

NOT HOLY BUT HELPFUL: A CASE FOR THE “EVANGELICAL FEAST DAYS” IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

by Daniel Hyde

AT THE DAWN of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the leadership of the Latin Church weighed down the faithful with a plethora of feast days, saints' days, and other holy days on which it was required to cease from labor, do penance, and attend Mass in order to have any hope of salvation. As the years went by, so the number of these days increased.¹

From this context the Reformation came. Alongside the doctrine of justification by faith alone (e.g., Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 59–64), the Reformers proclaimed the Christian's life of sanctification was one of gratitude, not guilt (e.g., Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 86–129). The non-Lutheran churches of this Reformation responded to the medieval system of worship in two ways. First, they re-established the Lord's Day as the primary feast day and focal point of the Church's worship and community life (e.g., Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 103; Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.7–8). The Heidelberg Catechism does this by using the German word *feiertag* to describe the day of worship. This was the word used for holidays/holy days in medieval German lands. It was also the word Martin Luther (1483–1546) used in his *Large Catechism* to explain the third (according to the Lutheran enumeration) commandment:

Our word “holy day” or “holiday” [*Feiertag*] is so called from the Hebrew word “Sabbath,” which properly means to rest, that is, to cease from work; hence our common expression for “stopping work” [*Feierabend machen*] literally means “taking a holiday” [*heiligen Abend geben*].²

The second response was and continues to be more controversial within the family of Reformed Protestantism. While removing all “ho-

1. For a survey, see J. J. von Allmen, *Worship: Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 227–32.

2. *The Book of Concord: The Confesisions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 396.

ly” days besides the Lord’s Day, the majority of Reformed churches as opposed to later English “Puritanism” and Scottish Presbyterianism retained what they called the “evangelical feast days.”³ Instead of seeing these days as a part of the Christian’s accomplishment of his or her salvation, they viewed these days as celebrations of the salvation which Christ had already accomplished for them in his Incarnation (Christmas), death (Good Friday), resurrection (Easter), ascending to the Father (Ascension), and giving of his Spirit (Pentecost). They were seen as invaluable times to celebrate the good news of Jesus Christ.⁴

The purpose of this article is to make a case for those churches that seek to be historically informed as well as confessionally Reformed as to why they may freely celebrate these days as days in which they remember and receive the benefits of Jesus Christ.⁵ Therefore this article will be a positive statement of this doctrine and practice. I will respond to one main objection *inter nos*, that is, between us as Reformed believers.

More often than not, the charge that observing any days other than the Lord’s Day is a violation of the Reformed regulative principle of worship is asserted by those within the Reformed family who are adverse to this practice.⁶ This principle comes from the second commandment (Ex. 20:4–6), which teaches “that we in no wise make any image of God, nor worship Him in any other way than He has com-

3. See James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968), 100; Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1984), 37, 161. For brief introductions to this topic, see *Leading in Worship*, ed. Terry L. Johnson (Oak Ridge: The Covenant Foundation, 1996), 103–4; Old, *Worship*, 34–37; Gregg Strawbridge, “The Church Liturgical Calendar and Spiritual Formation” (Evangelical Theological Society, Eastern Region, 2010) as found at: <http://www.wordmp3.com/files/gs/ETSe2010ChurchCalendar.pdf>.

4. For more on these days in terms of inter-Protestant polemics and irenics, see Daniel R. Hyde, “Lutheran Puritanism? *Adiaphora* in Lutheran Orthodoxy and Possible Commonalities in Reformed Orthodoxy,” *American Theological Inquiry* 2:1 (January 2009): 61–83.

5. While I am not arguing for the use of the whole liturgical calendar, for the Reformed reader St. Augustine’s sermons for the liturgical year are a good way to enter into the nature of the year in the early church: *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, Fathers of the Church 38, trans. Sister Mary Sarah Muldowney (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1959). For the history of the Christian year, see *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) and Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (1986; Second edition, New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, Inc., 1991). For an interesting look at John Calvin’s “Holy Week” sermons, see *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety*, ed. and trans. Elsie Anne McKee (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 174–93.

6. This is exemplified in Douglas Kelly’s article, “No ‘Church Year’ for Presbyterians.” *Presbyterian Journal* (November 14, 1979). As found at <http://www.newhopefairfax.org/files/33.%20Kelly%20on%20No%20Church%20Year.pdf>. Kelly polarizes the Reformation in two approaches: the “Continental” (by which he means Lutheran and Anglican) and “Puritan” (by which he means Reformed and Presbyterian).

manded in His Word” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 96; cf. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 108–109). One example of the aforementioned charge is the esteemed Orthodox Presbyterian historian D. G. Hart. He states the main argument in these terms: “From its very beginning, the Reformed tradition, because of its application of the regulative principle of worship, opposed celebration of any day other than the Sabbath as a required assembly for church members.”⁷ He then goes on to give some particular criticisms, saying, “The Reformed tradition most obviously veers from other high-church traditions concerning the matter of a church calendar.”⁸ According to Hart, this is most obvious “because if today’s Presbyterians who cling to their Christmas pageants and revere their Good Friday services ever had to confront the high-church origins of their favorite holy days, they might change their minds, and quickly.”⁹ Here Hart commits four errors, in my opinion.

