



## Theopolis Liturgy Guide Peter J. Leithart

The Theopolis liturgies may seem odd to you. You may find them odd because you're not used to "liturgical" services, scripted and repetitive. If you're from a liturgical church, you may find them odd because the music, arrangement, and wording don't match what you know.

This brief guide mainly addresses the first group, but let me briefly address those of you from liturgical churches. Theopolis liturgies are different partly because they're "practice liturgies," designed to train students in our courses and conferences rather than for church use. They're also "catholic" liturgies that draw from Lutheran, Anglican, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Reformed traditions. At some points, we have theological reasons for diverging from traditional liturgies.

The names of our liturgies are drawn from the monastic liturgy of the hours. "Matins" is morning prayer; "Sext" means "sixth," and designates noon prayers; "Vespers" is an evening service.

### **Liturgical Basics**

Above all, the church's worship must be *biblical*. In Scripture, the living triune God tells us how to approach Him. We're in His court, and He sets the etiquette. We dare not make up our own rules.

Worship is *dialogical*. Many of the Psalms are written in a conversational pattern, with their two-line verses. In worship, God speaks to us (call to worship, call to confession, Scripture readings, sermon) so that we can speak back to Him (confession, prayer, song). Liturgy is the work of the whole congregation, so all should be active in the dialogue.

Worship is *formative*. Through word, song, and sacraments, the Spirit shapes individuals and churches into the form of Christ. This is why worship is repetitive, like a drill: It trains us to keep in step with the Spirit.

Worship is *musical*. When the Spirit fills the church, we sing Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Lovers sing to each other, and the liturgy is musical because it's a love duet between Bridegroom and Bride.



Worship has a *particular order*. When Israel presented offerings, they brought purification offerings for cleansing, burnt offerings to ascend, and peace offerings for a covenant meal. Christian worship follows the same order: After we're cleansed by confession, we ascend in song to heaven to hear the Lord's word and join His Eucharistic feast. We put elements of the Eucharistic liturgy (the *Sursum corda*, "Lift up your hearts") early to call attention to our ascension.

### Questions

Why does the leader *wear a white robe*? Israel's priests wore distinctive clothing as a mark of their office. Christian ministers should do the same. White is the color of heaven's choir robes.

Why do you *kneel for confession*? Worship involves the body, not just the soul. Lowering the body expresses humility and repentance.

Why is Theopolis worship *so energetic*? Army commanders and their troops shout in ritual dialogue. The liturgy is an action of the church militant, so we should worship with vigor.

Why do you *pray the same words over and over*? Jesus warns about "vain repetition," but repetition need not be empty. Meaningful repetition impresses prayers on our hearts, and shapes us to be a prayerful people.

Why do you *say a creed*? A creed is a summary of Scripture and an oath of fidelity to the Triune God. At Vespers, the creed is our Amen to the Scripture readings.

Why do you *sing so many Psalms*? The Psalms are the Bible's hymnbook and the church's first songbook. They give words to express every experience of life and teach us to pray as God wants us to pray.

Why do you *chant Psalms*? We don't sing Hebrew, but we stay as close to God's words as we can. Chant allows us to sing the Bible as written.

Why do you sing *so many old hymns*? We have no objection to new music, but we want to introduce students to the church's rich but neglected musical heritage. New music should emerge from this tradition.



Christian worship is festive, so *why don't you celebrate the Lord's Supper?* The Supper is a feast of the church, and Theopolis isn't a church.

Why do you greet one another with *a kiss of peace*? Because Paul commands it, more often than he commands anything else.

### **Glossary.**

*Benediction*: Latin, "good word." A dismissal blessing; the minister places the Name of God on the people and sends them out under God's blessing.

*Benedictus*: The song of Zecharias (Luke 1). Praise for a God who keeps His promises.

*Canticle*: A Scriptural song that is not from the book of Psalms.

*Collect*: A short petitionary prayer that "collects" prayers into one. Collects have a regular structure: An address; a description of an attribute or work of God; a petition based on the attribute; and a desired result.

*Gradual Psalm*: "Gradual" from Latin *gradus*, a "step." A chanted Psalm that forms a transition from the ascent to the Gospel reading.

*Kyrie*: Greek vocative of "Lord." An ancient sung prayer for mercy. Placed near the beginning of Vespers because we depend on God's grace to worship rightly.

*Magnificat*: Mary's song. Traditional canticle, often used in Vespers.

*Nunc Dimittis*: Simeon's song (Luke 2). Like Simeon, we have seen the glory and so depart in peace.

*Propers*: The parts of the liturgy that change – the specific Scripture readings, hymns, Psalms used in a particular worship service.

*Sanctus*: Latin, "Holy." The seraphic song (Isa. 6), with Hosannas to greet the Lord Jesus' arrival. Historically part of the Eucharistic liturgy; placed early in the Theopolis Vespers to emphasize our union with heaven.



*Te Deum*: Latin phrase, part of the clause “We pray thee, O God.” An ancient hymn of praise to the Trinity, reminding us that we ascend to worship with angels and saints in heaven.

*Venite*: Latin name for Psalm 95, from the first word, “Come.” A traditional Matins call to worship, with a stern warning not to be hard-hearted.

*Versicle*: A short sentence sung by the minister, to which the congregation responds.