

No Clan is an Island:

Distinctions Between Forms of Corporate Worship in 17th Century Scotland

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Undergirding the religious-political landscape of Scotland in the 16th and 17th Centuries was the establishment principle. Indeed, this principle, which can be briefly defined as “one church for each nation,”¹ was applied to the churches and governments of almost all nations prior to the Scottish Second Reformation. The question that plagued the Scottish Presbyterians during the mid-1500s was the natural follow-up to the establishment principle: What ought one to do when the national church is no longer a branch of the true church? The Scottish Presbyterians’ answer to this question has gone down in history with mixed opinion, but remains a defining feature of their church polity. Their answer was to hold separate, and often clandestine, times of engagement in corporate worship, frequently referred to as “Conventicles,” accompanied by in-home sessions of collective worship known as “family exercise” or “family worship.” These distinct formats of worship and their manifestations can and ought to give the modern church guidance on how to view extraordinary circumstances in light of the proper worship of God.

The Distinction Between Conventicles and the Privy Kirk

The Conventicles were a consistent occurrence of separatist worship by Presbyterians. John Knox’s view of a Conventicle that met apart from the Romish-influenced national church was one in which the congregants would “assemble togidder, to Commoun Prayeris, to Exercise and Reading of the Scripturis.”² The marks of the true church as defined by Knox and the early Scottish reformers — faithful preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, and properly executed church discipline — are glaringly absent from the definition of a Conventicle.

1. David Whitla, “Scotland Awakened, 1560-1567 ” (Lecture, RP Church History, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, March 9, 2021).

2. John Knox, *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Printed for the Wodrow Society, 1846), 298.

“...Conventicles, Knox insisted, understood themselves to be provisional, consciously waiting ‘till it should please God to give the sermone of Exhortatioun to some, for conforte and instructioun of the rest’. However, even when ‘the sermone of Exhortatioun’ had been given, this was not enough.”³ Knox refers to a church as “a congregation in which ‘open crymes’ were ‘punished without respect of persone’ by elected elders, ‘to whome the hole brethren promised obedience’. A marginal note in his manuscript adds: ‘This was called the prevye Kirk.’”⁴

Additionally, “Knox preserved a (disappointingly vague) document from 1561 which records ‘the ordour of the electioun of elderis and deaconis in the privie kirk of Edinburgh.’”⁵ Clearly, the right preaching of the Word and the practice of church discipline by a plurality of elders are what constituted the assembly of a church, be it public or private, alongside the occasional administration of the sacraments. It is important to note that without a minister preaching the Word, these gatherings would not have been considered assemblies of the church, despite the early provision of Readers and Exhorters as temporary offices in the Scottish church.

Conventicles continued as a prominent feature of the reformed, presbyterian church of Scotland, and their historical occurrence redoubled on two other occasions: in the 1600s-1610s and in the 1670s-1690s, though evidence suggested they did not cease to exist in the period in between.⁶ In the earlier decades, Conventiclars sought to separate themselves from the English imposition of prelacy upon the Scottish national church. During these years, persecution dogged

3. Alec Ryrie, “Congregations, Conventicles and the Nature of Early Scottish Protestantism,” *Past & Present* 191, no. 1 (January 2006): pp. 45-76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtj006>, 46.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. Matthew Vogan, “Conventicles from the First to the Second Reformation in Scotland,” *Scottish Reformation Society Historical Journal* 6 (2016): pp. 53-85, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_srshj_01.php, 68.

those who attempted to remain faithful to the Scottish Confession and its view of worship, even the more peculiar distinctions. ““The burgesses were accused for not coming to the kirk on Christmas-day, for opening of their booth doores, walking before them in time of sermoun, disswading others from going to the kirk, and reasoning against preaching upon that day.””⁷

Those who remained committed to fighting the practices of the Episcopal English church would continue to gather in small and private communities. In 1620,

The king denounced those who: “out of a peevish humour, in contempt of good order, leave their ordinarie pastors; and following deprived or silenced ministers, receive of them the Sacrament [and] some who continuallie assist the refractorie ministers in all their disobedience, and spare not to countenance them in all their publict doings, yea, even to accompanie them...”⁸

The Conventicles slowly became a place for gatherings of the church *alongside* the administration of the sacraments. Thus, in Knox’s definition, they ceased to be Conventicles and became kirks. At last, the kirk was functioning as a church with all of its true marks. These privy kirk gatherings had to be privy, or private, as they were not legally permissible churches.

