



SUNDAY SCHOOL MINISTRY

Discipleship Plan

Third Quarter – Joshua to David
Part 1

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Lesson 1: Prior to Praise—The Recipe for Victory

Primary Verses: “Then the LORD said to Joshua, ‘This day I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you.’ Therefore the name of the place is called Gilgal to this day. Now the children of Israel camped in Gilgal, and kept the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month at twilight on the plains of Jericho. And they ate of the produce of the land on the day after the Passover, unleavened bread and parched grain, on the very same day.” Joshua 5:9-11 (NKJV)

Teaching Text: Joshua 5 (please allow time for Joshua 6 to be read after the lesson)

Supporting Text: Genesis 17:7-14; Numbers 9:1-5; Exodus 3:1-6

Is there a military exercise in the Old Testament more famous and more often referred to than the battle of Jericho? Of course, the popularity of Jericho’s battle is not surprising. The intriguing set-up for the war involving a prostitute, unconventional instructions for fighting, the dramatic build up, and the super-surprise that trumpets can serve as silos to launch the secret weapon of praise makes Jericho’s story one worth remembering and repeating. But is there more to the victory of God’s people than the sound of brass and zealous shouting? Amazingly, many have overlooked what should be a rather obvious fact – Joshua’s fifth chapter is the foundation for Joshua’s sixth chapter.

The Covenant Sign: The venerable King James Version calls it a “token,” while most modern English versions call it a “sign.” In common parlance, some might call it a “memento,” “keepsake,” or “souvenir.” Circumcision was the most intimate form of a reminder, far more so than any string tied around a finger. It was not definite proof that a person belonged to God *inwardly*, but an outward reminder that one should be living his/her life as though he/she owed it to God. How serious was circumcision to God under the Abrahamic Covenant? Ask Moses and Zipporah (Exodus 4:24-27)! **Renewal** of the nation in obedience to the ordinance of circumcision was a necessary pre-cursor to success in Jericho.

The Covenant Meal: This time was not the first instance Israel had celebrated Passover since leaving Egypt. However, if virtually all the nation’s males required circumcision—thus proving that they failed to keep that ordinance— isn’t it possible that they also didn’t keep the Passover annually as they should have? The Feast of Unleavened Bread, no matter how often it had been celebrated since the original meal, had never given rise to higher expectations than this one shared in Joshua chapter 5. Israel’s **remembrance** of God’s deliverance in Egypt was essential for confidence in His power to deliver Jericho into their hands.

The Covenant Keeper: There is a long-standing debate as to whether or not the Commander/Captain in this story is Divine or merely angelic. The fact that Joshua worships and is not rebuked for doing so is a good indicator that this Captain is Divine. When we remember Moses’ first encounter with the Great I AM, the Commander’s instruction to Joshua is another hint of Godhood. Whatever position one takes on this Mysterious Figure, the drawn sword and the army under Him is a clear indication God is the One Who fights Israel’s battles. Without **recognition** of this truth, victory at Jericho, or any other battle, would be impossible.

Questions to Consider: How do you generally deal with reminders you haven’t been obedient to God? How might those feelings/reactions multiply/intensify if it were a whole nation—or a congregation—being reminded of its unfaithfulness? What does chapter 5 teach us about God’s grace in the midst of Israel’s infidelity? How might this passage read differently if the Captain of the Lord’s Army had shown up before the people had restored their commitment to the ordinances of circumcision and Passover? What kinds of lessons can be learned by examining the questions and answers between Joshua and the Captain? How might those lessons impact a person? How might such truths speak to a nation?

Challenging the Class: How often do you recall being admonished to vibrant praise in light of the sure victory to follow in the pattern of Jericho's battle? How does understanding Joshua chapter 5 impact your understanding of such encouragements? Is there something that must come prior to praise? If what is prior has **priority**, what is God's priority with regards to worship? Are there any applications that we can make with reference to our understanding of worship individually/corporately?

