

HOLY MODERATION: Towards a Presbyterian Mind

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Presbyterianism is a system of doctrine and of polity but there is more to it than that. There is a Biblical Presbyterian mentality, a Presbyterian mindset which can be summed up in the phrase *'holy moderation'*. Moderation has had bad connotation in Britain ever since men in Scotland in the eighteenth century delighted to call themselves moderates as opposed to evangelicals. Their religion was normal, limited- and cold. Moderation in that sense is the last thing that we want, but in Philippians 4:5 we are told to let our moderation be known to all men. It is a word that can be translated 'gentleness'; it has the idea of clemency and forbearance. It is one of those qualities which is required of an elder (Titus 1:18) and it implies a sense of balance and proportion. The word 'moderation', so long as we define it thus, is a useful one because it reminds us that the right way is the middle way in many practical areas of life. We need to avoid error of both extremes.

There is a special need for us to study holy moderation because of our situation in England. Anglicanism glories in its embrasiveness and tolerance. This is vague moderation, as opposed to holy moderation. On the other hand, there seems to be a glorying in disagreement and intolerance in many non-conformist circles. The text over independent evangelicalism in our land seems to be 'Every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. Were we living in the days of the Commonwealth, some would say of us as they said of John Lilburn, 'If he was left all alone in the world, John would argue with Lilburn and Lilburn with John'!

Are we doomed? Is it the will of God that our kind should only be faced with these two options in its church life — a vagueness which embraces virtually everything or a narrowness which is constantly fragmenting fellowships and churches? Is there not an alternative, a holy moderation?

Presbyterians ought to exemplify this moderation; however, not all have done so. Too often Presbyterians have been characterized by a sad lack of moderation. That is not to say that holy moderation is a quality that none but Presbyterians can have. There are wonderful examples of this moderation in brethren of many different Christian backgrounds. But holy moderation is a fruit that ought to grow on our Presbyterian tree, and it is one that this tree, above all others, is best suited to grow. The genius of Presbyterianism leads to and develops its fullness in holy moderation.

Holy moderation is not indifference to the truth. Holy moderation is never developed at the expense of the truth. Indeed, it can only thrive where the truth is exalted. This is not the moderation of fuzziology, of the vagueness that passes for theology today. In the rest of this paper the emphasis is mainly on the need for greater tolerance. That is not because I undervalue sound theology. Everything we do must be founded on the word of God. I take it for granted that we are firmly committed to the reformed faith. My emphasis is due to a perception that we have neglected true liberty.

Holy moderation is not lukewarmness towards evangelism. Paul was a moderate man, yet Paul had continual sorrow and heaviness of heart for his brethren. He cried literal tears as he wrote to that erring church in Corinth because "unbelievers will think you are mad".

As Presbyterians we must be *immoderate* in our desire to see the cause of Jesus Christ spread in our land. We must have a holy intemperance of inertia. We must have a holy abhorrence that there are areas and communities in our nation that have never heard the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ in its biblical clarity. We cannot be moderate about our desire to see the gospel spread. Holy moderation is rather a way of life in which zeal for the truth is harmoniously blended with biblical wisdom, compassion and self-restraint. It is better seen in action than defined in abstract. The lives of men whom we revere as Presbyterians, such as Calvin, Chalmers, Hodge and Murray, have much to teach us here, as well as in their theological writings.

Aspects of Holy Moderation

The first aspect of holy moderation is concern for truth without over-reaction to error. Brook, the author of *The Lives of the Puritans*, said, "Persons who have embraced sentiments which afterwards appear to them erroneous, often think that they can never remove too far from them and the more remote they go from their former opinions the nearer they come to the truth". This is swerving out of the ditch on the left only to plummet into the ditch on the right. The Anabaptists reacted to the evils of the medieval church by throwing out the covenant baby with the polluted font-water.

Over-reaction to error can take many forms. Remember, for instance, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine. They were put out of the Church of Scotland for their stand for truth. When George Whitefield arrived in Scotland, they insisted that he preach nowhere but in their churches. He must not preach even for evangelical men of the Church of Scotland. When Whitefield refused to be bound by that command, they attacked him as being virtually the devil incarnate and guilty of all heresies and errors. One can understand their actions as human beings. These men had been deeply hurt and shamefully treated. But holy moderation should guard against such 'secondary picketing'. It was not Whitefield himself to whom they initially objected nor even the evangelical men for whom he preached, but the fact that those congregations were in a church with whom the Erskines had a dispute. This was over-reaction to error.

