The General Liturgical Order of the Church’s Worship

Source: Marva Dawn. *How Shall We Worship? Biblical Guidelines for the Worship Wars*. Tyndale House, Wheaton: Illinois, 2003.

In the following chart, the general pattern of the historic Western worship service is outlined and elaborated so that the value of its various parts might be clearly seen. Originally many of the parts—the Scripture lessons and Psalm for the Day, the “Introit” and “Collect” and “Gradual” explained below—were chosen by the larger Church so that worship would be the same in every place.

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| **Element** | **Explanation or Example** | **Why This Element is Used** |
| **The Gathering** |  |  |
| Invocation | “*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen*” | Said to remember our baptism in that name and to be reminded for whom our worship is and by whom it is made possible. |
| Confession and Absolution |  |  |
| *Introit* | A hymn or psalm sung when the officiant enters at the opening of a service. | Though this might be any hymn, *Introits* established in earlier centuries set the theme for particular day of the church year. |
| Greeting | P: “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all*.”C: “*And also with you*.” | This reminds worshippers that they and their leaders are in community together and with the Trinity. |
| Kyrie (“Lord”) | Prayer for the Church and those who worship here. | To each phrase the people respond, often in singing, “*Lord, have mercy.*” |
| Gloria | A Hymn of Praise | This hymn is usually not used in Advent or Lent, which are seasons of penitence. |
| The Collect | The Prayer of the Day | It gathers the people into the theme of the day’s texts and the time of in the church year. Many Collects are very old and used globally. Usually they are preceded by P: “*The Lord be with you*.”C: “*And also with you*.” |
| **The Word** |  |  |
| Old Testament Lesson | Matches the Gospel or sometimes follows a sequence from the same book for several weeks. | Often followed byP: “*The Word of the Lord*.”C: “*Thanks be to God*!” |
| Psalm | Matches the theme of the day | Sometimes read antiphonally (responsively) or chanted. |
| Epistle Lesson | Matches the Gospel or books read in sequence | Followed by the refrain, P: “*The Word of the Lord*.”C: “*Thanks be to God*!” |
| Gradual | An example is this song from Jn 6:68: “*Alleluia. Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Alleluia, Alleluia!”* | A song or reading that either matches the day in the church year or is a standard refrain that moves the congregation to the first high point of the service, *the Gospel*. |
| Announcement of the Gospel | Announced with the Acclamation: “*Glory be to you, O Lord!”* | Acclamations are said or sung to accent the Gospel as the high point of worship. |
| Gospel Lesson | Followed by the Acclamation: “*Praise be to you, O Christ*!” |  |
| The Sermon |  |  |
| The Hymn of the Day | A response to, and application of, the Scriptures and sermon. |  |
| The Apostles’ or the Nicene Creed | A confession of the faith that knits the community together. |  |
| The Prayers of the People | Often uses a congregational response after each petition. |  |
| The Passing of the Peace | People say to each other, “*May the peace of the Lord be with you*.” | Makes sure that all members are reconciled before bringing their offering and coming to the Lord’s Table. |
| The Offering | The offering is collected. |  |
| Singing of the Offertory | Sometimes, “*Create in me a clean heart, O God*” from Ps 51. |  |
| Offering Prayer |  |  |
| **The Meal** |  |  |
| The Great Thanksgiving | P: “*The Lord be with you*.”C: “*And also with you*.”P: “*Lift up your hearts*.”C: “*We lift them to the Lord*.”P: “*Let us give thanks to the Lord our God*.”C: “*It is right to give our thanks and praise*.” | Unites the pastor and people and points them to the second high point of the service. |
| The Preface and Eucharistic Prayer | The Preface is appropriate to the season of the church year. | Many ancient versions of this prayer have been recovered; it expresses gratitude for all God’s actions in history and especially in Christ. |
| The *Sanctus* | *“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of power and might! Heaven and earth are full of your glory. Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”* | A hymn of praise (Isa 6:3 and Ps 118:26) sung or spoken at the end of the Preface in many Eucharistic liturgies.  |
| The Words of Institution | P: “*Our Lord Jesus, the night in which he was betrayed, took bread . .* .” from 1Co 11. |  |
| The Lord’s Prayer |  |  |
| The *Angus Dei* | *“Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.* *Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.**Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; grant us your peace.”* | Reminds us that our salvation was costly to Christ and that we need his mercy profoundly. |
| Participation in the Meal | Often meditative hymns are sung during the distribution of the meal. |  |
| The *Nunc Dimittis*  | Simeon’s song: “*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace; your word has been fulfilled . .* .” (Lk 2:29-32) or some other Post Communion Canticle or Hymn. |  |
| **Sending** |  |  |
| Closing Prayer | Thanksgiving for the Meal. | Expressing confidence in the Meal’s blessings. |
| Benediction | Usually the threefold Aaronic benediction from Nu 6:24-26. |  |
| Final Hymn |  |  |
| Commissioning | P: “*Go in peace. Serve the Lord*.” C: “*Thanks be to God*!” |  |

