

Worship: A Gospel Compass

Strolling Through Our Service

I. OUR WORSHIP PHILOSOPHY

Last week I talked with you about worship at more of a philosophical and theoretical level. I told you that this week I would spend time walking through the service, which is the practical implementation of what we are doing philosophically.

There are two ideas to keep in mind as we think about worship. The first is that worship is a meeting between God and His people. Worship is a recapitulation of the Exodus. God gathers His people out of the world and to the heavenly Sinai (Heb. 12:22). He then comes to dwell in their midst in all His splendor and glory.

What is at the heart of this is the whole idea that Christianity is about relationship. It is a love affair between God and His people. The Bible uses romantic language to describe the relationship between Christ and his bride. Worship is about God the infinite person gathering His church, which is made up of all these redeemed finite persons to Himself that they may know mutual joy and delight in one another's presence.

This is not to bring God down or diminish any of his majesty, or to make God in our own image by suggesting this. In fact, what makes it so staggering and remarkable is that it is the infinite God of glory who has called us to Himself and identifies us with this language. It is this God, who does not need us, and does not require in Himself that He be praised.

The triune God of the universe is interpersonal; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the wonderful union within the Godhead there is mutual delight and joy, communication, love, and purpose. They don't need to create in order to be praised. They delight in one another.

It is a sheer act of God's condescension that He would create at all. It is even more extraordinary that having created those whom He did with the capacity to love and obey him and who rebelled against Him, that God would then redeem them and say to them, "you are the object of my affection" and that God might gather us to Himself in mutual joy and delight.

The second idea is summarized in the word dialogue. God is not a distant observer. Worship is not a performance at which God is the audience and we are the entertainers. God is present and is an active participant. Worship is not something horizontal that we do for one another. The rhythm of worship is that of a dialogue in which God speaks and His people respond. There is great interaction and exchange taking place. As you worship using this liturgy I suggest that you look for this dialogue.

These two ideas create a sense of expectation for our worship and give shape to the entire experience. We are disconnected with the previous generations and outside the stream of history. We are not as an evangelical lot standing on the shoulders of the giants of the Christian faith. I want to find ways for us to be reconnected with our Christian heritage and to learn from those who have gone before us.

This liturgy represents some of the ways to recover and rediscover worship. It includes various creeds and confessions (Apostles' Nicene, Athanasian, Westminster, and Heidelberg) as well as ancient prayers that have been voiced by great Christians of the past.

I brought a lot of this liturgy stuff with me. I need help in my devotional life. My exposure to the prayers and devotions of others from past generations gives expression to what is in my heart to pray, and trains me to pray better. These helps both teach and free us to pray more effectually. There is a place for extemporaneous prayers to be offered in the midst of the Prayers of the People in the corporate service of worship.

What follows is a brief explanation of each element of the service.

II. OUR WORSHIP SERVICE

Prelude:

This instrumental music is intended to heighten our sense anticipation of entering the presence of God.

Welcome and Announcements:

The pastor greets the worshippers and helps them to focus their attention on church family "business", which is horizontal. Having these before the service begins also ensures that worship, which is vertical, flows in an interrupted manner.

Take notice where the welcome and announcements occur in the service. This happens technically before the service. It is important to welcome people and remind them of why they are here. It is like everything else in the service. It is intentional, not an accident.

Silent Preparation:

Silence provides a time of prayer and contemplation helping us transition from the outside world full of noise and distraction.

If I had my way, we would meet ½ hour before the worship service to reflect and read and meditate on Scripture. I would like to extend this symbolic time considerably. In fact, I would like to see this silent preparation stretched back to the night before.

Imagine that you received a call on Monday that you were to meet the President of the United States at the White House on Friday at 3:00pm. What would happen to the rest of your week? You would be focused on Friday at 3:00pm. Why don't we approach worship like that? On Sundays, we are not gathered before the President, but the Lord of heaven and earth. God Almighty shows up for this meeting.

