

How We Worship: *Thinking Through Our Gathered Worship*

We gather weekly, in celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to worship the triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This *whom* of our worship is the most important aspect of our worship. The *whom* of our worship then relates directly to the *why* of our worship.

We worship God because that is the right response to God (Ps 29.2); our worship is first and foremost for God and his glory. God created us and redeemed us for this very purpose (John 4:23). Second, we gather for worship that we might edify each other (Col 3:16). Third, we worship because we are needy and come to God to receive from him (Ps 50.14-15). We also want the unbelieving to be evangelized through our gathered worship of God (1 Cor 14.24-25).

In light of those goals, this paper seeks to think through *how* we worship congregationally.

What is a “liturgy” for gathered worship?

In describing how we worship, we are describing our “liturgy.” The word “liturgy” comes from two Greek words and literally means “the work of the people.”¹ In the context of a Sunday service, “liturgy” refers to what we do as we gather for worship. Every church has its own liturgy – i.e., its own pattern for gathered worship. The question is, *how intentional is that liturgy?*

How should we intentionally shape our liturgy?

The first question to ask in how we worship is not “what do we want to do?”, but “how does God want us to worship?” For this reason, God’s Word is to be the most formative influence on our gathered worship. In our services, we want to sing the Bible, read the Bible, pray the Bible, preach the Bible, and see the Bible (in the “visible words” of the sacraments). The New Testament (as well as the Old Testament) also provides, by “precept and example,” many elements for gathered worship, including:²

- *Corporate prayer* (Acts 2.42, 1 Tim 2.1, 1 Cor 14.16)
- *Scripture is read* (1 Tim 4.13) *and expounded in preaching* (2 Tim 4.2; cf. Luke 4.20)
- *Songs to praise God and edify one another* (Eph 5.19, Col 3.15, Rev 5.9-13; cf. Ps 95, 100, etc.)
- *Reception and distribution of financial gifts* (1 Cor 16.2; cf. Rom 12.8, Acts 6.1-6, etc.)
- *Public confession of our faith* (1 Tim 6.12, cf. 1 Tim 3.16, 1 Cor 15.1-3)
- *Reception of God’s blessing by the people* (2 Cor 13.14, Luke 24.50; cf. 1 Cor 15.23-24, etc.)
- *Greeting one another* (Rom 16.16, 1 Cor 16.20, 2 Cor 13.12, etc.)
- *Sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper* (Matt 28.19-20; 1 Cor 11.23-32, etc.)

1 Mike Cosper, *Rhythms of Grace*, 117.

2 This list is adapted from Edmund Clowney, in *Worship: Adoration and Acts* (edited by DA Carson), 117.

One's culture and context will also have a shaping influence on a congregation's gathered worship. Culture and context are important to keep in mind, since our gathered worship must be intelligible to people in our day (e.g., 1 Cor 14). One implication of this reality is that we think it is good to sing *both* the great older hymns, as well as contemporary songs that are rich in Godward truth.

In addition, we want to connect with and benefit from the history of the Church in ages past. In particular, our Reformed theological tradition has had a rich and thoughtful history of liturgical practice that helps us focus on God and the work of Christ, while also edifying, instructing, and shaping us. That theological heritage is reflected in elements like our "call to worship," a practice of "corporate confession," and the importance we place on the Lord's Supper.

What about spontaneous elements in gathered worship?

While a structured liturgy is very helpful in promoting a God-centered, edifying time of gathered praise, there are also spontaneous elements of congregational worship found in the New Testament (e.g., see 1 Cor 14:26-33). These elements include something God spontaneously brings to mind (a word of "prophecy" in 1 Cor 14) with the specific purpose of speaking "to people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation." (1 Cor 14:3)

These spontaneous elements must always travel within the lanes of *edification* ("Let all things be done for building up"³) and *order* ("For God is not a God of confusion but of peace."⁴). And yet, God tells us that these elements are not to be despised either (1 Cor 14:39, 1 Thes 5:20). Such spontaneous elements might well be exercised in a small group setting, but space should be allowed for them in the gathered worship service also, since Scripture models this for us (1 Cor 14:26). We provide a "ministry microphone," located by the stage and overseen by a pastor, for this purpose.

How do structure and spontaneity relate in gathered worship?

While structure and spontaneity may seem to be antithetical to each other, it is better to think of a clear liturgical structure as the providing the context in which the spontaneous can most appropriately and effectively take place. An orderly liturgy provides the steel beams of the building in which the spontaneous can occur in an *orderly* way. In this way, our gathered worship is edifying for all involved. This is vital since God commands us to prioritize love in the use of any spiritual gift (see 1 Cor 13).