There is also the danger that people will become 'trigger happy'. How often there is dispute over the very core of the gospel and a secession church is formed. Very soon, however, that church itself is in turmoil, arguing not over liberalism and unbelief, but secondary issues. Thus a church which forms as a result of a bold and clear stand for the true gospel against modernism soon divides again over these secondary issues. When we have been in fierce battle, we become men of war, especially when we are young. Like young men in the Middle East today, we grow up knowing nothing but conflict, and we tend to look for fights. Holy moderation is knowing when to hold your fire.

The second aspect of holy moderation is concern for detailed holiness but not at the expense of the kingdom's goals. We should be concerned about consistent obedience in every area of life, but holy moderation required us not to get things out of perspective. Are our eyes fixed on the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ? Are we conscious that the church is in this world today because God has a work of salvation to complete? God has called us to herald His grace and to be His effective servants in this world. There is a perennial danger that the church will become obsessed with secondary details and forget its urgent duty.

We could easily spend the rest of our lives arguing about unfulfilled prophecy or the qualifications for coming to the Lord's Supper, but that is not going to extend the kingdom of Christ. We want everything to be biblical, but our time is limited and our energies are finite. Holy moderation means keeping a right balance. The predominant thing that should absorb our attention, emotions and time must be the spread of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thomas Chalmers was such a 'balanced' believer. He warned of the "vast amount of misplaced zeal (that) has been expended" on the "magnification of small matters". He went on to say, "There are thousands of the minuter controversies which I cannot sympathize in on either of the sides, and just for a lack of a clear or important principle to hold by". Among these issues he mentions sitting or kneeling at Communion, organs and stained glass windows and clerical attire. The people who show "zeal and tenaciousness" on such matters, are often at the same time faithful in upholding the great principles of the gospel and are to be highly esteemed for that. Nevertheless, their attitude is one that Chalmers "infinitely regrets, because of the contempt which is thereby drawn on Christianity". Chalmers was no latitudinarian -after all, he led the disruption of 1843 - but he fought to keep sight of the kingdom goal. Likewise, many of Calvin's letters are written warnings to people not to become obsessed about details. His comment that the English Prayer Book contained "many tolerable foolishnesses" was a reminder that there are things with which we do not agree but which must not divert us from the advance of the gospel itself.

The third aspect of holy moderation is a concern for unity but not an attempt to press all believers into the same mold. Calvin warned against a forced uniformity in ceremonial matters. He says, "when we appear before the judgment seat of God ... we will not be asked about ceremonies. In any case, such uniformity in outward matters will receive no consideration' we shall rather be asked about the right use of freedom. But the right use will be one that has contributed most to the edification of the church". (Calvin OS 1.432) He even says that it is good that complete uniformity does not prevail "so that it may be manifest that the Christian faith does not consist in such matters".

Is there not a danger of saying to people today, "We want you to become Christians but you will have to become middle class first. You will have to start wearing suits and ties. Otherwise you cannot possibly be a reformed Christian"? Do we say, "You must use pronouns in the way we do or you cannot pray with us"? *Why?* Why force people into a man-made pattern?

Of course, moderation must always look to both sides. We need unity with regard to that on which the Bible has explicitly delivered itself and liberty with regard to that on which the Bible has left no distinct or authoritative statement. We must learn the lesson of enlightened forbearance in the mere circumstantial of worship in contrast to the furious intolerance which characterized and disgraced a former age.

There are many questions of ceremony and activity on which we Presbyterians could dispute with each other. But is there no alternative to arguing? What I hold out to you today is that it is possible to have differing views on such things and to live and work together. Let me give you an example. Professor John Murray strongly believed that only psalms should, be sung in public worship.

When the denomination of which he was a minister changed its practice to allow its congregations to sing hymns if they so chose, Professor Murray did not leave the church. He lived for the rest of his days as a minister of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, enthusiastically helping in the outreach work of hymn-singing congregations.

Last century, when the Free Church of Scotland issued a hymn book, there were those who fought strongly against it. The book was approved and congregations in the church began to sing hymns, yet not one minister withdrew from the church. There was no secession over that issue. They did not practice it in their own congregations, but they did not split the church on it either.

My challenge to you quite simply is this: *Are we going to be Presbyterians like these men?* Are we going to say, "Look, there are things about which some of us feel strongly. We do not think they are unimportant things, but we recognize that brethren whom we respect in the faith take a different view of Scripture. So long as no one forces us to practice what we think is wrong, we are happy to live with them to the utmost of our ability"? There can be unity without uniformity.

