

PRESBYTERIAN WORSHIP IN ENGLAND IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

PART 2

II. Instrumental Music: Organs

The English environment and the challenge presented by the possibility of introducing hymns with new tunes into the worship of the Church led to a concurrent agitation for the introduction of instrumental music to lead the singing. The Scottish tradition, particularly in the Free Church, was against any such innovation. A storm arose in England when in 1855 an organ was installed in St George's Church in Liverpool. An elder, Robert Long, raised the matter in the presbytery but the presbytery dismissed the complaint on the ground that since there was no synodical prohibition of organs no illegality had been committed; however, the presbytery advised that the organ should only be used to lead the singing, presumably by this advice excluding organ voluntaries.⁴⁷ The issue could not be so lightly brushed aside; the absence of specific legislation prohibiting organs only indicated that the issue had never been raised and that the outlook of the Church had never envisaged the use of organs. Two months later, the presbytery returned to the matter and by eight votes to six decided to censure St George's congregation and to order the Church to be kept silent.⁴⁸ At the next meeting of the presbytery it was decided by fifteen votes to four not to forward to the synod an overture asking for a ruling forbidding the use of organs or any instrumental music in any English presbyterian church.⁴⁹ Dr Stewart, who had objected to hymns, now also took up the campaign against organs and wrote to the *Messenger* complaining that the Liverpool decision was a virtual licence to every congregation to do what seemed right in its own eyes; if this licence, which was a mark of congregationalism, was allowed, there would be nothing to prevent the introduction of vestments. He also held that if it was right to allow one congregation to install an organ then it must be right for all churches to have organs and they should be ordered to install organs forthwith.⁵⁰ On this issue Stewart was at one with his minister, Hamilton, who now raised the matter in the London presbytery which decided to ask the synod to forbid the introduction of musical instruments.⁵¹ At the synod Hamilton presented the overture and he was supported by R. H. Lundie of Liverpool and by H. M. Matheson, a London

elder; they asked the synod to declare that "the introduction of instrumental music in public worship is not approved by this Church and that presbyteries be enjoined to see that it is not introduced, and that steps be taken, so far as is practicable, to encourage the harmonious exercise of vocal praise". A counter-motion to appoint a committee to consider the whole subject was put forward but Hamilton's motion was carried by fifty-eight votes to thirty-two. Chalmers maintained that the matter should be left to the decision of each church and he and several others asked for their dissent to be recorded. He wanted to know if the synod thought the objections to organs were based on principle or on expediency; if on principle then it was a principle without foundation since there was no statement about organs in any Church formula; if on expediency, then a vote of fifty-eight out of a possible one hundred and forty-eight was clearly not a final vote. Hamilton, assisted by Alexander Munro of Manchester, drafted a reply to Chalmers stating that it was the right of the synod to approve or disapprove of practices in the Church and that many effective decisions had been made with less than fifty-eight votes.⁵²

The Lancashire presbytery then urged St George's Church to silence the organ but the session refused to yield; they said the synod's decision did not state that its ruling was retrospective and they did not believe that "the judicious use of an organ does in any way or degree infringe or compromise presbyterian polity or discipline".⁵³

At the synod of 1857 Chalmers, with the weighty support of Anderson, proposed a compromise resolution that no church should introduce an organ but since it had come to light that not only St George's Church but also St John's in Warrington had installed an organ and that both organs had been installed before 1856 and their use had the support of both congregations no further action should be taken against these churches. This was passed by fifty-three votes to forty-nine and only after a long debate. This decision weakened the case against installing organs for it now seemed clear to very many in the Church that opposition to organs could not be a matter of principle since two strong and determined churches had been able to get their way; the argument that their offence had been committed before the specific law had been enacted was not convincing.⁵⁴ This was seen by several presbyteries. Newcastle presbytery urged the next synod to deal firmly with the two offending congregations and maintain "the uniformity of worship" in the Church.⁵⁵ Stewart once again wrote to the *Messenger* and assailed the "premissible legislation" which,

among other effects, was liable to cause a rift with the Free Church, and he deplored the feeble yielding, even by Hamilton, "my beloved pastor", before "Mr Cromar and his defiant congregation" in Liverpool. As a protest Stewart said he had withdrawn all support from the home schemes of the Church. Another correspondent asked the editor to lay his hand on Stewart's shoulder to calm down his unstrung nerves; woe betide his patients if he doctored them as he would doctor the Church! Stewart, he said, appealed for firm presbyterian government and then supported his plea by urging members not to support the Church's schemes!⁵⁶

