

Worship &
Witness

Various Christian traditions mark their calendars to reflect the biblical and ecclesial narrative and enhance public worship. Such efforts safeguard against secularization's encroachment in the church's life. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* serves as a guide and traveling companion for the liturgical year, which circles the glorious Son as he breaks through the secular eclipse.

"This is a gem of a book. A gem because it is rare: part devotion, part reflective essay, a combination of deep biblical and theological wisdom, wise conversation partners, and cultural engagement. And also a gem because its content deserves to be mined and treasured as we seek to follow Jesus in this complex cultural and political moment. Constructively building on other recent efforts to retrieve the liturgical calendar as a part of the re-formation of our Christian imaginations, faithful engagement with this book will surely help its readers orient their lives around the Son in this secular, pluralistic age."

—KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON, Western Theological Seminary

"Paul Louis Metzger has once again demonstrated an amicable and coherent way that evangelical fervor can be married to Catholic timekeeping. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* is a handbook to a liturgical life receptive to profoundly ecumenical insights. Christian unity seems much more palpable in the light of its lucid but simple provocations."

—PETER J. CASARELLA, Duke Divinity School

"A delightful walk through the entire Christian year. At once devotional and practical, this book is a useful guide for pastors, worship leaders, and faithful Christians of all traditions. Warmly recommended!"

—TIMOTHY GEORGE, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University

"We need to reset our clocks to Jesus' time, and Paul Louis Metzger's book helps us to do just that. Filled with wise meditations throughout the Christian year, this book is a sure guide for Christian pastors, churches, and families."

—JOEL SCANDRETT, Trinity School for Ministry

"*Setting the Spiritual Clock* masterfully guides readers to discern the transformative presence of Christ's Easter glory breaking through the 'secular eclipse' in the post-Christendom era. Metzger offers a timely response redeeming Christian narratives in a culturally meaningful way."

—DAVID SANG-EHIL HAN, Pentecostal Theological Seminary

"Paul Louis Metzger makes the theoretical case for the ecclesial year as a central element in spiritual formation and offers a series of meditations and practical resources for renewing the Christian narrative in community. May this book enrich churches in recovering the vital gift of the liturgical year!"

—PETER ROBINSON, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

Paul Louis Metzger is Professor of Theology & Culture at Multnomah University and Seminary and Director of The Institute for Cultural Engagement: New Wine, New Wine-skins. His works include *Consuming Jesus: Beyond Race and Class Divisions in a Consumer Church* and *Exploring Ecclesiology: An Evangelical and Ecumenical Introduction*.

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Metzger

Setting the Spiritual Clock

Setting the Spiritual Clock

SACRED TIME
BREAKING THROUGH
THE SECULAR ECLIPSE

Paul Louis Metzger

“Paul Louis Metzger has once again demonstrated an amicable and coherent way that evangelical fervor can be married to Catholic timekeeping. This marriage is not only designed for long-term use but is actually exciting! The secular calendar is neither ignored nor glamorized. I loved what he wrote about the celebration of Black History Month in Lent and the need to retreat from American exceptionalism on the Fourth of July. Marian feasts are treated with reverence, but the 95 Theses of Martin Luther also get rehabilitated. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* is a handbook to a liturgical life receptive to profoundly ecumenical insights. Christian unity seems much more palpable in the light of its lucid but simple provocations.”

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—TIMOTHY GEORGE

Distinguished Professor, Beeson Divinity School of Samford University,
and general editor of the 28-volume *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*

“Over the past twenty to thirty years in evangelical circles there has been a renewed interest in the central place of practice in the Christian life. We are not just thinking things but embodied creatures who ‘know’ as much through what we do as through what we think. This recognition has been reinforced in an existential way by the rootlessness we are experiencing. The current upheaval in our world is leaving us disoriented in so many areas, leading us to search for ways to ground our lives. In this book Paul Louis Metzger not only makes the theoretical case for the liturgical year as a central element in Christian formation, but he also takes the next logical step and offers practical resources. Through a series of meditations grounded in the liturgical cycle he encourages us to enter into the pattern of renewing the Christian narrative in community. Rather than simply advocating for the place of practice, he offers communities ways to foster attentiveness to the Christian story throughout the seasons. May this book enrich churches in recovering, in practical ways, the vital gift of the liturgical year!”

—PETER ROBINSON

Academic Dean and Professor of Proclamation, Worship and Ministry,
Wycliffe College, University of Toronto

“This is a gem of a book. A gem because it is rare: part devotion, part reflective essay, a combination of deep biblical and theological wisdom, wise conversation partners, and cultural engagement. And also a gem because its content deserves to be mined and treasured as we seek to follow Jesus in this complex cultural and political moment. Constructively building on other recent efforts to retrieve the liturgical calendar as a part of the re-formation of our Christian imaginations, faithful engagement with this book will surely help its readers orient their lives around the Son in this secular, pluralistic age.”

—KRISTEN DEEDE JOHNSON

Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs,
Professor of Theology and Christian Formation, Western Theological Seminary

“In the face of a hypermodernity that increasingly corrodes Christian identity and community, the church needs to reclaim an understanding of time (and place) that is rooted in the life and person of Jesus Christ. We need to reset our clocks to Jesus’ time, and Paul Louis Metzger’s book helps us to do just that. Filled with wise meditations throughout the Christian year, this book is a sure guide for Christian pastors, churches, and families.”

—JOEL SCANDRETT

Assistant Professor of Historical Theology, Trinity School for Ministry

“Though confessionally evangelical in its orientation, *Setting the Spiritual Clock* invites readers rooted in variegated Christian traditions to take seriously the formational power of biblical stories deeply woven in the liturgical calendar of the Christian church. Journeying through the seasons of the Christian calendar, the author masterfully guides readers to discern the transformative presence of Christ’s Easter glory breaking through the ‘secular eclipse’ that reigning cultural narratives often generate. Wrestling with the currents of the post-Christendom era, with a particular concern for increasing secularization, Metzger offers a timely response redeeming Christian narratives in a culturally meaningful way.”

