welcome as leaders seek to navigate the territory either for the first time or in light of recent scholarship. Bradshaw and Johnson have contributed to this effort.

Personal reflections on the Christian year

Like many folks in a number of Protestant circles, I grew up in the kind of church environment that celebrated two high moments in the course of a calendar year: Christmas and Easter. Our leaders were suspicious of those churches that practiced a more fully orbed expression of the Christian Year. Epiphany? The Great Fifty Days? Kingdomtide? These are weird words and might take us off our game. After all, other things were more important in worship, like sermon series and evangelism. Worst of all, this is what Catholics or Protestant “Catholic lookalikes” do. Observing the primary days and seasons of the liturgical calendar was just not what good evangelical Christians should get involved in. There was even an implied assumption that people who celebrated the liturgical year weren’t quite as spiritual as some of the rest of us. Unfortunately, biases such as these remained unchallenged in my early years of ministry in the local church.

Thankfully, eventually I came to realize that my fears were unfounded and my suspicions were based upon sheer lack of understanding. Some wise and gentle mentors lifted the veil from my eyes and I came to see the Christian year very differently. I came to see it for what it is: a means of moving toward Christ-centered worship.

The purpose of the Christian year is to shift from marking time that is oriented to us (work and social calendars, civic holidays) to observing time that orients itself around God's purposes in salvation history (the Christian calendar). And because God's greatest act of saving history is found in the person and work of God's son, Jesus Christ, all of time takes on new meaning. Yes, each of us lives in a particular culture and time zone, and it's fitting to operate according to secular and civic calendars as we live our lives. In fact, one of the New Testament words for time is *chronos*, the Greek word from which we get "chronology." Observing *chronos* time helps us to order our lives as citizens in an earthly place.

Yet though observing *chronos* time is practical and necessary, we are simultaneously citizens of a more important kingdom, the kingdom of God. Therefore the New Testament offers us a larger, even cosmic, view of time with a second word, *kairos*. *Kairos* refers to appropriate and perfect time—from God's point of view—wherein God acts to achieve his purposes. Many moments all along the timeline of salvation history are remarkable because God intervened to save his people. Of course, God's timeline is still going until, in another *kairos* moment, time is no more, at which point time will be irrelevant. The Christian year highlights the greatest of God's timely acts: the incarnation, earthly ministry, death, rising, and ascension of Jesus Christ. "But when the fullness of time [*kairos*] had come, God sent his Son" (Galatians 4:4, NRSV).

There are several appropriate terms that refer to the marking of time in the *kairos* way (such as liturgical calendar, or the church year), but I favor "the Christian year." I do this simply because the main point isn't liturgy or church; the main point is Christ. Look at the meanings of the six primary seasons of the Christian year to see the centrality of Jesus's life and work:

- Advent: The prophetic anticipation of Christ's first and second comings
- Christmas: God's incarnation in the form of God's Son
- Epiphany: The manifestation of Jesus's divinity during his earthly ministry
- Lent: The passion of our Lord
- Easter: The resurrection victory of our Lord
- Pentecost: The realization of the promise made by Jesus to send the Holy Spirit

When we orient our weekly worship to what God has done in Christ through the Holy Spirit, we begin to see that *kairos* time is what gives *chronos* time its true meaning.

Early on, while I was smugly asking, "Why in the world are some churches focusing on liturgical days and

seasons,” God was all the while patiently waiting for me to discover that corporate Christian worship is the perfect occasion to tell *God’s* story, not my story. I am grateful to see this now, and it’s still coming into clearer focus.

As I live in increasing awareness of the Christian calendar year by year, I grow in my appreciation of the remarkable things God has done, is doing, and will do. I see the tremendous value in “marking the remarkable” in time. In fact, my discoveries have resulted in a richer spirituality, not only for me but also for my students and the people in the congregation I lead weekly. You could say I’ve been converted. What I once dismissed as irrelevant, even questionable, has deepened my worship of Jesus. In fact, I’ve come to believe that one of the ways in which my love for Jesus Christ has grown is in direct relationship to my appreciation for the Christian year. Why? Because in worship I come face to face with the center of God’s story: Jesus.