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OF NECESSITY THERE MUST BE SOME RULES:
THE BIBLE AND PUBLIC WORSHIP

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As you are very aware this is the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible and we've been doing quite a lot about in Oxford. Indeed, the President of my own college, Corpus Christi, John Reynolds, in 1604 went to the Hampton Court Conference and was the one who actually suggested to King James that a new translation was needed.

What I want to talk about today is the Bible, whether the King James version or the earlier translations into English, such as the Great Bible and the Bishops' Bible, and its role in public worship. The quotation from my title, 'of necessity there must be some rules', comes from the Preface to the 1559 Book of Common Prayer, talking about how to use the Bible in worship and that there have to be some rules, of course.

Now the sheer scale of the scholarly enterprise carried out in the elite centres of learning which produced the King James Bible in 1611 can, I think, obscure the fact that the chief aim of the whole project was that they would produce a text that would become familiar to the entire population of England, whether learned or unlearned. The Bible in early modern England [the first century following the Reformation] was not only read but heard, as the Frontispiece of the King James Bible made explicit. It was 'appointed to be read in the churches'. And in that sense it is an aural as well as an oral text – it is something heard as well as something read aloud.

Parish worship, in the words of one early modern historian, was 'a soundscape full of sounds', and I think some of us may be familiar with some of the domestic practices of devotion of the period, which included reading the Bible out loud, an exercise which brought together all the social networks of the household. However, the way most English people in the period we are talking

about would have encountered the Bible was when it was read aloud in public worship. This was another context that cut across age, gender and social standing. The dedication epistle to the King James Bible maintained that the aim of the translators was that 'God's holy truth would be more and more known to the people', professing the great hope that 'the Church of England shall reap good fruit thereby'. So this was to be a goal accomplished in no small part by this new translation's role, not read in the study, but read in public worship.

Since embarking on this study I have discovered that there is remarkably little primary source evidence about the experience of hearing the Bible read in worship in the period I'm talking about, so I am making a brick with straw! But Arnold Hunt's excellent book, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences 1590-1640*, suggests that many Puritans at that time considered the sermon preached to trump the Bible heard. This is a remarkable development in the Reformation idea of sola scriptura, and I'll return to that point in a bit.

The translators of the King James version of the Bible were not saying anything new, of course, but building on centuries of reading the Bible aloud in divine service, as well as over half a century in England of doing it in the vernacular. The Preface to the 1559 Prayer Book stated that the early Fathers of the Church maintained that the people 'by the daily hearing of Holy Scripture read in the church should continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God'. There's a real pedagogical element here. And the Preface lamented that for many centuries after Latin had ceased to be the vernacular, the Bible was still read in that tongue 'so that they have heard with their ears only and not been edified thereby'. There's a breaking of the link between hearing the Word and edification. They said this was in contradiction of St Paul's injunction to have worship conducted 'in such a language spoken to the people as they might have profit by hearing the same'.

Now I just want to spend a moment talking about literacy and illiteracy in this period. Clearly literacy was far lower than it is now but we need to be careful how we define literacy and literate culture. First of all, reading and writing are very different skills. We know from sources, people's biographies, diaries and so forth, that children often acquired the rudiments of an education, they went to school until they were about seven and learned the basics of reading, but they left school before they learned how to write. At the age of seven or eight they were needed back in the family economy, working in agricultural labour or in forms of manufacture. Simply to look at the numbers

of people who made their mark rather than writing their name can be misleading. We know that there was a vast market for cheap print. There were so-called chat books that cost a penny which put them well within the price range of even an agricultural labourer, and there were hundreds of thousands of these published. They must have had a market for them. But, and this I think is the most important point, literacy is a shared skill. Even if you can't read you are not cut off from the written word because there's probably someone in your family or household who can read. We've got remarkable stories, for example, of people who can't read but who buy books because amongst their acquaintance is someone who will read the book to them. In Chelmsford, for example, in 1540 there was a report that 'divers poor men of the town could be found reading in the lower end of the church and many would flock about them to hear their reading'. They are reading the Bible. Archbishop Whitgift, who was Elizabeth's last Archbishop of Canterbury and who was around at the time of King James' enterprise, remarked; 'And here we have, God be thanked, many examples in England of those which be not able to read themselves by means of their children reading to them at home receive instruction and edifying'. It was also the duty of head of house to ensure that the Bible was read as part of family prayers. And there are many more examples of this kind. So, in the words of the historian Adam Fox (*Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700*), 'early modern England may not have been a wholly literate society but it comprised a fundamentally literate environment'. And that is often not people's impression of pre-industrial England.

