

## Pass the plate?

### Theological reflections on the changing practice of ‘offering’ within Scottish liturgical tradition

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#### **Abstract**

At a time when many congregations are changing their practice of uplifting an offering during worship, this article offers a commentary on the history of the development of offering from the early church to contemporary Scottish Reformed worship. It will be demonstrated that in both early and recent church history, the offering was understood as an element of worship, part of the people’s response to God and symbolic of a broader offering of the self to God’s service, and the case will be made for its retention in the liturgy as an invitation to participation in the ministry of the church.

*The modes of public worship are matters of such solemn usage, that they seldom undergo any sober, considerate, or partial alterations. They are left untouched, except in times when the passions of mankind are very deeply and terribly stirred [...] and then they are changed with a mad and headlong zeal.<sup>1</sup>*

Health protection measures required during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic prevented the uplifting of a physical offering during worship for

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<sup>1</sup> John Gibson Lockhart, *Peter’s Letters to His Kinsfolk*, 3rd ed., vol. III (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1819), 317.

a short time. Since the lifting of these restrictions, the Church of Scotland's National Stewardship Team has observed a growing trend of congregations removing the time of offering from their liturgy altogether. This seems like a sudden departure from recent practice, and one that should not be rushed into 'headlong'.

The reasons given by congregations who have stopped the practice of a public offering during worship are chiefly concerned with necessity and desirability. It is no longer seen as necessary to include a time of offering when the majority of givers make their offering by standing order, bank transfer or even contactless card terminal, meaning that the act of giving often occurs at a fixed point outside the corporate act of worship. Some congregations have questioned the desirability of uplifting an offering in worship, concerned that it will be off-putting to visitors and perpetuate a stereotype that the church is always seeking money. Others express a concern that the time of offering disrupts the flow of the liturgy. Each of these reasons regards the offering as pragmatic in purpose, rather than as an act of worship in itself.

The purpose of this article is to trace the history of the offering within Scottish Reformed tradition, offering an opportunity for theological reflection on its place and purpose within liturgy. It will be shown that the offering has historically been understood to incorporate gifts given elsewhere and as symbolic of giving more than money, enabling worshippers to respond to the Word read and proclaimed by participating in the ministry of the church.



## **The early church**

The modern offering, consisting of monetary gifts collected or presented during an act of worship, draws on a varied heritage which can be traced back to the earliest Christian communities.

Central to the early Christian liturgy was the 'breaking of the bread'.<sup>2</sup> The eucharistic act, being an anamnesis of the self-offering of Christ, was itself regarded as an offering or oblation.<sup>3</sup> Early worship also afforded an

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<sup>2</sup> Josef A. Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960), 29.

<sup>3</sup> W. Jardine Grisbrooke, "Oblation", in *A Dictionary of Liturgy & Worship*, ed. J. G. Davies (London: SCM Press, 1972), 281–82.

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opportunity for worshippers to offer material gifts of the bread and wine required. It is an abuse of such an offering that Paul criticises in the church at Corinth<sup>4</sup> where 'the proper procedure would have been for the well-to-do members of the community to bring provisions for the common meal and share them with all the others.'<sup>5</sup> (Two centuries later, Cyprian similarly admonishes a rich lady who does not consider contributing to the offering, yet partakes in the sacrament with what the poor have offered.<sup>6</sup>)

By the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr describes the gifts of bread and wine being brought forward to 'the president' who offers thanks to God<sup>7</sup> in what is perhaps an early form of offertory procession. Contemporaneously, Clement of Alexandria points to such an offering as being symbolic of dedicating the whole self to God: 'Rightly we do not offer God, who has need of nothing, who however has given men everything, an [external] gift; on the contrary we glorify Him who dedicated Himself to us, by dedicating ourselves to Him.'<sup>8</sup> There is recognition here that humanity can only offer to God that which is already God's, yet such an offering can be a symbolic means of personal devotion. Macleod understands this offering as a response to the Word of God: 'having seen a vision—through the reading, hearing, and preaching of the Word—of the God of all grace and what he has done for men, the early church brought in its gifts of bread and wine, i.e. an Offertory took place.'<sup>9</sup> This understanding is significant as although, by necessity, the people's gifts of bread and wine would have to be brought before the Eucharist could take place, liturgically it forms part of the people's response.

