

## Worship: The Heavenly Pattern

What is worship? We have begun to explore what it means to have a redemptive-historical understanding of the church--what it means to see the church in the light of how God has accomplished the salvation of his people. And we have sought to show the eschatological nature of the church--that everything that God promised to do for Israel at the end of history he has done for Jesus in the middle of history--and therefore the ends of the ages have come upon us. If the church's true identity is found in Christ, and Christ has received the final judgment, then we too have heard the declaration of God's final judgment on us: you are mine!

What does that mean for worship?

Most discussions about worship today focus on style. Should we have praise choruses? Should we have guitars or drums? Or, on the other side, should we only sing Psalms? Or should we forbid all instruments? These sorts of questions have plagued the church now for three hundred years. And while the church has been fighting over worship style, she has seemed to forget the more important question of what is happening in worship. As our theology of worship has disappeared, it is perhaps not surprising that our practice of worship has become so fragmented.

The theology of worship is perhaps best expressed in the practice of worship. So what I would like to do today is do a rapid overview of the history and practice of Christian worship from the Garden of Eden to the New Jerusalem.

### 1. Worship in the Old Testament

The practice of worship in Eden was expressed very simply. Adam and Eve heard the Word of God, responded with faith and obedience, and partook of the Tree of Life. At least, that was the way it was supposed to be. But trading in the true worship of God for the worship of the serpent, they heard the word of the serpent, responded with faith and obedience toward the Devil, and partook of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Remember that--because you'll see the contrast again!

Throughout the book of Genesis you can see the connection between Word--Response--Table, but the first corporate worship service recorded in any detail in the scriptures is the assembly of Israel at Mt Sinai in Exodus 19-24. Exodus 19-23 recounts the establishment of the covenant between God and his people, and Exodus 24 gives the worship service where Israel ratified the covenant. The basic pattern is very simple:

1. Israel offered burnt offerings and peace offerings (Ex 24:4-6)
2. Moses read the Book of the Covenant to the people (Ex 24:7a)
3. The people responded with faith and obedience (Ex 24:7b-8)
4. Israel (in this case through its representatives) partook of the peace offerings with God (Ex 24:9-11)

It would be useful to go into the details of the daily worship of the Old Testament (and I do so in a seminar on worship that the Rev. Larry Wilson and I have conducted), but for our purposes it will be sufficient to point out that every biblical worship service described in scripture follows this basic pattern (no other pattern is ever substituted for it). The worship service that is presented in the greatest detail is the service at the dedication of the temple in 2 Chronicles 5-7. There is more detail in Solomon's service, but it follows the same pattern that Moses did:

1. Solomon assembles Israel for worship (2 Chron 5:2-5)
2. Sin is dealt with through burnt offerings (2 Chron 5:6)
3. Israel enters God's presence through the priests (2 Chron 5:7-10)
4. Psalm of praise (2 Chron 5:11-14)
5. Word of God proclaimed by Solomon (2 Chron 6:1-11)
6. Solomon's prayer of intercession (2 Chron 6:12-42)
7. Fire consumes the sacrifices/glory fills the temple (2 Chron 7:1-2)
8. Psalm of praise (2 Chron 7:3)
9. Israel partakes of the peace offerings (2 Chron 7:4-9)
10. Benediction (Israel departs in peace) (2 Chron 7:10)

So the Old Testament pattern of worship has a very clear theological shape: 1) worship is entrance into the presence of God, and you can only enter the presence of God if sin has been removed; 2) God then speaks to his people through his Word, reminding them of what he has done for their redemption, and calling upon them to live as his people; 3) God's people then respond to his word with faith and obedience, asking him to continue to do what he has promised; 4) worship concludes with the covenant meal, whereby the people of God partake of the benefits of the sacrifice and go forth in peace (for more detail on this, see the sermons on [Exodus 24](#) and 2 Chronicles 5-7).

