

WHY DO WE WORSHIP THE WAY WE DO?

**A compilation of sermons preached
at
Pasadena Evangelical Presbyterian Church**

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Preface

Questions have arisen over the years concerning our order of service and why we do what we do. There ought to be a reason for everything we do, especially in worship. What directs these choices? Is it the flow of the culture? Is it the whim of the Pastor or Worship Leader? What we believe, and attempt to practice, is that the Bible is our directive for worship.

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Our worship is historical, liturgical, and I believe, biblical. Hopefully, as you read this, you will come to agree.

Why Do We Worship the Way We Do?

Debates over worship styles and content have existed in the church for a very long time. In this booklet, I will attempt to demonstrate the biblical foundation for our form of worship, essentially answering the question: why do we worship the way we do?

This is not a recent issue. The Reformation was as much a reformation of worship as it was a reformation of doctrine. Many superstitions and abuses arose during the Medieval period that The Reformation sought to correct. The revivalism of the 19th century has also contributed to divergent views of worship. The effects of revivalism still influence the church today, namely, its utilitarian view or “whatever works” may be done attitude. As a result, the landscape seems to be dominated by questions like: Is it exciting? Is it innovative? Does it bring in crowds? The question the Church should be asking, however, is: What does God want us to do?

The Worship of God Is Regulated

We are not left in the dark or to our own designs when it comes to worship. Worship is regulated by God. Our forefathers put it this way in the Westminster Confession of Faith:

But the acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scripture.

This regulation has to do mostly with the elements of worship – what we do. Other considerations are forms and circumstances.

By forms, we are talking about things like: Are we going to sing a psalm or read it? Are we going to have a time of silent prayer or have someone lead in prayer? Will we stand, kneel or sit for prayer? Will the minister read the scripture or will some other person do so? How will the element of worship be carried out? – that is form.

Circumstances have to do with where and when we will worship. Will we meet in a building? Will it be heated? Will we have lights? Chairs? Pews or standing? Will

the service begin at 9, 10 or 11 AM? Will we have an afternoon or evening service?

These things are relegated to prudence under the general direction of the Word of God. A good bit of practicality and culture enters in when deciding these things. Some churches worship first and have an education hour following. Forms may be altered to fit the needs of each individual congregation.

For the elements, on the other hand, we need biblical sanction, perhaps not a direct command, but at least a biblical example that has been approved. Since Old Covenant worship practices (the Temple, sacrifices, etc) have been done away with, we look primarily to the New Testament for the directives for New Covenant worship, and not much is said.

In the Old Covenant there was strict regulation; it seems everything was spelled out. Moses was told not to deviate from the things shown to him on Mt Sinai. Nadab and Abihu died because they offered “strange fire” to the Lord. God’s worship was not to be altered by human innovation. They were not to change the “Day of Atonement” ritual, for instance, in order to make the Philistines feel comfortable.

Today, we worship the same God, so why do we think that we can throw open the flood-gates and do whatever seems right in our own eyes? 1 Tim 4:13-16 states:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

We can see that Paul had great concern for what was to be done, and gives instruction to Timothy on how to properly carry out his ministry. A few verses earlier, Paul warns, “Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly” (1 Tim 4:7). Paul then explains that we should instead give ourselves to reading, preaching and teaching the Word of God. Just because something has been done for years, does not mean it has biblical sanction. Many things are continued for sentimental value, but mere sentiment is not enough.

Our services ought to be filled with the Word of God. At Pasadena Evangelical Presbyterian, that is what we strive to do. The Welcome and Call to Worship are straight from the Scripture. The reading of the law is Scripture. Our Confession of sin is often laced with Scripture. The Assurance is Scripture. In the response, there are 2 brief Scripture readings. The singing responses are sometimes Scripture when we sing a psalm, or otherwise biblical in content. We have 3 Scripture sections read or sung, followed by reading the sermon text and biblical exposition. The Lord's Supper includes the Words of Institution, which are Scripture.

**How we use the Scripture in crafting the order and the elements
will be the general focus of this booklet.**

The Worship of God Ought to Be Dialogical

The pattern of worship that we see throughout Scripture is: God speaks or acts, and man responds. That pattern is important in the ordering of the elements of worship. There is a conversation going on: God speaks and we respond to Him.

We are welcomed by God in His Call to Worship. We respond in praise. Then He confronts us with His Law; we respond in Confession; He responds to us by announcing Forgiveness. We respond to that forgiveness with Praise and Affirming our Faith. On behalf of the people, the minister lays out the petitions and supplications to God, their Heavenly Father. Following the Prayer, we read, sing, and hear His Word preached. We respond by humbly assembling before His Table for the Covenant Meal. We demonstrate our gratitude for His abundant mercy in Christ as we give our Offering. God pronounces His blessing on His people and we go out in gratitude to serve Him by loving one another and our neighbors.

Do you see how it goes back and forth? It is a conversation between God and His covenant people.

Griess Cory wrote in the Standard Bearer:

This dialogical principle ought to make worship appealing to us. We are coming actually to hear Him and respond to Him! We ought to have the desire to come and hear God Himself speak over us His acts and the salvation He has purchased for us. The psalmist certainly had this desire. In Psalm 106:4-5 the psalmist shows that he grasps this dialogical principle not only as a principle that must be carried out,

but as a loving condescension of God to him personally in the church. He expresses that it is his personal desire to be in the worship of God's name and to hear God speak to him. This dialogical principle has driven him to a personal, fervent love for the unique fellowship of corporate worship.¹

Any worship service is made up of certain elements. As we have seen, these elements can be good or bad, biblical, or of human invention.

The Welcome, Call, and Invocation

The Welcome is simply a biblical blessing, something like “Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.” (1Tim. 1:2 NIV)

Call to Worship

The worship of God involves a renewal of the Covenant. This is the real function of the Welcome and Call to Worship in our service. God has the first word in this dialogue. He welcomes us with words of comfort and blessing and then calls us to worship Him. Essentially, He bids us to come.

In certain ancient cultures, it could be lethal to go to the king unbidden, or uninvited. Each service is a Covenant renewal ceremony, and God invites us to participate in it. We need not fear His judgment when He bids us, come.

Covenant Renewal was common in the Old Covenant. God gave His people the Covenant at Sinai amid thunder, lightning, and smoke. He not only invited them, He commanded them to assemble at the foot of the mountain. In various subsequent events, the people assembled before God to hear His covenant again and pledge their allegiance to Him. He invites us every week to meet with Him in a Covenant Renewal.

Here are some of the Calls we use from time to time; please note that these are all inspired of God, so God is speaking to us through whoever wrote these words. There are many biblical calls to worship. Here are a few:

¹ <http://standardbearer.rfpa.org/articles/dialogical-principle-worship-2>

Ps 100:4-5

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Psalm 34:1-3

I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice. Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

Psalm 95:1-3

Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Ps 95:6

Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

Psalm 96:1-4

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples. For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.

We must recognize God's presence here among us, and that it is He who is inviting us in. He desires our fellowship and wants communication with us. The call to worship is God's invitation to us to meet with Him. He desires to have us sit down at His table and dine with Him. That is what a call to worship is like. It is God calling us to come in and have spiritual food.

God is omnipresent and is therefore everywhere at all times, but there is a special presence of God among His people when they assemble. Jesus taught us, "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mat

18:20 NIV). Additionally, there is a special presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. God is here. He invites us to fellowship, and desires our worship in order to fulfill promises He made millennia ago.

Invocation

The Invocation follows the first hymn. An invocation is an appeal to God for His presence. Hughes Old, in his book, Leading in Prayer, gives 6 elements that make up a good invocation:

1. Call on the name of God. He points out that it is important to use names that God has revealed in the Bible.
2. Pray in Christ's name. We can only come to God, even in response to his invitation, in the merits of the perfect mediation of our heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ.
3. Hallow God's name. There are two basic ways to hallow, or honor, God's name. First, we are to proclaim God's attributes. Second, we are to make known his deeds of creation and redemption.
4. Claim God as our God.
5. Petition that worship be empowered by the Holy Spirit.
6. Conclude with Trinitarian doxology.²

Notice that the opening acts and responses of worship are immersed in Grace and in the merits of Christ. The only way we can invoke the name of God and not find the door of Heaven slammed in our faces is due to the grace of God. He has condescended to us in our sinful, broken condition and has redeemed us in the Blood of Christ. Jesus, in His life, death, and resurrection made all of this possible! We are to seek His face! "Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice. Look to the LORD and his strength; seek his face always" (1Chron 16:10-11 NIV).

The Psalmist writes,

Hear my voice when I call, O LORD; be merciful to me and answer me. My heart says of you, 'Seek his face!' Your face, LORD, I will seek. Do not hide your face from me, do not turn your servant away in anger; you have been my helper. Do not reject me or forsake me, O God my Savior (Ps 27:7-9 NIV).

This is the idea of an invocation.

² Hughes Oliphant Old, Leading in Prayer, Eerdmans, 1995, p 11ff

Just to receive a call to worship from the living and true God is an enormous blessing. That is why it is important to be here on time so that you hear God calling you. Do you care when you miss it? There are billions of people on this earth that do not hear God's call, they have no opportunity to invoke His name. You do! Do you take advantage of that opportunity? What else is more important on a Sunday morning that it would take your attention away from hearing God's call to worship?

Often, in the church in which I was raised, the focus was so much on the preaching that the elements of the service were referred to as the preliminaries! That is so wrong. True, the preaching of the Word is central, but God's calling us to worship is of extreme importance. You need to do all within your power to be here for it.

Even the Call to Worship was purchased for you by Christ, as was the right to the Invocation. This is so much more than a gathering of a bunch of friends who have similar religious views. That, you can be late for, but if God is going to speak to you, and call you to worship Him, and you know that that privilege has been bought for you by the blood of Christ, you must not miss it! Set your alarm; get up early; be at the service on time!

There is nothing more important in your entire week than this audience with God. God wants true worshippers who worship Him in Spirit and in truth. Jesus lived, died, and rose again to make this time possible, and to make it a delight both to the heart of God and to us. The Almighty Creator bids you to come; He sacrificed His only begotten Son to open the way. So come; heed His call and worship Him!

Law, Confession and Absolution

The Law

The spiritual situation in Israel had deteriorated considerably. Josiah came to the throne at the ripe age of 8. We are told that he did right in the eyes of the Lord. When he was 26, he began the repairs of the temple and arranged for workers etc. During that process, the book of the Law was found. Most likely, it was what we call the book of Deuteronomy (see 2 Kings 22:8-20).

We are caused to wonder, to what degree the law had been forgotten – probably extensively. They had immersed themselves in the idolatry of the people around them. Almost any law that is not regularly enforced and pursued by the masses is soon forgotten. We have all seen lists of laws that are still on the books, but have not been enforced for 100 years or more, things like, “you can’t chew gum and walk down the street backwards on a Sunday afternoon.” But this was the law of God that prescribed worship and had absolutely forbidden idolatry. So when it was found, it created quite a stir. The country was filled with idols and shrines; repentance and a major reform were necessary. Even in the temple of YHWH, there were altars to other gods, Asherah Poles, and altars to the stars.

They realized just how far they had fallen short of what God required. That is the purpose of a rehearsal of the law in our service. We want it to remind us of our duty and just how far we have fallen short. Many churches do not do this at all. Some churches rehearse The Ten Commandments weekly, some do it only on a Sunday when communion is served. We use New Testament statements of law. Not that it is wrong to use the old, but the passages selected are often more pointed and more openly heart directed. Which passage is selected is another one of those form issues, but the intent is the same.

