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Worship Perceptions and Future Directions in Korean Conservative Presbyterian Churches: A Liturgical-Theological Reflection Based on Surveys of Pastors and Laity

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Abstract

This study examines worship perceptions in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches through a liturgical-theological interpretation of nationwide survey data collected from pastors, lay congregants, and the next generation within a major conservative Presbyterian context in Korea. Analyzing programmatic priorities, preaching emphases, expected outcomes of worship, and patterns of participation, the study identifies both enduring strengths and structural tensions in contemporary worship practice. While worship remains strongly Word-centered and oriented toward personal faith formation, items related to liturgy and sacrament are largely absent, reflecting a sermon-centered and programmatic understanding of worship. Interpreted within their historical and cultural formation, these patterns are examined as liturgical-theological structures rather than merely empirical trends. In response, the article proposes five future directions for worship renewal, emphasizing a more integrated relationship between Word and sacrament, participatory engagement, worship education, and generational and multicultural inclusivity.

Keywords: worship perception; Korean Presbyterian churches; liturgical theology; Word and sacrament; worship renewal

1. Introduction

For more than a century, worship in Korean conservative Presbyterian churches has played a decisive role in shaping the faith and identity of Korean Christianity.¹ A worship structure centered on the proclamation of the Word, a spiritual tradition emphasizing conversion and personal piety, and distinctive practices such as strict Sabbath observance and early morning prayer have significantly contributed to the growth and vitality of the Korean church (Joo and Kim 2006, pp. 484–91).

In recent decades, however, these churches have faced concurrent challenges, including membership decline, the disengagement of younger generations, a loss of public trust, and a diminishing social presence (Kang 2012). In a 21st century context, there is a growing call to reassess how worship is understood and practiced within Korean Presbyterian churches (Ahn 2025). Reexamining worship perceptions is therefore not merely a matter of liturgical adjustment or programmatic reform, but a critical theological task that bears directly on the identity and future of the Korean church.

This study analyzes national survey data from the Education Institute of the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Kosin) to examine worship perceptions in Korean conservative Presbyterian churches and interpret their theological significance from a liturgical perspective. The author was not directly involved in the design or administration of the



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survey and approaches the data as an external theological interpreter. The national survey data, comparing pastors, lay members, and next-generation perceptions, offer a unique perspective on this question, as previous studies on worship in the Korean context have largely focused on theological reflection or case studies of individual congregations. This study compares and synthesizes the perspectives of multiple ecclesial groups, offering a more nuanced account of the structural features and internal tensions shaping contemporary conservative Presbyterian understandings of worship. In doing so, the survey data provides an important empirical foundation for analyzing both the theological strengths of current worship practices and the limitations that emerge in relation to faith formation and ecclesial life.

This study is guided by three primary research questions. First, how do pastors, lay members, and the next generation in Korean conservative Presbyterian churches understand worship? Second, what theological strengths and structural tensions are embedded within these perceptions? Third, how do these findings illuminate future possibilities for Presbyterian worship practices in Korea? These questions move beyond simple measures of worship satisfaction or sermon evaluation and instead seek to integrate theological and practical dimensions, including the essential elements of worship (Word, sacrament, prayer, and congregational participation), the relationship between worship and everyday life, and the public and social dimensions of Christian worship.

The structure of the study is as follows. Section 2 outlines the research design, including the survey instrument, sampling strategy, and analytical procedures. Section 3 presents the empirical findings, focusing on key indicators such as program priorities, emphases in preaching, expected outcomes of worship, and patterns of worship participation. Section 4 interprets these findings within a liturgical-theological framework, identifying both the strengths of Korean conservative Presbyterian worship and the structural tensions that accompany them. Section 5 proposes directions for future worship renewal, emphasizing the balance between Word and sacrament, the enhancement of congregational participation, the integration of worship and daily life, and the cultivation of generational and cultural inclusivity.

By combining empirical analysis with liturgical-theological reflection, this study offers a multi-layered exploration of where Korean conservative Presbyterian worship currently stands and where it may be called to move. Beyond functioning as a survey report, this study seeks to contribute to the recovery of theological and practical imagination for worship renewal within the contemporary Korean church (Smith 2009).

2. Research Design and Methodology

This section outlines the nature of the survey data on which this study is based and explains the analytical procedures employed, thereby providing a methodological foundation for the interpretation of the results and the subsequent liturgical-theological discussion. By describing the scope of the study, its analytical approach, and the steps of data analysis in a systematic manner, this section clarifies how the data on worship perceptions examined in this article were generated and analyzed.