—DAVID SANG-EHIL HAN

Dean of the Faculty, Vice President for Academics,
and Professor of Theology and Pentecostal Spirituality, Pentecostal Theological Seminary

SETTING THE SPIRITUAL CLOCK

WORSHIP AND WITNESS

The Worship and Witness series seeks to foster a rich, interdisciplinary conversation on the theology and practice of public worship, a conversation that will be integrative and expansive. Integrative, in that scholars and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines and ecclesial contexts will contribute studies that engage church and academy. Expansive, in that the series will engage voices from the global church and foreground crucial areas of inquiry for the vitality of public worship in the twenty-first century.

The Worship and Witness series demonstrates and cultivates the interaction of topics in worship studies with a range of crucial questions, topics, and insights drawn from other fields. These include the traditional disciplines of theology, history, and pastoral ministry—as well as cultural studies, political theology, spirituality, and music and the arts. The series focus will thus bridge church worship practices and the vital witness these practices nourish.

We are pleased that you have chosen to join us in this conversation, and we look forward to sharing this learning journey with you.

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SETTING THE SPIRITUAL CLOCK

Sacred Time Breaking Through the Secular Eclipse

Paul Louis Metzger



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SETTING THE SPIRITUAL CLOCK
Sacred Time Breaking Through the Secular Eclipse

Worship and Witness Series

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*To worship leaders who foster church family communion,
To my sister Nancy and brother Todd,
“Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.”*

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INTRODUCTION: CHECKBOOKS, CALENDARS, AND WHAT WE CHERISH

You learn a great deal about people and what they cherish by looking at their checkbooks and calendars. This happens on an individual as well as corporate or national level. Let's consider a few examples, as it will help us delve into the importance of the church's own calendar.

On an individual level, you find out what people prioritize, including food, clothing, and other necessities, favorite charities, work, entertainment, exercise, and rest. At the close of the secular calendar year, people are often scrambling to write checks for tax-deductible gifts. At the beginning of the new year, the same people (quite possibly you and me!) are making New Year's resolutions that they may keep for a time, but quite likely falter to maintain and eventually forget. I've been there more than once.

On a corporate or national level, you find out what a community or populace finds most important for its identity based on the dates it remembers regularly. Our secular calendars often list these key dates. In the United States, where I live, a calendar may list key events, national holidays, and historically significant political and cultural heroes. According to the National Archives, you will find the following listed as "federal holidays": New Year's Day, the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., Washington's Birthday (now often referred to as Presidents' Day), Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Christmas Day.¹ According to one US Senate document, Inauguration Day is included in the list, making it eleven.²

Whether US citizens think seriously about the selection of holidays, or simply look at them as possible occasions to relax, Congress's intent in choosing these dates was to emphasize dimensions of the country's heritage that have shaped our identity as Americans. According to that same

1. National Archives, "2019 Federal Holidays."

2. Stathis, "Federal Holidays."

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US Senate document, each selection of a national holiday “emphasizes particular aspects of the American heritage that molded the United States as a people and a nation.”³ The selection process can be quite painstaking, as the document suggests. For example, the recognition of Dr. King’s birthday as a federal public holiday was the result of an arduous fifteen-year struggle.⁴ The aim was to highlight his contribution to the civil rights movement.

You learn a great deal about what is important to American society based on what is recognized as a federal public holiday. *As with national monuments, the federal calendar reflects the nation’s liturgy.* “Liturgy”? Why would I use a religious term to discuss a secular subject? One reason is that the word originates in a broader social context. Another reason is that national liturgies often transcend or surpass the bounds of statehood to project transcendent or all-encompassing narratives and invite or demand total allegiance (minus perhaps private religious sentiments).

It’s important to give more context to the first reason for the use of the word *liturgy* in discussing the federal calendar. *Liturgy* is derived from the Greek composite word *leitourgía* (from the combination of Greek words for “pertaining to the people”—*leitós/láos* and “work”—*érgon*), which meant in its original setting a public duty performed by a citizen in respect to the state or “common welfare of the people.” In the Septuagint, the word and its equivalent were adapted to refer almost entirely to Israel’s chief end of worship and public duties of the priestly line in the tabernacle or temple. The New Testament picks up on this idea when we find in Hebrews 8:6 Jesus performing a surpassing liturgy or “ministry” (*leitourgías*) as the great high priest or “liturgist” of the New Covenant Law (Heb 8:1–6). The writer declares: “But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises” (Heb 8:6). The word *liturgy* came to refer to the entire scope of Christian ritual and service in public worship in contradistinction to private meditation, prayer, and devotion.⁵ Adolf Adam refers to the Christian liturgical year as “the commemorative celebration, throughout a calendar year, of the saving deeds God accomplished in Jesus Christ.”⁶ Lev Gillet (a “Monk of the Eastern Church”) views the church’s liturgical year

3. Stathis, “Federal Holidays.”

4. Rothman, “MLK Day.”

5. Catholic University of America, “Liturgy,” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 727–29; Fortescue, “Liturgy,” *Catholic Encyclopedia*; Cross and Livingston, eds., “Liturgy,” 994.

6. Adam, *The Liturgical Year*, vii.

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as “an abridgement of the history of salvation.”⁷ These are helpful, concise descriptions.

Now to return to the subject of calendar in general terms. Christmas Day is the only nationally recognized occasion that intersects with the Christian calendar. However, it should be noted that in the first two centuries of the Christian movement, the church did not prioritize Jesus’ birth. Moreover, it is worth highlighting that Christmas Day also has significance for pagans and secular people alike—albeit for different reasons.

