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The Religious Observance of Christmas and 'Holy Days' in American Presbyterianism

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It may come as a surprise to those unfamiliar with the history of the beliefs of American Presbyterians, that they were opposed to the religious observation of Christmas and other 'holy days.' This article explores some of the historical background of Presbyterianism's opposition to such days, as well as their practical handling of Christmas in particular, and traces the views of the American Presbyterians up to their embracing 'holy day' observance in the early 20th century.

I. Historical Background: Presbyterian Standards and 'Holy Days'

The roots of American Presbyterianism go back to the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, and their historic doctrine and practice are expressed in the Westminster Standards written in the mid-17th century. It was the time of the second reformation, and those pursuing reform had sworn the Solemn League and Covenant. This covenant bound the three kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland to endeavor to come "to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of church-government, *directory for worship* and catechizing...".¹ To achieve this end it became the work of the Westminster Assembly of Divines to draw up these confessional documents.

The houses of parliament in England ordered the Assembly on October 12, 1643 to turn their attention to the government and worship for the English Church.² Over a year later the Divines finished sending up the proposed Directory for the Public Worship of God.³ When completed this directory contained a preface, fourteen sections, and an appendix.⁴

The Parliament ordered the Directory printed, March 13, 1644/45.⁵ It had been issued and approved on January 4 1644-45,⁶ but in courtesy sent to Scotland for that kingdom's approval. Robert Baillie and George Gillespie conveyed it there and presented it before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Directory was approved by 'Act of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland' on February 3, 1644/45. The Government of Scotland approved and established the Directory three days later.⁷ Thus the Directory for Worship was actually more widely authorized than the Confession of Faith, or Larger Catechism, which never received the assent of the English Parliament.⁸ It represents the approved views regarding worship of not only the Assembly, but of the governments of England and Scotland, as well as the Church of Scotland.

The Directory's Appendix Against 'Holy Days and Places'

The appendix to the Directory is entitled, "An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship." The key clause of interest to this study is, "Festival days, vulgarly [*commonly*] called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued." The Directory is explicitly against the observance of set 'holy days,' and in light of the wide adoption of the document noted above, it is clear that this rejection was endorsed by the governments and churches of England and Scotland.

The development of this Appendix can be traced in the Minutes of the Assembly. It seems to have been

proposed as a possible addition to the portion of the Directory regarding the Sabbath day, and evolved into a separate section.⁹ It is finally noted as an appendix and approved in that form.¹⁰

Session 324. (November 18, 1644) “Ordered – To report the Preface to the Directory, and that concerning the Sabbath day.”

Session 325 (November 19) “Ordered – that in the Directory for the Sabbath-day something be expressed against parish feasts, commonly called by the name of rushbearings, whitsunales, wakes, as profane and superstitious.” “Ordered – Being the only standing holy day under the new Testament to be kept by all the churches of Christ.” “Consider of something concerning holy days and holy places, and what course may be thought upon for the relief of servants (to meet to-morrow in the afternoon) wakes, and feasts, whitsunales, rushbearings, and garlands, and all such like superstitious customs.”¹¹

Session 329 (November 25) “Mr. Coleman made report of the Directory for holy days and holy places. It was read.”¹²

Session 338 (December 10) “Report ‘of holy places’ debated.”¹³

Session 339 (December 11) “Debate upon the Directory for days.” “Ordered – To proceed with the Debate tomorrow morning.”¹⁴

Session 340 (December 12) “Neg. Resolved – The Report concerning holy days shall not be waived.(?)”

Session 348 (December 27) “Report of the Appendix concerning days and places for public worship.” “Debate about holy days.”

Session 349 (December 30) “Ordered – That the Appendix be sent up tomorrow morning.”

From George Gillespie’s notes we also learn:¹⁵

December 30. There were many abuses spoken of to be condemned in the Directory, as Wakes, etc. I said, if these be put in the Directory, the Church of Scotland must put in abuses among them in the Directory too, and it is not fit to make public in both kingdoms what is proper to either. So it was agreed to send up this in a paper by itself to the Parliament.

As the Westminster Divines perceived many corruptions in the English worship, there was an idea suggested during the forming of the Directory, to add a list of condemned abuses in worship to the Directory’s preface. As noted, George Gillespie opposed this, as it would require enumerating practices in one kingdom not practiced in the other. Subsequently it was determined to

send a separate paper to Parliament regarding the matter. C. G. M’Crie writes:¹⁶

From Gillespie’s ‘Notes of Debates and Proceedings,’ however, we learn that at a certain stage of the discussion as to what should find a place in the book, it was proposed to insert a statement of abuses ‘to be condemned, as Wakes, etc.’ The proposal was resisted by Gillespie on the ground that, if English abuses were to be specified, then the Church of Scotland would claim an enumeration of abuses peculiar to that kingdom, and he did not think it ‘fit to make public in both kingdoms what is proper to either.’ Ultimately, it was agreed to send up a separate paper to Parliament containing a list of such abuses.

Interesting light would seem to be thrown upon this document by a loose paper in Gillespie’s writing preserved by Wodrow, and printed among the ‘Notes’ of the former. On the one side of the MS. is an incomplete list of eight practices or ceremonies, beginning with ‘Gloria Patri,’ and breaking off with ‘the people’s responsals.’ On the other side is a statement ‘concerning other customs or rites in the worship of God formerly received in any of the kingdoms,’ to the effect that, ‘though not condemned in this Directory,’ yet if ‘they have been, or apparently will be, occasions of divisions and offences,’ it is judged ‘most expedient that the practice and use of them be not continued, as well for the nearer uniformity betwixt the Churches of both kingdoms, as for their greater peace and harmony within themselves, and their edifying one another in love.

If, as it appears likely, the list on the one side of this paper consists of an unfinished enumeration of ‘customs or rites’ spoken of on the other, then it is probable the latter was drafted as a proposed, but not accepted, addition to the preface as it now stands. In that case the Doxology, along with the Creed, standing up at the reading of the Gospel, preaching on Christmas, funeral sermons, churching of women, saying the three Creeds after reading of Scripture, and congregational responses, will rank among practices ‘not condemned in this Directory,’ but the observance of which Gillespie and his fellow-commissioners judged it expedient to be discontinued in the interests of uniformity, peace, harmony, and mutual edifying in love.

Preaching on Christmas in 1640s London

As M’Crie indicates, George Gillespie believed the English practice of preaching on Christmas was one of the “customs or rites” which was to be discontinued for harmony’s sake. This arose as a concern in 1643, as Lighfoot records:¹⁷

Friday, Dec. 22.] ... After this vote, was a proposal made by some, 'That the Assembly would determine whether there should be any sermon upon Christmas-day?' but it was waived to treat of it, because we are not yet come to it. Then was there some question how long we should adjourn, and some few would have had us to have sitten on Christmas-day; but it was more generally thought otherwise; and so we adjourned till after the fast, viz. till Thursday. In the afternoon, the city-ministers met together to consult whether they should preach on Christmas-day, or no. Among them there were only Mr. Calamy, Mr. Newcomen, and myself, of the Assembly. And when Mr. Calamy began to incline that there should be no sermon on that day, and was like to sway the company that way, I took him aside, and desired him to consider seriously upon these things. 1. That one sermon preached at the feast of the dedication, which had but a human original, John x. 2. That the thing in itself was not unlawful. 3. That letting the day utterly fall without a sermon, would most certainly breed a tumult. 4. That it is but this one day, for the next we hope will be resolved upon about it by authority. 5. That he, being an Assembly-man, and advising them, would bring an odium underserved upon the Assembly. With these things I prevailed with him to change his mind; and so he also prevailed with the company; and it was put to the question, and voted affirmatively, only some four or five gainsaying, that they would preach, but withal resolving generally to cry down superstition of the day.

As Lightfoot notes, the Assembly determined not to address the propriety of preaching on Christmas until a later time, and he convinced Calamy to take a moderate stance, particularly as by the next year an authorized course would no doubt be in place. The next year Lightfoot makes the following observation:¹⁸

Thursday, Dec. 19.], Then was there a motion made, and order accordingly, that some of our members should be sent to the Houses, to desire them to give an order, that the next fast-day might be solemnly kept, because the people will be ready to neglect it, being Christmas-day."

The Parliament did issue such an order. Daniel Neal writes:¹⁹

But that which occasioned the greatest disturbance over the whole nation, was an order of both houses relating to Christmas-day. Dr. Lightfoot says, the London ministers met together last year to consult whether they should preach on that day; and one of considerable name and authority opposed it, and was near prevailing with the rest, when the doctor convinced them so far of the lawfulness and expediency of it, that the question being put it was carried in the affirmative with only four or five

dissenting voices. But this year it happening to fall on the monthly fast,²⁰ so that either the fast or the festival must be omitted, the parliament, after some debate, thought it most agreeable to the present circumstances of the nation to go on with fasting and prayer; and therefore published the following order:

"Die Jovis 19 Dec. 1644. Whereas some doubts have been raised, whether the next fast shall be celebrated, because it falls on the day which heretofore was usually called the feast of the nativity of our Saviour; the lords and commons in parliament assembled do order and ordain, that public notice be given, that the fast appointed to be kept the last Wednesday in every month ought to be observed, till it be otherwise ordered by both houses; and that this day in particular is to be kept with the more solemn humiliation, because it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers, who have turned this feast, pretending the memory of Christ, into an extreme forgetfulness of him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights, being contrary to the life which Christ led here on earth, and to the spiritual life of Christ in our souls, for the sanctifying and saving whereof, Christ was pleased both to take a human life, and to lay it down again"

The royalists raised loud clamours on account of the supposed impiety and profaneness of this transaction, as what had never before been heard of in the Christian world, though they could not but know, that this, as well as other festivals, is of ecclesiastical appointment; that there is no mention of the observation of Christmas in the first or second age of Christianity; that the kirk of Scotland never observed it since the Reformation, except during the short reign of the bishops, and do not regard it at this day. Some of the most learned divines among the Presbyterians, as well as Independents, were in this sentiment. Mr. Edmund Calamy..."

Neal goes on to cite the fast sermon preached by Mr. Calamy on this occasion. James Reid records Calamy's comments about the circumstances of this fast:²¹

This day is commonly called *The Feast of Christ's nativity*, or, *Christmas-day*; a day that has formerly been much abused to *superstition*, and *profaneness*. It is not easy to say, whether the superstition has been greater, or the profaneness.... And truly I think that the superstition and profanation of this day is so rooted into it, as that there is no way to reform it, but by dealing with it as Hezekiah did with the brazen serpent. This year God, by his Providence, has buried this *Feast* in a *Fast*, and I hope it will never rise again.

It does not appear that the Parliament issued any directive about the Assembly's list of customs or rites to be discontinued, including this custom of preaching on

Christmas.²² However, the Parliament did move in June of 1647 to outlaw all ‘holy days,’ and tried to meet the concern for servants, expressed earlier by the Assembly. Neal writes.²³

Among the ordinances that passed this year for reformation of the church, none occasioned so much noise and disturbance as that of June 8, for abolishing the observation of saints’ days, and the three grand festivals of Christmas, Easter, and Whitsuntide; the ordinance says, “Forasmuch as the feast of the nativity of Christ, Easter, Whitsuntide, and other festivals, commonly called holy-days, have been heretofore superstitiously used and observed; be it ordained, that the said feasts, and all other festivals, commonly called holy-days, be no longer observed as festivals; any law, statute, custom, constitution, or canon, to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding.

