

# **REKINDLING ADVENT**

**Rediscovering the Season of Joyful Waiting**

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Rediscovering the Season of Joyful Waiting

John Allen Bankson

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John Allen Bankson, *Rekindling Advent: Rediscovering the Season of Joyful Waiting*

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**INTRODUCTION**

**STUFF** FROM THE  
**ADVENT**  
**GUY**

IN THE FILE DRAWER OF MY DESK IS A BIG MANILA FOLDER marked “Advent Stuff.” I have added ideas and clippings to this folder over the years for over twenty years now. Somehow, over time, I have become “the Advent guy” for many colleagues in ministry. They ask me questions about how to do this or that concerning Advent, and I dip into the big manila folder for an answer. Or they find something they think I might be interested in, and I add it to the big manila folder.

Now I’ve decided to take my big manila folder of Advent stuff and put it in more permanent form. The contents of that folder are essentially what you hold in your hands right now. In this book are resources, ideas, articles, and other materials related to Advent. Some of these ideas have appeared on my personal blog in different forms, and some I have shared with friends over the years, but most of them have simply been for my own use at the churches I have served . . . until now.

It’s kind of ironic that I have become “the Advent guy,” since I had no idea what Advent was until I was a freshman in college. I grew up in a Christian home, and the church we attended celebrated Christmas and Easter, but, as is the case with many Evangelical Christians, that’s where our knowledge of the church year ended. I had heard people mention Lent on TV, but my mother told me “that’s just something Catholics do,” and I never, ever heard Advent mentioned, by anyone.

I take that back: in kindergarten, we made Advent calendars. They consisted of a long, narrow strip of red felt through which we put twenty-four pieces of green yarn, which we used

to tie candy canes to the strip. At the bottom of the strip was a small jingle bell, and at the top we pasted a mimeographed poem that said something like

Untie a candy every night  
When the Sandman weaves his spell,  
And Christmas Eve will be here  
By the time you reach the bell.

At that point I knew more about the Sandman, the mental picture of whom always gave me nightmares, than I did about Advent. Why it was called an Advent calendar, I had no idea, nor did anyone tell me. So until I was in college, the only idea I had about Advent was that it had something to do with untying candy canes from a strip of felt.

I also did not grow up attending worship on Christmas Eve. It's not because my parents were slackers: our church did not offer Christmas Eve worship services. It never really occurred to us that people might celebrate Christmas by going to worship. Sure, we knew that Christmas was about the birth of Jesus. We had a Nativity scene at home, and every year, a couple of weeks before Christmas, our church choir put on a spectacular Christmas cantata with narration, solos, and special lighting. But Christmas Eve and Christmas Day themselves were family time, and it was all about Santa. In all, the view I had of Christmas as a child was that it was essentially a secular holiday with religious overtones, although I doubt I would have worded it quite like that. In conversations with others who grew up in Evangelical churches, I have come to realize that my experience was hardly unique. This was the American Protestant Christmas for generations.

In my freshman year of college I was working as a church organist at a small United Methodist Church. (I am no organist;

they were very kind to put up with my feeble efforts.) The pastor at the time was a former missionary to South America whose preferred apparel on Sundays consisted of a simple linen alb. This simple vestment, along with his beard, made him look a little like St. Francis of Assisi. A few weeks before Christmas that year, Pastor John had the children come down to the front of the sanctuary and showed them a wreath he had set up. It had three purple candles, one pink candle, and a white candle in the center. He explained to them that it was called an Advent wreath, and that they would be lighting a candle every Sunday until Christmas Eve, when they would light the white candle. He then got his guitar and taught them a verse of “Advent Song” by Mary Lu Walker. Each week Pastor John added a new verse to the song. By Christmas Eve, all the candles had been lit and all the verses of the song had been learned by the children. I will never forget it: that simple children’s sermon each week, and that simple song, began to transform my understanding of Christmas and, eventually, of the entire church year.

