

Should Reformed / Presbyterian Christians observe the Christian Calendar?

Although the Christian calendar is deeply rooted in many centuries of Church history, most reformed Christians, including Presbyterians, do not seem to be good enough at explaining, defending and celebrating them. If we do, we often copy other traditions - and not critically enough, I'm afraid.

Looking for a Reformed approach

The purpose of the Christian calendar is *to remember the main historic gospel events that the good news is based on*. The birth, the ministry, the suffering, death and the resurrection of Christ, his ascension and the outpouring of the Spirit on the first Pentecost Sunday are recalled.

If we do this in remembrance of him, we find a point of reference and a principle on which we can base, explain and defend these celebrations.

Is the basic point of departure of any New Testament worship not the words "*Do this in remembrance of me*" of Jesus when he had instituted his holy Supper? Proclaiming the gospel "in and out of season" and breaking bread in remembrance of our Saviour certainly forms the foundation of Christian worship and it therefore is the place to start looking for a Reformed / Presbyterian approach when observing these days of commemoration.

I suggest that the benchmark for a Presbyterian celebration of the Christian calendar is: "*Is this done in remembrance of Jesus and in fellowship with him?*"

Remembering is rooted in Old Testament worship.

"Remembering" was not strange to Old Testament worship. To the contrary, it is clear that devotional life in the Old Testament was based on remembering the great deeds of salvation and liberation by the God of Israel. Each one of the feasts prescribed in the Law, remembered, celebrated and taught what God did in the history of his people, creating and strengthening the belief that he will continue to keep his grace covenant and be their God and the God of their children, encouraging them to seek obedience to the Lord as the people of God.

It was at such a feast of remembrance, the Passover, that Jesus instituted his Supper. It seems to me that in the mind of Jesus, faith would still be sown and grown through "remembering" as part of the New Covenant. We would seek and find Christ's church, when we remember what Jesus has done to set us free and make us his own.

The Lord's Supper is a unique celebration.

The Lord's Supper is irreplaceable and unique. But it does refer us to the principle that remembering God's gospel events has great value. Proclaiming the Scriptures, faithfully preaching what the Gospel during these Days of Remembrance can, to say the least, not be wrong. The calendar can be a disciplined and structured way of teaching and preaching the full Counsel of God, a task our reformed fathers showed us to do. If this is done according to our confessions of faith, and the means through which we accomplish this, is the preaching of the Word and celebration of the Supper, it does not have to be considered "unreformed", "unpresbyterian" or "romish".

The Days of Remembrance are rooted in Church History.

All the commemorative days on the Christian calendar go back far beyond the days of the Reformation, before the ages when the truth within the Western Church became corrupted to the extent that the Reformation was required. To ignore these Days of Remembrance that constitute the Christian calendar, could amount to an arrogance that ignores the wisdom of the ancient church. We should be open to learn about the original intentions and meanings of these days and why and how they came into the life of the church. With the Word of God and our Confessions of Faith as guidelines, it should not be too difficult to discern what would be God honouring and would build up the people of God.

“Remembrance”, the key to understanding reformed worship, should also be the key to unlocking a Presbyterian identity and order of celebration for these commemorative days and seasons.

The Days and Seasons of the Christian Calendar:

The following seasons and days of Remembrance emerged from church history:

Advent Season- four Sundays before Christmas - remembering that Jesus came, is coming and will return to our world.

Christmas - Christmas day and the following eleven days - remembering that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, conceived by the Holy Spirit - our only Mediator between man and God.

Season of Epiphany - remembering, amongst others, the teachings, parables and miracles of Christ.

Lent - the 40 weekdays before Resurrection Sunday, not counting the Sundays, remembering the suffering and death of our Lord.

Palm Sunday - remembering that the followers of Jesus wanted to make him an earthly king, but that according to prophecy, this event confirmed that he indeed is the promised Messiah, the King that sits on the throne of David forever.

Tenebrae / Maundy Thursday - remembering that the Lord, on the night of his arrest, instituted his Holy Supper and serves his disciples, even washing their feet.

Good Friday - remembering that Jesus was crucified, that he died and was buried, as the complete, final and only sacrifice for all our sins.