Whenever you find a command, something to do or not do, there you have law, whether you find it in the Old Testament or the New. It must be understood in its context and according to redemptive history. We all know that there are things in the Old Testament that are no longer applicable to us in the New Covenant. They have been fulfilled or otherwise abrogated. It is important for us to notice when a particular text is a law statement so we can see how it applies. We must not get into the habit of disregarding it – that is what happened to Israel, and eventually the law was lost.

We need to hear the law because our hearts are not naturally inclined toward God and His ways. After we are regenerated, we have the Holy Spirit, who works through the Word of God to change and sanctify us. The exposing of our sin should humble us, and make us ready to confess our sin to God, both publically (or corporately) and privately.

What sanction do we have for this reading of the law? We have numerous examples of it in the Old Testament, but what about the New? Jesus himself taught the law in His Sermon on the Mount; the Apostles taught and interpreted the law in

their sermons and in their writings. We do not have a direct command to read the law in every service, but we do have the apostolic example given to us in Acts 2:42 “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

The Apostles' teaching clearly included the law. Though it is indirect, the reading of the law is a good and right thing to do when we gather together to worship.

Confession of Sin

The “Bidding to Repentance” in the old Book of Common Prayer puts in beautiful form the reason for public and corporate confession:

Dearly beloved brethren the scripture moveth us in sundry places, to acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness; and that we should not dissemble nor cloak them before the face of Almighty God our heavenly Father; but confess them with an humble, lowly, penitent, and obedient heart; to the end that we may obtain forgiveness of the same, by his infinite goodness and mercy.

And although we ought, at all times, humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together, to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands, to set forth his most worthy praise, to *hear his* most holy Word, and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.³

Cloaking our sin is harmful to us individually and as a congregation. When we begin to think that we have actually kept the law, the value of the Gospel begins to decline in our thinking. We never have kept it the way we should have. We can never boast before God that we have accomplished all that He requires. We always stand in need of confession. Even on our absolute best day, when we have obeyed most completely, we still have sin to confess, and if you think you do not, you ought to confess that thought.

The prayer entitled “Continual Repentance” in Valley of Vision gets at this thought quite well:

³ Book of Common Prayer, Reformed Episcopal Publication Society, 1932, p5

Thou hast imputed my sin to my substitute, and hast imputed his righteousness to my soul, clothing me with a bridegroom's robe, decking me with jewels of holiness. But in my Christian walk I am still in rags;
 my best prayers are stained with sin;
 my penitential tears are so much impurity;
 my confessions of wrong are so many aggravations of sin;
 my receiving the Spirit is tinctured with selfishness.
 I need to repent of my repentance;
 I need my tears to be washed;
 I have no robe to bring to cover my sins, no loom to weave my own righteousness.⁴

That is the heart of a true worshiper – one who wants to worship in Spirit and truth gets serious about his sin and freely confesses that he is a sinner and in constant need of God's grace.

Self-righteousness has no place in the worship of YHWH, but confession does. Even the structure of the tabernacle and placement of the altar etc teach us that acknowledging that we are sinners is important to do early on in a worship service.

There is an interesting account in Acts 19 about the Sons of Sceva who were attempting to cast out demons. We read:

One day the evil spirit answered them, "Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding. When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. (Act 19:15-19 NIV)

This is a clear example of public confession. It is doubtful, however that this was an actual worship service. Confession, both public and private, is urged and commanded in the New Testament. Doing it in a service just makes good sense.

⁴ Arthur Bennett, ed., The Valley of Vision, Banner of Truth, 2002, p136

The history of the Prayer of Confession is interesting. Hughes Old points out that early on, the Prayer of Confession was not part of the Sunday liturgy⁵, but rather, this was done in daily services. Sunday prayers were usually given to intercession. In time, both were incorporated into the regular Sunday service. At the time of the Reformation, new prayers were written that reflected a better understanding of sin, repentance, and forgiveness. Here is one of the earliest of the Reformed confessional prayers, written by Martin Bucer:

Almighty, eternal God and Father, we confess and acknowledge unto You that we were conceived in unrighteousness and are full of sin and transgression in all our life. We do not fully believe Your Word nor follow Your holy commandments. Remember Your goodness, we beseech You, and for Your Name's sake be gracious unto us, and forgive us our iniquity which, alas, is great, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen⁶

There are several examples of corporate confession in the Old Testament: there is one in Ezra 9, there is another in Nehemiah 9, and still another in Daniel 9. The Psalms are songs of worship and there are numerous confessions of sin there. John tells us in his first letter that we are to confess our sin to one another. In Revelation 2, we read “Remember the height from which you have fallen!” (Rev 2:5 NIV). This is a call to corporate repentance. This is a letter to the church in Ephesus and they, as a congregation, are to remember. Are they to just remember or are they to confess it and repent of it? Clearly the latter is intended. So, though we do not have a direct command to have a prayer of corporate confession in the service, we stand on good biblical example in doing so.

We see the ongoing dialogue between God and His people here. We hear God in His law, and we respond to the law with confession of our sin. The conversation does not stop there, and it's a good thing that it doesn't. Thankfully, in the dialogue, God speaks again. We are not left wondering if God will grant forgiveness. He does not leave us hanging.

Absolution

God speaks words of absolution. He announces that we are forgiven. This is a most vital portion of our service. If I am visiting somewhere and there is no confession and no absolution – I really miss it. I had never heard of such a thing

⁵ Hughes Oliphant Old, Leading in Prayer, Eerdmans 1995, p80

⁶ Martin Bucer, <http://rscottclark.org/2012/08/bucers-strasbourg-liturgy-1539/>

until I went to seminary. There, it was clearly part of the regular liturgy. We have made the absolution a bit of a litany, but the intent is the announcement of forgiveness.

In our service, I read a text of Scripture affirming God's forgiveness of those trusting in Christ. For instance, "For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13-14). The congregation then responds with Scripture. In this case, a paraphrase of Isaiah 12:1, "I will praise you, O LORD. Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me" (Isa 12:1 NIV). I follow with the question, "How far has He separated your sins from you?" The congregation responds by quoting from Ps 103:12, "As far as the East is from the West."

Even though we go back and forth with it, do you hear the voice of God in it? Do you hear Him saying to you, "I forgive you?"

In Bucer's liturgy, after the Prayer of Confession, he quotes 1 Tim 1:15, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners."

Then he proclaims:

Let everyone, with St. Paul, truly acknowledge this in his heart and believe in Christ. Thus, in His name, I proclaim unto you the forgiveness of all your sins, and declare you to be loosed of them on earth, that you be loosed of them also in heaven, in eternity. Amen.⁷

So here again, you have God speaking through His minister, and declaring that your sins are forgiven.

This idea of "binding and loosing" comes from Jesus' statement in both Mat 16 and 18. There, he refers to the Keys to the Kingdom given to the apostles. These are significantly difficult passages to understand, and there has been considerable debate over them. Suffice it to say that authority has been given to the church not to act on its own, but to carry out the authority of Christ. Notice how Bucer limited his statement: it is made to those who acknowledge in their heart that Christ came to save sinners and that they believe in Him. The same limits are in the absolution that we use: "by faith in Christ..." I do not have the authority in myself to forgive

⁷ ibid

your sins, but as Christ's minister, I can declare His forgiveness to you in His stead. It is God Himself saying you are forgiven.

Why is this so important? The law is important because we tend to hide from our sins. We need to have them exposed by the Word of God so that we recognize them and then turn to God in confession.

Confession is important because it clears the conscience and enables us to embrace Christ and all His benefits. Sin is the great alienator, but Christ is the Reconciler. In our justification, we are forgiven for all sins past, present and future, but the Confession is largely for our benefit. We are clearing away the spiritual fog that exists in our view of God.

Hearing the Absolution confirms that which our justification established. We need to have this repeated. Christ must be our Hope. Christ must be the One on whom we rely at all times. We tend to let that thinking slip away from us, so it is very important that we hear of God's Covenant of Forgiveness in the blood of Christ repeated week after week.

Do you struggle with guilt and frustration over sin? You need this.
 Are you laboring with a seared conscience? You need this.
 Are you broken and grieving over sin? You need this.
 This portion of the service is vitally important!

What about reading a written prayer? Shouldn't we pray from our own heart? Yes, we should, and that is why we allow a time for silent confession along with the corporate confession. The value of a written prayer is that someone else may come up with ideas that you would not normally think of, and allow you to confess more completely, compared to what you would normally do. It helps break you out of a rut. It also helps to move us from a totally private individualism to functioning as a body in prayer – that is always good. We do not want to exclude private prayer – both are good and useful, and ought to be practiced by the churches.

We need not comment much on the connection of this to the Gospel – it is essentially the Gospel. We stand forgiven in the blood and merits of Christ. He has replaced our sins with the righteousness of Christ, so we are not only forgiven, but we are granted positive righteousness, all because of Christ doing for us that which we could not do for ourselves.

Joyful Response

In the dialogue of worship, God calls us to worship Him; we respond by asking Him to meet with us and empower our worship. God confronts us with His law, and we respond by confessing our sin. God announces that we are forgiven in Christ, and our response is joyful praise. In recent decades, church music has caused as much controversy as almost anything else. There is great latitude, but it is not entirely neutral.

What Are We Doing When We Sing?

Singing has been a part of Christian worship since the time of Christ. If you recall, following the Last Supper, Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn, a Psalm. Some of those earlier forms would seem totally foreign to us. Even later forms like Gregorian chant seem strange to us. The musical forms change over time, but singing, for the most part, has always been involved. Debates have arisen over whether we ought to sing with accompaniment or a capella; should we sing only biblical Psalms, or can we sing uninspired texts?

Those things aside, what are we doing when we sing? Some songs and hymns are prayers. In some churches, there is a tradition of singing Amen at the end of a hymn. Some hymns are praises to God that rehearse His attributes and acts. Others are songs of testimony of our experience of God or salvation. Others still are statements of devotion or spiritual aspiration.

The first 2 categories are to be preferred. Not that the latter 2 are necessarily wrong, but they often have too much of a human focus. Which is better to sing in worship: “O How I Love Jesus,” or “Jesus Lover of My Soul?” Don’t we want to focus on the love of Christ for us, which is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, rather than my fickle love for Christ?

Early in the days of contemporary worship songs, many were mantras like “Alleluia,” for instance. The song consisted of singing Alleluia 8 times, and then it might be sung 2, 3 times or more, so you might have 24+ “Alleluias” with no other content. If you look at the pattern in the Psalms, you might find repeated Alleluias, but interspersed with these statements of praise, are statements of what God has done or who He is.

We make an effort to include the biblical Psalms, at least 1 in each service. Are we restricted to the exclusive use of Psalms as our Presbyterian forefathers taught? No, I do not think so. If you are interested in further reading on that, see “Exclusive Psalmody or New Covenant Hymnody” by Lee Irons⁸.

God/Christ Centered Worship

Singing was greatly affected by Revivalism in the 1800s. The focus was taken off of God and put onto the ramping up of emotions. This was the birthplace of gospel music. The revivals were driven by the skillful use of music and other emotionally manipulative things to get a response out of people. It was declared to be the evidence of the Holy Spirit, but it seems that it was not, but rather a clever use of means. Finney called this “new measures.” He believed that conversion was accomplished not by a regenerative act of the Holy Spirit, but rather by the proper use of means.

