

WORSHIP CHRIST THE KING

A BRIEF GUIDE TO THE PUBLIC WORSHIP OF
GOD IN REFORMED CHURCHES

WE LIVE IN a time when it is fashionable, at least in the United States and other western nations, for individuals to piece together one's answers to ultimate questions—*who am I? where do I come from? what is the purpose of my life?*—from a variety of eclectic sources. No longer do people want to be identified as “religious” for this seems to speak of institutions and group-think. Rather, “spirituality” is the new religion, and it is often the religion of one—one's spirituality is as distinct from the next person's, as their fingerprints are never identical. This cacophony of variation and hollowness has affected the Church in profound ways, perhaps no more evident than in how corporate worship on Sundays looks and sounds like.

Is it possible that God has let the order of public worship be determined by individuals irrespective of what He says in His Word? Or can the Church actually look to God's Word to understand the principles He says should undergird *His* public worship? Reformed churches are wholly committed to following Scripture and confess that God has spoken in His Word about how He wants to be worshipped. God's worship is not a matter of inventing or imagining something innovative, trendy, expressive of individual tastes. Rather, we believe there is a discernible pattern in Scripture that teaches us how God is to be worshipped.

This brief explanatory guide is meant to orient you to what God calls us to do on Sundays as His people. Below you will find an introduction to worship (including the essential principles of Biblical and Gospel-centered worship), and a more detailed explanation of each aspect of worship. Of course, we should state that this order of public worship is not infallible. However, we believe this liturgy is consistent with the way Scripture calls His people to worship Him. We seek to do only that which God has established in His Word.

Throughout this brief explanation, we have used a number of terms, and we provide a short definition here to explain how we've used them:

Liturgy: *This does not refer to the Roman Catholic mass. Actually, it simply means “service.” The way we use it here refers to the way the worship service is ordered. Every Christian church—whether Methodist, Charismatic, Baptist, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, Non-Denominational, etc.—has a “liturgy” since every church “orders” its service in a certain sequence, whether or not they are self-conscious of that order.*

Corporate Worship: *This refers to the weekly gathering of believers on Sunday (Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:42; 20:7) in distinction from the individual worship which occurs Monday through Saturday as we live life before God at home, in our work, in our neighborhoods, etc. God is certainly everywhere with us at all times, but He is with us in a unique and unparalleled way on Sunday when we are assembled together as one visible body.*

Elements of corporate worship: *a Christian worship service is composed of many essential parts—public Scripture readings, singing, prayers, preaching, the Lord's Supper. All these parts are elements of corporate worship and together form the liturgy of our worship.*

Introduction

The *first* thing that must be said about the worship of God is that it should be regulated by the Word of God. Scripture must be the final authority in matters of worship since there alone—and nowhere else—do we find God revealing His will for His people.

The Word of God must be central in worship. This does not simply mean that the sermon is to be Biblically faithful (although it should be) or that the sermon should be the centerpiece of worship (although, in many ways, it is). Rather, the centrality of God's Word means that corporate worship must be saturated, in all its elements, with God's Word—the formal call of God to worship at the start of the service, the prayers of His people offered, the hymns sung, the preaching of the Word, the confirmation of the Word in the Lord's Supper, and God's blessing to us in the benediction are all taken from Scripture and reflect Scripture.

If the Word of God is to regulate worship, then the *second* thing that must be said is that worship will be dominated by the reality of the Gospel, or Good News—that is, God saves sinners.

Scripture tells us that God created man to worship Him. Because of man's disobedience and fall into sin, God must call us to Himself if we are to worship Him. In Christ's person and work, God accomplished salvation for us, which is to say, God has drawn near to His people in Christ and, through His Spirit, resurrected them from spiritual death. As God breathed into the first Adam breath of life, so God has breathed into His people His Spirit to empower them to worship God. Because God has drawn near to us, we are to draw near to God. Our worship service reflects God's call to us—enlivening, empowering, and saving us—and our response of adoration to God.

