

Okay, I admit it... I love the sit-com, Seinfeld. I know, I know! It is anything but edifying, but what can I say? I have a weakness for that brand of humor. Why would I begin a paper about the church year with this startling confession? Because there is no better illustration for this article about the "church year" than episode #166, entitled, "The Strike." You might remember it as the episode where my favorite character, Kramer, attempts to resurrect a holiday invented by Frank Costanza, called, "Festivus." Frank, an apparently nominal Jew, invented Festivus as an alternative to Christmas, declaring, "Festivus for the rest of us!" According to Frank's design for Festivus, an aluminum pole is generally used in lieu of a Christmas Tree or other holiday decoration, during the Festivus dinner there is an "airing of grievances" that allows each guest to share his greatest disappointments with the other guests, and after dinner the "feats of strength" are performed. Traditionally, Festivus is not over until the head of the household is wrestled to the floor and "pinned". Amazingly, this episode struck such a chord within the fan base, that many people have actually begun celebrating Festivus world-wide!

How is the recounting of "Festivus" relevant to an article about the church year? It is relevant, because for American Protestants of any stripe, observance of the seasons and holy days of the church year smacks of Frank Costanza's Festivus. There seems to be no strong Scriptural reason for observing anything beyond Christmas and Easter – and for many, holidays of any sort are suspect. Whether you are a broad Evangelical, Reformed, or Baptist, there seems to be no rhyme or reason for a robust observance of the church calendar other than personal "religious" preference.

At Ancient Hope, we believe a Scriptural, historical, and practical case can be made for significant, but not slavish, observance of the "church year." The distinction of "significant" versus "slavish" is an important place to begin. There are some beliefs we have, like God's Triunity, that are absolutely non-negotiable because of the overwhelming teaching of Scripture and historic confession of the church. However, there are some beliefs we have that we hold less dogmatically – like the mode of

baptism. We prefer sprinkling for various Scriptural and theological reasons, but we acknowledge immersion and pouring as legitimate modes as well – all effectively portray union to Christ through washing in Christ’s blood and anointing of the Holy Spirit. Our understanding of the church year is similar to our understanding of how to apply the waters of baptism. It is an important matter and we have Biblical reasons for what we do, but we don’t dogmatize in ways that would unduly burden the consciences or sensitivities of others.

To avoid a Festivus mentality of personal invention and imagination, here are the brief and broad contours of our Scriptural case for observing the church year:

1. *Time itself is important in Scripture:* We learn in the first chapter of Genesis that the “space-time” universe God created has a chronological linearity moving towards a goal – God’s approval and rest. God’s universe is not amorphous and timeless, but deeply teleological (designed towards a goal) and chronological (expressed in time).
2. *Marking time is important in Scripture:* God not only invented time, but He created the sun, moon, and stars to help us demarcate days, seasons, and years (Genesis 1:14). God went even further and gave His People in the Old Covenant special holy days (weekly Sabbath), years (Jubilee), feasts (Passover), and festivals (Booths) by which to remember and look forward to His great acts of creation and redemption.
3. *Marking time is important in the New Covenant:* While many of the special holy days, seasons, and years of the Old Covenant were fulfilled and made obsolete in the New Covenant, some were transformed into different days (the Sabbath is now on the first day of the week, commemorating Christ’s resurrection / rest from redemption, cf. 1 Cor. 16:2, Heb 4:4ff, Rev. 1:10) or new expressions of old festivals (the Lord’s Supper is our Passover, cf. Matt 26:19ff, 1 Cor. 5:7).
4. *Important Events in the New Covenant Conspicuously Mirror the Old Covenant Calendar:* The death of our Lord during the Old Covenant feast of Passover (showing us that He is the true Paschal Lamb) is well known to us. What is not as well-known is that the “birth day” of the church, Pentecost, was also an Old Covenant feast commemorating the fiftieth day after

Passover (Lev. 23:16). It was a feast of first fruits, or harvest. It is no accident that Christ sent His Holy Spirit to fill His People in a new way on this Old Covenant feast of Pentecost. The church, God's first fruits of harvest, is being offered to God as a pleasing aroma in the New Covenant (Acts 2:3). The striking parallels of the Old & New Covenant calendars surrounding these redemptive events are not just an interesting theological footnote, but a sign that God's pattern of redemptively marking-out time is being extended into the New Covenant.

