

SCRIPTURE AND WORSHIP

B I B L I C A L I N T E R P R E T A T I O N
A N D T H E D I R E C T O R Y F O R
P U B L I C W O R S H I P

RICHARD A. MULLER
and
ROWLAND S. WARD


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Contents

Series Introduction vii
Preface ix

Part 1: Scripture and the Westminster Confession

Richard A. Muller

1. The “Whole Counsel of God” 3
2. “An Entire Commentary . . . the Like Never Before
Published in English” 11
3. “Inspired by God—Pure in All Ages” 31
4. “Either Expressly Set Down . . . or by Good and Necessary
Consequence” 59

Part 2: The Directory for Public Worship

Rowland S. Ward

5. Background and Principles 85
6. Elements and Practice 111

Appendix: A Directory for the Public Worship of God in the
Three Kingdoms 141

PART 1



SCRIPTURE AND THE
WESTMINSTER CONFSSION

Richard A. Muller

1

The “Whole Counsel of God”: Scripture, Exegesis, and Doctrine in the *English Annotations* and the Westminster Confession



The *English Annotations* and the Westminster Standards

As has been noted by an increasingly large group of revisionist scholars, the theological pronouncements of the Reformed orthodox stand in a high degree of continuity with the theological intentions and with the specific pronouncements of the Reformers. This revisionist scholarship, with particular reference to the Westminster Standards, has been formulated over against a relatively sizable body of writings that have seen the confessions and catechisms as a rejection, distortion, or departure from the thought of the Reformers. One of the most fruitful ways of analyzing the continuities and commonalities, as well as the discontinuities and nuances of divergence and difference, between the Reformers and the writings of the Reformed orthodox or Puritan writers is to examine trajectories of exegesis—specifically to chart the rise of orthodoxy in and through the developing Reformed exegetical tradition.

As to the focus of the present essays, comparative examination of the two sets of normative documents commissioned by the Long

Parliament, namely, first, the exegetical and interpretive conclusions embodied, for public use, in the *Annotations upon all the books of the Old and New Testament*, best identified, in short form, as the *English Annotations*, and, second, the doctrinal standards embodied as the Westminster Confession of Faith and its accompanying catechisms affords, among other things, a unique and highly significant window into the relationships between biblical interpretation and theological formulation and to the continuities and discontinuities in religious thought that belong to the development of the Reformed tradition in the eras of the Reformation and of Protestant orthodoxy as that tradition moved from its beginnings into its era of confessionalization or institutionalization.

There was, however, no official relationship between the *English Annotations* and the Westminster Standards. It was not the case that the Parliament first commissioned a set of official annotations and then commissioned the Westminster Assembly to write a confession and catechisms based primarily on the reading of Scripture found in the *English Annotations*. Indeed, one of the eminent members of the Assembly, Cornelius Burgess, protested explicitly against such an association of the documents. “It is indeed true,” he wrote,

that some Members of that *Assembly*, joyning with some others, did compile some *Annotations upon the Bible*; which many take to be the work of the *Assembly*. But take this for an undoubted truth, those *Annotations* were never made by the *Assembly*, nor by any Order from it; nor after they were made had the *Approbation* of the *Assembly*; or were so much as offered to the *Assembly* at all, for that purpose or any other.¹

His point, of course, was not to undermine the quality of the *Annotations*, but rather to take issue with his opponent, who had claimed that the Westminster Assembly approved of the gift of lands to the church on the basis of a particular annotation. Burgess, accordingly, and correctly, argued against the association of the *English Annotations* with the Westminster Assembly and its work.

1. Cornelius Burgess, *No Sacrilege nor Sin to purchase Bishops Lands*, 2nd ed. cap. iv, 87–88.

Much the same caveat concerning the *Annotations* carries over into Edmund Calamy's account of the era:

There is one Work unjustly Ascribed to this *Assembly*, and that is the *Annotations on the Bible*, which commonly bear their Name. It is true, as is hinted in the Preface before the said Notes, the same Parliament that call'd the *Assembly*, employ'd the Authors of those Annotations: For Letters were directed to them by the Chairmen of the Committee for Religion, urging their Undertaking of that Work: And they were by Order of that Committee furnish'd with whatsoever books were needful. It is also true, That several of those that were concern'd in it, were Members of the Assembly: And yet it was not undertaken by the Directions or with the Consent of the Assembly; nor were the major Part Members of the Assembly: nor did any of the Assembly review the work when it was finished: So that it cannot, upon any Account, be said to be theirs.²

The *Annotations* and the confessional standards were thus parts of a larger parliamentary project for the stabilization of religion in England.

