
Pro Rege

Volume 33 | Number 3

Article 3

March 2005

Before All Else Fails, Read the Directions (for Worship)

Laurence C. Sibley

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

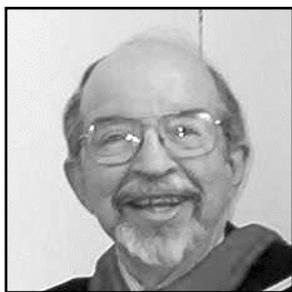
Sibley, Laurence C. (2005) "Before All Else Fails, Read the Directions (for Worship)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 33: No. 3, 20 - 25.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol33/iss3/3

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Editor's Note: Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., wrote this article in response to Keith C. Sewell's "Some Thoughts on 'The Reformation' as a Contemporary Icon," published in *Pro Rege*, 31.1 (September 2001): 14-25.

Before All Else Fails, Read the Directions (for Worship)



by Laurence C. Sibley, Jr.

In his landmark book, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds*, Harvie M. Conn proposes a new way of doing theology missiologically. His section on the missiological call for new directions in theology begins by looking at missions and theology in the recent past and then brings John Calvin's theological method to the fore as a model for the future.¹ Calvin did theology against the background of medieval scholasticism, and instead of a once-for-all formulation that could be universalized, he worked contextually to apply the gospel to the culture around him. As Karl Barth noted, Calvin established the meaning of the text and then rethought it until the walls between the first and sixteenth centuries became transparent for his contemporaries.² Essentially, Calvin replaced the reigning polemical theology with a pastoral, missiological approach.³ In the

Laurence C. Sibley, Jr., STM, is a lecturer in practical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, and a visiting professor at Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary, Riga, Latvia. His writings include *Spiritual Disciplines: The Tasks of a Joyful Life* and *Worship: Discovering What Scripture Says*, both published by Shaw Books.

hundred years that followed, several confessions of faith were written, each as a missiological response to the challenges of its European contexts. As the tradition developed, these creeds were used more to define the limits of orthodoxy than to confess the gospel in its fullness.

During the last 150 years, third-world churches have accepted Western creeds "as testimonials to the catholicity of the gospel, as fraternal symbols of a new relationship with the Western churches that have sometimes 'mothered' them."⁴ Lately, these churches have begun to feel caught in a set of sixteenth/seventeenth-century definitions of the church. As David Bosch writes, "The church was a place where something was being done (passive voice), and not a people who did something."⁵ If this is true theologically, it is also true liturgically. All too often, the church is where worship is done, not a people who worship. Liturgy can become the province of fussy experts, rather than the action of the whole assembly.

The criterion that Conn proposes for doing theology—defining central norms instead of setting limits—asks, "What are the centers from which we proceed?"⁶ In working this way, Conn follows Calvin's method for recovering the gospel (the center from which we proceed) in order to apply it in a new situation. Conn's gospel center, following in the footsteps of Geerhardus Vos (author of *Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948]) is a rich biblical-theological tracing of how God has revealed himself in the history of salvation. When we think once more about worship and liturgy in the early twenty-first century, it is time to ask, with Conn, "What are the centers from which we proceed,"⁷ which direct our worship, our formulation of the liturgy?

Our Present Situation

In the third quarter of the twentieth century, a

remarkable convergence occurred in the liturgical practices of Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Episcopal, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches. Renewal movements in all five traditions produced new printed resources and service books. While the practices did not become identical, the shape and content of worship in these and other communions became discernibly similar.

However, during the last twenty years, the effects of individualism and postmodernism have threatened to reintroduce divergence, both within and between these groups. In the face of this renewed diversity, Maxwell E. Johnson, of the University of Notre Dame liturgical faculty, has posed this question: “Can We Avoid Relativism in Worship?” (*Worship* 74.2 [2000]: 135-55). In seeking to answer his own question, he points to a promising approach used by Gordon W. Lathrop, that of an underlying *ordo*, or shape, of the liturgy.⁸ Lathrop draws much of the inspiration for his formulation from Scripture and the example of the early church, an approach similar to that used by the Reformers in the sixteenth century. They believed that Scripture speaks with authority, and to the extent that it speaks about worship, it requires us to follow. All of the Reformers and the traditions coming from them sought to follow Scripture, but they did so in differing ways.

How Does Scripture Guide?

