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ARTICLE VI.

IS THE RECOGNITION OF THE CHURCH YEAR
BY ALL CHRISTIANS DESIRABLE?

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THE annual recurrence of the season of Lent reminds us that a considerable part of Christendom is not accustomed to observe the church year, and it is the purpose of this article to plead for the judicious reinstatement of what has not inaptly been called "the chronological creed of the church."

In the history of the Christian church a very early and a very important place is assigned to the church year, which grew very naturally with the growth of the church, just as national holidays grow with the progress of the nation's life and stability. It is natural to keep anniversaries: nations thus honor the memory of their remarkable men and events; families thus observe the various occasions of interest which have taken place in the home circle. Precisely in the same way grew up the church year in the history and practice of the Christian church. The inception of the idea of celebrating by annually-recurring festivals the various events in the life of Christ was born of affection, and very early, doubtless in the apostolic age, it became the custom to observe the anniversaries of the passion, death, and resurrection in an Easter festival, and the outpouring of the Holy Ghost fifty days afterwards in a Pentecost, or Whitsunday festival, the two corresponding to the Jewish feasts of Passover and Pentecost. Thus dimly was the church year foreshadowed. In the three ensuing

centuries, embracing the period of the long and bitter persecutions of Christianity and the early history of its adoption as the state religion of the Roman Empire,—the period of the Fathers and antedating by a long interval the later corruptions,—this church year had grown out of outline into a well-defined and settled practice, out of shadow into reality. It is true that there was not during this period entire unanimity as to the times of observing certain feasts, as is seen in the original keeping of Easter, concerning which the Roman and Greek churches have always more or less differed, though the Council of Nicæa (325 A.D.) ordered that Easter should be observed on the same day by all the churches. It is true also that in different sections there was the recognition of certain feasts which were not included in the calendar of other sections; as Epiphany, which came from the East, and Christmas, which was of Western origin. It is true, also, that there was a wide difference of opinion as to the length of the observance of certain anniversary seasons; as, for example, in the case of the fast before Easter, variously observed as one day in certain places, forty hours in others, and forty days (*Quadragesima*) in still others. The very disagreements observed, however, point to an affectional and spontaneous origin, rather than to a studied inception in hollow spectacularism. Moreover, the principal feasts of the church which formed the skeleton of the church year were not only Christological, as Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Whitsunday, but were a part of the church practice when that was nearest to the original fountain-head of apostolic wisdom.

Other feasts of a doubtful character crept in even during this early period; but we must remember that what may have become the worship of the saints in a later age, and what has in an unlimited way expanded the hagiology of the church, was in the outset only the memory of the saints. On February 22, for example, we remember Washington;

but not the remotest suspicion was ever advanced that such a holiday conduced, or could ever conduce, to the worship of him who was "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." The early church expressly inhibited the worship of saints, while it sanctioned and practiced certain memorial observances in honor of the apostles, and of certain distinguished Christian teachers and workers in the apostolic age, as, St. Stephen, St. Mark, and St. Barnabas. If the commemoration of the saints lapsed early into a degraded worship,—a worship which seems to have the sanction of certain great names at least in the fourth century,—we must not forget the high initial purpose which underlay the institution of fixed festal seasons named for the martyrs:—a purpose that meant no more than we every Sunday affirm when we say, "I believe in the communion of the saints;"—a purpose that was originally as pure as that of certain sections of Christendom in keeping "Forefathers' Day."

It is interesting to observe, also, as a feature of that early practice, that the reasons for assigning certain feasts to special seasons or days of the year were not always arbitrary. Sometimes a festival was fixed with reference to its appropriateness to striking peculiarities of the seasons; as, Easter in the spring, because of returning life; Christmas at the winter solstice, because of increasing light day by day; and the feast of the nativity of John the Baptist (June 24) at the summer solstice, for the opposite reason with reference to the words of John, "He must increase, but I must decrease." Sometimes a festival day was appointed with reference to some special feature in the life of the person whom the church wished to remember. St. Stephen's day was thus fixed for December 26, the day after the Nativity, because Stephen was the first martyr to seal with his blood the faith in Christ. St. John the Evangelist's day was appointed for December 27 so as to be near

the day of Christ's birth, because of the intimacy between Jesus and the "beloved disciple," and because John's Gospel contains the enunciation of the doctrine of the Incarnation: "The Word was made flesh." Innocents' day is assigned to December 28, in order to emphasize with St. Stephen's and St. John the Evangelist's days the martyrology of the church. But the feast-days which marked the church year, including by that term those which were movable, occurring on Sunday and for the most part Christological, and those which were fixed, being mainly, with the exception of Christmas and Epiphany, in honor of the apostles, martyrs, and saints, and falling upon any day of the week,—amounted, all told, to very few, compared with the multitudinous feast-days and holy-days which crowded the calendar of a later age.

