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From Advent to Shrove Tuesday
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By WALTER E. BUSZIN

Liturgical life and activity have not been at a standstill since the close of World War II. Already more than a decade ago more books on worship and liturgics were being published in English than in any other area of theological literature. It is likely that this is true also today. At present more courses in liturgics are being offered at theological schools of North America than ever before in American history; they continue to increase in quantity and quality from year to year. Services of worship conducted in American churches of our day reflect concern for decorum and order which exceeds that of earlier generations. Church music and art as well as church architecture participate in this renaissance and strive to be expressive of the spirit of Christian worship. The training of church musicians includes courses in liturgics, and histories of music in general furnish ample evidence of the fact that their authors speak with necessary authority and insight in matters liturgical as they discuss the music of the church.

These developments and changes are in large part a reaction to the lack of decency and order prevalent among many two and more decades ago. Even in denominations which at one time were indifferent and even opposed to liturgical practice we today find greater concern for liturgical standards. While this change may be attributed to a more wholesome regard for Scriptural truth and the renewal of a sacramental emphasis, it may also be ascribed in part to present-day striving for a more exalted type of Christian culture and a com-

pliance with higher educational standards. Emphases among students in Christian schools particularly have shifted considerably. In this respect perhaps more than in any other, student life is undergoing a transition often accompanied by vexation and confusion but the change nevertheless reflects a salutary concern for spiritual values.

Concern for the church year plays a leading role in these developments of the 20th century. Though the services of worship conducted in many churches are still in large part secular and man-centered, and though there will always be those who indulge in such practice, yet the fact remains that observance of the Christian year has purged and cleansed the church life of many people and has enabled them to adopt a program of worship which they find God-centered and God-pleasing. The festive half of the church year relates itself to the life and work of Jesus Christ, and the nonfestive half, though Paracletic, by no means disregards or brushes aside Jesus Christ and His everlasting Father. All this helps to focus the attention of Christian worshipers on God's everlasting glory and on the eternal salvation He so bountifully proffers to sinful mankind through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. That such a response of faith is the work of the Holy Spirit we all know; however, we too often fail to consider what a wonderful instrument the church year is in the hands of the Holy Ghost.

Among the seasons of the church year none is richer and more glorious than the

Epiphany Season. Instead of following the traditional medieval practice of assigning the Festival of the Transfiguration to August 6, as many Lutherans from the 16th century to the present did, other Lutherans observe this festival on the last Sunday after the Epiphany to let this season reach its climax on this day. On January 6 the cycle opens with the Gospel account of the coming of the Magi (Matt. 2:1-12), who presented to the Christ gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and thus shows what happens when Gentiles come to His light and kings to the brightness of His rising (Is. 60:1-6, the Epistle). This Festival of the Epiphany commemorates first and foremost a theophany in which the promised Messiah manifested Himself as God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God. The Gospel of each Sunday of this season stresses this thought, thus giving the lie to Gnostics, Arians, Unitarians, Universalists, and all who deny the deity of Jesus Christ and His blessed theophany and thereby also the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

In view of the fact that from the days of Jesus Christ to the present the foes of the Christ have consistently denied His divinity and will continue to do so, the church must always battle against this arch falsehood. She does this through the trinitarian endings of her collects, through her doxologies and Gloria Patris, and through her trinitarian creeds. However, she does this also through her church year, through the Festival and Season of the Epiphany, and through the Festival of the Transfiguration, whether it be observed on August 6 or on the last Sunday after the Epiphany.

In their emphasis on missions, Christian churches often neglect to observe the

theophanic character of the Epiphany Season. The Epistle for the Festival of the Epiphany of Our Lord is a clear reminder that the church is not to obliterate all thoughts of missions during the Epiphany Season. However, the church should not stress missions at the expense of the proclamation of the theophany of her Lord since she will then take the very heart out of her mission work. The Epiphany Season is intended chiefly for Christians. The church's first duty is to those of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). Her foremost obligation is to establish people in their Christian faith and way of life. Once this is done, performing the task of winning others for Christ and of confirming also them in their Christian faith will and must follow. Experiences in mission fields show that it is dangerous, misleading, and false to make only halfhearted Christians of people and not to root them firmly and securely in the Christian faith. The church of Rome has been accused of committing this error; the same charge, however, should be leveled against all who venture into mission fields and there preach morality but not Christ crucified and risen again. Preaching Christ is more than spreading propaganda for the sake of increasing numbers. The church must adhere to her Epiphany Season chiefly to point out her own need as well as the need of her individual members of the Savior of the world and His saving Gospel. There is no better demonstration of what results when Christ's theophany takes place than what we find recorded Matt. 17:1-9, the holy Gospel for the Festival of the Transfiguration. The Epistle for this day, recorded 2 Peter 1:16-21, as well as the other propers for the day are clearly directed to

Christians; the Epistle in particular stresses that Christians be established in the truth. Neither the Epistle nor the Gospel are intended as mission texts.

