



Helps for Worship

A message from the
**ORTHODOX
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH**

BY WILLIAM SHISHKO

Helps for Worship

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Preface

The right worship of God is the highest calling given to every man, woman, and child. “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”

Indeed, joyful worship in this life is a blessed foretaste of the worship that God’s people will give him for all eternity. Man’s chief end in the new heavens and the new earth is indeed “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever” (cf. Rev. 5:8–14).

Worship is, first of all, *theological*. It is focused on the true and living God and regulated by his word (Deut. 12:32; Matt. 15:9).

Worship is *Christological*. It is given, received, and at every point conditioned by Jesus Christ as our Prophet, Priest, and King (1 Tim. 2:5).

Worship is *spiritual*. It flows from hearts filled with the Holy Spirit in a setting in which the Holy Spirit is at work using the elements of worship to transform lives (John 4:24; 2 Cor. 3:18).

But worship is also *pedagogical*. Each element of worship teaches something, and all elements of worship are to be used with an understanding of *what* is being done in worship and *why*. We are to worship with understanding (Heb. 11:6; 1 Cor. 14:15).

The brief expositions of the elements of worship that follow are to help both ministers who lead worship and those who follow them, so that all who are gathered together might better worship God with understanding minds and engaged hearts.

These were originally produced to be used as bulletin inserts at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Franklin Square, New York. As a pastor of a congregation with an increasing number of first-generation Christians who had little or no experience with historic Reformed worship, I sensed the need for our people to have popular explanations of the various elements of an Orthodox Presbyterian worship service. I was also concerned that “veterans” of Reformed worship either took these elements for granted or did not, in fact, understand what they had come to do as a regular weekly routine. In addition, I wanted to ask questions to challenge people’s hearts as they prepared to worship God on the Lord’s Day. It is an ever present danger for all of us to worship with our lips while our hearts are far from God (Matt. 15:8; cf. Isa. 29:13).

I would suggest that this material be used in at least three ways:

1. To give ministers a tool to help them orally explain the elements of worship as they lead worship services from week to week. If the people in our congregations learn to value the biblical reasons for what is prescribed in our Directory for the Public Worship of God, they will be less prone to run after contemporary departures from the richly significant elements of historic Christian worship.
2. To make these expositions available in consecutive weeks as bulletin inserts (which was the primary purpose for which they were written), so that those attending worship can use them in the quiet before the service to prepare themselves for the worship of God.
3. To send out as weekly e-mail communications for those who follow the blessed practice of preparing for the services of the Sabbath in their homes, especially on Saturday evenings.

I am honored that the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church desires to publish this little volume to help congregations of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and other Christian communions in their worship. May the great King and Head of the church use it to help make us ever more joyful, hearty, and educated worshipers of the true and living God in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28).

I. What Is Worship?

“The first foundation of righteousness undoubtedly is the worship of God.” —John Calvin

The term *worship* comes from an old word that means “worth-ship.” It is to ascribe honor to one who is worthy. The highest duty of those made in the image of God is to “ascribe worth” to the one in whom they live and move and have their very being (Acts 17:28).

Christian worship has been rightly defined as “the activity of the new life of a believer in which, recognizing the fullness of the Godhead as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and his mighty redemptive acts, he seeks by the power of the Holy Spirit to render to the living God the glory, honor, and submission which are his due” (Robert Rayburn). “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (Rev. 5:12). Our worship is to reflect the worship of heaven, in which all that is around the throne of God gives glory to him. “The Father is seeking such to worship Him” (John 4:23).

Your worship personally, in your families, and especially when gathered together as a church, ought to be the most wonderful experience of your lives. It ought to be a foretaste of an eternity of worship of the One who has saved us and who blesses us with good things beyond measure.

For Reflection

1. Why is God worthy of your *best* efforts in giving him worship?
2. What things hinder you from giving God the honor that is due to him in your worship?
3. What are the best ways you can remove those hindrances, so that your worship is more pleasing to God and more satisfying to you?

2. The Principles of Public Worship (Part 1)

(from the Directory for Worship)

1. Since the Holy Scriptures are the only infallible rule of faith and practice, the principles of public worship must be derived from the Bible, and from no other source.

2. A service of public worship is not merely a gathering of God's children with each other but before all else a meeting of the triune God with his chosen people. God is present in public worship not only by virtue of the divine omnipresence but, much more intimately, as the faithful covenant Savior. The Lord Jesus Christ said: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

3. The end of public worship is the glory of God. His people should engage in all its several parts with singular attention to his glory. Public worship has as its aim the building of Christ's church by the perfecting of the saints and the addition to its membership of such as are being saved—all to the glory of God. Through public worship on the Lord's Day Christians should learn to serve God all the days of the week in their every activity, remembering, whether they eat or drink or whatever they do, to do all to the glory of God.

4. Public worship is rightly said to be divine because God is its beginning and its end. It is of him and through him and unto him.

5. Public worship is Christian when the worshipers recognize that Christ is the Mediator by whom alone they can come unto God, when they honor Christ as the Head of the church, who rules over public worship, and when their worship is an expression of their faith in Christ and of their love for him.

For Reflection

1. How is your worship changed by knowing that it is "before all else a meeting of the triune God with his chosen people"?

2. How can you best glorify God as you worship today?

3. The Principles of Public Worship (Part 2)

(from the Directory for Worship, continued)

6. Public worship must be performed in spirit and in truth. Externalism and hypocrisy stand condemned. The forms of public worship have value only when they serve to express the inner reverence of the worshiper and his sincere devotion to the true and living God. And only those whose hearts have been renewed by the Holy Spirit are capable of such reverence and devotion.

7. The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given his church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness. From its beginning to its end a service of public worship should be characterized by that simplicity which is an evidence of sincerity and by that beauty and dignity which are a manifestation of holiness.

8. Public worship differs from private worship in that in public worship God is served by his saints unitedly as his covenant people, the body of Christ. For this reason the covenant children should be present so far as possible as well as adults. For the same reason no favoritism may be shown to any who attend. Nor may any member of the church presume to exalt himself above others as though he were more spiritual, but each shall esteem others better than himself.

9. It behooves God's people not only to come into his presence with a deep sense of awe at the thought of his perfect holiness and their own exceeding sinfulness, but also to enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise for the great salvation which he has so graciously wrought for them through his only begotten Son and applied to them by the Holy Spirit.

For Reflection

1. If worship is not what I expect it to be, how much of this problem is connected with me? Is my heart full of reverence and devotion?

2. Am I coming into God's presence with a deep sense of awe at who God is and also with real thanksgiving for all he has done for me?

4. Preparing for Worship (Part 1)

“Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.”

—Ex. 20:8

Why does the Lord tell us to remember the Sabbath day? The Larger Catechism (Q. 121) answers that this is “partly, because we are very ready to forget it.” Knowing our weakness, the Lord tells us, as part of his moral law, to make special efforts to keep the day for rest, worship, and works of necessity and mercy, separated unto him. (*Holy* means “separated unto God.”)

It is sobering to realize that failure to keep the Sabbath day separated unto the Lord is on a par with idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, stealing, and lying. That alone should be a powerful rebuke to us when we regard the Sabbath day as our day rather than the Lord’s, and when we seek our own pleasure rather than his (see Isa. 58:13). If we think of the Lord’s Day for anything beyond what God has ordained it to be, we are guilty of a serious form of idolatry of self.

As a major part of your preparing for Lord’s Day worship, plan ahead—that is, “remember”—to keep that whole day separate for God’s purposes for that day.