This distortion of worship, where content is replaced by sentimentality and emotionalism, has damaged the church considerably. This is easily seen. Now, I do enjoy Southern Gospel music as a genre, but if you watch as they sing a song, the people largely do not respond to the lyrical content, but rather to the music. If you are at a concert, that’s ok. For instance, if you have a group with an excellent tenor, and people are responding just kind of normally to the song – let that tenor change keys and take off belting it out, that is a great musical moment, but does that translate into better worship? No not necessarily. We are being emotionally swept along by a powerful musical moment. That does not mean that you aren’t, or cannot worship in that moment, but are you just being impacted by the music itself? That is an important distinction to make. I love being impacted by music, and so do you; that’s why we listen to it. In a concert, it is not just music; there are lights and other things going on that are intended to raise the impact. Even the reaction of the crowd can impact you and help ramp you up.

None of this is bad in and of itself, it simply is not worship. Worship needs to focus on God and not acquiring an emotional rush.

- **His Works**

We are commanded time and time again to remember the Lord and what He has done. Do you worship God for His great works? How often do you include

⁸ http://www.the-highway.com/psalmody_Irons.html

thanksgiving and praise for the great things God has done in the past: in biblical times, down through church history, or even past events in the lives of your own family members.

In Psalm 145 we read:

I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness. The LORD is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love. The LORD is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Part of our singing of praise ought to focus on God's great works. We should rejoice in His numerous works of Redemption. All of Redemption is centered in the work of Christ in His life, death, and resurrection. But God did many things before Christ that foreshadowed Christ's work. We sing often of God's creating the world and sustaining it. These are themes found often in the Psalms. The themes of Deliverance, Redemption, and Salvation are often repeated as well.

Most of the songs we sing have some reference to the work of Redemption, with a focus on the work of Christ for us. This is by design. What higher theme can we find to sing about?

We have a limited time to use for singing in any given service, no matter how long that service is. That being the case, we need to find the best songs to use in our limited time. We need songs focused on God and what He has done.

- **His Attributes**

Along with praising God for His great works, we ought also to praise Him for His attributes. In reality, God is indescribable and incomprehensible, but He has revealed some of Himself to us, and to the degree that we understand those things, we need to praise Him for who He is. We know that He is infinite and eternal. Do we truly understand that? No, but we can praise Him for it to the

degree we do understand. God is also holy, righteous, and just. Again, we have a faint understanding of these attributes as they are expressed to some degree in human life. We have all suffered injustice; we have seen unrighteousness; we are aware when we are unholy. So we have seen the negation of these things, but we don't fully understand what they are. We know that God possesses them perfectly; therefore, even with our shadowy knowledge of them, we can praise God for His embodiment of them.

Hymns like *Holy, Holy, Holy, Jesus Thy Blood and Righteousness*, and many others express praise to God for these attributes. We sing of God's justice in *Stricken, Smitten and Afflicted*. A good exercise to drive this point home would be to take your hymnal and start reading through it looking for these themes. Much of this has already been done for you in the way our hymnal is set up. If you look at the Table of Contents, you will notice that the order of attributes comes straight from the Shorter Catechism answer to question #4: "What is God?"

This focus on the attributes of God is essential to good worship. If we use the Psalms as a pattern, we not only see praise to God for what He has done, but there is a great rehearsal of His attributes.

One of the more popular is Psalm 139.

Verses 1-4 describe God's Omniscience:

"O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.
 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.
 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.
 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD."

Verse 5 points out His Sovereignty:

"You hem me in--behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me."

Verses 6-11 portray God's Omnipresence (being everywhere at all times):

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.
 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?"

If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.

If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.

If I say, ‘Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,’”

Verses 12-18 highlight elements of God’s creation, knowledge, sovereignty, immensity, and goodness:

“Even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.

For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb.

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.

My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place.

When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand.

When I awake, I am still with you.”

We do not have to necessarily use the theological terms assigned to God’s attributes; we can praise Him by describing how He deals with us. The focus is on what God is like.

● **Christ Centered, Not Me Centered**

Allow me to reiterate some of what I said before. If we are drawn away to how we feel, the focus is all wrong. In one sense, worship is not about us at all, yet, in another sense, it is. In this meeting with God, He deigns to grant us grace and truth. Do we need a stage full of instruments and amps and theater lighting to receive grace and truth? No. But we do need contrite hearts and the proclamation of the Word of God. We need to get our thoughts focused on the goodness and greatness of God.

A friend of mine used to be the principal of a school. The Kindergarten class was having a little birthday party for one of the students. They had cake and ice cream, and each kid got a little bag with some candy and little toys, while the birthday boy received many presents-- one from almost every student. Jimmy was sitting there pouting. The teacher asked him, "What's the matter Jimmy?" He said, "Look at all the stuff he got and all I have is this little thing of candy!" The teacher replied, "Jimmy it's not your party!"

Too often we think like Jimmy when it comes to worship. "I want it to be exciting or fun for me."

But it is not your party! Worship needs to be centered around what God wants; it is for Him to be recognized and praised – not us!

The impact of revivalism is strong in this area. It tries to force the focus on one's personal emotional state. Music was used, and still is, to lead people into ecstatic experiences. Meetings would go on and on as people would lose control. They would shout and weep, and roll of the floor, shake violently, go into trances, all in the name of the worship of God. It's where the derogatory term "holy roller" came from. Response to these "revivals" split churches and denominations.

The focus was on the effect it was having on individuals, rather than a focus on God, and His attributes and works. Responding emotionally to God and his works is not necessarily bad. We are a unified being, we cannot compartmentalize worship, but the intent and focus must be on God, and not trying to get an outward response from the people.

Value of Corporate Praise

So what is the value of this Joyful Praise? It is commanded again and again and exemplified throughout the Bible. It seems that corporate praise will be a primary activity in the Age to Come. This is something God wants from us. It is an activity essential for us. It reorients us, just like David in Psalm 139, our hearts are turned away from ourselves and toward God.

We come to realize more and more that we are not God, and that there is a perfectly good God who is worthy of our worship, love, and obedience. If our lives are not punctuated with these times of worship, the probability of the idols of our hearts growing is quite high. That battle is hard enough, even for those who

worship. But without reorienting our hearts and immersing ourselves in the grace and glory of God, we will lose ground in that battle.

So, worshipping together, and praising God together is a powerful influence for good and growth in our Christian lives. God's people have always been a worshipping people. Israel was called again and again to solemn assemblies. One of the stated purposes of the Exodus was that the Israelites could corporately worship God. Corporate worship is an influence for unity too. It is a great equalizer. If the rich man and the poor man are both focused on Christ and praising Him, the distinctions between them dissolve. The same is true with ethnicity and culture. Last year I was privileged to serve on the Presbytery commission to particularize Han Sarang P C, a Korean church in our Presbytery. It was fascinating and glorious when we sang hymns. The Koreans sang in Korean and we sang in English. Both were praising the same God in Christ, even though we differ in culture and language, we were praising him together. Worship brings unity.

Corporate worship brings our focus back to Christ in particular – or at least it should. Christ should be central to our worship, so that we are reminded of His great redemptive works for us. We should leave every week with Christ pressed on our hearts. We are reminded of His perfect life, His ignominious death, his burial, his glorious resurrection and his victorious ascension. We need to live in these realities, and joyous praise leads us to do so, when it is focused on Christ. He has accomplished forgiveness for us. He was raised for our justification. By faith in Him, we stand already righteous in God's sight. Joyous praise is a good and right thing to do when we meet together. It is a good and right thing to do every day!

We need to be a worshipping people. In fact, we are. If we are not worshipping and praising God, we will be worshipping ourselves or something else. Let's avoid that false worship. May the praise of our glorious God be continually in our minds and on our lips. May it be so especially when we gather together here on a Sunday morning. Let joyous praise arise from us in response to the great grace of God, and the astounding works of Christ on our behalf. In the words of Paul:

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! "Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?"

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Rom 11:33-36 NIV)

Confession of Faith

Titus 1: 9-11 asserts:

He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision group. They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach--and that for the sake of dishonest gain.

It has been a long standing tradition in the church to recite a creed in the worship service. You can find it in Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Lutheran, Anglican, Methodist and here among us the Reformed and Presbyterians, There are Baptists and independents who do so as well though the majority among them do not do so.

Is this just a tradition, or is there a biblical foundation to it? We do it – are we right in doing so? Is confessing our faith together a proper element of worship?

Creeds and Confessions

A creed or confession of faith is a reaffirmation of what we believe – sort of a pledge of allegiance to our Savior.

- **Anti-Creedalism**

There are those in the church today who denounce the idea of creeds and confessions of faith, not just the use of them in a service, but their existence. They often use the slogan, “No creed but Christ.” But this is an impossible position. Any statement made about Christ, is in fact some sort of confession. Merely to say, “Jesus Christ” is a confession of faith. Christ is not Jesus’ last name; it is a title. To say it, you are calling Him the Anointed One – the Messiah promised in the Old Testament.

To sing *Jesus Loves Me* is a confession of faith – and quite a profound one at that. There is no escaping a creed. The question is not whether to have one or not, but rather, do you have a good and sound one. It is not sufficient to say, “I don’t have a confession of faith I just believe the Bible.” As soon as you try to summarize what the Bible says about a certain topic, you are engaging in

Theology and you will come up with some kind of statement of faith – either a good and Biblical one or a bad one.

Carl Trueman in his book The Creedal Imperative, says:

I do want to make the point here that Christians are not divided between those who have creeds and confessions and those who do not; rather, they are divided between those who have public creeds and confessions that are written down and exist as public documents, subject to public scrutiny, evaluation, and critique, and those who have private creeds and confessions that are often improvised, unwritten, and thus not open to public scrutiny, not susceptible to evaluation and, crucially and ironically, not, therefore, subject to testing by Scripture to see whether they are true.⁹

A creed is unavoidable and the attempt to avoid one hides the beliefs of the congregation from public view and scrutiny. It can lead to personal domination, confusion, or theological disinterest. None of which are good for the church. This anti-creedal trend is not healthy. It has been fueled by Postmodern notions. The lack of certainty, and the rejection of foundationalism, has served to seriously undermine creeds and confessions. We believe in certainly. We adhere to the Bible as the inerrant Word of God, so therefore, we have a foundation upon which to build a creed, and we should!

The Bible must be interpreted. Roman Catholics and Protestants both claim to believe and follow the Bible. Many cultists do too. So in order to set the record straight, we need creeds and confessions. We need to say clearly what we believe the Bible teaches. The Pharisees of Jesus day certainly would have said they believed and followed the Law and the Prophets, but they had it all wrong. They misunderstood what was being said.

- **Value of Creeds**

The value of creeds is that things are stated clearly. We know where we stand. We know whether we personally agree with the standard. Creeds can actually serve to create unity between diverse bodies. I can have good fellowship, and do, with an elder from Plymouth Brethren Church. We both know where we stand, and we have significant differences, but we also agree on the essentials of the faith.

⁹ Carl Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, Crossway, 2012, p15

The creeds and confessions are corporate documents. They were crafted over time with more than one mind at work. They were adopted by churches after examination and deliberation. They are not the work of one guy off in a corner. Our own Westminster Confession was developed over 4 years by roughly 150 scholars. The council of Nicaea in AD 325 began work on what we call the Nicene Creed. Constantine invited 1800 churchmen to attend. Records are sketchy, but probably about 300 attended. They met for about 3 months.