Let Calvin have the last word on this point: "I entreat you, my dear brother [Farel], in so great iniquity of the time in which we live, that you will do your utmost endeavor to keep together all who are in any way bearable. As to the trifling ceremonies, strive to induce the brethren not to dispute the point with those of their neighborhood with so much of stiff-necked obstinacy".

The fourth aspect of holy moderation is the recognition of the continuing imperfection of all believers, including ourselves. Perhaps we should say "especially ourselves". Because our understanding is imperfect we need to learn from and be corrected by our brethren. We need to recognize, too, that we are a bundle of prejudices and scars. There are places in our lives where someone hurt us years ago; when people come near those places we jump. We get defensive and belligerent because our memories, prejudices and emotions continue to be imperfect though renewed by grace. When we recognize that, we will want the help of other believers.

Calvin comments on Luke 9, where John and James wanted to bring down fire on the Samaritans. Calvin said that, "they were elated with foolish confidence". In his reply, "Christ not only restrains the wicked impulse of His two disciples but lays down the rule for us all that we should not let our zeal have its own way".

We need to admit that our zeal may be mingled with error. How often have people used the zeal of Jesus Christ in cleansing the temple as an excuse for devastating the church? Indeed, Christ did cleanse the temple, but you and I are not perfect like Christ. Our zeal has impure motives mingled with it. We are continually affected by our upbringing and our background.

I.H. Marshall emphasizes this in his definition of 'moderation': "The essential meaning of the word is fairmindedness, the attitude of a man who is charitable towards men's faults and merciful in his judgment of their failings, because he takes the whole situation into his reckoning".

John Knox once wrote to Calvin about the continued use of sponsors at baptism. Knox was strongly against the practice. Although Calvin agreed in principle, his reply counseled caution: "the parents ought to come and recognize their commitment in the Lord, but, because of the long ages in which

the people have lived under a corrupt church, sponsors could take their place provided they promised to see the child brought up in the true faith".

Calvin was saying that this situation involved more than a theory. Knox was dealing with fallen people who were the product of a long tradition. As ministers, we have to recognize that we are dealing with ordinary, imperfect people. We do not profess to have a regenerate church membership. By that very admission we recognize that there is continuing sin. Moderation deals with this sin.

The fifth aspect of holy moderation is patience. In his letter to Knox, Calvin agreed that he wanted to be rid of sponsors, but it did not have to be done immediately. He counseled Knox to be patient. In another instance, Knox was complaining about the ex-priests who were still enjoying their pensions and rents from church lands. Knox wanted to get this money for the church. Calvin wrote back that "in the meantime, provided the church recover by their death the ecclesiastical property, it does not seem fitting to raise a strife about the annual revenue". Why did he say that? Because he saw that a weapon would be handed to the enemies of the gospel if Presbyterians were perceived as people who threw old men out of their homes and filled Edinburgh with beggar priests. Calvin was saying in effect, "Wait. They will die one day. Make it clear that when they die the resources come to the church where they belong. You can afford to be patient".

The English language has a proverb counseling such patience: "Geneva was not built in a day". It is interesting to compare this with the motto of the radicals and Anabaptists". Reformation without tarrying for any".

There is a world of difference between them. Calvin was not using patience as an excuse for doing nothing. In his 'tolerable foolishnesses' letter, he also complained of people who used past blemishes in the Church of England Prayer Book as an excuse for indefinitely tolerating all sorts of 'papist dregs'. But on the whole we can afford to be patient. This is a practical application of the sovereignty of God. Is this not what Paul says in Philippians 4? "Let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand." That 'at hand' includes both a reference to our Lord's return and his present control. We do not have to rush around insisting that something be done now. We must faithfully proceed, wisely considering every situation and patiently looking to the Lord. Presbyterians should know where they are going. Presbyterians should swallow when their brother Presbyterians do secondary things differently. In a right sense, Presbyterians should wait. This is holy moderation.

Presbyterianism and Holy Moderation

We have seen what holy moderation is. Our next question is why should Presbyterianism produce these characteristics? First, Presbyterianism has a high view of the unity of the church. Calvin did not like candles in churches. But he wrote to Reformed refugees in Wesel who were troubled by Lutheran candles: "Let us lay it down as a settled point that we ought to make concessions in small ceremonies that do not involve any prejudice to the confession of our faith and for this end, that the unity of the church be not destroyed by our excessive rigor or moroseness. The important consideration is, that you do not yield to a faulty pliancy in the confession of your faith . . . There is not one of us who from spite against a candle . . . would separate himself from the body of the church".

