

# **A Primer on Reformed Liturgics<sup>1</sup>**

## **Part One —The Beginnings**

### **The Reform Gets Underway**

The Reformed liturgy is thought to originate in St. John’s chapel in Strasbourg, where a revised mass was celebrated in 1524 in German by Diebold Schwarz.[1] Schwarz, an ex Dominican, translated the Latin mass into simple German and removed words and phrases which spoke of the mass as a repetition of Christ’s work on Calvary. The service was read audibly in the vernacular. A revised mass in the common tongue was just the beginning.

As the Reformation took root across Europe, a number of liturgical reforms were made in Strasbourg and elsewhere, especially in Switzerland. Metrical Psalms (with melodies and harmonies) and hymns were introduced into the service and sung by the congregation in German. The Apostles’ Creed was also recited by the congregation, and the old lectionaries (collections of biblical passages to support “holy days” on the church calendar) faded into disuse. The Scripture lessons, especially from the gospels and epistles, became much longer and were now read in every service. Sermons were also preached at every service, often based upon the Scripture lessons chosen for that service. The ceremonial elements of the mass were slowly eliminated, the minister no longer faced to the East (a long practiced custom) but now faced the assembled worshipers. Church fixtures changed as well—the communion table was no longer called “the altar” and was moved forward, much closer to the people.

By 1530, Martin Bucer’s influence had grown significantly, and reforms to the church’s worship became more distinctly Protestant. Bucer (1491-1551) was a German Reformer based in Strasbourg, who exercised great influence upon the development of a distinctive Reformed liturgy during this formative period. New prayers were composed to replace the old Roman rites, sermons increased in length (up to an hour), priestly vestments gave way to academic attire or “uniforms” of the ministerial vocation (including a cassock, bands, black academic gown, and felt hat), a bidding to prayer was added, and the table was fenced (unbelievers were warned not to partake). Weekly communion was instituted in many places (in most places it had been celebrated annually). Services were held weekly in the cathedral church (the large metropolitan churches) and monthly in the outlying parish churches (due to a shortage of ministers and difficulty in travel). Communion (of both kinds—bread and wine) was received while standing and service books were prepared to incorporate the various reforms.

### **Calvin Arrives in Strasbourg**

When John Calvin arrived in Strasbourg (from Geneva) in 1538, he was given charge of the

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<sup>1</sup> This a PDF version of the Riddleblog Publication, A Primer on Reformed Liturgics

small French congregation which utilized the same liturgy as the German-speaking congregation. Calvin made several minor changes to the service—adding a metrical Decalogue which was divided into two parts (reflecting the two tables of the law), separated by a collect (an appropriate prayer for the occasion) and the singing of Kyries (“Lord have mercy upon us”) and the Gloria in excelsis Deo (“glory to God in the highest”). This was the service Calvin brought with him from Strasbourg when he returned to Geneva in 1541.

By the time Calvin had returned to Geneva, forms for baptism, the ordination of ministers, and more metrical Psalms were added. Originally entitled, *La Forme de Prières* (the Form of Prayers), this became the standard of Reformed worship. It was translated into English, and used by the English exiles (during the Marian exile) in Geneva. Knox brought it to England and Scotland where it became the official service book of the Church of Scotland in 1560 (it was revised in 1564 and in 1638) and was known as *The Form of Prayers*, or *The Book of Order*.

Calvin’s Form of Prayers had no order for daily prayer (as did Roman rites), although daily services were held focusing upon biblical exposition and prayer. The Lord’s Day service opened with Psalm 124:8—“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” and followed by a confession of sin, biblical words of pardon or absolution, the singing of the Ten Commandments (with Kyries) after each table of the law, a prayer for the grace to keep the commandments, a prayer for illumination (invoking the same Holy Spirit who breathed forth the Scriptures to help the assembled congregation to understand what they were hearing), Scripture reading followed by the sermon from a biblical passage, intercessions, a recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, the Apostles Creed (often sung), a metrical Psalm, and followed by the Aaronic Blessing.

