

## “A Debt of Fealty to the Past”: The Reformed Liturgical Theology of John H. A. Bomberger

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A new level of interest in the history and theology of corporate worship is appearing in evangelical Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America. Increasing numbers of popular and academic books on liturgy are beginning to pour forth from the pens of evangelical Reformed authors.<sup>1</sup> The conferences and grant programs for worship renewal sponsored by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship<sup>2</sup> and the annual pre-General Assembly Conference on Reformed Liturgy for ministers in the Presbyterian Church in America<sup>3</sup> demonstrate that this growing interest is bearing fruit in liturgical reforms in local congregations.

For liturgical reformers flush with the excitement of new discoveries and a fresh theological vision for liturgical renewal, the history of controversy over Reformed worship provides a sobering caution. In the history of American Reformed churches, the intense debate over liturgical reforms in the German

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<sup>1</sup> In the past two years alone, evangelical Reformed and Presbyterian authors have produced the following works: D. G. Hart and John R. Meuther, *With Reverence and Awe: Returning to the Basics of Reformed Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002); Michael Horton, *A Better Way: Rediscovering the Drama of God-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002); R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002); Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Tim Keller, “Reformed Worship in the Global City,” in *Worship by the Book*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 193-249; Jeffrey J. Meyers, *The Lord’s Service* (Moscow, Ida.: Canon Press, 2003); D. G. Hart, *Recovering Mother Kirk* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); John D. Witvliet, *Worship Seeking Understanding: Windows into Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003); Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. and Sue A. Rozeboom, eds., *Discerning the Spirits: A Guide to Thinking about Worship Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Peter J. Leithart, *From Silence to Song: The Davidic Liturgical Revolution* (Moscow, Ida.: Canon Press, 2003); Philip G. Ryken, Derek W. H. Thomas, and J. Ligon Duncan, III, eds., *Give Praise to God: A Vision for Reforming Worship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2003); Emily R. Brink and John D. Witvliet, *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.calvin.edu/worship>.

<sup>3</sup> Although the lectures are not published in print, audio tapes from the conferences may be obtained from Biblical Horizons, P.O. Box 1096, Niceville, FL 32588 (e-mail: [bjordan4@cox.net](mailto:bjordan4@cox.net)).

Reformed Church serves as an instructive case study of the strife and division that can result from an ambitious agenda for rapid liturgical change, especially when that change includes liturgical forms and practices more commonly associated with other Christian traditions. The writings of German Reformed pastor and scholar John H. A. Bomberger offer an example of the challenge that defenders of more traditional Reformed worship practices pose to such liturgical ecumenism.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the German Reformed Church in the United States became the ecclesiastical battleground for one of the most protracted and intense liturgical conflicts in American church history. The excesses and widespread popularity of revivalistic “new measures” had provoked a crisis of theological and liturgical identity within the German Reformed Church. By the 1840s, a small but growing number of ministers began to clamor for a return to more traditional liturgical practices.<sup>4</sup>

The German Reformed Church began its first official steps toward liturgical reform in 1849 by appointing a committee to prepare a book of liturgical forms to guide denominational practice. When the committee began its work, it had no clearly defined goal or method for composing a Reformed liturgy. During the course of several years of intense study of liturgical history and theology, two competing ideals emerged that divided both the committee and the German Reformed Church as a whole.

The majority of the liturgical committee, led by Philip Schaff and John Williamson Nevin, defended a highly structured “high church” liturgy. The theological framework guiding the majority was the Mercersburg Theology of Nevin and Schaff, a “phase of that extraordinary High Church movement which swept across western Christendom in the nineteenth century and, with profound variations, made its presence felt in Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism—and one small outpost of the Reformed church.”<sup>5</sup> The Mercersburg Theology emphasized the organic growth and continuity of the church in history and highlighted the church’s role in mediating mystical union with Christ chiefly by means of its sacramental rites. Drawing primarily upon the patristic liturgies of the third and fourth centuries, the committee majority deviated from much of traditional Reformed liturgics by composing a service for the Lord’s Day that centered on the Lord’s Supper rather than on the sermon. Their liturgy featured numerous elements characteristic of the worship in more catholic liturgical traditions, such as liturgies with set forms intended for congregational use during corporate worship, a liturgy of the Eucharist complete with eucharistic prayer patterned after fourth-century

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<sup>4</sup> John B. Frantz, “Revivalism in the German Reformed Church in America to 1850, with Emphasis on the Eastern Synod” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1961), 144-77.

<sup>5</sup> B. A. Gerrish, *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 51.

models, a lectionary and set of collects correlated with the seasons and festivals of the liturgical year, numerous verbal congregational responses, and corporate recitation of the Lord's Prayer and Apostles' and Nicene Creeds on a regular basis. The eucharistic liturgy contained in the committee's final revision, the *Order of Worship* published in 1866, was a catholic liturgy very similar in its order and content and to the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>6</sup>

John H. A. Bomberger was the only member of the liturgical committee who opposed the Mercersburg Theology and the *Order of Worship*. Bomberger, the pastor of a prominent Philadelphia congregation, had played a key role in the initiation of the liturgical reform movement in the German Reformed Church. At the synod of 1849, Bomberger had argued persuasively for the composition of a denominational liturgy for the Lord's Day that revised and updated the traditional 1563 German Reformed Palatinate liturgy.<sup>7</sup> Because the Palatinate liturgy was not widely available in America at the time, Bomberger later published a translation in the Mercersburg seminary journal, and he included a defense of the use of liturgies against some Presbyterian objections.<sup>8</sup> As the committee moved toward a more catholic liturgical paradigm, however, Bomberger became increasingly belligerent in his opposition to the Mercersburg liturgical theology. Although he was a minority of one on the committee, he became the leading spokesman for a substantial number of ministers in the German Reformed Church who were greatly disturbed by the *Order of Worship*. Bomberger published numerous caustic books and essays against the *Order of Worship* and attempted to organize opposition to the new liturgy in the church courts. The controversy over the liturgy eventually led Bomberger to create a new theological journal, *The Reformed Church Monthly*, in opposition to the Mercersburg seminary journal, *The Mercersburg Review*, and to found a new theological school, Ursinus College, to keep ministers from attending Mercersburg Seminary.<sup>9</sup>

During the past generation, scholars have shown an increasing appreciation for the importance of the Mercersburg movement in American church history

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<sup>6</sup> For a narrative account of the liturgical-reform movement and a summary of the contents of the liturgies produced by the committee, see Jack M. Maxwell, *Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg* (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1976).

<sup>7</sup> James H. Nichols, *Romanticism in America: Nevin and Schaff at Mercersburg* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 287. The Palatinate was the Calvinist region of western Germany from where the American German Reformed Church traced its spiritual ancestry. The confessional standard of the German Reformed Church, the Heidelberg Catechism, as well as a book of liturgical forms for a variety of services were both composed in the Palatinate in 1563 under the direction of the elector Frederick III, who had recently converted from Lutheranism to Calvinism.

<sup>8</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563," *The Mercersburg Review* 2 (1850): 81-96, 265-86; John H. A. Bomberger, "The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563," *The Mercersburg Review* 3 (1851): 97-128.

<sup>9</sup> Maxwell, *Worship*, 264-82, 296-311.

and especially in the history of theology in America.<sup>10</sup> Liturgical scholars in particular now recognize that the Mercersburg liturgy marked an important milestone in the history of Reformed liturgics.<sup>11</sup> Under the expert guidance of Schaff, the committee tirelessly researched the history of liturgical forms, and the *Order of Worship* mediated the fruit of this historical scholarship to an American Reformed context largely ignorant of liturgical history.<sup>12</sup> John Nevin also made a major contribution by laying a sophisticated theological founda-

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<sup>10</sup> James H. Nichols initiated new interest in the Mercersburg movement with his work *Romanticism in American Theology* and the collection of primary sources he published in *The Mercersburg Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). Several works by Nevin and Schaff have since been reprinted, including, John W. Nevin, *The Mystical Presence: A Vindication of the Reformed or Calvinistic Doctrine of the Holy Eucharist* (which has been reprinted three times since the 1960s; the most recent reprint is edited by Augustine Thompson and published in 2000 by Wipf & Stock Publishers), several of Nevin's shorter tracts and essays in *Reformed and Catholic: Selected Historical and Theological Writings of John Williamson Nevin*, ed. Charles Yrigoyen, Jr. and George H. Bricker (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1978), John W. Nevin, *The Anxious Bench, Antichrist, and the Sermon Catholic Unity*, ed. Augustine Thompson (Wipf & Stock, n.d.), and Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, ed. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964). In addition to numerous doctoral dissertations, several important monographs on Mercersburg Theology have appeared; see Richard E. Wentz, *John Williamson Nevin: American Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), William DiPuccio, *The Interior Sense of Scripture: The Sacred Hermeneutics of John W. Nevin* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1998), and Sam Hamstra, Jr., and Arie J. Griffioen, eds., *Reformed Confessionalism in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays on the Thought of John Williamson Nevin* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1995), which contains a complete bibliography of Nevin's published and unpublished writings and an extensive bibliography of secondary literature through 1995. In 1983, Howard Hageman founded the Mercersburg Society, an organization for scholars and pastors devoted to studying the Mercersburg Theology and applying its insights to issues in contemporary theology and church life. The Mercersburg Society publishes the semiannual journal *The New Mercersburg Review*.