The Newcastle overture led to a long debate in the synod of 1858. Thomas Duncan of Trinity Church, Newcastle, with the support of H. M. Matheson, asked the synod to declare that the use of instrumental music was an innovation in the authorised mode of worship in the Church and marked a departure from its simplicity and compromised the Church's consistency in the eyes of Christians generally and threatened, if allowed, by its continued agitation in congregations and presbyteries to put the peace, union and extension of the Church in jeopardy; the motion also held that "in these days of inconsiderate and perilous change it was specially incumbent on the Church to maintain in all its simplicity and purity the whole testimony on doctrine, worship, government and discipline".⁵⁷ In the debate Lundie fought vigorously for the total prohibition of organs and even allowed himself to cite the absence of an organ in the Sistine Chapel in Rome as an argument for having no organs. He claimed that he had heard the Dead March in *Saul* played at a funeral in St George's Church and it was a melancholy sound and he trembled to think of the consequences of a general introduction of organs. Cromar challenged Lundie's statement and said that what had been played was not the Dead March but "the well-known Covenanters' tune of 'St Mary' ". Chalmers poured scorn on the attempt to forbid all organs and he said he did not much care whether or not the synod approved the overture; another synod would reverse it because in time the will of the people would be heard. However, at twenty minutes past midnight the Newcastle proposition was passed by seventy-two votes to sixty-two, but then, rather inconsistently, a further motion to proceed against the two churches in Liverpool and Warrington was defeated by seventy-seven votes to forty-three, and, not surprisingly, the forty-three recorded their dissent.⁵⁸

The decision of the synod did not put the matter to rest and it erupted again in this very same synod and it arose in the wake of church extension plans. In several towns where companies of

Presbyterians were coming together the aim was to secure a building from another denomination and this policy had the support of Robert Barbour who himself conducted and financed several transactions of this nature. In Cheltenham the Presbyterians secured the church of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion; this building already had an organ which the Presbyterians used in their services. The presbytery of Birmingham said the organ would have to be silenced before the congregation could be given the status of a presbyterian church.⁵⁹ A petition to allow the use of the organ was sent to the synod which decided not to grant the request and also appointed a committee to meet the congregation and to arrange for the silencing of the organ. Thomas McCrie, one of the professors in the College and a former Moderator of the Free Church, along with Hamilton and three elders, visited Cheltenham and found so much eagerness to be accepted as a presbyterian congregation that they were able to persuade the congregation that as a condition of acceptance it should "give up the use of instrumental music, reserving their own opinion regarding the organ question".⁶⁰ The organ was presumably silent when so doughty an anti-instrumentalist as the Irish Henry Cooke preached in the church in 1859.⁶¹

The issue arose again in Exeter in 1861. A church building known as Christ Church and originally erected for the Church of England had been secured by Robert Barbour for an embryonic presbyterian congregation but to the dismay of the synod the building had an organ which the presbyterians wished to use. Mr Cousens, an elder from Exeter, told the synod that he himself had no leaning to the use of the organ but the congregation would not dispense with it and he found it hard to think that the synod would only allow the Gospel trumpet to sound if there was a silent organ. In any case, he said, the singing at Exeter was so hearty that the organ became almost inaudible but was a useful background aid to the singing. He urged the synod to receive the people and allow the use of the organ. After long and heated argument the synod adopted a motion proposed by Chalmers that the presbytery be instructed to receive the congregation at Exeter "provided they agree within a reasonable time to abandon the use of instrumental music". Chalmers held that to make the reception conditional upon the immediate silencing of the organ was to make presbyterian government seem harsher than that of the stern Bishop Philpotts of Exeter; he also presumably hoped that the imprecise elasticity of "a reasonable time" would provide space within which the synod could change its mind.⁶² In the same year of 1861 R. R. Thom, a product of the college in London, was

ordained in Exeter and at his ordination it was announced that plans were in hand for the removal of the organ.⁶³ This was not a unanimous decision and in the synod of 1862 a petition was received from one hundred and sixty members of the Exeter congregation asking for permission to retain and use the organ. The committee on Bills, later to be known as the Business committee, ruled that since the petition came directly from members and not through the proper channels of the session and the presbytery it could not be entertained. Chalmers immediately protested that it was quite wrong to rule out so important a petition on a technicality. Some elders also held that access to the synod was a right available to aggrieved members of the Church. One elder, J. R. Robertson, held that the issue was "a paltry question" and the decision should be left to the local congregation. Munro and Paterson urged the synod to stand by its rules and previous ruling prohibiting organs. Thom told the synod that the prohibition was blighting the growth of new congregations. G. J. C. Duncan, the clerk of the synod, pointed out that one hundred and sixty petitioners out of a congregation which was said to number six hundred could not be taken as expressing the mind of the church without further enquiry. The synod resolved to stand by its prohibition seventy-four votes to forty-five.⁶⁴ The prohibition was reiterated in 1865.⁶⁵ Exeter, however, retained the organ and at a social evening in 1863 several pieces were performed on the organ.⁶⁶

