

OBSERVING THE SEASON OF ADVENT:
FUTURE, PAST AND PRESENT

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Summary:

The season of Advent has a rich history and much potential for contemporary practice. This paper briefly summarizes the roots of the season and then contends that the primary appropriate focus of Advent is an eschatological one. Included are some practical suggestions for those in traditions where Advent is either a new celebration or one with less depth. The themes of anticipation, hope and joy are discussed in light of potential connection to more typical contemporary evangelical church practice.

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All of life in our temporal world is subject to the limits of time. God has designed his creation to work within these boundaries, infusing an inherent rhythm into the cycle of time. Because we exist in time, we find ourselves ever in the present. Likewise, until we reach eternity, we will always find the past “behind” us, so to speak, and the future “before” us. As the church of Christ, we understand that God the Son “emptied himself” (Phil 2:7 NASB), stepping into time to be born as a human, becoming Immanuel: God with us. The significance of his Incarnation was lived out long ago, before our time. But the church looks to his life, death and resurrection as the defining moments in history. This remembering of the life of Christ (*anamnesis*¹) is ideally achieved in the liturgy of the church—that is to say, in our worship. In line with this remembering is the observation of the Christian year, which orients our worship around an anamnesis of God’s saving deeds and of the anticipation (*prolepsis*²) of the rule of God over all creation.³

From a Christian point of view, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are at the center of time, for from Christ we look backward toward creation, the Fall, the Covenants, and God’s working in history to bring redemption. But from the time of the Incarnation of Christ we also look forward to the fulfillment of history in his second coming.”⁴

The season of Advent marks the time leading up to the celebration of Christ’s nativity, which begins on December 25. In North America, however, Advent is almost completely obscured by the highly commercialized and sentimentalized Christmas season. The rhythm of the marketplace usually drives potential customers to be thinking about Christmas trees and

¹ Dale Dirksen, “Glossary of Worship Terms,” CM742 Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship course pack, Summer 2008. “Anamnesis: Literally ‘the drawing near of memory,’ the entrance into our own experience of that which otherwise would be locked in the past.”

² Ibid., “Prolepsis: Bringing the future into the present (To take beforehand – Anticipation)– eschatological ritual.”

³ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality Through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2004), 27.

⁴ Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 112.

Santa Claus, presents and parties, starting in early November. Often, by the time Christmas day actually arrives people are ready for the season to be over. In the evangelical church, Advent goes largely unrecognized as little more than anticipation of the Nativity. The true meaning of Advent—literally “coming” or “arrival”⁵—is more accurately centred on the return of Jesus Christ, his “second coming.” This eschatological theme of Advent appears to be all but unknown, and certainly un-practiced, in evangelical churches. A brief look at the fuller meaning of Advent will show us a wider, more complete picture of what it is to anticipate and hope for Christ to come. Based on this deeper understanding of the whole meaning of Advent, the evangelical church will be well-served to discover how it can observe this season of waiting and bring its people to a fuller appreciation of the hope and anticipation of Advent, which is then realized in the Incarnation.

Advent In History – Early Origins

Rome

The history of the season of Advent is not terribly easy to pinpoint. In Rome during the fifth century we find our “earliest detailed evidence” for the December fast in the sermons of Pope Leo I.⁶ Evidently, the second half of December in Rome was a time of celebration of the end of the agricultural year, and Leo “brought eschatological themes into his sermons at this time of the year in order to warn Christians against the excesses of Roman festivities.”⁷ Additionally, the Pope “saw the December fast as an expression of gratitude for the harvest of that year.”⁸ Interestingly enough, even though the term Advent is used, there is no mention of the coming

⁵ Laurence Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 121.

⁶ Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 2d. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 149.

⁷ Frank Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 189.

