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Samuel Johnson and Presbyterianism



by Jeremy Larson

In July of 2009, much of the Protestant world celebrated the quincentennial of John Calvin's birth (July 10, 1509). His *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), a systematic compendium of Christian doctrine, was one of the first of its kind, considered by some to be among the top five works on Christianity ever written. Significantly less celebrated was the

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tricentennial of another European giant—Samuel Johnson (b. September 18,¹ 1709)—a mere two months later. Johnson was a physically large man, but his size as a lexical powerhouse was even more staggering. Having few predecessors in the realm of glossary writing (though Nathan Bailey had made an attempt in 1730 with his *Dictionarium Britannicum*), Johnson single-handedly² wrote a dictionary (1755) in less than a decade and before he was fifty—arguably the most important linguistic event of the eighteenth century. But even though Johnson was born two hundred years after Calvin, and sixty years after the publication of Presbyterian doctrine presented in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, there may be similarities between Calvin and Johnson that have been overlooked; readers might even be surprised at the influence of Reformed thinking—particularly several doctrines and practices of Presbyterianism—on this larger-than-life figure.

The link between Samuel Johnson and Presbyterianism reaches far beyond his twenty-one years of friendship with James Boswell (1740–95), whom he met in 1763. For even though Boswell was raised in a Presbyterian home, his interaction and conversations with Johnson do not give us much information per se about Johnson's specific views on Presbyterianism. In fact, as Richard Schwartz notes, "Johnson's actual beliefs and philosophical postures must to a great extent be inferred."³ Fortunately, through Boswell's persistent journaling, especially in his monumental *Life of Johnson* (1791), we actually can infer a great deal of how Johnson's beliefs compared with Presbyterian dogma.

History of the Church of England

Before we establish Johnson's connections to Presbyterianism, we should review how the Church of England, also known as the Anglican Church, came into existence. In 1532, King Henry VIII of England (1491–1547) appointed Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556) as the first Protestant Archbishop of Canterbury so that Cranmer could give Henry permission to divorce Catherine of Aragon. Since the divorce was based on Catherine's failure to produce a male heir, Pope Clement VII condemned this separation. Unfazed by excommunication, Henry broke from the Roman Catholic Church—an added disparagement to Catherine, whose Spanish father was nicknamed “Ferdinand the Catholic”—and established the state church as Anglicanism, an amalgamation of Catholicism and Protestantism, which hailed the English monarch, instead of the pope, as its leader. As Henry VIII's Archbishop, Cranmer compiled *The Book of Common Prayer* and first issued it in 1549. This manual, which included ceremonies such as marriage, baptism, communion, and funerals, served as the official service book of the Church of England.

The blend of Catholic and Protestant traditions created king-sized changes in England's state religion. According to E.W. Ives, “[F]rom the break with Rome onwards, Henry VIII moved progressively towards a personal formulation of Christianity which was as distinct from Rome as it was from Luther.”⁴ Actually, the English Confession of Henry VIII remained fairly Catholic—without the doctrine of the pope's infallibility—until Edward VI (1537–53) took the throne in 1547. During his six-year reign, Edward VI instituted Protestantism as the state religion and revamped the Confession to be strictly Reformed.

When Edward VI's Catholic half-sister Mary I (1516–58) succeeded him in 1553, she attempted to jettison all vestiges of Protestantism and began an infamous persecution—reminiscent of her grandfather's Spanish Inquisition in 1478—which earned her the title “Bloody Mary.” Under her reign, Cranmer was burned at the stake in 1556 as a martyr for alleged treason and heresy. (One reason that Johnson so disliked David Hume [1711–76] was Hume's effort to vindicate Mary Tudor's violence; Johnson refused to believe in her innocence.⁵)

The immediate effects of Mary Tudor's bloodlust were short-lived, for after Mary's death in 1558, her half-sister Elizabeth I (1533–1603) ascended the throne and reinstated Protestantism as the state religion. Spanish war threats, along with stirrings of Catholic restoration attempts, loomed dark over Elizabeth's reign until the climactic defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 dispelled any remaining hazards and established the unifying British Isles as a world superpower. Moreover, Elizabeth solidified English Protestantism by connecting it to Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*, which included the *Thirty-nine Articles* (1563), a series of defining doctrinal statements and an attempt to achieve a *via media* between English Catholics and Protestants.⁶

Following Elizabeth's reign, the son of Mary, Queen of Scots (also known as Mary Stuart, 1542–97), came to the English-Irish throne. Known as James VI in Scotland, he became James I (1566–1625) of England. Though James I was raised as a Presbyterian, he reverted to Anglicanism when he became king. In 1611 (four hundred years ago), an authorized version of the Bible—translated from the original languages by a committee of Westminster divines—was published and named in his honor: *The King James Bible* (also called *The Authorized Version*). During the reign of his son Charles I (1600–49), the Westminster Assembly of Divines yet again completed an enormously significant work—*The Westminster Confession of Faith*—along with a *Shorter* and *Larger Catechism*. This confession, first presented to Parliament in 1646, systematized core doctrines of Presbyterian faith.