Key to a nation or religion’s liturgy is sacrifice, heroism, and martyrdom. Thus, holidays like Veterans Day and Memorial Day loom large. So, too, does the birth of a people, as symbolized by the Fourth of July. While not officially constituted as federal public holidays, Mother’s Day and Father’s Day are intended to recognize the major contributions that parents make in the formation of the populace.

The church calendar does not officially recognize Mother’s Day, though the church calendar in many ecclesial traditions does recognize Mother Mary’s holy obedience and virtue as *theotokos* (God-bearer or Mother of God). The church does not officially recognize Father’s Day, nor the federal holiday recognizing Washington as the founding father of this nation. However, the church does recognize Jesus—who is the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2)—as the founder of the church, which is a holy nation (see 1 Peter 2:9).

While many in our society would like to privatize religion and the church, the church and religion are not private realities or dimensions of life. Moreover, America has often operated as a church and manifests civil religion, though it has evolved considerably since the nation’s birth. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that America has the soul of a church and was founded on a creed.⁸

My main concern in drawing attention to the privatizing and publicizing of religion and the church as well as the church-like features of America is not to push for a Christian theocracy. *Rather, my aim here is to highlight the respective liturgies of the church and secular state. Just like the US, the church goes through an arduous process of recognizing certain days as constitutive for molding its populace.* While there is no unanimity between East and West (or in the West itself) on a universal Christian calendar, various church traditions mark key days of the Christian year.⁹

7. Gillet, *The Year of Grace*, 87.

8. Mills, “The Nation.”

9. Shepherd, “Church Year.”

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The Christian year does not begin on January 1 or the Fourth of July, but on the first Sunday of Advent around the beginning of December. While it is common to recognize the new year in keeping with the secular calendar, we who are Christians should be sure to mark our calendars to reflect the Christian story. Stories shape our lives. Just as the children entered a new world of Narnia in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*,¹⁰ so we must enter the world of the Bible and calendar events that mark the seasons of our Christian life cycle, year in and year out. Otherwise, other stories—no matter how great and lofty as those of grassroots movements, great individuals or nations are—will eclipse the Christian narrative. *This book is a sustained attempt to set our spiritual clocks according to the liturgical or church calendar, which circles the glorious Son as he breaks through the secular eclipse.*

We will return to the subject of setting the spiritual clock and secular eclipse shortly. In the meantime, it is important to highlight the approach this volume takes to featuring the church calendar in comparison with some other works that are vital contributions to the liturgical year:

- Cindy Crosby, ed., *Ancient Christian Devotional Lectionary Cycle A–C* (InterVarsity, 2007–2011). Crosby's volumes highlight readings from the church fathers in their engagement of Scripture in keeping with the liturgical cycles of the year. While certainly sensitive to church history, *Setting the Spiritual Clock* is more synthetic. It provides a biblical-theological-historical-cultural engagement of the Christian calendar.
- Hoyt L. Hickman with Don E. Saliers, Laurence Hull Stookey, and James F. White, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year*, 2d ed. (Abingdon, 1992). Hickman and colleagues provide a detailed guide for use in services from across the ecclesial spectrum. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* provides a devotional guide for meditation and preparation for biblical exposition on themes pertinent to the church calendar rather than an aid for worship services in various Christian traditions throughout the year.
- Mark Oakley, ed., *A Good Year* (SPCK, 2016). Oakley's edited volume is a collection of seven articles addressing the significance of holy seasons throughout the church year. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* gives more detailed consideration to particular days, including those that occur during Ordinary Time, throughout the ecclesial year.
- Kendra Tierney, *The Catholic All Year Compendium: Liturgical Living for Real Life* (Ignatius, 2018). Tierney's book aims to aid Catholics in

10. Lewis, *The Lion*.

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living into the church calendar in concrete and practical ways. While *Setting the Spiritual Clock* can certainly aid Catholic readers, it has in mind a more general Christian audience.

- Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Baker, 2004). Webber has done perhaps more than anyone in evangelical circles to relay the undying significance and relevance of the ancient church's wisdom. Through chapters dedicated to various important seasons in the church calendar, Webber enlightens the reader to the import of ordering their spiritual lives in keeping with the liturgical year. *Setting the Spiritual Clock* takes to heart Webber's fresh explorations of the ancient church for the future of faith, though in a more devotional manner befitting weekly devotionals.

Mention of these resources suggest that this volume will be ecumenical in scope, although situated with an eye trained on my evangelical theological and cultural context. The evangelical tradition of which I am a card-carrying member is often Biblicist and anti-historical/traditional, as well as anti-ecumenical in orientation. It tends to look down on liturgical churches as being stale, detached from people's daily lives, and unbiblical. It behooves the careful critic and faithful disciple to ask what it means to be "biblical," and whether there are ways of being biblical in a variety of ways in diverse ecclesial and cultural contexts, including forms of liturgical expression. Moreover, just as it is problematic to discount Scripture as authoritative, so it is disturbing when we claim to filter everything through Scripture, when, in fact, the situation is far more complex.¹¹

As an example of such complexity, if you were to look carefully at any given church fellowship, you will find that there are various extra-biblical traditions and rituals as well as rites of passage and authority structures that shape that body of believers. They include: where the pulpit, Lord's Table, or piano/organ/drum kit is placed; what kind of art is displayed or technology is used; whether a church sings hymns or praise choruses and how many songs are performed in a given service; if and when there is confirmation; who can vote on church matters—"members" or laity in general; and who actually governs the church. Here we need to account for those situations where instead of finding "extra-biblical" traditions, we find unbiblical traditions. May it be duly noted that it is not always the pastor, elders, and/or congregation who govern a church based on godly wisdom, but rather an

11. The point is not to be less biblical but more biblical, as well as theologically grounded. Regarding the need for laying deep theological foundations for a given tradition or movement's liturgy, see Senn, *New Creation*.