⁸ *Ibid.*

festival of Christ's nativity in Leo's sermons.⁹ Instead, the sermons are nuanced with eschatological themes.¹⁰ On this point, Thomas Talley states:

However appropriate to the end of the agricultural season or even the civil year, the Roman December fast in the time of Leo I is not a preparation for Christmas . . . It does, nonetheless, focus on the end time, the consummation of the year, and is, thus, a liturgical sign of the consummation of history. An important element in the spirituality of Advent is already present in the Roman December fast before the adoption of that preparatory season, which originated elsewhere.¹¹

Spain and Gaul

Among scholars it is apparent that there is some discrepancy with regard to the origins of Advent outside of Rome. Some sources suggest that the Advent season came about in Spain and Gaul near the end of the fourth century as a time of preparation for baptism at Epiphany on January 6th. It was "a time of spiritual discipline for all of the faithful and of intensive catechesis for those being initiated on Epiphany."¹² Meanwhile, historians such as Senn and Talley consider the existing evidence supporting the hypothesis of a pre-baptismal fast in the fourth century to be "minimal, if not nonexistent."¹³

Roman and Gallic Traditions Merge

By contrast, in the sixth century in the councils at Tours (567) and Macon (581) we have the earliest clear documentation of a period of penitential preparation for baptism at the nativity celebration and at Epiphany.¹⁴ The period extended from November 11 (St. Martin's Day) to

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Talley, 150.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Robert Webber, ed., *The Complete Library of Christian Worship. Volume Five: The Services of The Christian Year* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1993), 108.

¹³ Senn, 189. See also: Talley, 150-52.

¹⁴ Talley, 151.

December 25, and it came to be known as St. Martin's Lent.¹⁵ Meanwhile in Rome, baptism was not practiced on Epiphany, and so "Advent understood as a penitential season for baptismal preparation was unnecessary."¹⁶ Instead, the Roman Advent "was characterized by festive and joyful preparation for the celebration of the nativity of Jesus."¹⁷ These two differently themed celebrations came together slowly, starting in the eighth century.¹⁸ Whereas in Rome the focus was joyful and centred on the themes of the Incarnation and God's salvatory action in Christ, outside Rome the focus was on the *Parousia*: the final coming of the exalted Christ.¹⁹ The merging of these two thematic foci of the season did not come to fruition before the thirteenth century. Since that time, Advent has been celebrated in mainline liturgical settings across the globe, understood as a season of anticipation of Christ's advent, both future and past.

Advent in the Church at Large – Themes of the Season

The traditional approach to Advent has embodied themes related to the Incarnation, with a special emphasis on the Parousia. "The Advent readings express not merely expectation of Christ's nativity, which has already happened, but the coming of Christ to rule, to judge, and to save."²⁰ Organizationally, the weeks of Advent unfold in a somewhat peculiar fashion. Beginning with observances of the future, we see a mature Jesus making declaring "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17 NIV). The weeks ultimately close with an

¹⁵ Senn, 189.

¹⁶ Webber, *Services*, 108.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Hoyt L. Hickman, Don E. Saliers, James F. White, and Laurence Hull Stookey, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992), 52.

unborn Jesus, “Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Rejoice!”²¹ This backward movement in time should be regarded as imperative to a fuller understanding of the whole story of Christ.

In explanation of this point, Stookey states:

*. . . the sacred story, to be understood aright, has to be read backward. Just as the birth and ministry of Jesus are incomprehensible until we know of the Lord’s death and resurrection, so too the whole of the past is muddled unless first we have a grasp on the nature of the future.*²²

Hence the future-to-past progression of the weeks of Advent. This eschatological dimension of the season is a time of expectation for the faithful; it is “a festive commemoration of the Incarnation and, on the basis of the Incarnation, a devout and joyous expectation of the Parousia.”²³

Anticipation

The theme of anticipation, as we have already seen to some extent, permeates all of Advent and to some extent is inherent in, or catalytic to, the other themes of Advent. This anticipation of the Parousia is not unlike the anticipation of ancient Hebrews who longed for Messiah to come and redeem God’s chosen people and all of creation (cf. Isaiah 2:2-4).²⁴ Christians anticipate the coming of Jesus Christ as Lord of all creation. Webber identifies this anticipation in Advent with spiritual discipline. “Advent is a corporate spiritual journey that calls for expectant waiting and readiness for the coming of Christ. When the church travels this journey and treats it as a discipline of life and prayer, the joy of Christmas is immeasurably

²¹ Stookey, 122.

²² Ibid., italics mine.

²³ Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and its Meaning After the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. by Matthew O’Connell, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1981), 133.