Now, in the English Reformation which, of course, has many parallels with the Lutheran Reformation, with the vernacular came the added emphasis on hearing clearly what was said or sung in church. There are very few examples of new churches being built from the late fifteenth century until the Great Fire in the 1660s – there's just a few rare examples – so how are you going to conduct reformed worship with this emphasis on hearing and understanding inside a medieval church which is constructed with a very different theological trajectory in mind? Bishops' articles of enquiry to churchwardens for the period (churchwardens loved to reply *omnia bene* - all is well) are full of questions like 'Is everything distinct?', 'Can people actually hear what is being said in church both in the prayers and in the readings?' And in my first book, *Prayer Book and People*, I quote a lot of people who are getting really cross when they couldn't hear their Vicar and they write back to the bishop that all is not *omnia bene* and that he gabbles the service, or says it so quickly that they can't make the responses. Now, to give this a local context, George Herbert who was Rector of Fugglestone St Peter with Bemerton close to Salisbury wrote a book called *The*

Country Parson in which he says that 'the country parson when he is to read divine services [which includes reading the Bible, of course] composeth himself to all possible reverence lifting up his heart and hands and eyes and using all such gestures as may express a hearty and unfeigned devotion. Accordingly his voice is humble, his words treatable [which means can be heard, teachable] and slow and not so slow neither as to let the fervency of the supplicant hang and die between speaking [so he's not to be so ponderous that people fall asleep. Very topical, isn't it!] but with a grave liveliness between fear and zeal, pausing yet pressing he performs his duty'. So this whole idea that you really do need to hear what's happening in church, you need to understand it, is a really core Reformation idea in England, and not just exclusive to England at all.

Now this idea of presenting the word is not a new Reformation idea, as if people didn't know about the Bible in church in the Middle Ages, as this picture of the late fifteenth century lectern in my own college chapel in Oxford illustrates. The lectern in churches is a pre-Reformation object that continues. It is not smashed up like so many objects were during the English Reformation. So the reading of scripture, the proclaiming of the word as part of divine office is something very old. But what did change was the internal ordering of the church buildings. The basic medieval church was a rectangle for the nave with a smaller rectangle at the east end where the altar was placed against the east wall. The pulpit was a bit to one side in the nave. Now into that structure you have to fit a reformed liturgy. This was attempted in various different ways. For example, at the east end there could be two positions for the holy table; against the east wall when not in use, and then moved out into the centre of the chancel with the celebrant standing on the north side and the people gathered round for Holy Communion. And that movement of the table is all about visibility and audibility, bringing the Eucharist down to where people can see what's going on. In the seventeenth century things developed. The holy table went back to the east wall, often with rails, and the celebrant stood at the north end of it. These changes illustrate ways in which the reformers struggled to deal with the problem of audibility and visibility during the prayers and the sermon.

As I said, the way most people would hear the Bible in early modern England would be in public worship, and in a fascinating book published in 1993 William Graham (*Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*) says, 'The liturgical use of sacred texts is clearly the most common and often the most important context for the oral use of scripture even

though liturgy does not always focus principally on scriptural texts and sacred texts commonly play important oral roles outside of formal worship and ritual'. I think that's a very profound remark and it continues to baffle and elude me why I can't find more examples of theologians in this period talking about that.

Now, since the Reformation in England, the Bible's yoke-mate in terms of public ministry has been the Book of Common Prayer. I have already alluded to the Preface of the Prayer Book which maintained that, unlike the liturgical observances of the medieval church which one needed a small liturgical library to perform, it says 'Curates shall need none other books for their public service but this book and the Bible'. Furthermore, the Prayer Book directed through tables of readings for the year which parts of the Bible should be read in public services. This is the thing about 'there must be some rules'. The Prayer Book directed that by doing daily reading of the Bible you would get through a huge amount of the Bible in the course of the year because in addition to this you also had lesson appointed for the Communion and for Holy Days reflecting the church year. Cranmer, when putting together the Lectionary, was in fact indebted to a breviary produced by a Spanish humanist, Cardinal Francis Quignones, in 1535 so there was a nice bit of ecumenical cross-fertilization there.

