

Church and Mission

Recovering Mother Kirk: The Case for Liturgy in the Reformed Tradition by D. G. Hart. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003. Pp. 261. \$24.99 paper.

In his *Chronicles of Wasted Time* (1973), the late Malcolm Muggeridge reminisced upon a 1920s-era sea voyage to India. En route, a metamorphosis overtook passengers as they approached the Suez Canal. Whereas in England, they had been ordinary middle-class or lower-middle class persons—now, at this passageway to the Orient “the men became more assertive, the ladies more la-di-da. . . instead of calling for a steward, the cry was now “boy.” Those who had topees (pith helmets) now brought them out and wore them.” An imperiousness—quite unthinkable in their homeland and former stations of life—now came quite naturally. This vignette—which at first glance has no bearing whatsoever on the volume at hand—in fact goes some distance toward explaining the syndrome of which *Recovering Mother Kirk* is but a manifestation. I speak of a syndrome—and by this I mean to refer to a wave of recent writing by neo-conservative theological writers (of which D. G. Hart is but one) who share a determination to define and chart the future course of Reformed Christianity—after having only lately taken ship. Like Muggeridge’s fellow passengers, these writers have aspirations—and, in their case, it is to see the Reformed tradition disencumbered of all trappings of popular religion and religious feeling; they now aspire to be *high church* (21).

By his own admission, the author (7) endured a fundamentalist Baptist upbringing and the influence (through parents) of Bob Jones University. He left these drab environs for the more intellectually rigorous Reformed tradition, first in its Christian Reformed and, latterly, in its Orthodox Presbyterian manifestation. Yet, having embarked with this tradition, he has since had reason to demur over the state of the Reformed tradition as he has found it. What ails the Reformed tradition in its modern expression according to Hart? In a word, its *drift* from liturgical worship. The Reformed tradition, while it concurrently manifests the three tendencies nicely enumerated by George Marsden in 1985 as the *doctrinal*, the *cultural*, and the *pietistic* (9-11), has very nearly come to lack the rich liturgical style of worship that Reformers such as Calvin labored to introduce. Were it not for the prospect of reintroducing this neglected emphasis—“a churchly understanding of the Christian faith” (14) into Reformed churches, Hart might well have moved—as have some individuals known to him—beyond his adoptive Reformed tradition into the Anglican, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox communion.

I have stressed that Hart does his analysis of this subject as a migrant to the Reformed churches. It is necessary now to add that he also does this analysis as a scholar who has done his finest work on early twentieth century American Presbyterianism in the modernist-fundamentalist era. These two factors, when taken in combination, serve to very extensively color his judgments. The six-

teen chapters of the work cover a wide range of topics from the offices of the church, to hymnody, to revivalism. These, which have already appeared as popular essays in other places, are regularly broad-brush treatments of highly complex subjects that lie well beyond the epoch of his specialized researches to date.

According to Hart, the Reformed churches had a strong liturgical orientation at the time of their reconstitution in the sixteenth century. That they did not retain this strong liturgical orientation permanently is something for which we have to blame the Puritans of the seventeenth century and the preachers of the Great Awakening in the century that followed. Hart's treatment of this is, I regret to say, an extended piece of special pleading. It simply is not true that the Reformed churches of the sixteenth century necessarily had heavy liturgical commitments. An examination of the John Knox's *Genevan Service Book* (1556) or its later Scottish reissue as the *Book of Common Order* (1564) makes plain that these very simple liturgical forms were provided for voluntary use and for free adaptation. It was this stance—under which great liturgical freedom was enjoyed—that made the celebrated rejection of a royally mandated Scottish prayer book of 1637 a virtual certainty. Were the Puritans of the seventeenth century intrinsically antiliturgical, as portrayed by Hart? Not according to Bard Thompson's *Liturgies of the Western Church* (1961) or Horton Davies' *Worship of the English Puritans* (1948). A closer examination of the two centuries following the Reformation indicates not so much a debate over *whether* liturgical forms for worship had a place as over *what* that place was to be. Very serious over-simplification of the issues thus mars Hart's treatment.

As for the eighteenth century, Hart sees nothing but disaster and setback for the liturgical approach to worship in Reformed churches in the era of transatlantic religious awakening. Focusing almost exclusively on the revival preacher, Whitefield, Hart is willing to allege, without corroborating evidence, that revival preaching such as Whitefield practiced in the out of doors set the pattern and norm for the way Reformed Christians henceforth worshipped God (133-39). Even more perturbing however is the attitude latent in Hart's treatment of the era—a supposition that the Awakening movements were a nonnecessary intrusion upon a Reformed church life that was the picture of health. We are, in fact, urged to consider “deleting the terms, *revival*, *revived*, and *revive*” from our vocabulary (208). A close inspection of the life of the Reformed churches in America, Britain, and the Netherlands in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries will not sustain the interpretation that the movements of awakening were an intrusion that might as well have been kept at bay. Whole portions of the Reformed tradition in Britain and America in fact succumbed to deism in this period. That some of these very branches of the Reformed family were all the while great sticklers for liturgical correctness is simply a matter of record.

As for the nineteenth century, Hart tendentiously exalts the romanticist critique of American evangelicalism and revivalism enunciated by John W. Nevin of Mercersburg, Pennsylvania, as if the native, American Reformed tradition could not muster its own critique of the evangelical trends of that era! The

important criticisms of Finney's new measures enunciated by both the *Princeton Review* and by W. B. Sprague's 1832 volume *Lectures on Revival* (providing a Reformed counterpoint to Finney) are passed over in silence.

It is necessary to ponder the fact that the version of Reformed history since the Reformation being portrayed by Hart in this volume is not only highly romanticized but also is ultimately sectarian. He is willing to suppose, in pursuit of his case for liturgical worship, that various Christian traditions (in this case, the Reformed) are capable of existing for century upon century in complete isolation from their times and from other Christian movements. On this understanding, our current challenge is simply that of isolating and recovering the "true type"; the true type once recovered would enable us to dispense with the shoddy substitutes upon which we have unwisely relied for long periods. Upon closer examination, this will not work. The seeds of the Puritan movement that he so suspects are, on closer examination, traceable back to the age of the Reformation itself. The (in his opinion) baneful conversionist and revivalist emphases and their partner—itinerant preaching, characteristic of the eighteenth-century movements of awakening, appear to be but continuations of emphases well established in the ministries of seventeenth-century Puritans. This antiseptic, bacteria-free strain of the Reformed faith—the recovery and exaltation of which Hart supposes will be determinative of future health among the Reformed—does not in fact exist in the empirical world.

The asperity of these criticisms may draw from some reader the protest that *Recovering Mother Kirk* is, after all, but a collection of occasional essays—written in a semipopular form. Ought such writing draw this kind of intense scrutiny? In reply, it may be said that whether semipopular or not, the judgments and interpretation communicated in *Recovering Mother Kirk* are highly tendentious and regularly misleading. That such opinions have been communicated in the Westminster seminaries on both coasts over a decade makes one apprehensive about the degree to which the author's dubious perspective on these matters has been transmitted to a rising generation of pastors. That we all need discernment in evaluating popular religion is true; but that we gain nothing by treating popular Christianity as leprous is also true.

—Kenneth Stewart