

# The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas, Appendix B Why Do Presbyterians Observe Holy Days? By Andrew J. Webb

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Dr. Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Seminary, wrote confidently in 1835 “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days.”<sup>1</sup> Yet some 164 years after the book in which Miller made that bold declaration was published, an informal survey of 30 churches in the Presbyterian Church in America, the largest of the theologically conservative Presbyterian bodies in the United States, indicated that 83% of the churches *do* regularly celebrate holy days.

What happened in those intervening 164 years? Did the practice of Presbyterians change significantly in that time or was Miller’s declaration inaccurate when he made it? What might have brought about such a radical change if it did in fact occur? This essay will seek to answer these questions. Because of space constraints, considerably more time will be spent examining the history of the development of Presbyterian practice in the United States regarding holy days than in examining the theological foundations for that practice. Nevertheless, it is appropriate to begin by discussing the theological reasoning behind Dr. Miller’s declaration.

Presbyterians, and indeed most Christians who describe their theology as distinctively Reformed, believe that the worship of the church is one of the most important aspects of the faith. Furthermore they believe that this worship must be guided by the theology of the Bible. What makes the worship of those whose theological roots are in the Puritan wing of the Reformation distinctive is their belief that the only worship that is acceptable before God is that worship which is expressly commanded in His word, the Bible. This Puritan belief is succinctly summed up in the most important of the Puritan credal documents, the Westminster Confession of Faith, in the first section of the twenty-first chapter:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all, is good, and doth good unto all, and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. 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 representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

In accordance with their beliefs, the Puritans attempted to ensure that only those elements that were directly instituted by God were present in their worship. Such worship was distinctively different from that of other Protestants such as the Lutherans and Anglicans, who tended to believe that true worship consisted of that which was commanded by God *and* anything which was not specifically condemned. Accordingly, outside of the Puritan wing of the Reformation, many innovations in worship that had been adopted by the church since the closing of the Canon were retained. The fact that the Anglican church in particular retained many of these innovations is particularly important, because it was in the attempt to thoroughly reform the Church of England that the majority of the Puritan battles were waged, and it was out of these battles that the Presbyterian confessional standards came.

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Miller, *Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835), 73.

Amongst those innovations that continued to be practiced by the Anglican church after they broke with Rome was the observance of what had come to be called the church year. The church year consisted of a series of festivals or feast days on which the church traditionally held special worship services and employed particular liturgies. While feast days were most commonly held to celebrate the birth or martyrdom of a saint, the two most popular feast days in the Anglican Church were undoubtedly Christmas and Easter, which celebrated the birth and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Puritans did not observe Christmas and Easter not because they did not wish to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ, but because they believed that God had instituted a cycle not of two special feast days, but of fifty-two holy days on which to glorify Jesus Christ and to preach on the importance of his birth, death, and resurrection.

These fifty-two holy days were, of course, Sunday—the Lord’s day. The Puritans observed every Sunday as the New Testament continuation of the Old Testament Sabbath day of rest and worship:

As it is the law of nature, that, in general, a due proportion of time be set apart for the worship of God; so, in his Word, by a positive, moral, and perpetual commandment binding all men in all ages, he hath particularly appointed one day in seven, for a Sabbath, to be kept holy unto him: which, from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ, was the last day of the week, and, from the resurrection of Christ, was changed into the first day of the week, which, in Scripture, is called the Lord’s day, and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath.<sup>2</sup>

For the Puritans, these Christian Sabbaths were the only days that were specifically set aside by the Lord for worship. There had indeed been specific feast days apart from the Sabbath in the Old Testament period, but the Puritans felt that these feast days were part of the ceremonial law, and as such had passed away when Christ, the reality which they foreshadowed, appeared. The Sabbath, on the other hand, as both a creation ordinance (cf. Genesis 2:2-3) and part of the moral law (Exodus 20:8-11), was an occasion to be observed by all of the people of God throughout all the ages.

