Yes, Even Baptists Have a Liturgical Calendar

We live in a world that moves through seasons. We adjust by having different expectations and finding different hopes in each season.

The church has always had a seasonal calendar of its own. Baptists, coming out of their Puritan roots, developed their own seasonal calendar deviating from every other denomination – or so we thought.

September was the beginning of the church year with Sunday school promotions, state missions emphasis, and new energy flowing into programs coinciding with the new school year.

October was Stewardship Month, as pledge cards were sent out and some were even returned, which shaped the annual budget.

In late October and November, we engaged in fall festivals instead of Halloween parties, emphasized Thanksgiving, and some also celebrated Veterans Day.

Decades ago, Christmas celebrations started after Thanksgiving. That was when the secular world brought out the Macy’s Christmas Parade and the bell rang to begin our shopping.

The bell also rang for foreign missions and Lottie Moon while we endured winter by finding fellowship opportunities.

The first flowering bulb of spring shouted Easter. It was also the season to emphasize family, especially on Mother’s Day in May.

Then came the annual flurry of early June weddings. This was also the month of recognizing graduates and celebrating Father’s Day. We then celebrated July 4,
sent kids off to camp and took six weeks off from church.

This was the Baptist seasonal liturgy - a liturgical calendar shaped by the public school calendar, national holidays and an underlying agricultural influence.

For Baptists, the calendar was marked by missions offerings that declared the seasons: foreign missions at Christmas, home missions in the spring, children’s home offerings during May, and state missions in September.

The early Christian church found itself developing a seasonal ebb and flow centuries before there were Baptists.

It began with Advent, pausing to realize not that shopping season was upon us, but that within the human spirit we are made with a need and hunger to be near God.

The church year began with a desire to step back and reflect on how the world might be different if we lived anticipating God’s presence among us.

Christmas and Christmastide, the twelve days after Christmas, were the time when we recognized, again, that God is with us, celebrating Emmanuel, God with us in human flesh.

Epiphany, the days between Christmas and Lent, became the time to celebrate God’s presence lighting up our life in the breathing, walking, teaching person of Christ.

It is a season to look, learn, see and cling to his revelation and instructions.

Throughout our gospels, there is a transition that takes place when the teacher becomes the Savior.

The Lord invites the disciples to set their sights upon Jerusalem, where God’s son would die.

The church made a visible turn from listening and learning, to watching the love
of God unfold in sacrifice and cross with the celebration of Jesus’ transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany followed by Ash Wednesday, which commences the season of Lent.

During Lent, the church reflects on Christ’s death, the cross and their own place under the cross.

It is in the shadow of Lent we find the seeds of budding hope and joy through Easter, the celebration of the resurrection.

Like the first disciples who enjoyed the presence of the risen Christ for 40 days, Easter commences a celebration of the risen Christ – known as Eastertide.

After Christ’s ascension, the church witnessed the presence of the Spirit in Pentecost, 50 days after Easter, which birthed the church into being.

From Pentecost forward, we celebrate the greening of the church. Before school calendars and national holidays, before shopping seasons and missions’ offerings, the church established a seasonal living out of Christ’s birth, life, death and resurrection as well as the birthing of the church through the Spirit.

Because we are a people of agriculture and industry who are so often guided by school calendars, the reality is that we don’t live by one clock or one calendar.

Yet, the church’s liturgy offers a sacred life that we experience through its seasons.

The more that I’ve embedded my life in the Christian calendar, the more meaningful the gospel has become. It isn’t just a calendar; it’s an invitation to experience all of Christ repeatedly.

Enjoy the illumination of Epiphany. Walk attentively beside Christ toward the cross in Lent. Experience all the vast love of God in Holy Week – from death to life. Celebrate the resurrection and all that it means to us, and don’t let it go too quickly.
And finally, know that Christ has not left you alone, but wraps you in the Spirit so that you might be the church. This calendar springs us toward perpetual life.

Larry Coleman is senior minister at Churchland Baptist in Chesapeake, Va. A longer version of this article first appeared in The Churchland Spire, a monthly publication of Churchland Baptist, and is used with permission.