

Is Reformed Worship Eurocentric?

Terry L. Johnson,

Senior Minister

Independent Presbyterian Church

February 2019

Table of Contents

I.	Preliminary Questions	2
II.	Christianity and Eurocentrism	5
III.	Reformed Worship and Eurocentrism	10
	1. <i>Lectio continua</i> reading and preaching	11
	2. Psalm singing	15
	3. Covenantal sacraments	17
	4. Full diet of prayer	20
	5. Simplicity	21
IV.	Conclusion	25

Is Reformed Worship Eurocentric?

The roots of Reformed worship (RW) are to be found in such places as Switzerland, Holland, and Scotland, and among such leaders as Ulrich Zwingli (1480-1531), Martin Bucer (1491-1551), John Calvin (1509-1564), and John Knox (c. 1514-1572). The *immediate roots* clearly are anchored in Europe, even Northern Europe. Does this mean that it is “Eurocentric” in some kind of limiting way? That certainly is the implication of the question. Some argue that RW is what it is because of culturally relative distinctions that can be discarded in favor of other culturally relative distinctions of non-European cultures. The critics seem especially to have in mind a more emotionally expressive preaching and praying, a more physically and vocally active participation, and a more musically dominated approach. They tend to describe RW as overly intellectual, word-dominant, and rationalistic. These distinctive characteristics are attributed to the culture of Europe rather than biblical or theological conviction.

However, what about the more *distant roots* of RW? If the immediate roots are European, are there foundational roots in the Patristic church that are non-European? If that is indeed the case, how does this affect our outlook? Calvin claimed that his “Form of Church Prayers” was “According to the Custom of the Ancient Church.” Hughes O. Old’s *Patristic Roots* is dedicated to evaluating and in the end substantiating Calvin’s claim.¹ RW, he demonstrates, is more an expression of the *convictions* of the Fathers than the *culture* of the Reformers. At stake is the normativity of RW. We have several introductory questions before launching into the issue that may help to clarify our discussion.

¹ Hughes O. Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag), 1970.

Preliminary questions

First, what is Europe? “Europe” is not a geographic designation. There is no European continent. The huge land mass east of the western hemisphere and north of Africa is known as Eurasia. What separates Europe from Asia is not a body of water or a narrow isthmus, but cultures. “Europe” designates a cultural entity, not a geographic one, namely the culture produced by Christianity. It is home to a variety of ethnicities such as the Germanic, Slavic, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Latin/Romance, among others, distinguished by language and race. For the thousand years between the end of the Roman empire and the beginning of the Enlightenment (roughly mid-17th century), Western Christianity shaped the culture of Europe. At the same time, Eastern Christianity shaped the culture of Eastern Europe. When Christianity invaded Northern Europe, the missionary preachers did not encounter the Dutch Masters hanging in townhomes or Bach fugues being played in assembly halls. They encountered crude barbarism. The European culture that developed was the fruit of the interaction between Christianity and the native genius of the various people groups. Disentangling Christianity from European culture is more problematic than generally appreciated. For example, the music that develops in Europe is Christian music, the music of the church, sacred music, as well as European music.

Second, what does it mean to be “Eurocentric?” The cultures of Europe vary considerably among themselves. Calvin was French, consequently a product of a more emotionally expressive Latin/Romantic language and culture. Thomas Cranmer was English, and consequently a product of a less emotionally expressive Anglo-Saxon culture. The French, the English, the Poles and Germans are very different culturally. The comedy “My Big Fat Greek Wedding” made light of the vast cultural difference between the loud, clannish, boisterous family of the Greek bride and

that of her quiet, boring WASPish groom. It is simplistic to speak of “Eurocentric” in ways that obscure or trivialize these differences.

Americans at this particular point in our history are obsessed with ethnicity and race. Nearly everything, religion, employment, politics, music, language is reduced to race. Yet as Christians, our concern ultimately is not with race, but with truth. This is not to say that there are not important racial issues past and present and future that must be dealt with. Yet everything should not be view through the lens of race. Thomas C. Oden, in his comments on the racial identity of early African Christians in his groundbreaking book, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, shows little patience with those who wish to give the issue of race too much attention:

How black were the Christians of North Africa? Black enough, if blackness is understood in terms of intergenerational suffering and oppression. If black is defined by color, a trip to Numidia or Nubia or Ethiopia settles the chromatological argument. But orthodox *Christians do not admit skin color as a criterion for judging Christian truth*. Never have. Never will. African Christianity is not primarily a racial story but a confessional story of martyrs and lives lived by faith active in love. *To judge truth by race is itself heretical*, and that truth was first clearly formulated in ecumenical Christianity, from the Jerusalem Council and the early baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch and following, and that truth itself became a standard assumption of early African Christianity.²

² Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 69 (my emphasis).