Part of the proof for the Puritans that new feast days were not to be created and observed was the fact that they had not been invented or observed by either the apostolic or the early church. The Scriptures contained no references whatsoever to the actual dates on which the events that were later celebrated were to be observed or had occurred. The church did not begin to seriously conjecture as to when these events had taken place until the third century A.D. and it was not until the fourth century A.D. that the church began to celebrate the feast of the nativity (Christmas), for instance. The placement by the church of this event on December 25th had less to do with the date they felt was most likely for the birth of Christ than with the desire to undermine the celebration of the Saturnalia, a pagan festival beginning on the December 17th, with a rival Christian holiday. The choice of December 25th, the winter solstice, was made because the Roman Emperor Aurelian had decreed in 274 A.D. that December 25th was to be kept as a public festival in honor of the Invincible Sun.<sup>3</sup> The choice of the 25th was therefore both an attempt to challenge the pagan feast day and to maximize on the obvious metaphor between the “invincible sun” of Roman paganism and the “Invincible Son” (Jesus Christ) of Christianity.

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<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession of Faith, 21:7.

<sup>3</sup> Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 4.

But more important than the questionable circumstances of their institution for the Puritans was the simple fact that the celebration of these holy days had no warrant in the Word of God. On the contrary, the Puritans and their descendants were concerned that the Word of God forbade their celebration:

We believe that the Scriptures not only do not warrant the observance of such days, but that they positively discountenance it. Let any one impartially weigh Colossians ii. 16 and also, Galatians iv. 9, 10, 11; and then say whether these passages do not evidently indicate, that the inspired Apostle disapproved of the observance of such days.<sup>4</sup>

Another concern for the Puritans was the mode in which these feast days were commonly celebrated. In English society at the beginning of the 17th century the celebration of Christmas had become particularly scandalous. Far from being a season of dignified worship it had become a prolonged bacchanal that seemed to have more to do with the original feasting and festivity of the Roman Saturnalia than the celebration of Christ's birth: "Celebrants devoted much of the season to pagan pleasures that were discouraged during the remainder of the year. The annual indulgence in eating, dancing, singing, sporting, card playing, and gambling escalated to magnificent proportions."<sup>5</sup>

Accordingly, Puritan condemnation of the festival of Christmas in particular often focused on the common abuses of the holiday. William Prynne's *Histriomastix* (1633), for instance, commented: "Into what a stupendous height of more than pagan impiety...have we not now degenerated!" Another common complaint was that well over half of the days on the calendar were holy days. This seriously cut into the amount of time that could be spent occupied in labor. It seemed to John Northbrooke, another English Reformer writing in 1577, that the Pope, "not God in his word," had appointed Holy days "to traine up the people in ignorance and ydleness, wherby half of the year, and more, was overpassed (by their ydle holy-dayes) in loytering and vaine pastimes &c., in restrayning men from their handy labors and occupations."<sup>6</sup>

It should be stressed that the Puritans and Presbyterians were not the only descendants of the Reformation who held to this belief. Even the inheritors of the Radical Reformation, the Anabaptists, Baptists, and Quakers, loathed holy days as Papist abominations without scriptural warrant. This united support for the abandonment of feast days was to prove particularly important in the colonies of New England, where the celebration of feast days was to become virtually unheard of outside of the few Anglican enclaves that existed.<sup>7</sup>

While the Reformers in the Anglican church corporately decided to retain these holy days in 1562 and endeavored unsuccessfully to gain control of them, the Puritans decided to strike them from their calendars entirely for the above stated reasons.

When the Puritans assembled at Westminster in the 1640s to draw up the standards that would define Presbyterian belief for centuries to follow, they did not mince words regarding holy days. The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, which was a part of the original Westminster Standards adopted by Parliament, was intended to guide and inform (but not liturgically constrain like the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*) the worship of the church. Included in the Directory was the bold theological declaration: "THERE is no day commanded in

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Restad, 6.

<sup>6</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 24.

