

## Worship in the Congregational Tradition

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Congregationalists stand in the English Reformed or Puritan tradition. As such, the practice of worship in Congregational churches reflects the emphases of the Puritan movement. The Puritans, like all of those engaged in the Reformation of church and life, emphasized *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) and expected their worship service to reflect only what would be found in the Bible itself. At the core their desire, to use the words of John Owen, was to revive, “the old glorious, beautiful face of Christianity.”

The Congregational tradition in worship is thus founded on a desire for simplicity in form and marked by a dependence upon the Bible. The proclamation and exposition of the Word was, from the outset, the hallmark of Congregational worship. The “saints” gathered to hear of God and to hear from God; nothing else would suffice. Unlike the *Book of Common Prayer*, there was no equivocation on the centrality of preaching the “living Word.”

There was a general distrust of liturgy or ‘set-forms’ of worship. Henry Barrowe, and others, did not think that long-established liturgical forms gave free enough rein to the Holy Spirit. The concern was upon the immediacy of the believer's desire and heart being accessible to God; to use a Puritan phrase, “their mouths to God.” The emphasis upon extemporaneous, or “free,” prayer did not entirely take away a concern for the “decency and order” called for in worship by the Scripture. Richard Baxter would propose a *Reformed Liturgy* at the Savoy Conference, but it did not garner widespread support. Over time, however, something of a standard order for worship did emerge, as evidenced by John Cotton's accounts of the morning and afternoon worship services in Boston. The order, reported in Horton Davies *Worship of the American Puritans: 1629-1730*, p. 16, is as follows:

Opening Prayer of Intercession and Thanksgiving  
Reading and exposition of a chapter of the Bible  
Psalm singing  
SERMON  
Psalm singing  
Prayer (often referred to as the “long prayer”)  
Blessing

The only deviation in the order was the monthly celebration of the Lord's Supper, inserted after the second set of Psalm singing. If a Baptism was required this was inserted in the same spot, but in the afternoon service. It is important to note the concern to follow the classical Reformed tradition of the sacrament following upon the Word. While the Congregationalists were in line with the accepted Reformed practice of their day concerning sacraments, there was great diversity as to their administration. In many

places, following the admonition of the New Testament, the Lord's Supper was celebrated weekly. The former was primarily the practice in Britain, since early on it is evident, as in the writings of John Cotton, that the sacrament was celebrated only monthly, or in 'special seasons,' in New England. Both sacraments were administered within the context of the regular worship of the church, as noted above.

Again, concern for the centrality of the Bible led to the practice of singing only the Psalms or canticles (Scriptural texts, e.g. Luke 1:46-55 or 2: 29-32) during worship, and these without instrumental accompaniment. Celebrations of the Lord's Supper would, happily, lead Isaac Watts to introduce the singing of hymns to the service. Watts' practice, and hymn writing, was the result of the repeated singing of two or three appropriate Psalms following communion - which grew rapidly tiresome.

As with the 'meeting,' worship, so too with the meetinghouse. The "Lord's Barn," especially in New England, became symbolic of the Congregational Way of life and worship. The buildings "set in the convenientest place for us all" were multi-functional in design. The worship space of Sunday might host the town meeting on Monday, the mid-week lecture on Wednesday, and the militia drill on Saturday. The space itself was not sacred, the community that gathered there, dwelling in the Holy Spirit, rendered it so. Over time the Congregational worship practice evolved and, in the process, recovered many of the items so freely discarded by the earliest "saints." The use of musical instruments, choirs, candles, cross, stained glass, the calendar of the church liturgical year, and even liturgical formulas gradually became a part of Congregational worship live in the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Congregationalists in both Britain and the United States would contribute heavily to the scholarship of and progress of the liturgical movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Two names come immediately to mind, Nathaniel Micklem of Mansfield College, Oxford, and Willard Sperry of Harvard Divinity School. While worship in any given Congregational Church on a Sunday morning may differ widely in its form, there will, or should, be a consistency in its responsiveness to the Holy Spirit, the Bible, and to the situation of the particular church. The ancient law of *lex orandi lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) holds very true among Congregationalists. What is seen in the public worship of the church is reflective of the life of the gathered people who make it up. This is how it has been and how it should continue to be. To remain true to the Bible and to a desire for simplicity and the immediacy of the Divine Presence in response to God's love is to be consistent with the Congregational tradition of worship.

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