INTRODUCTION

Liturgy and Constitution

“The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice in the Reformed Church in America. Its Constitution consists of the Doctrinal Standards (which are the Belgic Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism with its Compendium, and the Canons of the Synod of Dort), the Liturgy with the Directory for Worship, the Government of the Reformed Church in America, and the Disciplinary Procedures.”

—Preamble to the Book of Church Order

Doctrine, liturgy, and polity together form the Constitution of the Reformed Church in America. What we believe, how we worship, and how we govern our life together are what make us who we are as a denomination. As one RCA minister has expressed it,

from 1793 on, the distinctive three-fold constitution has continued to differentiate the Reformed church from other Calvinistic bodies in North America. What is remarkable about the three-fold shape is that, unlike other Calvinistic bodies, the Dutch Reformed church assumed that its Liturgy was not an option. By including it in its constitution, the church recognized that the actual liturgical text was something that helped form the basic character of the church. Without it the church would be essentially different…in the Reformed church worship has been made only secondarily a matter of Church Order. The primary definition of worship comes from the actual text of the Liturgy itself, and from its use as a living document.¹

A distinction is to be made between the Liturgy and liturgies. Properly speaking, the Liturgy consists of those rites (and the words used to perform those rites) that have been approved by the whole church. In the RCA, the Liturgy is our “common prayer”: it declares what the church has agreed to say in the same way as it gathers for worship. At the same time, worshiping congregations also worship using liturgies, i.e., orders of worship that have been generated for occasional or local use.

Because Word and Sacrament lie at the heart of the Reformed Church in America, it will come as no surprise that in the narrowest terms the Liturgy consists of:

Order for the Lord’s Day (including the Order for the Lord’s Supper)
Order for the Sacrament of Baptism

¹Daniel Meeter, Meeting Each Other in Doctrine, Liturgy and Government (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 44.
Preparatory Services before the Celebration of the Lord’s Supper
Order for the Profession of Faith
Order for the Ordination of a Minister of Word and Sacrament
Order for the Reception and Installation of a Minister of Word and Sacrament
Order for the Ordination and Installation of Elders and Deacons

(Historically the Liturgy also included two orders for church discipline, namely the Order for Excommunication and the Order for Readmission of the Penitent. The General Synod of 1960 deemed public use of these orders “to be of doubtful spiritual value.” A board of elders wishing to use the Orders for Church Discipline is referred to the 1968 publication Liturgy and Psalms.)

All of these orders have been proposed to the General Synod, have been approved by the General Synod to be sent to the classes for approval, have received the support of two-thirds of the classes, and subsequently have been declared constitutional by another General Synod. (See appendix.) One practical application of this corner of the church’s Order is that when, in the course of being ordained, ministers vow to “administer the sacraments in purity,” they agree to use constitutional forms for baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

This volume contains a number of other liturgies, most of which have been approved by the General Synod and commended to the church for occasional use. (See appendix.) While the use of these liturgies is not required by the church, they are nevertheless to be held in high esteem and used as exemplars of the Reformed liturgical tradition.

Also included in this volume is the Directory for Worship. It should be noted that, while the Directory and the Liturgy are both constituent parts of the Constitution, the Liturgy remains the dominant document, with the Directory appended as instructional (analogous to the manner in which the Compendium of the Heidelberg Catechism is not a replacement for the catechism). In short, the Liturgy remains prescriptive, while the Directory is descriptive.²

**Liturgy and Mission**

The reference to the threefold Constitution in the Preamble to the BCO is set within the context of a statement of the mission of the church:

The purpose of the Reformed Church in America, together with all other churches of Christ, is to minister to the total life of all people by preaching, teaching, and proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of

²1988 Minutes of the General Synod, pp. 227-228.
God, and by all Christian good works. That purpose is achieved most effectively when good order and proper discipline are maintained by means of certain offices, governmental agencies, and theological and liturgical standards.

Offices, agencies, and theological and liturgical standards are not ends in themselves. They are to be maintained because they enable the very life and mission of the church.

The liturgy, the living worship of the gathered community, is both a witness to and a participation in the redeeming work of God in Christ. From this perspective, it is difficult to separate liturgy from mission. In the Word proclaimed, in the washing with water, and in the sharing of bread and wine, God in Christ is at work, reconciling the world to himself. It is here, in the worshipping community, that the world most obviously and most readily discovers the gospel.³

**Form and Freedom**

The liturgical standards of the Reformed Church balance form and freedom. From the outset the Reformed church has maintained a fixed liturgy, especially in the matter of the sacraments (BCO, Part I, Article 2, Section 8, b and c), but has also entrusted local consistories to guide the worship of the congregation. The order of worship for the Lord’s Day is to be in accordance with the *Liturgy* or with the principles set forth in the *Directory for Worship*, “as the consistory may direct for the edification and profit of the congregation” (BCO, Part I, Article 2, Section 11a).

