



‘The Exercise’ In the Scottish Reformation

I. Introduction

The *Exercise* is something that appears to have gone out of use over two centuries ago. Some of us may have gone through our life without even coming across the word, let alone knowing what it means. It was largely confined to what we might call the ‘Geneva Puritan movement’ that had an influence mainly in Switzerland, France, the Netherlands, England and Scotland. It varied in name and in practice from country to country. It has gone under the names ‘Prophesyings’, ‘Interpretation’ and ‘Exercise’ and it was closely related to the Colloquia and Presbytery. It was practised within a congregation but mainly in gatherings of ministers which later took the form of presbyteries.

Its Scriptural paradigm was 1 Corinthians 14:26-32, and especially verse 29. It is not part of my remit to try and exegete the particular passage. Paul seems to be referring to the exercise of the extraordinary and temporary spiritual gifts in the church at Corinth, and especially tongue speaking and prophecy. It is for that reason that we might hesitate to build a case from these verses for the type of meeting envisaged in the *Exercise* and especially its particular application to ministers. If we hold that such a type of meeting is to be practised then the prophecy must be concerned with the forth-telling of the Word of God, as in Acts 2:17.

II. Historical Origins

In order to see how the *Exercise* came to be part of the Scottish Reformation we have to trace its origins in Switzerland.

1. In Zurich

The meeting that came to be known as the *Exercise* began in Zurich. As early as 1525 meetings were held at the Grossmuenster under the leadership of Zwingli. The name of these gatherings was ‘Prophesyings’. This followed Zwingli’s interpretation of 1 Corinthians 14:26-32, and especially verse 29 ‘*let the prophets speak two or three and let the other judge*’. Zwingli, writing on the subject in 1525, denounced the Anabaptists with their view of ‘prophesyings’ and described the prophet as the teacher-scholar of Acts 13:1, ‘*certain prophets and teachers*’. And so a daily meeting, apart from Friday and Sunday mornings, developed for the purpose of presenting participants with a thorough training in Biblical exegesis. At the centre of the meetings was the study of the Bible in the original languages, with a constant comparison with the Latin and Greek text of the *Vulgate* (fourth century Latin translation of the Scriptures) and the *Septuagint* (second century BC Greek translation), requiring rigorous linguistic studies. The pattern of the meeting was as follows. There was an opening prayer in Latin, followed by a passage from the *Vulgate*. Then the text under study was read in Hebrew and was translated into Greek and Latin with philological explanations. It was followed by reading the same passage from the *Septuagint* and the translation into Latin was combined with theological comments. Finally a sermon in German was delivered employing all the results of both philological and theological discussion by the participants. Only this concluding part of the meeting was open to the public. One of the reasons for the heavy emphasis on the philological approach to Scripture was that Zwingli meant these meetings primarily for those parish ministers who had been serving as parish priests prior to the reformation of the area.

2. In Geneva

A similar kind of meeting was taken up in Geneva. Calvin first came to Geneva in 1536. In November of that year there was established the Colloquia, the meeting of the ministers of Geneva and vicinity, and Calvin became a member. Calvin's return to Geneva from exile in 1541 had for its object, from his point of view, the establishment of an ecclesiastical constitution which would make of the city a model Christian community. This was laid out in the Ordonnances which were approved by the General Assembly on 20 November 1541. They began with the declaration that Christ has instituted in his church the four offices of pastor, teacher, elder and deacon. A most important provision of the Ordonnances was that of requiring all the ministers of the city, and as many as possible of those in its dependent villages, to meet weekly for discussion of Scripture. It read: *'It will be expedient that all ministers, in order to conserve purity and harmony of doctrine among them, shall meet together on an appointed day in the week to discuss Scripture and none shall absent himself without proper cause'*.

John Knox in his sojourns in Geneva became well acquainted with the practice and latterly he ministered to an English congregation there. In the *Form of Prayers* he used in the congregation there is a paragraph on 'Interpretation' which reads: *'Every week once, the 'Congregation' assemble to hear some place of the Scriptures orderly expounded. At which time it is lawful for every man to speak or enquire, as God shall move his heart and the text minister occasion'*.

