

Worship Matters

The Practices of Public Worship

Psalm 95:6-7

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Scripture

Today I want to conclude our study of “Worship Matters” with a look at “The Practices of Public Worship.” Because of the nature of today’s message, I will not be expounding a text of Scripture. However, let me read a text of Scripture as a backdrop for this message. Let’s read Psalm 95:6-7:

**⁶ Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker!**
**⁷ For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand. (Psalm 95:6-7)**

Introduction

The way God draws us into his presence is demonstrated in the sacrifices of the Old Testament. Without a lengthy explanation, let me say that our Order of Worship corresponds to the three steps in the sacrifice of the animals (Leviticus 1:1-17). In the sacrifice of an animal there were three steps: (1) cleansing, (2) consecration, and (3) communion.

First, each animal sacrifice was always prepared for the sacrifice by cleansing. This corresponds, naturally, to *cleansing*.

Second, each animal sacrifice was killed, skinned, cut up and arranged on the altar. This corresponds to *consecration*.

And third, each animal sacrifice was burnt. The smoke ascended into God’s presence as food, and was sometimes eaten by the worshipper. This corresponds to *communion*.

This is the sacrificial pathway that every animal, or wor-

shipper, experienced as God brought him near to himself.

The movement of the worship service corresponds then to the way in which God draws us into his presence. The Bible reveals how God graciously draws redeemed sinners into his loving fellowship and this sacrificial way or “order” by which God draws us near and renews his covenant with us informs us of the Order of Worship on the Lord’s Day.

This is also the “gospel order.” It is the historical pattern that churches throughout the centuries have used to order their worship of God.

Lesson

With that in mind, let me explain our Order of Worship.

I. Before the Service Begins

First, let’s examine what takes place before the service begins.

A. *Prelude*

When the Prelude begins, that is the signal to take our seats, quiet our children, stop all conversations, and engage in silent prayer and preparation.

B. *Announcements*

Announcements are before the Call to Worship because they have nothing to do with public worship. Announcements are important, but they have no proper place in a biblical Order of Worship.

C. Mission Statement Moment

After the Announcements we will often have a Mission Statement Moment. This is an opportunity for some ministry to give much more detailed information to the congregation.

D. Preparation for Worship

After the Mission Statement Moment, there is focused Preparation for Worship.

II. The Order of Worship

Now we come to the Order of Worship itself. The heart of the Order of Worship is based on the three steps in the sacrifices in the Old Testament (cleansing, consecration and communion).

If we add the call to worship at the beginning and the commissioning by God at the end, we have the following five-fold Order of Worship:

- God Calls Us to Worship Him
- God Cleanses Us from Our Sin
- God Consecrates Us by His Word
- God Communes with Us at the Lord's Table
- God Commissions Us to Service

A. God Calls Us to Worship Him

1. Call to Worship

God himself calls us to worship. He *summons* us to assemble. We don't decide to gather together and then ask him to be present. This is the Lord's Day. He commands us from heaven to enter into his presence, and we respond in obedience as the Spirit effectually enables us. The pastor, as God's representative, utilizes some portion of God's word that contains a clear call to worship, authoritatively calls the congregation into God's presence.

2. Opening Song

The Opening Song is the first response to God's words and actions in the worship service. The entire service moves forward as God speaks and the congregation responds. It is a dialogue between God and his people. God calls and we respond. God speaks and we listen. God gives and we receive. God acts and we thank him. This dialogical pattern is found throughout the Bible when people find themselves in God's presence (Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-8; Revelation 4-5). It is the biblical way to approach God in worship. So, here, at the beginning of the service, the Lord calls us to worship him and we respond in praise, which is usually a song.

The first song is a song of praise or thanksgiving and will usually highlight some aspect of the character and/or work of God, thereby giving concrete form to the congregation's adoration and praise.

3. Prayer of Adoration

A Prayer of Adoration then follows the Opening Song. The pastor extols the Lord's greatness in this prayer. As a result of this prayer, God's people should be awakened with a

sense of awe and reverence at being in the presence of God.

This prayer is not an “invocation.” An invocation is a prayer in which the presence of God is invoked to be present. However, *God* is calling us into *his* presence; *we* do not call God into *our* presence. And so we should not think of this prayer as an “invocation.”

B. God Cleanses Us from Our Sin

Having been called by God to worship him, we now move to that part of the service in which God Cleanses Us from Our Sin.

This part of the service corresponds to the first step in the sacrifice, the cleansing of the sacrifice. When people were ushered into the presence of Almighty God, they were always made painfully aware of their own sin and guilt.

Consider Isaiah’s experience. His vision of God’s majestic holiness had an immediate effect. He cried out, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5).

Therefore, after we are brought into the presence of the Lord of Glory at the beginning of the service, we are conscious of our own unworthiness and are sensitive to the guilt and pollution that adheres to us because of our sin. Therefore, it follows that the first and most appropriate act for us as God’s covenantal people is the confession of sin.

Like every other element of worship, the congregation confession of sin comes as *response* to God’s call. Generally speaking, the very *layout* of the service in the bulletin helps to remind us of the *dialogical* nature of worship. God speaks and then we respond. We could see a typical portion as follows:

- God calls us to Confession
- We Confess Our Sins
- The Lord Assures Us of His Forgiveness
- We Respond with Thanksgiving and Praise

C. God Consecrates Us by His Word

Having confessed our sins and been cleansed by the blood of Christ, the congregation is now prepared to enter the second stage of covenant renewal, which is consecration. Just as the sacrificial animal was killed and consecrated to God, so the Holy Spirit uses the word of God, which is described in Scripture as a “double-edged sword,” to “chop” us up and consecrate us to the Father (Hebrews 4:12; 12:14; Psalms 24:4; Ephesians 5:26-27).