Therefore, we do not set structure and spontaneity against each other in our gathered worship. Instead, we acknowledge the Holy Spirit's prerogative to lead us spontaneously, while we recognize that the Spirit typically works through the means of careful planning and biblically-informed intentionality. Most fundamentally, we need the Holy Spirit's work in us that we might respond to God and his Word in a genuine, heart-felt manner.

³ 1 Corinthians 14:26

⁴ 1 Corinthians 14:33, see also 14:40.

What are the main elements of our liturgy?

The following may be considered the primary elements of our liturgy for gathered worship:

- CALL TO WORSHIP

The call to worship reminds us that worship begins with God. We were created by God to worship him, and we gather at his gracious initiative as his people (Deut 6.4-5; John 4.23-24). The call to worship reorients our hearts away from ourselves, and to the God whom we enjoy and praise.

- SONGS OF PRAISE & THANKSGIVING

God's word calls us to sing to God, and to one another, as the Spirit fills us (Eph 5:18-25), and as the word of Christ dwells in us (Col 3.16). In this way, singing helps us remember and respond to the truth - as well as feel the truth emotionally - that our praise might be a *heart-felt* response to God.

- CORPORATE CONFESSION & ASSURANCE OF PARDON

Confession directs us to rightly view our sin for what it is, but it also looks to the promise of the assurance of forgiveness that always follows. We make our confessions confidently in the presence of our gracious God, who has provided in Jesus all we need to be forgiven and assured of his love.

- CREED RECITATION

We will regularly (typically once per month) recite one of the historic creeds of the Christian faith together, that we might proclaim to the world and to each other what we believe. We profess these truths to keep us centered on the gospel that has been passed down the ages.

- PASTORAL PRAYER (& PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION)

After the singing, one of our elders (or pastors) will often lead a time of prayer for a need in our world, our country, our church, or our own lives. This might be a few minutes long, and sometimes more. It's a time for us to draw near to God's throne of grace together (Heb 4.14-16). Prior to the sermon, there will also be a prayer for God the Holy Spirit help us understand his word (Eph 1:18).

- SERMON (& SCRIPTURE READING)

The sermon is our time to be fed by God's word, since we do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Deut 8:3; Matt 4:4). The Bible is "living and active" (Heb 4:12), and we experience that reality on a weekly basis as it is preached to us (e.g., Heb 3:7). So, our approach is "expositional", that is, the sermon seeks to unpack one particular passage of Scripture, and our general practice is to preach the books of the Bible at a time. Hearing God's word preached is an act of grace from God, as we receive from him. So we humble ourselves under God's Word to experience the Spirit's transforming work in our lives (John 17.17, 2 Tim 3:16-4:2).

- LORD’S SUPPER (OR “COMMUNION”)

We generally practice the Lord’s Supper every week to remember Jesus’ sacrifice until he returns (1 Cor 11.23-26). In the Lord’s Supper, we also enjoy communion (or fellowship) with Jesus (1 Cor 10.16), as he is risen and is with us by the presence of the Holy Spirit (Matt 18.20; John 14.16-18). Lastly, we demonstrate our unity together through this Supper (1 Cor 10:17).

- SONG(S) OF PRAISE RESPONDING TO GOD AND HIS GOSPEL

We like to respond to the Lord’s Supper and what we have heard from God’s word by singing again. This helps us respond to and rejoice in our great God and his grace to us in Jesus.

- BENEDICTION

A benediction closes our service as a prayer of God’s blessing on his people. We approach God by his grace, and we are sent out in his grace. You will probably see some people raising a hand during this time. That’s simply a physical way to present the posture of our hearts to receive from God. The benediction also reminds us that Jesus has sends us *out* into his mission, as salt and light in our community (Matt 5.13-16, 28.18-20).

Can such a structure become empty or rote?

It is certainly possible for any structure to become rote. In no way are we advocating for mindless repetition, which definitely is empty and rote. We are simply seeking to be more *intentional* in our liturgy, and that intentionality should include *intentional variety* in our gathered worship.

However, a key for protecting gathered worship from becoming empty or routine is to make sure our hearts and minds are engaging with the truth to which we’re responding. As Jonathan Edwards put it, “True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.”⁵ So, our goal is for *heart-felt, mind-full* gathered worship as a genuine and passionate response to God and his gospel. We pursue this goal in dependence on the Holy Spirit, as we need the Spirit to illumine God’s truth to our hearts and minds.

How could we summarize this structure for our gathered worship?

Given the elements for gathered worship above, this structure *generally* follows this movement:

1. *Christ calls us into his worship* (i.e., call to worship, songs of praise)
2. *Christ renews us by his sacrifice* (i.e., corporate confession & assurance of pardon)
3. *Christ forms us by his word* (i.e., Scripture reading & expository preaching)
4. *Christ communes with us in his Supper* (i.e., the Spirit’s presence in the Lord’s Supper)
5. *Christ sends us into his purposes* (i.e., benediction / prayer of God’s blessing and sending)

⁵ Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 95.