

# WORSHIP

E S S E N T I A L S



## Returning to Ritual

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\*See the Additional Resources page for a special offer on [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)'s 13-session study "Prayer and Worship."

Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, " Amen! Amen!"

Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their



## How to use “Returning to Ritual”

Welcome to *BUILDING CHURCH LEADERS: Your Complete Guide to Leadership Training*. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you develop leaders who can think strategically and biblically about the church. Selected by the editors of *Leadership Resources* and *Christianity Today International*, the material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders.

“Worship Essentials” is completely flexible and designed to be easy to use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of worship ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for someone new to a particular ministry.

This specific theme is designed to help you provide training to the people who build your weekly worship service. You may use it either for a group training session or to give individually to people who work on your worship team and are interested in incorporating ancient practices into your worship services. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, for an introduction to the trend toward ancient practices in worship, read “The Future Is in the Past” (pp. 3–4). To understand how the liturgy is relevant in contemporary ministry, see “A Deeper Relevance” (pp. 5–6). Consider how liturgical worship relates to personal growth in “Liturgy and Personal Devotion” (pp. 7–8) and “Frustrating and Fashioning Worship” (pp. 9–10). For an explanation of the use of creeds in worship, see “Ancient Creeds in Modern Worship” (pp. 11–12). And for guidance in adopting these ancient practices without losing your identity, read “Our Journey Into Tradition” (pp. 15–16).

We hope you benefit from this theme as you equip your church to worship God in spirit and truth.

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## The Future Is in the Past

*Young Christians and non-Christians alike are drawn to historically rooted worship.*

1 Chronicles 29:18

The American church is changing. A generation ago, there were large churches and small churches; but for the most part, they all fell into traditional, denominational categories. That is no longer the case. Now there are emergent churches, missional churches, home, pub, and coffeehouse churches. Denominational distinctives are increasingly held in low regard. In the midst of the change, one major stream seems to be seeping into all the others: the trend toward recovering and adopting ancient forms of Christian worship.

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### Interest in Tradition Among Religious

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Large segments of evangelicalism are moving toward the traditional. This is evidenced by the fact that younger evangelicals are showing more interest in Christian ordinances, such as Communion and baptism, and in worshipping according to the liturgy. For them, tradition is vibrant. As Jaroslov Pelikan has said, tradition offers them “the living faith of the dead,” which stands in contrast to *traditionalism*—“the dead faith of the living.”

This is in large part the result of the decades-long effort by some to re-introduce evangelicals to the church’s rich history. In 1978, Robert Webber wrote *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity*, in which he insisted, “that the era of the early church (A.D. 100–500), and particularly the second century, contains insights which evangelicals need to recover.”

Young evangelicals have responded with alacrity. Many independent “emerging” churches are practicing Communion every week; they are employing creeds and written prayers; there is even a “new monastic” movement that is attracting young Protestant Christians to ancient religious orders. Younger worshipers are not deterred from practices that might have once been considered “too Catholic.” In fact, they are finding them increasingly meaningful.

It is significant, as Jay Tolson observes in “A Return to Tradition” (*U. S. News & World Report*, December 13, 2007), that the trend toward tradition is less about what people believe and more about how people choose to express what they believe. In other words, adopting traditional practices does not mean changing denominations or assuming a new theological perspective. Rather, young Christians are selectively choosing what practices to appropriate and which to ignore, creating in the process a new hybrid form of Christian worship.

All this suggests, of course, that the church that is willing to incorporate elements of liturgical worship—such as weekly Communion or observation of the Church calendar—may make itself more appealing to younger believers.

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### Interest in Tradition Among the Unchurched

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But it is not only young evangelicals who are attracted to ancient forms of worship. The trend is evident in all Christian traditions and all major religions. Younger Catholics are attracted to the Mass recited in Latin and are more eager than ever to attend confession; Judaism is experiencing growth in the Orthodox branch (the strictest and most conservative Jewish denomination) and a renewed interest in worshipping in Hebrew; more young Muslim men are wearing beards, and more young Muslim women are wearing headscarves.

In other words, this movement toward traditional practice is also challenging conventional wisdom about the best ways to reach young non-believers. A friend of mine conducted an informal survey in seminary to determine what type of worship service the unchurched would be most likely to attend. They set up two television sets in a busy area outdoors. On one they played a recording of a large, contemporary worship service. On the other they played a Catholic Mass. Overwhelmingly, the unchurched chose the Mass over the contemporary service.

