

Protestant Christianity

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RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

Required Daily Observances. While there are no scripturally mandated daily observances, many Protestants follow the examples of Jesus, as found in the gospels. These practices might include daily personal consecration, prayer, scripture reading, and meditation. Inmates can observe a daily, individual prayer time that would not normally require any special Chapel time. However, on days of prayer or spiritual emphasis, community prayer time may be beneficial to the faith community.

Required Weekly Observances. It is expected that Protestants will have the opportunity to attend weekly congregational worship to receive God's grace through the proclamation of the Word, opportunities for individual reconciliation and forgiveness, and

observance of the ordinances. Due to the diversity of worship expressions among the inmate population, the chaplain must incorporate a variety of worship styles into the Protestant worship service.

In addition, it might be beneficial to use outside volunteer groups representing different faith traditions to provide a variety of service styles and formats. These services, however, should not replace the Protestant, or general Christian, worship service led by the chaplain.

Worship services following the specific liturgy and faith of the chaplain will ordinarily be conducted on days other than Sunday to preserve the practice of providing the general Christian service on Sundays.

Chaplains are expected to provide communion under the supervision of and in accordance with their respective traditions. At the same time, chaplains need to be sensitive to and inclusive of the variety of traditions within the general Christian tradition. Communion will be provided once a month at a minimum.

Required Occasional Observances. Protestantism differs sometimes significantly from denomination to denomination, culture to culture, and yet holds in common the basic tenets of the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ. While not mandated as days of religious observance, the liturgical calendar (the lectionary) highlights several seasons that are significant in the life of the church and worthy of consideration for special services, remembrances, etc.:

- Season of Advent:
 - ▶ Christmas Day.
- Epiphany.
- Ash Wednesday (Lent).
- Holy Week:
 - ▶ Palm Sunday.
 - ▶ Maundy Thursday.
 - ▶ Good Friday.
 - ▶ Easter.
- Pentecost.
- Ascension Day.
- All Saints' Day, November 1.

Protestantism believes that God has an active role in human life and history. There are many days of observance that are commemorated in a celebratory response to God's

intervention and interaction. Other days of occasional observance traditionally fall on Sundays and normally are observed or recognized within a denomination's calendar year or lectionary. These days include (although not exclusively):

- Thanksgiving.
- Fourth of July.
- Mother's Day.
- Father's Day.
- Martin Luther King Jr. Day.
- National Day of Prayer.
- Earth Day.
- Reconciliation Day.
- Veteran's Day.
- Aids Awareness Day.
- World Wide Communion Sunday.
- Bible Sunday.
- Race Relations Sunday.
- Missions Sunday.
- Anointing Service.
- Labor Day.
- Week of Prayer for Christian Unity.

Required Holy Days. Protestantism, in general, embraces the concept in Psalm 118:24 in which every day is considered a unique gift from God and that no one more than others imparts special merit by its observance. However, there are several days of religious significance important to the Protestant believer. These are days of work proscription.

- **Christmas:** the celebration of Christ's birth, always on December 25.
- **Good Friday:** the celebration of Christ's death and burial. The date changes since it follows the lunar/solar cycle.
- **Easter:** the celebration of Christ's resurrection from the dead. Often, sunrise services are held at the institutions. The date changes since it follows the lunar/solar cycle.

RELIGIOUS ITEMS

Personal Religious Items

- Religious medallion and chain (usually a cross).
- Bible.
- Religious headwear may be essential for female members of such denominations as Quakers, Mennonites, and Amish.

Congregate Religious Items

- Bibles/prayer books.
- Hymnal/song books.
- Candles.
- Communion/altar table.
- Communion ware.
- Font/baptistry.
- Musical instruments for accompaniment.
- Vestments.
- Liturgical banners.
- Prayer/anointing oil.
- Wine and/or grape juice.
- Altar bread.
- Altar cross.

Security note: The Zimmer Amendment, passed annually by Congress, may affect the purchase and use of electronic musical equipment and videotapes/DVD's. Please consult the Regional Chaplaincy Administrator for an up-to-date interpretation of the amendment.

Searches. While Christian inmates may place great value in the Bible and other religious items (even articles that have been formally blessed), these can be handled by other people. Staff are expected to show the same respect for such items as for religious articles belonging to all traditions. Religious articles are not to be mishandled, thrown, placed on the floor, or brought into the bathroom and placed on the toilet or basin.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MEMBERSHIP

Requirements

- **Instruction.** Most, if not all, Protestant churches require potential members to attend classes on religious instruction. This usually includes Bible study, doctrinal study, and a short history of the church and denomination.

