



Prayer Before Studying Theology:

Μνήσθητι, κύριε, τῆς ἐκκλησίας σου,
τοῦ ρύσασθαι αὐτὴν ἀπὸ παντὸς πονηροῦ
καὶ τελειῶσαι αὐτὴν ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου,
καὶ συναξον αὐτὴν ἀπὸ τῶν τεσσάρων ἀνέμων,
τὴν ἀγιασθεῖσαν,
εἰς τὴν σὴν βασιλείαν,
ἣν ἠτοίμασας αὐτῇ·
ὅτι σοῦ ἐστὶν ἡ δύναμις καὶ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας

Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver her from all evil, and to perfect her in Thy love, and gather together from the four winds her sanctified into Thy kingdom, which Thou hast prepared for her; for Thine is the power and the glory for ever.

--Didache 10.5

- **Puritan Conceptions of the Church: An Introduction**

In looking at George Herbert, we saw that he, like his mentor Lancelot Andrewes and other moderate Anglicans of the early seventeenth century, sought to find a middle way (*via media*) between

- a strong (reformed Catholic) emphasis upon the goodness of the created order (in spite of its present imperfection) and of the Incarnation;
- a strong (reformed Catholic) emphasis upon the visible church (and the formation of its members through participation in the worship of the church) and a sense that this life is an earthly pilgrimage through imperfection (ours, the church's and the world's), imperfect knowledge and affliction that will only end when death brings us face to face with Christ and all things will be made new
- a relatively traditional (reformed Catholic) liturgy and pattern of personal devotion (the reading of morning and evening prayer as the successor to the medieval canonical hours of matins and vespers)
- a reformed Catholic conception of the priest who
 - leads the people in worship,
 - by his conduct serves as an example for the people to follow
 - sees pastoral care and spiritual direction as central to the pastoral office
 - but claims no mediatorial or peculiar intercessory functions
- a Protestant conception of the priority of divine grace, rooted in predestination (which is, as for Luther, not to be an object of speculation) and effected in time by a divine calling which smashes the hardened hearts of rebellious human beings, replacing the latter with a new heart which is capable of submission to God and spiritual life (justification coming through faith apart from works)

- a Protestant (moderate Reformed) conception that Christ and the benefits of his sacrifice are tangibly accessible to the believer through the Lord's Supper, received with faith.

This position has many commendable features and often seems to set forth a conception of the Church that is at once realistic (imperfections are candidly recognized) and transcendent (Christ's Spirit draws us forward and upward into a communion that is greater and perfect than any created thing).

It does, however, beg the question, "Is further reform possible?"

Assurance of Salvation and the Reform of the Church's Membership

And what about the reform of the church's membership?

- Is it possible to arrive at a more robust communion of the saints, to which persons can be admitted on the basis of clear testimonies of receiving divine grace and saving conversion and experiencing the assurance of salvation?

The Reformed churches answered this question in two different ways, which depend upon two different ways that the assurance of salvation could be imaged within Reformed thought (for further discussion, see --Robert Letham, "Faith and Assurance in Early Calvinism: A Model of Continuity and Diversity" in W. Fred Graham, *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, Kirksville, MO, Sixteenth Century Journal Pub., 1994, pp. 366-383).

(1) In Calvin and a number of the early Reformed Orthodox theologians, faith is to be conceived not merely as

- assent to divine truth (since even demons do this and shudder), but rather,
- as a result of divine election, an illumination (*illuminatio*) of the mind in which one comes to understand and is surely persuaded (*certitudo, persuasio*) that the promises of God are for them and they look to Christ in faith.

Faith is here identified with certain persuasion and assurance of salvation in Christ.