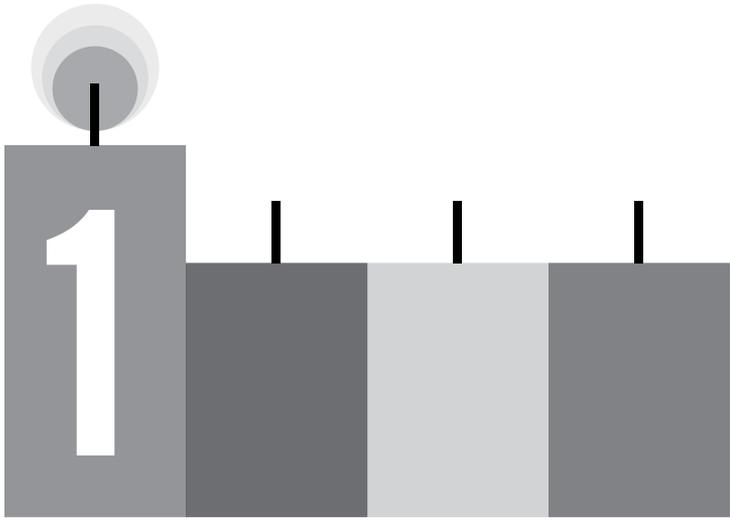
Historians tell us that the spring cycle of the Christian year (Lent-Easter-Pentecost) is centuries older than the winter cycle (Advent-Christmas-Epiphany), but for me, discovering Advent was my introduction to the Church Year. Along the way, I discovered Holy Week: first Good Friday and then Maundy Thursday. A couple of years after that, it was Ash Wednesday and all of Lent. When I moved to South Mississippi and later to Louisiana, Shrove Tuesday (Mardi Gras) was added to the mix. But it all began with Advent. It all began with Pastor John and a handful of children in a little church, singing a simple song and lighting a few candles.

That was a long time ago. Since then I graduated from college, went to seminary, got married, got a master’s degree in

music, became a parent six times over, taught school, and pastored churches. Every year I experience something new about Advent, often because a friend introduces something to me that I add to my big manila folder. Every year, the church year takes on a richer meaning for me. And every year, as it has for me since 1984, it begins with Advent.

I hope these ideas will lead to new beginnings of discovery for pastors, church leaders, worship planners, individuals, and families. I hope they will rekindle in you and your congregations an interest in understanding Advent and a delight in observing the season of joyful waiting.

JOHN ALLEN BANKSON



**SHOULD** WE  
CELEBRATE  
**ADVENT?**

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*<sup>1</sup>

Faithful God, your promises stand unshaken through all generations. Renew us in hope, that we may be awake and alert watching for the glorious return of Jesus Christ, our judge and savior, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. *Amen.*<sup>2</sup>



SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I WAS SERVING AS AN ASSISTANT PASTOR at a rather large, fairly traditional Presbyterian church. This church was “traditional” more in the English-Puritan sense rather than in the Liturgical-Protestant sense, although it had moderated its practices over the years to accept some liturgical elements. In addition to a typical Sunday morning adult-oriented service and separate children’s church, the congregation had instituted a Sunday night family service to allow all ages to worship together meaningfully. We had a family choir made up of all ages, chose hymns and songs that would encourage participation across the spectrum, and geared the sermons to be applicable to young and old.

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1 Collect for the First Sunday of Advent, *Book of Common Prayer*. New York: Church Publishing, 1979, 211.

2 Prayer of the Day for the First Sunday of Advent, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *Book of Common Worship*; Louisville KY; Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, 172.

As Advent approached, we decided to make use of an Advent wreath at this family service, incorporating Mary Lu Walker's "Advent Song," which was written especially with children in mind. Our desire was to make the period of anticipation something that had spiritual meaning for them, rather than just being "waiting for Santa Claus" time. The families who attended those services seemed to benefit from it, and many commented how the use of the Advent wreath and the accompanying song gave them a spiritual "anchor" for their family preparations for Christmas.

Others were not as appreciative. We fielded some phone calls from church members who wanted to know, "Why are we lighting Advent candles in a Presbyterian church?" It's a concern that is fairly common among some Protestants, especially those in the Reformed family of churches, which includes Presbyterians. Many have been taught that observing the church year in any way is wrong.

