



EQUIPPER

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Dear minister of Jesus Christ:

We are about to enter the Advent-Christmas season. Advent lasts four Sundays (this year the first falls on November 27), then comes Christmas (December 25). Because Christmas falls this year on a Sunday, we have five Sundays to celebrate our Lord's three *comings*: future, present and past (see p. 2).



This issue of *Equipper* is devoted to helping preachers, teachers and worship leaders prepare, as we enter a new annual worship cycle (see article below). May this season and the whole year bring you great joy in the Lord!

- Ted Johnston, *Equipper* general editor

The Christian Year

In *The Services of the Christian Year* (Robert E. Webber, ed.), Thomas Talley summarizes the development of the church's annual worship cycle:

"In the first centuries A.D. the cycle of Christian time grew out of the conviction that all time finds its meaning in the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus the early Christians, beginning with the paschal event [Easter], extended the Christian calendar forward to Pentecost and backward to Lent and Holy Week. Later, in the fourth century, Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany were developed to complete the cycle" (p. 85).

In *Calendar, Christ's Time for the Church*, Laurence Stookey speaks of the importance, even the necessity, of these annual worship events:

"To be deeply Christian is to know and to live out the conviction that the whole human family dwells continuously at the intersection of time and eternity... [However], at times our natural preoccupation with the pressures and details of life... produce a negative result: Time obscures the very eternity it is intended to reveal. For this reason, Christians have found it helpful—even necessary—to keep track of time in special ways that call to remembrance God's work among us" (pp. 17-18)

This "remembrance" of God's work includes both looking *back* and looking *forward* in order to bring past and future events into our present awareness.

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The meaning of Advent

In the ancient church, Advent ended the Christian year. More recently, it marks the beginning of the New Year with its new cycle of worship. In the Western Church, Advent begins on the fourth Sunday prior to Christmas Day, or on the Sunday falling closest to November 30. It then lasts through Christmas Eve (December 24), ushering in the celebration of Christmas Day (December 25).

The word "advent" comes from the Latin "adventus" meaning "arrival" or "coming," particularly of something having great importance. During Advent, the church remembers the important *comings* of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It starts by looking forward, in hope, to Jesus' future coming in glory. It then considers Jesus' continuing present coming to us through the Holy Spirit. Then it concludes with a joyous remembering of the Son of God's coming to us in the flesh through the miracle of the Incarnation. This leads into the celebration of Jesus' birth on Christmas Day. Thus Advent and Christmas bring into our present awareness the future, present and past *comings* of the Incarnate Son of God.



In an article in *The Services of the Christian Year*, Geoffrey Wainwright summarizes the meaning of Advent:

"The liturgical themes of Advent...envisage...the first and final comings of Christ. They encourage Christians to relive the Old Testament expectations that they believe were fulfilled at Bethlehem and, simultaneously, to prepare themselves for the Lord's return at the consummation. Isaiah is a favored source of Scripture lessons, since the book lends itself to a 'stereoscopic' reading that sees the prophecies as both realized in Christ and yet still outstanding until the End.

"The preacher will use the season of Advent not only to build up to the celebration of Christmas but also..., to confront the 'four last things' of death and judgment, heaven and hell. This is the existential application to each individual of Christ's awaited coming again in glory to judge the quick and the dead (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10)" (pp. 89-90).

Note Laurence Stookey's related comment in *Calendar, Christ's Time for the Church*:

"The First Sunday of Advent is regarded in the Western Church as the beginning of the liturgical year. But Advent is first of all about the end of time. Because the term itself means "coming" or "arrival," and because it precedes Christmas, many have misunderstood Advent to be exclusively a time to get ready to celebrate the coming of a child at Bethlehem. In fact, the primary focus of Advent is on what is popularly called 'the second coming.' Thus Advent concerns the future of the Risen One...

"What may seem to be an anomaly is a very important theological point: The beginning of the liturgical year takes our thinking to the very end of things. For 'end' means not only the 'end of time,' but the central purpose or goal of creation. We are not aimlessly wandering in the wilderness, even though we may be tempted to think so... History is headed somewhere by direction (though not dictation) from God. It is necessary that the liturgical year begin with this focus on a central holy intention; for otherwise the story of Jesus, which is about to be rehearsed from conception and birth to death and resurrection, may seem less than what it is: the deliberate fulfilling of divine purpose, worked out through historical process" (p. 121).

That divine purpose is, of course, to "bring many sons to glory" (Hebrews 2:10). This is the Father's plan, being worked out in and through the vicarious humanity of his Son Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is cause for great joy!

Resources for celebrating Advent and Christmas

- A principal focus of Advent and Christmas is the Incarnation—the central truth of the Gospel that for our salvation, the Son of God added our humanity to his divinity. For a helpful book that examines this stunning truth (including the truth that Jesus remains human forever), see *Jesus Ascended, the Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* by Gerrit Scott Dawson (P & R Publishing, 2004). Also, see GCI's *You're Included* video interviews with Dawson posted online at <http://www.gci.org/yi/dawson36> and <http://www.gci.org/yi/dawson38>
 - For a helpful article on Advent, see <http://www.crivoice.org/cyadvent.html>
 - For a helpful article on Christmas, see <http://www.crivoice.org/cyxmas.html>
 - For a *Hanging of the Greens* worship service on the first Sunday of Advent, see <http://www.crivoice.org/greens.html>
 - For an Advent sermon series, see <http://worldrelief.org/christmas>
 - For a Nativity-themed worship service for Christmas eve or Christmas day, see <http://www.crivoice.org/nativity.html>
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- Birth of the King* by Michael Dudash
www.somersetfineart.com/ps-5528-1169-birth-of-the-king-by-michael-dudash.aspx
- Advent lectionary: <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=B&season=Advent>
 - Christmas lectionary: <http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/lections.php?year=B&season=Christmas>
 - For ideas about celebrating Advent in the home, see <http://kingofpeace.org/resources/advent.pdf>
 - Here are links to GCI articles related to Advent and Christmas (these are good sources of material for sermons, studies and discussions):
 - <http://www.gci.org/history/christmas>
 - <http://www.gci.org/jesus/shame>
 - <http://www.gci.org/church/holidays/greatest>
 - <http://www.gci.org/CO/theater>
 - <http://www.gci.org/prophecy/return>
 - <http://www.gci.org/history/1stchristmas>
 - <http://www.gci.org/CO/christmaslight>