



NO 'CHURCH YEAR' | *for Presbyterians*

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As is its custom, the Presbyterian Church US (PCUS)² has published a workbook for use by the Women of the Church in their circle Bible studies. Unfortunately, the 1979-1980 study book, *Praise God—Worship Through the Year*, is out of keeping with the historic Presbyterian understanding of worship.

Let us carefully consider some of the main deficiencies of the workbook so that we might better understand what is the true Presbyterian position on the worship of God:

The basic problem with the workbook is simply its attitude. It assumes that it is appropriate to bring back into the Presbyterian tradition many things which were decisively thrown out by our forefathers in the Reformation, such as the Church Year and vigils.

From reading the workbook, one might get the impression that Presbyterians in the past have been ignorant of the high Church, liturgical Church year traditions; and now that we know about them, it might be good to bring back some of them, like Lent or Ash Wednesday or Epiphany.

This kind of thinking is misguided. It is not the case that Calvinist or Presbyterian tradition has simply been unaware of the ritualistic, Church Year tradition for these 450 years. On the contrary, we have knowingly, purposely and vigorously rejected from our worship the liturgical, Church Year position. We had good reason for rejecting it then, and we have good reasons for not allowing it to be brought back in today.

What are those reasons? Simply stated, our Reforming, Puritan forefathers were earnestly concerned that their worship should be pleasing to God, and they turned to the Scriptures in order to know what would please Him in this matter. As true believers, they knew that Scripture alone had the authority to prescribe what our worship should be. Therefore, they radically cut out elements and practices of worship that were not purely Scriptural. Our fathers in the faith have thus followed what is called the "Puritan principle of worship."

The great Protestant Reformation of the 1500's basically divided into two major camps in regard to worship: the broader, Continental approach, and the stricter Puritan interpretation.

Germany, Scandinavia and, later, England followed the Continental approach, which retained a number of medieval Roman Catholic rituals and practices in worship. They said, in effect, "If something is not expressly forbidden by Scripture, we can include it in our worship." Hence,

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² The PCUS is commonly referred to as the "Southern Presbyterian Church." In 1983 that denomination united with the "Northern Presbyterian Church," to make up what is now the PC(USA). The PCA was founded in 1973, largely by ministers and churches departing from the PCUS.

they kept medieval non-Scriptural innovations such as the Church Year, a complex liturgy, and so on.

This approach was decisively rejected by our Presbyterian ancestors. In large areas of Switzerland, France, Holland, England for one generation, Scotland, and then in the American colonies, especially New England, the Reformed Churches adhered to the “Puritan principle of worship.” They wanted to be as close as they could in every possible way to God’s revealed will in Scripture.

Hence they said, in effect, “We will not allow in worship that which is not expressly required or instituted by Scripture.” In other words, the Continentals said that if something is not expressly forbidden, it is all right. The Puritan Presbyterians said, “That does not go far enough. Unless it is actually approved by the Bible, then it is not acceptable.”

Therefore, the Puritan Presbyterians “purified” the Church’s worship by cutting out many of the un-Scriptural ceremonies and symbols which had come in during the Dark and Middle Ages. They chopped down statues from the cathedrals; they felt these violated the prohibition of the Second Commandment against graven images. They removed the ritual of the mass and the seasons of the Church Year—Advent, Lent and so forth. They felt this was also a violation of the Second Commandment because it brought “human inventions” into the worship of God.

For instance, the *Appendix to the Directory for the Public Worship of God* (of the Westminster Assembly), which constitutes the doctrinal basis of the PCUS says:

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 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 public fasting or thanksgiving, as the several eminent and extraordinary dispensations of God’s providence shall administer cause and opportunity to His people.

Hence the medieval Church Year is clearly cut out by our doctrinal standards.

In the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, the Puritan principle of worship is explicitly stated in Questions 108 and 109 (from which we quote in part):

Q. 108. What are the duties required in the Second Commandment?

A. The duties required in the Second Commandment are, the receiving, observing, and keeping pure and entire all such religious worship and ordinances as God hath instituted in his word . . . as also the disapproving, detesting, opposing all false worship; and, according to each one’s place and calling, removing it, and all monuments of idolatry.

The Presbyterian Church thus cut what it considered to be improper medieval accretions to worship in order to go back to the New Testament Church’s example of simplicity and purity.

Our Presbyterian forefathers did not do this because they wanted to be negative but because they wanted to leave the way open for the great positive to be expressed: the pure, powerful worship of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the life-changing proclamation of His Gospel every Lord’s Day. Therefore, fidelity to Scripture, simplicity and Christ-centeredness are the hallmarks of Presbyterian worship. Again Calvin says:

Observances should be few and edifying. Further we must strive with the greatest diligence to prevent error from creeping in, either to corrupt or to obscure this pure use. This end will be attained if all observations,

whatever they shall be, display manifest usefulness, and if very few are allowed; and especially if a faithful pastor's teaching is added to bar the way to perverse opinions (Institutes, IV, x, 32).

Today as much as ever we must stand for simplicity, purity, fidelity to Scripture, and Christ-centeredness in our worship because we want to worship God in the way He has prescribed, so as to have Christ and His Gospel flourishing at the center of our Church's life. And thus we must clearly reject the proposed reintroduction of the medieval, Roman Catholic Church Year with its attendant ceremonies.