<sup>11</sup> Surveys of liturgical history routinely mention the contribution of Mercersburg. For example, see Howard G. Hageman, *Pulpit and Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1962), 88-98; James H. Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 163-65; James F. White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 173; Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 581; Old, *Worship*, 142-43, 162.

<sup>12</sup> The sources that exerted the greatest influence on the Mercersburg liturgy were the various patristic liturgies of the fourth century, the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* (in its various forms), the Palatinate liturgy, and the liturgy of the Catholic Apostolic Church (a church founded in 1832 by Church of Scotland minister Edward Irving that became known for its millenarian views; its restoration of twelve apostles to lead the church; the manifestation of charismatic gifts, such as glossolalia and prophecy; and distinctive catholic liturgy combining eastern, Roman Catholic, and Anglican elements. For its influence on Scottish and American liturgical reform, see Gregg A. Mast, *The Eucharistic Service of the Catholic Apostolic Church and Its Influence on Reformed Liturgical Renewals of the Nineteenth Century* [Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1999]). Maxwell has identified the various contributions of the latter three sources to the text of the eucharistic liturgy in the Provisional Liturgy (*Worship*, 436-55). Mercersburg's attention to history and its attraction to early church models both anticipated and laid a foundation for the ecumenical liturgical movements of the twentieth century.

tion for the Mercersburg liturgy. In fact, Reformed liturgical historian Howard Hageman has claimed that the *Order of Worship* was “the first liturgy in the Reformed to articulate a theology. Indeed, it was at Mercersburg that there was worked out, often in the heat of battle, for the first time in the Reformed churches what could be called a theology of the liturgy.”<sup>13</sup>

As Hageman observes, the polemical context, the “heat of battle,” influenced the shape of the Mercersburg Theology. Nevin was a polemicist who developed much of his theology in the midst of debate. Therefore, it is important to know the views of John Bomberger, Nevin’s chief opponent in the liturgical controversy, in order to understand the historical context of the Mercersburg liturgical theology.

Scholarship on the Mercersburg liturgical movement, however, has devoted remarkably little attention to Bomberger’s liturgical position. The definitive history of the German Reformed liturgical controversy, Jack M. Maxwell’s *Worship and Reformed Theology: The Liturgical Lessons of Mercersburg*, focuses almost exclusively on the views of Nevin, Schaff, and their allies on the liturgical committee and does not describe Bomberger’s views in any systematic way. Other scholarship on Bomberger also fails to provide any systematic exposition of his liturgical views. James I. Good’s history of the German Reformed Church<sup>14</sup> in the nineteenth century devotes over two hundred pages to a detailed chronicling of the liturgical controversy, but it contains only brief and very condensed references to Bomberger’s views. The most substantial work on Bomberger, a collection of essays about his life and theology,<sup>15</sup> mentions his role in the controversy but does not expound his liturgical position.

The following article aims to fill a lacuna in Mercersburg scholarship by analyzing John Bomberger’s justification for rejecting the Mercersburg liturgical reform and his advocacy for an alternative position derived in part from the Palatinate liturgical tradition. After summarizing Bomberger’s liturgical ideal, this article will explore the structure and method of Bomberger’s liturgical thought by examining in turn the biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral beliefs that shape his liturgical convictions. The article concludes with a historical and theological evaluation of Bomberger’s liturgical views.

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<sup>13</sup> Hageman, *Pulpit and Table*, 92. For an overview of John Nevin’s liturgical theology, see Michael A. Farley, “The Liturgical Theology of John Williamson Nevin,” *Studia Liturgica* 33 (2003): 204-22. Nevin’s focus on the christological and ecclesiological dimensions of the liturgy also anticipated the twentieth-century liturgical movements’ focus on the centrality of the paschal mystery and the sacramentality of Christ and the church.

<sup>14</sup> James I. Good, *History of the Reformed Church in the United States* (New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1911).

<sup>15</sup> Ursinus College, *The Reverend John H. A. Bomberger: Doctor of Divinity, Doctor of Laws, 1817-1890* (Philadelphia: Publication and Sunday School Board of the Reformed Church in the United States, 1917).

## Bomberger's Liturgical Ideal

Bomberger's liturgical theology developed in reaction to revivalism. Bomberger had personally witnessed and participated in the discarding of older Reformed liturgical and sacramental practices in favor of fervent preaching, protracted meetings, the "anxious bench," and other "new measures" adopted by many evangelical churches during the revivals of the early nineteenth century. He acknowledged that the revivals did succeed in fostering a "resuscitation of true religion" following a period of "spiritual deadness" during which "the piety of the [American German Reformed] fathers seemed to have become extinct in their children, discipline had grown lax, and religious life was at a low ebb."<sup>16</sup> Among the positive effects of the revivals, Bomberger noted the recruitment of ministers, a new concern for the spiritual health of the church's youth and a new spiritual interest among the youth themselves, the flourishing Sunday schools and prayer meetings, as well as general renewal of spiritual fervor.

However, Bomberger ultimately rejected revivalistic "new measures" as a "most perilous remedy for the disease they were designed to cure."<sup>17</sup> Revivalist preachers ignored the "true ecclesiastical character" and the "evangelical principles" of the German Reformed Church, and the unfortunate results were poor preaching, "serious improprieties" at church meetings, and "spurious" conversions.<sup>18</sup> For Bomberger, an authentic Reformed piety cannot be sustained by the "religious ranting and disorder" of revivalistic "fanaticism."<sup>19</sup>

Bomberger's antidote for the instability and excesses of revivalism was a return to the pattern of the 1563 liturgy of the Reformed churches in Germany. Even when he was embroiled in strident polemics against the catholic liturgy of the *Order of Worship*, Bomberger always insisted that he did not oppose formal liturgies. Indeed, he explicitly agreed with the majority of the liturgical committee by saying, "the German Reformed Church is a Liturgical Church, in distinction from those Churches which reject all liturgical forms. The German Reformed Church has always approved the use of a Liturgy and has always had

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<sup>16</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons, Especially in Their Bearing upon the New Liturgy Movement: Twenty-five Years Ago," *German Reformed Messenger* [hereafter GRM], 12 February 1862.

<sup>17</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons, Especially in Their Bearing upon the New Liturgy Movement: The Reaction," *GRM*, 19 February 1862.

<sup>18</sup> Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons. . . Twenty-five Years Ago," *GRM*, 12 February 1862.

