

LITURGICAL PRINCIPLES

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What is “liturgy”? The word comes from a Greek word which is used in the Bible to signify the priestly service of worship. We use this word to denote the order of our worship service. The letter to the Hebrews makes it clear that Christ’s church is “the general assembly and church of the firstborn” who stand outside the throne room of the LORD to perform their service. The “firstborn” are the priests, a reference to us in our relation to our high priest, Christ. He stands inside the throne room to perform His service for us in the presence of His Father. We stand outside, just as the priests did in the temple service, to perform the service of worship there (see Hebr. 9–10, 12:18-24).

It is good to reflect upon this service of worship or liturgy. Are we conscious of what underpins our liturgy in the worship service? Do we allow our thoughts to be guided by the liturgy? It is the purpose of this article to stimulate the way in which we experience the liturgy of worship. Communal worship is, after all, one of the most important things we do in this life! It is also what binds us together as believers, coming together to honour and thank our triune God.

Worship as a profession of Faith

The idea of ‘worship’ is fundamentally that of expressing humble submission to God. The biblical terms most often translated as ‘worship’ refer to prostrating oneself before God in His presence. From the very beginning God desired His people to come together to sing His praises and express humble submission to Him. It is self-evident that we cannot do this *without faith*. Worship is the community of faith expressing its thankfulness in humble submission to God. At the same time, in worship, we humbly listen to what God has to say to us in His holy Word, and we speak to Him in prayer, making our requests *in faith*. None of this can appropriately be done, unless we are convicted that God has indeed saved us from certain eternal death by means of the crucifixion of his Son, our living Lord Jesus Christ.

For this reason, worship has in essence nothing to do with evangelism. People who are perhaps interested in learning more about the Gospel, but yet unsure whether they really believe, or whether the claims of the Gospel are appropriately made upon them, do not belong in a worship service. They belong in a discussion group with Christians who can walk them through the truth-claims of the Bible. Only as they come to conviction, ought they to be invited to attend worship. Worship is not evangelism. The church service is not a mission post where unbelievers are called to repentance.

Having said this, it is, of course, always possible that ‘outsiders’ could attend a worship service. The apostle Paul clearly recognised this in 1 Corinthians 14:24-25. Even though he characterises the church as a body which uses its gifts for *mutual* edification (not for the evangelisation of unbelievers, 1 Cor. 12; 14), nevertheless it is possible that unbelievers could be present and Paul’s point is that what is done in worship ought also to impact them. What we say and do in worship should not be so *foreign* in its language that it becomes *abra-cadabra* to outsiders. But this does not mean that it is the *purpose* of worship to communicate to outsiders. We communicate to God and God in turn communicates to us through his Word.

Liturgy of worship

The liturgy of worship, or – in other words – what we do and in what order, when we come together to worship God is the topic with which the rest of this article is concerned.

By way of introduction we shall first review a number of first-principles that belong to Reformed liturgy. We begin with those basic principles which are summarised in the confessions. Firstly, that God is the one who ought to determine what happens in His service of worship. Secondly, that there is a fundamental continuity between the worship of the Old and the New Testament. Hereupon we will review the structure of the liturgy in the Old Testament temple service. Then, before considering the application of these things to our own service of worship, we will reflect upon the connections and the differences between the worship of the Jewish synagogues in the time of Jesus and the services of the Christian church.

God determines the elements of His liturgy

As Reformed people we believe that it is God in His Word who determines how we should worship Him. This is not something that He leaves to us to decide. The correct manner of God’s worship is very important

because His holiness is at stake (cf. Lev. 10:1-7). Scripture warns us against “self-made religion” (Col. 2:23), that is, the worship of God according to our own ideas and rules. God’s rules ought to be sufficient for us.

This fact also explains the difference, which came to light at the time of the Reformation, between the Reformed and the Lutherans concerning principles of worship. The Lutherans maintained: what God has not forbidden is permissible and therefore a number of Roman Catholic elements were left intact (such as the confessional, etc.). The Reformed differentiated themselves by maintaining: what God has not commanded is forbidden. Our Heidelberg Catechism puts it this way (q/a 96):

What does God require in the second commandment?

We are not ... to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.