The Westminster Confession of Faith differed notably from Elizabeth I's Thirty-nine Articles on the issues of church government and the civil magistrate. The Westminster Presbyterian government was representative, whereas Anglicanism mirrored the hierarchical government of the Catholics—a top-down government by the king through bishops. Concerning magistrates, according to *The Westminster Confession of Faith* the monarch (or government in general) cooperates with (but cannot rule over) the institutional church, whereas in the Church of England, the monarch was, until modern times, the earthly head of the institutional church. At the dawn of Anglicanism, “Henry VIII was ‘the only Supreme Head on earth of the

Church of England.””⁷

With the onset of the English Civil War in 1642, which ended with the beheading of Charles I in 1649, England’s history turned even more turbulent. Henry Bowden claims that *The Westminster Confession of Faith* “did not survive the restoration of the monarchy in 1660,”⁸ but Gerald Cragg seems to disagree, for he says, “The Presbyterians . . . played an important part in the Restoration, and appeared to be firmly entrenched in positions of power.”⁹ Bowden does admit that “[t]he theology of the Westminster Assembly documents remained influential for Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and most Baptists throughout the English-speaking world.”¹⁰ By Johnson’s time, political and religious matters were no less complicated. American colonists were attempting to separate from Britain, largely on the basis of religious freedom; and the introduction of Methodism—and its later separation from the Church of England—further complicated people’s view of Anglicanism.

Anglicanism and Presbyterianism

In fact, Anglicanism has been a melting pot of religious viewpoints ever since the Church of England was born, probably because Henry VIII based doctrine more on pragmatism than on systematic, logical beliefs carefully derived from Scripture. Personal views of the clergy have varied greatly throughout Anglican history, from those of the Arminian Archbishop William Laud (1573–1645) to those of the Calvinist bishop J.C. Ryle (1816–1900). Johnson himself acknowledged the melting pot of Christianity in general when he asked Boswell to explain the differences among the Church of England, Presbyterianism, Roman Catholicism, the Greek (Orthodox) Church, and the Coptic (Egyptian) Church.¹¹ Not surprisingly, Boswell could not.

Still, Anglicanism played a central role throughout Johnson’s life. Boswell specifically labeled Johnson “a sincere and zealous Christian, of high Church-of-England,”¹² and Johnson’s mother, Sarah, was a devout woman who employed several religious books to rear Johnson in doctrinal truths. Chester Chapin notes that one “book which Sarah used in instructing young Sam in the duties of religion was the enormously popular any-

mous work *The Whole Duty of Man* (first published in 1657), commonly ascribed to the royalist divine Richard Allestree.”¹³

As an adult, Johnson greatly “admired the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*” and “apparently had committed great parts of it to memory.”¹⁴ This admiration began in his childhood. Boswell relates a story in which the prodigious Johnson, around age three, was instructed by his mother to memorize a daily entry in *The Book of Common Prayer*: “She went up stairs, leaving him to study it: But by the time she had reached the second floor, she heard him following her. ‘What’s the matter?’ said she. ‘I can say it,’ he replied; and repeated it distinctly, though he could not have read it over more than twice.”¹⁵ James Gray also mentions Johnson’s “deep and comprehensive knowledge of *The Book of Common Prayer*,”¹⁶ evidenced in his memorizing it “with characteristic thoroughness”¹⁷ and his modeling sermons after its liturgy.¹⁸

The Book of Common Prayer was not the only document to attract Johnson’s attention. *The Thirty-nine Articles* from almost two hundred years previous still held sway over religious institutions as well as political ones. In the eighteenth century, as Chapin notes, personal subscription to *The Thirty-nine Articles* was required for university entrance,¹⁹ a practice that Johnson mildly questioned. According to Chapin,

Johnson admitted that subscription was “making boys at the University subscribe to what they do not understand.” But he believed that since the universities were founded to bring up “members for the Church of England,” some kind of subscription, indicating adherence to that church, was necessary, and that it might as well be subscription to the Articles since a simple oath indicating adherence to the Church of England would entail the same difficulty.²⁰

When Johnson and Boswell discussed the issue three years earlier, Johnson interpreted the policy to mean, “you are not to preach against them.”²¹ However, in 1773, when “a measure was proposed to relieve dissenting ministers from the obligation—imposed by the Toleration Act—of subscribing to the greater part of *The Thirty-nine Articles*,”²² Edmund Burke supported the measure, but Johnson disagreed with such an absolution that he even wrote

to an Anglican clergyman to tell him so.²³

While Anglicanism had an obvious effect on Johnson, Presbyterianism, on the other hand, was not as clearly influential on him. It is true that Boswell was raised Presbyterian (his father, Alexander Boswell, was a Scottish Presbyterian judge) and that he had an immense influence on Johnson, but James Boswell's Presbyterianism was not as strong as that of his father. When James

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Boswell went to the University of Edinburgh at age thirteen, he became close friends with William Johnson Temple, who "introduced Boswell to the Anglican form of worship, which Boswell continued to prefer to the Presbyterianism of his boyhood education."²⁴ According to Gordon Turnbull, Boswell always shied away from his early Calvinism and at times "became attracted . . . to the idea of converting to Roman Catholicism."²⁵ It is no wonder, then, that Boswell's *Life of Johnson* specifically mentions Presbyterianism only three times.

Boswell's indifference towards Scottish Presbyterianism contrasts significantly with Johnson's open disdain for Scottish thinking and customs. For example, Johnson defines the word *oats* in his *Dictionary of the English Language* as "a grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people." Furthermore, when a friend "mentioned some Scotch who had taken possession of a barren part of America, and wondered why they should choose it," Johnson replied, "Why, Sir, all barrenness is comparative. The *Scotch* would not know it to be barren."²⁶ At that point, Boswell and Johnson had already toured the Western Isles of Scotland, and Boswell, failing in an attempt to persuade Johnson to admit that the experience had not been completely negative, said,

"Come, come . . . You have been in Scotland, Sir, and say if you did not see meat and drink enough there," to which Johnson replied, "Why yes, Sir; meat and drink enough to give the inhabitants sufficient strength to run away from home."²⁷ But despite Johnson's contempt for all things Scottish, Boswell's Scottish Presbyterian background caused little strife between the two men, other than one altercation between Johnson and Boswell's father after the Scottish Hebrides tour.²⁸