A recent study by the Cornerstone Knowledge Network confirmed these findings. CKN surveyed a representative group of people who do not attend church. They showed the participants four photos of churches—one with tall

white pillars, and a high steeple; one red brick and steepled; one megachurch; and one tall, regal cathedral—and asked them which of the church buildings they liked best and found most inviting. Participants chose the cathedral by a margin of 2 to 1. When showed images of the interiors of church sanctuaries, nearly 40 percent again chose the cathedral, with its hard pews and tall stained glass windows. Even in the case of sacred space, people appear to be drawn to those things that feel connected to an ancient past.

These days, the unchurched are undeterred by traditional sacred spaces and “foreign” forms of worship. Looking to the church’s past for cues in worship may pay future dividends in attracting the unchurched.

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## Reclaiming Tradition (the Right Way)

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Reclaiming the worship practices of the ancient church is not a simple matter. InterVarsity Press’s Joel Scandrett explains, “Retrieval of the tradition...requires an understanding of the intellectual context in which that tradition developed.” He goes on to identify three dangers in appropriating ancient practices:

- 1. Anachronism:** Naively interpreting the tradition in light of contemporary assumptions;
- 2. Traditionalism:** Being unwilling to see the flaws in the early church’s traditions;
- 3. Eclecticism:** Selectively appropriating ancient practices without regard to their original purposes or contexts.

Younger Christians and non-Christians alike are eager to experience the transcendent power of God. They readily find such an experience in ancient Christian practices that are available to the church that is willing to explore its own rich history.

—BRANDON O’BRIEN; © 2008 Christianity Today International/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

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## Discuss

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1. Have you noticed the trend toward tradition that this article describes? In what ways?
2. What excites you about the renewed interest in ancient Christian worship practices? Do you have any reservations?
3. What steps can your church take to introduce ancient practices into its worship?



## A Deeper Relevance

*Liturgy can take our worship to new places, and we don't have to re-invent the wheel to get there.*

Matthew 6:9a

A recent book on the missional church argues that we need to “reinvent the church” in “revolutionary” ways so that we can “incarnate the gospel within a specific cultural context.” Many churches are trying to do just that. Yet, it is precisely the point of the liturgy to take people beyond their cultural contexts and show them that, despite appearances, the last thing in the world they need is more of the world out of which they’ve come. Instead, the world the liturgy reveals is more real than the one we inhabit day by day.

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### Why the Liturgy?

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By “the liturgy,” I mean the prayers, responses, and shape of worship one finds in many mainline churches. The shape of this liturgy has its origin in the early church, and has been molded by the history of the church up to the present. When not approached wisely, it can be misused and abused; it can tempt participants to substitute mere religious ritual for a vital, personal faith in Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, this tradition does have much to offer contemporary evangelicalism.

The first thing the liturgy asks us to rethink is what we mean by “relevant” worship. When we think about making church more relevant, we usually mean meaningful for one particular group. In North America, that usually means 20-somethings and young families. Few churches that consciously seek relevance want to clear the way to church for the poor, the homeless, welfare moms, drug-addicted men, or those trapped in nursing homes and convalescent hospitals

This is one reason I thank God for the liturgy. The liturgy does not target any age or cultural subgroup. It does not even target this century. Instead, the liturgy draws us into worship that transcends our time and place. Its earliest forms took shape in ancient Israel, and its subsequent development occurred in a variety of cultures and subcultures—Greco-Roman, North African, German, Frankish, Anglo-Saxon, and so on. It has been prayed meaningfully by bakers, housewives, tailors, teachers, philosophers, priests, monks, kings, and slaves. As such, it has not been shaped to meet a particular group’s needs. It seeks only to enable people to see God.

Theologian and pastor Eugene Peterson has suggested: “I don’t think people care a whole lot about what kind of music you have or how you shape the service. They want a place where God is taken seriously, where they’re taken seriously.”

In this regard, the liturgy is more relevant than we can imagine, because it’s a place where God is taken seriously, and therefore where we are taken seriously. A liturgical service is by no means the only service that does this, but it is a form of worship that is especially suited to not getting distracted.

This is because the liturgy, from beginning to end, is not about meeting our needs. The liturgy is about God as he is himself: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The liturgy immediately signals that our needs are not nearly as relevant as we imagine. There is something infinitely more worthy of our attention—something, someone, who lies outside the self. Our culture is the transitory thing, an apparition that will someday have to pass away, just as childhood has to pass away. The liturgy says to us as we enter, “You’re in the culture of God and his kingdom now. Things will be different from now on.”

