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Tradition: Handing Down the Light to the Next Generation

Kristen Einertson



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We certainly must commend Christian doctrine in every way, by preaching, reading, singing, etc., so that young and unlearned people may be formed by it”—Martin Luther¹

When my husband and I found out that I was pregnant with our first child, we started discussing the ways we hoped to hand down the faith to our children one day. Initially, the things that our own parents had done when we were younger helped us to come up with a pretty familiar list of

activities: getting them baptized soon after they arrived, going to church regularly, teaching them to pray before mealtimes and bedtime, reading Bible stories, and familiarizing them with the church’s hymns. If there was one nearby—and we wanted to get a little crazy—maybe we would even send them to a Lutheran school! Since we were both products of the public school system, that seemed pretty out there—but we figured if it would help our children remain Christian, it might be worth a shot.

However, as my pregnancy progressed and we started to ask wise and experienced parents how they inculcated the Christian faith in their progeny, we discovered a profound difference between these families’ experience of the faith and the way we grew up. Indeed, it seemed like they inhabited a whole other world of Christian living that had previously been unfamiliar to us. To these families raising their children in the Lutheran faith was an entirely different endeavor than just teaching them to memorize “Come, Lord Jesus” and singing “A Mighty Fortress” on Reformation Day. To them the faith was not a series of additional extracurricular activities, school preferences, or other add-ons that they were in the habit of either doing or not doing. Instead, they embedded teaching moments within whatever they already did with their children: simple things like eating, singing, and story-telling. Their teachings reflected the seasons and holidays of the church’s year and mirrored the natural human experience. It was already a part of their lives. To put it simply, what we witnessed was not faith instruction as we had learned from our own parents and the churches of our youth; no, this was something wildly different. My husband and I immediately wanted to know more.

As we started to ask questions and observe these families more closely, we learned about St. Martin’s Day songs,² Twelfth Night parties,³ name day celebrations,⁴ pancakes on Fat Tuesday,⁵ waffles for the Annunciation,⁶ and crepes on Candlemas.⁷ We discovered the backgrounds and histories of St. Helena,⁸ St. Lucia,⁹ and St. Cecilia.¹⁰ We noticed how in

these families, even the youngest child could differentiate between feast days and fast days, glorias and litanies, epistles and apostles. The sort of teaching that these parents were doing taught their children how the faith applied to their everyday experiences and encounters. To them the faith was not a foreign object that was being forced upon their lives in an unnatural, uncomfortable way, nor was it the sort of thing reserved for Sunday mornings, dinner table devotions, or youth group. Instead, the Christian faith was the *only* way of life, one that easily matched up with the things that the children were already doing in the home and with their parents.

These parents were handing down the faith to their children in a way that was profoundly different from the ways we and many of our contemporaries had learned it—and it is not hard to see why they might want to do so. After all, it has been pretty obvious in recent years that the church needs to rethink the way it catechizes its members.¹¹ Surveys have shown that our own LCMS is simply failing to retain its young people, with perhaps only a third of our confirmands going on to remain active members of our churches and perhaps even more than that leaving the faith altogether.¹² Millennials’ parents and grandparents told us that our peers who grew up in the faith would come back to church when they got married or had children. That sentiment is understandable, but it does not account for what happens when they do not get married and do not have children.¹³ And the LCMS is not the only organization to have this problem. Newspaper headlines like “Church membership in the U.S. has fallen below the majority”¹⁴ and polls reporting a widening gap between “older Americans and Millennials in their levels of religious affiliation and attendance” show that this is an issue common to the American church.¹⁵ In short, the message has become plain and clear: the church where we have grown up has not done a good job of teaching the faith to its children and encouraging them in their faith as adults.

If the way young Christians in the last few decades have learned the faith was not effective, it might make sense to look for a new kind of teaching—yet these parents we met were doing the opposite. As the Preacher says, “there is nothing new under the sun,” (Eccl 1:9) and the way of teaching the faith that we observed as we anticipated our child’s arrival is not new, either. Living “liturgically,” as some now call it,¹⁶ that is, living in concert with the church year, has always been a custom of pious Christians. Although many of the church’s historic holidays are no longer as familiar to us as they were to our



Grace Before Meal. Franz Defregger, 1875. Public domain.

forebears, these days once marked the pattern of the church’s year for almost as long as there has been a church. That is how so many of the folk traditions associated with those days came about: as Christians celebrated these holy days and used them to instruct their children over the centuries, they invented and passed on customs that helped them hand down the

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faith to the next generation. Over time, these traditions and the seasons and patterns of the church year became common knowledge to much of Christendom, not just something special for people who paid particular attention in Bible class.