■ **Baptism.** Baptism differs – sometimes significantly – from denomination to denomination. The sacrament is depicted according to the denomination’s tradition and can vary from “sprinkling” water onto the individual from a baptismal font, to pouring water on the individual’s head, to full bodily immersion inside a baptistry or baptismal pool. While baptism is encouraged in Protestantism as an outward act of obedience and a willingness to demonstrate spiritual re-creation of the soul, it is not viewed as essential for salvation by most Protestant churches. Baptism requires a confession that Jesus Christ is viewed as personal Lord and Savior and that the participant agrees to the teachings of the church that he or she is joining. The communal dimension of baptism suggests that chaplains involve local church representatives in the sacrament.

Chaplains receive many requests from inmates to be baptized. Wherever possible, chaplains are encouraged to make the sacrament available for inmates. If chaplains feel uncomfortable baptizing inmates themselves, volunteer clergy or persons designated by the particular religious tradition of the inmates are available. Inmates, whether they hold ecclesiastical office or not, may not perform baptisms.

■ **Confirmation/Public Profession of Faith.** Some Christian traditions hold to the practice of infant baptism. When a person comes of age and makes a personal confession, the individual is not baptized again, but instead is confirmed or makes a public profession of his or her faith before the congregation.

Total Membership. There are about 1 billion adherents worldwide.

MEDICAL PROHIBITIONS

Most Protestant denominations adhere to the belief that God can and often does choose to bring about physical and emotional healing to individuals based on their faith or the faith of others through prayer and spiritual intervention. Protestants generally accept the validity of God’s healing hand at work through gifts and skills imparted to those in the medical professions.

DIETARY STANDARDS

While individuals may choose to exercise self-control in personal food consumption, religious-oriented dietary mandates are not part of the teachings of Protestantism. Self-selection from the mainline, including the no-flesh option, generally meets the dietary requirements of Protestant inmates.

BURIAL RITUALS

Traditional funeral services are held when an individual dies. These might include a preaching and graveside or interment (for cremation) service. Memorial services are another appropriate way to provide a grief ministry to family and friends unable to attend formal services. Services may differ based on denominational, ethnic, and cultural customs associated with the deceased's faith background.

SACRED WRITINGS

The **Holy Bible**, in many different translations or versions, is the only book considered truly sacred in Protestantism.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

Historically, Protestantism has embraced a congregational organizational structure, which also incorporates governmental bodies of various design, using either an episcopal, synodical, or presbyterian format. Protestant churches are primarily non-credal, but many have church covenants that seek to establish unity of belief and practice for the individual and the congregation as a whole. The practices of taking Communion or the Lord's Supper are viewed in various ways, including commemorative, consubstantial, or eucharistic, and are normally open to all believers regardless of denomination. Protestant churches are confessional and non-confessional in nature, depending upon denomination.

HISTORY

Christianity is the name of the religion of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, who believe him to be the Christ, or Messiah, sent from God for the salvation of his people. Springing from Judaism, Christianity follows the teachings and example of Jesus and views him as the fulfillment not only of the promise of God's deliverer, but also as the establishment of a new covenant between God and those who would seek him.

Jesus did not refute the teachings of Jewish scripture but sought to bring into a sharper focus tenets set forth in the covenant between God and the Jews. Jesus brought the concept that God's people were not only those of the Jewish race but included those – regardless of social or economic standing – who sought reconciliation and fellowship with God as well as those who would respond to his seeking after them.

Christianity, although differing in many aspects of theology and doctrine, holds to the

belief that Jesus' death on the cross, his resurrection from the dead, and his giving of the Holy Spirit are foundational.

The earliest followers of Jesus were initially part of Judaism but separated around 70 A. D. By that time, non-Jews, or Gentiles, had also been included among the numbers of followers of "the Way" and in Antioch by the end of the first century were referred to as "Christians."

The early centuries of Christianity witnessed diverse interpretations of beliefs that resulted in the formation of different groups within the faith. The Catholic Church quickly emerged as the dominant institution; however, other groups following the "tradition of descent" or the "evangelical alternative" continued to spread the teachings of Jesus. In 1054 the Great (or Eastern) Schism divided the Roman Catholic Church of the West from the Orthodox Church of the East. A partial reconciliation resulted in the establishment of the Eastern Rite Catholic Church. Another separation occurred with the Protestant Reformation in 1529, when objections were raised regarding the teachings of the medieval Catholic Church.