When the Lord’s Supper was celebrated, the Lord’s Prayer was moved to a place after the prayer of consecration (the setting apart of bread and wine for use in communion). This was followed by the words of institution (“on the night in which our Lord was betrayed . . .”), the fractionary (the “breaking of the bread” to be distributed to the communicants), people coming forward to receive communion (standing) as a Psalm was sung. The service ended with a prayer of thanksgiving, the singing of the *Nunc dimittis*, taken from Luke 2:29-32— “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel,” or the Aaronic blessing from Numbers 6:24-26—“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.”

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For histories and texts of the Reformed liturgies see: Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngy, *Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2018); Bard Thompson, *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

[1] William D. Maxwell, “Reformed Worship,” in *The New Westminster Dictionary of Theology and Worship*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 458.

## **Part Two — The Reformed Liturgies Take Shape**

### **General Characteristics of Early Reformed Liturgies**

As the Reformation got underway and the Reformed churches began to develop their own distinct theological identity and practices, general characteristics of Reformed liturgical practice emerged.[1] The following are found in the majority of Reformed liturgies in the Reformation era and can be summarized as follows: (1) The assumption that the church is the assembly of the covenant community. (2) The assembled people of God participate in worship in the common tongue. (3). Simplicity. (4). The centrality of word and sacrament. (5) A central role for Psalms. (6). Adaptability to need and circumstance.

### **Emerging Liturgical Forms and Practices**

Given the stress upon congregational participation in worship as central among the changes brought about by the Reformation, the assembled worshipers sang, prayed, heard the word of God read and preached, and received the sacraments regularly. These things were not limited to the clergy, choirs, etc. Full congregational participation can be seen in the common liturgical practices adapted early on. Worship in the Reformed churches was grounded in a word-centered liturgy in the vernacular (the common language). This was a departure from pre-Reformation practices, amounting to a . . .

Far-reaching change . . . The whole service [was read] in a clear audible voice [not Latin] and in the vernacular tongue. Low mass had been the popular form of service for a considerable period before the Reformation, and this meant that the old service had been said in Latin and also inaudibly. Now, for the first time, the people both heard the words and understood them, while at one stroke the old secret prayers disappeared and the central rite [i.e., the mass] stood clear of medieval accretions.”[2]

Much of the Reformation era liturgical reform was adapted from the ancient church, in part, to demonstrate that Reformation churches were not schismatic—a charge often leveled against them by Rome. Because the goal was the reform of the true church, the following became mainstays of the Reformed liturgies: The Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, a confession of sin with absolution or declaration of pardon, and intercessory prayers.

Martin Bucer, for example, used the Apostles’ Creed as a bridge from the service of the word, to the service of the sacraments.[3] Often, the law was read or sung before the confession of sin was offered and the absolution/declaration of pardon was declared. Some liturgies included a confession of sin after the sermon, in addition to a confession of sin before receiving the sacrament (which was often tied to the fencing of the table).

Pastoral prayers were frequently taken/adapted from Paul’s first letter to Timothy (for all men,

kings, and all in authority), and Peter's exhortation in 2:13–16:

Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you should put to silence the ignorance of foolish people. Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

The Aaronic Blessing from Numbers 6:24-26 – “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace”—was often used for dismissal (i.e., the Benediction), as was the phrase “the peace of Christ, be with you.”

### **The Centrality of Word and Sacrament**

The preached word and the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper were seen to be central to the church's mission and its worship. Worship focused upon “the word heard.”[4] The preached word gives efficacy to sacraments (the “visible word”), which is why the recovery of the one (preaching of the law and gospel from the text of Scripture) led to the other (the proper administration of the sacraments as taught in the word of God).