The Anglican, Lutheran, and German Reformed churches at the time of the Reformation purified the church year of the accretions with which the ecclesiastical calendar had become overloaded to the extent of minimizing its Christological, or even Christian, features, but they left the idea of a church year intact. What they specifically attempted was to bring the church year back to its original purity and simplicity, and any one may see in the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church approximately what the custom of the Christian church in its early period was in this respect. It is more than likely that a considerable part of the Christian world would wish to carry the principle of exclusion farther than the Anglican revision has attempted, which left in the calendar some feasts of a known late origin, and some of a character which would not be acceptable to all Protestants; but it would be the height of childish sectarianism, because we do not wish to emend the church year, to expunge it! The Anglican cycle includes two Marian festivals: The Annunciation of Mary, assigned to March 25, the first

trace of which appears about 430 A.D., though not sanctioned until 656 at Toledo; and the Purification of Mary, fixed for February 2, which became general after the middle of the sixth century, both of which were the out-growths of an excessive veneration of the mother of Jesus, which indeed early manifested itself, but received no specific place in the cult of the church until later. Inasmuch as our purpose is not polemic, but irenic, we decline to discuss here the right of a Marian festival to a place in the church year; but we may say, that she who was "highly favored among women," she whose Magnificat forms one of the most valued treasures in Christian hymnody, she who sustained the nearest relation to the Saviour of mankind, does not deserve to be contemned, if she is not worshiped.

Still the retention of the church calendar is consonant with the excision of these two festivals; yes, and consistent also with the rejection of a good many more which find place in the cult of some of the Reformed churches. The Feast of the Circumcision (January 1) is late; probably originated in the sixth century. The Feast of the Transfiguration (August 6) cannot be traced farther than the middle of the seventh century. Michaelmas, or the Feast of St. Michael and all the holy angels (September 29), is first mentioned as a feast of the church by the Council of Maintz (813). Even the Feast of the Trinity (the Sunday after Whitsunday), which gives its name to the last half of the year, is certainly late, not having been decreed until 1334 by John XXII., and All Saints' day (November 1) was not established till the eighth century. Of all these later feasts the one which has most justified its right to be is the last mentioned, presenting as it does a convenient time to freshen and perpetuate the memory of those who have departed from our midst during the year. Relieved of these specified features, the Anglican cult has

preserved to us a church year, sung by Keble and linked with folk-lore by Brand, which reflects the early practice of the Christian church, and as such is not the creation or the possession of any one section of the church, but is the common heritage of the church catholic, using that term as inclusive of all its parts. It is a calendar at once primitive and sufficiently embracive, and it aims at the exaltation of the great Head of the church. It distributes the gospel story through the year, and it links the church of each succeeding age with a hoary and holy antiquity; and if there is any argument in the potency of immemorial usage, certainly this should commend the church year to all Christians, if not for their adoption, at least for their consideration.

It may be asked, then, How have the majority of the evangelical churches so-called lost out of their life and thought that which early formed an integral place in the cult of the church?

It is the peril of all reformations that they go too far in the substitution of one *régime* for another. Revolution is blind, unreasoning change effected with resistless celerity; and while reformation is “slower of foot,” more thoughtful and more methodical, it always attracts to itself fanaticism, which it with difficulty represses. An ultra spirit of merciless vindictiveness is evoked which is not easily exorcised. The work of the Protestant Reformation is an instance in point. It was not completed in England for a century and a half after the initial protest of Luther at Erfurt. The Anglican, and the Independent, nonconforming churches had their birth in this epoch of intellectual and ecclesiastical unrest, and in their origin were not far apart, though in their constitution and practice they were widely separated, and bitterly at enmity. It was a period—that hundred and fifty years ending with the flight of James II. from Whitehall—when now the Anglican Church, now the Independ-

ent, and now the Catholic, was at the helm of government.

