

“Like a Box of Chocolates”: Experiencing PCA Worship

By Frank J. Smith

Who can forget the ever-lovable Forrest Gump from the 1994 eponymous movie? *Forrest Gump* portrayed a somewhat backward, certainly mentally challenged, young man from Alabama who had a remarkable knack for receiving accolades, while also offering homespun sayings. Perhaps his most famous aphorism is, “Mama always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re gonna get.”

How true! And how true is that sentiment when we consider experiencing Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) worship from the very beginning of this branch of the church until now.

But the root cause of this phenomenon goes back even further than 1973. The PCA did not gestate in a vacuum. She was birthed in an ecclesiastical and societal environment that produced this box of chocolates.

AMERICAN PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP

The American experience was shaped by the Great Awakening in the early 1700s, by the challenges of the frontier (with its economic hardships, war with Indians, a general lack of regular church buildings, and a paucity of preachers), by the intermingling of various religious denominations, and by the rising democratic spirit that led to political independence. Though the Westminster Assembly formulated its Standards in a world that was turning upside down, nevertheless, the unique set of circumstances in the New World brought other dynamics into play—dynamics which influenced how Presbyterians in America would worship.

Given the numerous winds of doctrine and change blowing across British North America, and the many diverse opinions that resulted, there would be no one way that American Presbyterians would worship. There was not a uniform view of worship—and that lack of uniformity would be reflected not only in practice but

also in governing documents. Regarding the adoption of the first American Presbyterian Directory for Worship in the 1780s, Julius Melton noted that the church “had produced what could almost be described as a non-directive Directory!”¹

OLD SCHOOL AND NEW SCHOOL PERSPECTIVES

The diversity of worship views and practice continued into the nineteenth century. The Old School/New School division in 1837 was the result of profound differences with respect to doctrine, polity, and worship. According to Melton, the criterion for New School worship was evangelistic effectiveness—a novel perspective that was evident among many Presbyterian ministers, including Charles Grandison Finney. Among the “new measures” he promoted were the “anxious seat” (employing an “altar call”); an overemphasis on application in preaching (to the virtual exclusion of Biblical exegesis and doctrinal explanation); singing hymns that were directed to sinners rather than being offered in praise to God; and the use of musical instrumentation, primarily for the psychological effect. The Old School approach to worship focused on Scriptural directives and decorum. However, the traditional understanding reflected in the Old School was not monolithic. For example, in 1832, an influential Old School evangelist and pastor, William B. Sprague, rejected the notion of the Bible being “a textbook of specified and therefore allowable worship practices,” and viewed it “as a ‘rule of judging.’”

According to this subtle revision of the Calvinist theory, Scripture furnished *standards* for judging whether

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1. Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America: Changing Patterns Since 1787* (1967; rpt. Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2001), p. 27.

a “method” was acceptable. The method did not have to be specifically sanctioned in the Bible, but it did have to conform to scriptural standards of seriousness, order, decorum, reverence, simplicity, honesty, and affection—qualities embraced by Sprague’s term “the spirit of the gospel.” He still was unwilling to allow a measure’s effect on people to prove its validity, unless by that was meant its “entire and ultimate effect.”

At Sprague’s hands “scriptural worship” and “decent and orderly worship” became virtually synonymous. The actual point of difference between him and Finney was thus primarily one of degree.²

HISTORIC PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP

What transpired in American Presbyterianism more than two centuries ago was a profound departure from historic Presbyterianism, as enunciated in the Westminster Standards. The Westminsterian view was, of course, rooted, in the Reformed branch of the Protestant Reformation, including particularly the doctrine of worship promoted by John Calvin and John Knox.

Protestantism initially was called Lutheranism, in recognition of the seminal influence of Marth Luther. However, this movement divided into two major branches, Lutheran and Calvinistic. Luther’s approach to worship was essentially that of Roman Catholicism, viz., allowing any practice that is not forbidden by Scripture. In contrast to that perspective, Calvin, Knox, and others maintained what became known as the regulative principle of worship (often abbreviated RPW). According to the RPW, if something is commanded for worship, then it is required to be done; if it is not commanded, whether by direct command or by good and necessary consequence, then its use is forbidden in worship.

The implications of this doctrine would be worked out over the next century. The persecution of the Puritans and Presbyterians by the absolutist Stuart kings, including King Charles I’s imposition of Anglican liturgy upon the Scots in 1637, triggered the Second Reformation in Scotland, a movement which honed the understanding of the regulative principle.

Also in the mid-seventeenth century, the English Civil War led to the convening of the Westminster Assembly, and to the Solemn League and Covenant, a 1643

religious and military treaty between the English Parliament and Scotland. That Assembly was designed to effect uniformity among the churches of Great Britain—uniformity of religion, doctrine, polity, and worship. The august body formulated the Westminster Confession of Faith, Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms, and the Form of Presbyterial Church-Government and of Ordination of Ministers. But the first document that was produced was The Directory for the Publick Worship of God.

On February 3, 1645, the General Assembly of the Kirk of Scotland voted to establish and to put into effect Westminster’s directory for worship. In doing so, the court did,

with much joy and thankfulness, acknowledge the rich blessing and invaluable mercy of God, in bringing the so much wished for uniformity in religion to such a happy period, that these kingdoms, once at so great a distance in the form of worship, are now, by the blessing of God, brought to a nearer uniformity than any other reformed kirks; which is unto us the return of our prayers, and a lightening of our eyes, and reviving of our hearts in the midst of our many sorrows and sufferings; a taking away, in a great measure, the reproach of the people of God, to the stopping of the mouths of malignant and disaffected persons; and an opening unto us a door of hope, that God hath yet thoughts of peace towards us, and no of evil, to give us an expected end; in the expectation and confidence whereof we do rejoice; beseeching the Lord to preserve these kingdoms from heresies, schisms, offences, profaneness, and whatsoever is contrary to sound doctrine, and the power of godliness; and to continue with us, and the generations following, these his pure and purged ordinances, together with an increase of the power and life thereof to the glory of his great name, the enlargement of the kingdom of his son, the corroboration of peace and love between the kingdoms, the unity and comfort of all his people, and our edifying one another in love.

In its Confession of Faith, the Westminster Assembly laid out the practices of worship, including the ordinary parts of worship: prayer, the reading of the word, the preaching of the word, the singing of Psalms, and the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. There are also occasional elements of worship: religious oaths and vows, fastings, and thanksgivings. In addition, the Directory for Worship also mentions the pronouncement of the blessing (the benediction).³

2. Melton, *ibid.*, p. 56.

3. For a discussion of the Westminster Assembly’s view of music in worship, see Matthew Winzer, Review of Nick Needham, “Westminster and Worship: Psalms, Hymns? and Musical Instruments?” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*,

However, as noted in Confession of Faith VII.6, the new covenant, in contrast with the old, is administered with greater simplicity and less outward glory. And further, the ceremonial law as a whole has been abrogated through the coming of Christ (XIX.3). Accordingly, all kinds of ceremonial practices, that were appropriate for the church during her old covenant dispensation, are inappropriate in the new covenant era. These practices would include not only animal sacrifices, but also the use of candles, the burning of incense, and the playing of musical instruments.

And furthermore, Presbyterianism rejected making an image of God or any person of the Godhead, as well as worshipping by means of an image (Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 109; Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q/A 51).

SEA CHANGE

As is the case when dealing with matters in the church militant, the Bride of Christ is constantly in a battle to maintain the truth—the Adversary is unrelentless in his attempts to damage and destroy her purity. There should be no surprise, therefore, that, as true throughout church history, the visible church would struggle to retain the standards that have been achieved. There will always be temptations to abandon divine worship, and to go back to manmade worship by adding to worship practices new practices as well as various “aids” to devotion, including especially things which appeal to a sensory experience.

Widespread abandonment of strict standards (or, modification of those standards) occurred both in Scotland and in America. In the eighteenth century, thanks in large measure to the intentionally deleterious effect of the paraphrastic Psalm imitations penned by Isaac Watts, exclusive psalmody was abandoned. In the nineteenth century, commitment to a *capella* singing gave way to the employment of organs. Also in the 1800s, there was in general an emotionalism that arose at least partially out of the era’s Romanticism.⁴

WHY THE INCONSISTENCY IN EARLY AMERICAN PRESBYTERIANISM?

However one construes the difference between or similarity of Old School and New School worship, there is no question but that American Presbyterianism as a whole, even in the eighteenth century, was not consistent in its understanding of worship nor in its practice. At least four factors figure in this doctrinal downgrade.

First, there was a general attack on revealed religion with the onslaught of skepticism in the 1700s. The effect of such undercurrents was apparent particularly in New England, where the dominant Puritanism largely apostatized and became spiritually dead.

Second, the First Great Awakening, though a genuine movement of the Holy Spirit, was accompanied by excessive emotional expressions and a concomitant relaxing of strict worship practices, especially with regard to the singing of praise.

Third, the proliferation of various denominations blurred denominational distinctives and led to regarding the presence of diverse doctrinal views as legitimate. Accordingly, there were fewer Presbyterian stalwarts holding forth all of the teachings of the Westminster Standards.

And fourth, the fact that there was denominational diffusion made ecclesiastical establishmentarianism unrealistic and untenable. Even apart from the impracticality of enforcing doctrinal uniformity in the American colonies, the persecution of Dissenters by the Anglican establishment created a great distaste for a close relationship between Church and State. Resultingly, the American version of the Westminster Confession of Faith modified a couple of its chapters in order to set forth a view of separation of Church and State. However, doing so, in effect, engendered a sphere of neutrality, and consequently undermined the objective nature of the law of God. For, either the law of God applies universally or it does not. If the second commandment does not apply to the civil magistrate, then it is difficult to see how that commandment can demand worship that is totally and objectively determined by the Word of God.

vol. 2, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 4 (2008): 253–66. For a discussion of the Directory for Worship, see Richard A. Muller and Roland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship*, in *The Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith: A Series*, ed. Carl R. Trueman (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishing, 2007), pp. 83–175.

4. One could argue that the practice of taking up an offering during worship also owes its prevalence starting in the nineteenth century to the impact of Romanticism and the notion of having to engage in that type of action in order to demonstrate sacrificial devotion. The Westminster Directory for Worship does speak of collections, but not offerings. In conjunction with the Lord’s Supper, the Directory specifies: “The collection is so to be ordered that no part of the public worship be thereby hindered.” Cf. Ryan M. McGraw, *The Consequences of Reformed Worship: The Biblical Foundations for the use of the Call to Worship, Baptism, the Offering, and Benedictions in Corporate Worship*, (ThM Thesis, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, 2008).

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the nineteenth century, the confusion in American Presbyterianism regarding worship continued. One factor in this regard was the Second Great Awakening, which contributed the phenomenon of revivalism. The evangelistic thrust breathed a pragmatic spirit. Whatever worked in order to bring about conversion was acceptable, including with respect to the practice of worship. Long before the arrival of William James and his philosophy of Pragmatism, the church was employing a strategy of the ends justifying the means.

The pragmatic approach lent itself to a distinct appeal to the emotions. Though the revivalism as perpetuated by New School Presbyterians was oriented toward eliciting a rational response by the individual, at the same time, it also opened the door to an emphasis on emotionalism via playing upon the emotions and seeking to meet individual emotional needs.

That appeal to the emotions, in turn, caused Presbyterians and other Protestants to become vulnerable to the Romanticism of the age—an emotion-laden movement characterized by fuzzy-thinking.