Those who embraced the separation were referred to as "Protestants." This name is actually a derivative of the verb "protestari" which means not simply "to protest" in the sense of "to raise an objection," but has a broader connotation meaning "to avow or witness or confess." Protestants believed they were professing the pure teachings of the early church, which had been obscured through medieval Catholicism. Protestantism has been referred to as the recovery of New Testament Pauline theology and, regardless of differing denominational interpretations, established its doctrinal foundation on several basic tenets.

Arising from the Reformation were several liturgical and non-liturgical groups, including Lutherans, Calvinists, and Anglicans (Church of England – later known as the Protestant Episcopal Church in America). The Anglican Church separated from the Roman Catholic Church upon the insistence of England's King Henry VIII. As the message of the Reformation movement spread further westward through Europe, more divergent groups emerged, including the Mennonites, Hutterites, and Swiss Brethren, which later evolved into the Baptist, Quaker, and Presbyterian denominations.

In America, during the 17th and 18th centuries, these churches further divided along theological lines and produced denominations, including Baptists, Methodists, Episcopalians, Disciples of Christ, Congregationalists, and Church of the Brethren, among others. Many denominations saw impressive growth in America during the First and Second Great Awakening movements.

Another phenomenon of late 19th and early 20th century America was the emergence of new religious groups. Centering mainly on individualistic scriptural interpretation and joining in the societal “millennial fever” experienced at the turn of the century, these groups developed theologies and doctrines that differed, sometimes greatly, from generally accepted doctrine.

One of the most significant changes in the last quarter century is the deep polarization within Christianity. On the one side are those characterized as liberal, progressive, or mainline and on the other side are those called conservative, traditionalist, evangelical, or fundamentalist. These divisions have at times become more significant than divisions along denominational lines.

A parallel shift in emphasis is a moving away from the denominational to the congregational level. The identification of churches with their denominations is minimized; what becomes important is the local congregation in a specific community. In addition, congregations are assuming functions that used to belong to centralized denominational offices. These shifts are also reflected in theological beliefs and experiences. Individual belief systems have become more determinative than denominational expressions of faith. This has resulted in a decline in membership of many “mainline” denominations and a rapid growth of membership of loosely structured denominations and non-denominational, independent churches. This shift is evident in the inmate population of the Bureau of Prisons. Many more inmates claim to be non-denominational, fundamentalistic, or charismatic than identify themselves with a specific denomination or religious organization.

THEOLOGY

Note: Due to the large variety of churches identified under the general rubric of Protestant Christianity, or general Christian, it is extremely difficult to come up with a set of theological statements with which all “Protestants” would agree. Even the following statements will vary in interpretation among the different faith groups.

The Trinity. The basic underlying belief of Christianity is the belief in the Trinity, that there is one God who subsists in three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Since each person of the Trinity has the same essence, God is described as one. Christians believe that the concept of the Trinity is implicit in the Old Testament and becomes explicit in the New Testament. The classic definition of the Trinity is that God is one in essence and three in person.

Many different explanations have been given to describe this seeming paradox. For example, water has three physical characteristics, solid, liquid, and gas, but only one

chemical formula. Ice, water, and steam all share the same makeup but have three different functions. In the same manner, the explanation goes, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have the same essence but function in distinct roles. Ultimately, however, the belief in the Triune God, the three-in-one, is a confession, a statement of faith, not provable fact. God is Creator (Father), Redeemer (Son), and Sustainer (Holy Spirit).

The Supremacy of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Jesus is the central focus as redeemer and savior. Protestants stand on the scriptural teaching that an individual's belief in Christ's sacrificial atoning death and his physical resurrection from the dead are essential for salvation (Romans 10:9-10). The Old Testament points to the coming of Jesus Christ and the New Testament is a fulfillment of his coming and how this worked out in the early New Testament church.

The Scriptures. Protestants rely on the Holy Bible as the source for all teachings and doctrines practiced in the church (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Old Testament consists of 39 books; the New Testament has 27 books. Many translations exist. For centuries, the most widely accepted translation was the King James Version, authorized by the English monarch James I and first published in 1611. A number of churches believe that the King James Version is still the only acceptable Bible. The best-selling translation today is the New International Version, first published in 1978.