That altercation was not the only indication of Johnson's view of Presbyterianism recorded in the Hebrides journals. Several times Johnson lambasted John Knox (c. 1505–72), the sixteenth century Scottish Protestant Reformer,²⁹ referring to "the tumult and violence of Knox's reformation"³⁰ and "the tumultuous violence of Knox."³¹ Later, when "[Boswell] happened to ask where John Knox was buried, Dr. Johnson burst out, 'I hope in the highway. I have been looking at his reformations.'"³² Moreover, "One of the steeples, which [Johnson] was told was in danger, he wished not to be taken down: 'for,' said he, 'it may fall on some of the posterity of John Knox; and no great matter!'"³³

And yet, Johnson's attitude towards Presbyterianism was at times ambivalent, and sometimes even positive. When Boswell asked Johnson if he opposed the Roman Catholic religion, Johnson replied, "No more, Sir, than . . . the Presbyterian religion."³⁴ In regard to formal prayer, Johnson preferred Catholicism to Presbyterianism.³⁵ In other ways, however, he conceded that the Reformation had brought light to the world.³⁶ Boswell records that Johnson did attend a "Presbyterian prayer" on their Hebrides tour.³⁷ That event surprised Boswell because Johnson had previously refused to go to a Presbyterian church gathering, saying, "I will not give a sanction, by my presence, to a Presbyterian assembly."³⁸ On that same tour, Johnson actually praised the intellectualism and refinement of the Scottish Presbyterian ministers³⁹ (perhaps indicating that some of his public disdain for Scotland was affected, or at least not as absolute as he put on):

I saw not one [pastor] in the islands, whom I had reason to think either deficient in learning, or irregular in life; but found several with whom I could not converse without wishing, as my respect increased,

that they had not been Presbyterians. . . . The ministers in the islands had attained such knowledge as may justly be admired in men, who have no motive to study, but generous curiosity, or, what is still better, desire of usefulness; with such politeness as so narrow a circle of converse could not have supplied, but to minds naturally disposed to elegance.⁴⁰

Johnson even owned a personal copy of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, at least for a brief while. Apparently, Boswell sent him a copy, along with other religious books,⁴¹ which Johnson eventually donated to the Bodleian.⁴²

As was indicated from the Hebrides tour, Johnson generally held a negative view of Presbyterianism, but the great irony is that Johnson espoused several significant Presbyterian doctrines, whether he realized that he did or not. The following points show similarities between Johnson's thinking and Presbyterian thinking in the areas of the atonement and total depravity, the law of lesser magistrates, the regulative principle, and eschatology.

The Atonement and Total Depravity

As many people do, Samuel Johnson shifted his position on theological matters throughout his life, especially on the exact nature of the Atonement. He even made several comments about the insignificance of doctrinal variations among denominations. At one point Johnson appeared to see little difference between Presbyterians and Catholics: "All denominations of Christians have really little difference in points of doctrine. . . . There is a prodigious difference between the external form of one of your Presbyterian churches in Scotland, and a church in Italy; yet the doctrine taught is essentially the same."⁴³ Earlier in his life, he said something similar: "I think all Christians, whether Papists or Protestants, agree in the essential articles, and that their differences are trivial, and rather political than religious."⁴⁴

Yet in 1773, Boswell wrote something in his Hebrides *Journal* to suggest that Johnson's view of the Atonement deviated from both Presbyterian and Catholic belief. According to Boswell, Johnson agreed with William Law's view of the Atonement, as proposed in Law's *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, namely, that Christ's death had no judicial

or propitiatory effect, but merely showed people the devastation of sin; from there, they could make their own decisions to follow or not to follow Christ.⁴⁵ This view of Atonement—as being merely illustrative and cautionary—agrees with neither the Protestant view (imputed grace as the basis of justification) nor the Catholic view (infused grace as the basis of justification). Even John Wesley (1703–91), an Arminian Methodist with whom Johnson was acquainted, disagreed with Law on this point: "Wesley insisted that Christ's death was first and foremost a vicarious sacrifice."⁴⁶ Still, Law's *Serious Call*, one of the most influential religious works in the eighteenth century, influenced Johnson.⁴⁷

On the other hand, Johnson's view of total depravity frequently concurred with Presbyterian teaching. Chapter 9 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, on free will, states, "Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation: so as, a natural man, being altogether averse from that good, and dead in sin, is not able, by his own strength, to convert himself, or to prepare himself thereunto."⁴⁸ And yet, according to Chapter 8, Christ has appeased the wrath of God the Father: "The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience, and sacrifice of Himself . . . hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father . . . for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him."⁴⁹ Then, on justification, Chapter 11, states, "Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth: not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous."⁵⁰

Johnson often acknowledged his own depravity and even said, "I hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am."⁵¹ According to Chapin, "Johnson never went so far [as to accept total depravity]. In conversation he could pass remarks on the depravity of human nature that would have satisfied the sternest Calvinist, but his considered opinion [in *Rambler* 70] is that most men are neither greatly good nor greatly wicked" and could "meet God halfway."⁵²

However, according to Johnson's *Prayers and Meditations* (published posthumously in 1785), as early as 1766 Johnson prayed for strength "not to sink into total depravity" and that God would "rescue [him] from the captivity of sin."⁵³ Furthermore,