It wouldn't be right, I don't think, to write an Advent book for pastors and church leaders without addressing this issue, because it is bound to come up. Even if no one says it out loud, odds are someone in your church will want to know, "Why are we lighting Advent candles in a Presbyterian (or Baptist, or Methodist, or non-denominational) church?" People will want to know why you're thinking about observing Advent *at all*. So we need to ask, Should we celebrate Advent? Should we be observing the church year, even in a limited manner?

The main objection to celebrating Advent or the church year in general is that it is a violation of the regulative principle of worship, the doctrine that we may only worship in a manner that is prescribed by Scripture. The regulative principle is frequently summed up as "whatever is not commanded is forbidden." The most thoroughgoing interpretation of

this principle is the one that seeks an explicit, New Testament command for every worship element. For instance, those who interpret the regulative principle in this way allow no musical instruments to be used in worship because the New Testament never commands their use.

Although most Reformed churches do not interpret the regulative principle in such a New-Testament-only fashion, many still cite the church year as one of the things that Reformed persons (including Presbyterians) simply “do not do.”



Many years ago, Dr. Douglas F. Kelly, one of my seminary professors and a great man of God to whose scholarship and Christian example I am forever indebted, wrote an article entitled “No ‘Church Year’ for Presbyterians”<sup>3</sup> which has been widely read and reprinted over the past few decades. Often when I talk about the church year, someone will ask me about Dr. Kelly’s article. I disagree with many of the points in that article, but in the past I have done so rather sheepishly: “Well, I think it is *possible* to celebrate the church year and still be a Presbyterian.” Over time, however, I have come to a stronger position on the matter: I do not believe celebration of the church year to be unbiblical in any way, or a violation of the principle that worship must be regulated by Scripture, for the following reasons:

**Our faith is not a timeless mythology.** I am so fond of saying this that I’m sure many in my congregation tire of hearing it, but it’s true. I don’t mean, of course, that the truths of our doctrine don’t apply to all times, but that we believe in a sovereign God who acts *in time* and is concerned with history. Our God is a God who stepped into time through miracles

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3 Douglas F. Kelly, “No ‘Church Year’ for Presbyterians,” *The Presbyterian Journal*, November 14, 1979.

(such as the Exodus), through prophets, and, ultimately and supremely, in the Incarnation. We celebrate the great events of redemptive history because they truly happened. We celebrate them at particular times throughout the year because they truly occurred in time and space. When I hear someone say, “We can celebrate Christmas in July if we want,” or “Why not sing ‘Jesus Christ is Risen Today’ in December?” I wonder, “Do you celebrate Independence Day in October? Thanksgiving in April? Memorial Day in November?” Many Christians show greater reverence for the timing of civil observances and Hallmark holidays (Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and the like) than they do for days the church has set aside for centuries to mark the mighty acts of God in history.

**We need to know the story of the Bible, not just the stories of the Bible.** One of the members of my current church told me that in his childhood church they used to sing “Up From the Grave He Arose” every year in December. On Pentecost this year, my friend told me, that church sang “Joy to the World.” This makes for some confused worshipers, especially children. When I was a teacher at a Christian school, I consistently found that children from liturgical churches grasped the *story* of the Bible, while those from non-liturgical churches only knew *stories* of the Bible. That’s an important distinction. We may say it’s the job of catechesis to teach children how all the different stories fit together to form the story of redemption, but what we do in worship can either support what we try to do catechetically or completely undermine it. *Lex orandi lex credendi*: the way we worship shapes what we believe and ultimately shapes who we are. Our worship needs to tell the story, in logical progression, throughout the year. Otherwise, we just have a group of disjointed stories. For the covenant theologian, nothing could be worse than that.