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### Meeting God in the Liturgy

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God renders himself tangible in the liturgy. He does this especially through Communion, in which he makes himself known in the breaking of the bread (Luke 24:30–31). Then there is the reading and preaching of the Word, the revelation of God to his people. As Jesus told the disciples before he sent them out to preach, and as he essentially tells every preacher: “The one who hears you, hears me.” Less obviously, God makes himself known through the words and drama of the liturgy. The words of the liturgy are Scripture-saturated, and thus carry the same revelatory power as the formal reading of the biblical lessons.

In addition, the very rhythm of the service—the liturgy of the Word followed by the liturgy of the Sacrament, the praise that prepares us for the Word, and the confessions and prayers that guide our response to the Word—is a pattern that has not so much been created by the church as discovered. In fact, it was as early as the second century that the shape of the service took the form we use today.

We have to pay attention to cultural context, no question. The history of liturgy has been in part about finding words and ritual that help people in a given culture express their thoughts and feelings to God in ways that make cultural sense. The liturgy has always had freedom and variety within its basic structure. But it has steadfastly refused to let the culture determine its shape or meaning. Liturgical churches know that as profound a reality as is the surrounding culture, there is an even *profounder* reality waiting to be discovered. The liturgy gently and calmly gets us to open our eyes to the new reality, showing us the “necessary separation” from the old. Suddenly, in the blink of an eye, we find our gaze directed away from ourselves and toward God and his kingdom. When we return to our homes, we are never the same.

—MARK GALLI; excerpted from *Beyond Bells & Smells: The Wonder and Power of Christian Liturgy* (Paraclete Press, 2008). Used by permission.

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## Discuss

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1. Does your church strive to be relevant for a particular demographic? Which one?
2. Do you think worshiping with the liturgy would make your services more relevant or less so? Why?
3. What one insight from this article do you find most helpful?





## Liturgy and Personal Devotion

*How one Christian college professor has seen liturgy enhance worship.*

Psalm 35:18

What was a non-denominational girl like me doing in a place like this?

I had been warned: there would be kneeling, recitations, processions, and vestments; there would be going forward for the Lord's Supper. But no amount of information could have prepared me for the reality. I felt so out of place. Honestly, I had been led to believe that there was something wrong with this type of worship service, and not as much by direct teaching as by complete omission.

Now, several years later, I find myself longing for more of these encounters. I should make it clear that I am 100 percent, whole-heartedly committed to worship practices that are consistent with Scripture. Furthermore, I am dedicated to the particular branch of Christ's body with which I am aligned. I feel, however, that by dismissing elements of worship simply because they are foreign to us, we rob ourselves of depth and breadth in our gatherings that could help us in our quest for unity, relevance, and spiritual growth.

Throughout the history of Christ's church, personal devotion has been connected to community. The term "liturgy" (literally, "public service" or "the work of the people") implies, by definition, that it requires two things: action and people. I have discovered that the use of carefully constructed, thoughtful liturgy enables me to strengthen my role as a worshiper. It reminds me that the gathering does not rely on music or preaching, but on the work of the Holy Spirit, who speaks through various vehicles of God's immeasurable grace.

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### The Benefits of Liturgy

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First, and most importantly, liturgy places Jesus at the center of worship. Both Word and Table (Communion) liturgies are bathed in living and active Scripture, Spirit-inspired prayer, and the powerful story of the Gospel. It is not that our contemporary, non-liturgical approaches to church gatherings *cannot* do this. But for me personally, they sometimes fall short. I would never want to do away with spontaneous, heartfelt prayers and expressions of praise. But I am encouraged by the fact that Jesus taught his disciples to pray by giving them an example. When I recite or sing words written by one of God's faithful followers—whether long ago or yesterday—I find myself uttering truths that engage both my heart and my intellect.

Second, because we live in an individualistic society, I need to be reminded on Sunday that Christianity is concerned with togetherness. Liturgy can help connect me to the body of believers with which I am gathered. In a recent chapel service at the college where I teach, I was fortunate to be led in worship by a student. I watched, listened, and marveled. We sang a contemporary chorus; we did so in unity. We sang a hymn; we did so with power. We recited a prayer of confession; we were convicted. We read words of forgiveness; we were transformed. We sang a song of commitment; we agreed to live as the sermon had taught us. We were all in it together.