Maurice Quinlan, who disagrees with Chapin's assessment of Johnson's synergy, makes a strong case for Johnson's orthodoxy. Quinlan writes, "Although Johnson never wrote at length on the Atonement, there are various allusions to it in his works, and on two occasions he discussed his interpretation with Boswell. His comments, when carefully studied, indicate that during the course of his life his views changed."⁵⁴ One of those occasions occurred in 1781, three years before Johnson's death, when Boswell specifically requested that Johnson speak in depth on the atonement. Johnson succinctly said, "The great sacrifice for the sins of mankind was offered at the death of the MESSIAH, who is called in Scripture 'The Lamb of God, that taketh away the sins of the world.'"⁵⁵

Johnson's position became even clearer in the final moments of his life. Quinlan writes, "During the last months before his death, [Johnson] made various comments showing that he now felt the vicarious sacrifice to form the central core of Christianity."⁵⁶ Evidence for this appears toward the end of *Life* where Boswell writes that in the last month of Johnson's life, according to Dr. Brocklesby (one of the attendant physicians during Johnson's final days), "For some time before his death, all his fears were calmed and absorbed by the prevalence of his faith, and his trust in the merits and *propitiation* of JESUS CHRIST."⁵⁷ Dr. Brocklesby added that Johnson "talked often . . . about the necessity of faith in the *sacrifice* of Jesus, as necessary beyond all good works whatever, for the salvation of mankind."⁵⁸ And further, within the last week of his life, Johnson composed this prayer (also recorded by Reverend George Strahan in *Prayers and Meditations*):

Almighty and most merciful Father, I am now, as to human eyes, it seems, about to commemorate, for the last time, the death of thy Son JESUS CHRIST, our Saviour and Redeemer. Grant, O LORD, that my whole hope and confidence may be in his merits, and thy mercy; enforce and accept my imperfect repentance; make this commemoration available to the confirmation of my faith, the establishment of my hope, and the enlargement of my charity; and make the death of thy Son JESUS CHRIST effectual to my redemption. Have mercy upon me, and pardon the multitude of my offences. Bless my friends; have mercy upon all

men. Support me, by thy Holy Spirit, in the days of weakness, and at the hour of death; and receive me, at my death, to everlasting happiness, for the sake of JESUS CHRIST. Amen.⁵⁹

These comments and prayer strongly suggest that the doctrine of Atonement, essential not only to Presbyterianism but also to general orthodoxy, had become essential to Johnson as well.

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The Law of Lesser Magistrates

Not only did Johnson change his mind about the necessity of the Atonement, but he also, at times, intellectually sympathized with the Reformed law of lesser magistrates, a distinctive Presbyterian doctrine, more suitable to the past than to today. This "law" differs sharply from the Anglican divine right of kings, which Johnson firmly rejected. On the subject of civil magistrates, Chapter 23 in *The Westminster Confession* states,

The civil magistrate may not assume to himself the administration of the Word and sacraments, or the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven: yet he hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire; that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed; and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administered, and observed. For the better effecting whereof, he hath power to call synods, to be present at them, and to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.⁶⁰

In other words, even though monarchs could not dictate church laws, they had the right both to assemble church synods and to prosecute her-

esy. Traditionally, Presbyterians applied their holistic view of Scripture—hence their Covenant theology—to their politics: whatever in the Old Testament is not revoked in the New Testament still stands. Traditional Presbyterianism, then, denied the absolute separation of church and state, just as the ancient Jewish kings did, and instead took Romans 13 as a primary support for the civil magistrate’s right to protect the church.⁶¹

It is probably John Knox who took this doctrine to the fullest extent ever, though (as we have seen) Johnson openly maligned Knox’s methods of reform. When Mary Stuart attempted to make Scotland a Catholic state, lesser magistrates—encouraged by Knox, other Reformers, and the majority of the common people—forced her to flee the country. Then, after she was accused of treasonous machinations against Elizabeth I and beheaded, Scotland established Presbyterianism as its official church, in 1690.

Despite Johnson’s violent verbal reactions to Knox’s reforms, his sermons and actions demonstrate his belief that magistrates should uphold virtue. In Sermon 5, Johnson wrote, “As [governors] are entrusted with the government for the sake of the people, they are under the strongest obligations to advance [the people’s] happiness, which they can only do by encouragement of virtue.”⁶² This statement mirrors Romans 13:4, which says that a ruler is to be a minister of God for the good of the people. Calvin himself, after explaining in the *Institutes* that men should obey even unjust tyrants, writes that constitutional magistrates, as defenders of the people’s freedom, ought to check the tyranny of kings and that obedience to a tyrant must not become disobedience to God.⁶³

In a startling episode occurring in a stagecoach, Johnson actually supported the papal Inquisition’s boldness because of its alleged devotion to religious purity:

To the utter astonishment of all the passengers but myself [Boswell], who knew that [Johnson] could talk upon any side of a question, he defended the Inquisition, and maintained, that “false doctrine should be checked on its first appearance; that the civil power should unite with the church in punishing those who dared to attack the established religion, and that such only were punished

by the Inquisition.”⁶⁴

Perhaps Johnson was being hyperbolic, in response to the woman’s railings against the Roman Catholics, whom Johnson did not completely write off as unorthodox.