### 2. Worship in the New Testament

There has been considerable debate regarding the relative influence of the temple and the synagogue in New Testament worship. (For more detail on this, see my essay, ["Which Regulative Principle? A Response to Steve Schlissel and Brian Schwertley."](#) where I show that the synagogue was not properly considered worship by Jews until after AD 70.) A comparison between the two is useful:

#### Temple Worship (2 Chron 5-7)

Assembling for Worship  
Burnt Offerings  
Enter God's Presence  
Psalm of Praise

#### Synagogue Worship

Assembling for Worship  
  
  
Psalms

Word of God read and preached	Prayer of the Covenant Community
	Benediction (if a priest was present)
Prayer of the Covenant Community	Word of God read and preached
Fire consumes the sacrifices/glory fills the temple	
Psalm of Praise	Psalms
Peace Offerings	
Benediction	Closing Prayer

The synagogue was established during and after the Exile to teach the Israelites the Word of God. Since they had been exiled from the Land because of their disobedience and idolatry, they began meeting weekly to learn how to avoid making the same mistakes again. Synagogue "worship," therefore, was not opposed to temple worship, but was designed to prepare people for temple worship. Indeed, Jesus and the apostles regularly attended both the temple and the synagogue, but never would have considered the synagogue to be "worship." Recall what Jesus said to the woman at the well in John 4 when she asked whether she should worship at Mt. Gerizim or Jerusalem: "the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:21-23). Jesus did not say, "well, you could worship at any synagogue you like!" He admitted that prior to his coming, there was only one place to worship truly--at Jerusalem--but that now things were going to change.

But what did the apostolic worship look like? Did they see themselves as synagogues, or as the temple of God? The Church is seen as the true temple (1 Cor 3:16-17; 1 Peter 2:4). The Lord's Supper is described in the language of the Old Testament peace offerings (1 Cor 10:18; Heb 13:10). While the preaching style and the traditions of prayer from the synagogue seem to have influenced apostolic worship, they did not imitate the pattern of worship found in the synagogue. Instead, the indications are that the apostles followed the same pattern of worship that had been laid down by Moses and Solomon. At the very least it is plain that they described their worship in terms of the Word, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers (Acts 2:42). But there is more evidence for the continued use of the Old Testament pattern: the whole book of Revelation is laid out in the pattern of an Old Testament worship service.

### 3. The Heavenly Worship as the Pattern for Our Worship: Worship in the Book of Revelation

In Revelation 1:10 we are told that John sees his vision on the Lord's Day, and in 1:12-13 we hear that John sees Christ among the Lampstands: in other words, Jesus is with his church. After the seven letters are sent to the seven churches, John is called to witness the heavenly worship.

1. **Assembling for Worship (Rev. 4:1-11)**--John is called to witness the worship of the heavenly hosts as they assemble to praise their God. The echo of 2 Chronicles 5:2-5 is quite strong as the expanding circles of persons reaches from the king's closest advisors to the entire assembly of the people of God.
2. **The Sin Offering (Rev. 5:1-7)**--John weeps because no one is worthy to open the scroll. The scroll contains the purposes of God for history. Sin seems to have caused history to come to a screeching halt. Redemptive history itself can only continue through the sacrifice. Only the Lamb of God who was slain is worthy to proclaim the purposes of God for his people. John is assured that Jesus has triumphed!
3. **Enter God's Presence (Rev. 5:8)**--Because Jesus has taken the scroll, his people may now come before God with hope.
4. **Psalm of Praise (Rev. 5:9-14)**--The people of God declare the praises of the Lamb for the great redemption which he has wrought.

Now, the next four items,

5. **The Word of God read and preached,**
6. **The Prayer of the Covenant Community,**
7. **Fire consuming the sacrifices/glory filling the temple, and**
8. **The Psalm of Praise,**

repeat themselves five times. But, each pattern of "sevens" in the Book of Revelation follows this same order.

Rev. 6:1-8:5--*The Seven Seals proclaim the Word of God*

7:9-8:4 reports the praises and prayers of the saints  
8:5 reports the fire from heaven in reply

Rev. 8:6-11:19--*The Seven Trumpets proclaim the Word of God*

11:15-18 reports the prayers of the saints  
11:19--says that the temple of God was opened in heaven, bringing lightning and thunder upon the earth

Rev. 12:1-15:8--*The Seven Signs proclaim the Word of God*

15:2-4 reports the song of Moses--the prayer of the saints  
15:5-8 reports that the glory of the Lord so filled the heavenly temple that no one was able to enter the temple until the plagues were done

Rev. 16:1-21--*The Seven Bowls proclaim the Word of God*

16:17-18--fire comes from heaven. The silence of the people of God here is striking--but understandable since no one can enter the heavenly temple right now (remember 15:8). God's wrath is so fierce that even the islands and mountains flee at the fierceness of his wrath! (15:19-20) These are the plagues of Egypt, but much worse!