First, he makes a category mistake. The Westminster Confession of Faith distinguishes elements (21.3–5) from circumstances (1.6), that is, those things that are of the essence of worship without which there is no worship and those things that are circumstantial, meaning, inevitable and indifferent matters that are not substantial. For example, without the Word read and preached and without prayer there is no worship. These are elements. Whether these elements occur on a Sunday or a Good *Friday* neither adds nor takes away anything from the elements.

Second, by invoking the imagery of “Christmas pageants,” he not only sets up a false dilemma between this particular kind of practice of the calendar or no practice at all, but he also falsely attributes the most extreme example to all who celebrate a church calendar day. Whether some church traditions have “Christmas pageants” and whether some Presbyterians have followed suit does not negate what was the historic practice of the Reformed churches, as will be shown below.

Third, Hart makes a genetic fallacy in arguing against Christmas and Good Friday based on their “high-church origins.” “High church” is technically a particular kind of liturgical celebration within the Church of England in the nineteenth century known as the Oxford or Tractarian Movement. The church calendar pre-dates this era and was utilized by what we might anachronistically call “low church” Reformed churches. In other words, as deplorable as some traditions may be, those traditions are not the true roots of Reformed practice.

7. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 31. Regardless of my critique of Hart on the freedom of worshipping outside of the Lord’s Day, see his (and John R. Muether’s) wonderful, brief explanation of the Lord’s Day in *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 63–73.

8. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk*, 31.

9. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk*, 31.

Fourth, Hart argues against the church calendar using a diversionary tactic known as a Red Herring argument in speaking of those who “revere” these “holy” days. A particular Reformed believer may (wrongly, in my opinion) revere a certain day and even consider it holy, but the question is whether historic Reformed doctrine and practice spoke this way. Unfortunately for Hart’s argument, and those who would follow this path of objection, the doctrine and practice of much of the Reformed tradition was exactly the opposite.

1. The History of Reformed Practice

Let me first lay out some of the history of Reformed practice. By “Reformed” I do not simplistically mean, “What John Calvin (1509–1564) said.” The Reformed tradition is broader and deeper than Calvin.¹⁰

1.1. Palatinate

The Palatinate, the region of the Holy Roman Empire in which the Heidelberg Catechism was published in 1563, observed Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Christmas, as well as New Year’s Day.¹¹ In the first hymnal published for Palatinate worship in 1565, there were 44 Psalms, 55 canticles, and 11 hymns. Later, in the second edition of 1573, all 150 Psalms were included, the canticle section was expanded to include the *Nunc Dimittis* and *Te Deum*, while the hymn section was divided into Luther’s catechetical hymns, hymns for the church calendar from Advent to Pentecost, and then some topical hymns.¹² The Palatinate liturgy contained in the Church Order (*Kirchenordnungen*) began with the following rubric:

Before the Sermon, especially in the morning on Sunday and *holy days*, and on fast days, the following prayer shall be delivered to the people, in which the Christian Congregation is explicitly reminded of the misery of man, and the saving grace of God is implored, so that hearts become humble and more desirous of receiving the Word of grace (emphasis added).¹³

10. See the excellent article by Richard A. Muller, “Was Calvin a Calvinist? Or, Did Calvin (or Anyone Else in the Early Modern Era) Plant the TULIP?” Found at: <https://www.calvin.edu/meeter/Was%20Calvin%20a%20Calvinist-12-26-09.pdf>. Cf. Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition: On the Work of Christ and the Order of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 51–69.

11. Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*, 79.

12. Deborah Rahn Clemens, “Foundations of German Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century Palatinate” (PhD diss., Drew University, 1995).

13. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, series ed., B. B. Zikmund, 3 vols. (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 2:360.

The rubric entitled, “Order of *Holy Days*” (emphasis added), stated:

Order of *Holy Days*: *Holy days* shall be kept in the same manner as Sunday. These *holy days* shall be observed: all Sundays, Christmas and the day following, New Year’s day, Easter and the day following, Ascension day, Pentecost and the Monday following.

On Christmas and the day after, the basis of our salvation, namely the two natures in Christ with the benefit we obtain therefrom, shall be expounded in the narratives of the birth of Christ, as that is dealt with in the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II of the Catechism.

The Ministers in the towns are also permitted to begin to explain the narratives of the Passion on Invocavit Sunday and pursue the same until Easter, according to the convenience of each particular church.