Still Saturday - that Jesus was laid in the tomb and truly died.

Resurrection Sunday - remembering that Jesus indeed rose from the dead and lives for evermore, conqueror of death, sin and hell.

Season of the Resurrection (or Easter Season) - remembering the power of the risen, conquering Christ in our lives and in the life of the Church.

Ascension Day - remembering that Jesus was enthroned in heaven, ruling at the right hand of the Father, where he intercedes for us and reigns as the conquering Head and King of the Church, from where he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Pentecost Sunday - remembering that we are not alone, but that Jesus sent his Holy Spirit to guide us in the understanding of the full Counsel of God and to empower us with his gifts so that we can proclaim it.

Trinity Sunday - remembering and celebrating the gracious blessing that we know the one and only true God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Holy Days not rooted in gospel events.

I doubt that the many other holy days that are observed by some Christians can pass the test of assisting us in worshipping in the spirit of “remembrance of Jesus”, because they are not rooted in gospel events witnessed to by Scripture. A clear case will have to be made as to how these commemorative days can enhance our understanding of the gospel truth.

Historic Background of the Lenten and Resurrection Seasons.

Resurrection Sunday is the oldest commemorative day. The resurrection was remembered every week since the very beginning and Resurrection Sunday since the first century as a result of the influence of the Jewish Passover. It certainly must have been the result of the fact that Christians remembered the resurrection every week, by celebrating the Lord’s Supper in remembrance of him.

During the second century it became customary to baptise converts on Resurrection Sunday. They had to be prepared for the confession of their faith and for their challenging walk with the Lord during those ages of persecution and martyrdom. These preparations lasted 40 days - not counting Sundays. *It most probably related to the fact that Jesus was prepared for 40 days in the desert before his ministry started, and even related to the 40 days that Jesus was “prepared” for his enthronement before the ascension.*

Whatever the motivation was, the church fathers in the second century required these forty days of preparation for baptism. Apart from teaching the gospel truth, fasting and prayer played an important role during this time. Those who taught the candidates in preparation of baptism, shared in observing this time of spiritual discipline. After some time, other Church members felt the need to “do the course again”, although they would not be baptised on Resurrection Sunday. This season, always during the European Spring, very early on became the Lenten Season of the Church, originally meant as a preparation for celebrating Resurrection Sunday.

It is easy to see how the other gospel truths, such as the institution of the Supper, the suffering and death of Jesus, the Palm Sunday history, Ascension and Pentecost events followed and claimed their place in the Christian calendar.

The Resurrection of Jesus is the culmination, the peak, of the Christian Calendar.

The shortest version of the gospel truth is to say that Jesus has risen - that he has risen indeed. Our Reformed tradition emphasises that all worship, including the Supper, creates fellowship with the living Christ. A celebration of the Lord’s Supper that begins and ends on Golgotha reminds us more of a funeral than of our joyous and intimate fellowship with the risen Saviour, our host at his Table. Is it not Jesus who through the signs and seals of bread and wine ensures us of our salvation and inclusion into the covenant of grace? Is it not our living Lord who nourishes and feeds us with himself through the work of his Holy Spirit?

Christian Calendar, reformed and Presbyterian or romish?

Observing the Christian calendar can be considered reformed and Presbyterian, if we never fall short of continuously worshipping, praising and having fellowship with our risen Lord. It can be considered Reformed and Presbyterian if we can steer clear of legalistic prescriptions and inflexible observances of culturally based customs, particularly those that encourage ritualistic worship that is neither sincere nor authentic.

It can be considered Reformed if we rely on the Word to reveal the gospel truth, if we preach only Christ, the crucified, risen Saviour and if we are careful to require nothing more from worshippers than to rely on and celebrate God's sovereign grace revealed in Christ, when we observe these age old commemorative days and seasons.

It can be considered Reformed if it grows the faith of the believers and brings all who participate to a place where they through faith alone receive the gracious salvation through Jesus Christ.

Although rooted in Christian history much older than the reformation, observing the Christian calendar can therefore be considered Reformed and Presbyterian, once we ascertained that our festive days and seasons are celebrated only to the glory of God - the one and only God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit and in remembrance of Jesus Christ, our Saviour.