Furthermore, through a liturgical service, I find myself more unified with the universal church. Liturgy helps me define the truth of my faith through a wider lens than my own back door provides. God has creative, Spirit-led people all over the globe who can help us broaden our worship database. For example, some of our international students recently led worship for us. They taught us to sing in other languages; they showed us how they dance in their cultures. We were not very good at it, but we tried. And we were able to praise the God of the universe.

Finally, the words and actions of liturgy speak to the whole person. They permeate body, mind, and spirit. Sometimes they get me out of the pew and force me to kneel, or to stand up and read when I'd rather remain in my own little comfort zone. Sometimes they give me words that I do not have or cannot find. Liturgy is image-rich, unafraid of exalting the great Creator through the beauty of his creation. When I am confronted with bread and cup, with water, with the written Word of God, with palms or ashes or Advent candles, I find symbols that have the power to speak louder than words.

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## The Challenges of Liturgy

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Liturgy carries with it the danger of becoming stale and meaningless. When I first introduce the term to students, they critique it in just that manner. I have had students who grew up in liturgically based churches, however, who take exception to this. They claim that because they understood and took to heart the words and actions of the liturgy, they find meaning and power in them. Repetition becomes vain in the heart of the believer, not through the words or actions themselves, but through other matters of the human heart.

In my denomination, churches celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday. For the most part, it is the pass-the-trays-down-the-pews-and-try-to-not-look-at-each-other kind of observance. When I lead the service, though, I generally have the congregation, the community gathered by God, come forward (something I learned from liturgy). Sometimes members of our college's faculty serve Communion. The first time I did this I witnessed one of our professors reciting the words "the blood of Christ was shed for you," as student after student stood before her and she called them by name. Tears streamed down her face. She was connecting to Christ and to his children, strengthening her own relationship to God and that of our community.

Since that first timid encounter with the unknown, I have learned to find new meaning in words, gestures, and symbols. I have found ways to respond to God that have strengthened and challenged me. I have incorporated these things in our worship gatherings in a way that I hope is theologically and pastorally appropriate. My fervent prayer is that God has been and will continue to be honored by these humble offerings.

—DINELLE FRANKLAND; © 2008 Christianity Today International/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

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## Discuss

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1. Have you ever experienced an unfamiliar worship practice or service that you found meaningful? Describe your experience.
2. How do you keep your church's routine practices fresh and inspired?
3. Based on this article, what do you consider the most compelling argument for liturgical worship?





## Frustrating and Fashioning Worship

*The liturgy teaches us how to approach God on his terms, not ours.*

Romans 12:2

“It took me a few weeks to figure out why I was drawn to your church,” said Cheryl. “I realized that your liturgy teaches me how to worship. Every week I am learning how to listen and respond to God.”

Our church, Life on the Vine Christian Community (LOV), is a small, liturgical, missional church in the Northwest suburbs of Chicago. Over the last three years, I’ve come to see how each element of our liturgy serves a dual function: a “frustrating” role of deconstructing and exposing the ways we’ve been formed by our world to worship and a “fashioning” role of reordering and teaching us how to worship as the Spirit-birthing community created for mission.

In this way, our liturgy serves much the same function as the traditional liturgy used by mainline Protestant denominations. The traditional liturgy is composed of four parts: 1) the gathering, 2) the Word, 3) the Eucharist, and 4) the sending. We have retained these forms, but have adapted them into our cultural context. Here are the elements that we use to heighten worship, many of which draw on the most ancient traditions and symbols of our living faith:

### In the Round

The traditional gathering of the liturgy invites worshipers to join in focusing their attention on the Triune God. At LOV, we achieve this by sitting in a circle with a table at the center of the room. Worship is communal—the people of God responding to the Triune God—and our seating arrangement physically represents this truth.

On the table in the center of our worship sits two candles representing the presence of the Holy Spirit, a Trinity candle, and the cross of Christ. We believe that sitting in rows of chairs all facing the same direction and elevating preachers and worship leaders above the congregation teaches and signifies what we honor and value in our worship. In contrast at LOV, the sermon is preached to the side of the altar (i.e. “from” the community, not “in front of” the community), musical worship is led by a band in the back of the room, and as people speak or sing in worship they are centered on the table and aware of the body of Christ gathered. No one other than the Triune God ever assumes the center position in our worship space. Sitting in the round is a discipline of worship that frustrates our individualistic, private relationship with the God and orders us as a community around the Word of God, the cross of Christ, and the power of the Spirit.