Presbyterians had long been antipathetic to Romanticism, knowing that it plays into the hands of the Romantics. Nevertheless, the Victorian tide flooded Britain and America, and largely triumphed. Increasingly, choirs were employed in worship, flowers adorned sanctuaries, and Easter and Christmas were observed religiously. And the pipes of organs soon bellowed in virtually all of the congregations. Even in the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS, often called the Southern Presbyterian Church), these innovations were welcomed, though with some staunch opposition.⁵

PECKING AWAY AT INCONSISTENCY

Predictably, the opponents of innovative worship practices included the premier conservative theologians in the Southern Church, particularly John Lafayette Girardeau and Robert Lewis Dabney. Girardeau's *Instrumental Music in the Public Worship of the Church*, published in 1888, is still the classic statement of the traditional view. Dabney seconded Girardeau's perspective

with a review of the book. Dabney's successor at Union Theological Seminary (Virginia), Thomas E. Peck, also sounded the alarm.

But the warnings were all for naught. The last holdout in favor of *a cappella* singing in the Southern Church was Girardeau's son-in-law, George A. Blackburn, pastor of Arsenal Hill Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina. Sometime after his death in 1918, an organ was installed at his old pastorate. As E. T. Thompson somewhat snidely sneered, "Dr. Blackburn was the last of his kind, and his peculiarity, we are told, limited no little the extent of his ministerial activity. 'There are not many churches,' commented the *Presbyterian Standard*, 'which would consent to part with an organ to secure a pastor.'"⁶

SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

In the 1900s, worship in the PCUS continued to depart from traditional Presbyterianism. *The Presbyterian Hymnal*, a 1927 denominational publication, manifested the influence of nineteenth-century Romanticism, coupled with early-twentieth century evangelicalism. Only one psalm selection, viz., "The Lord's My Shepherd" (Psalm 23), was included. Not even the Old Hundredth ("All People That on Earth Do Dwell") is found in this hymnbook.

There was increasing acceptance of the use of choirs, floral arrangements, and musical instruments. Christmas and Easter were observed more extensively. In 1965, the General Assembly approved adding to the church calendar the four Sundays of Advent, Epiphany, and the beginning of Lent, "and here and there ministers were beginning to garb themselves in the appropriate colors—white, green, red, violet, purple, and black."⁷

In 1951, Dr. Walter L. Lingle, a well-known Southern Presbyterian minister, reflected on the transformation of worship in his lifetime.

In his youth he noted that services were conducted with Puritan simplicity. All that went before the sermon was frequently referred to as the "preliminary exercises." Some churches were still opposed to instrumental worship in the church. In many churches a paid church choir was looked upon as an abomination. Now, he noted, more emphasis was placed upon worship and maybe a little less on the sermon. Many of the newer churches were being constructed with a view to making the architecture an aid to worship. Members of the choir wore vestments, and many of the ministers were wearing the Genevan gown with the tabs, which the Professor of

5. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Two: 1861-1890* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), pp. 429ff; *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Three: 1890-1972* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), pp. 345ff.

6. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Three: 1890-1972* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 353.

7. Thompson, p. 483.

Systematic Theology in his student days had contemptuously dismissed as “rags of popery.” Church services had become more elaborate. Responsive readings, the Lord’s prayer, and the Apostles’ Creed had been brought into the services and there was more and better music. The people were given a larger part in the services.⁸ But the innovation could not be contained in vessels of antiquity. In the 1960s, the theological revisionism that was overflowing the denomination conjoined with the counter-culture movement, resulting in experimental worship in key places in the Southern Church.

SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP IN THE SWINGIN’
SIXTIES

In August 1968, the PCUS conducted a “New Days! New Ways?” conference at the denominational conference grounds in Montreat, North Carolina. The editor of the *Presbyterian Journal*, G. Aiken Taylor, described the event as one in which “the audience went on a wild foot-stomping, hand-clapping spree around tables from which sports-shirted dignitaries served pieces of French bread and offered sips of grape juice.” He noted: “The rafters were ringing with ‘The Battle Hymn of the Republic,’ while an instrumental jazz combo provided the accompaniment. The audience was dancing its way to the tables for ‘communion.’”⁹

Examples of other experimental worship in the Southern Church were chronicled in the *Presbyterian Journal*. At a Youth Quadrennial in 1968, several unusual forms of “worship” were planned. In one, the audience was invited to participate in the “liturgy” by scrawling their thoughts on a graffiti board. In another, the participants were to have thrown rubber balls at imitation stained glass windows. These were described as “forms of liturgical action” (with emphasis on *action*), and the balls were called “liturgical balls.”¹⁰

Several months later, at a “college weekend” held at Columbia Theological Seminary, there was “a sort of psychedelic worship service—a regular service spiced with all sorts of sounds from the contemporary world blaring from a loudspeaker on the platform.” Dr. Taylor editorialized that “Simon and Garfunkel, ‘To hell with Jehovah’ and Bob Dylan in Sunday morning worship are offensive to many conservatives. They cannot worship God in such an environment.” He added: “So a new question is raised to trouble already troubled Christians. What to do when a visit to the house of God not only promises the possibility of views with which one must disagree, but an assault upon one’s sensibilities which deeply offends?”¹¹

And in May 1973, as the PCA was in the process of being formed, Aiken Taylor wrote that the “modern craze over ‘expressing the faith’ via dances, psychedelic art forms and liturgical drama” was “indefensible,” as these new forms “are a modern version of the ancient tendency to allegorize the faith out of all practical existence.” In this same editorial, he described an “interpretation of the resurrection in music and dance” that had been presented at a PCUS church, with a young girl playing the central role as “our dance liturgist.”¹²

THE CONTINUING CHURCH MOVEMENT

By the 1960s, many conservatives in the PCUS were coming to the conclusion that ecclesiastical separation from the spreading apostasy in their denomination was necessary. The issues were extensive, and there was no realistic prospect for effecting reform.¹³

However, despite agreement on basics such as Scripture and gospel, the Continuing Presbyterian Church movement, which morphed into the Presbyterian Church in America, was not committed consistently to the Westminster Confession of Faith, including its doctrine of worship. This movement was a product of its time, and of the state of Presbyterianism for more than a century—lack of conformity to the Westminster Standards, and lack of uniformity with respect to worship.

As has been noted elsewhere, the PCA at its formation was a mixed multitude, theologically speaking. Reflecting the lack of instruction in historic Reformation theology in Southern Presbyterian denominational seminaries, not every minister who helped in its founding was really committed to the Reformed faith, even on matters such as predestination.

One could argue that the PCA has matured doctrinally over the past half century, such that many of those

8. Thompson, pp. 482–483.

9. Frank J. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America: The Silver Anniversary Edition* (Lawrenceville, Ga.: Presbyterian Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 493–494, citing “Worth Asking: What Is Sacrilege?,” *Presbyterian Journal* (August 21, 1968), p. 16.

10. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 495, citing “When Worship is Not,” *Presbyterian Journal* (January 22, 1969), p. 12.

11. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 496–497, citing “Two Ways—Light vs. Dark,” *Presbyterian Journal* (March 5, 1969), p. 12.

12. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 497–498, citing “This Is Presbyterianism Today,” *Presbyterian Journal* (May 30, 1973), p. 12.

13. For a detailed account of the history of and reasons for the separation, see Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*.

early ministers might not be accepted today due to their lack of commitment to basic Calvinism. Nevertheless, the motif of liturgical diversity that was manifest in 1973 has continued into 2023.

DIFFERENT APPROACHES

The congregations that constituted the PCA largely reflected the worship practices that were found across the PCUS. And since there was a diversity of practice in the mother denomination, so there was in the new one.

The differences included matters of style, the content of worship, the administration of the sacraments, the garb of the minister, and the issue of women's leadership.

There were congregations that were "liturgical" in their approach, including regular usage of the Doxology and the Gloria Patri, recitation of creeds (particularly The Apostles' Creed), and responsive reading of Scripture. There were congregations that adhered to Puritan simplicity.

There were congregations that employed a hymnal with what might be considered formal hymns—whether the PCUS-endorsed *The Hymnal* or the Orthodox Presbyterian Church's *Trinity Hymnal*. There were congregations which used *Inspiring Hymns* or similar songbooks which reflected an evangelistic thrust and tunes more associated with camp meetings.

There were congregations that would never have a woman take part in leading a service. There were congregations who were happy to have female missionaries to share their experiences during a worship service—addresses which could morph into exhortation.

There were congregations in which the minister always wore a suit or a sports jacket and tie. There were congregations where clerical garb was used.

There were congregations that would never deviate from the normal pattern of having a regular sermon as part of the worship. There were congregations that were willing to substitute a special program, such as a movie or a Christmas play, for the sermon.

Though there were very few, if any, congregations that eschewed the observance of Christmas and Easter, there were congregations which also observed special days, such as Mother's Day and Father's Day. There were congregations that did not do so.

There were congregations that employed candles on the communion table or in the sanctuary, while others did not. There were congregations which featured

Christmas candlelight services, while others were much simpler in their observance of December 25th.

There were congregations that habitually extended an invitation for folks to come forward to make a commitment to Christ—sometimes referred to as "hitting the sawdust trail" (an allusion to the phenomenon of a tent meeting). There were congregations who were more formal in their worship service and who would never engage in what has been called "the liturgy of the invitation system as it has come to be in some non-liturgical churches."¹⁴

EVANGELISM AND PRAGMATISM

From the very start in 1973, there were at least two related influences on how PCA congregations would engage in worship.

Like the New School of the nineteenth century, evangelism was an overriding concern, which often impacted worship. Many of the founders of the PCA identified more readily with evangelicals in non-mainline denominations than with the leadership of the PCUS. Accordingly, the Continuing Church was influenced by evangelicalism and, indeed, neo-evangelicalism—which affected its worship. Billy Graham crusades (resonating with the baritone voice of George Beverly Shea and, during the closing invitation, the choir repeatedly singing all six stanzas of "Just As I Am"); 1960s Christian folk songs heard in movies produced by Dr. Graham's World Wide Pictures; singing and musical talent at Saturday night Youth for Christ rallies; and the phenomenon of the Jesus Movement (hippies converted to Christ) and Explo '72 in Dallas, were a powerful addition poured into a mix of lively, and sometimes maudlin, fundamentalistic gospel songs. Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF), one of the four organizations that formed the Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, contributed to how worship was conducted in congregations, both through local evangelistic crusades and the annual family conferences held in Montreat, North Carolina.

Having worship determined by the concern for evangelism played into pragmatism—the use of whatever song or practice seemed to work in order to press home the claims of Christ.

One could say that worship in the early days of the PCA was largely "traditional" in the sense that there was not much by way of 1960s-style experimental worship. However, at the same time, the employment of practices that had no biblical justification—showing movies and staging Christmas plays, for example—would

14. The quote is from Dr. John R. deWitt, a professor of church history at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson (personal recollection of the author, 1976).

make the budding denomination susceptible to more bizarre practices down the road.

Given that there was no theology of worship that had been formulated, there was a great deal of different ideas and practices. It is not an exaggeration to say that every congregation was free to do what was right in its own eyes. G. I. Williamson’s commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith, which emphasized the regulative principle of worship (RPW), had a positive effect on some ministers, particularly younger ones. Nevertheless, those who had even heard of the RPW, much less those who self-consciously held to it, were definitely in the minority.¹⁵

A NEW START

And yet, there were some stirrings to start to consider the matter of worship more seriously.

One example of this reality was a communication to the First General Assembly, authored by Eurie Hayes Smith, III. The pastor raised several items, including publishing to the congregations “the rich spirit filled, but neglected heritage of Reformed Worship”; contrasting this heritage “with the many non-Reformed liturgies presently in use”; providing “a Reformed Liturgy and a Reformed psalter”; recommending “what constitutes proper pulpit (liturgical) dress for Reformed pastors” recommending “what constitutes proper architecture as exhibits and Reformed Christian faith truly, accurately and majestically”; and demonstrating “by its attention to these matters that for the Reformed Faith, faithful, true, biblical worship in the Church is as important as the Great Commission to the world.” The Third Assembly addressed the first four of Smith’s items. It noted that “the Reformed view of liturgy, as seen in the Westminster Assembly’s Directory for Worship[,] has been marked by simplicity with few stated forms.” It recommended “the use of hymnbooks that include a good selection of the Psalms and hymns, that are true to the Word, set to music suitable for the worship of God,” with the *Trinity Hymnal* (from the Orthodox Presbyterian Church), the *Psalter Hymnal* (Christian Reformed Church in North America), *The Book of Psalms for Singing* (Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America), and *Bible Songs* (Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church) given as examples.