On Easter and the Monday following, the narratives of Christ’s resurrection shall be preached, so that the Christian congregation may receive good, basic instruction from the holy, divine Scripture upon the two principle articles of our Christian faith, namely, that Christ arose from the dead on the third day, and that we too shall arise from the dead.

The festival of Christ’s ascension also has its narratives, as they are written in the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1, and elsewhere. Upon them, we may teach and preach concerning those articles of our faith in which we profess that Christ has ascended into heaven, sitteth at the right hand of God, and from thence will come to judge the living and the dead.

On Pentecost and the Monday following, the second chapter in the Acts of the Apostles shall be the basis of preaching (emphasis added).¹⁴

The *Kirchenordnungen* specified the texts to be preached on Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost, while permitting freedom to the churches to celebrate “Good Friday” on the Sunday of In-

14. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, 2:374n4. See Bard Thompson, “The Palatinate Church Order of 1563,” *Church History* 23:4 (December 1954): 339–54.

vocavit.¹⁵ There are also prayers for Christmas, New Year's Day, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost.¹⁶

1.2. Strasbourg

In the city of Strasbourg, Old Testament scholar Wolfgang Capito (1478–1541) and liturgical reformer Martin Bucer (1491–1551) studied the issue of the church calendar. After originally rejecting any day but the Lord's Day in the *Grund und ursach*, they came to the position of celebrating the evangelical feast days.¹⁷ The *Strasbourg Psalter* of 1537 began to include festal hymns, especially those of the Church of Constance. This would, of course, indicate the observance of these feasts. Also, in 1548, Martin Bucer, in the name of the ministers of Strasbourg, wrote "A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine" in response to an unnamed Anabaptist tract against them. One of the points Bucer took up was "Christian festivals," no doubt because these Anabaptists rejected the Lord's Day as well as other celebrations. After a brief exposition of the Lord's Day, the "general festival of the Lord," Bucer went on to say,

In like manner must be observed *the other festivals and seasons* which have been prescribed, with a view to the increase of godliness by meditating upon the great deeds of the Lord accomplished for our redemption and eternal salvation, and to the giving of thanks to God for them. Such festivals are those of the Incarnation and Nativity of Christ, of his Ascension, etc (emphasis added).¹⁸

Notice the twofold purpose of these festivals: to increase godliness by means of meditating upon the work of Christ and to give thanks for this work.

What was the basis upon which the Church celebrated such festivals? Bucer took up this topic in several of his writings, most fully in his *Lectures on Ephesians*, published in 1562. At the end of his lectures on chapter 1, he discussed the unity of the Church and spoke of things necessary for unity and things indifferent (*adiaphora*), saying, "But unity is not necessary in anything not set forth in

15. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*, 2:374n4.

16. J. H. A. Bomberger, "The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563," *The Mercersburg Review* 2:1 (January 1850): 84. For the prayers for Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, see J. H. A. Bomberger, "The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563," *The Mercersburg Review* 2:3 (May 1850): 275–77. On Bomberger's contribution to the liturgy of the German Reformed Church in the mid-nineteenth century, see Michael A. Farley, "A Debt of Fealty to the Past: The Reformed Liturgical Theology of John H. A. Bomberger," *Calvin Theological Journal* 39:2 (November 2004): 332–56.

17. Old, *Worship*, 36.

18. *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, trans. and ed. D. F. Wright, The Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics 4 (Appleford: The Sutton Courtenay Press, 1972), 90.

the word: here a degree of liberty obtains. So in the matter of man-made rites, different arrangements can be made in different quarters the better suited to edification.”¹⁹ These rites or observances in the Church were divided into three classes, in which we can see the later distinction between elements and circumstances:

Observances ... concerning which Scripture contains explicit instructions.

Observances ... which are not explicitly prescribed by Scripture but can nevertheless ... be shown to be in accordance with Scripture [here Bucer gives the examples of infant baptism, hallowing of the Lord’s Day, and admission of women to the Lord’s Supper].

Observances ... instituted by revered men in the Church, such as the forms of prayer, the times of fasting, lectionary arrangements, details of place, etc. So long as they do not militate against the divine will but rather have its promotion as their object and also have regard to complete doctrinal purity.²⁰

The basis upon which the evangelical feast days could be celebrated, according to Bucer, was this third category of observances. The public worship of God in remembrance of Christ’s ascension, for example, was not contrary to God’s will since it was for the promotion of God’s glory in worship and to instruct the church in the truths of God’s Word. This is also seen in his earlier 1549 treatise, *The Restoration of Lawful Ordination for Ministers of the Church*. Bucer listed the points in which a candidate for the ministry was to be examined, including the following:

23. Whether he believes that we incur God’s stern displeasure when we fail to devote the Lord’s Day and other specially consecrated days to godly exercises, abandoning not merely useful physical labours but much more all the useless and harmful works of the flesh. ... For whatever lawful recreation to the people are granted, it can never be rightly permitted on days specially set apart for divine worship.²¹

19. *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, 208.