This is the principle with which we proceed when we study the Scripture to learn how God desires to be worshipped.

It is, however, a fact that God has not given us a ready-made liturgy in Scripture. We do have considerable freedom in the way in which we organise a worship service. Yet God has made known the *elements* which belong to His worship. A summarising list of these elements is given in Lord’s Day 38 of the catechism:

What does God require in the fourth commandment?

... that especially on the Sabbath, that is the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God

- *to hear God’s Word,*
- *to use the sacraments,*
- *to call publicly upon the LORD*
- *and to give Christian offerings for the poor.*

We see here the four elements of preaching, sacraments (baptism and Lord’s supper), prayer and the diaconal offering.

The continuity of God’s worship in the Old and New Testaments

How do we determine that God has intended these elements? They are determined by God’s revelation to us throughout the whole of Scripture, that is, both in the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament church is the continuation of God’s church in the Old Testament (see e.g. Rom. 11). This principle of *continuity* is also valid for the formal services of worship. However, in the *application* of God’s law from the Old Testament we need to reckon with significant changes. Christ’s coming and His suffering and death for our sins has meant that the shadowy (ritual) laws which reflected this work are no longer literally to be applied. We have their reality in Christ. We no longer bring lambs to church for sacrifice. *Christ* is our Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). We no longer have priests to minister to us the Gospel of reconciliation. *Christ* is our only high priest. The shadowy laws have fallen away. Why do we need a shadow if we have the real thing before our eyes? These changes are summarised in the following way in the Belgic Confession art. 25:

We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law¹ have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.

In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God’s will and to His glory.

And yet the elements and *non-shadowy* regulations of Old Testament worship are still applicable, just as the confession affirms. In accordance with Leviticus 23:3 we still gather together every (Christian) Sabbath to serve the Lord in our “holy convocation.” From the Old Testament we learn that prayer, confession of sin, the singing of psalms and the reading and exposition of God’s Word all belong to this gathering. From the New Testament we learn that some things, due to Christ’s coming, have been changed, for example we have baptism instead of circumcision and Lord’s Supper instead of sacrificial meals.

¹ Compare question and answer 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

The Structure of the liturgy in the Old Testament

We can also learn much from the structure of the public services of worship in the temple of our Lord in the time of the Old Testament. Such a service of worship consisted of three parts. Prior to the worship service, however, there seems to have been an entrance liturgy. We can see this from psalms such as 15 and 24 and also from Isaiah 33:13-16. A question was posed by those who had come for the service of worship (“Lord, who may dwell in your tent?”) which was answered by the Levites (“He whose walk is blameless ...”). Other psalms, such as the prayer in need of psalm 5 refer to this entrance liturgy (vv.7 ff.). We see here that it was not only ritual purity that was required to enter God’s sanctuary, but also a walk of life that showed the fruits of faith. Not everyone who called out “Lord, Lord” was permitted to enter and partake of the sacrament of sacrifice. Once one had gone through the entrance liturgy it was possible to engage in the service of worship, which as stated consisted of three parts. The general format of public temple worship may be summarised as follows (taken primarily from the example of 2 Chron. 29:25-36²):



Part one: The Corporate Sacrifices

While the congregation bows low the statutory sacrifices are offered up on the altar (the meat of the peace offerings is piled on top of the burnt offerings together with their grain offerings and libations). This is accompanied by the priests playing trumpets and the Levitical choirs singing to the accompaniment of their musical instruments. Upon completion of the sacrifice, the king and the officials also bow low. In this part of the worship service, after the sacrifices had been offered, the duty priest will have pronounced the priestly blessing over the congregation (see Lev. 9:22-23; Num. 6:22-27).

Part two: Praise and service of the Word

The Levitical choirs sing songs of praise using the prophetic psalm texts. They also supplement this with more obeisance to God. The congregation contributes communal “amens” and probably also communal songs of praise. Within this part of the service the opportunity was probably presented for Levitical prophets to teach the people through solo psalms (e.g. Ps. 78). It is probably in this part of the liturgy that the service of the Word took place as, for example, described in Nehemiah 8:4-8 (see below). This service of the Word took place prior to the third part of temple worship, namely, the personal sacrifices which resulted in the sacramental meals (cf. Neh. 8:9-12).



