

A Reformed Attack on the Church Year in the PCA.

Introduction

Piety, Not Window Dressing

This essay attacks the promulgation of the Church Year as wholesome for the Presbyterian Church in America. It is not about naming days in the year, or scheduling events. It is not syncretism to say, “Thursday,” even if a neo-pagan friend hears “Thor’s Day.” The issue is not “celebrating holy week” while ignoring the Christian Year. On close examination that may seem a bit silly, but it may be contextualization. Some say Americans are a silly people.

The disagreement is about a practice of discipleship and a framework for piety. Discipleship is the inculcation and nurture of the convictions and habits rooted in the gospel. Piety is the liveliness of those convictions and habits by which the church of living stones is built upon the foundation of the apostles. The PCA’s constitution is not thin on discipleship.

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others, by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of Baptism and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that Sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.¹

Despite dense paragraphs like the above, the Christian Year does not appear in the Westminster Standards— as an aspect, or an element, or an angle on piety. When the Confession² speaks of “time and seasons,” it specifies that such periods are “special occasions” attendant to “religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings” and are “to be used in an holy and religious manner.” Our constitution includes a wariness of abuse, and even pedestrian use of a calendar must reckon with it.

The Christian Year is not like setting your watch on 24 hour display instead of AM/PM. It is like installing a medieval Book of Hours on *your friend’s* Applewatch. Expansion from a default Chr-easter calendar to the Christian Year is not about indifferent customs. The Christian Year erects scaffolding for refurbishing the church building— the living of the very stones. As addressed at the end of this essay, apparently such work cannot be done by standing on the building’s present foundation. The Christian Year is not window dressing.

¹ Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 167, How is our baptism to be improved by us?

² Westminster Confession of Faith, XXI.v.

First An Attack on Warrant, Not Legitimacy

Given the assumption that we are shepherding correctly (even if not always well), an argument about piety is not a wise strategy in the PCA. There are two more stirring appeals for people who are serious about being right and prone to keep authority discrete. Truth and freedom are championed by a case for epistemological warrant and Confessional legitimacy.

Purportedly, the Bible teaches the Church Year, which the early church created; supposedly, the Reformation endorsed the Church Year, so the Westminster Confession allows it. Warrant and legitimacy carry persuasive pathos. They make us feel more correct than Presbyterians used to be, and more virtuous than they used to be. *Semper reformanda*.

We differ with other communions on epistemology and Confession. More poignantly— for a pastor, for a parent, for a convert looking back over some decades— most poignantly, I believe— we could compare practices of piety. The Church Year is a tool for discipleship. This is about what pastors and churches and parents do to their people. Weightier matters of the Law.

While the discussion is not new in the PCA, recently Teaching Elder Tim LeCroy has offered [a representative and articulate defense of the Church year](#). As to epistemological warrant, I aim to unmake his case. As to Confessional legitimacy, I aim to prompt decisive scrutiny. Lastly, I address the danger of the rising advocacy for the Church Year in the Presbyterian Church in America. My compelling interest is the PCA's piety in the next 50 years.

Why is Observance of the Church Year Opposed?

To begin, LeCroy's introduction requires frank contradiction.

"The most common reason given against Reformed churches engaging in this practice is based on the Regulative Principle of Worship (RPW), that nowhere in the Bible does it say churches should do such things."

I am a little incredulous at this introduction. The most common reason which I have heard is that the New Testament specifically rejects use of a sacred calendar. To wit:

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.*

Colossians 2:16–17

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. *But now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, 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!* I am afraid I may have labored over you in vain.

Galatians 4:8–11

Critics are not exerting a procrustean genius; they are repeating the apostle Paul. Indeed, they cite his counterstrike against religion that was about a Jesus but not about God's grace. Paul was gracious and stalwart, not narrow and repressive. With incredulity at Mr. LeCroy's lapse here, I am also grieved that such a lapse could be so blithely offered to his audience.

The Church Year is Not Grounded in God's Word

LeCroy first makes his argument for epistemological warrant by appeal to Scripture: Creation, Mosaic Law and New Testament. Before criticizing his Biblical case for a continuing holy calendar, I will undermine his claim that Scripture begets the Church Year handed down as tradition from the church of the first five centuries:

When it comes to the church year, we are not just appropriating church tradition. It turns out that, as in many other things, the church's tradition is grounded in God's Word.

The Westminster Standards are tradition grounded in God's Word. Is the tradition here commended so grounded? He speaks of the ancient controversy: how to determine the date for Easter. The adjacent text of Scripture, Leviticus 23, anchored the cycle of feasts imprecisely to the harvest; but tradition birthed an exact solution, the Spring equinox. I am not actually informed whether Moses had a concept of the equinox to employ. Is the tradition's contrivance for gentile certainty grounded in God's Word? Did they read Genesis 1 better than Moses wrote Leviticus 23? Perhaps we can get the Orthodox Church a Bible and clear up their inveterate miscalculation.

