

How Should We Worship:

Comparing the Reforms of Calvin and Luther in Worship

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Introduction

While the material reason for the Reformation was the issue of Justification by Faith Alone, and the issue of Scripture authority was the principal reason for it, the Reformation touched every aspect of the Christian faith. Every aspect of the Church's theology, from Church government to Church-State relations, to the topic of this essay, Worship, were changed by the Reformers returning to the Scriptures. As Elise Anne McKee says "The sixteenth-century reformation is most often remembered as a reform of theology or church politics, but it was also an especially a reform of worship. Central to the theological arguments was the conviction that God was not being worshipped as God willed, and therefore human salvation was in danger."¹

Proper worship of the one, true, Triune God of the universe is a key part of the Christian faith. The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with the issue of God desiring and commanding proper worship. Throughout the Old Testament, there are numerous examples of severe consequences for following after someone disregarded how God instructed His people to worship Him.

The Reformers of the 16th century thought that the Church had become like Nadab and Abihu, inventing their own forms of worship and offering strange fire to God. They sought a return to the Biblical and historical patterns of worship outlined by God in His Word and attested through the historical witness of the ancient church.

However, like most things in the Reformation period, multiple camps formed as to how far this reformation should go based on differences in theology. Martin Luther and those who were part of the German-Lutheran Reformation followed one set of principles, and the Swiss

¹ Elise Anne McKee, "Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century," in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches Past and Present*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 3.

Reformation, exemplified by John Calvin, followed another set. The differences in reforming the worship of the church in the 16th century by John Calvin and Martin Luther will be the focus of this essay.

This essay will begin by examining the state of the late Medieval Church's pattern of worship immediately before the start of the Reformation. It will then lay out the principles of both reformers individually, show case an example of their principles being applied through an overview of their liturgies, finally both will be compared and verdict given on which Reformer had a more biblical approach to the reformation of worship. This author will argue that while Martin Luther succeeded in correcting many of the egregious errors in the practice of the church's worship, it was John Calvin and the other Swiss Reformers who better exemplified returning the church's worship to the standards outlined in God's Word.

Principles and Definitions

Before moving on to examining the historical data it would benefit the reader to understand this author's position and definition of biblical worship. Much of this author's definition comes from Denis Prutow's *Worship 101*, Everett Henes's doctoral thesis "Less Outward Glory," and R. J. Gore's work titled *Covenantal Worship*. The author of this essay holds the position that proper biblical worship is that which is based in and regulated by Scripture², not exceeding the commands given by God, which is "covenantally" faithful to the forms and precepts of worship given in Scripture,³ is simple yet beautiful,⁴ and comes from the thankful

² Dennis Prutow, *Public Worship 101: An Introduction to the Biblical Theology of Worship, the Elements, Exclusive Psalmody, and A Cappella Psalmody* (RPTS Press, 2013).

³ R. J. Gore, *Covenantal Worship: Reconsidering the Puritan Regulative Principle* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2002).

heart of a regenerated person. An added characteristic, though not necessarily essential, is that proper worship will also be historically and catholically(universally) rooted. This means worship practices will be shown to be part of the historic witness of the ancient and apostolic church, and that they were accepted as proper practices across the church as a whole (in general). The reformers saw themselves as retrieving the historic practices of the early church alongside returning to Scriptures commands.

To summarize, proper worship according to this author is: founded upon biblical commands and precepts found in Scripture, regulated by Scripture to prevent going beyond God's commands and veering into "innovation", that is "covenantally" faithful in method and heart posture of the individuals, and lastly, that which is rooted in history and catholicity. As will be shown in the following section, the worship of the medieval Western church failed to meet any of these categories adequately. There was a deep need for God to be worshiped rightly. There was a need for reformation. The reforming actions of John Calvin and Martin Luther will be evaluated by the definition given.