2.1. Research Context and Questions

This study investigates how worship is perceived within Korean conservative Presbyterian churches and explores the theological strengths and structural tensions revealed through these perceptions. To this end, it conducts a secondary analysis of nationwide survey data administered by the Education Institute of the Presbyterian Church in Korea (Kosin). The original survey was a comprehensive instrument addressing various dimen-

sions of pastoral ministry; for the purposes of this study, the data were reorganized and selectively analyzed in accordance with the research focus on worship.

Among the original dataset, this article analyzes only the key items directly related to perceptions of worship, while excluding other areas such as Christian education, fellowship, and service. Based on this focused analysis, the study seeks to address three research questions:

- How do pastors, lay members, and the next generation in Korean conservative Presbyterian churches understand worship?
- What theological strengths and structural tensions are embedded in these perceptions?
- How do these findings illuminate possible future directions for worship in Korean conservative Presbyterian churches?

2.2. Participants and Sampling

The survey respondents consisted of three groups—pastors, lay members, and the next generation (middle and high school students and university students)—all of whom responded to the same set of core worship-related questions. The pastoral sample included approximately 330 respondents, comprising senior pastors, associate pastors, ordained ministers, and commissioned church workers (figures rounded). The lay sample consisted of approximately 650 respondents, including elders, deacons, deaconesses, and general church members. The next-generation sample included approximately 370 respondents.

The sampling process involved distributing official invitation letters through presbyteries and local churches, followed by voluntary participation via an online survey administered through Google Forms. Multiple respondents from the same congregation were permitted to participate; however, the aim of the study was not to compare individual congregations but to identify nationwide patterns in worship perceptions. The survey was conducted using Google Forms, and respondents participated voluntarily by accessing a survey link distributed through presbyteries and local churches (this survey was an official study conducted under the auspices of the Education Institute of the Presbyterian Church in Korea, Kosin).

2.3. Survey Instrument and Worship-Related Items

Although the original questionnaire addressed church education and ministry in a broad sense, the worship-related items can be organized into five main categories:

- **Perceived Program Priorities**
Respondents evaluated the extent to which various church programs—such as worship activities, Bible and doctrinal study, evangelism, service, fellowship, Sunday school, small groups, and multicultural ministry—were emphasized in their congregations, using a five-point Likert scale.
- **Perceived Emphases in Preaching**
Respondents indicated the relative emphasis placed on topics such as worship, doctrine, evangelism, service, fellowship, the next generation, mission, and social engagement in preaching, also measured on a five-point Likert scale.
- **Expected Outcomes of Worship**
Respondents assessed the degree to which worship was expected to lead to various forms of spiritual change, including experiences of God's grace, increased biblical knowledge, spiritual growth, commitment to a faithful Christian life, repentance, piety in work and society, church service, love of neighbor, fellowship among believers, financial and offering commitments, mission support, evangelism, and social engagement.

- **Frequency of Worship Participation**
Participation frequency was measured for various worship services, including Sunday morning and evening services, Wednesday services, Friday prayer meetings (or weekday prayer gatherings), and early morning prayer, allowing for comparison of participation patterns across generations and ecclesial roles.
- **Perceived Impact and Satisfaction with Worship and Preaching**
Respondents evaluated the perceived impact of worship and preaching on spiritual growth, life transformation, service, and social engagement, as well as overall satisfaction, using a five-point Likert scale.

Among these five areas, the present study analyzes only those items that most directly constitute the structure of worship perception. Other areas, such as educational programs and Sunday school experiences, are reserved for future research.

2.4. Analytical Procedures and Statistical Methods

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26.0 and proceeded through the following steps:

- **Descriptive Statistics**
Means and standard deviations were calculated for each item to identify overall trends and distributions in worship perceptions. Particular attention was given to whether mean values clustered above 4.0, in the mid-to-high 3.0 range, or below 3.0, in order to assess the relative importance respondents attributed to each domain.
- **Group Comparison Analysis**
To examine differences among pastors, lay members, and the next generation—as well as differences based on ecclesial role or educational level—*t*-tests and one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were employed. For example, expectations of “experiencing God’s grace” after worship consistently appeared in the mid-to-high 4.0 range across roles and educational levels, whereas items related to social engagement remained in the mid-3.0 range with relatively larger standard deviations.
- **Selection of Core Worship Indicators**
From the extensive set of survey items, this study identifies four indicators that most clearly reveal the structure of worship perception: (1) program priorities (worship and multicultural ministry), (2) emphases in preaching (worship and social engagement), (3) expected outcomes of worship (experience of God’s grace, spiritual growth, and social engagement), and (4) frequency of worship participation (Sunday morning worship versus weekday and early morning services).