Rev. 17:1-19:5--*The Fall of Babylon proclaims the Word of God*

19:1-5 reports the praises of the saints for such a great salvation

9. **The Peace Offering**--Rev. 19:6-10 and 17-21 record the two invitations to the two Suppers--the Wedding Supper of the Lamb (for the saints) and the "great supper of God" (for the vultures). One is a supper of blessing; the other is a supper of cursing. (Recall the two patterns of worship in the garden of Eden--true worship and idolatry--here we see the conclusion of the matter.)
10. **Benediction**--Rev. 20 offers the curse upon the devil and those who follow him, while Rev. 21-22 offers the blessing upon Christ's people.

Notice the parts of heavenly worship: John enters worship only because of what Jesus has done (Ch 1-3), the sacrifice is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross (Ch 4-5), the sermon is what God accomplishes in redemptive history in between Jesus' first coming and his second coming. (Chs 6-19), the prayers are the prayers of the saints throughout history (Ch 6-19), the covenant meal occurs when Christ returns (Ch 19), the benediction is the blessedness of eternal life in Christ (Ch 21-22).

In other words, the book of Revelation portrays us as living in the midst of the heavenly worship. The heavenly worship service began when Jesus (the great High Priest) entered the Holy of Holies, and will not end until the final Judgment, when we will enter the blessedness of eternal life in Christ. This is why Jesus said at the Last Supper: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is shed for many. Assuredly, I say to you, I will no longer drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:24-26). Jesus will not drink the cup again until the Wedding Supper of the Lamb because that is the conclusion of the heavenly worship.

Therefore, our worship each Lord's Day partakes of this heavenly worship. Our worship is a reminder that we share in the eschatological worship. In our worship, we are reminded of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, because we cannot enter worship except through His blood. But in our worship we truly enter the heavenly Holy of Holies because we come in His name (and how could anyone refrain from bursting forth into songs of praise for this!!!).

In our worship we hear the Word of God read and preached. We are reminded of how God has been faithful to his promises throughout redemptive history, and we are called to persevere in faith to the end because God has promised that he will bring this work to completion in the Day of Christ.

In our worship our prayers ascend to the heavenly throne as we ask God to continue to be faithful to his promises. We bring our praises and intercessions before God because he receives them as sweet incense before his throne. And, indeed, he answers them by sending fire on the earth (recall Rev. 8:5). The fire of his Spirit brings blessing to his people and judgment to his enemies through the prayers of the saints.

In our worship we partake of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ through the Lord's Supper. In it we remember our Lord's death until he comes. Hence there are two parts: we remember what he has done on the cross, and we anticipate the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. We partake of his death on the cross, and we partake of his resurrection life.

In our worship, finally, we receive God's blessing. When the benediction is spoken we are to remember that God has promised to grant his blessing of eternal life in Christ. The blessing that you hear from the minister is nothing less than God's blessing of eternal life.

We then may go back into the world for the next week remembering that even as we live in the midst of this crooked and perverse generation, we are also partakers of the heavenly worship whose true home is found before the throne of God. This is why Paul can say: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). All of life is an act of worship because all of history participates in the heavenly worship. And as Revelation reminds us, it either leads to blessing and joy or to cursing and destruction. It is either the worship of the Lamb or the worship of the beast. "Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev. 22:20)

#### 4. The Deformation of Worship

I did not invent this pattern of worship. You can actually find the same basic pattern reflected in almost every liturgy of the Christian church from the second century through the seventeenth century. The only reformer who rejected it was Zwingli--but no one followed him. All of the Reformed and Lutheran churches utilized this basic pattern (see tables below).