20. *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, 210.

21. *Common Places of Martin Bucer*, 264.

1.3. Dutch Reformation

Before the great Synod of Dort (1618-19) adopted what became the Church Order of all Reformed churches of Dutch heritage, the earlier Synod of Dort (1574) spoke only of the Lord's Day being observed. Nevertheless it decided that the Sunday before Christmas ministers should preach about the birth of Christ and that on both Easter and Pentecost Sundays, the resurrection and outpouring of the Holy should also be preached.²² Then at the next Synod of Dort (1578), it was decided to have sermons on Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, and the days following them, as well as Ascension and New Year's, because these were national holidays upon which licentiousness was known to be rampant. The churches, then, used these opportunities to gather the people of God for holy exercises of piety rather than unholy partying and living.²³

And so the Synod of Dort, at the insistence of the commissioners from the States of Holland,²⁴ said the following regarding the feast days in its Church Order, article 67,

The Churches shall observe, in addition to Sunday, also Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, with the following day, and whereas in most of the cities and provinces of the Netherlands the day of Circumcision and of Ascension of Christ are also observed, Ministers in every place where this is not yet done shall take steps with the Government to have them conform with the others.²⁵

This original Article was expanded by the Christian Reformed Church in its 1934 Church Order, which said,

The churches shall observe, in addition to Sunday, also Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, the Day of Prayer, the National Thanksgiving Day, and the Old and New Year's Day.²⁶

22. Idzerd Van Dellen and Martin Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary* (reprint; Wyoming, MI: Credo Books, 2003), 273, 274.

23. Van Dellen and Monsma, *The Church Order Commentary*, 274.

24. J.L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches: Volume II* (Chicago: Church Polity Press, 1947), 164.

25. As cited in *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, July 1999 edition), 187. This is the edition used by the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregations.

26. *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1934), 124. It is interesting to note that the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church 1926, sustained the judgment of a Classis against a Consistory for failure to call a service on New Year's Day. *Acts of Synod of the Christian Reformed Church 1926*, article 78, p. 97. Besides the Heritage Reformed Churches, the closest Continental Reformed federation/denomination to the original Church Order of Dort is the Canadian Reformed Churches, whose Article 53 says, "Each year the churches shall, in the manner decid-

Then the Christian Reformed Church extensively revised its Church Order in 1965. Article 51.b of that Church Order says,

Worship services shall be held in observance of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, and Pentecost, and ordinarily on Old and New Year's Day, and annual days of prayer and thanksgiving.²⁷

2. The Principles Behind the Reformed Practice

What is the reason behind this practice within much of the Reformed tradition? Reformed churches *must* celebrate the Lord's Day and *may* celebrate the work of Christ on other particular days of the year. The principles are Christian freedom (Gal. 5:1) and Christian edification (Rom. 14:1–12).²⁸ Martin Bucer summarized these two in his review of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*: “Since therefore we are free from the observation of days and seasons, more festivals ought not to be instituted than we may hope will be truly sanctified to the Lord.”²⁹

One historic example of how the evangelical feast days could be observed while holding to a Reformed view of worship is the Second Helvetic Confession. Written in 1561 by Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), this confession was “the most widely received of the sixteenth century Reformed confessions.”³⁰ In it we read a classic statement of the sufficiency of Scripture for all things, including worship:

And in this Holy Scripture, the universal Church of Christ has all things fully expounded, whatsoever belong both to a saving faith, and also to the framing of a life acceptable to God: in

ed upon by the consistory, commemorate the birth, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, as well as His outpouring of the Holy Spirit” (*Book of Praise* [rev. ed.; Winnipeg: Premier Printing, 1998], 670).

27. *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Christian Reformed Church, 1976), 201.

28. Concerning Christian freedom, the Scottish Presbyterian, George Gillespie (1613–1648), argued the exact opposite: “That which has been said against all the controverted ceremonies in general, I will now instance of festival days in particular and prove, both out of the law and gospel, that they take away our liberty which God has given us, and which no human power can take from us.” *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* (1637; repr., Dallas: Naphtali Press, 1993), 31.

29. E.C. Whitaker, *Martin Bucer and the Book of Common Prayer*, Alcuin Club Collections 55 (Great Wakering, England: Mayhew-McCrimmon, 1974), 140, 142. See also “Of Ceremonies” prefaced to the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, which stated: “Christes Gospell is not a Ceremoniall lawe (as muche of Moses lawe was), but it is a relygion to serve God, not in bondage of the figure or shadowe: but in the freedome of spirite, beeyng contente onely wyth those ceremonyes whyche dooe serve to a decenete ordre and godlye discipline, and suche as bee apte to stirre uppe the dulle mynde of manne to the remembrance of his duetie to God, by some notable and speciall significacion, whereby he myght bee edified.”

