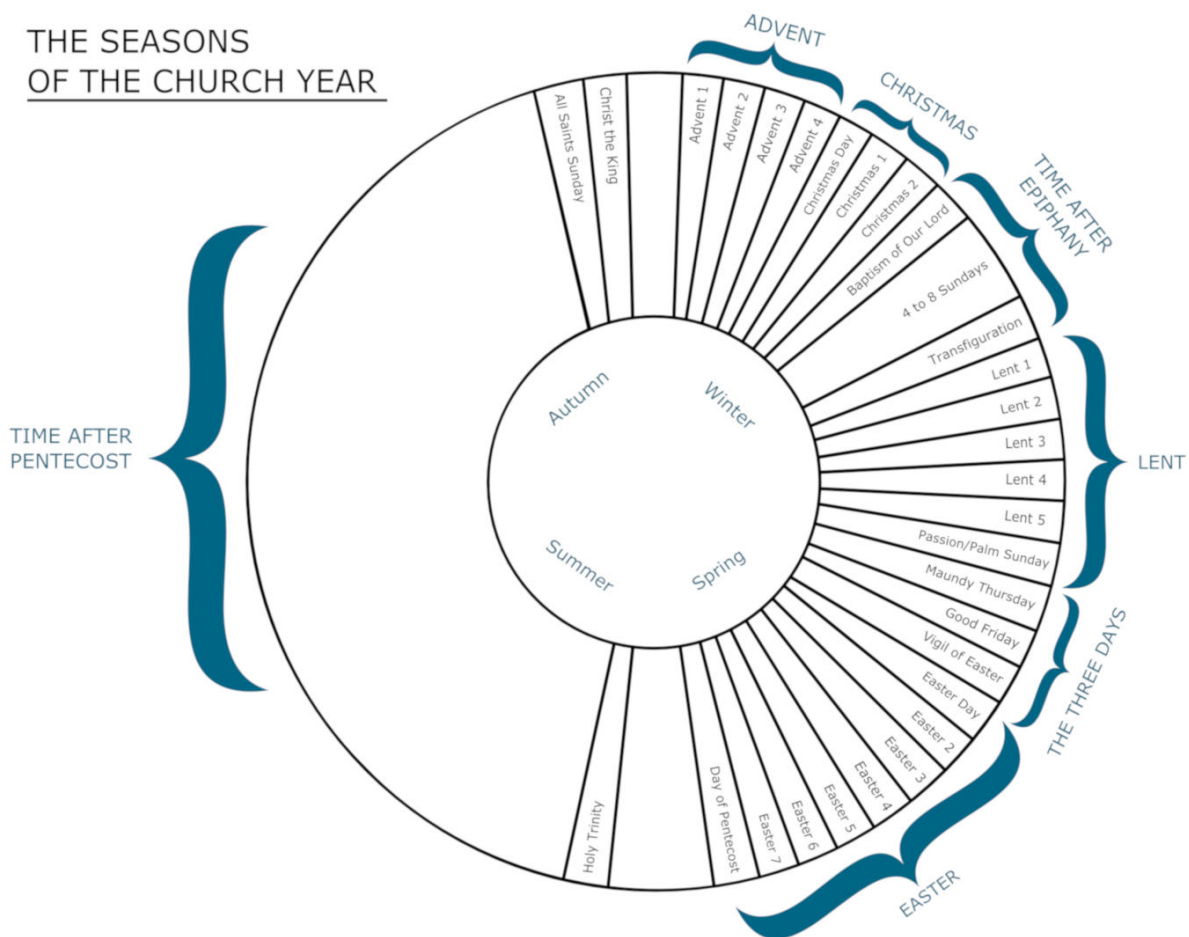


Richard C. H. Lenski

The Source, Meaning, and Value of the Church Year



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The Source, Meaning, and Value of the Church Year

*The Introduction to The Gospel Selections
of the Ancient Church*

By Richard C. H. Lenski

PASTOR OF FIRST LUTHERAN CHURCH, MANSFIELD,
OHIO

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Preface by Lutheran Librarian

In republishing this book, we seek to introduce this author to a new generation of those seeking authentic spirituality.