Keith C. Sewell, writing in *Pro Rege* (“Some Thoughts on ‘the Reformation’ as a Contemporary Icon,” 31.1 [2002]: 14-25), outlines four models for the authority of Scripture: “corrective” (Lutheran/Anglican), “regulative” (Zwinglian/Puritan), “exemplary” (Anabaptist), and “directive” (Calvinist). According to Sewell, the *corrective* view developed in the Lutheran reformation, in North Germany. This approach tended to preserve everything in the traditional liturgy “unless it was expressly contrary to biblical teaching and example” (15). Matters not treated directly in Scripture were regarded as *adiaphora*—things indifferent.⁹ The *regulative* view, developed in the Zurich reformation, was that “whatever had no explicit warrant in Scripture had no place in the doctrine and life of the church” (16). The Anabaptist, or *exemplary* approach, tended to cite examples from Scripture as authoritative in an ahistorical way with little or

no consideration of the differences between first century and contemporary contexts: “they did it this way, we must copy exactly” (23, note 6). The Strasbourg and Geneva Reformers preferred a *directive* approach, where Scripture is carefully expounded, but the patterns found then have to be applied under the guidance of the rest of Scripture and even general revelation (16-17).

This formulation of various models from the Reformation is helpful, particularly the *directive* label for the Calvinistic/Reformed view. The current tensions and arguments about the regulative principle in conservative Presbyterian circles are often about how strictly or loosely one should apply this principle. Proponents of either side tend to assume a Puritan Independent understanding of the Westminster Standards, rather than realizing that these documents strike a middle line between the English Puritan and other Calvinistic traditions on several questions about worship. According to an Orthodox Presbyterian study report,

The Assembly did not undertake, as a few of its members initially desired, a thorough revision of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*. They produced a *directory*, rather than a fixed, prescribed liturgy. In so doing, although some continued to hold that an established liturgy of prayers was permissible, even preferable, it wisely adopted a kind of middle ground between the more strictly regulated liturgical approach of earlier Reformed worship in Scotland, Geneva and elsewhere on the continent, and some Puritan Independents who were opposed even to a directory. A clear and firm commitment to the notion of the regulative principle enabled them to achieve this balance.¹⁰

The report earlier stated,

The regulative principle is misunderstood (and begins to be misapplied) when it is construed to mean that God has specified our worship “down to the last detail” or told us exactly how we are to worship him. Such a misconception is contradicted by the Confession when it goes on to say in 1:6. . . that “there are some circumstances concerning the

worship of God, and the government of the Church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word, which are always to be observed.” True to this confessional insight, and building on it, is the distinction, absolutely essential for a proper conception of the regulative principle, between *elements* (or parts) of worship, on the one hand, and *forms* and *circumstances* of worship, on the other.¹¹

Although the term *regulative* principle is used in this report, the view expressed is closer to Calvin’s *directive* approach as Sewell and Conn would define it, setting central norms, in this case the elements or parts of worship. The *directive* principle is an approach from the center, instead of a preoccupation with limits which tend to ask “how far can we go, or what can we not do?” There are limits, things forbidden, to be sure. But the *directive* emphasis is on doing what God commands.

Adjusting the Taxonomy

I would like to offer a few comments on how the *directive* approach was used by Calvin, citing a key example of defining a central norm that has guided Presbyterian and Reformed churches both in their writing of confessional statements and in their liturgical practice.¹² But before doing that, I would like to propose some changes in Sewell’s taxonomy of Reformation authority models. The adjustment amounts to pairing the Puritan Independents and the Anabaptists on their way of seeing how the authority of Scripture functions in guiding worship. That authority could be labeled *express authorization* or simply *expressive*. The Calvinistic/Westminster tradition is *directive*; hence, the term *regulative* should perhaps be set aside because of the difficulty in agreeing on how it should be applied. As the Orthodox Presbyterian report cited above notes, the term *regulative* is “hard to document before the nineteenth century”; it is not a Puritan term. This adjustment would result in three approaches: the *corrective* view (Luther, Cranmer), the *directive* view (Calvin, Westminster), and the *expressive* view (Anabaptist, Puritan Independent).