And that there may be a convenient time allotted for scholars, apprentices, and other servants, for their recreation, be it ordained, that all scholars, apprentices, and other servants, shall, with the leave of their masters, have such convenient reasonable recreation, and relaxation from labour, every second Tuesday in the month throughout the year...

The Westminster Confession of Faith

The parliament had pressed the issuing of the Directory to meet the urgent need for settling the worship practices of England. The Westminster Divines would later express the doctrinal substance of their worship practice in the Westminster Confession and Catechisms.²⁴ The Confession’s statement regarding the parts of the worship of God is found in 21:5.²⁵ Carruthers’ critical text of this paragraph reads:²⁶

The reading of the Scriptures with godly fear; the sound preaching and conscionable hearing of the Word, in obedience unto God, with understanding, faith, and reverence; singing of psalms with grace in the heart; as also, the due administration and worthy receiving of the sacraments instituted by Christ; are all parts of the ordinary religious worship of God: beside religious oaths, vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings, upon special occasions, which are, in their several times and seasons, to be used in a holy and religious manner.

Recurring Fast Days and Days of Thanksgiving

One of the many textual errors that had crept into this portion of the Confession over time was a comma misplacement, which made the text to read, “vows, solemn fastings, and thanksgivings upon special

occasions...”. Dr. Carruthers comments, “Its omission makes the words ‘upon special occasions’ refer only to the thanksgivings. It must be remembered that the divines used the word ‘occasion’ in its stricter sense, that of ‘suitable opportunity,’ or as Dillingham translates it, *pro varietate eventuum*. The next clause” [times and seasons] “deals with ‘occasions’ in the looser modern sense.” This phrase — “times and seasons” — applies to all four of the extraordinary parts of religious worship: vows, oaths, fastings, and thanksgivings.

Though the Divines refer to Esther 9:22 as a proof text for times of thanksgiving,²⁷ the words of WCF 21:5 do not address annually recurring thanksgiving times or days. To such a suggestion that it does, it first must be objected that the Divines do not reference the broader context of the proof text, which would have only required adding the immediately preceding verse or two. Since they do not, it seems clear the Assembly was simply adducing an example of a time of thanksgiving, and not addressing the subject of annual recurrence of such observances. It should also be remembered that the Scripture proofs are not provided to add propositions to the Confession, but are there to support the actual statements and propositions given. This role is additionally supported by the fact that the references were only added at the insistence of the House of Commons — it was not the original design of the Divines to ‘proof text’ the propositions of the Westminster Standards.²⁸

As to the actual text of WCF 21:5, it must be objected that requiring the words “times and season” to mean recurring observances necessitates applying this to all four extraordinary acts of worship. This is highly unlikely given the reformed understanding of these ordinances. Let the following suffice to explain the difficulty of insisting on this reading:

Since oaths and vows are voluntary in nature, they are truly occasional and cannot be imposed in an arbitrary manner... The age of the Spirit is not to be one of perpetual fasting. But as those possessing the first fruits of the Spirit, yet, groaning in anticipation of our complete redemption (Rom. 8:23), it is surely appropriate that we fast on occasion as we long for the return of our divine Bridegroom.²⁹

In Roman Catholicism (and following the lead of the roman church are many Protestant Churches today) certain days and seasons are designated for fasting. This is contrary to Scripture which teaches that fasting is not acceptable unto God when it arises out of such mechanical regulation (see Mark 2:18-20, Matt. 6:16-18). ... Observe once more the admirable consistency of the Confession. Fasting is an element of true

worship only if it remains spontaneous or occasional, rather than being made a fixed part of the worship of God.³⁰

However, when the Confession speaks of ‘thanksgivings upon special occasions’ it has in view more specific acts of thanksgiving for particular acts of providence and grace. An example would be annual harvest thanksgivings. Less regular and more truly occasional would be times of thanksgiving for national deliverance in times of war or other emergencies. . . . In any case, the principle of thanksgiving is clearly taught and this suggests the appropriateness of specific acts of thanksgiving, provided these occasions be truly occasional and do not become part of a religious calendar imposed on the church with binding authority.³¹

Even without these difficulties, there is no compelling reason to understand this phrase to mean anything beyond what Carruthers indicates. When we speak of a season of prayer, communion season, or time of fasting, there is no necessity to understand that an annually recurring observance is implied. That is not to say that they cannot be providentially recurring, as thanksgiving for a good harvest would certainly be appropriate and such obviously would occur at about the same time in the seasons of harvest each year. Of course the next year there may be cause for fasting rather than thanksgiving, which belies the idea that any recurring observance can be imposed, as it must remain open to the changing providences of God in the lives of individuals, families or larger societies.³² Nor is it being said that recurrence if voluntary is not in and of itself unlawful, only that the Divines do not address the topic. In our liberty we may do much to put the remembering of the events and workings of God in our lives to good use. Samuel Miller remarks upon a good example of this in the life of John Rodgers.³³

Besides other seasons, both of ordinary and special devotion, he [Rodgers] seldom failed to observe the anniversaries of his *Birth*, of his *Licensure*, and of his *Ordination*, as days of solemn humiliation, fasting, and prayer. And on these occasions he was accustomed to commit to writing reflections and prayers, which were found among his papers after his decease, and which indicate piety of a very fervent and elevated character.

However, while not strictly unlawful, beyond personal observance, binding similar recurring devotions upon others in a family, church or nation, would seem to endanger Christian liberty, or at the very least engender formality in religious duties. Samuel Miller points out this concern regarding fast and thanksgiving days:³⁴

But we are persuaded, that even in the keeping of these days, when they are made stated observances, recurring, of course, at particular times, whatever the aspect of Providence may be, is calculated to promote formality and superstition, rather than the edification of the body of Christ.

Fast and Thanksgiving Days Versus ‘Holy Days’

The fact that recurrence is not even being addressed by the Westminster Divines, dispels any idea that the confession itself may allow for recurring ‘holy days.’³⁵ However, more serious to such a contention is the historic use and understanding of words. “Solemn fastings, and thanksgivings” have a definite meaning as used in WCF 21:5 and in the Directory.³⁶ These times should not be confused with the ‘holy days’ condemned in the Directory’s Appendix.³⁷ Setting aside days to remember specific acts of redemption is not the same thing as separating “a day or days for publick fasting or thanksgiving, as the several eminent and extraordinary dispensations of God’s providence shall administer cause and opportunity to his people.”³⁸ As the Southern Presbyterian, William S. Plumer makes clear:³⁹

Even days of fasting or thanksgiving are not holy days; but they are a part of secular time voluntarily devoted to God's service. And if we are to perform these things at all, we must take some time for them. Yet none but God can sanctify a day so as to make it holy. The attempt to do this was one of the sins of Jeroboam, 1 Kings 12:33.

The differences between these lawfully appointed times and ‘holy days’ are clear. The former are prescribed acts of worship, clearly warranted in the Scriptures. ‘Holy days’ have no such prescription — there is no Scriptural command, approved example, or good and necessary inference, which warrants tying specific acts of redemption to ‘holy’ days of our own choosing. (See the appendix “Gillespie on Worship” for more background on the general rule governing worship).⁴⁰

God has given his church a general precept for extraordinary fasts (Joel 1:14; 2:15), as likewise for extraordinary festivities to praise God, and to give him thanks in the public assembly of his people, upon the occasional motive of some great benefit which, by the means of our fasting and praying, we have obtained (Zech. 8:19 with 7:3). If it is said that there is a general command for set festivities, because there is a command for preaching and hearing the word, and for praising God for his benefits; and there is no precept for particular fasts more than for particular festivities, I answer: Albeit there is a command for preaching and hearing the word, and for praising God for his benefits,

yet is there no command (no, not in the most general generality) for annexing these exercises of religion to set anniversary days more than to other days; whereas it is plain that there is a general command for fasting and humiliation at some times more than at other times.

While there is a general warrant for fast or thanksgiving days, since the circumstances, causes, etc. are infinite, there is no such general warrant for anniversary 'holy days' to remember specific acts of redemption, a list of which by its nature would not be endless. If it had been God's desire these could easily have been enumerated in Scripture.⁴¹

And as for particularities, all the particular causes, occasions, and times of fasting could not be determined in Scripture, because they are infinite, as Camero says. But all the particular causes of set festivities, and the number of the same, might have been easily determined in Scripture, since they are not, nor may not be infinite; for the Bishop himself acknowledges that to appoint a festival day for every week cannot stand with charity, the inseparable companion of piety. And albeit so many were allowable, yet who sees not how easily the Scripture might have comprehended them, because they are set, constant, and anniversary times, observed for permanent and continuing causes, and not moveable or mutable, as fasts which are appointed for occurring causes, and therefore may be infinite.

Fast and thanksgiving days have a necessary use, whereas 'holy days' are not necessary at all. As George Gillespie writes, "The celebration of set anniversary days is no necessary mean for conserving the commemoration of the benefits of redemption, because we have occasion, not only every Sabbath day, but every other day, to call to mind these benefits, either in hearing, or reading, or meditating upon God's word."⁴²

Presbyterians carried this position against 'holy days' over to the colonies and it continued within American Presbyterianism, until a practical decline began in the late 19th century. Explicit denominational approval came in the mainline churches within the first half of the 20th century.

II. 'Holy Days' and American Presbyterianism

From the early days of Presbyterianism in the American colonies through the founding of the United States, the American Presbyterians continued their opposition to the observance of 'holy days.'

American Presbyterian View of 'Holy Days' Prior to 1788

From the beginning of their arrival in the America colonies, the Presbyterians, who were mostly transplanted Scots and Ulster Scots,⁴³ did not observe Christmas or other 'holy days.' The Presbyterian view is clearly stated in the appendix to the Westminster *Directory for the Public Worship of God, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship*.⁴⁴

There is no day commanded in scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath.

Festival days, vulgarly [*commonly*] called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued.

Nevertheless, it is lawful and necessary, upon special emergent occasions, to separate a day or days for publick fasting or thanksgiving, as the several eminent and extraordinary dispensations of God's providence shall administer cause and opportunity to his people.

As no place is capable of any holiness, under pretence of whatsoever dedication or consecration; so neither is it subject to such pollution by any superstition formerly used, and now laid aside, as may render it unlawful or inconvenient for Christians to meet together therein for the publick worship of God. And therefore we hold it requisite, that the places of publick assembly for worship among us should be continued and employed to that use.

Constitutional Status of the Directory

Prior to 1788, the major body of American Presbyterians constitutionally approved of the Westminster Directory. The Synod of Philadelphia recommended the Directory in 1729.⁴⁵

A motion being made to know the Synod's judgment about the directory, they gave their sense of that matter in the following words, viz: The Synod do unanimously acknowledge and declare, that they judge the directory for worship, discipline, and government of the church, commonly annexed to the Westminster Confession, to be agreeable in substance to the word of God, and founded thereupon, and therefore do earnestly recommend the same to all their members, to be by them observed as near as circumstances will allow, and Christian prudence dictate.

