

Introduction

The Principal Festivals

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries.—1 Cor. 4:1

The expression we require is simply that of straightforward speakers. Provided you instruct me, then you may teach in any style you wish. Tell me what the Trinity is, how God is one but divided, one majesty, one nature, a unity and a trinity. How to explain the resurrection itself? What is this incarnation that so far transcends understanding, this mingling of elements towards a single glory, the dying towards resurrection, the return to heaven?—Gregory Nazianzen¹

THESE WORDS OF GREGORY NAZIANZEN (329–390 CE) are a fourth-century bishop's reflections on what to teach and preach concerning the primary mysteries of the Christian faith. Gregory's references to the Trinity, the resurrection, and the incarnation echo some of those doctrines embedded in the liturgical phrase "principal festivals."

What are the principal festivals? This phrase is used today *liturgically* to refer to the six major festivals that trace the historical genesis and ongoing revelation of God's reign in the world in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit. The festivals, in chronological order, are Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Holy Trinity. The calendrical origins of the festivals' dates evolved from various calendars inclusive of the Jewish lunar calendar and the Roman solar calendar. Four of these festivals—Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, and Holy Trinity—are designated as "moveable feasts,"² dependent on the rhythms of the lunar calendar. Thus the three festivals following Easter occur contingently on a given year's Easter celebration date. The two festivals reflecting their origins in the Roman solar calendar are Christmas on December 25 and Epiphany on January 6.

Homiletically, the principal festivals are viewed through the biblical narratives, which proclaim and celebrate the divine nature, activities, and revelations of God. Experiences of God and theological reflection on these biblical materials have coalesced over the centuries into a wide array of doctrines, sometimes called *dogmas*. Because of the thoroughgoing doctrinal texture of the festivals, the work of the preacher requires a significant commitment to sermon creation with an eye to these doctrines. In other words, an effective festival sermon needs to move beyond a mere retelling of the festivals' varied stories. Given this doctrinal core of the principal festivals, the following serves as a useful definition of doctrinal proclamation: *In preaching the festivals, engaging doctrinal reflection may be defined as proclamation of the intelligible, relational, and dynamic facets of God's revelation to and relationship with humanity.*

Dorothy Sayers's essays on doctrine from the last century address a key misperception about the role of doctrine. She presents a vigorous, direct challenge to all preachers of the principal festivals:

We are constantly assured that the churches are empty because preachers insist too much upon doctrine—"dull dogma," as people call it. The fact is the precise opposite. It is the neglect of dogma that makes for dullness. The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man—and the dogma *is* the drama.³

Sayers's words rightly note the captivating nature of doctrine truly preached in the principal festivals, but they also indirectly may be applied to the dramatic historical elements that created these doctrinal festivals in the first place.

Festivals and Doctrinal Developments

The development of the six principal festivals is historically complex and dependent on a variety of factors. Festival origins can be traced according to extant liturgical, doctrinal, and homiletical documentation. In keeping with the Jewish lectionary traditions that predate Christian lectionary developments,⁴ these Christian festivals were developed in synchronization with efforts across the church to create readings for each Sunday of the year as well as for commemorations and saints' days. Choices were debated and made in terms of celebrating individual

festivals or, in some cases, attempting to conflate them because of doctrinal similarities. Two such examples of periodic historical pairings in some quarters combined Ascension with Pentecost and Christmas with Epiphany. Such differences and pairings can still be found today.

While it is true that the festivals are part of the *overall* developments of the lectionaries of the church, true appreciation of the doctrinal dynamics which they embody means it is important to view them also as a unique theological anchor that orients the entire church year. They provide the spine of a year's lectionary readings, having precedence over all Sundays and occasions. They are chronologically successive in nature and yet assert noncyclical, ahistorical truths about the Christian faith as well.

Without in-depth homiletical engagement and expression of the doctrinal realities of each festival, preaching throughout the rest of the lectionary year becomes enfeebled and disjointed. Indeed, the thesis of this book is that preaching well the doctrines of the principal festivals, inclusive of their rich history, is essential to theologically sound, year-long lectionary proclamation of the mysteries of our faith.