Gravesend was the scene of the next battle on the organ front. The congregation had bought a hall which already contained an organ and it was claimed that the precedents already established justified its use by the congregation. When the matter was reported to the presbytery of London in 1869 George Barclay Bruce, an elder who was to give great service to the Church, said there was ground for accepting an already existing organ and that therefore no action should be taken against the church in Gravesend. However, at the same meeting the congregation in Camden Road asked permission to install an organ in their new church and Bruce immediately changed his position. He sensed that if no action were taken against Gravesend it would be more difficult to take a stand against the proposed action in Camden Road and so he now advocated a firm application of the synod's ruling and with no exceptions. Wright of Southampton took the view that the recent trends of opinion in the Church at large might force the synod to review its attitude. The fluidity of opinion in the presbytery was shown in the postponing of a decision until the next meeting.⁶⁷ At the next meeting Dinwiddie, the minister of Camden

Road Church, took the heat out of the issue by saying that the church would reluctantly yield to the synod's ruling and not use an organ.⁶⁸ However, within a year the presbytery of London decided to petition the synod to allow each congregation to determine the place of instrumental music in its worship.⁶⁹ This petition was presented to the synod by an elder, C. E. Lewis, and there was a debate lasting six and a half hours; the *Messenger* noted that the speeches were "long and animated and one or two were able" but the quality improved when in the course of the debate it was decided to limit speeches to ten minutes. Lewis's motion to leave the decision in the hands of each congregation was passed by one hundred and twenty-nine votes to forty-nine.⁷⁰

Thereafter, the invasion of the organ became a veritable flood. An organ was installed in St Columba's Church in Leeds in 1872;⁷¹ this was followed by an organ in Croydon in 1875,⁷² and in Crouch Hill in London in 1876.⁷³ Even G. B. Bruce was caught up in the flood and in 1878 he presented an organ to the new St Andrew's Church in Eastbourne. By 1892 he had been knighted and in that year Lady Bruce presented an organ to the new St Columba's Church in Cambridge.⁷³ It was not long before an organ was regarded as an essential piece of church furniture and there was a tendency to measure the prosperity of a church by the magnitude of its organ. It is an interesting curiosity of history that in 1873 the Irish General Assembly decided by a majority vote that instrumental music was unscriptural and then decided unanimously that no congregation should introduce any such music into its worship.⁷⁴

III. Orders of Service

Compared with the extensive and prolonged interest in hymnology and in the use of organs English Presbyterianism was much less interested in providing guidance for the ordering of the services of the Church. Much has been written about the revival of interest in Scotland in the nineteenth century in the liturgical heritage of the Church and in the dignity and seemliness of worship. The advisory prescriptions in the Westminster Directory were followed with the minimum of embellishment and with much accompanying carelessness. The services in English presbyterian churches seem to have reflected the prevailing Scottish practices. When the synod met in 1847 it had before it an overture from the presbytery of London asking that the attention of the churches be drawn to the Westminster Directory. This indicates that the standards of the Directory were being neglected, otherwise the overture would have been superfluous. Chalmers urged the synod to accept the overture

and it was decided to set up a committee to correspond with ministers and presbyteries.⁷⁵ This committee did not find much interest in or response to its approaches and it was dissolved by the next synod in 1848.⁷⁶

In succeeding years the seeds of reform were being planted in Scotland by Robert Lee of Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh and by many who followed in his train. Though this was for long a minority movement it included some of the leading figures in both Scottish and English Presbyterianism. Signs of the percolation of these ideas into English Presbyterianism became visible after the union of 1876 which formed the Presbyterian Church of England. In 1881 Alexander Henderson, the minister in Durham, persuaded his presbytery of Newcastle to forward to the synod an overture asking that in the interest of decency and order, but "without unduly curtailing the liberty of the celebrant", there should be a common order, especially for the Marriage and Burial services. However, after sensing the mood of the synod Henderson withdrew the overture.⁷⁷ He raised the matter again in 1882 and included a request for an "Order for the Sacramental Services" but once again he withdrew the overture in the face of a chilly reception.⁷⁸ A similar overture, once again from Newcastle, was presented to the synod of 1883 by Robert Leitch of Blackett Street Church but the synod decided that it was inexpedient to proceed to its consideration.⁷⁹

These signs of an awakening concern for the shape and content of services were perhaps not unrelated to a parallel movement which led in 1883 to the setting up of a synod committee to consider if the time had come for a restatement of the Church's doctrinal position and of the terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession. This was a live issue in many Presbyterian Churches and there were those who suspected that what was desired was not a restatement but an alteration, particularly in the definition of the doctrine of election, and that changes in forms of worship were likely to embody these shifts in doctrinal emphases.