The purpose of the statistical analysis in this study is not causal explanation or predictive modeling, but the identification of structural patterns in worship perception that call for liturgical-theological interpretation.

3. Survey Results: Worship Perceptions in Conservative Korean Presbyterian Churches

This section presents the empirical patterns of worship perception in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches, based on the research design outlined in Section 2. By organizing the survey data through descriptive statistical analysis, the section identifies the structural characteristics of worship perception and differences among respondent groups, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent theological interpretation.

3.1. Respondent Distribution and Data Characteristics

The survey respondents consisted of approximately 330 pastors, 650 lay congregants, and 370 members of the next generation. Participants were drawn from a wide range of

regions, including Seoul and the metropolitan area, as well as Yeongnam, Honam, and Chungcheong provinces. Churches of small, medium, and large sizes were all represented in relatively balanced proportions. This sampling composition suggests that the data do not disproportionately reflect a particular region or church type but rather provide a broad snapshot of worship perceptions within conservative Korean Presbyterianism.

Across most worship-related items, standard deviations ranged between 0.7 and 1.0. Items with high mean scores and low standard deviations indicate strong consensus among respondents, whereas items with moderate means and larger standard deviations reflect greater divergence of perception. These distributional patterns offer important clues for identifying both the core structure and the points of tension within contemporary worship perceptions.

3.2. Programmatic Priorities in the Church: Worship as the Central Programmatic Priority and the Decentering of Multicultural Ministry

In response to the question, “Which programs does your church prioritize?”, pastors rated worship activities highest, with a mean score of 4.28. This was followed by Bible and doctrinal education (3.62), fellowship (3.78), church education (3.67), small groups (3.68), and evangelism (3.38). Multicultural ministry received the lowest rating, with a mean of 2.24, indicating that it remains at the periphery of congregational priorities.

A similar pattern emerged among lay respondents. Worship activities again ranked highest (4.32), followed by fellowship (4.19), Bible and doctrinal study (3.91), service (3.85), evangelism (3.71), church education (3.67), and small groups (3.68). Multicultural ministry consistently received mean scores in the low 2-point range across all groups.

These findings indicate that conservative Korean Presbyterian churches continue to maintain a stable identity centered on worship and the Word, while multicultural and broader social ministries occupy a relatively marginal position within the core structure of church life.

3.3. Themes Emphasized in Preaching: Worship and Doctrine Versus Social Engagement

In response to the question, “What does preaching in your church emphasize?”, pastors reported the highest mean scores for worship-related themes (4.29), doctrine (3.57), the next generation (3.68), and evangelism (3.50). Social engagement received the lowest mean score at 2.92.

Several notable features emerge from these results. Preaching is primarily perceived as emphasizing the meaning of worship, doctrinal instruction, and evangelism, while themes such as fellowship, service, mission, and the next generation receive moderate attention. By contrast, social engagement ranks lowest and does not reach a mean score of 3.0, indicating that it occupies the least emphasized position within the preaching agenda.

Standard deviations across these items generally fall within the 0.9–1.0 range, suggesting considerable variation among churches, particularly with respect to social engagement. While some congregations place a strong emphasis on public faith and social responsibility, the overall pattern indicates that preaching remains structurally oriented toward personal faith formation and inward piety.

3.4. Expected Outcomes of Worship: Grace-Centered Focus and the Gap in Public Dimensions

Among next-generation respondents, the highest-rated expected outcomes of worship were the experience of God’s grace (4.46), spiritual growth (4.49), spiritual commitment (4.45), and repentance (4.41). High levels of importance were also assigned to love for neighbors (4.44), fellowship among believers (4.33), and growth in biblical knowledge (4.26).

By contrast, financial commitment (3.83) and support for missions (3.90) occupied the mid-range, while social engagement showed a mean score of 3.64 with the largest

standard deviation (1.04). This indicates a wide divergence of perception regarding public responsibility and social involvement.

Pastoral responses display a similar pattern. Items related to personal spiritual experience—such as grace, spiritual growth, and repentance—exhibit high levels of agreement, whereas items related to social engagement and faith in the workplace show lower means and greater dispersion.

Taken together, these response patterns suggest that expectations regarding the effects of worship are strongly concentrated on personal and inward dimensions of faith. At the same time, the wide dispersion of responses concerning social responsibility indicates that perceptions of the public and social implications of worship remain uneven and contested.

3.5. *Patterns of Worship Participation: The Absolute Centrality of Sunday Morning Worship*

Across all respondent groups, Sunday morning worship showed the highest levels of participation. In contrast, participation in Sunday afternoon or evening services, midweek services, Friday prayer meetings, and early morning prayer meetings was either relatively low or marked by significant generational differences. Among next-generation respondents in particular, “non-participation” emerged as the most frequent response for all services except Sunday morning worship.