<sup>19</sup> Bomberger commended John Nevin for almost single-handedly rescuing the German Reformed Church from the negative influences of revivalism by the publication of his antirevivalist tract *The Anxious Bench* ("A Review and Its Lessons. . . The Reaction," *GRM*, 19 February 1862). Bomberger's positive comments about the revivals, however, set him apart from Nevin, whose analysis of revivalism is wholly critical.

one” and “our church in this country ought to have a Liturgy, and that the sooner we get one the better.”<sup>20</sup>

Bomberger described the liturgical structure and rubrics of the Palatinate liturgy as a “moderate ritual.” The liturgies contained in the Palatinate liturgy were relatively simple services centered on public prayer and preaching. The Lord’s Day service began with a brief biblical salutation followed by a general prayer of confession of sins, a prayer for the saving apprehension of the Word, and a corporate Lord’s Prayer. Next came the Scripture reading and sermon followed by a more specific corporate confession of sins, absolution, and another corporate Lord’s Prayer. Then followed prayers of thanksgiving and intercession, which concluded with yet another corporate Lord’s Prayer. The service concluded with the singing of a Psalm and a benediction.<sup>21</sup> Although the Palatinate liturgy did not grant permission for extemporaneous prayer to replace the written prayers, Bomberger argued that the written prayers were not mandatory; rather, they merely served as a general guide for the minister’s public prayers on behalf of the silent congregation.<sup>22</sup>

The Palatinate liturgy also furnished orders of service and written prayers for the Lord’s Supper, baptism, ordination, weddings, visitation of the sick, and funerals. The Lord’s Supper was celebrated only a few times each year, and corporate recitation of the Apostles’ Creed was limited to the baptismal and Lord’s Supper services. A moderate observance of the liturgical year is evident in the special prayers provided for festival days of Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, and Whitsuntide (Pentecost).

Bomberger, however, was not in favor of simply adopting the Palatinate liturgy unchanged. He criticized the 1563 liturgy as “too doctrinal and abstract, as well as antiquated in its style,”<sup>23</sup> and he repeatedly supported the need for a

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<sup>20</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, “A Review and Its Lessons, Especially in Their Bearing upon the New Liturgy Movement: Our Present Situation; Its Opportunities,” *GRM*, 19 March 1862.

<sup>21</sup> Bomberger, “The Old Palatinate Liturgy,” 86-87, 269-74.

<sup>22</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic, Apostolic, Not Patristic: A Reply to Dr. Nevin’s “Vindication,”* *Éccl.* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers, 1867), 84. Bomberger’s claim has no grounds in the Palatinate Liturgy itself. The section, Of Common Prayer, introduces the prayer before the sermon with the following instruction: “Before the Sermon. . . the following prayer shall be delivered to the people. . . .” “Similar directives are found elsewhere, such as, “the Minister shall say” (before the confession of sin), “Thereupon he shall proclaim the forgiveness of sins. . . and shall say” (before the assurance of pardon), “At the completion of Communion, the Minister shall say (before the post-communion thanksgiving). See the translations in Bard Thompson, “The Palatinate Liturgy,” *Theology and Life* 6 (1963): 49-67, and (ironically) Bomberger’s own translations in “The Old Palatinate Liturgy of 1563” in the *Mercersburg Review*. James H. Nichols notes that synodical legislation in the German Reformed Church first granted permission to make additions or variations of the prayers in the Palatinate liturgy in the late seventeenth century. Nichols attributes the increasing popularity of free prayer in the German Reformed Church during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the antiformalist influence of pietism (*Corporate Worship*, 116-18).

<sup>23</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, “The New Liturgy,” *GRM*, 18 November 1857.

fresh revision of the old Reformed liturgy. It became clear, however, that Bomberger’s extremely conservative vision of reform left little room for any substantial revision at all. For example, in 1860, Bomberger composed a short manual for members of the German Reformed Church that contained a basic introduction to the church’s history, doctrine, worship, and life. In this manual, the discussion of the church’s corporate worship listed an order of service for the Lord’s Day that hardly differed at all from the Palatinate liturgy.<sup>24</sup>

Bomberger freely conceded the legitimacy of updated prayers with revisions of language, length, and style. In fact, he contended that all the materials for his desired liturgy could be found in the Provisional Liturgy, the 1857 precursor to the *Order of Worship* that contained a service almost identical to the *Order of Worship*.<sup>25</sup> At the 1862 denominational synod meeting, Bomberger offered his own proposed liturgy, which consisted of the Provisional Liturgy stripped of its congregational responses (Bomberger substituted the Palatinate forms for the Lord’s Supper and baptism, however).<sup>26</sup>

To what, then, did Bomberger so strenuously object in the *Order of Worship*? Bomberger’s primary substantive criticisms of the liturgy for the Lord’s Day services (including the service for the Lord’s Supper) may be grouped under four headings. First, Bomberger rejected its exclusive use of completely set, written forms that excluded free prayer. Second, he objected to its frequent congregational responses. Third, he objected to the high doctrine of ministerial authority implicit in the strongly worded absolution and the sacramental character of the ordination service. Fourth, he denounced the visual and ritual centrality of the Eucharist along with the language of “sacrifice” and “altar” used to interpret the rite.

Thus, the contrast between Bomberger’s liturgical ideal grounded in the Palatinate liturgy and the catholic liturgy in the *Order of Worship* produced by the liturgical committee was significant. Bomberger consistently presented his position as the reasonable *via media* between the “fierce fanaticism” of revivalism and the “frigid formalism”<sup>27</sup> and “extreme ritualism” of “high churchistic

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<sup>24</sup> See the ecclesiastical appendix in John H. A. Bomberger, *Five Year’s Ministry in the German Reformed Church in Race Street, Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1860), 50-51. The liturgy described as the “order usually observed” in German Reformed worship reads: “the invocation (either with or without confession of sin,) singing, reading the Scriptures, prayer (either free or according to the form of the Liturgy,) singing, the sermon, prayer, singing, and the doxology, after which the assembly is dismissed with a benediction.”

<sup>25</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, “The Classes and the Liturgy,” *GRM*, 17 April 1861; John H. A. Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy: A History and Criticism of the Ritualistic Movement in the German Reformed Church* (Philadelphia: Jas. B. Rodgers, 1867), 119.

<sup>26</sup> Maxwell, *Worship*, 279-80.

<sup>27</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, “A Review and Its Lessons, Especially in Their Bearing upon the New Liturgy Movement: The Reaction, in Regard to Doctrines,” *GRM*, 5 March 1862.



modes of worship.”<sup>28</sup> The reasoning behind Bomberger’s specific objections can only be discerned by examining the biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral beliefs that form the foundation of his liturgical thought. The following sections of this article will examine these sets of beliefs in order to show how they shape Bomberger’s liturgics.

### Biblical Hermeneutics and Sacramental Theology

In his many writings on the liturgical controversy, Bomberger devoted relatively little space to defending the biblical basis for his views through exegesis of specific biblical texts. In 1869, however, toward the end of the fiercest period of the controversy, he finally sketched the biblical support for his position in more detailed fashion in a series of three articles entitled “Primitive Christian Worship.” Because Bomberger’s biblical hermeneutics provide the logical and rhetorical foundation for the entire superstructure of his liturgical argument, it is important to examine his biblical theology of worship in some detail.

Bomberger contended that the Bible is the ultimate norm and all-sufficient source for liturgical theology and practice. In contrast to the strict Puritan and/or Presbyterian definition of the Bible’s normativity for worship (the regulative principle of worship), which stipulated, “only what was explicitly commanded by the Word of God was to be accepted,”<sup>29</sup> Bomberger’s articulation seems to allow significantly greater freedom:

We recognize the binding authority of this ultimate divine rule or test. . . . It is not required by this text that a literal “thus saith the Lord,” or thus did the Lord and his Apostles, should be produced to warrant every particular phase of belief and practice. But when a definite Scriptural declaration or example is at hand, the principle, at least, involved therein must rule our views, and nothing contrary to it, or disagreeing with such principle can be allowed. The text or example may be developed; but neither must be perverted into an argument or theory or practice essentially at variance with their plain import.<sup>30</sup>

However, his later insistence on the complete sufficiency of the Bible for the practice of corporate worship and the normativity of Scripture’s silence on particular practices seems functionally equivalent to the more restrictive Puritan regulative principle:

It may confidently be taken for granted, and as confidently asserted, therefore, that the Scriptures have furnished us with everything essential in regard to the matter [of worship]. Their silence, accordingly, is as significant

<sup>28</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Horton Davies, *The Worship of the English Puritans* (1948; repr., Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 8.