3. In England

The Prophesyings became established in England very early in Elizabeth's reign and were quite extensive, and are a story in themselves. Although widely acknowledged and sometimes actively encouraged by many of the bishops, they really belonged to the Puritan Church, rather than to the official Anglican policy. Archbishop Edmund Grindal did encourage the gatherings and rebuked the queen for ordering him to suppress them. For this he was deposed. The Elizabethan Prophesyings were in the Zurich tradition, with some traces of the more popular variety. They grew partly out of official and semi-official projects for the improvement of the ignorant clergy, but more out of the spontaneous enterprise of the Puritan preachers themselves. At each of these from two to five learned ministers moderated, and under their direction the remainder of the clergy were examined in their tasks before a public audience, *'so that all were for shame compelled to do something'*. After the public proceedings, the ministers withdrew to continue their conference among themselves.

III. Scottish Reformation

The 'privy kirks'

When we come to look at the development of the Prophesyings in Scotland we have to take into account the challenges that faced our Reformers in the transition from the darkness of the Roman Catholic system. Before the Reformed Church was established there was a form of the *Exercise* in what became known as the 'privy kirks'. Iain Murray observes:

'What part does the church member, who is not an elder or minister, play in the active life of the church? Is any part expected of him other than attending services? The "privy kirks", through which the spiritual Reformation in Scotland came into being, certainly thought so. In the years of the hidden advance of the gospel there were no "church officers", only merchants, bakers, butchers, malt-men and such-like people who could speak from their hearts, exhort and read the Scriptures to one another even though it might cost their lives. When regular churches were formed, as they were from 1559, this pattern had proved too valuable to be wholly dispensed with'.

In the 'Letter of Wholesome Counsel' sent to the brethren in Scotland in July 1556 Knox says *'If any brother have exhortation, question, or doubt let him not fear to speak or move the same, so that he do it with moderation, either to edify or be edified'*. When Knox came back to Scotland in

1559 he had the opportunity of putting into practice the Puritan ideals he had embraced and had been further confirmed by his 'schooling' in Geneva.

1. In the congregation

In the interpretation of the Scriptures the *First Book of Discipline* states: 'Every week once, the Congregation assemble to hear some place of the Scriptures orderly expounded. At which time, it is lawful for every man to speak or enquire as God shall move his heart, and the text minister occasion, so it be without pertinacity or disdain, as one that rather seeketh to profit than to contend. And if so be any contention rise, then such as are appointed moderators, either satisfy the party or else, if he come to cavil, exhort him to keep silence, referring the judgment thereof to the ministers and elders to be determined in their assembly or consistory before mentioned'.

2. In the gatherings of ministers

It was in the preparation, training and supervision of ministers that the real challenge came. Under Knox the Church was to be guided by ministers, elders and deacons but in addition by readers, exhorters and superintendents. Readers and exhorters were temporary and were intended for a transition period until all churches could be provided with qualified ministers. There was a group of men whom the *First Book of Discipline* calls 'Readers'. Their duty was limited to reading the Scriptures and Common Prayers, with liberty, when qualified, to explain the Scriptures read, and exhort the people — hence the name 'Exhorter'.

How were ministers to be equipped for their calling? Knox wanted to bring the universities under the control of the Kirk in matters of faith. His successor in St Giles, James Lawson, played a part in re-constituting St Mary's College in St Andrews as a theological college in 1579 and campaigned for a college in Edinburgh which came into being as the Town College in 1583, the forerunner of Edinburgh University. He was successful in having Robert Rollock appointed as the regent of the College. Rollock became Principal in 1585 and in 1587 began preaching at the East Kirk and was authorised by the Presbytery as the College's Professor of Theology. Rollock, a seminal early exponent of covenant theology, had a great influence through his lectures and sermons in preparing men for the ministry. Out of his public preaching and College instruction grew his nine published commentaries and five volumes of sermons.

Although a course of study was now available at the Town College, what machinery was in place to examine a candidate's suitability for the ministry and his continuity in ministerial training? Most young men graduated from University or the Town College by the age of 20 to 22. They were considered too young for a pastoral charge. Some were employed as regents, tutors or schoolmasters. They would function in congregations as exhorters. It was to deal with such a situation that Knox put in place the *Exercise* meeting.