The ancient enemy of England was France. Beginning with the Anglo-French War (1193-1199), intermittent warfare characterized the entire 13th century and half of the 14th century. Great battles were fought at Crécy (1346) and Agincourt (1415) during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). The 16th century saw four Anglo-French wars, the 17th century three, the 18th century seven more, the 19th century the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), culminating at Waterloo (1815). Contempt, bitterness and hostility have characterized the relationship between France and England for over 600 years. Yet the French identity of Calvin did not seem to affect English theologians such as Cranmer, Ridley, Lattimer, Bradford, or Hooper, Calvinists all. They didn't characterize Calvin's theology as "French." They embraced it enthusiastically because it was biblical and Christian.

Similarly, the French and the Germans, reaching all the way back to the ancient Gauls and Teutons, have been rivals in war, most notoriously in modern times. That rivalry didn't prevent a German Reformed (i.e. Calvinistic) church from being formed. Zacharias Ursinus (1521-1583), a German, was the primary author of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, the catechism of the continental Reformed churches. German-French rivalry didn't prevent German princes from inviting the fleeing Huguenots to settle in their principalities after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 outlawed Protestantism in Louis XIV's France. A Huguenot church had already been established in Berlin by 1672. Reformed churches were established in Poland, Hungary, Holland, and Scotland, and the *Genevan Psalter* with its "Form of Church Prayers" was translated into English, German, Dutch, Spanish, Hungarian, and other languages. The differences between Romantic, Germanic, Slavic, and Celtic cultures were not seen as barriers to implementing a Reformed form of worship. National rivalries were ignored. Ancient enmities were dismissed. Reformers include the Italian Peter Martyr (1205-1252), the Pole John á Lasco (1499-1560), and

the Englishman John Hooper (1495-1555). Guido de Bres (1521-1566), primary author of the Belgic Confession, was a Walloon from present-day southwest Belgium. Historically we speak of “International Calvinism” because it was embraced across cultural, ethnic, national, and racial lines.

Third, what is “white worship?” Last time we checked, white people have formed highly liturgical Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, tightly ordered Presbyterian churches, non-liturgical and “free” worship of Bible and Baptist churches, and highly emotive and physically expressive Pentecostal and charismatic churches. What does “white worship” even mean? The real question is, is RW rooted in sound biblical and theological soil? If so, who cares if its source is North Europe or the North Pole? “Eurocentrism” and “whiteness” are ill-defined or undefined concepts more likely to polarize than to inform.

Nevertheless, we will attempt to answer our question on its own terms and do so in two steps. First, a broader question, is Christianity itself Eurocentric? Or to put it more crassly, is Christianity “white man’s religion?” Then we will attempt to answer the second question. Is historic RW Eurocentric? Is its worship “white worship?”

Christianity and Eurocentrism

Is Christianity Eurocentric? On the surface this claim should be a tough sell, given that Jesus and His disciples were Middle Easterners. They were Semitic. The earliest churches were in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Ethiopia, and North Africa. Not until Acts 16 does the gospel cross over into Macedonia and Europe. Thomas Oden, who is also general editor of the landmark multi-volume *Ancient Commentary on Scripture*, argues that the flow of ideas and influence that

have given shape to historic Christianity was not north to south, as nearly everyone has assumed, from Europe to Africa, but south to north, from Africa to Europe.³ It is a stereotype and in error to say that Christianity came from Europe to Africa. The intellectual centers of early Christianity in the earliest days were in the Middle East, in Alexandria, Egypt, and especially in North Africa, the last of which is Oden's particular concern. One can take the north to south view, Oden insists, only by "ignoring Christianity's first millennium, when African thought shaped and conditioned virtually every diocese in Christianity worldwide."⁴ Classic ecumenical Christianity "was largely defined in Africa."⁵ It is not a European import. Again, he says,

in Christian history, contrary to this common assumption, the flow of intellectual leadership demonstrably moved largely from Africa to Europe—south to north.⁶

"The Christian leaders in Africa," he continues, "figured out how best to read the law and prophets meaningfully, to think philosophically, and to teach the ecumenical rule of triune faith cohesively, long before these patterns became normative elsewhere."⁷

Oden demonstrates that the early African theologians played a decisive role in the formation of Christian theology. Tertullian (c.160–220), reared in Carthage in North Africa (present day Tunisia), and who once said, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church," is widely known as "The Father of Latin Theology."⁸ He created much of Latin Christianity's orthodox theological terminology (e.g. *substantia* as in "one substance," *personae* as in "three persons,"

³ Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Volumes 1- 30 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁴ Oden, *How Africa*, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29,30.