Lesson 2: Disobedience, Defeat, And The Road Back from Disaster

Primary Verses: “And the LORD said unto Joshua, Get thee up; wherefore liest thou thus upon thy face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed my covenant which I commanded them: for they have even taken of the accursed thing, and they have also stolen, and dissembled also, and they have put it even among their own stuff. Therefore, the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they were accursed: neither will I be with you anymore except ye destroy the accursed from among you.” Joshua 7:10-12 (NKJV)

Teaching Text: Joshua 7 (please allow time for Joshua 8 to be read after the lesson)

Supporting Text: Genesis 3:1-6; James 1:13-15

Remember the battle of Jericho? All that shouting, marching, and praising? Everything wasn't perfect—even in the midst of a great victory. How proficient are the Lord's people in sin? We are so well-versed in our vices, such experts in evil, and so intent on iniquity even while the Lord is blessing us, we are able to curse him. Don't believe it? Remember the warning of 1 Corinthians 10:12 and consider the story of Achan from the tribe of Judah.

The People's Presumption: Note, at no time in the narrative concerning the initial contact and battle at Ai does the Lord speak. There is neither leading nor speaking from Him. Even worse, there is no inquiry to seek His direction. We have all suffered from what has appeared to be silence from God's side of things. While the timing of His response to us is entirely up to Him, we have no corresponding option concerning prayer. It is our duty and even for our good that we seek guidance from Him at all times. Joshua's failure to do this cost the nation dearly.

The Pitiful Prayer: Joshua's prayer reflects the fact he was caught between God's promise of victory and his experience of defeat. Whether under the Old Covenant or the New, all believers struggle to “walk by faith, not by sight.” For example, we know God promises to give our daily bread... but what do we do when our month is longer than our money? When God's promise doesn't seem to match our experience, we can find ourselves praying like Joshua. Honesty in prayer is good, but we should guard against letting *temporal* circumstances diminish our faith in God's *eternal* word.

The Pending Punishment: How well does the projected benefit of Achan's sin match up with the consequences of that same sin? This question is helpful for us to ask in our own lives whenever we are tempted, except it is often impossible to understand the scope of sin's tragic assault on human lives. It is almost certain that Achan did not foresee fatherlessness for thirty-six families because of his greed.

Questions to Consider: What are the common ways in which we presume on the Lord's power and grace today? Think about Joshua 7:9. In what ways could this verse be sinful? In what ways could this same sentiment be inspirational to us today? How do you really feel about Achan's punishment? How would you answer people who don't feel it was justifiable?

Challenging the Class: There is a difference between experiencing God's victories and making ourselves the victors. Yes, of course, we are “more than conquerors...” but only THROUGH Him who loved us.

Lesson Three: Man's Purity or God's Perseverance?

Primary Verses: "But Joshua said to the people, 'You are not able to serve the LORD, for He is a Holy God. He is a jealous God; He will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then He will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good.' And the people said to Joshua, 'No, but we will serve the LORD.'" Joshua 24:19-21 (ESV)

Teaching Text: Joshua 24

Supporting Text: Joshua 23

Joshua's death signaled the loss of the last link to the days of Egyptian slavery and the original Exodus. Think of all he had seen! As a young man, he knew the harshest conditions under the Pharaoh, while hearing his elders speak resentfully of a man who was as much from Midian as he was from Egypt - Moses. Joshua saw the 10 plagues, crossed the Red Sea on dry land, witnessed the first day of manna descending from heaven to its last day after crossing the Jordan. He knew Moses and saw the original Ten Commandments! But he also saw hundreds of thousands of Israelites die as a consequence of sinful disbelief. Can you imagine being present to hear this man deliver a farewell address to Israel?

The History of Israel: Joshua began with an account of Israel, including the nation's dealings with God and His omnipotent hand operating in their favor. This 110-year-old flawlessly recalls the names of the faithful and the vanquished, hills where Israel's hands were victorious and valleys where Israel's heart was proven notorious for its idolatrous ways.

The Heart of Israel: Much of Joshua's speech deals directly with Israel's propensity towards faithlessness and a warning against shameless imitation of the Canaanites' religion and practices. Reminding the nation, even Father Abraham was once a servant of other gods, Joshua relentlessly preaches against idol worship as if to pre-emptively oppose and halt it. While Joshua is not typically thought of as a prophet, the last two chapters in the book named for him make a good case for his divinely inspired foresight.