The centrality of the word led to Lectio-continua (sequential) reading and preaching of the Scripture. Martin Luther retained the traditional Scripture lessons from the German Mass (1526) on Sundays, but practiced Lectio-continua reading of Scripture on Wednesdays (The Gospel of Matthew), Thursdays and Fridays (the New Testament epistles), and John's Gospel on Saturdays.[5]

Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) took the inherited church calendar and modified it for the English church (the Book of Common Prayer). According to Cranmer, “all things shall be done in order without breaking one piece of it from another.” Cranmer's biblical lectionary (arranged into services of Morning and Evening Prayer, following the church calendar) covered most of the Old Testament (once annually), the New Testament (three times annually) and the Psalter (monthly).[6] Other Reformed liturgies ignored the church calendar and instead focused upon reading through entire books of the Bible.

The centrality of preaching can be seen in both Lutheran and Reformed churches from this period. Luther's preaching emphasized repentance and forgiveness based upon the pattern of Luke 24:46-47 (“Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem”). Following Luther, Philipp Melancthon (1497-1560) focused upon the distinction between law and gospel as the basis for the Christian life.

The English Reformers published a Book of Homilies (1547) which included twelve gospel sermons (Cranmer wrote the preface), as well as sermons such as “of the salvation of all mankind,” “of the true and lively faith,” “on good works.” A second volume (edited by Bishop

John Jewel in 1571) includes 21 additional sermons focusing on topics such as idolatry, repairing the church, gluttony, appropriate fashion, prayer, and proper use of the sacraments.

The Reformed liturgies focused primarily upon the reading and exposition of God's word. The Psalms (read, sung, recited) were utilized in virtually all Reformed liturgies. The Psalter was understood to be the primary connection between public and private worship. Both the preached word and liturgical text focused upon the once for all sacrifice of Christ. "The most regular feature across the spectrum of Reformation liturgies was the great evangelical emphasis upon the completed sacrifice of Christ at Calvary."<sup>[7]</sup> This is both a response to the centrality of the Mass in the Roman liturgy and an emphasis upon the five solas. This is especially the case with the confession of sin, in the declaration of pardon/absolution, and in preparation for partaking of the Lord's Supper. The churches in Zurich, Strasbourg, and Geneva focused upon expositional preaching. Sermons were preached throughout the week in addition to Sundays (to accommodate the difficulties of life—weather, travel, etc.). Polish reformer John à Lasco (1499-1560) warned against preaching filled with stories, human traditions, or philosophical speculation.

### **A Stress Upon Simplicity and Adaptability**

Reformed worship and liturgies focused upon the word preached, heard, and sung, not upon persons (saints, clerics, high offices such as Bishop and Cardinal) or objects (the high altar, church art and statuary, fixtures etc). Church furnishings and architecture increasingly began to reflect function (facilitating preaching and the administration of the sacraments), not decoration. The pulpit, font, and table became the focal points in church buildings and were stripped of all unnecessary decoration since these things were to serve the ministry of word and sacrament, which decoration obscured. If it did not facilitate the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, it was removed.

There is no specific liturgical text prescribed in the New Testament, but there are specific liturgical elements which are prescribed in the New Testament (i.e., Acts 2:42 – "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers"). The absence of a specific New Testament liturgical text led to a fair bit of diversity in form and practice. The necessary elements (such as those mentioned in Acts 2:42) were central in Reformed practice, not a uniformity in the manner in which they were presented in the liturgy. Reformed liturgies were often adapted to particular circumstances (usually based on local political issues and circumstances, language, the threat of persecution, etc.). But distance, weather, disease were also factors in diversity in liturgical practice among the Reformed churches.

## **Part Three — Liturgical Diversity Among the Reformers**

### **Elements and Circumstances**

The Reformed divide liturgical practice into two categories: elements and circumstances.<sup>[1]</sup>

Elements are limited to what Scripture authorizes (either by command or good and necessary inference) along the line of Acts 2:42, while circumstances refer to how we put elements into practice. Circumstances are matters left to our judgment and discretion, but remaining within the general bounds of God's word.