1. Affirmation of Faith

After receiving forgiveness and restoration in Christ, it is appropriate to affirm our faith in God. We may use Scripture or some biblical creed to affirm our faith in God.

2. Old Testament Scripture Reading

God then speaks to his people in his word. The first Scripture Reading is generally from the Old Testament.

3. Psalm

We respond to the first Scripture Reading with a Psalm, which is usually sung.

4. New Testament Scripture Reading

Following the Psalm, God again speaks to his people, in the words of the New Testament Scripture Reading.

5. Prayer of the Church

At this point we now have confidence to approach God's throne of grace with some measure of boldness, as a child confidently approaches his father when he knows that his father is well disposed toward him (Romans 5:1-2; 8:12-17; Hebrews 4:14-16). This portion of the service provides the opportunity for God's people to intercede for the needs of the church, both local and universal, and for the world.

6. Offering

The Offering is an act of corporate worship. As a sign of thankful dedication to God, the church offers to God a portion of what he has entrusted to his people (Genesis 14:20; Leviticus 27:30-32).

7. The Preparatory Song

The congregation also prepares for the ministry of the word of God. It is appropriate to sing a song requesting that the Lord will prepare his people for the ministry of the word.

8. The Scripture Reading

The pastor invites the congregation to stand as he reads

the word of God in preparation for the sermon. Nothing we say or do during the service can compare in importance with our thoughtful, openhearted reception of God's word.

9. Prayer of Illumination

Before the pastor preaches, he will ask God to illumine our minds so that the word of God will be rightly understood, received, applied, and obeyed.

10. Sermon

The Sermon is the time when Christ personally speaks to his bride through the ordained pastor (Ephesians 4:11-13). We sit down and listen to our Lord speak to us through his appointed representative (Ephesians 5:26).

The pastor has studied and prepared his sermon so as to instruct God's people (2 Timothy 2:15). This means that the purpose of the sermon (and, indeed, the worship service) is not primarily evangelistic, at least not in the narrow sense.

Of course, the good news of salvation by grace should always be prominent in the sermon, but I am convinced that the sermon in the midst of covenant renewal worship ought not to be primarily or only directed to unbelievers. On the Lord's Day believers "come together as the church" (1 Corinthians 11:18). We need the gospel applied to our lives too.

If unbelievers are present when the church gathers, that's wonderful (1 Corinthians 14:23), but they are not the primary reason why the church congregates.

The primary audience addressed on the Lord's Day is the covenant people of God. The sermon is the time when the pastor explains the word of God and brings it to bear up-

on the life of the renewed covenant people of God.

In other words, my job is to keep your nose in the Book! The word of God is more important than the pastor's stories, illustrations, mannerisms, or rhetorical skills. Faithful pastors want their congregations to learn the Bible! This has always been a central feature of the Reformed tradition.

That is why I ordinarily preach through books or, at least, through sections of the Bible and not simply topical or "how to" messages Sunday after Sunday.

11. Prayer of Dedication

A Prayer of Dedication follows the sermon. This prayer is a petition asking God to fulfill his purposes in his people's lives as a result of the preaching of the word of God.

D. God Communes with Us at the Lord's Table

Now, at this point, we have been cleansed and consecrated, but before God sends us out to serve him in the world he first sits down with us, as it were, for a meal. He must strengthen and nourish us for the task ahead with bread and wine. Therefore, we are invited to sit down and eat a meal with Jesus. This part of the service corresponds to the communion portion of the sacrifice.

There are various components that make up the Communion service. These include an invitation to the Lord's Table (including the proper fencing of the Lord's table), setting apart of the elements, the words of institution, warning, prayer of consecration, communion, and closing exhortation.

Then the Lord's Supper is closed with psalm or hymn. The first Lord's Supper at which Jesus officiated was closed

off with the singing of a hymn (Matthew 26:30).

E. God Commissions Us to Service

If the whole service has been a renewal of God's covenant with his people, now, as the service ends, it is time to start living differently as God blesses and commissions us to go back into families, communities, and marketplaces as the Lord's peculiar people. The Benediction is the final service God renders to his congregation as a whole on the Lord's Day. He assures us of his peace, promises, and his gracious presence as we leave his presence to return to the world.

So, the pastor faces the congregation, lifts up his hands, and communicates the Lord's blessing to his people, just as Jesus did when he blessed his disciples before he ascended into heaven: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them" (Luke 24:50).

Conclusion

This is a very brief explanation of our Order of Worship. I hope it will help you understand better the reasons for worshipping God using the Order of Worship that we use.

It is my intention to ensure that our Order of Worship follows a biblical pattern. However, as I have said in the previous weeks, the Order of Worship is not the heart of Worship. It is entirely possible to have the external form completely correct and still not worship God. Why? Because the worship of the Triune God must come from a proper attitude. Always examine your heart as you worship God. May God help us to worship him in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributors/freddy-fritz-sermons-11181.asp
3. www.sermonaudio.com/source_detail.asp?sourceid=FreddyFritz

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