This call and response pattern is what is often called *dialogical worship* (see *Chart 1*). In the liturgy, or order of corporate worship, we walk through and experience the realities of God's Good News to us, His people. The Good News, as we have noted above, is the work of salvation that God has undertaken for dead sinners who could not save themselves (Rom. 5:6-8). Having been made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-7), we respond to God's saving work (2:8-10). God speaks salvation to us, and we respond with gratitude to God. In the overview that follows, notice how there is a dialogue between God (call) and His people (response) in each of the elements.

1. Prelude and quiet preparation: Strictly speaking, the prelude is not part of corporate worship, yet we include it here as an invaluable preparatory time. Although the saints should value the tangible fellowship with other saints expressed in hearty greetings and conversations, corporate worship is not primarily a time and space where we speak to

**The dialogue of worship: God *speaks* to His people,
and God's people *respond* to their God**

1. Prelude and quiet preparation

2. **God's** Call to Worship Him

3. *We* respond with a hymn of adoration

4. *We* invoke God

5. **God** blesses us with grace and peace

6. *We* confess our catholic faith in the Person and
Work of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
— through the Apostles' Creed

7. *We* respond with the Trinitarian hymn, Gloria Patri

8. **God** gives us His perfect Law

9. *We* pray corporately, concluding with the Lord's
Prayer

10. **God** grants us His assurance of pardon for our sins

11. *We* offer to God our monetary gifts and tithes

12. *We* respond with a hymn of preparation

13. **God** speaks to us through the preaching of His Word

14. *We* respond with a hymn of commitment

15. **God** feeds us by faith in the Lord's Supper

16. *We* respond with a hymn of thanksgiving *

17. **God** places upon us His Benediction, or "Good Word."

18. *We* respond with a Doxology, or "words of praise."

one another, but where God speaks to us, and we respond to Him in unity. Hence, this time is set aside as a preparatory prelude, where we can quietly reflect on the greatness of God and prepare to meet with Him. During this time, it is good for us to remember that, in worship, we meet with God Himself in Heaven (see Heb. 12:22-24). We seek to meet with God in reverence and awe, that is, in a way that acknowledges His infinite and majestic grandeur.

2. God's Call to Worship

Him: After the prelude and the time of preparation, the minister asks the congregation to stand to hear the call to worship. This signals the

beginning of corporate worship. The "call to worship God" is when God calls us as His gathered people to worship *Him*. That is why the call to worship is a divine command to worship God. The Psalms are full of these divine commands and are often quoted in the formal call to worship God (e.g. Ps. 29:1-2; 33:1-3; 134; 135:1-4). God's saving call to His people to worship Him as the one, true, living God is what constitutes God's people as such (e.g. Rom. 1:6; 8:30 1 Cor. 1:2; Eph. 1:18; 4:4; Jude 1), and is reflected in our weekly call to worship Him.

3. Hymn of Adoration: Because God has called us to worship Him, we respond with grateful hearts full of praise (Heb. 13:15). That is why the first thing God's people do after God's saving call is to sing a hymn of praise. After God saved the Israelites from Egypt through the the Red Sea (Ex. 14), the people of God responded by singing God's praise (Ex. 15).

4. We invoke God: To “invoke” God means *to call* upon Him. Here, we ask God to be with us as we worship Him even as we meet with Him and thank Him for gathering us to worship Him.

5. God blesses us with grace and peace: How does God respond when His people call upon His name? He blesses them with “grace and peace,” as the minister raises his hands and speaks these words. Usually found at the beginning of the New Testament Epistles, these words are not insignificant but highly important. Because Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God in our place, God’s word to us is, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,” from beginning to end. There is no more condemnation for those who are in Christ (Rom. 8:1). The Law’s loud thunder has been hushed by the word from the Cross of Christ. This gracious word is the context in which the congregation hears any word of pointed rebuke or confrontative exhortation. Even when these must be given from the text of Scripture, they are never the punishment of an angry tyrant who hates us, but the discipline of our Father in heaven who loves us because of Jesus Christ.

