

MEETING WITH GOD

A Study Guide to Abraham Kuyper's
Our Worship

Michael R. Kearney



Reformed
Fellowship Inc.

www.reformedfellowship.net

Meeting with God:

A Study Guide to Abraham Kuyper's *Our Worship*

© 2021 by Michael R. Kearney

Printed in the United States of America.

All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible® (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means whatsoever without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Please refer all pertinent questions to the publisher:

Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

(877) 532-8510

president@reformedfellowship.net

www.reformedfellowship.net

Additional copies of this booklet are available from
Reformed Fellowship, Inc.

Book design by Jeff Steenholdt

Cover image: The Old Dutch Church in Sleepy Hollow, New York.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Recovering the Reformed Tradition	1
Chapter 1: The Form and Content of Worship	5
Chapter 2: The Call and Response of Worship	15
Chapter 3: Confession and Forgiveness in Worship	23
Chapter 4: Offering Prayer and Praise in Worship	31
Chapter 5: The Word Read and Preached in Worship	39
Chapter 6: Sacraments and Ceremonies in Worship	47
Conclusion: Toward Liturgical Awareness	57
Recommended Reading	61

INTRODUCTION

RECOVERING THE REFORMED TRADITION¹

The American filmmaker Les Lanphere made headlines in 2017 with the release of a documentary entitled *Calvinist*. Through interviews with prominent theologians and pastors across the country, Lanphere traced the groundswell of interest in Reformed theology, particularly among younger generations of believers.² The success of *Calvinist* prompted Lanphere to produce a follow-up documentary. That work, *Spirit & Truth: A Film About Worship*, premiered in 2019 and met with similar acclaim.

On his Kickstarter page (the project was entirely crowdfunded), Lanphere wrote, “I believe that the way we worship God is the most important thing we do in all of life. I want to make a film that explains what Biblical worship is all about.”³ Lanphere’s passion in producing *Spirit & Truth* coincides with a widespread interest in the distinctives of Reformed worship in these first decades of the twenty-first century. Theology flows naturally into doxology: what we believe about God shapes how we approach him, and a greater knowledge of him ought always to lead to more heartfelt praise.⁴ So it is no surprise that the distinctiveness of Reformed theology results in distinctiveness in Reformed worship.

But within that distinctiveness of Reformed worship exists an overwhelming variety of practices. In the worldwide collection of churches that currently identify themselves with Reformed theology, worship flavors encompass everything from cathedrals to gymnasiums, pipe organs to praise bands, and clerical vestments to skinny jeans. There are Reformed churches that observe a strict responsorial liturgy and Reformed churches where the order of worship shifts weekly. There are Reformed churches that pioneer brand-new music and Reformed churches that insist on a *cappella*

psalm-singing from the 1650 Scottish Metrical Psalter. Simply by virtue of its broad scope, Lanphere’s documentary necessarily ignores some of the big questions raised by these little differences.

The truth is that while Reformed theology shapes Reformed worship, it cannot explain every particular of Reformed worship. Theology offers only the beginning of an explanation for our worship. So, if we want to develop a fuller picture of why we worship the way we do, we must move upwards from that theological foundation into the realm of tradition.

Tradition derives from the same root as the words “trade” and “traitor.” A tradition is something handed over or handed down. It implies continuity and motion from generation to generation—the kind of continuity involved in the Israelites passing down the Lord’s commandments to their children (Deut. 6:7–9; Ps. 78:6–7) or in Paul’s commendation of the Corinthian church for maintaining the practices he had delivered to them (1 Cor. 11:2). The error of the Pharisees and other purveyors of manmade religion is in assigning human traditions an authority independent of and equal or superior to the Scriptures (Matt. 15:1–9). But *under* the Scriptures as the ultimate rule for faith and life, traditions are beautiful and essential intergenerational conduits for the gospel.⁵

My purpose in this booklet is to introduce one particular thread that runs through the rich tapestry of Reformed history: the tradition of the Dutch Reformed liturgy. The distinctive “accent” of a worship service in the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA) or some of its sister denominations derives not merely from explicit scriptural commands, but also from a long and beautiful heritage. While books on Reformed worship are plentiful, specific discussions of the liturgical patterns that developed in the Low Countries are harder to find.⁶ My goal here is to present the distinctive practices of the continental Reformed liturgy with broad strokes, complementing a robust biblical theology of worship with practical and historical reflections on the way that liturgy has developed.