Early liturgy therefore embodied both offertory (in the bringing of gifts of bread and wine by the faithful) and oblation (in the eucharistic act). There is also a third aspect of offering in early liturgy: alms. In Justin's description of weekly worship, following readings, prayers and the sharing of bread and wine, 'they who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the president' who uses it to support orphans, widows, the sick, those in prison, sojourning strangers

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:17–34.

<sup>5</sup> Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 34.

<sup>6</sup> Cyprian, *De opere et eleemosynis*, c. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, c. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, Book VII, c. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Donald Macleod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1965), 24.

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and others in need.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the offering of bread and wine there was an offering of alms for the needy, thus linking worship with Christian service.

By the end of the second century, the practice began of worshippers bringing their offerings forward to the altar.<sup>11</sup> Soon after, Hippolytus<sup>12</sup> and Tertullian<sup>13</sup> both speak of offerings by the laity in this form, and mention has already been made of Cyprian's account from the middle of the third century. Hippolytus also notes that in addition to bread and wine, people made an offering of oil and even of cheese and olives,<sup>14</sup> while Jungmann observes that this expanded to include the offering of any items useful for divine service, such as wax, candles or other church implements.<sup>15</sup> Many of these gifts were used in the act of worship, with some of them used to support the poor and needy. The practice of bringing these gifts to the altar came to be undertaken 'by the entire community in a solemn act, in a well ordered procession'<sup>16</sup> which was later accompanied by music and is still seen in some traditions today in the offertory procession. While the offering of the people consists of material goods, it is understood to represent something more:

The gifts over which the thanksgiving is pronounced are gifts of this earth, gifts that include something of our own labour and our toil, gifts that help to preserve our life. Our goods and possessions, our toil and sweat, our entire life is included therein. And through these gifts, our entire lives and the whole of this earthly creation is taken up into the holy sacrifice which Christ our High Priest is offering together with us; the whole of creation is thus returned to God.<sup>17</sup>

'Offering' in the early church, then, involved material gifts of the people given as a response to God's grace both for the service of the church and

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<sup>10</sup> Justin, *First Apology*, c. 67.

<sup>11</sup> Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 116.

<sup>12</sup> Hippolytus of Rome, *Apostolic Tradition*, 20:10.

<sup>13</sup> Tertullian, *De Exhortatione Castitatis*, c. 11

<sup>14</sup> Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 6:1.

<sup>15</sup> Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 172.

<sup>16</sup> Jungmann, 117.

<sup>17</sup> Jungmann, 117.

to care for the needy, such offering being a symbol of the giving of the whole self to Christ, whose self-offering is remembered in the Eucharist.



## **The church in pre-Reformation Scotland**

According to Bede, Ninian received regular instruction in Rome.<sup>18</sup> It would be reasonable to suppose, therefore, that the earliest offering practice among Scottish Christians would be similar to the practice of Rome in the late fourth century, brought by Ninian on his return.

Two significant changes occurred during the fourth century. The first is that regulations were issued to the effect that only gifts of bread, wine and other items necessary for worship should be brought forward to the altar. All other gifts should be collected elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> In the bread and wine, 'all the other things which the faithful wanted to give were symbolically represented and conjointly offered up.'<sup>20</sup> Offerings presented during worship are taken to represent offerings made elsewhere.