I cannot account for what happens in people's lives in any other way. This symbolic silent preparation acknowledges that something significant is happening and that a transition is taking place and we are coming into the presence of God. It is as if we were being carried away by Aslan into the land of Narnia.

Choral Introit:

A short choral or instrumental prelude to the service, aims to lift and focus our hearts toward God, his glory and grace, and the joy of worship. These are reminders of God's majesty and grace.

Call to Worship:

God, through the pastor, summons his people into his presence. The people add their voices in expectant

response.

Invitatory:

An invitation is given to praise God, to which the congregation responds by ascribing glory to the eternal and triune God.

Hymn of Praise:

This hymn of praise is to be viewed as a procession going up into the heavenly city to meet with God. A procession of a choir singing praise symbolizes this for us.

Prayer of Adoration:

God has called us to himself and going up to meet him we have sung his praises. This first prayer of the service acknowledges who God is as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that we need him. We call upon him to show us his mercy and to meet with us. This prayer normally follows a classic pattern: an address to God, acknowledgement of divine attributes, a petition, an application to our lives, and a final doxology praising Christ as the mediator of our prayers.

Affirmation of Faith:

We are now together with God. The meeting with God has begun and our first act in his presence is to confess our allegiance to him using the historic creeds, confessions and catechisms of the Reformation. It is like the covenant renewal conducted at the highland of Shechem between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal after the conquest of the land. Just as Israel reaffirmed her commitment to the one true God surrounded by and in the midst of the nations, so we as those who have been gathered from the nations reaffirm our faith in God who has redeemed us. This is a declaration of our allegiance—a covenant renewal in the likeness of Joshua 8:30-35.

Word of God:

God now speaks to His people often in a Psalm, reminiscent of its use in Old Testament worship. It reminds us that all of worship stands under the authority of Scripture.

Hymn of Thanks:

This is a hymn of gratitude to God for his goodness. The music underscores the truth of the Word of God read, focuses on some aspect of its teaching or directs our attention to the coming time of prayer. Sometimes this is simply an outpouring of praise and adoration, a time for reflection, a choral anthem, or a prayer sung on behalf of the people. Symbolically, it adorns the truth of God's Word with beauty.

Prayers of the People:

God has spoken to us and now the dialogue continues as we speak to God, expressing our personal and corporate needs and praises. These prayers are intended to direct us in specific avenues of intercession; worshipers are encouraged both to pray aloud and silently.

The Lords Prayer:

This prayer is offered in conclusion to the prayers of the people in confidence that the Lord Jesus will answer our prayers and teach us to pray, as he did his disciples.

Hymn of Grace:

This is a hymn of joy reflecting on the grace of God in the gospel. The theme of the hymn directs our minds to the truth of God's Word that is about to be read and preached. In this respect, the great hymns of the faith are like sermons set to music. At times this is a simple expression of praise in choruses.

Word of God:

God speaks again to His people. We stand in order to show particular attention, honor and reverence for Scripture. The biblical warrant for this comes from Neh. 8:1-8, when Ezra, the priest, read from the law, all the people stood. We stand for a minute or two, but they stood all day listening to God's Word.

Prayer of Illumination:

This prayer precedes the sermon as a plea that God the Holy Spirit would do in our hearts what Jesus did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus so that "our hearts burn within us" as the Scripture is explained. It is a request that what God previously inspired He would now illumine it.

This prayer follows the reading of God's Word and is arguably the most important prayer of the entire worship service. Because of the coldness of my own heart, I am painfully aware of how necessary it is for God, the Holy Spirit, to come and to anoint the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. If the Holy Spirit does not come to do this, then we might as well go home. At best the preaching will be information stored in our heads, which will only puff us up. This prayer is that the Spirit of God would so come that our eyes would see, and our ears would hear, and our hearts would embrace the truth of the gospel.

The Sermon:

We hear from God again in the Word preached. True preaching is the opening and applying of God's truth to our lives. This was how the prophets viewed preaching as well as the Reformers. The Puritans believed that God's Word preached was God's Word to you. The people come to hear from God, not a man.