In 1885 Henderson ventured a more cautious approach to the synod. He asked his presbytery to forward an overture asking the synod to recommend the restoration of the Westminster Directory as the norm of presbyterian practice but with such additions and emendations as the synod might see fit to provide in the light of the two centuries of experience since its compilation. In the presbytery there were twenty-one votes for transmitting the overture and twenty-one against and the Moderator declined to give a casting vote, but the presbytery agreed to forward it as a personal overture

from Henderson.⁸⁰ The synod went so far as to appoint a committee with Donald Fraser as convener to consider the overture and report to the next synod. Fraser told the synod of 1886 that the committee recommended the appointment of a special committee "to proceed with due care and deliberation in the direction of revising the Westminster Directory and preparing forms or specimens of services adapted to special occasions".⁸¹ This recommendation was accepted but the new committee made no definite report until 1889 when it submitted a draft of a revision of parts of the Directory for the consideration of the synod. The synod authorised the printing of the draft so that members might be able to give it a thorough examination, and the committee was instructed to continue its work and present a fuller report to the next synod.⁸² The draft was printed with a preface by Fraser in which he admitted that the draft had gone "beyond the ordinary limits of revision" in its suggested orders of service for the Sacraments, for Marriage and for Burial but he also claimed that it was faithful to the spirit of the Directory and was not intended to be a liturgy imposing an "inflexible verbal routine". In 1890 it was decided to add to the draft an "Order for Admission to full Communion" and to ask the presbyteries to submit their suggestions for improvements.⁸³

At the same synod the report of the committee on the Church's relation to the Westminster Confession was presented by the convener, J. Oswald Dykes, who was by now the Principal of the college. The committee had met frequently in the seven years since it was set up and the collected minutes of its meetings make up a large printed volume of over five hundred pages and they show a remarkable and very erudite attempt to summarise the Confession in a way which would be faithful to its teaching and to the teaching of the historic creeds of the Church and yet take into account the steps taken by other Presbyterian Churches and be sensitive to the restiveness in the Church over the stark statement in the Confession of the doctrine of election and reprobation. The committee submitted to the synod in 1890 a series of twenty-four "Articles of Faith" and in these there was a careful balance between an affirmation of the election by God in Christ before the foundation of the world of a people whom the Holy Spirit drew to himself and a declaration of the offer of forgiveness and eternal life to all people.⁸⁴

The suspicions concerning these reports on the Confession and the Directory were aired in the synod of 1891 when the Directory committee asked for approval of its report. The synod turned down a proposal to reject the report on the ground that the

proposed sacramental and other services were “not accordant with the apostolic, pure and spiritual practice of the Church of Christ, as understood in this Church”, but the committee had to be content with a decision to accept its report as an interim report.⁸⁵ In 1892 Charles Moinet of Kensington had succeeded Fraser as convener and he asked the synod to approve the new Directory and to authorise its publication as an official document of the Church. The proposal met with heavy opposition; it was said that the new book was virtually a new production and not a revision of the Directory; the critics had not been satisfied by Fraser’s assurances. After a long debate the synod postponed a decision until the next synod.⁸⁶ When the matter came up again in 1893 it was found that the necessary documents had not been circulated to members and there was an acid edge to the decision ordering the committee to present the Directory at the next synod with sufficient guidance “for the proper and intelligent discussion” of the book.⁸⁷

In 1894 the synod was asked by the committee to approve the publication of the Directory which now included orders of service for the ordination of ministers and of elders and for the dedication of a church. The committee asked for no more than a general approval of the book which would not be imposed as in any sense obligatory but with the hope that it might be found useful where it was found desirable and expedient to adopt it. An amendment was submitted stating that while an authorised directory as a general guide in the conduct of services was desirable the draft Directory with its favouring of the use of the so-called Apostles’ Creed and of liturgical forms could not be called a revision of the Westminster Directory and the synod should therefore order the committee to complete a directory along the lines originally intended and present it to the next synod. In the end it was decided to remit the draft to an enlarged committee with instructions to take into account the objections to the Apostles’ Creed and to the recommended forms of prayer. At the next three synods the committee whose convener was now David MacEwan of Clapham Road Church in London asked for and received permission to continue its work and it was only in 1898 that a new draft was presented to the synod. The work was substantially the same as the earlier draft but in most of the services the recommended “shall” was softened to “may” at some points, though in the sacramental services and in the marriage service the guidance remained very explicit. Where the earlier book had said that the Apostles’ Creed could be said the new draft said that “a Creed” could be used if “it is thought desirable”. The new draft also included verbatim from the Westminster Directory the section “Of the preaching of