The *English Annotations*, completed in a first edition (1645) in the same year that the Westminster Assembly began its work on a new confession, provide a highly proximate index to the understanding of Scripture behind the doctrinal definitions and the biblical proofs found in the confession and catechisms.³ The proximate location of the *Annotations* is enhanced, moreover, by the presence of several eminent members of the Assembly in the group of scholars gathered to compose the *Annotations*. The kind of continuities that exist between the confessional formulae and the teachings of the Reformers appear, moreover, not merely as parallels between the formal doctrines of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed or developments of doctrinal formulae along the various trajectories of discussion and debate

2. Edmund Calamy, *An Abridgement of Mr. Baxter's History of His Life and Times. With an Account of the Ministers, &c. who were Ejected after the Restoration, of King Charles II*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: John Lawrence, 1713), 1:86.

3. *Annotations upon all the books of the Old and New Testament wherein the text is explained, doubts resolved, Scriptures paralleled and various readings observed by the joynt-labour of certain learned divines, thereunto appointed, and therein employed, as is expressed in the preface* (London: John Legatt and John Raworth, 1645).

leading out of the Reformation, but as deeper continuities relating to the close understanding of the text and meaning of Scripture itself.

Scripture, Annotation, and Confession: Biblical Interpretation and the Formation of Doctrine in Seventeenth-Century England

The *Annotations* embody the text of the Authorized Version of Scripture and offer interpretations of that text that relate both to issues of translation and to issues of interpretation—in each case reflecting trajectories of discussion that had arisen at the beginnings of the Reformation and had continued in the Protestant tradition of biblical interpretation. Thus, by way of illustration of the purely textual issue, the text of the AV carried forward elements of the Tyndale-Coverdale-Rogers understanding of the biblical text (with its strong continental and frequently Lutheran accents), as well as elements of the sometimes different Geneva Bible (with its Calvinian and Bezan accents). In this context, it must be noted, a “Bezan accent” does not at all indicate, in the rather tendentious parlance of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions of later Calvinism, a speculative predestinarianism—rather, it indicates the reliance of the Geneva Bible and its marginal apparatus on the eminent philological work of Beza in his own *Annotationes in Novum Testamentum*. Similarly, the phrases “Lutheran accent” and “Calvinian accent” indicate the exegetical results of the Reformers in their work of translating and interpreting the text of Scripture. I should also note here that the term “precritical,” as applied to the older traditions of exegesis in the standard usage in the field, has a purely historical implication: it does not mean uncritical or non-text-critical, but only indicates the patterns and models of exegesis before the rise of the so-called historical-critical method.

First, to illustrate the point regarding translation: there are places in the *Annotations* where the nominally Genevan reading of a text in the AV has been juxtaposed with an interpretation that affirms the rather different understanding of the text found in the Tyndale-Coverdale-Rogers versions. For example, Hosea 6:7, both in the Geneva Bible

and in the AV, reads, “Like man they transgressed the covenant.” But the AV adds in the margin, “Heb. *like Adam*,” indicating the Tyndale-Coverdale-Rogers tradition, and echoing both the Bishops’ Bible and the typical continental readings. At this point the *English Annotations* accept the margin as the correct reading, disagreeing with both the Geneva Bible and the AV line: this text is, as far as all editions of the *Annotations* are concerned, a reference to Adam’s violation of the covenant of works.

Second, and equally importantly, beyond the issue of the Protestant translation tradition, the *Annotations* drew on earlier interpretive decisions belonging to the precritical tradition of exegesis, looking to the earlier work of earlier commentators, and reaching back into the past of the church. There are, of course, no citations of older commentaries in the *Annotations*, so that the continuities with earlier understandings of Scripture are not overtly stated—yet the use, by the English annotators, of the Geneva Bible and its marginal commentary, of Tremellius’s and Junius’s marginal notes to their eminent Latin version, of the annotations of Johannes Piscator and those of Jean Diodati, and perhaps of the annotations to the Dutch *Statenvertaling* signal the presence of an interpretive tradition reaching back through these documents (and through other commentaries known and used by the English annotators) into the older exegetical tradition, not only of the Reformers but of the medieval commentators and of the church fathers. The nature of this continuity is important to note: it is not the rather flat, unvariegated identity confused with continuity and demanded as an ahistorical index of theological legitimacy by the proponents of the “Calvin against the Calvinists” perspective; rather, it is a highly nuanced and variegated continuity of dialogue and debate within which broad lines of development, specific issues of interpretation identified with trajectories of reading particular texts, and a fair degree of diversity within identifiable theological and confessional boundaries can be discerned. For example, one can identify lines of interpretation of particular texts that move through the precritical tradition, are fastened on by Calvin, lodged in the Geneva Bible, maintained by Diodati, and drawn over into the *English Annotations*—and one can also identify lines of interpretation that link the *Annotations*, perhaps by way of the *Statenvertaling*, perhaps

by way of the older English tradition running from Tyndale through the Bishops' Bible, to non-Calvinian continental understandings of particular texts.