The First Book of Discipline

In the *First Book of Discipline*, Chapter XII 'For Prophesying or Interpreting of Scripture', we have a detailed exposition of what John Knox envisaged the *Exercise* to be. We can quote the opening paragraphs:

'To the end that the Church of God may have trial of men's knowledge, judgments, graces, and utterances, and that such as somewhat have profited in God's Word may from time to time grow to more full perfection to serve the Church, as necessity shall require, it is most expedient that in every town where schools and repair of learned men are, there be a certain day every week appointed to that exercise which Saint Paul calleth prophesying. The order thereof is expressed by him in these words: "Let two or three prophets speak; and let the rest judge. But if anything be revealed to him that sitteth by, let the former keep silence. For ye may, one by one, all prophesy, that all may learn, and all may receive consolation. And the spirits, that is, the judgments, of the prophets, are subject to the prophets".

'These exercises, we say, are things most necessary for the Church of God this day in Scotland; for thereby, as we have said, shall the Church have judgment and knowledge of

the graces, gifts, and utterances of every man within their own body; and the simple, and such as have somewhat profited, shall be encouraged daily to study and proceed in knowledge. And, too, the church shall be edified; for this exercise must be patent to such as list to hear and to learn, and every man shall have liberty to utter and declare his mind and knowledge to the comfort and edification of the Church’.

The Liturgy of John Knox

There is another reference to it in the Liturgy, under the heading ‘The Weekly Assembly of the Ministers, Elders and Deacons’:

‘To the intent that the ministry of God’s Word may be had in reverence and not brought into contempt through the evil conversation of such as are called thereunto, and also that faults and vices may not by long sufferance grow at length to extreme inconveniences; it is ordained that every Thursday the ministers and elders, in their assembly or consistory, diligently examine all such faults and suspicions as may be espied, not only amongst others, but chiefly amongst themselves, lest they seem to be culpable of that which our Saviour Christ reproved in the Pharisees who could espy a mote in another man’s eye, and could not see a beam in their own.

‘And because the eye ought to be more clear than the rest of the body, the minister may not be spotted with any vice, but to the great slander of God’s Word, whose message he beareth: Therefore it is to be understand that there be certain faults, which if they be apprehended in a minister, he ought to be deposed, as heresy, papistry, schism, blasphemy, perjury, fornication, theft, drunkenness, usury, fighting, unlawful games, with such like’.

IV. An Example of the Practice

It appears that the *Exercise* in some areas was in danger of falling into disuse. We find that the General Assembly of 1576 took the matter seriously and passed a new Act stating that *‘the dishaunting and intermission of exercise almost everywhere is greatly lamented and the chief reason thereof is for lack of penalty and punishment of such as either should prophesy themselves or occupy the second place of addition’*. All ministers are commanded to attend the *Exercise* and penalties for absence are imposed. We do not have much concrete evidence of the practice of the *Exercise* on record except in the Presbytery of Stirling. Valuable information from these Stirling Presbytery Records has been produced in a doctoral thesis at the University of Edinburgh by Peter Komlosi in *The Dual Aspects of Ministerial Training in the late Sixteenth Century*. We are indebted to this thesis for what is recorded.

Three groups of participants can be identified. Therefore three types of *Exercise* seem to have been developed in the initial years of the 1580s.

- 1) The first group were the parish ministers who met on a weekly basis. These meetings were often referred to as ‘public exercise’ in contrast to the exercise of trials that had been set aside for possible candidates for the ministry. The ministers set the task for themselves to offer Scriptural exegesis on an assigned text in the form of a sermon to each other. Usually consecutive passages from Scripture were read and explained. Once the sermon was heard another minister undertook to make some practical observations on the first speaker’s exposition. Often a candidate for the ministry supplied the second speaker. In Stirling they drew up a list of the prospective ministers and readers and so the participants had time to prepare and the ‘moderator’ could organize a replacement as necessary.
- 2) The second group of participants who took an active part in the exercise were those practising ministers and readers against whom charges of heresy and alleged misconduct of life were brought by their colleagues or by members of their congregation. We see that William Scott, reader first in Callander then in Kilmachog, was assigned the task of making the exercise on the last part of chapter 28 of Matthew. He was given almost two months to prepare for the *Exercise*. The examiners gathered in the minister of Stirling’s dwelling and found the sermon

sound and therefore continued him, as of before, to exhort his flock and minister baptism until they took further trial of him.