The Third Assembly also approved its Directory for Worship (DFW) as a part of the Book of Church Order (BCO). However, in doing so, it adopted a “Temporary Preface,” which states: “The Directory for Worship is an approved guide and should be taken seriously as

the mind of the Church agreeable to the Standards. However, it does not have the force of law and is not to be considered obligatory in all its parts.” That “temporary preface” is still in effect, so that the bulk of the DFW remains not fully obligatory. However, in 1981, three chapters, dealing with baptism, the admission of persons to the ordinances, and communion, were formally adopted as being binding. Later, a paragraph in the chapter on the solemnization of marriage was also given full Constitutional status, in order to be unambiguous that marriage is between a man and a woman, and that PCA ministers “who solemnize marriages shall only solemnize marriages between one man and one woman.”¹⁶

But the fact that the DFW as a whole did not become the law of the denomination was telling. And there are at least two basic reasons for this failure. One, there was no unanimity as to what constituted worship. And two, there was a deep desire not to dictate to congregations how they should operate. With respect to worship, the PCA, effectively, was congregationalist. Instead of uniformity, which is the Westminster ideal, all of the “chocolates” came in a sampler box that carried the label of Pluriformity.

But people who had had to deal with denominational overreach in the PCUS need not have worried, as the DFW was not as strict as they might have feared. That pluriformity was embodied even in the document itself. Chapter 47–6 states: “The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God’s Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God’s people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness.”

The question is, What is meant by this curious phrase, that “The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no

15. G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession Of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964). For an extensive overview of the history of the concept “regulative principle of worship,” see Frank J. Smith (with Chris Coldwell), “The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part One (1946–1999),” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 2 (2006): 89–164; and Frank J. Smith (with Chris Coldwell), “The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part Two (2000–2006),” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 155–215. See also Frank J. Smith, “Recent Reformed Writings on Worship,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 227–52.

16. For an extensive discussion of the history of the DFW, see Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 501–6; and also see the lead article in this present volume.

fixed forms for public worship”? At least two possibilities exist.

The first is that the word “forms” refers to actual language of worship. This would then be seen as a statement that there is no prescribed prayer book, as would obtain in Anglicanism. However, taken in its broadest sense, it would also mean that the language with regard to *any and all* of the elements of worship is not prescribed. But that would clearly contradict the fact that the reading of the Word of God entails reading the precise words of Scripture. And, based on a strict Presbyterian understanding of worship, it would also contradict the notion that the church is to restrict itself to singing inspired songs, which are recorded in Scripture.

The second possibility is that the reference is to the practices of worship themselves. In other words, “forms” refers to the way in which worship comes to expression, and that there is no fixity to those modes of expression. On this view, although it would be legitimate to preach a sermon, it might also be fine to sing a sermon—or, to dance a sermon. This view, of course, goes contrary to the historic Presbyterian notion of the fact that the practices or elements of worship are distinct and are prescribed. It would also go against a further statement in the DFW, found just three paragraphs later (BCO 47–9): “The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service...”¹⁷

Mitigating the problematic expression in BCO 47–6 is a final sentence in that section, which speaks of the necessity of “simplicity” of the worship service. Nevertheless, the terminology of “no fixed forms” was used by those who wanted to push the bounds of what transpired in PCA worship.¹⁸

AVANT GARDE, GENERAL ASSEMBLY STYLE

By the 1980s, there were blatant attempts to implement “contemporary” worship in the PCA. Indeed, the

17. The preceding four paragraphs are reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, page 502.

18. The deliberate pushing of the envelope with regard to “forms” of worship owes much to John Frame, long time seminary professor, first at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), then Westminster Seminary in California, and finally Reformed Theological Seminary (Orlando). In considering various influences on PCA worship, one should not underestimate the impact of his views. For an evaluation of how he framed things, see Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, “Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore,” *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 1 (2005): 116–50.

19. Smith, *History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 508.

celebration and promotion of avant garde approaches to worship occurred at the General Assembly itself.

To some extent, that which the powers-that-be scheduled at the Assembly merely reflected trends and practices at the local level. Nevertheless, it is hard not to draw the conclusion that there was a top-down effort to influence worship throughout the denomination.

BLATANT IDOLATRY

In 1983, the entertainment-oriented evening programs at the Assembly had been dubbed “worship services” in the proposed docket, but after objection was raised, the nomenclature was changed to “inspirational services.” However, it turned out that that was not the whole problem. Only after one of the programs did it become known that the slide show would feature a visible representation of Christ. A personal resolution objected to said depiction which was “in violation of Scripture and our confessional standards” and noted that the Heidelberg Catechism “warns about trying to instruct people through dumb images rather than by the sound preaching of the Word.” The personal resolution asked the Assembly to “convey these concerns to the Assembly’s committees and agencies and instruct them to exercise greater caution with regard to these matters in the future.” The Assembly acted to remind “its churches that in our understanding of Scripture we would reject any visible representation of Christ or the use of religious symbols as objects of worship, but that the particulars in this resolution do not warrant the type of action requested.”¹⁹

MOVIES AND MUSICAL ENTERTAINMENT

Three years later, at the 1986 General Assembly in Philadelphia, the stage would be rocking with a lively choir as well as films. An attempt to amend the docket to change the nomenclature for these evening programs from “worship services” was, overwhelmingly, turned back. Eleven commissioners recorded their negative votes on the adoption of the docket “due to their belief that unscriptural worship practices were to be included in the evening worship services.”

But after those worship services had occurred, fifty commissioners presented a formal protest against “the impropriety of incorporating non-Reformed worship principles and practices into these services in such a predominant way that the clear distinctives of our Reformed worship, as set out in *Book of Church Order*, chapters 47 and 49, were obscured, if not excluded.”

Among the reasons given for the protest was that "the preaching of the Word occupied a minor place in the program of worship each evening"; that "the predominant position was given to musical and choral presentations"; that "this preponderance of musical presentations encouraged applause... and a standing ovation; practices which are in conflict with the Reformed understanding of worship, where recognition is given to God, not man"; and that "the overall effect of these worship services was to produce approval and acceptance of non-Reformed traditions of worship, rather than to reflect the biblical basis and strength of our own distinct theology and practice of worship."

An Ad Hoc Committee was appointed by the Assembly's Moderator to respond to the protest, which report was adopted by the Assembly. The court argued that these evening programs "were intended to combine a worship time with programs which would illustrate and advance the great commission through the committees of the General Assembly." Furthermore, "[t]he parts of the programs that presented choral and instrumental music were Biblical in character, and the films were instructive in the work of the great commission." The response continued:

Exception was taken to the clapping during some of the singing and the applause after some performances. It should be remembered that these were part of the program emphasizing ethnic missions. If the tempo would not be attractive to some, our tempo and customs may not be attractive abroad where bongo drums may be the accompaniment (BCO 47-6).

The applause was a natural response of appreciation for a good presentation of Scripture truth. The human singing voice is a marvelous gift of God and to applaud it when used in Scriptural song is both to show appreciation to the singer and thanks to God as the author of all our gifts. To show respect and appreciation of fellow Christians is a debt of honor and respect. Romans 13:8 commands us not to leave such a debt outstanding. The Psalmist, after having listed many instruments and various modes of worship, including dancing in the assembly of his people, invites his people to join the Lord in delighting in his people's worship (Psalm 149). One mode by which the Psalmist expressed this "delight," elsewhere, was to join in clapping with the assembled people of God (Psalm 47).

The programs included the appropriate elements of reformed worship and added to the appreciation and

understanding of the work of the Great Commission through our committees.

Insofar as the evening program contained worship, that worship was agreeable to Scripture, was a Biblical expression of the Regulative Principle of Worship, and conformed to BCO 47 & 49.²⁰

Contemplating what the Assembly said is enough to take the breath away. There is obvious ignorance of the regulative principle of worship: the fact that there may have been proper acts of worship in a worship service does not justify incorporating non-ordained practices into a service of worship. The Assembly itself acknowledged that the worship services had other purposes than the worship of God, thereby detracting from His glory. And the court took the position that offering applause to man is appropriate during a time of worship, rather than understanding that in worship, all glory is to be given to God.

A DRAMATIC TWIST

At the 1989 Assembly, not only was there drama during Sunday morning public worship, but the practice of liturgical drama was promoted.²¹ Canon Creek Presbyterian Church, San Ramon, California, where the Rev. Lewis Ruff was organizing pastor, distributed a Drama Script Catalog. The Director of Creative Productions, who compiled the Catalog, stated in the introduction: "Many of these sketches are used in our Sunday services at Canyon Creek. Please keep in mind that our target audience is the unchurched and that those sketches are not intended necessarily to stand alone as a teaching tool; rather, they are used to raise questions and/or issues that the Pastor can later address with Biblical truth... Anything you do for the Lord is worth doing excellently. Drama is once again being viewed openly as a powerful means of communicating God's love & power and as such we, His speakers, need to be producing work of a quality that will bring Him honor. Press on!"

A total of thirty-seven commissioners (out of 774) protested the employment of drama during the Assembly-sponsored Sunday morning public worship, as being a violation of the Confession of Faith, and its strict standard of worship: "The acceptable way of worshiping

20. *Ibid.*, pp. 506ff. An attempt to remove the reference to bongo drums failed.

21. Customarily, PCA General Assemblies would not extend over a weekend, but this one on the West Coast started on a Thursday and ended the following Tuesday.

the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshiped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in Holy Scripture.”²²

MULTI-MEDIA WORSHIP

The 1990 Assembly overwhelmingly voted down a minority report from the Christian Education and Publications (CE/P) Committee of Commissioners, asking that exception be taken “to the action of CE/P in approving of and helping to sponsor a multi-media worship service” during the 1989 National Women in the Church Conference.²³

CONTROVERSY OVER PRAYER

The same year, the Assembly was led in what was called a Concert of Prayer by a Mr. David Bryant, a gentleman from outside the denomination who did not hold to Reformed theology. A protest was lodged.

First, we protest the charismatic emphasis of the service. This was evident in the manner in which the service was conducted—including the emotional and non-thinking thrust—and also in such phrases as “fuller revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Second, we protest the MANIPULATIVE view of prayer manifested in the service and evident in the literature of the organization. For example, the participants were encouraged to pronounce the word “Release!” the participants were told to shout out loud their worst sins. David Bryant’s book, *Concert of Prayer*, states, “Like a band on parade, your concept of prayer marches forth in an aggressive ministry of intercession. The leader, who has struck up the band, may put you through different paces and different tempos at different times... pressing on for a change. ‘Father, the time has come for you to act.’”

Third, we protest the fact that this Concert of Prayer movement claims to be in line historically and theologically with the Reformation understanding of the nature of Biblical prayer. This movement places an emphasis

on prayer almost as a magical formula rather than as a means that God uses.

Fourth, we protest the manifestation of New Age concepts in this service. For example, the participants were told to visualize and act out the putting on of the armor of God, and then to extend their arms as if brandishing the sword of the Spirit. The participants were told to hold out their hands and imagine themselves as being lifted up in their hands.

Fifth, we protest that this service caused grief to many commissioners and guests of the Assembly. The conduct and content of the service have generated great concern among many members of the PCA that such events could ever occur in this denomination.

