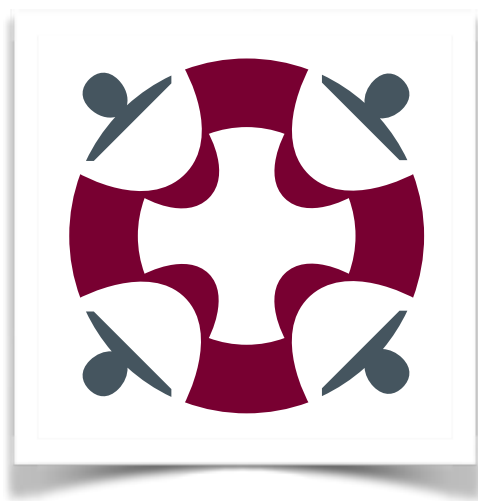


Worship Guide

Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church



By Pastor Jeff Meyers

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A Primer on Liturgy

If you are new to Providence, you may not be familiar with a service that is more formal and carefully structured. Some may call it liturgical, but “liturgy” is not a bad word. No church can avoid liturgy. A church’s liturgy is just the sum total of the rituals and rites the pastor and people engage in when they are assembled in God’s presence as a church. The pastor and people speak, listen, sing, stand, sit, kneel, raise hands, bow heads, close eyes, open eyes, look, grasp, eat, drink, etc. in an ordered sequence that communicates and embodies both God’s gracious gifts to us (Word and Sacrament) and our grateful response to him and service to one another.

So the question is: why do we at Providence speak and sing with these particular words and in this specific sequence or order? Many churches today have adopted the informal style of American entertainment, with stages, bands, video screens, casually dressed ministers, and very little reflection on the order of the service. Why have we not embraced that “contemporary” form of worship? Why do we follow the more traditional practice of Christian worship?

Worship Basics

Let’s begin to answer those questions with some basics about Christian worship.

First, Christian worship must be *biblical*. We should pay careful attention in the Scriptures to the way that God tells us how to approach him. The Lord has revealed to us specific precepts, general principles, and numerous examples concerning worship. He is the Lord. We don’t get to decide how to approach him. He sets the rules, not us. It is a lot like being invited into a governor’s or president’s office. There are protocols set by them and the invitee must be careful to follow them. We don’t just casually stroll into the presence of the Lord of the Universe and say, “Here I am, dude.” We are careful to learn the proper procedures.

Second, all of our worship is *a response to God’s gracious gifts*. Christian worship has a very important dynamic that is often obscured in modern services. The whole service moves in a dance-like, back and forth rhythm of gift and response. The Lord gives, we respond. The Lord gifts us with his speech, we answer back. God graciously offers us an opportunity to confess our sin, we respond in humility and repentance. The Lord forgives us, we answer with thanksgiving and praise. God counsels us in the reading of his Word,

we listen carefully and learn. Jesus feeds us at his Table with bread and wine, we gratefully eat and drink with him. The Lord then commissions us and blesses us at the end of the service, and we leave refreshed and ready for the new week. Gift—>response. That's the rhythm of a Christian worship service.

Third, there is a biblically authorized *order of approach* to God. Or we might put it somewhat differently: God draws us into his presence by means of a sequence of actions that ensures peaceful communion with him. We've already spoken above about the most important and fundamental structure for the liturgy (and for life): God's gracious gifts—>our faithful response. But within that basic order are other steps as well. And they are revealed in God's directives to Israel for how to approach him at the altar.

An "altar" in the Bible is a communion site, the place where God meets with and communes with man. Altars in the Israelite sacrificial system were symbolic holy mountains (like Mt. Sinai) where the worshipper, symbolized by the animal, ascended into God's presence (the fiery presence on top of the altar). So how are we drawn heavenward to enjoy communion with the Lord? We allow him to draw us near through the same steps (minus the slaughtered animal, of course):

1. Confession and Cleansing (the slaying of the animal)
2. Consecration and Wise Counsel
(preparing the animal to ascend)
3. Offering our Tribute (the "grain" or "meal" offering)
4. Communion in Bread and Wine (eating the cooked animal)

So to put this in simpler terms, when God calls us together for worship, 1) we are cleansed through confession of our sins, 2) we ascend in order to hear God's wise words of counsel (the Scriptures read aloud), 3) we offer ourselves and the fruit of our labors to him by giving our tithe, and finally, 4) we sit down with him to be nourished with the bread (the body of Christ) and experience joy through the wine (the blood of Jesus). The whole ordered process culminates in our relaxing in God's presence to enjoy a meal with Jesus as the local body of Christ.

