Guide to Our Liturgy



Oak Forest
Anglican Church

Every church has a liturgy. Every church orders its corporate worship in accordance with a particular rationale. Oak Forest Anglican Church is no different. And yet, if you are new to our church, you may not be familiar with our carefully structured, "formal" worship style. That's okay. Corporate worship is something we learn to do. When first learning to dance or play an instrument, our initial attempts are choppy and deliberate, requiring more thought and intentionality. But once we begin to master the new skill, then we are able to truly live in the moment, to engage emotionally, and to experience the fullness of joy. So whether you are new to structured liturgies or you grew up worshiping this way, this short primer is for you. This document outlines the biblical rationale underpinning our liturgical practices, which we hope will deepen and enhance your level of engagement on Sunday mornings.

Biblical Foundations

First and foremost, Christian worship should be biblical. When the Bible gives instructions on how to worship and draw near to God, we are wise to pay careful attention. As a young Naval officer, I was once ordered to the office of a four-star admiral. As I waited in the lobby, I was given detailed instructions concerning military decorum: how to enter, when to stand, when to sit, what to say, etc. Following these procedures was a way of demonstrating the respect I had for the high-ranking official. It would have been altogether inappropriate for me to saunter in casually and address the admiral informally.

Of course, the God of the Bible is more than just a high-ranking official; He is our loving Father and Friend (John 15:15). But as we will see, the Bible has revealed specific principles and practices to consider in ordering our worship. God has not been silent concerning how He desires His people to approach Him. And because His way is not arbitrary, our worship style is more than a matter of preference.

The most fundamental thing to know about Christian worship is that worship is a response to God's gracious gifts. We are first and foremost recipients, and we want our liturgy to call attention to this reality. The Lord gives, and we receive. The Lord speaks, and we respond. The Lord calls us, and we come. The Lord forgives, and we sing with thanksgiving. The Lord teaches, and we listen and learn. The Lord offers us bread and wine, and we eat and drink with joy and gratitude. The Lord recommissions us for service in His Kingdom, and we resolve to live obediently. This is the gift-response rhythm of corporate worship.

We see this gift-response rhythm whenever God enters into covenant, remembers covenant, or renews covenant with His people (Gen 6:18, Deut 5:3, Ezek 16:60, Heb 8:10, Luke 1:72, 22:20, etc.). In the Bible, a covenant is a relationship bound by oath, and the Bible clearly spells out the process for renewing covenant with God. We do so by way of sacrifice (Gen 8:20-9:17; 15:8-18a; Ex 24:4-11; 34:15; Lev 2:13; 24:1-8; Num 18:19; 1 Kings 3;15; Ps 50:5; Luke 22:20; Heb 9:15, 18; 9:20; 12:24; 13:20). Even today, God graciously gathers us together as His covenant people by way of a sacrifice. The same Holy Spirit who

inspired the highly ritualized form of worship in ancient Israel still inspires the worship of the Church, with one notable distinction. Under the Old Covenant, Israelite worshipers offered animals in sacrifice. Today, under the New Covenant, we enter into God's presence by the sacrifice of Christ. But in terms of the liturgy, the pattern is very similar.

Leviticus 9 describes the inauguration of the priesthood. The tabernacle has been built, and the people are summoned for worship. Having assembled, the priests make four types of sacrifices: a purification offering, an ascension offering, a tribute offering, and a peace offering. These sacrifices were to be made in a particular order.

1. The sin (purification) offering highlighted the need for confession and forgiveness as sinners approach their holy God. We must be purified as we draw near.
2. The ascension (burnt) offering literally ascended. The animal was skinned, cut up, washed, and then burnt on the altar. The smoke from the altar would be incorporated into the glory cloud over the tabernacle, a fragrant offering to the Lord.
3. The tribute (grain) offering was a way for worshipers to confess their loyalty and dependence upon God. In recognition of the fact that everything they had was a gift to be stewarded, they offered the fruits of their labors.
4. The peace offering was the climactic moment. All biblical worship is meant to culminate in communion with God. Worship

always culminates in a shared meal. As they ate of the peace offering, the worshipers were enjoying a meal with God.