Elements are a distinct and usually ordinary act of worship (e.g., prayer, Scripture reading, the preaching of word, the administration of sacraments, etc.). Circumstances pertain to practices not unique to religious worship, but common to "human actions and societies" (WCF 1.6). Circumstances refer to matters such as where and when to meet, how many hymns should be sung, how the church furniture should be arranged, etc. Circumstances are not indifferent nor unregulated, but are regulated by the light of nature, Christian prudence, and the general rules of Scripture (WCF 1.6). For example, we can choose what times to meet on Sunday, but we cannot move our Lord's Day worship to another day of the week.

As the Reformed liturgical traditions took shape (the elements), there were wide variations in circumstantial practice. The various church orders (the constitutional documents of the churches) often developed along national/local lines. Most liturgies were full services, while others were partial liturgies or set forth guidelines for parts of the service—i.e., John Knox's Practice of the Lord's Supper. And there was the collection and publication of prayers to be used in worship (i.e., Thomas Cranmer's Collects which are found the Book of Common Prayer (BCP).

### **Free or Fixed Worship**

How much freedom was allowed at the local level? Martin Luther stressed local adaptation of the German Mass, yet insisted upon the use of his version of the Lord's Prayer and admonitions before Communion. John Calvin's Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers provided a fixed liturgical form for the Genevans (as was his previous Strasbourg liturgy). At his death, Calvin insisted that consistories "change nothing." That said, Calvin did allow for variation in the opening prayer for midweek services, and Knox (who used The Form of Prayers) allowed for significant variations in the confession of sin, as well as prayer before the sermon, "should the Spirit of God, move the minister's heart" to pray extemporaneously. Remarkably, Cranmer's fixed liturgy in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer (BCP) did allow for substantial weekly variation through the use of the liturgical calendar for Scripture lessons and seasonal collects.

### **Congregational Participation**

Ulrich Zwingli proposed antiphonal congregational responses in the Zurich liturgy, but his request was not approved by the city council. Cranmer's service in the BCP utilized written prayers with congregational participation and/or responses throughout the entire service. Congregational singing was nearly universal by this time (with the Psalms serving as the principle song book of the churches), with the emphasis clearly falling upon the congregational singing of Scripture (including the Decalogue), although the Creed was also sung (i.e., in Geneva). As one writer put it, the emphasis upon congregational singing meant that the "the church was full of the people's song." [2]

## **The Frequency of Communion**

Luther, Martin Bucer, and Cranmer all instituted weekly communion—with the caveat that due to the shortage of ministers, the difficulty of travel and other circumstances, rural congregations were to commune monthly. Calvin argued for weekly communion (he famously considered infrequent communion “an invention of the devil”), but the Genevan council overruled him and instituted a quarterly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger also instituted quarterly communion, while Knox preferred monthly but acquiesced to quarterly communion. Fencing the table (limiting participation of church members and others upon examination and approval by local elders) was widely practiced (even by Cranmer).

## **Church Furniture, Gestures, and Vestments**

Luther’s liturgy (and that of subsequent Lutheran churches) retained the stone table and use of the term “altar.” But Zwingli, Cranmer, and Bucer replaced stone altars with wooden tables with ministers standing (not facing east or in front of the table with his back turned) so as to avoid any “priestly” appearances.

Elevation of the communion cup during the Lord’s Supper was discontinued, although making the sign of the cross was permitted early on for weaker Christians still clinging to certain Roman practices. Congregations typically knelt for prayer, stood for praise (singing), and sat for instruction.

Clerical vestments were varied and a source of contention. Luther approved of traditional clerical attire, although he insisted that “pomp and splendor be absent.” Cranmer likewise approved of clerical attire with the surplice (the white outer garment symbolizing imputed righteousness worn over the academic gown or cassock). Bucer retained clerical vestments for a time but replaced them with the cassock (or clergy coat) and surplice. The Genevans insisted upon removing all sacerdotal appearances associated with Romanism, mandating a black academic gown, white preaching band, and a black hat (or cap). These were not seen as clerical vestments, but the “uniform,” identifying the vocation of the minister both in the worship service and in the performance of his daily duties. Knox followed Calvin’s practice and was critical of Cranmer for retaining the surplice.

