

Top Ten Worship Planning Ideas from John Calvin

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People often come to me and ask, “How can we improve or renew our worship?” My response is that we should restore the central things and practice them robustly, using contemporary forms rooted in the practices of sixteenth century pastor and liturgical reformer, John Calvin. Even though Calvin is most widely known as a systematizer (for his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536-1559) and exegete (he wrote [commentaries](#) on almost all the books of the Bible), his leadership in liturgical renewal should not be ignored in the twenty-first century.

A case could be made that, for Calvin, the Reformation was primarily a liturgical reformation, with the exegesis and systematizing being the result of his interest in worship.

Calvin published the 1541 *Form of Prayers*, “in order that everyone might know what he should say and do in the Christian assembly ... what form the faithful should maintain and follow when they gather together in the name of Jesus Christ.”¹ Two of his four writings during 1536-1545 were wholly on liturgy (the *Form of Prayers* – a liturgy for use in Geneva—and the *Brief Treatise on the Lord’s Supper*), and at least half of the material in the 1545 *Catechism* and the 1536 *Institutes* also had to do with worship – covering various aspects of the Word, sacraments, and prayer. A case could be made that, for Calvin, the Reformation was primarily a liturgical reformation, with the exegesis and systematizing being the result of his interest in worship. So, here are ten top worship planning ideas from John Calvin.

1. Remember the necessary practices and always include them every week: the Word, prayer, the meal, and sharing.

In 1536 and 1559, Calvin wrote in his *Institutes*:

Luke relates in the Acts that this was the practice of the apostolic church, when he says that believers “. . . continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers” [Acts 2:42]. Thus it became the unvarying rule that no meeting of the church should take place without the Word, prayers, partaking of the Lord's Supper and almsgiving.²

Calvin treated this passage in Acts as a central norm for Sunday worship. There were to be four elements present: the reading and preaching of the Word; prayers in the language of the people; the Lord's Supper; and a sharing of goods, principally through almsgiving in the service. Plan to include all of them in the principal service each Lord’s Day.

2. Keep the traditional *ordo*: gathering, Word, sacraments, sending.

Calvin did this, reforming without disrupting the traditional outline of worship. See #5 below for the order of the *Form of Prayers*. Of particular importance is to gather first around the Word, read and preached. This sets the agenda for the intercessory prayer that

follows and allows the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper to seal the message of the Word. Calvin pointed out that God created us so that we need to see, touch, smell, and taste as well as hear; hence the sacraments.

3. Let the Scriptures come through.

Notice how many times the Word speaks in the Genevan service. It opens with a sentence of Scripture, and includes the Law and Psalms as well as a lesson and sermon. The Word is not only central, it is pervasive, guiding even the praise and prayers.

4. Connect the reading and preaching to prayer and the sacraments; balance the necessary practices as means of grace.

In Geneva, preaching was an exposition of the portion of Scripture that was read. In turn the reading and preaching were confirmed by baptism and the Lord's Supper and the Word was answered in the praise and prayers of the people. The secret here is to closely integrate the whole service around the Scripture readings of the day. People should be able to see and hear the connections.

5. Provide a full diet of prayer.

Include an invocation, confession of sin, prayer for illumination, prayer of intercession, Eucharistic prayer, and thanksgiving, as shown in this outline of the *Form of Prayers* with the prayers in **bold** (note also that the Psalms are sung prayers):

Opening sentence

“Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” Ps. 124:8

Confession of sin

The Ten Commandments (sung)

Psalm (sung)

Collect for Illumination

Lesson and Sermon

Prayer of Intercession

Apostles' Creed (sung)

The Lord's Supper (including the **table prayer**)

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Psalm (sung) or Canticle of Simeon (sung)

Offering for the poor

Blessing

In our day, public prayer has sometimes atrophied to a small, brief general prayer. To enrich worship, give each prayer its own identity and place. The prayers should be succinct and fulfill specific roles. Also encourage the people to see the hymns and Psalms as prayers.