These findings confirm that Sunday morning worship continues to function as the primary reference point of religious life in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches. At the same time, they indicate a weakening of the traditional rhythm of repeated worship participation—especially weekday services and prayer meetings—that once played a formative role in sustaining faith over time.

3.6. *Basic Patterns of Worship Perception*

When synthesized, the survey results reveal several defining characteristics of worship perception in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches:

- The stable maintenance of worship- and Word-centered orientation
Across programmatic priorities, preaching emphases, and expected outcomes of worship, worship, doctrine, and the Word consistently occupy the highest positions.
- The marginalization and dispersion of perceptions regarding multicultural ministry and social engagement
Mean scores remain low while standard deviations are high, indicating fragmented understandings of the public and social dimensions of faith.
- The absolute centrality of Sunday morning worship
Sunday morning worship holds a shared central significance across groups, while participation in other services reveals pronounced generational gaps.

These findings demonstrate that conservative Korean Presbyterian worship retains important strengths, including a strong emphasis on the Word, a God-centered orientation, and a commitment to devotional faith. At the same time, the near absence of survey items related to liturgy and sacrament suggests that worship understanding has been shaped over time less by liturgical or sacramental frameworks than by sermon-centered and program-oriented structures.

This basic pattern provides an essential empirical foundation for the interpretive analysis developed in Section 4. The numerical trends identified here indicate the need for interpretive reexamination of the theological assumptions and historical trajectories that have shaped contemporary worship perceptions in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches.

4. Liturgical-Theological Analysis: A Structural Diagnosis of Worship Perceptions in Conservative Korean Presbyterian Churches

The survey data allow for a detailed analysis of how worship is perceived within conservative Korean Presbyterian churches and how worship is currently practiced in concrete ecclesial contexts. The present analysis is guided by the classical liturgical axiom *lex orandi–lex credendi–lex agendi*, which understands worship as the formative nexus of prayer, belief, and embodied practice. From this perspective, worship is not merely an aggregate of activities but a theological event in which the church's prayer shapes its faith and directs its public life. The survey findings are therefore interpreted in light of this dynamic relationship between worship, doctrine, and action.

4.1. Theological Strengths of Worship

Although the survey does not include a sufficient number of items directly related to liturgy and sacrament, the responses nonetheless provide a clear picture of the theological foundations upon which worship in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches stands, as well as its enduring strengths.

First, a strong emphasis on the Word and doctrinal teaching is clear. The high response rates for items related to “worship activities,” “Bible and doctrinal education,” and “experiencing grace through the Word” indicate that conservative Korean Presbyterian churches continue to place the proclamation of the Word at the center of worship. This pattern suggests that the long-standing tradition of understanding preaching as the core element of worship remains stable, and that such an orientation has played a significant role in preserving theological coherence and ecclesial identity within Korean Presbyterian worship.

Second, worship is understood primarily in relation to the experience of divine grace and spiritual formation. The fact that “experience of God's grace,” “spiritual growth,” and “encounter with God” rank highest among the expected outcomes of worship demonstrates that conservative Korean Presbyterian churches perceive worship as a central event for meeting God and shaping faith. This response pattern suggests that a traditional understanding of worship—one that interprets its effects largely in terms of personal faith experience and inner transformation—continues to exert a strong influence.

Third, a commitment to devoted faith emerges as a defining characteristic of worship. High levels of participation in offerings and positive responses regarding acts of commitment indicate that worship is understood as a responsive act in which believers offer themselves to God. Rather than viewing worship as a consumable or purely private experience, respondents tend to recognize it as a public expression of faith involving responsibility and commitment. This orientation reflects a long-standing theological understanding of worship as a response to divine grace.

Taken together, despite the limited scope of the survey items, the respondents' descriptions of their worship experiences and faith attitudes demonstrate that conservative Korean Presbyterian worship continues to sustain important theological strengths, including a Word-centered orientation, a God-focused understanding of worship, and a commitment to devoted faith.

4.2. Structural Limitations and Tensions in Worship Perception

An examination of the survey design itself reveals several structural limitations in how worship is perceived within conservative Korean Presbyterian churches. Analyzing not only what the survey asks but also what it omits provides insight into the underlying formation of worship understanding.