6. Apostles’ Creed: The word “creed” is derived from a word that means “I believe.” The twelve lines of the Apostles’ Creed are the simplest and oldest ecumenical statement (outside the Bible) recited by Christians around the world almost since the time of Jesus Christ’s resurrection. It is a faithful summary of what we believe.

In Scripture, the word *confession* is often associated with sin (e.g. *confess your sins*). But Scripture also uses *confession* positively. Confession in this sense means “speaking what we believe.” We are to *hold fast our confession of hope* (Heb. 4:14; 10:23) and we are to *confess Christ before men* (Matt. 10:32). We *confess with our mouth* what we *believe in our hearts* (Rom. 10:13).

The reason why we recite the Apostles’ Creed is not only to show the world what we believe about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but also to confess what the Triune God has done *for us*. The confession of the church is a confession of praise that exalts the triune God for His saving work applied to His people. As such, it is a global expression of the church’s unity in truth.

7. Gloria Patri: After confessing the work of our Triune God in creation and redemption, we thank God with the trinitarian *Gloria Patri* hymn (“Glory Be To The Father”).

8. Scripture reading: After singing forth our praise of thanksgiving, we read God’s Word. We read God’s Word for two reasons: first, to understand how holy God is, and how sinful we are, and thus to repent of our transgressions. Second, the Holy Scriptures, as it has been fulfilled and re-signified by Jesus Christ, points us to how we are called to

live *now* as God's people. When Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (Jn. 14:15, 21; Jn. 15:10; 1 Jn. 5:3), He meant that loving God has a specific and concrete form. The Word of God, also called the Law of God, is not just a *mirror* of God's holiness that shows us our sins. It is also the divine *design* for our lives, meant to guide our love for God. That is why God's Law is often called the "rule of gratitude."

9. Corporate prayer, concluded with the Lord's Prayer: God's Word not only pierces us because of our sin, it drives us to confess our sin and find our refuge in Christ alone. What better place to go than to the Lord in prayer! Prayer is the creaturely and expansive repetition of God's words back to Him. The people of God are led by the minister, who often structures the prayers around *adoration*, *confession*, *thanksgiving*, and *supplication (acts)*, a structure which itself is borne out in the liturgy. It is fitting that we end this corporate time with the Lord's prayer (Matt. 6:9-13), since this prayer is itself a corporate prayer (there are no singular pronouns, only plural).

10. Assurance of pardon: Having offered our confession and prayers to God in faith, we hear God's assurance of pardon for our sins with His promise from Scripture. That is, God does not cast out His people because of their sins, but speaks forgiveness to them (e.g. Rom. 8:1; Ps. 103:8-13; 1 Jn. 2:1-2).

11. Offering: Part of our weekly worship to God is offering to Him our monetary tithes and offering, an element practiced since the Church's earliest times (1 Cor. 16:1-2). This is an act of worship and gratitude that acknowledges God as the Owner of everything in the world (Ps. 24:1; 50:10-11), including what He has graciously given to us (1 Cor. 4:7). Even in the offering, we follow the dialogical pattern of *responding* to God's *grace*.

12. Hymn of Preparation: After offering to God our monetary gifts, we ask Him to prepare us to hear His Word. Usually, this hymn is intimately tied to the Scripture text of the sermon, and it may even be quoted in the sermon itself or in the preface to the sermon (the introductory comments before the reading of the sermon).

13. Preaching of the Word: It is not an overstatement to view the sermon as the centerpiece of the service. This does not mean that those elements of worship before or after the sermon are incidental or of lesser importance. Rather, it means that corporate worship is driven by the Word of God, which finds its highest expression in the actual reading, exposition, and application of the Word that constitutes preaching. This Word should be found in every element of the corporate worship service, but it is especially and abundantly found in the preaching of the Word.