### Silence

After gathering the church for worship by focusing its attention on God, the liturgy leads us into a time of reflection on the Word of God. We begin our worship together with a short (1–2 sentence) reading from scripture or a meditation chosen for the particular theme of the day. After it is read, we spend time in silence for our congregation to be open to the Spirit. Worship isn’t our open mic time with God. Rather, we learn to wait—to listen in silence to the voice of God. Silence is a discipline of worship that frustrates our impulse to come before the Lord with a mouthful of words. We are fashioned into still, responsive people listening to the beckoning voice of God.

We don’t project scripture on screens. We don’t even give a specific scripture address when we read the text. This aggravates some people, but the practice is intentional. In our culture, in which information is controlled, possessed, and used for our purposes, we intentionally take the Word out of our hands and submit our ears to listen to it read aloud. Hearing is a discipline of worship that frustrates our tendency to commoditize information. We are fashioned into a people owned, controlled, and possessed by the Word.

### “Liturgicon”

This is how we describe our “liturgical icon,” a reflective, meditative engagement with art and music. This unique part of our liturgy is meant to be a window into God’s goodness, or sometimes a mirror of reproach. After

viewing the 2 to 3 minute moving picture (sometimes live-action video, sometimes ancient artwork, sometimes modern photography), we respond corporately in praise, affirmation of truth, confession, or thanksgiving. Seeing and responding is a discipline that frustrates our passive engagement with technology and our overly cognitive ways of processing reality. By responding together, we are fashioned into a people who actively engage art as a window or mirror of truth, beauty, and God's reality for us in Christ.

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## Lord's Supper

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As it is in most liturgical services, the Lord's Supper is the climax of our worship. As such, it is more than a mere object lesson, more than a memory tool; it is the very participation in the salvific work of Christ's death on the cross and resurrection life. As we eat and drink the bread and cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Eating the Lord's Supper weekly is a discipline that frustrates our consumerist, self-centered tendencies to approach the crucified and resurrected Christ individually. We are fashioned into a re-membered body by a meal that preaches, re-orders, and calls us into a fresh reception of the redeeming work of Christ's work on our behalf.

In all of these actions, liturgy teaches us how to worship. It calls us to recognize our sin, God's expectations, our need to confess; it declares the promise and reality of forgiveness. This celebration of Word and Table allows us to engage the Holy Spirit and be sent out in mission. Cheryl is correct: liturgy properly orders our worship of God and teaches us how we ought to approach him. Using both ancient and modern liturgical disciplines, we seek to create space and opportunity to frustrate the ways our world has taught us to worship and to be fashioned into proper worship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

—MATT TEBBE; © 2008 Christianity Today International/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

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## Discuss

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1. Do you currently use any elements of the traditional liturgy in your service (whether intentionally or not)? Which ones?
2. Does your worship service currently "frustrate" and "fashion" your congregation's worship? In what ways?
3. Which elements of LOV's liturgy would you find most frustrating and formative? How might you adapt these elements to suit your church's particular personality?



## Ancient Creeds in Modern Worship

*These historic affirmations create unity and theological depth in worship.*

1 Corinthians 15:3–8

Of Christendom's many creeds, the best known and most used are the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. Though the apostles did not write it, the Apostles' Creed evolved as a way for the early church to transmit the basic structure of biblical faith.

In the fourth century, a council of bishops wrote the Nicene Creed to refute the heresy that Jesus was human but not fully God. They wrote:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human.

Like the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed communicates the basics of Christian faith, but not a theological or doctrinal system. In other words, saying or singing the creed is not an argumentative or theological exercise. It is a celebration of faith and an act of worship.

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### Who Uses Creeds?

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A recent survey of U. S. congregations indicates that only a fifth of churches include creeds or statements of faith in worship. Most of these also have a strong commitment to denominational heritage, including Episcopal, Lutheran, Orthodox, and Reformed Christians, as well as those from historically black denominations. Of course, the Roman Catholic Mass has included the Nicene Creed for centuries, and has included the Apostles' Creed more recently.

But that trend is changing. For example, though Baptists don't often use creeds in worship, two Dallas Baptist University student groups—a worship formation program and study group—have begun using creeds in worship. And the change has been remarkably well received.