Confessional statements are not new. There are several places in the Scripture where we find this sort of statement. That famous one in Philippians 2 was probably a hymn of confession – confessing who Christ was:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11 NIV).

The Shema was used regularly by the Old Covenant church to confess faith: ***“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one”*** (Deut. 6:4 NIV). This was confessed corporately by God’s people of old. Certain Psalms were used for a similar purpose:

Psalm 33: 4-11

For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth. He gathers the waters of the sea into jars; he puts the deep into storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the people of the world revere him. For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. The LORD foils the plans of the nations; he thwarts the purposes of the peoples. But the plans of

the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.

Psalm 97: 1-6

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice. Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side. His lightning lights up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth. The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory.

The value of confession is demonstrated by Paul in Romans 10: 9-11:

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. As the Scripture says, "Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame."

In Hebrews 13: 15, the writer urges us to give thanks and make confession, "Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess his name."

Defending the Faith

Paul also instructs Titus to refute those who deny sound doctrine. This too would argue for stated creeds and the use of them by God's people on a regular basis. We have to know what sound doctrine is before we can defend it and refute its opposite. The recitation of a creed or portion of a confession serves both purposes. It confirms to us true doctrines. We need this. We need to have the truth rehearsed in our minds over and over so that we do not forget it.

It is easy to let essential truths slip from our thinking when confronted with challenges of life. When confronted with a tragedy, people are often tempted to question the goodness of God; why would God allow something like this to happen? Or they might question His wisdom; "God, this does not make any sense; what are you doing?" Or they may even question His sovereignty; "God, I thought you were in control; I think you lost it here. I don't think I can trust you anymore."

Confessing our faith can help keep us rooted in the truth of God as sovereign, wise and good. If rooted, we then can defend what we believe.

Confessing Faith as an Act of Worship

Robert Rayburn says in “Biblical and Pastoral Basis for Creeds and Confessions:”

The earliest creeds, as confessions of faith, served a liturgical purpose and some do to this day. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, in their liturgical usage, foster a sense of belonging to the one, holy, catholic church. Their importance lies not only in the excellence of their form of words but in their antiquity, the witness they bear to the unity of the church through the generations. In worship, creeds give expression to the living connection between contemporary Christians and their spiritual ancestry. The Heidelberg Catechism, which functions liturgically in some Calvinist communions, links the worshipper in a similar way to the epoch of the Reformation and the Reformed tradition.¹⁰

Traditions vary on how creeds are used. Some churches use only the Apostles Creed and use it every week; some only use the Nicene; still others use both of these. We and others like us use a variety of creeds and confessions. Usually we attempt to connect the portion used to the sermon topic, though not always.

You might be wondering about the difference between creeds and confessions. Some see a difference, some do not. They both are statements of doctrine. If there is a difference, it would be that in general, creeds as we know them, are shorter and deal with very core doctrines, i.e. the person and work of Christ. Confessions, on the other hand, are longer and deal with other doctrines like justification, adoption, sanctification, the church, the sacraments, etc. There are various terms used to describe these kinds of doctrinal statements: Apostles Creed, Westminster Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, Formula of Chalcedon, Canons of the Synod of Dort, 39 Articles, but they are all statements of faith, descriptions of what one believes.

So whether we use the Apostles Creed, or a question from the Heidelberg Catechism, or an article from the Westminster Confession, we are doing the same

¹⁰ Robert Rayburn, Biblical and Pastoral Basis for Creeds and Confessions, "Premise" Volume III, Number 3 / March 29, 1996, <http://www.reformedreader.org/bpcc.htm>

thing – confessing to God and before one another what we believe. Confessing Christ before men is a vital thing for us to do, and an appropriate thing to do when we assemble together. The Psalmist tells us to do this in Psalm 107:1-2, “Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever! Let the redeemed of the LORD say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble.”

He is saying more than just a corporate confession, but this is certainly one way to do what he says. It expresses to God our continued allegiance to him, and we express to one another a unified faith. Since we have clear Old Testament example of confession of faith, and we have several texts in the NT that seem to be liturgical confessions, and since confession of our faith is commanded, we stand on good biblical ground when we confess faith together.

A confession has things in common with a sermon. It is not necessarily the direct words of Scripture, and it is crafted by man, but it reflects the truth of Scripture in summary form. In a sense, we are declaring the Word of God when we use a creed that is true to the Word.

We affirm again and again the truths of God’s Word. Creeds, catechisms, and confessions are most useful in serving as reminders of what we believe. They are good to read and memorize. In the study guide that is handed out with the bulletin each week, there is a catechism question from either the Westminster Shorter Catechism or the Heidelberg. Read those; memorize the answer. We need every reminder to keep the faith before us.

Rehearsing our faith in the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin, that He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, and that on the 3rd day He rose from the dead – This is good for us. We so easily forget or allow these truths to slip into the background; therefore, we need to remind ourselves of Christ’s work of Redemption for us, because our only hope is in Him! Apart from His life, death, and resurrection, we would all be condemned to eternity in Hell, separated from God. But in Him, we have full and complete salvation – Why would we not want to say these things to one another and to God when we meet together? We should and we do!

It would be a healthy thing to repeat the Apostles Creed every morning. Reading the Word, praying and reciting a creed is a great way to start your day! Keep the

work of Christ fresh in your thinking so that your heart is always filled with gratitude to Him for all that He has done to save you.

Corporate Prayer

Acts 2 has had more debate surrounding it than probably any other chapter in the Bible – that may be hyperbole, but there really are numerous issues that are debatable here. Those in the Charismatic movement look to the early part of this chapter for support for speaking in tongues. Both Presbyterians and Baptists look to verses 38-39 to support their respective views on baptism. Those who believe the Bible teaches that believers ought to live communally point us to verses 44-45. Those would all be interesting and important to discuss, but those issues are not my primary focus. Tucked away in the midst of these controversies is a little verse that tells us what the early believers did when they met together – vs 42, “They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”

- **Prayer, or the Prayers**

^{ESV} **Acts 2:42** “**And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.**”

The word is clearly plural.

Richard Longenecker, In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* says:

His use here of both the definite article and the plural in "the prayers" (*tais proseuchais*) suggest formal prayers, probably both Jewish and Christian. The earliest believers not only viewed the old forms as filled with new content, but also in their enthusiasm they fashioned new vehicles for their praise. In addition, it is not difficult to envision the earliest believers using extemporaneous prayers built on past models—such as Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55), Zechariah's Song of Praise (Luke 1:67-79), or Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:28-32).¹¹

These prayers would have been filled with biblical content from the Old Testament, mostly the psalms and the prophets. There were numerous prayers most likely intended for different purposes.

¹¹ Longenecker, Richard N. “A. A Thesis Paragraph on the State of the Early Church (2:42-47)” In *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*: Volume 9. 290. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, © 1981.

These public prayers, do they counter what Jesus taught about entering into your closet and praying privately, unseen and unheard by others? No. Private prayer is extremely important in our Christian lives, but Jesus never condemned public prayer in corporate worship. The point He was making was concerning the hypocrite making a big show of prayer on the street, desiring to be seen and acknowledged for his holiness. Corporate prayer is a vital part of corporate worship. It has always been part of what we do as believers in worship.

- **Prepared or Extemporaneous**

Another issue that arises is the question, “Should we use prepared prayers?” How can we properly pray someone else’s words? It is actually a valuable thing to do. For instance, whenever you include a passage of Scripture in your prayer, you are praying someone else’s words. It does not invalidate your prayer to do so. Using someone else’s words can actually help expand your prayer, and help you avoid getting into a rut. There are others who are better at crafting a prayer or including things you do not normally think of, so why not use them as a resource?

There is a section in the Litany – a Prayer found in the *Anglican Book of Common Prayer* that I always find helpful, because I don’t always think to pray about the themes it raises. It says:

From all blindness of heart; from pride, vain-glory, and hypocrisy; from envy, hatred, and malice, and all uncharitableness, Good LORD, deliver us.

From all inordinate and sinful affections; and from all the deceits of the world, the flesh, and the devil, Good LORD, deliver us.

From lightning and tempest; from earthquake, fire, and flood; from plague, pestilence, and famine; from battle and, murder, and from sudden death, Good LORD, deliver us.

From all sedition, privy conspiracy, and rebellion; from all false doctrine, heresy, and schism; from hardness of heart, and contempt of thy word and commandment, Good LORD, deliver us.

We can clearly benefit from the prayers of others, both by adopting their language and their ideas.

- **Forms of Prayer**

Prayer takes many forms and fulfills numerous purposes. That is reflected in our service with the several prayers that we use.

- **Invocation**

One form is the invocation: a prayer in which we ask God to meet with us and empower our worship by his Holy Spirit.

- **Confession**

Confessing our sin together is a good and right thing to do. Following the Old Testament pattern, it ought to be done early in the service just as the altar was the first thing you came to in the Tabernacle.

- **Intercession**

Another form of prayer is intercession. Intercession is praying for other people and other situations. These people can be near or far, known or unknown. The Pastoral prayer is largely intercession though not exclusively. I include praise, thanksgiving, confession and intercession all in the same prayer, but it is largely intercession. Intercession has historically been a vital part of the gathering of God's people.

Hughes Old explains:

Prayers of intercession are a major focus of the public prayer of the Christian Church.

It is in prayers of intercession that we continue the ministry of intercession that Christ gave to the Church to perform in his name. One of the reasons that we come together in assemblies of worship is to pray for the coming of the Kingdom, for the progress of the Gospel, the reforming of society, and the building up of the Church. One of the distinctions between public and private prayer is that in public prayer we pray as a community for the community and for the concerns of the community.

Jesus himself taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the Kingdom. When he gave them the Lord's Prayer, this was one

of the things included: "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven."¹²

The importance of intercession cannot be urged too strongly. Jesus did it; the Apostles did it, and the church has always been involved in this kind of prayer. Don't we all desire this for ourselves? We ask others to pray for us in challenging situations. So intercession in a worship service is good.

Regardless of which side you prefer in the American Civil War, this statement about intercession from Robert E. Lee, I think you will agree with:

Knowing that intercessory prayer is our mightiest weapon and the supreme call for all Christians today, I pleadingly urge our people everywhere to pray. Believing that prayer is the greatest contribution that our people can make in this critical hour, I humbly urge that we take time to pray--to really pray. Let there be prayer at sunup, at noonday, at sundown, at midnight--all through the day. Let us all pray for our children, our youth, our aged, our pastors, our homes. Let us pray for our churches. Let us pray for ourselves, that we may not lose the word 'concern' out of our Christian vocabulary. Let us pray for our nation. Let us pray for those who have never known Jesus Christ and redeeming love, for moral forces everywhere, for our national leaders. Let prayer be our passion. Let prayer be our practice.

In most of Paul's epistles, he comments on how he is praying for that church. It was a regular part of his ministry. We have record of gatherings of the church for prayer in the New Testament, in which they are interceding. One case in point is in Acts 12:

Then Peter came to himself and said, "Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod's clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating." When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so

¹² Hughes Oliphant Old, Leading in Prayer, Eerdmans, 1995, p175

overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel." But Peter kept on knocking, and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. "Tell James and the brothers about this," he said, and then he left for another place. (Act 12:11-17 NIV)

This is almost amusing when you compare the fervency of their prayers to their lack of faith when the answer arrives. But they did pray, and their prayer was answered.