First, items related to liturgy and sacrament are largely absent. This absence should not be understood merely as a methodological limitation, but as a theological datum that

reveals how worship has been historically framed and internalized within conservative Korean Presbyterian churches. The survey focuses on expected outcomes of worship, frequency of participation, and satisfaction with preaching and worship. However, it includes very few questions that directly address the constitutive elements of worship itself, such as participation in the Eucharist, communal prayer and congregational responses, the role of the creed, or practices of Scripture reading and congregational singing. As a result, worship tends to be understood less as a composite of liturgical actions and more through the lens of sermon emphasis and individual spiritual outcomes, such as experiencing grace or spiritual growth. This pattern suggests that, over time, worship understanding within conservative Korean Presbyterian churches has been shaped primarily around preaching and programmatic structures rather than around worship as a holistic liturgical event.

Second, satisfaction with worship is effectively conflated with satisfaction with preaching.

Although the survey distinguishes between worship satisfaction and sermon satisfaction as separate items, the structure of the questionnaire suggests that, in practice, worship satisfaction is largely equated with sermon quality. There are no items assessing satisfaction with other liturgical components—such as prayer, congregational singing, offering, corporate responses, creeds, or the Eucharist—thereby reinforcing a framework in which the overall evaluation of worship is determined primarily by preaching. This indicates a weakening of the balance between proclamation of the Word and liturgical action within Korean Presbyterian worship, a pattern that has been widely observed in sermon-centered Protestant contexts beyond Korea (Lathrop 1993).

Third, questions about worship participation are framed in terms of program attendance rather than worship understanding. Items measuring participation in Sunday morning worship, Sunday afternoon or evening services, midweek services, Friday prayer meetings, and early morning prayer meetings treat worship participation largely as attendance at church programs. This framing reflects a structural tendency to view worship not primarily as a theological event or formative experience, but as a matter of programmatic involvement. Questions concerning why believers participate in particular services, what they expect from worship, or how worship shapes faith over time are notably absent.

Fourth, post-worship faith orientations are weighted toward personal piety and inward experience. Items such as “experience of God’s grace,” “spiritual growth,” “repentance,” and “encouragement in daily life” receive consistently positive responses, whereas items related to “love of neighbor,” “social engagement,” “public faith,” and “justice and responsibility” receive comparatively lower emphasis. This pattern suggests that worship understanding has been formed primarily around personal devotion and inward transformation, while communal and public dimensions have received less sustained attention.

Overall, the survey design reflects a broader structural reality: worship in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches continues to be understood predominantly through a sermon-centered framework, with relatively limited attention to liturgical and sacramental dimensions. Worship is thus more readily interpreted as participation in church programs than as a theological event. These structural limitations become more apparent when considered in relation to the contemporary challenges of worship, which will be addressed in the following section.

4.3. Interpreting the Formation of Worship Perceptions

The patterns identified above cannot be explained solely by recent trends or individual congregational choices. Rather, they are rooted in long-standing historical and cultural factors that have shaped worship perception over time—factors that are also reflected in the design of the survey itself.

First, historical factors play a decisive role. The worship structure of conservative Korean Presbyterian churches was largely formed under the influence of American Presbyterian missionaries who arrived in Korea in the late nineteenth century. Theologically, these missionaries were shaped by the Calvinist tradition emphasized by Old Princeton theology, while their worship practices reflected nineteenth-century American evangelicalism and frontier revival movements (Kim 1999, pp. 169–90).

As a result, worship naturally developed a structure centered on the proclamation of the Word rather than on sacrament and liturgy, with congregational participation oriented primarily toward listening to sermons. Worship patterns that involve preparatory singing followed by preaching aimed at personal conversion and commitment bear the marks of this early missionary legacy (Kim 1999, pp. 214–15). The near absence of liturgical and sacramental items in the present survey suggests that these historical patterns have been deeply internalized and continue to shape contemporary worship understanding. Within this historical configuration, the Eucharist gradually came to assume a secondary liturgical role in relation to preaching. While sacramental theology was never formally denied, its formative and ecclesial dimensions were often subordinated to the didactic and conversion-oriented priorities of worship. In practice, this produced an implicit hierarchy in which the sermon functioned as the primary locus of divine encounter, whereas the Eucharist was celebrated less frequently and received comparatively less sustained theological reflection. Such a development reflects historical prioritization rather than doctrinal rejection.

Second, cultural factors have exerted a powerful influence. Korean society's emphasis on pragmatism and efficiency has shaped expectations of worship as well. In a cultural context that values immediate results, tangible benefits, and personal religious experience, worship is easily reduced to "a time of spiritual recharging," "a place to receive grace," or "a means of acquiring spiritual benefit." Under such conditions, dimensions of worship such as public responsibility, communal participation, symbolic depth, silence, mystery, and embodied practices are more likely to be diminished (Saliers 1996, pp. 11–18).

