

GEORGE SPROTT AND THE REVIVAL OF WORSHIP IN SCOTLAND

Part I: Sprott's Theological Principles

During the creative years of the late nineteenth century, the Church Service Society numbered among its leading members some of the foremost churchmen in Scotland. Principals Tulloch and Story, the Reverends Thomas Leishman and John Macleod, George Campbell and Cameron Lees were all active in promoting its work. But of them all, the man who perhaps played the greatest role was George Sprott. Although Sprott's pre-eminence has never been denied, his life and work have received little detailed attention. The present article and the one which follows it are attempts to shed some light on Sprott's role in the Scottish liturgical revival. The first article will examine Sprott's life and the theological principles which guided his liturgical work. In the second, an examination will be made of the implications of these principles for the constructive and eclectic work which Sprott undertook as a leading member of the Church Service Society.

George Washington Sprott was born in Nova Scotia in 1829. His father, John Sprott, was a Presbyterian minister who had left Scotland as a member of the Relief Church. George was the second of five children by his father's third wife. He grew up in an atmosphere of greater religious toleration than did most sons of the manse in his day. Many years later, he recollected that his father had often said that there were 'many things in the Church of England which Presbyterians would do well to imitate'.¹

After receiving his primary education in Nova Scotia, George Sprott decided to train for the ministry. This he did at Glasgow University, being licensed by the Presbytery of Dunoon in 1852 for work overseas. He had been born a colonial, and his first plan was to spend his ministry among emigrant Scots abroad. Accordingly, he returned to Nova Scotia where he served as an assistant minister in Halifax. After going back to Scotland to serve brief pastorates in Greenock and Dumfries, he went overseas again. As chaplain of the Scots Kirk in Kandy, Ceylon, from 1857 to 1864, he became acutely aware of the conditions of Presbyterian churches in areas remote from the Scottish homeland. And he developed a particular concern for the conduct of worship in such remote areas, where many smaller congregations were without the regular services of a minister.

After his period in Ceylon, Sprott returned to Britain where he spent a year as acting chaplain at Portsmouth. Then, in 1866, he

became parish minister at Garioch. In 1873, he moved to his last and longest ministry at North Berwick.

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In the years before the founding of the Church Service Society, contributions to the improvement of worship in Scotland had come, in the main, from individuals.² George Sprott undoubtedly read the works of many of these individuals – Cumming, Baird, Bonar, Lee and the rest – and was spurred to think deeply about the issues which were being raised. It would be impossible to estimate when and how Sprott's interest in worship was first kindled, but it is clear from his earliest writings on the subject that he had already engaged in some thorough research and hard thought on the matters which he discussed.

An attempt to isolate the early influences on Sprott's interest in worship leads us on to rather shaky ground. However, our limited knowledge of his early life as well as occasional references in his writings justify a few surmises.

First, we may note that the devotional writings of several of the early liturgical reformers were prompted by the need for written prayers and other materials in remote parts of the world. It is safe to suppose that Sprott was made alive to this need first-hand and was appreciative of efforts made to meet it. As he said many years later in a speech before the Church Service Society:

As soon as I went abroad I realized the very defective state of the Church in regard to worship. I began to do what I could to help it, and I have been employed in that work ever since.³

From this and other writings, we may gather that his concern for the quality of worship had, as well, a more general motive. In 1877, he expressed an opinion which he surely must have held for some years:

. . . the majority of our people are longing for better churches, and for more orderly, reverent, and hearty worship; and if there are some who are hostile to all change, it is better that they should be displeased than that the Church at large should suffer.⁴

This is the statement of a man who has encountered opposition to his views, but who nevertheless clings to the original concerns which prompted him to adopt them. Sprott undoubtedly found conventional worship tedious and assumed, from his experience and from current writings on the subject, that he was not alone in his impression.

In his later writing, Sprott suggested that an awareness of developments in other branches of the Church had had an influence on his

ideas about worship. Growing up in Nova Scotia where there would have been greater denominational diversity than in a typical Scottish town, and ministering in Ceylon where most leading British Churches would have been conducting their missions, he cannot have avoided coming into contact with other liturgical traditions. Moreover, he was aware of developments in worship in other Churches, notably the Oxford movement in the Church of England. Writing in 1882, he noted that England was in the midst of a liturgical revival and suggested that it was appropriate for Scotland to have one as well.⁵

But what must be emphasized above all in any attempt to analyse the origins of Sprott's liturgical concern is the fact that he never studied worship *in vacuo*. As his writings show, Sprott always thought of worship in its proper context: the context of history and doctrine. Sprott had a particularly deep concern for the Church, for its history, its unity, its Catholicity, and its ministry. It would be impossible to say which, if any, of these subjects claimed his attention before the others. By the time Sprott came to commit his ideas to print, he could not divorce his concept of worship from the historical and ecclesiastical structure of which he conceived it to be a part.