The second change regards the manner of presenting offerings. In the Roman church, tables of prothesis were introduced as locations in the sanctuary for receiving the people's offering of bread and wine.<sup>21</sup> During the 'liturgy of the faithful', the celebrant and deacons would receive the offertory at the tables of prothesis and carry them back to the altar.<sup>22</sup> The first Scottish churches were likely to have followed this practice, though liturgical practice in the fifth and sixth centuries was not uniform,<sup>23</sup> so a more local variation may have developed.

A few centuries later, by the time of the Stowe Missal, offerings in kind appear to have disappeared from the liturgy, with the elements of bread and wine being prepared before the service by the clergy and presented at the offertory.<sup>24</sup> This appears to be representative of a wider shift in focus

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<sup>18</sup> William D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 2.

<sup>19</sup> Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 172.

<sup>20</sup> Jungmann, 172.

<sup>21</sup> J. G. Davies, *Origin and Development of Early Christian Church Architecture* (London: SCM Press, 1952), 47.

<sup>22</sup> Maxwell, *History of Worship*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy*, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Maxwell, *History of Worship*, 15.

across the West towards the preparation of the bread and wine.<sup>25</sup>



## **The Reformation**

The Reformers, being keen to avoid anything which might be construed as a propitiatory sacrifice, dispensed with the offertory as it had hitherto been understood.<sup>26</sup> Emphasising the congregation's part in the service, they stressed the preparation of the people to faithfully receive the elements over and above the preparation of the bread and wine themselves.<sup>27</sup> The *English Prayer Book* of 1552 substituted in the place of the offertory an offering of money, 'a new action for congregations to perform in the liturgy'<sup>28</sup> which emphasised the connection between worship and service.

Although discontinued in England by Mary I after only a year, the *English Prayer Book* was adopted by the Protestant Lords in Council in 1557 for use in Reformed worship in Scotland. Moreover, there was no other book yet available in English, and many prominent Scottish ministers had served south of the border and were familiar with this text.<sup>29</sup> In the years leading up to the Scottish Reformation, then, this form of offering would be widely practised. After the Creed and sermon, homily or exhortation, the curate selects and says a Scripture sentence to:

earnestly exhort [the people] to remember the poore [...] Then shal the Churche wardens, or some other by them appointed, gather the devocion of the people, and put the same into the poremens boxe: and upon the offering daies appointed, every man and woman shall paye to the curate the due and accustomed offerings<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Working Group on the Place and Practice of Holy Communion, *Celebrating Holy Communion* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2010), 46.

<sup>26</sup> Working Group, *Celebrating Holy Communion*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> Kenneth W. Stevenson, "Offertory", in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 337–38.

<sup>28</sup> Stevenson, "Offertory", 338.

<sup>29</sup> Church of Scotland Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, *Manual of Church Praise According to the Use of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Committee on Publications, 1932), 31.

<sup>30</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1552, c. xii.

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There then follows a simple form of offering prayer, asking God 'to accepte our almose [alms] and to receive these our prayers'.

Barkley points to how this reimagined practice of offering was understood by observing that in the early days of the Reformation, on Communion Sundays, bread and wine was only brought to the table immediately after the Creed, i.e. within the community which has already confessed publicly its faith. When Communion is not being celebrated,

the offering should be seen in the same context, that is, of the confessing community. In the offering we do not offer ourselves and our gifts as individuals, we offer ourselves and our gifts as members of the body of Christ, as members of a confessing community. So the Creed, offering and prayer of thanksgiving and dedication of ourselves and our substance should be seen as closely linked.<sup>31</sup>

The purpose of the offering took on sharper focus following the Scottish Reformation. The *First Book of Discipline* (1560) declared that 'every several kirk must provide for the poor within itself' – one of the most important duties laid upon the Kirk Session of a parish. Although other sources of income were available to Kirk Sessions (such as the imposition of fines or the assessment of 'stent'), largely the poor fund of the parish church came from the offerings of its members.<sup>32</sup> Reminiscent of the primitive practice of offertory, it became commonplace for weekly collections to be supplemented by a special Communion offering, usually made as people went to the table.<sup>33</sup> While the poor fund was the first call on monetary offerings (fabric costs were met by the heritors, and ministers' stipends paid by teinds), there were nevertheless other costs

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<sup>31</sup> John M. Barkley, *The Worship of the Reformed Church: An Exposition and Critical Analysis of the Eucharistic, Baptismal, and Confirmation Rites in the Scottish, English-Welsh, and Irish Liturgies* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966), 59–60.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Herron, *Kirk Lore: Answers to Some Interesting Questions on the Constitution and History of the Kirk in Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1999), 68–69.

