

ANNO DOMINI:
THE TRANSFORMATION OF TIME

Like a great piece of music, time or history has rhythms. From the second hand on our modern clocks to the days, weeks, months and seasons of the year, history moves forward rhythmically. In this movement there is sameness, yet there are differences. Like that piece of music which uses the same notes and similar rhythms to move toward an appointed end, so history has repetition which is moving forward to an appointed end. Some have made the mistake of emphasizing the sameness of history to the point of saying that history is cyclical (reincarnation for example). History is not a vicious circle. It is moving forward. But those patterns, those rhythms, remain quite familiar.

This is true not only on a cosmic scale, but also in our individual lives. These cosmic patterns are personalized in each individual. Even if you are not a very scheduled or structured person, your life has some rhythm to it. Whether it is a sleeping and waking pattern, work and rest pattern or more broadly a day-by-day pattern, all of us live with these rhythms of life. It is when these rhythms are interrupted that we recognize them the most. For instance, if you fly from here to Japan you stand the great chance of becoming somewhat disoriented because you will go an entire day without seeing the sun go down. This interrupts your pattern in sleeping. We call this jet lag.

Whether we are aware of it or not, we live with these patterns and rhythms in life. This way of living is not arbitrary. On the contrary, they are created by God. The rhythms of life keep us connected to the past, keep us oriented in the present, and keep us moving toward the future as individuals and communities. God providentially guides things to be so. How these patterns are to be defined or what perspective we are to take on them is what will concern us in this article.

To speak about the *Liturgical Year* means that our worship throughout the year follows a particular theme. That theme is the life of Christ as revealed to us in the Scriptures. The Liturgical Year is, essentially, *the definition of history in terms of the work of Jesus Christ*. We should understand that it is impossible to live in an “undefined history.” History will be defined. Man will understand time in some way. Whether it is through the old pagan understanding and rituals of celebrating fertility in the spring or defining history as essentially meaningless, time will be shaped, molded, or defined in some way. God defined time in the Old Covenant (OC) quite clearly. The church for nearly 2000 years has understood that time/history must be shaped, molded, or defined by the advent, death and resurrection of Jesus. The purpose of this article is to give you the theological reasons that lie behind the liturgical year.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ORIGINAL CREATION AND NEW CREATION

The Scriptures teach that the scope of salvation goes far beyond the individual or even beyond a collection of individuals called the church. Most certainly salvation includes both of these, but it is much more than this. The church has been heavily influenced by movements such as Pietism with all its first cousins into reducing salvation into a matter of personal devotion that somehow rises above or escapes history and is distinct from it. So, as we will continue to see, salvation is understood almost as a “substance” like water that is poured into us that does not necessarily have any bearing on the rest of history, except, that is, striving to get others to join you in your salvation prayer closet. In this view, salvation is really an escape from history and creation.

But the Scriptures are opposed to reducing salvation/redemption to individual piety and some sort of escape. Redemption, in its broader terms, is the transformation and reconciliation of all things to their proper relationship with God. In other words, original creation, even as it has been corrupted by sin, is not destroyed but rather transformed. The Christian mission in the world is not one of escape or hanging on until we leave this evil creation. That is a pagan view. The Christian mission in the world is one of transformation and reconciliation. Our mission is to take up the vocation of Christ: that the world, the entire cosmos, might be saved through him (John 3.17). This is what Paul describes in part in Romans 8.

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected *it* in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. (Rom 8.19-22)

Creation is being and will be redeemed; i.e., set free from the bondage brought about by the sin of Adam. So the history of redemption is the history of how God is transforming the original creation through Jesus Christ. Two basic biblical images will help us to understand this continuity between the original creation and the new creation in Christ.

NIGHT AND DAY

The first biblical image that gives us the rhythm or pattern of redemptive history is found in the opening words of the revelation of God.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw the light, that *it was* good; and God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. So the evening and the morning were the first day. (Gen 1.1-5)

The theme of darkness and light is prevalent throughout Scripture and characterizes the progress of redemptive history. On the fourth day of creation the darkness and light are given governing bodies, as it were. The sun will rule the day, the moon will rule the night along with the stars. These lights in the firmament will serve for *signs* and seasons, and for days and years. Here it is from Genesis again:

Then God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs and seasons, and for days and years; and let them be for lights in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth"; and it was so. Then God made two great lights: the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night. *He made* the stars also. God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to rule over the day and over the night, and to divide the light from the darkness. And God saw that *it was* good. So the evening and the morning were the fourth day. (Gen 1.14-19)

The word “signs” here is the same word used in Exodus 12.13 to speak about the “sign” of the blood displayed in the Passover. The presence of the sun is not simply there for pragmatic purposes (e.g., warmth, light, etc.), even though it provides all of those things. God appointed the sun to tell the world about himself and how he works. As we look back through the complete revelation of God, we can understand better how God orchestrated these themes and how his glory is etched in all of creation.