Sixth, we protest that this concept of Concert of Prayer is being promoted throughout the Church. The book, *Concert of Prayer*, contains the following quote: “Since a major aspect of Jesus’ ministry to the unreached involved the casting out of demons, the healing of the lame and the deaf and the blind, the raising of the dead, and many other miracles, ask God to give His Church worldwide whatever signs and wonders are needed to confirm the Word before an unbelieving world.”

We are grieved by what we perceive to be the drift of our beloved denomination, as she drifts away from us. We respectfully call upon the Assembly to repent and to return to the faith of our fathers.

There were 126 protesters out of 1220 commissioners. Interestingly, even though there were more than twice as many teaching elders (818) as ruling elders (402 plus 22 alternates) at the Assembly, more ruling elders (64) signed the protest than did ministers (62).

The Assembly responded by expressing great grief to those who were offended. However, the court defended itself by stating that “there has been no cause for the General Assembly to be indicted as to sin in this case. While there may be differences in style, culture, or format which for some are uncomfortable, we believe it is too much to charge the whole of the Wednesday night service as being unbiblical or sinful.” Furthermore, “We do not in any way mean to defend either the Concert of Prayer movement, nor everything included within the context of the Wednesday night service. We would point out that the General Assembly has in times past (and even at this present Assembly) invited fellow believers to preach or lead us in worship who are not in

22. The preceding four paragraphs are reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 512f. See the sidebar, “Dramatic Productions at Canyon Creek: Your Benevolence Dollars at Work,” for examples of the drama scripts.

23. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 513.

complete conformity with our Standards. This practice has never been interpreted as an official endorsement by the PCA of either the whole of the theology or specific movements or organizations as represented by them.”²⁴

SHALL WE DANCE?

The 1991 Assembly was hosted by Briarwood Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, Alabama. Women in that congregation had developed a ballet ministry, which included the use of dancing girls on occasion during public worship. In an interview with a local Birmingham newspaper, Senior Pastor Dr. Frank Barker stated that the employment of dancing during public worship would probably be one of the most controversial aspects of the General Assembly. At the Sunday evening worship service, liturgical ballet was offered as part of the worship. Perhaps even more inflammatory were the remarks by the guest speaker—Steve Brown, a well-known pastor and seminary professor—who attacked anyone who would dare oppose this display of the young female dancers.

You know, of course, John Calvin rolled over in his grave this evening. We simply don’t dance in Presbyterian services. I was praying for you guys while the dancers were dancing. And I said, “Lord, is this proper?” And the Lord said (Now we Reformed people don’t believe the Lord speaks anymore, but it sounded like him. Maybe it was Rich Little, I don’t know.) Lord said, “I really like it—a lot.” What a magnificent way to praise God! And if you were not moved, if you were not deeply touched, if you were not moved spiritually, you’re insensitive to the Spirit of God.

That Sunday evening service had been arranged under the auspices of the General Assembly Arrangements Committee. A motion from the floor sought to pour oil on troubled waters. It read: “Until such time as there is greater unanimity within the PCA re. worship, local arrangements committees are encouraged to include in their Assembly worship services only those elements outlined in the Directory of Worship.” This motion was defeated, 308–384. Fifty-five commissioners asked that their affirmative votes be recorded on the lost motion.

At the close of the Assembly, the attempt to protest the Sunday evening service was ruled out of order, based on the fact that that service had occurred prior to the actual convening of the Assembly. (The Sunday evening service had been listed in the Commissioners’ Handbook as being part of the Assembly’s agenda.)²⁵

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Also at the 1991 Assembly, there was a patriotic worship service in celebration of the Allied victory over Iraq in Desert Storm. The operation’s chief military chaplain was a PCA minister, who helped lead the service. A protest was lodged, as follows:

We the undersigned do protest the patriotic service, which included a pledge of allegiance which was made to a particular nation; that that pledge of allegiance was improper for the Church to make; that there are members of the Assembly and denomination who are not citizens of the United States of America; and that “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” was sung (which is not a Christian song and which was written in support of what many feel was an unjust war against a sovereign nation).²⁶

MNA MACHINATIONS

What we have seen is that there were conscious efforts at the General Assembly meetings to push the envelope, so to speak—to foster a progressive approach to worship that was, at the same time, a celebration of plurality and hence a denial of uniformity. It is not so much that denominational bureaucrats were trying to dictate to all PCA churches that they must engage in “contemporary” worship. Rather, the point was to give expression to this new way of worship and ensure that the attitude of the PCA would remain that of “live and let live,” rather than one in which there would be strict enforcement of the official doctrine of worship enunciated in the Church’s Constitution.

An overture had been sent up to the 1991 Assembly from Eastern Carolina Presbytery asking the court to appoint a committee to study whether liturgical dance and drama are consistent with the PCA’s doctrine of worship. The Bills & Overtures Committee that year reported a favorable recommendation, noting the “great controversy and much consternation” which such practices have caused throughout the PCA; the fact that some mission churches under Mission to North

24. Smith, pp. 513–15.

25. The material in this section on dancing was reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 515f. The source for the lengthy quotation of Steve Brown’s remarks is David C. Lachman, “Reflections on the Nineteenth General Assembly of the PCA,” *Presbyterian Advocate* (July–August and September 1991), p. 2.

26. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 516.

America (MNA) sponsorship “have regularly used drama as part of the worship”; and that the dramatic play at Sabbath morning worship at the 1989 Assembly “was vigorously protested.” This recommendation, which came late in the 1991 Assembly, was postponed until the next year.

However, the 1992 Assembly defeated a motion to answer this overture in the affirmative. Aiding its defeat was the information that the MNA Committee had, although without General Assembly authorization, appointed a task force on worship. The Assembly commended the MNA Committee for “the caliber and balance of the task force assembled.” The MNA Committee was to make this study available to people “upon request and at their expense after approval by the General Assembly.” The task force was comprised of more than three dozen people, including several women. At least one of the participants was from a liberal Methodist denomination.²⁷

THE INNOVATORS SEEKING A CONSENSUS

In 1994, various denominational leaders in the PCA set forth *A Proposed Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America (PSI)*. This booklet attempted to reach a consensus by which those across the theological spectrum of the denomination could live with each other in peace. The chapters covered Scripture and Hermeneutics, Subscription to Doctrinal Standards, Theological Reflection, Church Polity, Worship, Church Discipline, and Mission. The breadth of topics demonstrates that the internecine theological war had many aspects, and also shows the crucial part played by the doctrine and practice of worship.

With respect to “Worship,” *PSI* professed its allegiance to the Calvinistic Reformation.

As Presbyterians, we are the grateful heirs of the Reformed tradition, which has clearly based its faith and practice on the Word of God alone. In particular, the Protestant reformers modified and sanctified the worship of God in their day to conform to the pattern of biblical, apostolic worship. In this respect, we believe our tradition still provides a model for true, spiritual

worship. As we affirm our past, we are eager to live out these same principles in today’s world. In order to do this carefully and fruitfully, especially when there are differences in the Church, we would always return to the first principle of our Reformation forefathers: *Sola Scriptura*, the Word of God alone.

However, the document controversially maintained a three-fold distinction, among “elements,” “circumstances,” and “expressions” of worship. It also spoke of what it called “somewhat [!] controversial” practices of worship, “such as the use of drama, dance, musical instruments and vocalists, the lifting or clapping of hands, the use of women in liturgical leadership, and the use of various forms of art.”

Blue Banner Books, the publishing arm of First Presbyterian Church, Rowlett, Texas, published a response to this proposal. With regard to *PSI*’s perspective on worship, concern was expressed that

worship elements (and expressions) are being legitimized on the basis of the principle of their not being “specifically prohibited.” This, of course, is essentially the Catholic/Lutheran/Anglican position; and, is a complete reversal from the fine statements found in the opening paragraphs of this chapter. We are, quite frankly, at a loss to comprehend how the author(s) could subscribe to the regulative principle of worship, and then two pages later in essence deny it. If someone were writing a parody of a “loose” theological position (or the state of theological and intellectual reflection in today’s church), he could hardly do better than simply to quote from the document under consideration.

Noting, with gratitude, “the humble respect expressed [by *PSI*] for the Church’s unity,” the critique declared:

We trust that this desire may represent a change from what has occurred in the past, in which General Assembly Arrangements Committees have felt free to impose bizarre worship practices upon the entire Assembly while knowing full well that that imposition would engender resentment and cause heartache for many of the commissioners. We trust that this also represents a mature view of the Church as being an organic whole, in which things that happen in one congregation are seen as affecting all of us (and thus, potentially, causing concern throughout the entire denomination). And, we trust that this principle of charity would inform PCA worship practices from now on.²⁸

27. The previous two paragraphs were reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 516.

28. Frank J. Smith, “Worship,” in Christopher Coldwell, ed., *Answers to PCA Consensus: An Analysis of A Proposed Statement of Identity for the Presbyterian Church in America* (Dallas, Tex.: Blue Banner Books, 1994).

The *PSI* illustrates the ongoing reality of liturgical diversity throughout the denomination, and how that lack of uniformity was fostered by prominent churchmen, including some in the denominational bureaucracy.

THE BUREAUCRATS WERE AT IT AGAIN

In 1995, the unsettled state regarding worship led to the scheduling of a pre-Assembly “discussion” on worship. However, the way in which the speakers were chosen generated controversy. There had been an attempt by certain interested parties to schedule a genuine debate which would have featured two seminary professors, one representing an avant garde approach (John Frame), the other a traditional viewpoint (T. David Gordon). Professor Frame declined to accept the invitation to debate Dr. Gordon. Then, the person in charge of pre-Assembly seminars decided to schedule a totally different format for discussion. The new event left Dr. Gordon being “uninvited” to speak; among the three speakers who did lead the “discussion” was Professor Frame.²⁹

NEW SONG-SALT LAKE

Meanwhile, MNA continued its novel ways. In 1998, in an effort to reach “baby busters,” an MNA church plant, New Song-Salt Lake, employed styles of worship and forms which varied from what most traditional Presbyterians would be familiar with.

Alternative rock and roll music was one of the styles utilized in public worship. One of the songs sung by the worship team was entitled “Jesus Freak”, with the following lyrics: “What will people do if they know that I’m a Jesus freak? // What will people do if they know that it’s true? // I don’t really care if they label me a Jesus freak, // There is no disguising the truth.”

The medium of video was also used. Video clips from secular movies, such as *Forrest Gump* and *Soul Food*, were shown. The organizing pastor also did man-in-the-street interviews with a video camera, which he then showed during public worship.

A video of the “Jesus Freak” song and the video of the man-in-the-street interviews (*What Makes You Happy?*) were on New Song’s website. A ten-minute video entitled *What’s at Stake in the West*, produced by Presbyterian Media Productions, Inc. (PMP), showed the “Jesus Freak” video and portions of the other. Numerous copies of *What’s at Stake in the West* were distributed throughout the denomination.³⁰

THE JASON WALLACE STORY

About the time of the New Song-Salt Lake saga, there was another story related to it. A young man, Jason Wallace, was in the process of being sent by Central Georgia Presbytery to do church planting in Utah. The state of Utah was outside the bounds of any PCA presbytery, and therefore any presbytery could engage in ministry within one of those destitute parts of the Church.

However, Lewis Ruff objected to Mr. Wallace coming onto the field—not because the young ordinand wanted to engage in traditional worship, but because of his opposition to the type of worship being offered at many of the MNA church plants in the West.

Northern California Presbytery petitioned the General Assembly to extend its boundaries in order to include most of Nevada and all of Utah. Central Georgia fought back. The end result was that the Assembly declined at that time to allow Northern California to exercise total control over the Beehive State.