What of the transmogrification (his term) of "*the springtime feasts of the Old Testament into a Christian liturgical calendar?*" It is more than a kaleidoscope rearrangement. Transmogrify is a fitting term for the details which LeCroy expounds. It is a poor synonym for "grounded." Transmogrify brings to mind grotesque transformations which barely preserve the original subject. While not rhyming with transubstantiate, is transmogrify substantially different? An act of transmogrification suggests great authority. It is bold. One can admire the feat. LeCroy calls the PCA to embrace or tolerate in our stewardship the results of a transmogrification by the ancient church— admitted by its advocates to have eluded the New Testament writers.

If the ancient tradition is grounded in Scripture, by what other authority are Lent and Advent subject to revision? Bullinger is cited by LeCroy as an example of rejecting these penitential seasons, yet he claims the Church Year is grounded in Scripture. Even reforging Lent and Advent into purportedly more salubrious practices (which I have heard reported in the PCA) undercuts the claim of a tradition grounded in Scripture. Holy Wednesday (intuitive as hump day?), imposition of ashes (imposed by what authority?), Maundy Thursday (because we have Friday, right?)-- rather than Scriptural, these are more like the highest quality fanfiction. The traditional Church Year is grounded in the Fathers rather than the Scriptures.

Grounded in Creation?

Genesis 1:14-18 establishes the heavenly lights: moon, and sun, and stars. LeCroy asserts that these provide a sacral order. Neither sun nor moon nor stars appear in the Pentateuchal legislation for the feasts; instead, mention of months and days implies moon and sun. The stars, by which the seasons are marked, have not even an allusion.

A lunar calendar seems to be assumed by Moses. Only Exodus 19:1 marks a date by counting new moons. Only collocation of Numbers 28:11 and 29:6 ties a sacral action to the moon: “*At the beginning of your months you shall offer a burnt offering to the LORD . . . the burnt offering of the new moon.*” The calendrical role of the moon for sacral convocations appears in later narratives (1 Sm 20, 2 Kgs 4, Ez 3), but neither sun nor stars appear thus.

As “*the greater light to rule the day,*” it is unsurprising that the ancient world gave careful attention to equinox and solstice— the four cardinal points of the sun’s annual course. It is striking that, with the special revelation of Genesis 1, the Mosaic calendar omits them entirely. While the sun’s rise and fall functions for the counting of days and weeks between feasts as well as their prescribed lengths, the cycle of the sun is irrelevant for Moses.

The agricultural year is reckoned according to the stars, which are far less recondite than the solar cycle. The circuit of the zodiac schedules farming, animal husbandry and the hunting of migratory animals. Although the most conspicuous cycle, it does not serve the Mosaic calendar— despite the harvest’s role in the annual holy cycle. The moon marks months for the feasts. The sun enables the counting of days. The stars have no role whatsoever. All this contradicts the claim that the Church Year is grounded in the Bible’s creation account.

LeCroy’s case hangs on Genesis 1:14 “for signs and seasons.” Without significant reference to the heavenly lights in the feast legislation, it is the joining of these two lexemes which alone supports his appeal to creation. To the contrary, this pairing holds other obvious import: the lights which *in a farmer’s experience* constitute the seasons are also purposive communication. Farmers don’t intuit the seasons; God gave them reliable “signs.”

Signs and seasons: this is the sum of his exegesis in Genesis 1. The context is silent. In the Pentateuchal context, the lexeme translated “sign” never appears with the feasts. At Sinai, the Sabbath is enjoined by pointing back to the creation account (Exodus 20:11). The holy calendar is never enjoined by reference to the “signs” or the fourth day.

In the Pentateuch, the feasts are enjoined with the second lexeme. They are “appointed times,” as are the seasons. Both are established by God’s authority. LeCroy cites use of the same lexeme in references to God’s dwelling place in Israel. The second lexeme implies authority but not a sacral reference: “*Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, about this time next year, and Sarah shall*

have a son” (Gn 18:14)³. Let similarity between seasons and feasts be granted: man thrives in the structures which God has appointed and communicated, by general or special revelation. This is true of both the common and the holy. That God made man male and female is not an allusion to the Aaronic priesthood, though it is decisive for common family life.

LeCroy cites Psalm 104:19, which uses the same lexeme. He mandates a translation, “He made the Moon to mark the *sacred seasons*.” Like Genesis 1, the psalm lacks any reference to sacred things, actions or persons. It draws closest at its conclusion, “*I will sing to the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have my being*” (vs. 33). Like Genesis 1, man figures as only a most honored element in the panoply of God’s care for creation. God stirs the earth’s fecundity; man reaps rich benefits from the ground (vs. 14-15).