- Plan ahead, so that you can be present for all the church meetings of that day (including evening worship).
- Plan ahead, so that you can eat simple meals that do not take too much time and effort for those who prepare and serve them.
- Plan ahead, so that you can get some bodily rest on this day that was made for our physical and spiritual rest.
- Plan ahead, so that you can do some works of mercy for others on the day that is to be kept free of our regular weekly work.
- Plan ahead, so that you can have some time to nourish your own soul by private Bible and devotional reading and by prayer.
- Plan ahead, so that you can have some time to reinforce your children’s Bible and catechism lessons.

For Reflection

1. Do you take the fourth commandment as seriously as the other nine?
2. What do you need to change today, so that you can better keep the Sabbath day holy?

5. Preparing for Worship (Part 2)

“Be still, and know that I am God.”

—Ps. 46:10

After six days in overdrive, it is difficult to slow down, change gears, and get our souls to the proper speed for the worship of God. Even with the best preparation for the Sabbath day, the world and its concerns stick to us as we gather on Sunday.

Corporate worship of the eternal God is the most important activity of our week, but we come to it caught up with the trivial things of our passing lives and a passing age.

Our remaining indwelling sin, together with the power of a very active devil—see Mark 4:15—works powerfully, and we find it hard to turn our attention to the surpassing greatness and goodness of the everlasting God.

Use the minutes prior to worship to “be still” and prepare to give God praise that comes from an undivided heart. Here are some practical suggestions:

- Discipline yourself to be quiet before worship. There will be ample time to speak with others after the service is concluded.
- Go over the items in the order of worship listed in your bulletin. Look up the hymns and Scripture passages that will be used. Pray over them, and ask God to use those words powerfully in your own life and in the lives of others as you worship.
- Show your children the hymns that you will be singing. Quietly explain the items of worship and what they mean. Pray with your children for God’s blessing on the service.
- Pray that the Holy Spirit would come and show his transforming power during the time of worship. Particularly pray for his work in the one who will be leading worship and preaching the Word.

For Reflection

1. What distractions before worship make it difficult to be well prepared to give God glory in corporate worship?
2. How can the time before the service best be used to make the worship time most profitable for everyone?
3. How might you be hindering others from “being still” before worship?

6. The Order of Worship

“Let all things be done decently and in order.”

—1 Cor. 14:40

The word *liturgy* means “order of worship.” It comes from a Greek word meaning “public work,” especially as rendered in a religious service. All churches have a liturgy. Some have thought more about what an “order of worship” should be than others have. In all cases, an order of worship guides us as to how we are to do the public work of giving God the glory that is due to his name.

Those in the Reformed and Presbyterian tradition see the order of worship as a dialogue between God and man. Isaiah 6 provides the pattern for this understanding. God is present and he is praised. The prophet humbles himself and pleads for forgiveness of his sins. God graciously grants forgiveness. Then God speaks to Isaiah, giving him his commission as a prophet. Isaiah responds in faith and obedience. Those are the essential elements of all worship—personal, family, and corporate.

In our “liturgy” (order of worship), note that the dialogue pattern is the reason for the specific elements and their order. God speaks and we respond in praise and confession. We ask God to bless us in this particular service. We minister to one another and confess our sins. God promises us forgiveness by his word. We respond in thanksgiving and giving! (We give out of thanks for God’s goodness to us.) We hear God’s word read and ask for the Spirit’s work to prepare us as it is preached. In preaching, Christ himself speaks to us by his minister who opens the Word of God faithfully. We respond in faith, obedience, and appropriate praise. We go forth with the promise of God’s blessing.

What a privilege it is to have God speak to us through his minister. And what a privilege it is for us to respond to him as a congregation (not just individually or as a family). Prepare yourself for your holy dialogue with God through your worship service.

For Reflection

1. Read Isaiah 6. Do you see the dialogue aspect of Isaiah’s dealings with God?
2. How does knowing that worship is a dialogue between God and man help you appreciate the entire experience of worship?

7. The Salutation

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

—Rom. 1:7, 1 Cor. 1:3, etc.

The order of worship, as presented in the bulletin, often uses unusual words, like *salutation*, *invocation*, and *benediction*. All of these terms have a biblical basis. By understanding them, you will have a better experience of corporate worship.

Many churches do not have a salutation at the beginning of worship. Believers gather on Sunday. They are called to worship God. They sing. They pray. They listen to the Word of God read and preached. At best, they think of God as speaking to them.

The Bible’s view of worship is far grander than this!

All of the New Testament letters written to churches (i.e., written to be read in churches during a gathering for worship) begin with a greeting (formally known as a salutation), such as the one given at the head of this article. God himself greets his gathered people through the minister. The greeting not only indicates that God himself is with them, but also demonstrates that God is with them under the promise of his grace. Just as the divine presence dwelt with the covenant people in the Old Testament (e.g., Ps. 26:8), and just as Jesus promised that “where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20), so now God himself is present in every gathered assembly of the New Testament temple, the church.

This ought to revolutionize our view of worship! Corporate worship is, first of all, a gathering of God with his people. He is really with us by the Holy Spirit. He reminds us that he is with us by his greeting. He is really with us to minister to us (which is why the one who leads worship is called a “minister”). We must believe that God himself is with us as we gather for worship, and we are encouraged to fully involve ourselves in what is to come because his greeting is a promise of grace and a statement that God intends peace—i.e., the fullness of the blessings of redemption—to those who respond in repentance and faith.

For Reflection

1. Would it bother you if your Lord’s Day worship did not begin with a salutation? Why or why not?
2. How is your worship made different because you know that God is with you? How should this affect your concentration? Your singing? Your prayers?

8. The Call to Worship

“Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world’s golden store,
from each idol that would keep us, saying, ‘Christian, love me more.’”

—“Jesus Calls Us,” stanza 3

The world calls us to its various forms of worship every day. Advertisements call us to spend our money (the worship of mammon). In various ways, we are called to give our time to sports, television, and other amusements (the worship of pleasure). We even so plan things that we become the center of our own lives (the worship of self). The call to worship for Lord’s Day services is designed to call us away from all other worship so that we will focus on the true and living God.

When you come to worship on Sunday morning, you may be upset after an argument in the car on the way. You may feel harried after getting your children out of Bible school classes, into the bathrooms, and into the auditorium (on time!) after hurriedly giving them snacks. You may be tired from a busy previous week. You may be out of sorts for any number of reasons.

The call to worship bids you to put all of those things aside and enter solemnly and joyfully into the high privilege of worship. God himself, through his minister, calls you to give him the glory that is due to his name. Listen carefully to the words of the call to worship:

“Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise” (Ps. 100:4).

“Worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness” (Ps. 29:2).

“Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things” (Ps. 98:1).

“Oh come, let us worship and bow down” (Ps. 95:6).

Then rejoice that your Creator and Redeemer has called you to join with others in the highest calling for those who are made in his image and saved by his grace.

“Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at His holy hill; for the LORD our God is holy” (Ps. 99:9).

For Reflection

1. Read the Scripture text given for the call to worship for your next worship service. How does that passage call you to worship God?
2. Can you, in faith, believe that God is calling you to worship through his minister? How does that change your outlook on what you will do following the call to worship?

9. Psalms and Hymns (Part 1)

“Oh come, let us sing to the Lord!”

