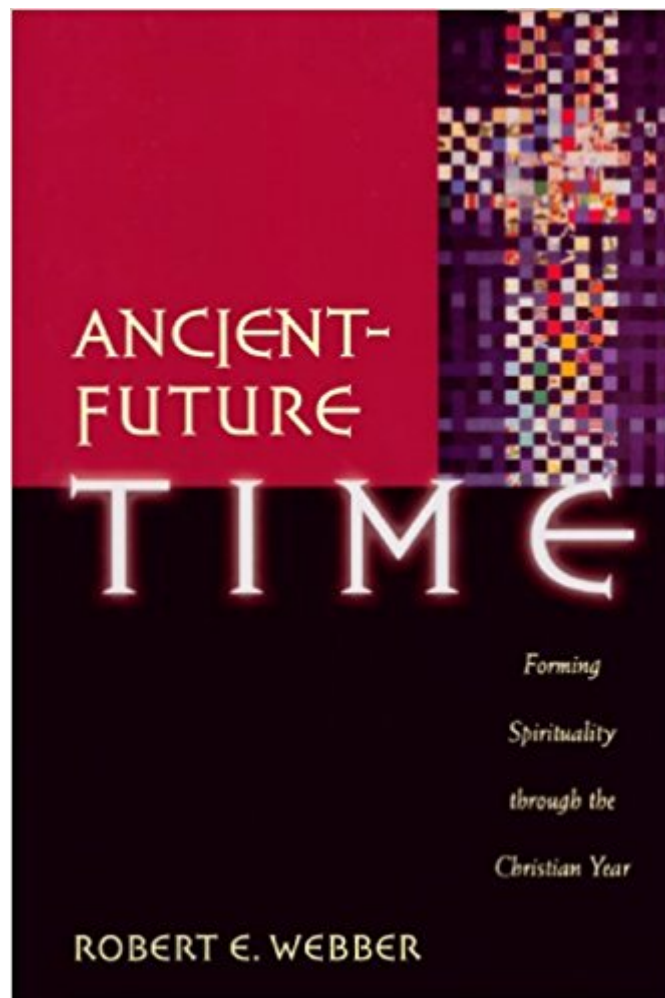




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Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through The Christian Year



Synopsis

Millions of Christians worldwide follow the liturgical Christian calendar in their worship services and in their own personal devotions. The seasons of the Christian year connect believers of diverse backgrounds and offer the sense of unity Jesus desired. Robert Webber believes that we can get even more out of the Christian calendar. He contends that through its rich theological meanings the Christian year can become a cycle for evangelism and spiritual formation. He offers pastors, church leaders, and those of the "younger evangelical" mind-set practical steps to help achieve this end, including preaching texts and worship themes for Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Advent, and Christmas.

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Customer Reviews

Discover ancient rhythms for a new spiritual awakening God's people have always celebrated his work by retelling the stories of his mighty deeds of salvation. In a time when the church's memory sometimes seems short, many are rediscovering the value of using the Christian year to pattern our celebrations around the essential truths of the faith. In *Ancient-Future Time*, Robert Webber draws from this church tradition by introducing and exploring biblical themes and liturgical traditions for each season of the Christian calendar. Helpful charts, prayers, reflection questions, and resource lists are provided for those planning church worship or seeking old, yet new, paths to spiritual growth through a deeper understanding of the Christian year. "In an age that says, 'time is money,' Robert Webber says, 'time is spirituality.' Webber reminds us of the many old truths about the

Christian year, which if followed, can become a countercultural witness and a very practical means of drawing closer to Jesus Christ."-Mark Galli, managing editor, Christianity Today

"The rhythm of Christian-year spirituality is part of the heritage of liturgical wisdom that Robert Webber has long been relaying to evangelicals enthusiastically and with flair. The layout of it here is the spiritual equivalent of a combined course of antibiotics and vitamins; all who take the course will benefit greatly from this book."-J. I. Packer, professor of theology, Regent College

Robert E. Webber is Myers Professor of Ministry at Northern Seminary and the president of the Institute for Worship Studies. He is the author of a number of books, including *Ancient-Future Faith* and *The Younger Evangelicals*.