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individual who has longevity, is most affluent, has more formal education, or has greater influence or prestige in the broader community.

Going further, “Low-Church” Christian traditions (including many evangelical communities) have liturgies, just like “High-Church” traditions. They may not follow the Christian calendar, perform the Eucharist/Lord’s Supper every Sunday, or clothe their pastors in priestly robes, but they worship in song and in proclamation of the Word of God, offer prayers, and honor Christmas, Easter, and possibly a few other days in the church calendar. Apart from the association with the word *ecumenical* that suggests (to some evangelicals) “watering down” doctrinal distinctives for some vague sense of Christian unity, Christian Scripture exhorts us to pursue unity with the whole Christian community (see John 17, for example). This is the best sense of “ecumenical,” as it conveys the passionate pursuit of visible unity with the entire body of Christ here on earth.¹²

While the evangelical community has much to offer the larger church with our emphasis on personal relationship with Jesus in evangelism and devotions, commitment to the rigorous study and exposition of Scripture in many contexts, as well as grassroots activism, we have much to learn from the larger Christian communion.¹³ The church did not begin when each of us came to know Jesus personally. It precedes us and the evangelical movement, and it extends beyond us in the world today. While holding true to the vital aspects of our evangelical Protestant tradition, we should be open and desirous of learning and benefiting from the riches of other ecclesial traditions, when there is no sense of biblical compromise. Moreover, these traditions often help safeguard against “secular creep” in our worship services, given their aim of filling the Christian calendar with attention to the time- and world-altering reality of Jesus Christ. Apart from its clear Catholic orientation, what Protestant evangelical cannot give a hearty “Amen” to the following statement regarding the liturgical calendar?

Many holy men and women through the ages, however, have set their internal clock to the liturgical calendar and have found their lives reshaped in the process—for the purpose of the liturgical calendar is to orient our days around the person of Jesus. This process begins with Sunday worship, which is the cornerstone of the whole liturgical calendar. We celebrate Mass each Sunday—rather than on the Jewish Saturday—in recognition

12. Brad Harper and I pursued this evangelical and ecumenical balance in *Exploring Ecclesiology*.

13. See for example the balanced treatment of how evangelicals benefit (and can be benefited by) the larger church community in Braaten and Jenson, eds., *In One Body*, 55–56.

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that when Jesus resurrected on Easter Sunday He began the renewal of the whole world and the universe was fundamentally changed (see Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1193). As the liturgical poet John Keble, a great friend of Blessed John Henry Newman, exclaimed in his poem “Easter Day,” Easter sheds “light on all the year,” making Sundays “more glorious break, / An Easter Day in every week.” Sunday worship reveals to us the nature of the world in which we live.¹⁴

May evangelical Christians join with Christians of various ecclesial traditions across the globe in welcoming Jesus’ Easter Day shedding light on every day and night throughout the year, not just Sundays, but also every moment of the seemingly secular work week. There can be no such thing as a “Sunday-only” Christian.

Here we now return to the theme of setting the spiritual clock. Hans Frei wrote about *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* in modern thought, whereby the reader evaluates or judges the biblical text in view of attempted historical reconstructions rather than approaches the text as rendering the history it narrates, as in pre-modern interpretation.¹⁵ *Something similar happened in the modern period with the removal or erosion of the sacred liturgy in the broader societal imagination. In its place we find secular liturgies that often cloud or eclipse Jesus’ Easter glory in the Christian imagination.* Sacred liturgy involved molding Christians as a virtuous community with a teleological or eschatological orientation involving perfection through our union with Christ.¹⁶ In contrast, today we often find the autonomous individual free of all temporal and spatial boundaries. Where community does exist, liturgy is often the projection of an autonomous human agent in loose association with other such individual agents, or the imposition of a hegemonic force of individual tyranny or collectivist derivation, including the nation state.

One example of a secular liturgy eclipsing sacred space and time is the shopping mall. The shopping mall is a secular worship center involving liturgy and ritual founded upon a deity of sorts. The hidden force known as the invisible hand of the market controls the individual producers, retailers, and consumers. Apart from the opening and closing hours, the worshiping customer is led to shop without a sense of time given the absence of clocks in stores. In place of Classical Theism’s spaceless and timeless God, the Market is seemingly omnipresent and timeless. An abundance of mirrors makes up for the absence of clocks. Those mirrors parallel in parasitical form icons

14. Heady, “What Is the Liturgical Calendar?”

15. Frei, *Eclipse*.

16. Along these lines, refer to MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.

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of the Trinity and great saints who inspire us and serve as windows into the divine reality. In their place, mirrors provide opportunity for self-worship as we fixate on ourselves. There's no sense of belonging to something holy and transcendent and that inspires us to pursue the path of virtue. In the place of tradition and teleology involving human virtue, we pursue boundless freedom and maximum pleasure, comfort, health, and wealth—in other words, the American Dream. Given the predominance of this way of being, we might well ask: how often do our worship services at church reflect a shopping mall experience that fixates on fickle individual religious consumer preferences of praise, and purchases of fleeting happiness and frivolous religious goods or products through our giving?

This is a far cry from the biblical narrative and its inherent liturgical practices. Take for example the pilgrimage feasts that helped to orient and bind the Jewish community. Three times a year the people of Israel were commanded to journey to Jerusalem to honor God and offer costly sacrifices at the Temple:

According to the Torah, God commanded the Israelites: “Three times a year shall all your men appear before the LORD your God in the place that God will choose [referring presumably to the Temple in Jerusalem], on the festivals of Pesah (Passover), Shavuot (the Feast of Weeks), and Sukkot (the Festival of Booths). They shall not appear empty handed. Each shall bring his own gift, appropriate to the blessing which the Lord your God has given you” (Deuteronomy 16:16). . . .