**We must reclaim the Lord's Day as the first day of the week.** God instituted the feasts of the Old Testament (such as Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Tabernacles) to give His covenant people a *sacred sense of time*. They were not to mark days and seasons such as new moons and harvests exactly as the nations around them did. Those events figure into the feasts of the Old Testament, but the main focus is the mighty acts of God in history, as He has "visited and redeemed his people" (Luke 1:68). The same is true of the Christian feasts. In celebrating how God has acted in history to visit and redeem us, His people, we seek to establish a sacred sense of time, to redeem the time. At the very heart of this sacred sense of time is the idea of the first day of the week being the Lord's Day. There is no such thing as a "weekend" in the biblical economy. The rhythm established in Scripture is that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh, which is the day we call Saturday. Christ rose from the dead on the first day of the week, the day we call Sunday: it was the first day of a new creation.

This concept carries over into the major Christian feast days. Palm Sunday is the first day of Holy Week. Easter Sunday is the first day of Easter Week. Holy Week is sometimes referred to as Easter Week and Easter is sometimes lumped in with Holy Week, but we should take care to note the clear demarcation between the two. Similarly, "Easter Weekend" might be casually used when making vacation plans, but it is nonsensical in a liturgical context. Easter begins not only a new week, but a new life! On the first day of Creation, God created light out of darkness. On the first day of the week, Jesus Christ arose from the darkness of death into the light of new life, and He gives that new life to us. We dare not give away the importance of the first day of the week. The Lord's Day, Sunday, is not the end of the week: it is a new beginning, every time. We must go against the grain of our culture on this point.

One of the great misunderstandings of the church year is that it undermines the primacy of the Lord's Day as the biblically mandated day of worship. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Observance of the church year *promotes* Sunday as the day of worship. In fact, the only feast that takes precedence over a Sunday is Christmas, which only means that when December 25 falls on a Sunday, the Scripture readings for Christmas Day take precedence over the usual readings for that Sunday. It in no way means that we would cancel church because Christmas is on a Sunday any more than we would cancel church on Easter Sunday!

Another misunderstanding about the church calendar is that it necessarily includes the observance of saints' days. But the sanctorial calendar is completely separate from the gospel feasts. Even among Christians such as the Anglicans who do celebrate saints' days, the Lord's Day always takes precedence over a saint's day, which gets moved to the nearest vacant weekday.

**Prepare. Celebrate. Reflect.** Flowing from the sacred sense of time idea is the rhythm of prepare, celebrate, reflect. The world around us does *not* prepare for holidays other than buying food, gifts, and decorations. But built into the church year is the idea that we must prepare ourselves inwardly to celebrate in a meaningful way. Thus, before Easter, there is Lent, and before Christmas, there is Advent. Lent is not the time to celebrate Easter, and Advent is not the time to celebrate Christmas. Among American Christians, as soon as Thanksgiving is over, it's time, as most see it, to plunge headlong into celebrating Christmas. And then, when December 25 actually arrives, most people have already been celebrating for a solid month and proclaim, "Christmas is over!" right when it is really just beginning. This tendency in our society is, I believe, related to the weekend mentality. Just as we tend to view Sunday as the end of the week,

we see the arrival of Christmas—and every holiday—as the end of something rather than the beginning. The time-tested Christian approach to the seasons of the church year turns this around, transforming the full stop into a crescendo.

During Advent, for example, Christians *prepare* through Scripture study, prayer, and observation of various Advent disciplines such as the Advent wreath and the Jesse tree that focus our attention on the world's great need for a Savior, the promise of Christ's coming, and the hope of His return. (This focus on Christ's Second Advent is another dimension that is frequently lost when we celebrate without preparation.)

If we observe Advent, then we've just *begun* to celebrate when Christmas arrives on December 25, or, more precisely, at sundown on December 24. The festivities keep going as the Christmas Season continues through January 5, Twelfth Night, and then we go on celebrating with the Epiphany of Christ on January 6.

The Epiphany season, which commemorates the arrival of the magi and the manifestation of Christ to the gentiles, stretches out the joy of Christmas through several more weeks until the last day before Lent, which is known as Shrove Tuesday or Fat Tuesday or Mardi Gras. During this time, we *reflect* on the truth that the Light of Christ has come into the world and that we are called to bear that Light into the world.

