

**LITURGY**

***BACKGROUND TO ECCLESIAL LITURGY***

The word *liturgy* does not imply a highly formal structure of worship, such as is often supposed and associated with “high church” dogmatics. The Greek root for this term simply denotes “acts of worship.” And in this sense, every church has some sort of liturgy, a more or less predictable way of conducting worship by including certain “acts” and omitting others. Liturgical considerations are based on two general principles, namely, *elements* and *arrangement.* Every congregation has to decide on what elements to include and how to arrange them, in order to make liturgy conducive to the worship of God. However, choices with regards to elements and arrangement can easily obscure the most fundamental concern underlying the question of liturgy: What, after all, is worship?

Under the leadership of the Swiss Reformers, particularly Calvin, the most radical liturgical reform that the Christian church has ever known was brought about. It is important to retain the proper meaning of “reform.” The Reformers saw themselves not as reinventing the wheel or as the initiators of a new start, but as returning to the liturgy of the early/primitive church. Thus, it is not at all surprising that a juxtaposition of, say, the Geneva liturgy of the 16th century and liturgy of Justin Martyr [103-65 AD] points up striking similarities. The early church included two main parts in its liturgy – the service of the Word [reading and preaching] and the service of Holy Communion. Intercessory prayers formed a bridge between the two. All in all, the church services consisted of four basic elements: prayer, singing [praise], the Word [preached and as Sacrament], as well as the giving of offerings, usually at the time of the Lord’s Supper [Communion]. This simple division was recovered in the Reformation, at a time when Roman Catholic services had all but abandoned the preaching of the Word, not to speak of others aggravating distortions, not the least relating to Communion [the “cup” being withheld from congregants] and the exclusive use of Latin, a linguistic medium the common people no longer understood.

To these abuses the Reformers reacted intensely. They recognized that the liturgy in the Roman church placed stress almost exclusively on the Sacrament, whereas the early church had given equal emphasis on Word and Sacrament in tandem, and in this order. The early order and balance was restored, and is also reflected in COPC’s liturgy. The sequence is crucial, since the Sacrament is meaningless apart from the divine definition of the Word, both read and preached. The Word or gospel , both read and expounded, precedes the Sacrament and creates the theological matrix within which it must be received. As is evident from COPC’s liturgical structure, offering [tithes], singing, and praise are included as well, as they were in the early church and Reformed liturgy.

By far the most salient contribution of Reformed liturgical worship, however, it is dialogical rationale, and this notion is wedded to the above stated fundamental question of the nature and meaning of worship. The Reformers understood and practiced worship as a meeting of God and his people, following the biblical pattern from the earliest witnesses in Scripture, where God called Israel to come to his Tent/Temple to worship in his presence and so to be blessed by him. Accordingly, God acts in public worship and the congregation responds in faith. Thus, the defining aspect of Reformed liturgy is that God acts as the initiator and we react as responders. In worship, then, God and his people interact in the power of the Spirit.

Included in this brief synopsis is a representative liturgy of COPC with some further comments and thoughts.

***COPC LITURGY GUIDE***

**Call to Worship.** God speaks, calling his people to himself to come and worship.

**Hymn/Singing.** God’s people rise to God’s call and sing praise in response to the divine call to worship. Congregation singing is often understood as no more than a decoration of the service, a welcome coating of either culture or entertainment, or as a way of achieving emotive audience participation. In still other cases, singing becomes a pedagogical device, designed to serve as a “clincher” of the worship service’s theme. While this notion has its merit, singing is first and foremost of all our response of praise to God’s acts.

**Confession of Sin.** Reformed worship included a congregational confession of sin near the beginning of the service, affirming our need to have a clear conscience before worshipping God in Spirit and in truth. The practice is reflected in COPC’s lirutgy.

**Assurance of Pardon.** God, for Jesus Christ’s sake, declares his people forgiven.

**Hymn/Singing.** God’s people respond with thanksgiving and praise.

**Confession of Faith.** The worshipers continues ascribe “worth” [as the etymology or *worship* implies] or glory to God by reaffirming the faith verbally and in unison.

**Hymn/Singing.** A hymn of praise concludes this introductory section of the liturgy. From here, the focus shifts even more specifically to the Word of God, read and preached, taking the central position in the order of worship.

**Scripture Reading.** God speaks to his people through the read Word.

**Prayer.** The pastor speaks on behalf of the congregation in public, congregational prayer. The prayer is a response to the Word of God.

**Sermon.**  A sermon is genuinely viewed as “God’s Word.” Calvin’s understanding of the Word preached is one of the hallmarks of Reformed liturgy: “God’s voice resounds in the mouths anx tongues of preachers, so that hearing ministers preach is like hearing god himself speak. God uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honor, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work – just as a workman uses a tool to do his work.” In other words, through the sovereign operation of the Holy Spirit the minister speaks the Word of God in the radical sense that God now speaks through him. In listening to gospel proclamation we hear God speaking to us. Therefore, biblical calls to preach also abound: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, …, preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 tim 4:1-2; cf. 2 Tim 3:16].

**Offerings/Tithes.** Tithing is not a “necessary evil” or the church’s robbing of the innocent congregant. In giving of our material blessings to the work of the gospel ministries, we joyfully give ourselves to God in response his Word. God gives of his spiritual bounty in the gospel, we respond by giving of our material resources to build his kingdom.

**Lord’s Supper.** Reformed theology of the Supper is distinct. Too often, communion is viewed as a mere memorial or a mode of thanksgiving [Zwingli], and in this sense, as an act of worship of the people. While this is true to some extent, the cardinal truth about the Supper is that the believer is not the primary actor. In the Supper, God confirms the promises he has made to us in Christ. The promises of the gospel are real in the Sacrament, in that Christ acts “here and now” and we receive him, giving himself to us. He acts through the Spirit not only in confirming his promise of union with him, but he also effectuates it. If we approach the Supper in simple faith, we are spiritually nourished and strengthened in and through Christ, as God himself fulfills inwardly what he depicts outwardly and visibly in the designated elements of bread and wine. The fact that God acts in the Supper is also a strong argument in favor of weekly observance of the Sacrament as a means of grace, not to speak of correspondence with the early church’s worship, where the two high points, Word and Sacrament, formed the heart of the enduring shape of the liturgy.

**Diaconal Offering.** After having our spiritual needs met, God’s people respond to Christ’s giving of himself to them by an offering for the relief of those in need. The offering is taken every 4th Sunday of the month in addition to the weekly tithes.

**Hymn/Singing.** The congregation praises God in the closing section of the liturgy.

**Benediction.** The minister puts God’s blessing on the people as the conclusion of the service.

**Doxology.** The people respond by ascribing glory to God.