Indeed, not only the folk traditions but also the church's holidays themselves are the product of ordinary Christians finding ways to teach Christianity to the young and those new to the faith. To take the sanctoral calendar for example, ordinary people putting on humble commemorations of local martyrs and other exemplary members of their congregation is exactly how saints' days entered the Christian calendar to begin with. For example, St. Martin of Tours, famous in LCMS circles for lending his name to our own Martin Luther, was a prominent example of godliness in the church of France before and during his service as a bishop there. Immediately following his death, the churches of the area began commemorating their dearly departed bishop on the day of his heavenly birth. From there his feast spread throughout Europe and the whole Christian world: Christians from Italy to Germany found in the soldier-bishop an example of faith and Christian living that was worthy of annual remembrance. And so it is with many of the other saints' day on the Christian calendar. Most of them were not instituted by centralized authorities in places like Rome or Constantinople; they simply grew out of the pious remembrances of Christians in local communities who were trying to pass down the faith and virtues of these various saints to the next generation. We can even see this phenomenon in today's church, with Lutheran parishes continuing to add new saints to their own local liturgical calendars,¹⁷ showing the families of those congregations that saints like Andrew and Cyril were not larger-than-life heroes of the olden days but the same type of broken sinners that we all know.

In time, though, the pious traditions and holidays that originated in the devotion of ordinary Christians came to be seen in some circles as too "medieval" or "Catholic." In the face of this accusation, it is important to note that handing down the faith by means of the church's calendar is endorsed by no less than the Lutheran Confessions.

Throughout our Confessions it is clear that the reformers did not think that the annual commemorations of Christ and his saints were an aspect of medieval piety that merited rejection; rather, they were a helpful custom of the ancient church that ought to be preserved and used to teach the young and unlearned.¹⁸

Thus, from the very start of the Lutheran church, Christians eagerly worked to follow the yearly cycle of feasts and festivals that celebrated both the events of our Lord's life and the lives of his followers.



The Feast of St. John. Jules Breton, 1875. Public domain.

Of course, when they utilized communal traditions and customs to hand down the light of faith to their children, our Reformation forebears were not only following the example of their immediate predecessors in the medieval church. Rather, they were living out a scriptural pattern. As far back as the Pentateuch, the people of Israel can be seen using the Old Testament

liturgical calendar and simple family activities of eating specific foods and telling specific stories on specific days as a means to teach the faith. God even commanded his people to teach their children with these sorts of customs! Take, for example, the Feast of Unleavened Bread. When the Lord instituted it, He told his people that they would eat only unleavened bread for a week each year so that they could bring their children into the story of the Exodus. The Lord knew that children like to ask questions about these sorts of customs, so He commanded his people, “You shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt’” (Exod 13:8). Yet just like any other custom, it was not for children alone; it was for everyone in Israel. Thus, the Lord says that this pious tradition “shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth. For with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt” (Exod 13:9). Even in the age of Moses, long before our current liturgical calendar had taken shape, God’s people knew that simple family customs were a way to keep His words on their hearts and in their mouths, an insight that our fathers in the faith maintained long after the Old Testament Paschal feast gave way to the New Testament celebration of the Resurrection.