The Puritan stream of religious history and activity, swelling proudly onward, and bearing on its bosom the enrichment of the nations, took its rise in the poisoned springs of rancor and hate so prevalent at this period. The genesis of Puritanism, essentially a reform-movement, stamped upon the churches that grew out of it an ineffaceable inheritance of deep and cherished hatred towards all formalism, and also gave to them a contempt for historic continuity, and we have been looking at the splendid history of the Christian church with warped judgments ever since. Puritanism turned and overturned, but particularly overturned. It refused to kneel at Communion, and so received the sacrament, sitting or standing; and in some places even walking. It objected to crosses, or the signs of the cross, and so in the day of its triumph it hewed down altars and melted up statues. It abominated the Prayer-Book, and called it a Mass-Book. It derided the vestments of the clergy, and, abhorring read prayers, substituted in its "conventicles" extemporaneous prayers, concerning which Bunyan, himself a Dissenter, said, "He is counted nobody now that cannot at any time, at a minute's warning, make a prayer of half an hour long"; yes, and sometimes two hours long! It eliminated from worship all bowings, and the judgment of its ecclesiastical posterity has favored and ratified from age to age its action in that respect; but it also read out of that worship of God in his holy sanctuary the Lord's Prayer, the Decalogue, and the Apostles' Creed, and the same posterity has been quietly undoing the work of the fathers in that particular, though not until the lapse of nearly two centuries, the replacement of these liturgic features having been effected, in spite of much opposition, almost within the memory of the younger generations. And finally it abolished all holy-days, turned Christmas and all feast-days into fast-days, effaced the whole calendar of saints, and ob-

literated the Christian year; and all this it did as effectually as the Inquisition crushed out heresy from Spain and Bohemia, so that hardly the memory of it exists. The General Assembly of Scotland, August 6, 1575, resolved "that all such days which heretofore have been kept holy, besides the Sabbath days, such as Yule [Christmas] saints' days, and such others may be abolished, and a civil penalty be appointed against the keepers thereof by ceremonies, banqueting, fasting, and such other vanities." The Directory issued by the Long Parliament (1644) contains this: "Festival days, vulgarly called holy days, having no warrant in the Word of God, are not to be continued." These two edicts are three generations apart, showing how rigorously and ceaselessly the Puritan movement held to its basal ideas, substituting for the harmonious sweep of the diapason a monotonous thrumming on one note; and if we add to that gestatory period between 1575 and 1644 the two centuries which have elapsed since, during which the practice of the New England and cognate churches which grew out of that movement has perpetuated early religious prejudices, the attitude of these churches towards the church year will be explicable.

It goes without saying, that the Puritan Reformation went altogether too far. The churches which were born out of its womb have been proclaiming it in these latter days. It seems hardly possible that it is only within three short decades that we have restored Easter to its place in the Christian year and in Christian worship. We have become reconciled to floral cruciform emblems, if not to brazen ones. We are not afraid of Holy Week any longer, and Good Friday is losing some of its terrors though not generally recognized, significant as the fact is that Massachusetts, the cradle of Puritanism in the New World, is considering the project of making it a holiday in lieu of her recently abolished fast-day. Aside

from these indications of a conservative and moderate reaction from Puritan extremism, there is practically no recognition of the church year by the churches which grew out of the revolt against Anglicanism. Even Christmas day is by them hardly ever religiously observed, although they shrink no longer from mince-pie in the celebration of that festival, as it is soberly stated by Professor Green that the Puritans did. Their children know not the meaning of the terms "Epiphany," "Ascension," or "Whitsuntide," scarcely even the terms themselves; and Lent, if it has any significance to them, has mainly an ichthyological one, owing to their comradeship in the public schools with children of other faiths. The special days set apart to the memory of the apostles and martyrs have no place in their calendar; and thus the churches of the Puritan faiths, in severing themselves from Romanism and Anglicanism, have separated themselves from much that was their common Christian heritage. Will they perpetuate the cult of their iconoclastic fathers, or are the present reactionary symptoms favorable to the establishment of an historic continuity between them and the church of the ages?

We contend for the reinstatement of the church year throughout Christendom upon the following grounds, prefacing our argument with only this single remark, that three things should govern us with reference to the reinstatement of any custom of the church which a fervid reaction may have laid ruthless and destructive hands upon, viz., its venerableness, its inception at a time when the state of the church was proximately pure, and its appropriateness for the glorification of Christ or for the inculcation of Christian teaching. These principles seem to be fundamental and determinative, ruling out indeed some of the days now observed by the Anglican Church which greatly simplified the church year. A cycle of festivals that should reproduce the practice of the early church in part, and that

should contribute to the worship of Christ and the life in him and for him, would rule out the later hagiology, and would purify the earlier. The marrow of the Christian calendar would then be constituted of those feasts which the church has found to emphasize the great central facts and truths of Christ's life and of the Christian religion. It is such a cycle as that which should be revived and conserved by that part of evangelical Christianity so-called which has paid little or no attention to the observance of the church year.