Sewell’s Puritan/*regulative* view,¹³ I believe,

shows more resemblance to Anabaptist approaches than to Zwinglian, approaches. It was the Anabaptists who insisted that specific or express biblical authorization be given for such matters as whether to sing hymns, baptize infants, or celebrate the Lord’s day instead of the seventh-day Sabbath.¹⁴ Puritans, for instance John Hooper (no Anabaptist, he was the Anglican Bishop of Gloucester), insisted that Scripture must explicitly authorize some details of clerical dress. As the Puritan Independents and Scottish commissioners at the Assembly sought to address the pressures toward liturgical uniformity from the English church and crown, they were concerned with establishing liberty of conscience.¹⁵ This context eventually led to a formulation in the Westminster Confession of Faith that protected liberty from the imposition of unbiblical rites and ceremonies.¹⁶

In spite of the fact that Hooper owed much of his thinking to his time in Zurich with Bullinger and Zwingli, his use of Scripture was not Zwinglian. Zwingli’s approach to the question of how the authority of Scripture functions was more in line with that of Calvin, Oecolampadius, and Bucer. All four Reformers appealed primarily to Scripture against Rome’s dependence on tradition, but they also insisted on following the “custom of the ancient church” in liturgical matters, wherever that custom was consistent with Scripture and provided examples of biblically directed worship practice.¹⁷

Acts 2:42: A Central Norm for Reformed Liturgy

A case in point is Bucer’s¹⁸ and Calvin’s use of Acts 2:42 to determine the four necessary elements in the liturgy: word, prayer, meal, and alms. Although Calvin was not alone in the development of a Reformed liturgy,¹⁹ he was a key player and he makes this comment in his *Institutes*:

Luke relates in the Acts that this was the practice of the apostolic church, when he says that believers “...continued in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” [Ac 2:42, cf. Vg.]. Thus it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the

Word, prayers, partaking of the Lord's Supper and almsgiving.²⁰

What Calvin did with this was to develop a paradigm for Sunday worship. There were to be four elements present: the reading and preaching of the word; prayers in the language of the people; the Lord's supper; and a sharing of goods, principally through almsgiving in the service. This is a particularly clear case of proposing a central norm instead of setting limits.²¹

In considering these elements, we must clarify four points. Although the medieval mass included readings from Scripture, the readings were in Latin, not the language of the people, and sermons were not always on Scripture, nor were they a necessary part of the mass. A vernacular preaching service, called the *prône*, was popular, sometimes associated with the mass and sometimes independent. The effect was to separate preaching from worship. The Protestant Reformers restored exposition of the text in the language of the people to a central place in worship. It was both a way of praising God and a necessity for belief and salvation.

Second, Calvin understood the "breaking of bread" in Acts 2:42 as the Lord's Supper, the "visible word" by which Christ and all his benefits are conveyed to the believer. For Calvin, in contrast to Zwingli and his followers, the Sunday service was more than a word service. Word and Sacrament together were necessary, even though he was unable to convince the city fathers of Geneva to authorize weekly celebrations in every congregation. A rotation system of celebrations in the different parishes of the city was the best that could be established.

Third, prayer, which included sung prayer (usually Scripture/Psalms), was the third element in the paradigm. Although some prayers were left to the minister's discretion, there were also set prayers to be read. The Reformers saw no problem with this combination, unlike some of their Puritan heirs of one hundred years later. Congregational singing gave the people opportunity to enter fully into the prayers.

Fourth, Calvin defined *koinonia* as "mutual association, alms and other duties of brotherly fellowship," and he saw a connection between the Lord's Supper and this fellowship.²² Calvin's essay on the meaning and practice of the Lord's

Supper, which appears in some editions of *La forme des prieres*, draws a direct connection between the blessings given in the supper and our oblation of ourselves in service to God, and further, to "holy offerings and gifts which are administered to Jesus Christ in His least ones, to those who are hungry, thirsty, naked."²³

Where We Are (Again)

In terms of the present needs of the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in North America, we would do well to heed the example of Calvin on all four of these parts of worship, but especially on the frequency of the Lord's Supper and the priority of offerings for the poor. A much better balance would be achieved if there were a weekly celebration of the meal and if the primary offerings each week were for the poor. Preaching is generally strong. However, since in some churches prayer "has just dried up," to quote Hughes Oliphant Old, renewal is needed there as well.²⁴ But that is a topic for another article.

ENDNOTES

1. Harvie M. Conn, *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology, and Mission in Trialogue* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 216-19.
2. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford, 1953), 7.
3. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 219; see Gillian R. Evans, *Old Art and New Theology: The Beginnings of Theology as an Academic Discipline* (New York: Oxford, 1980), 137-66, for an outline of scholastic/polemical theology.
4. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 222.
5. David J. Bosch, "Theological Education in Missionary Perspective," *Missiology* 10 (January, 1982): 16-17.
6. Conn, *Eternal Word*, 224.
7. *Ibid*, 225-6; Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948).
8. Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 27-31; *Holy People: A Liturgical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), chapters 1-3.
9. For further explanation of the Lutheran/corrective view, see James Moffatt, "Luther" in *Christian Worship*, ed. Nathaniel Micklem