Noblemen and noblewomen frequently opened their homes to these groups, so that a consistent group of people may be found in a single home.⁹ This would prove a necessity for the administration of the sacraments:

Moreover, to hold [the Lord’s Supper] at all required some kind of congregation: that is, a group of believers which defines itself as something more than a gathering of friends, and which believes that one of their number has or can be given the authority to preside at such celebration. In the Reformed tradition, this definition extended to

7. Vogan, “Conventicles from the First to the Second Reformation in Scotland,” 58.

8. Ibid.

9. Vogan, “Conventicles from the First to the Second Reformation in Scotland,” 57.

the assumption that where there is celebration of the sacrament there should also be discipline, to control access to it.¹⁰

The mainline shift from "private, community gatherings for the purpose of edification" toward "secret meetings of the assembled church" would prove an important change as the Presbyterians' religious and political demands met with success in later decades. However, not all gatherings were blessed with the presence of an ordained minister. The line had to be drawn which would define church gatherings over and against the former practice of Conventicles — a line which proved very difficult to draw.

In the 1638 General Assembly, the Presbyterians had finally thrown off the corrupt practices of Kings James VI and Charles I. The Stuart kings' "innovations in worship" would be extinguished by the Presbyterians. The more radical party of the Presbyterians wished to throw off all innovations which had no scriptural warrant, but desired a continuation of private meetings. "The more radical opponents of the religious policies of James VI and Charles I had [initially] taken to such meetings since they regarded the worship of the kirk as corrupt. They now wished to continue to hold them, seeing nothing in them incompatible with presbyterian church government."¹¹ Scriptural warrant for these exercises was found by the radicals in verses such as Malachi 3:16: "Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another," and James 5:16: "Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another."¹²

10. Ryrie, "Congregations, Conventicles and the Nature of Early Scottish Protestantism," 51.

11. David Stevenson, "The Radical Party in the Kirk, 1637–45," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 25, no. 2 (1974): pp. 135-165, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022046900045711>, 135.

12. John Howie, *The Scots Worthies. Rev. from the Author's Original Ed. by W.H. Carslaw* (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, & Ferrier, 1870), 235.

The Distinction Between Conventicles and Family Worship

Ultimately, this question of what practices were permissible at private gatherings sparked a long and largely unresolved dispute between the Presbyterian elders, though there are several points of consensus among the various historical documents. In large part, the ministers of the 1638 General Assembly had a narrow view of what constituted proper and formal worship. “For most ministers the only legitimate forms of worship were private prayer by individuals, family exercise or worship, and the public worship of congregations.”¹³ A constant, but suppressed, debate over the next decade would seek to adequately distinguish between family worship and the public worship of congregations. The majority of ministers sought to make no allowance for private gatherings, while those of the radical party maintained a biblical warrant for them.¹⁴

Among those in support of private gatherings alongside corporate worship were Samuel Rutherford and Alexander Henderson. Their writings on these and other topics can help modern audiences understand how the Conventiclors approached the various embodiments of worship.

Henderson’s 1641 treatise *Familie Exercise, or, the Service of God in Families* provides helpful insight into this matter from one of the foremost divines of the Second Reformation. In this treatise, Henderson defines six elements of family worship, rightly practiced:

1. Reading of Scriptures in a constant course, that all in the family may profit in godliness, and may make the better use of the public ministry.
2. ...That the members of the Family... be instructed at home in the grounds of Christian Religion and that doctrine which is according to godliness.