What, then, are some of the reasons why the church year should be observed by all Christians? Let it be noted, in the first place, that it emphasizes the essential idea of the church, as a something "called out" (*ἐκκλησία*), an institution separated from the world with a life, a history, and ordinances of its own. It may be said that in some countries of Europe where every other day seems to be sacred to the memory of some canonized mortal, and where shrines are placed in little niches in the street walls, the church is prominent in the life of a people not overgiven to the cardinal virtues and graces. It is only necessary to reply, that the indefinite expansion of the church year is not primitive; tends to prevent reverence for holy things by cheapening them; and, like a letter every word of which is underscored and therefore no word is emphatic, such a calendar defeats what it was designed to promote. In an "Ahab-served-Baal-a-little-but-Jehu-shall-serve-him-much" sort of way, it is destructive of the significance and spirit of the whole idea. A festal cycle of observances which tend to idleness and spiritless formalism is no better than a rotation of unhallowed days each one of which is only a little more intent than the one preceding upon forgetting God and his church. In America every day is St. Midas' day, when everybody is scrambling to get place in the pathway of the oncoming Golden Car of Juggernaut. A "church

year" judiciously determined by a consensus of Christendom (so far as possible) would emphasize and enhance the idea of the church in the world's thought, would introduce no disturbing element into business or secular affairs by the frequency of its holy-days, would, in the language of the late Dr. Schaff, who, true to his Lutheran antecedents, felt intensely the neglect of the church year, "interweave religion with the life of the people by continuously recalling to the popular mind the most important events on which our salvation rests."

The Christian year, it is to be observed in the second place, presents Christian truth in its completeness, by these anniversaries commemorating the basal facts of Christianity: the incarnation, the humiliation, the sufferings and death, the resurrection, ascension, and risen life of Jesus of Nazareth. Churches and ministers are thus helped to keep out of thought-ruts, the tendency of isolated thinking. The church year is in a certain way the objectifying of Christian truth, lending it not only prominence, but symmetry. If it be said that some of these festival-days are kept now by the universal church, it would be more correct to say that one of them is kept—Easter. Christmas is celebrated religiously by only a small part of Protestant Christendom, which exaggerates its pagan features early imparted to it and its votive offerings at the shrine of St. Nicholas, at the expense of its real significance. It is indeed within the memory of those who are not yet in middle life that Easter has come to be recognized in any but the Anglican and Roman churches. Advent, Lent, Ascension, Whitsuntide—eminently Christian in their original significance and tendency—have not only suffered from the indifferentism, but from the hostility, of many sections of the Protestant world, which even would be for reading out of their communions any one who should plead for their reinstatement. Why? Did not these seasons originate in primitive, Christian prac-

tice? Do they not conduce to the exaltation of Christ? Do they not afford opportunity for helpful and symmetrical presentations of Christian truth? Or is it because they are a part of the cult of the Roman Church? Ah! "there's the rub." The goldenrod might as well disdain the air which the aster breathes as for the Protestant Church to ignore its common inheritance and life with the Roman Church. Or is it because the tendency of festivals and fasts is toward that degeneracy which the prophets everywhere rebuke? Then why did Jesus "keep the feast"? Yea, more! we who characterize, yes and caricature, people who observe Lent, as doing up all their penitence as a *coup de théâtre*, are we quite willing to be judged by the same standards of charity concerning our "Week of Prayer"? Would we like to hear it said that we do up all our intercessory prayer in one short week at the beginning of each year? The recognition of the tendency of a form to produce mechanical piety is the best guard against its baneful effect, but it does not follow that we should seek the abolition of the form. What reproduces primitive Christianity, exalts Christ and emphasizes Christian truth in its entirety, must have some other reason than prejudice or fear or sectarian uncharitableness to warrant its discontinuance.

Another reason which should impel Christendom to its duty in this matter is the sentimental one of being in touch with its own Past. The accentuation of an important doctrine may not always be needed to enhance it or impress it; but when, by an anniversary of some event or teaching, the individual is one with the continuity of historic thought and custom it is seen that a powerful argument pleads for the reinstatement of the church year. The church is thus unified, and harmonized with its own past. The spectacle of seasonal celebrations is thus presented on the background of the ages. We enjoy in them a mystic commun-

ion with the saints. We are one with the splendid progress of the Christian faith, going forth with stately triumph over its enemies, and celebrating with each recurring cycle the victory of truth over error, of righteousness over unrighteousness, of God over the conspiracies and malignities of evil:—a steady, onward, mighty, and resistless progress from age to age. We breathe the inspirations of the past; we feel its power behind us and about us. England's greater stability than other European nations grows out of its glorious Past from which it has been steadily evolved. No church has any right to monopolize the common domain of antiquity; and with that antiquity the church year puts us closely in touch. And not only has this feeling of union with the Past power over those who are inside the pale of the church, but over those who are outside. Hawthorne's comparison of Christianity to a stained window whose outside is somber and dull, but which, seen from the vaulted aisle, is instinct with significance and beauty, is not quite true. There is a splendid attractiveness to external Christianity, her history, her ceremonial, her feast-days, her worship and ritual, her contribution to art, literature and music, and her church year, all of which force her influence through the outworks of the senses to the citadel of the heart.