Late Medieval Worship

The worship of the church in the period immediately preceding the Reformation was full of accretions to the God's directives for worship. Many of these additions had slowly come about over the centuries. What started out as a tradition of one congregation became mandatory practice for all others. The sacrifice of the Mass, the Cult of Saints and the veneration of their relics, and the lack of participation by the laity in corporate worship, are the three most glaring issues with Medieval worship.

⁴ Everett Henes, "Less Outward Glory: A Biblical-Theological and Historical Defense of Simplicity in Worship," January 2019.

The Mass

One of the most glaring and pervasive of these accretions was the function of the clergy as priests and the official view of the Sacraments espoused by the Roman church. In the Mass, the clergy member, functioning as a priest, would hold up the bread and speak a specific phrase in Latin which was said to transform the humble loaf into the physical body of Christ. The priest would likewise hold up the cup of wine and turn it into the blood of Christ. Not only was this human priest summoning Christ's body from heaven to become this piece of bread, but the priest was also re-sacrificing Christ in this ceremony.

The sacrifice of the Mass was meant to serve as a means of salvific grace. It was meant as a way for the Christian to atone for their sins on earth. Masses could also be done on behalf of someone departed to lessen their time in Purgatory according to the Roman church's understanding. The theology demonstrated by the Mass shows a complete lack of understanding of the free gift of grace in Christ, undermined His sufficient work upon the cross, and contained errors about the Christ's hypostatic natures. The theology of the Mass was a major concern for the Reformers. As McKee states "Those who broke with Rome criticized in particular the sacramental teaching that was the basis of Catholic worship. This theology seemed to make the church with its sacraments, Saints, and good works the source of salvation, rather than God. The sacramental system was *the* means of salvation; the objective practice of the sacraments was sufficient to compel God to give grace the Mass, for example, was regarded as a sacrifice offered to God by the priest on the people's behalf."⁵

⁵ McKee, "Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century," 7.

First Christ offer of free grace is misunderstood when participation in Masses is made necessary for salvation. This idea adds human works to Christ's completed work upon the cross. Speaking of His work of atonement, the idea that an earthly priest calls down the Son of God to be sacrificed again for sins already atoned for is quite strange. As the author of Hebrews tells his readers in chapter ten verse ten and twelve, Christ made atonement for sins with His death, once for all. Lastly, the Roman Church created potential confusion about Christ's two natures with their understanding of the Mass. They asserted that Christ's human nature was somehow able to be in multiple places on the earth simultaneously as well as heaven. This seems to mix the divine and human nature of Christ, attributing to His humanity the omnipresence that only His deity could possess.

The last issue that needs to be highlighted regarding the Mass is the fact that the laity were prevented from participating fully in the Lord's Supper. While the clergy were allowed to partake of both the bread and the cup, the laity were forbidden from drinking from the cup. This did two things. First, it effectively created two "classes" of Christians, clergy and laity. Secondly, it made it so that the laity really did not get to fully experience the sacrament as a means of grace as God had designed it to be.

Saints and Relics

Another area where Medieval worship had gone astray was the veneration of relics and the cult of the saints. Noble lords would pay hefty sums of money to obtain some of these relics for them to lessen their potential time in Purgatory. They were also religious status symbols, meant to boost the prestige and honor of the noble. The relics were treated as conduits for venerating the saint that was attached to them. These relics would often move from being mere

artifacts of the departed heroes of the faith into becoming magical talismans that offered certain powers or protections.

Related to the collection of relics was the idea of the cult of the saints. Particularly pious and holy men and women who were recognized by the church were special. These men and woman had done enough in life to have an overflow of meritorious works. Their good works were added to the good works of Mary, the Apostles, and Jesus in the “Vault of Merrit.” It was this vault that the Pope could open when someone purchased an indulgence.

The devotion and veneration given to these the Virgin Mary, the angels, the saints and their relics took away from the pure worship of God. It distracted the people from worshipping God alone, and contributed to confusion surrounding what the Gospel was. People sought aid from these other “mediators” rather than from the true mediator between God and Man, Christ Jesus.