⁸ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1592.

and *trinitas*, “Trinity”), and developed the early Christological formulations. He understood the covenantal meaning of the Lord’s Supper, applying the term *sacramentum*, the oath taken by Roman soldiers, to baptism and the Lord’s Supper (more on this in a moment). Ivor J. Davidson, writing in the first volume of *The Baker History of the Church* series, asserts that “It was in North Africa that the most robust formulations of a distinctive Western Theology was first produced in the work of the gifted teacher Tertullian.”⁹

Origen (c.185-c.254), born in Alexandria, Egypt (the geographically challenged should remember that Egypt is on the continent of Africa), and one of the first of the early Christians to formulate a systematic statement of faith, was an energetic Bible commentator and an effective apologist. Henri Crouzel, writing in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, calls Origen a “great theologian”¹⁰ and places only Augustine and Aquinas among his peers in Christian history, while Old has called him “the genius of the early church.”¹¹

Cyprian (d.258), also of Carthage, has been called “one of the greatest theologians in the history of the Christian church.”¹² Athanasius of Alexandria, Egypt (c.296–373), nicknamed the “Black Dwarf” by the way, was the great champion of orthodoxy against Arianism. Egyptian by birth, he famously stood for the doctrine of the Trinity *contra mundum*, against the world. Five times he was exiled during 17 years of flight and hiding. Almost single-handedly he preserved the

⁹ Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, AD 30–312*, Volume One, The Baker History of the Church, John D. Woodbridge and David F. Wright (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 238.

¹⁰ Henri Crouzel, “Origen,” Adrian Hastings (ed.) in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 503.

¹¹ Old, Hughes O., *Worship: That is Reformed According to Scripture* (1984, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 63.

¹² Emmanuel Y. Lartey, “African Theology,” in Trevor A. Hart (ed.), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 2.

orthodoxy of the church. His treatise, *On the Incarnation of the Word of God*, is a theological classic.

Augustine of Hippo, born in present day Algeria (354–430), North Africa, is, of course, the single most important theologian in the history of the Christian church, writing with decisive insight on the subjects of the Trinity, the dual nature of Christ, original sin, free will, grace, predestination, and the church and sacraments. His *Confessions* was the first Christian autobiography, and his *City of God* is a classic of the “western” canon.

Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, Augustine make for an impressive line-up. Oden says of the fourth- and fifth-century councils that defined classic Christianity,

Their definitions of Christology and the Trinity were profoundly shaped by definitions and concepts that were defined decades earlier in Africa by Tertullian, Cyprian, Athanasius, and Cyril . . . Western Christian dogma was formed with precision in Africa before it became ecumenically received worldwide.¹³

The Cappadocian fathers, (Gregory of Nyssa [c. A.D. 335 – c. 384], Gregory of Nazianzus [c. 329 – c. 389 or 390], Basil the Great [330–379]), natives of Asia Minor (present day Turkey), were the decisive influence leading to the final defeat of Arianism at the Council of Constantinople in 381. They “could not have done their work without the scriptural expositors of the Nile,” Oden maintains.¹⁴

¹³ Oden, *How Africa*, 47.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

It was not just the doctrines of classical orthodoxy that the early African and Middle Eastern Christians influenced, but the conciliar process itself by which those doctrines received definitive expression. The great ecumenical councils, such as Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451), were crucial in the formulating of orthodox Christian belief and practice. But as Oden points out regarding the conciliar method,

African churches, especially in the Medjerda Valley (present day Algeria and Tunisia) under Cyprian, developed highly sophisticated protocols and procedures for drawing together Christian leaders in councils to reach agreement on conflicted questions. They debated disruptive issues through rigorous scriptural inquiry. These were not debates primarily about philosophical language, but about the texts of Scripture. They came to discrete judgments based on mutual consent. The votes were reported and the debates summarized, and they became the beginnings of canon law. These actions became known as the conciliar process, and in time the ecumenical movement.¹⁵

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (208–258), Athanasius (c. 293–373), bishop of Alexandria, Augustine (354–430), and Cyril of Alexandria (376–444), are among the early Africans who gave leadership to the conciliar movement. Oden summarizes their contribution:

So if you ask, from what continent did the great fathers of ecumenical orthodoxy get the core of their scriptural interpretation? The answer has to be: More of it comes from African texts than European (assuming that the far southeastern reaches of Europe are Thrace and the Bosphorus). From where did John of

¹⁵ Ibid., 49 (present day references added).