While still maintaining its exceptions to certain clauses regarding the civil magistrate in WCF 20 and 23, the Synod reaffirmed its position again in 1736, declaring: "... that the Synod have adopted and still do adhere to the Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory,

without the least variation or alteration, and without any regard to said distinctions.”⁴⁶

During the time of the Old Side / New Side schism, the Synod of New York affirmed its adherence to the Westminster Standards, Catechisms, and Directory for worship and government. In 1751 the synod declared:⁴⁷

The Synod being informed of certain misrepresentations concerning the constitution, order, and discipline of our churches, industriously spread by some of the members of the Dutch congregations, interspersed among or bordering upon us, with design to prevent occasional or constant communion of their members with our churches; to obviate all such misrepresentations, and to cultivate a good understanding between us and our brethren of the Dutch churches, we do hereby declare and testify our constitution, order, and discipline, to be in harmony with the established church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession, Catechisms, and Directory for public worship and church government adopted by them, are in like manner received and adopted by us. We declare ourselves united with that church in the same faith, order, and discipline.

Meeting for a plan of union in 1758, the Synods of Philadelphia and New York declared:⁴⁸

Both Synods having always approved and received the Westminster Confession of Faith, and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as an orthodox and excellent system of Christian doctrine, founded on the word of God, we do still receive the same as the confession of our faith, and also adhere to the plan of worship, government, and discipline, contained in the Westminster Directory, strictly enjoining it on all our members and probationers for the ministry, that they preach and teach according to the form of sound words in said confession and Catechisms, and avoid and oppose all errors contrary thereto.

As late as 1786, in response to queries from the Low Dutch Reformed Synod of New York and New Jersey, the Synod of New York and Philadelphia reaffirmed that it:⁴⁹

... receives the directory for public worship and the form of church government recommended by the Westminster Assembly as in substance agreeable to the institutions of the New Testament. This mode of adoption we use, because we believe the general platform of our government to be agreeable to the sacred Scriptures; but we do not believe that God has been pleased so to reveal and enjoin every minute circumstance of ecclesiastic government and discipline as not to leave room for orthodox churches of Christ, in these minutiae to differ with charity from one another.

Adherence to the Directory was part of ordination vows during the 18th century as well. “John Tennent, September 18, 1729, subscribed the following subscription: ‘I do own the Westminster Confession of Faith, before God and these witnesses, together with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, with the Directory thereto annexed, to be the confession of my faith, and rule of faith and manners, according to the word of God.’”⁵⁰ In the Philadelphia Presbytery Samuel Evans in his subscription “adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith, Catechisms and Directory, according to the adopting act of Synod.” Donegal Presbytery, which was formed in 1732, required the following subscription: “I, having seriously read and perused the Westminster Confession and catechisms, do declare in the sight of God, and all here present, that I do believe, and am fully persuaded, that so far as I can discern and understand said Confession and Catechisms, they are, in all things, agreeable to the word of God... I also believe the Directory for the exercise of worship, discipline, and government, commonly annexed to the said Confession, to be agreeable to the word of God, and I do promise to conform myself thereto in my practice, as far as in emergent circumstances I can attain unto.”⁵¹

The only apparent American Presbyterian version of the Westminster Standards prior to 1788 contains the Directory for Worship.⁵² About this edition Warfield writes:⁵³

It can hardly be doubted, on the other hand, that the second American edition which we have met with, was called out by a purely Presbyterian demand. This was issued in 1745 at Philadelphia, from the press of Benjamin Franklin, and was a finely manufactured 16mo volume of 588 pages, following the type of the normative Edinburgh edition of Lumisden and Robertson of 1728, and containing all the documents included in that edition and ever subsequently constituting the fixed contents of Scotch editions. It came from the press, it will be observed, the year of the formation of the Synod of New York, and it may well be that the disruption of the Synod of Pennsylvania, and the controversies out of which that disruption grew and which had been disturbing the Church since 1740, were the occasion of its preparation. That only these two editions were issued in America until, as the century was drawing to a close (1789, 1799), the two greater Presbyterian bodies established in this country began to publish their amended editions of the Confession, is readily accounted for by the continued dependence of Presbyterians at large on Scotland for their supply of Confessions. This dependence is attested by the very large number of Scotch Confessions bearing dates in the eighteenth century which are found scattered through America to-day.

Pardovan's Collections: An Early Book of Order and Secondary Standard

The rejection of 'holy days' was also embodied in a secondary standard, the *Collections* of Steuart of Pardovan. The early American Presbyterians used this book as an exposition of their discipline.⁵⁴ "One manual, by Steuart of Pardovan, is referred to in early American Presbyterian records as designed to serve the future as a paradigm of polity."⁵⁵ Robert J. Breckinridge (1800-1871) wrote in 1843, "From the earliest period of the church in America, the *Collections* of Pardovan have been its rule of discipline, and the general principles therein embodied as essentially our own; and that work was made the basis of a portion of our present standards when they were compiled."⁵⁶ Ashbel Green recalled, "When I was preparing for the gospel ministry, I was directed to read the Scotch collections of Steuart of Pardovan, as a book of authority on the government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church."⁵⁷ Official records make this clear as well. "Article 5th: The rules of our discipline and the form of process in our church judicatures, are contained in Pardovan's (alias Stewart's) collections in conjunction with the acts of our own Synod..."⁵⁸

Pardovan's *Collections* state: "This church hath no anniversary feast or festival days, but doth only set apart a day or days for thanksgiving or humiliation, as emergent providences do call for."⁵⁹

The Practical Handling of Christmas and 'Holy Days' in 18th Century American Presbyterianism

In the New England colonies, Christmas day was largely ignored. In those colonies where the Church of England held sway, there was much more observance of the day. However, at this time there was also an overriding concern in all parts for the immoral reveling during Christmas. One mid 19th century writer noted this customary immorality associated with 'Christmastime.'⁶⁰

The moral and religious influence of the observance of Christmas has never been good. It has usually been a day of unhallowed mirth... The mode of its observance has, nowhere, been suitable to the anniversary of the birth of the author of a spiritual religion and the Saviour of the world. We would object to its observance, even if performed in a better spirit: for the experience of the church has shown that to observe periodically other religious days than God has appointed inevitably diminishes the respect that ought to be paid to the day that God has certainly hallowed.

This of course was not new, but had long been a problem in England, as noted earlier by the comments of

Mr. Calamy. Regarding the Puritan view of 'holy days,' one non-Christian writer has astutely observed, "Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to *Christianize*."⁶¹

"The Puritans knew what subsequent generations would forget: that when the Church, more than a millennium earlier, had placed Christmas Day in late December, the decision was part of what amounted to a compromise, and a compromise for which the Church paid a high price. Late-December festivities were deeply rooted in popular culture, both in observance of the winter solstice and in celebration of the one brief period of leisure and plenty in the agricultural year. In return for ensuring massive observance of the anniversary of the Savior's birth by assigning it to this resonant date, the Church for its part tacitly agreed to allow the holiday to be celebrated more or less the way it had always been. From the beginning, the Church's hold over Christmas was (and remains still) rather tenuous. There were always people for whom Christmas was a time of pious devotion rather than carnival, but such people were always in the minority. It may not be going too far to say that Christmas has always been an extremely difficult holiday to *Christianize*. Little wonder that the Puritans were willing to save themselves the trouble.

The same author observes that Christmas was "nothing but a pagan festival covered with a Christian veneer."⁶²

The Puritans understood another thing, too: Much of the seasonal excess that took place at Christmas was not merely chaotic "disorder" but behavior that took a profoundly ritualized form. Most fundamentally, Christmas was an occasion when the social hierarchy itself was symbolically turned upside down, in a gesture that inverted designated roles of gender, age, and class. During the Christmas season those near the bottom of the social order acted high and mighty. Men might dress like women, and women might dress (and act) like men. Young people might imitate and mock their elders... Increase Mather explained with an anthropologist's clarity what he believed to be the origins of the practice: 'In the Saturnalian Days, Master did wait upon their Servants ... The Gentiles called Saturns time the Golden Age, because in it there was no servitude, in Commemoration whereof on his Festival, Servants must be Masters.' This practice, like so many others, was simply picked up and transposed to Christmas, where those who were low in station became 'Masters of Misrule.' To this day, in the British army, on December 25 officers are obliged to wait upon enlisted men at meals.⁶³

Samuel Davies

This concern for the general licentious and/or superstitious use of the day, seems to have been the reason the Presbyterian minister, Samuel Davies decided to preach a Christmas sermon at a weekday gathering in 1758.⁶⁴ He appears to be one of the few that did, as Presbyterians and Non-conformists generally ignored the 'holy days' celebrated in the Episcopal and Lutheran churches at this time. This was no doubt due to the fact that he ministered in Virginia,⁶⁵ where religious observance was more the norm than in New England. Davies observed:⁶⁶

This is the day which the church of Rome, and some other churches that deserve to be placed in better company have agreed to celebrate in memory of the Prince of Peace, the Saviour of men, the incarnate God, Immanuel. And I doubt not, but many convert superstition into rational and scriptural devotion, and religiously employ themselves in a manner acceptable to God, though they want the sanction of divine authority for appropriating this day to a sacred use. But, alas! It is generally a season of sinning, sensuality, luxury, and various forms of extravagance; as though men were not celebrating the birth of the holy Jesus, but of Venus, or Bacchus, whose most sacred rites were mysteries of iniquity and debauchery....

To remember and religiously improve the incarnation of our divine Redeemer, to join the concert of angels, and dwell in ecstatic meditation upon their song; this is lawful, this is a seasonable duty every day; and consequently upon this day. And as Jesus improved the feast of dedication, though not of divine institution, as a proper opportunity to exercise his ministry, when crowds of the Jews were gathered from all parts; so I would improve this day for your instruction, since it is the custom of our country to spend it religiously, or idly, or wickedly, as different persons are differently disposed.

But as the seed of superstition which have some times grown up to a prodigious height, have been frequently sown and cherished by very inconsiderable incidents, I think it proper to inform you, that I may guard against this danger, that I do not set apart this day for public worship, as though it had any peculiar sanctity, or we were under any obligations to keep it religiously. I know no human authority, that has power to make one day more holy than another, or that can bind the conscience in such cases. And as for divine authority, to which alone the sanctifying of days and things belongs, it has thought it sufficient to consecrate one day in seven to a religious use, for the commemoration both of the birth of this world, and the resurrection of its great Author, or of the works of creation and redemption. This I would religiously

observe; and inculcate the religious observance of it upon all. But as to other days, consecrated by the mistaken piety or superstition of men, and conveyed down to us as holy, through the corrupt medium of human tradition, I think myself free to observe them or not, according to conveniency, and the prospect of usefulness; like other common days, on which I may lawfully carry on public worship or not, as circumstances require. And since I have so fair an opportunity, and it seems necessary in order to prevent my conduct from being a confirmation of present superstition, or a temptation to future, I shall, once for all, declare my sentiments more fully upon this head.