The Hope of Israel: The book of Joshua begins with an appeal to faithfulness to the Scriptures and ends in the same way, along with visual reminders to stay true. However, the theme of Joshua is about God's integrity and how He keeps His promises to Israel despite the nation's inability to keep up their end of the covenant. This fact never gives God's people license to break His laws. But, the ultimate hope of all believers is that God will stay perfectly true and supply us with sufficient grace to follow Him faithfully.

Questions to Consider: How would you explain to someone, who was confused, how Israel's battles were fought by God although there were soldiers in actual combat on the battlefield? Why was Joshua so adamantly stressing the importance of steering clear of idolatry? Was it merely a matter of keeping the law? If Abraham was an idol worshipper, why did God enter into covenant with him?

Challenging the Class: Joshua 24:31 seems to imply a connection between serving the Lord in righteousness and remembering what He's done. What personal memorials do you construct to ensure you live faithfully for the Lord?

Lesson 4: The Book of Ruth—A Supernatural Symphony of Circumstance

Primary Verses: “Her mother-in-law asked her, ‘Where did you glean today? Where did you work? Blessed be the man who took notice of you!’ Then Ruth told her mother-in-law about the one at whose place she had been working, ‘The name of the man I worked with today is Boaz,’ she said. ‘The LORD bless him!’ Naomi said to her daughter in law. ‘He has not stopped showing kindness to the living and to the dead.’ She added, ‘That man is our close relative; he is one of our kinsman-redeemers.’” Ruth 2:19-20 (NIV)

Teaching Text: Ruth

Supporting Text: Deuteronomy 24:19, Matthew 1:1-6

Mistaken to be a mere love story, the practical, theological, and significance of Ruth’s story is often missed or overlooked. Far more than being an account to give single women hope for finding their “Boaz,” the book of Ruth is a powerful account of God’s sovereignty—even if mistaken for serendipity.

Loyalty: The dullest and least sophisticated lens loaned to this story easily perceives remarkable fidelity on the part of Ruth to Naomi. On her part, Naomi seeks to discourage Ruth from returning to Bethlehem with her, perhaps knowing the likely reluctance of faithful Israelite men to marry foreigners. But Ruth’s fierce loyalty to Naomi is unflinching. Clinging to Naomi also involved devotion to Yahweh, Naomi’s God.

Love: What is often missed in the love-angle of this story is the basis of that love. We are never told that Ruth is physically beautiful. Boaz notices her in his field, but we’re not told why he notices her. Naomi tells her to put on her best garment which may be a request to take off any indication she is still grieving her dead husband. We really don’t know. But what do we know? We know that on two separate occasions, Boaz speaks of her noble character and at least once, of her faith in God (see Ruth 2:11-12 and 3:10-11). The point made is very simple - a woman who is loyal beyond question, industrious, and faithful to God is both lovely and worthy of love.

Legacy: There are at least two strands of love and loyalty seen in Ruth’s legacy. Firstly, she is loyal to her husband by not only maintaining close ties to his mother, but by her willingness to ensure his family property would not be lost. Her decision to obey Naomi’s advice is a testament to her desire for her husband’s name to live on. But better yet, her character speaks to another legacy. God honored Ruth by putting her in the lineage, of not only the great King David, but the King of Kings Himself. Ruth, the Moabite, is ancestor to Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Abraham and Son of David!

Questions to Consider: How would you compare the beginning of Ruth with the end of the book? How many hints are there God Himself is orchestrating this symphony of circumstance? Some have embraced the opinion that Ruth and Boaz acted less than honorably on the night that they discussed marriage. What do you think and how would you explain/defend your position?

Challenging the Class: It’s easy to see “the hand of God” at the end of Ruth’s story. But aren’t God’s good intentions and providence present in the first chapter too? We must trust God in tragedy **and** triumph!

Ruth's Righteous Husband

"Ruth the Moabite, the widow of Mahlon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance, that the name of the dead may not be cut off from among his brothers" (Ruth 4:10a).