This short study is intended for individuals and groups looking to dip a toe into the immense sea of discussions about Reformed worship. Emerging from a series of articles I wrote for *The Outlook*

magazine in 2020, it charts my own ongoing journey toward a broader and deeper appreciation for the liturgical patterns of the continental Reformed tradition. As a student of communication, not a pastor or theologian, I approach this topic from the position of an interested observer and participant in the holy dialogue that constitutes Christian worship. This paradigm of trying to “learn in public” about Reformed worship has guided me since beginning the blog *URC Psalmody* in 2011,⁷ and I am thankful to Reformed Fellowship for providing the opportunity to continue that journey here. Thanks also to Rev. Zac Wyse and Rev. Bill Boekestein for offering supportive and helpful comments in the development of this booklet.

As our guide for this study of the Dutch Reformed liturgy, I have chosen Abraham Kuyper’s work *Onze Eeredienst (Our Worship)*, which I will introduce in more detail in chapter 1. While Kuyper enters into some very specific prescriptions about liturgy, he is careful to distinguish between explicit scriptural requirements for worship and practical recommendations for worship. That distinction is a particularly salient one as we enter into this study. The specific practices described here are not the *only* biblical way to worship. They do, however, reflect far-reaching patterns in the biblical narrative of redemption, and they have helped many generations of believers toward the goal to which all earthly worship points: preparing our hearts for the new Jerusalem.

- 1 This is a nod to the tagline of R. Scott Clark’s *Heidelblog*, “Recovering the Reformed Confession,” <http://www.heidelblog.net>.
- 2 Brett McCracken, “Calvinist’ Documentary Revisits Reformed Resurgence,” *The Gospel Coalition*, November 13, 2017, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/calvinist-documentary-revisits-reformed-resurgence/>.
- 3 Les Lanphere, “Spirit & Truth: A Film About Worship,” *Kickstarter*, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/calvinist/spirit-and-truth-a-film-about-worship>.
- 4 “The Fruit of the Spirit,” *Ligonier.org*, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/fruit-spirit/> (accessed March 20, 2021).
- 5 Michael R. Kearney, “Faith and Fruit in a Post-Christian World: The Next Generation,” *The Outlook* 69, no. 6 (November/December 2019): 14–16.
- 6 See the back of this booklet for recommended reading.
- 7 See <http://urcpsalmody.wordpress.com>.

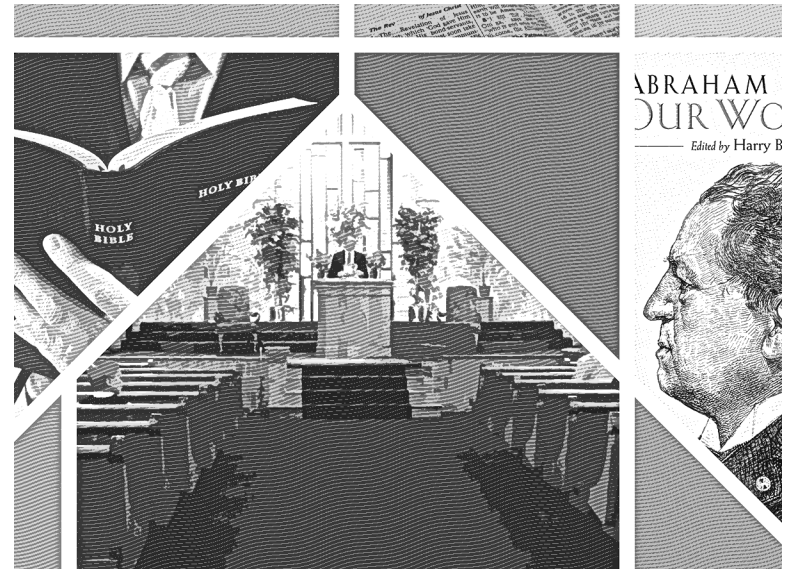
THE FORM AND CONTENT OF WORSHIP

Our Worship, chapters 1, 4–5, 9–12

1

Liturgy is the pattern of our life in God's house.