The moon and the sun carry out their alternation: nocturnal beasts are roused to seek their food from God, and man rises with the sun for his own labor of provision. The moon marks the progression of seasons—appointed times, most likely by its monthly progress through the circle of constellations. In this way the moon marks the cycle of agricultural labor and reward which is man’s silhouette in Psalm 104. Like Genesis 1, the context is the created order rather than worship. The context of a lexeme is as significant as that lexeme.

In Psalm 74 the same lexeme for “signs” appears poignantly, paired with the seasons—though not with the second lexeme for “appointed times.” The Psalmist is grieved. The temple is overrun. “*Your foes have roared in the midst of your meeting place; they set up their own signs for signs*” (vs. 4). Perhaps these are pagan cultic intrusions, but more likely they are military insignia with pagan religious connotations set up in the holy place; nevertheless, here are “signs” in a sacral rather than creation context.

In verse 9 the lament repeats the lexeme for “signs” with a potent temporal reference: “*We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long*.” Anguish about the defiled holy place is expressed as revulsion from and longing for “signs.” As is profoundly native to Israelite piety, he seeks encouragement from Genesis 1. In the face of sacral disaster, he does not speak of feasts or appointed times (vs. 16-17). In this context of worship, the one lexeme does not invoke the other:

*Yours is the day, yours also the night;
you have established the heavenly lights and the sun.
You have fixed all the boundaries of the earth;
you have made summer and winter.*

People with clocks on their wrists do find telling time unimpressive. When agriculture is mostly out of sight, the seasons become about clothing and vacations and Seasonal Affective Disorder. The ancient world recognized that telling time is telling how ordinary life can succeed. While redemption does not float untethered from creation, the context of Genesis 1 presents the celestial array as part of God’s kind

³ Compare the repetition of the salient lexeme at the fulfillment of this promise in Genesis 21:2, without any reference to a feast or sacred occasion. “*And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him.*”

order for all peoples. Telling time is a great gift, like rain on the righteous and the unrighteous, if the continuance of agriculture after the fall is premium common grace for civilizations.

Grounded in Mosaic Law?

Secondly, LeCroy's appeal to the creation narrative segues into the Mosaic code. The feasts serve the purposes of "*thanksgiving, instruction, and formation.*" What element of the Mosaic code does not, at least implicitly? The same is true of the sabbath— or the Lord's Day.

In contrast to the sabbath, the feasts give longer seasons and particular observances worthy of their own accurate exposition. More strikingly, they hinge on a new and necessary act of God preserving the people from destruction. They are not only memory or celebration. They are stipulated practices of faith in the era of waiting. While the feasts celebrated blessings and duties given in the Exodus, their cycle depended on an annual act of atonement rather than an equinox for the cycle to unroll again each year.

The day of Atonement is introduced in Leviticus 16 with an unprompted recapitulation of God's judgment on Nadab and Abihu. Mortal danger is underlined for Aaron— even as a priest acting properly. It is the only feast that requires the people to participate by afflicting themselves, and the danger involved is extended to them: "*For whoever is not afflicted on that very day shall be cut off from his people.*" (Lv 23:29).

While the cycle of feasts harkens back to God's great acts, the Day of Atonement points back to no previous act of God. "*It is a Day of Atonement, to make atonement for you before the LORD your God.*" (Lv 23:28) The multifarious stipulations, which must be observed each year, are the only object of memory. There is no backward reference to creation or exodus.

Leviticus 16 has layers: atonement for the priests, atonement for the Holy Place, atonement for the altar and atonement for the people of Israel. Rather than pointing back, it insists on atonement then and there, and again next year. "*For on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins*" (Lv 16:30).

It beckons for the abrogation in Hebrews 9 and 10. On this day. Not a single day, but on the same day— each year. "*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*" (Hb 10:14) The cycle of feasts is not just a cycle of historical meditations. Their meditation reached towards fulfillment in the abrogating fullness of the New Testament.

The feasts should not be emptied of their redemptive—historical weight. Of course they can be filled otherwise. It just takes imagination. A serious case for an abiding holy calendar from Moses cannot be made by alluding sagaciously and then applying significantly:

"One way to think of these celestial signs are as creational ebenezers, heavenly stones of remembrance, that move us to mark the mighty deeds of the Lord in worship as we move through each year of our lives."

This is LeCroy's way of speaking. It is certainly one way to think of the heavens and the feasts; but even Samuel didn't think of his own ebezer that way. "*Then Samuel took a stone, placed it between Mizpah and Shen and named it Ebenezer. He said, 'The LORD has helped us thus far.'*"⁴ It testified to both the fidelity and incompleteness of God's work against Philistia. Paul's own way of understanding the holy calendar prompted his laconic and decisive rejection of it in Galatians 4 and Colossians 2— as if his way of understanding it was both authoritative and obvious.