<sup>30</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, “Primitive Christian Worship,” *The Reformed Church Monthly* 2 (1869): 240.

as their statements and descriptions. It is as positive, also, in its import. More is not said, because there was nothing more needful for the guidance and direction of the Church to be said. The devotional usages reported are all that were practiced, or regarded as essential and worthy to be reported.<sup>31</sup>

Bomberger interpreted this sufficiency to mean that specific forms not contained in Scripture may be used, but such extrabiblical forms may not be imposed as the only legitimate manner to conduct corporate worship because this would go beyond the Bible's degree of specificity.<sup>32</sup>

Not all parts of the Bible were equally normative for Bomberger. He drew such a sharp contrast between the Old and New Testaments with respect to their teaching about corporate worship that his canon for matters liturgical was effectively reduced to the New Testament alone. For Bomberger, a radical discontinuity existed between the sacrificial worship of the temple and the early Christian worship attested in the New Testament. John 4:21-24 and the books of Galatians and Hebrews and 1 and 2 Peter show that "the distinctive forms and ceremonies of the ancient Jewish worship (cultus) were abolished under the Christian dispensation."<sup>33</sup> The temple, priesthood, and sacrificial ritual of the Old Testament were perfectly fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice and therefore have absolutely no relevance for the present practice of Christian worship. Although the early Christians were well acquainted with the ceremonial worship of the temple, these ceremonies "were not originally made the pattern or model of [Christian] services [of worship] in a single respect."<sup>34</sup> Instead, the early Christians modified the liturgical patterns of the Jewish synagogue for their corporate worship, and rejected a "priestly class" corresponding to that of the Old Testament, as well as any practices even "outwardly and formally" analogous to the use of sacrifices and altars.<sup>35</sup>

Such radical discontinuity in liturgical form between the old and new covenant eras corresponded to changes in the "inward ruling ideas and principles" of worship that resulted from the introduction of a "new and far more glorious dispensation" by the work of Jesus Christ.<sup>36</sup> Bomberger identified four important changes. First, Jesus' teaching about the spirituality (meaning, non-corporeality) of God's nature revealed "conceptions of God, and modes of worshipping Him" that were "more pure, more spiritual, and more true" than the theology and worship of Israel that God guided by means of. . . localized and sometimes visible manifestations of His presence in the temple, particularly in

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 449.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 294.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 295. Cf. Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> Bomberger, "Primitive," 243, 294, 296. Cf. Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 82.

<sup>36</sup> Bomberger, "Primitive," 243.

the Shekinah glory of the holy of holies.<sup>37</sup> In his extended discussion of John 4:24 (“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” [ESV]), Bomberger interpreted worshipping “in spirit” as an “advancement and spiritualization of [Israel’s] outward mode of worshipping [God].”

“In spirit,” as under the immediate influence, and by the immediate aid of the Holy Spirit, operating upon the mind and heart. . . . The devout communings of the worshipper should be no longer bound to local or sensuous manifestations of God, to temple, altar, or ark. They should ascend by faith to God Himself, to God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and in Him as ascended on high, and seated at the right hand of God in glory. Their worship should be heart-worship, in contradistinction to all formal, material, carnal worship consisting of ceremonial, sacrificial offering, and the like.<sup>38</sup>

Second, the new covenant reveals the fatherhood of God with greater clarity, and therefore Christian worship should be approached with a greater “childlike simplicity and confidence.” Citing the fatherhood of God and the doctrine of adoption revealed in Hebrews 12:18-24, Matthew 6:9, and Romans 8:15, Bomberger contended that this familial relationship grants an immediacy of access to God in prayer that was unavailable to old covenant believers, who had to “beg” and “entreat” the priest or Levite to make intercession for them.<sup>39</sup>

Third, the sacrificial worship of the old covenant has been abolished because Christians are now reconciled to God on the basis of Christ’s death. Therefore, God is not “to be propitiated by any devout offerings or acts, by sacrifices or sacrificial rites in any form.” Instead, the sacrifices are replaced by “mere simple penitent believing sincerity of heart.”<sup>40</sup>

The fourth point simply expanded on the second. By the direct mediation of Christ, Christians always have immediate access to God’s presence at all times and at all places. Thus, Christians are not dependent upon the corporate assembly and the special ministry of the pastor to obtain an audience with God.<sup>41</sup>

Bomberger frequently explicated the theological and liturgical implications of these four discontinuities between old and new covenants for the practice of

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 245. In *The Revised Liturgy*, Bomberger appeals to this same verse to defend the iconoclasm and antiliturgical tendencies of Reformed worship:

The fathers of the Reformed Church, therefore, sought above all to restore the worship of God in spirit and in truth, even as the Lord Jesus designates this as that which should be instituted under the New Covenant in opposition to that which characterized the old. Hence, they excluded. . . every thing that was calculated to work upon the senses, rather than appeal to the spirit...They would know nothing of a Liturgy, in the sense of alternating responses between the minister and the people, of special altar-services, or of artistic means of edification. (91)

<sup>39</sup> Bomberger, “Primitive,” 246.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 246.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 247.

ministerial absolution and the theology and ritual of the Lord's Supper. First, Bomberger insisted that Christian ministers are not priests, by which he meant someone who acts as a mediator of God's presence and blessings to believers; rather, all believers are priests because each individual believer has immediate access to God.<sup>42</sup>

[T]he congregation does not approach the mercy seat through the minister (as though he were a mediating sacerdos), does not pray through the minister for pardon, and such blessings as may be desired. Rather are minister and people considered as one common priesthood, and the people as praying in and with the minister as their mouth-piece (not sub-mediator). . .

[T]he people themselves had access, in common with the minister, by one and the same Spirit, to the Father.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore, a ministerial declaration of forgiveness in response to a congregational confession of sins should not be construed as a sacramental action by which the church depended upon the minister for any "formal and official priestly impartation of forgiveness."<sup>44</sup> Rather, the absolution should be interpreted according to the assumption that "pardon had already been granted, and that the declaration of it was made not as something necessary to the conveyance of such pardon, but only as a proper means of confirming the hearts of timid, troubled penitents in the possession of it."<sup>45</sup>

Second, Bomberger rejects any attempt to interpret the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice analogous to the sacrifices of the Old Testament temple cultus. For Bomberger, the Lord's Supper is an act of "commemoration" that stresses the believer's inner, subjective act of remembering Christ's death in the past and the immediacy of the believer's personal communion with Christ in the sacrament.<sup>46</sup> In the Lord's Supper, believers "receive a sign and seal of [Christ's] saving grace."<sup>47</sup> By modeling the Lord's Supper upon the paradigm of Old Testament sacrifices, however, several distortions occur that violate the advances of the new covenant. By treating the ritual as an offering of a sacrifice to God (whether the sacrifice offered is the bread and wine as a memorial of Christ's

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<sup>42</sup> The irony of Bomberger's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers is that his own preferred liturgy reserves almost all of the speaking and praying to the minister alone. In the later German Reformed use of the Palatinate liturgy, the congregation was almost completely passive and silent during prayer (with the exception of the recitation of the Lord's Prayer and an occasional corporate Amen).

<sup>43</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 95. This, for Bomberger, is the error of the Roman Catholic Church, and its result was a perversion of the assurance connected with the preaching of the gospel of grace. See Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 84.

<sup>46</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 97; Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 85-87, 98, 103.

<sup>47</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 100.

sacrifice or the worshippers themselves<sup>48</sup>), the focus turns to the act of giving to God rather than receiving from God,<sup>49</sup> and the ritual takes on a propitiatory function that detracts from the sufficiency of Christ's finished work of atonement.<sup>50</sup> To call the communion table an altar and to bow or genuflect toward the altar is to act as if God's presence were once again localized on earth as it was in the temple rather than in heaven where all believers have immediate access from any place by means of the Holy Spirit.<sup>51</sup> Instead of this Old Testament paradigm, the liturgy should refer to the communion table, and worshippers should focus on Christ's spiritual presence with the inner eye of faith.