<sup>7</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, *Puritans at Play* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 89.

scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued."<sup>8</sup>

The Puritans had declared holy days theologically unwarranted, and as they began to gain the upper hand in the English Parliament, they moved decisively against both the public and ecclesiastical celebration of holy days. In 1642 Parliament outlawed the seasonal plays and pageants that proliferated around holy days and purposely met on every Christmas from 1644 to 1652 to show their disdain for what they felt was an unwarranted innovation that produced nothing but moral abuses. Finally in 1652 after the triumph of the Puritan statesman Oliver Cromwell and the beheading of Charles I, the observance of holy days was "strongly prohibited" and ministers who preached on the birth of Christ on Christmas risked imprisonment. Shops were required to keep open and churches were heavily fined for attempting to put up decorations.<sup>9</sup>

As was to be expected, many of the common English people and Anglican clergy were not at all happy with this Puritan suppression of "their holiday." Consequently, after the death of Cromwell and the restoration of both the King and the primacy of the Anglican Church, the celebration of holy days was once again declared legal. Their celebration returned as a permanent part of both the English secular and ecclesiastical landscape.

In Scotland however, the Reformation was more thoroughgoing and the Presbyterian Church successfully purged holy days almost entirely from their landscape. All English attempts to reintroduce them failed miserably, and indeed Scotland was not to officially recognize Christmas as a holiday until the 1950s—by which time the influence of the Presbyterian church on Scotland had long since been waning.

Before the short-lived victory of the Puritan armies in England, many Puritans had despaired of reforming the Church of England. By the early 1600s the struggle to reform the Anglican church had been going on for over half a century with little or no success. Every English monarch since Henry VIII had resisted, suppressed, or martyred the Puritans. After years of suppression and ecclesiastical maneuvering by Elizabeth I, Puritan hopes for reform were rekindled with the accession of James I to the throne of England. King James was a Scot who had been trained by Presbyterian tutors, so it was hoped that he at last would be the monarch who would bring in a thoroughgoing reformation of the English Church. These hopes were cruelly dashed however, when it became painfully apparent that the new King despised the Puritans and was insistent on preserving or even strengthening the existing status quo in the English church.

For many Puritans this was the last straw, their hopes turned either to separating themselves entirely from the English church or establishing a purified church elsewhere to act as a shining example. Some immigrated to the Holland, where the Reformed faith was more firmly entrenched. Other Puritans looked to the new colonies in America. It was here in the New World that Puritanism was to reach its fullest expression outside of Scotland.

In the Puritan settlements of New England the celebration of holidays simply did not occur outside of the few Anglican enclaves. The pilgrims who immigrated to Plymouth spent their first Christmas in America working in the fields. By spending the days on which holy days were observed in a cycle of routine work these Puritan settlers showed their utter contempt for what were to them symbols of the corruption from which they had fled. Attempts by non-

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<sup>8</sup> Westminster divines, "The Directory for the Publick Worship of God" (1645).

<sup>9</sup> Restad, 8.

Puritans visiting the colony at Plymouth to observe Christmas were initially tolerated, but when it was discovered that they were actively engaged in games and revelry on this day they were angrily told by Governor William Bradford: “Your conscience may not let you work on Christmas but my conscience cannot let you play while everybody else is out working.”<sup>10</sup>

After this, attempts to celebrate Christmas in the English way were punished, and Bradford noted years later that “no one had tried to celebrate Christmas since that second year.” Other American colonies, such as Massachusetts and Connecticut, also outlawed the observance of Christmas, and after the laws abolishing holy days were passed in England, the colonies gladly followed with their own. Even after the Restoration monarchy forced the repeal of these laws in the colonies in the 1680s, the practice of not observing holy days remained. While it may no longer have been strictly illegal, socially and ecclesiastically holy days were anathema. The Puritan Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and the other dissenters of New England were all unified in their belief that holy days were an abomination and no proper part of the worship of the people of God. This common belief was to remain in place well into the 1800s.