- 3) The third group had to do with examining candidates for the ministry, especially those who were recent graduates of one of the universities. The General Assembly which met in St Andrews in April 1582 ordained the presbyteries to try and examine those who desired to enter the ministry *'and such as they find qualified, to provide them to kirks'*. The earlier routine of examination had been undertaken by visitors commissioned by the General Assembly. In Stirling, both in the examination and gradually in the admission of candidates to the ministry, the presbytery had a significant role to play. Between 1581 and 1587 only four recent university graduates were undertaking the *Exercise* in Stirling, all four having studied at St Andrews.

V. Disappearance of the Exercise

The *Exercise* fulfilled the function of a presbytery. As early as 1563 we find on record that commissioners to appoint kirks had all the authority of superintendents, and had *'the assistance of learned men next adjacent, of meetings of ministers for the exercise of prophecy, of synods etc'*. This is the first mention of a body which might take part in ecclesiastical business. In 1573 we read of a copy of the Acts of the Assembly to be given *'to every exercise'*, so that again the *Exercise* is being used for other than its original purpose of instructing ministers. At the Assembly of 1579 a question was raised by one of the Synods regarding *'erecting of presbyteries in places where public exercise is used, unto the time the policy of the church be established by law'*. The Assembly declared that *'the exercise may be judged a presbytery'*. The General Assembly met no more than twice a year. But there was the lack of institutions that would have managed and controlled church administration at regional and district levels and to meet between assemblies to deal with matters arising in the Kirk.

The first Presbyteries were established in 1581. The Assembly of that year, with help from the Privy Council, decided to set up thirteen model presbyteries in the main towns of the central lowlands *'as examplars to the rest of the country'*. They received royal approval.

The earliest extant register — that of Stirling Presbytery — records the creation of the Presbytery on 8 August 1581, with ministers and selected elders from the constituent kirk sessions in attendance.

'The function of the Presbytery was to carry out the examination, ordination and admission of ministers, the supervision and visitation of parishes, the execution of ordinances made in the higher courts such as synods and general assemblies, the licensing of marriage contracts and to deal with issues of church discipline'.

When Presbyteries were established they absorbed the *Exercise*. In an Act of Assembly 1598 it is stated: *'For better observing of the Presbyteries, it is statute and ordained that every Presbytery shall assemble themselves 'once orderly each week in their full number at the least so many of them as has their residence within eight miles to the place of the ordinary convention of the Presbytery'*. It goes on to enact: *'That every member of the Presbytery study the text whereupon the exercise is to be made'*. Every ordinary meeting of presbytery in those days was opened with a discourse preached by one of their number on a text which they assigned to him.

When the Presbytery met, but before it was constituted, the delivery of this discourse was the first thing attended to; and it was on no account to be neglected. The half of the time allotted to it was to be taken up *'in the explicatory and analytic part of the text and in answering textual and critical questions and difficulties. The remaining half of the time was devoted to raising of "doctrines or observations from the text, and applying them in their several uses". The first part of the Exercise was called "making"; the second "adding". When all this was over, and the presbytery constituted, then began another serious bit of work — the "Censure" the sitting in judgment on the exercise to which the brethren had just listened'*.

Thomas Boston at the end of the 17th century speaks of the *Exercise*. At the Presbytery meeting his *Exercise* lasted an hour and a quarter, and the Presbytery stopped him half way through his addition.

In typical Boston fashion he declares: '*After my entering on the study of the exercise with a pretty good run, the wind fell and I was left to tug and row in it and in the addition even to the end*'. The *Exercise*, at least in its common form, seems to have slowly died out in the middle of the 18th century. Presbyteries and sessions were much slacker at this period than formerly but no party appears to have done anything to revive the *Exercise* later.