By instructing our children in the faith using the aid and gift that the liturgical calendar is to us, we get to follow in the footsteps of our ancestors, Old and New Testament alike, teaching our progeny the same lessons that our forefathers in the faith taught theirs. As we live out the faith in this way, we get to joyfully remember Christ’s annunciation, visitation, nativity, circumcision, epiphany, baptism, transfiguration, last supper, Passion, resurrection, and ascension with all the saints who have gone before us. We get to live the cycle of the church over and over again, experiencing the holy days as our Lord experienced them and remembering how He walked on this earth just as we do. And as we repeat the cycle with our children time and time again, year after year, decade after decade, we get to pass on the faith to the next generation, understanding just a bit more every single time how brilliant and wonderful the work is that our Savior did for us when He came down from heaven. In this way, we can ensure that the faith is something that is joyfully and fruitfully celebrated regularly and often in our churches, hearts, and homes.¹⁹

Moreover, when we celebrate the church’s calendar and teach it to our children, we learn more about the men and women who faithfully followed our Lord and gave up their life for Him. In becoming more familiar with the days that grace the liturgical year, we can also become more familiar with the folks who knew our Lord better than anyone else.²⁰ People like the twelve apostles who were the primary witnesses of His work and the authors of the New Testament. Or the individuals who were a part of Jesus’ family; the men and women who made up his bloodline, people like St. Abraham, St. Joseph, and St. Ruth. Or the ones who watched him grow up, St. Mary and St. Joseph. We can learn more about Jesus’ friends and the ones he loved: Ss. Mary and Martha, St. Mary Magdalene, and St. Lazarus. We can learn from the early church fathers who were extremely influential to the church that raised us—St. Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Basil the Great, and St. John Chrysostom. Or we can learn more about those who have helped inform the Lutheran tradition: St. Wilhelm Löhe, St. Philip Melanchthon, and Ss. Lucas Cranach and Albrecht Dürer. I promise you, everywhere you look on the Christian calendar, you will find someone with whom you can identify, someone whose story you find interesting, or someone who challenges you to grow in your faith and trust more in our Lord.

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The possibilities for instruction are endless, and we thank God for that.

By re-adopting this rich treasure into our daily Christian practices and meshing our Christian household life with the liturgical calendar and the traditions that flow from it, we can better understand, challenge, and grapple with the very faith that we wish to hand down to our children. By studying the Christian calendar and the seasons of the church's year with them, we can provide them with an education in not only theology but also church history, political history, spirituality, and prayer.²¹ Further, our adherence to these feasts and holy days together as a family has the potential to be so powerful that in remembering our Lord's saints, we can preserve a public memory of the faith, collectively meditating upon the examples that most closely resemble Christ.²²

Moreover, the fact of the matter is that every person and every family has traditions. Whether it is singing "Silent Night" on Christmas Eve or eating nachos on Superbowl Sunday, traditions are a natural and unavoidable part of human life. If that is the case, we must ask what sort of traditions we want to have, and if one of our fundamental goals as Christian parents is handing down the faith to our children, it only makes sense to preserve the sorts of traditions that have been tailored to that purpose and stood the test of time. An appropriate dose of humility will also probably make us admit that our ancestors likely knew a thing or two about how to make the faith more tangible for our children, how to weave it seamlessly through the pattern of their days and ensure that it is far more congruous with their worldly experiences than any well-intentioned church after-school program or VBS curriculum could ever be. Besides, if we are going to pattern our life after anything—and we will pattern our life after something—it might as well be after Jesus and His life.²³ And what a gift it is for us to be able to use the same sort of things that our Lord has found so meaningful and significant, the common and ordinary objects and events of life.²⁴

Finally, perhaps the best part of engaging in this handing down of the faith is that after you do it for any period of time, you will realize that it is not just for the kids. If you open yourself up to a life of living liturgically, you will discover all sorts of things that you never learned in Sunday School, like how the new year actually begins with Advent or that Christmas trees can stay up until February 2nd.²⁵ You might discover that you look forward intently to St. Lawrence's Day and Ss. Peter and Paul because you like barbecue ribs²⁶ and fish.²⁷ Or perhaps you look forward to Michaelmas because you love blackberries!²⁸ By opening your life up to the church and her traditions, you will likely learn more about the faith than you ever thought you could. You will discover how to prepare yourself and your families for the feast to come and a lifetime of celebration with our Lord.²⁹ You will find that your thoughts, your prayers, and your actions begin to be shaped by the church's calendar. You will realize that seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, hearing, making, and doing in accordance with our Lord and his work is purely delightful.³⁰ And in your feasting and fasting, baking and singing, your praying and storytelling, you will pass the days doing what matters: handing down the light of faith to the next generation until you and your families can join all the saints who have gone before us and who rest in the home of our Heavenly Father for all eternity.

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