

SPIRITUAL FORMATION, EVANGELICALS,
AND THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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Our Appropriate Focus

Any talk of tools or strategies for spiritual formation (such as this article will shortly present) must be preceded by a fairly obvious question: if we are to be “formed” in some sense, what “form” are we to take? In other words, before the process of spiritual formation can really begin, one must first identify its ultimate goal. What, then, does genuine spiritual maturity look like? Of course, any process of spiritual formation among us as Christians must ultimately seek to engender Christlikeness—that is, any program of spiritual formation must find its footing, its foundation, in Jesus.

After all, Jesus spoke of the relationship that ought to obtain between himself and his disciples as analogous to that between a vine and its branches (John 15:4–5). Through this image Jesus meant to convey not simply the idea of some trivial connection, but of utter dependence, of a relationship that provides us with our “life blood,” existentially speaking.¹ Indeed, Jesus promises that by “abiding” in him and allowing him to “abide” in us, not only do we come to know who he was and is, we will come to know who we are as well—we find our truest identity, becoming the sort people that God has intended us to be.²

To take another of Christ’s teachings, in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus declares, “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a slave above his master. It is enough for the disciple that he

1. Köstenberger, *Encountering John*, 161.
2. Borchert, “John,” 1071.

become like his teacher, and the slave like his master” (Matt 10:24–25a).³ Christ is undoubtedly the teacher and master in this passage, and thus the apothegm stands as a reminder that Christians (Jesus’ disciples) are to aspire to become like Jesus himself.⁴

The Apostle Paul asserted this same sentiment in Eph 4:11–16 when he spoke of God’s desire that the Christian community “grow up” into the maturity and likeness of Jesus—a process that would unite Christians both to Christ and to one another.⁵ Thus, in the end, “spiritual formation is the process whereby the inmost being of the individual takes on the quality or character of Jesus himself.”⁶

A Further Issue

With the ultimate goal of spiritual formation clearly articulated, one may then move on to the question of method: How might one seek to impress upon a Christian the “quality and character of Jesus”? How might a community of faith seek to form that complete spiritual maturity within its members from a practical perspective? It is, after all, one thing to know one’s intended destination and quite another thing to know how to reach it. So how might we approach our goal in this instance?

Once more, Jesus himself is our paradigm as Christians, and while that is most immediately true of his person, his practice deserves consideration as well. And in his own ministry, Jesus sought to encourage his followers on to Christlikeness—that deep connection with and emulation of his own self—in a rather direct and obvious fashion. As the recently deceased Michael Spencer noted,

Jesus made disciples through relationship and as a result of observations. The disciples . . . observed his actions, routines, reactions, and interactions . . . His disciples—both then and now—were

3. Bible quotations are from the NASB.
4. Boring, “Matthew,” 260.
5. Bruce, *Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians*, 349–53.
6. Willard, “Spiritual Formation,” 46.

to learn from his life as a living curriculum . . . Second, Jesus made disciples out of these followers through their constant exposure to his teachings. The most complete curriculum for disciples [is] the words, parables, sermons, prophecies, and teaching of Jesus.⁷

In other words, Jesus called his followers to observe his example and teaching that they might embody them themselves. As always, the ability to answer the conscientious disciple's question, "what would Jesus do?" naturally depends on a familiarity with what Jesus himself actually did.⁸

Of course, this sort of direct, face-to-face regimen with Jesus is no longer available this side of the Ascension. Things have changed; the Master has withdrawn. But Christians are not thereby utterly cut off from the informing example and teachings of Christ. Rather, in the words of the Gospels, the church is presented with a window that allows us to peer through the otherwise opaque walls of time to see our Lord and Savior as he was: alternately challenging and comforting, uniformly inspiring and compelling, and just a bit mysterious. The "living curriculum" that is Jesus' life perseveres, only now it is found not traveling the dusty roads of Palestine but contained in the Christian Scriptures.

Evangelicalism's Problem

Still, even with the vital connection to Jesus available to us in the Gospels and all the formative benefits that holds out to us, spiritual formation is simply not something that modern Evangelical congregations generally pursue in a well-integrated, systematic fashion. To be sure, this is not to say that today's Evangelicals do not seek spiritual formation *at all*. Quite the contrary, vast amounts of time and effort are often expended within Evangelical circles to increase the theological awareness, moral rectitude, and Christian commitment of church members—all matters that might legitimately fall under the larger

7. Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, 155.