There is a lot that could be said about preaching, but what is often left unsaid is that preaching is one side of a dialog. First, it is a dialog between you and God through an appointed messenger. The Word of God has a prophetic function to speak into the lives of God's people. Just as the Prophets spoke for God, the Word of God preached has this prophetic function.

Second, preaching is also a dialog between the preacher and the people. On one hand, my preaching is shaped by the conversations, relationships, and counseling that happens among you during the week, by which I hear and pray with you about the struggles of your lives. On the other hand, my preaching is informed by my study of Scripture and prayer for those who are not yet gathered into the church.

Preaching is not merely about telling you what a text of Scripture means. That is a point of departure for the greater thing of applying God's Word to the particular needs and concerns of a congregation and community. We don't need preaching primarily because we are ignorant, but because we are sinful. Application is rooted in Scripture and preaching is not merely a Bible study.

There is an addition element that shapes the conversation between a pastor and his people. Pastors who are CEO's distance themselves from the congregation and cannot, in my estimation, be effective preachers. Shepherds have to be among the sheep in order to know where they are hurting and to apply salve of the gospel to their wounds. As a congregation gets larger, it becomes more difficult to do this. Conversations and relationships are what make preaching work.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones spoke of the "Romance of Preaching." There is mystery at work here. How can one person presume or pretend to speak for God in the first place, and then speak to dozen of people? It is hard to explain, but we must acknowledge the unseen presence of God in all this. The Holy Spirit works remarkable and surprising things in the context of worship and through the ministry of the Word of God as it is read and preached. That is the only way I know to account for what happens in people lives.

Pastoral Prayer:

This prayer asks God to seal to the hearts of his people the truth they have heard. It is also a prayer that it will shape their lives and move them to obedience.

Offering:

This act of worship is a symbol of our response to the grace of God. All that we are and all that we have belong to him and we give freely because we have received freely. Why do we receive offerings in worship? In both the Old and New Testaments, offerings were received from the people of God as they assembled for worship (1 Cor. 16:2). These offerings are given to support the work of the ministry.

Doxology:

We offer these "words of glory" to the triune God by our praise of him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Prayer of Dedication:

This is a prayer of consecration before God asking he would be pleased to use our gifts and our lives for the cause of Christ's kingdom and glory.

Confession of Sin:

Here we place ourselves in the proper attitude by saying what is true, namely, that we have in fact sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that we need God's forgiveness.

Assurance of Pardon:

This announcement declares that we, being repentant, are forgiven by God for Christ's sake and on the basis of His merits alone. This is a reminder to God's people that he loves, forgives, hears and responds to them. Jesus prays for us as our advocate in heaven, who ever lives to make intercession for us.

This comes as a word of encouragement as if God is in effect saying, 'I have heard you and am indeed your father and you must never forget that'. Typically, when given in the context of a corporate confession, this word will include a reminder from Scripture regarding the forgiveness of our sins.

The Great Thanksgiving:

The Lord's Table having been set, this prayer focuses our gratitude on the redemptive work of Christ in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly intercession.

The Sanctus:

This is a song of the angels to which we join our voices in ascribing glory to God. The text comes from Isaiah 6:3 and Rev. 4:8. In keeping with the assurance of pardon, the Sanctus has a devotional feel to it. It is more meditative and reflective than the previous hymns and has minor key themes.

Prayer of Consecration:

This prayer asks that God would meet with us at his table, and by the Holy Spirit, remind us of Christ's sufficient work, stir up faith in our hearts, set apart the elements from a common to a holy use, and mediate Christ's presence to us.

Words of Institution:

These words from the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Corinthians 11:23-26) indicate that the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an ordinance established by Christ himself and clearly articulated in Holy Scripture.

Prayer of Approach:

This prayer acknowledges our unworthiness to come to the Lord's Table and our need for his mercy.

The Agnus Dei

This anthem points to Christ as the only sufficient sacrifice for sin, who was offered once and for all time for repentant sinners and who alone can atone for our sins and grant us true peace.

