

Historical Development of Christian Worship

I. Classic Structure of Christian Worship

The most ancient, enduring, and widespread pattern of Christian liturgy in the history of the Christian faith is the sequence of word, prayer, and sacrament that forms the heart of the biblical liturgy of covenant renewal.

The chart on the following page demonstrates this profound historical continuity by listing the order of worship found in three different sources and traditions spanning the first 1600 years of the church's history. The headings (in all capital letters) have been added to break down each liturgy into its components and to highlight the common structure of each order of service. Justin Martyr was a Christian philosopher who lived in Rome during the mid-second century A.D. In his *First Apology*, Justin wrote to explain Christian beliefs and practices and defend them from wild rumors and false accusations of various non-Christian critics. At the end of this work, he provided a two-paragraph summary of the order of corporate worship in the Roman churches, which is the earliest extant description of a complete Christian liturgy. Even in this brief account, the core of the biblical liturgical sequence is clearly discernible as the service moves from the reading and preaching of Scripture to prayers of intercession to its conclusion in the Lord's Supper.

As Christian worship developed over time, the liturgy became more elaborate in detail and ceremony, but the core actions remained the same. The middle column of the chart shows the basic liturgical framework that emerged in the Latin-speaking western half of the Roman empire and in western Europe during the medieval period. As Christian worship matured, the full biblical order of covenant renewal appeared more explicitly in the entrance rituals, a confession of sin and plea for God's forgiveness, and a concluding blessing added to the core sequence of word, prayer, and sacrament.

Most of the major traditions of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century continued to affirm and practice the basic pattern of Christian worship inherited from the early and medieval church. Although Lutheran and Reformed churches differed in matters of music and ceremonial details, they generally shared a common commitment to the classical shape of Christian worship in confession, word, prayer, and Lord's Supper.

The third column of the chart shows the order of worship established by French Reformed pastor and theologian John Calvin in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. Calvin was perhaps the most influential founder of the Reformed/Presbyterian tradition, and his Genevan liturgy was representative of many Reformed liturgies in the 16th century and also had a substantial impact on later Reformed/Presbyterian worship. Although Calvin was critical of many aspects of worship in the Middle Ages, he clearly maintained the ancient shape of Christian worship from the pre-Reformation traditions.

Justin Martyr (2nd Century)	Western Liturgy (4th-16th Centuries)	John Calvin (1542)
ENTRANCE Gathering	ENTRANCE Procession & Introit (psalm) Opening dialogue	ENTRANCE Opening dialogue
	PURIFICATION Confession of Sin Declaration of Forgiveness <i>Kyrie eleison</i>	PURIFICATION Confession of Sin Declaration of Forgiveness
MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD Scripture Reading: OT and NT Sermon	MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD <i>Gloria in excelsis</i> (sung) Collect prayer Scripture Reading: OT, Psalm (sung), NT Epistle, NT Gospel Sermon	MINISTRY OF GOD'S WORD Decalogue or Psalm (sung) Prayer for illumination Scripture Reading Sermon
RESPONSES TO GOD'S WORD Prayers of Intercession Kiss of Peace	RESPONSES TO GOD'S WORD Nicene Creed (Prayers of Intercession)	RESPONSES TO GOD'S WORD Offering for poor Prayers of Intercession (+ Lord's Prayer) Apostles' Creed (sung)
COMMUNION AT GOD'S TABLE Offerings of bread and wine Communion Prayer Communion Giving of offerings/gifts	COMMUNION AT GOD'S TABLE Procession with offerings of bread and wine Communion Prayer (+ Prayers of Intercession + Lord's Prayer) Kiss of peace Communion Prayer of thanksgiving BLESSING Benediction	COMMUNION AT GOD'S TABLE Words of Institution & Warning Communion Prayer Communion Prayer of thanksgiving BLESSING Benediction

II. The Liturgical Ideals of the Reformation

1. Biblical and classical Christian worship: Based upon extensive study of Bible and the writings of the early church fathers, the Reformers came to believe that some developments in theology, liturgy, and piety during the medieval period had obscured and distorted the purity of the gospel. Thus, they sought to renew the church by removing the excesses and errors that had accumulated in the church's thought and practice by recovering models of church life from an earlier period that followed God's word with greater fidelity and purity. This meant a focus on:

- **The Bible:** Reformed leaders sought to reform worship by stripping away everything that did not have firm biblical foundations. They restored a central role to the reading and preaching of Scripture in worship and also to the singing of scripture-based congregational songs (mostly psalms and some other biblical songs).
- **Early church traditions:** The Reformers were not revolutionaries who jettisoned church tradition altogether. Rather, they sought to reform the liturgical traditions they inherited from the early church while maintaining continuity with the best of that tradition. Indeed, the Reformers appealed to the early church and sought to model their liturgies on ancient Christian sources because they believed that these earlier models preserved the purity of biblical worship established by Jesus and the apostles.

2. Grace-centered and Christ-centered worship: Reformed ministers stressed the sovereignty and glory of God and the church's access to God through Christ. Their Christ-centered focus resulted in the following emphases:

- **Word and sacrament:** John Calvin, Martin Bucer, and other early Reformed leaders stressed the importance and intrinsic connection and complementarity between the ministry of both the word of God and sacrament of the Lord's Supper as the concrete means through which we encounter the risen Christ and receive Christ by faith. Thus, Calvin was an ardent advocate of weekly communion.
- **Liturgical calendar:** Early Reformed churches celebrated the major festivals of the annual liturgical calendar (Advent & Christmas, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost), which helped keep the church centered on Christ.

3. Active, intelligent participation in the liturgy by the whole church: The Reformers sought to restore the biblical and early church model of corporate worship as the privilege and responsibility of the whole people of God. Thus, they overturned several medieval developments that restricted the congregation's active involvement and promoted the active, intelligent participation of the congregation in a variety of ways:

- **Spoken and sung responses for the whole congregation:** The Reformers sought to make every congregational response a truly corporate one so that the liturgy expresses the unity of the whole church as we speak and sing together with one voice.
- **Liturgies with fixed structures:** Protestants pioneered the production of liturgical service books with fixed liturgical texts for use by both the minister and the congregation. They did this so that worship could be well-planned and theologically substantive, and also so that it could be a truly corporate event in which the whole people of God could participate actively and intelligently in every part of the service. The fixed structure provides the stability and consistency that promotes active involvement by facilitating familiarity and memorization (which allows even small children to participate).