Fourth, Christian worship ought to be *saturated with the Bible*. Because it's not the pastor's wisdom or clever speech, but the Word of God which is powerful to challenge and to comfort us. That is why our entire service, from the Call to Worship to the

Commissioning, is packed with Scripture. God calls us to worship by means of his Word, our prayers are steeped in biblical language, we hear larger portions of the Bible read aloud, we sing the Psalms, and more. And if the sermon is lukewarm on any given Sunday, you will nevertheless have been served well by a service saturated by the Word of God.

Fifth, since the Holy Spirit calls us together and fills the congregation, the service will be *musical*. The Holy Spirit is the breath of God, even the music of God. The spoken word is good, but singing is better. When we sing we glorify and beautify our words with music, as is appropriate for the dialog that takes place in worship between the Bridegroom Jesus and his Bride, the Church. God's Word and our response is glorified and beautified with appropriate music and musical instruments.

Sixth, because we want to express our unity as a local body of Christ the worship service is *scripted*. This is so that we can all participate together. We don't just listen to the pastor pray. We will all pray out loud together using a common prayer. Not only does this allow us to participate in unison as an assembly, but it also helps mold and shape us as individuals. Through these repetitive sequences the Spirit trains us how to pray and how to relate to our Lord. There's no reason to fear repetition in the liturgy. You don't ever grow tired of saying similar things to your spouse or your parents or your friends. Ritual words such as "I love you" and "Thank you" along with many other recurring phrases in ordinary life are foundational for maintaining healthy personal relations.

Seventh, though the elements of the service might feel formal and rigid, its parts are completely relatable to our daily lives. Think about what happens when you invite someone over to your house for dinner. There is a welcome at the door before they come in. If there is any conflict between you and your guests, it will be resolved upon their entrance. Then there's a lot of talk—stories and retellings in the living room or den. The visit will normally culminate with everyone gregariously gathered around the table for food and drink. The evening will end with farewells and well-wishes. Though there is obviously more to it in a Christian worship service, these are also the basic elements of the liturgy. Each week we are invited to God's house to commune with him and fellowship over bread and wine. And just as you feel rejuvenated and encouraged when meeting with friends or neighbors, it is even more refreshing when we fellowship and dine with the Holy Trinity.

Very Brief Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

Why do we say or sing the Nicene Creed?

The English word “creed” comes from the Latin *credo*, which means “I believe” or “I trust” or even “I place my faith in.” We confess the ancient Nicene creed as our pledge of loyalty to the Triune God. The Creed is a recitation of the gracious acts of God for us, as well as what we hope for from him in the future.

Why do we sing a Psalm almost every week?

We sing Psalms because these are the sung prayers that God has given to Israel and the church. The Psalms give us words to express the full range of human emotions in prayer to God. When we have the words of the Psalms in our minds and hearts we have divine authorized content and forms of prayer.

Why do we “chant” some of these Psalms?

When we “chant” the Psalms we are sticking very close to the inspired text and not changing the words to make lines rhyme and/or to fit predetermined metrical music. The poetic flow of the words in Hebrew is part of the inspired text and communicates more than simply ideas.

Why do we kneel for confession?

Because we worship not just with our mind but with our body. When the Scriptures record encounters with God or the risen Christ people go down on their faces or knees. Not only does lowering the body express humility and repentance, but it also helps us get into a humble frame of mind to confess our sins.

Why does the service move so quickly and hymns are sung with such a quick tempo?

Worship ought to be lively and energetic because we are in the presence of the living God. Some hymns, of course, are better sung a bit more slowly, especially those that involve either confession or contemplation. But most hymns are meant to be sung energetically and with passionate praise.

Why do we sing so many older hymns?

The Holy Spirit has confirmed the use of many of these hymns since the Church has sung them for centuries. Traditional hymns are rich with biblical theology that engages our minds as well as our hearts. Letting the wisdom of older saints guide us in the

modern Church expresses our humility and receptivity to the wisdom of Christian tradition as the Spirit has led the Church.

Why does everyone talk to each other while the wine is being distributed at Communion?

When we eat dinner at home around the family table we talk to each other. Unless you are eating alone silence at the table means something is wrong. When we eat the Lord's Supper we are not merely communing as individuals, as if we have our private tubes into heaven. We are eating as a community, as a body, so it is very appropriate to acknowledge the presence of those around you and pass "the peace of Christ" to them.