²⁴ Robert Webber, *Rediscovering the Christian Feasts: A Study in the Services of the Christian Year*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 12.

intensified.”²⁵ Christ’s return is both immanent and a mystery. Since “no one knows when that day or time will be” (Matthew 24:36 NCV), “*watchfulness* is the key.”²⁶

Anticipation encompasses penitence as a theme of Advent. John the Baptist—whom tradition has rendered an Advent figure²⁷—preached a message of preparation and repentance for the coming of the kingdom, embodied in Christ (Matthew 3:2). We have already seen above that this was also Jesus’ message. The penitence of the season of Advent is wrapped up in the idea of seeking to live a holy life out of obedience to the Lord and as an outward symbol of the anticipation of his kingdom. Webber offers profitable insight on this point, saying, “readiness is more than a feeling. It includes moral and spiritual preparation, the kind alluded to by Peter when he wrote, ‘What manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness. . . ?’ (2 Pet 3:11 NKJV).”²⁸ And so, in Advent we seek to live to Christ and die to self.²⁹

Hope

There is hope in the season of Advent. Hope for the dawn of a new day under Christ, hope for an end to the dark and cold of winter and for the “breaking in”³⁰ of the light and of spring. The message of hope that we have in Christ has come to us out of the bleakest of times; these words of hope are not “glib musings of the comfortable but the trusting cries of those who

²⁵ Webber, *Services*, 111.

²⁶ Stookey, 122, italics mine.

²⁷ Webber, *Services*, 111.

²⁸ Webber, *Feasts*, 12.

²⁹ Thomas Merton, *Seasons of Celebration: Meditations on the Cycle of Liturgical Feasts* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), 97.

³⁰ The idea of God “breaking in” on us is brought out in Webber, *Ancient-Future Time*, 43-50; specifically, see p.44.

see beyond the present dimness”³¹ of their particularly hopeless situations. In hope we proclaim to one another and to the world that Jesus is coming back.

Advent expresses hope and expectation for both the first and second comings of Christ . . . [and] challenges us to rethink and confront in Word and sacramental sign-acts the revelation of Christ’s time in the midst of our times. Thus, we begin the [Christian] year reflecting and praying together about the end of all history.³²

Even as we hope for the day of Jesus’ physical return, the reality of his presence in the world remains ever true. “The fact that the world is other than it might be does not alter the truth that Christ is present in it and that this plan has been neither frustrated nor changed: indeed, all will be done according to his will.”³³

Joy

The Advent season is characterized also by joy. The promise of Jesus’ return, and the establishment of his eternal kingdom, which will destroy the powers of evil must incite joy for the believer and for the body. Just as the Prophets foretold of his coming, and as John the Baptist pointed to him as the Christ, “Christians are those who look forward and find God out ahead of them. The result is rejoicing.”³⁴ The joy of the Advent season reaches its peak at the third Sunday of Advent, called “Gaudete Sunday.” *Gaudete*, which means “rejoice,” comes from the antiphon of the introit psalm “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).³⁵

It should be pointed out that the penitential element of Advent does not quench the joy of the season. While we are called to repentance by John the Baptist, we need to be reminded that there is joy in the doing of it. True joy comes not from parties or festive cheer, but is found in

³¹ Stookey, 124.

³² Hickman et al., 52.

³³ Merton, 90.

³⁴ Stookey, 124.

³⁵ Webber, *Feasts*, 13.

the turning toward a “new direction of patient obedience to God.”³⁶ Adolf Adam sums the point nicely: “Gaudete Sunday, then, is characterized by anticipatory joy and expectation, which must, however, find expression in a readiness to live according to the Spirit of Christ.”³⁷

Immanence

Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah prophesied of the Messiah, saying he would be called Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14). In the Hebrew language, *immanu-el* literally means “God with us.” While the name clearly indicates that Messiah would be God among mankind in the form of a man—that is, Jesus—we can also infer that Messiah would somehow remain ever present. Jesus himself told his disciples, “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). And we know that the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9) dwells in the hearts of those who believe (Ephesians 3:17). “In Advent we celebrate the coming and indeed the *presence* of Christ in our world.”³⁸ Advent declares that he is come (anamnesis) and he is coming back (prolepsis). Stookey offers, “Not at all distant from the present struggle for justice, never removed from the present agony when justice is denied, this God is thoroughly engaged in both struggle and agony, yet is always ahead of us to ensure the victory.”³⁹

Advent for Contemporary Evangelical Churches

While mainline churches have already woven the rhythms of the Christian year into the fabric of their doxologies, evangelical churches have not, by and large, seen the value of observing much more than Christmas and Easter. There are richly beneficial implications for

³⁶ Stookey, 125.

