

PROTESTANT (MOSTLY REFORMED) WORSHIP IN AMERICA

1. English Puritans and Scottish Presbyterians Come to America

Reformed worship came to America in four primary groups: English Puritans/Congregationalists in New England, Scottish Presbyterians in the mid-Atlantic region, and English Episcopalians, starting from Virginia, and Dutch Reformed, starting in New York. The Congregationalists and Presbyterians had very similar orders of worship that came from the radically minimal forms of worship that arose in England and Scotland in resistance to the Church of England.

- **Simple, sermon-centered Sunday service:**

- Prayer
- Reading
- Psalm
- (Long) Prayer
- Sermon
- Prayer
- Psalm
- Benediction

- **Very plain, unadorned church buildings** with a large central pulpit.

- **Communion seasons:** One way that American Presbyterians initially differed from Congregationalists was their the practice of annual communion seasons (from Scottish tradition), i.e., multiple congregations merging to receive communion outside at long tables in the context of several services of preparation and thanksgiving with extensive preaching held over several days. Elders held interviews to examine members regarding the authenticity of their faith, and they gave communion tokens (shaped like small coins) as admission “ticket.” This helped foster some Presbyterian unity by giving opportunities for scattered congregations to gather and foster connections to one another.

2. First Great Awakening

During the 1730s and 1740s, a movement of revivals occurred throughout the American colonies. The revivals were united principally by the trans-Atlantic and trans-colonial travels of Calvinistic Methodist George Whitefield and defended theologically by Congregationalist Jonathan Edwards. The revivals also found support in some Dutch Reformed and Presbyterian churches. Several changes in worship practices resulted from the revivals:

- **Conversion theology and preaching:** Emphasis shifted from a balance of teaching biblical doctrine and practical application toward a more defined experience of spiritual conviction, rebirth/awakening, and a reformed life of new affections and works of obedience. The goal was increasingly to convert unbelievers and to renew/revive the affections and will of believers.
- New focus on **itinerant preaching and extended meetings:** Pro-revival pastors traveled to preach in areas already populated by established churches. Revivalists promoted mid-week meetings that eventually influenced Sunday services.
- **Inter-denominational and trans-colonial unity:** Revivals often united pastors and other members of congregations from different ecclesial traditions and exposed them to new styles of preaching and singing.
- **Hymns:** Whitefield helped popularize the hymns of Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley.

3. Second Great Awakening

- **Communion seasons to camp meetings:** A second great wave of revivals began with a massive revival that emerged from a communion season in Cane Ridge, Kentucky in 1801 under Presbyterian minister James McGready. On the American frontier, communion seasons became important social events attracting hundreds and sometimes thousands, of people. Since many frontier people were unchurched, ministers seized these opportunities by turning them into evangelistic rallies that aimed more and more at preaching to non-communicants and the unbaptized than to active church members. They baptized people and admitted them to communion in these occasions, and eventually the sacrament itself became sidelined and forgotten. These camp meetings/revivals were very inter-denominational affairs. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians all participated, and the result was a blending of traditions and the forging of a new common evangelical frontier tradition.

- **Frontier worship tradition:** Worship was designed for evangelism and a tangible act of conversion or recommitment as primary goals.

1. "Preliminaries": Prayers and music to prepare the congregation for the sermon.
2. Sermon (the main event)
3. Call for public demonstration of conversion and/or recommitment in response to sermon. The *altar call* effectively became a new sacrament replacing the Lord's Supper as the event in which sinners receive grace in a new tangible act of responding to God.

Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Disciples of Christ, Dutch and German Reformed churches all came to employ this structure of worship.

- **Charles Finney** pioneered *adaptation of frontier revival methods for more established churches* in the east and articulated a *theology of revivals* (and worship) in his famous *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*.

- **Decision and commitment:** Contrary to other revivalists, Finney did not aim primarily at emotional excitement but rather on very direct appeals to the will. His later work is critical of the fanatical emotionalism of some revivalist ministers.

- **New measures:**

- Multiple, long meetings for preaching and prayer per week
- Altar calls and the anxious seat/bench, a seat for those convicted of sin to signal their desire for prayer for conversion.
- Rousing hymns with instrumental accompaniment (he loved the organ).

- **Pragmatism:** Finney maintained that the New Testament left only very general directives about what to do in corporate worship and thus churches were free to do whatever worked in accomplishing evangelism. Churches ought to do whatever was necessary to achieve the desired emotional and psychological impact to convert and awaken sinners. Churches should adopt whatever techniques attracted people to attend services, pay attention, and respond to sermons with commitment.

- **Egalitarian impulse:** The political experience of the American Revolution and the nature of life on the frontier had produced a cultural climate opposed to Old World tradition and authority, including that of the churches. Methodist and Baptist churches spread largely through the efforts of lay preachers, and church members typically had little knowledge or interest in history of the church and sometimes disparaged the traditional learning of seminary-trained pastors in other churches. Revivalism thus contributed to the *decline of the authority of the pastoral office*. Not surprisingly, by the 1820s, *many ministers had discarded any distinctive ministerial dress or vestments* of any kind including the Genevan gowns and bands that had been the standard uniform of Reformed ministers for generations.

- **Decline in infant baptism and covenantal view of child nurture:** Revivalism contributed to a decline in infant baptism in Presbyterian churches and shifts in the nurture of baptized children away from a gradual growth of faith from the earliest years toward a more definite conversion experience later in life defined in the explicit and subjective terms favored by revivalists.