- Ruth 4

Marriage is an important theme that arises again and again in Scripture, and there are many models of what a good marriage looks like in the Bible. The Song of Solomon, for example, is a beautiful picture of a husband and wife and their love for one another. In the New Testament, Priscilla and Aquila stand out as a couple who served the kingdom of God together, complementing each other in their life and witness (Acts 18:24–28; Rom. 16:3–5a).

We also find in the Old Testament the history of Boaz and Ruth, who marvelously display what God intends for husbands and wives to be in the marriage relationship. Clinging to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi after her first husband died, Ruth journeyed to Bethlehem, Naomi's home. While there, she gleaned wheat from the fields of Boaz (Ruth 1–2). In desperation, with all the men in the family dead, Naomi and Ruth were in danger of losing their inheritance and their family's land if an heir could not be produced. In keeping with the Levirate marriage law, Ruth was able to marry a close relative and bear a son who would legally belong to Naomi's family, thereby ensuring that the property would not pass from them (Deut. 25:5–10).

As a close relative, Boaz could redeem Ruth and Naomi, and so Ruth approached Boaz one evening, inviting him to redeem her from this plight (Ruth 3). Ruth was calling on him to take the lead in the relationship to provide for her materially and, ultimately, spiritually, for in marrying her, Boaz would be obeying the law of God. Her example shows us what it means for a wife to submit to her own husband (Eph. 5:22–24). Good wives look for their husbands to lead them and encourage them in their difficult calling. May the wives among us follow Ruth's lead.

Boaz also shows us what it means to be an ideal godly husband — one who is willing to give up his life for his own wife and family (vv. 25–27). Another of Naomi's relatives was unwilling to take Ruth for his wife, fearing that he would lose any compensation for meeting Ruth's needs once they bore a son and the inheritance passed into the son's hands. Boaz, on the other hand, was willing to sacrifice much to bless Ruth and her family, showing us what godly husbands do for the sake of their wives (Ruth 4). May those of us who are husbands imitate his self-sacrifice.

Coram Deo

Boaz was ultimately rewarded for his selfless deed when he was included in the line of David and thus the line of Christ (Matt. 1:1–17). He did not know that this would be his reward when he cared for Ruth, however. Likewise, we do not always know how God is going to reward us for doing what is right, but we can rest assured that we will be repaid for any sacrifice we make to obey His law, whether now, in the age to come, or both.

Passages for Further Study

Proverbs 12:4; 18:22;

31:10–31

Matthew 1:18–25

Titus 2:3–5

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Gospel-Ordered Worship

Gillis Harp

The word worship literally means ascribing worthiness to the object of worship.

Dutch theologian, Dr. G. van der Leuw, once aptly observed that "whoever takes the little finger of liturgy soon discovers that he has grabbed the whole fist of theology." Evangelicals appear to have confirmed the truth of this dictum in their rediscovery of worship in recent years. In the past, we have understandably focused on the content of preaching in considering whether our worship was biblical. This article seeks to answer two different theological questions about worship: In what ways do our conceptions of both the gospel and worship affect our corporate worship? And, in what sense should the story of redemption actually shape our worship? Or, to put it differently, how exactly does the gospel constitute the heart of Christian worship and, more specifically, how should it frame the very structure of our corporate worship as well as determine its contents? The Holy Scriptures, the early church, and many of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers shared a general consensus about how the order and components of Christian worship should reflect the great redemptive events of incarnation, atonement, and resurrection. Much of contemporary Protestant worship has lost or mangled this biblical order and its recovery should be a high priority for those of us committed to a modern reformation.