The pilgrimage festivals created an opportunity for the Jewish community to reaffirm their communal commitment to the covenant with God, strengthen the self-identification of the nation as a religious community, and entrench the sanctity of Jerusalem and the place where the Temple stood in the religious consciousness of the people. These festivals are at their core a community-building experience.¹⁷

The tradition of pilgrimage three times a year reflected a teleological orientation in a historical vein, as God promised to deliver his people and lead them into the Promised Land. The tradition centered in this teleological paradigm fostered a vibrant community.

Jesus was raised in a home that honored his Jewish heritage and its various feasts and festivals. From his earliest days through childhood to adulthood, Jesus practiced the Jewish tradition and participated in its community-building experiences, including the pilgrimage feasts. Such

17. Kohn, “Pilgrimage Festivals?”

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tradition involved teleology and eschatology. Each of the pilgrimage feasts shaped the Jewish people as a missional movement that obeyed God's Law to cultivate virtuous love of God and neighbor and prepared them for worship in the Messianic age when they would dwell in the Promised Land of rest. Certainly, as we will find in the entries on Holy Week, Jesus remembered the Passover and understood himself to be the focal point of bringing healing through his suffering to Israel and the nations. If Jesus did not find these liturgical celebrations to be dead tradition, but essential to his spiritual practice and mission,¹⁸ shouldn't we do the same and honor the Christian calendar when it reflects and extends the biblical story?

Now some may object and claim that Christianity is not about special days. Certainly, we are not to allow others to judge us spiritually based on observing festivals and Sabbaths. Instead, we are to put ourselves under the judgment of Christ to whom the substance of spirituality belongs. He is our Sabbath rest and the substance of the various biblical images in salvation history. As Paul wrote to the church in Colossae, "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col 2:16–17). With Paul's point in mind, I would hate to see us allow other calendars, such as that of a great nation, to cast their shadows on Jesus and his church's life. Jesus and his church must alone mark the seasons of the church calendar year, as well as mold our souls.

Again, we are not to allow others to judge us based on whether we observe certain festivals and the Sabbath. The substance belongs to Christ (Col 2:17), who is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt 12:8) and the one to whom the festivals like Passover point. He is our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). As the focal point of the biblical pageantry and liturgy, Jesus should inspire and shape our liturgical expression.

As Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus did not allow certain Sabbath practices to stand in the way of caring for others in need. He told the religious establishment: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So, the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27–28). But that does not mean Jesus did away with liturgy. He reframed the church's liturgy to circle around his Father through him in the Spirit. So the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews exhorts his readers who considered abandoning Christ to return to their Jewish traditions: "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day

18. See for example Burge, *Jesus and Jewish Festivals*.

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drawing near” (Heb 10:24–25). Many of the initial recipients of this epistle had their hearts, imaginations, and habits in the wrong place. The author appealed to them to reconsider: How could they go back to the old way of life centered in a temple that would soon disappear when Jesus, according to Hebrews 8, ministers as the royal priest in the heavenly temple of the New Covenant? Hebrews does not call for removing liturgy but reframing it in and through Jesus as the center of worship.

Instead of trying to do away with liturgy, we should think again. Liturgy, including the church calendar, involves a communal response to the sacred.¹⁹ We cannot get away from liturgy and the way we shape and structure existence according to certain patterns and rhythms centered in what we find to be our ultimate concern. *God wired us to be liturgical beings (homo liturgicus), and so we will either repeat God’s liturgical norms or create our own, including calendars.*

The question is not whether we have a liturgy, but what kind of liturgy we have, express, and embody. The shopping mall example above was not a one-off exception to the rule, but one example among a multitude of others. James K. A. Smith puts it this way in his discussion of humans as liturgical beings:

Recovering religion as ritual is not just another way to domesticate it or explain it away. Rather, the point is to appreciate the enchantment of our rhythms, the incarnation of devotion, the way rituals are a last tether to sacramentality that tell us something about ourselves. Even if a secular age is increasingly willing to throw overboard an array of beliefs and norms we associate with religion—precisely *because* we associate them with religion—we are a long way from giving up on ritual. It’s not that we’re a-religious; we just inhabit different liturgies. Our penchant for finding grooves for our longings and hopes

19. Mircea Eliade refers to the sacred as that which “always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from ‘natural’ realities.” *Sacred and Profane*, 10. Eliade refers to the revelation or “act of manifestation of the sacred” as “hierophany.” Eliade refers to “the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ” as “the supreme hierophany,” 11. Drawing from Rudolf Otto, Eliade highlights “the numinous,” which the religious person (*homo religious*) experiences. This experience involves an overwhelming sense of “awe-inspiring mystery” (*mysterium tremendum*) and “fascinating mystery” (*mysterium fascinans*), 9–10. Theologically and liturgically speaking, God who is wholly different or “wholly other” according to Otto (see Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 9) becomes one with us as the incarnate Christ. Jesus is the manifestation of the sacred in history. The Spirit awakens us to experience Jesus as this manifestation of the sacred. The liturgical calendar reflects his sacred incarnate glory as it encircles him.

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is a backhanded witness to our enduring nature as worshipers.
Homo religiosus is fundamentally *homo liturgicus*.²⁰

As liturgical beings, what rituals will shape our existence and worship of God? While immediacy and individual experience in worship have their place, without the historical and global church context in mind, we lose our moorings. We must account for the biblical reality that we arise in a concrete historical and larger social context and are proceeding toward a particular end, namely the Promised Land to which Jesus leads us. Otherwise, the American Dream of upward mobility from New Year's to July 4 to Black Friday can easily displace the faith once and for all delivered to the saints, and which culminates in the Christian calendar with Christ the King Sunday at the close of the church year. Allow the biblical and ecclesial panorama involving the great cloud of witnesses throughout salvation history to inspire us as we pursue "the founder and perfecter of our faith" to the finish line (see Heb 12:1–2).