Diverse local practices remained. The City of Zurich celebrated Christmas, Cranmer and Bucer allowed extra-biblical hymns, Calvin’s church sang the Creed, the Decalogue, and the Psalms, while the Scots and Puritans rejected church holidays and adopted exclusive Psalmody.

The process of confessionalization (the development of Reformed confessions, catechisms, and books of church order) was long and complicated, but brought with it the increasing standardization of liturgical practices with which we are familiar.

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[1] Adapted from Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngy, Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present (Greensboro: New Growth Press, 2018), 35 ff.

[2] Maxwell, "Reformed Worship," 458.

## **Part Four — Lessons from the Past Applied in the Present**

### **For the Reformers, Recovering the Gospel Also Meant Recovery of Proper Worship**

The Reformers understood that the recovery of the gospel was directly connected to proper Christian worship.[1] John Calvin, for one, saw his own conversion and subsequent work of reform tied directly to the removal of all forms of Roman idolatry (especially the mass) from Christian worship. The centrality of the gospel to the life of the church must be made manifest in the pure worship of God. This meant a Word-centered liturgy in which biblical texts were preached upon, biblical exhortations and commands were made clear, and biblical promises made to the people of God were to be read for their comfort and assurance. As one writer puts it, "the recovery of the gospel in the Reformation was ultimately a worship war—a war against the idols, a war for the pure worship of God." [2] Our worship must reflect our gospel, and our gospel must define our worship.

### **The Reformers Sought to "Reform" the Church's Worship**

While affirming Sola Scriptura and striving to base all liturgical reform on biblical principles of worship, the Reformers carefully considered the practices of the ancient church and the teaching of the church fathers when revising the liturgies they inherited. The goal was to reform the church's ancient liturgies by stripping them of all unbiblical additions, not to compose entirely new liturgies from scratch. "New" and "contemporary" when used in the Reformed tradition in connection to worship, are therefore best understood as "reforming" (i.e., removing all unbiblical accretions, as well as adding those things which are missing), not replacing the ancient liturgies with contemporary fads grounded in popular preferences.

Martin Luther stated that his intention was to not to abolish, but to cleanse the liturgies of "wicked additions" (i.e., Roman inventions) and recover their proper (pious) use. Calvin too sought to remove Roman additions made to the liturgies of the ancient church, which is why his Genevan liturgy (The Form of Ecclesiastical Prayers) was subtitled "According to the Custom of the Ancient Church." Like Luther, he was no innovator, but a "Reformer." It was said of Heinrich Bullinger (the Reformed pastor in Zurich and a contemporary of Calvin) that he restored "all things to the first and simplest form of the most ancient, and indeed apostolic tradition." [3] It is fair to say that "tradition mattered to the Reformers. It was the living faith of the dead, not the dead faith of the living." [4]

Returning to the ancient ways meant, in part, incorporating the reading of the Ten Commandments (or "law" texts from throughout the Scriptures), using the Lord's Prayer (either recited or as a model for prayer), reciting the Apostles' or Nicene Creeds, God's people thereby confessing the orthodox faith while effectively uniting the church of the present to the people of



God of the past—the so-called “cloud of witnesses” mentioned in Hebrews 12:1.

### **Reformed Worship Is Catholic but Not Roman**

The Reformers took seriously the charge from the church father Cyprian (c. 210-258), “You can no longer have God for your Father, if you do have not the church for your mother.”[5] Calvin expanded on Cyprian’s comment, explaining,

Let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels (Matthew 22:30). Our weakness does not allow us to be dismissed from her school until we have been pupils all our lives. Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation, as Isaiah (Isaiah 37:32) and Joel (2:32) testify.[6]

For Calvin, one finds the Word of God proclaimed and the sacraments properly administered in the church. Since word and sacrament are essential to a healthy Christian life, the Christian must seek these things where they can be found. They cannot be found in false churches (i.e., Rome), nor in our age in entrepreneurial churches which are the institutional facade of their charismatic leader, nor in the various so-called “ministries” which mimic the church’s biblical activities but exist apart from all ties to local churches. Those who claim to be Christians, but who have no connection to a local church (or who do not see the importance of joining a local church) need to be reminded that the New Testament knows nothing of a professing Christian who is not a member (or seeking to become one) of a faithful congregation where the proper elements of worship can be found.