“Many of our students and faculty are hungry for a sense of heritage and communion,” philosophy professor David Naugle explains. “Creeds articulate what our forefathers and foremothers in the faith believed and have passed down the ages to us. They connect us to a Christian past, helping us realize we belong to something much greater than just what's happening now.”

Reciting creeds and confessions in worship is not only a trend. The practice also has biblical precedent. Many Scripture passages were used during biblical times as creeds and confessions of faith:

- “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).
- “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3–4).
- “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness...and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:6–11).

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### Why Use Creeds?

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The biblical authority of creeds “safeguards thoughtful worshipers from being led astray by every wind of doctrine,” Albert Aymer says. This is because creeds help Christians explain what we believe—and why it matters.

Dan Brown's novel (and movie) *The DaVinci Code* challenged Christians and non-Christians alike to question whether Jesus was really divine and the Scriptures were truly trustworthy. Those unfamiliar with the ancient Nicene Creed may have fallen for the story's central claim about Christianity, that "almost everything our fathers taught us about Christ is false."

In other words, brushing up on historic creeds will prepare you for conversations about what Christians believe and why. "The creeds help us focus on the bigger things that bind us together instead of on those news-catching things that we're using to fight each other to death," Aymer says.

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## Saying the Creed Is Countercultural

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Choosing to celebrate faith by reciting or singing creeds in worship has become a quietly dramatic behavior, actually countercultural, says Luke Timothy Johnson, in *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters*. In a world that values individuality, novelty, situational ethics, and consumerism, creed-reciting Christians "are actually doing something together," pledging themselves "to a set of convictions and thereby to each other," Johnson says.

Creeds move the focus from "my" to "our," explains worship professor Ronald Byars. "When the church is summoned to rise and profess its common faith, it does so not in a cacophony of simultaneous personal testimonies, but in words that belong to the community of saints, including both the living and the dead."

—JOAN HUYSER-HONIG; excerpted by permission from the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship,  
<http://www.calvin.edu/worship/>.

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## Discuss

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1. Does your denomination or church tradition have an official opinion about the use of creeds in worship? What is it?
2. Which elements of worship help your congregation see itself as the gathered body of Christ, rather than as individuals worshipping God in the same room?
3. What might be the benefit of expressing your faith in words handed down through the church over centuries?



## The Seasons of the Church Year

*Following the church calendar builds a biblical rhythm into worship.*

Exodus 12:25–27

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### Why the Church Calendar?

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Humans keep track of time and seasons by following calendars; they establish rhythms in our lives. For example, the year kicks off with New Year's Day; school ends around Memorial Day and begins again around Labor Day; the year ends just after Christmas. Then it all starts again. Throughout the year we commemorate special events (Independence Day) and special people (Mother's Day, Veteran's Day, and President's Day).

The Christian church has long followed an alternative calendar that recognizes different times of the year as opportunities to worship God as the Lord of every season of life. This began in the Old Testament, when the concept of sacred time was a vehicle for teaching the faith (see Exodus 12:1–13:22). Later, when most people in the church were poor and uneducated, the cycle of the church year provided a framework for teaching the story of God and his actions in human history. The value of this type of education continues into the present, in a culture that is increasingly biblically illiterate.

As a congregation moves through the church calendar, it is presented in an organized way with the opportunity to talk about, reflect upon, and respond to the entire range of faith confessions that lie at the heart of Christianity. This is important not only for the vitality of the whole community, but especially for children to become aware of those things that are important to their faith (Deut 6:20–25). In other words, observance of the church calendar is an attempt to allow the church and its history, rather than secular culture, to set the agenda for the church's teaching and ministry.

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### What Does It Look Like?

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Put simply, the Christian church year focuses on the life and ministry of Jesus. The sequence of festivals from Advent to Easter Sunday becomes an annual spiritual journey for worshipers as they kneel at the manger, listen on a hillside, walk the streets of Jerusalem, hear the roar of the mob, stand beneath the cross, and witness the resurrection. The rest of the church year provides opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the coming of Jesus and his commission to his people to be a light to the world.

To break it down, then, the Christian calendar is organized around two major centers of Sacred Time: 1) Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany; and 2) Lent, Holy Week, and Easter, concluding at Pentecost. The rest of the year following Pentecost is known as Ordinary Time. That designation is derived from the word "ordinal," which simply means counted time (for example, the First Sunday after Pentecost).