The old Presbyterians such as George Gillespie and James Durham passionately believed in unity in the church. Durham wrote "Never did men run to quench fire in a city, lest all should be destroyed with more diligence that men ought to bestir themselves to quench this in the church; never did mariners use more speed to stop a leak in a ship lest all should be drowned, than ministers especially, and all Christian men should haste to stop this breaking in of the waters of strife, lest thereby the whole church be overwhelmed.

George Gillespie, addressing the independents in the Westminster Assembly, wrote: "Let there be no strife between us and you for we be brethren . . . Let it not be said that there can be no unity in the church without prelacy . . . Alas! How shall our division and contentions hinder the preaching and learning of Christ (the vision, you see), and there edifying of one another in love? . . . There is but one Christ; yea, the Head and the body make but one Christ, so that you cannot divide the body without dividing Christ... Oh brethren, we shall be one in heaven; let us pack up differences in this place of our pilgrimage the best way we can. Nay, we will not despair of unity in this world . . . Hath not God promised to give us one heart and one way? . . . Brethren, it is not impossible, pray for it, endeavor it, press hard toward the mark of accommodation".

Presbyterianism leads to holy moderation because it has a strong view of the unity of the church. Presbyterianism is an internationalist -religion. Presbyterians have always favored international conferences, because they recognize their brethren in Korea, Japan, Africa, North American and South America. Meeting people from those diverse lands is a great corrective. Speaking to those from the Dutch Reformed Churches, we find that they have a strong commitment to the reformed faith, but many of their circumstantial practices are different. We cannot say, "You are not reformed"; we must say, "We do things differently". Immediately such things are put into perspective.

Secondly, Presbyterianism leads to holy moderation because it has a biblical view of the Old Testament in relation to the New. The unity of the people of Israel under the old covenant and the continuity (with development) between the New Testament church and Old Testament Israel are fundamental. They provide the materials for building a holy moderation of New Testament Christianity. There is still only one 'people of God', one holy community that must dwell in unity. Yet the New Testament has no book of Leviticus. The Spirit-indwelt, mature (Gal. 4:1-7) church does not need a rule book fitted to the juvenile age of the covenant people. When people cut asunder the Old and New Testaments or when they blur the distinction between them, trouble inevitably results. Presbyterians ought to have holy moderation because of their covenant theology.

Thirdly, Presbyterians ought to develop holy moderation because the very system of Presbyterian government expresses this moderation. People who are not involved in a Presbyterian government may not understand it. They ask, "How can we give to a presbytery the right to change a local decision?" The question I would put back to these people is this: Do you know how often that happens? The answer is very, very seldom. Almost never. Well then, is it all necessary? Are we just arguing about abstractions? No, I am more and more convinced that this court of appeal has a restraining influence on all sides in disputes in the church.

No wonder there is often tyranny in independency if the pastor knows that he can treat people as he pleases and they can do nothing about it as long as he has a majority in the church meeting. No

wonder bitterness and division occur if a group is passionately concerned about something it believes is true but knows that it does not have a majority in the church meeting. It has nowhere to turn. The very fact that in Presbyterianism there is a court of appeal, a wider venue in which these things can be aided produces moderation so that only in exceptional circumstances is it needed.

Presbyterianism with its checks and balances, with its limitations on human foolishness exercises a tremendous influence in holy moderation. We are reminded that the church of Jesus Christ does not end at the door of the local church. It is not you in your small corner and I in mine, but all of us in the one body of the Lord Jesus Christ. That restrains the strong-minded individual who imagines that wisdom will die with him and that he alone knows exactly what is wrong with the church. What tremendous trouble a person like that can cause in our independent church! Yet in Presbyterianism we can say to him, "Go talk to the presbytery and see what those men think. Then your court of appeal, a wider body with whom you can deal". When approached in this fashion, these do not sound like important biblical principles, do they? But is it a lack of such 'little' things that so often has wrecked our churches and ruined the effectiveness of the evangelical cause in our land?

It is my conviction that Presbyterianism is wonderfully suited to foster and grow in moderation. "Here", said Alexander Henderson, "is superiority without tyranny, . . . here is parity without confusion and disorder . . . and lastly, here is subject without slaver/".

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