### **Reformed Worship is Trinitarian**

Reformation era liturgies are packed with Trinitarian references (i.e., prayers to Almighty God and Father in heaven, through his Son Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit). Both prayers and worship services often end with phrases taken directly from or echoing Scripture, such as, “through our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, forever and ever, Amen.” The Aaronic Blessing was common (Numbers 6:24–26)—“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.” So too, an apostolic benediction taken from one of Paul’s letters is found frequently in Reformed liturgies (i.e., 2 Corinthians 13:14, “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” All proper Lord’s Day worship should express the church’s Trinitarian confession in tangible ways—in its songs, in its sermons, in its creeds, and in its liturgy.

### **Reformed Worship Is Christ-Centered**

What does this mean, exactly? It means that most or all of the following should be found in a

Reformed Lord's Day worship service and incorporated into its liturgy (more specifics to follow in part two).

We start with Isaiah, who tells us, there are no other gods but the true and living God (Isaiah 44:6), and Luke, who in Acts 4:12, clarifies that "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Our liturgies should proclaim that our salvation (in terms of deliverance from the wrath of God) comes only through faith in Jesus Christ—God incarnate. As the adopted children of God, Christian believers pray in the name of Jesus Christ (John 16:23), and ascribe praise to the works of God the Son (Ephesians 1:3 ff).

The heart of Christian worship is the act of asking for forgiveness of sin because the shed blood of Jesus alone washes it away, and because the spotless righteousness of Christ covers our unrighteousness. This conviction of sin arises from a reading of God's law with opportunity given for all those present to confess their sins, before hearing a biblical word of pardon and assurance. This should be tied to the present intercessory work of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of the Father interceding for his people, making a defense for his own before the Father (1 John 1:7-2:2).

Paul tells us that preaching is to be centered around the proclamation of the reconciling work of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:18 ff). Paul told the Galatians that when he had been to Galatia previously (3:1), he had set Christ before them as on a billboard—that is, the person and work of Jesus had been explained so clearly and thoroughly that it were as though Jesus was publicly placarded before their eyes through preaching. Mentioning Jesus every now and then in a worship service is not in any sense what the Reformers meant by "preaching Christ."

The Lord's Supper, as the fulfillment of the Passover, is in one sense, a setting forth as the visible word, a new Exodus, as we, the people of God begin our journey from the captivity of sin to freedom in Christ who now leads us the promised land (the heavenly city). Christ's death for us and his shed blood which washes away our sin (as recounted in the gospel) is set forth visibly in the bread and wine—the visible signs and seals of Christ's redemptive work on our behalf. According to Paul, we feed upon Christ's body and blood through faith (1 Corinthians 10-11). As the preached word creates faith, so too the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper confirm and strengthen that faith.

Even the offering (Christian charity) is collected upon the ground that God redeemed us by the blood of his Son (2 Corinthians 9:15).

### **Reformed Worship Seeks to Be "Through the Holy Spirit"**

What specifically, does this mean? It does not mean a "charismatic" type worship service, in which the Spirit supposedly leads worshipers to profound experiences apart from the preached Word and the person and work of Jesus Christ. Our liturgies are to be based upon those things through which the Spirit works—word and sacrament.

According to John, our confession of sin is brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8 – “And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment”). This is closely related to the fact that preaching is said to be a demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:4, “my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” It is the Spirit who convicts us of our sin, confirms to us that the promises God makes to his people in his Word are true, and that they apply to each one of God’s people.

