Reformed Christians have always been passionately concerned about worship. The regulative principle of worship is one of the distinctives of Presbyterian churches. It is a commitment to be governed only by the Word of God in the substantial issues of worship. This commitment has caused Reformed Christians to divide, not only from the Anglicans, but from one another with regard to acceptable worship. It may seem surprising, therefore, that the study of worship has not been a major concern among conservative Presbyterians in the Twentieth Century. But it has not! Fortunately, in the providence of God, others have given considerable attention to the history and theology of Christian worship. Since the middle of this century there has been a growing community of scholars who have been investigating the spectrum of Christian liturgies from Orthodoxy’s Divine Liturgy of St. Chrysostom to the worship orders of such reformers as Calvin, Bucer, Knox and Zwingli.

One of the goals of Echo Hills Christian Study Center is to bring the fruits of these studies to the Reformed passion for worship that is according to the Word of God. With this in mind, Echo Hills offers this first in a series of essays on the historical origins and development of Reformed worship. The goal is to foster not only an understanding of the past, but a consideration of the biblical theology and pastoral implementation of worship. We begin our story with the earliest of the Reformed reformers, Ulrich Zwingli.

Zwingli was a priest in the Swiss city of Zurich. In 1518 He began to preach through the entire New Testament. He method was to intersperse epistles with gospels beginning with St. Matthew. This biblical exposition excited a desire among many of the citizens of Zurich for the reform of the Latin Mass. Zwingli’s initial effort at reform was entitled An Attack upon the Canon of the Mass published in 1523. Zwingli’s criticisms and proposals were focused on that portion of the Mass known as the Canon. In the West the prayer over the bread and cup in the Lord’s supper portion of the liturgy had come to be divided between an introduction and a main section that was required to be said verbatim. This standardized prayer was called the Canon from the Greek word meaning rule (κανών). Between the Preface and the Canon was response that combined the seraphim’s song (Isaiah 6:3) and the chant of the crowds at the triumphal entry (Mark 11:9).

The core of the Canon was very ancient. But the Canon of the Mass had also come to express the latter doctrines of Christ’s bodily presence (real presence) and the continuation of Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice in the Mass. These later doctrinal expressions were not only in the form of new paragraphs added to the ancient core, but also were an intermingling of new ideas with ancient formulas, giving to those ancient formulas meanings it is doubtful that they had at their inception. For example, the bread and cup are called “a holy offering, a victim without blemish.” This phrase was a latter addition that combined older terminology with a new idea. Calling the elements an offering was very ancient, but adding that they were a victim without blemish reflects the developing medieval consensus. The result was a prayer that Zwingli, a Latin stylist, found to be appalling Latin. Furthermore, like Martin Luther, he despaired of revising the Canon to make it theologically acceptable. As a result he dispensed with the Canon entirely. In its place he set four prayers in Latin of his own composition following the traditional Preface and Sanctus.

The first prayer recounts man’s fall and Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. “From this state of grace man fell through his own fault and was deemed worthy of death” but Christ “gave himself to be the perfect sacrifice of those who were lost: and not content with this, so that we might lack for nothing, he gave himself to be our food and drink.” Zwingli places the idea of sacrifice entirely in the past. The present action of the supper was not to be conceived as a sacrifice, but as a spiritual feast. In the second prayer Zwingli beseeched God that those who partook would be nourished by the spiritual food of God’s word. In this prayer we can see that Zwingli, in rejecting Christ’s bodily presence in the supper, also
Besides the divorce of word and supper in the weekly service, Zwingli also began a number of practices still with us today. Another aspect of Zwingli’s reform was the omission of most of the ancient formulae of worship. Such classic liturgical pieces as the Sursum corda (Lift up your hearts…), the Sanctus (Holy, Holy, Holy…), the Kyrie (Lord, have mercy!) and the Agnus Dei (O Christ, Lamb of God…) disappeared in Zurich. To this day, most Reformed services do not remind one of the ancient liturgies either in shape or phraseology.

Zwingli established the practice that the people should remain seated and the elements be brought to them by the deacons. The deacons at this time were still liturgical assistants, not ministers to the poor, as they would become in Geneva under Calvin’s influence. As we noted above, the practice of preaching continuously through the books of the Bible was begun by Zwingli. Though this is not as common as it once was, only the Reformed (not the Lutherans or the Anglicans) dispensed with the lectionary structure of readings based on the church year in favor of a lecto continua method. At the quarterly celebrations of the Lord’s supper, Zwingli’s liturgy included only a prayer of humble access and the words of institution. The dominical pattern of taking the bread and giving thanks disappeared in Zwingli’s reform. The same was true for the cup. Here we encounter one of the strangest liturgical customs, namely, a service of thanksgiving without formalized thanksgiving! The oddness of this is accentuated by the very phraseology of Zwingli’s prayer of access: “O Almighty God, who by thy Spirit has brought us together into thy one body, in the unity of faith, and has commanded that body to give thee praise and thanks for thy goodness and free gift in delivering thine only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to death for our sins: grant that we may do the same…” No prayer of thanksgiving followed!

One innovation of Zwingli was not followed in the rest the Reformed world. In Zurich not only were the organs removed from the church buildings, but even singing was banned from the service. At first Zwingli kept a responsive reading of the ancient chant Te Deum in his Lord’s supper liturgy. After 1529 this too ceased. As a result, the service of the supper was celebrated in almost total silence! Calvin would take a very different approach. Whether Zwingli would have modified his views under the influence of Calvin we shall never know for Ulrich Zwingli was killed in battle in 1531.

Zwingli, as the first of the Reformed theologians, played a crucial role in the evolution of worship in the Reformed churches. He initially established many of the practices that would become characteristic of Reformed worship: quarterly communion, a complete break from liturgical custom in form and phraseology, communion seated, and a service...
entirely in the vernacular. But this is just the beginning of the story. The reform of worship would continue in Strasbourg and in Geneva, and in those cities it would take some very different directions.

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