- (London: Oxford, 1936), 125; Formula of Concord, Article 10, “Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices”; and The Solid Declaration, Article 10, “Concerning Ecclesiastical Practices That Are Called Adiaphora or Indifferent Things,” in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Eds), *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 515-16, 635-40.
10. “Report of the Committee on the Involvement of Unordained Persons in the Regular Worship Services of the Church,” 58th General Assembly of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, (Minutes of the 58th General Assembly. Willow Grove, Pa.: Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 1991), 268. For a helpful clarification of the Westminster Standards, see “The Regulative Principle,” pages 266-71 of the report, or access it at <<http://www.opc.org/GA/unordained.html>>
 11. *Ibid*, 267.
 12. Second Helvetic Confession, 22.1; Heidelberg Catechism, 103; Westminster Confession of Faith, 21.3-5; J.-J. von Allmen, *Worship, Its Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford, 1965), 129-30; Jean-Marc Prieur, “Actes 2,42 et le culte réformé,” *Foi et Vie* 94.2 (1995): 63-72.
 13. Current interest in promoting the *regulative* approach is demonstrated by T. David Gordon’s discussion with John M. Frame in the *Westminster Theological Journal*. See “Some Questions about the Regulative Principle,” by Frame, *WTJ* 54 (1992): 357-66; “Some Answers about the Regulative Principle” by Gordon, *WTJ* 55 (1993): 321-9; and “Reply to T. David Gordon,” by Frame, *WTJ* 56 (1994): 181-3. Gordon has also recently given a sharply negative review of R. J. Gore’s *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002) in “The Westminster Assembly’s Unworkable and Unscriptural View of Worship?” *WTJ* 65 (2003): 345-56.
 14. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 77-109. The influence of John Knox should also be considered in understanding the Puritan Independent mindset. See Richard L. Greaves, “The Nature of Authority” in *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation: Studies in the Thought of John Knox* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 4-24.
 15. For a summary of related events in Scotland during the early seventeenth century, see G. W. Sprott, *Scottish Liturgies of the Reign of James VI*. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1901), ix-lvi.
 16. Westminster Confession of Faith, 20.2
 17. Old, *Shaping*, 111-44, outlines Zwingli’s arguments against the Anabaptists. See also Ulrich Zwingli, *Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists* (1527), in *Selected Works* (ed. Samuel M. Jackson; Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1972), 123-258. The title page of the 1542 Geneva Liturgy reads, *La Forme des Prieres et Chatz Ecclesiastiques, avec la maniere d’administrer les Sacremens, et consacrer le Mariage: selon la coustume de l’Eglise ancienne*. (ed. Pierre Pidoux; Genève: Bärenreiter-Verlag Kassel, 1959).
 18. Martin Bucer, *Grund und Ursach* (1524), *Martini Buceri Opera Omnia*, Series 1 *Deutsch Schriften: Band I Frühschriften 1520-1524* (ed. Robert Stuperich; Gütersloh: G. Mohn, 1960), 211; English translation in Elsie A. McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1984), 76.
 19. Commenting on the process of liturgical reform that began around 1518 in the diocese of Meaux, France, and culminated in 1542 in Geneva, Switzerland, Hughes Oliphant Old writes, “The Genevan Psalter of 1542 is a liturgy and as all true liturgies, it is the product of a community. We are not concerned with the writing of Calvin but rather with a document that had come out of the Reformed Church as a whole.” *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1975), 95.
 20. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559. Trans. Ford Lewis Battles (London: SCM, 1960), 4.17.44; see also his *Commentary on Acts*, ad. loc.
 21. For a helpful summary of Calvin’s use of the Bible and the resulting Geneva Liturgy, see Gore, *Covenantal Worship*, 53-89. Pages 9-51

contain an analysis of the relationship between present-day Presbyterian worship and seventeenth-century Puritanism, including the work of the Westminster Assembly.

22. Elsie A. McKee, "Context, Contours, Contents." *Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, 16.2 NS (1995): 188-193.
23. John Calvin, *Opera Selecta*, vol. 2 (eds. Petrus Barth, et. al.; Munchen: Kaiser, 1926-52), 42; McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate*, 50.
24. Hughes Oliphant Old, *Leading in Prayer: A Workbook for Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 361. This book is a plea for a full diet of public prayer; in addition, Old provides many examples of such public prayer. When people ask me how to improve prayer in the churches, I tell them to work with this book for a year and see what happens. The patient is usually much improved.