An often-quoted paragraph from the Preface to the 1793 constitution of what would later become the Reformed Church in America describes a style of worship with elements of both form and freedom:

> Her mode of worship is expressed in the *Liturgy*, where forms of several prayers are given, without any idea, however, of restraining her members to any particular terms or fixed standards for prayer. Firmly believing, that the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of Zion in every age, are promised and bestowed, the Reformed Dutch Church judges it sufficient to show in a few specimens the general tenor and manner in which public worship is performed, and leaves it to the piety and gifts of her ministers to conduct the ordinary solemnities of the sanctuary, in a manner they judge most acceptable to God, and most edifying to God’s people.

Liturgical flexibility in non-sacramental liturgies thus characterizes a Reformed liturgical tradition that significantly predates the Explanatory Articles of 1793. When Dominie Michaelius and the earliest Dutch settlers came to North America in 1628, they brought with them the liturgy that had been approved by the Synod of Dort in 1618. It was considerably abbreviated from Calvin’s robust liturgy: it consisted of a prayer before the sermon, a prayer following the sermon, and a benediction. The sparseness of this liturgy most likely served a church made up of more than one stream of believers. Dutch worshipers with Mennonite sympathies would have recoiled at Calvin’s prayer of confession and absolution; stricter Calvinists had leeway to add these as they desired.

The orders for the Sacraments, however, were somewhat more elaborate and fixed, and these orders formed the foundation of that tradition by which the sacramental life of the Reformed Church in America remained relatively stable while the other Lord’s Day practices evolved over time. The Dort-approved liturgy included an order for the Lord’s Supper, which remained the official table liturgy well into the twentieth century. It also included an order for baptism. These services remained in use throughout the early years of the Reformed Church in America, and were only slightly altered by John Henry Livingston for the Reformed Dutch Church in America.

However, Livingston’s preface to the English translation balanced form and freedom. He made it clear that the two “long prayers” for the Lord’s Day were to be understood as models, to be used only until ministers developed sufficient skill to compose their own. “Free prayer” had been introduced to North America in 1720 by Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen; Livingston’s allowance for free prayer in 1793 satisfied the Pietists within the Reformed church.

Officially sanctioned liturgical change has come slowly to the Reformed Church in America. Sixty years passed before the General Synod dealt with matters of liturgical revision, and when changes in baptism and the Lord’s Supper were proposed to the classes, the changes were not approved by the classes. Nevertheless, the church evidently desired change, as the liturgical book that had been circulated in preparation for the proposed changes found an audience among RCA congregations. It was not long (1858) before the General Synod established another committee for liturgical revision, but again, the changes in the forms for baptism and the Lord’s Supper were rejected, while the optional forms were approved. Once again, the rejection of change in sacramental liturgies led to significant dissatisfaction, and by 1902 the General Synod

Synod established a new committee to abbreviate and simplify those forms. By 1906 the revisions were accepted (by a one-vote classical margin). The 1906 liturgy remained the officially sanctioned liturgy until 1968.

*Liturgy and Psalms* was an eighteen-year labor of love. In it the RCA stood at the crossroads of liturgical renewal by recapturing not only the Reformation roots of Reformed liturgy but also by reestablishing continuity with the apostolic church. The Order for the Lord’s Day published in 1968 draws together elements of worship scattered throughout the New Testament, and in large part echoes the earliest practice of the church. However, it was not until 1987 that the Reformed Church in America published a single normative Order for the Lord’s Day that bore witness to the ancient pattern of gathering for “the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers.” The Reformed Church hymnal, *Rejoice in the Lord*, and the 1989 volume *Worship the Lord* brought together Word and Sacrament for the first time since Calvin’s *Form of Prayers after the Custom of the Early Church*.

The General Synod of 2004 encouraged “the consistory of every congregation…to consider moving toward the practice of celebrating the Lord’s Supper more frequently.” With the publication of this volume, worship within the Reformed Church in America wed Word and Sacrament in a way that honors the church’s tradition and points a way toward more frequent celebration. At the same time, the liturgy continues to balance form and freedom. Even as it values stability at the table and the font, it allows for considerable freedom in other liturgical practices. It is the hope of the Commission on Worship that the faith of a new generation of Christians will be richly nourished, both as it gathers for common prayer and as it draws from a treasury of prayers that give glory to God.

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**The Commission on Christian Worship**

These members served terms while the new liturgy resource was being developed (2001-2005):

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