<sup>33</sup> George W. Sprott, *The Worship and Offices of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1882), 139.

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which had to be met from offerings, such as the joiner's fee for erecting and dismantling the Communion table.<sup>34</sup>

Shortly after the Reformation, the *English Prayer Book* was succeeded by Knox's Liturgy (known as the *Book of Common Order*), adopted by the General Assembly in 1562. It makes no reference to the uplifting of an offering at a set point in the liturgy nor of the means by which it should be collected. The method and timing of collection varied in different places and at different times: sometimes taken at the church door or kirkyard gate, at other times within the worship service itself.<sup>35</sup> This matter of when and how to uplift the offering appears to have vexed the church for several decades to follow.

The General Assembly of 1573 ordered that 'no collections for the poor be made at the time of the ministration of the table of the Lord Jesus, nor yet in the time of the sermon, hereafter within kirks, but only at the kirk doors'.<sup>36</sup> No reason for this decision is recorded, but given the Reformers' concern to maintain good order it would be reasonable to assume that the Assembly's concern was to avoid any interruption to the orderliness of worship. In the days before the introduction of pews, when the congregation may be variously stood or sat on stools, benches or the ground,<sup>37</sup> options for the orderly uplifting of an offering in the course of the service would have been limited. That many congregations ignored the Assembly's ruling on Communion Sundays, continuing to collect the offering as worshippers gathered around (as in Perth<sup>38</sup>) or rose from (as in Aberdeen<sup>39</sup>) the table, would support this reasoning, as on these occasions an orderly collection was more easily facilitated. The *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* makes no suggestion as to when and how the offering should be uplifted, only that it is 'so to be ordered, that no part of the publick worship be thereby hindered'.

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<sup>34</sup> George B. Burnet, *The Holy Communion in the Reformed Church of Scotland 1560–1960* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 34.

<sup>35</sup> G. D. Henderson, *The Scottish Ruling Elder* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1935), 75.

<sup>36</sup> *The Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland 1560–1618*, 307.

<sup>37</sup> J. M. Ross, *Four Centuries of Scottish Worship* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1972), 49.

<sup>38</sup> Spratt, *Worship and Offices*, 139.

<sup>39</sup> Henderson, *Scottish Ruling Elder*, 88.



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Practice in this regard continued to vary for some time. In 1583, for example, the Kirk Session of Glasgow appointed collectors at the door for the first time,<sup>40</sup> while the minutes of the Kirk Session of Tynninghame show that an offering continued to be taken during worship on Communion Sundays throughout most of the 1600s.<sup>41</sup> In the early seventeenth century, the Kirk Session of Aberdeen ordered that alms be collected from Communicants at their rising from the table 'according to the form observed by Reformed Congregations in the South part of the Realm'<sup>42</sup>, while around the same time congregations in Boyndie, Fordyce and Galston were changing to collect at the door.<sup>43</sup> In Balmaghie, ladles were used to uplift the offering just before the benediction.<sup>44</sup> Added to this mix, Laud's Liturgy,<sup>45</sup> introduced as part of the attempt to restore episcopacy in Scotland, returned the offering to the manner of the *English Prayer Book*, but this met with much opposition and was not widely adopted.<sup>46</sup> With the Act of 1573 having fallen into disuse and a diversity of practice, the General Assembly of 1648 again forbade collections during the service, this time making the reasoning clear: it was 'a very great and unseemly disturbance of divine worship'.<sup>47</sup> Again, this did not seem to be universally or immediately followed (the Kirk Session of Essil, for example, did not comply until 1676, and only then 'because the people were so throng in the body of the church that ther was no collecting off it within doors'<sup>48</sup>) and by the turn of the century the custom of table collections was again commonplace.