4. “Traditional” Presbyterian worship

- Old School/New School: The Second Great Awakening elicited a major split within the Presbyterian Church. The revivals had become more extreme in their departure from Reformed theology and liturgical practices, and dissension over revivalism caused a formal schism into pro-revival (New School) and critical-/anti-revival (Old School) denominations between 1837 and 1869. (The southern Old Schoolers broke away to form a separate denomination in 1861 over issues of slavery and church government).
- **Rejected revival excesses, not revivals per se:** The Old School was not opposed to spiritual revivals per se; indeed they praised and sought genuine revivals. However, they objected to the idea that revivals should be the normal state of the church’s life and that revivals could be engineered by human techniques that deviated from the ordinary biblical means of grace. Biblical revivals happen as God blesses the ordinary practices of the worship of the church in unusual, extraordinary ways.
- Emergence of “traditional” Presbyterian worship
 - Goal was genuine **heartfelt piety expressed in respectable, dignified, sober manner**. This Old School ideal was a middle ground between the perceived coldness of Episcopal worship and perceived emotionalism and crudity of Methodist and Baptist worship.
 - Sermon remained the dominant focus, although decreasing in length.
 - Prayer: Growing sense of need for reform of public prayer due to abandoning biblical and traditional postures by sitting for prayer, to poor preparation for prayer by ministers, and to the repetitious and perfunctory nature of many public prayers.
 - Communion
 - **Quarterly in local church:** As communion seasons waned, so did the use of communion tokens.
 - **Seated in pews:** Most American Presbyterians eventually adopted the Congregationalist practice of receiving communion seated in the pews.
 - **Permanent communion tables** appear (without rails): As communion seasons waned and communion returned to the local church, Presbyterian churches began to place permanent communion tables at the center of the assembly. Tables were usually placed below pulpit in the center, a pattern that became very widespread across all Protestant traditions in the 19th century.

5. Broad influence of frontier/revival tradition

(1) High-art revivalism

From mid-19th century to the middle of the 20th century, development of worship was spurred in most churches not by liturgical theology or historical study but rather the continuing effects of *revivalistic pragmatism expressed in more culturally refined and sophisticated ways* as some Christians grew in wealth and social standing. The same pragmatism that led earlier revivalists toward informality and emotionalism in rural parishes led *more educated, urban congregations back toward more historic forms in worship for largely aesthetic reasons*.¹ The underlying revivalist approach to worship remained unchanged, namely, worship aimed primarily at eliciting a particular affective and moral response to the sermon, and the forms and environment of worship were crafted to support that response. Even when more corporate, historic forms began to reappear in the liturgy, they were often understood in terms of the frontier/revival tradition, i.e., they were preliminaries before the sermon chosen primarily because of the way they affected individual spirituality.

¹ And also partly for evangelistic reasons: Presbyterians in the mid-19th century were increasingly concerned over the phenomenon of Presbyterians converting to the Episcopal church due in part to the extreme austerity, passivity, anti-traditionalism, and poor quality of worship leadership in Presbyterian churches.

- **Gothic-type architecture:** In the mid-19th century, Presbyterian and Congregational churches began to incorporate increasingly ornate architecture and furnishings into their churches inspired by a revival of the Gothic style favored by a romantic fascination with the medieval era: towers and spires on stone churches; stained glass windows; high, vaulted ceilings; arched doorways; high quality craftsmanship in woodworking of pews, pulpits, tables.
- **Instruments & choirs:** Organs and choirs gradually appeared in more churches, beginning with the wealthiest: New England Congregationalist and Unitarians; Episcopalians, Presbyterians. This was due in part to evangelistic concerns to appeal to the emotions as well as the intellect, as well as dissatisfaction with Puritan aesthetic austerity in worship music.
- **Emotional restraint** remained an aspect of Presbyterian worship in reaction to the perceived excesses of Pentecostal, charismatic, and Baptist approaches to worship.
- **Sermon-centered worship:** Educated preaching remained the central event. Little or no sacramental emphasis.
- **Somber communion on a quarterly basis:** Communion remained a quiet, meditative, introspective occasion and quarterly celebration remained the norm for Presbyterians until approximately the 1970s when the shift toward monthly and weekly communion began.
- **Historic forms:** Gradually, these historic set forms like the *Apostles' Creed* and *Lord's Prayer* began to reappear in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They lent dignity to expression.
- **Social activism:** Social gospel hymnody made its way into hymnals.

(2) Low-art revivalism and popular culture influences

- **Pentecostalism:** Pentecostal and charismatic worship is a variation of the frontier pattern. Their services had the same basic order: music, preaching, manifestation of extraordinary spiritual gifts. The sermon was the main event, but the expected response was no longer simply an altar call or acts of recommitment but rather the supernatural manifestation of miraculous spiritual gifts.
- **Grape juice:** Wine was universally used in communion until the late nineteenth century when Methodist temperance activist Thomas Welch and his family began to produce and market grape juice as a substitute for American evangelicals who supported prohibition.
- **Gospel songs:** Light, energetic songs designed for mass evangelistic rallies (Ira Sankey and Dwight Moody; George Beverley Shea and Billy Graham) or Methodist class meetings, camp meetings, and revivals (Fanny Crosby) eventually made their way into the trans-denominational evangelical canon of hymnody. They tended toward a sentimental, individualistic message with shallow tunes oriented to entertainment.
- **Youth ministry and “seeker-sensitive” churches:** The format for informal worship in youth ministry gatherings and later in churches influenced by the church growth movement (“seeker-sensitive” churches) also adopted the frontier pattern: music and drama to set the stage for the sermon, which remained the main event.
- **New Christian worship music with pop/rock, folk, and jazz influences** (pioneered by the charismatic movement in the 1970s and 1980s) brought a new kind of connection to popular culture and more emotionally exuberant ethos to evangelical worship that marked a radical change from the restrained sobriety that had characterized the mainstream of Presbyterian worship since the mid-19th century.