Scriptural interpretation varies greatly among Protestants. The evangelical or fundamentalistic churches believe in a literal interpretation of Scripture, while progressive, liberal churches believe that Scripture is historically influenced, requiring understanding to see what biblical truth is portrayed in a particular passage.

Justification By Faith. Protestants believe that an individual receives forgiveness from sins and experiences a "newness" of life from God through acceptance by faith; not merited by works or personal achievement (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Salvation and Eternal Reward. Protestants believe that God seeks individuals for fellowship. Human beings, through sin, have alienated themselves from their Creator. Those who accept God's grace receive salvation, or deliverance, from eternal damnation, the penalty of rejecting God ultimately resulting in spiritual death. God's reward to the repentant faithful is his abiding presence with us and the promise of eternal life (Romans 6:23; John 3:16).

Sacraments/Ordinances. Protestants acknowledge one source of God's grace, the Word, which may be manifested through preaching/proclamation, active ministry, and

the sacraments. Sacraments or ordinances are best described as the Word of God made visible. Protestants generally believe that there is scriptural evidence that two ordinances were established and practiced by Jesus himself: Baptism (Matthew 28:18-20) and the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-29).

- **Baptism.** Baptism is a rite of purification by water, a ceremony invoking the grace of God to regenerate the person, free him or her from sin, and make that person a part of the church. Formal baptism is performed by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling, depending on the tradition. Baptism can be performed on babies or postponed until the person is relatively mature and can make a formal confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior of his or her life.

- **The Lord's Supper.** Partaking of the elements, the bread and wine (grape juice in some traditions), the believer is united in some form with Christ and with other members. Much difference of opinion exists with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Some believe that a change occurs by which the body and blood of Christ join with the bread and wine; others believe that no such change takes place, but that there is a union with Christ and each other; still others believe it is an occasion to remember the death and resurrection of Christ. Some Protestants use unleavened bread, others use raised bread. Some use wine, others use unfermented grape juice. All Protestants receive both elements. The frequency of celebrating the Lord's Supper ranges from weekly to once a year. At Bureau facilities, communion should be provided once a month at a minimum.

The Church. Protestants believe that God indwells believers through the Holy Spirit. Where God's people gather together for worship or service, there is fellowship with God and with each other. The church, like a body, functions with the cooperation of its combined members. Protestants likewise believe that God has empowered the church with gifts that, when performed properly, edify and equip the church for ministry (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:19-22).

Priesthood of All Believers. Protestants hold fast to the scriptural teachings found in 1 Peter 2:9. Each individual has access to God the Father through Jesus the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. Forgiveness, reconciliation, salvation, revelation of and understanding God's divine will, etc., are sought and attained on a personal level.

Eschatology or Doctrine of the Last Things. Probably nowhere is the Protestant branch of Christianity more divided than on the subject of eschatology. The last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, is key to understanding the different viewpoints. Much emphasis is placed on the interpretation of the thousand-year reign of Christ (Revelation

20), the events surrounding that reign, and the interpretation of Biblical prophecy. There are three major views on the thousand-year reign of Christ, called the Millennium.

One view is that certain prophesied events need to happen before a literal thousand-year reign of Christ (premillennialism) is ushered into history. Upon completion of the thousand-year reign, judgment will come. Many different interpretations of this view exist among the more fundamentalistic and evangelical churches. Another view is that the thousand-year reign of Christ is symbolic (amillennialism) of the time between Christ's first and second coming. A third view is that the church is victorious in the world today and that the church will usher in a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment (postmillennialism).

The whole subject of the end times is very popular today among Protestant Christians. Many books of theology are written on the subject; currently a whole series of best-selling novels is written around the theme and various aspects of the literal thousand-year reign of Christ.

RESOURCES

Many Protestant denominations produce periodicals and monthly devotionals.

APPENDIX 1: THE CHURCH YEAR

The liturgical calendar is followed in some form by many Protestant churches that have a liturgical background: Lutheran, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Orthodox, Methodist, and others.

The Church Year consists of two nearly equal halves: Festival Time, from Advent through Pentecost, and Non-festival Time, the post-Pentecost season. Festival Time is itself divided into the Christmas cycle (Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons) and the Easter cycle (Lent and Easter seasons). Easter, which can fall any time between March 22 and April 25 (the first Sunday after the full moon that falls on or after the vernal equinox – the only remnant of the Jewish lunar calendar), is the central festival of the Christian year. The lectionary covers a period of three years, reflecting the readings from the three synoptic gospels – one each year.