Why does the pastor wear a white robe?

The pastor wears the uniform of his calling in the service in order to remind everyone that everything he says and does in leading the service is performed in his official capacity as a minister of Jesus Christ. He's not a businessman, so he doesn't wear a suit and tie. He's not a comedian or entertainer, so he doesn't wear casual clothes or jeans and a T-shirt. He's not a judge or an academic, so he doesn't wear a black robe. He's a pastor to the congregation. As has been the traditional practice in most churches for centuries, he wears a white robe with a stole colored according to the appropriate season in the church year. Just as uniforms identify doctors, nurses, judges, policemen, repairmen, even UPS drivers, so also a uniform is appropriate to help identify Christian pastors.

Why do we follow the church year?

The Apostle Paul tells us that "everything God has created is good and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is sanctified the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4). The church sanctifies time, specifically the yearly cycles of our life, with the word of God and prayer. We coordinate God's created, recurring seasonal cycles with Scripture readings and prayer to remember the life of Jesus Christ. It has only been since the French Revolution (AD 1789) that the calendar has been secularized in so many countries. No longer is it keyed primarily to the great redemptive historical events of Christ's life, death and resurrection. The calendar has been de-Christianized and politicized. We think there's a better way to mark time that transcends nationalism and the veneration of political heroes.

A Glossary of Terms Used in the Service

Covenant. The Scriptures designate God's personal relationship with us as a covenant. A covenant is a formal personal bond, which has an objective shape and configuration, with promises, obligations, rituals, symbols, etc. Marriage is an example of a covenantal relationship. Sunday worship is called a "covenant renewal" because God graciously renews his relationship with us by drawing us near by means of his covenantal Word and sacramental rituals.

Salutation. Another Latin term that refers to the "greeting" at the beginning of the service. The pastor says, "The Lord be with you," and the people respond, "and also with you" or "and with your spirit." This establishes a bond between the people and the minister at the start of the service.

Sanctus. The Latin term for "holy." This is the seraphic song that Isaiah hears in chapter 6, but also sung by the angels in heaven in Revelation 5. The song combines the angelic chorus with the petitions of the people at the arrival of Jesus in Jerusalem: "Hosanna in the Highest." **Hosanna** is the Hebrew petition to "deliver" or "save."

Purification. This is the name of the first "sacrifice" made in the sequence of animal sacrifices given to Israel as the way of drawing near to the Lord. This particular sacrifice highlights the death of the animal (symbolizing the worshiper) and the disposition of blood on the altar (a public display that the death has happened) in order to begin the process of the ascension into the Lord's presence.

Yahweh. Yahweh is the revealed name of God in the Hebrew Scriptures. The English word "God" is a generic term for divinity, a translation of the Hebrew *El* or *Elohim*. The true God revealed his personal name "Yahweh" to his covenant people so they could call on him by name. The Jews later decided that it was too dangerous to say that name and instead said *Adonai* (Lord) whenever the name Yahweh occurred in the Scriptures. Unfortunately, English translations perpetuate that superstition by translating Yahweh as "LORD." But God's *name* is not Lord. Lord is another word for Master. That's simply one of his *titles*. Our Lord and God is Yahweh. And Yahweh came to us in the flesh. The name "Jesus" is the English way of saying "Joshua," and that Hebrew name means "Yahweh saves" (*Yah-shua*).

Consecration. From the Latin that means “set apart” or “make holy.” After we are purified, we are consecrated by the Word of God. During this part of the service we hear the Scriptures read and explained and are thereby exposed to the consecrating power of the Word of God. This corresponds to the priestly preparation of the animal for its ascent to the altar.

Sursum Corda. From the Latin “lifted hearts.” It is often put just before Communion; but we place it near the beginning after we are forgiven to highlight that God has drawn us up and near to him at the start of the service. When we say, “We lift up our hearts before the Lord” we are confessing by faith that we have been admitted into the Lord’s heavenly court.

Psalm Chants. The word “chant” has a medieval ring to it, but we often chant Psalms in order to stay very close to the actually inspired words of the Psalms, which is the sung prayerbook that God has given to his people.

Nicene Creed. A creed is a spoken or sung confession of faith (*credo* is Latin for “I believe” or “I trust”). The Nicene Creed was written in 381 AD and has been used in the liturgy of the church ever since.

Te Deum. The first words of the ancient 4th-century hymn we may sing in place of a creed. *Te Deum laudamus* is Latin for “O God, we praise Thee.”