But his comments were not complete exaggeration. In *Rambler* 203, Johnson made it clear that “To prevent evil is the great end of government.”⁶⁵ And if that government is itself evil, human nature will strike it down. As Johnson said in yet another discussion, “I consider that in no government power can be abused long. Mankind will not bear it. If a sovereign oppresses his people to a great degree[,] they will rise and cut off his head. There is a remedy in human nature against tyranny, that will keep us safe under every form of government.”⁶⁶

In spite of this statement, Johnson supported neither divine right nor regicide.⁶⁷ In Sermon 23, he used *The Book of Common Prayer* to denounce the rebellion and disorderliness of those who executed King Charles I.⁶⁸ According to Chapin, Johnson expressed opinions fraught with internal tension:

Johnson’s [church-state] view is both conservative and liberal. It is conservative as against modern libertarian views in that it considers extensive or “unbounded liberty” in any area of human activity no necessary precondition of the good society; it is liberal in that its distrust of such liberty is based upon sincere concern for the material and spiritual welfare of the common man, as against all invaders of his peace, security, and property.⁶⁹

Since, according to Chapin, Johnson believed that “the most dangerous kind of strife . . . stems from difference of opinion in religion”⁷⁰ (such as the Spanish Inquisition⁷¹), Johnson also believed that violence is necessary to control that strife in extreme cases, even though he disliked it.

This is not to say that Johnson, who attributed Knox’s violence to the “malignant influence of [C]alvinism,”⁷² specifically supported the same reforms as Knox. Still, Johnson recognized that while God appoints authorities, no single authority is divine, not even a monarch.

The Regulative Principle

Along with the doctrine of Atonement and the

law of lesser magistrates, the “regulative principle,” though never specifically mentioned by Johnson, plays a minor role in Boswell’s *Life*. Apparently, Johnson was familiar with this highly controversial Presbyterian teaching. The regulative principle, which permits only church practices that are expressly approved by Scripture, provides a major distinction between Presbyterians and Lutherans or Anglicans. (Lutherans and Anglicans practice the normative principle, which permits church practices that are not expressly forbidden by Scripture.)⁷³

Johnson displayed his support of postmillennial eschatology . . . in his appreciation of the Reformed view of vocation.

Chapter 21 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, on religious worship and the Sabbath Day, explains the regulative principle as follows:

The light of nature showeth that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart, and with all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.⁷⁴

While this principle deals specifically with corporate worship, Reformers commonly looked to the Bible to regulate other areas of life (such as the law of lesser magistrates, above), and many Presbyterians applied the line of reasoning to all of life: they believed that as much as possible, they were to live the way the Scriptures prescribe and were not to assume that because an activity is not explicitly prohibited, the Bible condones it.

Johnson’s sympathy with the regulative principle emerged in 1768, when some of Johnson’s

friends mentioned an essay speculating on the future state of “brutes” (animals): “Johnson, who did not like to hear of any thing concerning a future state which was not authorised by the regular canons of orthodoxy, discouraged this talk” and was actually “offended at its continuation.”⁷⁵ Johnson’s comment against this speculation sounds similar to Calvin’s view of speculation: “we should not indulge in speculations concerning the angels.”⁷⁶ “Let us remember here,” he continues, “as in all religious doctrine, that we ought to hold to one rule of modesty and sobriety: not to speak, or guess, or even to seek to know, concerning obscure matters anything except what has been imparted to us by God’s Word.”⁷⁷

Johnson’s sympathy for the regulative principle emerged again in 1773, when Boswell praised the Roman Catholics (Boswell does not mention why) and Augustus Toplady (an Anglican clergyman who lauded both George Whitefield and John Knox and eventually became a French Calvinist minister) criticized them for praying to saints and claimed that their prayers supposed the “omnipresence of the saints.”⁷⁸ Johnson disagreed with Toplady’s reasoning but said that since praying to the saints is never commanded in the Bible, it would be better not to practice it.⁷⁹ Such a caution has clear roots in the Presbyterian regulative principle of worship.

Eschatology

A final Presbyterian idea that Johnson seemed to support tangentially is postmillennial eschatology.⁸⁰ Johnson was contemporary with other postmillennialists—Matthew Henry (1662–1714), Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), George Whitefield (1714–70), William Carey (1761–1834)⁸¹—who had inherited this optimism from the Puritans.⁸² Johnson displayed his support of postmillennial eschatology, first of all, in his appreciation of the Reformed view of vocation.⁸³ Chapter 23 in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* says of civil magistrates,

It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate, when called thereunto, in the managing whereof, as they ought especially to maintain piety, justice, and peace, according to the wholesome laws of each commonwealth; so, for that end, they may lawfully now, under the New

Testament, wage war, upon just and necessary occasion.⁸⁴

This allowance for Christians to become magistrates is contrary to the teaching of some Christian denominations (past and present), which claim—with a medieval-like insistence that the spiritual realm is superior to and more godly than the secular realm—that while secular jobs are acceptable, there is nothing particularly redemptive about them, for what God is primarily concerned with is the spiritual business of pastors, evangelists, and perhaps a few other ministry-minded professions. In *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, however, secular vocations and cultural engagement (e.g., employment as a magistrate) are not only permitted but encouraged as vehicles to spread the kingdom of God.

Johnson's Sermon 5 is one of the most expressive statements of his view of cultural engagement:

To general happiness indeed is required a general concurrence in virtue; but we are not to delay the amendment of our own lives in expectation of this favourable juncture. A universal reformation must be begun somewhere, and every man ought to be ambitious of being the first. He that does not promote it, retards it; for every man must endeavour to make the world happy, by a strict performance of his duty to God and man,⁸⁵ and the mighty work will soon be accomplished.⁸⁶

This statement sounds like a classical Presbyterian postmillennial position, in that Christ's people work not in some static form with no visible results (i.e., no gradual and overall improvement of society through the discipleship of the nations) but to make the gospel successful in every area of life.⁸⁷ It is doubtful that what Johnson specifically meant by "the mighty work" was simply a higher degree of personal piety,⁸⁸ for Johnson's own actions of writing and interacting with society showed that he sought to change the world for God, despite his society's resistance to such changes.