—Ps. 95:1

God has created us to sing. Music enables us to take our deepest thoughts and feelings and give expression to them in a way that mere words cannot do. The ability to sing is even an aspect of our being made in the image of God. God sings! “He will rejoice over you with singing” (Zeph. 3:17). What a magnificent thought: Our singing out of delight in God is a reflection of his singing out of delight in his redeemed people!

Some Presbyterian and Reformed churches use only the Psalms in their worship. They believe that those are the only songs that God has ordained for use in worship. We also sing psalms because the Bible tells us to (see Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; James 5:13). That is why some churches have a psalter in the pews along with their regular hymnal. There are songs other than the Psalms that are used in worship in the Bible (e.g., Ex. 15; Rev. 15:3–4), and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church teaches that it is appropriate to sing hymns that possess these three characteristics:

1. They must be thoroughly biblical in sentiment and in expression.
2. They must consist of true, rich expressions of praise to God.
3. They must have tunes that the congregation can sing, and that are appropriate vehicles for the expression of the words to be sung.

You will note that psalms (for singing) and hymns are used at various places in the worship service. The *opening hymn* is designed to be a suitable response to the call to worship. Its purpose is to focus your devotion on God. The *hymn following the assurance of God’s pardon and promises* enables you to thank God for his mercies. The *hymn before the sermon* frequently asks for the Holy Spirit’s aid as we hear the Word of God preached. The *closing hymn* is chosen to send us off with confidence in the Lord’s grace and to encourage us to serve him in the world.

For Reflection

1. Notice where the hymns have been placed in the worship service. Why are they there? Why were these particular hymns chosen to be sung at these points in the service?
2. Do you sing out of a real delight in God and out of a real joy in the work he has done for you in Jesus Christ? Why or why not?

10. Psalms and Hymns (Part 2)

“Where’s the choir?”

In the Old Testament, one group of Levites was dedicated to the work of singing in the temple (see 1 Chron. 9:33; 25:1–8). With the coming of Jesus Christ (whose person and work were foreshadowed in the Old Testament temple—see John 2:19–21), the Old Testament temple and its worship are superseded by the church as the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16–17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21). There is no indication from the pages of the New Testament or the earliest records of Christian church history that there ever was (as in the Old Testament temple) a separate choir in Christian worship.

During the Middle Ages, as worship was more and more removed from congregational participation, choirs separate from the congregation developed.

But the Protestant Reformers returned singing to the congregation, arranged for the printing of psalters and hymnals for use in the churches, and encouraged a wholehearted response of praise from the entire congregation. Indeed, congregational singing of Psalms and hymns became a hallmark of Protestant churches.

In our congregations today, we should build upon this historic Protestant emphasis. “Where’s the choir?” you ask. The answer is: “It’s sitting in the pews!” The *entire congregation* is the choir.

This has many practical implications:

1. We should have “choir practice” in our homes during personal and family worship, and on other occasions when we are gathered together for meetings—for example, during the prayer meeting.

2. We should use tunes that are learnable and singable by every age group in the congregation. “Both young men and maidens; old men and children” should be able to praise the Lord in song (Ps. 148:12–13).

3. We should remember that God is listening to the choir, that is, the congregation. He should be as pleased to receive our praise as we are to hear praise sung in our hearing (1 Pet. 2:5).

For Reflection

1. How does considering God as the “spectator” of your worship affect the way you sing?
2. How can your home be a better place of weekly “choir practice”?

II. Corporate Confession of Faith (Part 1)

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God,
the LORD is one!” —Deut. 6:4

The essence of the Bible’s word for “confession” is “to say the same thing as.” When we confess our sins (e.g., 1 John 1:9), we say the same thing about them as God does. This assumes, of course, that God has told us things that we can confess. Christian faith is agreeing with God about what he says about himself and about us.

Usually when we think of confession, we think of a confession of faith. We agree with God about what he has told us to believe. (Otherwise we make a religion out of our own imagination.) We confess our faith individually when we publicly take the vows necessary to become communicant church members (that is, church members who may partake of the Lord’s Supper). We also confess our faith individually when we tell others what we believe regarding Christ and salvation. We are called to confess Christ before others (Matt. 10:32).

From the earliest times, God’s people were also taught to confess their faith corporately, that is, when they were gathered together as a body for worship. Israel’s basic confession was, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” In the New Testament, we have a much fuller revelation of God to confess: The Lord our God is one, but he exists in three persons. These persons all act for our salvation. The focus of their work is on Jesus Christ. We are to believe in him as Lord, and we are to confess him with our mouth (Rom. 10:9).

We use various “patterns of sound words” (see 2 Tim. 1:13) for our corporate confession of faith. In the next exposition, we will consider the purpose of using these patterns. For now, be thankful for the time of corporate confession of faith in worship. In a world in which so few people say the same thing about religion, we join with Christians of all ages in confessing what God has already said about himself in his inspired and infallible Word!

For Reflection

1. Why is it important to have a corporate confession of faith as we begin our worship? (Hint: Does “God” have the same meaning for everyone?)
2. Do you simply say the words of the confession, or are you actually confessing your faith?

12. Corporate Confession of Faith (Part 2)

“You have come ... to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven.”

—Heb. 12:22–23

There is much more to corporate worship than what meets the eye!

One of the profound truths revealed in the New Testament is that, when we worship, we join our hearts and our voices with those of all other saints, living and dead, who are also worshipping the Lord. This is mind-boggling! The Scriptures even teach us that, when we worship, Jesus Christ himself is with us, singing his own praise and declaring his own name in the midst of his brothers and sisters (see Heb. 2:12).

That is another reason why our corporate confession of faith is so important in the early part of our worship. We join with the saints of all ages and those alive today in confessing the basic truths about God and what he has done for us by Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit. We confess that we are not alone in our faith, but part of a whole heritage of believers in the name of the Lord.

For our corporate confession of faith, we sometimes use basic biblical statements such as the Ten Commandments or Philippians 2:1–11 (which some biblical scholars believe was the first “corporate confession of faith” of the Christian church). At other times we use creeds of the early church, such as those commonly known as the Apostles’ Creed (which was not written by the apostles), the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed. When we confess our faith using these statements, we demonstrate our unity with the catholic church, that is, the universal Christian church. At other times we use portions of the Westminster Confession of Faith or Catechisms or the Heidelberg Catechism to confess our faith. These demonstrate our unity with the Reformed churches of the Protestant Reformation.

What a joy it is that we begin our worship praising and confessing the God of our fathers, the God whom our children and children’s children shall also, by his grace, confess!

For Reflection

1. Can you imagine Christ himself and other believers who have passed on to glory confessing his name the same as you do in the corporate confession?
2. What difference does that make in this portion of your worship?

13. The Prayer of Invocation

“Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek, and you will find.”

—Matt. 7:7

There are so many prayers in a worship service: opening prayers, closing prayers, prayers of confession, the “pastoral prayer” (which can often become quite long!), prayer after the offering, prayer before the sermon, and then prayer after the sermon. Why so many prayers?

The fact that we take so much time for prayer during worship indicates the blunt truth that without the blessing of Christ we can do nothing (John 15:5). It also indicates that we know that everything we have comes from God, so we are to be thankful in everything (Phil. 4:6).

We use the term *prayer of invocation* as a formal term to describe the first prayer in a Lord’s Day worship service. (In our church, we usually call it the “prayer for God’s blessing on our worship.”) It may well be the most important prayer of any worship service.

