

Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present

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The following excerpts were selected by Jerry Nelson

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In other significant ways, however, Calvin's teaching on the Supper was closer to Luther's than to Zwingli's. This is evident in two issues: the question of presence of Christ and that of means grace. Calvin did not share Zwingli's idea of the Supper as a memorial only. Instead, like Luther, Calvin affirmed that there is a real presence of Christ's body and blood (though he insisted that this is spiritual and not physical), and he considered the sacrament a means of grace.

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This understanding of the meaning and purpose of the Supper influenced Calvin's view of how frequently it should be celebrated and what constitutes worthiness to partake. The Supper is a means of sealing the grace of the promises that are preached, to make the doubting human heart more sure of the truth of God's acceptance in Christ. (Word and Supper offer the same grace, but in different ways; the sacrament or "visible word" serves to confirm the promises tangibly because of human weakness). The Supper should therefore be held frequently, as often as the people are able to receive it—that is, as often as all the communicant members of the congregation can be prepared. The reason to limit frequency is thus that people must be fit to partake. There is much confusion about what was meant by worthiness, but Calvin insisted that what makes one fit to receive is not perfection but trust in Christ alone, along with repentance, and reconciliation with God and one's neighbors. This ideal is common to most other reformers, but the Reformed added a distinctive corporate factor: the Supper is the meal of the whole body, not just those who happen to feel worthy on a given day, and therefore worthiness has a corporate dimension.

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It might appear that all the components of liturgy had been covered: word, prayer, sacraments. The Calvinist Reformed paradigm for worship, however, included one more element, based on the teaching of Acts 2:42: "They continued steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles and the fellowship and the breaking of the bread and the prayers." That fourth element was fellowship, and those four aspects of worship together—preaching the word, fellowship, the Supper, and prayers—were regarded as necessary components of the right worship gathering, not a specific order of service.

Fellowship was most often concretely expressed as almsgiving, though Calvin also mentions the kiss of peace. Another aspect of this fellowship would be an awareness of mutual needs, physical as well as spiritual, which might include also announcements about the sick and needy in the congregation. (In Calvin's Geneva, however, these were

a constant part of daily prayers and in particular a major theme on the Day of Prayer, so they received less attention on Sunday).

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Calvin's Genevan Service of the Word and Sacrament
(Order of 1562, with three psalms)

Liturgy of the Word

Psalm

Invocation

Confession of Sin

Psalm

Minister's Extempore Prayer for the Illumination-Sealing

Biblical Text and Sermon-Exposition

Liturgy of the Table

Confession of Faith (Apostles' Creed)

Decalogue (sung)

Scripture (1 Cor. 11:23-29) and Exhortation

Distribution (men and then women file up in order, a lector reads aloud from the Gospel of John chap. 13 and following)

Thanksgiving

Song of Simeon

Benediction

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Reformed people may have been more insistent than other Protestants on the necessity of carefully prepared expository preaching, but the two more significant contributions were perhaps the choice to set the canon of Scripture above the liturgical calendar, thus making a very clear revision of religious time, and the emphasis given to the Old Testament.

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A second area of worship and piety distinct to the Calvinist Reformed is the role of the psalms as the words of prayer and praise. Unlike other Protestants, Calvinists (and most other Reformed) did not sing human compositions, but they made of the Psalter a treasury of public and private worship. The memorization of a body of biblical songs formed an important basis for Reformed piety, a language of prayer that gave a particular coherence to public and private worship.

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With regard to the sacraments, one of the important marks of the Reformed tradition, especially of Calvinists, was the consistent requirement that these be corporate. Public baptisms in the presence of the whole worshipping community were essential: there were no emergencies that necessitated private baptisms. Also, the common participation of the whole communicant membership in the Lord's Supper, and proper preparation for it, mark the Reformed practice as different from most Protestants.

A particular concern of Calvin's was that right participation in the Lord's Supper necessitated prior repentance, trust in God, and reconciliation with one's neighbors.

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In accordance with the order established by the Reformation, Reformed worship was mainly a matter of listening. Through the preaching of the word the congregation was taught and admonished. Reformers such as Calvin introduced the practice of preaching series of sermons on books of the Bible, a practice that lasted until the emergence of more freedom in preaching customs.

