

Worship Diversity Among Presbyterians

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<http://kinneer.rpts.edu/home/liturgy/RootsofReformedWorship%2CNo2.pdf?attredirects=0&d=1>

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Reformed Christians have strong opinions about worship. We also have strongly divided opinions about worship. Perhaps no branch of the visible, catholic church has as much diversity in worship opinions and practices as do conservative Presbyterians in this country. What makes this amazing (or depressing) is that we Presbyterians profess to believe that the only acceptable worship is worship regulated by the Word of God. We are not traditionalists who are bound to liturgical heritage like the Orthodox churches. We are not papists who are bound to the pontiff's authority. We are not experimentalists who believe that if it feels good, do it. We hold to the regulative principle of worship. As the Westminster Confession expresses it: "But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture." To this statement of doctrine every Presbyterian minister swears his allegiance. However, if we survey the practices of conservative Presbyterian churches (churches in the OPC, PCA, and RPCNA, for example) what we find is a diversity that reflects almost every approach to worship found in Christendom. In other words, we all agree that worship is to be regulated by the Word of God, but we do not agree as to what that regulation is except in the most extreme cases (e.g., prayers to Mary and the saints).

There are at least six approaches to corporate Lord's Day worship among our churches. We can classify these as follows:

1. Neo-Puritan
2. Traditional American
3. Neo-Reformational
4. Anglican/Lutheran
5. Semi-Charismatic
6. Seeker-friendly

These categories are not hermetically sealed but represent general tendencies. In practice a congregation may have a mix of approaches either in different services or in the same service. Given this variety, it is not surprising that it has become common place to speak about "worship styles." The purpose of this essay is to describe briefly what are the characteristics of each of these approaches. The intention is to accurately

represent current trends in Presbyterian worship. None of the terms is intended to be pejorative.

The Neo-Puritan approach is most often associated with a strict enforcement of the regulative principle. It is marked by a commitment to views that developed in the Puritan era especially in England and Scotland. Neo-Puritan worship holds these values:

1. It rejects all prepared or set prayers (including the recitation in unison of the Lord's Prayer).
2. It advocates the exclusive use of the Psalter without accompaniment.
3. It limits all public prayers to the Pastor who alone speaks individually in the service.
4. It has almost no ceremony except the raising of the minister's hands for the benediction.
5. It rejects the Church festivals entirely.

This approach to worship was developed during the controversies in England and Scotland that centered around the imposition of the Book of Common Prayer from the reign of Edward till the restoration of the monarchy after the Puritan commonwealth.

The Traditional American approach is historically a development from the Puritan era. The service described above as Neo-Puritan is the way most Presbyterians in America worshipped in 1740 at the beginning of the Great Awakening. The influences of revivalism, the liturgical renewal of the 19th Century, and the general pressures of American culture produced a significant modification of the Puritan approach. The changes included:

1. Introduction of non-inspired hymnody and musical accompaniment,
2. Re-introduction of the corporate recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed,
3. A minimal notice of the Church festivals (at least Christmas and Easter),
4. Introduction of choirs, solos, and some of the ceremony associated with them, such as processions and recessions,
5. The substitution of Ruling Elders for some of the Pastor's liturgical functions: call to worship, invocation, responsive Psalmody.

Most of us who grew up Presbyterian experienced this approach to worship in our youth. It is the image other Christians have of Presbyterian worship.

The Neo-Reformation approach (which is often mixed with the Traditional American approach) is a rediscovery the Reformation era liturgies of Bucer, Calvin, Knox and others. Some churches have tried to adapt and modify these liturgies for use today. This

involves a rejection of the Puritan principle that all public prayers should be free, extemporaneous prayers. Instead there is a return to Reformation era practice of prepared prayers. Usually this approach involves:

1. Written prayers to be used for the service
2. Re-introduction of prayer of confession of sins with absolution at the beginning of the service.
3. Re-adoption of the Genevan gown (an unadorned black robe) for the garbing of the Pastor. This is not to be confused with priestly garbing. The black gown was used by Reformed Churches precisely because it was not Roman Catholic.

Because the Neo-Reformational approach is a recovery of old Reformed liturgical practices, it should be distinguished from the Anglican/Lutheran approach. Some Presbyterian congregations have adopted liturgies derived from the Anglican and Lutheran sources. Such liturgies have some marked differences from tradition Reformed liturgies, though a blending of the two approaches can be found.

Anglican/Lutheran derived liturgies are much more responsive. They have short congregational responses, sung or spoken, that are absent from traditional Reformed liturgies. (In part this is because Cramner's and Luther's liturgies were derived from the medieval high or sung mass while Bucer's, Calvin's and Knox's liturgies were derived from the low or said mass. The sung mass had preserved the dialogue character of ancient liturgies although the people's parts had been largely taken over by choirs.)

Anglican/Lutheran derived liturgies usually have a lectionary structure to the Bible lessons that is coordinated with the Church year. Likewise, the variable prayers are tied thematically to the Church year.

Anglican/Lutheran derived liturgies usually have more ceremony including recessionals, processions, lighting of candles, and traditional medieval style of garbing.

The Semi-Charismatic approach is an adaptation of worship practices found among Charismatic (or Pentecostal) churches to function within the Reformed conviction on the cessation of revelation. Characteristics of Semi-Charismatic worship include:

1. Use of contemporary Scripture songs and choruses (though these have become popular throughout Presbyterianism) with non-traditional instrumental accompaniment (guitars, drums, etc.),
2. Singing in mass (a number songs sung back to back, often chosen at the moment),
3. The conceptualization of the service as divided into two aspects: worship (songs, prayers, sharing) and sermon,

4. Use of a lay worship leader to conduct the worship portion of the service,
5. Allowance for vocal free prayer by members of the congregation during the service,
6. Concern for emotional expression: sharing, raising hands, clapping and sometimes liturgical dance,
7. Dislike of a set order and a planned service, that is, a preference for spontaneity.

The Seeker-friendly service is an event conducted during the customary hours of congregational worship. It is called worship but in fact is really an evangelistic event. Such an event is more of a concert of religious music with a sermon. Normally there are only one or two very brief prayers, no extended intercessions and no celebration of the sacraments. These are reserved for another meeting held on a weekday that more closely resembles a worship service. This mid-week meeting is where intercessory prayer takes place and the sacraments are administered.

It is evident from this survey that "almost" anything goes in Presbyterian worship. If you drop in on a Sunday morning service at a conservative Presbyterian church, you could experience any of the above approaches or even a combination of two or three of them! As churches that have been willing to be persecuted rather than to compromise on matters of worship, it is bizarre that such a bewildering diversity should exist among us. What is even more bizarre is the minimal theological literature that Presbyterians have produced to justify and defend their diverse worship practices and underlying convictions. There is very little written on the subject by conservative Presbyterians! There are few conferences held to consider the matter. It occupies a minimal place in the curriculum of Presbyterian seminaries. Presbyterians are pragmatically serious about worship. Presbyterian people choose between congregations based on their worship practices. Congregations advertise for new Pastors by detailing their convictions on worship.

Our desire at Echo Hills Christian Study Center is to foster a serious discussion of the biblical and Reformed theology of worship. This brief survey of diverse worship practices and convictions points to the need to think theologically about worship. So in our next issue we will turn to an initial consideration of the theology of worship. We will also continue our series on the history of Reformed worship to provide a historical context for our theological reflection. Theology never occurs in the abstract but always in the context of current human struggles and the heritage of those who have served Christ before us.