Davies warns against a factious prosecuting of this difference in religion in those who may observe the day to worship, though without superstition, for which he adduces Paul and the use of things indifferent. He then adduces Paul to the Galatians to demonstrate that warning is warranted to those who would place a "great part of their religion in the observance of them." He concludes "The commandments of God have often been made void by the traditions of men; and human inventions more religiously observed than divine institutions; and when this was the case, St. Paul was warm in opposing even ceremonial mistakes."⁶⁷ Davies then proceeds to reason why Christmas should not be religiously observed, before continuing to preach from Luke 2:13-14.

American Presbyterian View of 'Holy Days' After 1788

In 1788 the Presbyterian Church in the United States was formed, and new standards adopted. The Directory was extensively streamlined to remove dated, inapplicable and/or unnecessary references and directions. From the two chapters on days of Fasting and of Thanksgiving, and the Appendix, a single new chapter was created — *Of Fasting, and of the Observation of the Days of Thanksgiving*. The first two paragraphs of the new chapter were derived from the appendix.

I. There is no day under the Gospel commanded to be kept holy, except the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath.

II. Nevertheless, to observe days of fasting and thanksgiving, as the extraordinary dispensations of divine providence may direct, we judge both scriptural and rational.

The first paragraph is a slight rewording of the first paragraph from the old appendix. The second is a rewording of the third paragraph. Both the original second paragraph stating that observance of 'holy days' should no longer be continued for lack of Scriptural

warrant, and the fourth paragraph, affirming the continued use of buildings were superstitious worship had taken place, were dropped. The reason is obvious. The American Presbyterians never had observed festival days, nor had their church buildings been places for superstitious and idolatrous worship. With the retention of the first paragraph of the appendix, the substance of the opposition to 'holy days' remained in the new directory.

This is easily confirmed. From 1816 to 1819 Samuel Miller, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton, served on the committee to revise the 1788 American directory. This committee did not revise the section in question. Two years prior to the Old School / New School schism,⁶⁸ Miller gave the following understanding of this portion of the directory:

Presbyterians Do Not Observe Holy Days. We believe, and teach, in our public formularies, that "there is no day, under the Gospel dispensation, commanded to be kept holy, except the Lord's day, which is the Christian Sabbath." We believe, indeed, and declare, in the same formula, that it is both scriptural and rational, to observe special days of Fasting and Thanksgiving, as the extraordinary dispensations of Divine Providence may direct. But we are persuaded, that even the keeping of these days, when they are made stated observances, recurring, of course, at particular times, whatever the aspect of Providence may be, is calculated to promote formality and superstition, rather than the edification of the body of Christ.⁶⁹

This book, one of the most widely published of Miller's works, was prepared at the request of The Tract Society of the Synod of New York, and published by the Presbyterian Board of Publication. It was published many times, sometimes in several printings and places in a given year, in 1837, 1840, 1842, 1847, and 1848.⁷⁰ It was published in Italian in 1855. The section on worship was extracted and turned into a Presbyterian tract by the Board of Publication.⁷¹ Miller's comments therefore can be taken as expressing the common view of his church.⁷²

Another indication of the continued adherence to this stance against observing 'holy days' is apparent in examining the American Presbyterian edition of a popular exposition of the Westminster Confession. In 1846 the Presbyterian Board of Publication published Robert Shaw's exposition of the Confession of Faith. Shaw comments at WCF 21:5:

Solemn fastings and thanksgivings. Stated festival-days, commonly called *holy-days*, have no warrant in the Word of God; but a day may be set apart, by competent authority, for fasting or thanksgiving, when

extraordinary dispensations of Providence administer cause for them. When judgments are threatened or inflicted, or when some special blessing is to be sought and obtained, fasting is eminently seasonable. When some remarkable mercy or deliverance has been received, there is a special call to thanksgiving. The views of the compilers of our Confession respecting these ordinances may be found in "The Directory for the Public Worship of God."⁷³

The preface to this American edition notes that the Presbyterian Board of Publication took the liberty to change the sections of the Exposition dealing with 31:1; 25:1-3, 23:3, deleted other local illusions to the civil magistrate, and dropped the introduction by William Hetherington. They did not change this section on chapter 21 where Shaw presents the Westminster Directory as commentary on the meaning of WCF 21:5, and in fact uses the language of the original directory in his exposition.⁷⁴

Other sources of the American Presbyterian viewpoint regarding 'holy days' abound, from both the Northern and Southern churches, as well as the Associate Reformed, Reformed, and United Presbyterian churches.

But as it was found that this did not suit the actual Christian state of most Christians, human authority was allowed, and even encouraged, to appoint Sundays, Easters and Whitsuntides for them. The objections are: first, that this countenances 'will-worship,' or the intrusion of man's inventions into God's service; second, it is an implied insult to Paul's inspiration, assuming that he made a practical blunder, which the church synods, wiser than his inspiration, had to mend by a human expedient; and third, we have here a practical confession that, after all, the average New Testament Christian does need a stated holy day, and therefore the ground of the Sabbath command is perpetual and moral.⁷⁵

Under the Jewish economy there were other set times and modes of worship, which were abolished when the Christian economy was introduced. Since then no *holidays* (holy days) but the Sabbath, are of divine authority or obligation.⁷⁶

No human power can make it unlawful for men to pursue their industrial avocations during the six secular days. The New Testament plainly discourages the attempt to fill up the calendar with holidays, Gal. 4:9-11; Col. 2:16-23. Even days of fasting or thanksgiving are not holy days; but they are a part of secular time voluntarily devoted to God's service. And if we are to perform these things at all, we must take some time for them. Yet none but God can sanctify a day so as to make it holy. The attempt to do this was one of the sins of Jeroboam, 1 Kings 12:33.⁷⁷

To those who believe in this form of regimen it forms “the golden hours” of time; and finding no command nor fair deduction from Scripture warranting them to keep any other day, whether (in honor of the Saxon goddess Eostre, that is, the Prelatic) “Easter,” “the Holy Innocents,” or of “St. Michael and all the angels,” they believe that “festival days, vulgarly called holidays, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be observed.”⁷⁸

Q. 7. Is it not a daring intrusion upon the prerogative of God to appoint as a stated religious festival any other day or season, such as Christmas or Easter? A. It is an impeachment of the wisdom of God and an assertion of our right and ability to improve on his plans.”⁷⁹

The erection and regular observance of other holy days. Had God seen their regular recurrence was desirable they would have been appointed. Their use has been spiritually damaging. They often become centers of ceremonialism and sensual worship.⁸⁰

In former times the Reformed Presbyterian Church was solidly opposed to the religious observance of Christmas, Easter and other special days of the same kind. ... [W]e should realize that we Covenanters, in opposing the observance of Easter and other “holy” days, are only holding to the original principle which was once held by *all* Presbyterians everywhere. It is not the Covenanters that have changed. ... [T]he apostle Paul regards this observance of days as *a bad tendency*: “I am afraid of (for) you, lest I have bestowed upon you labor in vain.”... Paul wondered what was wrong with their religious knowledge and experience, that they should have become so zealous for the observance of days.”⁸¹

No doubt even more testimonies could be gathered, but they are not necessary. The general rejection of ‘holy days’ by American Presbyterians is confirmed by one of the most important Southern Presbyterian historians. Ernest Trice Thompson writes:

The Presbyterian Church in this period [1607-1861] had no interest in a “Church Year.” Easter was completely ignored, and Christmas, however popular as a holiday, was not a day of religious observance.⁸²

In the antebellum South, Christmas had been observed in accordance with the English custom as a day of jollity and goodwill, families were united, slaves enjoyed a rest from labor, and school-children looked forward to a four-day holiday from school. There was, however, no recognition of either Christmas or Easter in any of the Protestant churches, except the Episcopal and Lutheran. For a full generation after the Civil War the religious journals of the South mentioned Christmas only to observe that there was no reason to believe that Jesus was actually born on December 25; it

was not recognized as a day of any religious significance in the Presbyterian Church.⁸³

The changing tide of opinion

The observance of ‘holy days’ crept slowing into the Presbyterian Church through popular and cultural pressures.⁸⁴ The tide began to turn in the late 19th century. In 1889, Robert L. Dabney could still write that the use of organs in worship would open the door to ‘holy days’ and more ritualistic worship in the Southern Presbyterian Church.⁸⁵

That a denomination, professing like ours to be anti-prelatic and anti-ritualistic, should throw down the bulwarks of their argument against these errors by this recent innovation appears little short of lunacy. Prelatists undertake every step of the argument which these Presbyterians use for their organ, and advance them in a parallel manner to defend the re-introduction of the Passover or Easter, of Whitsuntide, of human priests and priestly vestments, and of chrism, into the gospel church.

Thompson observes, “The breakover seems to have come first in the Sunday schools, or in festivities arranged for the Sunday school children in the church auditorium.”⁸⁶ Katherine Lambert Richards notes:

A résumé of the development of Christmas observance in the Protestant Sunday-schools of the United States makes one thing clear; Christmas returned to Protestant church life because the rank and file of the membership wanted it. It made its way against official opposition in many denominations until there were so many local groups celebrating December twenty-fifth as the birthday of Jesus that opposition was futile and indifference impossible. Even when the denomination accepted Christmas as part of the church year its position was magnified and its celebration increased in response to popular desire. As time went on, Sunday-school and other denominational leaders played a larger part in the promotion of certain types of Christmas observances but as a rule the local schools have remained the chief experiment stations. Christmas preceded other church festivals in general recognition and has continued to overshadow them in popular esteem.⁸⁷

Regarding Presbyterians, Richards also writes:⁸⁸

Like the Congregationalists, the Baptists and Presbyterians repudiated ‘all the saints’ days’ and observed “the Lord’s day as the Sabbath and the only season of holy time commanded to Christians.” It was 1851 before the Presbyterians produced a Sunday-school magazine, *The Sabbath School Visitor*. Its first approach to a Christmas reference came in the number for December 1, 1853, where, in a serial history of the

Presbyterian Church, the action of the Assembly of 1618 at Perth in assenting to the observance of holidays was disapproved. December fifteenth of the following year brought an article on the birth of Christ which urged the careful instruction of children in the Scriptural accounts of the nativity and the correction of all impressions received from tradition only. Although this procedure was expected to convince the children that Christmas was a most unlikely date for Jesus' birth no objection was made to its observance; indeed the author used the occasion to urge the worship of the risen and exalted Saviour. The December numbers from 1855 to 1858 contained poems, pictures and articles, on the nativity of Jesus but from 1859 to 1865 the subject of Christmas was dropped from the pages of the *Sabbath School Visitor*. Apparently the fires of the Christmas controversy were burning low. Though not yet accepted by the denomination as a whole, it could be mentioned and its religious as well as holiday, character could be recognized.