In the centuries immediately following the Reformation, the offering's place as a devotional act within worship seems to have been lost. A concern to maintain good order and to distance the church from

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<sup>40</sup> Maxwell, *History of Worship*, 60, n. 6.

<sup>41</sup> Maxwell, 60, n. 6.

<sup>42</sup> Sprott, *Worship and Offices*, 139–40.

<sup>43</sup> Henderson, *Scottish Ruling Elder*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> William McMillan, *The Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church, 1550–1638* (London: James Clarke & Co., 1931), 123.

<sup>45</sup> William Laud, *The Booke of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments: and other parts of divine Service for use in the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Robert Young, 1637).

<sup>46</sup> McMillan, *Worship of the Scottish Reformed Church*, 123–24.

<sup>47</sup> Henderson, *Scottish Ruling Elder*, 76.

<sup>48</sup> Henderson, 77.

propitiatory sacrifice led to the offering being considered largely in pragmatic terms, as the numerous debates about the place and manner of its collection demonstrate. Lee's criticism that the Reformers 'were so much occupied with the doctrinal side of Christianity that they never appreciated its devotional element'<sup>49</sup> seems true when the Reformation approach is contrasted with the more spiritual understanding of the early church.



### **Secession to the modern era**

The eighteenth century saw secessions from the national Kirk and the birth of independent denominations. These congregations faced a radically different financial picture: no longer were they required to service the parish poor fund, but they now had to meet all the regular church running expenses, including a building for worship and a stipend and manse for their minister. This placed a greater emphasis on the need for Christian liberality in giving. The Basis of Union of the United Secession Church, for example, described giving by its members as an 'obligation and privilege [...] to support and extend, by voluntary contribution, the ordinances of the Gospel.'<sup>50</sup>

At around the same time, the Kirk began supporting missions at home and overseas, all of which required funding. Care of the poor became just one financial commitment among many. In addition to the regular offering already in place, it became common to uplift a special collection for these other, non-congregational purposes. This might be gathered during worship, but more often as a retiring<sup>51</sup> collection upon leaving the church.<sup>52</sup> In some places, this could mean multiple collections gathered in a single act of worship: the regular offering at the door, a Communion offering gathered at the table, and a retiring collection for an extramural purpose.<sup>53</sup> When responsibility for poor relief was transferred from the church to civil authorities and the regular offering was used only for church expenses,

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<sup>49</sup> Church of Scotland, *Manual of Church Praise*, 39.

<sup>50</sup> Andrew Herron, *The Law and Practice of the Kirk: A Guide and Commentary* (Glasgow: Chapter House, 1995), 187.

<sup>51</sup> 'Too often they were "very retiring"' according to John White, in Herron, *Kirk Lore*, 91.

<sup>52</sup> Herron, *Kirk Lore*, 90.

<sup>53</sup> Ross, *Four Centuries*, 17–22.

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many congregations continued the practice of a special collection during worship on Communion Sundays as a benevolent fund to be distributed in cases of hardship.<sup>54</sup>

In 1865, three ministers of the Church of Scotland formed the Church Service Society to 'study the liturgies – ancient and modern – of the Christian church, with a view to the preparation and publication of forms of prayer for Public Worship'<sup>55</sup> and to 'bring back elements in the Reformation service which should never have been lost'.<sup>56</sup> The Society's aim was achieved in the publication of *Euchologion*, the first corporately produced prayer book in the Church of Scotland since Knox's Liturgy. As successive editions were produced, one element which was gradually restored to its place within public worship was that of the offering. While earlier editions referred only to the collection of alms as part of the Communion service, by the fourth edition in 1877 reference is made to the collection of alms in a regular Sunday service, coming after the sermon and intercessions but before the benediction.<sup>57</sup>