The Lord's Supper:

The congregation is encouraged to reflect on the greatness of the gospel and to sing in praise and celebration of God's mercy as the sacrament is observed.

Prayer of Commitment:

This prayer offers thanks to God for what he has done for us in these holy mysteries, and asks him for strength to go out into the world to do his will.

Benediction:

God pronounces his blessing upon his people and reassures them to be with them all their days. The term "benediction" comes from two Latin words, bene (good) and dictum (speech) and simple means "good word". When God told Moses to bless the people, He said to do it in this way, "The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace".

It is remarkable that God instructs Moses to bless the people in this way in Number 6:24-25. The face of the Lord was a frightening thing. You know from your reading of the Old Testament, that when the voice of God was heard and the face of God was seen, it was crushing. This was true of the Israelites with Moses at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19; Heb. 12:18-24). The terror of Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, is another case in point (Jud. 13:2-23).

Again, it is God who speaks this word. We use this benediction a lot. I never tire of reminding you of this. It has never become rote for me and I trust it will never become rote for you. This is the "beautiful vision" of what awaits us in glory when we will see God face to face and be unashamed because of the work of Christ (Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 12:15-17). At this point it is appropriate for us to ask ourselves an important question. Do we know the smile and favor of God, the Father? As we go from the sanctuary, we leave in peace knowing that His smile is upon us.

Dismissal:

We go into the world with the praise of Christ on our lips, to serve Him and point others to His grace.

Postlude:

Triumphant music is played to encourage us as we go into the world to be Christ's servants and witnesses.

OUR CORPORATE UNDERSTANDING

That is the basic rhythm of our corporate worship service. We want to worship corporately and not merely individually. While there is no systematic treatment of corporate worship in the Bible, there is a distinctive people of God worshipping corporately in both the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament church gathered on the Lord's Day for worship and to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. Revelations gives snap shots of the present and future glory of the worship of the saints before God. From what we see in Scripture, we conclude that it is the right thing to do.

I think we know theologically and experientially that we were made for community. While worship is primarily a vertical thing, there is, within the community of God's people gathered for worship, the means God employs to shape and assist His people. The Psalms are filled with references to God's assembly and God is present in the midst of that assembly.

This is not to negate His presence when we are alone, but there is something qualitatively different

about corporate gatherings for worship. God promises to inhabit the praises of His people. The image of a fire with only one log burning comes to mind. That one log will soon go out if left to burn alone. Place another log beside the one and they will both burn better and longer. The biblical practice of the people of God was corporate worship and so should ours be. Isolation is not a good thing for us. Lone Ranger Christianity is a bad idea.

OUR COVENANTAL COMMITMENT

When we receive the sacraments of the Baptism and the Lord's Supper we practice them "covenantally". For instance, we encourage families to come forward with their children for communion because this is a covenantal meal. We pray for children before they are born and after they are born. We pray for families because that is what it means to be covenantal. When we call a covenant meal, we believe the whole family needs to be there. You don't leave your children out in the garage at dinner time. No, you bring them to the table. The Lord's supper is a family meal and everyone is to come.

Those children who have not made a credible profession of faith before our pastor and elders, are still invited and need to come. They are not second class citizens, but are members of the covenant community by virtue of their parent's faith. They may not have confessed faith in Christ yet, but they are members nonetheless. We have them come with their families, so we can pray for them and we trust God will use these parents to raise these children in such a way that they themselves will come to trust Christ.

OUR COMMUNION PRACTICE

The sacrament of Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is a means of grace for the people of God. All who have trusted in Christ alone for salvation and have been baptized are encouraged to participate. We come to this table because Christ is the Host, and has invited us to come. We come to it with great joy because in doing so we affirm that we are redeemed sinners.

Our sin is great and is not to be minimized. Yet our Savior is greater and delights to minister to us by His Spirit in this covenant meal that the joy of salvation might be restored to us.

The pastor of the church serves the congregation at the front of the sanctuary as they come forward. The people are to receive the elements by dipping the bread in the cup. Kneeling is an appropriate posture to receive the sacraments. It expresses our humility before God, acknowledging that we are under His authority and direction.