Johnson could have easily agreed with Calvin's biblical doctrines of Christ's present kingship over the nations and the priesthood of believers, which led to a reformation in the area of vocation. In fact, many of the Puritans' writings include statements⁸⁹ completely in step with ones like this from Calvin's

Institutes: "[N]o task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight."⁹⁰

Even though Francis Schaeffer's terminology of "two stories" did not exist during Johnson's time (though Augustine had written of "two cities," and Luther and others had written of "two kingdoms"), apparently Johnson rejected a bifurcated theory of secular and spiritual matters, in which "lower-story" mundane activities (e.g., academics, agriculture, artisanship, etc.) are permitted but are not as essential to God's kingdom as are "upper-story" activities (e.g., preaching, partaking of sacraments, personal piety, etc.).⁹¹ Johnson's literary activity attests to this fact. Chapin writes,

In the New Testament parable of the talents Johnson found a religious commandment [that] seemed to him of the utmost importance. As Johnson sees it, God demands that every man employ to the fullest those talents with which he has been endowed. This applies to every activity, religious or secular, provided the secular activity violates no dictate of religion and is of benefit to man (dictionary-making, for instance).⁹²

Johnson further demonstrated his compatibility with Puritan eschatology by his support of city life. Eric O. Jacobsen, in writing about the current "eschatological paradigm shift" among evangelicals, notes that in the past it has been common for Christians to ignore the role of the public square.⁹³ Such Christians possess what Jacobsen calls an "over-ruralized eschatology," in which they display the "Gnostic tendenc[y] . . . to think of their eternal reward as a return to the simplicity of Eden, more than a journey to the New Jerusalem."⁹⁴ To bolster his point, Jacobsen cites lines from *The Task* (1785), a poem by Johnson's English contemporary, William Cowper (1731–1800):

God made the country and man made the town.
What wonder then that health and virtue, gifts
That can alone make sweet the bitter draught
That life holds out to all, should most abound
And least be threaten'd in the fields and groves?
. . .
Domestic happiness, thou only bliss
Of Paradise that hast survived the fall!

But in fact, a ruralized eschatology was the new-comer. Aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, John Winthrop (1588–1649) declared that God’s kingdom on earth could flourish “as a city on a hill.” Of course, as more than a century passed and no city-kingdom came, perhaps it became easier to shift the focus to the country. *The Task* was published one year after Johnson died, but Johnson, no stranger to discussions about the virtues of country life, often made his opinion to the contrary extremely clear. Boswell once “suggested . . . that if [he] were to reside in London, the exquisite zest with which [he] relished it in occasional visits might go off, and [he] might grow tired of it.”⁹⁵ Johnson famously replied that no intellectual man is willing to leave London, for “when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.”⁹⁶ At one point Johnson was offered a clergy position in the country, but he declined, according to Boswell, partly because he felt that “his temper and habits rendered him unfit” for the duties of a clergyman, “and partly because his love of a London life was so strong, that he would have thought himself an exile in any other place, particularly if residing in the country.”⁹⁷ A concept of the kingdom of God as being merely a spiritual reality, best pursued in the country, would have been offensive to Johnson.

John Calvin, who first introduced Presbyterianism in Geneva in 1541, believed that Christ was presently reigning over both the spiritual and physical worlds, the implication being that Christians have a duty to advance Christ’s kingdom, not only in preaching and sacraments or in the hearts of men but also through excellence in so-called secular professions as they seek to do good to their neighbors and show Christ to the nations.⁹⁸ As Bowden points out, “One central point in Calvin’s thinking is the conviction that God is the actual present ruler over all creation.”⁹⁹ Johnson’s concurrence with Calvin on this point shows his affinity with Reformed eschatology.

Conclusion

None of this is to say that Samuel Johnson was a Calvinist, or a Presbyterian. For example, Johnson vehemently disagreed with many Presbyterian doctrines, such as “necessity.” And even though he never said that it was a doctrine *contrary* to reason, he thought that it, like the Trinity, was probably

beyond human reason.¹⁰⁰ Instead of trying to wrap his mind around all of the theological intricacies of that issue, he merely said, “We *know* our will is free, and *there’s* an end on’t.”¹⁰¹ In fact, sometimes he preferred to argue from experience instead of theory. In a conversation about Jonathan Edwards’ view of the freedom of the will, Johnson said, “All theory is against the freedom of the will; all experience for it.”¹⁰² In another conversation—refuting the theory of George Berkeley (Irish philosopher and bishop, 1685–1753) that all matter existed only in the imagination—Johnson kicked a rock and exclaimed, “I refute it *thus*.”¹⁰³ As N.D. Wilson writes, “Sore toes are a compelling argument.”¹⁰⁴

These examples aside, many of Johnson’s views and practices are strikingly similar to those of Calvin, who was serious about theology. Calvin sincerely believed that in writing the *Institutes*, he was “carry[ing] out this task for God’s church.”¹⁰⁵

Both Calvin and Johnson aimed at doing good for mankind through writing. . . .

God has filled my mind with zeal to spread his Kingdom and to further the public good. I am also duly clear in my own conscience, and have God and the angels to witness, that since I undertook the office of teacher in the church, I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness.¹⁰⁶

Similarly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* notes in its preface, written especially to heads of families, that its purpose is to provide a means to resist ignorance and error so that families may be faithful.¹⁰⁷

Such noble goals in writing contrast humorously with Johnson’s statement within the last decade of his life—“No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money.”¹⁰⁸ Despite Johnson’s gruff tone, the former hack writer from Grub Street had a soft spot in his heart for humanity, as his most famous biographer made abundantly clear. Both Calvin and Johnson aimed at doing good for mankind

through writing, and that is not a minor similarity.

