

The General Structure of a Worship Service

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‘LET all things be done decently and in order’ is the apostolic command with reference to Christian worship. A scriptural order should therefore prevail in both the Sabbath day services, so that the prescribed acts of worship succeed one another in natural and proper sequence, and appear, not unrelated, or loosely related, but part of an indivisible whole. This gives definite structure to the service. It also helps to make worship beautiful and meaningful. And this is important. God calls true worship ‘the beauty of his ornament’; and he desires that it should be glorious, ‘set in majesty’ (Ezek 7:20; cf Jer 17:12). He also desires that it should be spiritually beneficial to his people and it is so, when properly arranged. Its various acts are like steps by which we come face to face with God in his ‘power’ and ‘glory’ (Ps 63:2).

The services of the church are of two kinds: (1) ‘the Word-of-God Service’, the main service of the Lord’s Day, comprised of praise, prayer, the reading of Scripture, preaching, and the blessing; and (2) ‘the Service of the Upper Room’, or Lord’s Supper, a feast commemorative of Christ’s death in which believers appropriate to themselves the benefits of redemption. The two services should be distinguished (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:20-34; 14:23-33) although in practice the one is often followed by the other, as in Acts 20:7-11. In this article my concern is with the Word-of-God Service.

Here are some general principles to help us in the arrangement of this service:

A fundamental and determining principle will be reverence for the divine glory. God has been pleased to reveal his glory to men, that they might draw

near to him in a right manner. ‘In thy fear’, says the Psalmist, ‘will I worship towards thy holy temple’ (Ps 5:7; cf 89:7). The grace of fear should be in evidence even before the worship service begins. Discerning God’s glorious presence in the sanctuary, we should avoid unnecessary conversation with others and quietly prepare ourselves for communion with him. ‘Prepare your hearts unto the Lord’ (1 Sam 7:3; cf Ps 10:17; Job 11:13).

When it is time for the service to begin, a Call to Worship will bring a new awareness of God’s presence and his ineffable majesty; and, as soon as those thoughts impress themselves upon the gathered church, the instinct of every believing heart will be to feel a profound sense of unworthiness. This is the lowliness of reverence described so beautifully in one of the Psalms: ‘Exalt ye the Lord our God, and worship at his footstool; for he is holy’ (Ps 99:5, 9). In their first approach to God, worshippers must carefully avoid undue familiarity and self-confidence. Let the minister lead in prayer, and let the people draw near to God with solemn steps, mindful of their sins and of the mercy which is in Christ Jesus. Solomon gives excellent counsel when he says, ‘Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thy heart be hasty to utter anything before God; for God is in heaven and thou upon earth; therefore let thy words be few’ (Eccl 5:2).

The service should also be one in which the Word of God is central. Framed on the model of synagogue worship, one of the chief purposes of Christian worship is to enable men to hear God’s Word (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim 3:15; cf Acts 15:21). God’s Word will immediately appear to have its proper

place if the Call to Worship is a Scripture verse, or at least includes Scripture verse (e.g. Ps 95:6; 98:1; 117:1,2). But the Word must retain its prominence throughout the service.

When the apostle exhorted Timothy to the faithful discharge of his ministerial duties, he wrote: 'Till I come, give attendance to (public) reading, to exhortation, to doctrine' (1 Tim 4:13). Evidently, the reading and exposition of Holy Scripture were among the chief elements of worship. It is therefore important to read from both Old and New Testaments (in that order) and to make the preaching the central feature of the church's worship (See: Acts 20:7-11; Col 4:16, 17; cf Lk 4:16-20; Acts 13:14, 15).

In his Word, God has revealed himself; and since true worship is response to revelation (e.g. Exod 34:4-8), it is right and fitting that Scripture should have the principal place. 'Thou hast magnified thy word above all thy name' (Ps 138:2). God's Word should therefore have preeminence, even over praise and prayer. How rarely is this seen today. Sadly, the modern church has no real desire to hear God's Word: it would much rather sing and throw arms in the air, to some kind of rhythmic beat. But a godly, well instructed people will say to their minister what Cornelius once said to Peter: 'Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God' (Acts 10:33).

It follows, of course, that the entire service should be scriptural - not only with respect to its elements but also with respect to its emphasis. Since scripture is the inspired record of God's self disclosure, our worship should be theocentric, or God-centred. At the very beginning of the service (as we have seen), the divine majesty should be acknowledged, as should our deeply felt unworthiness; and, in the same God glorifying manner, the church's opening

praise should be objective and robust. What better than a Psalm?

'Thy mercy, Lord, is in the heav'ns;
Thy truth doth reach the clouds:
Thy justice is like mountains great;
Thy judgments deep as floods:
Lord thou preservest man and beast.
How precious is thy grace!
Therefore in shadow of thy wings
Men's sons their trust shall place'.