It also provides an offering prayer<sup>58</sup> which opens by acknowledging the supremacy of God as 'King of all the earth', indicating that what is offered can come only from that which God has provided (cf. Clement of Alexandria). It then frames the offering as the people's response to God ('in obedience to Thy commandment, in honour of Thy name') and emphasises the link between worship and service ('grant [...] that the same being devoted to Thy service, may be used for Thy glory'). Sprott, one of the founders of the Society, desired that this type of prayer should become commonplace. Proposing a new order in keeping with the earliest Reformed order, he specifies that the main (intercessory) prayer after the sermon 'should conclude with a prayer to God to receive our offerings, to accept our service, notwithstanding its imperfections, and to follow it with His blessing'.<sup>59</sup> Speaking of days of public thanksgiving, Sprott says, 'The people should be taught that liberality in alms-giving is, like the joyful

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<sup>54</sup> Ross, 30.

<sup>55</sup> The Church Service Society, "History and Purpose", <https://www.churchservicesociety.org/history>.

<sup>56</sup> Church of Scotland, *Manual of Church Praise*, 51.

<sup>57</sup> Church Service Society, *Euchologion: A Book of Common Order*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1877), 58.

<sup>58</sup> Church Service Society, *Euchologion*, 283–84.

<sup>59</sup> Sprott, *Worship and Offices*, 44.

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singing of the Psalms, one of the proper characteristics of a thanksgiving service'<sup>60</sup> emphasising the view that the offering is an element of worship.

Similar societies were also formed in the United Presbyterian Church in 1882 and the Free Church in 1891.<sup>61</sup> The latter published a new directory for worship in 1898 seeking to draw on earlier Reformation documents. It too indicates that the offering should be taken during worship, suggesting it comes either during an item of praise before the sermon, or during the doxology after the sermon.<sup>62</sup> The General Assemblies of the churches eventually went on to authorise their own worship books, the Church of Scotland producing *Prayers for Divine Service* in 1923 and the United Free Church the *Book of Common Order* in 1928, both of which placed the offering firmly within the liturgy.<sup>63</sup> The latter claims that 'For each of the elements in the services now submitted, ample warrant is found in Scripture' and this includes 'the bringing of offerings to God for His service'.<sup>64</sup> The text provides offering prayers in both morning and evening orders, and these contain many of the same elements as *Euchologion*: an acknowledgement that all things come from God (e.g. 'all things come of Thee, and of Thine own do we give to Thee'<sup>65</sup>), a framing of the offering as a response to God (e.g. 'our offerings which we bring in devotion to Thy most holy Name'<sup>66</sup>) and a link between worship and service (e.g. 'these gifts are devoted to Thy service'<sup>67</sup>). In addition, these prayers invest the offering with a symbolism representing the offering of the whole self (e.g. 'grant that as these gifts are devoted [...] we ourselves be consecrate to Thee'<sup>68</sup>).

By the time of the 1929 union that brought about the modern Church of Scotland, the offering was very much part of the service of worship and

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<sup>60</sup> Sprott, 182.

<sup>61</sup> Church of Scotland, *Manual of Church Praise*, 51.

<sup>62</sup> Public Worship Association in connection with the Free Church of Scotland, *A New Directory for the Public Worship of God* (Edinburgh: MacNiven & Wallace, 1898), 2.

<sup>63</sup> Church of Scotland, *Manual of Church Praise*, 60.

<sup>64</sup> United Free Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order 1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), 4.

<sup>65</sup> United Free Church, 18.

<sup>66</sup> United Free Church, 18.

<sup>67</sup> United Free Church, 30.