Now, just a little bit of terminology. The word 'Anglican' before 1660 is a very problematic word to use because, in a sense, everybody in England is an 'Anglican', everybody is a member of the English Church. To talk about 'Anglicans' as opposed to 'Puritans' is not really correct. Almost everybody is a member of the Church. Out and out dissent is a very small element of English protestantism in this period. Nevertheless within the Church of England there was a lot of faction fighting. It's worth remembering that it got so bad in the seventeenth century that it led to civil war. So you do have different theological traditions within the Church of England which can be more accurately described as Puritan and Conformist. There were people who believed that the Church of England had got things about right in the Elizabethan Settlement and so the right thing to do was to conform. There were others who thought that the Elizabethan Settlement had not gone far enough and was still in need of reform. These were the Puritans. But both groups were within the Church. It was King James' genius to get these two warring factions working together on a common project which was important to them both, and that was the new translation of the Bible.

To Puritans the Prayer Book was a highly flawed document. There are some pretty extreme examples. One Puritan said that it was 'an unperfect book, culled and picked out of the popish dunghill the Mass' (Admonition to Parliament 1572). My favourite was from an anonymous Cheshire curate who gets reported in the proceedings of a church who said, 'I am persuaded that the reading of common prayer hath been the means of sending many souls into Hell, that the Book of Common Prayer doth stink in the nostrils of God, and that reading of common prayers is as bad if not worse than the mumbling of the Mass upon beads'.

Now what's striking for our purposes here is not objection to some of the ceremonies that went with the Prayer Book but that despite the use of the vernacular the whole connection between hearing and understanding still doesn't work. It's just as bad as though it were a medieval Mass. That is part of the Puritan critique.

Now the Bible sits inside the liturgy and the liturgy had its defenders. Richard Hooker defended every last jot and tittle of the Elizabethan Settlement in his *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, with enormous determination.

Now another thing about public worship in conformity with the Prayer Book is the sheer amount of Bible in English to which the congregations were exposed. So on a Sunday the inhabitants of a conforming parish would hear an Old and New Testament passage plus the Psalms in Morning Prayer, then an Epistle and a Gospel in a service called Ante-Communion, that is the Communion Service up to and including the prayer 'for the church militant here on earth'. That was the normal Sunday morning pattern. Only infrequently would you go on to have the whole of the Holy Communion, perhaps three or four times a year. So that's four substantial passages of the Bible, and then in Evening Prayer there are two more Bible readings and Psalms. So if you were a conforming member of the Church of England you would have had six big passages of the Bible read to you as well as Psalms. That's a lot of Bible. And Psalm singing is one of the great developments of this period in terms of lay participation, because Psalm singing becomes very popular not only among the Conformists but also the Puritans in the parishes. That might be due to influences coming across from the continental Reformation.

More than that, the Book of Common Prayer is infused with direct and indirect references from scripture. Most notable of these are the Canticles used in Morning and Evening Prayer, for example the Benedictus, the Magnificat, the Nunc Dimittis which were taken over as a 'scissors and paste job' from the monastic offices. So the structures provided by the Prayer Book exposed the laity, whether they could read or not, or whether they could afford a Bible or not, to huge portions of the scriptures Sunday by Sunday. This process was also augmented by readings for holy days which survive the Reformation, though the numbers of them are reduced, but the Christo-centric festivals and those celebrating the New Testament saints remain in the Prayer Book as 'red letter days'. In fact the 1559 Prayer Book restored 58 minor saints as 'black letter days'.