5. *There is evidence that Jesus observed a "non-prescribed" holiday:* In John 10:22, we see Jesus going to worship in the Temple during the Feast of Dedication, otherwise known as Hanukkah. It should be understood that Hanukkah memorialized an event not recorded in Scripture because it happened during the "silent" inter-testamental period. The Jews rededicated the Temple after it had been desecrated by pagans, and the necessary and scarce oil for the lampstand that would have normally lasted one day lasted for eight days. The Jews to this day celebrate this holiday as a reminder of God's faithfulness to His people. This extra-biblical holy day was evidently respected and recognized by our Lord. There is some positive Biblical liberty in these matters that we should take note of.
6. *Certain controversial texts require contextualization:* Texts like Gal.4:10, and Col. 2:16,17, are often used against implementation of the church year. Unfortunately, these texts are being applied to the wrong pastoral problem. In these passages, Paul is clearly arguing against a slavish adherence to the totality of the Old Covenant and all its trappings as many Judaizers and false teachers were advocating (Gal. 1:7, Col. 2:11). We have no desire to go back to the Old Covenant and its shadows (Heb 8:13) – that is not in question. What is being wrestled with is the principle of marking-out time redemptively in the New Covenant. These texts no more argue against this general principle than they argue against celebrating individual birthdays. Paul was wrestling with a specific pastoral problem of Judaizing, not a principled question of marking-out time according to redemptive patterns.

While historical and practical arguments do not carry the authority or weight of Scripture, they are still valid as considerations in our struggle.

1. *The early church marked-out time by redemptive historical events:* The early church not only recognized Sunday as the new Sabbath day of worship, but by the second century it had a robust celebration of the New Covenant Passover (Pascha) / Easter / Pentecost holy days. While there was much debate over which calendar days to celebrate on, the principle was clear enough – time in the New Covenant was to be marked-out by redemptive events. The foundation of the Pascha led to a two-fold structuring of the year – the semi-annual of the Lord and the semi-annual of the Church. The semi-annual of the Lord celebrated the earthly life of Jesus from His nativity (Advent) to His leaving His Spirit with His Church (Pentecost). The semi-annual of the church began after Pentecost Sunday and celebrated the way the Lord continues to work in the world through the church.
2. *The rhythms of our lives will be structured by something; it might as well be redemptive-historical patterns:* Try as we might to deny it, our lives have a daily, seasonal, and annual rhythm. We are made to function this way in God's universe (Gen 1:14) – and we operate accordingly whether we want to or not. Should we have our lives revolving around seasonal sports championships, changes in weather, or school vacations – or should our lives be patterned after the rhythms of our redemption in Christ? We will choose something no matter what. We believe we should follow the Scriptural pattern of redemptive history.
3. *This structure helps us to learn the whole counsel of God:* Using this redemptive pattern to structure our corporate Scripture readings and orders of worship helps us to interact with the whole counsel of God instead of parts of it. The repetition also provides a path of devotional piety that we can share in common as we grow in grace.
4. *This structure connects us to the wider "universal" church of the world and of the ages:* We are not a church unto ourselves – we are part of the glorious body of Christ. For centuries and across many nations, Christians have observed the church year in some basic form. When we adopt the church

year we share a marvelous rhythm of life with brothers and sisters that extends far beyond our own sanctuary and homes.

5. *Abuse of a principal is not an argument against a principle:* True enough, the church calendar has been abused by many through the ages. During the time of the Reformation, Luther was quick to cast-off all holy days for specific saints except for the more general "All Saints Day." Despite the propensity for some people and churches to take the principle of the church year too far, this is not an argument against the church calendar. Eating too much butter is not an argument against butter, but against gluttony. We should be measured and cautious in the ways we observe the church year, but we must not run from the boogie-man either.

Hopefully, some readers are now open to if not convinced of structuring our calendar according to redemptive history instead of other worldly events. The question now comes, what is the structure of the church year, and how do we observe it? We will begin by laying-out the simple structure of the calendar and then move to practical ways that we will be observing it at Ancient Hope. Keep in mind that the early church started observing the church year with the Pascha cycle (Passover / Good Friday, Easter) and worked forward to Pentecost before going back to lay-out Advent in the Semi-Annual of the Lord.

Advent – Back to the Future

The beginning of the church year, the semi-Annual of the Lord, marks the earthly ministry of Jesus and therefore begins with His first coming, or Advent. Interestingly, the four weeks of Advent are not primarily intended for the church to look backward in time, but rather for the church to look forward in time to Christ's Second Advent. Through the reality and lens of the first Advent of Jesus, the church anticipates the Second Coming of Jesus in glory. This is a paradoxical season of preparation and renewed anticipation of Christ's return in the future.