When dealing with the history of redemption, the themes of darkness and light, night and day, characterize the progress from the OC to the NC (New Covenant). The OC is characterized as darkness or sometimes shadows while the NC is characterized as day or light. Two things need to be noticed from the reading of the opening verses of Genesis that will be made clear as God unfolds his story of redemption.

1. Light comes out of darkness.

It might seem a little odd that the God who dwells in unapproachable light (cf. 1Tim 6.16) would have created the heavens and the earth and that there would be darkness on the face of the deep. One might think that light would be the first thing that would be recognized. But the Scripture is clear: darkness is first, and light comes out of the darkness. This is how the story of redemption will unfold: out of the darkness light will come. Paul takes this passage in Genesis and gives it its theological import in light of the coming of Jesus. “For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4.6 NASB). As in creation the light came out of the darkness, so the light of God’s salvation in Jesus will come out of the darkness of the OC.

2. Day follows night.

Throughout the creation account we have, what is for us, a somewhat strange way of reckoning days: “and the evening and the morning were the first day.” The entire “day” began in the evening and progressed through to the daylight. This is why, not so incidentally, the Jews begin their day at 6:00 PM. The day begins at night based on creation. So it will be in God’s history of redemption: day will follow night. God has etched his plan in his providential pattern throughout the creation. And when we see allusions to night and day, we should take greater notice of them. For instance, we see the NC being described by Isaiah as light instead of the present darkness: “Arise, shine; For your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you. For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, And deep darkness the people; But the LORD will arise over you, And His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, And kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa 60.1-3). The Messiah himself is described as the “Sun of righteousness rising with healing in his wings” (Mal 4.2). Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, praises God for the deliverance coming through his promised Messiah and says, “Because of the tender mercy of our God, With which the Sunrise from on high shall visit us...” (Lk 1.78 NASB). Matthew writes that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise spoken by Isaiah in “Nevertheless the gloom *will not be* upon her who *is* distressed, As when at first He lightly esteemed The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, And afterward more heavily oppressed *her*, *By* the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, In Galilee of the Gentiles. The people who walked in darkness Have seen a great light; Those who dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, Upon them a light has shined.” (Isa 9.1-2; Matt 4.15-16).

While there are other ways in which the darkness-light theme is used in Scripture (e.g., walking as pagans as opposed to the people of God), ultimately the theme always points to Jesus. In Jesus himself we have the Sun rising, bringing in the *day* of the Lord (which is another interesting allusion). So when we see Paul referring to the Jewish calendar as “shadows” but the substance is Christ (Col 2.17), or the writer of Hebrews speaking about the tabernacle being the shadow of heavenly things (Heb 8.5) and the sacrifices being shadows of good things to come (Heb 10.1), this darkness to light theme seems to lie behind these references.

For the purposes of our article, what needs to be recognized is that the pattern of night and day are still maintained in creation. These patterns still reveal the glory of God, and as those who are informed by God’s special revelation through his word, we see that glory and understand it in its redemptive significance. Darkness and light, sun, moon and stars are all still in place, but our understanding of them has been transformed by the resurrection of Jesus. Our salvation does not deliver us from creation but from the sin which perverts it. Our understanding of the signs of God’s creation must be informed by the work of Jesus. The liturgical year recognizes and acknowledges the patterns in creation. But these days, weeks, months and seasons are all defined in the light of the day that Jesus has brought. And so the liturgical year celebrates the dawning of the day of the Lord.

THE EIGHTH DAY

In considering the relationship between the original creation and the new creation, there is also another strong allusion throughout the OT which points to and looks for fulfillment in the new creation in Christ. It is quite obvious from the beginning of creation that God established a seven day week. In six days God created all there is and on the seventh day God rested. This pattern of labor and rest was practiced since creation and codified in the Fourth Word/Commandment given at Mt. Sinai. But again, something seems to be a little out of place when the OT refers to the “eighth day.” Granted, if one were just counting up days, the eighth day would seem to be just one more number in a succession. After all, it does come after seven and before nine. But the eighth day stands as a prominent reference in feasts and covenant rituals to the point that it begs for an explanation. Several examples from Scripture will help us to see that there is great significance in this “eighth day.”

First, the sign of the covenant is given on the eighth day. Leviticus 12.3 makes it clear that “on the eighth day the flesh of his [new born son] foreskin shall be circumcised.” This was the day that the male children were formally initiated into the covenant. It was the sign that they were born in sin, but God has graciously brought them out of the world dominated by sin and included them among his priestly people. In this sign God gave them not only a privileged status, but a vocation to the a part of the holy priesthood to the nations. The eighth day was not only the sign of death, but also of resurrection for in it they were given and promised new life.

Second, the cleansing of a leper went through an eight day process. It was on the eighth day that sacrifice was offered for him, he was cleansed, and readmitted into the people of God (cf. Lev 14.10, 23). This was not only true of the leper, but it was also true of anyone who was unclean because a discharge (cf. Lev 15.14) and the cleansing of a defiled Nazarite (Num 6.10). The eighth day was the time of new life. The unclean person passed from being separated from the people of God and the worship of God—death—into being readmitted to presence of God—life.