Getting the Gospel Straight

Before proceeding to examine what constitutes gospel-ordered worship, we need first to clarify our understanding of God's Good News; for, as theologian David Peterson puts it, "The gospel is the key to New Testament teaching about worship." "Essentially the gospel is a declaration of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ," writes Graeme Goldsworthy, "rather than (as is often implied) what God does in the believer, although we may not separate the two. It is the objective historical facts of the coming of Jesus in the flesh and the God-given interpretation of those facts." Goldsworthy hastens to note that when the Apostle Peter delivered his important sermon recorded in Acts 2, "he was quick to divert attention from what God had done in the apostles by giving them the Holy Spirit, and to concentrate on the facts concerning Jesus of Nazareth." Very little "what the Lord has been doing in my life" testimony here! "The facts," Goldsworthy continues, "are those of the incarnation, of the perfect life of Jesus of Nazareth, and of his dying and rising from the grave. The interpretation of these facts is that this took place [in the words of the creed] 'for us men and for our salvation.' In these two simple statements of fact and interpretation we sum up the breadth and depth of biblical revelation." The gospel is thus the story of redemption, of God working in history to redeem his people, a redemption prefigured in the Old Testament and culminating in the person and work of Christ recorded in the New Testament. In and through Christ, God dealt definitively with human sin. Christ's death and resurrection saved his people from their sins, a perfect redemption that will achieve final consummation at his glorious return.

Many evangelicals today focus primarily on the subjective dimension of the Good News as it relates to themselves as believers. Some contemporary errors in the realm of worship are rooted in a pietistic (and ultimately subjectivist) understanding of the gospel. Just as their Pietist forbears criticized the formalism of the state churches, so modern-day evangelicals stress that personal commitment to Christ is the heart of the gospel. Such an approach has bred a suspicion of outward forms of any kind and a preference for spontaneous or extemporaneous expressions of piety. Accordingly, one should not be surprised to see this subjective dimension highlighted in evangelical worship. Because of their skewed construction of the gospel, some evangelicals actually end up making their worship man-centered as they seek to be gospel-centered. What an ironic outcome! Their misreading of the gospel is such that when they seek to make it the heart of

their worship, the service inevitably becomes highly subjective and individualistic. Frequently, the focus is on the minister (whose extemporaneous prayers naturally reflect his individual skill or creativity), and worship often features personal testimonies of how the gospel has transformed the lives of particular individuals. Individuals may provide "special music" in the form of an emotive solo. Often, the liturgical climax of the service is the altar call when, significantly, one sees the gospel at work in the lives of individuals who come forward to commit themselves to Christ.

The concerns of the eighteenth-century Pietists about the arid formalism of nominal Christianity were legitimate. Christianity without a personal commitment to Christ is indeed what Bishop Ryle called a "useless form of religion." But this valid concern for "experiential religion" (to employ an eighteenth-century phrase) has warped our understanding of the gospel and consequently sidetracked our worship. Indeed, it has kept many from seeing in what important ways the gospel should shape our corporate worship.

Clarifying the Meaning of Worship

The word worship literally means ascribing worthiness to the object of worship. The dictionary defines it as "a reverent homage or service paid to God" arising from the latter's worthiness or merit. Christians today tend to see this sort of homage as consisting of praise, prayer, and related acts of adoration within the context of a church service. Although the Old Testament carefully stipulates ritual acts of worship in the tabernacle and subsequently in the Temple, the New Testament transforms this cultic character of worship. Indeed, St. Paul (picking up on Old Testament passages that upheld obedience as preferable to worship) exhorts the brethren in a familiar passage to present their entire lives "as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God." Such a wholehearted self-offering of obedience Paul characterizes as "your spiritual worship" (Rom. 12:1). It is this "total life-response that is the worship of the new covenant," concludes David Peterson. This is radical stuff and it should rebuke us when we fall into the unscriptural habit of conceiving of worship as only that which we do when seated in a pew of Sunday morning beneath a gothic arch.

Although this radical perspective on worship in the New Testament is a helpful corrective, it should not prompt us to exclude the earlier notion entirely. For Christians under the new covenant there is still a cultus of sorts, though there is now no human priest and the sacrifices offered are strictly the responsive sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving of the redeemed. Although there is now no carefully prescribed Temple ritual, the corporate worship of the body of Christ on the Lord's Day is not unimportant. Peterson stresses "that the indwelling in and communion of Christ with the church have their point of concentration and special realization in its unity as assembled congregation." Those of us in the Reformed tradition have sometimes so stressed the "whole-life-service" aspect of worship (definitely an important point) that we have neglected or dismissed liturgical questions as ephemera or neglected the physical setting of the church's corporate worship. Indeed, sometimes we seem to identify the ability to conduct corporate worship in the ugliest settings as evidence of being "super-spiritual." Many ask, as long as there are three hymns and a sermon what's the difference? But both the early church and the magisterial reformers did not think that the components of corporate worship, or the order of the service, were adiaphora.