30. *Reformed Confessions of the 16th and 17th Centuries in English Translation: Volume 2, 1552–1566*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 809.

which respect it is expressly commanded by God that nothing be either put to or taken from the same (Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18–19).³¹

Then, in this very same confession we read that the celebration of the evangelical feast days belonged “to Christian liberty” and that “we do very well approve of it.”³² Notice the fine distinction implicitly made between Rome’s obligation and the Gospel’s freedom. Instead of viewing these days as a part of the Christians’ ongoing contribution to salvation, these days were within the Gospel liberty of the churches to commemorate the salvation that Christ had already accomplished for his people.

Another example of how the evangelical feast days are an aspect of Christian freedom and edification is that of Francis Turretin (1623–1687).³³ Whether or not the church celebrates the high points of Christ’s work on our behalf or not, “this the orthodox think should be left to the liberty of the church.” The reason is that their celebration is “not from necessity of faith, but from the counsel of prudence to excite more to piety and devotion.”³⁴ And their observance is not due to any intrinsic holiness of the day, but to “positive right and ecclesiastical appointment; not, however, necessary from a divine precept.”³⁵ Turretin demonstrated that these days were celebrated in this manner by the Reformed in unity with the ancient church, quoting the ancient historian Socrates Scholasticus (380–439), who in detailing the debate between East and West on the celebration of Easter, said,

Neither the apostles, nor the gospel itself imposed the yoke of slavery upon those who yielded to the doctrine of Christ, but left the festival of Easter and others to be celebrated according to the free and impartial judgment of those who had received on such days blessings.³⁶

This is illustrated as well, according to Turretin, by the examples of the Jewish celebrations of Purim, instituted in Esther’s time (Est. 9:22), and the Feast of Dedication (“Hanukah”), instituted in 164BC

31. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 2*, 810.

32. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 2*, 872.

33. On Turretin, see J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, Reformed Historical Theology, Volume 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).

34. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols. (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1994), 2:101.

35. Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:101.

36. *The Ecclesiastical History of Socrates Scholasticus*, rev. A.C. Zenos in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series* (reprint; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), Book V, Chapter 22 (p. 130). The translation offered here is that of Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:101.

by Judas Maccabaeus. In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ who chastised the Jews for their man-made traditions added to the law (e.g., Matt. 15:3; Mark 7:9), participated without condemnation in these added festivals (John 5; John 10:22).³⁷

According to Turretin, these celebrations do not prove “that this custom ought to prevail in the Christian church,” but, “it shows only that on certain days (annually recurring) there may be a public commemoration of the singular benefits of God, provided abuses, the idea of necessity, mystery and worship, superstition and idolatry be absent.”³⁸ And so, as Turretin concluded, “If some Reformed churches still observe some festivals ... they differ widely from the papists,” for four reasons:

1. these days are dedicated to God alone, and not to creatures;
2. no sanctity, power, or efficacy is attached to them above other days;
3. believers are not bound to a scrupulous and strict abstinence on these days from servile work;
4. the church is not bound by necessity to observe these days unchangeably.³⁹

Therefore the Reformed historically have not viewed these days as holy, but as helpful.⁴⁰

A final example of the regulative principle being asserted in the elements of worship as well as Christian freedom and edification in the circumstances is the Belgic Confession (1561). In article 7 we read of the sufficiency of Scripture:

We believe that those Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God required of us is written in them at large,

37. “...doubtless, he never would have done that, if he had considered a feast appointed by man for the recognition of Divine benefits to be unlawful” (John Davenant, *An Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians*, trans. Josiah Allport, 2 vols. [London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1831], 1:486).

38. Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:102.

39. Turretin, *Institutes*, 2:103. As Davenant said, “These days appointed by human authority, may be done away and changed by the same authority if the advantage or necessity of the Church should require it.” In fact, he went so far as to say that “private Christians ... may omit the public solemnization of them, if either necessity or charity require it” (Davenant, *Colossians*, 1:487).

40. The Lutheran theologian of Copenhagen, K. E. Skydsgaard (1902–1990) said it like this: “Good Friday does not in itself possess any special value, any particular ‘virtue.’” “Good Friday,” *Stages of Experience: The Year in the Church*, trans. J. E. Anderson (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1965), 47. See also Davenant, *Colossians*, 1:487.

it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise that we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures.⁴¹

In fact, the summary of what makes a true church is this: “in short, if all things are managed according to the pure Word of God, all things contrary thereto rejected” (Belgic Confession article 29).⁴² But then we read in article 32:

In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet that they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore we reject all human inventions, and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever. Therefore we admit only of that which tends to nourish and preserve concord and unity, and to keep all men in obedience to God. For this purpose, excommunication or church discipline is requisite, with all that pertains to it, according to the Word of God.⁴³

