LITURGICAL ISSUES AND DIRECTIONS IN AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM

One: The Prologue of Our Past

REFORMATION LITURGICAL REFORMS

Calvin and most early Reformers were *not* opposed to liturgy and liturgical forms. Calvin especially did not want to abandon the forms and structure of the Catholic Mass. He simply wanted to *reform* it.

While Calvin did allow more local freedom and variety in worship than almost any other liturgical tradition of his time, nevertheless, since for the sake of purity in the newly reformed church he did not consider it wise to leave too much to the discretion of each individual minister, most prayers in Calvin's orders of service were "set" prayers. While Calvin did drop many aspects of the Catholic church year, such as the celebration of saints' days which he saw as an example of Catholic pomp and superstition, he kept and followed the full basic outline of the church year itself. And while Calvin did profoundly reinterpret the meaning and form of the Lord's Supper, and did stress the central importance of the clear preaching of the Word at every service of worship, nevertheless he personally desired that the sacrament continue to be administered and celebrated *each* Sunday *along with* the proclamation of the Word.

What Calvin did oppose was worship which was superstitious, unscriptural, unclear, or dominated by a priestly cult at the expense of lay participation and understanding. The language of the Catholic Mass was Latin, a dead language understood only by an highly educated elite. Calvin, insisting that such a practice both made an idol out of past languages and worship forms and blocked contemporary understanding, translated the scriptures and every aspect of the worship service into the everyday language of the people of his own day. Opposed to lectionaries chosen by the hierarchy in Rome as a means of enforcing Rome's theological biases and prejudices through a selective use of scripture, Calvin favored instead continuous expository preaching through books of the Bible chosen by each individual minister (Other Reformed groups kept but altered the lectionary to reflect their own theological self-understandings.).

Convinced that the Mass had degenerated into a superstitious spectacle acted out by the priestly worship professionals while the people watched like an audience at a play, Calvin returned both the cup and the bread of communion to the laity, replaced the high altar with a common table, and insisted that the clear preaching of the Word accompany every act of worship in order to explain the meaning of the scriptures for today, and to nurture a deeper understanding of what was being done in worship itself. Because he felt that the meaning and clarity of the church's prayers and songs of praise had been sacrificed to the idols of artistry, beauty, perfection, and tradition as understood by the priestly elite, Calvin did away with instrumental music in the church's worship, substituted translated biblical texts for obscure Latin lyrics, and replaced intricate musical scores and trained priestly choirs with simple melodies the entire congregation could sing.

But lastly, and most importantly, Calvin recognised the deeper goals and limits of liturgical reform. Worship needed to be reformed in order that human lives could be reformed as people responded to Christ's clear call to follow him. Yet only people who were disciplined disciples of Jesus Christ could ever hope to worship God in spirit and in truth. It was this lack of disciplined discipleship which was at the heart of the crisis which necessitated the Reformation. The only valid reason for worship reform was to nurture the kind of discipline and sense of discipleship which would lead once again to reformed lives.

While Calvin did succeed for the most part in reforming and giving worship back to the people in a language and form they could understand, he discovered that he could not force them to receive that gift or to respond in discipleship. Indeed, in *The Necessity of Reforming the Church,* Calvin himself went so far as to argue that "external worship is an evasion" by which performing all kinds of ceremonial "subterfuges" people hope "to escape the need of giving *themselves* to God."[1] Despite the successes of the Reformers they were often haunted by the lack of reformed life in their Reformed Church, even as they struggled to make it a reality.

THE AMERICAN ANTI-LITURGICAL HERITAGE

Even among the early Reformers there were a few, such as Zwingli and Farel, who were more radically anti-liturgical. Rather than attempting to reform the Mass itself they elected instead to abandon the traditional liturgical forms of the Mass altogether and to return to what they viewed as a simpler, purer,

more spontaneous form of worship more faithful to scripture and the New Testament Church. Even Calvin met resistance to his more highly liturgical ideas. The Strassburg council ruled, over Calvin's objections, that the Lord's Supper be administered only monthly. The Geneva council reduced the frequency of communion to only four times per year.

Liturgical attitudes were further intertwined with political events as church and state struggled to come to terms with the great issues of authority, power, and religious freedom raised by the Reformation. Knox's resistance in England to the "black rubric" of kneeling and to the written and read responses of Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer* were as much a result of political and social factors as theological ones. Knox was objecting to the limits on religious freedom and the authority imposed by the Crown as much as he was raising any purely theological objections to the loftier liturgical forms of Anglicanism. As religious persecutions increased, the liturgical forms of the persecutors were increasingly identified by Reformed minorities as evil tools of the enemy.