One often hears Christian people express their disapproval of the commercial spirit which has permeated the Christmas season. The Christian church herself may in large part be responsible for this misuse of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord and its season, which is unduly brief when the Epiphany Season is not attached to it. Christmas and Epiphany form a unit, just as the incarnation of our Lord and His theophany belong together. We prepare the way for the Feast of the Nativity by observing the Advent Season immediately before it. Though considered a penitential season, Advent is usually so devoid of its penitential character that even devout Roman Catholics, who are prone to stress penitence unduly, often fail in letting John the Baptist set the tone for this season. The Advent Season therefore no longer serves the real purpose for which it was intended at the time it was introduced. Not only has Christ the Redeemer been taken out of Christmas among many people, but His forerunner, of whom He said, "Truly, I say unto you, among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist" (Matt. 11: 11), and the unmistakable penitential emphasis of his life and work have been eliminated from the Advent Season. The world seeks not only to get rid of Christ and His blessed Gospel, but also of him who pointed to the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. It can be said that we join the world when we preach sentimental sermons about the babe of Bethlehem, play romantic music on our

church organs, and sing charming Christmas carols which speak to us in endearing sweet charms but say very little, if anything at all, of our need of an incarnate Christ to atone for our sins and lead us to eternal mansions on high. Martin Luther was of the opinion that the incarnation of Christ is a matter of such magnitude that it causes us to shudder. This is both a sentiment and a language which the world of today prefers not to understand or appreciate, and our observance of Advent and Christmas often betrays the same lack. We should include in this observation also what happens to the Festival of the Circumcision and Name of Jesus. In our Christian calendar this day has been set aside for a Christ-centered message which calls our attention not only to what the name of Jesus really means and implies but also to Christ's first shedding of blood for sinful mankind, but the majority of people prefer to think of this day simply as New Year's Day. Though the latter designation does not relate itself to the church year, which begins its new year on the first Sunday of the Advent Season, it is possible to combine the concepts suggested by the circumcision and name of Christ with the thought of a non-liturgical new year. While this has been done in services of Christian worship and from Christian pulpits repeatedly, the fact remains that we think of the day chiefly as one which marks the beginning of a new calendar year and observe it with secular activities which are often anything but Christian in their expression. We thus see in these habits additional proof for the fact that man prefers to think of himself rather than of what Christ has done for him not only in Bethlehem, Nazareth, and

Egypt but also in Gethsemane and on Golgotha.

We are thus reminded of the fact that man's imagination is evil from his youth. By nature man prefers himself to God. We find evidence of this perversity even in his observance of a church year which has the very purpose of keeping the church and her members theo- and Christocentric in their life and endeavor. The Gospel and the blessed sacraments, which are God's most Christ-centered gifts to all of mankind, still remain foolishness to sinful people. If the apostle Paul was compelled to admit: "I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (Rom. 7:19 RSV), we need not be surprised to find this spirit of natural perversity also among those who advocate the adoption and the use of liturgical worship. Strangely enough, while our church year stresses the Gospel and while this Gospel imbues us with the spirit of real joy, man still prefers what does not satisfy and what does not offer him a full and lasting measure of joy.

We therefore ask what we can do about this entire situation. We think first of all of the words St. Paul addressed to the Philippians: "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own" (Phil. 3:12 RSV). We suggest, therefore, that we try harder than ever before to retain Advent as a penitential season, already because our flesh and blood indicate clearly that we need Advent as such a season. Advent must precede Christmas just as the Law must precede the Gospel in order to accomplish its task as it should. If the Christmas Season is too short to bud forth

into full bloom, why not couple it with the Epiphany Season? If present customs compel us to celebrate Christmas on December 24th and 25th, perhaps we can, at least in a measure, follow the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church and celebrate Christmas again on January 6th, the Christmas of the Gentiles, since the vast majority of us are descendants of a Gentile lineage. Perhaps we can give half of our gifts on December 24th or 25th, since these gifts are to be symbols of God's great Gift to the world, and the rest on January 6th, to remind us of the gifts brought to the Christ Child by the wise men from the East. We might bear in mind too that no one can prove with certainty that Christ was born on December 25th; January 6th has a better historical basis as the Christmas Day of the early church. The Christmas Season could thus continue to be the season of our Lord's incarnation while the Epiphany Season could serve as the season of our Lord's theophany. We suggest that, in view of its importance, the Epiphany Season be the season of Christ's theophany and not the mission season of the church. We could keep the two apart and yet, should the occasion demand this, we might refer to missions without depriving the Epiphany Season of its theophanic stress.

