

Reformed Worship Introduction

“On the Necessity of Reforming the Church,” Today!

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October 31, 2007: “Happy Reformation Day!” (not the wicked “Happy Halloween!”) Today, we are only 10 years short of celebrating the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting of his “95 Theses” on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg, an event that catalyzed the Protestant Reformation in Europe.

In a previous post, I questioned the claim of many evangelicals of being heirs of the Protestant Reformers, particularly of John Calvin, the great Geneva Reformer. There I said that being Reformed and Calvinist is much more than subscribing to the so-called “Five Points of Calvinism,” because Calvin wrote on virtually every systematic theology subject, consisting of “the entire life of the believing community.”

In addition, in 1543, Calvin wrote a treatise addressed to Emperor Charles V entitled, “On the Necessity of Reforming the Church,” wherein he discusses the two things that make up “the principal place... and the whole substance of Christianity”: first, *worship*, and second, *salvation*.

The great Scottish Reformer John Knox called Geneva “the most perfect school of Christ that ever was in the earth since the days of the Apostles.” In this post, I will introduce the subject of Calvin’s reformation of medieval public worship in Geneva. And in later posts, I hope to expand on this introduction. What did Calvin teach about public worship?

Regulated by Scripture

Foremost is his teaching that worship must be regulated by Scripture. Calvin affirms that “true and sincere worship which God alone approves, and in which he delights, is both taught by the Holy Spirit throughout the Scriptures.” He gives two reasons for this rule: (1) so that “we do not follow our own pleasure”; and (2) because “when we are left at liberty, all we are able to do is to go astray... [and] fabricat[e] perverse modes of worship.”

In his *Institutes*, Calvin correctly perceives the human heart as “a perpetual factory of idols” (I.II.8). From where did he get that idea? He gathered this from Paul as the apostle wrote that men “*became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened... and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images*” (Rom. 1:21-23). Today, there is no end to gimmickry in the churches – altar calls, drama, dance, talk shows, puppet shows, ear-splitting unsuitable music, movie clips – which have truly fulfilled Calvin’s “perpetual idol factories.” Calvin’s words of warning to the Christian world ring loudly today:

Whatever they do [in worship] has in itself a sufficient sanction, provided it exhibits some kind of zeal for the honor of God.

Thus, contrary to current evangelical thinking, Scriptures tell us that being earnest and sincere is not enough to please God! “*Obedience is better than sacrifice*” (Psa. 40:6-8).

Saturated with Scripture

From the Invocation (Psalm 124:8), *Sursum Corda* (Psa. 25:1 “*Lift up your hearts*”), recitation of the Creeds, Confession and Absolution of Sin, Reading of God’s Law, to the Benediction (Num. 6:24-25), the worship services in Calvin’s Geneva church were saturated with Scripture.

Calvin also saw the error of the medieval church in having only the priest chant and the choirs sing during the services, so he hired musicians to compose the Psalms into songs which are easy for the congregation to sing. Because children in the schools were taught to sing these Psalms, Calvin had them teach the congregation how to sing them. The Psalter was the inspired songbook of God’s old covenant people, and it should be the inspired songbook of the new covenant Israel of God. Psalm 100, “All People That On Earth Do Dwell,” widely used as a Doxology, is an example of a song from the Reformation Psalters.

How tragic that our churches today have forgotten the Psalter for singing! From the apostolic period to the 18th century, Protestant churches sang Psalms almost exclusively. How woeful that none of my ten students has ever heard of Martin Luther’s free translation of Psalm 46, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” a hymn sung by Protestants for almost 500 years now!

But evangelical churches sing Psalms, don’t they? No, I’m not talking about the “7-11” contemporary ditties (7 phrases sung 11 times) which take snippets (commonly used out of context) from a verse or two of the Psalms. The Genevan Psalter consists of versifications of whole or large portions of the Psalms. For Calvin, true worship includes the singing and praying of the Psalms:

It is a thing very expedient for the edification of the church to sing some psalms in the form of public prayers through which one may pray to God or sing His praise so that the hearts of all might be moved and incited to form like prayers and to render like praises in thanks to God with similar affection.

This is why in the prayers – Prayer for Illumination, Pastoral Prayer, Prayer of Consecration, and Prayer of Thanksgiving – large Scripture portions were also used. Again, today, this practice is unknown and frowned upon as uninteresting and contrary to “praying in the Spirit.” What a travesty of the union between Word and Spirit!

As well, Calvin’s preaching was always an exposition of Scripture texts. This was very different from the preaching of the medieval church, which was nothing more than an invitation to the sacraments, which alone dispensed grace. While Calvin’s preaching centered on Scripture, Romish preaching centered on the priest and the Eucharist. Similarly, the “message” in our day is nothing more than a prelude to the revivalistic “altar call.”

And in the service of the Lord’s Supper, Calvin’s Words of Institution, Instruction, Distribution of Elements, Prayer of Thanksgiving, and Song of Thanksgiving were filled with Scripture.