- When this initial faith finds itself under attack from the forces of sin, the Devil and death, it fortifies itself by receiving the Lord's Supper, in which Christ (through the Spirit, using a tangible means) presents himself to the believer and strengthens his or her faith.
- Our assurance of salvation therefore looks not to ourselves or to our works or inner states *but to Christ alone*, in whom God chose us to be His beloved children; we must therefore rest in Christ, confident in the power of God to complete what he has begun in us. Here *the good works one does after conversion are not to be thought of as a form of obedience, but rather as freely performed expressions of gratitude* to the God who has saved one.

(2) Certain of Calvin's younger contemporaries took a somewhat different approach. They argued that in thinking of God's dealing with human beings, the concept of *covenant* must be central and it must be understood in a certain way. Prior to the fall, it was argued, God had extended to humanity *a covenant of works* as kind of legal arrangement in which *the reception of the promised blessings was conditional upon obedience*: If we obey the conditions, we may expect the promises; if we neglect the

conditions, we shall be cut off from the covenant and shall not be recipients of the things promised. Although law (the covenant of works) is succeeded by grace (the covenant of grace extended through Christ), *the legal basis of the covenant remains*. If I have been transferred from death to life by Christ, then I shall expect to see in myself the marks of this—instead of unbelief, I shall find faith and instead of disobedience, I shall find a new nature which is able to do those good works which are commanded by God and which are the fruit of faith.

Thus, to find out whether the things promised in the covenant are for me and whether I have been transferred from death to life, I must be sure that the terms of the covenant have been fulfilled: When I look within myself do I find faith and when I examine my conduct do I find the good works which flow from faith? If so, then (and only then), *having perceived these marks of election within myself can I move on to have assurance that I am saved*. Note here how

- faith and assurance have been separated and are treated as distinct entities;
- the way human acts (good works conceived as obedience to the demands of the covenant) are treated as visible marks of election and are understood as responses to the legal basis of the covenant;
- how consolation and assurance are associated with individual self-examination and the quest for “visible marks of election,” rather than being intrinsic elements of a faith that is tried by worldly adversity and strengthened by communion with Christ in and through the corporate celebration of the Lord’s Supper. (This shift of emphasis is discernable in many of the later, more radical Puritans and in the Dutch parallel movement, the *Nadere Reformatie*, for whom the Lord’s Supper has a much less central and is usually conceived primarily either in mental terms as remembrance or as being linked with disciplinary/regulative conceptions of the church.)

There is one more change that often appears in connection with these shifts in later, more radical Puritanism, namely the idea of

- preparationism and
- the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation).

Preparationism is essentially an elaboration of Luther’s Law/Gospel distinction within the framework of the later Reformed conception of an initial covenant of works.

- Because the first covenant made with humanity prior to the fall was a conditional covenant established in legal terms, one must preach the Law (legal demands associated with the covenant of works) to induce fear, anxiety and misery in the hearer (“the feeling of our sinnes and the miseries of this life”) before one presents the answer to this desperate situation by preaching the covenant of grace (setting forth Christ with his benefits as the object of faith).
- One may therefore in some sense “prepare for salvation” by attending church and hearing the preaching of the Word (=the means of grace ordained by God in which first the demand of the Law and then the grace of the Gospel are set forth).

- This in time led to rather elaborate descriptions of the different stages through which one passed in moving from bondage to sin into freedom in Christ.
 - Cf. the “golden chaine” [logical sequence] of stages laid out in Rom. 8:30, each stage of which can be given an experiential correlate in Puritan preaching,
 - helping the believer to know where one is at (i.e. if the required steps have taken place in his or her own experience),
 - correlating one’s experiences of trials/anxiety, faith/inner states, and discernable fruits with the various stages of spiritual progress enumerated by the preacher).
 - Assurance strengthens faith and empowers one to more boldly pursue holiness and do works of charity.

Like Letham, I appreciate the rich psychological description given in Puritan sermons and devotional writings, but feel that *any attempt to find assurance through introspection and a scrupulous self-examination* for “visible marks of election” *is misguided* and more confusing than helpful.