In a prayer of invocation, we “invoke” (i.e., call upon, summon, beg) God to bless our time of worship. While God greets us as we gather (in the salutation), we do not presume upon his promised mercy to us. We praise God for who he is. (Notice that the elements of a prayer of invocation usually include things about which we have just sung or confessed.) We earnestly ask God to use the means of grace as means of *grace* to those who are present.

Among other things, we pray that:

- Those who are dead in sin would be made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit, who uses the Word of God to bring new birth (1 Pet. 1:23).
- Those who are already saved by grace would be built up in the true Christian faith (Jude 20).
- The Holy Spirit would transform all who hear, so that we are not just hearers of the Word, but doers as well (James 1:22).
- We would all be transformed by the renewing of our minds and by the “washing” done by the Word of God (Rom. 12:1–2; Eph. 5:26).

For Reflection

1. Do you carefully follow the prayer of invocation?
2. Do you earnestly desire what is asked for in that prayer?
3. What would the results of worship be if the Lord did *not* answer those requests? (Think seriously about this one!)

14. Responsive Readings

“... speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”

—Eph. 5:19

Some students of liturgics (that is, the study of the proper manner of worship) question whether responsive readings are to be used in worship. What is the biblical basis for them? What is their purpose?

Our pattern is to use responsive (or unison) readings (usually from the book of Psalms) as we prepare ourselves for the prayer of confession of sin, which follows. The biblical basis for this practice is that the Scriptures themselves tell us that the congregation should use appropriate words in its ministry to one another (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). We usually think of our congregational singing in this regard, but the Scriptures command us to “speak” to one another as well as to sing to one another and to the Lord.

In the Old Testament, there is an example of this kind of congregational speaking in Deuteronomy 27. The tribes of Israel were divided between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. The blessings and the curses of the covenant were read aloud, and the people responded with their “Amen!” In doing so, they committed themselves to the very things God had told them in his covenant word. We do something similar as we take God’s words on our lips and recommit ourselves to them in corporate worship.

In a real sense, this time of congregational speaking is an extension of our corporate confession of faith. Because the Psalms have their ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Christ (Luke 24:44), we are continuing our confession of him. We are also reminding one another of the multifaceted truths in a believer’s experience (the Psalms are given, in part, for that purpose). Those very reminders should make us desire to come before God in repentance and confession.

What a privilege it is to take the Word of God on our own lips as we worship the God who is to be worshiped according to that Word!

For Reflection

1. How does the responsive reading reflect your own experience, and how does it call you to confess your sins?
2. How well are you ministering to others as you participate in the responsive reading?

15. Prayer of Confession (Part 1)

“Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” —Isa. 6:5

All worship has three basic parts. In the first, we consciously and thoughtfully come before the Lord, knowing that he promises to be with us as we are gathered in his name (see Matt. 18:20). In the third (and, by far, the longest part of worship), we sit in the presence of God and hear his Word read and preached. Before we can do that, however, there is the all-important “middle” part of worship: our confession of sin.

In the Bible, confession of human sin, failing, and weakness is the invariable response when people come into the presence of God. After God describes and displays his glory to Job, Job’s response is, “I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5–6). And, lest we think that this dynamic changes in the New Testament, when the apostle John found himself in the presence of the exalted Jesus Christ, the God-man, he “fell at His feet as dead” (Rev. 1:17).

The same pattern is found in Isaiah 6. Isaiah is in the presence of the holy God (vss. 1–4). His response is a heartfelt confession of his own sin and of the sin of his people (vs. 5). This confession and an object lesson in forgiveness of sins (vss. 6–7) precede Isaiah’s reception of the word of God from the Lord’s mouth (vss. 8–13).

Our sinful human nature demands this order when we know that we are in the presence of God. We must be cleansed from our sins before we are fit to receive God’s word for the good of our souls. In the corporate confession of sin in public worship, we are led by the minister (who, at that point, speaks on behalf of the congregation to God) in confessing our sins before a holy God and begging for his mercy on us. How thankful we should be that there is forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, so that we might worship and serve God with clear consciences and pure hearts (Ps. 130:4).

For Reflection

1. Do you *feel* the need to confess your sins when you come into God’s presence in personal and corporate worship?
2. Would you feel that something is missing in worship if there were *not* a time of confession of sin? Why or why not?

16. Prayer of Confession (Part 2)

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” —1 John 1:9

Reformed worship is marked by its great use of the Word of God. Even the *prayers* in Reformed worship are formed by the Scriptures as the Word of God. That includes the *prayer of confession*, which usually follows a reading of Scripture.

The biblical understanding of confession is “to say the same thing as ...” When we confess our faith, we “say the same thing” as God tells us in his Word regarding himself, the way of salvation, and what a true Christian is to be. When we confess our sins, we “say the same thing” as God regarding what sin is, how serious it is, and how much we desire to be delivered from it and its effects. In order to do that, we use the Scriptures as our guide.

In preparing to lead the congregation in corporate prayer of confession of sin, the minister does several things:

1. He asks how the Scriptures (and particularly the Scripture portion used before the prayer) call him and the congregation to “say the same thing” as God says regarding their many failings and shortcomings before a perfect God.

2. He considers the promises (especially those given in the Scripture portion before the prayer) that should be brought before God as he represents the congregation before the throne of grace.

3. He takes time to let both the calls to confession of sin *and* the promises of God’s mercy through Jesus Christ impact his own life as a man and as a minister, so that he might not pray in an unfeeling manner.

How wonderful this portion of worship is! God himself tells us (and in a responsive reading we remind one another) how far short of his glory we fall. In heartfelt prayer before that God, we make a humble confession of our many failings as we are led by the one called to minister on our behalf. And we do all this before “the throne of grace,” encouraged by many, many promises of divine forgiveness. Is there any other way to approach the absolutely holy God?

For Reflection

1. What are some differences between your *personal* confession of sin and the *corporate* confession of sin that is part of public worship?
2. Do you really *enter into* the confession of sin, or do you tune out? What do the two different responses say about the way you approach the Lord?
3. How can you *better* participate in this part of public worship?

17. Assurance of Pardon

“If you forgive the sins of any,
they are forgiven them.” —John 20:23

One of the great errors of the Church of Rome is to teach that the priest has the actual *power* to forgive sins, that is, to grant “absolution.” Only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:7; Luke 5:21), and he can do that only because of the forgiveness secured in the blood of Jesus Christ, the glorious sacrifice for sin (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14). Jesus spoke the words of John 20:23 to the apostles, but nowhere in the New Testament do they do anything other than *declare* that the sins of those who repent and believe in Christ will be forgiven (e.g., Acts 2:38; 13:38; 26:18). Hence, we say that the church’s authority is not magisterial and legislative, but only “ministerial and declarative.” The church *declares* what God says in his Word.

This has immense practical significance when we come to the portion of worship following the prayer of confession of sin. We do not simply go on with our worship. It would be utterly incomplete and even cruel to do that. After we have come before our holy and just God, and earnestly confessed our sins according to his Word, would we be encouraged at all if we just proceeded to the next element of worship? Not at all! How thankful we should be that *God speaks to us* after we speak to him in humility and contrition for our sins. God promises forgiveness and cleansing to those who confess their sins (1 John 1:9), and it is one of the minister’s great privileges to declare that forgiveness to the congregation.

It is very important for worshipers to *believe* these promises. As surely as they are a faithful declaration of the Word of God, they are also a faithful declaration of forgiveness that comes specifically to *you* as one who repents and believes in Jesus Christ. Let that assurance of pardon encourage you as much as the preaching of the Word of God instructs, corrects, and admonishes (and encourages!) you. Then, and only then, can you proceed with worship in joy and in confidence of God’s love for *you*.