Certainly many people could make valid objections to these similarities between Johnson and Presbyterianism. But evidence suggests several significant connections between the two, and, as Johnson himself wrote in *Rasselas*, “Nothing . . . will ever be attempted, if all possible objections must be first overcome.”¹⁰⁹ Taking into account all the factors that contributed to the influence of Presbyterianism on Johnson—the overwhelming dominance of Reformed thought during the mid-seventeenth century in England, Johnson’s being weaned on *The Book of Common Prayer*, his friendship with Boswell, their tour of the Hebrides, his respect for many Scottish ministers, and his sympathy with four of its doctrines—it was almost impossible for Johnson not to be somewhat sympathetic towards the Reformed perspectives in Presbyterianism.

Endnotes

1. Johnson’s original date of birth was September 7, according to the Julian calendar, but the Gregorian calendar was adopted in England in 1752, after which time Johnson celebrated his birthday on September 18.
2. “Single-handedly” means that there was no collection of writers who worked together to write definitions for this dictionary. But Johnson did have amanuenses who copied quotations and performed other duties.
3. Richard B. Schwartz, *Samuel Johnson and the Problem of Evil* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1975), 5.
4. E.W. Ives, “Henry VIII,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Lawrence Goldman, 2006, Oxford UP, 7 April 2006 <<http://oxforddnb.com>>.
5. Samuel Johnson, “Review of [William Tytler],” *Major Works*, ed. Donald Greene (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 551.
6. The term *via media* may apply to hierarchy and liturgy, but Abraham Kuyper writes that “in [the] XXXIX Articles, the Church of England is strictly Calvinistic” (*Lectures on Calvinism* [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1931], 16).
7. Ives, *ODNB*.
8. Henry Warner Bowden, “Presbyterians,” *World Book Magazine* (1989 ed.), 761.
9. Gerald R. Cragg, *The Church and The Age of Reason: 1648-1789* (Forge Village, MA: Murray, 1960), 50.
10. Bowden, 761.
11. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R.W. Chapman (New York: Oxford UP, 1998), 463.
12. *Ibid.*, 1399.
13. Chester Fisher Chapin, *The Religious Thought of Samuel Johnson* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1968), 7-8.
14. *Ibid.*, 10.
15. Boswell, 30.
16. James Gray, *Johnson’s Sermons: A Study* (New York: Oxford UP, 1972), 47.
17. *Ibid.*, 182.
18. *Ibid.*, 185, 230.
19. Boswell, 463.
20. Chapin, 51.
21. Boswell, 424.
22. Chapin, 126.
23. *Ibid.*, 126.
24. Gordon Turnbull, “James Boswell,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. Lawrence Goldman, 2006, Oxford UP, 31 March 2006 <<http://oxforddnb.com>>.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Boswell, 774. A few minutes earlier, a different friend had “remarked, that ‘among all the bold flights of Shakespeare’s imagination, the boldest was making Birnamwood march to Dunsinane; creating a wood where there never was a shrub; a wood in Scotland! ha! ha! ha!’” (771).
27. *Ibid.*
28. Peter Levi, ed., *Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* by Samuel Johnson, and *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* by James Boswell (New York: Penguin, 1984), 397-98.
29. Knox is known as the “Father of Scottish Presbyterianism.”
30. Levi, 36.
31. *Ibid.*, 49.
32. *Ibid.*, 189.
33. *Ibid.*, 190.
34. Boswell, 424.
35. *Ibid.*, 424.
36. *Ibid.*, 760.
37. Levi, 223.
38. *Ibid.*, 224.
39. J.H.S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (New

- York: Oxford UP, 1960), 303.
40. Levi, 108-9.
 41. Boswell, 562-63.
 42. The Bodleian Library is the main research library of Oxford University.
 43. Boswell, 463.
 44. Ibid., 287.
 45. Levi, 204-5.
 46. Maurice James Quinlan, *Samuel Johnson: A Layman's Religion* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1964), 49.
 47. W.H. Hutton, *Cambridge History of English Literature*, vol. 10 (New York: Cambridge UP, 1913), 401.
 48. Westminster Assembly of Divines, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1646 (Glasgow, Scotland: Bell and Bain, 1995), 9.3.
 49. Ibid., 8.5.
 50. Ibid., 11.1.
 51. Boswell, 357.
 52. Chapin, 62.
 53. Boswell, 1377.
 54. Quinlan, 50.
 55. Boswell, 1160.
 56. Quinlan, 64.
 57. Boswell, 1391. According to Quinlan, "Johnson no longer believes that it is man alone who must make propitiation for his sins. Christ by his universal sacrifice has made a perpetual propitiation" (Quinlan 55). A footnote in Boswell's *Hebrides Journal* says that later in Johnson's life, he "was fully convinced of the propitiatory sacrifice" (Levi 204).
 58. Ibid.
 59. Ibid., 1391-92.
 60. *WCF* 23.3.
 61. Verse 4 says, "For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to *execute* wrath upon him that doeth evil" (KJV).
 62. Johnson, *Major Works*, 474.
 63. Calvin, *Institutes* 1517-21 (4.20.30-32).
 64. Boswell, 329-30.
 65. Quoted in Schwartz, 57.
 66. Boswell, 477.
 67. Chapin, 134.
 68. Gray, 187.
 69. Chapin, 139-40.
 70. Ibid., 135.
 71. Ibid., 134.
 72. Chapin 127.
 73. Other denominations that practice the normative principle of worship could be added (e.g., Methodists, Baptists, etc.).
 74. *WCF* 21.1.
 75. Boswell, 392.
 76. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Battles, ed. John McNeill (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1960), 163 (1.14.4).
 77. Ibid., 164.
 78. Boswell, 544.
 79. Ibid., 544.
 80. Two qualifications should be made: First, postmillennialism is not solely a Presbyterian eschatology; second, not all Presbyterians have been postmillennialists. However, in *The Puritan Hope* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), Iain Murray emphasizes the hope that historically gave Puritans assurance of the triumph of God's people (through gospel power, not military power), and he labels it "postmillennialism." Murray says that "it can be conclusively shown that the inspiration which gave rise to the first missionary societies of the modern era was nothing other than the doctrine and outlook which, revitalized by the eighteenth-century revival, had come down from the Puritans" (135). He acknowledges that there has been a shift in postmillennial thought throughout subsequent centuries and says, "It is a mistake to treat as synonymous the Puritan and [current] postmillennial view of unfulfilled prophecy" (xviii). In other words, Puritans were not necessarily "golden agers," to use today's terminology. (In fact, many postmillennialists even today acknowledge that there will always be persecutions until Christ's return.) So the Puritans were not necessarily Reconstructionist (top-down) postmillennialists focused on God's law (such as R.J. Rushdoony, Greg Bahnsen, Gary North, and others) but could perhaps be described as Revivalist (bottom-up, grassroots) postmillennialists focused on gospel propagation.
 81. The postmillennial optimism of Carey (the "Father of modern missions") led him to "attempt great things [and] expect great things."
 82. See Greg Bahnsen's "The Prima Facie Acceptability of Postmillennialism" for more on the history of