No Songs to Sing

The last issue of Medieval worship that should be raised is the lack of songs for the congregation to sing. For much of the Medieval service the laity were meant to be mere spectators. They did not participate in the singing, this was reserved for trained professionals. The priests, the monks and specially trained choir boys would sing stunningly beautiful and complex songs. The regular congregant was unable to understand the words of the songs, and even if they could they were not expected to join in the singing of praise. With these main issues of Late Medieval worship highlighted it is time to move on to the reforms taken by Luther and Calvin.

Luther’s Worship Reforms

Out of Darkness, Light

In 1517, a young Martin Luther saw the state of the Church and desired to see her reformed and renewed by the Word of God. He posted his 95 Theses to the door of the Castle church on October 31 of that year. The issue at hand for Luther was the practice of selling indulgences. As stated earlier this was the practice of purchasing time out of Purgatory for oneself or deceased loved ones that had the official approval of the Pope. This was not the only issue that Luther brought up in his theses, but it was the principal reason for him posting them. After this event, the reformation began to escalate quickly.

Luther and the Word

It was Luther's firm conviction that the Scriptures should be translated into the language of the people. "Luther was purposeful in making the Word of God available to the common man, when before it had only been available to the clergy."⁶ This was a conviction held by all of the protestant reformers. Unnecessary and arbitrary barrier had been put in between the laity and the Word. The professional clergy class and their tradition of reading the Bible in Latin had made it near impossible for the common Christian to truly benefit from the Word of God being preached.

Since Luther saw this issue of primary importance he immediately began translating the Bible into the German language. He emphasized readability for the German commoners and so

⁶ Emily A. Dieter, "Martin Luther the Worship Leader Processes and Methods of Liturgical Reform through the Reformation," *Liberty University*, Spring 2010.

in “his word-setting as well as in his translation of scripture, he closely imitated the ways people spoke[.]”⁷ According to Luther, God’s Word needed to be readable for God’s people.

Luther the Hymn Writer

Luther not only valued the people being able to read or hear the Word preached to them, but he also wanted them to be able to sing it. He wanted the German people to sing songs containing the truth of the Gospel of free grace and justification by faith. Being musically gifted himself he wrote many hymns. His most well known is “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.” “While the primary function of music for Luther was undoubtedly the “preaching” or proclaiming of doctrine “through sound,” it was his profound love of music as an art form that inspired successive generations of artists use their craft in the service of God and Luther's Reformation.”⁸

Luther understood the ability that beautiful music has to stir the soul and pull on the heart. This ability of music is a dangerous and often abused thing though. Many songs today attempt to artificially create an emotional reaction from congregants but do not actually declare sound doctrine nor are they of high artistic quality. Luther wanted the music of the reformation to be beautiful and biblical. He wanted music to carry the doctrines of the reformation from people’s heads to their hearts. “Spurred on by his insight that music was an ideal means to communicate theological truth, from an early point of his Reformation onwards Luther

⁷ J. Andreas Loewe, “Why Do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation,” *Church History and Cambridge University Press* 82 (March 2013): 74.

⁸ Loewe, “Why Do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation,” 72.

intentionally began to use popular song as a means to broadcast his message effectively to a large cross-section of society.”⁹

“Is Means Is”

The last important contribution to the topic of Worship was his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. It is also one of the most unfortunate pieces of the Reformation period because it was his unwillingness to move an inch from his position that led to the deep divide between the Reformed and Lutheran branches of the Reformation. Luther rightly saw many issues with the official Catholic position that the elements of bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper fully and truly transform into the body and blood of Christ. The Roman position is called “transubstantiation.”

Luther rejected this view outright and came to his own. He believed that the body and blood of Christ were rather in and beneath the elements. At the Colloquy of Marburg, the Swiss reformer, Zwingli, and Luther met to see if they agreed on enough points of essential doctrine to work together. While they agree with nearly everything one issue stopped them from joining forces, the Lord’s Supper. Zwingli held to a view now called “memorialism.” This view stated that the elements were merely symbols or remembrance of the things they were meant to signify. Because of their difference in opinion Luther did not even view the Swiss reformers as fellow brothers, as even Christians.