Part three: Personal worship and sacramental meals

Personal sacrifices are brought which provide the meat for the sacramental meals of the peace offerings which will be eaten by the offering families in the temple courts. The personal sacrifices are accompanied by the singing of the worshippers as they walk around the altar (cf. Ps. 26:6-7). In some cases there may be antiphonal singing together with the Levitical choirs, and possibly also the officiating priest. We may probably view these personal sacrifices as taking place in groups of extended families. The heads of the households will have provided the sacrificial animals.

This same threefold division is also found in the worship service described in Exodus 24:1-11 where sacrifices are brought (part one), followed by the reading of the book of the covenant (part two), and closing with a sacrificial meal (part three).

The order of the service for part two is further elucidated in Nehemiah 8:1-12. The description is of the corporate worship on the first day of the month (new moon’s day and therefore an extra Sabbath day) in the temple. We read in verse 5 that the scribe Ezra ascends a wooden podium flanked on either side by office

² The sin offerings which King Hezekiah had brought prior to the burnt offerings (2 Chron 29:20-24) are a special case here for the cleansing of the congregation after corporate sin in neglecting God’s public worship, see Num 15:22 f.

bearers. We may compare our tradition of the minister in the pulpit flanked on either side by the elders and deacons. The description of this part of the service contains the following elements:

- the book of God's Word is formally opened in the sight of all
- at this signal the congregation stands
- the leader of the service utters a *berachah* (= formula of praise to God)
- the congregation responds with a communal "amen"
- the congregation bow low to "worship" God (obedience is a sign of humility and dependence upon God)
- the law of God is read, translated and explained to the people by Ezra and the Levites³

The following verses mention the third part of the worship service, namely, the communal eating and drinking of the holy meal of the peace offering. Each family will have gone to the priests to receive portions of the meat which had been offered up as peace offerings to the Lord. These meals were the sacrificial meals of the Old Testament and had to be eaten in a holy place (i.e. in the temple courts) by worshippers who were in a ritually clean state. This meal is the equivalent to our celebration of Lord's Supper on the basis of Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sins. The concern for the poor here (v.10) is also the origin of the collection taken at the Lord's Supper table, a practice which goes right back to the beginning of the early church when at Lord's Supper extra food would be deposited for distribution to the poor.

The Relation of the New Testament Church to the Synagogue

We must briefly address the relation of the worship of the New Testament church to the Old Testament. From the New Testament itself (primarily the book of Acts) we learn that the earliest churches arose as secessions from the Jewish synagogues. In the days of Christ Jewish synagogues were to be found throughout the entire known world. They were the local churches of Jews and converted Gentiles ("godfearers"), who gathered together every Sabbath for a "holy convocation" in accordance with Leviticus 23:3.

After Pentecost the apostles continued to regard the Jewish synagogues throughout the world as true churches of God. For this reason they came and preached to them of the Messiah who had come. The apostle Paul on his journeys always preached in the synagogues first, and only if and when he was finally ousted because of their rejection of Jesus Christ did he turn to the Gentiles. At that moment a secession occurred and the local synagogue was no longer considered to be a true church of God. Believing Jews separated themselves from the unbelieving synagogue to form (under the apostle's direction) a new church of Christ (see, for example, Acts 18:4-8). This procedure had the effect of providing a nucleus of converted Jews and Gentile God-fearers (i.e., those Gentiles who were members, or at least worshippers, at the synagogues) to every newly established church of Christ (cf. Acts 13:43; 14:1; 17:4, 10-12; 18:7-8, 19-21, 'godfearers' were Gentiles who had belonged to the synagogue). Thus each church would have had a nucleus of people who knew the Scriptures and were familiar with weekly worship. Paul evidently expected converts to quickly come to terms with the Old Testament Scriptures, as a passage such as 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 surely presupposes.

Given that the Old Testament synagogue formed the basis and starting point for New Testament worship we may ask where the synagogue came from, and what we know of its worship.⁴

The Origin of the Synagogue

Modern scholarship has come up with a variety of theories regarding the origin of the synagogue. It has been dated from the time of the exile, from the time of Ezra, or even later.⁵ What enables scholars to come up with such divergent theories is the fact that we have very little information to go on.