Grounded in the New Testament?

Finally: "*In the New Testament we find that the people of God are still celebrating these feasts and references to them are sprinkled throughout.*" The feasts are part of the history, as Jesus is the Messiah. Passover and Pentecost are not incidental. Their abrogation appears neither as perfunctory nor even punctiliar; nevertheless, as the gentile mission proceeds, the references are not so much sprinkled as barely noticeable. In this later period one pericope gives significance to participation in the Jewish calendar.

Paul specifies that he will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost, though without any reference to a particular celebration (1 Cor 16:8). Similarly, in Acts 20 the course of Paul's travel is marked in relation to the dates of Passover and Pentecost. While this is the calendar he had used since childhood, for the apostle to the gentiles it is striking. (It is too far afield to consider Moses' command to postpone the passover if one is on a journey, Numbers 9:9ff.)

In the immediate context of Acts 20, Passover and Pentecost mark points in time without other apparent resonances. From them, LeCroy extends his crucial claim: "*With these positive participations in the ecclesiastical calendar, we find nowhere in the New Testament that the yearly calendar is to be abrogated.*" With the calendar exempted, "*We find other aspects of the Mosaic law are abrogated: bloody sacrifices, circumcision, food laws, other holiness separation laws related to purifications and clothing, and others.*"

The glory of the general abrogation appears ubiquitously and the narrative of Acts demonstrates the fact, but the quotable "cinch it verses" for the particulars are sprinkled widely in the New Testament. In considering the historical event of abrogation, it is difficult to discern the moment of comprehensive transition. Were the outworkings of abrogation a necessary (not secondary) consequence that came clear in various interactions, far less fractious yet similar to Galatians 2? Did the whole thing come to general implementation when the Jerusalem temple was razed? Was it the break with the synagogue? However and whenever the transition was completed, a lingering and overlapping appears in Acts.

Let only this observation be clear: the "*positive participations in the ecclesiastical calendar*" cited by LeCroy cannot be exempted. Mention of the feasts in Acts 20 are telic. Paul's Jerusalem visit has unexpected importance. His attention to the calendar shows his participation in the overlap, and serves to vindicate his integrity as the narrative proceeds. The subsequent narrative implicitly invokes Paul's previous positive

⁴ 1 Samuel 7:12. The expression of limited extent may be rendered either as temporal or geographic.

participation in the feasts— whatever it may or may not have been— as inseparable from the array of practices abrogated redemptive-historically but still actually continuing for some time.

In Acts 21, Paul arrives in Jerusalem, and positively participates in vivid fashion: Nazirite vows, temple reverence, purifications, presentation of offerings. Some hesitate to affirm it was a Nazirite vow, as there is a lot of blood in Numbers 6. Such reticence is ill founded.⁵ There was generally a lot of blood nearby when one visited the temple; that was a given. Even with such reserve, I assert that Mr. LeCroy’s crucial claim fails in Acts 21:19–26.

And they said to him, “You see, brother, how many thousands there are among the Jews of those who have believed. They are all zealous for the law, and they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or walk according to our customs. What then is to be done? They will certainly hear that you have come. Do therefore what we tell you.

We have four men who are under a vow; take these men and purify yourself along with them and pay their expenses, so that they may shave their heads. Thus all will know that there is nothing in what they have been told about you, but that you yourself also live in observance of the law. But as for the Gentiles who have believed, we have sent a letter with our judgment that they should abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality.”

Then Paul took the men, and the next day he purified himself along with them and went into the temple, giving notice when the days of purification would be fulfilled and the offering presented for each one of them.

The overlap between the Old and New Covenants is not shocking. They are administrations of the single Covenant of Grace. It is only puzzling in light of the difference between promise and fulfillment. There isn’t a documented timeline, but the difference dawned and the shadows faded. Whatever Paul’s practice of Passover while journeying, and of Pentecost when in Jerusalem, these feasts cannot be cordoned off from the temple practice and purification rituals in which he participated. In Acts 21, Paul was publicly demonstrating that, like any pious Jew, he continued in Mosaic practice. Of course that included the feasts.

LeCroy’s insertion of Easter into the context of 1 Corinthians 5:7-8 fails similarly. Without explanation he claims, “*we find an encouragement from Paul to keep the feast, not the old feast of unleavened bread, but the new Pascha, that we now call Easter.*” With his argumentation absent, disagreement is at a disadvantage; however, a refutation would include something like his final comment on the passage:

There Paul gives us the theological content of the Old Testament feast (cutting off the old leaven of malice and wickedness) and connects the Old Testament feast of Pascha to the sacrificial death of Christ on the Cross.