Sprott's concept of the Church proceeded from a theological premise which he enunciated in a sermon entitled, *The Church Principles of the Reformation*, which he preached before the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale at its May meeting in 1877. In this sermon, he defined a churchman as

one who . . . believes . . . in the Church as the body of Christ . . . ; that it is not a shapeless mass, but a divine organization for administering grace and carrying out God's eternal purpose, . . . that it has a worship to offer which in its main features has been divinely prescribed.⁶

A 'high' doctrine such as this had profound implications for Sprott's understanding of ministry, worship and the sacraments. The divine element in the Church's life was, for him, pre-eminent. Consequently, the out-working of the Church's forms of government and liturgy could not be regarded as matters of mere human convenience or expediency. Rather, they were to be seen as subjects in which the divine will was to be determined and obeyed.

In determining God's will for His Church, Sprott placed great emphasis on the Church's history. In the Reformed tradition, of course, the Bible was the ultimate rule of faith for the Church as well as for individual Christians. But next to it, Sprott relied on the beliefs and practices of the early Church – and particularly of the Apostolic age – as a guide to the Church's faith and organization in these later ages. He valued the Reformers' teachings as an attempt to get back to these early principles.⁷ If a single word were to be used to describe

Sprott's ecclesiastical stance, that word would be 'orthodox'. For him, faith meant orthodoxy; and orthodoxy meant a return to the venerable confessions of the Reformed Church.⁸ Indeed, when Sprott deplored a lack of orthodoxy in other ministers, he went on immediately to define this as a departure from the Church principles of the Reformation.⁹ And so, in Church order and doctrine, as well as in worship, Sprott sought to gain insight into the present by studying the past.

From his study of the Reformation, Sprott was convinced that the Presbyterian form of Church government was faithful to early Church order, and that episcopacy was not. In this, of course, he was neither unique nor original. He was simply following the orthodox arguments of the Reformers. However, he felt that the time had come for Presbyterism to remind themselves of how far they had drifted from classical Reformed Church polity. In his sermon on *The Church Principles of the Reformation*, he said that, 'we should return to the views of the Reformers and their successors on the subject of office bearers and government of the Church'.¹⁰

This is a theme which Sprott first enunciated in his early work, *The Worship, Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Scotland*, published in 1863. In that pamphlet, he declared that only the Presbyterian Church had produced a structure which included the three orders of the ministry which were evident in the early Church.¹¹ These orders, as defined by the Second Book of Discipline, are ministers or preachers (equivalent to bishops in the early Church), elders or governors, and deacons or distributors.¹² Sprott deplored the fact that this three-fold concept of ministry had, for practical purposes, been abandoned. He quoted Edward Irving's assessment of the situation and concurred with it. Irving had said that the orders of the Church are 'bishops, priests or presbyters or elders, and deacons; whereof the last is clean gone, the second little better, and the first hath more of worldly propriety, or literary and intellectual character, than of episcopal authority and grave wisdom'.¹³

Sprott sought to revitalize Church order in Scotland by advocating a return to a full understanding of ministry. The term, he said, should not be restricted only to the local minister. He was the local bishop and should function as such; but he shared the ministry of the Church with the elders and deacons. Accordingly, Sprott suggested that the importance of the elders' function should be emphasized by the laying on of hands at their ordination, and that deacons should be appointed in each parish.¹⁴ In a modified form, some of Sprott's proposals gradually came into effect. He applauded the fact that, since Irving's time, the office of deacon had already been revived in some places.¹⁵

Sprott's ideas about three-fold ministry were in no way intended

to diminish the importance of the parish minister. Indeed, he felt that stronger clerical leadership was needed.¹⁶ 'We have yielded too much,' he said, 'to those levelling tendencies which have ever been the ruin of republics.'¹⁷ It must be remembered that the ordained ministry was a divine appointment and ought to be regarded as such. Accordingly, he condemned as heretical the statement of the Pan-Presbyterian Alliance that, 'ordination to the Ministry is simply a formal mode of declaring by a number of known individuals that in their judgement a certain unknown person possesses the qualifications needed for the position'.¹⁸

Far from regarding ordination as a matter of human convenience, Sprott allied himself with those who believed that it conferred grace in a particular and special degree.¹⁹ This gave ordination a quasi-sacramental character. But if Sprott wished to give ordination a heightened dignity and importance, his ideas about the sacraments themselves tended to set them in an even higher realm.