Ancient and Simple

Calvin not only studied Hebrew and Greek to exegete Scripture for preaching and teaching. He also studied ancient church worship. And he found out that ancient church worship was simple, not “external show” or “naked ceremonies,” which are but shadows of Christ. Worse than these ceremonies are “human inventions.” We are to worship God “simply in spirit and in truth.” You can see how Calvin’s worship services compare with ancient worship services in the liturgies below.

Reverential but Joyful

When traditionalists defend “traditional” worship, they often invoke Calvin’s worship, thinking that the stern and frozen worship they desire is what Calvin imposed on the people. For Calvin, worship is, at the same time, reverential and joyful:

“Unquestionably we do exhort men to worship God neither in a frigid nor a careless manner... His benefits towards ourselves we extol as eloquently as we can, while we call upon others to reverence his majesty, render due homage to his greatness, feel due gratitude for his mercies, and unite in showing forth his praise.”

This is one of the reasons why he desired the singing of Psalms in worship. He saw that the Psalms deal with the entire range of human emotions, reverence and joy included:

“[T]here is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”

Liturgical

For the first 1,700 years of Christian history, worship services were in two main parts: the Service of the Word, and the Service of the Lord’s Supper. Because Calvin knew that Word and Sacrament are not to be detached from each other, he advocated a weekly Lord’s Supper, but the higher authorities denied his request.

Calvin saw that from the worship service at Mount Sinai (Exod. 19-24), the liturgical movement was this:

1. assembly and confession of sin;
2. God speaks his word;
3. the people respond in thanksgiving and vows of obedience;
4. the people share a covenant meal before God; and
5. God sends forth the people in joy and peace.

Here is a comparison of Old Testament, 4th century, Calvin’s (16th century), and contemporary worship services:

Solomon (2 Chr 5-7)	Augustine (4th Century)	John Calvin (1542)	19 th -21 st Century Evangelical
1. Assembling for Worship	1. Salutation (<i>pax vobiscum</i>)	1. Psalm 124:8	1. Singing songs and hymns (Praise & Worship)
2. Burnt Offerings	2. OT Reading	2. Confession of Sin	2. Prayer of Intercession
3. Entering God's Presence	3. Epistle Reading	3. Word of Pardon	3. Scripture Reading
4. Psalm of Praise	4. Psalm	4. Absolution	4. "Message"
5. Word of God proclaimed	5. Gospel Reading	5. Ten Commandments (sung)	5. (Prayer of Application)*
6. Prayer of Intercession	6. Sermon	6. Prayer for Illumination	6. Songs
7. Fire consumes sacrifices/glorify fills the Temple	7. Dismissal of Catechumens	7. Scripture Reading	7. Altar Call or Lord's Supper (monthly or quarterly)
8. Psalm of Praise	8. Prayers of the Faithful	8. Sermon	8. (Testimonies)*
9. Peace Offerings	9. <i>Lord's Supper</i>	9. Collection of Alms	9. Closing Prayer
10. Benediction	a. Prayer over gifts	10. Prayer of Intercession	10. (Benediction)*
	b. Eucharistic prayer	11. Lord's Prayer	
	c. Lord's Prayer	12. Creed (sung)	
	d. Kiss of Peace	13. <i>Lord's Supper</i> (quarterly)	
	e. Blessing	a. Words of Institution	
	f. Communion with psalmody	b. Exhortation	
	g. Prayer of thanksgiving	c. Prayer of Consecration	
	h. Dismissal	d. Fraction	
		e. Bread	
		f. Cup	
		g. Psalm	
		h. Prayer of Thanksgiving	
		i. Aaronic Benediction	

When Revivalism swept the Christian churches starting from the 19th century “Second Great Awakening,” the Reading of the Law, the Confession, and the Word of Pardon slowly disappeared, as “God’s love for all” replaced “God’s wrath on sinful man.” Slowly, the altar of the Lord’s Supper, being a remembrance of God’s forgiveness of sin in Christ, was also replaced by the revivalists’ “altar call.” Thus, today’s “liturgy” follows this pattern: sing-a-lot-of-ditties, pray-a-ditty, preach-a-moralistic-ditty, and here comes the altar-call-ditty.

Conclusion

In the Publisher’s Introduction to Calvin’s tract, the writer lays out similarities between the pathetic conditions of the medieval church and of the postmodern evangelical churches:

“The perceptive reader will see many parallels between the spiritual climate of Calvin’s day and the religious chaos in our own society. If religious corruptions required reformation then, similar corruptions demand serious reform today. We witness the sad spectacle of Protestant churches fascinated with liturgical rites and innovations in worship...If anything, Calvin’s tract demonstrates how far modern Protestants have declined from the doctrines and practices of the Reformation. “The Necessity of Reforming the Church” is more than just an historic monument to the Reformation. It is a spiritual manifesto, calling us to repentance in an era of gross religious corruption.”

If you see in your own church a lack of God-centered, Christ-centered, Word-and-Sacrament-centered worship, then ask yourself, “Is our church an heir of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, or is our church in need of another sweeping 21st century Reformation?”