Samuel Miller appears to be largely correct then when he declared that “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days.” This was certainly the understanding of the first Presbyterians, it had been codified in their creedal documents, and it had been their practice both in Scotland and America for over 200 years. What then happened in the 19th and 20th centuries to change the practice of Presbyterians?

The answer to that question is complex, but surprisingly it does not lie in any substantial rethinking of the underlying theological presuppositions that have guided Presbyterian worship since the Reformation. Rather, as we shall see, the increasing willingness of Presbyterians to observe holy days was ultimately the result of pressure from the laity, the movement towards the adoption of a common liturgy, and the pervasive atmosphere of pluralism, ecumenicism, and liberalism in the American Protestantism of the 19th and 20th century.

America after the Revolution was a very different place than Europe, and even than the mother country she had painfully broken away from. Unlike most European countries which had one established state church, America was simply awash in different forms of Christianity. Immigrants seeking freedom from the religious persecution of Europe had flooded into the New World, and by the 1800s America was a nation unlike any other. A large town might have Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Presbyterian churches and whilst these churches were initially strongly associated with the immigrant populations they served (German Lutherans, French Catholics, Scottish Presbyterians), the strong American desire for novelty and experimentation gradually began to overcome the initial distaste for worshiping outside of one’s own tradition.

Nowhere was this attraction more apparent than on holy days. By the 1800s the initial spiritual vigor that had marked the first Puritan settlers of New England had begun to dampen. Nominalism, legalism, revivalism, and heresy were all working to produce moribund and listless congregations in what had once been the fiery heart of Calvinism in America. Unitarian Universalism, which represented the triumph of rationalism and liberalism over the scriptural faith nurtured by the Reformation, was growing in popularity, and by 1805 even the old Puritan bastion of Harvard had been overcome by it. In the midst of this sea-change in the religious attitudes of New Englanders, both the laymen and clergy of Calvinistic denominations began to express a curiosity about the rites and practices of different denominations. After over 200 years of non-observance, many of the descendants of the Puritans were extremely curious about the colorful celebration of holy days in non-Reformed denominations. In many cases it was precisely

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<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, 89.

because the Puritan victory over holy days had been so complete in the new world that the laity and, in some cases, the clergy were unaware of the theological arguments against their observance or of the battles that had been fought in Britain over them. Henry Ward Beecher, who was raised in a Presbyterian household, wrote in 1874: “To me Christmas was a foreign day. When I was a boy I wondered what Christmas was. I knew there was such a time, because we had an Episcopal church in our town and I saw them dressing it with evergreens, and wondered what they were taking the woods in church for; but I got no satisfactory explanation. A little later I understood it was a Romish institution, kept up by the Romish Church.”<sup>11</sup>

Initially, the reaction amongst Reformed clergy to clandestine visits of their parishioners to other churches on Christmas and Easter was often to oppose it directly: “Congregationalist ministers countered by ordering fasts on Christmas Day and tried in other ways to show their disregard for the festival. One spent the Sunday preceding Christmas outlining his proof that the celebration of Jesus’ birth was ‘Popery and prelatic tyranny, a destroyer of consciences.’”<sup>12</sup> But gradually under the influence of social pressure Reformed churches began to change their practice. In 1772, for instance, the Baptist Church in Newport observed Christmas for the first time in its history. One observer of the service, Ezra Stiles who had studied at (the then-Calvinist) Yale, remarked “this looked more like keeping Christmas than any Thing that ever before appeared amongst the Baptists or Congregationalists in New England.... It is probable this will begin the Introduction of Christmas among the Baptist Churches, about one hundred and fifty years from the planting of New England and near one hundred and thirty years from the foundation of the first Baptist Church in New England.”<sup>13</sup>