For Reflection

1. Why isn’t it possible to truly worship God if you do not know the forgiveness of sins?
2. What’s the difference between your *reading* the promises of forgiveness and your having them *declared* to you by a minister of the Word?
3. When you truly *confess* your sins during the prayer of confession, do you also truly believe that they are *forgiven* when you hear the assurance of pardon?

18. Response of Praise

“I will greatly rejoice in the LORD ... for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation.”

—Isa. 61:10

At no point in our worship should we do things thoughtlessly, simply “going through the motions.” This is especially true in our singing. “Sing praises with understanding” (Ps. 47:7). “I will sing with the spirit [i.e., in the power of the Holy Spirit, filled with the Holy Spirit, from a heart made new by the Holy Spirit], and I will also sing with the understanding” (1 Cor. 14:15). These are standing orders for the church in every age!

It will help you to “sing with the understanding” when you consider the place and the purpose of each hymn (or psalm) in the liturgy, that is, the order of worship. In the first hymn, we approach God in praise for who he is and what he does or has done. In other hymns, we prepare for the ministry of the Word or respond to it. After our corporate confession of sin and the assurance of God’s pardon, we respond with thanks for the amazing grace of God. God’s person and works prompt us to praise, but his forgiving mercies toward us prompt our special praise.

Think of this time as your response to receiving a new suit of clothes. You come before God “wretched, miserable, poor, ... and naked.” (If you think that’s an overstatement, read Revelation 3:17!) You confess all of that as you are led by the minister in the corporate confession of sin. Then, in the assurance of pardon, God, through the work of his Son, provides you with “white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed” (Rev. 3:18). By grace, through faith, you have received a new suit of clothes!

How do you feel when you have gone from “filthy rags” (Isa. 64:6) to fresh, new, beautiful apparel? There is happiness and joy! You want to go out and show the world what you have received!

That’s the spirit of the response of praise following the assurance of pardon. It ought to be the most intensely personal and joyous expression of praise in an entire worship service, because it expresses the most intensely personal and joyous blessing of the grace of God!

For Reflection

1. Are you just “going through the motions” as you sing in worship, or are you working to “sing with the understanding”?
2. What is it about the hymn following the assurance of pardon that makes you well up with praise like a person with a new suit of clothes?

19. The Sacraments

“As many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus
were baptized into His death.” —Rom. 6:3

“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood,
you have no life in you.” —John 6:53

The sacraments of the New Testament are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These, and these alone, were instituted by Christ to be part of the ministry of his church (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 11:26).

The written promises of God are not enough for us. If they were, God would not have instituted sacraments as visible forms of his promises and his work of redemption. So what do they add?

The answer is that sacraments give *objective* signs and seals of those promises to all those who are entitled to receive them, and to all who receive them in faith. Your personal faith can be a very subjective thing. Sacraments, by their very nature, are objective.

The written promises go to all people who read or hear them. But baptism is given only to those who are entitled to be regarded as part of the Christian church, by profession of faith or by birth into a family with at least one believing parent. The Lord’s Supper is given only to those who have demonstrated maturity in the faith (that is, ability to “discern the Lord’s body”) and commitment to it by making a public profession of faith.

In both sacraments, individuals are given objective things (water; bread and wine) that demonstrate the blessings of Christ promised to them personally. Of course, they must still believe these promises and live out of that faith, but it nevertheless remains that the sacraments given to them are objective evidences of Christ’s love for them. And the fact that they are given by a minister of Christ further shows that Christ himself is ministering personally through these objective signs that he has ordained.

Our faith is so often weak, assaulted, and full of unbelief. Sacraments are visible signs and seals of the promises of the new covenant, encouraging us to look, not at our faith, but at Jesus Christ and his objective work in history.

Isn’t that the way we are saved from sin and death?

For Reflection

1. Do you consider your baptism and the giving of the elements of the Lord’s Supper as objective signs and seals of Christ’s love to you *personally*?
2. How should your Christian life be different when you consider that Christ called you his in your baptism and feeds you at his Supper?

20. Christian Baptism

“Then those who gladly received his word were baptized.... And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” —Acts 2:41–42

Baptism and the Lord’s Supper are the two sacraments of the Christian church. They are part of “the ordinary religious worship of God” (Westminster Confession, 21.5) and should occur regularly in church.

In our culture, we do not appreciate baptism nearly as we should. People in our nation often view baptism simply as a festive religious custom. In other cultures, however, baptism is viewed with a seriousness that is far more in line with the teaching of Holy Scripture. When individuals or families are converted from a background of Islam or Hinduism, for example, those around them understand their baptism as a death with respect to their former life. Those baptized are part of a new community, with a totally new allegiance. In some countries, this can bring serious negative consequences to those who are baptized.

The Scriptures do, in fact, teach that baptism marks the death of one’s old nature and entrance to a new life in Christ (Rom. 6:3–4). Baptism also marks the one baptized as a member of the visible church and officially brings the person into fellowship with God’s people (Acts 2:41–42). The person baptized is marked out as a disciple of Jesus Christ the Lord (Matt. 28:18–20). Indeed, baptism represents being united with Christ as surely as a bride’s wedding garments represent her being married to a husband (Gal. 3:27).

For all of these reasons, baptisms are rightly regarded as part of our worship. In a visible way (because sacraments are “visible signs of invisible grace”), Christ shows the work of his kingdom in claiming individuals and families to be his. This should fill us with praise and fresh confidence in his saving work in human history. Likewise, the baptism of others is designed to remind us of our own baptism. It is a time to remind ourselves of Christ’s goodness and mercy toward us. It is also a time to repent of our own sins against the meaning of our baptism, and to renew our commitments to Christ, our husband and our Lord.

For Reflection

1. Have I really died to my old life? Does my baptism constantly challenge me to walk in the new life that Christ gives (see Rom. 6:4)?
2. How does observing a baptism prepare me to glorify God more joyfully and confidently when I worship?

21. How Should I Come to the Supper?

“Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup.” —1 Cor. 11:28

Westerners tend to be *reductionistic* in their thinking; everything should be *reduced* to one all-encompassing idea. So we say things like: “Worship must be joyful.” “Worship must be serious.” “Worship must be God-centered.” In fact, worship is *all* of those things, and many more.

As Christians, our thoughts should be *expansive*. Our thoughts should expand to be as wide and full as God’s word would have our thoughts be.

This helps us know how to answer the question, “How should I come to the Lord’s Supper?” The Lord’s Supper is for believers in Christ who have professed their faith and are members of true Christian churches. But *how* should believers come to the Supper? Here’s a brief, but expansive, list of answers to that question:

I should come in faith: I come believing that Christ has ordained the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, that Christ is present (by the Spirit) at its administration, that he feeds me on himself as I partake of the bread and the wine, and that Christ truly feeds *me* as surely as I eat and drink in faith.

I should come thoughtfully: I cannot “remember” Christ’s death unless I consider the work that he did for my redemption. And I also give thought to the fact that he will one day come again to host the marriage supper of the Lamb—with me as a guest! “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes” (1 Cor. 11:26).

I should come soberly: Before the elements representing his body broken and blood shed for my sins, I must do an honest self-examination. “Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat” (1 Cor. 11:28). It is sobering to realize that carelessness here caused many people in one of the early Christian churches to become sick and even to die under God’s judgment, rather than being strengthened by this sacrament (see 1 Cor. 11:30).