Because of the busyness of common life, we have found our weekly communion services to be times of special and profound ministry. Communion is the covenant meal in which the covenant community (believing parents and their children) celebrates its redemption and eats together with its covenant redeemer anticipating the fulfillment of His promises.

Parents are encouraged to come with their covenant children so that the pastor and elders may pray with and for them and their salvation. The sick, discouraged and needy are prayed for as well. What makes this time so tender is the personal attention given to each one who comes.

If you are not a Christian and therefore not in a position to receive communion, you are welcome to come forward and ask the pastor to pray for you, any needs you have, and for your salvation. This manner of serving may be different to you but we encourage your participation and trust that you will enjoy its benefits.

OUR BAPTISM PRACTICE

Baptisms in our church are not do-dads or something that is added to the service of worship, but it becomes the center piece around which we will build the prayers, readings and exhortations. When we baptize children, the pastor walks with the child into the midst of the congregation and calls on them to vow their help to these parents and children in the life to which God has called them. This act reinforces covenantal bond of the sacrament and dramatizes the multi-generational nature of the church. Scripture teaches that children of believing parents are members of the covenant community. We baptize them trusting that everything symbolized in the sacrament is or will become reality in their lives.

Services, which include infant baptisms, are celebrations as well as times for sober reflection. Parents make vows before God promising to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of Christ. Congregation members promise to assist the parents in that task. The liturgy for the service reflects the joy and seriousness of the occasion as prayers, Scripture readings, explanatory remarks and a hymn focus upon the sacrament.

OUR CHURCH COLORS

Liturgical colors are new to many of you. Here are a few reasons for the use of these. First, worship is to engage all the senses, including our seeing as well as our hearing. Look at the example of the Old Testament tabernacle. The beauty of God was put on display by the things that were made. All of the diversity of color and the lavish expression of the architecture symbolized the God of beauty who stood behind it all.

When we walk into our place of worship, I want very much for us to be reminded of three things: God is great, God is beautiful, and God is near to His people. I want those things to mark the place in which we meet for worship. The colors are just one little expression of that.

Second, the Old Testament people viewed time differently and although their calendar was structured around significant agricultural times, those seasons of the year had redemptive significance imported into them. Passover was in the spring time of planting. Pentecost was the time of the initial harvest, the first fruits of what was to come later. The feast of Tabernacles was the last feast in celebration of the final harvest. These feasts had agricultural moorings, but each of these seasons of the year also had redemptive significance. In this way, the people were conditioned to think redemptively about time and not merely agriculturally.

Third, we observe the church year in remembrance of the life of Christ. The Christian calendar basically follows the person and work of Christ from Advent to Easter to Pentecost—His incarnation, His life and ministry, His passion, His resurrection and ascension, and His extending His kingdom, which begins after the season of Pentecost. We do this because we need to think differently about time. In January, I want to be thinking about Epiphany rather than the Super Bowl. In July, rather than thinking about parades and Independence Day, I want to think first about the extension of Christ's kingdom.

The church calendar is there to shape our thinking about time. Time is different for us. It is the stage upon which God acts out His redemptive purpose. The liturgical colors correspond and give expression to these various seasons of the Christian year and reinforce this way of thinking. They are called paraments and change periodically in order to create visual associations with the different aspects of the life of Christ. Liturgical colors have the instructive purpose of pointing us to the work of Christ and the great acts of redemptive history. The four most commonly used colors are:

White represents purity and is used for festivals of the Lord Jesus, primarily Christmas and Easter. It is also the color for All Saints Day. *Blue* represents royalty, repentance, and even suffering. It is used during Lent and Advent, times of preparation and penitence. *Red* represents the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On Good Friday, it signifies the blood of Christ. It also signifies the blood of the martyrs. *Green* is used during "ordinary time," the period from Pentecost to the beginning of Advent, and the period from Epiphany to the beginning of Lent. It represents spiritual growth and world missions.