Despite Knox's own increasingly anti-liturgical leanings, he himself was not yet opposed *in principle* to the need for liturgical forms. But anti-liturgical attitudes were bound to multiply and thrive in such an atmosphere. Separatist and Puritan groups eventually came to oppose *any* set forms, rules, prayers, or ceremonies. They denied the right of the Crown, the Catholic hierarchy, or any other "outside" group, to set standards for *their* worship or to tell them how to live *their* lives of faith. They rejected liturgical authority of any kind on the grounds that all set liturgical forms, no matter how well intended at first, eventually became a barrier to freedom (*no one* should have the right to tell us how to worship) and spontaneity (*real* worship participation must come from the heart and not from a book).

The question that still remained, however, was how could the Reformed Church have its cake and eat it too? How could the church have "purity and integrity" (whether Calvin's, Cranmer's, Knox's, or the Separatist's version) in worship, without some type of service book or at least an order of service? How could the church have worship traditions and forms of any kind, without reducing these to dull habit and parrot-like recitations? How could the church have both complete freedom, and yet some kind of recognisable order and form, in its worship? How could the church insure that its prayers and worship forms were both scripturely and theologically sound, without imposing some kind of liturgical authority? These issues, along with a

host of others, came to a head at the Westminster Assembly, and the various competing liturgical crosscurrents can be seen at work in the *Westminster Directory for Worship* itself.

And so it was that as the Puritans, Separatists, Presbyterians, and other Reformed Christians migrated and mingled in the New World of America that the first firmly established practice of "non-liturgical" worship in the Reformed tradition was born. Such worship practices would increase among Reformed communities on the European continent as well. The *Westminster Directory for Worship* itself dealt with the issue of liturgical control by insisting that its use was purely discretionary. It has in fact been wryly described as the only liturgy consisting of nothing but suggestions.

THE REDISCOVERY OF LITURGICAL WORSHIP

By the end of the seventeenth century non-liturgical worship too, however, had developed its own set forms and traditions. With the pressure of weekly repetition even so-called spontaneous prayers could begin to sound strangely alike. As James Nichols has observed so well:

> For two centuries or more the arguments were rehearsed for and against set forms, with little novelty. The rival patterns each had its superior utility for certain types of situations and congregations and neither had universal superiority. And as for authenticity of worship, this is not secured either by forms or their rejection, but in either case is the gift of God,[2]

Nevertheless, in American Presbyterianism these issues would continue to influence worship for generations to come, even to the present day.

The Old School-New School split in American Presbyterianism was fundamentally a liturgical one. Both schools were anti-liturgical in character. Both had by this time rejected even the barest outline of the church year. Both had become almost exclusively liturgies of the preached Word, to the neglect of the sacrament. Both opposed any imposed liturgical forms. Both had moved away from concern for institutional and liturgical reform to a concern for the reform and salvation of individual life. But because of its concern for evangelistic effectiveness the New School was willing to make worship innovations the Old School could not or would not allow.

The New School reintroduced organs, instruments, choirs, and new hymns with verses composed to address the plight of sinners and saints in their own time, verses which went beyond the

words of scripture. All of this the Old School rejected on biblical and anti-liturgical grounds, preferring to explore ways of "enriching" its already existing traditional anti-liturgical forms. The Civil War would force a reallignment and cross-fertilisation of ideas, with the more liberal tendencies of both schools reuniting in the North, and the more conservative tendencies of both schools reuniting in the South. By the late 1800's and early 1900's New School "innovations" would be accepted almost universally as "traditional" forms in both the North and the South, even among those with Old School leanings.

Nineteenth-century romanticism would also influence American Presbyterian worship in a more liturgical direction. Whether Old School or New, North or South, many church members and ministers grew increasingly hungry for worship which was more "meaningful", more "enriched", more "aesthetically pleasing" to both the mind and the senses. The working out of this basic desire could take quite different directions in different congregations, from the conservatives' never-ending search for that "Ol' Time Religion" to the sophisticates' nostalgia for worship which was impeccably traditional and in the best of "good taste", from the emotionalism of a revivalistic "spirit-led" service to the snob appeal of "quality" worship led by the most gifted preacher, accompanied by the best music, in the loveliest sanctuary, hang the cost.

The movement toward more liturgical worship, however, at this point was by no means a conscious one. American Presbyterians had been largely cut off from their earlier European Reformed liturgical heritage, and were still theoretically opposed to liturgical forms. Charles Baird's *Eutaxia, or the Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches,* published in 1855, was perhaps the most important early work which encouraged liturgical understanding among American Presbyterians. Charles Shields, a Princeton graduate, also provided a worship manual for use by the Union army, and *The Presbyterian Book of Common Prayer,* published in 1867, as well as various communion, funeral, baptism, and wedding services. None of these liturgical aids, however, bore any official denominational approval.