Finally, Bomberger examined the teaching and practice of Jesus and the apostles concerning the manner of public prayer. He observed that numerous texts enjoin prayer about various subjects without specifying any words or forms to repeat verbatim on every occasion (e.g., Matt. 5:44, Luke 8:1-14, Rom. 8:26, James 1:5, 1 Peter 4:7), and he thus inferred that apostolic precepts sanction and encourage free prayer. Although the Lord's Prayer does furnish "a divine warrant for written or prescribed forms of prayer," it also "condemns the rigid imposition of such forms to the exclusion of free prayer" because the wording varies slightly between the two versions in Matthew and Luke and the introductory words only exhort Jesus' disciples to use the prayer as "a ruling model or pattern."<sup>52</sup> Bomberger then contended that apostolic precepts were confirmed by apostolic practice, which adopted the "freely devotional" pattern of synagogue worship (as opposed to the "ceremonial" or "ritualistic" temple worship) and adapted it in a fashion that was "even more simple and free."<sup>53</sup> Narrative texts that provide examples of early Christian worship (Acts 1:13-26, 2:42-47) suggest that corporate worship was dominated by preaching and free prayer.<sup>54</sup>

Bomberger conceded that the apostolic churches were concerned for decency and order (citing 1 Cor. 14:33) and thus "some plan of public worship was provided and observed. All forms, even, were probably not discarded." Nevertheless, he asserted that "so far as such existed, they were very simple and unceremonial, and were not enforced to the suppression or the curtailment of spiritual freedom."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The Provisional Liturgy and the *Order of Worship* interpret the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice in both of these senses. See, e.g., the communion service of the Provisional liturgy in Maxwell, *Worship*, 439-55.

<sup>49</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 101.

<sup>50</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 100.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-106.

<sup>52</sup> Bomberger, "Primitive," 293.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 297-98. According to Bomberger, the order of the elements in early Christian worship listed in Acts 2:42 suggests that the "chief place" was given to "doctrinal instruction."

<sup>55</sup> Bomberger, "Primitive," 451.

Bomberger concluded that the structured, responsorial, Eucharist-centered liturgy of the *Order of Worship* could find no support in either the teaching and practice of Jesus or the apostolic churches. According to Bomberger, worship that is faithful to the divinely revealed New Testament norms is characterized by simplicity of form, the practice of free prayer, and a theological framework that rigidly excludes any influence from the sacrificial ritual of the Old Testament. It is this biblical and theological framework that supplied the criteria by which he evaluated the history of liturgical development.

### History of Christian Liturgies

In contrast to his biblical exegesis, Bomberger devoted the greatest amount of space to the history of the sixteenth-century German Reformed liturgies. Bomberger carefully documented the precise contours of traditional Reformed liturgical practice (mostly during the sixteenth century) in order to argue that the German Reformed churches employed liturgies to guide their corporate worship and to demonstrate that the Mercersburg *Order of Worship* deviated from the foundational and enduring Reformed patterns of worship.<sup>56</sup> Because most of Bomberger's liturgical writings were polemical works opposing the Mercersburg liturgical program, most of Bomberger's historical arguments attempted to show that the features of the *Order of Worship* that he found objectionable had no precedent in Reformed liturgical history. Specifically, he argued that the early Reformed liturgies contained almost no congregational responses;<sup>57</sup> encouraged free prayer;<sup>58</sup> observed only a few major festivals of the liturgical year;<sup>59</sup> used no lectionary to guide Scripture readings;<sup>60</sup> and practiced the Lord's Supper in a simple, unceremonial fashion that focused on the individual's subjective experience of remembering and communing with Christ and that rejected all sacrificial and priestly language and ritual (especially any ritual associated with Roman Catholic practice).<sup>61</sup> For Bomberger, the most offensive and dangerous feature of the *Order of Worship* was its departure from traditional Reformed practice.

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<sup>56</sup> Bomberger, "Old Palatinate Liturgy"; Bomberger, "The New Liturgy," *GRM*, 18 November 1857.

<sup>57</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "Our Church and Liturgies," *GRM*, 15 May 1861; John H. A. Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons, Especially in Their Bearing upon the New Liturgy Movement: The Testimony of Old Liturgies, Hymnbooks, and Actual Practice," *GRM*, 9 April 1862; Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 78-82.

<sup>58</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 82-87; Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 111-13.

<sup>59</sup> Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons. . . The Reaction," *GRM*, 19 February 1862.

<sup>60</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 84.

<sup>61</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 93-103; Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 84-87.

Bomberger had at least two important reasons for focusing so much attention on the history of traditional Reformed liturgics. The first reason was his theological historiography. Following the common Protestant interpretation of church history, Bomberger believed that the purity of early apostolic worship had been seriously distorted and corrupted by the fourth century. Patristic liturgies betray palpable and serious departures from apostolic rules and from strictly primitive practice, which results in the loss of “Apostolic purity” due to “the introduction of many heathen errors and superstitions.”<sup>62</sup> Chief among these errors were the “propitiative sacrificial view of the Lord’s Supper,” and the corresponding “sacerdotal” theology of priesthood that elevated the role of the priest as the special mediator of the sacramental presence of Christ. The root of the church’s liturgical decline into “sacerdotalism and hierarchical bondage”<sup>63</sup> was a rejection of the worship of the apostolic church as “too radical and spiritualistic” and a return to the sacrificial system of Old Testament temple worship as a model for Christian worship.<sup>64</sup> Later medieval developments only compounded the problem by continuing in the direction of the decline already well underway in the fourth century.

The church was cleansed from this liturgical corruption by the sixteenth-century Reformed liturgies,<sup>65</sup> which restored the pristine purity of apostolic worship. According to Bomberger, the Reformed churches rejected much of the ritual of the catholic liturgical tradition in favor of the kind of simple liturgy represented in the 1563 Palatinate liturgy because they adopted the Bible alone as the ultimate norm for liturgical matters. The Reformed liturgies “were made to rest upon divine authority, and to be in essential, and as much as possible, in formal harmony with the Sacred Scriptures. The testimony of tradition was not discarded. But it was of secondary authority, and strictly tied by that touch-stone of truth, which tradition itself declared to be the standard.”<sup>66</sup> By their faithful adherence to biblical norms, the Reformed churches restored “that order of Christian worship which was originally instituted in the church, and which had the sanction of apostolic and primitive precept and example.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, for Bomberger, the German Reformed liturgies of the sixteenth century represent the purest and most faithful embodiment of biblical theology and divinely instituted apostolic liturgical practice.

The conjunction of Bomberger’s biblical hermeneutics and theological historiography effectively eliminated any possibility of development in Reformed

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<sup>62</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>64</sup> Bomberger, “Primitive,” 294.

<sup>65</sup> Bomberger means the Swiss and German Reformed liturgies in the tradition of Zwingli and Bullinger. He ignores the more catholic liturgies of Martin Bucer and John Calvin almost entirely.

<sup>66</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 80.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

liturgics that would alter the sixteenth-century patterns in any substantial way. Bomberger did occasionally attempt to defend the possibility of development. Early in the controversy, he approved of the "liberal catholic spirit" of the Provisional Liturgy.

The Evangelical Catholic Christian. . . may appropriate every thing that is good and make it auxiliary to his faith, his piety, and his love. He need despise, or reject, no age, no nation, no Church, no body of Christians who hold the truth in righteousness, but regard all with charity, and learn from all with meek wisdom, whatever they may offer for his improvement.<sup>68</sup>

He also insisted that his denomination "should not be so slavishly bound" to sixteenth-century customs because Reformed Christians "believe in genuine ecclesiastical development and progress," and therefore, "neither the forms of the sixteenth century nor those of the fourth century should be allowed to enslave or fetter us."<sup>69</sup>

As the liturgical controversy progressed, however, Bomberger's focus shifted almost entirely to the discontinuity between the Reformed and the patristic and medieval traditions. In the heat of the liturgical controversy, the "liberal catholic spirit" willing to "learn from all with meek wisdom" gave way to a rigid and belligerent defense of the Reformed liturgies. "To the past, as well as to the future, . . . the Church of the present is under solemn obligations to preserve her inherited faith and practice inviolate, and to defend it, with firm, undaunted courage against all 'material improvements,' however plausible, and against all 'innovation upon her old system,' however specious."<sup>70</sup> According to the later Bomberger, any deviation from the Reformed liturgies invariably leads to doctrinal deviation.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, any development that would materially change the structure or doctrine of the sixteenth-century Reformed liturgies is an unfaithful repudiation of divine standards for worship and faith.

Beyond the abstract biblical and theological arguments, there was a second, more personal reason for Bomberger's focus upon the history of Reformed liturgics. For Bomberger, altering the traditional Reformed liturgies is not just a theological error but also a violation of the proper filial piety that is due to the fathers of the Reformed heritage as well as an abandonment of Reformed identity. According to Bomberger, the church owes a "debt of fealty to the past"<sup>72</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Bomberger, "The New Liturgy," *GRM*, 18 November 1857.