- **Consecration**

Another form of prayer is the Prayer of Consecration at Communion. When Jesus initiated the Supper he prayed.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. (Mat 26:26-28 NIV)

Paul reiterates the fact that Jesus prayed when he gives instructions for the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor 11. In this prayer, we give thanks to God for the sacrament and for the work of Christ that it represents. We also ask for Him to take common things and use them for a holy purpose.

Some traditions have a Prayer of Consecration plus a Prayer of Thanksgiving after bread and again after the wine.

- **Thanksgiving**

Near the end of the service, we have a Prayer of Thanksgiving. Can this even be questioned? If offering thanksgiving to God in a worship service is not appropriate, than what is? The people of God have always done this.

Psalm after psalm demonstrates this. How many exclamations of praise do we find in the New Testament? We are commanded to rejoice and to give thanks. This should be part of our praying when we gather together. We accomplish this in our service by singing praises as well as through our prayers of thanksgiving.

Throne of Grace

The blessing and privilege of prayer ought to cause us to marvel every day. We have access to the Throne of Grace individually, as families, and here, when we meet together. Spurgeon said:

True prayer is an approach of the soul by the Spirit of God to the throne of God. It is not the utterance of words, it is not alone the feeling of desires, but it is the advance of the desires to God, the spiritual approach of our nature towards the Lord our God. True prayer is not a mere mental exercise, nor a vocal performance, but it is deeper far than that—it is spiritual commerce with the Creator of heaven and earth. God is a Spirit unseen of mortal eye, and only to be perceived by the inner man; our spirit within us, begotten by the Holy Ghost at our regeneration, discerns the Great Spirit, communes with him, prefers to him its requests, and receives from him answers of peace. It is a spiritual business from beginning to end; and its aim and object end not with man, but reach to God himself.¹³

O what a blessed privilege it is to offer prayers of any sort to God, but prayers of thanks and gratitude are especially blessed. God is worthy of our praise and gratitude, but it is also good for us to do so. It changes the direction of our hearts. Gratitude and thanksgiving is a wonderful healing influence. So at the very least let us offer prayers of thanksgiving when we meet together in worship.

These prayers: Thanksgiving, Intercession, Invocation, and Confession are rooted and grounded in the grace and character of God. We can go to God because we know He will never turn out to be the devil. We know he is the great Covenant Keeping God. He has come to us in grace in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, who has borne our sins in His own body on the Cross. He has lived and died for us. He rose again for us. By faith in Him, we have full and complete redemption.

¹³ C. H. Spurgeon, The Throne of Grace, A Sermon delivered on Lord's-Day Morning, November 19th, 1871
<http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/1024.htm>

We have the assurance of life and blessedness in the Age to Come. O there is so much to thank Him for, and so much to pray about. Because of the work of Christ and our union with Him, we have open and ready access to the Throne of Grace. God never sleeps nor slumbers. We have His full attention at any time from any place.

In Micah 7:18 we read, “Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy.”

He delights to show mercy. Why, when we go to the Throne of Grace and Mercy, do we ask small things? He delights in showing mercy! Why are we hesitant to ask? He delights to show mercy! Asking small things is not wrong, but let’s not exclude asking for large things.

In our service, when we meet together, we need to pray; we need to invoke the Name of God; we need to confess our sin; we need to intercede for others, and we need to offer thanksgiving. Thanks for life, health, freedom, and all the provision that God has made for us, but most of all, praise and thanks for the salvation we have in Christ. He fulfilled the requirement of perfect obedience and bore the perfect justice of God against our sin. We need to rejoice in Him and glory in all that He is. We need to worship Him daily, we need to pray daily, but we especially need to pray when we assemble for that purpose on a Sunday morning.

Scripture Reading

In 1 Timothy 4: 13-16, Paul exhorts:

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

In January, 1984, a man was painting the home of an 89 year-old lady in Spokane. She had a large family Bible prominently displayed on the coffee table and remarked that it was 116 years old and a priceless heirloom. The man commented on how remarkable that was, and added, "It doesn't matter how old the Bible might be, what's on the inside is what matters." She immediately replied, "Oh, I know. That sure is the truth. Why, we have family records and births and marriages and deaths that go so far back, all recorded in that Bible; we could never replace them."

There is a video that made the rounds on Facebook a couple of times of a church somewhere in the east opening crates of Bibles. This was the first that they had a Bible of their own. Most were weeping, some kissing the cover, others clutching it close to their heart, while here in this country, more and more churches are removing the reading of Scripture as part of the service. In some churches it's completely gone; others maintain the reading of the sermon text, but that's all.

In the dialogue that of our worship service, we have three scripture readings: an Old Testament lesson, a Psalm, and a New Testament lesson. Some other traditions have four Scripture readings: Old Testament, Psalter, Gospel, and Epistle. The reason given at times for the removal of readings is that it has no appeal. People get tired of it. It does not draw in the unchurched. Essentially, what is being said is that it has little entertainment value.

The great paragon of prayer, George Muller said:

It is a common temptation of Satan to make us give up the reading of the Word and prayer when our enjoyment is gone; as if it were of no use to read the Scriptures when we do not enjoy them, and as if it were no use to pray when we have no spirit of prayer. The truth is that in order to enjoy the Word, we ought to continue to read it, and the way to obtain a spirit of prayer is to continue praying. The less we read the Word of God, the less we desire to read it, and the less we pray, the less we desire to pray.

Historical Precedent

Historically, the reading of scripture was present in Old Covenant worship and carried right over in the New. In an article entitled, "The Public Reading of Scripture in Worship," Glen J. Clary said:

That Jesus read from the prophet Isaiah and not from the Law indicates that this was the second Scripture lesson in the service. In each service, there were two Scripture lessons: the Law and the Prophets, which in the Jewish division of the Scriptures also included the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Thus, Moses was read every Sabbath (Acts 15:21) and so were the Prophets (13:27). Unlike the *law*, the prophets were not read as a *lectio continua* but were specifically chosen to complement the torah lessons and provided the key to their interpretation. In Luke's account of the service that Paul and Barnabas attended in Pisidian Antioch, both readings are mentioned:

After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to them, saying, "Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it." (Acts 13:15)¹⁴

Many of the first Christians continued to attend synagogue and were very familiar with the reading of Scripture as an element of worship. There is little wonder that this became a vital and regular part of Christian worship. It ought to cause us great concern that this practice is on the wane today and has been for some years. Elders, see to it that this continues. Members, insist on this being part of the liturgy here. Do not accept any excuses for removing Bible reading from the service.

Value of Reading Scripture

If it is this vital, what value is there in reading scripture in the service? As we have pointed out before, our service is loaded with Scripture: The Call to Worship, portions of the Confession of Sin, the Absolution, the Words of Response. Reading Scripture is God speaking to us. So in the dialogical conversation of worship, having God speak is essential. Having him speak at length is a blessing.

Tim Challies wrote on his blog:

The Bible is the very Word of the living God, breathed out by God and given to us to train us in all that is necessary for life and godliness. As God's people we are deeply reliant on Scripture, trusting that the Bible is the only infallible and inerrant means through

¹⁴ Glen J. Clary, **The Public Reading of Scripture in Worship: A Biblical Model for the Lord's Day**
http://opc.org/os.html?article_id=342

which God speaks to us. For this reason Scripture must be central to our worship services. We ought to read it, sing it and preach it every Sunday! Reading Scripture is not something we do out of duty or obligation, but something we do in delight, trusting that it is a means by which the Lord blesses, pursues, convicts, and draws. To stand at the front of a church and read the Bible is to stand in the place of God and proclaim his Word.¹⁵

Public reading tends to expose you to passages that you might not read on your own. We all have our favorite books or chapters and perhaps go to them again and again. We are sometimes reluctant to read a minor prophet or 3rd John, etc. Public reading takes that choice out of your hand and therefore may take you places you might not normally go.

There is a tradition in the church concerning the public reading of Scripture called *Lectio Continua*. In this approach, the Bible is read straight through portion by portion. So, for your Old Testament lesson, you start in Genesis and read probably a chapter a week until you get to the end of Malachi and then you start over. The same would be done for the New Testament: Matthew to Revelation, and then start over. They do this regardless of what the sermon is about. In this way you expose your congregation to the entire Bible over the course of years. J.C. Ryle, a bishop in the nineteenth century Anglican Church, wrote:

“There is nothing in the public worship of the Church of England which I admire so much as the large quantity of Scripture which it orders to be read aloud to its members. Every Churchman who goes to church twice on Sunday hears two chapters of the Old Testament and two chapters of the New, beside the Psalms, the Epistle, and the Gospel. I doubt if the members of any other church in Christendom hear anything like the same proportion of God’s Word.”¹⁶

We don’t read as much as the old Anglican service, and we do not do *Lectio Continua*, rather we do try to have a loose connection to the sermon topic in our readings. Eric Smith said:

It doesn’t have to seem like a fireworks display every time we read Scripture in our services. This is one of those worship practices that tends, by the grace of God, to have a subtle, cumulative effect on a

¹⁵ <http://www.challies.com/articles/the-public-reading-of-scripture>

¹⁶ <https://ericcsmith.wordpress.com/2010/09/16/the-value-of-reading-scripture-in-worship/>

congregation over the long haul. May the ongoing ministry of the public reading and hearing of Scripture week-in and week-out shape the thinking and affections of our churches.¹⁷

God could have continued revelation and communicated over and over again to each congregation, but he did not. He had his revelation written down, at least the portion he intended to preserve. We have that written revelation in the Bible. If we want to hear from God, we must use the Bible – We must read the Bible. What better time to read it than when we meet together in God’s presence? We need to have our concentration on the Word of God, so putting as much attention to it in our worship service as we can is a great value. What has God promised to bless; is it not His Word?

Public Reading is Commanded

Our text says so clearly. Paul tells Timothy, **“Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching.”**

This was not private study, although that was essential too, but the public reading. This was to be done when the church gathered for worship. Justin Martyr, writing at Rome around the year 150, says that on the Lord’s Day, “the memoirs of the apostles” and “the writings of the prophets” are read as long as time permits.¹⁸

Our text is not the only place where the reading of Scripture is commanded. Paul commands the Colossians to do so in **Col. 4:16, “And when this letter has been read among you, have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you also read the letter from Laodicea.”**

In the days before the New Testament had been compiled into a single volume, the various letters would make the rounds from one church to another. Copies were probably made so eventually, more and more local churches had their own portions of the New Testament Scriptures. Here in this instance the Colossians had received a letter and so did the Laodiceans; Paul commands them to swap letters and have both of them read to their respective congregations.

¹⁷ ibid

¹⁸ Cary

Paul also commands the Thessalonians to read their letter in the congregation. **“I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers”** (1 Thess. 5:27). He puts them under oath! This was not just a mere suggestion or urging, this was a command on the authority of God Himself, so serious a command, that He used an oath to bind their conscience. This must be done. The apostles took this idea of reading Scripture to the congregation very seriously.

In 2 Pet. 3:15–16, Peter instructs his fellow believers,

And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.

The early Christians were accustomed to the reading of the Old Testament Scriptures and that continued into the New Covenant era. But here, Peter puts Paul’s writings on the same level as Scripture, which makes the writings of Paul valid texts to use as Scripture reading.

