

PRESBYTERIAN AND PURITAN WORSHIP (1550–1850)

The tradition of Presbyterian worship in the English-speaking world was influenced not only by the Protestant Reformation in general and its struggle against the Catholic Church but also more specifically by conflicts within England and Scotland during the 16th and 17th centuries.

1. Scotland

American Presbyterian tradition has strong roots in the Church of Scotland. In 1560, the Church of Scotland adopted a Presbyterian church government under the guiding influence of the Reformer John Knox. Knox had spent very formative years as a pastor of English exiles in Geneva, where he worked with John Calvin. Consequently, the worship that Knox brought to the Church of Scotland was a Genevan-style liturgy codified in a service book called the *Book of Common Order* (BCO), which provided the order and prayers of Scottish worship for 85 years until the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s.

Some characteristics of Scottish Presbyterian worship:

- **Ancient order and elements of worship:** entrance with *prayers of confession*; response to God's word with prayers of *intercession*, the *Lord's Prayer*, and the *Apostles' Creed*; *communion prayer focused on lengthy thanksgiving* for creation and redemption in Christ
- **More passive role for congregation**, e.g., no spoken responses; no choirs; the minister only says the Apostles' Creed.
- **No church calendar:** Unlike other Reformed churches, the Church of Scotland rejected all annual festivals of the traditional liturgical calendar (e.g., Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost).
- **Psalm singing only.**
- **Kneeling** was the general posture for prayer. The pastor knelt for prayer before giving the sermon. Praise was done sitting or standing.
- The BCO contains no references to musical instruments, but other sources reveal that **organs, violins/viols, lutes, and other instruments** were used to accompany congregational singing.
- Some first-hand accounts of services record lengths of about **1.5 hours on Sundays** and about **1 hour on weekdays**.
- **Meal-like communion at long tables** at which the **congregation members served one another**. The BCO refers to the monthly practice of other Reformed churches, but the first complete Book of Discipline in 1562 only mandated **communion four times per year in towns** and **two times per year in rural areas** (mainly due to the lack of enough ministers to preside).

2. England

Reformers in the Church of England under Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer and King Edward VI (d. 1553) established the national church as a Protestant body with English liturgies in the *Book of Common Prayer* (1st edition: 1549; 2nd edition: 1552). After a brief interruption by the reign of the Catholic Queen Mary, Queen Elizabeth I sought to reestablish the liturgical and doctrinal unity of the Church of England under her authority with the Act of Uniformity, which mandated all priests and bishops to conform to the 1559 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP). The BCP evoked much controversy because it attempted to be **theologically Reformed** and yet **more liturgically catholic** than other Reformed churches.

2.1 Reformed features of the BCP

- Reformed **theology**
- Use of the common **language of the people**
- Stress on solid **expositional and doctrinal preaching**
- Distribution to the whole congregation to encourage **the whole church's active participation** in the liturgy

2.2 Pre-Reformation/catholic features of the BCP

- Traditional **robes (vestments)** for ministers.
- Singing of **choirs**
- Use of a **lectionary** to guide multiple readings each Sunday from an **epistle and gospel**
- Use of ancient forms/structures for prayer: short **collects** with ancient patterns to conclude various parts of the service; an ancient form of **eucharistic (thanksgiving) prayers** prior to communion; written **litanies** with congregational responses to pray broadly for the needs of the church and the world
- Regular use of the **Nicene Creed** (other Reformed churches used the Apostles' Creed)
- **Frequent short responses for the congregation** to speak together with one voice
- **Full church calendar**, including the seasons of Advent, Epiphany, Lent in addition to other festivals

2.3 Resistance and controversy with the Puritans

Several factions within the Church of England did not like government and liturgy of the Church of England and worked toward the goal of more radical reformation of worship and theology along the lines of Continental Reformed churches. These factions came to be called “Puritans” for their attempts to “purify” the church according to their ideals. While agreeing in theology (indeed, virtually all Anglicans in the 16th century were theologically Reformed), Puritans wanted to replace the episcopal government of the church (rule by bishops) with either a **presbyterian** structure like other Reformed churches or an **independent/congregational** structure like the Anabaptists. They also disliked the liturgical conservatism of the BCP and sought to revise or reject it altogether.

- Those with Presbyterian leanings sought to revise the BCP to resemble the liturgies of Geneva and the Church of Scotland.
- Those with Independent leanings sought to reject liturgical books and written prayers and set forms altogether.

2.4 Puritan ideals

Puritans rejected the pre-Reformation/catholic features of the BCP liturgy (see above) for a combination of reasons:

- **Biblical warrant:** Puritans wanted to reject any practice without biblical foundations, and they demanded with increasing rigidity and fervor that *only practices grounded in explicit commands or normative examples in the New Testament qualified as “biblical.”*
- **Correcting abuses associated with medieval Catholicism.** Often this resulted in rejecting the forms altogether simply because they had a Catholic association, e.g., the litany, congregational responses, vestments, etc.
- **Edification:** Some Puritan corrections were motivated by judgments about their practical impact on the spiritual life of the congregation, e.g., the length of services, lack of flexibility to pray about specific circumstances other than the subjects in the approved litanies; the reading of homilies prepared by the national church leadership.