<sup>69</sup> Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons. . . The Testimony of Old Liturgies, Hymnbooks, and Actual Practice," *GRM*, 9 April 1862. See also, Bomberger, "Primitive," 240, 453.

<sup>70</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 7.

<sup>71</sup> "Disorderly departures from the established usages of a Church, are almost invariably associated with corresponding doctrinal aberrations from its proper system of faith" (Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons. . . The Reaction, in Regard to Doctrines," *GRM*, 5 March 1862). See also Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 70.

<sup>72</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 7.



that the Mercersburg Theology and liturgy forsakes. He firmly believed that the reforms advocated by the liturgical committee would cause the German Reformed Church to “disown” its “spiritual ancestry”<sup>73</sup> and to squander the “priceless blessings inherited from our Fathers” as a “sacred custody.”<sup>74</sup> Thus, he solemnly warned that the *Order of Worship* was “in essential hostility to the historical cultus of the Reformed Church. It is not only our privilege but our duty, to preserve and perpetuate our identity. The introduction of a full responsive scheme of worship like that of the new Order strikes at the root of that identity, and must prove its destruction.”<sup>75</sup> Even more starkly: “The adoption of the new ‘Order’ is necessarily the end of the Reformed Church of the sixteenth century. . . . Though falsely retaining the ancient name, her character, faith and practice will be as different from what it has been hitherto, as the Church of the Reformation was different from that of Rome.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, for Bomberger, the defense of the traditional German Reformed liturgical heritage was an issue of great personal and pastoral moment.

The example of Nevin’s own life and of some of his followers certainly gave Bomberger sufficient grounds to fear that the trajectory of the Mercersburg movement pointed away from the Reformed tradition altogether. Nevin himself frankly admitted that the *Order of Worship* was quite different from much traditional Reformed practice.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, Nevin’s ecclesiology stressed the organic continuity between the Reformation and the early and medieval periods in church history, and his ecumenical hope for the future was a synthesis of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, which he called “Protestant Catholicism.”<sup>78</sup> It was a widely known fact that Nevin himself had seriously considered converting to Roman Catholicism during the early 1850s.<sup>79</sup> Although Nevin eventually pulled back from the brink of conversion, some of Nevin’s students actually did join the Roman Catholic Church, and own sons left the German Reformed Church to become Episcopalian.<sup>80</sup> In a period character-

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<sup>73</sup> Bomberger, “Our Church and Liturgies,” *GRM*, 15 May 1861.

<sup>74</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> John W. Nevin, *The Liturgical Question* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1862), 62.

<sup>78</sup> John W. Nevin, introduction to *The Principle of Protestantism*, by Philip Schaff, Lancaster Series on the Mercersburg Theology, eds. Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1964), 42. Schaff’s work along with Nevin’s introduction provide an excellent summary of the Mercersburg ecclesiology.

<sup>79</sup> Nichols, *Romanticism*, 192-217.

<sup>80</sup> Maxwell, *Worship*, 359. Maxwell reports that the number of converts to Rome included eight to ten prominent ministers.

ized by intense nativist anti-Roman Catholic sentiment, these developments must have filled the more traditionally Reformed wing of the denomination with a sense of ominous foreboding.<sup>81</sup>

### Pastoral Prudence and Practical Ecclesiology

Bomberger's convictions about the proper implementation of liturgical reform rested upon a democratic ecclesiology as well as on prudential judgments about the likely effects of the Mercersburg liturgical agenda on the piety and unity of the church. Bomberger believed that corporate worship has a formative influence on the church's belief and piety that exceeds the influence of even the church's official doctrinal standards.<sup>82</sup>

[The liturgy] must exert a mighty moulding influence upon all who stately join in our public services. Its moral power in this respect, therefore, will really be much greater than that of our confession of faith, the Heidelberg Catechism itself. The doctrines inculcated, even in an incidental way, will make a deeper impression than those of the Catechism. For being conveyed directly to the heart through impressive devotional forms, they will carry with them a persuasive, captivating force, with which abstract doctrinal statements can never be invested. It is a well-attested fact, that the popular theology of the various Churches is far less the theology of their doctrinal standards, than [sic] that of their hymn books and prayers (whether these are free or prescribed forms.) Indeed one of the strongest collateral proofs which can be urged in favor of good liturgies, is their salutary doctrinal influence.<sup>83</sup>

Bomberger especially feared the negative influence of corrupt worship practices, which eventually leads to corrupt theology. He traced the origin of much of the corruption of popular belief and practice in the early church to the corruption of its worship, and he was eager to prevent the same declension in his own church.<sup>84</sup>

Because liturgical reform is so important to the life of the whole church, each member of the church is entitled to participate in the process of deliberation.<sup>85</sup> For Bomberger, popular reception by the laity is one of the most important criteria by which the value of a liturgy should be assessed. Failure to obtain the consent of the faithful can even override the best theological, historical,

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<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of the strongly anti-Roman Catholic ethos of the 1840s and 1850s, see Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), 555-68.

<sup>82</sup> Bomberger, "The Classes and the Liturgy," *GRM*, 17 April 1861; Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 62.

<sup>83</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "The Classes and the Liturgy," *GRM*, 27 March 1861.

<sup>84</sup> Bomberger, *Reformed, Not Ritualistic*, 62-64.

<sup>85</sup> Bomberger, "A Review and Its Lessons. . . Twenty-five Years Ago," *GRM*, 12 February 1862.

and aesthetic considerations.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, part of Bomberger's opposition to the Provisional Liturgy and the *Order of Worship* was grounded in his observation that the ministers and laity of the church as a whole were not using the liturgies.<sup>87</sup>

Because the Provisional Liturgy and *Order of Worship* had not received any significant popular use, Bomberger attempted to portray the Mercersburg liturgical reform as an undemocratic effort by a small minority to foist a radical liturgical scheme upon an unwilling majority.<sup>88</sup> Bomberger styled himself as the populist churchman opposing the arrogant and elitist Mercersburg men. For example, Bomberger described Nevin's polemical writings as "offensively self-opinionated, dictatorial and overbearing." Nevin is "the only person whose judgment or taste merits any consideration in such matters. Over against that, the mind and will of the church seem to be thought of small account. Caesar aut nihil."<sup>89</sup> (In response, Nevin pointed out that the church's synod had in fact approved the committee's work and even requested the same committee to revise the Provisional Liturgy after the publication of Nevin's 1862 tract *The Liturgical Question*, in which he had explicitly and publicly defended the distinctive Mercersburg liturgical ideal.)

Popular reception was important to Bomberger because he held that a central purpose of a liturgy is to "secure a certain measure of uniformity among all. . . Churches in their mode of worship."<sup>90</sup> One of Bomberger's chief arguments against the Provisional Liturgy was its "tendency. . . to introduce even greater diversities in our mode of conducting public worship, that have heretofore existed" due to the inclusion of multiple liturgies with varying degrees of structure and set forms.<sup>91</sup> Bomberger's concerns were confirmed when attempts to introduce the new liturgies resulted in "dissension and strife." For him, this alone was sufficient reason to reject the Mercersburg liturgical agenda because it was contrary to the unifying purpose of the church's liturgy.

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<sup>86</sup> Because the church did not "feel at home" in the Provisional Liturgy and "cannot get used to it," Bomberger argued that it was "of little avail to attempt to vindicate the scheme of the service aesthetically, or patristically, or theologically" ("The Classes and the Liturgy," *GRM*, 17 April 1861).

<sup>87</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 34. The weekly periodical of the German Reformed Church, the *German Reformed Messenger*, often contained reports of churches that made use of the Provisional Liturgy. In Maxwell's survey of the *German Reformed Messenger* between 1858 and 1866, he only discovered reports from three churches that had briefly experimented with the eucharistic liturgy. Thirteen other churches had used some of the occasional services (*Worship*, 259). Even John Nevin, the leading public proponent of the Provisional Liturgy, acknowledged in 1862, "the Provisional Liturgy has not come thus far, as we know, into any general use in the Church" (*The Liturgical Question*, 51-52). Reliable statistics on the use of the *Order of Worship* are difficult to obtain due to a moratorium on liturgical debate in the church's publications as well as a declining interest in the liturgical issue by the late 1880s (Maxwell, *Worship*, 333).

