

Understanding the Basis for our Order of Worship

Why do we do what we do in church every Sunday at Trinity?

Something you often hear in our circles is that we should focus on “God’s means of grace.” What does that refer to? It refers to the ways that God feeds us with the Gospel. This is the primary reason that God gave believers a church. Since God’s means of grace are so important, it is crucial that we have a clear grasp of why we do what we do in the worship service so that we are properly fed with Christ and so that God is properly honored.

One of the things that we see often throughout Scripture is God gathering His people together for a renewal of His covenant promises to them, and then in turn for His people to respond to His gracious reminders. This, it seems is the best biblical model for us to understand what is happening in our worship services.

Covenant Renewal Ceremony

In these ceremonies the history of what God had done for His people was reenacted or rehearsed. Why? To remind the people of why they needed their covenant relationship with God in the first place, and to remind them of how powerful His promises of salvation are.

In our day and age where everyone is so obsessed with how to fit God comfortably within their *own* life story, this model is especially helpful because it takes the focus off of us and instead places us deep within *God’s* story.

Though we were more conscious of it in the past, the typical elements that comprise a Protestant liturgy, or order of worship, stem from this idea of putting on a drama where God reenacts His saving of us.

The essential elements of worship are the things that Scripture commands us to do:

PCA Directory for Public Worship: 47-9. The Bible teaches that the following are proper elements of worship service: reading of Holy Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, the offering of prayer, the preaching of the Word, the presentation of offerings, confessing the faith and observing the Sacrament, and on special occasions taking oaths.

In a covenant renewal ceremony the order of these elements often looks like this.¹

The Call to Worship

This is basically a summons from the King to His people calling them into His throne room to meet with them. By it we are put in the proper mindset for worship because these calls are passages of Scripture read aloud that state how glorious our God is and why it is a privilege for us to meet with Him.

¹ This Pastor’s Corner post is very indebted to, Michael Horton’s *A Better Way*, 145-162.

The Invocation

This stems from the biblical promises that remind God's people that "anyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." This phrase was found in many ancient near-eastern texts because it was a common way that Kings reminded their people that being their subjects had benefits. In this we remind ourselves that this great and awesome King is also one who has made it safe for sinners like us to meet with Him because of His gracious promises to protect us through Christ. So it is a response of prayer to His call to worship Him.

The Call to Holiness (sometimes referred to as the Reading of the Law)

This serves to remind the people what they owe to their King and it is a common feature in the Covenant Renewal ceremonies we see in Scripture. This can be done through the reading of the Word or through singing it. But the point is to remind and instruct us of God's perfect and beautiful holy standards. These then initially expose our lack thereof. Why?

The term "law" can mean several different things in Scripture; however, in this instance we are defining:

- all of the commands of God
- all of his statements condemning sin
- all of the descriptions of His holiness

So why do these things reveal our sinfulness? Because the Bible claims that the way that we are made aware of our sin is through the law (**Rom 3:20**). Thus all of these things are what the Scripture uses to reveal to us the beauty of who God is, to make us long to reflect such beauty, and to remind us how and in what ways we currently fall short of it.

However, the point of God's law here is NOT to beat us down but to bring us to confession of our sin and to a greater reliance and appreciation for His grace through Christ.

This is what our *Westminster Standards* teach:

WLC Question 97: What special use is there of the moral law to the regenerate?

Although they that are regenerate, and believe in Christ, be delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works, so as thereby they are neither justified nor condemned; yet, besides the general uses thereof common to them with all men, it is of **special use**, to show them: [1] How much they are **bound to Christ for his fulfilling** it, and **enduring the curse thereof in their stead**, and for their good; [2] and thereby to **provoke them to more thankfulness**, [3] and to **express the same** in their **greater care to conform themselves thereunto** as the rule of their obedience.

Confession of Sin

The law exposes our sin and God's intent is that we confess these sins and receive the good news of His grace in Christ. Doing this corporately is a very crucial thing. We have biblical precedent that God often called Israel to confess as a nation together before Him. But there is also great humility promoted in God's people when we all admit together that we fall far short of what God requires of us.