13. Stevenson, “The Radical Party in the Kirk, 1637–45,” 135.

14. Ibid.

3. Prayer and thanksgiving, morning and evening, before and after meals, with singing of psalms, when and where it may be had.
4. ...There must be exercise of discipline in wisdom and patience, by admonition, reproof, and correction for such faults as are proper to be censured in the family; and if servants will not amend, by removing them; and for this end, diligent observing and watching over their ways is necessary.
5. To observe the providence of God, and to make use of the works of his justice and mercy, both past and present, that he may be known to be the Lord.
6. Private Fasting and Humiliation, when by public calamities or the private distress of the family, God called unto it.¹⁵

From these points, we can see that families ought to pursue righteousness and godliness by many of the means of grace, including Scripture reading, prayer, Psalm singing, catechesis, and even the regular practice of discipline by the Master of the house. We must note, though, that the expounding of Scripture is not advocated in Henderson's understanding of family worship. This is a duty and privilege given only to the ordained minister of the gospel, as made evident in the Westminster Directory for Private (Family) Worship:

As the charge and office of interpreting the holy scriptures is a part of the ministerial calling, which none (however otherwise qualified) should take upon him in any place, but he that is duly called thereunto by God and his kirk; so in every family where there is any that can read, the holy scriptures should be read ordinarily to the family; and it is commendable, that thereafter they confer, and by way of conference make some good use of what hath been read and heard.

15. Alexander Henderson, *Family Exercise, or, The service of God in Families* (Edinburgh: Robert Bryson, 1641; Ann Arbor: Text Creation Partnership), <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/B03420.0001.001>.

Though family worship ought not to contain interpreting Scripture, Conventicles in the vein of the 1560s or 1610s would have been permissible, as they did not contain Scriptural interpretation. The radicals would be able to encourage the continuation of private gatherings *if* the Westminster Directory for Private (Family) Worship had not limited them by saying, “At family-worship, a special care is to be had that each family keep by themselves; neither requiring, inviting, nor admitting persons from divers families, unless it be those who are lodged with them, or at meals, or otherwise with them upon some lawful occasion.”¹⁶ However, the radical ministers were able to hold and encourage private meetings like Conventicles, even though the majority of ministers stood in opposition. “Though family exercise was strictly limited, the loop-hole for private meetings under another name, that of mutual edification, remained.”¹⁷

The Distinction Between Family Worship and the Privy Kirk

We have seen that there is a clear delineation between those elements of corporate worship and of family worship: broadly, the marks of the church are not to be present in times of private worship, whether that be at Conventicles or in family worship. On the occasions in which the marks were practiced, these were always in larger gatherings than families and would have been considered assemblies of the privy Kirk. Instances of private celebrations of the sacraments were condemned by the church at large.

In essence, Conventicling practically ceased to be merely a time of mutual edification when a minister was present and expounded Scripture or administered the sacraments — this

16. The Westminster Assembly, *The directory for the public worship of God*, (New York: Robert Lennox Kennedy, 1880; Internet Archive, 2008), <https://archive.org/details/directoryforpubl00west/>.

17. Stevenson, “The Radical Party in the Kirk, 1637–45,” 161.

time became a function of the privy Kirk. Similarly, family worship practically ceased to be a time of family worship when “people from divers families” were present — this time became a function of mutual edification (similar to Conventicling).

To summarize the distinctions:

1. At the nucleus of the system was the common and daily engagement in family worship.
2. When multiple families gathered, this was a Conventicle.
3. When a minister was present, this was the church. (When gathered in illegal opposition to the established church, this was a privy Kirk.)

The Modern Church at (or Away From) Worship

In recent times, the advance of technology upon the church has gotten swifter and, at times, a matter of necessity. Though televangelists have been broadcast into homes for decades, a majority of Christians have maintained attendance at a local church and under local preaching of the Word. At the onset of COVID-19, many churches were forced to adopt livestreaming technology in order to avoid the complete cessation of church services. A complete liturgy could be broadcast from the church building or from the pastor’s home into the private homes of parishioners each Sunday. The question arises: how ought the livestreamed service to be considered through these three basic categories of worship — or can it be?