Some Protestant churches also celebrate other days not specifically tied to these cycles, such as Reformation Sunday and All Saints Sunday. These are becoming increasingly popular ways to flesh out the themes of the church in the world by focusing on our heritage and the faithfulness of those in the past.

One simple avenue that can assist worshipers in tracking the seasons of the church year, as well as providing a visual context for worship, is the use of designated colors in the sanctuary. Different colors are associated with different seasons, and the changing colors of communion table and pulpit coverings (called paraments), or wall banners, provide visual clues for the seasons.

Consider the outline of the church year on the next page:

Observance	Timing in Year	Scripture References
<b>1. Advent and Christmas Season</b>		
Advent	Begins fourth Sunday before Christmas Day	Malachi 4:1–6; Matthew 25:1–13; Luke 1:1–80
Christmas	December 25	Matthew 1:18–25; Luke 2:1–20
The Twelve Days of Christmas	December 24–January 5	
Epiphany	January 6	Matthew 2:1–12
<b>2. Lent and Easter Season</b>		
Shrove Tuesday or Mardi Gras	Tuesday before Lent begins	
Ash Wednesday	First day of Lent; 40 days before Holy Saturday	Mark 1:9–13
Lent	40 days preceding Easter, excluding Sundays	Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13
Palm Sunday	Sunday before Easter	Matthew 21:1–11; Mark 11:1–11; Luke 19:28–38; John 12:12–19
Holy Week	6 days preceding Resurrection Sunday	
Maundy Thursday	Thursday before Easter	Matthew 26:17–30; Mark 14:12–26; Luke 22:7–20; John 13:1–17
Good Friday	Friday before Easter	Matthew 27:11–66; Mark 15:1–47; Luke 23:1–56; John 19:1–42
Holy Saturday		
Easter	Resurrection Sunday	Matthew 28:1–10; Mark 16:1–8; Luke 24:1–49; John 20:1–9
Pentecost	50 days (seventh Sunday) after Easter	Leviticus 23; Exodus 23, 34; Acts 2:1–41

### 3. Ordinary Time (Until first week of Advent)

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#### Discuss

1. What calendar does your church follow? Do you observe secular and national holidays in your worship services?
2. What would be the advantages of following the church year cycle? What would be the disadvantages?
3. Which of the above holidays (or holy days) are you most compelled to observe?





## Our Journey Into Tradition

*How a Vineyard church adopted liturgy and, in the process, stayed faithful to its mission.*

John 4:24

John Wimber, founder of the Vineyard movement that our church belongs to, was known for telling Vineyard pastors to “take the best and go.” In so doing, he encouraged us to not be frozen in time by continuing to do church in the same manner as we did it before. He was convinced that the message of the gospel was timeless and unchangeable, but that the medium of delivery needed to adapt to a constantly evolving context.

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### A Move Toward Traditional Practice

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Our Vineyard church took John’s advice in a somewhat surprising way. We began weekly Communion as an effort to appeal to people living in the strong Catholic culture of Chicago. There were many in the community who were not believers, but who nevertheless identified weekly Communion with “real” church. We remained Vineyard in identity: outside of an occasional hymn, the worship music style was contemporary and culturally relevant, and mainly vertical and intimate in orientation (singing *to* God, rather than only *about* him). The basic service format remained the same: worship followed by a Biblical sermon, followed by a time in which people could come forward and receive prayer from the ministry team. The belief and practice of the church did not change in any substantial way; we were merely trying to connect to people in our context.

Though it began as a means of outreach, we found that many people really enjoyed weekly Communion; it didn’t lose its specialness because of its frequency. So, when we started the next church about 50 miles away, we kept weekly Communion. In fact, it became the high point of our worship experience

In 2001, the church purchased a 100-year-old traditional church building, complete with pews and vintage stained glass windows. The question we faced was, *What should we do to the building to help us in our mission and remain consistent with our Vineyard identity?* We rebuilt the platform in the front of the sanctuary to accommodate a Vineyard worship band, and we left space for people to approach the front during ministry time. Other than that, the visible changes were mostly cosmetic. We wanted to maintain much of the character of the building, so we left the pews in place and repaired the stained glass windows.

Soon people began to feel a connection with the past in a good way—that they were part of something older and more important than themselves. Encouraging this dynamic, we started decorating the sanctuary in the colors specified by the church calendar and using candles during our services. We also expanded our observance of the church calendar beyond just Christmas Eve and Easter services. During all of Advent and Lent, we included dramatic readings from the lectionary (tradition readings from the Bible designated for certain days) and used those passages as the text for the sermon. We offered contemplative, liturgical services on Christmas Eve, Ash Wednesday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. In all of this, we remained thoroughly Vineyard in theology and faithful to our worship values.