Ezra Stiles was a clandestine attendee of Christmas services, attending his first in 1769. Initially Stiles seems to have been driven to attend Christmas services solely by curiosity, remarking in his diary that “Had it been the will of Christ that the Anniversary of his Nativity should have been celebrated, he would have at least let us have known the day.” As has proven to be the case time and again however, practice can have a very strong influence on one’s belief, and by 1782 Stiles appears to have fully acclimated himself to observing Christmas. That year he wrote that he did “cordially joyn with the greatest part of christendom this day in celebrating the nativity of a divine Savior; altho’ I well know from Ecclesiastical History that this is not the true day of his Nativity.”<sup>14</sup>

The attraction of the holy day celebrations of Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches for those raised in communities that did not observe them was very strong, and this attraction certainly exerted its influence on the clergy. Thomas Robbins, a Congregational minister, made a habit of slipping into an Episcopal Church on Christmas. In his diary he notes that on December 25th of 1804 he was invited to a quiet “Christmas entertainment” with a number of people who were also from denominations that did not technically observe the day. By 1808, however, Robbins was already venturing to “preach a little in reference to Christmas Day.”<sup>15</sup> One Presbyterian pastor, the Rev. James Waddel Alexander, was somewhat bolder than Rev. Robbins in appeasing his curiosity. He records that on Christmas of 1851 he attended no less than nine different churches in New York including several Roman Catholic ones.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Restad, 31-32.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 31.

But while the practice of observing holy days was growing informally amongst congregants and clergy in denominations that had formally eschewed them, there was as yet no formal acknowledgment of the legitimacy of the practice. In many cases the practice of attending a church that celebrated a holy day was a guilty thrill that the individual knew the guardians of doctrine in their own denominations would frown upon.

It was not until the liturgical movement that a means was created within Presbyterianism that might have real success in gaining official recognition for the observance of the church year at a denominational level.

Historically Presbyterians had rejected written liturgies, the Westminster divines had made a conscious decision not to create a formal liturgy that would restrict their freedom in worship and for which they saw no warrant in Scripture, but they decided instead to write a simple directory that would give guidance to ministers in preparing their worship. The colonial Presbyterians had inherited the same distrust of liturgies as their Puritan forbears, but their distrust went even further. In 1729 when the American Presbyterians decided to formally adopt the Westminster Standards, they did not officially adopt the *Directory for Publick Worship*, which had been considered an integral part of the Standards by the Puritans who framed it. This was because of the hostility of many American Presbyters to *any* document that smacked of usurping the role of Scripture in guiding and shaping their worship. As a result, the Adopting Act framed by the Synod of 1729 only “recommended” the directory to its members. In 1786 when the Presbyterian church of the newly formed United States again adopted the Westminster Standards as their creedal statement they opted to “receive” the Directory as “in substance agreeable to the institutions of the New Testament.”<sup>17</sup> This was an important distinction, for of all the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly only the Directory contained an explicit repudiation of the practice of observing Holy days. As we have seen, holy days are clearly inconsistent with the idea of biblical worship as it is abundantly set forth in the Confession, but in later years the concept that biblical worship was only that which was explicitly authorized in Scripture (this concept is often referred to as the *regulative principle of worship*) was to come under attack within the Presbyterian church.

Until the mid-1800s, both the regulative principle and tradition were usually enough to ensure that the Church year had no place in the Presbyterian Church. In 1837 the Presbyterian Church in the United States had split into two separate camps, the “New” and “Old” school. The issues that had caused the split had to do with the feelings of ministers in either wing towards Calvinism and the traditional polity and practice of the Presbyterian church. The New School, which had been profoundly influenced by the sweeping revivals of the 18th and early 19th centuries, tended to believe that evangelistic considerations outweighed issues like strict adherence to confessional standards. Their worship tended to be less constrained by the regulative principle and more inclined to incorporate elements that were to be found in the Protestant traditions that did not descend from Puritanism, or which had moved further away from their roots. Despite this tendency towards adopting new methods, the New School does not seem to have initially been any more eager than their more conservative counterparts to incorporate the observation of the church year into their worship. Before that could happen there was to be a more thoroughgoing revolution in Presbyterian attitudes towards worship.