I should come gratefully: Despite the indwelling sin that remains within me, Jesus bids me to “*Do this* in remembrance of (Him).” Because he gave himself for *my* sins, he himself bids me, through the minister, to take, eat, and drink. How grateful I should be for such amazing grace!

I should come joyfully! This Lord’s Supper is a foretaste of the banquet I will enjoy in Jesus’ physical presence after his return! To *enjoy*, I must (and I will) come to the Supper with *joy*!

22. The Frequency of the Lord's Supper

“And they continued steadfastly in ...
the breaking of bread.” —Acts 2:42

As a result of the Protestant Reformation, worship was “reformed” according to the Scriptures. In the process, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (which could too easily be confused with “the Mass”) was separated from regular worship and celebrated less frequently. In some Protestant churches, the Lord's Supper was observed only once a year! The Lord's Supper then became a “special” event in the life of the church. In the Presbyterian tradition, “communion seasons” developed.

Some of the Reformers, like John Calvin, believed that the Lord's Supper should be a part of worship each Sunday. He was overruled in this desire by the governing authorities in Geneva, so the Lord's Supper was observed there on a quarterly basis. That became the common practice in Reformed and Presbyterian churches for generations.

In recent years, many Presbyterian churches have been rethinking the issue of the frequency of the Lord's Supper. It has become common to administer the sacrament of the Lord's Supper monthly. Some do so more frequently, even (in some cases) on a weekly basis.

The Bible does not specify how frequently we should observe the Lord's Supper. It is not a family meal (11:34), but a church meal (1 Cor. 11:18) to be observed by believers who are gathered as a body (11:20, 33–34). It does seem, however, that the Lord's Supper (sometimes called “the breaking of bread”) was a regular part of church life—perhaps even a weekly part. Frequent communion, far from taking away the “special” character of the Lord's Supper, provides a regular reminder that Christ not only *speaks* to us in preaching, but also *feeds* us at his table.

Churches will continue to consider how frequently to administer the Lord's Supper, so that the congregation is edified by this means of grace. However often it is part of worship, the church should rejoice at this remembrance of the love of Christ and receive it as a tangible token that our Shepherd “prepares a table for us in the presence of our enemies” and feeds us on the emblems of his body and blood.

For Reflection

1. Do you wonder whether this added part of worship is really necessary—or do you receive it thankfully as a visible expression of your Savior's giving of himself for you?
2. How often do *you* think the Lord's Supper should be part of worship?

23. Tithes and Offerings

“Give to the Lord the glory due His name; bring an offering,
and come into His courts.” —Ps. 96:8

In both the Old Testament (e.g., Ex. 25:2; 35:5; 1 Chron. 16:29) and the New Testament (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:1–2), offerings are treated as part of the worship of God. While some preachers and churches put an overemphasis on giving (thus sickening people), others put too little emphasis on the subject, and thus disregard an important part of biblical teaching. Some churches do not even include an offering as part of worship, but prefer to put collection boxes at certain spots in the place used for worship. This eliminates the opportunity for people to give as *part of worship*.

The tithe (10 percent of one’s income) and offerings (gifts above and beyond the tithe) are a response of thanks for God’s good gifts to us. Some churches place the offering after the sermon, so that the giving of tithes and offerings might reflect the commitment of the person to what has been preached. However, this may create the false impression that the giver is paying for the sermon, or that the giving of the offering is a sufficient response to a message that actually demands the commitment of one’s life.

A good place to include the offering is after the sung response to the Lord’s promise of forgiveness. It is at this point in worship that we are specifically impressed with what God has done for us. He has given his Son for our sins! “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). It is out of a strongly felt sense of those riches in the gospel that we give our tithes and offerings.

Tithes and offerings also show our commitment to the kingdom of God. All that is given to the church, whether by the weekly offering or by other offerings (such as a monthly deacon’s offering), is used to show the love and grace of Christ to others and to make provision for his ministry locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally. In political gatherings, people give their money for kingdoms that will end; in the gatherings of God’s people, gifts are given to further the kingdom that will never end. What a privilege it is to give our tithes and offerings!

For Reflection

1. Do you count it a privilege or a burden to give tithes and offerings?
2. Why does God, who is in need of nothing, ask us to give gifts to him?
3. Have you ever thought of tithes and offerings as part of worship?

How are they a response of praise and thanks?

24. Prayer after the Offering

“... in everything by prayer and supplication, with *thanksgiving*, let your requests be made known to God.” —Phil. 4:6

“What? You pray *again* after the offering? Why are there so many prayers during your worship service?”

That’s what visitors (and perhaps some regular attenders!) may think during the morning worship service. We have silent prayer before worship; then we have prayer at the beginning of worship; then there is a prayer of confession of sin. Now, after the offering, there’s another prayer. Why are there so many prayers during a worship service?

Part of the answer is that Jesus says that his house—that is, the place where he is worshiped—will be called a house of prayer (Matt. 21:13; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:46). If there is not an emphasis on prayer in Christian worship, then something is amiss.

Another reason why prayer occurs throughout a service is to preserve the “dialogue” pattern of worship. Remember that, in corporate worship, God speaks and we respond as a congregation. Prayer is part of our speaking to God when we gather as a church. While the giving of tithes and offerings is part of our response to God’s goodness in promising us his forgiveness and grace, this response of *action* (i.e., giving of tithes and offerings) is properly coupled with *words* that are appropriate to that action. It is fitting that we ask the Lord to use these gifts in the best way for the extension of his kingdom and his glory on earth by the proclamation of the gospel. (This is also a way to remind ourselves of what is most important in the world!)

But the most important reason for having prayer at this point in worship is simply to *thank* the Lord for what he has given us. It may seem strange to thank the Lord after we have given gifts to him. But that is not strange at all, given the fact that we would have nothing to give if God had not given us things to give (see 1 Cor. 4:7)! Indeed, thankfulness is one of the most significant parts of true prayer and true worship. In a state of sin, people are not thankful to God (see Rom. 1:21). People brought into a state of saving grace are thankful for everything (see 1 Thess. 5:18). Given that, perhaps we ought to ask why so *little* time is spent in thanksgiving when we worship the Lord.

For Reflection

1. Are you bothered by all the time spent in prayer during worship? Why?
2. Does genuine thankfulness permeate all of your worship? Why or why not?

25. Scripture Readings

“Give attention to reading ...”

—1 Tim. 4:13

We all too easily take for granted the privilege of having the very words of God given to us in the Bible. “Thus says the Lord” or its equivalent is used hundreds of times in the Old Testament to remind us that, in Holy Scripture, we are not reading the words of mere men, but the word of God. In the New Testament, the written words of the apostles are equated with Scripture (see 2 Peter 3:15–16), thus confirming their uniqueness as inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16–17). God’s people are never to forget that one of their greatest benefits is to have the word of God (Deut. 4:8; Rom. 3:1–2).

That being the case, God has always made provision that his word be read publicly in the gatherings of his people (e.g. Josh. 8:33–35; 2 Kings 23:2; Neh. 9:3). In the New Testament, the apostle Paul specifically required this of young minister Timothy (and, hence, of all ministers following him) by telling him to “give attention to reading” (1 Tim. 4:13). Most commentators agree that this does not refer to Timothy’s personal reading of the Scriptures (although he was also to give attention to that, so that he would be “rightly dividing the word of truth” [2 Tim. 2:15]), but rather to his public reading of the Word of God in the gathered assemblies of God’s people.