Now just a word on the Canticles here, because I just like this story so much I just can't not tell you about it. A lot of the Puritans even objected to those parts of the Prayer Book taken directly from scripture. They objected to them because they involved repetition, and the extreme Puritans believed that repeated prayers were somehow inferior, and the most extreme even objected to the Lord's Prayer because it was repeated so often. Hooker, not unreasonably, challenged people like Thomas Cartwright who had remarked that 'these thanksgivings (the Prayer Book canticles) were made by occasion of certain particular benefits and are no more to be used for ordinary prayers than the Ave Maria'. In other words, according to Puritan reasoning one may only repeat the Magnificat if visiting an elderly cousin who is like oneself miraculously pregnant.

Now I mention these theological tensions because they particularly come to a head in the period about 1630 to 1660. Now you could argue that these unresolved theological tensions within the church had to burst open at some point, and in the 1640s Puritans are beginning to use the language of a 'second Reformation'. We didn't do it right in 1559, so we're going to do it right now. That's one possible reading of the situation, but I am of the view that in the 1630s, because of policies of King Charles the First and his Archbishop William Laud the whole religious temperature gets turned up very high in England, and Laud imposes, with Charles' consent, all sorts of liturgical innovations on the English Church which create a kind of polarisation that I'm not sure would have happened if it had not been for those policies. It's Laud who is responsible for moving the Holy Table from the more corporate place in the chancel back to the East wall. He ordered that they should be put on steps and railed, supposedly to keep the dogs away from the Holy Table but more

likely to create a holy, sacerdotal space which he felt had been lost as the priesthood had been diminished by the Reformation.

What happens then in the 1640s is the terrible Civil War in England which the Puritan party wins. They control Parliament, they abolish the Book of Common Prayer in 1645 and make it illegal to use it, they abolish Deaneries and Chapters and Bishops and Dioceses and 'hoover up' all the money! They do not, however, destroy the parish system. That is the great survivor of all these upheavals. They replace the Prayer Book by the Directory of Public Worship, which was a set of rubrics or stage directions to clergy about how to conduct worship between 1645 and 1662. It hardly ever gives the minister the words he should use, but it gives the directions about how to conduct services. So it's a real departure from the Book of Common Prayer which gives the minister the authorised words to say. The minister is expected to pray extempore.

Now I just want to talk about the two theologies of the Book of Common Prayer and the Directory of Public Worship and how they relate to the Bible. The Preface of the Book of Common Prayer says, 'There was never anything by the wit of man so well devised or so sure established which in continuance of time hath not been corrupted as among other things as may plainly appear by the common prayers in the church commonly called divine service'. That is in 1559. In 1645 the Directory says, 'In the beginning of the blessed Reformation our wise and pious ancestors took care to set forth an order for the redress of many things which they then by the Word [the Bible] found to be vain, erroneous, superstitious and idolatrous in the public worship of God. Howbeit, long and sad experience hath made it manifest that the liturgy used in the Church of England, notwithstanding all the pains and religious intentions of the compilers of it hath proved an offence.' So it's a theme of good intentions undone by abuse and corruption. And that's a play in both texts. In 1559 it's not that the medieval church was wicked but things got corrupted. Again, the same argument from the Puritans, it's not that Thomas Cranmer and others were wicked – obviously not because they are martyrs – but things get corrupted and again need reform. Both prefaces express common support for the use of the vernacular in public worship, and that's not surprising in the 1559 Prayer Book because, after all, the vernacular is still rather a new thing. But I haven't found an explanation for the fact that the Directory goes on at some length about how valuable the vernacular is even though, for over a hundred years, that's what the English Church has been using. That is rather curious and may be something about anti-Popery.

One of the other big themes in the Directory is that public worship in a sense is much more about the clergy than about the laity. The Preface of the Prayer Book speaks mostly about what will be the experience of the people of God in public worship whereas in the Directory highlights the fact that the clergy have become spiritually lazy because they have had everything set out for them in terms of public worship. The Directory, in contrast, is a kind of 'clerical gym' where they go to work out, write all their own prayers and get themselves back into spiritual shape. There is a strong clericalism about Puritanism which I think isn't often appreciated. It really is about the clergy, and the clergy's control over public worship.