We make sense of life through patterns. From the moment our alarm goes off in the morning to the time our head hits the pillow at night, we organize our days around certain practices that help give structure to our work and home—whether it is our routine in the shower or the route we drive to work or the way we arrange our daily medicine. Some of us live more structured lives than others.



But all of us, to one degree or another, rely upon habitual patterns of life to provide meaning and momentum.

Actually, the idea that habits are meaningful might strike us today as a little strange. Contemporary Western culture tends to send the message that habits are anything but significant. Habits are boring, monotonous, and unoriginal. We have only authentically lived, so the assumption goes, if we break outside the bounds of our “habitual” lives and venture into the extraordinary and the spectacular.

This penchant for the extraordinary is increasingly popular, even among Christians, but it is at direct odds with historic biblical faith. Throughout the New Testament, Christ and his apostles point to patterned ways of living that affirm the kingdom of God in all areas of life: families patterning their homes on gracious hospitality, workers patterning their labor around a weekly rhythm of rest, and individuals patterning their lifestyle on sacrificial involvement in the local church. The fruit of the Spirit is meant to become routine. Loving God and our neighbors ought to be second nature. Developing these habits is crucial to our sanctification as believers.

But what about the patterns of our life together as a community of faith when we gather each week to worship God? In cultures and communities marked by chaos, disorder, and an increasing pursuit of the extraordinary, how does the regular rhythm of corporate worship offer a joyful and winsome alternative?

This booklet centers on the word “liturgy.” By liturgy I am not referring to vestments, candles, incense, and other high-church traditions. Nor do I mean to broaden the term, as do some Christian philosophers, to include all of life.¹ At its root, liturgy means “public service” (*leitourgia*), and what concerns us here is the specific practices that constitute the public worship of God.

Simply put, liturgy is the pattern of our life in God’s house. Patterns communicate what matters in a relationship. The patterns of our corporate worship communicate what matters in our relationship with the Lord. Every church has a liturgy—even if the liturgy is nothing but a vehement protest against structure and tradition. And the form of our liturgy says something about our identity as believers and the content of our faith.

Speaking out of the particular tradition of the United Reformed Churches in North America (URCNA), it is uncommon to describe a Reformed church as liturgical or to call a Reformed worship service a liturgy. And yet, if you visit several URCNA congregations around the continent, you will see (despite some variations in practice) a fairly large degree of congruence in how they worship. In contrast to the freeform style of a typical nondenominational American church, the Dutch Reformed tradition possesses a relatively consistent liturgy reflecting a specific set of beliefs about worship. But why do we worship as we do? Too often the scriptural, historical, and practical reasons for our liturgy escape us. And if we fail to reflect on our patterns of worship, we neglect a beautiful and integral element of the Reformed tradition.

Unawareness of the Reformed liturgy is not a new problem. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) penned a series of articles for the Reformed magazine *De Heraut* to defend the practices of corporate worship against ignorance and abuse. Kuyper later enlarged the articles and collected them into a book, *Onze Eeredienst*, which was translated into English and published in 2009 as *Our Worship*.² With theological richness, pastoral warmth, and frank practicality, Kuyper’s commentary on the Reformed liturgy fills a need that is still felt today.

My purpose in this booklet is to explore the practical dynamics of Reformed worship with Kuyper’s book as a guide. I hope such a discussion will offer encouragement and insight for pastors, office bearers, and musicians—those who lead and facilitate worship. Even more, however, I hope this study will inspire all Reformed Christians with a greater appreciation of the communion of saints and the holy dialogue between the Lord and his church that takes place each Sunday.

For those who wish to follow along in Kuyper’s original, I will note the chapters I am drawing from at the beginning of each section of this booklet. Since Kuyper’s magazine-series-turned-book is naturally somewhat scattered in organization, I have grouped the thirty-nine short essays of *Our Worship* into six general themes: Form and Content, Call and Response, Confession

and Forgiveness, Prayer and Song, The Word Read and Preached, and Sacraments and Ceremonies. The first set of themes, “Form and Content,” invites us to consider four of Kuyper’s general observations about liturgy: (1) it resists individualism, (2) it reflects the faith, (3) it relates the material to the spiritual, and (4) it reorients physical and spiritual space.