Like humans generally, Christians are seasonal beings. Our rhythms follow the seasons and cycles of life. The Christian liturgical seasons are Advent, Christmastide, Epiphanytide (which overlaps with the first phase of Ordinary Time), Lent, Easter Triduum, Eastertide, and Ordinary Time (second phase). This book traces these seasons, except in the case of the Easter Triduum, which begins on Maundy Thursday evening and ends on Easter evening. In its place, we feature Holy Week, which runs from Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday. Easter Sunday will appear under Eastertide (which officially begins at sunset on the eve of Easter). It is also worth noting that this volume extends Epiphanytide to last until Lent, reserving the discussion of Ordinary Time to its second phase. As noted above, in the traditional liturgical calendar, Epiphanytide overlaps with the first phase of Ordinary Time. Together they close at Lent. *An appendix is provided to help the reader navigate the essays in this volume in accordance with the liturgical seasons and days of observance, as many may wish to do. Others may choose to read the book from front to back at their own leisure. Either approach is fine.*

The reader will find a section dedicated to each specified liturgical season. Each section will begin with an introductory reflection followed by a series of entries pertaining to that season. The introduction to each section will orient the reader to what follows as well as highlight the book's central focus articulated earlier: namely, to set our spiritual clocks according to the Christian calendar, which circles the radiant Son as he breaks through the secular eclipse. Just as a total or partial eclipse may reset a species' internal

20. Smith, "Homo Liturgicus." See also his work *Desiring*.

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clock,²¹ so secularity resets our orientation to the world. Perhaps what is even more perplexing is that we are often unaware of this secular reset.²² While it is incumbent upon Christians to engage the surrounding culture in an irenic, dialogical, and nonsectarian manner, we must also make sure that as the church we focus our imaginations on the glorious Christ, around which the liturgical calendar rotates, as he breaks through the secular eclipse. As Robert Webber makes clear in reflecting on Christian time's shaping of spirituality, "it is of utmost importance that we begin with Christ, who is the source of our spirituality and the one who gives meaning to time. Without

21. See for example the discussion of how eclipses impact the "internal clocks" of various species of animals and plants in Zirker, *Total Eclipses of the Sun*, 184–87. It has been debated whether humans rely "more on social cues than light to set their body clocks." Smolensky and Lamberg, *The Body Clock Guide*, 33. However, regardless of the nature-nurture issue, eclipses of natural or cultural-ideological varieties do indeed impact our imaginations and orientation to the world.

22. In his work on Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, James K. A. Smith highlights three ways in which secularity has been understood to shape people's lives. First, it splits reality into two spheres: the sacred, religious, spiritual vs. the mundane, nonreligious, earthly (Secular₁). Second, it splits society into two domains: the public as nonreligious and private as religious (Secular₂). Third, secularity champions pluralism over exclusivism. The Christian faith is one option among many from which to choose (Secular₃). Adding to this challenge, religious belief is not the easiest option to accept (another way to put it may be that the Christian faith is not the most user-friendly product or cheapest brand). Ultimately, secularism leaves us with an all-or-nothing scenario. While Christians may inadvertently accept the first and second options and reject the third due to adherence to the claim that Jesus is Lord, secularism's desired reach is total. Contrary to the "secularization theory" that involves the "subtraction story," the modern world is far more than the subtraction of God and faith. It is a substitution that eclipses religion. It takes its place as "exclusive humanism." See Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 20–22, 142–43. It is worth noting here that for Taylor exclusive humanism does not ultimately jettison Christianity with its deletion of religious content. Secularism presupposes and co-opts Christianity and presents itself as an all-encompassing framework from beginning to end. See for example Taylor's discussion of "subtraction stories" in *A Secular Age*, 22, 26–27. Having noted Taylor and Smith's engagement of the concept of secularism, it is worth pointing to Hugh Whelchel's commentary on what he sees as the hodgepodge adoption of the first two aspects of secularism and rejection of the third in Christian circles. Such an eclectic or piecemeal adoption gives rise to "private religious time" in the contemporary Christian imagination: "This explains one of the most significant problems in the current evangelical church. An overwhelming number of Christians today completely embrace Secular₁ and Secular₂ above, while many more struggle with Secular₃ because of the exclusive claims of Christianity. They live schizophrenic lives, existing as a secularist at work and in the public square, but then as a religious believer in their private lives. They seem unaware of the Apostle Paul's charge to do *everything* to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31) because they are caught up in this sacred-secular divide. As a result, the gospel becomes only a bus ticket to heaven and, except for some private religious time, has minimal effect on how many Christians live their lives." Whelchel, "Sacred-Secular Divide."

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Christ there could be no Christian time. It is Christ who determines the Christian year, and it is through the practice of Christian-year spirituality that Christ is formed within us.”²³

It is important to pause at this point in the effort to strike the right balance on cherishing the sacred in the Christian community in the context of our secular age. The aim in contending against what I refer to as the “secular eclipse” or “secular creep” in Christian worship (including the church calendar) is not sectarian. This book simply seeks to make certain that the Savior rather than a secularist paradigm shapes our narrative, imagination, and sense of time in the church.²⁴ Without this orientation, we will not survive as authentically and distinctively Christian in our secular, pluralistic age. With this mind-set and heart-set, we will thrive.²⁵ That said, it is essential to authentic Christian witness that we pursue genuine and meaningful dialogue with the broader community. The Bible encourages and exhorts us to be prepared always to enter into conversation and make a cogent and compelling case for our Christian faith as an alternative way of life while engaging others in an inquisitive and charitable manner (1 Pet 3:15). This perspective and posture are needed now more than ever, since we cannot presume that faith is axiomatic for the broader society. As Charles Taylor shows, ours is a secular age, where Christian belief is no longer a given.²⁶

Having attempted to orient the reader to the balance to strike concerning the sacred and secular, it is important to note other features that help situate the readership in terms of what they can expect to find in the ensuing pages. In addition to tracing the seasons of the church calendar, this volume features special occasions, such as Jesus’ birthday at Christmas, the church’s anniversary celebration on Pentecost, and certain deaths. Deaths? Yes, in addition to remembering Jesus’ death on Good Friday, the church

23. Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 24.