The survey findings reflect this cultural influence. While items related to personal grace and spiritual growth receive strong emphasis, those concerning love of neighbor, social responsibility, and public faith remain relatively underdeveloped.

A worship theology that emphasizes God's sovereignty and transcendence has yielded important strengths, including careful biblical interpretation and a God-centered orientation. At the same time, it has tended to weaken theological sensitivity to God's immanence as expressed through social engagement, public responsibility, and attention to structural injustice. These historical and cultural dynamics provide essential context for understanding how worship perceptions and practices have been formed within conservative Korean Presbyterian churches and why certain tensions persist today.

5. Future Directions for Worship in Conservative Korean Presbyterian Churches

Renewing worship in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches requires the recovery of fresh liturgical imagination—understood not as the retrieval of a fully articulated historical system, but as the reactivation of latent liturgical sensibilities rooted in Scripture, the Reformed tradition, and the lived practices of the church—while remaining attentive to theological identity. Based on the preliminary survey findings and the liturgical-theological analysis of this study, the following five directions are proposed.

5.1. *Inviting a Balance Between Word and Sacrament*

A review of the survey items in this project reveals a noticeable absence of questions related to liturgy and sacrament. From the standpoint of a liturgical scholar, this is a

significant limitation. At the same time, it is understandable that researchers may have hesitated to include such items, given the relatively limited awareness of liturgy and sacrament among many pastors and congregants in Korean Presbyterian contexts and the long-standing priority accorded to the Word—particularly as it is preached, taught, and studied.

Rather than presuming that a historically stable balance between Word and Sacrament once existed and was later lost, this study argues that the future of Christian worship lies in cultivating a more integrated theological and liturgical imagination, in which Word and Sacrament function as mutually interpretive practices through which the gospel is proclaimed, enacted, and received. One obstacle to such integration, however, is the persistent misunderstanding of liturgy within certain Protestant contexts.

In many cases, “liturgy” is mistakenly perceived as the exclusive domain of Roman Catholicism (McKee 1995, p. 187). This misconception can be traced, at least in part, to a historically intensified Protestant reaction against Roman Catholicism within a Presbyterian tradition deeply shaped by the sixteenth-century Reformation (Moon 2021, p. 231). Yet every Christian tradition has liturgy and ritual, even in communities widely regarded as “minimalist.” For example, Quaker worship, often cited as one of the simplest forms of Christian worship, still manifests a liturgical form (White 1989, pp. 135–49), because what appears to be “formless” is itself a form. For this reason, the concept of liturgy must be revisited and clarified.

Liturgy includes both a Word-centered dimension and an enacted, bodily dimension (Anderson 2003, p. 40). Reading Scripture together, listening to preaching, offering communal prayer, singing praise, presenting offerings, and proclaiming blessing—these are not peripheral add-ons but liturgical acts. Christian worship, therefore, is inherently liturgical, and historically as well as contemporaneously it has generated diverse forms of worship across time and place (White 1992). In Korean Presbyterian churches, however, a strong assumption persists: if one has listened to the sermon, one has “done worship.” The Word of God is indeed central, but in practice, preaching is often confused with instruction, and worship can be reduced from the celebration of God’s presence to something closer to an extended Bible lecture. This “lecture-style preaching” tendency emerged in part from an effort to strengthen Word-centered tradition, yet it has also contributed to an imbalance in which “explaining the Word” is treated as the center of the whole service, weakening the dramatic, gracious, and communal character of worship.

For this reason, a renewed theological recognition of the Eucharist as the “visible Word”—that is, as a sacramental act constitutive of ecclesial identity and formative of Christian life—is as necessary as the proclamation of the “audible Word” in preaching. What is needed is not merely an increased frequency of communion but also a richer Eucharistic theology and liturgical education that attends to the concrete shape of sacramental practice. John Calvin advocated weekly communion, yet due to opposition from the Geneva City Council, he practiced it four times a year; at the same time, he coordinated communion schedules among the churches in Geneva so that participation beyond four times remained possible (Horton 2000, p. 150). Contemporary North American Reformed denominations, inheriting this impulse, have in recent decades produced liturgical resources and service books as part of an intentional renewal of liturgy and sacrament (Moon 2020a, pp. 117–19). Such developments deserve careful attention, since the balance between Word and Sacrament is essential for spiritual growth and maturity. Moreover, this balance is closely related to the connection between what the church prays and confesses and how it acts in the world (Anderson 2017).