Article 32 establishes a balance between authority and accountability: those who rule the church (pastors and elders) have the authority to order the outward body of the church while remaining accountable to the Word in doing so. So the church has Christian freedom. And that freedom is for the purpose of edification in establishing a church order that is “useful and beneficial” to maintain “the body of the church.” In using the metaphor of a body, the Confession draws upon Scripture’s picture that the church of Jesus Christ is made up of real people who come together as one (e.g. Rom. 12:3–21; 1 Cor. 12:12–31). All those who call upon the name of the Lord must come together under some structure and form in order for all to be edified. Church order springs directly from the biblical principle that all things must be done decently and in order (1 Cor. 14:40). The church is limited in its authority by the Word. The rulers of the church must be studious in not departing from what Christ has instituted. The church at Colossae was beset with those who went beyond the Word in setting up “human precepts and teachings” (Col. 2:22) that bound the consciences of the faithful. In doing so they created a “self-made religion,” or, as our Reformed forefathers called it,

41. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 2*, 427.

42. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 2*, 442.

43. *Reformed Confessions: Volume 2*, 443–44. What follows is an expansion on my, *With Heart and Mouth*, 428–32.

“will worship” (Col. 2:23), that is, worship that originates from the will of man and not the will of God.⁴⁴

While Scripture does not say everything, what it says is sufficient. When we develop an article of church order, we look to direct teachings of Scripture, or we look to principles that may be deduced by “good and necessary consequence” (Westminster Confession, 1.6) from general principles. These deduced rules and regulations must not contradict Scripture. To use Pauline language, we must be “studious” that we do not “go beyond what is written” (1 Cor. 4:6).

What article 32 is getting at is that issues of the “body of the church,” that is, its order and structure, are just that, issues of order, not of faith. The Confession speaks of these “ordinances” as being “useful and beneficial.” Here the distinction between things of the essence of the church (*esse*) and the well-being of the church (*bene esse*) is invoked. This is known to many in Reformed circles as the distinction between things the churches in common *must* do and things the churches *may* do.

Because matters of church order are of the well being of the church, simply to “maintain the body of the Church,” these ordinances must never “depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted,” either in adding or taking away from the Word.

In rejecting “human inventions ... [in] the worship of God,” we confess what has come to be known as the *regulative principle of worship*. Our Confession teaches this principle by way of negation. When we confess that we reject man’s laws in worship, we are implying, therefore, that we accept only what Christ has instituted. Article 32 lists reasons for rejecting these practices. First, they are “human inventions” and “will worship.” Second, these laws “bind the conscience.” They place burdens beyond the Word that the people cannot in good conscience perform and obey. The regulative principle actually frees the conscience of the faithful to worship God in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24). We were bought by Christ and set free from being slaves of men and their commandments (Isa. 29:13; 1 Cor. 7:23; Gal. 5:1). Worship services for the purpose of commemorating the saving acts of God in history, such as Christmas (Incarnation), Good Friday (our Lord’s sacrifice), and Pentecost (outpouring of the Holy Spirit), are not essential to the life of the church, although they may be beneficial. They are certainly within the bounds of the Word but are not mandatory. Churches desiring to gather on these days

44. On will worship, see Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, 4 vols. (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), 3:114; John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, 12 vols. (1965; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 11:343; Richard Sibbes, “The Returning Backslider: Sermon 11,” in *The Works of Richard Sibbes*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart (1862–64; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2001), 2:386.

may do so, while those deciding against it need not feel any compulsion to do so. Both parties can peacefully co-exist. It is of the essence of the true church that the churches must gather for worship, but it is only for the well-being of the churches that they may gather in celebration outside the Lord's Day. One church's rulers may call their people to celebration on these days while another may not, for the well-being of their respective churches, not out of any divine requirement.⁴⁵ In the words of John Calvin:

For God threatens not one age or another but all ages with this curse, that He will strike with blindness and amazement those who worship Him with the doctrines of men. This blinding continually causes those who despise so many warnings of God and will fully entangle themselves in these deadly snares, to embrace every kind of absurdity. But suppose, apart from present circumstances, you simply want to understand what are those human traditions of all times that should be repudiated by the church and by all godly men. What we have set forth above will be a sure and clear definition: that they are all laws apart from God's Word, laws made by men, either to prescribe the manner of worshipping God or to bind consciences by scruples, as if they were making rules about things necessary for salvation.⁴⁶

3. The Benefit of This Practice

The practical question remains, how can the celebration of Christ's work utilizing these historic days of worship help?

3.1. Celebrating these days gives explicit opportunity to reflect on the objective work of Christ for us as signposts throughout the year.⁴⁷

Again, the days are not holy but helpful to commemorate what is—Jesus Christ. As Skydsgaard said, "There is no quasi-divine institu-

45. One practical issue that needs more reflection is the naturally arising question of the individual liberty of Christians in churches that issue a call to celebration outside of the Lord's Day and whether they will be disciplined for failure to comply with something the Word does not require.

46. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, Vols. XX–XXI (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 4.10.17.

47. Michael Horton, "A Year of Signposts—Following the Church Calendar," *Modern Reformation* 10:1 (January/February 2001): 18; Donald Macleod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method* (1965; rev. ed., Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 114–18; François Stoop, "The Year of Grace," *Stages of Experience*, (Baltimore: Helicon, 1965), 17.

tion of Holy Week. These days are centered, not in themselves, but in Jesus Christ alone.”⁴⁸

Yet, it is often said, “We celebrate Christmas and Easter fifty-two Lord’s Days a year.”⁴⁹ It would be an amazing testimony to the world if this were explicitly and clearly made known Lord’s Day to Lord’s Day. Yet, experience shows that because of our finite capacity as creatures, we need to reflect upon the mysteries of God one by one:

We are men with limitations; limited by our existence in time. We cannot grasp everything at the same moment. We need to stop at such and such a point in the “economy of the mystery,” so that its truth may be fully illuminated, and may in this fuller light go with us and pierce below the surface of our lives. And there is an equal need for returning again and again to the same truths, to the same events in our salvation, so that we may come to a deeper understanding of them as we go on through life.⁵⁰

It’s helpful to remember that Paul marked time with liturgical celebration. He did this with Pentecost. In Acts 20:16, Luke writes, “Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus, so that he might not have to spend time in Asia, for he was hastening to be at Jerusalem, if possible, *on the day of Pentecost*” (emphasis added). Paul himself wrote in 1 Corinthians 16:8, “But I will stay in Ephesus until *Pentecost*” (emphasis added). He did this also with Passover, according to Luke in Acts 20:6, “We sailed away from Philippi after *the days of Unleavened Bread*” (emphasis added).⁵¹

48. “Good Friday,” in *Stages of Experience*, 49.

49. *Leading in Worship*, ed. Johnson, 103.

50. “The Year of Grace,” in *Stages of Experience*, 12.

51. This would support a reading of Galatians 4:9–10 (“...how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days and months and seasons and years!”) and Colossians 2:16–17 (“Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.”) in which Paul is not negating all celebrations other than the Lord’s Day, but in which he rejects a non-Christocentric, superstitious, and legalistic use of a calendar. It is not the Old Testament calendar *per se*, but a Judaizing and pagan misuse of these by those who profess to be justified by faith in Jesus. See Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, trans. Henry Zylstra, NICNT (1953; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr., 1965), 160–63.

3.2. Celebrating these days reminds us that our faith is in an historic person—Jesus Christ.

The writers of Scripture point out that Jesus Christ was born, lived, and died within particular historic times, and which the Apostles' Creed commemorates, saying he "suffered under Pontius Pilate":

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria (Luke 2:1, 2).

Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem (Matt. 2:1).

But when Herod died, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel" (Matt. 2:19, 20).

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people gathered in the palace of the high priest, whose name was Caiaphas, and plotted together in order to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him. ... Then those who had seized Jesus led him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the scribes and the elders had gathered (Matt. 26:3, 4, 57).

When morning came...they bound him and led him away and delivered him over to Pilate the governor (Matt. 27:1, 2).

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. ... Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" (Luke 23:44, 46)

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb (Matt. 28:1).

We do not believe in "cleverly devised myths," but in him of whom Peter said, "We were eyewitnesses. ... [W]e ourselves heard" (2 Pet. 1:16, 18). Because of this objective, tangible reality, we can say by faith with John,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it

and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn. 1:1–3).

Thus our celebration is not formal and merely traditional, but involves *participation*. We participate with the patriarchs and prophets in looking back upon our Lord.

3.3. Celebrating these days reminds us that our faith is an eschatological faith in Jesus Christ.

Christ—his person and work—is the mystery of God manifested to the church until the consummation of all things. And so in our celebration we join the historic Christian Church in all times and in all places in *anticipation*, awaiting our Lord, crying out, *maranatha!*

The apostle Paul wrote to the saints in Ephesus, saying God lavished his grace upon us in Christ, “Making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:9–10). A mystery (μυστήριον; Eph. 1:9) in Paul’s terminology is something that was hidden but has now been revealed.⁵² To adapt Augustine’s (354–430) famous dictum that the New Testament was in the Old Testament concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed,⁵³ what Paul is saying is that Christ was in the will of God concealed, and the will of God is in Christ revealed. The will of God that was concealed was to bless us “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3), choosing us “before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless” (Eph. 1:4), predestining “us for adoption” (Eph. 1:5), and redeeming us and forgiving our trespasses (Eph. 1:7). All this was concealed in God’s will, but revealed in Christ (Eph. 1:3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10) “according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us” (Eph. 1:7, 8). God’s “purpose,” or, better, “good pleasure” (εὐδοκίαν; Eph. 1:9), was to publicly display this purpose in Christ. The word Paul uses in Ephesians 1:9, which the ESV translates “set forth” (προέθετο; cf. Rom. 3:25), is used only by him in the New Testament. Christ is the Father’s public proclamation of his “economy of the fullness of the times” (εἰς οἰκονομίαν τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν; Eph. 1:10). God has