- Our ability to discern spiritual realities in this present life is impaired by temptation and the blemishes/distortion of our old nature, so no trust can be put in self-evaluation; even in matters that are far less important, we would be well-advised not to place any full or certain trust in ourselves, our perceptions or our judgments but to welcome the counsel of others.
- Furthermore, a certain unedifying confusion is introduced by introspection/self-examination—our trust is not in ourselves, our own works or even in Christ’s work within us.
 - The object of our faith is Christ himself, who is the only savior and our only comfort in life and in death.
 - If we are in doubt and despair, it is enough to look to Christ with faith, knowing that he will provide what we cannot—it is this (and not morbid introspection) which is the demand of the Gospel and the consolation of faith.

From Assurance to Ecclesiology (a Church of Visible Saints)

As Brachlow (pp. 115-116) notes, we sometimes talk about the visible church (the local congregation; presumably a mixed body) as if it were the invisible church (the elect whom God has drawn to himself by grace).

- Presumably this is because for the authors of the Reformed confessions (as for Calvin) *the members of the invisible church are found within the visible church* and are themselves the reality of the church (the hypocrites and false professors being incidentally present but in no way defining or connected with what the church really is).
- Since we know that the members of the invisible (=true) church are present within the visible church but due to our limitations cannot infallibly discern who are or are not members of the invisible church, we extend the judgment of charity to recognize as members of Christ all who profess Christ as Savior and Lord and participate in the worship of the Church.

But what if one could begin to discern (at least provisionally) who were the objects of divine election and true members of Christ by looking for persons who

- had “visible marks of election” (=signs of regeneration) and
- had passed experientially through the different stages of the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) identified in Puritan preaching? (“If I be sanctified...I am justified; if justified, I have been called...; if called, I was predestined...even to glory.”)

In this case, one *could* begin to distinguish between

- those who were truly members of the (invisible) church and
- those who merely participated externally in the confession and worship of the visible church, but as yet lacked
 - discernible “visible marks of election” or
 - (as was increasingly required after the 1630’s, particularly in New England) an account of having passed through the various stages of the *ordo salutis*.

See what happens when faith and assurance are separated?

- Faith is not enough.
- To have assurance and know that one is in Christ and a true member of the Church one must go through a process in which, in response to the faithful preaching of the Word, certain stages are passed through and certain marks appear.

The appearance of these marks of grace (visible obedience in doing the works of charity commanded by God) and the reconstitution of the Church in terms of a body of visible saints is also important because of the tendency in later Reformed/Puritan writings to make *discipline* a third mark of the Church, alongside the faithful preaching of the Word and the correct administration of the sacraments. This meant that *profane and unworthy persons should be excluded from the communion of the saints* (discipline might involve either suspension of the erring from the Lord’s Supper or excommunication). Where such discipline was not possible, *the godly should separate themselves* from the company of corrupt and openly wicked persons so that they might

- “frame their wills and doings according to the law of God,”

- “covenanting to live together as members of a holy society” and
- being concerned to “instruct and admonish one another” in the true faith,
 - ordering the Church in accordance with God’s revealed will and
 - persevering to the end in faith and good works without slackening in zeal, lest they be cut off from the covenant and perish.

How to deal with *infants* here is a real problem.

- *Baptism admits them into the visible church* since the promise made to Abraham is for believers and their children (note new requirement: the parents must have made a credible profession of faith and demonstrated visible obedience).
- The problem is that *the visible congregation is increasingly being assimilated to the invisible congregation of the elect who experience the saving workings of divine grace and evidence this through works of visible obedience.*
 - Is there any visible church left for the infant to (provisionally) join until he/she can profess faith and show good works?
 - If the practice is to treat members of the visible church who have not made satisfactory confession/demonstration of works as persons who are outside the Kingdom, then why shouldn’t one do this with infants too?