Distinctions must be made between Conventicles and the livestreamed church service. Where Conventicles featured the physical gathering of congregants outside of the church building for the purpose of mutual edification and forbade the preaching of the Word, the livestreamed service comprises the approved digital (and spiritual?) gathering of congregants

outside of the church building for the purpose of partaking in an act of the church, each in his own home. Private exercises involving one family ought to designate this as “family worship.” This created the sort of “cellular organisation” by which James Kirk referred to the early meetings of Conventiclers.¹⁸ With the — albeit digital — gathering of diverse families, the livestreamed service is necessarily placed in a category different from family worship. With the presence of preaching by an ordained minister, the livestreamed service is necessarily placed in a category different from the Conventicle. Classification may be difficult, or perhaps impossible in only these three categories; but it seems that the guiding principles of the Second Reformation fathers might be applied to the livestreamed service to help uncover practical considerations for the livestreamed worship in the church.

The Grounds of Distinction

The evident distinction between private worship and public worship is found in the practices of preaching or interpreting the Word and of administering the sacraments.

Since the grounds for preaching the Word is based on the ordination of the minister, and is dependent only on the qualification of the individual speaking and not on the qualification of the hearer, it ought to be permissible for the livestreamed service to include the elements of the liturgy up to and including the preaching of the Word of God. In this case, we should consider the livestreamed service to fall into the category of an act of public worship, as the preaching of the Word was forbidden in family worship and in Conventicles by the early reformers.

As the Westminster Directory and Henderson’s treatise have shown, there is no question as to the permission of other parts of the liturgy except the administration of the sacraments, in

18. Vogan, “Conventicles from the First to the Second Reformation in Scotland,” 53.

particular, the Lord's Supper. For many believers, particularly those living under totalitarian political regimes, a livestreamed service may be the only means of hearing the Word from an ordained minister. This would not have been possible for many Conventiclers, save when a preacher was traveling through. If a sermon were livestreamed into one's home, a family could supplement the sermon with the remaining elements of family worship. In this way, a family could experience a "normal" worship service's liturgy, complete with reading and interpretation of the Word. This may be the only viable option for many Christians in countries like China.

Altogether different is the controversial act of individuals or families taking communion in their private homes while "gathered" through the digital unification of livestreaming. This seems to be in conflict with the efforts made by Second Reformation fathers to exclude acts of public worship being done in private. Whereas the preached sermon is dependent on the qualification of the speaker alone, the early reformers made a concerted effort to understand the sacraments of communion and baptism to be multi-faceted. The reader must remember that "where there is celebration of the sacrament there should also be discipline, to control access to it."¹⁹ The lack of ministers was one of the reasons communion was so seldom taken by rural congregants during the early part of the 16th Century.²⁰ Today, how can church discipline, particularly the guarding of the Table, be done without a gathered church? Quite simply, there can be no guarding of the Table if there is no physically gathered church. Congregants would otherwise be free to "drink judgment upon themselves," as 1 Corinthians 11:29 says²¹.

19. Ryrie, "Congregations, Conventicles and the Nature of Early Scottish Protestantism," 51.

20. William D. Maxwell, *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Development and Forms* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), 137.

21. *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers, 2001).

Secondly, while communion is a corporate act that does rely on the qualifications of the minister, the emphasis is on the communal nature of the gathered body. First Corinthians 11:33-34 places this emphasis when it reads, “So then, my brothers, *when you come together* to eat, wait for one another—if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.”²² The phrase “come together” is used throughout 1 Corinthians to indicate the gathered church. Clearly, the partaking of communion is a joint act to be done together with the gathered body. Ultimately, the question of whether communion is an acceptable act in livestreamed worship is dependent on whether the church is considered to be gathered when they are not physically present together. It would seem from this passage that this is not what Paul had in mind. By following the guidelines of the reformers, modern audiences can find express permission for all parts of the liturgy except the digital administration of the Lord’s Supper.

A livestreamed service clearly must be placed in a category all its own; this service does not meet the criteria of the three basic forms of worship. However, modern churches must remember that while Knox and Rutherford never held a Zoom bible study or commented “Here!” on a Facebook post, the biblical principles to which they subscribed are no less applicable to the church and can be a source of great clarity amidst much desperation and confusion today.

22. *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*. Emphasis added.

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