Festival Time: Christmas and Easter cycles

The Church Year begins with the season of Advent, a word from Latin meaning "coming." Advent is observed on the four Sundays before Christmas. It is a time of expectation, hope, and preparation for the coming of Christ, not just at Christmas, but,

especially for the first three weeks of Advent, at the end of time. The first Sunday links with the final Sundays of the previous church year in giving a glimpse, indeed a warning, of the end of the world. The second and third Sundays focus on the ministry of John the Baptist, the one who prepared the way for Jesus. The fourth Sunday brings believers to the brink of Christmas as we learn about Mary and Joseph and Jesus' divine heritage.

Traditionally there are three liturgies of Christmas: Christmas Midnight, Christmas Dawn, and Christmas Day. The midnight and dawn services focus on the story in Luke's gospel, so beloved by Christians, of the simple birth in a barn of the Savior, the annunciation of the angels to the shepherds, and the shepherds' adoration of the Christ child. The Christmas Day Eucharist explores the mystery of the Word made flesh, as expounded upon by the evangelist in the so-called Prologue of John. John states that this Word was present, not just at his incarnation, but in the beginning, as the means whereby God created the universe. Then, because of sin, God sent the Son, the Word, into history as Savior, to win God's children and the world back from eternal death. The Christmas season extends into one or two more Sundays, the first focusing on the Holy Family, the second revisiting the Prologue of John from Christmas Day.

The season of Epiphany follows. Because of the movable date of Easter, the number of Sundays in this season varies from four to nine. Epiphany is rich: it was originally a unitive festival combining the celebration of Jesus' birth, the visit of the Magi from the East, Jesus' baptism, and his first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding at Cana, signaling the beginning of his earthly ministry. Today the Epiphany festival (January 6) deals just with the visit of the Magi. The following Sunday tells of Jesus' baptism, and only in one of the three years of the three-year lectionary (Year C) is the story of Jesus' first miracle read. The Epiphany season then tells stories of the beginning of Jesus' ministry, including the calling of the first disciples. The season concludes with the festival of the Transfiguration, the disciples' mountaintop vision of Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

Next, the season of Lent is observed, a word whose original meaning was "spring." In the same way that the earth is renewed in spring, Christians are to focus on rebirth and renewal during 40 days. These 40 days do not include the six Sundays, which are still observed as weekly celebrations of Jesus' resurrection. The traditional discipline of Lent includes prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Lent points not so much to Good Friday, but to the baptismal waters of Easter Vigil. Lent was originally a time of preparation for converts ("catechumens") who were to pass through death into life with Christ through baptism. Thus the liturgy of these Sundays focuses less on the Passion (there is Holy Week for that) than on the spiritual journey in the context of God's redemptive act in Jesus. Lent begins with the most penitential day of the year, Ash Wednesday, when ashes are smudged on participants' foreheads with the words, "Remember that you are

dust, and to dust you shall return.” Another formula may also be used, “Repent from your sins and believe in the Gospel.”

The final week of Lent is called Holy Week, or, as St. Augustine called it, the Great Week. It begins with the Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday. As its double name indicates, the focus is on Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his passion and death. Church members gather, as did Jesus' disciples, outside the walls of "Jerusalem" for the beginning of the liturgy, then move into the church singing Hosannas to the King. Yet, just as happened 2,000 years ago when nearly everyone deserted Jesus on Maundy Thursday, the liturgy abruptly shifts to the complete recitation of one of the synoptic Passions, according to Matthew, Mark, or Luke.

At the end of Holy Week comes the Triduum (“three days”), the celebration of Jesus' death and resurrection from Thursday evening until Easter Sunday evening. This is the heart of the Church Year. As with the Epiphany festival, Christians originally celebrated this event as a unitive festival, only later separating the events into individual liturgies.

The triduum begins with Maundy Thursday. Maundy is the English form of the Latin *mandatum*, or commandment. Jesus commands his followers this night to "love one another as I have loved you." In the evening's liturgy, three special signs of God's love and grace are given: personal assurance of forgiveness, mirroring the imposition of ashes on Ash Wednesday and concluding the Lenten period of repentance; the washing of the feet, reenacting what Jesus did for his disciples that night; and the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist, since it was on that night that Jesus changed a simple meal into an eternal banquet, a foretaste of the never-ending feast to come.