2.5 Puritan and Presbyterian reaction and results

After overthrowing King Charles I, the English Parliament authorized the Westminster Assembly in 1643 not only to produce a new doctrinal confession for the English and Scottish churches (The Westminster Confession and Catechisms) but also a plan of church government and directory for worship (the **Directory of Public Worship**). After King Charles II returned to the throne and restored episcopal church government and the BCP in 1662, thousands of English Puritan clergy lost their positions for refusing to conform to the Church of England liturgy and polity. While non-conformist/dissenting (i.e., non-Anglican) congregations were later permitted in England, they had developed an increasingly radical and minimal approach to worship that

maximized their separation from the worship of the state church. Scottish Presbyterians were also radicalized in their reaction to attempts at enforced Anglican worship with very similar results

- **Freedom & diversity:** Later Presbyterians established guidelines for worship not with a complete liturgical book like the BCP (or the BCO) but with a directory, which only gives very general guidelines for the elements of worship. (Directories became the official manner of governing worship within Presbyterian churches in the English-speaking world to the present day.)
- **Free prayer only:** By the late 17th century, Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans had come to reject written forms of prayer entirely in favor of free/extemporaneous prayer. Ministers prepared their prayers, but they did not pray from written forms, which many believed to hinder the work of the Holy Spirit in prayer.
- **Psalm singing with no instruments and only a small number of well-known tunes.** The singing was often slow, lacking rhythm, poorly led, and poorly sung.
- **Sermon-centered order of worship:** Presbyterian worship deviated from the classic Christian order of service in earlier Reformed liturgies by combining the different major types of prayer into one long prayer before the sermon. Thus, the confession of sin and prayers of intercession (usually placed at the beginning of the service and after the sermon, respectively) were combined together with the prayer of illumination prior to preaching. This compromise reflected an increasing trend toward a more sermon-centered order that placed the sermon at the end of the service.
- **Omission of the Creed and the Lord's Prayer:** These changes represent the victory of more radical and reactionary Puritan ideals over Scottish and Genevan tradition. Despite their Reformed pedigree, these forms (along with other written prayers and set forms) became badges associated negatively with Catholic and Anglican traditions and the oppression that Presbyterians had received from attempts by rulers to mandate their desired prayer books.
- **No agreement on frequency of communion:** The Scottish church practiced communion quite rarely (not more than four times per year and closer to annually in many places by the late 17th century) whereas the English Puritans typically favored monthly communion.
- **Communion reception:** Scottish Presbyterians continued their long practice of receiving communion at actual long tables set up in churches or outside in large communion festivals/seasons that featured several days of preparation services. English Puritans typically received communion seated in pews in their church buildings.

The sparse model of worship exemplified in the Westminster Directory of Worship became increasingly minimal in the worship of English, Scottish, and (later) American Presbyterian and Independent/Congregationalist churches from the late 17th and to the mid-19th centuries. English Puritan and Scottish Presbyterian minimalism did not make the churches non-liturgical, i.e., they still had a very fixed, predictable order (liturgy in the broad sense of some fixed order is inevitable).

The order that prevailed had become a highly truncated version of both worship from the corporate worship of the early church, the medieval era, and even the early Reformation.

- No visual art/images; no vestments, paintings, pictures/statues
- Minimal ritual actions: no processions, passing of peace, sign of the cross
- Minimal active congregational participation
 - No musical instruments
 - No hymns

In contrast to pre-Reformation liturgies that appealed to all the senses in a holistic way (sight, smell, hearing, touch/movement), Puritan worship became a highly intellectualized experience consisting almost entirely of listening to the word of God prayed, read, and preached (with the exception of the occasional communion service). It had also become a passive affair with congregational participation reduced to hearing the minister pray, read, and preach. Singing a few psalms had become the only active, vocal means of corporate participation in the liturgy itself.

<i>The Book of Common Order Scotland 1562</i>	<i>Worship after Westminster Scotland, England, America in 17th-18th c.</i>
	Call to worship
Confession (choice of 2 prayers; 1 from Calvin)	Prayer: • Invocation • Illumination
(Confession concludes with prayer for forgiveness)	
Psalm (in meter in a “playne tune”, i.e., no harmony)	
Prayer for illumination	
Reading (OT or NT)	Reading(s)
	Psalm
Sermon	Prayer (long): • Confession • Forgiveness • Praise and thanksgiving • Intercessions/petition (option: after sermon) • Illumination
	Sermon
Prayer of Intercession	Prayer (short; based on sermon)
Lord’s Prayer	
Apostles’ Creed (said by minister alone)	
Psalm	Psalm
(When no communion: (Benediction , Num 6, or 2 Cor. 13)	(When no communion: Benediction)
Institution narrative	Exhortation on Lord’s Supper (long) (including Fencing)
Exhortation on Lord’s Supper (from Book of Common Prayer 1552 and from Calvin)	Institution narrative (option: additional explanation)
Eucharistic Prayer (minister and people seated at a long table)	Eucharistic Prayer (short)
Communion (Passed through seated congregation with words of delivery)	Communion (Passed through seated congregation with words of delivery)
	Post-communion exhortation
Post-communion prayer (from Calvin)	Post-communion prayer
Psalm (103 or some other psalm of thanksgiving)	Psalm
Benediction (from Numbers 6 or 2 Cor. 13)	Benediction