

Roots of Reformed Worship

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The Westminster Assembly

In this edition of *Roots of Reformed Worship* we turn our attention to the significance of the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster Assembly was a crucial turning point in the liturgical history of British Christianity. Until the Westminster Assembly the Reformed churches had written and prescribed liturgies. To review what we have said in earlier essays, most of the reformers produced books of prayers and addresses for the conduct of public worship. The Reformed liturgies prior to the Westminster Assembly had much in common, but nonetheless represented three different approaches to the problem of reforming the worship of the churches. The first pattern was represented in English by the Church of Scotland's liturgy, the *Book of Common Order*. It was largely the work of John Knox derived from the liturgies developed by Calvin in Geneva and Bucer in Strassbourg. This family of liturgies followed the general outline of the medieval mass and the ancient liturgies: word, intercessions, supper. They presumed in their form that the Lord's supper was the climax of the service even if in practice it was only occasional. Though they conserved the form of the ancient liturgical heritage, they did not keep much of the traditional wording. The second pattern first emerged in Zwingli's liturgy in which the weekly preaching service was based on a medieval preaching service called the Prone. In the Zwinglian pattern the communion service was a completely separate liturgy from the weekly preaching service. In form it severed the liturgical tie between sermon and supper. However, in practice it was not that much different from the liturgies of Calvin, Bucer and Knox since the supper celebrated infrequently throughout the Reformed churches. In England, Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* was a third

pattern of Reformed service. Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* was in some ways the opposite of the liturgies of Calvin and Bucer. It conserved much of the traditional language of Christian liturgy, but it lost the essential pattern of the ancient liturgies as a unified service of sermon and supper. In that regard it was closer to the Zwinglian pattern.

The *Book of Common Prayer* set the stage for continuing controversy that would eventually lead to the Westminster Assembly and its novel approach to problem of liturgy. What was it about the *Book of Common Prayer* that instigated a century of liturgical conflict? First, the *Book of Common Prayer* was to some extent a political compromise document intended to keep peace in the realm. The fact that it was imposed by the monarchy made it suspect to many. Its "middle road" approach while gaining it initial acceptance also engendered future controversy. In contrast, the other Reformed liturgies were less the product of balancing factions and more the result of theological and pastoral concerns. Second, in its form the *Book of Common Prayer* included many brief responses to be said by the people. In this it was similar to the ancient liturgies. It used brief collect prayers and the litany form of prayer rather than the long prose prayers of the continental Reformed liturgies. The other Reformed liturgies had less frequent congregational responses. Those responses were longer and consisted mostly of metrical psalms and metrical versions of the ten commandments and the apostles' creed. Third, the *Book of Common Prayer* included many rubrics instructing the officiant how to be garbed and what gestures to use. The other Reformed liturgies required no garbing (though ministers normally wore a black robe which has come to be known as a Geneva gown), and a minimum of gesturing. Finally, as the Puritans saw

it, the *Book of Common Prayer* lacked the theological clarity that existed in the other Reformed liturgies. Some of its phrases and gestures were regarded as Roman. Hence the *Book of Common Prayer* was criticized as theologically inconsistent, as too rote (many read responses), and ultimately as too Popish (priestly garbing, priestly gestures, ceremonies not authorized by scripture, and language that allowed of a Roman Catholic interpretation). Especially prominent in the controversy was the practice of kneeling to receive communion which to many seemed a continuation of the adoration of the host from medieval devotion.

Discontent with the *Book of Common Prayer* reached its climax at the Westminster Assembly when the Assembly, rather than revising the *Book of Common Prayer*, chose instead to replace it. As it turned out, the Assembly's document did not permanently replace the *Book of Common Prayer*. The restoration of the monarchy after the Puritan commonwealth brought with it the restoration of the *Book of Common Prayer* to the English Church (and the expulsion of many of the Puritan divines who opposed it). It did, however, replace the Scottish liturgy, the *Book of Common Order*. The historical irony is that the effort to rid the English Church of the theologically questionable *Book of Common Prayer* only rid the Scottish Church of the theological excellent liturgy of John Knox. Moreover, it rid the dissenters from the established Church (Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Independents) of any written liturgy at all. There were, of course, but on the whole British dissenters came to reject all written liturgies in favor of extemporaneous prayers and addresses by ministers. But we must not read the later radicalism back into the Assembly.

The Assembly's *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* conserved much of the Scottish and continental Reformed liturgical heritage. But it did so not by supplying written prayers and addresses, but by offering extensive instructions to ministers as to what to do and say in conducting the public assemblies of the church. This approach was a compromise between those who opposed any written prayer and those who merely opposed the specifics of the *Book of Common Prayer*. The result was the creation of a new thing in the history of Christian worship - a liturgy composed only of

rubrics. Since then Presbyterians have followed the course of producing, not a liturgy *per se*, but only instructions to the minister as to how he ought to create a liturgy extemporaneously each Lord's day. Regrettably, the theological richness of the original has not been inherited by its descendants. The contemporary Presbyterian directories for worship are bare outlines compared to the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*. While the material on conducting public worship in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* is rather brief, we have an extensive description of how the Westminster divines thought the services should be conducted in the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God*. By its standard much of contemporary Presbyterian worship is paltry and meager.

The *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* broke from the pattern of the earlier Reformed liturgies in one other significant way. The order of the service was rearranged to place the intercession before the sermon. In the ancient liturgies and in Calvin and Bucer's revisions, the order of the service was sermon, intercessions, supper. After the Westminster Assembly the established pattern became intercessions, sermon, supper. The reason for this appears to be the awkwardness of ending the service with the intercessions on most Lord's days when the supper was not celebrated.

Meaning, however, is conveyed not just by the choice of words, but the order in which they are placed. This is true not only of prose and poetry, but of liturgy. We readily recognize the awkwardness of singing "we gather together to ask the Lord's blessing" at the end of the service rather than at the beginning. It would be strange indeed to have the scripture reading after the sermon or place a prayer of confession of sins after a declaration of forgiveness. So why are we not bothered by an order where first we do all the talking and only later listen to the heavenly King in whose presence we stand. Does not the very nature of prayer as our response to God's declaration of his mercy, love and kindness show us that proper order of the assembly is not intercessions then sermon, but sermon then intercessions? But leaving aside this illogical reordering of the historic order of Christian worship, the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* contains much from which we can learn today. On the whole it expresses a rich understanding of

what its means to stand as the people of God in the presence of the high King of heaven. Such richness is a needed balm for theological lameness that often characterized Presbyterian worship in our day. In our next edition we will survey some of that richness.✠

Dr. Jack Kinneer

www.wso.net/echohills
jkinneer@a1usa.net