The drift of the Presbyterian attitude toward Christmas is further described in the letters of James W. Alexander, son of a Presbyterian minister and himself, teacher at Princeton Seminary, pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City and prolific writer for the American Sunday-school Union. On December 25, 1838, Dr. Alexander ventured to wish his correspondent a Merry Christmas; on Christmas Day of 1843, he made one of a family reunion at his father's house in Princeton. In 1845 he speaks of Christmas meetings as common in New York City on Christmas. In 1851 Christmas saw Dr. Alexander in nine churches – five Roman Catholic, one Unitarian, and three Episcopal. His own longing for “anniversary festivals” was openly expressed next year, only to be set aside in obedience to Presbyterian tenets, as “against the second commandment.”⁸⁹ Another three years and “three hundred and fifty urchins and urchinesses” assembled on Christmas Day for a cake and candy fête in the Mission Chapel of the Fifth Avenue Church. Christmas, as a holiday, seemed to hold fewer dangers than Christmas as a religious festival. At all events it enabled Presbyterians to join in the pleasures of the season without a complete rejection of the historical attitude of the denomination on the matter of “set days.” The various divisions which marked the history of American Presbyterianism from 1810 to 1860 did not materially affect the attitude toward Christmas of the different groups. If anything the separating bodies were the more vigorous in their rejection of the day.’

The official sanction and religious observance of ‘holy days’ did not come easily nor quickly however. The General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church proclaimed in 1899 that there was no Scriptural warrant to observe Christmas and Easter. However, despite

renewing this objection in 1903, 1913 and 1916, the opposition was collapsing in the face of wide observance and acceptance.

With the twentieth century the Southern Presbyterian, or the Presbyterian Church in the United States, to use its official title, joined the ranks of Christmas-keeping denominations. The process followed the familiar lines of official disapproval and ignoring of the day, of an increasing number of local celebrations, many of which were of the holiday, Santa Claus, party type, and finally of official recognition and attempts to change the character of the local observance.⁹⁰

In 1921 the General Assembly did not repeat its former injunctions against Christmas and Easter observance. In 1950 the religious observance of days finally received official sanction by the Assembly.⁹¹ Julius Melton documents that the Northern Presbyterian Church likewise did not officially embrace ‘holy days’ until the 20th century. The 1906 edition of the Book of Common Worship approached the Christian year cautiously. By the 1932 revision, Melton notes the “Presbyterians were moving more into the ecumenical mainstream” with an “heightened emphasis given to the Christian year.”⁹² The United Presbyterian Church, as late as 1926, did not officially recognize ‘holy days.’⁹³ The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America adopted a new directory for worship in 1945, and its ambiguity allowed observance of days to spread in that church, though some still contend against the practice. This occurred despite the fact that the RPCNA Covenant of 1871, which they affirm is still binding, requires adherence to the original Westminster Directory.⁹⁴ The Associate Reformed Presbyterian constitution contained the wording of the Westminster Directory appendix against “Festival days, commonly called holy-days” until 1975.⁹⁵

Continuing Witness Against Christmas

In this historical overview, the relationship between the Westminster Confession and the Directory for Worship has been demonstrated, and rejection of ‘holy days’ by the Westminster Divines and those approving the Directory is clear. There is no room for ‘holy days’ in WCF 21:5, if history, grammar, and intent of authors are to be observed. This opposition to ‘holy days’ continued strong in the American branches of Presbyterianism until a decline from orthodoxy began, with the various branches officially approving these days throughout the early to later part of the 20th century. Thankfully, there continues to be a Presbyterian witness against

observance of 'holy days,' though very much a minority view. John Murray had at least a witnessing influence in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and at Westminster Seminary.⁹⁶ Joseph Duggan (OPC) also wrote a tract about 1959, which continues to circulate.⁹⁷ In 1962, G. I. Williamson defended the good old way in an article for the RPCNA's *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, and continues that witness in the OPC today.⁹⁸ Within the last twenty years or so several Presbyterians have appeared in print against 'holy day' observance. Some of these have become popular tracts on worship and 'holy days,' and the faithful Presbyterian view has received wide circulation via the Internet.⁹⁹ May the Lord be pleased to bless his church with a continuing witness against the present-day corruptions in His worship; may He send reformation to his church.

Appendix 1: Thomas M'Crie on The Days of Purim

[In the following extract Dr. M'Crie addresses the nature of the days of Purim, the authority of their appointment, and the relevance of these days to 'holy days' and the Westminster Confession's days of fasting and thanksgiving.¹⁰⁰]

The feast referred to in our text is called the feast of Purim, or Lots, from the Persic word *pur*, which signifies the *lot*; and the name was given it because Haman had cast lots to determine the day on which he should destroy all the Jews; but He who has the disposal of the lot, "caused his wicked device to return on his own head," and saved his people.

There are two questions respecting this feast. What was its nature? And by what authority was it enjoined?

What was its nature? Was it religious, or merely civil? Some interpreters are of opinion that it was entirely civil or political, and intended to commemorate a temporal deliverance, by such expressions of outward joy as are common among all people on such occasions. In corroboration of this opinion, they observe that nothing peculiarly sacred is mentioned as belonging to its celebration, but only eating and drinking, rejoicing, and sending portions to one another, and gifts to the poor; that they were not restricted from ordinary work, but merely rested from the trouble and sorrow which they had lately felt. But though it should be granted that the description contains nothing but expressions of secular joy, we would scarcely be warranted to maintain that this feast had no religious character. It is of the nature of this Book not to bring forward religion expressly, for reasons that we formerly assigned. Would we say that the fast formerly observed by Esther and the Jews in Shushan

consisted solely in abstinence from food, because there is no mention of prayer combined with it? Nay, we find this exercise specified in the account of the feast: "they had decreed for themselves and for their seed the matters of their fastings *and their cry*," that is, their prayer (v.31). Now, though this should be understood as looking back on their exercise when the murderous edict was first promulgated, yet its being named here gives a religious character to the feast. Can we suppose that they would fast and pray during their distress, and not rejoice before the Lord, and give thanks to him after he had hearkened to them? But it is more natural to understand the words prospectively, and they may be translated thus – "adding fasting and prayer." Accordingly, in after times, the Jews kept the thirteenth of Adar as a fast, and the two following days as a feast.

By what authority was it enjoined? Or, in other words, did the observance of it rest on mere human authority? Did Mordecai, in proposing it, act from the private motion of his own mind; and, in confirming it, did he proceed entirely upon the consent of the people? Or was he guided in both by divine and extraordinary counsel, imparted to him immediately, or by some prophetic person living at that time? That the vision and the prophecy were still enjoyed by the Jews dwelling in Persia, cannot be denied by those who believe the canonical authority of this book, and what is contained in that of Ezra. We have already seen reasons for thinking Mordecai acted under the influence of the faith of Moses' parents, from the time that he proposed his cousin Esther as a candidate to succeed Vashti the queen. There can be no doubt that he was raised up in an extraordinary manner as a saviour to Israel; and in the course of this Lecture we have seen grounds for believing that, in addition to his other honours, he was employed as the penman of this portion of inspired scripture. From all these considerations, it is reasonable to conclude that the feast of Purim was not instituted without divine counsel and approbation. Add to this, that the decree of Esther confirming it, is expressly said, in the close of this chapter, to have been engrossed in this book, by whomsoever it was written.

From what has been said, we may infer that this passage of Scripture gives no countenance to religious festivals, or holidays of human appointment, especially under the New Testament. Feasts appear to have been connected with sacrifices from the most ancient times; but the observance of them was not brought under any fixed rules until the establishment of the Mosaic law. Religious festivals formed a noted and splendid part of the ritual of that law; but they were only designed to be temporary; and having served their end in

commemorating certain great events connected with the Jewish commonwealth, and in typifying certain mysteries now clearly revealed by the gospel, they ceased, and, along with other figures, vanished away. To retain these, or to return to them after the promulgation of the Christian law, or to imitate them by instituting festivals of a similar kind, is to doat on shadows — to choose weak and beggarly elements — to bring ourselves under a yoke of bondage which the Jews were unable to bear, and interpretatively to fall from grace and the truth of the gospel. “Ye observe days and months, and times and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain.” “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holiday, or of the new moon, or of the Sabbath days, which are a shadow of things to come.” Shall we suppose that Christ and his apostles, in abrogating those days which God himself had appointed to be observed, without instituting others in their room, intended that either churches or individuals should be allowed to substitute whatever they pleased in their room? Yet the Christian church soon degenerated so far as to bring herself under a severer bondage than that from which Christ had redeemed her, and instituted a greater number of festivals than were observed under the Mosaic law, or even among pagans.

To seek a warrant for days of religious commemoration under the gospel from the Jewish festivals, is not only to overlook the distinction between the old and new dispensations, but to forget that the Jews were never allowed to institute such memorials for themselves, but simply to keep those which infinite Wisdom had expressly and by name set apart and sanctified. The prohibitory sanction is equally strict under both Testaments: “What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it.”

There are times when God calls, on the one hand, to religious fasting, or, on the other, to thanksgiving and religious joy; and it is our duty to comply with these calls, and to set apart time for the respective exercises. But this is quite a different thing from recurrent or anniversary holidays. In the former case the day is chosen for the duty, in the latter the duty is performed for the day; in the former case there is no holiness on the day but what arises from the service which is performed on it, and when the same day afterwards recurs, it is as common as any other day; in the latter case the day is set apart on all following times, and may not be employed for common or secular purposes. Stated and recurring festivals countenance the false principle, that some days have a peculiar sanctity, either inherent or impressed by the works which occurred on them; they proceed on an

undue assumption of human authority; interfere with the free use of that time which the Creator hath granted to man; detract from the honour due to the day of sacred rest which he hath appointed; lead to impositions over conscience; have been the fruitful source of superstition and idolatry; and have been productive of the worst effects upon morals, in every age, and among every people, barbarous and civilized, pagan and Christian, popish and protestant, among whom they have been observed. On these grounds they were rejected from the beginning, among other corruptions of antichrist, by the reformed Church of Scotland, which allowed no stated religious days but the Christian Sabbath.

Appendix 2: Gillespie on Worship

[The following extended quote from W. D. J. McKay explains further the point of view regarding worship expressed by George Gillespie, which is assumed in this article.¹⁰¹]

An illustration of Gillespie’s view of the diatatic power of the Church is to be found in his 1637 work *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*. Gillespie structures his treatise around the four lines of argument used by those who support the introduction of such ‘popish ceremonies’ as kneeling at communion (with its suggestion of adoration of the elements), making the sign of the cross, wearing vestments such as the surplice and observing holy days (‘holidays’), namely that they are necessary, expedient, lawful or indifferent matters. The part which is relevant to our discussion is Part 3, dealing with the lawfulness of these ceremonies.

In chapter 7 Gillespie argues that the ‘lawfulness of the ceremonies cannot be warranted by any ecclesiastical law, nor by any power which the church hath to put order to things belonging to divine worship.’ After listing examples of false views, drawn from such writers as Field and Lindsey, Gillespie sets out his own positive case regarding the true limits of the Church’s power to enact laws relating to the worship of God.

Three conditions must be met if a matter can be the object of prescription by the laws of the Church:

- (1) It must be only a circumstance of divine worship; no substantial part of it; no sacred significance and efficacious ceremony.

In Gillespie’s view ‘circumstances’ are left to the Church to determine whilst the ceremonies are not. The Church must observe order and decency in all it does, the same order and decency that should apply in civil

matters, but this is not to be confused with the ceremonies themselves.