Corporate Worship: A Gospel Design

But how should this redemptive "meta-narrative" mold what Christians do when they gather together on the Lord's Day? We need to return to biblical first principles. Protestants look to Scripture as our supreme authority, while respecting the church's tradition as an important, albeit fallible, guide to understanding that authority. Reformed Christians may be familiar with the tripartite division of the Heidelberg Catechism into the categories of guilt, grace, and gratitude. Sinners are convicted of their guilt by the Holy Spirit, they are justified by God graciously crediting Christ's perfect righteousness to them

(which they receive through faith), and they then offer lives of obedience as a sign of their gratitude. One recognizes this "gospel design" in the Bible's own treatment of worship. There is a clear movement from self-examination and confession to receiving the word of grace and expressing thanks through praise and prayer for others. But there is considerably more in the biblical models than this bare outline might suggest.

The pattern of Old Testament worship reflects the larger story of redemption highlighting God's covenant relationship with his chosen people. The Old Testament teaches that God's people may only approach him through blood sacrifice. One of the few detailed descriptions of Old Testament worship is contained in 2 Chronicles 5-7. It describes a pattern we see repeated elsewhere (see also 1 Chron. 15-16; 28-29; Neh. 8-10): God's people gather together in one spot; there is animal sacrifice; they enter the Most Holy Place (2 Chron. 5:7-10); they sing praises to God; God's Word is read aloud and expounded; there is prayer for the entire community; fire comes down from heaven (2 Chron. 7:1-2); responsive singing of praise; peace offering or covenant meal then follows; a benediction ends worship (not explicitly included in this account but evident in others).

The New Testament picture of heavenly worship provided by the Apostle John in Revelation appears to follow a similar pattern, although biblical scholars disagree about how best to understand these difficult passages. In some respects, the order of heavenly worship seems to reflect the order of redemptive history (i.e., worship begins based on the sacrifice of Christ and concludes by partaking of that sacrifice in the wedding supper of the Lamb). One might interpret St. John's vision this way: First, the heavenly hosts call John to worship (Rev. 4:1-11), no one is deemed worthy to open the scrolls, but the Lamb of God is worthy and thus the worshipers enter God's presence on these terms (Rev. 5:1-7), and a psalm of praise is sung (Rev. 5:8-14). Then, the Word of God is read and preached (in the Seven Seals, Rev. 6:1-8:5), the covenant community prays and praises God (Rev. 7:9-8:4), and Heaven responds with fire (Rev. 8:5).

Of course, the worship of the Old Testament has been transformed under the new covenant. There are now no human priests, Christ is our only mediator and advocate. Although God's covenant people are still only able to enter his presence on the basis of blood sacrifice, it is now on the basis of the single, past, completed sacrifice of Calvary. The author of Hebrews puts it eloquently in words that helped early Christians understand the basis of worship under the New Covenant: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart full of assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22). There are, notably, no detailed worship instructions contained in the pages of the New Testament (outside of the heavenly worship recorded by John). Yet Acts 2:42 does speak significantly of the gathering together of the saints for "the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." As their counterparts in Heaven, the early Christians had access to God only through the blood of the spotless Lamb, and they enjoyed spiritual fellowship with their Savior and their brethren by sharing the covenant meal. Observance of the covenant meal appears to have been weekly, i.e., every Lord's Day.

A Pattern Preserved: The Early Church and the Reformers

It is significant that one of the earliest extra-biblical accounts of Christian worship retains this general pattern. Note, for instance, the description of the church's worship in Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (ca. 155):

On the day which is called Sunday, all who live in the cities or in the countryside gather together in one place. And the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read as long as there is time. Then, when the reader has

finished, the president, in a discourse, admonishes and invites the people to practice these examples of virtue. Then we all stand up together and offer prayers. And as we mentioned before, when we have finished the prayer, bread is presented, and wine with water; the president likewise offers up prayers and thanksgiving according to his ability, and the people assent by saying Amen.