In Geneva and elsewhere (in France, for instance), the sermon began and ended with the singing of a psalm in unison, according to well-known melodic and verse settings. In Zurich such singing in worship was not allowed until 1598. Accompaniment on the organ was forbidden everywhere until the nineteenth century.

P85-86

As far as English Congregationalism is concerned, the Savoy Declaration of Faith and Order of 1658 may be said to have achieved classical status. John Owen (1613-1683), one of England's leading seventeenth-century theologians, was one of those responsible for it, and he and his colleagues were indebted to the exposition of Congregationalism propounded by John Cotton, formerly of Boston, Lincolnshire, latterly of Boston, New England. With certain modifications of wording, Savoy largely follows the Westminster Confession, in the preparing of which some prominent Congregationalists had been involved. One reason for this was that the Declaration's authors wished to demonstrate their doctrinal orthodoxy in the face of such scurrilous charges as that Congregationalism was "the sink of all Heresies and Schisms." Savoy does, however, omit Westminster chapters XXX and XXXI, concerning church censures, synods, and councils—Parliament having objected to these as being too Scottish. It includes a new chapter, "Of the Gospel, and of the extent of the Grace thereof," it adds to Westminster's statements on the civil magistrate, and it modifies Westminster's paragraphs "Of the Church." To the Declaration is appended the *Savoy Declaration of the Institution of Churches, and the Order appointed in them by Jesus Christ.*"

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Separatists and Puritans alike sought a form of worship in accordance with Christ's will and with apostolic practice, and there would have been widespread agreement with John Owen that the "chiefest acts and parts" of worship are "*preaching of the word, administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of discipline*; all to be performed with prayer and thanksgiving." While it would take us too far afield to pursue the theme of church discipline here, we should note that the quest of a pure church inspired the fencing of the Lord's table so that church members only were permitted to receive what was, after all, a sacrament of the church.

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Worship in Congregational and Presbyterian churches in eighteenth-century America was the product of their free-church heritage from Great Britain, in opposition to the state-imposed Anglican liturgy, beginning in the sixteenth century with the *Book of Common Prayer*. The Calvinist and Puritan view was that worship should be governed by Scripture and should include only elements specifically authorized by Scripture. Hence,

the primary elements of worship were the reading of Scripture, prayer, the singing of psalms, and the sermon. The use of the Apostles' Creed and liturgical responses such as the *Gloria Patri* were rejected, along with set liturgical prayers. Even recitation of the Lord's Prayer in worship was rejected by many, especially the Congregationalists, who understood it as a model for prayer but not a prayer to be recited in worship. In consequence, Congregational and Presbyterian worship was clergy dominated. The only active participation of the people was the singing of psalms.

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Directory for the Publick Worship of God

Established and put in execution by Act of the General Assembly, February 3, 1645, and approved and established by Act of Parliament February 6, 1645

In the beginning of the blessed Reformation, our wise and pious ancestors took care to set forth an Order for redress of many things, which they then, by the Word, discovered to be vain, erroneous, superstitious, and idolatrous, in the Publick Worship of God. This occasioned many godly and learned men to rejoice much in the Book of Common Prayer, at that time set forth; because the mass, and the rest of the Latin service being removed, the Publick Worship was celebrated in our own tongue: many of the common people also received benefit of hearing the Scriptures read in their own language, which formerly were unto them as a book that is sealed. Howbeit, long and sad experience hath made it manifest, that the Liturgy is used in the Church of England (notwithstanding all the pains and religious intentions of the compliers of it) hath proved an offence, not only to many of the godly at home, but also to the Reformed Churches abroad...

We have, after earnest and frequent calling upon the name of God, and after much consultation, not with flesh and blood, but with His holy Word, resolved to lay aside the former Liturgy, with the many rites and ceremonies formerly used in the worship of God; and have agreed upon this following Directory for all the parts of Publick Worship, at ordinary and extraordinary times. Wherein our care hath been to hold forth such things as are of divine institution in every ordinance; and other things we have endeavored to set forth according to the rules of Christian prudence, agreeable to the general rules of the Word of God...

Of the Assembling of the Congregation, and their Behaviour in the Publick Worship of God

...Let all enter the assembly, not irreverently, but in a grave and seemly manner, taking their seats or places without adoration, or bowing themselves towards one place or another...

The publick worship being begun, the people are wholly to attend upon it, forbearing to read any thing, except what the minister is then reading or citing; and abstaining much more from all private whisperings, conferences or salutations or doing reverence to any person present or coming in; as also from all gazing, sleeping, and other indecent behaviour which may disturb the minister or people...