VI. Assessment

1. *The Exercise in the congregation*

It would seem from the passage in 1 Corinthians 14:26-32 that this *Exercise* is appointed for the congregation and it was practised in Geneva and in the 'privy kirks' in Scotland in that way. This form seems to have come under threat through the Anabaptists. They too based their right to 'prophecy' according to their 'inner light', on 1 Corinthians 14, whereas the Reformed Churches insisted that the work of the Holy Spirit now is not to give new light in the form of more revelation, but to interpret the one and only revelation which came through Jesus Christ. This was to be done via diligent study of the languages in the texts of the Old and New Testaments. Romanists too were looking at Anabaptistic 'propheysings' as the logical development of the Reformation with its insistence on personal Bible study and the resultant breaking down of the partition between clerical and lay. The Anabaptist influence helps to account for the early abandonment of these meetings in many areas of the new Reformed Church. The risk of being identified with their excesses was too great to be tolerated. And this risk continued to influence men's attitudes toward the *Exercise*.

2. *The Exercise in the Presbytery*

It appears that the *Exercise* was adopted as a very useful means of the examination, training and elevating of the ministry in the Church. We cannot but admire the zeal with which the Reformers went about this *Exercise*. And it must be remembered that in spite of 16th century communication and transportation problems, and the extraordinary responsibilities weighing heavily on every member of the Reformed Church, the *Exercise* meetings were held each week.

- 1) The instigators believed the *Exercise* provided the setting and situation which would identify and further develop those gifts and graces which God had bestowed on men. If anyone appeared specially gifted, Knox's idea was that he might be compelled to enter the ministry (as he himself was in St Andrew's Castle). Formal university education was expected to provide the basis from which this ideal should be further realised at a rapidly increasing pace.
- 2) They believed that it was necessary to promote a unity of belief based on instruction and assent rather than on ecclesiastical authority, and to maintain a general doctrinal agreement. There were not the commentaries and aids available for the ministers then as there are now. Not only could they learn actual doctrine by listening and asking questions, they also could learn more by observing the study methods and growth patterns of older Christians and thus, as Knox put it, '*be encouraged daily to study and proceed in knowledge*'.
- 3) It appears that a huge effort was made to ensure that those who were in the ministry received not only tight control over both their personal lives and that of their families but also help in their continuing education. This might also be seen as a possible source of motivation for the continuation of one's ministry. It was the combination of the pastoral and disciplinary duties of oversight and the instructional purpose which made the *Exercise* a vitally important tool in the hands of presbyteries in the late sixteenth-century Kirk. The

training programme, the examination and the continuous emphasis on preaching all contributed towards the development of a corps of confessionally, and more importantly, ethically aware ministers.

VII. Application for Today

Although views may differ about the nature of the original type of meeting in 1 Corinthians 14 there are lessons we can apply to our situation today:

- 1) Surely it is in the local setting that a man can best be assessed, and be given opportunity to be assessed, for the ministry. The local body of ministers and elders are those charged with this responsibility. Perhaps we are in danger of passing too much of that assessment on to a central Committee. It leads, like in some large denominations, to assessment on many factors, including psychological, more than commitment to sound doctrine and the exercise of spiritual gifts.
- 2) We choose the best ministers to be lecturers and tutors and rely on them to be experts in their field. This leaves the ordinary ministers to be less diligent in their continued use of the languages and in their ongoing abilities to exegete Scripture and to preach. The *Exercise* was aimed to maintain a high standard in training and ongoing knowledge of the languages and in exegesis at the Presbytery level.
- 3) Over the years the Presbytery has tended to take more and more of an administrative role in the affairs of the Church. When the *Exercise* as a distinctive event began to disappear, a form of it was maintained at the commencement of Presbytery meetings. Now that even the form has disappeared perhaps the time has come to consider re-instating it or having regular Colloquia. Perhaps the role has been taken over by conferences, some arranged by para-Church organisations. These may be a source of encouragement but they cannot fulfil the role that the *Exercise* had in raising the standard of the ministry.

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