Indeed, as Southern Presbyterians watched the development of these newer worship aids and trends among their Northern brethren, liturgical opposition, if anything, intensified. What others saw as "enrichment" of the service many Southerners regarded as "unregulated aestheticism" which would lead into medieval, papist, and ritualistic corruptions of Presbyterian worship. Officially then Southern Presbyterians continued to

oppose "architectural pomp", "pictured windows", "floral decorations", "instrumental and operatic music", and recitation of the Lord's Prayer in "unintelligible unison".[3]

Nevertheless, even before the turn of the twentieth century, the liturgical tide was moving Presbyterians in a more conscious liturgical direction. In 1894 the Southern Church published and adopted its revised *Directory of Worship.* In 1906 the Northern Church issued a new *Book of Common Worship* which, while not formally adopted, in the eyes of many clergy and laity came to bear at least an unofficial denominational endorsement. In 1929 the Southern Church again updated its *Directory of Worship.* And in 1932 the Northern Church published and, with little or no resistance, officially approved a revised and expanded version of its *Book of Common Worship,* which was also accepted by the Southern Church as a supplement to its own 1929 *Directory.*

In 1941 the Northern General Assembly set up a permanent committee to evaluate, and when necessary revise, their *Book of Common Worship.* This resulted in a thoroughgoing revision of the *Book,* which was published in 1946 and drew heavily on the 1940 *Book of Common Order* of the Church of Scotland. Although attempted reunion between the Northern and Southern Church failed in 1954, in 1955 the two denominations (along with the Presbyterian Church of North America) did at least unite to form their Joint Committee on Worship. This, in turn, paved the way for the new Northern *Directory for Worship* adopted in 1961 (by the newly formed U.P.C.U.S.A.), and the new Southern *Directory for the Worship and Work of the Church* adopted in 1963. The new joint *Book of Common Worship* was then published in 1966 (an effort also endorsed by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church).

While all these directories and worship books were for *discretionary* use only, and while the Southern Church was more cautious and slow to move in a more liturgical direction than was the Northern Church, nevertheless each directory and book moved each church one step closer to an explicit and conscious liturgical approach to worship. At first only forms for special services such as baptisms and weddings appeared, along with a few suggested prayer forms. But gradually suggested orders of service for even Sabbath worship and the Lord's Supper were included. Slowly, the seasons of the church were added, until by 1965 even the Southern Church calendar carried a full outline of the church year once again. At first a rudimentary, and then a complete lectionary appeared. Eventually all these forms moved

the church's liturgy much more into the ecumenical and liturgical mainstream.

Two: Liturgical Issues and Directions Today

THE 1970 WORSHIPBOOK AND THE MODERN ERA

The decade of the sixties was a tumultuous one for American society in general, and for the church in particular. A "counter culture" and a "cultural revolution" developed. Button-down white shirts and blue-black suits gave way to folk masses, guitars, and communion in the grass. At least it was recognised more than ever that no one worship "style" — whatever its theology — could appeal to all of the people all of the time. The media, especially television, played their role in disseminating knowledge and diverse ideas almost instantaneously, helping further to break down regionalism, and building an expectation among audiences for a more polished and entertaining "performance" at worship too.

As the church faced the realities of racism, Viet-Nam, and the student revolution, the social gospel gave way to radical theology, and "liberation" became an almost overused by-word. Institutional and corporate sin became every bit as real as personal and individual sin. Insights from psychology, sociology, and anthropology increasingly influenced theology and worship. Transactional Analysis and sensitivity training became in effect paraliturgies or pastoral surrogates for many churches.

The Consultation on Church Union and the ecumenical movement may be said to have both failed and yet strangely succeeded. Vatican II and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy shook the foundations of Roman Catholicism and the ensuing shock waves made Protestantism tremble as well. It is for such reasons as these that Sydney Ahlstrom regarded the decade of the sixties as a pivotal point in American history and American church history, marking the end of the 400-year "Great Puritan Epoch".

The new joint *Worshipbook* of 1970 (again published jointly by the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church in the U.S., and the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.) could not help but reflect at least some of these concerns. Since the 1966 *Book of Common Worship* was a collection of "provisional" services, the 1970 *Worshipbook* was in reality the first fully authorised successor to the 1946 *Book*. The change in title itself indicated, as the Joint Committee on

Worship notes in its preface, a recognition that the church was a church living in a new age.