The extent to which the authors of the Westminster Standards defined their doctrinal formulae in relation to such traditions, as embodied for them in the work of the English annotators and other commentaries of the era, shows that they stood in a distinct continuity with the Reformation—not, of course, a flat, unnuanced continuity of stasis or identity of thought. Thus, the study of the doctrinal formulations in the Westminster Confession in the light of its context—with some emphasis on the exegetical context—offers opportunity not only for a presentation of the doctrine but, more importantly, for a contextualized reading of its theology, indicating on the one hand the continuity of its teaching with that of the Reformers and the Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century and, on the other, the continuity of the confession and its teaching with the developing thought of scholastic orthodoxy on the continent of Europe as well as among the British Reformed. The argument of this essay, thus, counters some of the claims that the confession represented a form of orthodox Protestantism that had strayed from the biblical theology of the Reformers and had replaced exegesis with dogmas.⁴ It also, more generally, counters the rather ahistorical claims of some that the Westminster Confession represents a pre-scholastic phase of British Reformed or Presbyterian thought capable of being contrasted with the scholastic orthodoxy of the Continental writers of the same era—noting both the arrival in Britain of the scholastic mode of teaching and presenting theology a long generation before the writing of the confession, and the common ground and interrelationship between the British writers and the Continent, whether before, during, or after the writing of the

4. E.g., Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972); idem, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the *Westminster Confession*," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129–56; James B. Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. Alisdair Heron (Edinburgh: Saint Andrews Press, 1982), 40–53; and idem, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background or Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 51–76.

confession.⁵ This latter point also stands in the way of various attempts to read the thought of the English Puritans in a rather insular manner, despite the Puritans' own consistent intellectual commerce with the doctrinal, exegetical, and philosophical currents of Continental thought and the high profile and wide currency of various British writers (such as Perkins, Ames, Cameron, Rutherford, Twisse, and Owen) on the Continent. The context for understanding the Westminster Confession is, certainly, the exegetical and doctrinal heritage of the Reformation as presented through the interpretive glass of the English and Scots Reformed theology of the mid-seventeenth century,⁶ which was itself part of the larger phenomenon that has been called "international Calvinism."⁷

Given both the doctrinal scope of the Westminster Standards (all of Christian doctrine in confessional and catechetical form) and the scope as well as size of the *English Annotations* (an exegesis of the entire Bible, in two volumes, over twenty-four hundred folio pages in length in the final edition), any study of the *Annotations* in relation to the confessional documents will need to be carefully limited. I propose to offer in the following essays an introduction to the *English*

5. Contra Jack B. Rogers, *Scripture in the Westminster Confession: A Problem of Historical Interpretation for American Presbyterianism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967); idem, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," in *Biblical Authority*, ed. Jack Rogers (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1977), 17–46; idem, "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Reformed Tradition," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 51–65; also Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979).

6. On this broader context, see Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003); also note idem, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). The history of English religious thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was well surveyed in John Hunt, *Religious Thought in England from the Reformation to the End of the Last Century: A Contribution to the History of Theology*, 3 vols. (London: Strahan, 1870–73). On Scottish theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see John Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 1943); and G. D. Henderson, *The Burning Bush: Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, 1957). T. F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), is so tendentious and anachronistic in its theological judgments as to be without value as a historical study.

7. William Robert Godfrey, "Tensions within International Calvinism: The Debate on the Atonement at the Synod of Dort, 1618–1619" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1974); and Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541–1715* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

RICHARD A. MULLER

Annotations in their three editions (1645, 1651, and 1657), and two supplemental volumes (1655 and 1658); a chapter on the doctrine of Scripture and its interpretation in the Westminster Confession of Faith;⁸ and a study of some selected doctrinal issues from the confession and catechisms that illustrate the relationship between the various biblical proofs cited by the Westminster Standards and the interpretive tradition evidenced in the *Annotations*.

8. This essay appeared in an earlier form as “‘The Only Way of Man’s Salvation’: Scripture in the Westminster Confession,” in *Calvin Studies VIII: The Westminster Confession in Current Thought*, papers presented at the Colloquium on Calvin Studies (Davidson College, January 26–27, 1996), 14–33.