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This is actually my second time reading this marvelous book. I think more than reading this work by Robert Webber, one lives through it. This has been my experience...a life-changing experience. I think one of the greatest gifts to Christian spiritual formation is the Liturgical Calendar or Christian Year. This claim says a lot coming from a Protestant Evangelical. I can say without equivocation that this observation and living into the seasons of the Christ life have done more to grow deeply in my faith than any other discipline I have observed during the course of my spiritual journey to date. I have a number of resources teaching about this particular discipline and practice. I appreciate Dr. Webber's contribution among my favorites for several reasons. Reason One: He speaks from an Evangelical position. I like this not because of a particular disposition or doctrine, but because I am familiar with his language as he is my own. Our "family of origin" is similar. Reason Two: the book is written very clearly, concise, and linear. I did not have an innate sense of what the Christian calendar was all about, having never practiced living through the seasons. This book provided the framework and detail necessary to build out from; other books have been helpful in ways that added texture to the work Dr. Webber has provided here. Reason Three: The tables, charts, and recommended resources (additional reading suggestions), Bibliography, and Notes section have proved themselves invaluable in my continued learning on this great discipline. I do not think I could provide better insight to the value of this book than the words of the author Robert Webber, who writes the following on page 22: In the early '70s I came upon an ancient discipline for ordering the Christian life. It is the spiritual discipline of living in the pattern of Jesus' saving life throughout the

year. This discipline is so filled with depth and so challenging to the spirit that I feel I have, after a number of years, only begun to scratch the surface of its potential. It has the power to call ethical behavior into conformity with the pattern left us by Jesus. It has the power to construct a view of reality that is thoroughly Christian. But more, it compels us to live, die, and be raised with Christ. Through the discipline of the Christian year, we can experience the power of Christ within the community of the church, through its worship and in our life twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. I think I noted that Robert Webber wrote those words thirty years after first practicing this ancient discipline--and he was only beginning to "scratch the surface of its potential" for Christ-like development. I would echo the same words, but feel embarrassed to put myself anywhere near the place of Dr. Webber. I have only been practicing this discipline in earnest for five years. I cannot speak highly enough about this book or the others that have introduced me to this ancient practice. I would say that this should be one of the books that holds a prominent place on your library shelf.

Robert Webber teaches ministry at Northern Seminary and is the president of the Institute for Worship Studies. He is the author of numerous books. Webber wrote *Ancient-Future Time* "to introduce the Christian year and the spirituality it orders." (15) Chapters are organized around important events of the Christian year: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, The Great Triduum, Easter, and after Pentecost. Other than special sermons or activities for Christmas, Webber's early church and worship experience did not deal with the other important events of the Christian year. It was only later that he became aware of the possibility for observance of the Christian year to shape and order the Christian life. (23) Webber distinguishes between two different senses of spirituality. The first is objective spirituality which is imputed to us by God as a gift. The other is subjective spirituality which is our response to God. We can embrace spiritual disciplines to grow in our relationship with God. Baptism brings both forms of spirituality together, where God imparts grace to us (objective spirituality) and we rise to walk in newness of life (subjective spirituality). (20-21) While we can not grow and develop in our objective spirituality, we can in the subjective. Many Christians experience frustration, even failure, in spiritual growth because the methods used to promote growth simply do not resonate with faith and devotion to Christ. Typical for many of us is a do/don't do mentality. Webber says his early experience and training included instructions about not doing anything that would bring him shame before Jesus, including smoking, drinking, playing cards, telling dirty jokes, etc. The dos included being honest, obedient and working hard. (22) Webber recognizes the good intentions behind a do/don't do mentality, but says eventually he wanted "something that went deeper than pious ideas on morality or intellectually stimulating thoughts about