Damascus get his vision of orthodoxy? More from Athanasius and Cyril than any European. From where did Leo the Great get the Chalcedonian formulation? The roots are mostly African, from the exegetes of the Nile and Medjerda.¹⁶

Again,

Classical African Christianity represented ecumenical Christianity better than it was represented anywhere else in the fourth century, and the proof of that is historical: its judgments were widely received by ecumenical consent, and still are.¹⁷

Anyone who wishes to identify Christianity as “western” or “European” or “white” must not only ignore the Middle Eastern origins of the Hebrew patriarchs and prophets, of Jesus and the Apostles, but also the development of the defining doctrines of the Christian religion in the first four centuries. Historic orthodoxy and catholic doctrines of the creeds and counsels primarily are products of African and Middle Eastern church fathers.

Reformed Worship and Eurocentrism

Since RW is the expression of Christian, and specifically Reformed Christian doctrine, the claim of Eurocentrism becomes dubious from the outset. Calvinism often goes by the name of Augustinianism because so many of the distinctives of the Reformed faith were first taught by Augustine, such as: predestination, total depravity, and prevenient grace. Calvin cites Augustine

¹⁶ Ibid., 77; again, the Nile in Egypt, Medjerda in North Africa (Algeria or Tunisia).

¹⁷ Ibid., 92.

on nearly every page of *Institutes*. To be Reformed is to be profoundly catholic. We can be specific about liturgical practices that have non-Western patristic roots from which the Reformers learned as they reformed the church. This is as true of the elements of RW as it is of Reformed doctrine.

Lectio-continua reading and preaching

Verse-by-verse preaching has been a hallmark of Reformed Protestantism from the very beginning. Why? Because of what can be known from the Bible and from church history. The Apostle Paul exhorts his successor, Timothy, and all subsequent successors,

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. (1 Tim 4:13)

The text literally reads, “*the reading*.” It could be called *the reading* because it was a known entity, inherited from the synagogues, of reading sequentially through books of the Bible (see Luke 4:16b-17a; Acts 13:15; 15:21). The *lectio continua* was characteristic of the Bible readings and preaching in the early church. Of this, liturgical scholars agree.¹⁸ The “exhortation” and “teaching” arose out of the reading (again, see Luke 4:16b-17a; Acts 13:15ff; 15:21). Reading and preaching were *lectio continua*.

We see this clearly in the work of the church fathers. Clement of Alexandria (c.150–205) provides one of the earliest extant Christian sermons, a verse-by-verse exposition of Mark 10:17-31, preached with historical-grammatical awareness in which he allows Scripture to interpret

¹⁸ E.g. R. H. Fuller, *New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. by J. G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 298; Josef A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy: to the Time of Gregory the Great*, ed. by J.G. Davies (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 167.

Scripture.¹⁹ Origen may be considered the father of biblical exposition. He wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible, and his homilies are among the oldest examples of biblical preaching. While ministering in Caesarea (northern Palestine) he preached through the whole Bible. Origen was a brilliant *lectio continua* preacher who paid close attention to the historical-grammatical meaning of the text of Scripture. Hughes Old regards him as “the greatest preacher of the second and third centuries.”²⁰

Origen’s influence on the history of biblical exposition, as well as that of the African expositors who followed him, has been vast. According to Oden, “The rules and methods for interpreting Scripture were decisively shaped not only by Africa’s greatest scientific investigator of sacred texts, Origen, but also by fourth- and fifth-century African exegetes like Didymus the Blind (c.313–98), Tyconius (d.c. 400) and Augustine of Hippo.”²¹ Moreover, he continues, “Virtually all Christian exegetes following Origen and Didymus the Blind actively borrowed from their studies in large portions, even while at times resisting or opposing certain aspects of the checkered tradition later called “Origenism.”²² Again, “. . . the greatest fourth-century Christian exegetes of East and West (Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine) were all profoundly influenced by the writings of Origen.”²³ Hughes Old calls this early African “the first great Christian biblical scholar.”²⁴

John Chrysostom (c. 344/354-407), Syrian by birth, was one of the greatest preachers in antiquity. He preached through most of the books of the New Testament. His sermons on

¹⁹ See Hughes O. Old, *The Reading & Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, Vol. 1–7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998–2010); 1:294–305.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 313.

²¹ Oden, *How Africa.*, 45 (dates added).