Liturgy Resists Individualism

Although we tend to think of individualism as a recent and distinctly American attitude, Kuyper discerned its first seeds in the Dutch culture of his own time. Individualism recasts worshipers as consumers who choose a church based on the products and services it offers, with no awareness of the larger institution in which they participate.³ Kuyper describes a “free-reining spirit” that turns a congregation into “an independent business run by the minister, without any confessional forms and without connections to other churches” (7). Such a gathering severs itself from the continuity of Christ’s church dating back to Pentecost, violates God’s commandments about worship, and harms the spiritual health of the worshipers (5).

Liturgy, Kuyper suggests, offers an antidote to individualism. Neither the minister nor the members get to dictate the elements of worship—this is the prerogative of Scripture alone (6). Liturgical awareness combats individualism by promoting biblical faithfulness, honoring the historical rationale for Reformed worship, and linking the church across space and time with past and future generations (7).

Liturgy Reflects the Faith

Kuyper’s contributions to liturgical awareness can be summed up in two principles. The first is the relationship of form and content: what we say and how we say it. As has already been stated, liturgy communicates. And the form of our worship can communicate as much or more as the actual words uttered within it.

Throughout its history, the church of Jesus Christ has rarely achieved a harmonious balance between form and content. At times it has fallen into an empty formalism in which the content

of the faith is all but lost. At other times it has focused exclusively on content while claiming that form does not matter, or worse, that artful forms are necessarily evil. Kuyper warns against both extremes, but it is the latter danger to which Reformed churches have historically fallen prey (48–50). In seeking to avoid idolizing beauty, Reformed Christians have sometimes opted for a model of worship that is not merely plain, but downright ugly.

But insofar as form and content are related, ugly worship—even in tiny details—communicates a spiritual problem. More than once Kuyper mentions a particularly hideous stovepipe that cut across the auditorium of one of the Reformed churches in Amsterdam (47). Careless construction communicates carelessness about worship. Because form and content are related, Kuyper finds it unsurprising to enter “a crude and rough building, hideously painted, badly equipped . . . cold, chilly, and repulsive” and to encounter in that building “a sermon without elegance, movements without grace, and singing that sometimes sounded like clearing one’s throat” (54). Beautiful forms are no guarantee that genuine worship is present, but ugliness in church may be a telltale sign of its absence. In contrast, genuine worship should naturally produce beautiful forms in service to the glorious content of the gospel (49).

This is not to say that congregations ought only to worship in beautiful buildings. Kuyper acknowledges that in times of persecution and hardship “people must assemble wherever they can” (48). And here, too, form communicates. For a church plant that meets in a storefront or school, the informal and functional surroundings can communicate an earnest commitment to worshiping God together even when material resources are scarce. But whether in hardship or in abundance, we should strive for a physical context that conveys something of the beauty due to our heavenly King.

Liturgy Relates the Material to the Spiritual

This brings us to Kuyper’s second principle: the relationship between the spiritual–invisible and the material–visible. The spiritual–invisible should direct what goes on in worship, and the material–visible should provide that worship with a beautiful and

fitting form (24–25). This harmonious relationship is dishonored not only when the sensory aspects of worship drown out its spiritual character, but also when the spiritual leaves no room for grace and beauty in the service (24).

When artistic considerations such as architecture and music become ends in themselves, they oppose and contradict the explicit purposes of the assembly of believers (53). So the church is duty bound to exclude sculptures, paintings, architectural ornamentation, and instruments as soon as any of these artistic elements begins to obscure or overshadow the holy dialogue at the heart of Christian worship (55–57).

However, if such artistic endeavors are presented in a way that serves and supports the spiritual–invisible character of worship, Christians ought not to dismiss them outright. Kuyper writes, “Insofar as art is willing to lend itself to this humble service of assistance, the Calvinist too will welcome art in the realm of the sacred” (54).⁴ The physical space should serve and support the spiritual character of the divine meeting that occurs in the service.

Liturgy Reorients Physical Space

So far, Kuyper has taken great pains to emphasize that the form of our worship matters and that the physical elements of our churches ought to affirm and support the spiritual character of worship. Before turning in the next chapters to consider how these two principles inform specific aspects of worship, it is worth summarizing Kuyper’s comments on three prominent facets of the visible church.