Christmas – The Greatest Gift of All

The anticipation of the advent season is realized in the season of Christmas, which celebrates the incarnation of Immanuel, God with us. Some may be wondering why Christmas is referred to as a season, and not a day.

Christmas is a season (and a day) because it is supposed to be a season of feasting – it is literally a “Christ Mass.” This does not mean that we are Roman Catholics confessing transubstantiation, it means that the church used to hold a multi-day feast celebrating the amazing truth of God become flesh. This might help you make sense of why a classic Christmas carol is called, “The Twelve Days of Christmas,” not the “One Day of Christmas.”

Epiphany – Jesus, the King Revealed

Following on the heels of the twelve days of Christmas is the season of Epiphany, which means, “Appearing.” This season begins with the account of the Gentile “Magi” paying tribute to the infant king of glory and moves toward the baptism of John where Jesus is shown forth as the Son of God. This season not only prevents us from conceiving of Jesus as a “cute baby” in a manger, it reinforces once again to us what Jesus came to do in His earthly ministry as Messiah.

Lent – Prayerful Preparation

After the season of Epiphany there is a forty day season preceding the celebration Easter, called Lent. These forty days deliberately correspond to the Scriptural pattern of forty days as a time of preparation, fasting, and penitence (Gen. 7:17, Deut 8:2, Mk 1:13). If you look at a church calendar, you may notice that Lent is actually forty-six days long. That is because the Sundays in Lent don’t properly count as days of fasting – because Sundays are always feast days when we celebrate Christ’s resurrection! The Lenten season is consummated in remembering our Lord’s brutal death during the Passion week including Palm Sunday, Maunday Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Vigil.

Easter – The Week of Weeks

Lent is followed by the glorious Sunday and season of Easter which reflects on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The season of Easter lasts for fifty days – paralleling the 50 days of Pentecost following Passover (Lev 23:16). This Easter celebration lasting a week of weeks (seven times seven) symbolizes the fullness of the salvation we have in Christ's resurrected body (John 1:16). It is a time of great joy and gladness for the people of God.

The Semi-Annual of the Church – The Season of Pentecost or Trinity

After the fifty days of Easter and celebration of Pentecost, the church celebrates a long season of Christ's work in the world through the church. It is a time for the church to thankfully reflect and pursue the growth of the kingdom in the power of the Holy Spirit.

As you might imagine, there is much more that could be said about the structure and details of the church year, but hopefully that gives you a better understanding of its intent and flow. The last hurdle to jump here is the application of the church year. It is one thing to acknowledge its place in theory, and another to apply it in practice. At Ancient Hope, these are the principal ways that we will seek the application of the church year to our corporate piety:

1. *The church year will guide our Scripture readings in gathered worship:*
Instead of reading through the Scriptures at random or the whim of the pastor, we will use a tool to cycle through the whole Bible called a Lectionary. A Lectionary is nothing more than a chart or system of Bible verses from the Old Testament, Psalms, Gospels, and Epistles for us to read through. The one we will use corporately takes us through the whole Bible every three years. The beauty of a Lectionary is that it mirrors the church year and puts related Scriptures together so that we can consider how Scripture interprets Scripture. In time, we may make a daily lectionary available for the church, but for now we will begin with a Lectionary for corporate worship only.
2. *The church year will guide the content and music of our worship liturgy:*
Simply put, during Advent, our liturgy and music will be reflective of Advent,

and during Lent our liturgy will be reflective of Lent. Even non-liturgical churches have some kind of “Christmas” season, but ours will be more intentional and thoroughgoing at all levels. Our sermons will generally not be bound to the lectionary, but may reflect it from time to time as pastorally appropriate.

3. *The church year will impact certain visual circumstances of worship:* While liturgical colors are beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that we will de facto choose colors and decorations of some kind no matter what. Therefore, we will seek to be intentional, but not legalistic, gaudy or distracting in the use of liturgical color to reinforce where we are in the flow of the church year.
4. *The church year will guide certain family fellowships and celebrations:* As much as possible, we will celebrate the great holy days of the church together. Some times, these celebrations will be reflective (eg. Good Friday) and sometimes they will be full of feasting (Easter). We will seek to order our thoughts and actions according to the patterns of redemptive history.

I pray that the use of the church year will be a blessing to us and that no one will be motivated to begin celebrating Festivus out of spite – although I might join you just for the pleasure of participating in the “airing of grievances” around the dinner table!

May God bless us in time and eternity through Jesus Christ our Lord.

- Brett Bonecutter