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

Matthew were of decisive influence on Zwingli, leading to his decision to preach verse by verse through Matthew beginning the first Sunday in January, 1519, at Zurich's Great Minster church. This has been called "the first liturgical reform of Protestantism."²⁵

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is regarded by Hughes Old as not only "the greatest Latin theologian of antiquity" and "a master of classical oratory," but also "a great expository preacher."²⁶ His five hundred sermons are the largest collection to survive from Latin antiquity and include a lengthy series on John, 1 John, and the Psalms. According to Old, Augustine gave "first importance" to straightforward grammatical-historical expositions of Scripture. Though he would use allegorical methods, his sermons are rooted in the text and the biblical author's intent. In his sermons on John, his sermon text is the Scripture lesson just read, indicating *lectio continua* reading of Scripture preceded his *lectio continua* preaching of Scripture. When preaching on the Psalms, it was typically the Psalm that had just been sung in the service.²⁷

His festal preaching is also expository. Hughes Old draws what he calls the "obvious contrast between the elaborate festal sermons of the Greek Fathers, most notably Gregory of Nazianzus, and the simple, straightforward sermons of Augustine."²⁸ As a former professor of rhetoric, he could have used a more artistic, more embellished, more rhetorically sophisticated and esteemed form of preaching. But he clearly chose not to do so, "sticking instead with the form of the expository sermon as it was developed in the synagogue in the early Christian church."²⁹ These

²⁵ Old, Reading and Preaching, 4:46.

²⁶ Ibid., 2:324.

²⁷ Ibid., 358.

²⁸ Ibid., 381.

²⁹ Ibid.

early African Christians gave to us the formative examples of straightforward, text-driven expository preaching.

Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*, *On Christian Doctrine*, or better *On the Art of Christian Teaching* is the Christian classic on the subjects of rhetoric, hermeneutics, and exegesis.³⁰

“Probably no other book on preaching has had so strong an effect on how Christian preachers have preached,” argues Hughes Old.³¹ Repeatedly, the reader encounters in Augustine some of much of the best of the Christian, and particularly Reformed Protestant rhetorical tradition.

When he divides the preacher's task into two parts: understanding the meaning of Scripture and communicating its meaning once understood, one sees the foundation of expository preaching.³² His emphasis on love as his foundational hermeneutic;³³ his emphasis on authorial intent;³⁴ his emphasis on the piety of the minister;³⁵ his urging of study of the original languages;³⁶ his emphasis on the analogy of faith; his principle that “wherever truth may be found it belongs to his master;”³⁷ his advocacy of a broad liberal arts education encompassing history, natural sciences, mathematics, mechanical arts, logic, rhetoric, and even philosophy,³⁸ all demonstrated the profound influence of Augustine of Hippo upon the broader Christian and specifically Protestant tradition of preaching. The decision to preach text-driven, *lectio continua*, verse-by-

³⁰ Augustine, “On Christian Doctrine,” trans. J. F. Shaw, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff, Vol. II (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 1983), pp. 513-597.

³¹ Vol. 2:386.

³² *Ibid.*, 4:1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:23-36.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:36,37; 2:18.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1:39; 2:9; 2:41.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:16.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:18.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:19-40.

verse sermons is not a decision to preach like Europeans, but a decision to preach after the model of the best of the Christian tradition.

Psalm-singing

The Reformation revived *congregational* singing of psalms and biblical hymns, restoring what had become in the Middle Ages the sole preserve of monastic and cathedral chants. The Psalter itself, a book of songs in the center of the Bible, was argument enough for the church to undertake psalm-singing as a regular part of its worship. The Apostles commend it (Eph 5:19; Col 3:16; Jas 5:13), and so the Reformers embraced it. They also learned of the importance of congregational psalm-singing from the church fathers. The early Africans and Middle Eastern Christians also were champions of psalm-singing. For example, Tertullian, in the Second Century, testified that Psalm-singing was not only an essential feature of the worship of his day, but also had become an important part of the daily life of the people. Athanasius (300-343 A.D.) says it was the custom of his day to sing Psalms, which he calls “a mirror of the soul.”²³ Eusebius (c.260 – c.340), Bishop of Caesarea, left this vivid picture of the Psalm-singing of his day, which he says was characteristic “throughout the whole world.”

The command to sing Psalms in the name of the Lord was obeyed by everyone in every place: for the command to sing is in force in all churches which exist among nations, not only the Greeks but also throughout the whole world, and in towns, villages and in the fields.²⁴

Likewise, Augustine (343-430 A.D.) in his *Confessions* (ix.4) says of the psalms,

²³ John McNaughter, *The Psalms in Worship* (Edmonton, Canada: Still Water Revival Books, 1907, 1992), 550.

²⁴J.G. Davies, *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 451.