Now what of the Bible in terms of the Directory and the Prayer Book? You'll remember that the Preface to the Prayer Book said very proudly that only two books would be needed to conduct public worship in the Church of England – the Book of Common Prayer and the Bible. That's what the Directory says as well – you need the Directory and the Bible. Now quite a significant amount of the Prayer Book Preface was given over to a discussion of the use of the Bible in worship. In fact, the Preface talks more about the Bible than it does about the Prayer Book. The Church Fathers, maintains the Preface, had intended that a large part of the Bible should be read over the course of the year and that this admirable intention, they maintain, had been lost in the corruptions of the medieval Church. They maintain that not only had this diligence been abandoned but that many 'stories, legends, responds, verses, vain repetitions, commemorations and synodicals were inserted'. In other words, all sorts of non-canonical readings get into divine service. In the old order books of the Bible were begun at a certain season but never read through. So the answer was – and here's where the rules come in – a calendar, easily understood 'so that as much as may be the reading of Holy Scripture is so set forth that all things shall be done in order without breaking one piece thereof from another. And this was really very pedagogical. In the course of divine office you really did work your way through all of the book. It had its problems. One Christmas Eve you found yourself reading Acts 24, for example, which didn't make sense in terms of the church year but it did have this strong pedagogical and theological educational element about it.

Now the Directory was also ambitious in its approach to Bible reading and also instructed that the larger part of the scriptures should be read through in the course of the year although it explicitly

said you can't read the Apocrypha, whereas the Prayer Book allowed for that. However, the reading of the Bible in public worship was to become a ministerial office. In Prayer Book worship the Parish Clerk who was a layman would read the lessons. Not any more. Reading the Bible is very important so it has to be done by the most important person, who is the minister. Furthermore, what portions of the Bible are to be read is left to the wisdom of the minister and not prescribed by any central authority or shaped by the church year. Another of the reforms of 1645 is the suppression of the church year. It becomes illegal to celebrate Christmas, Easter, Whitsun and so forth. The suppression of Christmas was one of the great public relations disasters of the Puritan revolution. There's a wonderful story in Canterbury in 1647 where shops open on Christmas Day because it's not a public holiday and there's a riot against the shops that are open. So the minister has this enormous amount of control again. He decides which parts of the Bible are going to be read at any one point in Christian worship. The Directory also makes clear in a way that the Prayer Book that you must always have a sermon, whereas in the Prayer Book that was not stipulated; you may get a preaching minister, otherwise you read one of the Homilies.

I have already said that I have been unable to find much evidence for the use of the Bible during the period in question, but one of the sources is, of course, Richard Hooker. In Book Five of the Laws on Ecclesiastical Polity he says, 'Touching the use of scripture openly read it brings about inestimable good which the Church of God by that very mean hath reaped', and he goes on to say that there is more to it than simply edification when reading the scriptures aloud in public worship for, he says, 'I see not how we shall possibly prove more palpable than this manifest received and everywhere continued custom of reading the scriptures publically. The reading therefore of the word of God as the use hath ever been in open audience is the plainest evidence we have of the Church's assent and acknowledgement that it is his word,. In other words, what Hooker is saying is that the practice of reading the Bible aloud and hearing it read was the clearest evidence Hooker could provide for the Church's assent and acknowledgement that it was the word of God. It is a doctrinal act as well as a devotional one.

Now in this tension which I have been talking about, between Conformist and Puritan, about the hearing of the Bible and the preaching of the word they key text that they babbled over was from Romans, about faith comes by hearing. Puritans like Thomas Cartwright asserted that Paul meant by that preaching, exposition and application of scripture, not the mere reading of it privately or

corporately. But Whitgift, who I mentioned earlier, responded to ‘how shall they hear without a preacher?’ by saying, ‘I say that St Paul in that chapter to the Romans by “preaching” doth understand all kinds of publishing of the Gospel by the external voice which comprehendeth “reading” as well as that which thou dost call “preaching”.’ Hearing the word read aloud is just as valuable as hearing it preached. Whitgift maintained that many more heard the scriptures than heard them preached and more are converted every day, he says, ‘even such as seldom hear the word preached’. Hearing the Bible read is a means of conversion.

I would like to end by throwing this open to some theological reflection on our own experiences and your own thoughts about hearing the Bible read corporately. How is that a different experience from reading on your own, or from hearing it preached?