the meaning of human existence." (23) Webber found something deeper in observance of the Christian year. Our spirituality is rooted in Christ's redeeming activity on our behalf: his birth, life, death and resurrection. These saving deeds are historical events that occurred in real time. But they are more than past events we can study intellectually; they are events we can experience afresh through observance of them. Just as the Jews participate in the Passover seder as a way to experience slavery in and deliverance from Egypt ("We were Pharaoh's slaves ..." Deut. 6:21-22), Christians can participate in Christ's redemptive activity through observance of the events of the Christian year. (24-5). The early church's participation in the Easter celebration (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7 - "Christ, our Passover lamb) "recalled an event to transform life." Webber sees participation in Easter celebration as a passage from the clutches of the evil one to Christ. "This transformation is a transition from allegiance to the evil one to an allegiance to Christ." (25) While Christ is the source of Christian spirituality, the church is the context in which that spirituality matures. The church is the body of Christ, and our "worship is a celebration of God's mighty deeds of salvation culminating in the death and resurrection of Christ." Worship reminds Christians that we celebrate the historical events of Christ while at the same time we anticipate future eschatological events. "Through worship the worshiper enters into God's saving deeds through which the entire history of the world is revealed." (27) Unfortunately, the emphasis of many churches to teach in the assembly takes the emphasis off of celebrating the saving work of Christ. Churches celebrate by remembering, telling, and acting out God's saving deeds and anticipating the eschatological redemption. (28-29) The Christmas season provides innumerable opportunities to celebrate God's redemptive activity. Christmas recalls "the divine presence in human form" and embodies mystery and incarnation. (56) The birth of Christ is light dispelling darkness, and this mystery can be experienced today with a candle lighting ceremony and narration. The narrator can say, "Light and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord" with the congregation responding with, "Thanks be to God." (58). Webber says that the incarnation is the "starting point for our spirituality ... God united himself with humans in order for men and women to be united with God. The incarnation ... has everything to do with our spirituality - for the incarnation not only brings God to human nature but brings human nature to God." (62) Christ's birth is an act of God's grace, and we enter into that grace through our own conversion and birth at baptism. (64-5). Christ's incarnation was an act of humility, as he emptied himself to take on the form of man (Philippians 2:5-11). As we enter into and dwell in Christ, humility becomes part of our nature as well (Philippians 2:3). To provide a living example of what incarnational humility looks like today, Webber tells the story of a man with an M.A. in engineering who was also a successful businessman working as a janitor. He reason was to "learn humility and some day serve our Lord

on the mission field." (70) This kind of humility is not learned by lecture or by a do/don't do approach to spirituality. It is learned by participating in God's redemptive nature and activity by remembering, telling and acting. Maundy Thursday provides another opportunity to participate in Christ's redemptive activity by remembering, telling and acting out events that occurred the night before Christ's crucifixion. Worshipers today can experience the suffering of Christ by choosing to "subject our bodies and stomach to a meaningful discipline, the actual sense of experiencing Christ's suffering ..." We can do that by depriving ourselves of sleep and food. The discomfort we experience is "an empathetic way (of) creating a sense of our spiritual oneness with him." (130) While recreating and participating in events surrounding Christ's death will bring about physical and emotional discomfort, recreating events celebrating his resurrection will bring about a corresponding joy and celebration. We can experience some sense of this simply by moving beyond rational arguments for the resurrection and acknowledging our existence as a "community of the resurrected people." (150) Remembering the Emmaus Road experience is another way we can experience afresh Christ's redemptive activity. The Emmaus Road story has a four-fold structure: We gather; to hear the good news; to break bread together; to go forth and tell others. This structure is God's activity, and as we recreate it today in our worship, we are involved in God's story. (152) The Christian year lasts from December through April. But, that doesn't mean the rest of the year is without significant opportunities to celebrate God's saving activity and promote spiritual growth in believers. Every Sunday expresses three important truths: "It remembers God's saving action in history; it experiences God's renewing presence; and it anticipates the consummation of God's work in the new heavens and the new earth." (169) True remembrance can be a relief for Christians. Many of us have experienced worship as teaching (via the sermon), as "doing church" in the right away according to some prescribed rituals, and by self-effort. Self-effort is when we operate on the false assumption that we have the capacity to worship God. Webber said, "I can no longer sing those songs that ask me to go deep inside of myself and from within myself offer God praise. I am worn out by the self-effort." (170). To anyone else who is weary and discouraged from these attempts to worship God, we can experience relief and growth by engaging in worship as remembrance, remembrance of God and his good work on our behalf. If that interests you, this book will be worth your time. Warren Baldwin

No one book out there seems to have it all with respect to organizing one's personal spiritual growth around the liturgical year, but this book is one I would highly recommend to be part of the necessary collection. Each chapter includes nice summaries at the end which are good to refresh one's

memory as well as questions to ponder about the readings. The book primarily covers just the major portions of the church calendar, but provides very thoughtful and helpful devotional ideas to consider during each of those seasons. At least a little bit of coverage of lesser feast days as well as perhaps some basic templates for personal prayer/reading would be nice but there are other books out there which focus more specifically on these subjects. Also, I expected there would be more history of the church calendar presented but there wasn't much. In spite of omissions, this is an excellent and useful book to make part of any collection on the practical, personal use of the church year for spiritual growth and discipline.

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