⁵ For examination of Paul’s previous vow in Acts 18:18 and the vows in Acts 21, consult I. Howard Marshall, Acts in the *Tyndale New Testament Commentary Series*, 1980 (Reprint, 1991).

Paul encourages observance of Easter for repentance, yet he connects the Passover feast to Christ's death—not a particular day or liturgical event? If this second statement is the argument for the previous, then it is exemplary for the failure of his case to ground the Church Year in the New Testament.

Although the date of Passover was either recently past or soon to come (1 Cor 16:8), Paul does not speak of a New Pascha. He does not contrast an old holiday with a new one. He contrasts the old leaven of “*malice and evil*” with the “*unleavened bread of sincerity and truth*.” Observance of a holy day is an unaccountable insertion—invoked neither by the cited ritual practice of Passover nor by Christ's sacrificial work fulfilling the Passover lamb. Leaven is not a calendar; Christ's death does not repeat each year.

LeCroy's claim hangs on Paul's diction, “*Let us therefore celebrate the festival*.” Paul delivers this exhortation, because the Corinthians failed to discipline egregious sin. That failure was not an error of fact or procedure; rather, Paul rebukes their toleration as rooted in pride. They are not called into celebration of a holy day, but away from the sins of the old man and the old order. A new holy day is not enjoined, but the abiding substance of holy living. The imperative describes no particular day but rather every day.

Abrogation of Old Testament practices did not end the authority and application of Old Testament texts. The rhetorical use of the Passover is in keeping with the date of First Corinthians. The lingering and overlap is part of the context, as in Acts 21. Contrary to the abrogation's trajectory, LeCroy inserts Easter most unaccountably. Again, a lexeme without reference to context does not constitute “grounded in God's Word.” Replicating his procedure in 1 Corinthians 5 with a subsequent exhortation to the Corinthians would result in ritual ablutions for Christian piety. There are communions with such practices.

Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

2 Corinthians 7:1

Grounded in Scripture, But Optional?

While LeCroy's presentation is concise, I have left some points aside. His brevity has done the same, and I must alone address his neglected climactic claim on the New Testament:

I will argue that the Scriptures do present a case for observing a yearly calendar of worship, and that the New Testament writers instead of abolishing it, move it to a secondary matter that churches may or may not participate in.

The Church Year is taught by God's Word, but it is optional? Commonly the language of “grounded in God's Word” claims not only evidence but authority. It means binding. If the heavens declare it, the Law embodies it and the Apostle encourages it for a life of repentance, then “*may or may not*” is a shock.

LeCroy does not give a New Testament case for optional. Again, he resorts to a bald assertion that limits discursive disagreement with his rationale.

After all, this is what is laid down by Paul in Colossians 2 and Romans 14, establishing the Apostolic principle that the Church year is a matter of adiaphora not dogma.

His position hinges on demonstration that the Church Year is adiaphora. He signals that necessity by beginning the essay with the claim and by ending it with the assertion. He fails to obtain it— offering no Biblical examination of it. A presumptuous and facile assimilation of Colossians 2 and Romans 14 cannot be admitted as fulfilling the announced thesis.

Colossians is an intervention. “*See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.*” Paul sharply warns the Colossians with the same language he employs in the intervention of Galatians. “*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!*”

Romans is not an intervention, although Paul’s theological summation establishes clear lines and unwavering duties. Paul sought partnership with the Romans, among whom the shift from Old to New practice continued playing out. He does not intervene against the weaker brothers, but neither does he regard their consciences as establishing an abiding option. They are weak, which entails temptation in the church. Beyond the mention of the calendar, the mistaken assimilation rests on the similarity of diction in Romans 14 and Colossians 2.

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. Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind, and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God.

Colossians 2:16–19

In Colossians, Paul intervenes against syncretism that would corrupt the faith. It is untenable that he speaks thus: “Don’t let people judge you; however, with your confidence grounded in Jesus, do adopt kosher practice and calendar observance— if you think best, you may or may not.” It seems LeCroy reads Colossians 2 as a white hot argument— for adiaphora. That claim fills Paul’s mouth with something like: “Don’t let others disqualify you; instead, hold on to your confidence in the gospel— while engaging in asceticism, angelic worship, fascination with visions.” These are adiaphora, so long as you stay connected to Christ? Surely not.

It is embarrassing to answer TE LeCroy’s silence at such length, but silence alone upholds his crucial claim about New Testament teaching. Advocacy for the Church Year in the PCA as adiaphora cannot marshal Colossians 2 as an echo of Romans 14. What of Galatians 4?