Each of the festivals evolved out of multiple geographical and liturgical contexts over successive centuries. This process was multifaceted and definitely characterized by significant regional differences. The festivals eventually yielded an extant corpus of homiletical responses based on evolving biblical-text choices and theological developments particular to each festival. Proclamation of these texts demonstrates the perceptions, debates, and meanings of the principal festivals in their most public form. Such works provide ample historical examples of the unique, sometimes unorthodox, ways in which preachers attempted to speak the faith for their listeners.

Today these ancient homiletical works continue to yield important sources for contemporary doctrinal and homiletical reflection. Thus in this work sermonic materials from the patristic era (roughly dated from the close of the first century to the eighth century) are used extensively. This sermonic corpus reflects doctrinal articulation at its earliest. It is often unsurpassed in its depth, as it was created in the crucible of ecclesial disputes, conciliar decisions, heresies, and Christian education. There is a clarity of thought in many of these sermons that can continue to serve as homiletical models today.

The evolution of the principal festivals is not without negative consequences for the historical unity of the church: sadly, their history

dramatically symbolizes the church's record of schisms. Some of these are brought into focus through the debates held in the seven major ecumenical councils of the church (recognized by Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant branches between 325 and 787 CE), or in the 1054 schism between the Eastern and Western forms of the Christian faith. All have had their impact on the celebratory dates, Scripture choices, and doctrinal emphases of the principal festivals. Two current examples involve the naming of the Holy Spirit's role in relationship to the Father and the Son and the meaning of justification. These schisms still *directly* affect the proclamatory choices preachers make today around these festivals. From a positive perspective, however, increased ecumenical dialogue across many boundaries has produced new interest and materials that are available for homiletical contemporary use.⁵

Since these festivals represent the historical conjunctions of many and great doctrinal differences among Christians, what issues were and still are at stake? First, the festivals asserted, in terms of church authority, life, and doctrine, the consensus of what constitutes *orthodox* Christianity. In some cases, the minority view was termed heresy and treated vigorously as such. In other cases, choices were quieter, simply a matter of a road not taken and discarded for another view.

Surviving sermons⁶ and homilies of the patristic era (circa first to seventh centuries CE) offer substantial evidence of doctrinal discussions that contributed to the doctrinal, calendrical, and homiletical developments of that period. Since some of the corpus was preached prior to the conclusion of the church's seven major councils⁷ and their norming of doctrinal decisions, these earlier works make for interesting reading. Their vivid imagery, as well as their allegorical and metaphorical contents, can still provoke the contemporary homiletical imagination even though their hermeneutical and exegetical strategies may prove less useful or archaic.

One set of extant patristic sermons reveals the early developments of the festivals: these are Augustine's homilies, numbering over four hundred⁸ and probably only a small percentage of the thousands he actually preached. Augustine's homilies are usually brief. They hum with the vigorous pulpit energy he expended in his varied analyses of the biblical texts in relationship to the heresies of his day. He affectionately buffets and encourages his congregation on all manner of issues. Augustine's sermon battles were not simply a matter of words: groups in his time were being imprisoned and slaughtered for the doctrinal disputes that

played across the homiletical vectors of his era. Indeed, in some parts of the contemporary world, these doctrinal differences still continue to endanger and sometime take the lives of those who adhere to them, also making adherence to the tenets underlying these principal festivals a mirror of martyrdom.⁹

In a sermon given during Easter week on John's Gospel relating Mary's encounter with the risen Lord, Augustine preaches on the doctrine of the resurrection, focusing on Jesus' admonition to Mary not to touch him. In claiming that the forms of touching Jesus are acts of belief and faith, Augustine also enumerates the heresies of those who do not believe this.