Nevertheless, Mr. Wallace decided that he would have been in an untenable position if he had remained in the PCA. He thereupon joined and was ordained by the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Through his efforts, the OPC has had a fruitful ministry in Utah.³¹

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF WORSHIP AT THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

In 1980, the Assembly had approved the following motion: “That presbyteries and not the four major committees be responsible for worship services at future General Assemblies on a regular rotating basis.” However, in 2002, the Assembly followed its permanent Administrative Committee’s recommendation that the Committee “through the local Host Committee be responsible for all services at General Assembly.” Though not listed in the grounds justifying the change, heard on the floor was the notion that planning for said worship services could take a long time.³²

But, of course, the idea that it might take a year or two to plan a worship service is ridiculous—unless the service has turned into a show or a big production. This

29. This paragraph is reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 518.

30. Much of the material in this section is reproduced essentially verbatim from *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (Spring 1998).

31. See “The Saga of Jason Wallace” and related articles, including editorials “Sympathy for New Song-Salt Lake” and “Conscience Bound,” in *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 4, no. 2 (Spring 1998).

32. *M8GA* (1980), p. 121; *M30GA* (2003), p. 294.

professionalization of the Assembly's worship services—letting the “experts” be in charge, rather than allowing the grass roots as manifest in the smaller presbyteries of the PCA to lead in at least some of the worship services—was telling with respect to how the Assembly viewed worship. It also meant that because the Assemblies would always be hosted by presbyteries in urban areas, the type of worship offered would skew toward the *avant garde*. And moreover, PCA worship, rather than being informed by a traditional Presbyterian understanding, would further diverge from the Westminster Standards, helping to reinforce the rift between those who were faithful Presbyterians and those who were liturgical innovators.³³

WORSHIP DIVERSITY AMONG CONGREGATIONS

The discussions, debates, and controversies at the denominational level were reflective of the diversity locally. But how diverse could it get?

A BASEBALL SERVICE

On August 23, 1998, the worship service at Parkview Church of Lilburn, Georgia, featured a baseball theme.³⁴

33. Shortly after the 2023 General Assembly, in an article entitled “Music at the GA and the PCA (Reformation 21, July 3, 2023), Terry Johnson lamented the state of worship in the PCA as illustrated by the worship offered at the denomination's highest court.

Does the PCA in general understand the role of music in the worship of the Reformed Church? The answer must be no if our annual experience at the General Assembly gives any indication. What the Reformation revived was the *congregational* singing of the patristic church. The medieval church had musical instruments and choirs. They provided the music. Congregations sat mute as the ‘professionals’ performed. The Reformers rightly restored the singing of the *congregation* whether hymns (Lutherans) or psalms (Reformed) as one of five essential elements in the ordinary worship of the church. It was elevated to this place of prominence along with the reading and preaching of Scripture, prayer, and the administration of the sacraments. Congregational singing even takes on confessional status in the Westminster standards (*WCF XXI.5; Directory for the Public Worship of God*, “Of Singing of Psalms).

Yet year in and year out we assemble, 3000 strong, only to have the musicians, vocalists, and choirs overwhelm the gathered congregation. Once again, this year, most of the time in our official services it was impossible to hear one's own voice, never mind those of the surrounding multitude. The high level of skill and prodigious efforts made by all of the performers is obvious. Their proper function, less so.

34. “Stepping Up to the Plate: PCA Church Uses Baseball and Hot Dogs to Attract People to Its New Season,” *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 4, no. 3 (Summer 1998).

35. *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (Fall 1998).

36. *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (Winter 1999).

News of this event resulted in reaction by Ascension Presbytery, located in western Pennsylvania and northeastern Ohio. That court adopted a communication to North Georgia Presbytery which noted that the Parkview baseball service “violates the Biblical Regulative Principle of worship, and... seems to make a mockery of true worship and proper observance of the Lord's Day.” The communique stated that the Presbytery voted 1) “to send a letter to North Georgia asking if they had inquired into this service relative to its conformity to the regulative principle and, if so, if they would be willing to share what they found; 2) to direct the Clerk to follow up by telephone if he does not hear from the North Georgia Presbytery in one month; and 3) to circulate any response from North Georgia Presbytery to Ascension Presbytery within a week after it is received.”³⁵

The North Georgia stated clerk responded to Ascension's stated clerk as follows:

I am in receipt of your letter, dated November 10, 1998, to me. I have discussed your letter with the Rev. Mr. Jon Adams, Parkview Church's pastor. My notification was the first knowledge he had that Parkview Church was the subject of discussion and action by your Presbytery. I am appalled that your court would take such action without even contacting Parkview's pastor or other church leaders.

Regarding the August 23rd service, Parkview attempted to combine (1) a Vision Awareness, (2) a call to commit to using spiritual gifts, “Step Up to the Plate”, and (3) morning worship. The juices got rolling in planning (1) and (2) and spilled over into (3). Hindsight makes it clear that this was unwise and will not be repeated.

I know and have high respect for the Rev. Mr. Adams and the officers and members of Parkview Church. I do not share your Presbytery's concern about Parkview Church's worship practices; but to allay any fears you may have, the Session has prepared this statement: “We desire that our congregation's worship of God be marked by fidelity to Holy Scripture, informed by the Westminster Standards and the ‘Directory of Worship’ of our denomination's Book of Church Order (BOCO). Our Sunday morning worship services normally are planned in accordance with the regulative principles of Reformed worship as interpreted by BOCO, and we sincerely regret any confusion or offense caused by insufficient attention to these guidelines on August 23rd.”³⁶

Despite the (mild) apology from the Parkview Session,

questions remain. No matter how many creative juices were flowing, how in the world could anyone with any understanding of public worship allow this baseball service to take place? And what exactly did the Session mean by its commitment to the regulative principle?

“IT’S SHOW TIME AT SPANISH RIVER CHURCH”

The entertainment-oriented nature of the worship at Spanish River Church, Boca Raton, Florida, was documented in a July 1999 article in the local newspaper. Entitled “New 1,500-seat Worship Center Opens at Spanish River,” the article says,

Cue the lights, bring up the sound, and roll the videotape: It’s show time at Spanish River Church, where a brand-new, multi-million dollar worship center has turned Sunday services into entertainment extravaganzas.

Services at the 30-year-old Presbyterian church have long included dramatic interpretation, soaring music and special videos to bring the Gospel to life. Now, in the \$9.3 million worship center that opened this week, the Gospel is larger than life, presented with a fully rigged, professional-quality theatrical stage that includes massive video screens and state-of-the-art lighting, sound and computer graphics. It takes a crew of up to a dozen technicians to run it all, working from a spacious new control booth high above the congregation.

The article continues:

Like many churches, Spanish River finds it necessary to use new ways of presenting the ancient message of the Christian faith. “You have to think about what people are used to,” said... the church’s business manager and director of its men’s ministry. “People are used to high-energy, multi-media presentations of information, he said, so “we try to take the message of the Gospel and present it in those ways.”

[The] director of music and programming, demonstrated that approach with a video created by the church’s Tech Team. The team videotaped a drive through Mizner Park in Boca Raton and down Federal Highway into Fort Lauderdale, speeding up the tape to show frantically traveling cars and pedestrians. The tape played on the two 12-by-16 foot rear-projection video screens placed on either side of the stage, while “Through the Noise,” a song by the Christian

rock band Truth, blared through speakers throughout the facility.

The point... was “how to live a Christian life in a world that continually bombards us with other stuff.”³⁷

WHAT IS THE PCA WORSHIP EXPERIENCE TODAY?

It is arguable that there has been a greater awareness of a Reformed approach to worship since the founding of the PCA in 1973—though that approach is more Continental (with liturgies and assurances of pardon and so forth) than Scottish. This is a point that was made by Brad Isbell, a ruling elder at Covenant Presbyterian Church, Oak Ridge, Tennessee, in a 2022 blog post.³⁸

He began his piece by stating:

The state of worship in the Presbyterian Church in America is arguably better than it has ever been, at least as far as *liturgy* goes. More churches now use recognizably Reformed liturgies than at any point in the denomination’s history. These are liturgies that include the biblical elements of worship—they are not just the standard evangelical format of “30 minutes of singing/30 minutes of preaching.”

However, at the same time, he cautioned about a lack of

the hard-to-define (but essential) qualities of reverence and awe. What may be trending is leadership of worship that does not comport with or support presbyterian polity. And what may be chipping away at the foundations of proper worship are errant and novel practices, mostly regarding the Lord’s Supper.

He listed several items of “tangible and intangible things which have been added to liturgies, to the

37. Kate McClare, “New 1,500-seat Worship Center Opens at Spanish River,” *Boca Raton (Fla.) News*, July 17, 1999; quoted in Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 549. Another example of such excess in PCA worship involved a multimedia nativity celebration, an annual event at Ponte Vedra Presbyterian Church, located in Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida, just south of Jacksonville. Even though this event is not a worship service *per se*, nevertheless, worship is clearly being offered, which is why we have included this account as another example of PCA worship. See “Thousands Take Tour at PCA Nativity Scene Florida Church Puts on Multi-Media Production,” and “Secular Press Covers ‘A Bethlehem Visit’ Local Newspapers Report that Spectators Kneel Before ‘Holy Family’ Five-Month-Old Girl Among Those Portraying the Baby Jesus,” *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 7, no. 1 (January-February 2001), pp. 10–11.

38. Brad Isbell, “Worship, Polity, & the PCA,” *pcapolity.com* (January 24, 2022).

detriment of simple, biblical, Spirit-and-truth Reformed worship.”

For example, there is “an overly horizontal, man-centered ethos” that is “reflected in informal or casual approaches to the service, which could include announcements or presentations that break up the dialogical-biblical flow and tone of the service.” Possible foci of these interruptions might include “promotional pitches complete with video presentations or distribution of materials. Fellowship times in the middle of the service (sometimes called ‘passing of the peace’ or even ‘halftime’) might succeed in establishing a familiar or homey feel even as they distract from the holy purpose of worship.” He also listed children’s activities or the departure of the children during the service, as well as “showy musical performances, loud or complex musical accompaniment or leadership . . . , or other inappropriate visual elements.” Also mentioned were “the eclectic additions of the Anglican-attraction, which includes complicated and variable clerical garb and vestments, crossings, bowing at prescribed times, or turning to face a cross, bible, or procession.”

Elder Isbell lamented a number of omissions in present-day PCA worship, including the lessened frequency of the long pastoral prayer, as well as the loss of the “second” or evening service. He wrote: “All is not well in the way worship is conducted in the PCA”; and added: “Church members who visit PCA churches across the country often come home stunned and confused by the variations they see.”

PRACTICES, PARTICIPANTS, AND SETTINGS

As we think about PCA worship today, let’s consider three angles: the practices or elements of worship; the participants; and the settings, both in terms of space and time.

PRACTICES

Worship Music

The musical repertoire continues to be variegated across

39. Following an investigation by South Florida Presbytery of a woman preaching, the CrossBridge congregations in Pinecrest, Brickell, and Homestead voted in June 2023 to leave the PCA and to join the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), which allows for female ministers. The Key Biscayne congregation was slated to vote in August 2023 as to whether to make a similar move. John Pacenti, “Women in the Pulpit? Key Biscayne Church May Be Caught in the Crosshairs,” *Key Biscayne (Fla.) Independent* (July 10, 2023). Nevertheless, the key point in this context is that there was no official Presbytery investigation of the practice of baptism, though initial inquiries were submitted to the leadership of CrossBridge.

the PCA. In terms of instrumentation, it ranges from simple accompaniment (such as organ and/or piano) to all kinds of instruments and ensembles. It appears that there is presently no PCA congregation that engages habitually in unaccompanied singing.

With respect to the content of worship song, it appears that no PCA congregation practices exclusive psalmody. At the same time, there has been an increase in Psalmody, whether through a psalter (such as the *Trinity Psalter* or *The Book of Psalms for Singing* or *The Book of Psalms for Worship*), the *Trinity Hymnal*, or the newer *Trinity Psalter Hymnal*. On the other hand, there are many PCA congregations that practice exclusive hymnody.