Third, the eighth day also played a prominent role in the Feast of Tabernacles/Booths. The first day and the eighth day of this feast were both to be holy convocations (cf. Lev 23.33ff; Numb 29.12ff.). This feast was appointed as a festival to remind the people of Israel that they

dwelt in booths after God had brought them out of Egypt. The eighth day was the final sacrifice and the beginning of life after the wilderness.

Fourth, there is an allusion to the eighth day in the dedication of the Temple of Solomon. After Solomon offers multitudes of sacrifices and the people feast for two seven days (this is the way the passage reads in 1 Kings 8.65), on the eighth day they are sent away with joy and gladness. The Temple has been completed and Israel has a new beginning of life. A similar allusion to the eighth day is also found in Ezekiel 43 as he prophesies of the coming restoration of the people from exile when the Temple will be rebuilt. The altar will be cleansed for seven days. Then on the eighth day God will accept them once again (cf. Ezek 43.27).

The eighth day is the beginning of new life or new creation. This is the way the early church fathers understood it. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, an early church letter, the writer there says,

Finally He saith to them; *Your new moons and your Sabbaths I cannot away with.* Ye see what is His meaning; it is not your present Sabbaths that are acceptable [unto Me], but the Sabbath which I have made, in the which, when I have set all things at rest, I will make the beginning of the eighth day which is the beginning of another world. Wherefore also we keep the eighth day [i.e., the Lord's Day, Sunday] for rejoicing, in the which also Jesus rose from the dead, and having been manifested ascended into the heavens. (15.8-9)

The eighth day of the week is what we are living in right now. We live in the new creation. But the way these days are reckoned is significant. The eighth day assumes a numbering from the first day. The eighth day is reckoned from the first day of creation. Therefore it is grounded in original creation but goes beyond original creation in some sense. Not only that, it is the same day as the first day of original creation; i.e., Sunday, the first day of the week. It is on the eighth day, or the first day of the week, that Jesus rose from the dead inaugurating the new creation. So that, if any man be in Christ, he is, literally, "new creation;" i.e., he participates in God's transformed creation. What we can learn through this is that, like the resurrection itself tells us, the new creation is continuous with the old creation. There is great continuity between the two, but there are radical transformations also. As Laurence Stookey says in his book *Calendar: Christ's Time For The Church* in reference to the eighth day theme, "The creation of the cosmos (which God began on Day One) and the new creation are not antagonistic to each other; we do not have to leave the physical world in order to participate in the new creation in Christ...." (41)

Therefore, we must jettison all beliefs that seek to make us want to disdain creation and history as if it is a total loss. Instead, the church should define all of life—including the calendar—in terms of the lordship of Jesus. Of course, because the church is not infallible, these definitions are not on par with Scripture and, thus, cannot bind the conscience. But, the church should take dominion in this area as well as all other areas. The sun, moon, stars, days, weeks, years and seasons will remain at least until the coming of Jesus. These things have aided the people of God in the past to understand time and history in terms of what God is doing with, through and in it. We who stand in the light of day brought about by Jesus would be wise stewards of what God has given in expounding the glory of God in redemption through marking our calendars.

There are two examples that I want to relate about how others have defined the calendar through history. In the Roman Empire, everything was dated in relation to the founding of the city of Rome. To put a date on events happening before the founding of the city, you would count backwards from the year 1; e.g., 1 before Rome. Events after the founding of the city would be calculated from that same year 1 only counted forward. This was the turning point of

history. This was the measure by which all other events would be judged. Jews also understood the calendar in this way. Beginning in what we call AD 132 there arose another rebellion among the Jews against Rome. This rebellion was led by a man called Ben-Kosebah. He was given the title Bar-Kokhba by the famous Rabbi Aquiba. This was a messianic title which means “son of the star” taken from Numbers 24.17. Being a messianic figure who was bringing in the kingdom of God, the beginning of the rebellion became the turning point of history. So much did Ben-Kosebah believe this that he had coins minted with the year “1” stamped on them. (This corresponds to AD 132.) The years progressed with the rebellion until Rome crushed the rebellion in AD 135.

One thread that is common between both of these examples is that in each case a particular event was understood as the turning point of history. If we as Christians believe that the turning point of history occurred in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, should we not proclaim this loudly to the world through orienting our lives around this event?

The question is not “Will we have a calendar?” but “What calendar will we have?” Will we allow others to define history for us in light of the founding of a country, the birthdays of heroes, or some other non-Christ centered approach to history? It is okay to celebrate all of these other things or have a national calendar. But we must understand that Jesus Christ is Lord over time and, thus, the calendar. Will we not insist that while we may celebrate other special events like birthdays, the founding of our country, national heroes, etc., history must be defined pre-eminently by the Lord of the calendar?