But it is not clear that the church always understood the theological rationale behind the pattern. And by the seventeenth century, some English Puritans, especially those who had been influenced by the growing rabbinic studies, began to argue that the traditional pattern of worship was too influenced by the temple, and began to argue that we should follow the synagogue pattern. They were afraid of the tendency toward "priestcraft" that came from using Old Testament forms of worship, and began to argue that the New Testament alone should provide the model for worship. The first alteration was the elimination of weekly communion. Only a few Reformed churches had been able to reinstate weekly communion during the 16th century, and the result was a truncated worship service. Without weekly communion, the service was out of balance, and the sermon became the only center of worship. Perhaps, then, it was only natural for the sermon to come at the end of the service. But further, with no participation in the covenant meal, the Word of God was divorced from the participation in the sacrifice, and so the understanding that worship begins with the sacrifice was also lost. The confession of sin and declaration of pardon gradually dropped out of the service as well, resulting in the now-familiar evangelical liturgy: sing-a-little, pray-a-little, here comes the preacher!

**Disclaimer:** The table below has been abstracted from a seminar conducted by Rev Wallace in which he gives much more detailed explanation of the fourfold biblical pattern of worship:

Entrance by means of **Sacrifice**  
Proclamation of **Word**  
**Response** of Covenant Community  
Partaking of **Covenant Meal**

#### The Pattern of Worship from Moses to the New Creation

Moses (Ex 24)	Solomon (2 Chr 5-7)	Synagogue (no biblical examples)*	The Heavenly Worship (Rev)
Call to Worship	Assembling for Worship	Shema/Call to Worship	Call to Worship
Burnt Offerings and Peace Offerings	Burnt Offerings		Sin Offering of the Lamb

	Entering God's Presence		Entering God's Presence
	Psalms of Praise	Psalms	Songs of Praise
Word of God proclaimed	Word of God proclaimed	Prayer of the Covenant Community	Word of God proclaimed
	Prayer of Intercession	Benediction (if a priest was present)	Prayer of Intercession
	Fire consumes the sacrifices, glory fills the temple	Word of God read and proclaimed	Fire from heaven, glory fills the temple
Response: profession of faith and obedience	Psalms of Praise	Psalms of Praise	Songs of Praise
Covenant Meal	Peace Offerings (Benediction)	Closing Prayer	Wedding Supper of the Lamb Benediction

\*The synagogue service dates from 200 years after AD 70 and therefore does not reflect the practice of the synagogue in Jesus' day. Prior to AD 70 the synagogue was considered a school and was never described as worship.

**Early Church Liturgies\***

<b>Justin Martyr (2d Century)</b>	<b>Rome (5th Century)</b>	<b>Augustine (5th Century)</b>	<b>Constantinople (5th Century)</b>
Gathering	Psalms (sung by choir during the entrance of the clergy)	Salutation (pax vobiscum)	Little Entrance  Litany "Holy, Holy, Holy"
OT Reading	OT Reading Epistle Reading Psalms (interspersed)	OT Reading Epistle Reading Psalm	Antiphon Epistle Reading Alleluia and two prayers
NT Reading	Gospel Reading	Gospel Reading	Gospel Reading
Sermon		Sermon	
Dismissal of Catechumens	Dismissal of Catechumens	Dismissal of Catechumens	Dismissal of Catechumens
Intercessory Prayers		Prayers of the Faithful	Prayers of the Faithful
Kiss of Peace			
Presentation of bread and wine	Offerings of bread and wine (choir sings another psalm)	Offering of bread and wine (with psalm)	Great Entrance with elements  Five Prayers Nicene Creed Kiss of Peace Two offertory prayers and two prayers of the veil
	Collect for mysteries Preface Choral song of praise	Prayer over the gifts	
Great Thanksgiving	Canon Lord's Prayer	Eucharistic Prayer Lord's Prayer Kiss of Peace Blessing	The Anaphora of James Prayer and the Lord's Prayer Prayer of Inclination Prayer of Elevation
Distribution of bread and wine--by the deacons	Communion (psalm sung by choir)	Communion with psalmody	Communion
Extended distribution to the absent			Two prayers behind the (reading desk)
Giving of tithes and offerings	Prayer of thanksgiving Dismissal	Prayer of thanksgiving Dismissal	Prayer of Thanksgiving Dismissal

\*Patristic worship divided the service into two parts: the Service of the Word and the Service of the Table, connected by the prayers of the faithful. The idea of entering worship on the basis of sacrifice was included more in the Eucharistic service. The reader will note that by the fifth century the sermon is dropping out of some services.