Many congregations employ old-style tunes. Increasingly, particularly in urban areas, congregations are utilizing more contemporary tunes, such as exemplified by Indelible Grace, a Nashville-based group affiliated with the PCA’s agency focused on serving college campuses, Reformed University Fellowship (RUF).

Baptism

One would think that there would be no great diversity on the matter of baptism. Don’t all Presbyterians insist on baptizing infants and baptizing by sprinkling or pouring? Well, actually, no.

Crossbridge Church, which is a network of churches with several congregations in South Florida, including ones in Key Biscayne, Pinecrest, Brickell, and Homestead, is one example where people are baptized by immersion. A video on the church’s website shows a series of baptisms in the ocean, with the officiants doing the dunking shouting and raising their hands as the one being baptized comes up from the water. There is no indication that the sacrament was accompanied by the preaching of the Word or as part of a service of worship. Nor was there any indication that these baptisms were tied to church membership and the taking of membership vows. It appears that the ritual is a standalone event while folks are gathered in swimwear on the beach. The website advises would-be candidates for baptism: “Don’t worry about what to bring for the water baptism. Our team is prepared with everything you need including a Baptism t-shirt you get to keep.”³⁹

It also bears noting that there have been PCA congregations which perform infant dedications on behalf of parents who do not wish to have their babies baptized. One such example is First Presbyterian Church, Chattanooga, Tennessee. As reported in the press:

The Session of the prominent PCA congregation

proclaimed that it “prefers and promotes infant baptism,” but that “the practice of infant dedication is not intended to be a sacrament, nor any substitute therefor.” The elders also stated: “A careful search of scripture reveals no evidence that dedication of infants is not permitted in worship services. The practice of dedication of infants is illustrated in the Old Testament scriptures in the cases of Samuel and Samson. Jesus, Himself, when an infant, was presented to the Lord in the temple by his parents, as prescribed in the law of the Lord. Luke 2:22,23.

“Finally, BCO 47–6 states, ‘The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship, but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His church a large measure of liberty in this matter.’ And BCO 47–9 lists the proper elements of worship service and includes... ‘on special occasions taking oaths.’”

The Session resolved that, in its judgment, “infant dedication is not prohibited and is therefore permitted by Scripture.”⁴⁰

Communion

But what about the Lord’s Supper? Surely Presbyterians can agree how to observe that holy meal! Well, actually, no.

Though the Westminster Standards prescribe a duty to fence the table, there are PCA churches which, in essence, practice open communion, inviting anyone who wishes to participate to do so, or, at least, not enunciating that only those who have received valid Trinitarian baptism and who presently have membership in some evangelical church should partake.

There are PCA churches in which the communicants are standing rather than sitting for the meal.

And there are PCA churches that practice intinction, which is dipping the bread into the wine rather than eating the bread and drinking the wine as separate actions. This practice of intinction, which is a Roman Catholic practice, has even been utilized at General Assembly. Attempts to prohibit that practice at the Assembly communion services were unsuccessful, and an attempt to make explicit what is implicit in the PCA *Book of Church Order*, viz., a prohibition of intinction, failed to garner the two-thirds supermajority of the votes by the presbyteries.⁴¹

PARTICIPANTS

Women Leading in Worship

In the PCA, there have been examples of women having

a leadership role in worship, including, reading Scripture, leading in prayer, and even preaching.

In the words of Brad Isbell,

the most glaring disorderly trend in PCA worship is a matter of *who*—who leads worship. There are PCA churches across the denomination where nearly every portion of the worship service (except for the sermon and benediction) is led by unordained persons—men, women, children, and young people who are not officers of the church. For some reason, these unordained persons are usually women. One assumes that many officers in the PCA have decided that women in the churches suffer from a lack of regard, visibility, and inclusion. And these officers and ministers have decided that assigning large portions of worship leadership to them is a way to remedy their oppression and exclusion.⁴²

The phenomenon observed by Elder Isbell is not a new one. In 1999, there was the matter of John Wood and the congregation he pastored, Cedar Springs Presbyterian Church, Knoxville, Tennessee. Despite attempts to bring Mr. Wood to trial for his views of believing in women preaching, and the role he played in having a woman deliver two messages during public worship services, the Standing Judicial Commission effectively ran interference and declined to pursue the matter, while at the same time, noting that the woman had “crossed a line” in what she had done in public worship. Cedar Springs Church ended up leaving the PCA and joining the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC), a denomination that ordains women to all ecclesiastical offices.⁴³

As early as 2001, a woman spoke in chapel at Covenant Theological Seminary, delivering a message

40. “TVP [Tennessee Valley Presbytery] Supports Practice of Infant Dedications at First Presbyterian Church of Chattanooga,” *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 6, no. 5 (September–October 2000), p. 6.

41. The 2012 General Assembly voted, by a margin of 14 votes, to approve the amendment, but that amendment was then defeated by the presbyteries, 23–45. Tim LeCroy, “Thoughts on 40th General Assembly, Part Four: Intinction,” *Vita pastoralis* (website; June 29, 2012); *M41GA* (2013), pp. 116f.

42. Isbell, “Worship, Polity, & the PCA.” This Tennessee ruling elder went on to argue that the relinquishing of leadership in worship by the presbyters undermines their authority as a whole.

43. Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, pp. 445–447, 527; “SJC Declines to Proceed to Trial in John Wood Matter: Commission rules that woman ‘crossed the line’ in her messages in public worship,” *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 6 no. 5 (September–October 2000), p. 1. See also “PCA Korean Church Responds to Concern over Woman Preaching and Her Charismatic Teaching: Prominent Congregation Vows Not to Allow This to Happen Again,” Vol. 6 no. 5 (September–October 2000), p. 7.

that had the classic earmarks of a sermon of explanation and application.⁴⁴ There has been more recent controversy in a similar vein at Covenant College, where women have addressed students during chapel services.

Historically, there has been pushback with regard to female leadership in worship services. For instance, the 1997 General Assembly took exception to the minutes of Southern Florida Presbytery because the “worship service for the purpose of organizing a church and installing its pastor included a lady who ‘read passages of Scripture’ prior to the sermon.” This exception was approved after vigorous debate on the floor. The next year, Southern Florida asked for the rationale for this exception being taken to its minutes. On motion from the floor, the Assembly referred the Presbytery “to 1 Corinthians 14:34; 1 Timothy 2:11–15; *Westminster Larger Catechism* Questions 155–159.”⁴⁵

More recently, the 2023 General Assembly cited Metro New York Presbytery to appear before the Standing Judicial Commission to give answer for not dealing with the serious irregularities in one of its congregations, Trinity Presbyterian Church of Mt. Kisco, New York, which has on several occasions had lay people and

a female Episcopalian minister to deliver the message during Sunday morning worship.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, despite these actions by the General Assembly, having women read Scripture and lead in corporate prayer in worship services is not unheard of in the PCA. Indeed, in 1999, the Assembly rejected an overture that the Directory for Worship be amended to state unambiguously that only men may read Scripture in public worship.⁴⁷

Children’s Worship

Presbyterianism, historically, would expect that every member of the covenant community, including young children, would worship together, and that therefore the worship practices for everyone is the same unless otherwise regulated by Scripture (space constraints disallow a discussion of the diversity of views surrounding paedocommunion at this point). However, many PCA churches reject that position, and implement worship designed specifically for children.

One such congregation is Perimeter Church, located in the Atlanta suburb of Johns Creek, Georgia, long known for its cutting-edge approach. Perimeter’s website advertises Kids Quest, which is the church’s “high-energy children’s worship service for kids ages kindergarten through fifth grade.” The website video shows children jumping around and having a really fun time.⁴⁸

Choirs and Soloists

Many times, having a church choir is regarded as essential for “traditional” Presbyterian worship. Fifty years ago, many PCA churches boasted choirs, often dressed in special robes, and would often feature special music sung by a soloist. That reality is still true today.⁴⁹

At the same time, there are at least some PCA congregations that embrace the historic Presbyterian position of rejecting special choirs, maintaining instead the view that the congregation is the choir, consisting of believers all of whom exercise their priesthood.⁵⁰

Worship Teams

Many PCA churches have moved from having choirs to employing worship teams. Though ostensibly they are to lead the congregation in singing, the reality is that many times they simply dominate the singing, and furthermore, that as a result of the team’s dominance, as well as the lack of familiarity with what is being sung, congregational singing morphs into congregational spectating.

44. Mark Rooze, “Covenant Seminary Shrouds Itself in Mystery: St. Louis School Refuses to Release Audio Tapes of Woman’s Chapel Message,” *Presbyterian & Reformed News*, Vol. 7 no. 2 (March–April 2001), pp. 1–2.

45. Much of this paragraph is reproduced essentially verbatim from Smith, *The History of the Presbyterian Church in America*, p. 527.

46. Matt Fender, “Safeguarding Our Unity: RPR’s Citation of a Woman Preaching,” *pcapolity.com* (June 9, 2023).

47. *M27GA*, pp. 212–213.

48. <https://www.perimeter.org/pages/worship/kidsquest-children-s-worship/>.

49. Examples include Trinity Presbyterian Church, Montgomery, Alabama (<https://trinitypca.org/worship/music/adult-choirs/>); Granada Presbyterian Church, Coral Gables, Florida (<https://granadachurch.com/services/>); Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2457842724314214>; <https://crpc.org/choir/>); Park Road Presbyterian Church, Hollywood, Florida (<https://parkroadpres.org/music-ministry/>); Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois (<https://www.gracepres.org/worship/>); First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, Mississippi (<https://fpcjackson.org/church-life/adults/music/>); Christ Covenant Church, Matthews, North Carolina (<https://christcovenant.org/ministries/worship-music/>); Westminster Presbyterian Church, Lancaster, Pennsylvania (<https://westpca.com/music/>); Park Cities Presbyterian Church, Dallas, Texas (<https://pcpc.org/music/choirs/>).

50. For the argument against the use of choirs in worship, see Cliff Blair, “The Few on behalf of the Many: An Examination of Choirs in the Light of Scripture, Church History, and Practical Theology,” in *The Worship of God: Reformed Concepts of Biblical Worship*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2005), pp. 219–35.

SETTINGS

Buildings

Generally speaking, there is no one appropriate architectural style for church buildings. Churches may quite properly meet in storefronts or houses or old broom factories that are repurposed for worship.

However, sometimes there are architectural decisions made that reflect a wrong understanding of worship.

Atmosphere

Most PCA churches would, per the implication of Acts 20:7, have normal lighting. However, there are many PCA places of worship that are deliberately darkened so that a spotlight can be shined upon “performers” on a “stage.”

Images of Christ

Numerous PCA churches, from big-city churches to small-town and rural congregations, have sported pictures of Christ in their sanctuaries, especially at the front above the pulpit. To name just a few: Westminster Presbyterian, Atlanta, Ga.; First Presbyterian, Stamps, Ark.; Hazelwood Presbyterian, Waynesville, N.C.; Second Presbyterian, Greenville, S.C.; McIlwain Memorial Presbyterian, Pensacola, Fla.; Seacrest Blvd. Presbyterian, Delray Beach, Fla. At least one church, Key Biscayne Presbyterian (i.e., CrossBridge), Miami, Fla., has used slides that depict Jesus kneeling and washing the disciples’ feet and the Last Supper. This list exhibits simply a sampler of the PCA churches that violate the second commandment in their worship spaces and services.

Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., founded by D. James Kennedy of Evangelism Explosion fame, goes one step further: on the outside of its building is a tall statue of Christ, perhaps resembling (for some onlookers) a Catholic church.

Times and Days

Presbyterians have been known to be staunch Sabbatharians. The Westminster Standards have perhaps the most extensive treatment and strict understanding of the Sabbath of any set of confessional documents.