5.2. *The Law of Prayer, the Law of Belief, and the Law of Action*

True worship does not end on Sunday morning. Worship is an event that extends into daily life; it must guide believers to practice in the workplace, the home, and society what they hear and receive in worship. A foundational liturgical maxim expresses this dynamic: *lex orandi, lex credendi*—the law of prayer forms the law of belief, meaning that doctrine emerged from, and was shaped within, the worshiping life of the church (de Clerck 1994, pp. 180, 189). As the church developed from the early centuries, doctrines and confessions were refined in and through worship; these doctrinal formulations also served to test and guide worship practice, so that worship and doctrine matured in mutual relation. Worship and theology, in other words, are inseparably intertwined. Yet many contemporary liturgical theologians and Christian ethicists argue that this relationship must be extended further into the sphere of action (Moon 2025, pp. 21–22). The church must form believers who are faithful not only inside the sanctuary but also in the public world.

One reason for the weakening of Christianity’s public credibility is that confessional faith has too often failed to take root in lived practice (Lee 2000, p. 276). Therefore, discipleship in one’s vocation and social location—namely, the practice of public faith—must be strengthened. Put differently, worship should be structured in such a way that “experiencing grace” leads toward “transformed living.”

When this happens, the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) forms the law of belief (*lex credendi*) and expands into the law of action (*lex agendi*). While *lex agendi* represents a later development of the classical *lex orandi–lex credendi* axiom—and contemporary scholarship has proposed related formulations such as *lex vivendi* or *lex operandi*—this study retains the *orandi–credendi–agendi* sequence as a coherent theological framework linking worship, belief, and embodied practice. Worship is not merely a time for conveying religious instruction; it becomes a gracious event that reshapes life. Ultimately, worship reforms believers’ existence and sends them into the world in the power of the Spirit, guiding the church beyond being merely a community that confesses faith toward becoming a community that embodies faith.

5.3. *Planning Worship for Active and Participatory Congregational Engagement*

Worship should not remain a structure in which ministers deliver, and congregations merely listen. Worship is, by its nature, a shared act performed by the whole people of God, and a structure that centers on passive listening inevitably cultivates passivity. This tendency is particularly pronounced in many Korean Presbyterian settings.

Beyond standing and sitting, congregational forms of response are often limited. The Apostles’ Creed may be recited mechanically each week; Scripture reading can be treated less as the proclamation of God’s Word and more as a preparatory step for the sermon; and communion often repeats a privatized pattern in which the bread and cup are received quietly and individually for personal reflection. Over time, such practices have produced a structural limitation in which active participation becomes difficult. It is also plausible that this worship pattern has some relationship to the wider tendency of Korean churches to be less engaged and less transformative in relation to public issues and social concerns (Moon 2015, pp. 221–23).

If congregational participation is to be strengthened, each church must pursue participatory worship planning appropriate to its particular context. For example, rather than reciting the Apostles’ Creed uniformly, a church may at times employ a dialogical confession of faith in which the leader asks questions regarding each person of the Trinity and the congregation responds. Likewise, prayers for illumination may sometimes be offered as a shared reading by the whole congregation, using a printed text in the bulletin as a communal preparation to receive the Word.

The same is true of communion. Depending on the size of the congregation and the spatial configuration of the sanctuary, communicants may come forward to receive, or gather around the table, rather than remaining seated. In addition, a brief dialogue between presider and congregation can be placed at the beginning of the Eucharistic rite to enliven congregational participation. Scripture reading may also become more fully congregational by inviting children to serve as readers in intergenerational worship, as is common in many North American Reformed churches. When congregants assume roles, respond, and move as participants, worship becomes not a time to “attend a lecture” but a holy act enacted by the people of God.

5.4. Strengthening Denominational Worship Education

What lies at the root of the limited depth and breadth of worship awareness in many Korean Presbyterian contexts? Above all, the absence of sustained worship education must be identified as one of the most serious weaknesses today. In many seminary curricula, the number of courses in liturgics is minimal, and practical training related to the sacraments and presiding in worship is often insufficient (Moon 2025, pp. 40–41).

It is also notable that the emergence of faculty specializing in liturgics within conservative Korean Presbyterian denominations has been relatively recent. For example, in the Hapdong denomination, a professor specializing in worship has been appointed only within the past few years, while the Hapshin denomination still lacks a professor trained specifically in liturgical studies. Such institutional limitations inevitably shape local ecclesial practice and consciousness.

In this environment, pastors may have a genuine interest in worship yet remain at the level of adopting new programs or treating worship primarily as a tool for church growth (Moon 2020b, p. 51).

Moreover, some communities absolutize a particular interpretation of the Reformation tradition or a single Reformed worship model, responding defensively to new hymnody or the strengths of other traditions. Under such conditions, healthy worship development becomes difficult.

Therefore, denominational initiatives should include efforts such as the following:

- Regularized programs in liturgics and sacramental theology for pastors;
- Development of educational materials for laypeople, including small-group resources on worship.