24. Webber laments the secularization of worship, most notably in “the typical evangelical calendar.” He draws attention to various national and local special days filling the evangelical calendar and writes, “This strange mixture of the patriotic, sentimental, and promotional shows how far removed we are from a Christian concept of time.” Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, 111.

25. Webber’s *Ancient-Future* series claims that the ancient church arose in a pluralistic society that bears striking similarities to our present-day context. The Christian community must draw from the ancient Christian narrative and practices if it is to flourish in our postmodern world. A recent article noting the move among Christians of various stripes, including evangelicals, to immerse themselves in liturgical practices is Tara Isabella Burton’s “Christianity Gets Weird.”

26. Taylor, *A Secular Age*. The following statement strikes a good balance: “The point is not to be sectarian or to try to put ourselves at odds with non-Christians. The point is to keep God’s story at the center of our lives and calendar.” Claiborne et al., *Common Prayer*, 15.

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honors saints on the occasions of their passings, since it is understood that they have passed into their eternal glory. We have paid tribute to a few of these saints as representatives of the great cloud of witnesses. There is no way a book of this size with its intended focus could account for every day in the church calendar, or every day honoring a saint. Similarly, this book does not account for the three-year church calendar cycle from A to C, nor the various scriptural readings associated with those particular years in the cycle. Rather, the aim is to provide an overview with an emphasis placed on the Son of God breaking through the secular eclipse whereby we celebrate sacred time. In general, the various sections comprise a series of essays that account for each week of the church calendar, though there will at times be more than one entry, as in the case of Holy Week.

Mention was made of saints above and the dates in the church calendar that honor their passing. My own saintly mother recently entered her eternal rest. On February 23, 2020, my mom passed away peacefully. From now on, I will take to heart in a renewed way her birthday on August 28 and her death on February 23. Mom used to remind me of my deceased grandparents' birthdays. They were alive to Mom, as was my father who passed away several years before her. Mom cherished them. It never got old to honor their birthdays, just like we never get tired of celebrating the birthdays or anniversaries of living loved ones. In fact, we love going to the shopping mall or florist to purchase a gift for them. We would never say of cherished children or beloved spouses that we celebrated their lives at their births or our marriages on our wedding days, so there's no need to express our love and appreciation in future years. The same goes for Jesus' birthday or resurrection from the dead, or the church's anniversary (Pentecost). If we love him and his people, we will remember them. Remembrance is one of the ways we keep our love alive, as in honoring them on special days with festive parties, feasts, and gifts.

As I stated at the outset of this introduction, you learn a lot about people and what they cherish by looking at their checkbooks and calendars. What might others learn about what and who we love if they were to look at our checkbooks and calendars on any given Sunday and on Christian holidays and landmarks throughout the year?

REMEMBER HANUKKAH— CELEBRATE RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Edward Gibbon famously remarked: “The various modes of worship which prevailed in the Roman world were all considered by the people as equally true; by the philosopher as equally false; and by the magistrate as equally useful. And thus toleration produced not only mutual indulgence, but even religious concord.”⁹ I do not think the Roman Empire owned the copyright on this view of religion. It has triumphed in many eras. However, dissenting views have arisen throughout history.

Take, for example, the story of the Maccabees and their Judean followers, whose courage and conviction serve as inspiration for the eight-day Jewish holiday known as Hanukkah, which is celebrated in December every year (and which was once a Christian celebration, too). According to the traditional account recorded in the first Book of Maccabees,¹⁰ the Maccabean family and their followers refused to succumb to the tyrannical demands of the Syrian king Antiochus IV, who sought to force them to worship the Greek God Zeus and partake in pagan sacrifices. Beginning in 167 BCE and culminating in 164 BCE with the capture, cleansing, and rededication of the second Temple in Jerusalem, the Maccabees and their small band of soldiers fought for religious liberty and against what we might call today the commodification of their religion. The chief symbol of Hanukkah

9. Gibbon, *Decline and Fall*, 1:22.

10. Philip Jenkins challenges the traditional account, claiming that there is “quite a wide gulf separating historical reality from later religious myths.” Later, Jenkins writes, “Mainly, this was not so much a straightforward revolt of Jews against pagan Greeks. Rather, it was a vicious civil war between Jewish factions, who hotly debated how far they could and should accommodate Gentile ways and ideas.” And again, “It greatly behooved later writers to write the history of the revolt in pious terms, to show that those Maccabee ancestors had indeed been fighting a holy war rather than merely seizing power in a putsch.” Jenkins, “Hanukkah and National Myths.” For an expanded treatment of the complex historical backdrop to Hanukkah, see Jenkins, *Crucible of Faith*.

Remember Hanukkah—Celebrate Religious Liberty

is the menorah, which is an eight-branched candelabra. The eight branches signify the miraculous intervention of God: the one drop of oil remaining in a jar at the Temple's reclamation burned for eight days in the menorah, when it should have burned only for one.