8. Augsburg, *Dissident Discipleship*, 29. Also, Reuschling, *Reviving Evangelical Ethics*, 123.

umbrella of spiritual formation. Indeed, much of this work is done with the words and deeds of Jesus front and center. But, at least in the modern milieu, these efforts are often sporadic, disconnected from each other, and largely *ad hoc*: a small group study on prayer here, a sermon series on *The Purpose Driven Life* there, and so on. Thus spiritual formation, at least as a systematic and integrated concern, is mostly lacking in today's Evangelical churches.⁹ Indeed, with the slow decline in the popularity of Sunday school, this issue has become increasingly acute.

This scarcity of integrated spiritual formation among Evangelicals has, in its own way, contributed to stereotypes of the movement as at times faddish, shallow, and cynically pragmatic.¹⁰ After all, every church seeks to pursue a number of different and potentially competing interests. And without a sustained, conscientious focus on spiritual maturation, other concerns (such as the always pressing need for church growth) can come to shape the overall *stance* of a congregation. And this possibility, if allowed to develop unchecked, can lead churches in bizarre directions and dilute their distinctly Christian character.¹¹

Even within reasonably healthy churches, however, a lack of sustained and systematic spiritual formation is a liability. By leaping from one program to the next, or one isolated sermon to the next, ministers can unintentionally overlook needed elements of Christian discipleship: What does a deeply Christian response to periods of loss and disappointment look like? How might a Christian manage hope that is orientated towards a long-distant fulfillment? Where ought one to look for humility in the midst of triumph? These kinds of questions simply may not be answered in the context of a five-week sermon series on tithing or family

9. Demarest, "New Dimensions," 375.

10. Recall James Twitchell's summary evaluation of mega-churches (themselves almost exclusively Evangelical and often Baptist) as "shallow, self-centered, corporatized, ahistorical, sensational, predictable, ceaselessly energetic, and a little paranoid" (Twitchell, *Shopping for God*, 284).

11. For some of the more prominent (and at times tragically comic) examples of this dynamic see Spencer, *Mere Churchianity*, 29–32.

relationships—and yet they remain vitally important. Indeed, since spiritual formation is, as Henri Nouwen said, something oriented toward a person’s heart (one’s attitudes, affections, will, and so on) more than any external deed he or she might perform, all the well-intended and well-executed “how to” sermons and devotionals in the world may touch on such matters only tangentially.¹²

Clearly, something more is needed. Some sort of *sustained process* of Christocentric spiritual formation that seeks to engender comprehensive spiritual maturity is required in many Evangelical churches.

A Way Forward

It is at the point of confluence of the above-mentioned realities—Evangelicalism’s great need for sustained spiritual formation, the vital importance of a Christocentric focus, and the accessibility of Christ in the pages of Scripture—that the traditional Christian Calendar emerges as a possible solution.¹³

The Christian Calendar represents the end result of a long process of development, one that had its origins in the first-century Jewish calendar of biblical feast days (e.g. Passover, etc.) that were reinterpreted by Apostolic and Patristic Christians in a Christocentric fashion and then further expanded upon by later thinkers.¹⁴ It is precisely towards Jesus’ actions and his teachings as recorded in the New Testament that the Christian Calendar orients a believer. With its variegated seasons of devotion and its sacred holidays, the Christian Calendar moves the church through the major portions of Jesus’ life, calling attention to what he did and what he said in an intentional variety of contexts and moods. Of course, the Christian Calendar is not a monolithic reality; different churches in different cultures have developed it in slightly different ways. Here in the West, though, the broad outlines at least are fairly consistent across

12. Nouwen, Christensen, and Laird, *Spiritual Formation*, xvii–xviii.

13. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 159.

14. Stern, “Calendar.”

denominational lines: In Advent, Christians place themselves alongside the ancient Israelites as they anticipated the arrival of the Messiah. In Christmas we celebrate his birth and the tenderness and gravity it entailed. In Epiphany we attend to the beginnings of Jesus' public ministry with all their promise and success, a focus that culminates in Transfiguration Sunday. In Lent, Christians follow Jesus as he finds himself opposed with ever greater vigor and tenacity, advancing towards the cross. In Holy Week—Palm Sunday, Maunday Thursday, Good Friday—we marvel as the Lord gives his very life for the sake of his divine mission. And in Easter we revel in Christ's victory over death and the dizzying possibilities that event holds for the human condition all the way through to a celebration of the Ascension.

In each of these seasons the faithful are encouraged to focus upon a different aspect of Jesus' life and character, and thus we come to have a fuller awareness of the man in all his complexity. Sermons, studies, devotionals, hymns—even the very decorations present in a church's sanctuary—can all be orientated around the season at hand, conspiring to drive home some particular facet of Jesus' person with reference to episodes from his life and the teachings he propounded.