A Seedling of Confessional Scrutiny

TE LeCroy's credentials for appealing to the ancient church surpass those of most readers. Our slightness in this respect is lamentable, but not improved by credulity. He commends the Church Year by drawing from the ancient church not only a once useful but also a presently authoritative three strand bond for the unity of the church: creed, polity and calendar.

The creeds have ever been and remain vindicated by the checking of their homework; in fact, commonly it is recognized that we embrace the creeds while differing exegetically from the fathers. The creeds have stood the test of time, but not simply because time has passed. The same cannot be said for the ancient polity, and even less so for the Church Year.

LeCroy cites Clement and Ignatius, speaking of the Bishop and the college of presbyters tuned like the strings of an instrument, and the Bishop having the mind of Christ. There are details and variation over the early centuries, but Ignatius identifies the entirety as the blooming of monarchical episcopacy. Though useful often in its early era, it did not in practice stand the test of time, and with the Reformation it did not stand the test of *ad fontes*.

Wisdom acknowledges the unifying utility of the Christian Year in the context of the Roman empire and its lingering hegemony. That wisdom is well expressed by communions with a binding liturgical rubric or Directory of Worship, but the history of exegesis and theology withered the epistemological warrant for the Christian Year— at least that is how the stream of reformed thought flowed to the specifics of the Westminster Standards. The Divines were not primitivists, but their learned thoroughness did not vindicate the Church Year as a structure for unity (specifically with the Scots church).

Perhaps it is incidental, but LeCroy cites the *Didache* to enhance the reliability of the Church Year tradition. It ought not be dismissed as a whole, but on the very matter of time and piety it is suspect. It hints at the blight which undermined the Church Year as a tool of discipleship.

Your fasts must not be identical with those of the hypocrites. They fast on Mondays and Thursdays; but you should fast on Wednesdays and Fridays. (Didache 8)

The Reformed Churches are catholic. We did not plant this garden but received it from the ancient and medieval church; yet like them and after them, and *unsurprisingly by their legacy* better than they— we tend this garden by the Word and Spirit. We ought not dishonor the early teachers by dishonoring their subsequent students. Our Confessional Standards ought to guide and instruct our appropriation from the early church. For officers and courts of the PCA, this should be seen as fundamentally good-faith subscription.

TE LeCroy cites Bullinger as approving, depicts Calvin as more irritated (but not really), and presents the Reformation as endorsing the Church Year while purging it of abuses. He places all these in contrast with a later Puritan consensus. I earnestly urge attention to Martin Bucer's Ground and Reason⁶ (published

⁶ Ottomar Cypris, Martin Bucer's Ground and Reason: A Commentary and Translation,

1524). Just taste the tone and observe the stalwart rejection of the Church Year by one of the most irenic Magisterial Reformers. I submit that LeCroy's characterization is not adequate.

How, then, should a Christian, who should always be inclined and ready to advance the destruction of sin and the furtherance of righteousness, even at the cost of his life, have anything but disgust for these holy days and do everything in his power to abolish them?⁷

Since we have no reason to retain one feast and reject another, and since it cannot be denied that all have been harmful and the great ones most of all, we shall be satisfied with the observance of Sunday alone.⁸

What of the Five Evangelical Feasts Days on the continent? Given the Magisterial Reformation's comprehensive responsibility within the bounds of the civil magistrate's jurisdiction, one cannot flatly depict them as taking an abiding theological middle ground. I am sure many a magistrate thought it an exceedingly prudent middle ground. Yes, excesses purged, branches lopped, but the stump and roots were not burned in the ground. One cannot clean a house by burning it down; cities, cantons and nations are large houses. Changing people along with practice was the point. Read Bucer to hear the early expression of temporizing prudent reticence.⁹

As to legitimacy for the Church Year within the Westminster Standards, this topic is only as important as one esteems the system of doctrine taught and the vitals of religion commended therein. This is about piety. I suggest, with fervent hope, that attention and exposition be given to the Standards' teaching on Scripture, Worship and Christian Liberty. That discussion can resolve whether pastoral use of the Church Year accords with the system of doctrine taught in our Standards and/or harms the vitals of religion. As a starting point, TE LeCroy provides a Confessional position dependent on the gap in his Biblical case:

Thus, whatever form of the Church Year PCA churches employ, it must not be according to our imaginations, but prescribed in God's word. I have attempted above to argue that the Church year is prescribed by God's word and that the New Testament gives freedom to do it or not do it as a secondary matter.

What Grows Out of the Church Year?

The Presbyterian Church in America must respond to repristination of the Christian Year. Our not uncommon eclectic creativity with the Christian Year is already a historical anomaly. Jealousy towards idiosyncratic practice of an ecclesiastical calendar is one point held in common by the Ancient and Reformed churches. Our historical contrast should prick our attention. I disagree with my devout Anglican friend, but the virtues of his church's order blunts (without resolving) my concerns for his

⁷ Ibid., paragraph 146.