6. Use the Lord's Prayer as the backbone of praying.

In the *Form of Prayers*, Calvin used the Lord's Prayer in three places: 1) The prayer for illumination before the reading and preaching of the Word ended with a recital of the Lord's Prayer. 2) At a certain point in the prayer of intercession after the sermon, Calvin

inserted a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer. 3) In the meal, the table prayer included the text of the Lord's Prayer.³

Calvin wrote that God "prescribed a form for us in which is set forth as in a table all that he allows us to seek of him, all that is of benefit to us, all that we need to ask." It is the prayer text "which the heavenly Father has taught us through his beloved Son."⁴

Make the Lord's Prayer the heart of all the other prayers. How is this petition reflected in a hymn, or a Psalm, or how do the readings and the sermon support and lead to another petition? "Give us today our bread" is not just about the needs of the people in the room, but about the needs of all the world for bread. And not just for the bread that perishes (that, of course) but also the bread, the flesh of the Son of Man in the Supper, that gives life (John 6:25-51). It is about crops and the means of grace. It is pleading that God hold the world in mercy.⁵

7. Let the people pray: singing the prayers, Psalms, creed, Song of Simeon in the language of the people.

This was Calvin's way of restoring prayer to the voice of the people, after centuries when only the clergy prayed (and only in Latin). Also, make the intercessory prayer a common prayer by using the same outline week after week, so that people can anticipate and enter into prayers for the church and her leaders, for the world and its leaders, and for the poor, needy, and sick. Intersperse the prayer topics with responses by the people, such as "Lord, hear our prayer."

8. Focus on baptism to comfort the troubled consciences of believers.

One way to do this is to lead the confession of sin and assurance of forgiveness from the baptismal font (see Romans 6:3-4). For Calvin, the sacraments are instruments, with force. "For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word. Secondly, he confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within."⁶

9. Feed the poor from the Lord's Table.

Calvin and the early reformers reintroduced the gifts for the poor into the main liturgy. Calvin's essay on the meaning and practice of the Lord's Supper, which appears in some editions of the *Form of Prayers*, draws a direct connection between the blessings given in the supper and our oblation of ourselves in service to God and further, to "holy offerings and gifts which are administered to Jesus Christ in His least ones, to those who are hungry, thirsty, naked."⁷ Make the offering for the poor (both money and food) a weekly practice connected to the Lord's Supper. Then develop an enhanced ministry to the poor and needy in your area.

10. End by singing the *Nunc Dimittis*, the Song of Simeon (Luke 2:29-32).

This leads the people to give thanks for what they have heard and seen in the Word and sacraments. As they go from the assembly into the world to serve God, they remember that they have been assured of God's salvation, have seen it.

Once you have developed and applied these ten ideas, improvise within the discipline of these practices. This will give your worship depth, consistency, and continuity with the saints who have gone before; and also allow you to adapt the tradition in terms of your local culture.

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Footnotes

1. John Calvin, "Epistle to the reader" *Form of Prayers*, trans. Charles Garside, Jr., in *The Origins of Calvin's Theology of Music: 1536-1543* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1979), 32.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1536 (trans. Ford Lewis Battles. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 113; *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 (trans. Ford Lewis Battles. London: SCM, 1960), 4.17.44, see also his *Commentary on Acts* (trans. Henry Beveredge. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 126-8.
3. For the paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer in the intercessory prayer, see Elsie A. McKee, ed. and trans., *John Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (New York: Paulist, 2001), 129-30.
4. Calvin, 1559 *Institutes*, 3.20.34 (trans. Battles, 1960), 897.
5. Gordon W. Lathrop, *The Pastor: A Spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 23-40.
6. Calvin, 1536 *Institutes* (trans. Battles, 1986), 89.
7. Quoted by Elsie A. McKee, *John Calvin on the Diaconate and Liturgical Almsgiving* (Genève: Librairie Droz S.A., 1984), 50.