Richard C. H. Lenski (1864-1936) is best known for his insightful and still invaluable series of New Testament Commentaries. He served as Professor of Theology at Capital University and President of the Western District of Joint Synod of Ohio and Editor *Die Lutherische Kirchenzeitung*.

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General Introduction: The Christian Church Year And Christian Preaching

A TRULY MAGNIFICENT CONCEPTION is presented to us in the so-called Christian Church Year. Adopted in the earliest centuries, the Church Year comes to us as a most valuable inheritance.

The early Church began to celebrate the great historical events on which our salvation rests. The start was made with the resurrection of the Savior, the supreme event celebrated already every Lord's Day (Κυριαχὴ ἡμέρα, Rev. 1:10). At first, and before the development had gone far, Easter Sunday was counted as the beginning of the Church Year, much as the Jews regarded their annual Passover Festival. In due time the other great historical events in the life of our Lord were made prominent by festive celebrations: the death of the Savior on the Friday before Easter; the Ascension forty days after Easter; the Sending of the Holy Spirit fifty days after Easter; the Manifestation of the Savior on Epiphany, the sixth day of January, — celebrated at first and quite early in the Eastern churches, and later also in the Western; finally the Birth of the Savior on the twenty-fifth day of December. These high festivals termed the basis of the Christian Church Year.

On the first half of the Christian Church Year rests the second, which deals with the members of the Church. As far as I am able to discover, the development of the second half occurred at a later time. No great festivals were placed into this second half. Nebe is right in observing that festivals cannot be celebrated before the great work which they commemorate is done. The Savior's redemptive work is completely done, hence the great celebrations which deal with him, hence also no celebrations which deal with us in the Church on earth. We of the Church *are not done* with repen-

tance, justification, and sanctification, — all these must ever go on. One historical celebration was introduced, that of the Reformation, commemorating the nailing of Luther's Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, Oct. 31:1517. The Harvest Home Festival and the American Thanksgiving Day bear no relation to the Church Year.

The Sundays following Pentecost were not left in an unbroken, monotonous line. Three dates divide them into four groups. The Sunday before June 29 was used as a preparation for the commemoration of the martyrdom of the apostles Peter and Paul. According to the varying date of Pentecost there could be as many as five Sundays after Pentecost. The very first gospel lection presents Nicodemus and baptismal regeneration, John 3:1-15. The epistle lection for the fifth Sunday after Pentecost (the Fourth after Trinity), Rom. 8:18-23, our groaning for the redemption of our body, fits the thought of the two apostolic martyrs.

The idea of the Trinity Festival, occurring on the Sunday after Pentecost, was introduced in the Middle Ages, and not until then was the count of twenty-seven Sundays "after Trinity" made. This innovation obscures the original conception, yet it in no way justifies the mistaken conclusion that the texts for the twenty-seven Sundays are without cohesion. Despite the late introduction of the Holy Trinity Festival, the original text for the day, John 3:1-15, has never been discarded.

August 10 commemorated the martyrdom of Saint Laurentius.¹ The Sundays between June 29 and August 10 were reckoned as "after Peter and Paul," and formed the second group. The third group extends to Michaelmas, September 29, the day of the angel Michael (often called Saint Michael), and dedicated to the angels in general. The final group was not fully fitted out with fixed lections, so that Luther determined what some of them should be.

The progress of thought in these after-Trinity lections is not difficult to perceive, for they lead us from the inception through the development to the consummation of the Christian faith and life in the Church. One may be in doubt now and then as between one lection and its successor. The original line of texts had appointed an epistle text for the Wednesday and a gospel text for the Friday service, both of which have been lost. These lost texts might have made the connection of thought clearer. The conclusion is not

warranted that the twenty-seven after-Trinity lections were chosen without regard to proper sequence. Jerome, who seems to have made the selections, followed a *causa rationabilis*, if we may attribute to him the letter in which this statement appears. Nor is it credible that the first half of the Church Year should be supplied with carefully chosen texts, while the second half was left with a loose and disconnected set of selections.