³ It is worth considering the question as to whether the informal way in which this instruction was given (many Levites who spread out to teach the people simultaneously) might justify a form of separate instruction for children during the sermon of the worship service.

⁴ This scenario is confirmed by A. D. Nock's examination of the terminology of the New Testament (1933, "Vocabulary"). He finds that the terminology used, rather than being typical for Graeco-Roman religion, was distinct and heavily influenced by a Semitic background (e.g., Septuagint). He continues, "Such usages are the product of an enclosed world living its own life, a ghetto culturally and linguistically if not geographically; they belong to a literature written entirely for the initiated ..." (135). A Jewish Christian nucleus would have been essential to help communicate the Gospel and interpret the Scripture to recent pagan converts.

What we do have, however, is a common tradition in the first century that dated synagogue worship back to the time of Moses. Josephus says that Moses ordained “that every week men should desert their other occupations and assemble to listen to the Law and to obtain a thorough and accurate knowledge of it” (*Ag.Ap.* 2:175). Likewise, Philo traces the practice in his own day of meeting in synagogues every sabbath, to the command of Moses to set aside the sabbath for the study of the Scriptures (*Vit.Mos.* 2.215-16; cf. *Op.Mund.* 128).

Important for us is the fact that this explanation of the origin of synagogues is also recorded in the New Testament. When James delivered his speech at the council of Jerusalem, he noted that “Moses from ancient generations has in every city those who preach him, since he is read in the synagogues every Sabbath,” Acts 15:21. This explanation also fits the command of Leviticus 23:3 for every Israelite to assemble every Sabbath to worship God.

The Worship of the Synagogue

We are somewhat better informed about the worship of the synagogue in the first century, although nowhere in any of the sources (Mishnah, Tosefta, Josephus, Philo) is there a proper description of a regular worship service.

The synagogue service on the Sabbath began early, usually just before sunrise. A synagogue official (*archisynagogos*) presided over the worship service. The elders sat at the front in a semicircle facing the people. The worship service contained the following elements:

- Blessings of praise to God
- Confession of faith (commonly called *shema*)
- Blessing of God to the people (only if a priest was present)
- Recitation of the 10 commandments
- Scripture readings from the law and the prophets⁶
- Singing of psalms and probably also other songs⁷

⁵ See S. Safrai, 1987, “Synagogue,” for an overview. According to I. Elbogen (1931, *Gottesdienst*, 237ff) and H. Danby (1933, *Mishnah*, see the notes to the ensuing Mishnah citations) the origin of the synagogue is to be traced to the tradition of *Maamadoth* (“places of standing”) recorded in the Mishnah: *m.Ta’an.* 4, *m.Bik.* 3:2. The people of Israel were divided into 24 courses (in line with the priests) and representatives were present to watch the offerings in Jerusalem, whilst the others gathered in their local towns. But this would mean a gathering only around one particular town at any given week in which a particular course of priests served. The point was that the people of Israel should be represented at the offerings made daily on their behalf. The local *maamad* held services at the same times as the offerings in the temple. The Mishnah implies that this tradition goes back to the “first prophets,” i.e., David and Solomon (according to Danby). But *m.Ta’an.* 4:1 goes further than this for it states that the four prayer services (with priestly benediction) were held on 1) days of fasting, 2) *Maamadoth*, and 3) the Day of Atonement. This practice, however, whilst it may be ancient, stood alongside that of the regular synagogue service in each town. Synagogues met in each town on each sabbath. The *Maamadoth* met only in the town of the currently serving course of priests. They cannot therefore explain the origin of the synagogue.

⁶ For the reading from the Scripture it was the custom for the head of the synagogue to select males from the congregation to read. Various sources indicate that rabbis, priests and elders were normally given the first opportunity. The readers (there was normally more than one) would stand, and after pronouncing a blessing to God, would read from the Scripture in Hebrew whilst a translator interpreted this in the common language. After the reading, the reader would have opportunity to sit and expound upon the passage he had just read. In Luke 4:16-22 we see Jesus doing the reading and exposition in this way. The head of the synagogue could also ask for other volunteers from the congregation to speak a word of exhortation. In Acts 13:15-41 we see Paul responding to such a request by standing and exhorting the congregation concerning the Gospel of Jesus.

