

Christ's Redemption of Time

Charles St-Onge, September 28, 2000

Just last week several students in my Genesis class questioned why God took six days to complete his work of creation. No less theologians than Augustine and Athanasius have asked the same question, thinking it much more fitting for God to have completed creation instantaneouslyⁱ. Yet if modern physics has demonstrated anything it is that things that happen “instantaneously” are inherently disorderly and chaotic. At a gravitational singularity, such as a black hole, all known laws of time and space completely break down. There is, in fact, nothing more formless and void than something “instantaneous”. The six days God took to complete creation are part of his establishing order and form to what was only total chaos and nothingness before. Yet after the Fall, creation became subject to frustration in bondage to decay (Romans 8:20-21). That bondage included time. Before, time was part of the order and form of a good creation; now it had become a burden.

The covenant that God made with Israel included regulations for the hallowing of not only space, but also of time. “The Sabbath expresses the consecration of time to God, as the temple expresses that of space.”ⁱⁱ For one day each week the burden of time was to be lifted in order to rest in the Lord. The other significant cyclical pattern of existence, the year, was also hallowed by the three yearly Hebrew festivals. Furthermore, these festivals were not to suggest a timeless “cycle of life”. They looked back at the wondrous acts of God *in history* (the Exodus), and looked *forward* in anticipation to the coming of the one who would redeem all creation from the Fall.

As Christians we believe, teach and confess that Christ's atoning work on the cross and his resurrection is the start of that new creation. “We are,” in the words of St. Peter, “looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth” (2 Peter 3:13). We have a foretaste in this world of the new creation to come. That new creation is not only the redemption of matter, but also the redemption of *time*. “The Sabbath...was the sacrament of the consecration to God of the whole of history, which...find(s) its principle in the resurrection of the incarnate Word.”ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus identified himself both as the new temple (sacred space) and the new Sabbath (sacred time) (Matthew 12:6-8). In Jesus, time is being restored to the glorious order and form that God intended it to have, instead of the weight it feels like to mortal beings in a mortal creation. Since it is in Christian worship that we see, hear and respond to God's redemptive acts in Christ, is it not appropriate that our worship reflects not only the re-creation of space but also the re-creation of time? Should we not recognize that Jesus is not only the new temple, but also the new Sabbath?

The most significant way in which Christians emphasize the Lordship of Jesus Christ over time is in our marking of time in this world. As one author puts it, “What do Christians believe? ...Look at how they keep time!”^{iv} By marking and hallowing time, we demonstrate that time is no longer futile and meaningless – for Christ has given it meaning, and is bringing time to fulfillment. Perhaps the two most significant ways in which we mark time are in our Sunday celebration of the resurrection of our Lord, and in our yearly cycle of the celebration of Christ's work of redemption. Both of these patterns take two ordinary, repetitive time cycles: the week and the year: and turn them into something extraordinary. “(T)he rhythm of daily life is

interwoven with the story of salvation through Christ,” as one author writes, and “that helps give significance to the flow of time.”^v

Since almost the very beginning of the Church, Christians have worshipped on Sunday. Christians early on recognized in Christ’s acts and especially his crucifixion and resurrection the work of re-creation. If on the seventh day of the first creation God rested, then Christ’s resurrection is in some ways like an “8th day”. “The Lord’s Day (is)...an eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the Resurrection of Christ, and prefiguring the eternal repose not only of the spirit, but also of the body.”^{vi} If the Sabbath day was a day of rest in anticipation of the real rest to come, then the Lord’s Day is the celebration of the coming of that real rest. In the creed recited in each Sunday worship we remember the acts of God in creation, the redemptive work of Christ and the Holy Spirit’s on-going sanctification of time and space to be completely fulfilled at Christ’s return. Where the world sees only one week following after another, the Church proclaims Jesus’ Lordship over time.

The other repetitive cycle of life is the year. Our lives are shaped by the passing seasons as much as by the passing week. If the week is the micro-cycle of life, the year is the macro-cycle. Creation itself, even in its fallen state, displays the rhythm of life given to it by its creator: death in fall, dormancy in winter, rebirth in spring, and the fullness of life in summer. Where the world sees only the meaningless passing of time, the Church here proclaims over the course of the year the mighty acts of God in Christ. As the late autumn marks the death of nature and shortening of days, we remember the first and anticipate the second coming of Christ. Through the dark of winter we recall “the true light that gives light to every man” (John 1:9) that came into the world, and will come again. As nature once again returns to life, we celebrate the redemptive work of Christ in his cross and in his resurrection. Through the summer, as nature flowers and grows, the Church looks at herself and the work that the Holy Spirit is doing in and through her. To the world, it is only one passing after another. But the Church proclaims the sanctifying of time by the Lord of Time himself.

The Church does not just sanctify space through the proclamation of Word and the partaking of Christ in bread and wine, but it also sanctifies time. It sanctifies time when, in its worship, it takes futile and meaningless weeks and years and gives them meaning and hope. Through the weekly celebration of the Lord’s Day we sanctify the seven-day cycle that forms that basis of so many activities. For one day we remember that life is not futile, but that Christ has given it meaning and will bring his new creation to completion. Through the cycle of the church year the Church takes the passing of the seasons and reinterprets them in light of Christ’s work. The year is no longer “meangless, a chasing after the wind” (Eccl. 1:14). Instead, it points back to the cross and forward to the return of Christ and the final restoration of all things. This is the rhythm of worship in the church: to foreshadow the redemption of time.

ⁱ Pieper, Francis. Christian Dogmatics. (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, 1950) p.468

ⁱⁱ Danielou, Jean. The Bible and the Liturgy. (Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1956) p.223

ⁱⁱⁱ Danielou. The Bible and the Liturgy. p.224

^{iv} White, James F. Introduction to Christian Worship. (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1980), p.54

^v Brauer, James L. “The Church Year”. Lutheran Worship – History and Practice. (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1993) p.147

^{vi} Danielou. The Bible and the Liturgy. p.284