**Assessment of the Liturgy**

1. Advantages of using such a form from the ancient liturgies of the early church are:
2. The liturgy of worship is always moving forward to the climaxes of the Gospel and the Lord’s Supper.
3. Such a liturgy includes many refrains in which children can participate.
4. The structure requires constant participation by the entire assembly so worshippers have little opportunity to be passive.
5. Many of the refrains and sung portions of the liturgy are direct quotation of Scripture, so the entire service is bathed in the Word.
6. The service does not depend on the personality of the pastor or worship leader because the interactions are biblical quotations that eliminate private commentary. Rather, the prayers and refrains knit together those who have followed this ancient pattern for centuries and around the globe.
7. Disadvantage of using such a form
8. These refrains can become mere rote and lose the power of the Word. Leaders can forget why they are saying these texts and just recite them without life.
9. Sometimes the rituals are developed with empty pomp instead of being engaged in with honest gestures.

**Historical Replacements of the Universal (catholic) Ancient Liturgy**

Due to, at least partially, the disadvantages note above, the ancient liturgy began to be replaced with several major trajectories. Until after the major splits between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism and then with various principal Reformations, worship was always centered on God and was not usually confused with evangelism. In fact, in the early Church those who were not yet baptized and fully committed to the life and practices of Christian disciples were dismissed from worship and not even permitted to observe when the time came for the Lord’s Supper.

Worship had two high points—the Gospel and the Lord’s Supper. Luther confirmed that true worship is that which contained the Word and Sacraments (including confession/absolution, the Lord’s Supper, and baptism).

**Trajectories of Variations**

Several major variations from the primary structure of worship should be noted:

1. The trajectory away from having the Lord’s Supper at every Sunday worship service. After Reformation, more emphasis was put on the Word, and preaching came to have a much more dominant place so that the twin high points of Gospel and Sacrament were sometimes reduced to one, with greater attention to teaching. Consequently, the structure in many churches developed into a three-fold pattern of Gathering, the Word, and Sending, with the first and last parts concentrating mostly on the singing of songs or hymns or psalms to prepare for the extended sermon. Notice that this variant begins the move away from worship being for God and towards the persuasion that worship was primarily for the instruction of the people.
2. A second type of major variation was an antidote to an overly cerebral/doctrinal emphasis on the objective Word. This could be called the *Pietist* strand of worship. Its major mark was its focus on devotion, adoration, and the language of the “heart,” understood in a subjective sense. The great value of this strand is its recovery of emotions which had been and continue to be frequently lost in biblical instructions. One unstable tendency of this strand, however, is to accentuate only the emotional side and thus lose from the single remaining high point its dialectical interplay of objective truth about God and subjective response of the believe. The *charismatic movement* extends this Pietistic trajectory much more extensively and thus advocates the greatest “freedom in the Spirit” for emotion expression, especially in speaking in tongues. The tendency it must be careful to avoid is the danger of losing the “public” sense of worship since not all participants in a worship service are equally endowed with the same charismatic manifestations. Also, the biblical directive that speaking in tongues should always be “interpreted” in public settings should not be ignored.
3. A third major variant of the predominant worship structure arose in the mixing of worship and evangelism. John Wesley’s public altar calls were given in the fields where he preached and from which he attempted to place converts into churches for worship, but soon these “tent meetings” were moved into large tabernacles and then churches. As a result, now many denominations customarily offer evangelistic messages and “altar calls” during the congregation’s primary worship time.

All three of these strands are very evident in the range of worship options in contemporary churches in North America. Some churches, most notable those in the Reformed traditions, spend the larger part of the worship service in the Word/sermon, prefacing it with singing. Some churches, particularly those who call their services “*Praise and Worship*,” follow the Pietist’s lead. Especially since the 1960s and the Jesus Movement, “Praise and Worship” has specialized in contemporary choruses that emphasize adoration and emotional response to God. The tent meeting / evangelistic rally trajectory is evident in those churches that sponsor “seeker services.” This dimension has been heightened in the last few decades because of stagnation in mainline churches and because of renewed zeal for non-believers in reaction to the complacency of many churches.

What is important for us to recognize **now** is that each of these trajectories of worship patterns emphasizes something crucial. The Catholic Mass remembers that our Lord Jesus commanded us to eat His Supper when we gather together. The Reformed emphasis on the Word retains the Jewish synagogue pattern of hearing of the Scriptures read and having someone teach about that text. The Pietistic trajectory preserves the focus on God and on offering our adoration to him, while those who offer seeker services remember that keeping that first great commandment to love and worship God must cause believers to keep the second, which is to act in love toward their neighbors and to invite them also to share in the faith.

**The Implications of all these are to learn what worship should be:**

1. From Scripture primarily,
2. And other trajectories secondarily.
3. To recognize that many of the aspects over which we fight are simply opposite sides of crucial dialectics which should be held in tension instead of discarding one pole and overemphasizing the other.
4. To search for ways to keep more of these elements in our worship services.

More study of the Scriptures, of worship through the ages, of who God is, and how we can best “*ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name”* would help us be more faithful in worship.