It has been argued that Antiochus IV or Antiochus Epiphanies was surprised that the Jewish people should take such offense at his attempts of adapting and syncretizing religious traditions in service to his rule, in keeping with Gibbon's claim noted at the outset of this piece. According to R. Kendall Soulen, Antiochus likely maintained that Israel's God was simply a tribal name for the transcendent and all-encompassing nameless deity of imperial rule.¹¹ Little did Antiochus truly grasp that for the monotheistic Maccabees the God whom the Jewish people knew and worshiped as the LORD—the name for the God of the Covenant made with the Patriarchs and revealed to Moses at the burning bush—was the Almighty God above heaven and earth, who would not allow his name or his named people to be commodified by tyrants. As with Moses and Pharaoh, the Maccabees declared that Antiochus should cease and desist.¹²

Regardless of one's perspective on the historical veracity of the first Book of Maccabees (refer to the footnote above concerning Philip Jenkins's analysis), it is indeed the case that throughout much of their history, the Jewish people have sought to navigate those religious, cultural, and political forces that would deprive them of their religious and cultural identity and liberty. Some have gone so far as to claim that Christmas in the United States has posed a threat to Judaism, and thus Hanukkah has been elevated to greater prominence as a Jewish religious holiday than would be historically warranted given that it is relatively late and intertestamental in its origin, unlike Passover or Succoth.¹³ Regardless of the historical triggers for its emergence as a cherished holiday, it serves to counter forces that would weaken the Jewish heritage:

11. See Soulen, "Go Tell Pharaoh," 51–52.

12. See Soulen's entire essay, "Go Tell Pharaoh."

13. For critical reflection on this argument and Hanukkah's significance in the Jewish community in the United States, see Emma Green, "Hanukkah, Why?" Green writes: "So why, in America, has Hanukkah taken on outsized significance? Because it serves a particular purpose: an opportunity to negotiate the twin, competing pressures of ethnic tension and assimilation. As the Rowan University historian Dianne Ashton writes in her book, *Hanukkah in America*, 'Hanukkah's strongest American advocates seem to have been those who felt the complexities of American Jewish life most acutely.'" For the original source, see Ashton, *Hanukkah in America*. For a treatment of Hanukkah in more general terms, refer here: Augustyn et al., "Hanukkah."

II—Christmastide: Jesus Is Born!

Since Hanukkah is not biblically ordained, the liturgy for the holiday is not well developed. It is actually a quite minor festival. However, it has become one of the most beloved of Jewish holidays. In an act of defiance against those in the past and in the present who would root out Jewish practice, the observance of Hanukkah has assumed a visible community aspect.¹⁴

Hanukkah, like many religious holidays, serves to mold a people according to the substance and form of a given spiritual tradition and story so that they and their tradition do not become eclipsed by competing narratives, whether secular or religious. Hanukkah addresses the vital concerns of religious liberty and freedom of worship. One analysis claims that the theology and themes behind Hanukkah entail the following: “Like Passover, Hanukkah is a holiday that celebrates the liberation from oppression. It also provides a strong argument in favor of freedom of worship and religion. In spite of the human action that is commemorated, never far from the surface is the theology that the liberation was possible only thanks to the miraculous support of the Divine.”¹⁵

Going beyond singular reflection on Hanukkah, there are many reasons why people celebrate religious holidays, including Christmas and Hanukkah. Some of those reasons include ethnic, nationalist, and consumerist agendas. The following point on Hanukkah made in Green’s piece noted earlier could be extended to other holidays, including those of the Christian tradition: “It’s so simple, so conveniently vague, that it has been used by rabbis, advertisers, Zionists, Hebrew school teachers, and parents to promote everything from ethnic pride and nationalism to engagement in Jewish life and buying stuff.”¹⁶

Speaking of ethnic pride and nationalism, we need to guard against those forces that bind and rebind societies in ways that favor one people group to the detriment of others. The call for religious liberty, for example, should not be taken by Christians as a rallying cry to enforce Christian hegemony in the US to the detriment of Jews, Muslims, atheists, and others. However, the solution is not the privatization and subjectification of religion, whereby it becomes merely the object of sentimental attraction of religious individuals, who should keep their convictions to themselves. On this view, the only time religion is given public credence is when it serves the GNP with the purchase of goods and services in the marketplace of

14. My Jewish Learning, “Hanukkah 101.”

15. My Jewish Learning, “Hanukkah 101.” See also the discussion of Hanukkah in Drucker, *Family Treasury*, 46.

16. Green, “Hanukkah, Why?”

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commodified desire during holiday seasons, to which the quotation including “buying stuff” points.

The dominant mind-set in the US favors the democratization of religion. While it can help safeguard against religious hegemony, all too often such democratization can give rise to treating religious holidays like Hanukkah and Christmas as the equivalents of consumer products. Celebrate them, if you wish. Pick and choose and mix them together, if you like. They merely exist for fostering holiday cheer and a sense of mystery, nostalgia, or novelty. Contrary to what many Americans think, such democratization is a form of tyranny.

Today in our free market society, tyranny often takes the shape of consumer demand. This demand transforms, reshapes, and co-opts the great religious traditions so that they no longer serve to bind societies, but rather cater to other forces’ agendas. Lesslie Newbigin puts the matter this way:

Different religious traditions lose their capacity to be the binding element of societies and become instead mere options for religious consumers to select for their own private reasons, reasons which are not to be argued about. Thus “democratized,” religions enter the marketplace as objects of subjective choices in much the same way as brands of toothpaste and laundry soap.¹⁷

As Newbigin suggests, religious traditions are better and rightly conceived as metaphysical underpinnings that serve to bind and rebind societies.

The celebration of Hanukkah with its claim to honor the LORD, whose name is not to be discarded and replaced by the leading brand deity of the month, whether Egyptian or Greek or Roman, German, American, or other, should inspire us to safeguard space for the religious and cultural minority voices whether they be Jewish, Palestinian, African American, Mexican, or other, whatever their religious tradition, rather than oppress them. We who are Christians should remember and show respect for Hanukkah during Advent and Christmastide and cherish the biblical or intertestamental Jewish holidays that often support and give rise to our own holy days like Passover/Easter and Pentecost. May we also safeguard against religious hegemony and its democratized, consumerized counterpart that for all its supposed merits can never rebind society in a manner that protects the rights of religious and nonreligious minorities and the people generally from magistrates and rulers who would use religion for their own ends to commodify the masses.

17. Newbigin, “Religion for the Marketplace,” 152.