In 1855 a book that began to change the way Presbyterians of both the Old and New Schools thought about worship was published by a Presbyterian minister by the name of Charles Baird. Baird had been heavily influenced by the history of the continental Reformed churches,

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<sup>17</sup> Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 17.

and in particular he began to discover that the Reformed tradition outside of England and Scotland had a rich tradition of using liturgies. His book *Eutaxia, or the Presbyterian Liturgies: Historical Sketches*, was the result of his discoveries. By examining the liturgies used by the likes of Calvin, Knox, and the Huguenots, Baird was able to construct an argument for the reintroduction of liturgical worship into the Presbyterian Church.

While Baird did not advocate a reintroduction of the Church year in *Eutaxia*, and his comments on the subject were limited to an observation that even Calvin had observed Christmas on a few occasions, his work paved the way for two important developments. The first was a reassessment of the use of liturgies in Presbyterianism and the second was the opening of a window in which the practices of Reformed churches that had pursued a less thoroughgoing reformation of worship than the Scots and English Puritans might be introduced. Both played on the growing distaste of some within the Presbyterian church for purely extempore worship.

Baird's book was to create an opportunity for other Presbyterians who wanted to "improve" Presbyterian worship by making it more liturgical, and in many cases, directly tied in to the church year. One such individual was a Presbyterian elder and businessman by the name of Benjamin Bartis Comegys. Comegys had no sympathy whatsoever for the older Puritan view of worship. His views were highly colored by his romanticism and attachment to all things medieval. His sympathies lay so thoroughly in the Anglican camp that one friend commented: "A stranger visiting his library would probably conclude that its owner was a clergyman of the Church of England, as few clergymen in this country, even those of the Episcopal Church, possessed so complete a liturgical library."<sup>18</sup>

This combination of romanticism and sympathy for high-church Anglicanism led Comegys to an almost total rejection of the regulative principle of worship and in particular the Puritan rejection of holy days. Consequently, he endeavored to see holy days restored, and while he agreed that these holy days had no warrant in Scripture, he pointed out that the Presbyterian Church had been gradually introducing other innovations that did not square with the regulative principle and that "no bad effects have followed." From this he concluded that the average layman (and presumably himself) could not "see why other changes may not be adopted."<sup>19</sup>

Comegys even went so far as to say that preaching was not the primary element in Sunday worship: "The grand object of the church service was prayer and praise." He hoped, therefore, to make Presbyterians into "a people who express their devotions in well-ordered prayer and praise."<sup>20</sup> To this end Comegys published *An Order of Worship with Forms of Prayer for Divine Service* in 1885 and then *A Presbyterian Prayer Book for Public Worship*. His stated intention was to "create a public opinion which will not be startled" by the move away from traditional Presbyterian worship according to the regulative principle to a more expressly liturgical and Anglican model. Both books had an impact on American Presbyterian practice that was so deep that one need not hesitate in concluding Comegys achieved his stated intention. Needless to say, both of Comegys's books included mention of the church year. But as yet, there was no *official* Book of Common Worship that would officially tie the Presbyterian Church to the observation of holy days.

The stage had been set for the creation of such a book by the publication of several smaller books of "forms" of worship by the denominational press—the Presbyterian Board of Publication. The advantage of creating a book of forms for worship over a set liturgy was that it

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 104.

seemed to tie in better with the Presbyterian practice of not forcibly determining exactly how worship should proceed. The first of these books was A. A. Hodge's *Manual of Forms* published in 1877. Hodge's manual was really quite conservative and certainly did not advocate the observance of the church year in any way. The second of these was *Forms for Special Occasions* by ex-moderator of the General assembly, Herrick Johnson. Johnson's book, published in 1889, wasn't that much more radical than Hodge's work, but it did take another step closer to a set liturgy by including liturgical diction in prayer.