John also speaks on this topic in Revelation 1:3 **“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.”** Here he pronounces a blessing on reader and hearer, thus assuming that this will be read to others who will listen to what is being read. So what is so important in these recent developments to push the public reading of Scripture out of the service? Skits, concerts, theatrical type sermons, other readings, performance oriented singing, and in more extreme cases we see things like journaling, labyrinths, private meditation, etc. Many things not commanded or sanctioned by the Bible have made their way into worship services. The service is oriented around felt needs and entertainment, not the Word of God.

If I ever begin pursuing those sorts of things – Fire me! Or at least bring me up on charges to the Presbytery for breaking the Regulative Principle. I’m serious – It’s that important that the Word remains central.

Here at PEP, we have even re-oriented some of the “Circumstances” of our service to point to the Word: the lights used to be focused on the band when the former church was still here-- we redirected them to the table with Word and Sacrament clearly portrayed. The other set shines on the cross.

When the Israelites slipped from the primacy of God's directives for worship in His revealed Word, they did not immediately run to false god's. No, rather they attempted to worship God by the use of images and other things He did not prescribe. The Golden Calf was actually an attempt to worship YHWH!

So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."

So the next day the people rose early and sacrificed burnt offerings and presented fellowship offerings. Afterward they sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry (Exodus 32: 3-6).

This was to be a festival to YHWH. But it deteriorated rapidly into pagan revelry. So not only are we to read the Word in the service, we must also heed the Word in the service. What better way to heed it than to read it? The Word directs our worship, but it also gives us the reason for worshipping.

We worship God because He is worthy of our praise. He is the Creator, Sustainer of all that is. He is the Great Redeemer. He sent His only Begotten Son to this sin cursed Earth to call to Himself a people and purchase their redemption. Jesus lived, died, rose again and ascended to heaven all for us and for the glory of His Father. Our salvation and eternal future totally depend on this work of Christ. We cannot save ourselves and are under the wrath and curse of God in our natural state, but the Bible reveals the long history of Redemption, culminating at the Cross. Jesus established the Kingdom of God and He will consummate that Kingdom when He returns. We are received and accepted by God by faith in the merits of Christ and on the basis of Christ's work. The Word of God makes this clear. Therefore, we must read and study it. We must read it when we gather together in a worship service, because it declares Christ to us. It must also be preached.

Preaching

Preaching started at least as far back as Noah. It continued through Moses, the prophets, Jesus, the Apostles and down through the history of the church. This is another category like prayer and praise that really ought to be unquestioned as to its proper place in a Christian worship service. We saw last week that the Word is valuable to be read, and by extension we can say that it's valuable for us to hear it preached.

We have been looking at the various aspects of our worship service to see whether or not they conform to the requirements of the Word of God. We believe God regulates His worship and that we are not free to make it up on our own. We believe also that worship should be a dialogue between God and His people. He speaks and we respond. The reading and preaching of the Word of God is the way God speaks to us today. We are not going to get a message from God from the bark of a tree, the clouds in the sky, from the fur of a caterpillar, or even a gut feeling. No! It is here that He speaks. If you want hear from God, go to His Word.

I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage--with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths (2 Timothy 4: 2-4).

There is a revelation of God in Creation; Psalm 19, Romans 1 et al make that clear. But you cannot find God as Savior and Redeemer there. Paul says in Romans 1, **“since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse”** (Rom 1:19-20 NIV). So rather than salvation, all you find is culpability; there is a God and I am responsible to Him!
Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ we are told, and that Word goes out primarily through preaching.

Preach

There are different words in the original that are translated “preach.” Here, he used a word that means “proclaim.” Paul is commanding Timothy to proclaim the Word of God. This is clearly a spoken activity, and is often done in a group setting, with one proclaimer and many hearers. It is not restricted to just evangelizing the lost. It is proper to understand this as a proclamation whenever the Word of God is declared, regardless of the nature of the audience. In this function of preaching he lists 3 things that ought to be done; this is not necessarily an exhaustive list, but these were of prime importance to Paul.

- **Correct**

This is to redirect someone who is believing wrong things or pursuing the wrong actions. It is a teaching sort of thing. “Here do it this way rather than that way.” Preaching should apply the Word of God in such a way that we can see the errors of our ways and purpose to follow the way of Christ. For the unbeliever, this would explain the need of Christ and a giving up on finding Redemption anywhere else. For instance, Paul’s correction of the Philippians about anxiety:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phi 4:4-7 NIV).

He is trying to redirect them from anxiety to a confident trust in the goodness of God. Don’t worry – Pray! Quit doing that – start doing this. The Scripture is full of correctives to our natural sinful way of thinking and doing. Paul also speaks elsewhere about putting off the old and putting on the new – that is this idea of correcting.

- **Rebuke**

This is a firm exposing and denouncing of wrong. Some of the terms used in the Greek lexicon are *chide*, *rebuke*, *censure severely*, *charge one with wrong*, or *restrain*. This takes correction to a higher level with greater urgency and greater firmness. This includes serious warning. Paul’s most urgent rebuke is given to the Galatians. He spares no words in his rebuke – we can sense a clear difference in his tone here compared to how he wrote to the Philippians:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel-- which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ (Gal 1: 6-10 NIV).

He threatens them with Hell if they continue to pursue this way of believing. They were on the verge of denying the Gospel itself, so he rebukes them; he denounces them, with the hope and prayer for their repentance. He wants them to return to the Truth he had taught them, so his words are very strong. Here Paul rebukes when other places he may be much more corrective. Why, we might ask? Because here, the very Gospel is at stake. Here, a rebuke is absolutely necessary. This was urgent.

- **Encourage/Exhort**

This can be understood in a similar vein, almost a synonym, of the other too, but most likely he is going after its other meaning that is *to console, to encourage and strengthen by consolation, to comfort*. That is the approach of the NIV and the NLT, while the KJV, ESV, and the NASB use exhort. It seems that most likely he would not be repeating himself, but rather adding to his statement. Preaching should encourage the hearts of the believer. God's people need to be corrected, rebuked and encouraged. For instance, in most of Paul's epistles, he spends the first part encouraging his readers in the Gospel. Only after he has done so does he turn to correction and rebuke.

- **Patience**

Paul then gives an overall directive for how these are to be done – with all patience and teaching. He instructs Timothy that this must be done with patience or long-suffering. We need to do these things over and over again, patiently continuing on so that God's people will be conformed into the image of Christ. This is similar to the command he gives in 1 Thes 5:14, **“And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the**

timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” Different terms are used, but the theme of patience is clear. Whether correcting, warning, rebuking, encouraging, etc we must do so with all patience. I have no delusions that because I preached on a certain topic once that I will never have to address it again. No, we change over time as the Word is worked deeper and deeper into our souls. So preaching must be a patient endeavor. But in being patient, I must not forget correcting, rebuking and encouraging.

Wisdom of the World

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (1Co 1:21-24 NIV)

We need to have the Word preached to us because the wisdom of the world will never save us. The wisdom of the world has led to a very long list of false gods. It has led to Atheism. It has led to a great doubting of the only true God. It has led to self-indulgence and arrogance. To boil it down, it is a declaration to God that, “we will not have you rule over us.” Now that is not to deny that the learning of the world has produced some very beneficial things. Science and technology, medical advances etc are good things, but the philosophies of this world are opposed to God and His Word. This rejection has been the case for a very long time. Cain rejected God, Lamech rejected God, and Nimrod rejected God and developed false religion. The Babylonians, Assyrians, the Egyptians, The Greeks, the Romans all in their philosophical systems did not find God, but served the creature rather than the Creator! Have we done any better in the “New World?” Not really, our cultural elites are often ok with some sense of a god, with civil religion, but are offended by the God of the Bible.

The Word needs to be declared into this culture. Even though it is filled with skeptics, and mockers, we need to declare the Word of God fully and firmly. Let’s not kid ourselves, the culture and the philosophies of this age are trying to press us into their mold. Paul tells us elsewhere that we are not to let the world press us into its mold, but rather, be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Christ and Him Crucified

The message that is to be declared is, as Paul says here, “Christ and Him crucified.” Now the contemporary has been strongly influenced by the world, so that this message has slipped into the background and in some places, totally disappeared.

Over against the preaching of the Word, so many have succumbed to the pressures around them and have taken up other things. They may even use the Bible to promote these things. Some have turned to what we might call “civil religion.” By that I mean a general belief in a somewhat undefined god. “Let’s be nice; let’s get along; let’s apply the Golden Rule.” There is little said about sin, no real declaration of the Work of Christ. It’s a general theism and a good dose of morality. But it is not Christ and Him crucified! Similarly, we can be easily distracted by political action. There is no place in the New Testament where the Apostles tell us to make the political struggles of our day part of our preaching. We are to preach Christ so that the church is built up and prepared to deal with whatever our political circumstances are.

I have strong political views. I believe our country is on the verge of disaster, but that is not my message when I stand here. My message must be Christ and Him crucified. In private I’ll discuss my views, and express my opinions. But when I stand here I am not an agent of the USA, nor is my calling to preserve this country. NO! I stand here as an ambassador of Christ. I must be about His business. He is concerned for His church and about the Gospel. This country is not indispensable to the progress of the Gospel, so preserving it is not my concern. Let’s remember Isaiah’s words: “Who has understood the mind of the LORD, or instructed him as his counselor? Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him, and who taught him the right way? Who was it that taught him knowledge or showed him the path of understanding? Surely the nations are like a drop in a bucket; they are regarded as dust on the scales; he weighs the islands as though they were fine dust” (Isa 40:13-15 NIV).

My job is not to be a guru of self help either. My job is not to preach the message of recovery, or weight loss (even though I could use that); it’s not to build self-confidence, or how to deal with bad memories. I’m not saying that those things are necessarily wrong; it’s just not what I am called to.

So many churches have given themselves over to that kind of thing and the message of Christ crucified is shoved way to the back. Does the message of Christ address the distresses of life and the deep concerns of our souls? Yes, but we must not try to address those apart from Christ.

The message must be Christ every week. The story is told of some preacher that was being compared to Charles Spurgeon. Someone commented that when they heard the other guy, people would comment, "My, what a wonderful preacher." But when they heard Spurgeon they would comment, "My, what a wonderful Savior!"

When Paul says preach Christ and Him crucified, he is using that statement as a synecdoche, a part for the whole. The whole message of Christ must be declared: He was and is the Son of God and he came here to accomplish our Redemption. This He did by living perfectly before His Father, fully obeying the law and doing everything the Father gave Him to do. He went to the Cross, not as a martyr for a cause, but as a substitutionary sacrifice for His people to pay the debt owed to God for sin, which was death. He was buried, and on the 3rd day rose from the grave. Through His life, death, and resurrection, we are justified-- declared righteous in the sight of God-- all based on the merits of Christ. It is all of that that must be declared. If what I preach on some Sunday could just as well have been preached in a synagogue, at the Rotary Club, or even in a Roman Catholic Church, it was not Christ and Him crucified!

Foolishness

Paul says that this is foolishness. The translations differ on this; is it the preaching that is foolish or is it the foolishness of the thing preached? I think it is a sort of combo of the two. The idea of proclaiming the historical fact that a perfect man lived, died, rose again, and is the only hope of the world, does on the surface seem foolish, and that is how it is regarded by the world. On this, Hendriksen wrote:

"We preach Christ crucified." But precisely what is the meaning of that saying? Paul himself provides a twofold answer.