Late in life, Sprott expressed his conviction that unbelief begins with the lowering of the doctrine of the sacraments.²⁰ In nineteenth-century Scotland, Sprott had reason to fear a lowering of sacramental theology. During this period a form of Zwinglian memorialism had become widespread as the popular understanding of the Lord's Supper. But, as with many aspects of Church order and doctrine, Sprott maintained that neither Roman nor Zwinglian understandings of the Eucharist were faithful to the doctrine of the early Church. It was Calvin, he held, who had best recaptured the early Christian interpretation of the Sacrament. His doctrine of real presence avoided both the superstition of the Roman interpretation and what Sprott called the 'low and defective views of sacramental grace'²¹ prevalent through the influence of Zwinglian doctrine.

In attacking the latter understanding – which obviously was of more immediate concern in the Church of Scotland – Sprott said that:

The doctrine of Zwingle [sic] on the Lord's Supper was rejected by our Reformers as not only defective, but profane; yet prominent theologians in our modern Churches have gone much below Zwingle, and have even had the boldness to say that the sacramental teaching of the Reformed Confessions is their great blot. It is not their blot, but their glory.²²

Before Sprott, worship reformers in Scotland had been concerned mainly with providing devotional material for the Church in order to improve the conduct of regular Sunday services. Sprott was among the first to draw attention instead to the service of the Lord's Supper and to reaffirm its centrality. In his book, *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* (1882), he stated his position plainly. Com-

munion, he said, is 'the normal service of the Church and the only one appointed by [Christ]'.²³ The importance of the Eucharist, Sprott apparently felt, could be brought home to people by convincing them of two things: first, that it was ordained by Christ as the central and normative worship of the Church; and, second, that only a 'high' Calvinist understanding of the action would do it justice.

Sprott suggested that the people might be more impressed with the first of these principles if the Lord's Supper were celebrated more frequently. In a country where annual or semi-annual Communion seasons had been customary for centuries, this must have seemed a radical proposal. But in appealing to the canons of Reformed theology, Sprott showed that his suggestion was really not revolutionary at all. He pointed out that the Westminster Directory had called for frequent Communion and that Calvin, Bucer and Baxter had actually recommended weekly celebration.²⁴

As for propagating true Calvinist doctrine, Sprott could only publicize his own views and hope that other ministers would take them up and preach them from their pulpits. The sacraments, said Sprott, should be re-emphasized as signs in which Christ's power was at work. On one occasion, he quoted Bishop Cowper on this subject. Cowper held that the elements

are not only signs representing Christ crucified, nor seals confirming our faith in Him, but also effectual instruments of exhibition [application], whereby the Holy Spirit makes an inward application of Christ crucified to all that are His.²⁵

In an age when the popular emphasis in the Lord's Supper was on worthy receiving ('receptionism'), it was important that Sprott should thus emphasize the objective factor in the Sacrament, the idea that a real change took place in the course of the action. In the service itself, Sprott stressed the consecration. He advocated the inclusion of an epiclesis, criticizing those who insisted that the Words of Institution were sufficient.²⁶ This prayer, he said, should be followed by a declaration – a practice suggested in the Westminster Directory but absent from contemporary practice – to the effect that the bread and wine were now set apart for holy use.²⁷

Following the principle that the Sacrament is performed in accordance with Christ's commandment, with the minister representing Him, Sprott held that the minister ought to communicate first. This, he said, followed primitive practices, was implied by the Westminster Directory, and was shown to be normative in the old Scots records.²⁸ He lamented the fact that this was one of the many practices which had been superseded by customs borrowed from English nonconformity. The popular practice of simultaneous communion he found 'utterly subversive to all the old ideas of the

Church'.²⁹ As he implied in *The Worship, Rites and Ceremonies* and re-emphasized in the *Worship and Offices*, Sprott also disapproved of the imported practice of receiving Communion in the pews. As he pointed out in the latter volume, there was quite enough room at the front of most churches for the sacraments to be performed there.³⁰ Here again a return to old Scots practice was recommended.