³⁷ Adam, 136.

³⁸ Merton, 89, italics author.

³⁹ Stookey, 126.

churches that opt to observe Advent as more than the primer season leading up to December 25. The themes mentioned above offer rich depth to the landscape of worship in gathered community of faith, and to individual spirituality.

The season has been manipulated in the West by the marketplace, turning what should be Advent into pre-Christmas. This is a fact that is not likely to go away. However, by making some intentional steps toward setting a new tone for the Advent season, evangelical churches can enjoy a fuller depth of what the season has to offer. Following are some suggestions for evangelical churches who wish to celebrate Advent in a way that is in tune with the traditional observance of the season while remaining pertinent their own church contexts.

Keep Advent Separate From Christmas

By choosing to *wait* during the season of Advent, and placing emphases upon themes of anticipation, hope, joyful expectation, and the immanent presence of Christ, the joy of Christmas will be “immeasurably intensified.”⁴⁰ One way to keep Advent and Christmas separate is to avoid singing Christmas carols during Advent. Instead, sing Advent carols such as “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” and “Come Thou Long-Expected Jesus.” Similarly, hymnody beset with the imagery or themes of anticipation, the kingdom of God, hope, and so on, will also work well. *The New Handbook of the Christian Year* suggests the use of the “O Antiphons,” solemn short readings sung or spoken on each of the last seven days in preparation for Christmas.⁴¹ These antiphons, which have been sung for at least nine centuries⁴², are the root of what has become the well-known Advent hymn “O Come, O Come Emmanuel.”^{43, 44}

⁴⁰ Webber, *Services*, 109.

⁴¹ Hickman et al., 54f., 62f.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Henry S. Coffin, John M. Neale, and Thomas Helmore, “O Come, O Come Emmanuel” © Public Domain.

In my experience as a worship pastor, Advent hymns were not easy to come by, aside from the couple listed above. I simply did not know any others. No doubt this is due in large part to the patent *un*-observance of Advent in the evangelical church. There are, to be sure, hymnals in existence that contain Advent selections which may be less familiar but would be worthy of being taught and sung in gathered community of faith. Otherwise, the Advent season will be an excellent theme for which new worship songs and hymns can (and should!) be written.

Another way to set and maintain the uniqueness of Advent is to avoid Christmas imagery before Advent. Christmas décor added to the sanctuary too early will signal that the waiting is over. Instead, a focus on winter will be seasonally current and thematically congruent with Advent.

Advent is the church's winter, a season with a heightened risk of starvation, of disease, of isolation. Winter is exile, a time of pregnancy and anxiety, a passing into death and judgement. The cooperation and self sacrifice needed if we all are to survive the season can become for us a holy sign. The Advent worship environment should bring reminders of winter—not as cute decorations but as a *memento mori*, a reminder of death.⁴⁵

The first verse of an old Christmas carol serves as inspiration for this winter aesthetic—"In the Bleak Midwinter" by Christina Rossetti.

*In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone
Snow had fallen snow on snow; snow on snow
In the bleak midwinter long ago*⁴⁶

The winter imagery speaks to the frozen wasteland we find ourselves in without Christ and very nearly pleads for the advent of the spring thaw.

⁴⁴ Webber, *Services*, 116.

⁴⁵ Webber, *Services*, 129.

⁴⁶ Christina G. Rossetti, "In the Bleak Midwinter," © Public Domain.

During Advent traditionally, churches are “greened.”⁴⁷ The judicious use of evergreen sprigs will enhance the worship environment while staying seasonally appropriate. Avoiding Christmas decorations on the greens, once again, will help distinguish Advent from Christmas.

Use Advent Symbols

Perhaps the most well known of all Advent symbols is the Advent wreath. Advent wreaths typically hold five candles—one for each of the four Sundays of Advent, and the Christ candle, which signifies his coming. The candles should either be all white or use the colors of the season as a guide⁴⁸—the Christ candle, however, should always be white. One candle should be lit the first Sunday, that candle plus another on the Second Sunday, and so on. This *signals progression* as we ever closer approach the Light of the world.⁴⁹ The Christ candle is finally lit on Christmas Eve, signifying his Incarnation.