We touch Christ, you see, by faith, and it is better not to touch him with the hand and to touch him with faith, than to feel him with the hand and not touch him with faith. . . . So he ascended for us when we came to have a right understanding of him. He ascended just once, back at the time; but now he ascends every day. Oh how many there are for whom he hasn't even yet ascended, and how many for whom he is still lying on earth! How many who say, "He was a great man"; how many who say, "He was a prophet!" How many antichrists have come along, to say like Photinus, "He was a man, he had nothing more. But he surpassed all other devout and holy men by excelling them in justice and wisdom, because he was not God!"¹⁰

The Principal Festivals Today

Today the festivals are established biblically and doctrinally in orthodox Christianity. Their vitality and their faith claims, however, have not lessened in intensity for contemporary humanity. In actuality, the Christian preacher is operating from a profound doctrinal naïveté if she or he assumes that these festivals have little to say to listeners today. The challenges to belief are just as substantial, in some cases the same and in others different, as they were for the preachers of the patristic era. With the pressures of increased globalization, including its impact on religion, secularization stands as a fact and influences the preacher's assertions concerning the doctrinal content of the festivals.¹¹

The festivals serve multiple functions in today's church. They are expressions of the biography of God's work among human beings. They are metaphoric, doctrinal, and biblical conversations about the

nature of divine revelation, which if preached effectively are calls to change and new life. From a homiletical perspective, these festivals are the transition markers between seasons and parts of different seasons in the church year. Viewed from the history of lectionary development, this means they have both anchored and created various lectionaries over the centuries. Their creation and stability is a gift to the homiletical life of the church. Preachers must always keep in mind that proclaiming the festivals will always elicit positive response *and* resistance. Festival contents reveal *both* the impact of sin and evil as well as the joyous invitation to faith whenever they are truly proclaimed.

What does it mean to consider the six principal festivals *as a unit* for the work of the contemporary proclaimer? These festivals provide the hub of all that creates, inspires, and defines the established church and its pastoral work: theology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, pneumatology, evangelism, and pastoral care. Their unique assertions, persons, and actions demand that these festivals be proclaimed vigorously and celebrated publicly in all their strangeness and joy as the core of the Christian witness. It means when the preacher takes to the pulpit there ought to be the expectation that things will *happen*. N. T. Wright notes the same potential of the principal festivals in his comments on celebrating Easter.

[Easter] ought to be an eight-day festival, with champagne served after morning prayer or even before, with lots of alleluias and extra hymns and spectacular anthems. Is it any wonder people find it hard to believe in the resurrection of Jesus if we don't throw our hats in the air? Is it any wonder we find it hard to believe the resurrection if we don't do it exuberantly in our liturgies? Is it any wonder the world doesn't take much notice if Easter is celebrated as simply the one-day happy ending tacked on to forty days of fasting and gloom? It's long overdue that we took a hard look at how we keep Easter in church, at home, in our personal lives, right through the system. And if it means rethinking some cherished habits, well, maybe it's time to wake up.¹²

Certainly from a pastoral perspective, these festivals offer significant personal religious challenge. They yield abundant doctrinal materials for corporate educational opportunities to the Christian faith both for longtime believers and for those who are wary of God's interactions with humanity. Connecting the work of the pulpit with a correspondingly

strong, ongoing adult educational program that relates Bible, preaching, and worship is critical. The pulpit must never “stand alone.” The preacher can use the principal festivals to help structure parish worship and communal life by making much of them and teaching them in all their richness. Even the least-known festivals, such as Ascension and Holy Trinity, can intrigue parishioners with thoughtful and imaginative preaching. To this end, everything in this work is intended for potential sermonic usage: whether it be for sermon structures, biblical interpretation, illustrations, quotations, book suggestions, or even phrases that offer themselves for use as sermon titles.

Since proclamation on the principal festivals is always based on the biblical witnesses, the widespread use of the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) provides the basis for the materials in this book. The most recent revisions to the RCL made a major change with the inclusion of more Old Testament texts. Across the three lectionary years, the context of each of the festivals features the background use of particular Old Testament texts and themes. The preacher must look at this Hebrew scriptural background in preparing sermons on any of the festivals. A summary of these changes includes: “For Year A, 20 Sundays of selections from the Pentateuch (beginning with Abraham’s call and concluding with Moses’ death); for Year B, 14 Sundays of the Davidic narrative (from David’s anointing to his death); for Year C, 10 Sundays of the Elijah-Elisha narrative (beginning with Solomon’s dedication of the Temple and concluding with Elisha’s death).”¹³

The lectionary also offers varying doctrinal approaches for the principal festivals. Some of the festivals offer a plethora of texts for each of the three lectionary years. Easter, on the one hand, is the most richly populated textual festival, presenting a total of thirty-three readings for possible sermonic choices through the three-year cycle—and this excludes the multiple readings for Easter Vigil, which precedes it! The festival of the Ascension, on the other hand, uses only one set of texts for all three years.

