

## *What Is Worship?*

### **Psalm 95**

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I'm trying something different today. We're going to pause at different times through the worship service and talk about what we do and why we do it. I thought it would be helpful to teach about the various parts of worship to introduce what worship means or to refresh us in our understanding and appreciation of aspects of our worship.

We'll look at our "traditional" service today, since that's the one we're in. The outline or shape of the order we use is what I call "modified traditional" or "modified Twentieth Century" worship. It's a pattern that Methodist and United Methodist Churches adopted in the early 1900s and then adapted and adjusted over the decades. It's similar to what other churches do. It was standard for a lot of years. It's very close to what I grew up with—and probably many of you did too.

Sometimes we call what we do in worship the "liturgy." The word liturgy literally means "the work of the people." Generally, the word refers to "the form, traditions, and arrangements used in the worship service" ([https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-need-to-explain-what-you-do-on-sunday-mornings?fbclid=IwAR15QzGJOCHJ1wUohXzx\\_BktHCUJpKSaKNLRBJUK4WVv1Uc5UvLouMK02bs](https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-need-to-explain-what-you-do-on-sunday-mornings?fbclid=IwAR15QzGJOCHJ1wUohXzx_BktHCUJpKSaKNLRBJUK4WVv1Uc5UvLouMK02bs)).

Now let's look at the opening part of our worship service.

We've already heard the **Prelude**. That's the music—usually instrumental—that lets us know something is about to happen. This music signals that it's time to gather and get ready to worship. Hopefully, we've been getting ready for worship through prayer and other practices before we even arrive in the building.

Then we do **Announcements**. It used to be that these came somewhere in the middle of the service, but many of us have moved them to this earlier position. It's important to call attention to what's going on in the life of the church, but that can feel like an interruption during the

service. So we do them earlier. I see announcements as helping us see that we're part of body of Christ. They're part of our fellowship and they call attention to ways we serve—and invite us to consider other ways to be involved.

In a moment we'll have our **Greeting** time. Again, this is part of fellowship and our connection to each other. In other traditional services there's a time for "passing the peace." What we do is similar to that. One thing about greeting each other is that it makes it harder to stay anonymous. Some people do find it uncomfortable. Some studies have shown that people visiting a church don't appreciate this time as much as we'd like. Until we come up with better ways to affirm that everybody's welcome, we'll keep doing this.

After greeting time, we sing an **Introit**. That's the signal that worship is starting. It calls us to enter in, to give God our attention. It gets us started praising the Lord.

We'll resume our introduction to the parts of the service after greeting and the introit.

Now we join in the **Call to Worship**. We hear the call and we respond. We use a short passage of Scripture, usually from the Psalms, to call us together in worship, to help us focus, to declare our purpose here. I try to select passages that relate to the topic of the message for the day. Today, we're using Psalm 100, which is a biblical call to worship. It also kind of connects with Psalm 95, which we'll read later.

After the call to worship, we sing a **Hymn**. There's a lot of music in Christian worship. That's partly because the Bible encourages us to use music and singing to praise God and declare the good news. The Book of Psalms is the songbook of the Bible. "Psalms" means "songs." Jesus and the disciples sang a hymn after the Passover meal and before they went to the Mount of Olives (Matthew 26:30). The apostle Paul encourages us, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (Colossians 3:16). The book of Revelation includes many songs sung by the people of God and the angels.

One church describes the reason for singing in worship this way:

People sing about the things that capture their hearts; things that give them joy, or allow them to express sorrow. People sing of heroes, victory, longing, and hope. As Christians we have every reason to sing, and are even commanded to do so. As sinners who have been forgiven, as slaves who have been set free, as the spiritually blind who have received sight, as spiritual cripples who have been healed, all by the gospel, we have real reasons to be known as a people who sing!

It is one thing to tell the world of God's redemption, it is another to sing of it. It's easy to parrot truth, but to sing of it, from the soul, reveals how we feel. Song is the natural and appropriate response to the gospel, because it is one of the highest expressions of joy.