> The *Worshipbook* is a new book with a new name, offered in the hope that it will serve a new age in the church. The old and well-loved title of the former book, *The Book of Common Worship,* has been sacrificed because the word *common* is no longer used as it was in the times gone by. The change in title is symbolic of the attempt to help Christians, and those who may become Christians, to hear God's word, and worship him, in the language of their needs and aspirations today.[4]

The *Worshipbook* then is the most explicit attempt among American Presbyterians since Calvin himself to provide a truly contemporary translation of the spoken and sung liturgy of prayer and praise into the language and needs of today. Further, while seeking to remain faithful to the best in the Reformed tradition, it is a consciously ecumenical book, seeking meaningful points of contact with other churches and traditions. The *Worshipbook* lectionary, for example, with only minor alterations, is identical to that used by the Roman Catholics and other major Protestant denominations. The *Worshipbook* further marks a full return to the unity of word and sacrament both in theory and in practice. While the Reformed emphasis on preaching is still maintained, the *Worshipbook* nevertheless strongly advocates weekly communion, and, returning to the practice of Calvin, provides an order of service for Sabbath worship so structured that whether or not the Supper is celebrated the sacrament always remains central and determinative.

Lastly, the *Worshipbook* attempts to balance the "virtue of orderliness" with the traditional Presbyterian value on "freedom and variety in worship". As the committee more specifically notes, "it is hardly necessary to state that the book is for voluntary use".[5]

The *Worshipbook* then marks a full return to "liturgical" worship for Presbyterians, at least as full a return as might be now imagined given the checkered history and competing tensions of Presbyterian worship. But while many Presbyterian congregations have warmly embraced the *Worshipbook,* many other Presbyterian congregations have rejected it outright, preferring to use the old *Hymnbook* and their own particular order of service.

Some have rejected the *Worshipbook* out of simple ignorance, or suspicion of anything new and different. Some have rejected it on the level of practical usage, criticising its limited selection of

hymns. (In its defence, however, it must be remembered that the *Worshipbook* never claims to be a *hymn*book but a *worship*book.), or its organisational format. (It has been wryly suggested that a congregation could save money by purchasing the *Worshipbook* in place of central air conditioning, for the constant rustle of wind caused by the turning the pages from litany, to hymn, to prayer, is enough to cool the passions of even the warmest worshipper.) Some have rejected it on the basis of its sexist language. (While the *Worshipbook* greatly modernised the language of worship, unfortunately it was first published on the edge of the women's movement, just before the need for non-sexist religious language was recognised and affirmed.)

But others still have criticised the *Worshipbook's* fundamental approach to theology and worship, from a number of differing points of view. For example, while the *Worshipbook's* theological understanding of the unity of word and sacrament may well be more faithful to Calvin, the very idea of celebrating communion every Sunday is still foreign to large numbers of Presbyterians. "That's too Catholic", they say. Or "Communion would lose its special meaning for me if it were celebrated too often". While such feelings may not be well-reasoned or true to Calvinist theology, they nevertheless are real and also have historical roots which reach back to Calvin's struggles with the councils at Strassburg and Geneva. Consequently these feelings cannot simply be brushed aside.

Also a number of Presbyterians still simply reject outright any "liturgical" approach to worship. No lectionaries, litanies, and written prayers for them. Others object, not so much to the *Worshipbook's* "liturgical" approach, but to its overall "tone" and "style", which they see as largely upper middle class, well-educated, big church, and urban. While many Presbyterians fit this description, other Presbyterians, and many of the unchurched to whom the church has its mission, do not.

The central problem of worship then — bridging the gap between *any* worship form and the actual life experience of a particular community of people in a particular time and place — still remains and always will. Cultural pluralism and diversity, between Presbyterians, and in American society at large, cannot be "answered" by a book, not even the *Worshipbook*. This is where the pastoral and ministerial task must take over as a given community seeks to give expression to its own particular needs, hopes, and faith through the language and style of its own way of worshipping God. In fairness, it must be observed that the

Worshipbook is aware of this tension. The last prayer offered among "Other Prayers for Worship" prays:

> Almighty God you have no patience with solemn assemblies, or heaped-up prayers to be heard by men. Forgive those who have written prayers for congregations. Remind them that their foolish words will pass away, but that your word will last and be fulfilled, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.[6]

NOTES

1. Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church,* World Publishing, New York, 1961, p. 195.
2. James H. Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition,* The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1968, pp. 108-110.
3. Ernest T. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South, Volume Three: 1890-1972,* John Knox Press, Richmond, 1973, pp. 345-346.
4. The Joint Committee on Worship, *The Worshipbook,* Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1970-1972, p. 9.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., p. 202.

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(The concluding part of this article, dealing with *Unresolved Problems,* will be published in the next issue.)