The Christian Calendar isn't simply a tool of education, however, offering Christians mere data for curiosity's sake. Rather, by focusing on the fully-orbed life that Jesus lived through this intentional, repeated annual cycle, Christians come to inhabit the story of Jesus—living in it that it might live in us;¹⁵ or, to use the familiar biblical expression, *abiding* in Christ that he might abide in us. As J. Winston Pearce opined in a remarkable passage,

As the human life of Jesus unfolds through the Christian Year, from Advent through Easter and Pentecost, our lives are caught up in the procession. We are impressed with the similarity between his life and ours, yet we are shocked at the contrast between the way he lived his life and the way we live ours. His life unfurls before us: helpless infancy, disciplined and obedient youth, work and growth, choice and

15. Gross, *Living the Christian Year*, 16. Also, see German's conclusion in German, "Christian Year," 238.

temptation, vocation and ministry, Holy Week and resurrection. It is all there to see and, if we dare, experience! We begin to understand as season after season, year after year, we see Christ tempted, betrayed, crucified, buried, raised, and glorified before our eyes, as Paul would put it! We vicariously identify with him.¹⁶

With this dynamic in mind, the benefits offered by the Christian Calendar as pertain to spiritual formation are obvious. Instead of moving from one disconnected sermon series or Bible study to the next, a church moves through a year-long program oriented towards the organic and cumulative experiences of Jesus. Rather than focusing exclusively only on those themes most agreeable to the human heart, a church maturely faces all of Christ's life—even the sorrowful periods. And by seeing how the Lord responded to the ups and the downs of his experience, Christians come to possess a more comprehensive theological and existential grammar to sustain and encourage them when faced with similar circumstances. Indeed, through the observance of the Christian Calendar (whether in connection with the use of a lectionary or not), a church's entire experience of "doing church" can be rendered less self-involved and more theologically and christologically grounded. And through this shift in focus, a church can guard against the sort of ennui that may grow in an overly consumer-oriented Evangelical worship setting and which itself militates against spiritual maturity.¹⁷

Evangelical Openness to the Calendar

Given Evangelicalism's traditionally low-church character and general distrust of ritual and formalism—elements only amplified in, for example, self-consciously Baptist congregations—one might expect Evangelical churches to balk at the idea of observing the historical Christian Calendar in any kind of detail. Christmas and Easter—sure; Lent and Epiphany—no, thank you.

16. Pearce, *Planning Your Preaching*, 42–43.

17. Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*, 35–39. For a specific case study see Webber, *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail*, 109–10.

To be sure, such an expectation is not entirely without warrant. Still, Evangelicalism is gradually warming to the benefits of long-standing Christian traditions, traditions like the Christian Calendar.¹⁸

Since I am a Baptist pastor, let me speak in more detail here about Baptists. Consider that, historically speaking, even the few modest observances of the Christian Calendar common in today's Baptist churches (Christmas and Easter) represent a generally unnoticed softening and opening of Baptists to the calendar. Surprising as it may seem, there was a time—and that not too very long ago—when even these much beloved holidays were anathema in most Baptist circles. In his fascinating article on the topic, R. E. E. Harkness chronicles how representative and sometimes even authoritative voices in Baptist life across a broad geographical range in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries referred to Christmas as “popemas,” condemned the celebration of Easter as just so much “baptized paganism,” and even insinuated that those who observe these holidays are “worshippers of the beast in these particulars.”¹⁹ That such comments are likely to strike modern Baptists as bizarre and even perhaps shocking indicates just how far we have come in these matters. Not only do we not share the scruples of our denominational forefathers here, most of us are totally unaware of their relevant views to begin with.

While the Baptist appropriation of Easter and Christmas was largely unconscious and the result of cultural assimilation, more recently work has been done that may facilitate additional progress in these matters—and that in a conscientious way this time. On an academic level, in partial continuity with past thinkers such as J. Winston Pearce of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary and Robert E. Webber of Wheaton College, several Evangelical scholars of a Baptist stripe have emerged who seek to reengage long-standing historical patterns of Christian worship and belief while still remaining within their own

18. Van Dyk, “The Church,” 132–33.

19. Harkness, “Attitude of American Baptists,” 325, 360.

denominational spheres.²⁰ These “Bapto-Catholics” (or “catholic Baptists” if one prefers) include such figures as Curtis Freeman of Duke University, Paul Fiddes of Oxford University, Ralph C. Wood, D. H. Williams, and Barry Harvey of Baylor University, Steven Harmon—recently of Beeson Divinity School but now teaching at Gardner-Webb University—and quite a few others. Each of these scholars has, in his own way, done the conceptual prep-work for legitimating the adoption of such practices as observing the fuller Christian Calendar within Evangelical contexts. And while it has been claimed (at times by these men themselves) that the agenda pursued by these and similar thinkers has not made much of an impact at the level of the local church,²¹ the evidence points in a different direction, especially if one looks to the larger Evangelical universe.