John Calvin (1509-1564)

Besides the fact that ordinary confession has been commended by the Lord's mouth, no one of sound mind, who weighs its usefulness, can dare disapprove it. For since in every sacred assembly we stand before the sight of God and the angels, what other beginning of our action will there be than the recognition of our own unworthiness? But that, you say, is done through every prayer; for whenever we pray for pardon, we confess our sin. Granted. But if you consider how great is our complacency, our drowsiness, or our sluggishness, you will agree with me that it would be a salutary regulation if the Christian people were to practice humbling themselves through some public rite of confession.²

Additionally, it is comforting to see that we are not alone in these struggles as Satan would like us to believe.

Calvin

For this reason, the Lord ordained of old among the people of Israel that, after the priest recited the words, the people should confess their iniquities publicly in the temple [Leviticus 16:21]. For he foresaw that this help was necessary for them in order that each one might better be led to a just estimation of himself. And it is fitting that, by the confession of our own wretchedness, we show forth the goodness and mercy of our God, among ourselves and before the whole world.³

Declaration of Forgiveness (sometimes called Assurance of Pardon or Absolution)

This is such an important point in the service! Recalling that the service is, to a degree, reenacting our salvation, this moment is crucial because it reflects our transition from being under God's just judgment to receiving His gracious forgiveness in Christ.

This is way too often neglected today in protestant churches and that is to our serious detriment. Throughout the Bible we see the great longing of humanity to know that their sins are forgiven. And being confident of this is something that is often hard for us to believe.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (1559) in *The Library of Christian Classics*, Vols. XX-XXI, ed. J.T. McNeill, trans. F.L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 3.4.11.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.10.

Calvin

But if there is anything in the whole of religion that we should most certainly know, we ought most closely to grasp by what reason, with what law, under what condition, with what ease or difficulty, forgiveness of sins may be obtained! Unless this knowledge remains clear and sure, the conscience can have no rest at all, no peace with God, no assurance or security; but it continuously trembles, wavers, tosses, is tormented and vexed, shakes, hates, and flees the sight of God.⁴

Rather than a verse being read that merely hints at God's being gracious, we need to hear the announcement that Christ has done the unthinkable: He has paid our astronomical debt and we are free.

Far from being a Roman Catholic practice, the Reformed were adamant from the very beginning that this be a clear, firm and powerful statement to the Christian to strengthen them in their faith. For instance, the *1539 Strasbourg Liturgy* of Martin Bucer had everyone recite **1 Tim 1:15** which states: "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst." Then it instructed the pastor to proclaim:

Let everyone, with St. Paul, truly acknowledge this is his heart and believe in Christ. Thus, in His name I proclaim unto you the forgiveness of all your sins, and declare you to be loosed of them on earth, that you may be loosed of them in heaven, in eternity. Amen.⁵

Thus, God's representative in the pulpit needs to remind the people of His promise that all who trust in Christ are covered by His life and death so that God can never be angry at them again, and that he loves them as much as he loves Christ.

Confession of faith

God tells us in scripture that we should not only read and preach his Word, but also teach it, and pass on those teaching to future generations. (2 Thes 2:15, 1 Cor 11:2, Jude 1:3, 1 Tim 6:20, 2 Tim 1:13-14) That's what our confessions do: explain the truths of Scripture and in confessing them we are passing them on. We confess ancient Christian creeds, Reformation Confessions, as well as Reformation catechisms together to remind us what we believe. Confessing these things together helps to ground more of our faith in the truths of Scripture so that we lean on it more and more, turning away from putting our hope in earthly things,

⁴ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.4.2.

⁵ Quoted in Horton, 154.

The Pastoral Prayer

In celebration of what Christ has done the Pastoral Prayer often follows this because it is a clear statement of our freedom to approach the throne of grace boldly. In this the Pastor or an Elder intercedes for the people, thanking God for His grace and bringing their welfare, salvation and the mission of the Kingdom before the Lord. As Paul exhorts Timothy:

1 Timothy 2:1-2

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- ² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.

The Preaching of the Word

This is the chief means of grace, or, the primary way that God feeds His people.

WLC 155: Q. How is the word made effectual to salvation?