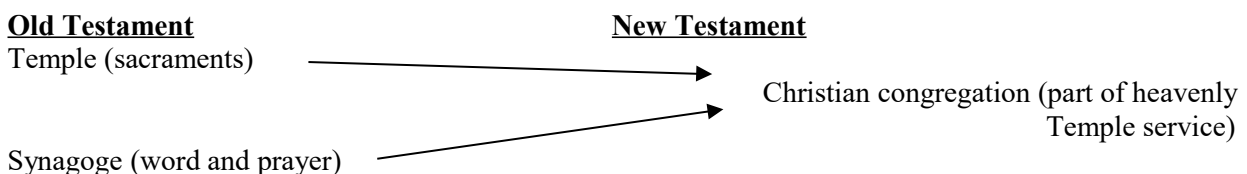
⁷ Regarding singing, there is actually little evidence. This has led some scholars to argue that singing in synagogue worship was a late development. But we ought to be careful, given the fact that we do not possess any synagogue liturgy before the Amoraic period (which begins in the third century AD). The Mishnah does not seem to mention any regular psalm singing in the synagogue, but it does mention the singing of the Hallel at certain feasts. Nowhere does the Mishnah deliberately set out to describe a synagogue service or liturgy. The closest we get is the tractate Berakoth with various regulations concerning the saying of blessings and certain prayers (Philo mentions a group of ascetic Jews in Alexandria who apparently sung psalms as well as hymns they composed, but we ought to be cautious since it is clear that this small group was in no way part of mainstream Judaism.) According to I. Elbogen (1931, *Gottesdienst*, 502) the Talmud says that after the dissolution of the state of Israel there was to be no singing in the synagogues as a sign of mourning. This of course seems to imply that there was normally singing involved. Further, we do know that there was singing in the worship of New Testament churches, as 1 Cor 14:26 testifies. Given that the church in Corinth had a Jewish nucleus, including the leader of the local synagogue (Acts 18:8), this singing probably reflected synagogue practice.

The service could last until around midday.⁸

The Worship of the New Testament Church

As stated above the early New Testament churches were essentially synagogues that now recognised the Messiah. Their pattern of worship will therefore have conformed in large part to the model of the synagogue. That pattern involved all the basic elements of worship outlined in the Old Testament that do not specifically relate to the temple service (see the list above). These elements will also have found a place in the Christian churches.

But this is not to say that the character of the local church of Christ is identical to that of the Old Covenant synagogue. After Pentecost the significance of the temple for redemptive history was negated. The sacramental worship of the temple (its system of ritual law culminating in the sacrifices) was significantly altered by Christ's completed sacrifice and given to the worship of the local congregations in a new form (e.g. Lord's Supper instead of sacrifice, cf. 1 Cor. 5:7).⁹ In Jewish synagogues sacramental worship was unheard of. Such worship could only take place in the temple. This new situation after Pentecost explains how easily the apostles could apply temple imagery to the local Christian churches. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, for example, the church itself is called a "temple of God" in which the Spirit of God dwells (the "you" is plural here referring to the congregation as a whole, not individual members).¹⁰ We are the priests who perform the service of worship outside the holy throne room of the heavenly temple.



The New Testament church also began to pay particular attention to Jesus as the Messiah (i.e., the Christ). This was, after all, what separated them from Jewish synagogues. Thus in the prayers and the blessings, Christ tends to have a central place.¹¹

Reformed liturgy rooted in Scripture

As noted at the beginning, our worship must be determined by God. This fact is emphasised in the confessions and shows itself in the guiding principles of our liturgy. Our liturgy may also be considered in three parts:

⁸ See S. Safrai, "The Synagogue," in *The Jewish People in the First Century*, ed. S. Safrai *et al.* vol. 2. *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1987) 922. Philo (*Hypoth.* 7,13) speaks of synagogue services lasting until late in the day (δείλη refers here to the day, not the afternoon), cf. Jos. *Apion* 1,209. Pagan sacrificial rituals also began at dawn and lasted until in the afternoon, see John Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion*, trans. by J. Lloyd (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) 80vv.