Throughout the history of the church, both the reading and the preaching of the Word of God have been guarded and esteemed as the main means by which Christ feeds his flock and calls them to repentance and faith. During the Middle Ages, the “Mass” replaced these elements of worship as the central focus of worship. The Protestant Reformers revived the pattern of the ancient church and once again made the reading and the preaching of the Word of God the prominent elements of Christian worship.

Throughout the week, we are bombarded with the contradictory opinions of mere human beings. We become confused. How important it is to read the Word of God for ourselves daily, and also to read it in family worship. But there is something distinctly powerful when the minister of the Word reads the Word of God in worship, reminding us that over against every word of man is a powerful and life-changing “Thus says the Lord!”

For Reflection

1. Are you thankful for the privilege of hearing the pure Word of God in your hearing during worship?
2. Each time you worship, pray that God will make the reading of the Word of God powerful to convert and to sanctify those who hear it.

26. Old and New Covenant Readings

“The New is in the Old concealed;
the Old is in the New revealed.”
(attributed to Augustine)

In many church services, there are readings from both the Old and the New Covenant. I prefer the term Covenant, rather than the more familiar Testament, because it reminds us that the Bible is a covenant document. That is, it is a book of promises that God guarantees by the blood of his own Son, Jesus Christ. The Old Covenant consists of thirty-nine inspired books that were written before the coming of Christ; the New Covenant consists of twenty-seven inspired books (including the four Gospels) that were written after the coming of Christ. But why read from both the Old and the New Covenants?

One answer is simply that this is a healthy exercise to increase our familiarity with both the Old and the New Covenants/Testaments. Many people know very little about the Old Testament, and even question its relevance for our day. Regular readings from the Old Testament (as well as the New), perhaps accompanied by the minister’s brief comments preceding the readings, help the congregation to better appreciate portions of the Scriptures that would otherwise be foreign to them.

The other reason is that readings from the Old and the New Covenants together serve to remind us that the New Covenant is a fulfillment of the Old, and the Old is a prophecy of the New. Both the Old and the New Covenants have their focus on Jesus Christ and his everlasting kingdom. In hearing them together, we increasingly understand how the New Covenant uses portions of the Old, and we increasingly understand how the Old Covenant includes the themes that are unwrapped in the New.

The total effect is not only to help us to understand the Bible better, but also, above all, to prepare us for the ministry of the Word, which also focuses on Christ and his redeeming work in all of the Scriptures.

For Reflection

1. If two portions of Scripture are read in a church service, ask *why* they were chosen. How does one help you understand and appreciate the other?
2. How do the Scripture readings prepare you for the ministry of the Word?

27. Hymn of Preparation

“Come, Holy Spirit, come;
Let thy bright beams arise;
Dispel the darkness from our minds,
And open all our eyes.”

—original *Trinity Hymnal*, #254

The purpose of the hymn before the sermon is *not* to give the congregation an opportunity to stand up before sitting for the sermon! At least that’s not the *primary* purpose of the hymn.

The hymn before the sermon is called the “hymn of preparation for the Word of God preached.” There is no biblical mandate to sing a hymn before a sermon. (There may be one in the morning service, but not in the evening service.) The biblical mandate is that we sing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Their number and place in a given worship service is governed by the general principles that everything done in worship is to be done (1) “decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:40), and (2) “for edification” (1 Cor. 14:26). At least in the morning service, it is “for edification” that we are reminded, and that we remind ourselves, that the reception of the Word of God preached is not to be taken lightly.

The hymn of preparation is often a hymn that reminds us of the truth of God’s Word, such as “Break Thou the Bread of Life, Dear Lord to Me” (which is not a Lord’s Supper hymn, as is commonly thought). Or the hymn may remind us of the work of the Holy Spirit and its necessity as we sit at the feet of Christ as his Word is proclaimed, such as “Come, O Come, Thou Quick’ning Spirit,” or “Come, Dearest Lord, Descend and Dwell.” This emphasis should be the most common one in the hymn of preparation.

Especially before the sermon, it is important to realize that the Holy Spirit’s work is *absolutely necessary* if the unconverted are to have their hearts changed under the preaching of the Word, and if individual Christians, families, and the whole congregation are to be transformed by that preaching. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit “will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14). It is this ministry of Christ by the Spirit, using the infallible Word of God, that we pray for and prepare for as we sing before the sermon.

For Reflection

1. How does the hymn of preparation actually prepare you to hear the sermon and be changed by it?
2. Are you really *asking* for the Holy Spirit’s work as you sing?

28. The Sermon (Part 1)

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.”

—2 Tim. 4:2

One of the greatest impacts of the Protestant Reformation was the re-establishment of the priority of the preached Word of God in the church. The “sermon” (from a Latin term that means “a talk” or “a discourse”) became the center of worship, rather than the Eucharist (the Lord’s Supper), as in the Roman Mass.

The Directory for Worship of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (chapter 3, section 3) gives a powerful statement about the sermon:

In the sermon God addresses the congregation by the mouth of his servant. It is a matter of supreme importance that the minister preach only the Word of God, not the wisdom of man, that he declare the whole counsel of God, and that he handle aright the Word of truth. To these ends the sermon must be prepared with the utmost care. Let the session give diligence that no person enter the pulpit concerning whose doctrinal soundness or knowledge of Scripture there is reasonable doubt. A text may not be used merely to introduce a sermon but must be painstakingly expounded. In the sermon the minister should explain the Word of God for the instruction of his hearers and then apply it for their exhortation. Care should be taken in preaching that Christian duty be not divorced from Christian truth. That minister fails to perform his task as a God-appointed watchman on Zion’s walls who neglects to warn the congregation of prevalent soul-destroying teachings by enemies of the gospel. The minister should seek to perfect the saints by building them up in the most holy faith and in Christ’s stead should beseech the unconverted that they be reconciled to God. Nothing is more necessary than that the gospel of salvation by grace be proclaimed without any adulteration or compromise, in order that the unsaved may rely for salvation on the grace of God only, to the exclusion of their own works or character, and that the saints may ascribe glory for their salvation to God alone.

For Reflection

1. Why is the sermon such a serious matter?
2. Do you value the sermon as you should? Why or why not?
3. In light of the statement above, how should you pray for your minister?

29. The Sermon (Part 2)

“Take heed *what* you hear.” —Mark 4:24

The preaching of the Word of God is nothing less than Christ’s message given to a particular congregation at a particular time and in particular circumstances. Through preaching done by a man who has been commissioned by the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ draws his sheep to his fold and feeds them heavenly food (cf. John 6:31–33, 50, 51).

Because preaching is so important, it is critical that those who go to church “take heed what they hear.” What should you listen for in a sermon?

First, listen for the Bible in a sermon. Sermons may be part of a series on a book or a large portion of the Bible (consecutive expository preaching), or they may deal with themes addressed in Scripture (topical preaching), or they may simply treat short portions of Scripture (textual preaching). But whatever type of sermon is used, preaching must proclaim what the Bible says. The Bible *alone* is the Word of God. Preaching that delivers the opinions of men is not what you should be hearing from the pulpit.

Second, listen for the purpose of a sermon. What concern is driving the minister as he preaches? (You will usually be able to find this out in the introduction of the sermon). What does he want you to learn? What does he want you to believe? What does he want you to do? How does he expect you to change as a result of his preaching? Are all of those things consistent with the purpose of the biblical text or passages that he is preaching? You cannot heed what you hear if you do not know what you are intended to hear!