In the early days of the PCA, the General Assembly emphasized its commitment to keeping the Sabbath day holy. However, as noted in a 2016 article in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, the PCA’s commitment to the fourth commandment has grown cold.⁵¹

One manifestation of a failure to regard the entire Lord’s Day as being sacred, is the fact that relatively few PCA congregations today have two worship services bookending the Sabbath. Historically, one could tell a

Bible-believing church from a liberal one by means of noting whether it had an evening service or not. As documented recently, only about 12% of PCA congregations regularly gather for worship morning and evening.⁵²

Concomitant with a lack of Sabbath keeping is a tendency to replace God’s day with days of men’s own choosing. Accordingly, there are many PCA congregations that observe Christmas and Easter, and many that also observe Maundy Thursday and/or Good Friday, and other such days. Traditional Presbyterianism has always rejected the observance of manmade holy days. The fact that there are many PCA congregations embracing such unauthorized commemorations is another example of pluriformity rather than uniformity with respect to matters of worship.

Communion Seasons

Another example of variety today in the PCA has to do with the frequency of the sacrament of communion. Increasingly, there has been a move toward more frequent observance, including, in a number of cases, weekly communion. The practice of frequent communion, particularly on a weekly basis, is at odds with the historic Presbyterian emphasis on having communion seasons with preparation services and a thanksgiving service after the sacramental service itself.⁵³

WORSHIP SURVEY

In 2023, two Westminster Theological Seminary students conducted a survey of church leaders in NAPARC denominations. The research demonstrated a wide variety of practice among NAPARC denominations, and particularly within the PCA. Among the matters covered were the following: the Lord’s Supper (wine or grape juice or both?; frequency of observance); use of creeds, confessions, and catechisms; prayers (use of written); ministerial garb; use of screens; liturgical ceremonies; religious images; and music (content of worship song; instrumentation).⁵⁴

51. Chris Coldwell, “On Dropping the Subject Again,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 12 (2016): 40–99.

52. Justin Andrusk and Matthew Lee, “Morning & Evening in the PCA,” *pcapolicy.com* (August 22, 2023).

53. Cf. Gregory David Soderberg, *As Often As You Eat This Bread: Communion Frequency in English, Scottish, and Early American Churches* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2023); and see in this current issue, Ryan Speck, “Review: *As Often As You Eat This Bread: Communion Frequency in English, Scottish, and Early American Churches* by Gregory David Soderberg,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 19 (2023).

54. Robert Cone and Nicklaus Hart, *2023 NAPARC Worship Study: How We Worship* (MDiv Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary,

A SAVANNAH PERSPECTIVE

The Rev. Terry Johnson, a PCA minister, has served admirably for three decades at historic Independent Presbyterian Church, Savannah, Georgia. He has been a champion of “traditional” worship, including most notably with respect to the promotion of Psalm-singing. He spearheaded the overture from Central Georgia Presbytery to the 1992 General Assembly which called for the implementation of Psalmody, and the production of the *Trinity Psalter*, a words-only book of Psalm settings designed to encourage the singing of Psalms in churches practicing hymn-singing.

In 2017, he penned a piece that evaluated the state of worship in the PCA. He noted that a “quiet solemnity has characterized Puritan and Reformed worship” in which emotions “are powerfully moved, but they run deep, below the surface. We have sought to worship God with... ‘reverence and awe’... It was this consciously cultivated atmosphere of disciplined reverence that many of us found deeply satisfying, and more importantly, biblically balanced and sound. It was for this that many of us became Presbyterians.”

However, he went on to lament what took place at the General Assembly.

The worship services at General Assembly were quite different from what I am describing. They were novel, unlike the culture and practice of [the] Reformed church across the centuries and across the continents. They were also quite unlike anything practiced in 95–99% of our churches today, though not unlike General Assemblies of recent years. I began criticizing the worship services at General Assembly in 2003. I found the addition of contemporary forms, plus those forms that mirrored the entertainment industry, plus forms borrowed from charismatic and Pentecostal churches, unsettling. It is clear that those who over these years have sought to remake the worship culture of the PCA to a significant degree have succeeded. Though the services at General Assembly were uncomfortably different from historic norms, they seemed to be widely appreciated, even enthusiastically received by many. At least that was the case in the section in which I was sitting. The sensibilities regarding what is appropriate in worship

are changing in the PCA in ways that many of us find disconcerting.

Though wanting to be charitable towards those responsible for these services, he described the services as

contemporary with a dash of Pentecostalism minus tongues. The choirs’ performances, the gestures of those leading (arms thrust skyward, hands clapping overhead, hands waving back and forth, one leader literally jumping up and down), up-front leadership of three women, non-traditional instrumentation (drums, tambourines featured prominently), plus choir-dominated and leader-dominated congregational singing, were all outside the norms of Presbyterian practice over the past 400–500 years.

Pastor Johnson claimed that “the services were foreign to what our tradition has considered best, and to the regular practice of the vast majority of our churches today.” Despite “a superficial resemblance to the tradition,” nevertheless, “the overall impact was overwhelmingly novel, from the prelude all the way to the end, when we were instructed to hold out our hands to receive the benediction.”

My question is, why? Why all this novelty? Why are the organizers of these services not more concerned about their brethren of tender conscience for whom these innovations are a matter of great concern? Large numbers of commissioners have simply stopped attending General Assembly worship services. Should we not be seeking to feature generic Presbyterian services that are familiar, common, and beloved by the majority? Should we not seek strong and obvious lines of continuity with the past? There actually are those of us who, if we *had* to choose (which we’d rather not), would prefer eliminating all instrumentalism, eliminating the choir altogether and reducing the sung part of the service in half if we could have a simple service of Scripture reading, congregational singing of psalms and hymns, and expository preaching without the on-stage distractions. Call it the Zwingli option.

The Savannah minister implored: “Should we not seek to organize services that express the ethos and substance of the vast majority of our churches, even as they reflect the ethos and substance of historic Presbyterianism?” He argued: “Presbyterianism is characterized by both a distinctive theology and a distinctive worship. Doctrine and practice are interrelated and mutually dependent.

2023). Essentially half of the respondents were from the PCA. The authors came close to the ideal goal of 10% in terms of number of PCA respondents; even though they did not hit that number, nevertheless, their survey still gives a good flavor for what congregants are experiencing in PCA worship.

We would be advised not to allow our zeal for diversity of forms [to] undermine what for centuries has united us at the hour of worship.” He added:

I wish that 40 years ago when I joined the PCA that the denomination’s elder statesmen had raised their voices warning those of us who came into Presbyterianism from other traditions, be they Baptist (as in my case), Lutheran, Anglican, or Pentecostal, that it was not for us to remake the church in accord with our own background and preferences. I recall trying to persuade stuffy Anglicans and Presbyterians to loosen up and sing “Heavenly Father, I Appreciate You,” and “Father, I Adore You.” I might also have tried to import the altar calls and gospel songs of my childhood and youth. I wish that we all had been counseled to respect the regulated worship culture of international Calvinism and conform to it for at least a decade or two, so that we might learn to love its distinctive strengths. Too many of us thought we knew better and, as a result, all these years later we are drowning in the liturgical chaos we call the PCA.⁵⁵

THE VIEW FROM THE CANTERBURY TRAIL

One minister who responded to Dr. Johnson was William H. Smith, one of the original ministers of the PCA. During his career, he pastored significant congregations, including First Reformed Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and Westminster Presbyterian Church, Huntsville, Alabama. He became a theological editor for Great Commission Publications, the agency jointly owned by the PCA and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. He eventually abandoned Presbyterianism for Anglicanism.

He responded to Terry Johnson by saying that even if his wish for “elder statesmen” to instruct those entering the PCA four decades ago were fulfilled,

it would not have prevented what is occurring in the PCA. Why? Because many of the “elder statesmen” had been affected by Second Great Awakening revivalism. More than 40 years ago William Hill was writing Reformed Seminary graduates to determine whether they gave invitations in their worship services. More than 40 years ago many of the hymn “favorites” were not Psalms and historic hymns of faith but gospel songs. Nearly, if not more than 40 years ago, at the Pensacola Theological Institute Dr. Robert Strong gave in “invitation” to spite Al Martin who was also on the faculty that year

and expositing the Parable of the Sower. The “fathers” could never have agreed to instruct those coming into the PCA in a common form of worship.

In Smith’s eyes, “Mr. Johnson gave away his store when he wrote: I’m not saying that anything that was done was wrong or invalid per se. There are many ways to worship God.” Smith retorted:

If the guide is what is “best,” then worship becomes a matter of preference. Why must we choose what is best and by what criteria are we to judge it? If I don’t care [for] The Metropolitan Opera, why not allow me my preference for the Grand Old Opry? Isn’t [it] what[s] best for me?

Smith concluded: “Terry, I am sorry, but the worship issue was over before you ever entered the PCA.”⁵⁶

Four months prior to this blog post, he offered this analysis of the PCA and her worship:

Pastors, in consultation with their staffs and local congregational elders, do what they think best. If you visit churches in the PCA you never know what you are going to get. You can get churches that borrow heavily from the Book of Common Prayer (much of it incorporated into the old Presbyterian Book of Common Worship which was the liturgical standard taught in worship courses when I was a student at RTS-Jackson), Terry Johnson worship, Tim Keller worship, James Ward worship, Bill Hill (PEF) worship, and the list of personalities goes on. In the Jackson [, Mississippi], area you can visit a number of churches and get a different worship experience in each—First Presbyterian Church, Pear Orchard Presbyterian Church, Redeemer Presbyterian Church, Madison Heights Presbyterian Church, and more. Across the PCA you can find strict regulative principle worship (few), traditional worship, contemporary worship, black worship, near charismatic worship, blues worship, revivalistic worship complete with the invitation system, gospel-driven worship, and all sorts of blended worship. You can find ministers leading

55. Terry L. Johnson, “Worship in the PCA in 2017,” *The Aquila Report* (July 2, 2017).

56. William H. Smith, “It Was All Over before Terry Johnson Entered the PCA,” Just a Curmudgeon blog (July 5, 2017). Robert Strong was a minister who, though a strong conservative, never entered the PCA. Al Martin is a well-known Reformed Baptist preacher, most notably pastoring in northern New Jersey. William Hill was the founder of Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship (PEF), now called Reformed Evangelistic Fellowship (REF), one of the four organizations that formed A Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church.

worship in black Geneva gowns, suits with white shirts and ties, blazers and open collar shirts, polo shirts and sandals, khakis or jeans and sports shirts tucked in or out standing behind pulpits, sitting on stools, walking across an empty stage. You can find pulpits, baptismal fonts, and communion tables prominently displayed, or entirely hidden. You can sing Psalms and historic hymns, gospel hymns, praise and worship songs, accompanied by nothing, organs, pianos, orchestras, acoustic guitars, and rock bands. Depending on your worship principles, preferences, and personality, you can find the worship in a PCA church comfortable, compatible, challenging, relevant, irrelevant, or offensive.

There is a phrase I find that describes worship in the PCA: *liturgical chaos*.⁵⁷

INFLUENCES ON PCA WORSHIP IN THE TWENTIETH-FIRST CENTURY

We have earlier noted the impact of evangelicalism and pragmatism. That twin influence is still very influential. However, there are other perhaps more potent factors today.

For instance, sensualism, a movement which influenced the Presbyterian Church starting in the nineteenth century and continuing into the twentieth, has become even more pronounced. The stained glass windows have given way to strobe lights and video clips, and the organ music has faded away with loud rock music taking its place. The result is an overwhelming sensory experience.

The sensualism of yesteryear was largely tied to Romanticism. Today, it seems tied more directly to the approach advocated in Anglicanism, as part of a self-conscious motif of a mixture of ancient and modern practices which find their origin in man's creativity rather than God's express command. That affinity with Anglicanism also reflects an increasing imposition of liturgies.