They are sung through the whole world, and there is nothing hid from the heart thereof.²⁵

Basil the Great commends them, and Chrysostom can hardly contain his enthusiasm:

All Christians employ themselves in David's Psalms more frequently than in any other part of the Old or New Testament. The grace of the Holy Ghost hath so ordered it that they should be recited and sung night and day. In the Church's vigils the first, the middle, and the last are David's Psalms. In the morning David's Psalms are sought for; and David is the first, the midst, and the last of the day. At funeral solemnities, the first, the midst, and the last is David. Many who know not a letter can say David's Psalms by heart. In all the private houses, where women toil – in the monasteries – in the deserts, where men converse with God, the first, the middle, and the last is David.³⁹

He says again, "David is always in their mouths, not only in the cities and churches, but in courts, in monasteries, in deserts, and the wilderness. He turned earth into heaven and men into angels, being adapted to all orders and to all capacities" (Sixth Homily on Repentance).⁴⁰

In a remarkable statement, Hughes Old sees a patristic root of Scottish metrical psalmody in the monks of the Egyptian desert, who faithfully chanted through the entire Psalter each week.⁴¹

Enthusiasm for psalm-singing is not a result of western, rationalistic, overly content-driven

²⁵McNaughter, *Psalms in Worship*, 550.

³⁹Ibid., 166, 504.

⁴⁰Ibid, 170.

⁴¹Hughes O. Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1970 *Patristic Roots*), 268.

concerns of Europeans, but faithful biblical and experiential reflection. The logic of psalm-singing is clear in Calvin's *Preface to the Psalter* (1543):

Now what St. Augustine says is true, that no one is able to sing things worthy of God unless he has received them from him. Wherefore, when we have looked thoroughly everywhere, and searched high and low, we shall find no better songs nor more appropriate to the purpose, than the psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit made and spoke through him. And furthermore, when we sing them, we are certain that God puts the words in our mouths, as if He Himself were singing in us to exalt His glory.⁴²

Covenantal sacraments

“Covenant theology is Reformed sacramental theology,” says Hughes Old.⁴³ Zwingli's flirtations with and final repudiation of the Anabaptist challenge was based on his studies of the covenant. Jesus said of the Lord's Supper, “This... is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20; Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; 1 Cor 11:25). By invoking the covenant on an occasion of participation in a covenantal meal, Passover, Jesus was signaling the fundamental meaning of the eucharist. It is a covenant meal which is both a sign and seal of that covenant. It signifies, it represents, and it “seals” or ratifies covenantal obligations. Likewise, circumcision is identified by the Apostle Paul as “sign” and “seal” of justification in Romans 4:11. Circumcision is identified with baptism in Colossians 2:11, 12, the Apostle Paul even calling it “the circumcision of Christ.” Baptism is the covenant rite of admission. Converts and their children are baptized into the

⁴² John Calvin, “Preface to the Psalter,” 1543, found in E. A. McKee (ed.), *John Calvin: Writings on Personal Piety* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 96.

⁴³ Old, *Worship*, 165.

membership of the church (Mt 28:19; Acts 2:38; 16:33; etc.). The Reformers spoke of the sacraments as “visible words” and as “outward signs of inward graces.”

Where did they get this language? From the Bible. The Apostle Paul says that by administering the Lord’s Supper we “*proclaim* the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor 11:26). The Lord’s Supper is a form of *words*. He also speaks of “spiritual food” and “spiritual drink” (1 Cor 10:3, 4), as well as “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:6; cf Rom 6:3-11), external signs of inward graces. Yet they also learned this language from the African and Middle Eastern church fathers. The Africans Tertullian, Cyprian and Augustine all gave prominence to a covenantal understanding of sacraments as oaths by which covenants are ratified or confirmed. Augustine defined the sacrament as “visible words” and as external signs of inward graces, both classic definitions. This covenantal understanding had a profound influence on the church’s understanding of the meaning and manner of administration of the sacraments, and especially influenced the Reformers and subsequent Protestantism. Peter Martyr Vermigli (1500-1562), a Reformed Dominican monk, in his *Oxford Disputation on the Eucharist* (1549), cites support for a reformed eucharist from Irenaeus of Smyrna (c. 115-202), and the Africans Tertullian (c. 160-c. 225), Origen (c. 185-254), Cyprian (c. 206-258), Athanasius (c. 296-373), Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), and most extensively, Augustine (354-430), among others.⁴⁴

Calvin appeals to Augustine more than any other authority in his Eucharistic writings.

“Augustine is totally ours,” he claimed.⁴⁵ Roman Catholic scholar Kilian McDonnell points out

⁴⁴ Peter Martyr Vermigli, *The Oxford Treatise and Disputation On the Eucharist*, 1549, tran. and ed. Joseph C. McLelland, The Peter Martyr Library, Vol. 7 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2000), 48-61; 76-105.