52. On biblical “mystery,” see G.K. Beale and Benjamin J. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014).

53. Augustine, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum*, 2.73, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne, 34:623. This volume may be read online at http://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/02m/0354-0430,_Augustinus,_Quaestionum_In_Heptateuchum_Libri_Septem,_MLT.pdf.

worked out his plan precisely as he purposed it: “when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:4–5). Whereas in Galatians Paul speaks of the fullness of *time* (χρόνος), that is, the ages of history, in Ephesians he speaks of the fullness of *times* (καιρος), that is, the precise times of God’s appointment. And because this time has been fulfilled, we are living in a new age.

This plan, put into effect at the precise time in Christ, is “to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth” (Eph. 1:10). Christ is “recapitulating” (ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι; Eph. 1:10), or “summing up” all things that are estranged together in himself, the second Adam who availed where the first Adam failed (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:20–28, 42–49).⁵⁴

All of this mystery has been made known “to us” (Eph. 1:9), and as Paul later says, “So that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might be made known” (Eph. 3:10). He makes his mystery known to us, that we might make it known “to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places” (Eph. 3:10)—and how much more so to the world. The Church’s very existence is a witness to these mysteries of God, and they are to be proclaimed and celebrated.

3.4. Celebrating these days is an opportunity for evangelism.

The Holy Spirit calls us to “redeem the time” (Eph. 5:16; KJV) in which we live. There should be no doubt that we live in a consumer culture. Every year Christmas decorations go up a little earlier than the year before. It used to be that “Black Friday”—the day after Thanksgiving—was the day businesses relied upon to get “in the black for the year.” Yet they’ve wised up. If they move the sales up even before Halloween there is more money to be made. Further, it’s no secret that Christmas has been co-opted into the generic, “Holiday Season.” Cultural conservatives annually update their lists of stores and corporations that do not say “Merry Christmas” but “Seasons Greetings,” in order to decry the ever-nebulous “secularization” of America. In the words of Scott Wilson, “One by one, the Church’s holy days have been overshadowed by secularizing forces, by new false gods, if you will. The religious meaning of most of these great commemorations has been lost, especially in the United States, to all but

54. On this aspect of the work of Christ, see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* in *Ante-Nicene Fathers: Volume 1*, trans. Alexander Roberts and W.H. Rambaut (1885; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, fourth printing, 2004), 3.18.7; 4.34.1; 5.14.2; 5.21.1. On Irenaeus’ hermeneutics of recapitulation, see Bertrand de Margerie, S.J., *An Introduction to the History of Exegesis: Volume 1, The Greek Fathers*, trans. Leonard Maluf (1979; Petersham, MA: Saint Bede’s Publications, 1993), 51–77.

the most observant worshipers.”⁵⁵ As Christians, sadly, we are not immune to being tempted by this “spirit of the age.” Because we too can be swept up into consumerism during these times of year, it is helpful for us to pause and meditate why these seasons even exist. The evangelical feast days of Christmas and Easter, especially, protest the world’s calendar.⁵⁶

In commenting on Paul’s reference to staying in Ephesus until Pentecost (1 Cor. 16:8), Calvin offered a helpful remark for us to apply: “not that Paul kept that day at Ephesus because he was bound by scrupulous regard for it; but rather that he did so because there would be a greater gathering of people then, and so he hoped that he would be presented with an opportunity of spreading the Gospel.”⁵⁷ Especially during the seasons of Christmas and Easter, people attend church; people are thinking something about Jesus, whether right or wrong. We would be foolish not to seize the opportunity and to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Gregory Nazianzus said, the best sermon is “that which is best adapted to the occasion.”⁵⁸

4. Conclusion

The Reformed family of Protestant Reformation churches affirms that worship is to be done according to the Word of God. What this means today may not be what it meant historically speaking. And so we’ve seen that some of those same churches and theologians who affirmed *sola Scriptura* and what later came to be known as “the regulative principle,” also affirmed the Christian freedom to celebrate the work of Jesus Christ on the evangelical feast days besides the Lord’s Day and that this was to be done with a view to the edification of the body.

55. Scott Wilson, “The Devil’s Calendar,” *Touchstone* (November/December 2011). Found at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=24-06-025-v>.

56. von Allmen, *Worship*, 227.

57. John Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John W. Fraser, Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries, 12 vols. (1960; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 9:352–53.

58. Gregory Nazianzen, “On Pentecost,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Second Series*, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (1894; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, fourth printing 2004), 7:378 col. 2.