Another way to use Advent symbols is to display a Chrismon tree (an evergreen tree endowed with white lights and gold coloured symbols of Christ⁵⁰), or a Jesse Tree (a tree, genuine or figurative, decorated with “ornaments or objects that represent Old Testament events from Creation to the Birth of Jesus”⁵¹). In either case, some explanation of these items and their symbols will help the congregation with the meaning of these images and will serve as an aid to see the symbols as windows to the divine. As a point of caution, Webber states, “great care should be given to avoid any of the secular symbols of the Christmas season.”⁵²

⁴⁷ Webber, *Feasts*, 13.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Says Webber, “The colors of Advent are royal purple or Sarum blue. Rose colors may be used on Gaudete Sunday. The deep colors express the penitential character of Advent. The rose color is more joyful and expresses the hope of the Incarnation.”

⁴⁹ Stookey, 128.

⁵⁰ See <http://www.chrismon.org/site/chrismon.htm> for more information about the Chrismon Tree.

⁵¹ Dennis Bratcher, “The Jesse Tree,” © 2007 [document on-line]; available from <http://www.crivoice.org/jesse.html> ; Internet; accessed 28 July 2008.

⁵² Webber, *Services*, 137.

Use Advent-Themed Readings

The lectionary is a rich source for the reading of Scripture in the corporate setting. Even churches that choose not to use the lectionary in their practice will find in its pages a valuable resource of Scripture references suitable to the season of Advent. Of note are passages with eschatological themes, such as with Isaiah, Ezekiel and Revelation.

Passages highlighting the characters of Advent such as John the Baptist and his message that “the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2), Simeon the priest (see the Cantic of Simeon, Luke 2:29-32), and Mary, the mother of Jesus (see the Annunciation and the Magnificat in Luke 1:26-38, 39-56) wonderfully suit corporate worship during Advent. Mary’s relative Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, as well as Isaiah the prophet, are each traditional Advent figures also.⁵³ These characters and their Scriptural passages can be incorporated into readings, sermons, or even into dramatic monologues.

The Psalms offer numerous selections for Advent. Notably, the eschatological themes found in Psalm 146, the penitential theme of Psalm 25, and the themes of hope in Psalms 42 and 85. Other selections can be found in the lectionary readings for Advent.

Embrace the Penitential Side of Advent

The call from the Baptizer, “Repent!” is a worthwhile message for us all. Leading the congregation through corporate prayers of confession will add to the overall shape of Advent, making it this period of waiting and anticipation markedly different than Christmas. Confession reminds us that sin still infects life and that we still need a Saviour. Incorporating this practice into our Advent liturgies gives an opportunity for the church to recognize their corporate identity

⁵³ Ibid.

in sin and in salvation, and it reinforces the cohesiveness of the body while downplaying our North American bent toward individualism in piety and, indeed, in all of life. Likewise, an assurance of pardon proclaimed over the congregation declares that Jesus has overthrown and is overthrowing (prolepsis) the powers of sin and death.

In Advent we can further communicate the penitential theme of Advent by incorporating the liturgical colors of the season—royal purple or deep blue—which convey penitence and hope.⁵⁴ Songs of lament will also enhance the penitential character of Advent.

Onward to Christmas

Observed properly as a season of anticipation and hope, the Advent season sets the church up for a particularly joyous celebration of the Christmas season. After the time of penitence and waiting afforded by Advent, the Incarnation presents the world with a Saviour. He is Immanuel, God with us. This is a good reason to rejoice.

In the Christian calendar, the Christmas season actually extends to Epiphany on January 6. It is not inappropriate to continue to celebrate the Incarnation through this entire period with the singing of Christmas carols, keeping the Christ candle lit, using Scripture readings focusing on the Incarnation of Christ and of his redemption of all of creation. In the light of his redemption and his coming, a new light seems to be shed on the significance of the New Year. Finally, preaching and teaching on the body of Christ as the Incarnational presence of Christ in the world is a beneficial theme to draw upon in Christmas.

In all of these ways, we can add depth to our celebration of the Advent-Christmas seasons, seeing not only the unifying threads throughout them both, but also by celebrating their distinctiveness from each other. Shifts toward the celebration of Advent as we have discussed

⁵⁴ Ibid.

may also open the doors in many evangelical churches to start observing other seasons of the Christian year, including Epiphany, Lent and Easter, and Pentecost. In any case, seeing the eschatological essence of Advent points us toward the coming of Kingdom, and hopefully leads us to live out the reality of the Kingdom in the here and now.

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