"To the Jews a stumbling-block." From a Jewish point of view, God had cursed a crucified person forever. Even a mere reference to such a person was offensive to a religiously sensitive Jew (compare Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13; 5:11). Indeed, calling a crucified man the Christ, that is, the Messiah, was the height of spiritual insensitivity.

"And to Gentiles foolishness." For the Gentiles, the idea of proclaiming a message about a person who was nailed to a cross was utter foolishness. A person crucified by Roman authorities usually was a criminal slave. In the Gentiles' minds, it would be ridiculous to say anything at all regarding a man condemned so to die. Certainly, a criminal slave who died on a cross could not be Lord and Savior of mankind.

Believers accept the message of the cross and readily admit that they do not fully understand the significance of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross. Nevertheless, they know that through faith they are saved.¹⁹

But God has chosen to use this "foolishness" to call and redeem a people unto himself. When the church attempts to improve on the foolishness, then we begin to go astray. When we back away from the message of Christ because it is regarded as foolish, we are failing and falling.

Today, the exclusive nature of the Gospel is not only considered foolish, it is considered dangerous and is in some circles, hated. If we calmly take our position on the shelf along with all the other varieties, we can be accepted. But if we begin to say, "No, those other ways are wrong and Christ is the only way!" – then the trouble begins. And so it must, because Christ is the only way. He must be believed in for salvation, hence He must be declared in every sermon that is to be considered Christian.

The validity of preaching in a worship service is self-evident. It is a worship experience because it is part of the dialogue between us and God. But it also is intended to exalt Christ and the majesty of God. If you leave a service saying "I am a great sinner, but Christ is a great Savior," are you not in an attitude of worship? Yes Indeed! You cannot properly worship apart from that attitude. So Christ must be preached, even though regarded as foolish by the world, the message must be Christ and Him Crucified.

The Lord's Supper

¹⁹ William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary, 1 Corinthians, Baker, 2002, p59

The sacraments have been a point of significant disagreement since the Reformation and still are. There is disagreement over the number: Roman Catholic Church says 7; Protestants say 2. There is disagreement over how they work: RCC says *Ex opere operato* (in the doing it is done); Protestants say, no faith is necessary. Some say baptize babies others say, no, only professing adults. Some say the bread and wine change substance in communion, while others say it is just bread and wine. We will not have time to explore all of the variants on the sacraments. Actually we will not talk about Baptism at all, but focus on the Lord's Supper. Even with that limitation we will not cover all questions.

For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we judged ourselves, we would not come under judgment. When we are judged by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be condemned with the world. So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for each other (1 Cor 11: 23-33).

The Institution of the Supper

The Lord's Supper was not some memorial dreamt up by the disciples; rather it was commanded by Jesus to be done. It was instituted on the night before the crucifixion at what we call the Last Supper. There is no question as to its being commanded. Jesus directly commanded that we do it in remembrance of Him. He instituted it for the church until He returns. Luke records it, "**And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'** (Luke 22:19-20 NIV).

Paul applies what Jesus instituted to the Church and ordered its continuation, **“For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”**

This is something a church must do, and if it does not, it is not a church. There are countless para-church ministries out there that are not sanctioned to do the Lord's Supper. Your home, though Christian, is not sanctioned to serve the Lord's Supper. It was given to the church and the Church must do it.

In Catholicism, the priest raises the host up high. He then says, “HOC EST CORPUS MEUM,” Latin words, which mean, "This is my Body." By this ritual they believe that the elements are transformed into the body and blood of Christ. In the modern Mass the priest may say, "Behold your Lord." Saint Liguori tells us that at this point the priest conceives, with his hands, The Christ, just as truly as Mary conceived Him in her womb. You are expected to believe that the wafer before you is literally transformed into the Body of Christ. To deny this is blasphemy according to Canon law. The same is true for the wine becoming the blood of Christ. This was a major point of conflict in the Reformation. Calvin et al rejected this notion and therefore thought that declaring the elements to be God when they were not, that bowing and worshiping them was idolatry.

Is this what Jesus intended when he instituted the Supper or did men add to what he established and turn it into something it was not? We answer, yes it has been distorted. Jesus instituted bread and wine. The bread he used was very likely unleavened, since he instituted the Supper at the Passover meal. But the Supper is not the Passover; it was instituted after the Passover was observed. There is a relationship, but they are not identical. When Paul commanded that this be done, he did not use the specific word for unleavened bread, but rather that general word for bread – common bread. So we are free to use leavened bread. It ought to be bread though, not potato chips. I say that because back in the 60s in the “Jesus movement” stories were told of groups of hippies having communion with chips and coke.

Jesus also instituted wine. That is clear from the rebuke Paul gives the Corinthians for getting drunk at the celebration. Wine is the appropriate element. We offer both for those who for physical reasons, need to use juice. I urge you use the wine unless you are otherwise prevented. Before revivalism took root in this country, nothing but wine was served at the Supper, no choice was given.

Notice also that two actions were commanded: eating and drinking. There is a distortion of the Supper called “Intinction” where the minister dips the bread (usually a wafer) into the wine, and the participant consumes both at once. This is being allowed in our denomination. I was one of those who fought against it, but we lost. The reasons given for doing this were merely pragmatic: it’s cheaper and quicker. They do receive both bread and wine, but the pattern established by Jesus and reiterated by Paul is distribute the bread; eat it, then distribute the wine and drink it in two distinct actions. That is what we ought to do. We have no authority to change what we were told to do. Remember, God regulates how He is to be worshiped.

The Meaning of the Supper

There are four basic views on what the Supper is, and what it means. We already mentioned the **Catholic** view that the elements change substance and become the body and Blood of Christ, and that in doing so, He is being re-sacrificed week after week. The re-sacrifice idea is clearly opposed by several passages especially in Hebrews that state His sacrifice was a once and done event.

The **Lutheran** view is that there is a real physical presence of Christ by and with the elements, but they remain bread and wine. Luther insisted on this because Jesus said, “This is my body.”

The **Memorial** view is the belief that there is no presence of Christ at all, but merely a ritual of remembering. Swiss reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, taught this view. This is followed by most Baptists, independents, Pentecostals, etc. Among American evangelicals, it is the prevailing view.

We hold to a fourth view – that of the **Spiritual** presence. It is clear that the substance does not change, and there is no sacrifice going on. But there is something about it that makes it more than a memorial.

Paul explains in 1 Cor 10, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1Co 10:16-17 NIV).

There is a fellowship, a participation, in the body and blood of Christ. That's more than a memorial! We spiritually feed on Christ in the Supper. Did not Jesus say: "I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Your forefathers ate manna and died, but he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:53-58 NIV).

He is not saying that He is actual Manna, but rather, that He is spiritual bread.

If this were just a memorial, a ritual in which we remember what Jesus did, why would the strong warnings be given in 1 Cor 11?

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Cor 11: 27-29).

This feeding on Christ is not in a carnal or fleshly way, but spiritually – we feed on Him by faith.

This is a covenant meal. This idea goes way back before the giving of the law. When Abraham was returning from his victory, Melchizedek met him and brought out bread and wine – remind you of anything? Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, and Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

So this has very ancient roots. We sit down with Christ at the Supper and fellowship with Him in the eating and drinking.

When God established the Covenant with Israel through Moses He had a Covenant meal with their leaders. We read in Exodus 24:

Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."

Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. 11 But God did not raise his hand

against these leaders of the Israelites; they saw God, and they ate and drank (Ex 24:8-11 NIV).

This idea of a covenant meal impacts our view of what we do in the Lord's Supper. God prophesied through Jeremiah the establishing of a New Covenant, and Jesus is the one who established it at the Last Supper... "This cup is the New Covenant in my blood!"

The Supper stands between Christ's sacrifice on the Cross for our sin and the consummation, when we will sit with him at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. We both remember what he has done for us, but we also look forward to the Age to Come when He will make all things new. That is why we continue it until He comes. Once He returns, we will no longer be celebrating the Supper.

The Abuse of the Supper

Our text warns us about abusing the Supper or eating and drinking it unworthily. To do this without faith and understanding is to sin against the body and blood of the Lord. When Paul talks in our text about discerning the Body of our Lord, I do not think he is talking about us, the church. The church is sometimes called the body of Christ, but here I believe he is talking about discerning the presence of Christ in the sacrament. Look again at what Paul says:

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself (1 Cor 11: 27-29)

This is often mis-applied. The poor broken sinner who is struggling with his sin fears to take the elements because he has not been holy enough. That is not what Paul is talking about. If that broken sinner is clinging to Christ as his only hope and knows he needs the grace of God to sustain him, he ought to partake. He needs the benefits that come from communing. Michael Horton said, "But the purpose of this Holy Supper is not to hold out judgment, but rather to hold out God's forgiveness and pardon. Through it, we receive the benefits of Christ's death and present intercession; in fact, through it, we receive nothing less than Christ himself."

Now we do limit who is to participate: first by the explanations in the bulletin, and secondly, in my comments at the table. Paul offers a severe warning in our text and says there that some have died due to unworthy partaking. So what do we require? Our Book of Order says, “the minister, at the discretion of the Session, before the observance begins, may invite all those who profess the true religion, and are communicants in good standing in any evangelical church, to participate in the ordinance;”

So you must be a member of an evangelical church, therefore this assumes having been baptized. This is increasingly difficult in today’s world. There are many churches who, for whatever reason, do not have official membership. There are others that put no requirements on those who partake at all. I have heard of churches that put the elements out, maybe off to the side, and are there for anyone to take as they see fit: no words of institution, no prayer of consecration, no real administration at all, and no communing together. Rather than a covenant meal, it becomes like a fast food snack. So not only is it possible for a worshiper to abuse it, the church can too.

There is an opinion floating around in our denomination and elsewhere that baptized children, even infants, are to be given communion, without having professed their faith to the church. Perhaps you know someone who holds to that view. The requirements of our text cannot be met by an infant. The infant is incapable of examining himself. Depending on how young he may not be able to receive the elements himself but has to be fed them.

They argue that children partook of the Passover in the Old covenant, so they ought to receive communion. But it is highly questionable that all children did so. Peter M. Dietsch in the Aquila Report argues this way:

[U]pon returning from exile, the people of Israel gathered to renew the covenant with God (Nehemiah 8-10). It is instructive to note that those who participated in this covenant renewal ceremony are described as “men, women and all who could listen with understanding” (Nehemiah 8:2). Third, one of the key principles of biblical interpretation is to interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament and the fuller revelation which was given through Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20; Galatians 3:16; Hebrews 1:1-2). The argument for paedocommunion seems to trend in the opposite direction, reading the New Testament in light of the Old Testament.²⁰

²⁰ <http://theaquilareport.com/arguments-against-paedocommunion/>

So to sum all of this up, to properly partake, you must be a baptized member of a church that believes the Bible and preaches Christ and Him crucified. You must be old enough and competent enough to know what is going on and that in partaking, you are spiritually receiving the benefits of Christ. It also needs to be done in the context of the church, not at home with your family, not by yourself, etc.

The Value of the Supper

Well, if there are so many abuses of it, why bother with it? What value is there for us in it? First, it is commanded to be done. Obeying Christ is always valuable.