⁴⁵ “*Augustinus... totus noster est*,” cited by Kelly, “The Catholicity of Calvin’s Theology,” in Hall (ed.), *Tributes to John Calvin: A Celebration of His Quincentenary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 212; Regarding the

that Calvin draws upon Augustine for support in denying the ubiquity of Christ's physical body, for its *locus* in heaven, for communion in both kinds, for the distinction between the sign and the thing signified, for denying any local, carnal, substantial presence of Christ in the eucharist, for denying that the mass is a sacrifice, and for denying the doctrine of transubstantiation.⁴⁶ Calvin and all the Reformers embraced Augustine's above-mentioned classical definition of a sacrament ("external sign of an inward and spiritual grace" and as a "visible word"), as well as his stress on the necessity of faith in confirming the covenant. "Believe," said Augustine, "and you have eaten."⁴⁷ The eucharistic reforms of the sixteenth century are rooted in Scripture and the patristic testimony. Successive generations of Reformed theologians continued this legacy of patristic scholarship.

Thomas Watson's (c. 1625-1686) treatise, *The Holy Eucharist* (1655) provides a case in point. Though it is by no means an academic or polemical work, he supports his biblical and Reformed arguments with citations from John of Damascus (c. 556-c. 750), Theodoret (born in Antioch, bishop of Cyrrhus (Syria; c. 393-c.458), Theophilus (Patriarch of Alexandria, d. 412), Cyprian, Ignatius (c. 35/50-c. 98/117), Tertullian, and especially Augustine.⁴⁸

eucharist, Augustine "is wholly and incontrovertibly on our side" (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 volumes [Library of Christian Classics, Vols. 20 and 21; edited by John T. McNeill. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960]).

⁴⁶ Killian McDonnell, *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 40-46.

⁴⁷ Cited by Martin Luther, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in James Atkinson (ed.), *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 133; from Augustine, *Sermon 112*, cap. 5. Migne 38, 645; also by Zwingli in *On the Lord's Supper*, in G. W. Bromley (ed.), *Zwingli and Bullinger*, Library of Christian Classics, Vol. 24 (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1953), 197.

⁴⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Lord's Supper* (1665; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2004); Similarly, we find John Owen in his argument against the imposition of liturgies citing Eusebius, Clement, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Origen, Cyprian, Ambrose, Leo, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory, the "pseudographical writings" and others (Owen, *Discourse Concerning Liturgies*, in *Works*, Vol. 15, 22-32).

Upon these foundations Reformed Protestants have based their insistence upon simplicity in the administration of the Lord's Supper. Jesus' words are to be taken in their "simple or natural sense," as Zwingli insisted.⁴⁹ It is a meal, not a mass; a supper, not a sacrifice; served on a table, not on an altar; by a pastor, not a priest; to participants adopting the posture of eating, that is, sitting or standing, not kneeling.

Prayer

Reformed Protestants have insisted on what Hughes Old has called a "full diet" of biblical prayer.⁵⁰ By "biblical," they meant in the language of the Bible. The Bible gives us terminology we are to use in prayer, as each generation must ask, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1). It also gives us the categories. An essential text is 1 Timothy 2:1, 2:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

The Apostle Paul utilizes various terms for prayer ("supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings") to indicate that all the prayer genres are to be a regular part of the public prayer life of the church (cf Phil 4:6, 7). The Reformers identified six basic prayer genres in Scripture:

praise (e.g. Pss 145-150; 1 Chr 29)

confession of sin (Pss 32, 51; Neh 9; Dan 9)

thanksgiving (Pss 65, 136)

⁴⁹ Zwingli, *On the Lord's Supper*, 192-193; also Calvin, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 3:134.

⁵⁰ Old, *Worship*, 173.

intercessions

illumination (Ps 119; Eph 1; Phil 1; Col 1)

benediction

Further, they identified five categories into which intercessions might be divided:

sanctification of saints (Eph 1:15-23); Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-12)

church and its ministry (Col 4:2-4; Jn 15:1-5; Rom 10:1)

sick and suffering (Mk 10:46-48; Jas 5:13-15)

civil authorities (1 Tim 2:1, 2)

Christian mission (Mt 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-16)

They found support for the six genres and the five-fold intercessions from Scripture for certain.

Yet also, support was found in the writings of the fathers: Syrian and Egyptian liturgies, Augustine, Tertullian, Ambrose, etc.⁵¹ By restoring the prayers of praise, intercessions, illumination, and benediction, the Reformers launched a veritable “revolution in prayer.”⁵²

Simplicity

RW is simple. Reformed Protestants merely urge that Christian assemblies do that which Scripture directs. The resulting services are simple and plain: the word is read, preached, sung, prayed, and seen. Unauthorized ceremonies, rituals, gestures, symbols, and postures are eliminated so as not to distract attention from the ordinary means of grace, the word, sacraments, and prayer. Worship must be “according to Scripture,” regulated by Scripture, and therefore limited to what God has authorized. This means that worship will be simple. It will be *focused*.