the Word". As in the earlier book the new draft prefaced most of the prayers by the statement that the prayer could be offered "in these or the like words". Whereas the former draft had prescribed that in the Lord's Supper the minister "shall offer the eucharistic prayer to this or the like effect" and had said that it "may conclude with the ancient doxology", the Sanctus, the new draft dropped the Sanctus and simply said the minister "shall offer the Prayer of Thanksgiving to this effect". The Twenty-four Articles of Faith approved by the synod in 1890 were printed as an Appendix to the new draft and one of the prescribed questions to be put to ministers and elders at their ordination asked if they owned and believed "the body of doctrine set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and the other subordinate standards of this Church, and now more briefly expressed in the Twenty-four Articles of the Faith". Thus, the work of the committee on the Confession had its influence upon the shape of the new Directory but the intention in 1898 was clearly to keep as close to the Westminster Confession as possible. Nevertheless, a step had been taken on the way which led to the position set forth in a new edition of the Directory issued in 1921 wherein it was said that the Standards were to be understood as "constitutionally interpreted by the Courts of the Church" and that the Twenty-four Articles "represent generally" the teaching of the Church which had the right to "interpret, alter, add to, or modify her Subordinate Standards".

The 1898 draft was approved by the synod by a majority vote and the book won increasing favour in the Church and there was a greater readiness to embark upon an ampler work when in 1914 the synod appointed a committee to prepare a new edition. The World War delayed any action and it was 1920 before the convener of the committee, Professor Anderson Scott, presented the proposed revision to the synod. This was issued in 1921 and was much fuller in its prescriptions and its materials and was much attuned to the observance of the Christian Year. Once again it was emphasised in the preface that the forms of service were "not intended to interfere with the freedom of our worship or to be in any sense obligatory" but it was hoped that especially in the observance of the Sacraments there would be a uniform procedure in the Church and that the book would encourage the offering of worship "in the language of orderly devotion".

NOTES

47. *Presbyterian Messenger* (the monthly magazine of the Church, hereafter referred to as M), 1855, 248.
48. M, 1855, 320.
49. M, 1855, 377.
50. M, 1856, 19.
51. M, 1856, 91.
52. *Minutes* of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church in England (hereafter referred to as EPM), 1856, 179-80; M, 1856, 167-8.
53. M, 1857, 92.
54. EPM, 1857, 208-12; M, 1857, 151, 182.
55. M, 1858, 29.
56. M, 1858, 112-3.
57. EPM, 1858, 251-4.
58. EPM, 1858, 251, 253; M, 1858, 154-8.
59. M, 1858, 97.
60. EPM, 1858, 256; M, 1859, 328; R. B. Knox, *Westminster College, Cambridge*, 7.
61. M, 1859, 328.
62. EPM, 1861, 356, 358; M, 1861, 156.
63. M, 1861, 233.
64. EPM, 1862, 10; M, 1862, 171-2.
65. M, 1865, 185.
66. M, 1863, 21.
67. M, 1869, 191.
68. M, 1869, 284.
69. EPM, 1870, 374; M, 1870, 6, 114.
70. M, 1873, 11.
71. M, 1875, 212.
72. M, 1876, 89.
73. R. B. Knox, *St Columba's Church, Cambridge, 1879-1979*, 65.
74. M, 1873, 186.
75. EPM, 1847, 26.
76. EPM, 1848, 19.
77. EPM, 1881, 335, 566.
78. EPM, 1882, 622, 865.
79. EPM, 1883, 39, 333.
80. EPM, 1885, 687, 941.
81. EPM, 1886, 34, 209; see also 1887, 331, and 1888, 633.
82. EPM, 1889, 32, 272.
83. EPM, 1890, 442, 652-5.
84. EPM, 1890, 433, 642-51.
85. EPM, 1891, 799, 949-50.
86. EPM, 1892, 42-4, 216.
87. EPM, 1893, 343.
88. EPM, 1894, 663, 850-2.
89. EPM, 1898, 30, 32, 250-1.

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