⁸ Ibid., paragraph 161.

⁹ Ibid., passim.

family. The PCA's order must be championed and deployed for this threat. The Christian Year carries deleterious influence.

Making up the Christian faith pragmatically cuts the nerve of promise and command. Our children can tell the difference between doing religion to get the most out of it and reverence that takes God at his Word. I suspect that the reason the church of my experience watches baptisms evaporate so frequently merely by leaving home is this: there was not much solid in their Christianity beyond the ephemera of a local congregation.

There was not, either in private or in public, a standard demarcated by a Christian tradition grounded in God's Word, a documented and culturally ridiculous submission to Scripture. The taste of their own congregation and the recipe of Christianity were indistinguishable. It was no larger or deeper or weightier than their parents or their social niche. Filling the absence of a stout Westminsterian tradition of discipleship among us with the fascinating but unfounded pomp of riding the Church Year is no solution.

The Church Year must have the same epistemological solidity as our Standards, or it's just play and pretend. Elevating ungrounded tradition devalues well grounded tradition. Satisfaction in Christian-esque accretions rather than submissive application of God's Word alone will give divine promises and commands the flavor of sentiment and eclecticism. By what standard does a young adult submit to the moral sentiments and social fabrications of parents? That standard is more stable in Rome or Constantinople or liberal Protestantism, with an authority unabashed about making up the faith beyond the bounds of Scripture.

The Church Year is a fabrication of the early church and will serve as the exemplar and warrant for whatever fabrication educated clergy will conscientiously develop. That is the demise of Scripture and Confession filling piety. Office and personality become the hands that juggle authority and practice. Put enough Bible on it and find enough people who pay to participate, and a congregation sacralizes whatever. We should fear— flinch and pull back from— whatever emboldens us to exceed God's Word. Do we not already see this happening with the psychologizing of the Christian Faith and the magnetic draw to adopt the therapeutic piety of the apostate West?

Why erect such a corrupting influence around the sinful men who are our pastors? Adoption of unaccountable tradition in the church was the precursor to the accumulating superstition that bloomed before the Reformation. Protestant seminary education can be a prophylactic, but it is also a union card. Once you're part of the chorus slinging some secret-sauce significance for some Sunday after another, there are lots of other useful things to make up.

The PCA needs to exclude the Church Year as a tool of discipleship and framework for piety. The PCA's functional elevation of the minister's conscience above the church's authority will foster a fluorescence of novelty. Ironically the authoritarian simplicity of episcopacy would squelch this. Promulgation of fixed liturgical rubrics erects real limits. With the Church Year's compromise of Confessionalism based on *sola Scriptura*, the PCA can only encourage and expect increasing innovation ungrounded in God's Word.

The Church Year promises to soothe the disarray of uninstructed Presbyterianism. The programmatic instruction of the church often has little fullness and sturdiness. Why else is there so much leaning of members on parachurch ministries? Frequently, there isn't a beefy U.S.D.A. heft on the table at home, from which a daily diet can be sustained. The purpose of our catechisms should be as binding as their content. What's a catechism for?

Our Standards' content about use of the Word and Sacraments is reserved as too advanced for the bread and butter familiarity of our members. The eldership's shared–embraced with a vow–exposition of the Ten Commandments is not commonly pondered as an everyday tool of discernment. We don't often field practical questions or overhear purposeful discussion by members about what we profess to be the tradition grounded in Scripture.

Despite the weightiness and wealth for piety in our Standards, we are either content with or cornered by religious disinterest in a tradition well grounded in God's Word. We do not hand members the Standards and say, "This is the teaching of our church for your piety. Get to know it well. We will help you understand it from Scripture and grow in these things." That approach rings as foolish to many because few have attempted the same with fitting accommodation. Congregants are hungry or anemic, and we want them full again and again. We look for some way to stir and form them, to grab and enrich their attention.

Shunning the magnetism of celebrity evangelicalism, the Church Year will refashion the assembled congregation into a celebrity. You must be there, you can't miss this. The meaning of today is supercalifragilistic. Next month is expialidocious. Here's an optional home choreography to get ready. Family religion is so important, we'll try to nudge you into it occasionally, rather than ever provoking a conscience that needs encouragement and instruction and conviction to continue in season and out of season. Your family gets religion from our staff (and the internet), so don't miss an episode. Don't worry, this is not frothy megachurch stuff. We made ours up by pretending to be like the ancient men we rightly admire. You're sure to get something out of it; that's why we cooked it up.