Of Publick Reading of the Holy Scriptures

Reading of the Word in the Congregation, being part of the Publick Worship of God (wherein we acknowledge our dependence upon Him, and subjection to Him), and one means sanctified by Him for the edifying of His people, is to be performed by the Pastors and Teachers...

How large a portion shall be read at once, is left to the wisdom of the minister; but it is convenient, that ordinarily one chapter of each Testament be read at every meeting; and sometimes more, where the chapters be short or the coherence of matter requireth it. It is requisite that all the canonical books be read over in order that the people may be better acquainted with the whole body of the scriptures...

Of Publick Prayer before the Sermon

After reading the word (or singing the psalm) the minister who is to preach, is to endeavor to get his own and his hearers' hearts to be rightly affected with their sins, that they may all mourn in sense thereof before the Lord, and hunger and thirst after the grace of God in Jesus Christ...

Of the Preaching of the Word

Preaching of the word, being the power of God unto salvation, and one of the greatest and most excellent works belonging to the ministry of the gospel, should be so performed, that the workman need not be ashamed, but may save himself, and those that hear him... Let the introduction to his text be brief and perspicuous...

...In raising doctrines from the text, his care ought to be, *First*, that the matter be the truth of God. *Secondly*, that it be a truth contained or grounded in that text, that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence. *Thirdly*, that he chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended, and make most for the edification of the hearers...

Of the Celebration of the Communion, or Sacrament of the Lord's Supper

The Communion, or Supper of the Lord, is frequently to be celebrated; but how often, may be considered and determined by the Ministers, and other Church-governors of each Congregation, as they shall find most convenient for the comfort and edification of the people committed to their charge. And, when it shall be administered, we judge it convenient to be done after the Morning Sermon. The ignorant and the scandalous are not fit to receive this Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Where this Sacrament cannot with convenience be frequently administered, it is requisite that public warning be given the Sabbath Day before the administration thereof; and that either then, or on some day of that week, something concerning that Ordinance, and the due preparation thereunto, and participation thereof, be taught; that, by the diligent use of all means sanctified of God to that end, both in public and private, all may come better prepared to that heavenly Feast.

Of the Sanctification of the Lord's Day

The Lord's Day ought to be so remembered before-hand, as that all worldly business of our ordinary callings may be so ordered, and so timely and seasonably laid aside, as they may not be impediments to the due sanctifying of the day when it comes...

Of the Singing of Psalms

It is the duty of Christians to praise God publickly, by the Singing of Psalms together in the Congregation, and also privately in the family. In Singing of Psalms, the voice is to be tunably and gravely ordered; but the chief care must be to sing with understanding, and with grace in the heart, making melody unto the Lord...

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The need for a church of the word *and sacrament* is not just a cure for our terminal worldliness. It is not a matter of supplementing left brain thinking with right brain feeling, or replacing sharp words with warm communal affections, or suppressing the

word's judgment in favor of creating group ties that bind the church together. Word and sacrament are not contrasting aspects of church life: brain and heart, abstract and concrete. On the contrary, Calvin placed word and sacrament *together* at the core of the church's life because he took it to be "a settled principle that the sacraments have the same office as the Word of God: to offer and set forth Christ to us, and in him the treasures of heavenly grace." Calvin's view is remarkable in two ways. First, the purpose of the sacraments is the same as that of the word. Baptism and Eucharist have the same function as Scripture and preaching: to proclaim the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, giving us true knowledge of God. Second, the purpose of both is to communicate the presence of the living Christ to us, uniting us to him in the power of the Holy Spirit. The word is not for imparting information and the sacraments are not for imparting feelings; both are occasions for the real presence of Christ in our midst.

Calvin was confident that word and sacraments are effective: they give to us precisely what they portray. Preaching God's word imparts Christ himself to us, maintaining Christ's living presence among us. The sacraments represent the person and work of Christ, making real among us the very presence of Christ. "I say that Christ is the matter or (if you prefer) the substance of all the sacraments," says Calvin, "for in him they have all their firmness, and they do not promise anything apart from him." Thus, the Lord's Supper and baptism are not occasions for the Christian community merely to celebrate its own life. The sacraments impart to the community the substance of its life in Christ.