One major example of text choices for the festivals that demonstrates the debates and insights surrounding the evolution of their doctrines is exemplified in today’s Scripture choices for Christmas found in the RCL. The doctrine of the incarnation is expressed in a unique fashion by the appointment of John 1 as a Christmas Day Gospel text. What a radical departure the elevated, poetic reflections of this text are in comparison with the homier nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke’s Gospels! Yet the inclusion of John’s text brings a necessary balance to

the Synoptic versions of the incarnation. John's thoughts incorporate an understanding of the incarnation which asserts that it extends beyond time and history and is grounded in eternity. Jesus is God and has been so eternally.

While there is a breadth of interpretation found in the lectionary appointments—all within the boundaries of what we now term orthodoxy—historically the decisions on text usage bespeak fierce debates over the nature of the person and nature of Jesus. For example, the use of John's Gospel for Christmas proclamation reflects, among other issues, responses to the heresy of "adoptionism," that is, the view that Jesus was not God originally but was adopted at his baptism into the role.

Contemporary preachers must understand that proclaiming these principal festivals are by no means "done deals" for many of today's listeners. Festival proclamation encounters global, ecumenical, and diverse views of God from all manner of religions, cults, and sects. As in all eras, orthodox Christians are continually assaulted with many different versions of God, whether they are brought by television, doorstep evangelists, or the public witnesses of cults and other major world religions. Works of literature and the cinema also continue to present a complex mix of Christian history and doctrines. At the time of this book's writing, a humorous and culturally pertinent Broadway musical titled *The Book of Mormon* has played to large crowds.¹⁴ One of the major songs in it specifically reiterates the doctrinal beliefs of the protagonist.

The responsible proclamation of the festivals will naturally present views of God that differ from those of orthodox Christianity. A sample of a current list of religious choices makes this obvious: Jesus was the ultimate good human being and prophet (Islam); Jesus is not God (Judaism); Jesus is a human being and connected divinely but is not really God (Mormonism); Jesus remained in human form and lived out his life in the world (Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* or D. H. Lawrence's novella *The Man Who Died*).

Lest the preacher in the local parish think doctrinal proclamation is of little importance, theological debates in the popular literary press say otherwise. These debates acknowledge the ever-increasing global influence of any discourse in which we engage and focus on the differences and similarities of the Christian faith with other belief systems. Two examples, which stand in theological opposition to one another, are Stephen Prothero's work *God Is Not One*¹⁵ and Miroslav Volf's *Allah*.¹⁶

These works are theologically accessible to the layperson and have caught the attention of many pew sitters.

The radical faith claims of the festivals unavoidably highlight the debates the Christian faith has created by its understanding of the relationship between divinity and humanity that coheres in Jesus Christ. As such, the festivals draw the listener unambiguously to the core affirmations of what it means to be Christian. They raise significant concerns in terms of biblical interpretation and ecumenical dialogue. The preacher does well to ask, How does the doctrinal content of each festival invite—or divide—listeners?

Sermons on the principal festivals—particularly Christmas and Easter—can potentially be addressed to visitors, who may or may not hold orthodox Christians perspectives. The challenge for the preacher is considering how principal-festival proclamation is also a work of evangelism. How does the preacher invite such visitor-listeners to hear the mysteries of our faith and possibly be embraced by it? This is a difficult but ever-present topic since preaching the gospel, vis-à-vis the festivals, truly highlights the gospel in all its scandalous particularity.

Within the life of the global church, there are differences interior to the Christian faith that have skewed the celebration of the festivals to some extent. Globally these festivals serve as reminders of the church's differences in celebration dates and doctrinal emphases between Western and Eastern Christianity. Dates for celebrating some of the festivals differ between the two major traditions. As a result, the focus on different biblical texts and therefore doctrinal emphases also differ. A thousand years after the Western–Eastern schism over matters of the Trinity, such differences would seem now to offer less potential for division and more for mutual interest and respect.