German Mass

We can see Luther’s reforms at work in his German Mass. The order of his service was as follows: a spiritual song or Psalm is sung in German, the *kyrie ellison* is sung three times, the

⁹ Loewe, “Why Do Lutherans Sing? Lutherans, Music, and the Gospel in the First Century of the Reformation,” 73.

pastor (called a priest by Luther) chants a set prayer called a collect, a section of an epistle is chanted by the priest, then the congregation sings a German hymn, a portion of a Gospel is chanted, the Apostle's Creed is sung by the congregation, a sermon is then preached, followed by a paraphrase of the Lord's prayer and a call to participate in the Lord's Supper, the elements are consecrated and music plays while the people come to partake of the elements, the service ends with the Aaronic benediction.¹⁰

From this liturgy Luther primary focuses on the Word in the German language, the importance of congregational singing and music, and the importance of the Lord's Supper are easily seen. Of the three focuses Luther's love for music and for the Word are clearly displayed. The entire congregation sings at least four times, add on to that the four times that the priest/pastor sings or chants alone and you get a church service that is full of songs of praise to the Lord. Also worth noting is the fact that all of these songs, scriptures, and the sermon itself are all in the native language of the Lutheran congregations, German.

Lastly, we see that every service ended with the Lord's Supper. Luther maintained a similar, albeit refined, view of the Supper compared to the Roman church. He still viewed it as a necessary part of the worship service. In the exhortation language Luther outlines in the German Mass the fact that the elements are the body and blood of Christ is made explicitly clear. Having discussed Luther and his reforms it is now time to move to John Calvin.

Calvin's Worship Reforms

¹⁰ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation*](#), Newly revised edition., vol. 3 (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2016)

Needham is directly quoting a large section of the German Mass at the end of Chapter 3 which is where I paraphrased this outline of the German Mass from.

Calvin's Emphasis

Calvin, like Luther, saw that the church needed to reform her ways and thoughts, not only in the areas of justification and scriptural authority but in worship as well. Calvin's view of Scripture caused him to view the reformation of worship as essential. One of Calvin's main concerns was that the common people, the laity, received God's Word. His goal was that the people know God's Word inside and out. That Bible would be hidden in their hearts. The other was a recovery of the proper view of the sacraments of the church, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The guiding principle for his reformation of worship was that all practices of the church should be grounded and regulated by God's Word. "Calvin believed that nothing should be done in Christian worship unless the New Testament authorized it."¹¹ This view is known now as the Regulative Principle of worship.

The Word of God in the Tongue of the People

Calvin, like Luther, saw the need for the Bible to be translated into the common tongues of the people. It was not good for the laity to be unable to understand what the Scriptures said. To rectify this issue, with the aid of other French-speaking reformers, Calvin helped translate the Greek and Hebrew bible into the French language. (Insert Author name) says it well when they write, "Calvin shared the common Protestant conviction that preaching the word was one of the most critical factors that needed to be reintroduced and maintained as a vital part of public worship."¹²

¹¹ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation*](#), Newly revised edition., vol. 3 (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2016), 228.

¹² McKee, "Reformed Worship in the Sixteenth Century," 17.

With these translated scriptures, Calvin, began to preach to the people of Geneva and French refugees. Following the pattern of great men of the faith like John Chrysostom and Ulrich Zwingli, Calvin began to preach through whole books of the Bible. This *Lectio Continua* model of preaching aided in bringing the whole counsel of God to the laity. It was the conviction of Calvin and other reformers at the time that the common people needed to know the Scriptures. They were not required to solely trust the word of the supposed clerical experts. They were to act like the Bereans and compare the teaching of pastors to the Word.