We encounter the same rhythm in the Spring: we *prepare* during Lent, culminating in Holy Week, *celebrate* the Resurrection during the Great Fifty Days of Easter (Easter Sunday through Pentecost), and then *reflect* on the continuing significance of the Resurrection and the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives throughout the Sundays following Pentecost, up to and including Christ the King Sunday, which is the last Sunday of the church year. The next week a new church year begins as

we arrive again at the first Sunday of Advent and the rhythm of *prepare-celebrate-reflect* continues.

**We profess to believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.** An individual congregation, or an individual denomination, is not *the church*. It is an expression of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church: the body of Christ, which is made up of all believers, regardless of nationality, race, or denomination. We do not have the corner on the Holy Spirit. We say the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, both of which include belief in the universal church as an article of faith. We are taught in seminaries and from pulpits that the church is bigger than the denominational walls that we, as human beings, have put up. Yet, for all that talk, worship in many churches is quite sectarian, if not idiosyncratic. Reformed churches, for example, sometimes recite selections from the Westminster Catechisms and Confession in the place of the aforementioned ecumenical creeds. There's nothing wrong with a Presbyterian pastor wanting his people to be familiar with the Westminster Standards. I am instructed and led by them every week in my pastoral duties. I study them. I teach them. But I do not use them in worship in the place of the ecumenical creeds, because I believe that when we worship, we join in spirit with the church throughout the world to come before the throne of God. So what we corporately confess in worship should be what all Christians believe, not just what Presbyterians (or Baptists, or whatever) believe.

In observing the church year, we have another magnificent opportunity, to join the larger body of Christ around the globe in a practice that goes back to the earliest days of Christianity. The Lent-Easter-Pentecost cycle goes back to the second century AD, and the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany cycle dates back to the fourth century AD, the century of the

Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. In Dr. Kelly's original article, one of his main points was that the church year was a Medieval accretion that was excised by the Reformers. But while some particular aspects of our observance of the seasons of the church year may come from the Middle Ages, the feasts themselves are from the same ancient church that gave us the great Trinitarian theologians.

A while back, I sent an extended family member some information about the season of Advent. Her reply echoes another concern of many Reformed believers: "Sounds like a bunch of Catholic traditions." Yes and no: "catholic," meaning universal, yes. "Catholic," as in "belonging solely to the Roman Catholic Church," no. The church year is the heritage of the early church, which means it is the heritage of the whole church. These seasons and cycles were a part of the rhythm of the Christian life centuries before the Great Schism in 1054, the church split that created the two branches that eventually became known as the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church. When we cut ourselves off from the liturgical calendar, we cut ourselves off from the vast majority of Christians around the world and down through the centuries. If we confess to believe in the "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church," we should be eager to embrace practices that show our unity.

**The church year is part of the Reformed tradition.** I am glad to be a part of a Reformed denomination that includes in its Book of Confessions a number of documents from different times and places. The Second Helvetic Confession was written by the great Reformer of Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger, and predates the Westminster Confession by over eighty years. It has this to say about the church year: "If in Christian liberty the churches religiously celebrate the memory of the Lord's nativity, circumcision, passion, resurrection, and of his

ascension into heaven, and the sending of the Holy Spirit upon his disciples, we approve of it highly.”<sup>4</sup> This list mentions what are often called the great evangelical feasts, that is, the gospel feasts: the days and seasons that highlight the great gospel story. These are also called the dominical feasts, the feasts of our Lord. The confession makes a distinction between feasts that help take us through the gospel story and feasts that were instituted to commemorate the saints. When it comes to the gospel feasts, the Second Helvetic Confession does not merely tolerate them, but “approves of them highly,” encouraging us to “religiously celebrate” them. So it is not “un-Reformed” to set aside specific worship services in honor of these days, e.g., a Christmas Eve, Ash Wednesday, or Maundy Thursday service. It is true that the Puritan mind, which is reflected in the Westminster Confession, had little room for the church year, but then again many Puritans did not even approve of saying the Lord’s Prayer in worship. But the Puritan vision is not the only one, and the Second Helvetic Confession is just as much a part of the great Reformed tradition as the Westminster Confession. One may celebrate all the great Gospel Feasts and be, in every sense, Reformed, even “thoroughly Reformed.”