(ii) That which the church may lawfully prescribe by her laws and ordinances, as a thing left to her determination, must be one of such things as are not determinable by Scripture ... because *individual* are *infinita*.

Gillespie says he is not trying to limit God but rather presupposes the limits set in the written Word, which are not to be exceeded. As he rightly points out, for all the changeable circumstances of worship we would need a world of books. On the other hand, the actual elements of worship are not numerous or changeable, and are 'most easily and conveniently determinable in Scripture.' He adds that the value of the written form of the Word lies in avoiding 'Satanical subtilty [sic]' and also in 'succouring human imbecility.'

(iii) If the church prescribe anything lawfully, so that she prescribe no more than she hath power given her to prescribe, her ordinance must be accompanied with some good reason and warrant given for the satisfaction of tender consciences.

This condition is clearly very important to Gillespie and counts strongly against any portrayal of the Church of Scotland of the Second Reformation as exercising a spiritual tyranny. Gillespie says that the Church is not to command imperiously but in a spirit of meekness such as becomes the spouse of Christ. Since the aim is to edify, the Church's laws must have 'a manifest utility.' Gillespie argues that the 'conveniency' of a thing must go before the Church's prescribing it, 'neither can the church prescribe anything lawfully which she showeth not to have been convenient, even before her determination.'

Gillespie applies these criteria to the ceremonies in question and finds that none of them is met. The ceremonies are, according to their supporters, not mere circumstances of worship but 'sacred, mystical, significant, efficacious ceremonies.' In the second place, they are not the kind of thing which is not determinable from Scripture, since there is not an infinite number of them. In the third place, these laws regarding ceremonies are not backed by reasons to satisfy tender consciences.

Gillespie finally stresses that the Church is forbidden to add to God's commands regarding his worship and service. The Church may not lawfully prescribe anything relating to divine worship unless it is a mere circumstance not determinable by Scripture. His opponents try to defend their additions by distinguishing *additio corrumpens*, which is forbidden, and *additio perficiens*, which is allowed. Gillespie points out that this distinction itself adds to the Word and blasphemously says that the

commandments of God are imperfect and need additions.

In this argument Gillespie is clearly defending what later came to be known as the Regulative Principle of worship which in essence states that what is not commanded in Scripture regarding the worship of God is forbidden. This principle distinguished the attitude to worship of the Calvinistic branch of the Reformation from that of the Lutheran, which followed the principle that what is not expressly forbidden in worship is allowed. As William Cunningham states,

The Calvinistic section of the Reformers, following their great master, adopted a stricter rule, and were of opinion that there are sufficiently plain indications in Scripture itself, that it was Christ's mind and will, that nothing should be introduced into the government and worship of the church, unless a positive warrant for it could be found in Scripture.

It is not necessary to set out here a defence of this principle which was adopted by, among others, English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians. We note simply that the fundamental issue is the extent of the authority of God's revelation in Scripture. For Gillespie, the regulations of Scripture are the final word with regard to worship. The authority of the Word of God is not limited to matters of doctrine or conduct, but extends to the area of worship. This has been the conviction of the churches taking their origin from the Calvinistic Reformation. The Scriptures provide a sufficient rule for the way in which God is to be worshipped, this being the highest activity in which men and women can engage. It is clear throughout the Old Testament that God is concerned to be worshipped in the way that he prescribes: note the fate of Nadab and Abihu recorded in Leviticus 10:1ff.

In the New Testament there is no indication that God's concern is any the less. The subject is dealt with only occasionally and indirectly in the New Testament. Those who support the Regulative Principle argue that this indicates the continuance of the Old Testament principle that God alone determines the content of worship. The issue then becomes one of determining the practice of the New Testament Church which is regarded as binding on the Church in all ages. Some opponents accept that the practice of the New Testament Church should be followed but come to different conclusions concerning the content of worship from those who defend the principle, for example in the area of psalmody.

We note that in the Westminster Confession of Faith 1:6 several tests are set down with regard to elements of

worship and government. Fundamental is the express teaching of Scripture, together with what may be deduced from it, but in addition the light of nature and Christian prudence are given a place.

The Regulative Principle is sometimes dismissed on the grounds that it is impossible to determine what are ‘circumstances’ of worship and what constitutes the substance of worship. This difficulty is more apparent than real. There is no dispute regarding the necessity of assembling for worship, especially on the Lord’s Day, the singing of praise, the exposition of Scripture, the observance of the sacraments. The myriad details such as time of meeting, locations and so on clearly fall into the category of ‘circumstances’. Undoubtedly there will be disputed cases, as for example regarding whether instrumental accompaniment in praise is a circumstance or enters into the substance of worship, but such differences provoke deeper study. The really significant difference is between those who, like Gillespie, accept that Scripture speaks in a binding way in this area of church life, and those who do not.

Endnotes

¹ “The Solemn League and Covenant” *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990) 359.

² “Upon serious consideration of the present state and conjuncture of the affairs of this kingdom, the Lords and Commons assembled in Parliament do order, that the Assembly of Divines and others do forthwith confer and treat among themselves, of such a discipline and government as may be most agreeable to God’s Holy Word, ... and touching and concerning the Directory of Worship, or Liturgy, hereafter to be in the Church...” William M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, third edition (Edinburgh, 1856) 158.

³ “The Directory for the Publick Worship of God” *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 369-394. Observance of ‘holy days’ was one of the subjects discussed by the Assembly in preparing this directory. “Then from the records of the English journalist and orientalist Lightfoot, we get information regarding the subjects which it was agreed should be treated of in the new Service-book, and the discussion to which in turn they gave rise. The matters discussed were such as these: the use of the Lord’s Prayer; preaching; pulpit quotations in foreign languages; the reading of Scripture during service; the administration of sacraments; the employment of licentiates, or, as they were styled in the Reformed Churches,

“Expectants,” relieving the minister of part of the service, and thus acquiring experience; the mode of administering infant baptism by sprinkling, dipping, or pouring; the observance of days; and the contents of a preface to the new book of ritual.” M’Crie, 186.

⁴ The outline of the directory is as follows: The Preface. 1. Of Assembling of the Congregation, and their Behaviour in the Publick Worship of God. 2. Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures. 3. Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon. 4. Of the Preaching of the Word. 5. Of Prayer after the Sermon. 6. Of the Administration of the Sacraments: and first, of Baptism. 7. Of the celebration of the communion, or sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. 8. Of the Sanctification of the Lord’s Day. 9. The Solemnization of Marriage. 10. Concerning Visitation of the Sick. 11. Concerning Burial of the Dead. 12. Concerning Publick Solemn Fasting. 13. Concerning the Observation of Days of Publick thanksgiving. 14. Of Singing of Psalms. An Appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship.

⁵ England was still using the Julian Calendar, which set March 25th as the first of the year, and did not officially adopt the Gregorian until 1752. This type of format (e.g. March 13, 1644/45) is generally used to avoid confusion.

⁶ “... and passed them with some amendments on the 3rd of January. On the following day these amendments were the subject of a conference between the two Houses, and were finally agreed upon. The Ordinance itself, which is prefixed to the Directory, is incorrectly dated 3rd January, 1644-45.” William A. Shaw, *A History of the English Church during the Civil Wars and under the Commonwealth* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1900) 1.353.

⁷ C. G. M’Crie, *Public Worship of Presbyterian Scotland* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1892) 187-193.

⁸ “It is not a little curious that those portions of its accomplished work which have remained through later times the most distinct and memorable accomplishment of the Assembly – i.e., the Confession of Faith and the Larger Catechism – should have never received the assent of the Parliament which had called the Assembly into being, and at whose behest it had prepared those works. Shaw, 1.376.

⁹ Dr. Leishman comments, “Apparently we owe this appendix to the accidental circumstance that on a certain day in November, the Assembly, through a derangement of their plans, found themselves without work to do. First they ordered ‘that in the directory for the Sabbath-day something be expressed against wakes and feasts, commonly called by the name of rush-bearing, as profane and superstitious,

whitsunales and garlands.” Then they spoke of declaring against holy days as such, and yet keeping up some days for relief of servants. Having thus opened up the whole subject, they agreed to “consider of something concerning holy days and holy places,” and the result was that this appendix was brought up on the 10th of December. There was some debate about the mention of the Sabbath in it. The views of the divines on holy days had somewhat changed during the year. On the 22nd of December 1643 they had adjourned till the 28th, refusing to give any opinion on the propriety of having services on Christmas Day. The London ministers, however, with few exceptions did have it, resolving to cry down the superstition of the day. But this year the Assembly applied to Parliament for an order for the observance of the next *fast* day, “because the people will be ready to neglect it, being Christmas Day.” This was a matter on which the Scots held decided opinions. Their historical position in reference to it is stated in Act of Assembly 1638, session 17. The Assembly of 1645 so far confirmed the Directory Appendix by an Act of great stringency against the observance of Yule Day. Between the Restoration and the Revolution the holy days were little regarded. No act of Queen Anne’s government was more unpopular than the repeal of a law which forbade a *Yule vacance* or Christmas recess in the court of Session.” Thomas Leishman, *The Westminster Directory, Edited, with an Introduction and Notes* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1901) 152-153. Leishman appears to make too much of this “change” in the Assembly’s opinion. The Assembly had determined not to decide the matter of services on Christmas at that earlier time, because they believed it would be appropriately treated in the due course of their deliberations. As Lightfoot writes, “Friday, Dec. 22.] ... After this vote, was a proposal made by some, ‘That the Assembly would determine whether there should be any sermon upon Christmas-day:’ but it was waived to treat of it, because we are not yet come to it.” John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot* (London: 1824) 13.91-92.

¹⁰ *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*, Rev. Alex F. Mitchell, D. D. and Rev. John Struthers, LL.D., eds. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1874) 3, 11, 17, 19, 23, 24. “The appendix touching Days and Places for Public Worship was sent into the House on 1st January 1644-45, and adopted the same day.” The House of Lord’s approved the Directory with some amendments on January 3rd. A conference between both Houses took place the next day and the Directory was officially approved on January 4, 1644-45. See Shaw, 1.353, cited above.

¹¹ “Tuesday, Nov. 19.] – Then was there speech about Holydays, and some motion about declaring against them. This held us much canvassing; and it was well approved that the

superstition of Holydays should be cried down, but yet some days allowed for relief of servants. The conclusion was, that the business was recommitted to the first committee to consider of it.” John Lightfoot, “Journal of the Assembly of Divines” Lightfoot, 13.332-333.

¹² “Monday, Nov. 25, Thursday, Nov. 28.] These days was I at Munden.” Ibid, 337.

¹³ An exchange takes place concerning “holy places” between Palmer, Rutherford, Gillespie, Burges, Seaman and Marshall. Lightfoot records some of this debate as well. Ibid, 341-342.

¹⁴ “Next did we fall upon the debate about holy days; and had some debate about one proposition concerning the Sabbath...” Ibid, 342.

¹⁵ Notes of Proceedings of the Assembly of Divines at Westminster” *Works: The Presbyterian’s Armoury* (Edinburgh: Robert Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1844-46) 97.

¹⁶ M’Crie, 208-210. See Leishman, 83-85.

¹⁷ Ibid, 91-92.