While Hodge and Johnson were cautiously moving towards a more expressly liturgical format in worship by producing books that were safe enough for the denomination to publish, private individuals like Comegys were producing other volumes that moved considerably more quickly. Eventually these two streams were to merge in the production of an official *Book of Common Worship*. An important agency that was to pave the way for this was the Church Service Society formed in 1897 by two influential American Pastors—Henry Van Dyke, pastor of the prestigious Brick Presbyterian Church of New York City, and Louis Benson, an influential Philadelphian and pastor of another prestigious church in the suburbs of that city. Both had worked extensively to privately produce liturgical materials that included the observation of the church year.

The effect of forming the Church Service Society was to create an organization that unified the various men fighting for the institution of a standardized Presbyterian liturgy. Most of these men were gentlemen of “pastoral, esthetic, and literary inclinations”<sup>21</sup> and *not* the foremost theologians of Presbyterianism. One author observed that this was because “most of Presbyterianism's theologians were too busy fighting in the opening engagements of the fundamentalist-modernist war and defending scholastic Calvinism to take an active part in what became a significant movement.”<sup>22</sup> While the organization stated their commitment to the Presbyterian standards in their “Statement of Principles” it seems clear that with individuals such as Comegys on board, this commitment was to a very broad definition of these standards in regard to worship. The group did no more than survey the practices of churches and the way in which ministers were trained concerning worship, but the effects of the surveys themselves were far reaching. They stirred the church into concerted action on the issue of worship and led several Presbyteries, most notably that of New York, to comprehensively examine the issue themselves.

The fruits of this examination were to quickly become apparent. In 1903 both New York and Denver Presbyteries overtured the General Assembly to produce forms for public worship. With Henry Van Dyke acting as the chairman of the all-important Committee on Bills and Overtures, the committee quickly resolved to answer the two overtures favorably and appointed a committee to consider the preparation of a simple common book of worship for voluntary usage in Presbyterian churches. This measure too was approved and eventually resulted in the publication in 1906 of the *Book of Common Worship*. While the General Assembly stressed that the use of this book was strictly voluntary and not officially recommended (the title page simply stated “Prepared by the Committee of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. for Voluntary Use”) it had far reaching effects—it was, after all, an official publication of the denomination. More importantly, as far as the question we are considering was concerned, it contained prayers for Good Friday, Easter, Advent, and Christmas. Barely 71 years since Samuel

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 121.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Miller had declared that “Presbyterians do not observe Holy days” the denomination had boldly proclaimed that this was no longer true.

The 1906 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* was eventually replaced twenty-two years later by the edition of 1932. The 1932 edition continued the advance towards a liturgical format and included even more emphasis on the church year, with prayers provided for Lent, Palm Sunday, Pentecost, and All Saints’ Day. The 1932 edition was also the first edition to be officially accepted by the Southern Presbyterian Church. This was even more startling in light of the fact that in 1899 the Southern General Assembly had declared: “There is no warrant in Scripture for the observance of Christmas and Easter as holy days, rather the contrary (see Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-21), and such observance is contrary to the principles of the Reformed Faith, conducive to will worship, and not in harmony with the simplicity of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>23</sup> Apparently the intervening 33 years and the obvious influence of the 1906 edition of the *Book of Common Worship* had made a world of difference in Southern Presbyterian attitudes. It is important to note, however, that the original declaration of the 1899 General Assembly was never repealed.

As the *Book of Common Worship* continued to be revised, subsequent editions indicated that Presbyterians continued to become more and more comfortable with the observance of holy days. The 1946 edition included prayers for Maundy Thursday, Ascension Day, Trinity Sunday, and thirteen Sundays after Trinity.

By 1955, when Northern Presbyterians were once again considering another revision of the *Book of Common Worship*, it had become painfully obvious that the *Directory of Worship* of 1788, which was still technically in force, had little or nothing to do with the actual worship of Presbyterians. Indeed it was questionable whether the Presbyterian practice could even claim to follow the regulative principle of worship outlined in chapter twenty-one of the Westminster Confession, especially now that the gap between Presbyterian and Anglican worship was rapidly closing. The solution, of course, was to revise the Directory for Worship of 1788 and to produce a modern edition that would finally put an end to the need to give lip service to the principles that had guided the worship of the Puritans. Accordingly, the new Directory, published in 1961, stated that worship should draw its order and content not only from Scripture *but also from the historical experience and resources of Christianity*. At last the Northern Presbyterian Church (UPCUSA) had altered its theological foundations to allow for what they had already been officially practicing for over 55 years.