Over time, such educational investment can expand worship awareness and deepen the ecclesial “soil” in which worship practice grows. By contrast, worship reform pursued without theological foundations tends to remain at the level of superficial programming, while an approach that absolutizes one tradition may result in reproducing fixed forms without critical reflection. Conservative Korean Presbyterian churches, therefore, must recover a more open and well-balanced theological posture and concentrate denominational energy on teaching and practicing the depth of worship’s meaning.

5.5. Preparing for Next-Generation Worship and Multicultural Worship

In a rapidly changing society, worship requires the imagination to receive the language of new generations and diverse cultures. Since COVID-19, Korean Christianity has declined at a notable pace, and the perception is widely voiced both inside and outside the church that young adults, adolescents, and university students have become, in effect, a “mission field” (Moon 2021, p. 34). Yet hope remains. The generations that once led Korean church growth are still present, and a liturgical reconstruction that connects these generations with the next remains possible. What kind of approach, then, is required?

First, the forms, language, and modes of participation in worship for youth and children must be reconfigured so that generational division may be addressed. While the language and sensibilities of the next generation should be respected, this must be pursued in ways that do not damage the essential meaning of worship. The recent growth of interest in “intergenerational worship” is encouraging, but a merely physical integration without careful study and pastoral sensitivity can intensify resistance and deepen conflict between generations.

Unless a church cultivates shared worship practices across generations—developing hymns that can unite communities, improving musical quality, and fostering mutual cultural understanding—generations will increasingly separate, and the conditions that once supported widespread growth will be difficult to recover (Moon 2024, pp. 123–24).

Second, the church must develop concrete and sustainable strategies for worship integration in response to the rapid increase in multicultural families and immigrant communities. Not only in major cities but also in smaller regional areas, migrant workers and their families continue to grow in number. Helping them become naturally integrated into the worshiping space of the church has become an urgent task that can no longer be postponed. If they are to move beyond mere attendance at Sunday worship toward participation in the sacraments and fuller incorporation into the communal life of the church, worship must employ liturgical strategies that can cross linguistic barriers (Moon 2022, pp. 8–11).

Above all, denominations should produce bilingual (Korean–English) editions of service books for use in both domestic and international contexts. In addition, churches should prepare worship environments suitable for multicultural realities—providing subtitles during worship, projecting congregational responses on screens, and, when needed, offering simultaneous interpretation. Such efforts go beyond mere “convenience.” They are concrete ways for Korean churches to embody, within worship itself, the diversity and hospitality of the people of God.

6. Conclusions

This study has examined large-scale survey data collected from pastors, congregants, and the next generation in order to identify the structural characteristics of worship perceptions in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches and to offer a liturgical-theological interpretation of those findings.

The analysis confirms that Korean Presbyterian churches have firmly maintained distinctive strengths—namely, a strong Word-centered orientation, a theocentric understanding of worship, and a deep sense of religious commitment. The long-standing tradition of understanding worship as an event of grace and placing preaching at its center has served as a crucial foundation sustaining both the identity and theological coherence of Korean Presbyterianism.

At the same time, the findings reveal a persistent structural tension. As the understanding of worship has converged excessively on a sermon-centered framework, the meanings of sacrament and liturgy have not been adequately recovered, and emphases on personal piety have not sufficiently expanded into public responsibility and social practice. This indicates that the classical liturgical paradigm—according to which the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) forms the law of belief (*lex credendi*) and is further extended into the law of action (*lex agendi*)—has not been fully realized. Such discontinuity is not unrelated to the broader erosion of public trust in the church within Korean society.

Patterns of worship participation likewise show a strong concentration on Sunday morning services alongside a widening generational gap in worship experience. This

should not be read merely as a statistical tendency but rather as a theological indicator reflecting the historical and cultural formation of Korean Presbyterianism.

Looking ahead, the renewal of worship in conservative Korean Presbyterian churches will require a recalibration that seeks balance between Word and Sacrament, the strengthening of congregational participation, the integration of worship with everyday life, the expansion of public faith, and the reconfiguration of liturgical imagination attentive to generational and cultural diversity. Worship is not only the center of the church but also God's gracious drama that sends believers into the world. When worship is re-envisioned in light of this theological awareness, conservative Korean Presbyterian churches may discover new possibilities for renewal even amid the present challenges.

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Note

- ¹ In this study, the term “conservative” does not denote a political orientation but refers to a historically formed ecclesial and theological identity characterized by confessional Reformed theology, strong biblical authority, and continuity with twentieth-century Presbyterian orthodoxy in Korea.

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