<sup>68</sup> United Free Church, 30.

regarded as being 'a devotional act'.<sup>69</sup> The *Book of Common Order* of the united church placed the offering after the sermon as a response, and provided prayers in each order in a similar form as had the United Free Church.<sup>70</sup> The abolition of teinds and the removal of the role of heritors also placed the Church of Scotland in the same position as other denominations, being required to meet the full costs of ministry and fabric from offerings. The various national and international schemes were streamlined, so that it became normal to collect just one offering.<sup>71</sup> The manner of its uplifting varied, with some congregations continuing the tradition of a plate at the door brought forward during worship, while others collected it during the service (usually towards the end).<sup>72</sup> Regardless of the means of uplifting, it came to be seen as part of worship – 'a deliberate act, a response to the Word read and preached'.<sup>73</sup> This is evidenced in the most recent edition of *Common Order*, which provides no fewer than fifteen offering prayers containing the same elements mentioned above.<sup>74</sup> Herron points to the use of the phrase 'Let us worship God in our offering' as evidence of the offering increasingly being seen as an 'integral part of worship' and 'as part of a stewardship that concerns more than just worldly goods'.<sup>75</sup> The pre-Reformation understanding of the offering as an act of spiritual devotion had been restored.



## Conclusions

From this potted history of the offering in Scottish Reformed tradition, there are several elements which seem pertinent to considerations of the place of a time of offering in today's liturgy. In the early church, and for at least the last two centuries, the offering (whether uplifted during the

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<sup>69</sup> Henderson, *Scottish Ruling Elder*, 79–80.

<sup>70</sup> Church of Scotland, *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland with Gaelic Supplement* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940).

<sup>71</sup> Herron, *Kirk Lore*, 93.

<sup>72</sup> R. D. Kernohan, *Our Church: A Guide to the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1985), 25.

<sup>73</sup> Church of Scotland Committee on Public Worship and Aids to Devotion, *New Ways to Worship* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1980), 36.

<sup>74</sup> Church of Scotland Panel on Worship, *Common Order* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2015).

<sup>75</sup> Herron, *Kirk Lore*, 89.

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service or at the door) has been understood to form part of the response of the people within the liturgy, providing an opportunity for participation in both the ministry of the church and care of the needy. In this act, the body of Christ acknowledges that 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it'<sup>76</sup> and confesses its dependence on God. An offering of money is not only a way of financially sustaining the church and spreading the Gospel – something which the United Secession Church described as an 'obligation and privilege' – but a spiritual act of worship, offering thanksgiving for God's provision.

Although today many give financially by standing order, bank transfer or digital methods, the presentation of a physical offering can be understood to represent all of these, as was the case when offerings made elsewhere were 'conjointly offered' in the fourth century. Much was made in the post-Reformation years about the orderliness of uplifting an offering so as not to disrupt the flow of worship. The addition of modern methods of giving has made uplifting the offering a simpler and swifter task, meaning that this should be less of a concern. In many places where the offering was taken at the door, the custom developed of presenting this as a response to the Word during worship. This practice could today be seen as representative of all offerings made at any time and by any means.

Moreover, from early offertory processions through the *English Prayer Book* to the prayers in the worship books of Scottish Presbyterian churches, there has been a consistent theme of the offering representing something more than material, symbolising the offering of the people's whole selves to God. The offering, in whatever form it takes, represents the giving back to God of the worshippers' time, gifts, possessions, bodies, lives and so much more. If the offering is understood and framed within worship in this wider symbolic sense, any notion of it being a practical device by which the church seeks money is dispelled. That the purpose to which offering monies are put has changed over the years shows that as a liturgical act, its purpose is not chiefly financial.

Rather than omit a time of offering from the liturgy, there is an opportunity for the church of today to reimagine and strengthen its place within worship as an invitation to participation: an opportunity for the faithful week-by-week to devote their very selves anew to God's service.

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<sup>76</sup> Psalm 24:1a.