This new directory was not accepted by the Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS) however, and the directory they produced was far closer to the content and format of the *Directory of Worship* of 1788. It differed markedly from these documents however, in that it too gave a notable prominence to the Christian year, but without clearly admitting, as the Northern directory had, that the new worship model followed by the PCUS was not strictly scriptural.

In 1973 many conservative Southern Presbyterians faced with the prospect of the union of the body they belonged to (the PCUS) with the more liberal Northern UPCUSA opted instead to withdraw and form a new theologically conservative Presbyterian Church. This new church, the Presbyterian Church in America, opted not to adopt the liturgically oriented *Book of Common Worship* of the PCUS, its revised Directory of Worship, or any of the alterations that had been made to the Presbyterian standards since adoption in 1789. Instead the PCA adopted the 1789 revision of the Westminster Standards and set to work on creating their own Directory of

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<sup>23</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern Presbyterians), “Deliverance on Christmas and Easter” (1899).

Worship. The non-binding Directory they created—while it is far more liturgical than the original Directory for Publick Worship and includes sample forms for special occasions—does not contain a single reference to the church year. In fact at no point in the history of the Presbyterian Church in America has the practice of observing holy days been officially authorized by the General Assembly, nor does anything in the constitution of the church legitimize the practice. To the contrary, since the constitutional documents of the PCA uphold and endorse the original Puritan concept of the regulative principle of worship as it is set forth in chapter 21.1 of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the practice of observing holy days in worship is logically forbidden as no one has ever been able to prove that the practice of their observation was instituted by God in His Word. What is odd in light of this is that very few, if any, members of the PCA view the observance of holy days as an exception to the teaching of the Westminster Standards.

So while we can answer clearly why Presbyterians who belong to the PCUSA observe holy days, for they changed their doctrinal standards to allow for the practice, one cannot answer that question when it comes to members of other bodies that have not, such as the PCA. Their doctrinal standards clearly do not permit the practice, and yet it would seem that the majority of PCA churches observe holy days anyway. Why is that? One might be tempted to conclude that it is because the General Assembly has never tackled the subject, but the far more obvious answer is that *they observe them because the church they left observed them and the vast majority of modern evangelical churches around them observe them*. In most cases no one living can remember a time when holy days were not observed and most Presbyterian clergymen seem unaware that there was once a time when they were not observed. Even the oldest of PCA saints might be reasonably tempted to conclude that a notion that holy days should not be observed represents the thought of a crackpot.

Of course, while these conclusions address the specifics of how it was that the vast majority of American Presbyterians came to celebrate holy days when their forbears clearly did not, they do not tell us from whence the psychological impetus for these changes comes. Perhaps it was an unconscious desire to return to the comforting traditions and symbolism of medieval Roman Catholicism; this is, for instance, the supposition advanced by James Hastings Nichols in *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition*. Nichols notes that Catholic conceptions and forms of worship “established themselves in a few Reformed centers in the day of cultural romanticism and political reaction” and from thence “they have increasingly penetrated the main Reformed bodies.” Nichols goes on to point out that while the Catholicizing tendency has often been blunted by the “legacy of anti-Romanism” it has “established its right to exist in these churches and won official toleration.”<sup>24</sup> It is more likely, however, that the answer ultimately lies somewhere in a statement made almost 200 years ago by French Statesman and observer of the new American society, Alexis de Toqueville: “All the clergy of America freely adopt the general views of their time and country and let themselves go unresistingly with the tide of feeling and opinion which carries everything around them along with it.”

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<sup>24</sup> James Hastings Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 153.