**Reformation Liturgies**

<b>Ulrich Zwingli (1524)*</b>	<b>Martin Luther (1526)</b>	<b>Martin Bucer (1537)</b>	<b>John Calvin (1542)</b>
Lord's Prayer	Hymn or Psalm		Psalms 124:8
Ave Maria	Kyrie ("Lord Have Mercy")	Confession of Sins	Confession of Sin
Sermon		Words of Pardon	Word of Pardon
Remembrance of those who died the past week		Absolution	Absolution
Lord's Prayer		Psalm or Hymn	Ten Commandments (sung)

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Ave Maria	Prayer (collect)	Prayer for Illumination	Prayer for Illumination
Creed	Epistle (sung)	Gospel	Scripture Reading
Ten Commandments	Hymn		
Confession and Pardon	Gospel (sung)		
Lord's Supper (quarterly)	Creed		
Prayer of preparation (collect)	Sermon	Sermon	Sermon
Epistle		Collection of alms	Collection of Alms
Gloria Patri (read)		Creed	
Gospel		Prayer of Intercession and Consecration	Prayer of Intercession
Creed			Lord's Prayer
Exhortation		Lord's Prayer	Creed (sung)
Lord's Prayer	Lord's Supper (weekly)	Lord's Supper (weekly)	Lord's Supper (quarterly)
Communion Prayer	Admonition	Exhortation	Words of Institution
Words of Institution	Words of Institution (sung)	Words of Institution	Exhortation
Bread and Cup (John 13 read)			Prayer of Consecration
Psalms 113 (read)		Fraction	Fraction
Prayer of Thanksgiving	Bread	Bread	Bread
Dismissal	Sanctus ("Holy Holy Holy")		
	Cup	Cup	Cup
	Agnus Dei ("Lamb of God")	Psalm or Hymn	Psalm
	Hus's Hymn		
	Prayer of Thanksgiving	Prayer of Thanksgiving	Prayer of Thanksgiving
	Aaronic Benediction	Aaronic Benediction	Aaronic Benediction

\*Zwingli followed the medieval preaching service instead of the biblical/patristic pattern. The other Reformers rejected his approach.

**Post-Reformation Liturgies\***

	<b>Westminster Divines (1648)</b>	<b>19th Century Presbyterian</b>	<b>19th Century Evangelical</b>
Call to Worship			
Prayer for God's presence and pardon		Invocation	
		Psalm or Hymn	Singing several songs and hymns
Scripture Reading and Exposition		Scripture Reading	(Testimonies)
Psalm (sung)		Congregational Prayer	
Prayer of Confession and Illumination (Scots)	Congregational Prayer (English)	Psalm or Hymn	Congregational Prayer
		Announcements	Announcements
Scripture Reading			Scripture Reading
Sermon		Sermon	Sermon
Prayer of Thanksgiving and Application (Intercessions--Scots) with Lord's Prayer		Prayer of Thanksgiving and Application	(Prayer of Application)
		Psalm or Hymn with Doxology	Songs
Lord's Supper (monthly or quarterly)		Lord's Supper (monthly or quarterly)	Lord's Supper (monthly or quarterly)
Exhortation		Exhortation	Exhortation
Words of Institution		Words of Institution	
Prayer for the Sanctification and Blessing of the Elements		Prayer	
Communion		Communion	Communion
Exhortation			
Prayer of Thanksgiving		Prayer of Thanksgiving	Prayer
Psalm (sung)			
Benediction		Benediction	(Benediction)

\*The Westminster Directory for Public Worship begins to move toward a synagogue view of worship due to the revival of rabbinic studies in the seventeenth century. From the seventeenth century to the present we have seen a progressive loss of the classic theology of worship, which is also reflected in the tendency to debate music rather than the theology of worship itself ever since the controversy over Isaac Watts's paraphrases around 1700.