The faithful then received communion and the service ended with an outward directed response: a collection taken for the needy. Again, second-century Christians obviously did not assemble on the Lord's Day without sharing in their covenant meal together-the very logic of the service called for it.

What may be surprising to many contemporary evangelicals is that most of the Protestant reformers of the sixteenth century did not seek to reinvent the wheel when they came to reform the practice of corporate worship. Rather than beginning with a blank sheet of paper, they chose instead to revise the existing liturgical forms. Although they took pains to cleanse the church's worship of medieval corruptions (especially seeking to expunge thoroughly anything that taught the unbiblical doctrines of transubstantiation or the propitiatory sacrifice of the Mass) most reformers maintained the ancient order. For example, Luther excised from the eucharistic prayer all of the material that taught eucharistic sacrifice, so much so that the eucharistic prayer ended abruptly (in the minds of some commentators) with the immediate communion of the faithful. The *Augsburg Confession* rejected the medieval doctrine of Mass sacrifice in strong terms: "Concerning these opinions our teachers have given warning that they depart from the Holy Scriptures and diminish the glory of the passion of Christ.... Now if the Mass take away the sins of the living and the dead by the outward act[,] justification comes of the work of Masses, and not of faith, which Scripture does not allow" (Article 24). Nevertheless, despite his radicalism in this respect, despite Luther's eagerness to cleanse the service of Holy Communion of medieval error, he scrupulously retained the traditional order we have outlined. Melancthon stressed that he and his fellow "evangelicals" were not seeking to depart from ancient tradition when it was consonant with Holy Writ. As the *Augsburg Confession* puts it: "This worship pleases God; such use of the Sacrament nourishes true devotion toward God. It does not, therefore, appear that the Mass is more devoutly celebrated among our adversaries than among us" (Article 24).

Although the wording of their liturgical handiwork varied, the leaders of the Reformed tradition were also concerned to preserve the broad outlines of the ancient order. Martin Bucer at Strasbourg, for example, sought to restore the church's worship to a shape and form that he termed "old, true, and eternal." It was, moreover, Bucer's liturgical work at Strasbourg that Calvin relied upon heavily. Calvin's liturgy, as set forth in *The Form of Prayers and Manner of Administering the Sacraments according to the Use of the Ancient Church* (1545-the wording of the title here is notable), adhered to the traditional order of confession of sins, metrical psalm, reading from both Testaments, offertory, pastoral prayer/intercessions, prayer of consecration, communion of faithful, blessing. In an often ignored passage, Calvin offered a rationale for this sequence and its components:

We begin with confession of our sins, adding verses from the Law and the Gospel [i.e., words of absolution], ... and after we are assured that, as Jesus Christ has righteousness and life in Himself, and that, as He lives for the sake of the Father, we are justified in Him and live in the new life through the same Jesus Christ, ... we continue with psalms, hymns of praise, the reading of the Gospel, the confession of our faith [i.e., the Apostles' Creed], and the holy oblations and offerings.... And, ... quickened and stirred by the reading and preaching of the Gospel and the confession of our faith, ... it follows that we must pray for the salvation of all men.... And, because we receive Jesus Christ truly in this Sacrament, ... we worship Him in spirit and in truth; and receive the eucharist with great reverence, concluding the whole mystery with praise and thanksgiving.

Calvin then concluded significantly: "This, therefore, is the whole order and reason for its administration in this manner; and it agrees also with the administration in the ancient Church of the Apostles, martyrs, and holy Fathers." The Swiss reformer also battled unsuccessfully to return to the apostolic pattern of celebrating the Lord's Supper every Sunday. The Reformed scholar, Dr. K. Deddens, comments:

Did Calvin link up with liturgical customs of the late Middle Ages and with the situation in Strasbourg for the sake of convenience or because he himself was not very inventive? Neither is the case! We already saw that Calvin consciously wanted to base himself on Holy Scripture. Besides, he also very much stressed the connection with the early church (*L'eglise ancienne*). Especially when liturgical matters were involved he pointed to the customs of the New Testament church and the first period after Pentecost. Frequently he quoted apostolic fathers and church fathers in order to emphasize his argument. It must also be said that Calvin was absolutely not aiming for a multitude of forms in worship. But that which had shown itself to be significant in former ages, especially in the early church, had to be taken over. Nor did Calvin's Scottish student, John Knox, radically depart from this pattern in his otherwise simplified service contained in *The Forme of Prayers* (1556).