When we observe the church year, we proclaim every week, in a systematic, logical fashion that suits our commitment to worshipping “decently and in good order,” the saving acts of God in history. The church year proclaims the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. The church year helps us to communicate the story of the Bible, not just disjointed stories of the Bible, and thus goes hand-in-hand with Covenant theology. The church year can help us reclaim the prominence of the Lord’s Day as the first day of the week, rather than the last day

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4 *Second Helvetic Confession*, Chapter 24: Of Holy Days, Fasts, and the Choice of Foods, <http://www.creeds.net/helvetic/c24.htm>.

of a “weekend.” The church year builds into our lives a rhythm (prepare, celebrate, reflect) that allows us to take in, and meditate on, the meaning of the saving acts of God. The church year connects us to the communion of saints, our unity with other believers throughout the world and down through the centuries. And the church year, understood as the great evangelical feasts or gospel feasts, is solidly a part of the Reformed tradition and furthers the proclamation of the Gospel which has always been central to that tradition.



Another objection to Advent, or the church year in general, that is related to the idea of the regulative principle of worship is a concern that by celebrating Advent, we are binding the consciences of worshipers. But what we are really talking about here is choosing Scripture passages, songs and hymns, and sermon topics on a given theme for a given Sunday. This is something that all churches do every week, Reformed churches included. A pastor may choose to preach through a book of the Bible, but at various times of the year there may also be thematic Sundays such as mission week or stewardship Sunday.

The pastors and worship leaders of churches that observe the church calendar do the same thing every week that those in non-liturgical churches do:

*They pick out what Scriptures will be read.* Some churches follow a lectionary such as the Revised Common Lectionary, which prescribes an Old Testament lesson, a Psalter selection, an epistle lesson, and a Gospel lesson for each week. During seasons such as Advent, these readings are linked thematically. A pastor making use of such a schedule is not binding the consciences of worshipers any more than one who chooses the Scriptures based on his own preferences. Verse-by-verse

expository preaching, known to many as *lectio continua*, is the traditional practice of many Reformed churches, but it is just that: a *tradition*. It may be beneficial for the congregation, but it is not scripturally mandated. Furthermore, it could just as easily be said that a pastor who decides to spend the next year and a half preaching through Romans is binding the congregation's conscience by doing so. What about the pastor? Would the use of a lectionary bind his conscience? If a lectionary were mandated, yes, but no one is suggesting that. The issue here is one of freedom, which includes the pastor's freedom to use lectionary texts if their use is deemed beneficial for the congregation.

*They pick out the hymns.* Most pastors pick out the hymns or other songs to be sung in worship each week. In some churches, the music director picks out the songs. The church-year-following pastor chooses hymns based on the overall theme of the service, which is set by the Scriptures that will be read in the service. Pastors who do not follow the church year usually do the same thing. The Scriptures come first, and the hymns are chosen to complement those readings. If hymns are not chosen to complement the Bible texts, then they are most likely chosen to complement the sermon. Either way, it could be said that by choosing the hymns in advance at all, we are all binding the worshipers' consciences. How can we get around this?

*They write a sermon, give it a title, and preach it.* Again, all pastors do this, whether they are following the church year or not. Are we binding worshipers' consciences by expecting them to listen to our words? Should we do as the Quakers do and sit in silence, waiting for someone to receive the inner light and stand up and say something? Even then, will that be binding the consciences of those who don't stand and speak?

*Periodically, they change the colors of the antependia (pulpit and lectern scarves), the Communion Table cover, and banners*

(if they use them). They change out the flowers, too. But it is no more binding to the conscience to change the color scheme of the decorations than to take any other measures to beautify the worship space.

If this is what our confession of faith means by binding the conscience then we are all in serious trouble as worship planners and worship leaders. We can't plan and carry out corporate worship without making decisions about what will be read, what will be sung, what will be said, and in what order it will all take place. If we apply the definition of binding the conscience that those who oppose the church year use, then we will not be able even to ask people to stand to sing a hymn: it would bind the consciences of those who don't want to stand or who don't want to sing. That can't be what it means, can it?