The Building

Architecture communicates through “the language of stone and wood” (90). The Old Testament temple proclaimed that God dwelt with his people in an earthly sanctuary. A Roman Catholic cathedral asserts the presence of two sanctuaries: one in heaven and one on earth. A Reformed church ought to affirm that our sanctuary is in heaven alone. For this reason it would be more appropriate to call our sanctuaries “forecourts,” since our worship consists in “observing what is happening above, and identifying in [our] experiences and feelings with the sacred ceremony in heaven

above” (65–66). The most fitting historical model for church buildings, then, is not the temple but the synagogue (89).

Kuyper offers two major questions for designing a church building: how it will serve the needs of the meetings that will occur there, and how to reflect the nature and purpose of the assembly in the architectural style (70). His recommendations are ordinary and practical: Design entrances to be large and welcoming. Ensure good ventilation, plenty of natural light, and a reliable heating system. Provide ample seating, arranged so that members can see one another and hear the minister easily (71–72). Avoid designs that privilege some seats over others, which would destroy the unity of the Spirit (88–89). A great deal of spiritual damage, Kuyper observes, can be accomplished by poor church architecture alone (73).

The Altar Area

An altar communicates the notion of sacrifice. The Reformed church has no altar, because Christ, our perfect sacrifice, has already offered himself for us. “Our priest is no longer a sinful human being, but Christ in heaven. And our sacrifice is no longer what we offer to God, but rather what God offers us in the Lamb that was slain, who died for us and conquered” (23). Typically, Reformed churches replace the altar with the communion table. And Kuyper encourages both the table and the baptismal font to be central along with the pulpit at the front of the worship space, in order to communicate the centrality of the two sacraments in the Christian liturgy (76–84).

The Attire of the Minister and Worshipers

Clothing communicates a variety of ideas, such as status and office (59). Dressing up for church can communicate that worship is a unique and reverent activity set apart from the ordinary labors of the week. However, it can also veil a conceited heart (60–61). “[N]othing forbids us to appear in the gathering of believers in distinctly suitable clothing and to come to some agreement on that subject,” writes Kuyper. “The evil in all special vestments lies in the *distinction*,” when we assign human importance to the caliber of

one's clothing (62). So Kuyper encourages Christians to observe the following general guidelines: ministers ought not to dress like priests in ceremonial garb; ministers need not dress differently than their congregants; believers may adopt "symbolic attire" in order to differentiate themselves from the world, but not from one another; and churchgoers should generally aim to be "decent, becoming, and proper" in their choice of clothing (63).

Kuyper's case is simple: physical aspects of worship communicate no less than spiritual aspects. Our appearance and our meeting place communicate the nature of our faith and our relationship with our heavenly Father. For believers assemble within a world that is at times hostile, at other times disinterested, but sometimes even curious. If liturgy means "public service," liturgical awareness offers a public service announcement: Christ is King! Be reconciled to God! Join us with the church of all ages as we assemble before him! Because our liturgy communicates, we can go on to examine each facet of our worship in the light of Scripture so that in form and in content God's holy name will be honored and praised.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How would you describe your church's liturgy? What is the most important thing it communicates? What is the first thing a newcomer would notice?
2. What is front and center in your church's worship space? What does that communicate about priorities in worship?
3. Who built your church's present building, and when? What might its style and design communicate to passersby?
4. Is it possible to come to an agreement on how to dress in church? What are some scriptural principles for appropriate attire?

Suggested Study: 2 Chronicles 5; Psalm 95; 1 Corinthians 14

- 1 Examples of this position include James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), and Tish Harrison Warren, *Liturgy of the Ordinary: Sacred Practices in Everyday Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).
- 2 Abraham Kuyper, *Our Worship*, ed. Harry Boonstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1911] 2009). I will refer to *Our Worship* throughout this series with page numbers in parentheses.
- 3 The effects of individualism on institutional religion are a common concern of social commentators both inside and outside the church. See Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage, 1992), 179–219; Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, 20th anniversary ed. (1985; reprint, New York: Penguin, 2005), 114–24.
- 4 Kuyper uses the term "art" to refer to a wide range of artistic media such as sculpture, painting, architecture, and music. He is not endorsing the presence of images of Christ or statues of the saints in worship, and he explicitly warns against the tendency of sculptures and paintings to encourage idolatry (55).