It is through regeneration by the Holy Spirit that a Christian first confesses that “Jesus is Lord” (1 Corinthians 12:3). It is through the indwelling Holy Spirit that Christians continue to profess their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Romans 8, that it is the Holy Spirit who helps us when we pray, testifying to us that we are, in fact, children of God (v. 16), and by making intercession for us in our weakness when we do not know how to pray (v. 26-27).

Paul also tells us in Ephesians 5:18b-21, that the church’s praise is based upon the fact that we are to “be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” Singing in worship is a form of prayer. It often entails recounting God’s mighty acts back to him (especially in the Psalter) to remind us of his promises and how he keeps them. The Holy Spirit unites many members into one body, and stirs our collective hearts to pray to God and to praise his name. It is the Spirit who helps us understand the Word of God when it is read or preached (illumination). When Jesus Christ is preached, we know the Holy Spirit is present, and he will apply to us all the saving benefits of Jesus Christ through faith.

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[1] Adapted from Gibson and Earngy, Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present, (2018), 47 ff.

[2] Gibson and Earngy, Reformation Worship, 47.

[3] Gibson and Earngy, Reformation Worship, 50.

[4] Gibson and Earngy, Reformation Worship, 50.

[5] Cyprian, *De catholica ecclesiae unitate* 6, PL 4:503

[6] Calvin, Institutes, 4.1.4

## **Part Five — More Lessons from the Past Applied In the Present**

### **Reformed Worship Supports the Church’s Discipline**

Churches in the Reformed tradition “fence the table” to preserve the purity of the church and its gospel witness. “Fencing the table” refers to the practice of a church’s elders not permitting unbelievers or those who are under church discipline (as determined by the church’s elders) to

receive the Lord's Supper. Those who anticipate receiving the Lord's Supper are exhorted to search their hearts for hidden sins and implored to offer sincere repentance before partaking. Lists of specific sins which should keep the unrepentant from the table are often included in that portion of the liturgy designed to prepare the faithful for receiving the elements (bread and wine). The Reformers were not so much concerned that sinners might partake of the supper, rather that unrepentant sinners would eat and drink judgment upon themselves (1 Corinthians 11:29), or that churches who were lax in their practice of discipline might provoke the judgment of God as explained in 1 Corinthians 5.

A proper liturgy warns those under church discipline, or who have a different understanding of the Lord's Supper than that found in the Reformed confessions, to refrain from partaking until any issues are resolved. A proper liturgy also gives biblical exhortations to communicants to repent of their sins but then come to the table to partake with great comfort and full assurance since Christ's merits received through faith alone secure our Lord's welcome and access to the communion table and its benefits.

### **The Churches Are to Affirm the Faith “Once for All Delivered to the Saints”**

The church's doctrine truly matters since error abounds. The Reformers affirmed the historic creeds of the church because these creeds were understood to affirm the essence of Christian truth in the sense of Jude 3. The Apostle's or the Nicene creed were usually recited each Lord's Day. John Calvin asserted that in reciting or singing the creed, God's people testify that “they wish to live and die in the Christian faith.” As the Reformation matured, Reformed churches composed catechisms and confessions of faith which too were often read and utilized in worship—not to replace the reading of Scripture, but to supplement it since they effectively summarize biblical teaching.

This is an important practice to maintain—especially in an age of wide-spread doctrinal ignorance as in our own. Recitation of the ecumenical creeds and the Reformed confessions and catechisms serve an important catechetical function (instruction), as well as giving us a means of professing our faith publicly, and they are a useful and important way to unite a particular local congregation to their brothers and sisters in faithful churches around the world, and across time.

### **Reformed Worship Should Give Serious Attention to Prayer**

A prayer of the confession of sin by the assembled congregation is one of the most important elements found in almost all Reformed liturgies. Among the better known instances of the confession of sin is that of Heinrich Bullinger, who prayed that “we are not worthy to be called your children, nor lift our eyes up to heaven.” Calvin included the line, “we poor sinners, conceived and born in iniquity and corruption.” Perhaps the most well-known prayer of confession, is Thomas Cranmer's general confession found in The Book of Common Prayer (BCP).

Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Maker of all things, Judge of all men: We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, Which we, from time to time,

most grievously have committed, By thought, word and deed, Against thy Divine Majesty, Provoking most justly thy wrath and indignation against us.

We do earnestly repent, And are heartily sorry for these our misdoings; The remembrance of them is grievous unto us; The burden of them is intolerable. Have mercy upon us, have mercy upon us, most merciful Father; For thy Son our Lord Jesus Christ's sake,

Forgive us all that is past; And grant that we may ever hereafter serve and please thee In newness of life, To the honour and glory of thy name; Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Prayers for illumination by the Holy Spirit (before Scripture reading and the sermon), prayers in preparation for communion, and general intercessions for the people and their rulers were standardized, and utilized in every worship service. Free and extemporaneous prayer was not discouraged, provided such prayer fit within the theological structure and proper context of the liturgy.

### **Reformed Worship Should Be Saturated with Praise for God**

Praises were recited or sung in virtually all Reformation liturgies, reflecting the exhortation from Paul in Ephesians 5:19, “addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,” and the elaboration in Colossians 3:16, where Paul writes “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” James 5:13 comes to mind as well, “is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise.”

The Psalter was considered the church’s divinely-inspired songbook. The Reformers also utilized other biblical “songs” (i.e., Elizabeth’s “Song,” Luke 1:42-44; Mary’s “Song,” Luke 1:46-55; Zechariah’s prophecy, 1:68-79, and the “Song of Simeon” (the *Nunc dimittis*) from Luke 2:29-32. Early Christian hymns were also utilized, such as those found in Philippians 2:5-11; Colossians 1:15-26; 1 Timothy 1:17, 3:16.

### **Reformed Worship Is to be Conducted Decently and in Good Order**

It has been said that the “true creed” of Reformed and Presbyterian churches is Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 14:40, that “all things should be done decently and in order,” which flows from the apostle’s prior assertion in verse 33, “God is not a God of confusion but of peace.” The Reformed sought to be faithful to Paul’s exhortation knowing that the Holy Spirit ordinarily works through particular means (Word and sacrament) and not independently of them. Where the Word of God is preached and Jesus Christ is exalted, the Holy Spirit is surely present. The Reformed liturgies endeavored to include those things mentioned in the New Testament because they were confident that by doing so the Holy Spirit would glorify Christ and create and strengthen faith in the hearts of God’s people. At the same time, such liturgies would provide the decency, order, and peace as commanded by Paul so as to avoid the chaos as found among the

Corinthians.

### **Reformed Worship Should Include Practices Mentioned in Scripture**

The Reformers point us to those particular elements which ought to be incorporated in contemporary Reformed liturgies:

- 1). A biblical call to worship (e.g., Numbers 6:24-26)
- 2). Various biblical exhortations to proper worship and godly living (e.g., Colossians 3:16a – i.e., “let the word of God dwell richly”; Ephesians 5:19)
- 3). The singing of Psalms and appropriate hymns (Colossians 3:16b – Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs; Ephesians 5:19)
- 4). The reading of the law (e.g., Exodus 20:1-17; Matthew 5:17; 1 Corinthians 9:21)
- 5). A confession of sin and a declaration of pardon and assurance (1 John 1:8-10)
- 6). The recitation of creeds (Deuteronomy 6:1, 1 Corinthians 15:3, 1 Timothy 3:16)
- 7). The Lord’s Prayer recited or utilized as the pattern for prayer (Matthew 6:9-13)
- 8). Prayers of thanksgiving and of general intercession for all people (1 Timothy 2:1-2)
- 9). Prayers for illumination of God’s word by the Holy Spirit (Psalm 19:14, 43:4; Ephesians 3:18-19)
- 10). Scripture reading and a sermon (1 Timothy 4:13– “devote yourself to public reading”)
- 11). The benediction (Numbers 6:24-26; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 4:7)

For further reading, see Jonathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, Reformation Worship: Liturgies from the Past for the Present (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2018)