Consider the following section of the Westminster Confession:

29:1 Our Lord Jesus, in the night wherein He was betrayed, instituted the sacrament of His body and blood, called the Lord's Supper, to be observed in His Church, unto the end of the world, for the perpetual remembrance of the sacrifice of Himself in His death; the sealing all benefits thereof unto true believers, their spiritual nourishment and growth in Him, their further engagement in and to all duties which they owe unto Him; and, to be a bond and pledge of their communion with Him, and with each other, as members of His mystical body.

Is there value in remembering the sacrifice of Christ? Most assuredly!

Is there value in having the benefits of Christ sealed to you by faith? Yes, absolutely.

Is there value in spiritual nourishment? Who would deny that?

Is there value in re-engaging with the duty we owe to God? Certainly there is.

Is there value in renewing our bond with Christ and with one another? Yes, a thousand times yes!

The value is unquestioned and its place in worship is too. Because of its value to the believer, we choose to observe the Lord's Supper weekly; it is a wonderful way to respond to the preached Word. Others do it less frequently; it seems wise to us to make it a weekly practice.

Here, portrayed before us, we have the gospel of Christ. We acknowledge our absolute dependence on Him for our salvation. In this, we confess to God and to one another, our need of Christ and His work for us. Here, we declare our sins are

forgiven by the grace of God and the sacrifice of Christ. We acknowledge the vicarious life, death, and resurrection of our Savior the Lord Jesus.

He and He alone is our Redeemer, and we confirm His covenant with us each week as we partake of this spiritual feast.

The Offering and the Blessing

“Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” (1Co 16:1-2 NIV)

The Offering

Giving offerings to God has been a part of worship since the days of Adam and Eve. This is a function of our gratitude and God’s worthiness. Offerings given with the hope of buying God’s favor are misguided and offensive. God’s grace is free; it’s granted apart from our merit. Our hearts ought to be filled with praise and gratitude – out of that sense of gratitude, we give. We give for the purpose of supporting the work of the church, and we give as the 1 Corinthian text said, to support fellow believers who are in distress.

In the Old Covenant, a tithe or a tenth was required. It is hard to make that exact case in the New Covenant, but Paul does say that we ought to give according to our ability. If a tenth was required under the Law, shouldn’t our New Covenant giving exceed that?

Malachi railed against the Israelites about their giving habits:

⁷Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. (Mal 3:7-10 NIV)

We cannot apply the specifics in the same way, but certainly the general principle does apply; we can rob God by giving too little. We are to give as God has prospered us.

The offering is in fact an appropriate element of worship. We have Paul's directives and the example of the early church, as well as the long history in the Old Covenant. In order for this to be appropriate for worship, it needs to spring from thankful hearts. As you give your gifts, give with praise in your heart. Don't give begrudgingly out of duty; God loves a cheerful giver. So rejoice in the goodness of God and give as an act of worship.

The Blessing

The LORD said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, 'This is how you are to bless the Israelites. 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 turn his face toward you and give you peace.""

"So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them" (Numbers 6: 22-27).

In an article in Leadership Journal, Lee Eclov wrote:

I like to ask people new to our congregation about their first impressions of Village Church. Mary's answer surprised me. "I've been part of a church family for as long as I can remember," she said, "but this is the only church where the pastor blessed his people at the end of the service." She always thought the benediction was the last hymn the congregation sang before returning to the world; she didn't know it was God's blessing on his people.

"When you stretched out your arms and sang a song of blessing over us," she said, "I was moved to tears. You weren't just sending us out to face the world on our own; you were pouring out God's blessing and Spirit on us so that we would be better prepared to face the world."

Benedictions have become one of my favorite pastoral privileges. I can't imagine ending a worship service with, "See you next week," or "You're dismissed," when I can offer a congregation God's blessing instead.

Pronouncing blessings or benedictions has also been part of the worship of God from way back when. Even before the creation of man, God blessed His creation:

God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas, and let the birds increase on the earth" (Gen 1:22 NIV). He blessed Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc.

Men soon began to pronounce the blessing of God on others like when Isaac blessed Jacob. May God give you of heaven's dew and of earth's richness-- an abundance of grain and new wine. May nations serve you and peoples bow down to you. Be lord over your brothers, and may the sons of your mother bow down to you. May those who curse you be cursed and those who bless you be blessed (Gen 27:26-29 NIV).

The words "God bless" or "God bless you" are extremely commonplace today; I'm caused to wonder if there is significant meaning behind them though. We say "God bless you," or sign our email "Blessings" and we run the risk using the Lord's name in vain, if we do not say these things with meaning and understanding.

So what about the benediction, the blessing with which we conclude our service?

Direction: Heaven to earth

We need to make a distinction between a blessing, a prayer and a doxology. We find an abundance of all 3 in Scripture. How do we tell the difference?

A prayer and a Doxology are both directed from earth to heaven. As in "Our Father who art in heaven..." Whenever there is a petition from a human, rising to God, that person is praying.

Whenever a human is offering praise to God, he is doing doxology.

An oft made mistake is the use of a passage like this one as a benediction:

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jud 1:24-25 NIV).

How does it begin? "To him..." It is being spoken to God. Is that a benediction? No. It is doxology, an ascription of praise. It is a wonderful statement and one we should read often, but it is not calling the blessing of God down on His people.

A benediction comes from Heaven to Earth. For example:

The LORD bless you and keep you;
 the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you;
 the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace (Num 6: 24-26).

Do you see the downward flow, the Heaven to Earth direction?

There is another passage that is misused in Rom. 16:25-27

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Did you notice the directional words: To him, to the only wise God. That is going from earth to heaven, and is therefore not a benediction. It is a doxology – it is praising God for things He has done or what He will do.

In a good service of worship, all 3 of these should be present: prayer, doxology and benediction.

But at the close, especially when we call it a benediction, we need it to be an actual benediction. The word itself simply means “good word.” It is the act of putting God’s good word on to someone else.

Another mistake is the use of what is called the Mizpah benediction, “May the Lord watch between you and me while we are absent from one another”. When Jacob was leaving his father-in-law, Laban, they had a final confrontation. They set up a heap of stones as a memorial – to act as a boundary marker. Gen 31 records:

It was also called Mizpah, because he said, "May the LORD keep watch between you and me when we are away from each other. If you mistreat my daughters or if you take any wives besides my daughters, even though no one is with us, remember that God is a witness between you and me."

Laban also said to Jacob, "Here is this heap, and here is this pillar I have set up between you and me. This heap is a witness, and this pillar is a witness, that I will not go past this heap to your side to harm you and that you will not go past this heap and pillar to my side to harm me. (Gen 31:49-52 NIV)

So what is going on there? Is this a benediction? No, essentially, it is a curse. This was a calling on God to be a judge between them. They did not trust one another,

so they wanted God to stand between them. What is intended by those who use this at the end of a service is, “May the Lord watch over you and me while we are away from each other.” But that is not at all what the context of the passage is saying. This is not a good benediction.

Putting My Name

By this process of blessing, the Lord says that He puts His name on His people. Our text says: ***“So they will put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”***

This is a good thing to do. It identifies us with our God.

This is very similar to adoption. You bring someone into your family and give them your name, so that now they function as a member of the family, because they legally belong.

The same thing happens in spiritual adoption. God calls and redeems us, in and through Christ; He declares us righteous, based on Christ’s merits; then, He adopts us into His family where we are fully accepted and loved for all eternity.

The Westminster Catechism puts it this way:

Q: What is adoption?

A: Adoption is an act of God's free grace, whereby we are received into the number, and have a right to all the privileges of the sons of God.

In Christ, we are the sons of God. We have the rights and privileges of the sons of God, because God put His name on us! Receiving God’s blessing at the end of a service confirms this reality to you. You are blessed of God and have received His name. You are part of His family. When Jesus spoke of His Father in Heaven, He was speaking of your Father.

So many folks, perhaps you are one of them, struggle with a sense of identity. These old questions haunt many: Who am I? Where did I come from? here am I going? Youth in particular struggle with hammering out their personal identity. Some will try to outperform the others; some will act out in unprofitable ways; still others seek escape through substances.

This perennial question is answered through spiritual adoption, and it’s reconfirmed to us week after week in the benediction. We belong to God; we are His children, giving us a blessed and eternal hope. His name is placed on us via these words of blessing and benediction. We now belong to Him. We now need to

bear the family resemblance in the world. Our position is secure and now our practice must follow.

Fitting Conclusion

This is a fitting conclusion for the service. It corresponds to the welcome which are benedictory words as well. God blesses us in welcoming us into His worship and blesses us again at the conclusion. It, in a sense, puts a seal on all that has transpired. We have interacted with God and are now preparing to go out into another week as His people. We have met with God and have not died, because He has met us in grace. Remember Isaiah's response to seeing God: "Woe is me I'm a good as dead..."

The covenant has been renewed: He is our God and we are His people. We may now go in peace.

We gather to receive His grace and blessing; we scatter in order to take that grace and blessing out to those around us. We go out under the blessing of God. What better way to conclude? It certainly is better than, "you're dismissed." Or "That's all folks," or ringing a bell like the ending of a class period. Words of grace and love from God make this conclusion of our service something desirable.

Review

We have seen that worship is regulated by God, so that we need Biblical sanction to do what we do. Therefore we do not do skits, or concerts. We do not do patriotic stuff: flags, songs, etc. No, rather, our focus is to be on God and His Kingdom. We don't do labyrinths, clowns, ventriloquists, cowboy's with bull whips, interviews with celebrities, or riding motorcycles on to the platform. All of these have been done, but none of these is sanctioned by Scripture. We have seen over and over: God regulates His worship! We must do what He tells us to do.

We have also seen that a worship service is to be a dialogue: God speaks and we respond. Our service is built on the dialogical pattern, and is filled with Scripture.

As we have seen, God welcomes us with the words: "Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." He then calls us to worship Him with statements like Psalm 105:1-3, "Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done. Sing to him, sing praise to him; tell of all his wonderful acts. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice."

God then confronts us with His law, and we respond with confession and seeking forgiveness.

God comforts us with words of absolution. We then, with joy in our hearts, sing God's praises and confess our faith in Him. Then the Word of God is read and preached.

We respond to the Word by gathering at God's table for the covenant meal. Here, we spiritually feed on Christ and renew our allegiance to Him. Out of gratitude, we give our offering to God, and He grants us His blessing as we depart. The whole thing fits together; there is an intentional flow to the service. Ours is not the only way it can be done, but we have reasons for doing what we do, and why we do them when we do.

Part of our purpose, and a major focus is to exalt Christ. If I do not preach Christ in the sermon, the liturgy still does. In the service, we are not trying to entertain; we are not trying to run you through an emotional wringer. No, rather, we want to have you acknowledge that you are a sinner and that Christ and Christ alone is your only hope for salvation. We want you to call to mind the enormity of His sacrifice, and for you to be filled with gratitude for all that Christ has accomplished. The confession of sin, the absolution, the confession of faith, and the singing of praise all focus our attention of the work of Christ, as do the reading and preaching of the Word. It culminates in the Lord's Supper, where Christ is seen as the only Sacrifice for sin. He is the Lord of Glory become victim for us and endured the wrath of God in our place. He, by faith, grants to us His obedience and promises never to leave us or forsake us.

What a blessed and glorious Savior we have. We desire to exalt Him every week. Having received His blessing, let us then, in gratitude, go out into the world to love God and our neighbor. Let us live lives of servanthood and devotion. Let us always keep in mind what Christ has done for us in His life, death, and resurrection. Therein lies our only hope.

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