¹⁸ Ibid, 344.

¹⁹ Daniel Neal, *The History of the Puritans* (London, 1837) 2.284-285.

²⁰ Writing about an ordinance prohibiting public diversions and recreations during England’s civil war, Neal explains, “The set times of humiliation mentioned in the ordinance refers to the monthly fast appointed by the king, at the request of the parliament [January 8, 1641], on account of the Irish insurrection and massacre, to be observed every last Wednesday in the month, as long as the calamities of that nation should require it. But when the king set up his standard at Nottingham, the two houses, apprehending that England was now to be the seat of war, published an ordinance for the more strict observation of this fast, in order to implore a divine blessing upon the consultations of parliament, and to deprecate the calamities that threatened this nation.” Ibid, 2.155.

²¹ James Reid, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982; Reprint of 1811) 186.

²² Regarding disputed practices, the Scots appear to have been more thorough in removing impediments to uniformity. While affirming there was nothing unlawful in the action, the Church of Scotland would some months after this determine to lay aside their practice of bowing in the pulpit. They also determined to cease singing the Doxology without addressing the lawfulness of the question, or as Gillespie suggested, “to

make no Act about this, as there is made about bowing in the pulpit, but to let desuetude abolish it.” M’Crie, 210-212.

²³ Neal, 458. ‘Holy days’ were outlawed until the Restoration, though personal observation of Christmas was left as a matter of indifference. Ibid, 459.

²⁴ It may be that at least part of the reason lawful oaths and vows received treatment in their own chapter (WCF 22), is because the Directory does not really address them as part of worship. Vows and oaths are mentioned in the answer to Larger Catechism 108, 112 and 113 as well. Religious fasting is mentioned in the answer to LC 108. A *Memorandum* was noted when the Assembly was discussing this question, “To consider of days of thanksgiving in the fourth commandment.” (Minutes, 408). Unfortunately, the surviving Minutes following this session become bare notices and do not indicate if this question was discussed. Whether it was or not, the outcome suggests they determined not to address the issue in that commandment, as the questions and answers in the Larger Catechism dealing with the fourth commandment contain no reference to days of thanksgiving (LC 115-121.) Thus the occasional ordinance of “thanksgiving” is not specifically mentioned in the Larger Catechism.

²⁵ One would think the relationship and connection between WCF 21:5 and the Directory would be apparent. “Now, your Committee beg leave to observe, that the outline of the Public Worship of God, to be used in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, is specifically and clearly stated in the 21st chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith; which, in fact, contains the sum and substance of the Directory relative to the reading of the Word – to Prayer – to Preaching – to the celebration of the Sacraments – and to Praise, – the five distinct heads under which the Reformed Presbyterian Churches arrange Public Worship. The Confession of Faith was framed in the year 1647, confirmed by Act of Parliament 1649; and therefore it is certain that the framers of it had distinctly in their view the Directory for Public Worship, approved by the General Assembly in February 1645, and confirmed by Act of Parliament in the same year.” *The Organ Question: Statements by Dr. Ritchie, and Dr. Porteous, for and against the use of the organ in public worship* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1856) 146-147.

²⁶ S. W. Carruthers, M.D., Ph.D, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, Being an account of the Preparation and Printing of its seven leading editions to which is appended a critical text of the Confession with notes thereon* (Manchester: R. Aikman & Son, 1952) 130.

²⁷ The divines also refer to Psalm 107 throughout, which says nothing to the subject of recurrence. As for Esther 9, see

the appendix at the end of this article containing an extract from Thomas M’Crie’s *Lectures on the Book of Esther*.

²⁸ Shaw, 1.361-364. Minutes, 295. Hetherington, 346. Especially see, Alexander F. Mitchel, *The Westminster Assembly its History and Standards* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1897) 377-378.

²⁹ J. Cameron Fraser, “Occasional Elements of Worship” *Worship in the Presence of God*, eds. Frank J. Smith and David C. Lachman (Greenville, SC: Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1992) 263, 267.

³⁰ G. I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1964, 1980) 169.

³¹ Fraser, 269, 270.

³² The original constitution of the Associate Reformed Church indicates that only clear providence can bind such observances and when clear they should not be avoided except upon clear and weighty reason. “The reasons of devoting any part of our time to extraordinary religious worship, being laid, not in the will of man, but in the will of God, declared in his Word, and manifested in the extraordinary dispensation of his providence, no human authority can create any obligation to observe such days. Nevertheless when the call of providence is clear, civil or religious rulers may, for centering the general devotion, specify and recommend a particular season to be spent in fasting or thanksgiving, Nor, without very weighty reasons, are such recommendations to be disregarded.” *The constitution and standards of the Associate-Reformed Church in North-America* (New York, 1799) 563-564.

³³ Samuel Miller, D. D., *Memoirs of the Rev. John Rodgers, D. D.* (New York: Whiting and Watson, Theological and Classical Booksellers, 1813) 70, cp 309.

³⁴ Samuel Miller, D. D. *Presbyterianism the truly primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835) 73.

³⁵ The contention that recurring days are in view in WCF 21:5 and that it allows for ‘holy days’ can be found in the rather oxymoronically titled *Celebrating a Calvinistic Christmas with a Clear Conscience*, by Pastor Mark Horne, of the Presbyterian Church of America. One of Mr. Horne’s outrageous statements prompted the initial compiling of material that eventually became this present article. “Of course, we all know — and if we didn’t, we would soon learn, for we are incessantly reminded — that the *Westminster Directory for Public Worship* banned other festival days beside the Lord’s Day. But that is entirely irrelevant. No major presbyterian body in America ever included the *Directory* in their doctrinal

standards, probably precisely because doing so would have made them beholden to such notions. What is conspicuous when comparing the Directory to the Confession is that the statements banning Christmas and other holidays are obviously missing from the latter document. The Confession does not ban Christmas, but considers it a viable exercise of religious liberty to observe it.” Mark Horne, *Celebrating a Calvinistic Christmas with a Clear Conscience* (1997, Internet article: http://horns.org/theologia/papers/horne_calvinist_christmas.html). Mr. Horne presumes a great deal in his ignorance of Presbyterian history and their arguments against ‘holy day’ observance.

³⁶ “Concerning Publick Solemn Fasting,” “Concerning the Observation of Days of Publick Thanksgiving,” *Confession*, 391-393. As per the Solemn League & Covenant, the Westminster documents were a package deal. Often the divines would debate whether to handle a particular subject in a Directory, or in the Confession and Catechisms. It is therefore not credible to force a meaning on the words of one document where some topic may not be as clear, that contradicts plain statements in another.

³⁷ Some contend that ‘holy days’ if free of superstition, are nothing but a thematic structuring of worship services, which should be no less lawful than a minister choosing to preach a particular topical series for a length of time, or following the Heidelberg Catechism regularly, or preaching through a book of the bible for a number of years. (Mark Horne, *ibid.* See Also: Jeff Meyers, *Is the Church Year Biblical? A Parking Lot Parable* [1997, Internet article: http://horns.org/theologia/papers/jmeyer_parking_lot_parable.html]). While an interesting topic, it is rather beside the point whether a minister is free to adopt any manner of recurring topical or thematic ‘liturgy,’ as the advocates of this are not contending that a minister appoint just any recurring themes, but that he follow what is called the ‘Christian year’ – Christmas, Easter, Lent, Advent, etc. But these are the ‘holy days’ rejected by Presbyterians because they were notoriously part of the idolatrous worship of Roman Catholicism. It was determined that these were no longer indifferent observances to be retained or rejected at pleasure. They must be rejected according to a biblical principle well articulated by George Gillespie:

“All things and rites which have been notoriously abused to idolatry, if they are not such as either God or nature has made to be of a necessary use, should be utterly abolished and purged away from divine worship, in such sort that they may not be accounted nor used by us as sacred things or rites pertaining to the same.” (George Gillespie, *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies*, ed. Christopher Coldwell [Dallas:

Naphtali Press, 1993] 154; or other editions, part 3, chapter 2, section 1 [3.2.1]).

After explaining this principle, Gillespie proves it from God’s precepts, his promises, negative example, approved example, and a twofold reason, that things once notoriously abused to idolatry remind us and move us back toward idolatry. He then spends twenty pages answering objections to the principle. (*Ibid.*, 154-180; 3.2.1-20).

This was just one of the arguments Gillespie used to demonstrate that ‘holy days’ should be rejected. ‘Holy days’ were inexpedient to edification because the enforcement of the ceremonies was mixed with cruelty and intolerance (1.1-6). Christian Liberty was taken away in the process, which Gillespie proved from the Law (1.7) and the Gospel (1.8). Gillespie also contended observance of ‘holy days’ was unlawful because they were observed superstitiously (3.1.7-15), and they were unlawful because they were monuments of past idolatry (the argument presented above), present idolatry, and were actually idols themselves. The alleged scriptural arguments for ‘holy days’ were shown to be groundless (3.6.7-3.6.14), and Gillespie concludes by showing in part four of his book that the controverted ceremonies like ‘holy days’ were not indifferent in nature.

While it is true some of Gillespie’s arguments are not going to be as relevant in every situation today (for instance, most are not under civil or ecclesiastical injunction to cease from laboring on pretended ‘holy days’), on the whole his arguments are excellent and highly relevant; particularly the sections on the superstition and idolatry of ‘holy days.’ Those Presbyterians in favor of ‘holy day’ observance should at least take his arguments under consideration when venturing to write on the topic.

³⁸ *Confession*, 394.

³⁹ William S. Plumer, *The Law of God, As Contained in the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia, 1864).

⁴⁰ *English Popish Ceremonies*, 35; 1.7.6.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴³ James T. Dennison has given new support to the position that the majority of the founders of American Presbyterianism were from Ireland and Scotland. Thus ‘old world Presbyterianism’ and not New England Congregationalism is the founding character of Presbyterianism in America. James T. Dennison, “New Light on Early Colonial Presbyterian Ministers” *Westminster Theological Journal*, 60 (1998) 153-157.

⁴⁴ “The Directory for the Publick Worship of God, An appendix, Touching Days and Places for Public Worship” *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990) 394.

⁴⁵ *Records of the Presbyterian Church of the United States* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1904) 95.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 126-127.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 245.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 286.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 518-519. “The ‘substance’ of the Directory is of course its Presbyterianism. What is not substantial about it, is its numerous directions, having reference in many cases either to unimportant, or to local and temporary circumstances. A stricter adoption of the Westminster Directory, in this country, was impossible.” Charles Hodge, *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851) 1.14.

⁵⁰ Hodge, 1.88.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1.163.

⁵² The first American edition of the confession published in Boston in 1723 was probably Congregationalist in origin. Benjamin Franklin published an apparently Presbyterian oriented printing of *The Westminster Standards* in 1745. *The confession of faith, the larger and shorter catechisms, ...* (Philadelphia: Printed and sold by B. Franklin, 1745) [483]-521.

⁵³ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Printing of the Westminster Confession,” *The Westminster Assembly and its Work* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1959) 354-355.

⁵⁴ Walter Steuart of Pardovan, *Collections and Observations Concerning the Worship, Discipline, and Government of the Church of Scotland in four books*. There are many editions of this work (first edition, Edinburgh, 1709). It is referenced by book, chapter and paragraph.

