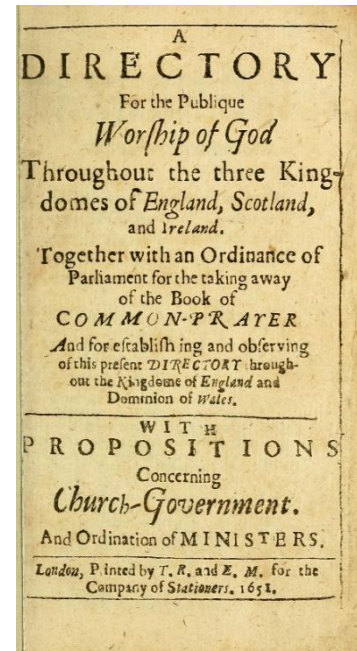


## Reformation Sunday

## Worship Reformed

**Psalm 96:1-9**

As the world progressed into what is commonly known as the Middle Ages, the worship of the church was increasingly corrupted. The services which became known as “the Mass,” had become the product of priest craft. That is, it was the priests acting as the mediators between God and the people, who performed all of the work. Indeed, according to church doctrine, the various rites were believed to be effective in and of themselves quite apart from the faith of the people which was seen as good but unnecessary. The services were conducted in Latin making them unintelligible to the people (and often, even the priests). Preaching had been largely abandoned in part because much of the clergy were ungodly, untrained, illiterate, or all three. The places of worship were filled with images of God, Mary, and the saints in direct violation of God’s Word. Mary was venerated as the Mother of God, Queen of Heaven, and Christ’s “Co-Redemptrix.” She and the saints were prayed to as heavenly intercessors. At the center of worship stood the altar, the place where Christ was believed to be sacrificed every day at Mass. It was believed that as the priest held up the host and the cup and uttered the words of institution the bread and wine would transform into the literal flesh and blood of Jesus to be offered once again for the covering of the people’s sins.



The Psalmist tells us, we are to, “Worship the Lord in the splendor of holiness” (96:9). That means that it truly does matter how we worship God. He is not to be worshiped according to our own imaginations or in the ways that the world worships its gods because, unlike the idols and our imaginations, God is holy. So, worship that is holy is worship that is according to God’s holy requirements. It is worship that is set apart from the world. Indeed, it is worship that will seem strange and alien to the world.

Fortunately, God has not left us without guidance. In the Bible, God teaches us how he is to be worshiped. But we will not find a neat summary in one verse, one chapter, or even one book of the Bible. Rather, the whole Bible tells the story. It is through the progressive revelation of Scripture that we learn the dialogue of covenant renewal upon which the church’s worship is built. That means that worship which is pleasing to the Lord will tell the story of the gospel. “We relive the gospel every time we gather as a church to worship...Consequently, a proper service of worship centers on Christ, and each element, from praise to confession to intercession to Scripture reading and preaching focuses on the benefits which flow from the cross.”<sup>1</sup> It is this robust biblical worship which the Reformers sought to recover for the glory of God.

**1. God calls / We praise**

- Worship begins with the gracious call of God. In the Bible, God provides us with language to be used for Calls to Worship (for example, **Psalm 100**). Our worship begins by hearing God’s Word first. It is a reminder that God is the Divine initiator and director of our worship. Redemptive history in general and the gospel specifically offer the rationale for a formal Call to Worship in which we hear God calling us into his presence. The word church in New Testament Greek is *ekklesia* which means “called out ones,” or “gathered ones.” Our very name recognizes that we exist and are gathered by God’s gracious initiative.
- **Hebrews 12:18-24** reminds us that under the Covenant with Moses the people’s worship began with sacrifice and cleansing. Under the New Covenant, however, worship begins with God’s gracious call to enter his presence with praise on the basis of Christ’s shed blood.
- That God has given his people formal calls to worship teaches us that worship does not slowly materialize. It does not begin with a countdown or funny anecdotes to “warm up the crowd.” In contrast to a service where “the parishioners slowly saunter in to join the crowd, a worship service that begins with the Call to

<sup>1</sup> Terry Johnson quoted in What Happens When We Worship by Jonathan Landry Cruse (Grand Rapids: RHB, 2020) p. 83

Worship has already received a word from God who is active in worship and who wants us there... So the Call to Worship is a weekly reenactment of the primacy and sovereignty of God in our lives.”<sup>2</sup>

- Our response is praise. It is a covenantal pattern – God initiates and his people respond. Many of the liturgies written during the Reformation included a *votum* (a Latin word meaning vow or confession of faith) spoken by the people after the Call to Worship. Typically, this *votum* was taken from Psalm 124: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (vs. 8). The people would then – just as we do – respond with sung praise. The Reformers peppered their liturgies with sung praise. Calvin had the 10 Commandments, The Apostles Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer set to music. Additionally the people would sing the Psalms, selected passages from the New Testament, and hymns.