Along with the preached Word being put into the vernacular, Calvin also desired for people to sing God's Word in the common tongue. He wanted, as Dr. Ryan Reeve puts it, for the people to have "the Word of God on their lips."¹³ It is Calvin's desire for the people to be active participants in the worship of God, and no mere spectators of the liturgy or Mass as they had been previously. So, Calvin aided in the translation and setting to music the one hundred and fifty Psalms as well as a select few other Bible songs for the people to sing.

There are many who argue that Calvin held to Exclusive Psalmody, but as Nick Needham points out "he was quite happy that other suitable things should be used: the *Nunc Dimittis*, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed."¹⁴ However, it is true that Calvin did view the Psalms as the pinnacle of possible songs of praise. So as a quick aside, this author would argue that Psalm singing is a practice that needs to be rediscovered by the majority of the American church. Through these two reforms, the translation of the Bible into French and the setting of translated Psalms to music, it is evident that Calvin valued the Word of God in the tongue of the people.

¹³ Ryan Reeves, "Organization of Geneva" (Recorded Lecture on YouTube, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, April 10, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xXIeo4cBIs4>.

¹⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation*, Newly revised edition., vol. 3 (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2016), 228–229.

Signs and Seals of the Covenant

One area of the theology of worship that Calvin is probably best known for is his understanding of the sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. For Calvin the sacraments of the church were not mere or bare signs. He rejected the "memorialism" of Zwingli and instead used his understanding of sacramental union to make sense of the biblical data. He viewed the elements of Baptism and the Lord's Supper as being connected to the things they signified, the washing of sins and the once for all sacrifice of Christ respectively. As Calvin himself stated in his *Institutes*, "the flesh and blood of Christ feed our souls in the same way that bread and wine support and sustain our bodily life"¹⁵

The sacraments were also meant to be means of grace. Not salvific grace like the Roman Catholic Church had taught, but rather a means of sanctifying grace. A grace that conformed the worshiper more and more into the image of Christ. This grace is only available to the believer who take hold of Christ through faith. Again, Calvin states that "[the Lord's Supper] is received with benefit by believers alone, who accept this great generosity with genuine faith and thankful hearts."¹⁶

The Sacraments are also viewed by Calvin as seals of the New Covenant. Baptism is the sign of entrance into the Covenant in a similar way that circumcision had been under the Old Covenant. Christ, by the power of the Spirit and His Word, seals the believer through both the

¹⁵ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation*](#), Newly revised edition., vol. 3 (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2016), 246.

¹⁶ Nick Needham, [*2000 Years of Christ's Power: Renaissance and Reformation*](#), Newly revised edition., vol. 3 (Scotland, U.K.: Christian Focus, 2016), 246.

sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The elements of the sacraments do not have the power in and of themselves, rather they are empowered by God.

Genevan Liturgy

Like Luther, Calvin's liturgy expresses his theological convictions and position on the issue of proper worship. The liturgy of Geneva was as follows: The *Votum* (Ps. 124:8) was their call to worship, there would be a confession of sins, prayer for forgiveness followed by words of comfort and Absolution, the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) would be read or sung, a prayer for illumination would be offered, Lord's Prayer would be recited, then the Scripture for that service's sermon would be read and preached on, after that a prayer for intercessions would be made along with a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer, Apostle Creed would be recited or sung, the pastor would lead the congregation through a Prayer of Preparation, then the Lord's Prayer, afterwards the Words of Institution offered along with a Long Exhortation to the people as they prepared themselves to partake in the Lord's Supper, the elements would be distributed, a psalm would be sung, finally a Prayer of Thanksgiving would be given, *Nunc Dimittis* would be sung and the pastor would end with a benediction.¹⁷

The liturgy above was actually the longer of Calvin's two liturgies. This was his liturgy of the "Service of the Table." Calvin desired weekly or monthly communion, but the city council of Geneva shot this idea down and decided on quarterly communion services. So, the churches of Geneva would typically follow an abridged version of the liturgy above called the "Service of the Word."