Third, listen for the gospel in the sermon. All preaching must proclaim some aspect of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Even the duties that a preacher declares from the Bible must be grounded in the authority and power of Jesus Christ. Without him, we can do nothing (John 15:5). You are not supposed to hear about morality and virtues in the abstract. The Lord Jesus Christ, his kingdom, and his amazing grace are what Christian preaching is all about.

For Reflection

1. What type of preaching do you usually hear? Is the Bible the substance of that preaching? How?
2. What is the purpose of the sermons you hear? Are you meant to be different because of these sermons?
3. What are you learning about Jesus Christ from these sermons? Are you called to believe in him as your Savior and Lord? How?

30. The Sermon (Part 3)

“Take heed *how* you hear.” —Luke 8:18

In preaching, Christ the King speaks to us and changes us by his Word and Spirit. As we keep in mind the exalted place of preaching, and what we are to listen for in preaching, we must not forget that *how* we hear the Word of God preached is of eternal importance. James 1:22–25 warns us:

Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, *deceiving yourselves*. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

The Westminster Larger Catechism (Q. 160) gives a helpful summary of how we are meant to hear the preaching of God’s Word:

Q. What is required of those who hear the Word preached?

A. It is required of those who hear the Word preached, that they attend upon it with diligence, preparation, and prayer; examine what they hear by the Scriptures; receive the truth with faith, love, meekness, and readiness of mind, as the Word of God; meditate, and confer of it; hide it in their hearts, and bring forth the fruit of it in their lives.

For Reflection

1. Have you taken seriously that you are deceiving yourself if you simply listen to sermons and do not actually obey what Christ tells you in them?
2. How do you prepare yourself to receive the preaching of the Word?
3. What do you learn about Christ from sermons? Are you called to believe in him as your Savior and Lord? How?
4. How much do you pray for upcoming preaching? Are you quicker to criticize preaching than to pray for it?
5. Do you receive the preaching of the Word with a *love* for the truth that is given in it? See 2 Thessalonians 2:10.
6. How do you meditate on the sermons that you hear each week?
7. Do you discuss the sermons afterwards, or do you forget them and act as if you never heard them?
8. In specific ways, how do you bring forth the fruit of preaching in your life and in your family’s life?
9. How can you better “take heed how you hear” the Word of God?

31. After the Sermon

“Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.”

—James 1:22

What happens when the sermon is over? For some, this is simply the indication that worship is about to conclude. But that response, while all too common, is hardly a godly response to the privilege of hearing Christ’s ministers explain and apply his word.

Usually there is a “hymn of response” following a sermon. Sometimes this is used as a kind of congregational prayer, asking the Lord to bring to us the specific gospel blessings that have been opened up in the preaching. At other times, this hymn is evangelistic in nature, calling all present to entrust themselves to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. At other times, the hymn is contemplative and reflective, calling us to specific repentance and new obedience. At other times, there is no hymn of response. That is not because the minister forgot to include one (nor usually because the service has run too late!), but because the minister believes that any hymn would *detract* from the message preached, or that it is simply better for the congregation to have time for quiet reflection following the preaching of the Word.

Whatever the order of worship includes after a sermon is preached, it is imperative that those who have heard the Word of God respond to it. The Bible is clear that we deceive ourselves if we think that hearing the Word of God is sufficient. The Lord’s people are to be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22).

Following a sermon, do nothing that will have the effect of taking away from you or from others the impact of the Word preached. (Read the Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13:3–23 to be reminded of how that can happen.) Speak with others (Mal. 3:16a) about what you have learned from the sermon, how you have been convicted of failings, how you have been helped, or how you have been prompted to change. The ministry of the Word continues through you, as you tell others about what God had done for you under this most important means of grace. Continue your discussions on the way home and at your lunch table. Christ’s will is that you and others *be changed* by the Word preached. Whatever you do, don’t let the work of the sermon end with the minister’s closing prayer!

For Reflection

1. What is the main thing Christ would have me do as a result of the sermon?
2. How am I doing it? How am I helping others to do it?

32. The Benediction

“And He lifted up His hands and blessed them.” —Luke 24:50

When worship is ended, it is important to realize that we do not go out into the world on our own, but in the strength and with the gracious promises of the same God who called us to worship and who has spoken to us by his word. This promise of grace is called “the benediction” (which comes from the Latin word “to bless”). The benediction, like the salutation, is the blessing of Christ on his gathered people. It is spoken by a minister who officially represents the ascended and reigning Lord Jesus.

In the Old Testament period, the priests were commanded by God to give such a blessing to the people: “This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you: the LORD lift up His countenance upon you, and give you peace.’ So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:23–27).

At the conclusion of our Lord’s earthly ministry, he fulfilled this priestly role by lifting up his hands and blessing his disciples (Luke 24:50) before his ascension into heaven. This communicated to the nucleus of his church that he would be with them in blessing, even though he would be absent from them in bodily form. The benediction meant that he was with them as they faced the world with the ministry of the gospel.

In a similar way, at the conclusion of the New Testament letters written to churches, the apostles usually give a benediction, such as: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (1 Cor. 16:23). Keep in mind that these letters were read to churches before the Christian ministry was the fixed institution that it would become after the foundational work of the apostles. Their benedictions became patterns that would be followed in the church in every age. As we leave our gathering in the presence of Christ to face the world and to be witnesses in it, we go forth with the words of Christ’s blessing.

Because the benediction is a promise and not a prayer, it is most fitting to look up and receive it as you would any other gift. How wonderful it is to receive the Lord’s blessing as you depart from worship and go into a watching world!

For Reflection

1. What should you think about as the benediction is pronounced?
2. Would it make any difference to you if there were a benediction at the close of worship? Why or why not?

33. What to Do *after* Worship

“And they worshiped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”

—Luke 24:52

The benediction has been pronounced. You have taken a few moments to consider what has been said and done in the previous hour or more. Now you gather your family and your things, and you prepare to leave. But what should you do after worship?

The simple answer is: *Continue your worship!*

In the early church, the joy of the transforming grace of the gospel was the hallmark of worship. That joy permeated the lives of the early disciples. It did not leave them after they had gathered for corporate worship. It affected everything they did, and it became a force that influenced the world around them (see Acts 2:47 for an example). The same pattern ought to continue in our experience of worship today.

After worship, as you greet those around you, encourage them in the very things that have helped you in the worship that has preceded. “Aren’t you thankful that we can know God and have his word preached?” “I appreciated being reminded that the grace of God in Jesus Christ is greater than all of our sin and guilt!” “The hymns really ministered to me this morning.” “What a joy that the Lord met with us again!” “I am resolved to go home and serve the Lord more zealously.” Or, if you are greeting a visitor, you might simply say, “It’s so good to have you with us! Please join us again. We love to have other people with us to worship the Lord and hear the gospel preached!”

On your way home, think about what you learned and how the sermon challenged you. Discuss these things with your family. What were the points that were made? What did they teach us about the Scriptures? How must my life change, based on what I heard? What personal and family commitments should we make in the light of today’s message from the Word of God? The point is: Continue your worship, just as the early Christian disciples did.

Remember the very real danger that “the cares of this world” will choke the word you have received in worship, so that it becomes unfruitful (see Matt. 13:22). Worship doesn’t end after a worship service! Let your joy and obedient response continue throughout the week!

For Reflection

1. What could I say to the person next to me before I leave church?
2. Am I wasting what I learn and do in worship because of what I do (or don’t do) after worship? How can I change, beginning today?