The festival preacher might want to consider which doctrinal viewpoints can be presented in fresh ways if historical information between Western and Eastern views is explored. What if a ministerial pericope-study group made a corporate commitment to discuss both Eastern and Western churches' doctrinal views homiletically? A different kind of ecumenical exploration was featured at a regularly scheduled ministerial pericope study at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary, where I teach: a Christian professor of biblical studies and a rabbi offered their perspectives on the RCL's appointed texts for Pentecost.¹⁷

Another major fact about the principal festivals is the obvious intersection they present between faith and culture. While this is true of the

gospel generally, some would assert that festivals like Christmas and Easter have been completely co-opted by the secular culture. Unlike other principal festivals, Christmas and Easter come obviously burdened with substantial, even overwhelming, materialism and cultural interpretations. Some of these support the Christian faith, while others undermine it.¹⁸ One need only ruefully consider congregational battles around when to put up the church Christmas tree or whether or not to hold an egg hunt at Easter to know how true this is! H. Richard Niebuhr's template of the five options for understanding this relationship¹⁹ may still be useful today in assessing personally, congregationally, and denominationally how one represents the homiletical tensions between these realities.

A Preview of the Festivals

Each of the successive chapters of this book explores one of the principal festivals. The following topics, addressed in each chapter, are (1) festival history, (2) pericope information, and (3) doctrinal proclamation.

In the first section, each festival's origins are described through available official church documents, inclusive of sermonic references, which speak of festival purposes and origins. It will become obvious that disputes about the festivals have continued unabated historically concerning the why and where and what of festival origins. Readers should note that since this work is *homiletical* in nature, attendant *liturgical* customs related to these festivals may be pursued through other sources.

Next, in order to focus specifically on the link between Scripture and doctrine, each chapter's second section will address *only* the specific Gospels designated for a festival, as the embodiment of its doctrinal heart. Supplementary resources for the other texts, should the preacher wish to use a cross section of texts for the day, are available online.²⁰ Biblical analysis is primarily geared toward ways texts might function homiletically. This presupposes that preachers will first do the necessary exegetical and doctrinal exploration of the texts. With some of the festivals, several Gospels are listed while in others there is only one appointed text.²¹ The focus on the Gospel texts, as formative of doctrinal expression, is critical. Herman Stuempfle says of them:

The person and work of Jesus *do* stand at the center of the Gospel.
The unique revelation of God's forgiving grace in Jesus' life, death

and resurrection does not negate what God manifests of himself elsewhere but gather it to such a point of brilliance that all the rest is illumined. . . . Jesus is supremely God's parable to us. This is why the Gospels themselves have always provided the central texts in the history of the church's preaching.²²

The final section of each chapter will illustrate doctrinal proclamation through defining core doctrinal aspects of the given festival by using illustrative sermon excerpts taken from varying times, places, and proclaimers. Contributors of sermon materials represent different historical, contemporary, cultural, and denominational perspectives. This work makes no attempt to harmonize divergent views, all of which reflect the church's spectrum of faith and practice.

Sermon excerpts include those that discuss the festivals through the prism of themes that influence all Christian proclamation, such as race, gender, sexuality, age, geographic location, denominational views, ethnicity, and politics. In this third section, there is also no move to link homiletical strategies with doctrine, for the simple fact that denominational perspectives direct this connection. The preacher is free to take the historical and biblical materials offered and blend them with the doctrinal section as local context and theology demand.

Obviously, festivals like Christmas and Easter have received more attention historically and homiletically. Nevertheless, a lesser-known festival like Ascension has its distinct possibilities, as witnessed by one California parish that served coffee and pie following each year's celebration, terming the day "Pie in the Sky"! Because of the summary nature of the final festival of the Holy Trinity, a substantial amount of material is featured in that chapter, reflecting the festival's role as an ongoing arbiter in contemporary global theological work.

In conclusion, the writer of 1 Timothy expresses in hymnic shorthand all the possibilities of preaching the principal festivals to which we are invited.

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great:
He was revealed in the flesh,
vindicated in the spirit,
seen by angels,
proclaimed among the Gentiles,
believed in through the world,
taken up in glory. (1 Tim. 3:16)