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Classical Worship for Today:
It's Time to Tell the Story

Wilbur Ellsworth

Early twentieth-century evangelical Christians often sang, "I love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love." This beloved old gospel hymn at least suggests that the love of the earthly man Jesus and the unseen glory of his mission, person, and experiences form the controlling passion of Christian worship, life, and witness. However, that seems far less so than it used to be. The "story" often is reduced to the most basic facts of Christ's death. While secular culture has given some prominence to his birth, it seems that even his resurrection hardly plays the life-shaping role in the Church that it should. Not long ago a widely-connected evangelical leader remarked with a considerable degree of surprise that throughout his Christian life he had never heard a sermon on the transfiguration of Christ. For a number of reasons, evangelical Christianity has greatly diminished its love to tell the "story."

Telling the story of the Lord Jesus Christ has a wonderful and historical depth that we need to recover. Our church calendars tend to fill up quickly either with highly-focused attempts to do ministry and outreach or with the unintentional drift of whatever happens to be going on. And with full awareness that I raise a point of great controversy, I suggest that simply preaching expository sermons through one book

of the Bible after another actually keeps the Church from telling the story of Jesus Christ in its worship life.

While still in the first century of its new life, the Church continued the Jewish observance of Passover with its now glorious fulfillment in Jesus Christ. The death and resurrection of Jesus became anchored securely in the worship life of the Church. From that seed of eternity marking earthly time, the story of Jesus began to be rehearsed in the life of the Church. As the Church deepened its reflection on the life of Christ it took on the Psalmist's delight in telling all God's wonderful works in his earthly experience. As the Church began to establish days of specific remembrance for specific moments in Christ's life, a calendar for worship began to develop that today we call the Church Year. The history of the development of the Church Year is a fascinating story in itself. It is told by people such as Thomas Talley in *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Pueblo Publishing Company). There have been times of controversy in the Church Year's dates and development. There has always been a degree of freedom for some rearrangement according to local need. But the order and guidance that the Church Year offers to the local congregation is a great gift that enables the Church to tell the story.

The Church Year, as is true for any structure, can easily suffer ossification that is devoid of the Spirit and fruitfulness. Indeed, the fact that so many classically oriented churches seem to fail to clearly proclaim Christ while observing the Church Year ought to sober all Christians that even the life of the Lord himself when remembered or alluded to without the life-giving power of the Spirit can become dead ritual. But reaction to that seeming spiritual deadness is hardly a reason to discard the time remembrance of the life of Christ in the Church's worship life.

There are at least three specific ways the Church can tell the story with hope that the Spirit of God will own the telling. First, when we follow the great tradition of the Church we will encounter a pattern identifying and remembering *the defining events* of Jesus' life. Advent, the Days of Christmas, Epiphany, The Lord's Baptism, The Annunciation of Our Lord, The

Transfiguration, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, The Easter Vigil, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost Sunday all form a pattern for worship that begins to center the Church's life around the wonderful works of God in the life of his Son in time. These historical events are in reality the wonderful works of God and the Church needs to delight in their remembrance and telling.

Second, when we follow the tradition of the Church Year the *significance* of the events of Jesus' life becomes the theme of our preaching and worship. This is where true evangelical preaching and the Great Tradition come together gloriously. The Christological interpretation of all Scripture, both Old and New Testaments will begin to thrill Christians as they see the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms, come alive as the Spirit reveals Christ. Without this Christological interpretation, many of these texts remain obscure and unremarkable and have little impact on the heart. For example, Psalm 21and Psalm 30 are powerful expressions of resurrection joy, and Psalm 29 is a cosmic interpretation of the Lord's baptism.

Third, when we follow the pattern of the Church Year we are drawn to *participate* in these events. The old spiritual, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?", asks a question that has a profound biblical answer. The biblical doctrine of the believer's union with Christ calls for a joyful and thankful yes. By the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit, we *were* there and by the same work of the Spirit Christ *is* here among his people. This participation is powerfully demonstrated in baptism, the great initiatory rite that proclaims that every believer was "there" just as Christ is now "here" in the life of the one identified and united to Christ in his death, burial and resurrection. The weekly observance of the Lord's Table, a foundational practice in the early church, again proclaims in deepest measure the presence of Christ with his people as his people in eating and drinking express by faith their presence in the saving life of our Lord. The message of participation is what has given evangelicals their unique influence in making Christ known to the nations. We have always said that merely knowing about Christ or even understanding the

significance of his life does not bring salvation. It is participating in his life by faith and the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit that brings eternal life (Galatians 4:6).

But what if a congregation were to follow the Church Year? How can all the other issues and events the Church wants to deal with find a place? The events of Christ's life offer a clear way of measuring all the other concerns and issues we might bring into our worship service. When we began patterning our worship in keeping with the Church Year our elders have been impressed repeatedly that few other matters really justify setting one of these Christ-remembrances aside. The tradition of the Church Year has always had a degree of flexibility that can accommodate urgent concerns. It is also worthy to note that many times the very event in the life of Christ can powerfully address the other issue that would replace remembering the events of Christ's life. Christ is still present and still impacting our lives today. The Church Year is roughly divided into two parts, the "Christ Year" which ranges from Advent to Pentecost and the "Church Year" which fills the rest of the year as the Church discovers what it is to live out its life, work, and witness in the power of the descended Holy Spirit. This season from early June through November provides months in which more freedom is available to address other concerns.

Time is a mighty force in our lives. It is often a power that we feel is overwhelming us, driving us faster than we can go and taking us places that we are not sure of. Christ as Lord of all time is a great comfort and peacemaker in our schedules. He alone is strong enough, good enough, and beautiful enough to rule our time and make that rule freedom, peace and joy. Stopping to remember and to worship is an act and discipline of faith. Our surrounding culture will continue to press us to do more things, lesser things, distracting things. The world will tell us that life will not be as rich as it could be without all its preoccupations. Meanwhile Christians who live deep in the life of the Church will go forth into the world with a quiet and joyful witness because they have learned to "love to tell the story of unseen things above, of Jesus and his glory, of Jesus and his love."