The subject of missions warrants room in our church year. We are interested in foreign missions because foreign lands still afford us abundant opportunity to battle against the destructive forces of paganism. Intensive and far-spread mission work beckons to us in our own land where we find countless fellow citizens who are not attached to the Christian church; in addition, we have many weak and nominal

Christians in America whom we are able to help. We also know that besides being a God-assigned obligation of the church, mission work is good for us as a church and as individual Christians. It stimulates theological life and interest, fosters corporate and organizational growth and development, and keeps us from trying to have Christ, the Savior of the world, all for ourselves. Mission work can help preserve us from ecclesiastical self-satisfaction, pride, satiety, inbreeding, and materialism. A church which is mission-minded will not easily deteriorate and will remain alert through its battles against the foes of the triune God. Mission work therefore deserves to be considered by the church when formulating and adopting her church year. Although it is by no means the only determining factor, it should not be belittled or ignored.

The church can well afford to make needed room for a mission season in her liturgical calendar. The present writer suggests that a place for it be arranged in the time which begins with Septuagesima (or its vigils on the evening before) and ends with Shrove Tuesday. These weeks occur at a time of the church calendar which is indeed most favorable. They follow the Epiphany Season directly and hence would not deprive the Epiphany Season of its theophanic character; they immediately precede the Season of Lent and thus also allow an opportune time for its observance. This would be good and favorable also for the mission congregations and fields themselves.

The Lutheran church does not need a season of Pre-Lent. In view of present-day developments within the Roman Catholic church, it is doubtful that even Rome will

continue to want a Pre-Lenten season for all times to come. There is a greater stress on penitence in Roman Catholic theology and worship practice than in the Lutheran church. This emphasis is evinced also in the church year of the Roman Catholic church. One of the reasons why Lent was expanded into a Septuagesima Season may quite possibly have been to allow for the inclusion of saints' and martyrs' days without reducing the forty penitential days. Among Lutherans we do not find this problem; saints' and martyrs' days were deleted from the Lutheran calendar in large numbers already at the time of Martin Luther and no lengthening of the season is needed to keep the number of days at forty. Furthermore, in Roman Catholic circles the season was expanded to Septuagesima Sunday to accommodate especially monasteries and other institutions of the church in which all saints' and martyrs' days were observed religiously. Among Lutherans we find practically no institutions whose practices fall in line fully with those of the monastic system of Rome.

Actually, therefore, the three Sundays and two and one half weeks of Pre-Lent are not needed by Lutheranism as they are by Rome. Why not devote this season, which would be neither too long nor too short, to the observance of a mission season? A suitable name could be chosen for the season, fitting propers could be selected as has been done also for other seasons, and rubrics and appointments could well be developed which would contribute to the spirit, character, and balance of this season. An examination of the present propers of Pre-Lent will indicate that one or the other might be retained with profit. Attention might be called also to the prop-

ers for Pentecost Monday, a day which is never observed among us, which include John 3:16 in the Gospel for the day. One might also consider at least some of the propers for Pentecost Tuesday since they too are not used among us. Old Testament lessons should accompany the Epistles and Gospels of the season, not only because such lessons are being adopted today, but also because we find in the Old Testament Scriptures a rich supply of excellent texts well suited for this purpose as well as for the Introits and Graduals for these days.

The Division of Missions could assume the task of selecting such lessons and propers, assisted by the Division of Doctrine and Church Relations, notably by the latter's Commission on Worship, Liturgics, and Hymnology. The matter should be submitted to our church body for ratification and steps should be taken to include such materials in the worship books of the church. If they so prefer and if conditions

warrant this, congregations could still conduct mission festivals at other times of the church year. However, since the church year constitutes a well-integrated unit, a mission season should help to prevent breaking up other seasons of the church year and help to preserve and perpetuate its unitary character.

Our aim is of course to foster a Christ-centered observance of the church year. Much depends on the sermons preached, the instruction given, and the faithful and frequent participation in the Lord's Table. Holy Communion accords us the closest communion with Christ, and preaching of the Gospel will draw not only us, but also those to Christ who must yet be won for Him with the help of the Holy Spirit and under the protection given us in rich measure by the Father, the Giver of every good and perfect gift.

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