The Good Friday liturgy has three main elements: first, the entire Passion story from St. John's Gospel is read, as has been done since earliest times. St. John's Passion emphasizes the glory of the crucified Jesus, triumphant even in death. Second, the Church offers "solemn" (meaning elaborate, formalized) prayers to God: prayers for the Church and its leaders, for the people of God, for those separated from the faith, and for the world. The prayers are summed up by the archetypal prayer, the “Our Father.” Finally, the cross is brought to the altar in procession, and Christians meditate on the inestimable love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus.

The Great Vigil of Easter on Holy Saturday is the climax of not only the Triduum but of the entire Church Year. It is the oldest, richest, and most elaborate of liturgies. In it the church experiences with Christ the passage from death to life. The Vigil is made up of four parts. In the first, the Service of Light, the new fire is blessed from which the new Paschal Candle is lighted. The people are led into the darkened church by the "pillar of fire" just as the children of Israel were led through the desert after their escape from

Egypt. Then, in the magnificent Easter Proclamation, the Church praises God for the light of Christ.

The second part of the Vigil consists of up to 12 readings from the Old Testament, emphasizing God's saving mercy to the Israelites. These readings sum up the Church's understanding of God's redemptive power for the people of the Covenant, and in the stories' rich imagery the prefiguring of Jesus' death and resurrection is seen. One of the stories is the Exodus from Egypt and how God threw the Egyptians into confusion in the Red Sea while safely leading the children of Israel through unharmed. The symbolism of water and drowning to sin are at the root of the Christian theology of Baptism.

The third part of the Vigil picks up on the theme of water in the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. The Easter Vigil was the original time for new Christians to be baptized in the early Church. In Baptism, the believers die with Christ to be raised with him to eternal life. At this point in the liturgy, all baptized Christians are called upon to renew their own baptismal vows.

Finally, the first Eucharist of Easter is celebrated (traditionally some time after midnight of Easter Day). Believers rejoice with the Church Eternal that the Risen Christ gives himself to them in the sharing of his body and blood. Easter Day continues the celebration and begins a season of 50 days: a week of weeks culminating in Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Easter is the reason Christians began to worship on Sunday, or the Lord's Day, as the perpetual weekly celebration of Jesus' resurrection. "Alleluia," not heard since before Ash Wednesday, returns as a persistent refrain today and throughout the season. The 40th day of Easter is Ascension Day, when Jesus disappeared from earthly sight so that he could send the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, on Pentecost to inspire and guide the Church.

Non-Festival Time: the time between Pentecost and Advent

Pentecost both concludes the 50 days of Easter and also names the entire second half of the Church Year. Once again, due to the movable date of Easter, the post-Pentecost season, like the Epiphany season, varies in length, from 23 to 28 Sundays. The first Sunday after Pentecost always celebrates the Holy Trinity and the last Sunday of the post-Pentecost season (and of the entire Church Year) is the feast of Christ the King. In this longest season of the year, rather than focusing on specific events in the life of Christ, the Church follows the most ancient practice of semi-continuous reading from one Gospel writer. The Old Testament reading is chosen to reflect the Gospel, while the Second Readings are semi-continuous writings from the Epistles. Each year, one of the three synoptic gospels is followed: Matthew in Year A, Mark in Year B, and Luke in Year C. The Gospel of John is read from time to time in all three years, especially during Lent

and Easter, and five passages from John 6, the “Bread of Life” chapter, are read during the Mark year to supplement that shortest Gospel.

In addition to the Sunday and festival calendar, also called the temporal cycle, the church observes numerous Lesser Festivals and commemorations, known as the sanctoral cycle. There are Lesser Festivals devoted to certain events in Jesus’ life and to the apostles and earliest martyrs, which have been observed since earliest times. For example, in the churches that trace their roots back to the Reformation, such as Lutheran, Reformed, and Presbyterian churches, Reformation and All Saints (at the end of October and the beginning of November) often displace one or two normal Sundays. Other “heroes” of the faith down through the ages have been added to church calendars as commemorations from time to time, allowing the church to give thanks for these witnesses of the faith as Christians seek to emulate their trust in God. It is traditional to commemorate such believers on the day of their death, their “heavenly birthday.”

In observing the Church Year, Christians affirm that the eternal God is with them also in time, hallowing their daily lives. God broke into time and history in Jesus, the Son of God. The Sundays and seasons are marked with confidence that Christ will be with his followers “until the end of the age.”