A few people were not pleased with the developments. Even though the Sunday worship format and music style was unchanged, it felt too liturgical to them. They left, and God will bless them in other churches. However, the overwhelming majority of our congregation appreciates the changes, and many look forward to the Advent and Lent seasons where they can scratch their “liturgical itch” more than at other times of the year.

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### Elements of a Smooth Transition

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Looking back over our relatively quick transition into this selective return to tradition, I’ve identified at least six keys to its success:

1. We were a new church. There wasn’t much sense of “this isn’t what we’ve done before,” because there wasn’t that much “before.” A church with a longer history would require more time to effectively transition its people.



2. Our moving into a traditional church building attracted some people who felt it helped them connect with God.
3. We started the process with one new practice. The weekly Communion prepared people for the changes to come.
4. There was already a level of interest among some congregants. One man told me that he would like an “Episcopal Vineyard.” These people became a pool of motivated workers to champion and implement the changes.
5. There is freedom within the Vineyard movement to experiment like this. Nothing we changed was inconsistent with Vineyard theology or practice.
6. There is an increasing attraction among people to ancient spiritual practices. For some, this has resulted in a “liturgical itch” that we could satisfy in a contemporary style. Our changes enable us to try to reach those in the community who have an inclination toward liturgical worship.

We have tried to follow John Wimber’s words, “Take the best and go”—though perhaps from further back than he originally intended. We have found that incorporating traditional and liturgical elements into our worship services has helped us to connect with the past even as we look forward to the future. I think John would be pleased.

—DAN RAK; © 2008 Christianity Today International/BuildingChurchLeaders.com

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## Discuss

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1. Does this article bring to mind any ways you might like to introduce liturgical elements into your worship?
2. Do you already follow the church calendar during Advent or Lent? Does your congregation find the observation meaningful?
3. What elements of your current denominational or church identity do you fear will be lost if you adopt liturgical practices?



## Further Resources

*Books and resources to help your church understand the trend toward tradition.*

- 📖 **[BuildingChurchLeaders.com](http://BuildingChurchLeaders.com)**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.

    - “[Assembling the Order of Worship](#)” Worship Essentials
    - “[Blending Worship](#)” Worship Essentials
    - “[Smoothing Conflict over Worship Styles](#)” Survival Guide
  - 📖 **[ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://ChristianBibleStudies.com)**: Bible study resources from Christianity Today International.

    - “[Prayer and Worship](#)” Bible Study Course; receive **\$10 off** this course by entering coupon code **PW2008** upon checkout.
  - 📖 **[LeadershipJournal.net](http://LeadershipJournal.net)**: Leadership training resources from Christianity Today International.
  - 📖 **Calvin Institute of Christian Worship**. [www.calvin.edu/worship/](http://www.calvin.edu/worship/). Promotes the scholarly study of theology, history, and practice of Christian worship.
  - 📖 **CRI/Voice**. [www.crivoice.org/](http://www.crivoice.org/). Biblical and theological resources for growing Christians. This site provides many articles explaining the elements of historical, liturgical Christian worship.
- The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters** by *Luke Timothy Johnson*. This book explores the origin of the Nicene Creed, its purpose, and an explanation of the theological statements it addresses (Doubleday, 2003; ISBN 978-0232525212).
- Emerging Worship: Creating Worship Gatherings for New Generations** by *Dan Kimball, David Crowder, and Sally Morgenthaler*. This book offers church leaders ways to create alternative services from start to finish (Zondervan, 2004; ISBN 978-0310256441).
- Liturgical Theology: The Church as Worshiping Community** by *Simon Chan*. Focuses on the liturgical practices that have marked the history of Christian worship (InterVarsity Press, 2006; ISBN 978-0830827633).
- Planning Blended Worship: The Creative Mix of Old and New** by *Robert Webber*. Provides ways to blend the structure and style of worship between traditional, contemporary, and emergent (Abingdon Press, 1998; ISBN 978-0687032235).
- What Language Shall I Borrow? The Bible and Christian Worship** by *Ronald P. Byers*. This book explains the traditional elements of the liturgy and how the language of the liturgy is derived directly from Scripture (Eerdmans, 2008; ISBN 978-0802840141).