## 2. We Confess / God Pardons

- The Bible is filled with examples of confession of sin and repentance. The gospel offers this covenantal pattern of confession and pardon. In **Nehemiah 8** the great scribe Ezra came into possession of the book of God’s law after years of neglect. The people were gathered and he read the law of God to which the people responded with weeping repentance (vv. 5-9). Similarly, under King Josiah the Law of God was discovered after having been long neglected. It was brought before the people and proclaimed. The people fell down in confession of sin (**2 Kings 22:11**). Isaiah responded to the glorious vision of God with confession of sin and repentance (**Isaiah 6:1-5**). When he was confronted with his sin, David publicly repented (**Psalms 51**).
- We Christians continue to confess our sins for the obvious reason that we continue to sin. David recognized the goodness of confession of sin: “When I kept silent, my bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me... I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I have not hidden; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (**Psalms 32:3-5**). Likewise in the New Testament we read, “If we confess our sins [God] is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (**1 John 1:9**).
- The Reformers understood that Christians had no need to go to a priest for absolution. Rather, having freely confessed our sins, we hear God’s own words of pardon. Such passages as Romans 8:1, Romans 5:1ff, 1 Peter 1:18-19, and many others give us God’s own comforting words of pardon. In the confession of sin and assurance of pardon we experience what Luther called “the great exchange.” Jesus bears our guilt and we are covered with his righteousness. What a great privilege and blessing to rehearse this glorious truth together every Lord’s Day. It is a public witness to the heart of the gospel.

## 3. We pray / God hears

- Having been assured of and comforted by God’s gracious words of pardon, we are free and bold to enter the place of prayer together. As Calvin writes, “We can go boldly into the Holy of Holies to intercede for others, as well as ourselves, with the confidence that our Father hears us and delights in satisfying us with good things.”
- Throughout the ages, God has called his people to pray. The worship gatherings of the first church were characterized by “the prayers” (**Acts 2:42**). Our prayers are to be characterized by praise, confession of sin, and intercession. In intercession we pray for others and ourselves. As we intercede God promises to hear.  
 “First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” (**1 Timothy 2:1**).

## 4. We Give / God Provides

- We no longer offer sacrifice offerings for sin since Jesus has been offered once for all. Rather, in the age of the New Covenant in Christ we bring offerings of thanks. Just as God established in the days of the temple, the work of the ministers and the needs of the people would be addressed by the tithes and offerings of the people. We see this practice of tithes and offerings being brought to the church from the very first days (**Numbers 18:21; Deuteronomy 12:6; Malachi 3:8; Acts 2:44-45; 1 Timothy 5:17-18**).

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<sup>2</sup> James Smith quoted in Cruse, p. 88

In serving one another through our giving tithes and offerings we are trusting the Lord to take our offerings and multiplying them for the good just as we see him do so often in the Scriptures.

### 5. God speaks / We listen

- God is a speaking God. That is, he is self-revealing by way of his word. He creates by his word. He judges by his word. He saves by his word. He guides us and grows us and blesses us by his word (**John 17:17**). From the time God gathered his people at Sinai and constituted them under his holy law, he has spoken to them by means of preaching. Indeed, the **Book of Deuteronomy** is Moses' sermons proclaiming and applying the Ten Commandments. In **Nehemiah 8** we see the biblical pattern of God's Word being read and preached and the people's response to hear and receive: "And Ezra opened the book [the law of Moses] in the sight of all the people...Then all the people answered 'Amen, Amen!' while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground...The Levites...helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading" (vv. 1-6). God continued to speak to his people primarily through the prophets who were above all else, preachers.
- Preaching has always been weird. People have always preferred sense experiences to words. God's people proved that when they directed Aaron to make them an idol (**Exodus 32**). Likewise, Paul affirms the "weakness" of preaching (**1 Corinthians 1:21**). But God has determined that faith will come by way of hearing the Word of God (**Romans 10:14-15**). Jesus was a preacher. The ministry of the Apostles was centered on preaching. The church was "devoted to the Apostle's teaching" (**Acts 2:42**). Just as the Sinai generation so long ago, God still gathers his people together for the purpose of hearing and joyfully receiving his Word proclaimed.

### 6. God promises / We believe

- From the very beginning, a regular feature of the church's gatherings was "the breaking of bread" which is a reference to the Lord's Supper (**Acts 2:42**). Likewise baptism, instituted by our Lord (**Matthew 28:18-19**), was the way in which people were included in the visible church. The sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper are "visible sermons," whereby God announces and applies his gracious promises of salvation to his people. In baptism we bear the promise of God to cleanse from sin all who believe in him. In the Lord's Supper we commune with the Lord and each other tasting the goodness of the Lord's grace. The church of the Middle Ages had corrupted the sacraments with errant doctrines as well as adding five additional sacraments to the two instituted by Jesus.

### 7. God blesses / We depart

- The benediction is not just a formal way of saying, "The service is over." In the benediction, we have one last opportunity to hear God's word before we depart and return to the world. Just as God has the first word in our worship, so too does he have the final word. And it is a word of blessing. How appropriate for a people saved by grace to have God's words of gracious blessing linger in our hearts and minds as we return to the world on mission to make Christ known.

*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 his countenance upon you and give you peace.*

- Numbers 6:24-26