Thus all should proceed, even to a climax of praise at the end. 'Give unto the Lord the glory due unto his name' (Ps 96:8). 'Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end' (Eph 3:21). Furthermore, since Scripture presents God as one existing in three Persons, Christian worship will be trinitarian. It will be an approach 'to' the Father, 'through' the Son, 'in' or 'by' the Holy Spirit (Eph 2:18; Phil 3:3). An example of such worship may be found in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. The Apostle opens the first chapter with a formal inscription of praise distinctively trinitarian in its sequence (Eph 1:3-14). Ideally, a worship-service will like this, with praise first directed to the Father, followed later with praises which concern the Persons or special offices of the Son and the Holy Spirit. The main Prayer will also have a trinitarian reference (Acts 4:24-30; Col 1:3, 4, 8), as will, of course, the final Benediction (Num 6:24-26; 2 Cor 13:13).

It is also important to remember that biblical religion concerns the 'God who acts'. In fact, its uniqueness consists in the fact that it is founded upon historical events (Ps 103:7; 1 Cor 15:3, 4). To this divine self-revelation in history, worship is the response. 'Who can utter the might acts of

the Lord? who can show forth all his praise?' (Ps 106:2; cf 111:1-4; Lk 1:67- 80; Acts 4:24-28) It follows that Christian worship must set forth the redeeming acts of God in Christ. After a Call to

Worship reminding us that we were made to glorify and enjoy God, and after our humble and contrite acknowledgment that, fallen in Adam, we have failed to answer our chief end, we sing to God's praise because, in his infinite mercy, he has 'remembered us in our low estate' and 'redeemed us'. The promise of this redemption is in the Old Testament. Its fulfilment is in the New. We therefore read first from the Old Testament, then from the New, suitably responding in prayer and praise.

The same applies to the Sermon. It is the exposition of the Word and therefore the proclamation of redemption. When concluded, the gathered church is moved once again to call upon God for the benefits of redemption and to thank him for Jesus Christ who is the only Redeemer of God's elect.

'O that men to the Lord would give
Praise for his goodness then,
And for his works of wonder done
Unto the sons of men!'

Another important aspect to consider is that the God of revelation is the God of amazing grace. Biblical and reformed doctrine, emphasising the sovereignty of grace, requires that the movement of a worship service should be from God to man: and not, as in a Roman Catholic Mass, from man to God. Throughout the service, therefore, God should be seen taking the initiative and coming to us with spiritual blessings. This will be the case only when the Word precedes the offering of prayer and praise (See: Gal 1:15; 2 Tim 1:9).

Moreover, God's grace has been revealed in a covenant: the form of a worship service will therefore be covenantal. As has already been remarked, the Book of the Covenant (Old and New) is at the core of the service. Its structure should actually express God's covenant relationship with his people (Compare: Exod 24:3, 4).

Some of the elements of worship represent

God communicating with his people (the Call or Invitation to worship, the Scripture readings, the Sermon, and the Benediction), while others show his people communicating with him (prayer and praise). Good arrangement will ensure that these be presented in such a way that the service assumes the form of a dialogue. God first speaks to us in his Word and then we reply to him in prayer. 'I will say, It is my people: and they shall say, The Lord is my God' (Zech 13:9; cf Hos 2:23; 2 Cor 6:16).

God should have the first word (in the Call to Worship). We should then respond to him (in a prayer of adoration and confession). Praise naturally follows, as an expression of our heart-felt delight in God. Then, God once again speaks (in the readings), evoking further responses from us (after the first reading perhaps, the main prayer, and after the second, praise). The Sermon too will convey God's Word or Message, and it is therefore suitably followed by prayer and the closing Psalm. This 'to and fro commerce' is the essence of covenant fellowship.

Finally, to be an effective vehicle of worship, the service must honour the principle of spiritual progression. When people worshipped in ancient times, they were said to 'approach' or 'draw near' to God (Num 16:5; Ps 65:4). The same language is to be found in the New Testament. 'Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith...' (Heb 10:22; cf 4:16). A properly ordered service needs to make allowance for this movement. First, there should be a divine call, followed by a solemn and humble approach in prayer; then, a response to grace in congregational praise; and, after this, the central feature of worship will be the experience of the Holy Spirit in the reading and the preaching of God's Word. This will bring a new, glorious, and soul-satisfying vision of God. And, after suitable prayer and praise, the service will conclude with the Benediction - which is really a promise of further blessing, and even of eternal blessing. 'The grace

of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and

the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all.
Amen' (2 Cor 13:14).