¹⁷ Johnathan Gibson and Mark Earngey, eds., *Reformation Worship : Liturgies from the Past for the Present* (Greensburg, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2018), 306.

The Liturgy of Geneva showcases Calvins love of the Word. It also highlights his love for congregational prayer. The people are lead through multiple prayers throughout the service. Likewise there are multiple times during the service where the people are called upon to sing the Psalms or other pieces of Scripture.

Luther and Calvin Compared

Reformers, Luther and Calvin, both sought to restore the Church's worship practice back to the biblical standard, but both went about it in different ways and came to different conclusions. While there are many things that these two men agreed on in terms of worship practices, there are equally as many differences. Of the two, John Calvin, went further in his reformation and came, in this authors opinion, to the more biblical conclusions.

Both Luther and Calvin agreed that the Scriptures needed to be in the common language of the laity rather than in Latin. Both desired for the common man to be able to hear and understand the Word in their native tongue. Because of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, there was no need for a separate, special class of clergy that were the only one able to understand the Bible. All men could and should know the Scriptures, this Calvin and Luther could agree on.

In a similar vein, both men wanted the average Christian to participate in the singing of praises to God. Before the Reformation it was the duty of monks, priests and choir boys to sing on behalf of the common people. The laity had no songs to sing to their God. Calvin and Luther saw this as unacceptable. But the Reformers with different in what they thought were acceptable songs to sing. Luther was perfectly fine with non-inspired songs being sung in the worship service, while Calvin was not. While not an exclusive psalmist, Calvin did only commission

songs for the Genevan psalter that came directly from Scripture. There were no man-made songs in that psalter.

Lastly, these two men differed on their understanding of the sacraments, most especially the Lord's Supper. For Calvin, the elements were spiritually tied to the realities they represented. They were means of conferring sanctifying grace and imparting assurance to the believer. They were signs and seals of the covenant. While for Luther he still maintained a view of the sacraments that was based too much on the traditions of the medieval Roman church. He viewed the elements as the physical and literal body and blood of Christ. This view had and still does have dangerous ramifications on the doctrine of Christ's two natures. It is in this area especially that Luther did not go far enough in his reforms.

Application

The Church in America is in dire need of reformation, renewal, and revival. One of the first places this author would start would be a confession of sin and deep reformation in the American Church's worship practices. The entertainment of man has taken the place of the honor of God in the list of priorities for many evangelical pastors. This can not be so.

Looking to the reforms of Luther and Calvin a few key things can be taken away. 1) Our worship practices must be rooted in the Word and arise from the Word. To do anything else is to wander off into superstition like the Medieval church had. 2) Our choice of songs matter. Their content matters especially. It is the opinion of this author that whether one holds to the position of exclusive psalmody or not the "song book of God" must become a more central part of the service. Whether sung (with or without instruments), chanted, responsively read, whichever way a church chooses, the Psalms must retake their place of prominence. 3) The Table must be taken

seriously. While this author agrees with the position of Calvin, Luther also rightly understood the profound importance of the Lord's Supper. That is why he was so harsh against Zwingli. While this author does think that treating memorialists as heretics is unnecessary, a renewed appreciation of the Table is in order. The Lord's Supper is not to be taken lightly.

Conclusion

This essay sought out to examine the reforms of Martin Luther and John Calvin the worship practices of the Church. When compared these men shared many of the same convictions: the Word being translated into the vernacular tongue, the need for the congregation to participate singing songs of praise, and recognizing the errors of the Latin Mass. Yet there were places that these men disagreed with one another. The two biggest being whether or not non-scriptural songs could be sung in the church service, and their understanding of the elements of the sacraments.

This essay argued that John Calvin went further in correcting the practices of the Medieval church by employing the regulative principle of worship. He did not wish to base his beliefs or practices primarily on the traditions of the church, rather he wanted to root his theology of worship in God's Word. The practices outlined in the New Testament would be the practices of the Church of Geneva and any other church that followed the Calvinist or reformed tradition.

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