Of the two sacraments recognized by the Reformed Church, Sprott had considerably less to say about Baptism. Yet the same high theology pervaded his attitude toward them both. He saw Baptism, not as a transaction between an infant's parents and God, but as a means of grace, as an 'effectual means of salvation'.³¹ As with the Lord's Supper, the action was not simply a sign; it had within it the power of Christ. Sprott held that, '... the sensible signs employed in them [i.e. the sacraments] not only signify and seal – i.e. make sure – but *apply* Christ and his benefits to the heirs of salvation'.³²

In an age of poor understanding Baptism and lax enforcement of baptismal vows, Sprott had some influence in improving matters. It was through his efforts that the Church's Committee on Aids to Devotion was persuaded to recommend the use of the Apostles' Creed at baptismal services.

Sacramental theology and the doctrine of the holy ministry were two of Sprott's major concerns in his study of the Church and its worship. As he said in the notes written in his own copy of his edition of Knox's Liturgy, 'Our Lord only instituted the ministry and the two sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper – Wherever you have them you have the Church, whatever may be the defects and corruption'.³³

Beyond the ministry and the sacraments, however, Sprott also expressed a deep concern for the Church's unity. One of the most important results of his study of Church history was a personal horror of schism. The Disruption of 1843 was still well within living memory when Sprott wrote the preface to his edition of Knox's Liturgy in 1868, and its effects were to be seen everywhere in Scotland. Looking back, Sprott concluded that:

The Reformed Churches and the great Scottish Churchmen of former times never dreamt that separations were justifiable on such grounds as those on which they have since been defended.³⁴

Looking beyond his own country, Sprott could see that the evils of schism had marred the progress of the Reformed Church in other parts of the world, particularly in the United States. The existence of separate ethnic Reformed Churches and many Presbyterian denominations there were facts which he deplored.³⁵

But not only did Sprott hold that the Reformers regarded schism as 'one of the worst of evils',³⁶ but his study of scripture also led him

to see that it represented the rending of the body of Christ.³⁷ Of course, the Church, while it was the body of Christ, nevertheless consisted of frail human beings. No Church could be perfect. Yet, as Sprott said in a sermon on the subject in 1902, it is the duty of churchmen to reform the Church from within.³⁸

Sprott generally interpreted the term 'the Church' to mean the Reformed Church. The break with Rome was, presumably, the one defensible schism in history. Yet, his use of early liturgies and early precedents on Church order show that Sprott regarded the Reformed Church as a rightful heir to the pre-Reformation Catholic tradition. And his occasional borrowings from the Book of Common Prayer show, too, that he was not so narrow as to exclude non-Reformed denominations from his concept of the modern Church.

Yet the precise nature of Sprott's opinion of other branches of the Protestant Church is not clear. It is obvious, however, that his ecumenical hopes extended beyond the reunification of the Scottish Church. 'Blessed by God,' he declared in 1896, 'there are many signs that an era of Christian reunion on a larger scale is dawning.'³⁹

He was particularly anxious for closer relations with the Church of England, but the aggressive policy of the Episcopal Church in Scotland made him wary of Anglican motives. As a result, his attitude seems vague and contradictory. Toward the end of his life, he expressed a hope for a single united Church in the British Empire.⁴⁰ In his edition of Knox's Liturgy of Compromise, used at Frankfurt, he suggested that, 'The English Prayer-Book will certainly be the basis of any common Liturgy that may be adopted by the English-speaking peoples . . .'.⁴¹ In so saying, he undermined his long-held conviction that the classical worship of the Reformed Church was more faithful to that of the early Church than was current Anglican practice. Nevertheless, one of the fondest hopes of his old age was that somehow the two national Churches of Britain could be brought together to give visible expression to the idea of the unity of Christ's body.