Thus within Reformed thought, the two different approaches to the relation between faith and assurance will naturally lead to two different ways of understanding what it means to become part of the Church:

- one can connect membership in the Church with baptism into Christ and look back to this incorporation into Christ’s Body when troubled/despairing or when the child dies before coming of age OR
- one can consistently treat members of the Church who have not made a satisfactory profession of faith/demonstrated works of obedience as *external to the Kingdom and apart from Christ*. (Unless of course infants/small children are accepted freely by God apart from faith in Christ, some means of salvation/forgiveness of sins having been opened to them, so that faith in Christ is not after all the only means to be saved.)

The Regulative Principle and the Reform of the Church’s Worship

Thus, for example, can it really be sufficient to reform the Church’s doctrine without also reforming its structures, forms and institutional practices?

- Can one reform the doctrine on the basis of the Scriptures and remain content with traditional forms inherited from later ages of the Church which have in the recent past been objects of misunderstanding and abuse? E.g.
 - kneeling at communion, which formerly signified eucharistic adoration after transubstantiation had taken place;
 - the episcopal office of the bishops, who had initially been the greatest opponents of the emerging Reformation;
 - ecclesiastical vestments, which had set apart the priesthood as a separate order with special mediatorial powers.

- Just as doctrine had been radically revised in accordance with the standard of plain apostolic testimony, should not the structures and practices of the Church also be radically revised to agree with the clear and plain pattern of the apostolic period?
- This was formalized by the Puritans in the Westminster Confession (completed in 1647) in terms of the “regulative principle” of worship and church order:
 - “nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in Scripture” (William Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, v. 1, London: Banner of Truth, 1960, p. 64).
 - If Christ is to be recognized as Savior, King and head of the Church, one must hold that in regard to the worship and government of the church, Christ has set forth a single pattern for the ordering of His Church and **whatever is not commanded in Scripture (or warranted by it) is not allowed but rather forbidden.**
 - “But the acceptable way of worshiping 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 representations, or any other way not prescribed by Scripture.” (Westminster Confession 21.1)
 - To introduce into the worship, governance or discipline of the church new rites/ceremonies/ fundamental practices not commanded by Christ is a contemptible form of idolatry in which the idol of the human will and will-worship are substituted for the sovereign rule of Christ.
 - “God alone is Lord of the conscience, and hath left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men, which are, if any thing, contrary to His Word; or beside it, in matters of faith, or worship.”(Westminster Confession of Faith 20.2; “beside it,” i.e. outside Scripture is intended to reject any practice of extra-Scriptural origin)
 - Salvation must be looked for within a Gospel church, rightly ordered in accordance with Christ’s commandment and having a Gospel ministry unencumbered by pagan accretions that seek to bind the conscience:

Exactly how narrowly one should interpret and use the regulative principle as a criterion has been a matter of discussion.

- Certainly if a practice is more explicitly commended by Scripture, it should more readily be accepted by the Church.
- What about practices deducible from Scripture “by good and necessary consequence,” i.e. from Scripture’s implicit teaching? Thus, if Scripture commands all things to be done decently and in good order, there is no need for a large number of special commands regarding individual acts, e.g. prohibiting people from making faces in worship or spitting on each other (William Ames, *Marrow of Theology*, Eusden tr., p. 285)

- What about the ordering of the circumstances of the commanded action in a commonly intelligible way? (E.g. even though the early church took communion while reclining on long, low couches, since this was their universal manner of dining, we do not do this, since our manner of dining is different. Prudent ordering of the circumstances/time/place/mode of administration of the commanded action in accordance with accepted common sense/cultural custom is not only acceptable but actually required).

The Church of England had not previously endorsed the regulative principle, since it assumed (with Calvin) that

- national churches had the power to “decree rites and ceremonies” (Article XX), i.e. introduce new forms of worship that took account of the local situation in aiming to edify the Church;
- **what is not forbidden is allowed** (being morally indifferent=adiaphora), **provided that it does not obscure the doctrine of Christ.**

That Calvin agreed with the Church of England over against the Puritans can be seen from his description of the 1552 (Edwardian) Prayer Book as containing *multas tolerabiles ineptias* “many bearable pieces of foolishness”!