Beginning with the high festivals, appropriate liturgical material gradually became established and helped to bring out and to grace the significance of every celebration and finally also of almost every main Sunday service. In the first half of the Church Year the festivals each dominated certain preceding or following Sundays, so that fixed cycles were formed. Each Sunday arrived at a definite significance and many of the Sundays were actually named.

Israel of old had its high festival celebrations in the old covenant. When local synagogues were established after the Babylonian exile, fixed Old Testament Scripture lections for each Sabbath service in the synagogue were appointed to be read, namely a *parasha* from the Pentateuch and a *haphthara* from the Prophetical Books. In the Christian churches the lections were taken from the apostolic writings after these had been copied and spread and then finally authored into a fixed canon. The ancient Israelite tradition was thus continued in a new form and was lifted to the highest plane by the development of the Christian Church Year.

During the reign of the papacy in the Middle Ages the early pure development was not lost, but was badly spoiled by the introduction of Romish saint worship and by the rank growth of saint days and festivals, with their legends, their adoration of relics, and other extravagances, perpetuated to this day especially in papal lands. The celebration of the Mass usurped the place of the preaching of the Word.

The Reformation finally cleaned house. Luther's conservative work preserved, restored, and augmented the ancient Christian inheritance. The Zwinglian and Calvinistic reformation did the opposite. Proceeding on radical lines, the whole idea of the Christian Church Year, with all that made it so valuable, was cast aside by Calvinism. Instead of the mountain heights of glorious Christian festivals, with their ascending and descending Sunday services, a monotonous, unbroken plain of fifty-two common Sundays was

introduced. All the special lections and their rich liturgical settings were abolished, and in their place the *lectio continua* was introduced, i.e. the reading of biblical books chapter following chapter, among them also and even preferably Old Testament books. The choice of the books was left to the individual preacher, who also composed the prayers at each service, in fact, arranged the entire service as he pleased. For his sermon he took whatever text suited him.

This radical change was made on the plea that the Church Year and the lections for the festivals and the Sundays, together with the liturgical prayers and other features, were Romish and supported Romanism, — whereas the entire conception and system are anciently Christian. A second plea was that the series of selected texts — we call them pericopes — withheld from the churches the bulk of Scripture, in Romish fashion, and purposely impoverished the Christian faith, life, and knowledge. The answer to this second plea is that no *lectio continua*, especially when including many Old Testament books — Calvinism has always manifested a preference for the Old Testament books, — can possibly supply more Christian truth and knowledge than the carefully selected and exceedingly rich lections and texts from the New Testament.

Although the Anglican Church became strongly Calvinistic after the Lutheran movement in England, it preserved the old lections and liturgies. The denominations that split away from the Calvinistic reformation kept to the radical idea.

About 400 years have passed, ample time for a comparison of results. We are able to register the fact that the innovations begun under the influence of Zwingli and Calvin have run a deplorable downward course.

Where is now the *lectio continua* in all the denominations descended from Calvin's radical reformation? All their preachers choose their own texts Sunday after Sunday, each one as he deems best. The extreme opposite of reading continuously through entire books, with pulpit exposition according, is in vogue, namely extremely short texts, which often appear only as scrap texts or as pretexts. All these preachers are continuously obliged to hunt after this type of text. They live from hand to mouth; they hardly ever know what their next text will be. Each is swayed in his choice by his subjective personal limitations, likings, chance experiences, and the like.

The case is worse. Many no longer know what a text really is, namely a *textus*, a web, a section of Scripture woven through the sermon, or, to use another figure, the Scripture section on which the entire sermon is built. Many of these preachers expect the text to furnish only a *subject* for the sermon, one on which the preacher may dilate *ad libitum*. They call this “topical preaching.” The usual result is an *essay* on the subject which some Bible verse may mention. No homiletical training in a theological seminary is necessary for essay writing. Luther’s idea is that every sermon is a battle. Reciting what amounts to an essay is one of the lower types of sermonizing. The preacher soon runs out of subjects. The churches are not filled by reciting essays, especially when the essays are merely read from manuscript. To obtain additional subjects topics are selected that often have no place whatever in the pulpit of a Christian congregation.