Culture, too, plays a role, in at least three ways. One, there is a desire to conform to the prevailing culture so as to make an appeal to Gen-Xers and younger generations. Two, there is a desire to appeal to minority groups by means of employing styles with which they would

be familiar. And three, there is also the notion of the cultural mandate which purportedly provides justification for importing "the arts" into worship as a way of glorifying God by means of various talents.

And let us not forget that there is also an abiding interest in historic Presbyterian worship, particularly as manifest in simplicity of worship and Psalmody. In point of fact, the General Assembly has given its blessing to the singing of the Psalms. In 1989, the same Assembly which had heard Arminian preaching and which entertained liturgical drama, also commended the 1990 Psalmody Conference. In 1993, the court approved a report from a committee on Psalm singing, which included the recommendation that at least one Psalm selection be sung during every worship service. Also approved was the publication of the *Trinity Psalter*, a words-only version, as a joint venture between the Christian Education and Publications Committee of the PCA, and Crown & Covenant Publications, the publishing arm of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.⁵⁸

In the PCA, pluriformity tolerates those who choose to practice according to the Westminster Confession of Faith—so long as no one insists that there is only one way to worship or tries to impose that Presbyterian perspective on others. And while representing only a tiny minority, nevertheless, the position expressed in the Standards is still a factor among a range of flavors.

SHIFTING SPECTRUM

Over the past half century, there is, persistently, the phenomenon of a wide spectrum of views and practice in the PCA. However, to some extent, the spectrum has shifted. In 1973, "traditional" PCA churches often featured worship services geared toward evangelism and giving an "invitation" for sinners to walk the sawdust trail and come forward to make a decision for Christ. For the most part, that type of worship has dissipated.

EVALUATION

One obvious observation to be made from considering the panorama of PCA worship, is that there is very little understanding of the doctrine of worship. The ignorance is stunning, but perhaps not surprising, given how virtually all the seminaries supplying the PCA with ministers teach contrary to the strict view of worship set forth in the Westminster Standards.

Offering worship that is not divinely mandated is idolatry. Only circumstantial details—the order of

57. William H. Smith, "The Regulative Principle Doesn't Work: And There's Your Problem," Just a Curmudgeon blog (March 4, 2017). The title of this article does not reflect reality, but does reflect the author's rejection of the Presbyterian faith which, when he was ordained, he had professed and vowed to support.

58. *M17GA*, pp. 179–180; *M19GA*, pp. 75–76.

service, the time of service, the length of service, the seating arrangements, the building, the tunes used, the dialect in which the worship is offered, and similar matters—are to display variety. John Calvin observed that all of us are prone to idolatry—indeed, that our hearts are idol factories. To change the metaphor a bit, we could say that churchmen in their confectionaries concoct their own confections rather than following the cookbook. Worship, according to the Westminster Assembly’s exposition of the second commandment, is to be kept “pure and entire.” Or, we could say, “unadulterated and complete.” But in today’s PCA, along with most of professed confessional Presbyterianism, the worship is adulterated and incomplete. And one of the results is that the worship that is imposed on God’s people and offered to the Almighty is like a box of chocolates. Indeed, it’s kind of like buying a box of chocolates that promises the same flavor and discovering that there were many (unpleasant) surprises.⁵⁹

Some PCA chocolates are filled with nuts: those that feature liturgical dance, liturgical drama, or video clips. Some PCA chocolates are spicy: for example, the exciting worship team swaying to rock music, a spotlight on the performers in an otherwise dark auditorium. Some PCA chocolates are cream-filled—smoother and more subtle than the nutty or spicy ones, but still not the norm of uniformity, and therefore unacceptable for saints with refined Presbyterian tastes.

Besides being a direct affront to the Almighty, improper worship causes offense to believers and violates Christian liberty and liberty of conscience. It may seem delectable to some, but to staunch Presbyterians who hold genuinely to the WCF, this worship sampler is galling and causes gagging—especially when it is shoved down the throats of commissioners at General Assembly, or members of the PCA who may be visiting another PCA congregation.⁶⁰

The reality of PCA worship being like a box of chocolates is to be expected, given the lack of adherence to the Presbyterian view of worship as outlined in this article. In brief, rather than being lamented, pluriformity in worship is celebrated.⁶¹

But please note, then, that the adoption of a pluriform perspective with respect to worship is not a position of neutrality—rather, the attitude of “live and let live” is a direct repudiation of the Westminsterian ideal of uniformity in doctrine, polity, and worship. In other words, it is anti-Presbyterian.

Let it also be said that uniformity *per se* is not the ideal. The uniformity must be the result of conformity to Scripture. The Westminster divines aimed to reflect primitive

Christianity. As one Presbyterian minister put it, they desired “worship the apostles would have recognized.”

Scottish Presbyterianism, along with its twin, English Puritanism, marked the high water of theological development in the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods, manifesting a depth of doctrine and a precision of theological expression unequaled in Christendom. This observation does not imply that Presbyterianism was or is perfect, nor that there might not be other branches of the universal church that could have particular theological insights that could be of benefit to the church as a whole, and that could be incorporated within the Westminster Assembly’s systematic theology. Nevertheless, particularly with respect to worship, the Puritan-Presbyterian perspective represents a refinement of the Calvinistic and Continental Reformed commitment to the regulative principle of worship. In sum, the doctrine of worship found in the Westminster Standards is part of an entire system, and is consistent

59. This present author is privileged to pastor a Psalm-singing congregation in a greatly impoverished, crime-ridden area of inner-city Atlanta that is notorious for heroin-dealing and prostitution-peddling—a neighborhood that happens to be about 96% African-American. Is it not amazing that at least some of the urban dwellers in the “hood” can grasp the concept of the regulative principle of worship and the ideal of purity of worship, but sophisticated academics and educated ministers seemingly cannot? (Or, is it that they *will* not?)

60. Years ago, one astute church journalist referred to the PCA being not a denomination, but a franchise, affording you the privilege of hanging out your PCA shingle by way of identifying with this Delaware corporation. However, while we appreciate the point, nevertheless, that analogy may be insulting to most franchisee enterprises, such as McDonald’s: any restaurant under the Golden Arches that does not measure up in terms of predictability, including uniformity of menu, quality of food, and attractive (not to mention inoffensive) presentation, would quickly be disenfranchised.

61. One of the recognized authorities in the PCA with respect to worship is Larry Roff, a minister who edited the *Trinity Hymnal* (1990) and has served for many years as the organist at the General Assembly. In responding to Terry Johnson’s article that lamented the worship being offered at the 2023 Assembly, Dr. Roff essentially conceded the reality of non-uniformity of PCA worship as he wrote:

As has become customary, the three evening worship services at our General Assemblies were each led by a different set of local teaching and ruling elders and musicians from churches in the host presbytery. Each included great preaching, solid liturgical structure, and a variety of musical styles. One evening was with choir, orchestra, and organ. A second was with piano and a small acoustical instrumental ensemble. A third was by a praise band that included guitars, percussion, and vocalists. Each of these involved many hours of planning and rehearsal by talented, well-trained Christian musicians who were honored to offer their skills as a sacrifice of praise to enhance the worship of God’s people.

Larry Roff, “A Response to: ‘Music at the GA and the PCA,’” *The Aquila Report* (July 21, 2023).

with Scripture and with itself. The Standards' enunciation of "parts" (elements) of worship; formulation that the worship of the New Covenant, in contrast to the Old, is simpler and has less outward glory; and affirmation that the ceremonial law has *en toto* been abrogated, together constitute an understanding that is thoroughly Scriptural and non-contradictory.

Many in the PCA today desiring to orchestrate "traditional Reformed" worship hanker after the regularity of weekly creeds and confessions, promote responsive readings of Scripture, and have a penchant for the "evangelical holy days." But these practices do not enjoy the blessing of Scripture, in that they are not commanded. Their employment tracks with the "reasonableness" ("decent and orderly") of Old School Presbyterian worship of two centuries ago as exhibited by Sprague cited previously. The lack of strict prescription is the Achilles heel for virtually all of those in the PCA who reject the bizarre excesses that have been manifest in the denomination almost from the beginning.

Accordingly, attempting to fix the problem of pluriformity of worship in the PCA by implementing "liturgical" services will fail. Only consistency will suffice. The ideal of uniformity of worship will not be achieved via aping the Anglicans, but solely through a rediscovery and reaffirmation of Westminster.

CONCLUSION

The PCA was part of a broad reform movement in the twentieth century—a movement that included new institutions (such as seminaries and colleges), new conferences (such as those in Pensacola and Philadelphia), new publishing houses (such as Banner of Truth), new organizations (such as Presbyterian Evangelistic Fellowship and the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council [NAPARC]), and new branches of the universal church (including the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and the Presbyterian Church in America). But at the same time, there were deficiencies in understanding, particularly with

respect to the doctrine and practice of worship. As a result, the PCA was very much a mixed bag—and her worship was very much like a variety box of chocolates. And now, as she has passed the half-century mark, though there are a few signs here and there of an attempt to rediscover Presbyterianism, historically considered, there are many manifestations of diversity in worship that would have appalled the Scottish Presbyterian forefathers of the faith.⁶²

The Lord's blessing of the PCA has not been because of her faithfulness in matters of worship, but in spite of her gross inconsistency. Indeed, this inconsistency borders is wildly ironic—especially given not only the clear teaching of the Westminster Standards, but also the testimony against experimental worship in the PCUS as one of the manifestations of heterodoxy in that liberal denomination.

But there is always hope. Repentance is always an option. The Spirit of the living God may yet blow across the denomination, resulting in genuine Spiritual worship which will reflect His mandated uniformity, not manmade pluriformity.

So, instead of a sampler, perhaps someday the chocolates with the PCA label will all feature plain vanilla filling, and be dubbed Puritan Delight. Plain, simple, sweet, predictable, no surprises—and therefore no disappointment. Most importantly, it would be positively divine.

Now, wouldn't that be a treat?■

In Brief: The Regulative Principle of Worship.

"The Second Commandment lays down the regulative principle of worship: it forbids idolatry." James Harper, *An exposition in the form of question and answer of the Westminster Assembly's Shorter catechism* (UP Board of Publication, 1905), p. 221. "To worship God otherwise than he has appointed is 'will-worship,' more or less gross. The law regulative of worship is not that we may use both what is commanded and what is not expressly forbidden, but that we must be limited to the use of what is either expressly or implicitly appointed by God (Deut. xii. 32; Matt. sv. 9, xxviii. 20)." Johann Jakob Herzog, *A Religious Encyclopaedia: or Dictionary of Biblical, Historical, Doctrinal, etc.* (Funk & Wagnalls, 1889) "Psalms, Use of the, in Worship," 3.1960.

This biblical doctrine is a hallmark of Presbyterianism, but the phrase is relatively modern. It seems to have developed in US Southern and U.S. and U.K. Covenanter Presbyterian literature. In 1905, Harper appears to be the earliest to use it in print. Earlier in 1889, Harper used the stiffer British phrasing, less friendly for moniker making. John Murray used both phrasings in the OPC 1946 reports on worship song, and this may have helped popularize the label. See Murray, "The Regulative Principle of Worship & Song in the Public Worship of God," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 11 (2015), p. 5–7 n2, n9.

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62. For extensive consideration of American Presbyterianism's interaction with the regulative principle of worship, see the following: Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman, "Reframing Presbyterian Worship: A Critical Survey of the Worship Views of John M. Frame and R. J. Gore," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 1 (2005): 116–50; Frank J. Smith (with Chris Coldwell), "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part One (1946–1999)," *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 2 (2006): 89–164; Frank J. Smith (with Chris Coldwell), "The Regulative Principle of Worship: Sixty Years in Reformed Literature. Part Two (2000–2006)," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 3 (2007): 155–215; Frank J. Smith, "Recent Reformed Writings on Worship," *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 227–52.