Glenn J. Segger


In 1661, in the midst of the Savoy Conference, which had been organised by King Charles II to discuss possible revisions to the Book of Common Prayer, Richard Baxter made the audacious move of presenting his own, completely rewritten, version of the liturgy to the bishops. The significance – and prudence – of this move has been debated by scholars ever since, but Glenn Segger is to be commended for providing us with the first full-length study of this fascinating and subtly provocative text. Baxter’s Reformed Liturgy has often been criticised for its verbose and overly didactic character. Certainly, it went down like a lead balloon at Savoy. To the bishops, Baxter’s attempt in just two weeks to write a new liturgy from scratch to rival Cranmer’s could only look like arrogance and presumption. Segger, however, while conceding the hastily-written character of Baxter’s liturgy and its stylistic inadequacies, rightly places its genesis in the much broader – and longer – context of his parochial and pastoral ministry in Kidderminster. In doing so he is able to look beyond the surface of the text to its deeper theological, ecclesiological and pastoral motivations, revealing Baxter as a much more profound and creative liturgist than has hitherto been acknowledged.

Baxter’s Reformed Liturgy is presented by Segger as a ‘Puritan alternative to the Book of Common Prayer’. Certainly, throughout he pays careful attention to Baxter’s debt to the Westminster Assembly’s Directory of Worship and to the Continental Reformed tradition. Yet, he gives as much, and sometimes more, attention to the significant continuities between Baxter’s liturgy and the Book of Common Prayer itself. Without denying Baxter’s marked reservations about aspects of the Prayer Book, or his sharp critique of Anglican diocesan ecclesiology, Segger therefore takes seriously Baxter’s conformist tendencies and his irenic desire for accommodation and unity. While recent studies of Baxter’s ecclesiology have tended to downplay Baxter’s irenicism, Segger refreshingly seeks to show the way in which the Reformed Liturgy embodies his concern for both the unity and purity of the national Church. In this way he restores an important aspect of Baxter’s ecclesiology, offering valuable reflections on its liturgical context. Yet Segger is also careful never to paint Baxter as a mere conformist. Rather, he seeks to show the way in which Baxter’s liturgical experiment boldly, but also with a surprisingly deft touch, sought to lay out the blueprint for the Church of the future.
Following a helpful, if at times overly concise, historical introduction, Segger opens his main discussion of the *Reformed Liturgy* with a discussion of Baxter’s rite for Sunday Public Worship. Through a careful analysis of the set litany and prayers he demonstrates the way in which Baxter drew on both the *Book of Common Prayer* and the Directory and the three Christian fundamentals (the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer and the Decalogue) in order to develop an irenic rite for a comprehensive church. As Segger suggests, Baxter’s creative synthesis of these materials is intended to emphasise the Trinitarian and covenantal shape of Christian faith and the doctrines which could be affirmed by all Christians. He also points to the way in which Baxter’s liturgical emphasis on sanctification and the working of the Holy Spirit can be sourced in his distinctive covenantal soteriology, which saw works of love not only as the fruit but also as the condition of justification. He suggests that all these themes come together in Baxter’s Larger Litany, which weaves together the three fundamentals into a profound expression of Christian faith and practice. However, here, as well as elsewhere in the volume, Segger’s lack of attention to Baxter as a theologian of method prevents him from offering a deeper analysis of the patterns of the *Reformed Liturgy*, one moreover which would have allowed him to connect sanctification to the Trinitarian refashioning of the image of God in man.

From discussion of Sunday worship Segger turns to giving an account of Baxter’s liturgy for the Lord’s Supper and Baptism. His insightful discussion of this not only reveals the Trinitarian and covenantal dimensions of Baxter’s sacramental theology, but also places both rites in the context of broader sacramental and ecclesiological discussion. Baxter’s reworking of the communion liturgy, which intriguingly anticipates contemporary developments, is undoubtedly one of the high points of the *Reformed Liturgy*. Pointing to Baxter’s restoration of the presentation of the elements, his innovative introduction of a ritualised fraction of the elements and his repositioning of the words of institution, Segger argues that Baxter’s eucharistic theology was remarkably ‘high’, even akin to that of the moderate episcopalianists themselves. In emphasising both the visible representation and real (sacramental) presence of Christ crucified in the bread and wine, it also reconfigured these in line with a Trinitarian and eschatological focus on the heavenly banquet of the Church. By contrast, Baxter’s baptismal theology presents a different picture. In particular, Segger argues that Baxter’s opposition to a theology of baptismal regeneration led him to avoid overtly sacramental language in his liturgical discussion of the water bath. In this way he highlights an important tension between sacramental and covenantal themes which runs throughout the *Reformed Liturgy* and which shapes its deeper theological structure. At the same time, however, Segger suggests that Baxter’s shift of focus away from the baptismal water allows