Some preachers attempt to rise higher and seek texts containing a striking phrase or sentence, on which the preacher may ring the changes in his sermon. Such texts, of course, are not numerous. To obtain more of them the preacher resorts to allegory, — a capital crime in preaching. A preacher of national prominence used John 11:44: “Loose him and let him go!” as a text for a high school baccalaureate sermon, telling the audience for over thirty minutes that there comes a time when parents must let their children go out into the world and stand on their own feet. Another used the clause from the account of Christ’s Transfiguration: “as they came down from the mountain,” and told a class of seminary graduates that they must *come down* from their mountain heights to reach the people with their preaching. This man forgot Matt. 5:1: “He (Christ) *went up* into a mountain,” which would supply him with the very opposite allegory. Holding up the hands of Moses for the slaughtering of the heathen Amalekites (Ex. 17:12) has been allegorized for the conversion of the heathen in a missionary sermon.

To such pitiful levels has the Calvinistic *lectio continua* of Zwingli and Calvin degenerated in the pulpit of the present time.

Yet, in spite of all efforts, the great Christian Church Festivals have defied the Calvinistic nivellization² They stand today as a defiant Gibraltar, and are celebrated everywhere in the Christian world. The radical attempts have deprived the churches in which they were made only of the minor festivals like Epiphany and Ascension Day. Lent is forcing its way back among the descendants of Calvin, although many of them as yet have no

conception of Lent as the Passion Season (*Passionszeit*) of the Christian Church Year. Even Unitarianism and modernism are helpless allies when it comes to wiping out the great festivals of Christendom, which form the very backbone of the Christian Church Year.

No Calvinistic preacher has ever produced a Postil, — the term derived from *post illa* (sc. *verba*), meaning “after those words,” i.e. the sermon spoken after reading the words of the text. Among the sermon books of all time Luther’s Postil stands in the front rank. Great is the number of other Postils. All of them expound the anciently chosen texts. Often they were called Sermons for the Church Year; many of them bore specific and beautiful titles. All these preachers knew only one form of preaching, namely the expository, which sticks to the text and unfolds to the hearers the saving contents of the text.

Calvinists, like the Baptist Spurgeon, preached only once on an individual text selected only by the preacher himself for this or for that Sunday. Enterprising publishers printed collections of such sermons and sold them in quantities by means of heavy advertising and by proclaiming that particular preacher’s fame. The preachers who preached on pericopes did not proceed in this fashion. They preached on the established texts perhaps as many as twenty times, and then at last published only the ripest fruit of all their repeated efforts. The Church has been greatly enriched by this most valuable and noble sermonic literature. It appears in Germany, in Norway, in Sweden, etc., in hundreds of volumes, and in the Christian homes each “sermon book,” as it is commonly called, is treasured, read, and reread many times. In America and in the English language we have too few of such “sermon books.” Let our best preachers produce more.

In more recent times new selections have been made and authorized by the different church authorities in Germany and by the Synodical Conference in America, not as Scripture lections to be read at the altar or at the lectern, but as texts for the pulpit. All these selections are pericopes, fitted closely to the ancient idea of the Christian Church Year. Often there are three lines of texts, an Old Testament line besides a gospel and an epistle line. There are more than twenty-five of these. Naturally many individual pericopes appear in a number of these series of texts. Take for instance the Christmas festival, — the four gospels offer only three or four outstanding

texts suitable for this occasion, certainly not twenty-five or more. The same is true regarding the other great festivals.

These new series of texts for the pulpit aim to answer the desire of the churches to hear sermons on those portions of Scripture not contained in the ancient series of gospels and epistles. In these new pericope selections the correlation of the texts is close, much like chapters in a continuous narrative, which makes them attractive for both preacher and hearer. Outstanding are the two selections named after their authors, those proposed by Thoma-sius, and those offered by Nitzsch. The selections made by the Eisenach Conference in Germany have met with great favor, especially also in America. Exegetical and homiletical helps for the Eisenach text selections were published in Germany. For our American preachers *The Eisenach Gospel Selections* (now in the third edition), *The Eisenach Epistle Selections*, and *The Eisenach Old Testament Selections* soon followed; also another entirely new series of gospel texts, *The New Gospel Selections*, an exegetical-homiletical volume in which a complete sermon on each text is added to the other material. In these four volumes no text is repeated, and no text from the ancient pericopes is introduced.