[https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-need-to-explain-what-you-do-on-sunday-mornings?fbclid=IwAR15QzGJOCHJ1wUohXzx\\_BktHCUJpKSaKNLRBJUK4WVv1Uc5UvLouMK02bs](https://ftc.co/resource-library/blog-entries/you-need-to-explain-what-you-do-on-sunday-mornings?fbclid=IwAR15QzGJOCHJ1wUohXzx_BktHCUJpKSaKNLRBJUK4WVv1Uc5UvLouMK02bs))

During this opening hymn of adoration, we also **Bring in the Light of Christ**. Young people called acolytes bring in the light and light the two candles on the Communion Table. We use two candles to represent the two natures of Christ: divine and human. Light and fire are powerful symbols in Scripture and in our experience.

After the hymn, we join in **The Affirmation of Faith**. This ancient Christian practice declares what the church believes. It's a way of telling the story of God who creates, who comes to save in Jesus, and who is present and active in the Holy Spirit. We typically use "The Apostles' Creed," a statement of faith that has its roots in Christian worship during the Second Century—though it developed into the form we use over several centuries. We're declaring and affirming what Christians believe. We're learning the faith. We don't make up our own beliefs, but we receive faith, belief. We do choose to believe it. The Apostles' Creed is a good short, easily remembered statement. It's mostly associated with baptism. Another

ancient creed is the Nicene Creed, which is commonly associated with Communion.

After the Creed, we sing again. This act of praise is called the *Gloria Patri*, "glory to the Father," which is the first phrase in it. Like the Creed, it affirms God as Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Though we still use an old version that says "Holy Ghost." It also emphasizes that God remains consistent from past to the present to the future.

After we do this section of the worship service, we'll talk about prayer.

Now we come to **Joys and Concerns** and a time of **Prayer**. Joys and Concerns remind us again that we're connected to each other. We "rejoice with those who rejoice and mourn with those who mourn" (Romans 12:15). This is a reminder that we're not alone. We're part of the fellowship of God's people. And we can bring everything to God in prayer, whether it's celebration, happiness, and joy, or if it's sorrow and struggle and concern—for ourselves or others.

We sing a **Call to Prayer**. This is to help us get attention back on God. It may be a prayer in the form of a song that helps prime the pump of our own praying. We have a time of silence. We live in a noisy world. Sometimes it's good to get quiet. We may be composing our thoughts. We can meditate. We can pray silently. Then I lead us through the **Pastoral Prayer**. I often begin this prayer with an emphasis on the message that will come later. I try to give voice to the prayers we're all praying silently. We're gathering them together and offering them to God. Hopefully, this leads you into further prayer. Then we move into **The Lord's Prayer**. This is a prayer that Jesus taught his disciples (Mt 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). We might do better to call it "The Disciples' Prayer," since Jesus intends his disciples to pray it. I think it's a good thing to memorize and pray this prayer. But we also need to realize that it's a pattern for prayer. Jesus is teaching us a way to pray and giving us topics to include in prayer. We start with focusing on God and praising him. We align with God's will. Then we ask for things we need before closing with more praise.

At this point we have an **Offering**. This is a way of worshiping God with giving. Some orders of worship put the offering after the sermon as a response to God's word—and that makes sense. I still like to do it now as an act of praise. We recently spent several weeks talking about our commitment to God and ways we express that in the church. Giving financially is one of those. Remember the principle of giving as you're able, as you've determined in your heart, not reluctantly, because God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).

During the Offering, we have music. Then we follow the Offering with the **Doxology**. This is another act of praise. The word doxology means "right glory" or "right praise." Again, it's Trinitarian. We remember God is the source of all blessings. We invite and join all creation to praise the Lord. The "heavenly host" includes angels and faithful people who are now in God's presence.

Then we sing another hymn. This one often relates to the theme of the message.