In 2007, *U.S. News and World Report* noted an on-going traditionalist shift in worship among a number of religious communities, Evangelicalism included.²² The *Washington Post* followed suit in 2008 by issuing its own observations on the re-appropriation of traditional liturgical practices at the local level by Evangelical Christians.²³ In that same year, even Evangelicalism’s own flagship magazine, *Christianity Today*, published an issue, the cover story of which detailed precisely the phenomenon in view here: Evangelicals (particularly those of a younger generation) seeking a greater sense of spiritual depth and rootedness in the observances and disciplines of the ancient Christian church, and that within the context of local congregations.²⁴

20. Jorgenson, “Bapto-catholicism.” Also, Cary, “Authority, Unity and Truthfulness, 22–39.

21. “Thus far interest in a catholic Baptist programme of retrieval has been almost exclusively limited to academic theologians. The current state of affairs might lead some to regard this discussion as . . . of little consequence for the warp and woof of Baptist church life” (Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity*, 19–20).

22. Tolson, “Return to Tradition.”

23. Salmon, “Feeling Renewed.”

24. Armstrong, “Future Lies in the Past.”

The somewhat pessimistic status reports of Bapto-Catholic seminary professors notwithstanding then, it seems that an Evangelical interest in historical Christian thought and worship does indeed extend beyond the walls of the academy. The time is ripe, then, for a further appropriation of the Christian Calendar among Baptists, one that goes beyond merely Christmas and Easter to embrace the totality of Christ's life as he lived it and as we can relive it together in the midst of Christian worship.

Personal Experience

I recently completed a six-year pastoral tenure at the First Baptist Church of Granada Hills in Los Angeles, CA. During my time there I felt moved by the above considerations to integrate the Christian Calendar into the church's worship. Working in conjunction with the Women's Missionary Union I designed seasonal banners and paraments in keeping with the traditional liturgical colors and themes. I began utilizing a lectionary (i.e. the Revised Common Lectionary) to ensure that my preaching would be appropriate for the season at hand. And, each Sunday from mid-November until about a month after Easter, the First Baptist Church focused on Jesus Christ intentionally, methodically, and episodically in the context of our worship for the glory of God and the building up of the faithful.

While there were questions from time to time, and the occasional expression of skepticism, this new (and yet quite old) element of our spiritual formation was, generally speaking, well received. Members of the church appreciated the greater sense of significance attached to time. They came to recognize the importance of honoring and modeling *all* of Christ's life by facing *all* of his life in turn.

Perhaps no other element related to the Christian Calendar was so heartily embraced there as the observance of Good Friday. Whereas in the past, Easter Sunday (of course) featured a sermon on the resurrection of Jesus, the story of the crucifixion was either awkwardly appended to the Palm Sunday sermon or only briefly mentioned as a preamble on Easter itself. The inadequacy of this arrangement was apparent to all and as such the

congregation was quite enthusiastic about setting some time aside to focus exclusively on Jesus' great sacrifice in the midst of a distinct (and distinctly somber) service. Indeed, the attendance at that night-time service rivaled that at even some of our Sunday morning programs.

My own experience at the First Baptist Church of Granada Hills stands thus as evidence that, in the world of Evangelicalism, the Christian Calendar and its related traditions are not merely the playthings of ivory tower academics but that they are also workable solutions in local churches as well.

Conclusion

Of course, the Christian Calendar is not a magic bullet. It does not, in and of itself, guarantee rigorous and reliable spiritual formation within those congregations that observe it. Nevertheless, as one tool among many—and as a profoundly christo-centric tool at that—the Christian Calendar is a helpful option for those Evangelical churches willing to employ it. Given that the need for spiritual formation is ever-present, given further that Evangelicals in particular stand in need of additional tools here, and given that a growing number of Evangelicals are seemingly open to such a tool as this, it may be hoped that the Christian Calendar shall become a commonplace in Evangelical churches—including Baptist churches—in the coming years.

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