⁵¹ See Old, *Patristic Roots*, 219-250; *Worship*, 91-107.

⁵² Old, Class Lectures, Erskine Theological Seminary, May 11, 2004.

This too was emphasized by the early Christians, especially the Africans. They took seriously the prophetic tradition which warned of external ostentation at the expense of internal or heart service (e.g. Am 5:21-24; Isa 1:10-15; Jer 7:1-11). Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), Tertullian, and Lactantius (c.250–325), another Carthaginian theologian, came to their understanding of Christian worship before it had been influenced by what Hughes Old calls small and “the trappings of the imperial court.”⁵³ It is also significant that they came to faith out of stoicism rather than the Neo-Platonism that influenced so many subsequent Christian thinkers. Old explains of Lactantius,

Like Tertullian before him, he contrasted the simplicity of Christian worship with the highly developed liturgy of Greek and Roman paganism. He insisted that it is innocence and purity of life that God wants from those who worship. He ridiculed those who burned candles before statues of their gods.⁵⁴

According to Lactantius, “The chief ceremonial in the worship of God is praise from the mouth of a just man.”⁵⁵

Reformed Protestants have also emphasized emotional discipline in worship for the same reason: attention must be focused upon the word and not lost in a maze of emotion. The spirit of the prophets must be subject to the prophets and all things must be done decently and in order, for God is not a God of confusion (1 Cor 12:32, 33, 40). Congregations have a finite amount of time in which to meet. To do one thing is not to do another or to do less of another. We should ask of our worship customs, do they enhance, promote, extend the ministry of the word? Or do they

⁵³ Hughes O. Old, *Themes and Variations for a Christian Doxology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), 98.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 99, from his *Divine Institutes*, 6.25.

distract, detract, displace or replace the ministry of the word? Because faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (Rom 10:17); because we are born again by the living and abiding word of God (1 Pet 1:23-25); because we grow by the pure milk of the word (1 Pet 2:1-2); because we are sanctified by the truth (Jn 17:17); and because the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16), it is crucial that the word provide the content for what we read, preach, sing, pray, and see, and that the word receive our full attention.

Conclusion

We recognize that many questions are left unresolved by our studies. Yet those of us wishing to see the growth of Reformed and Presbyterian Protestantism can't but rejoice to discover so many of our "patristic roots" in Africa and non-European sources. Calvin *was* reviving the ministry and worship of the "Ancient Church" when he published his "Form of Church Prayers." Not only did the Reformers look to Scripture for the patterns, but also to the best of the early churches.

- *Lectio continua* reading and preaching in the writings of Origen, Chrysostom and Augustine;
- Psalm-singing throughout all the churches and eager advocacy from Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, and the Cappadocians;
- Scripture-enriched "full diet" of prayer, often extemporaneous throughout the churches, as seen in the works of the Africans Cyprian, Tertullian and Augustine; yet also in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c.155), the *Didache* (c.80-110), the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus (217), the *Apostolic Constitutions* (c.387);
- Word-filled synagogue-like services with the simple administration of the sacraments, and without visual stimuli, without extensive liturgy, without ceremony and ritual as urged by Lactantius and Tertullian.

Those who wish to see the establishment of Reformed Protestantism in the non-Western world and among African-Americans can rejoice that something very much like Reformed Protestantism is indigenous to Africa, at least as indigenous as the camel, as Oden points out, which didn't arrive until the ninth century, five centuries at least after classic African Christianity.⁵⁶ When we bring Reformed Protestantism to Asia, Latin America, Africa and the African diaspora around the world, we bring not a European import, but that which is scriptural and indigenous to Africa, the Middle East and non-European peoples.

Still unconvinced that RW is not Eurocentric or “white worship?” Granted that there are some important issues to be worked out, such as style of music. Still, we can ask of the main point, is there any church that would not benefit by adopting the elements of RW? What church would not benefit by adopting the *lectio continua* reading and preaching of Scripture? What church would not benefit by adopting the singing of Psalms and biblical hymns? What church would not benefit by adopting a full diet of biblical prayer? What church would not benefit by adopting the regular administration of covenantal sacraments? What church would not benefit by simplifying its public worship so as to eliminate time-wasting activities of dubious benefit and focus on the ministry of the word read, preached, sung, prayed, and seen?

⁵⁶ Oden, *How Africa*, 31.