- postmillennialism throughout the last four centuries (www.cmfnow.com/articles/pt031.htm). This essay also presents the optimism of multiple eighteenth-century hymns—by the “Father of English Hymnody,” Isaac Watts (1674–1748), and others—rooted in the Puritan hope (postmillennialism). See especially Watts’ hymns “Jesus Shall Reign” and “Joy to the World.”
83. The teleology and optimism of the postmillennial position provide the strongest motive for cultural engagement.
 84. *WCF* 23.2.
 85. Cf. Matthew 22:34-40: Love God and love your neighbor.
 86. Johnson, *Major Works* 474.
 87. In Chapters 32 and 33 of *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, while the term *postmillennial* is not used per se, the timing of events is such that the Judgment Day is a single day of judgment for the reprobate and elect alike, with little room for a millennium between judgments. Furthermore, *The Larger Catechism* answer to Question 191 provides a highly optimistic view of God’s inter-advent work in this world: “In the second petition (which is, *Thy kingdom come*) . . . we pray, that the kingdom of sin and Satan may be destroyed, the gospel propagated throughout the world . . . ; the church furnished with all gospel-officers and ordinances, purged from corruption, countenanced and maintained by the civil magistrate: . . . that Christ would rule in our hearts here, and hasten the time of his second coming, and our reigning with him for ever: and that he would be pleased so to exercise the kingdom of his power in all the world, as may best conduce to these ends.”
 88. Even though Johnson frequently lamented his own idleness (and one of his main points in this sermon deals with personal piety), he stresses the need for general piety and an adherence to God’s law to achieve both true happiness and the reversal of “the present corrupt state of the world” (*Major Works* 469).
 89. Leland Ryken documents many of these statements in his book *Worldly Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), especially in Chapter 2, on work. I am indebted to Ryken for the following two observations on Calvin.
 90. Calvin, *Institutes*, 725 (3.10.6).
 91. Dordt President Carl Zylstra’s *Pro Rege* article “Serious Education for Serious Christians” (June 2011, pp. 39-42) and John Frame’s new book, *The Escondido Theology: A Reformed Response to Two Kingdoms Theology* (Whitefield Media Productions, 2011), both address a recent divergence from the Reformed view of “two kingdoms.”
 92. Chapin. 50-51.
 93. Eric O. Jacobsen, “Over-ruralized eschatology,” 2010, *Comment*, 24 December 2010 <www.cardus.ca/comment/article/2437/>.
 94. Jacobsen is responding to (and punning on) the charge that optimistic Christians have an “over-realized eschatology.”
 95. Boswell, 858.
 96. *Ibid.*, 859.
 97. *Ibid.*, 227.
 98. Calvin’s postmillennial eschatology appears most clearly in his *Institutes* in a section on the Lord’s prayer petition that God’s kingdom come (3.20.42).
 99. Bowden, 761.
 100. Boswell, 1318-19.
 101. *Ibid.*, 411.
 102. *Ibid.*, 947.
 103. *Ibid.*, 333. More than fifteen years later, as one gentleman (who believed Berkeley’s theory) was leaving Johnson’s presence, “Johnson said to him, ‘Pray, Sir, don’t leave us; for we may perhaps forget to think of you, and then you will cease to exist’” (*Life* 1085).
 104. N.D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009) 18.
 105. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.
 106. *Ibid.*, 4.
 107. *WCF* 5-8. All members admitted to sit in the Assembly were required to take a vow that they would “maintain nothing . . . but what may make most for God’s glory, and the peace and good of this church” (15). Moreover, the Scottish parliament ratified the confession in 1690 with the intent “to settle and secure therein the true Protestant religion . . . most conducive to the advancement of true piety and godliness, and the establishing of peace and tranquillity [*sic*] within this realm” (18).
 108. Boswell, 731. Perhaps Boswell took Johnson too seriously on this point, because Boswell solemnly notes that “Numerous instances to refute this will occur to all who are versed in the history of literature.”
 109. Johnson, *Major Works*, 345.9