We hear **Scripture** read. The Bible is our sourcebook for life with God, for worship, for being the people of God. Scripture is the basis for our belief because it's God's revelation. The Bible is the word of God that tells us about and leads us to the living Word of God, Jesus Christ. We listen to Scripture being read instead of just reading it silently to ourselves. This reinforces it in our thinking. And, Romans 10:17 tells us that "faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ." We respond to the reading of Scripture by giving thanks for God's word given to God's people.

Typically, we have an anthem following the Scripture reading. This is usually delivered by the choir. Sometimes it's instrumental or a solo or something else. We've already talked about the importance of singing. When the message is sung, it's preached twice. We hear it and feel it. Music and lyrics speak to us in a holistic way. They engage both sides of our brains. The message stays with us through song. Not many of us can quote many of John Wesley's sermons, but we can sing Charles Wesley's hymns.

Having a choir allows more people to share their gifts and talents. So there are many reasons for singing this way.

We also have the **Message/Sermon** preached or proclaimed. There are many sermons in the Bible. Through Christian history, preaching has been one of the main ways we've told our story, talked about the meaning of God's acts and words, applied the gospel to life, and invited people to respond.

Sermons build on Scripture. For me, the best sermons expound the Bible's message. They also include personal interaction with God and Scripture.

Today we've read Psalm 95. It begins with a call to praise and worship God. It gives reasons for worshiping God. The LORD is the great God, the Creator. He is our God, the one we worship and serve. We are God's people.

After several lines of calling us to worship and telling us why and how we worship, the psalm shifts into an exhortation. The current generation is identified with the exodus generation, those Israelites who were delivered from slavery in Egypt, but then rebelled and complained against God in the desert.

We identify with the people in the Bible as well. Their story is our story. We worship the same God. We hear the same God calling us to listen to him, not to rebel against him.

What is worship? One of my favorite definitions or descriptions of worship comes from Anglican Archbishop William Temple:

To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, to feed the mind with the truth of God, to purge the imagination by the beauty of God, to open the heart to the love of God, to devote the will to the purpose of God.

(*Nature, Man and God*; <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/441116-to-worship-is-to-quicken-the-conscience-by-the-holiness>

So worship involves everything we are, everything that makes us, us.

Annie Dillard writes about nature and life and God. In one of her essays, she tells about some of the first expeditions to the South Pole. At the same time, she describes a contemporary tour on board ship. She parallels those descriptions with Christian worship and asks, "Why do we people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?" She suggests that Christians often live and worship as if we're having coffee and donuts on Deck C, assuming that someone is minding the ship, avoiding icebergs, and watching the radar. She then observes that the wind seems to be picking up.

Then she says, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside the catacombs, are sufficiently sensible of conditions." She wonders if anyone has the foggiest idea of the power we invoke. Then she writes:

The churches are like children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. (*Teaching a Stone to Talk* 40-41)

Worship is more powerful than we imagine. It's dangerous to our self-centeredness and self-sufficiency. We may think we've got God packaged and contained. But God keeps breaking free, speaking to us, working in our lives, confronting us, saving, delivering, healing us in ways we didn't expect. If we enter into worship of this God, we're letting ourselves in for more than we know.

But it's worth it. The Lord God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Spirit of Life, is the only one worthy of all honor and glory and power and praise. The only one who deserves and can handle our full devotion and commitment.

Now we sing a **Hymn** of invitation and commitment. This is one way we respond to the word of the Lord. It's a time for prayer and commitment.

Then we have a **Benediction**. That means "good word." Sometimes it's Scripture, sometimes it's a prayer. It's a way of reminding us what we've heard and experienced and a call to allow God to lead us and sustain us through the week. I love this benediction from Hebrews:

Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (13:20-21)

After the Benediction, the acolytes **Take Out the Light**. This is a symbol that the Lord's presence isn't contained in this building, but his light shines in and through us wherever we go. By the Holy Spirit's presence and power, we take the light of Christ with us into the world.

Finally is the **Sending Forth**, another song to send us out to live as God's people.