A. The spirit of God makes the reading, but *especially the preaching* of the word an effectual means of enlightening,(1) convincing, and humbling sinners;(2) of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them unto Christ;(3) of conforming them to his image,(4) and subduing them to his will;(5) of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions;(6) of building them up in grace,(7) and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation.(8)

But true preaching must proclaim Christ or it isn't Christian preaching. Doctrinal lectures, moral instruction, or self-help "biblical" advice fall short of what God's people need. They need to hear how God reveals Himself to us in His word, what Christ has done as a result of that revelation, and then how we, through the Spirit, who unites us to Christ's saving work, must respond in grateful obedience.

Calvin

As often as we come to the sermon we are taught of the free promises of God, to show us that it is simply in His goodness and mercy that we must trust, that we must not be founded upon our merits nor on anything that we can bring from our side, but God must stretch forth His hand to begin and accomplish all. And that (as Scripture shows us) is applied to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, so that we must seek Him entirely... All that is *daily* declared to us.⁶

⁶ John Calvin, quoted in T.H.L. Parker, *The Oracles of God: An Introduction to the Preaching of John Calvin* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1947), 81 (emphasis mine).

The Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper functions in a confirming and strengthening role as it re-declares to us the same work of Christ that the sermon declared. However, through it, God stoops down to our weak faith to reach us with visible, touchable and edible signs that powerfully communicate that Christ was broken in our place, and His innocent blood has covered over our sins once for all. As food nourishes our bodies, these truths are designed to nourish and invigorate our souls.

We do this every Sunday for numerous reasons. First, we see this as the practice of the first Christians in the New Testament. **Acts 20:7** says “And on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached to them.” And this reference to breaking bread refers to the Lord's Supper.⁷

But in addition to this, the Lord's Supper provides for us the comfort that we need in our struggle against sin. Paul says that the Lord's Supper “proclaims the Lord's death,” and celebrates “His body and blood” given for us. (1 Cor 11:26-27) This means it functions like sermons do: proclaiming the Word of God to us.

And since it takes place through things we can touch, see and taste, we see that through them, God has stooped down to our weakness and given us signs to do all that the Word does for us. But since He has tailored this to our state of weakness, we see this functioning like Christ's willingness to let doubting Thomas touch the holes in his hands to strengthen his weak faith.

Thanksgiving

This takes two forms: singing and tithes/offerings.

Listing this element of worship here is not intended to limit it to this point because it is appropriate at multiple points to sing to God in response to His holiness and grace. But it is also crucial that after the powerful means of grace we respond with deep gratitude and jubilant praise. God calls us to sing and not simply recite because singing helps us to feel, with deeper emotion, the truths we rehearse from Scripture.

Tithes &/or offerings are also an important way of responding to God's indescribable gift by giving ourselves. Many Reformed churches in the past reserved the offering for the end of the service so that it could be seen as a response to the preaching of the Word. God's purpose for this giving is to care for His Church while they journey towards Him this side of Heaven.

Benediction

Far too many pastors confuse a benediction with a doxology. A doxology in Scripture often starts, “and now to Him...” This means that it is ascribing praise to God.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 235–236; F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*,: *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 384.

But this is NOT a benediction! The purpose of a benediction is *God blessing His people* and not the other way around.

We see numerous examples of this in Scripture and it is clear that God wants His people to be blessed by His words to them:

Num. 6:22-27

²²The Lord spoke to Moses: ²³“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘This is how you are to bless the Israelites. You should say to them, ²⁴“May the Lord bless you and protect you; ²⁵may the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; ²⁶may the Lord look with favor on you and give you peace.” ’ ²⁷In this way they will pronounce my name over the Israelites, and I will bless them.” ⁸

So a benediction essentially ought to proclaim “blessings to you from God.” It is the last act in God’s play reminding us that because of Christ we can go in peace and full confidence that God, the King of the universe, is *for* us, *with* us, and will *never leave* us nor forsake us. This is a parting note that we need to hear!

And then we come back to the same format each week, because God has designed the rehearsals to feed us just like He fed Israel the bread from Heaven and the water from the rock while they journeyed to the Promised land. Both, the NT says, were pictures of God feeding His people with Christ.

⁸ [*Christian Standard Bible*](#) (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2020), Nu 6:22–27.