Here's what the Westminster Confession has to say on the subject:

God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are in anything contrary to his Word, or beside it in matters of faith or worship. So that to believe such doctrines, or to obey such commandments out of conscience, is to betray true liberty of conscience; and the requiring an implicit faith, and an absolute and blind obedience, is to destroy liberty of conscience, and reason also.

They who, upon pretense of Christian liberty, do practice any sin, or cherish any lust, do thereby destroy the end of Christian liberty; which is, that, being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, we might serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life.<sup>5</sup>

The confession here speaks to those who would declare something a sin that Scripture does not say is a sin, or requiring

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5 Westminster Confession of Faith 6.109 and 6.110, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anonymous/westminster3.1.xxii.html>.

something of someone as a “holy obligation” that Scripture does not require. Thus, with reference to worship, Scripture says, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.” It does not say, “Celebrate Christmas on December 25, or thou shalt surely die.” So we as church leaders can encourage parishioners to be in attendance on Sundays, except when providentially hindered. We can even admonish them if they neglect to do this. But we can’t tell people it’s a sin not to celebrate Christmas or Advent or Lent.

So what about these “extra” services, such as Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday, that occur on days other than Sundays? Those who oppose the church year would say we are binding consciences by requiring these days. I can’t speak for anyone else, but our session isn’t *requiring* attendance on Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, or Christmas Eve, any more than we’re *requiring* attendance at any Wednesday evening prayer meeting or Sunday school. No one’s going to get in trouble or come under discipline for not coming to Wednesday prayer meeting. However, if we do hold services outside of regular Sunday worship, we are not doing so with the idea that these days should be treated as if they were the Lord’s Day. That *would be* binding the conscience, but that’s not what’s going on. Rather, in holding services on those days we are seeking to bless the flock with additional opportunities to rejoice in God’s wonderful works in history.

We need to understand what the writers of the confession were objecting to when they wrote this liberty of conscience section. They were not objecting to worship that is done decently and in order or to choosing Scriptures and hymns for worship (and we’ve already seen that’s what the church year is all about). They were opposed to *holy days of obligation*.

Canon law of the Roman Catholic Church states that on holy days of obligation, “the faithful are obliged to participate

in the Mass. Moreover, they are to abstain from those works and affairs which hinder the worship to be rendered to God, the joy proper to the Lord's day, or the suitable relaxation of mind and body."<sup>6</sup>

So a holy day of obligation is a day that, while not a Sunday, the Roman Church requires its members to treat as if it were a Sunday, in terms of attending worship and refraining from work. Protestants who observe the church year are not issuing any such mandate.

So the question "Should we celebrate Advent?" is not one of binding worshipers' consciences. Pastors, sessions, and worship leaders who choose this emphasis for the four Sundays preceding Christmas aren't binding consciences by doing this any more than they are binding consciences by choosing the hymns from week to week. The real question is, then, "Will the observance of Advent be spiritually beneficial to individuals and families within my congregation?"

That is a question that, ultimately, each congregation will have to answer for itself. In the next chapter, however, I will present the reasons why I believe recovering the practice of celebrating Advent is a good idea, and one whose time is long overdue.

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6 Code of Canon Law, c. 1247, *The Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, Washington, DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/eng1104/\\_p4n.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/eng1104/_p4n.htm).

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

To his friends and fellow church leaders, John Allen Bankson is “the Advent guy.” As a Presbyterian minister, educator, composer, and choral conductor, his love of the rhythm of the church year and his diverse interests in theology, liturgy, music, and communication make him an ideal teacher on the subject of the Advent season. Bankson holds degrees from Samford University (BMus), Reformed Theological Seminary (MDiv), and the University of Southern Mississippi (MMus). A native of Birmingham, Alabama, he now makes his home in Laurel, Mississippi, where, with his wife, Rae, and their six children, he owns and operates Lippen Croft Farm. Bankson also serves as pastor of First-Trinity Presbyterian Church in Laurel and is the author of *Everyday Miracles: The Sacraments As Ordinary Means of Grace*.