An Appeal to Those Who Plant and Water and Bloom

Responsible parties must ward off corruption of the ordinary means of grace, which seeks sanctification by practices contrary to our constitutional piety. If you consult Francis Turretin on the fundamental articles of the Christian faith, you will read his diagnosis of Rome: she kept the fundamentals but added vitiating articles which corrupt rather than displace the truth.¹⁰ This is why in the idolatry of the Roman Mass, you will hear the clear keynotes of the Christian gospel, though it is quite a different song and dance.

This may all sound like a speculative jeremiad, fears invoked in a pinched Presbyterian psychosis by the mere thought of Trinity Sunday. No. Below are the words that turned my long pondered disagreement with the Christian Year to a pastoral concern for the PCA, one worth the embarrassment of controversy.

¹⁰ Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology, I.XIV.

[These](#) are the published words of TE LeCroy from 2012,¹¹ about which I corresponded with him in June of 2021.

We have been acquainted since my RUF service in the 00's. As an impressive undergrad, I have cast him a glance over the years. God, in my opinion, has prospered him greatly. He has served as a pastor, and our General Assembly with distinction. He is a warmly received professor at our denominational seminary. We agree significantly in a desire to see the PCA grow into the maturity of well grounded church tradition, rather than fostering a naive Biblicism as if God started his work in 1973. We also share a concern about piety in the PCA. I share his zeal to invigorate God's people in doing good and praising God, and the vigor of my rejoinder comes from that commonality.

I now address his claims for the epistemological warrant and Confessional legitimacy of the Christian Year because of his previous claims about sanctification. He has a notably solid and mature knowledge of the Christian Year. His integrity and industry require challenge. He is not just theologizing; this is about discipleship and piety, what the church does to her people. Weightier matters of the gospel.

In my letter, I framed two critical characterizations of his views, and added quotes from him to substantiate my objections. He did not respond with qualification or revision. He simply suggested that I publish my letter elsewhere, as he would not host it on one of his platforms. I freely admit that I am nobody worthy of notice. Here are my characterizations of his view and his statements which they reference:

First, the Christian Calendar ought to have a formative role in our character. I think that makes it more than a secondary matter.

"I'm not against having a civil calendar, but we are being completely naive if we think that this worldly calendar doesn't need to have the necessary counterbalance that the church calendar provides us. The civil calendar teaches us to honor and remember, but it also breeds in us a nationalistic zeal that makes us myopic with regard to the world around us. We have to understand that if we shun the church calendar, the only calendar we will have is the civil calendar, and it will be the only annual rhythmic influence on our lives and on our children's lives."

Second, the stakes are the bread and butter of sanctification. No, neither Scripture nor the Reformed faith make this prescription for our ill condition.

"We need this counter-formation. We as Christians cannot keep our heads in the sand and pretend that we don't need a Christian calendar to provide balance to the worldly calendars all around us. If we do not offer a counter-formation to the

¹¹ It might be suggested that representations from more than a decade previous cannot be cited as presently representative; however, in the essay here under examination LeCroy cites for further understanding his 2013 essay, "[On The Origins of Lent](#)." Both elucidate his present advocacy.

liturgies of the world, then we as the church will be producing disciples that are no different from those in the world around us. We will be self-centered, greedy, entertainment hungry, individualistic, sex crazed, bloodthirsty robots. And isn't this who we are already? Aren't these the kinds of disciples our churches are already churning out? Is this what we want to be like? What we want our children to be like?"

TE LeCroy strikes different notes in this 2022 essay, speaking of the Church Year as prescribed by Scripture but optional for piety. The discord of these two notes rings out the fundamental contradiction within his combined argument for epistemological warrant and Confessional legitimacy. My concern is the adoption of the Church Year as a tool of discipleship and a framework for piety. Weightier matters of the law.

I would be pleased for him to repudiate the necessity of the Church Year for sanctification with an unambiguous dismantling of his previous assertions. I would like us to have from him an essay stronger than his case for epistemological warrant and Confessional legitimacy. At present, he is perhaps the apex of advocacy for the Church Year in the PCA, but he is far from the only elder making such noxious claims regarding the need to revolutionize our piety with the Church Year. He is just the most maturely impassioned in my experience.

* * *

I believe that in this essay I have unmade TE LeCroy's published case for epistemological warrant and given a foundation for others to attack his claim of Confessional legitimacy. I believe that I have given good reason to ward off his discipleship project from the PCA. I close this essay by offering these words about the Christian Year to the courts and officers and members of the PCA, the words which I addressed to TE LeCroy previously.

It is one thing to speak of the Christian Year as adiaphora, though our Standards do not. You advocate for the Christian Year as a tool and a necessary tool for sanctification. By the contrast to our Standards, I think that should be considered harmful to religion, even if it does not also impinge on the fundamental articles.

[n u n c a t q u e f i n i s]

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