<sup>88</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 33-35.

<sup>89</sup> John H. A. Bomberger, "The Liturgical Questions," *The Reformed Church Monthly* 7 (1874): 344.

<sup>90</sup> Bomberger, "The Classes and the Liturgy," *GRM*, 17 April 1861.

## Evaluating Bomberger’s Liturgical Theology

How does Bomberger’s liturgical theology appear from a twenty-first-century vantage point? While space does not permit a full evaluation of Bomberger’s views, this section will offer some general lines of critique of historical and theological aspects of Bomberger’s liturgical views.

Regarding the liturgical use of written prayers, Bomberger insisted that the Reformed churches of the Reformation era emphasized free prayer and used liturgical forms sparingly and with freedom. This is clearly an anachronistic reading of early Reformed practice. Liturgies by Bucer, Calvin, and Knox were not mere directories of worship providing suggestions for pastors; rather, they were full liturgies aimed at securing uniformity of liturgical practice. By the 1530s, Bucer “began to plead for [liturgical] uniformity” because he was “dismayed by ‘deplorable differences’ of practice and ‘detestable changes’ made upon an unfounded notion of freedom.”<sup>92</sup> Calvin also “favored a liturgy ‘from which ministers be not allowed to vary’” for this “would curtail ‘the capricious giddiness and levity of such as effect innovations.’”<sup>93</sup> Even the Palatinate Liturgy composed in a later generation provides no evidence that free prayer was permitted, let alone encouraged.<sup>94</sup>

Bomberger did correctly note that the New Testament does not demand an exclusive use of written prayers for corporate worship. Indeed, current scholarship affirms that the early church offered extempore prayers in corporate worship on a regular basis until the fourth century when the movement toward standardization and uniformity began.<sup>95</sup> However, Bomberger failed to see how the many examples of unison praying and written prayers, acclamations, songs, and confessions in the Bible also establish a biblical basis for the liturgical use of written prayers (e.g., the Lord’s Prayer; the book of Psalms; Rev. 4:9-11, 5:9-14, 7:15-17, 11:16-18, 15:3-4, 19:1-8; Ezra 3:10-11; Deut. 27:11-26; Acts 4:24-30).<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (New York: World Publishing, 1961), 163.

<sup>93</sup> Thompson, *Liturgies*, 195. Howard Hageman concurs with Thompson: “Calvin and the other reformers had always left room in the liturgies for adaptations of liturgical prayer to special needs and circumstances. But during the first century or so after the Reformation, little use seems to have been made of this provision” (*Pulpit and Table*, 38).

<sup>94</sup> See footnote 22.

<sup>95</sup> Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 225; Allan Bouley, *From Freedom to Formula: The Evolution of the Eucharistic Prayer from Oral Improvisation to Written Texts* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1981).

<sup>96</sup> Bomberger’s distinction between a “freely devotional” synagogue and a highly “ritualistic” or “ceremonial” temple liturgy also finds no support in historical evidence. Indeed, recent research shows that significant continuities existed between worship in synagogues and at the temple during the Second Temple period. Peter J. Leithart has shown that Jewish sources “treat the synagogue

Bomberger's biblical-theological framework for liturgy is what Reformed theologian Peter Leithart calls a "semi-Marcionite" hermeneutic, which is:

a structuring theological narrative that, while remaining within orthodox parameters, betrays reservations about Old Testament materialism or legalism, or minimizes the grace offered to Israel. . . . Modern Marcionism, like its ancient counterpart, conspires with a Gnostic ambivalence to physical creation and sees Christianity as removing the husks of materialism in religion. Christianity is not merely a different religion but a different *kind* of religion from that of Israel. . . . The Marcionite account of history supports the reading of Christianity as inwardness, and the interpretation of Christianity as inward piety sets it off from the materialism and socio-political concerns of Hebrew sensibility. Among the "husks" of Old Testament religion supposedly discarded in the emergence of the spiritual "kernel," ritual has first place. Hebrew religion is to Christianity as empty ritualism is to heartfelt piety, as Baroque Catholicism is to Puritan liturgical minimalism.<sup>97</sup>

This describes Bomberger's liturgical theology quite accurately. His interpretation of John 4:23-24, for example, clearly reveals his Marcionite tendency to portray the liturgical transition from old covenant to new covenant as a movement from corporate, material rites to an individual, inward, and immediate experience.

"In spirit," as under the *immediate influence*, and by the *immediate aid of the Holy Spirit, operating upon the mind and heart*. . . [t]he devout communings of the worshipper should be *no longer bound to local or sensuous manifestations of God*, to temple, altar, or ark. They should ascend by faith to God Himself, to God as revealed in Jesus Christ, and in Him as ascended on high, and seated at the right hand of God in glory. Their worship should be *heart-worship, in contradistinction to all formal, material, carnal worship consisting of ceremonial, sacrificial offering, and the like* (emphasis added).<sup>98</sup>

The fathers of the Reformed Church, therefore, sought above all to restore the worship of God in spirit and in truth, even as the Lord Jesus designates this as that which should be instituted under the New Covenant in opposition to

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as an extension of the temple, rather than as an institution in competition with the temple" and that in the New Testament "the early Christians, following Jewish precedent in this regard, almost invariably described their own assemblies and worship according to the categories of the temple" ("Synagogue or Temple?: Models for Christian Worship," *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 [2002]: 119-33). See also Donald D. Binder, *Into the Temple Courts: The Place of the Synagogue in the Second Temple Period* SBLDS 169 (Atlanta Society of Biblical Literature, 1997).

<sup>97</sup> Peter J. Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003), 4-5. This book is the published version of Leithart's Cambridge University doctoral dissertation.

<sup>98</sup> Bomberger, "Primitive," 245.

that which characterized the old. Hence, they *excluded*. . . *every thing that was calculated to work upon the senses, rather than appeal to the spirit* (emphasis added).<sup>99</sup>

Furthermore, all of his major theological objections to the Mercersburg liturgy concern the use of Old Testament cultic categories to describe Christian worship.<sup>100</sup> According to Bomberger, Christian worship has no altars, priestly ministers, or sacrifices in any sense.

This semi-Marcionite theology is deeply flawed. First, it misinterprets the spiritual character of worship in the Old Testament. The old covenant rituals were not a barrier to genuine spiritual communion with God. As Nobuyoshi Kiuchi correctly observes,

Far from being the seedbed of Pharisaism, it is highly likely that the sacrificial law in Leviticus endorses a rich spiritual relationship between the worshipper and God. The concentration of the text on external rituals is not an indication that the worship is external, but it is rather an indication that the lawgiver desires to stress that the worshipper must express his inner attitude outwardly.<sup>101</sup>

When the prophets scathingly indict Israel’s hypocritical abuse of sacrificial worship (e.g., Isa. 1, Mal. 1), their critique assumes that God designed sacrificial ritual to mediate this spiritual relationship. Indeed, the New Testament explicitly affirms that Israel ate “spiritual food” and drank “spiritual drink” (1 Cor. 10:3-4), and thus this spiritual reality is a point of continuity (not discontinuity, *pace* Bomberger) with sacramental worship in the new covenant era.

Second, Bomberger mischaracterizes the spirituality of the new covenant by ignoring the role of concrete, material rites and institutions in the New Testament. Salvation in the new covenant is also mediated through and embodied in the church—a concrete, visible community of flesh-and-blood people demarcated by baptism, the reading and preaching of Scripture, and participation in the Lord’s Supper. The rites of the old covenant were abolished not because they were inferior material pictures discarded for a purely spiritual reality; on the contrary, they have been superseded by new physical rites more appropriate for the church’s new eschatological maturity and mission in Christ.

Bomberger’s antipathy to the mediatorial role of the church emerges in his treatment of ministerial “priesthood” and absolution in the liturgy. In his zeal to deny that forgiveness could only be received through the minister (an error he attributes to Roman Catholic doctrine), Bomberger appears to deny that the ordained minister has any unique role at all in mediating Christ’s presence by speaking and acting on Christ’s behalf. While Bomberger is right to deny that the minister possesses an inherent personal power and authority to forgive sins,

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<sup>99</sup> Bomberger, *The Revised Liturgy*, 91.