For the ancient gospel and epistle selections the main helps consisted of the many sermon books on these texts, nearly all of which are rich in material, illustrations, etc., and suggestive for our present sermonizing. In 1886-7 the Reformed preacher and professor A. Nebe published *Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres* in three volumes, and also three volumes on the epistles, which became well known and were extensively used. A condensation of the volumes on the gospels was prepared by E. J. Wolff, *An Exposition of the Gospels of the Church Year Based on Nebe*. A smaller but useful work is that by J. L. Sommer, *Die Evangelischen Perikopen des Kirchenjahres*, the fourth edition of which appeared in 1898. Sommer also has a volume on the epistles. The need of a more adequate exegetical-homiletical treatment of the ancient gospel and epistle selections has long been felt. The manager of the Lutheran Book Concern has commissioned the writer of these lines to meet this need.

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1. He suffered martyrdom in the Valerian per in 258. The Roman prefect, having heard that the Christian Church was in possession of great

treasures, demanded that Laurentius surrender them. He seemed willing to comply, was released, then returned with a host of old, poor, and sick people, paupers and cripples, and said: “These are our jewels!” The prefect was enraged, and sentenced Laurentius to death over a slow fire. The Christians of Rome actually saw and heard how “his living limbs hissed over the coals.” The legend reports that when his scourged and lacerated body, stretched on the gridiron over the slow fire, was roasted on the under side, the martyr asked that his body be turned over to roast on the other side.↵

2. “leveling” —Ed.↵

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How Can You Find Peace With God?

The most important thing to grasp is that no one is made right with God by the good things he or she might do. Justification is by faith only, and that faith resting on what Jesus Christ did. It is by believing and trusting in His one-time *substitutionary* death for your sins.

Read your Bible steadily. God works His power in human beings through His Word. Where the Word is, God the Holy Spirit is always present.

Suggested Reading: [New Testament Conversions](#) by Pastor George Gerberding

Benediction

Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen. (Jude 1:24-25)

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- *The Doctrine of Justification by Matthias Loy*

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A Summary of the Christian Faith has been appreciated by Christians since its original publication for its easy to use question and answer format, its clear organization, and its coverage of all the essentials of the Christian faith. Two essays on election and predestination are included, including Luther’s “Speculations Concerning Predestination”.

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- [*Sermons on the Gospels* by Matthias Loy.](#) and [*Sermons on the Epistles* by Matthias Loy_](#)

“When you feel your burden of sin weighing heavily upon you, only go to Him.. Only those who will not acknowledge their sin and feel no need of a Savior — only these are rejected. And these are not rejected because the Lord has no pity on them and no desire to deliver them from their wretchedness, but only because they will not come to

Him that they might have life. They reject Him, and therefore stand rejected. But those who come to Him, poor and needy and helpless, but trusting in His mercy, He will receive, to comfort and to save.”

- *The Great Gospel* by Simon Peter Long and *The Eternal Epistle* by Simon Peter Long

“I want you to understand that I have never preached opinions from this pulpit; it is not a question of opinion; I have absolutely no right to stand here and give you my opinion, for it is not worth any more than yours; we do not come to church to get opinions; I claim that I can back up every sermon I have preached, with the Word of God, and it is not my opinion nor yours, it is the eternal Word of God, and you will find it so on the Judgment day. I have nothing to take back, and I never will; God does not want me to.”

- *True Christianity* by John Arndt
- *The Sermons of Theophilus Stork: A Devotional Treasure*

“There are many of us who believe; we are convinced; but our souls do not take fire at contact with the truth. Happy he who not only believes, but believes with fire... This energy of belief, this ardor of conviction, made the commonplaces of the Gospel, the old, old story, seem in his [Stork’s] utterance something fresh and irresistibly attractive. Men listened to old truths from his lips as though they were a new revelation. They were new, for they came out of a heart that new coined them and stamped its own impress of vitality upon them as they passed through its experience...” – From the Introduction

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