⁹ See further my paper *The Laws for Uncleanness in the Pentateuch and NT Baptism*.

¹⁰ The presence of sacramental worship also explains why the office bearers of the New Testament church have a more direct role in leading in worship than in the Old Testament synagogue.

¹¹ In particular, note the various blessings contained in the New Testament which are identical in form to those found in the Mishnah and other tannaitic Jewish sources, cf. Luke 1:68-75; 2 Cor 1:3-4; Eph 1:3-14; 1 Pet 1:3-5. Compare LXX *eulogeetos* (for *baruch*) mostly of God, cf. Gen 9:26; 14:20; 24:27; Exod 18:10; Ruth 4:14; 1 Kgdms 25:32f; 2 Kgdms 6:21; 18:28; 3 Kgdms 1:48; 5:7 (21); 8:15,56; 2 Chr 2:12 (11); etc.. Jewish life in the first century AD was surrounded with such blessings. Before the daily recitations of the *Shema* (the Jewish creed, = Deut. 6:4-9) morning and evening, blessings were to be said (*m.Ber.* 1:4). The well known eighteen blessings (also known as the *T'fillah*) were also to be said daily (*m.Ber.* 4:3). In fact the pious Jew was taught to bless God in and for everything (*m.Ber.* 9:1-3). Blessings were a very serious part of daily piety (cf. *m.Ber.* 3:3; 4:1; 5:1). We may understand then that for the Christian Jew, Paul, it was especially important to render blessing to God, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, for all the mercies of election and salvation contained in the divine Messiah Jesus (Eph 1:3-14). Just as such blessings tended to begin a synagogue service, so also they tend to begin letters in the New Testament. Ultimately the form was modelled on Old Testament blessings, e.g., 1 Kgs 8:56-58; Ps 72:18-19; Ps 41:13 & citations above. This blessing formula of praise to God is to be distinguished from the Aaronic blessing of God upon His people. For a good overview of contemporary Jewish practice, see the tractate *Berakoth* in the Mishnah.

The beginning: Praise

Just as in all worship services in the Bible, after the introductory greetings (and possibly a confession of dependence, the so-called *votum*), the congregation breaks forth in jubilant praise. The first psalm (or hymn) ought to be a psalm of praise.

Part one: The path of reconciliation

Next comes the path of reconciliation, when in the Old Testament sacrifices would be offered up for the whole congregation. Our Passover lamb has been sacrificed on the cross. On the basis of this sacrifice the first prayer is a prayer with emphasis on the forgiveness of sins and purification through the blood of Jesus. Sometimes a reading of God's law immediately preceding this prayer heightens the necessity of reconciliation with God because of our sins.

Part two: The service of praise and the ministry of the Word

In this part of our worship we hear the reading of the Word and the sermon and we also sing relevant psalms and hymns. If the law is read after the sermon in this part of the worship service it functions as the rule for our thanksgiving. The confession of our faith also belongs to this part.

Part three: Personal worship and holy meals

Because our worship no longer has to be centralised in one place (as the temple in Jerusalem was), we are not compelled to break off into smaller groups. The local congregation of Christ is one family of brothers and sisters in Him, who together form His body in that place. Therefore it is best to allow the celebration of the Lord's Supper to be a communal happening in one place with the whole congregation, even if various "tables" need to be used. When Lord's Supper is not served, the prayer for the needs of various brothers and sisters belongs to this part, just as earlier personal sacrifices were brought in preparation for the holy meals and at that time personal prayers were brought before the Lord.

Further Literature

A good overview of the various elements of our liturgy can be found in ...

G. van Rongen, *Zijn Schone Dienst: Studies over de Gereformeerde Liturgie* (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1956)

An extended discussion of singing in worship can be found in...

R. D. Anderson, "Singing in the Public Worship of the Church."
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

Other liturgical practices are discussed in...

—, "The use of the word 'Amen.'"
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

—, "Laying on of hands at the ordination of elders."
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/articles>

—, "De plaats van de vrouw in de eredienst: 1 Korintiërs 14,34-35 overwogen."
<http://anderson.modelcrafts.eu/artikelen>