Now consider the basic structure of our liturgy:

1. God calls us (Lev 9:1-5). We worship in response to God's summons. God takes the initiative, and we draw near to Him because He has first invited us.
2. God cleanses us (Lev 9:15). Our time of confession and assurance corresponds to the sin offering. Having been washed, we enter into the presence of God.
3. God consecrates us (Lev 9:16). Like the burnt offering, we "ascend" into the presence of God. We acknowledge this in the liturgy by saying, "Now lift up your hearts. / We lift them to the Lord." From this privileged place, we hear the reading and preaching of God's Word, and we are consecrated in His truth (John 17:17; Heb 4:12).
4. God collects our gifts (Lev 9:17). The tribute offering is represented by the collection of tithes and offerings. We offer the fruits of our labors, acknowledging that all we have is a gift from the Lord.
5. God communes with us (Lev 9:18-21). As with the peace offering, the Communion meal is the climax of the liturgy. God invites us to His table, and we feast in His presence.
6. God commissions us (Lev 9:22-23). To conclude, we are sent out with God's blessing to serve Him in the world. In the tabernacle,

> Aaron was instructed to lift his hands toward the people and bless them with the words of Numbers 6:24-26.

In short, Jesus abolished animal sacrifice, but He did not abolish the *way* of sacrifice. Christian worship is still described in sacrificial categories (Rom 12:1-2, Heb 13:15), and the Church is described as the true Temple (1 Cor 3:16, Eph 2). Thus, we should pay careful attention to the divinely-inspired form and content of worship in the Temple.

Liturgy as Discipleship and Pastoral Care

Not only can we make a biblical case for our liturgical practices, we believe our structured liturgy is a powerful tool for discipleship and pastoral care.

First, our worship is saturated with Scripture. The Word of God—not human wisdom or clever sermons—is what challenges, comforts, and transforms us. Thus, from beginning to end, our service is packed with Scripture. Even if the sermon is a dud (entirely possible), every worshiper will depart having been blessed by a liturgical service steeped in the Word of God.

Second, because we have a liturgy that remains largely consistent week after week and year after year, we are further shaped into the image of Christ, both as individuals and as a community. The scripted nature of our worship is an expression of our unity; rather than

watching passively, we are all able to participate together. In addition, the Holy Spirit uses liturgical repetition to teach us how to pray and relate to the Lord as individuals. Some argue that liturgical repetition eventually becomes meaningless, but this is not necessarily the case. There are all sorts of ritualized phrases that we speak every day: "I love you," "Thank you," etc. We rarely tire of repeating such phrases. In fact, these repetitions establish a healthy foundation for interpersonal relationships. In the same way, liturgy is not dry and mechanical merely because it's repetitive. Liturgy is powerful precisely because it's repetitive.

Not only that, but repetition makes our corporate worship more inclusive, especially for those who are unable to follow a sermon or read the lyrics of a new song. Specifically, repetition makes our worship inclusive of young children, the elderly, and the mentally challenged—the very sorts of people God has called us to love most diligently.

Conclusion

We hope this guide has helped to explain the rich biblical theology and history which corroborate the rationale behind our worship service. Many consider structured liturgies to be lifeless and dry, but on the contrary, it would be difficult to overstate the formative power of a robust, lively liturgy. When we worship sporadically and/or fail to understand the rationale, the power of liturgy is diminished. But once we come to understand what we're doing and why, we can begin to

shift our focus away from the mechanics and toward the God who is truly present with us each and every Sunday. So stick with it. Commit to learning and internalizing the portions of the liturgy that remain the same week to week, and come prepared to speak and sing loudly, boldly, and with joy. Speak and sing as though God were in our midst—calling, cleansing, consecrating, collecting, communing, and commissioning. Because He is.

Resources for Further Study

Jeffrey Meyers, *The Lord's Service*
James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love*
Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World*
James Jordan, *The Liturgy Trap*

Note: We plan to expand upon this guide in the future, including answers to Frequently Asked Questions, such as: Why do we follow the Church calendar? Why do Christians sing in worship? What criteria do we use in selecting songs? Why do we kneel for confession? Why do we observe Communion weekly? What role do children play in corporate worship? And so on. If you have a question, please feel free to send it to *hello@ofa.church*.

Worship should be an occasion of cross-cultural hospitality. Consider an analogy: when I travel to France, I hope to be made to feel welcome. However, I don't expect my French hosts to become Americans in order to make me feel at home. I don't expect them to start speaking English, ordering pizza, talking about the New York Yankees, and so on. Indeed, if I wanted that, I would have just stayed home! Instead, what I'm hoping for is to be welcomed into their unique French culture; that's why I've come to France in the first place. And I know that this will take some work on my part. I'm expecting things to be different; indeed, I'm looking for just this difference. So also, I think, with hospitable worship: seekers are looking for something our culture can't provide. Many don't want a religious version of what they can already get at the mall. …they are searching for the mysterious practices of the ancient gospel.

— James K.A. Smith



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