A final consideration to be emphasized is, that the recognition of the church year by all Christians would be a most practical and valuable step in the right direction towards Christian unity. If the prayer of the great Head of the church is ever to be realized, it will be by the deepening in Christian hearts of the spirit of concession and conciliation up to the point where we do not trench upon conviction as to the great and fundamental truths. To insist on the invalidity of any ordination but Episcopal, would provoke and intensify opposition to any scheme of union until doomsday; to make subscription to the Vatican de-

cree of infallibility obligatory would be to postpone unity forever; to foist impossible conditions into the question of Christian unity would be cold Mephistophelian hypocrisy, showing us to be intent on our shibboleths, and little concerned for the aggressive and progressive work of the church of God. To consent, however, to the reëstablishment of the church year in all parts of Christendom ought to be no impossible requirement, but a measure which all parts of the dismembered church of Christ should be swift to adopt, if by so doing the cause of Christian unity would be furthered. Such a reinstatement of the calendar would do violence to no Scripture, outrage no sentiment of conviction worthy the name, produce no evil result but only good, and, aside from interweaving religion with the daily life and emphasizing the truths of Christianity, aside from linking the church with its past and making her more attractive to the common people, would help to unify the church. As the distinguished leader of the Presbyterian host, the late Professor H. B. Smith, has said, "These festivals which make up the church year are a standing proof against infidelity by a public and solemn recognition of essential facts, and all different denominations could unite in their observance without sacrificing any article of faith or discipline."

We believe the time is coming when all portions of the church year will be as loyally and universally observed as is the restored festival of Christ's resurrection. It is the trend of the mighty march of a tolerant Christian spirit, and all prejudices and sophistries will be as chaff before its approach. It is the swing of the pendulum backward, seeking equilibrium. It is the growth of the leaven of the gospel in the church. Nevertheless, this increasing observance of the church year will be brought about, not by a fiat, but by natural processes. Those churches which have not hitherto conformed to the calendar, and which

desire so to perpetuate an olden and cherished custom of the church, can speed such a consummation in many ways. In their midweek prayer-meetings there could be such flexibility of arrangement that their gathering for conference should fall in the week in which there was a special day set apart by the church upon that holy-day. Again, one of the serious objections to the International Sunday-School Lesson system has been that it gave almost no recognition to the church year, so that the children are often preparing (?) for Advent and Easter by a course of study in the historical books of the Old Testament, a difficulty that could be easily adjusted, and still retain the benefits of the International Lesson system wherever there were schools which preferred this method of studying the Bible. The hymn and tune books of all churches could be adapted to the church year without destroying their devotional value or interfering with the convenience of their topical method of arrangement. Whitsunday was observed in the early church by large numbers of baptisms, so that it might have been called with truth "Baptism Sunday." We have a day (May 1) when baptisms very generally take place, particularly infant baptisms. How much better to let that day harmonize with Whitsuntide in the church year! Then there is a day, "All Saints day" (November 1), which was not established till late, but which is valuable for Christian teaching and for its appropriateness as a memorial-day. How pleasant it would be if each church were to remember on that day those who have laid down their earthly industry and warfare during the year, or if it were to enforce some of the lessons of immortality and the heavenly life! Epiphany (January 6) brings to mind crowds of Old Testament theophanies, and by contrast the grand manifestation of manifestations! St. Stephen's, St. John's, and Holy Innocents' days afford an introduction of the most direct and pressing kind with which to begin the winter special

seasons of service, if such are desired, when men are perhaps more urgently entreated to "stand up and be counted" on the side of God and righteousness. Lent affords a long and precious opportunity to get attention to biblical doctrine, as does Advent. Indeed, it is hardly possible to conceive how the church year may not be utilized effectively by all of Protestant Christendom in the regular work and worship of their churches, and when we think of the reasons which clamor for its reinstatement, we wonder that they have so long permitted themselves to be severed from this historic calendar, which is at once their inheritance, a mighty factor conditioning their own growth, and an olive-branch towards the reunion of Christendom.