<sup>100</sup> Bomberger’s biblical theology of liturgy also influenced his historiography. He believed that corruption entered the early church when these Old Testament categories were introduced into Christian liturgical theology and practice.

<sup>101</sup> Nobuyoshi Kiuchi, “Spirituality in Offering a Peace Offering,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 50 (1999): 31.

his stress on the immediacy of each individual believer's relation to Christ in worship undercuts the strong doctrine of ministerial authority and instrumentality in the New Testament and in the Reformed tradition. For example, Paul writes to Timothy that he will save himself and his hearers by properly guarding life and teaching (1 Tim. 4:16). Commenting on John 20:23, John Calvin affirms that God forgives sins through the ministry of the church's pastors:

[W]hen Christ gives the apostles a mandate to forgive sins, . . . He commands them to declare in His name the forgiveness of sins, that He may reconcile men to God through them. In short, He alone, properly speaking, forgives sins, through His apostles. . . . Nothing is more important for us than to be able to believe definitely that our sins do not come into remembrance before God. . . and since God uses the witness of men to prove it, consciences will never be at rest unless they know God Himself speaking in their person. . . . We now see why Christ so magnificently commends and adorns that ministry which He enjoins on the apostles. He does so that believers may be fully convinced that what they hear about the forgiveness of sins is ratified, and may not think less of the reconciliation offered by men's voices than if God Himself had stretched out His hand from heaven. The Church daily receives the rich fruit of this teaching when she realizes that her pastors are divinely ordained to be sureties of eternal salvation. . . . We have cause to thank God who has conferred on men such an honour as to represent His person and His Son's in declaring the forgiveness of sins.<sup>102</sup>

The Second Helvetic Confession also affirms that pastors, by virtue of their unique office, serve as God's delegated representatives and spokesmen in the preaching of Scripture: "Wherefore when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful."<sup>103</sup> The same sacramental theology of preaching also appears in the *First Book of Discipline in the Scottish Kirk* (1560): "For whosoever heareth Christ's ministers, heareth himself, and whosoever despiseth their ministrie and exhortation, rejecteth and despiseth Christ Jesus."<sup>104</sup>

Bomberger's semi-Marcionism also appears in his rejection of any sacrificial character to the Eucharist. Bomberger interpreted sacrificial language applied to the Eucharist in terms of propitiation. If the Eucharist was a true sacrifice, then it was a separate propitiatory act added to Christ's propitiatory death on the cross, and therefore it undermined the perfection and sufficiency of Christ's atoning death.

However, Bomberger failed to observe that there are different kinds of sacrifices in the Old Testament, and some of them embody and affect other

<sup>102</sup> John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St. John 11-21 and The First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 207.

<sup>103</sup> Philip Schaff, ed., *The Evangelical Protestant Creeds*, vol. 3 of *The Creeds of Christendom* (Baker, 1996), 832.

<sup>104</sup> Quoted in Meyers, *The Lord's Service*, 294.

aspects of redemption besides propitiation. The sacrifice that forms the closest typological analogy with the Lord’s Supper is the peace offering,<sup>105</sup> the only sacrifice that concluded with a meal eaten by both the priests and the worshippers. The purpose of the peace-offering meal was to celebrate the reconciliation and renewed fellowship with God received on the basis of propitiatory blood offered prior to the meal itself.<sup>106</sup>

In all the other sacrifices the worshipper received nothing back, but in the peace offering most of the flesh was shared out by the worshipper with his family and friends, thus making the sacrificial meal a joyful barbecue. . . .

The shared luxury of a meat meal was a tangible, indeed edible, token of God’s continuing mercy and grace. It was this that made peace offerings usually such joyous occasions.<sup>107</sup>

If the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper correspond to the peace offering meal eaten by the Old Testament saints, the eucharistic sacrifice is not a propitiatory act in itself but rather the celebration of peace and communion with God received on the basis of Christ’s propitiatory death.

More recent scholarship connects the Eucharist with sacrificial ideas, and even with the idea of propitiation, by means of the concept of memorial. Paul (1 Cor. 11:25) and Luke (Luke 22:19) refer to the Lord’s Supper as a memorial (*avna, mnhsij*). In the Old Testament, at least some memorial rites and symbols have a godward direction. They are a ritualized plea for God to remember his covenant promises to forgive and to bless his people (e.g., the trumpets in Num. 10:9-10 are a “reminder” [*avna, mnhsij* in the LXX] that call God to remember his people).<sup>108</sup> If the Lord’s Supper is a memorial of this type, then it can be called a sacrifice in the sense that the church enacts a memorial of Christ’s sacrifice, which calls on God to remember his covenant established with his church in Christ. Understood in this way, the eucharistic sacrifice does

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<sup>105</sup> See C. John Collins, “The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read the Bible,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 1-23.

<sup>106</sup> Kiuchi associates this propitiation and atonement with the death of the animal and the ceremonial display of its blood on the altar: “[T]he blood of the [peace offering] sacrifice enables the worshipper to draw near to the Lord, thus removing the sinfulness of the worshipper” (“Spirituality,” 29). When different kinds of sacrifices are offered in a liturgical settings, the peace offering is always last following the propitiation and consecration accomplished by the burnt and/or ascension offering (and sometimes the sin and/or purification offering). See A. F. Rainey, “The Order of Sacrifices in Old Testament Ritual Texts,” *Biblica* 51 (1970): 485-98.

<sup>107</sup> Gordon Wenham, “The Theology of Old Testament Sacrifice,” in *Sacrifice and the Bible*, ed. Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 83-84.

<sup>108</sup> Other Old Testament memorials that call God to remember his covenant promises include the rainbow (Gen. 9:8, 11-17), the Passover (Ex. 12:14), the memorial salt mixed with sacrifices (Lev. 2:16), and grain offerings (Lev. 2:2, 6:15). For works that interpret the Lord’s Supper as a memorial before God, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1966), Max Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, 2 vols. (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1960-61), and Meyers, *The Lord’s Service*.



not add anything to Christ's atoning death; rather, it is a way of pleading Christ alone before the Father. Seeking a way beyond the Catholic-Protestant impasse over doctrines of eucharistic sacrifice, Geoffrey Wainwright suggests:

Could not the contentious notion "we offer Christ" paradoxically be seen as antipelagian? It could be an acknowledgment that we have nothing else to offer. It could be the equivalent of the publican's cry in the parable, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." . . . [W]e are pleading Calvary, not repeating it. When in the eucharist we "set forth" Christ's sacrifice before God, this is a sacramental action on earth corresponding to the fact that Christ is even now "showing" himself, the once Crucified, to God in heaven on our behalf.<sup>109</sup>

Thus, modern advances in biblical and liturgical theology provide ways to address Bomberger's concerns about the misuse of Old Testament cultic language without denying the profound theological and typological continuity between worship in the Old and New Testaments.

### Conclusion

By examining the structure of Bomberger's liturgical thought, it is evident that his defense of the Palatinate liturgical ideal rested upon a complex foundation of biblical, theological, and pastoral convictions. Bomberger found the paradigm and authority for the simplicity of sixteenth-century Reformed worship in his interpretation of the liturgical practice of the first-century apostolic church. A personal desire to preserve the distinctive identity of the German Reformed Church in America as well as anxiety about the pastoral and ecclesiastical consequences of liturgical change further compelled him to defend traditional Reformed practices with a definite urgency. To the extent that some American Christians continue to share Bomberger's liturgical beliefs and concerns, a better understanding of the reasons for his vehement rejection of Mercersburg's catholic liturgy will shed light not only on the beliefs and practices of the German Reformed Church in the nineteenth century but also on the pervasive resistance to catholic liturgies in contemporary American evangelicalism.

Bomberger's resistance to the liturgical proposals of Nevin and Schaff also provides lessons for contemporary liturgical reformers in Reformed churches. In order to overcome the inevitable inertia that develops within any tradition and the natural and understandable suspicion of change, an advocate for liturgical reform must be prepared to demonstrate patiently and carefully how the proposed reforms (1) are based solidly on biblical examples, principles, and precepts; (2) faithfully embody Reformed theology; (3) follow or at least build upon historic practices in the Reformed tradition; and (4) foster a genuinely Reformed piety. True respect for the Reformed tradition and a pastoral concern for the unity of God's people require nothing less.

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<sup>109</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine, and Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 272-73.