With good reason, then, Scripture tells us about the power of God's Word to make its hearers born again (1 Pet. 1:22-25), an active Word that pierces and deconstructs the heart of man (Heb. 4:12-13) and is at work in believers (1 Thess. 2:13). God's faithfully preached Word *is* His Word (1 Thess. 2:13), and His instrument to create faith in Christ (Rom.10:14-17). We are called to hold fast to the preached word, by which we are being saved (1 Cor. 15:1-2) because it manifests the hope of eternal life that God has promised in Christ (Titus 1:2-3), and because in the faithfully preached Word we hear Christ and the Father (Luke 10:16). This is why all the elements of corporate worship (songs, prayers, etc.) must serve the message of the Gospel, and be infused with the rich truths of God's Word. This is why the minister chooses the songs since he is the one who has prepared the sermon beforehand.

Prayers are normally said before (prayer of illumination) and after the sermon (prayer of application). The minister should open the meaning of the Scriptures by explaining the pertinent elements of the text. He should have a point to his message, and show how Christ's work is sufficient to meet the sinful condition found in the text. He should clearly proclaim the Word with clarity, biblical consistency, conviction and competence. In faithful preaching, God is pleased to use the weakness of the human instrument to save His people (1 Cor. 2:1-5; 2 Cor. 4:7-12).

14.Hymn of Commitment: How are we to respond to God's word of salvation to us? With a song praise that issues forth from a committed heart. The hymn immediately following the sermon reflects the sermon's content and tone, and shows how God invites us again to Himself, re-orienting us from our sinful ways to His will.

15.Celebration of Lord's Supper: Every third Sunday of the month, we enjoy the feast the Lord Himself prepares for us as His family. Just as there are table manners and protocol at family gatherings and wedding banquets, so, too, there is a proper approach to the Lord's Supper. There are four simple requirements to partake of the table of the Lord. You must be 1) a baptized Christian 2) who has publicly professed Christ, 3) a member in communion with a local body of believers, 4) and not under church discipline. The table is "fenced" verbally so that every person can examine himself (1 Cor. 11:28). Biblically speaking, no other examination is needed apart from this. As a sign, the Lord's Supper points us to the preached Word and God's gracious promise contained therein. As a seal, the Lord's Supper visually assures us of God's promise to forgive our sins because of the sacrifice of Christ and grant us eternal life. This is why the sacraments (the Lord's Supper and Christian baptism) are never to occur outside the context of corporate worship and the preaching of God's Word, and partly why no graven images are allowed in worship (Ex. 20:4-6). God has already given all the images we need in His *preached Word* (as it reveals the perfect image of God, Jesus Christ) and in the *sacraments* of

baptism and the Lord's Supper (they are to be seen in order to understand the promise of the Gospel).

16.Hymn of Thanksgiving: We praise God's love in satisfying His wrath on the cross of Jesus Christ and adopting us into His family by singing a rendition of Psalm 103. This psalm beautifully extols God's fatherly grace upon His people.

17.Benediction: Our triune God is the overwhelming fountain of all good, and He shows us His fatherly and favorable disposition to us from beginning to end. He announced that there was "grace to you and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" at the beginning of corporate worship, and now He declares it again with a word of blessing. That is what "benediction" literally means. The first part of the word is *bene* and it means "good." The second part is *dictio* and means "word." Hence, benediction is God's good word to us because of the life and death of Christ on our behalf. As an example of a Scriptural benediction, Paul's conclusion at the end of 1 Thessalonians reminds hearers that no matter what God enjoins upon them, they are His in their totality, and He will accomplish His holy will in them: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24). Other benedictions can be found in Scripture, as well (Num. 6:24-26; Heb. 13:20-21; and 2 Cor. 13:14).

18.Doxology: Once more, we respond to God's grace by praising His greatness. With this "word of praise," the congregation is dismissed and encouraged to greet everyone around them, as God sends His people into the world to be His salt and light (Matt. 6:13-16).



Grace Reformed Church of Jersey City

Sunday worship at 10:00am

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*a member congregation of the
United Reformed Churches in North America [urcna.org]*