Kyrie. From the Greek for “O Lord.” The Kyrie is an ancient sung prayer for mercy. This is not a prayer for forgiveness (which has already been extended), but for God to graciously help us praise him and that our service to him would benefit not only ourselves but the world.

Lectionary. The way the church orders her Scripture readings is called “the lectionary” (from the Latin *lectio*, a “reading”). We commonly use the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) during the seasons of Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, and Easter. But oftentimes the Scripture readings are tied to the sermon text.

Gloria Patri. Latin for “Glory to the Father.” We often sing the *Gloria* after the Scripture readings and our confession of faith as a way of ascribing all glory to the Triune God for the gift of his wise counsel to us from his Word.

Doxology. From the Greek: “words of glory.” We praise God from whom all blessings flow immediately before we offer him our tribute, thereby confessing that everything we have comes from his gracious hand.

Tribute Offering. In the sacrificial sequence this is the time when a meal offering is placed on top of the prepared animal sacrifice before it ascends to the fiery presence of God on the altar. Once our sins are forgiven and we have heard the Scriptures read and explained, we then offer ourselves to the Lord as we give our tithe and offerings. The Lord accepts the work of our hands and uses our gifts to advance his kingdom.

Tithe. The word “tithe” comes from an Old English word that means “a tenth.” The Lord asks us to acknowledge his benevolence toward us by designating ten percent of our increase as his tribute.

Sacrifice of Peace. This is how the last sacrifice in the sequence of animal offerings is designated. The final act of God is to give “peace” to his people as they eat and drink with him, enjoying meat cooked on the altar. After we are cleansed, consecrated, and offer our tribute, we sit down and enjoy the peace offered to us at the Table of the Lord.

Eucharist. From the Greek for “Thanksgiving.” The Apostle Paul uses this word to describe the Lord’s Supper as a thanksgiving meal in 1 Corinthians 10.

Memorial. The Lord’s Supper is a memorial meal, but not primarily because it’s given for us to remember. Rather, when we do what our Lord has given us to do we remind God of his covenant promises to come to our aid. We memorialize God, asking him to remember the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus and be faithful to his promise to be with us.

Nunc Dimittis. The Latin translation for the first words of Simeon’s song in Luke 2. We sing this song at the end of the service because we have experienced the glory of the Lord and depart from the service in peace.

Benediction. From the Latin for “good word.” At the end of the service the minister places the blessing of God on the people and sends them out for service under God’s protection. The traditional benediction used in the Church is the Aaronic blessing found in Numbers 6:24-26: “The Lord bless you and guard you. . .”

A Closing Personal Note

from Pastor Jeff Meyers

I grew up in a very traditional liturgical church. The service was highly structured and mostly sung by the pastor and people. It followed the traditional order I have described in this pamphlet, even if some of the content was slightly different. I was baptized in that church and participated weekly in the service according to my capacity as a baby, toddler, young boy, and a teenager. Truth be told, as a young boy I was not always fully engaged in the service. I could get distracted pretty easily. I remember daydreaming about having my BB gun in the sanctuary and knocking out panes of stain glass windows one by one. Even so, I learned my part because of the repetition present in the worship. Everybody participated, children included. I also heard the Bible read, explained, prayed, and sung every week. I sang the classic hymns and learned to recite from memory the portions of Scripture embedded in the liturgy, as well as the Nicene Creed.

But in my first years of college no one who knew me would have said that all of that “rote” worship really made much difference in my life. I was not attending church. I was walking away from the Christian faith and the Church. But that changed. Actually, the Lord changed me. He mercifully reeled me in and pulled me back from the precipice. This could be a long story, but all I want to do here is note how all the liturgy, Bible, creed recitation, psalm singing, and hymnody that was drilled into me in my formative years in the church—all of it came back to me when I walked back into a Christian worship service again. Liturgical worship is a gift that will keep on giving. I have ministered to elderly Christians who could not remember much, but would join in with prayers that they learned in church, hymns they regularly sang, and even portions of the liturgy that were repeated every week. Liturgical worship calibrates our minds and hearts to worship, live, and die as faithful Christians.

A Few Resources for Further Study

Jeffrey Meyers, *The Lord's Service: The Grace of Covenant Renewal Worship* (Canon Press, 2003).

James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos Press, 2016).

Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (St. Vladimir's Press, 1997).

James Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap: The Bible Versus Mere Tradition in Worship* (Athanasius Press, 2009).



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