Sprott's views on the Church's ministry, unity and sacraments marked a return to the traditions of the Scottish Reformation and its interpretation of early Church doctrine and practice. It was against this background that he developed an understanding of worship which sought to draw new life from old sources. Just as the forgotten principles of the Reformation had much to teach the Church in matters of polity and doctrine, they had much to bring to the revival of Scottish worship. It was with this thought in mind that, in 1863, Sprott made a significant proposal. '. . . there should be,' he said,

a self-constituted Society of the liturgical scholars in the Church, who would, after due time and full consideration of the whole

subject, draw up a book of prayers for public worship, and of forms for the administration of the sacraments and other special services, as a guide to the clergy. Antiquity, the Reformation, and our present practice, should all be kept in view by these compilers; and I have no doubt that a book could be produced suitable to the Reformed Church and superior to any book of prayer in Christendom. The basis of this book should be the old Reformed Liturgy; but in the Greek and other liturgies there are many golden sentences full of sweetness, piety, and sympathy, which should also be incorporated with it. . . . This book, when compiled, I would leave to work its own way. It would be prized by the laity, be a guide to the clergy and correct their taste, and as respects the sacraments would, I have no doubt, in the main be followed.⁴²

It was in response to this suggestion that a small group of ministers met in the Religious Institution Rooms in Glasgow on 31 January 1865. At that meeting the Church Service Society was organized. The Society was constituted with aims expanded considerably from Sprott's simple suggestion of the production of a service book. And yet, the book which the Society produced along the lines proposed by Sprott has remained its most celebrated work. Sprott's contributions to it and to the other publications of the Society were considerable. They reflected his theological principles as well as his liturgical skill. Sprott's work under the auspices of the Church Service Society will form the subject of another paper.

NOTES

1. George W. Sprott, ed., *Memorials of the Rev. John Sprott* (published privately; Edinburgh: George A. Morton, 1906), p. xiii.
2. John M. Barkley, 'The Liturgical Movement and Reformed Worship', *Church Service Society Annual*, No. 31, 1961, p. 13.
3. Quoted in John Kerr, *The Renaissance of Worship: the origin, aims and achievements of the Church Service Society* (Edinburgh: J. Gardner Hitt, 1909), p. 47.
4. Sprott, *The Church Principles of the Reformation: a sermon preached before the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale, 1 May 1877* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1877), p. 16.
5. Sprott, *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland – or the Celebration of the Public Worship, the Administration of the Sacraments, and other Divine Offices, according to the order of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), p. 264.
6. Sprott, *Church Principles*, p. 7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
11. Sprott, *The Worship, Rites and Ceremonies of the Church of Scotland compared with those of other Reformed Churches and of the Primitive Church* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1863), p. 7.

12. Sprott, *Worship and Offices*, p. 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., p. 9.
15. Ibid., p. 8.
16. Sprott, *Church Principles*, p. 10.
17. Ibid., p. 11.
18. Quoted in A. K. Robertson, *The Revival of Church Worship in the Church of Scotland from Dr. Robert Lee (1804-67) to Dr. H. J. Wotherspoon (1850-1930)* (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis in the library of New College, Edinburgh, 1956), p. 360.
19. Ibid., p. 363.
20. Sprott, *The Aims of the Scottish Church Society*: being an address at the fourth annual meeting of the society at Edinburgh, 26 May 1896 (Edinburgh: J. Gardner Hitt, 1896), p. 7.
21. Sprott, *Church Principles*, p. 73.
22. Ibid., pp. 12-14.
23. Sprott, *Worship and Offices*, p. 10.
24. Ibid., p. 99.
25. Cowper, *Works*, p. 264 quoted in Sprott, ed., *Scottish Liturgies of the Reign of James VI* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1871), p. 108.
26. Sprott, *Worship and Offices*, p. 120.
27. Ibid., pp. 122-3.
28. Ibid., p. 128.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., p. 235.
31. Ibid., p. 64.
32. Ibid.
33. Sprott, Handwritten notes on *The Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland commonly known as John Knox's Liturgy* (published with Leishman's edition of the Westminster Directory) (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1868).
34. Ibid. (Sprott's Introduction), p. vii.
35. Ibid.
36. Sprott, *Church Principles*, p. 11.
37. Ibid., p. 12.
38. Sprott, *The Doctrine of Schism in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), p. 2.
39. Sprott, *The Aims of the Scottish Church Society*, p. 9.
40. Sprott, Address as president of the Scottish Church Society, 1906-7, quoted in Robertson, *op. cit.*, p. 368.
41. Sprott, ed., *The Liturgy of Compromise used by the English Congregation at Frankfort* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1905), p. 228.
42. Sprott, *Worship, Rites and Ceremonies*, p. 5.

J. CLARK SAUNDERS, Melita, Canada