⁵⁵ *Paradigms in Polity: Classic Readings in Reformed and Presbyterian Church Government*, eds. David W. Hall and Joseph H. Hall [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 23.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 519.

⁵⁷ *The Life of Ashbel Green begun and written by himself in his eighty-second year and continued to his eighty-fourth prepared for the press at the author’s request by Joseph H. Jones* [New York: R. Carter, 1849] 180.

⁵⁸ *Records of the Presbyterian Church of the United States* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1904) 519.

⁵⁹ Pardovan’s *Collections*, 3.VI.6.

⁶⁰ “Plea for Amusements,” *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Vol. II, No. 4 (March 1849) 561; Cited in Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963) 1.464-465.

⁶¹ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A social and cultural history of Christmas that shows how it was transformed from an unruly carnival season into the quintessential American Family Holiday* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997) 7-8. This is a secular treatment from the standpoint of a cultural and social historian, who was raised in an Orthodox Jewish family. At the time of publication, the Author was Professor of History at the University of Massachusetts.

⁶² *Ibid*, 4.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 8.

⁶⁴ Rev. Samuel Davies, “A Christmas-Day Sermon” *Sermons* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1864) 3.562-586. This sermon was delivered on December 25, 1758. Davies preached the same sermon again in Nassua Hall one weekday, December 25, 1760. He had accepted the call to replace Edwards as president of the College of New Jersey in 1759. He died little more than a month later on February 4, 1761 at the age of thirty-six.

⁶⁵ While based in Hanover, Davies also filled the pulpits of many meetinghouses in the area. During two months in 1757 he traveled five hundred miles preaching forty sermons. During his ministry he contended much with the civil authorities for the right to preach to the dissenter congregations, being called upon to travel to England in 1753-54 to represent the right of dissenter congregations in Virginia to obtain license for their meetinghouses. Rev. Richard Webster, *A History of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Philadelphia, Joseph M. Wilson, 1857) 549-563.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 562-564.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 566.

⁶⁸ In general the Old School was concerned with scriptural warrant and decorum. The New School emphasized evangelistic effectiveness. Yet, it does not appear that this New School pragmatism led to observance of days, at least not at this juncture. In a publication issued after this schism, Ashbel Green articulates the same position as Samuel Miller. “It follows from what has just been stated, that those churches that appoint fasts and festivals, to be observed regularly, or at *set times*, need, in this particular, to be reformed.” Ashbel Green, *Lectures on the Shorter Catechism of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America addressed to Youth* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841) 2.105-106. Katherine Lambert Richards notes, “The various divisions which marked

the history of American Presbyterianism from 1810 to 1860 did not materially affect the attitude toward Christmas of the different groups. If anything the separating bodies were the more vigorous in their rejection of the day.” (Katherine Lambert Richards, *How Christmas Came to the Sunday-Schools: The Observance of Christmas in the Protestant church schools of the United States, an historical study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1934) 92).

⁶⁹ Samuel Miller, D. D, *Presbyterianism the truly primitive and Apostolical Constitution of the Church of Christ* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1835) 73-78.

⁷⁰ And even this may not be the full story on the wide circulation of this work. As Miller’s granddaughter Margaret Miller notes, “it is impossible to specify all editions and reprints of his books; the Presbyterian Board of Publication having republished a number of them repeatedly; in some cases, even to this day.” See: “A List of the Writings of Samuel Miller, D.D., LL.D., 1769-1850, Second Professor in Princeton Theological Seminary 1813-1850.” *The Princeton Theological Review*, vol. IX, No. 4 (Oct. 1911) 636.

⁷¹ “The Worship of the Presbyterian Church” *A series of tracts on the doctrines, order, and polity of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: embracing several on practical subjects* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, n.d). Tract 197.

⁷² Dr. Miller had made his position against Christmas observance clear earlier in a letter to a New York newspaper. “For the Commercial Advertiser” *Commercial Advertiser*, New York, NY. December 29, 1825. The American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, Massachusetts has this issue in their collection. “Is it any wonder, then, that the Puritans, perceiving the tendency in all churches to go to extremes in multiplying such observances, whenever they began to be introduced; and knowing that there was no way to prevent this, but by shutting them out altogether: deliberately preferred the latter as the safer course? — and truly, if there be no Bible warrant for festivals; — no solid warrant for them in the practice of the Christian Church for the first 300 years, and, above all, none for *Christmas*; if the whole business of bringing institutions into the Church for which there is no Divine authority, be unlawful and of dangerous tendency; and if, whenever the practice has been admitted, it has been almost always abused, that is, carried much further than it ought to have been, I cannot help thinking that the Puritans had at least *plausible*, if not *conclusive*, reasons for taking the course which they did.”

⁷³ Robert Shaw, *An exposition of the Confession of faith of the Westminster assembly of divines* (Philadelphia, Presbyterian Board of Publication, c. 1846) 251-252.

⁷⁴ Ibid. “Advertisement to the American Edition,” 7-10.

⁷⁵ Robert Lewis Dabney “The Christian Sabbath: Its Nature, Design and Proper Observance,” *Discussions: Theological and Evangelical* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1890) 1. 524-525. See also, “The Sabbath of the State,” 2.600.

⁷⁶ James R. Boyd, *The Westminster shorter catechism: with analysis, Scriptural proofs, explanatory and practical inferences, and illustrative anecdotes* (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1860) 145.

⁷⁷ William S. Plumer, *The Law of God, As Contained in the Ten Commandments* (Philadelphia, 1864).

⁷⁸ Alexander Blaikie (ARP), *The philosophy of sectarianism, or, A classified view of the Christian sects in the United States: with notices of their progress and tendencies : illustrated by historical facts and anecdotes* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, 1854) 135-136.

⁷⁹ James Harper, UPC professor at Xenia Theological Seminary, *An Exposition in the Form of Question and Answer of the Westminster Assembly's Shorter Catechism* (1905).

⁸⁰ J. A. Grier (UPC), *Synoptical Lectures on Theological Subjects* (1896).

⁸¹ J. G. Vos, “The Observance of Days”“ *Blue Banner Faith and Life* (1947).

⁸² Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963-1973) 1.464.

⁸³ Ibid, 2.434.

⁸⁴ For treatments on the history and cultural development of Christmas observance in America see Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas: A social and cultural history of Christmas that shows how it was transformed from an unruly carnival season into the quintessential American Family Holiday* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Penne L. Rested, *Christmas in America A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Katherine Lambert Richards, *How Christmas Came to the Sunday-Schools: The Observance of Christmas in the Protestant church schools of the United States, an historical study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1934).

⁸⁵ “Dr. Girardeau's ‘Instrumental Music in Public Worship’” *The Presbyterian Quarterly*, July 1889.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 2.434-435.

⁸⁷ Richards, 220

⁸⁸ Richards, 90-92.

⁸⁹ Dr. Alexander had written “The degree of excess and abuse which occurs on set days, will be in proportion to the decay of religious feeling among a people; but I am by no means sure that these are greatly increased by set days. Yet as a

good son of Mother Church, I subside into the tenet, that all such feasts are against the second commandment.” John Hall, *Forty years’ familiar letters of James W. Alexander, D. D.* (New York: Scribner, 1860) 2.181.

⁹⁰ Richards, 186.

⁹¹ Ibid, 3.350-353.

⁹² Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond VA: John Knox Press, 1967) 138.

⁹³ *The Confessional Statement and The Book of Government and Worship* (Pittsburgh: The United Presbyterian Board of Publication and Bible School Work, 1926). This denomination merged into the Northern church in 1958. The change in practice had already begun as in other denominations. G. I. Williamson writes, “I once had opportunity to discuss this subject [bringing in worship practices without scriptural support] with an elderly minister of the old United Presbyterian denomination. I asked him what brought that church to change its stand on the exclusive use of psalms in worship, as it did in the 1925 creedal revision. His answer was both interesting and revealing. He said the church had already started, some years before, to celebrate such days as Christmas. After these had become well-entrenched, he said, the pressure began to grow to bring in 'appropriate' music.” *The Scriptural Regulative Principle of Worship* (Paper presented at the 1990 Psalmody Conference, Bonclarken, Flat Rock NC, 1990).

⁹⁴ *The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America Being Its Standards Subordinate to the Word of God The Confession of Faith, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the Testimony, the Directory for Church Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory for the Worship of God. Together with Official Vows and Forms* (Pittsburgh: RPCNA Board of Education and Publication, 1989).

⁹⁵ *Constitution of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church* (1799, 1908; 1955). Compare with *The Book of Worship of the ARP Church, as Approved by the General Synod in 1975*.

⁹⁶ “Life of John Murray,” *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982) 3.102, 120.

⁹⁷ Joseph Duggan, *Should Christians Celebrate The Birth Of Christ* (Havertown, Pa: New Covenant Publication Society, nd). The tract from which this is a reprint has a date of 2/4/1959 printed on it.

⁹⁸ “Holy Days of Men and Holy Days of God,” *Blue Banner Faith and Life*, July-September 1962. *The Regulative Principle of Worship* (1990 Psalmody Conference). *On the Observance of Sacred Days* (Havertown, Pa: New Covenant Publication Society, nd). “Is Christmas Scriptural” *New Horizons*, December 1998.

⁹⁹ The following tracts by Presbyterian authors have all appeared on the Internet: Douglas F. Kelly, “No ‘Church Year’ for Presbyterians” *Presbyterian Journal*, November 14, 1979. Kevin Reed, Christmas: *An Historical Survey Regarding Its origins and Opposition to It*. Michael Schneider, *Is Christmas Christian*. (These tracts appeared in the 1980s and were bound together and published as *Christmas: A Biblical Critique* [Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications, revised edition 1993]). Brian Schwertley, *Is Christmas Christian?* (Hold MI: Reformation Forum, 1996). Brian Schwertley, *The Regulative Principle of Worship and Christmas* (Holt, MI: Reform Witness, 1996). Douglas Comin, *What Fellowship Hath Christ With Belial? An examination of the religious celebration of Christmas in light of the Scriptural duty of separation and the Regulative Principle of worship* (Sermon preached December 22, 1991, published on the web, 1997). Douglas Comin, *God’s Word and the Church Calendar* (abt 1997, Internet article).

¹⁰⁰ Thomas M’Crie, *Lectures on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1838) 279-286.

¹⁰¹ W. D. J. McKay, *An Ecclesiastical Republic: Church Government in the Writings of George Gillespie* (Edinburgh: Paternoster Publishing for Rutherford House, 1997). 92-96. Extract used with permission. McKay’s footnotes have not been reproduced and the reader is referred to this significant work for these and the broader context surrounding this extract. McKay is referring to pages 126, 130-132 in the 1637 edition of *English Popish Ceremonies*. See also *A Dispute Against the English Popish Ceremonies* (Dallas, Naphtali Press, 1993) 281-284. For additional material covering the Regulative Principle of Worship see the tract *Scriptural Worship* by Carl Bogue available from First Presbyterian Church of Rowlett’s Blue Banner Books ministry. The same and more material is free at the church’s web site, www.fpcr.org. ❀

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