The Model Undermined

It is not until the seventeenth century that one sees a substantial movement away from this classic model. Because of their prolonged battle against rigid requirements of conformity to the *Book of Common Prayer*, some within English Puritan circles came to harbor a deep antipathy to liturgical forms of any sort. Accordingly, when the Westminster Divines drew up the *Directory of Public Worship*, they introduced an unprecedented degree of freedom into the content and order of the service. Indeed, some have described the *Directory* as substituting a collection of rubrics for a prayer book. Instead of set forms of the sort Luther, Bucer, and Calvin employed, the *Directory* prescribed only an order and described the sort of prayers to be offered. The outline implied in the *Directory's* lengthy directions appears to have diverged from the ancient order. Some interpreted it as allowing the offertory to precede the sermon and thus derail the crucial guilt, grace, gratitude order. The extent of choice struck some critics as imprudent; Henry Hammond contended that the *Directory* would not promote church unity "by leaving all to the chance of men's wills, which can no more be thought likely to concur in one form, than *Democritus atoms* to have met together into a works of beautiful creatures without any hand of providence to dispose them." Hammond bemoaned this deadly individualism whereby the devil would "get rid of both his enemies, Religion and Liturgy together."

Subsequent developments among Presbyterians in America opened the door to further innovation in ways the Westminster Divines did not anticipate. Communion soon came to be administered only quarterly. Later, the *Directory* was not adopted as a constitutional standard by American Presbyterians but became only an advisory guide. Accordingly, there arose a tendency to view the component parts of worship as suited to virtually any arrangement, appropriate in any order and some were soon treated as entirely optional. Even confessional Presbyterians were not inclined to take the *Directory* seriously when its authority was no more than advisory. Next, evangelicals outside of the Reformed or Presbyterian camp drew away from traditional forms during the early nineteenth century and embraced the pragmatic features of the camp meeting and revivalism. Since sentimental hymns and an earnest address seemed to get the job done (i.e., public commitments to Christ), why "mess with success"? Thus the worship of God's covenant people became primarily an evangelistic endeavor governed by pragmatic considerations.

A Way Forward

In order to make our corporate worship once again gospel-ordered, we need to recover both the biblical components and the biblical pattern followed in the early church and preserved and purified by most of the Protestant reformers. Minimally,

this would involve the following: 1) Ensure that the service begins with an explicit corporate confession of sin and absolution/assurance of pardon. 2) Include substantial readings from both testaments in the main Sunday service. 3) Make sure that the order of service preserves the logical movement from guilt, to grace, to gratitude. Accordingly, the long pastoral prayer and offertory would follow in its most logical place after the ministry of the Word. And, 4) return to a more frequent and regular administration of the Holy Communion (with weekly observance being the goal). The last of these reforms is among the most effectual ways to make evangelical worship more truly centered on the Evangel. What better way to ensure that the cross is central to our worship than to feast on the sacred emblems of his broken body and poured-out blood?

1 [[Back](#)] In his article, Professor Harp quoted the following works: Ian Breward's *The Westminster Directory of Public Worship* (Grove Books, 1980); K. Deddens's "A Missing Link in Reformed Liturgy (2): Confession of Sins and Forgiveness of Sins," *Clarion* 37 (August 19, 1988): 340; Graeme Goldsworthy's *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian's Guide to the Old Testament* (Winston Press, 1981); Howard Hageman's *Pulpit and Table: Some Chapters in the History of Worship in the Reformed Churches* (John Knox, 1962); William Maxwell's *An Outline of Christian Worship: Its Developments and Forms* (Oxford University Press, 1949); David Peterson's *Engaging with God* (Eerdmans, 1992); and Bard Thompson's *Liturgies of the Western Church* (Meridian, 1961).

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