

What Happens in Worship: A Commentary

God Calls Us to Worship

Q: Why do we have a call to worship at the beginning of the service in which “God calls us to worship”?

A: When the church gathers for corporate worship, we do not call God to come to be with us. Rather, we gather because God summons us to come to him (e.g. Leviticus 9:1-6; Psalm 95:1-3; 98:1-4; 100:1-4). God’s initiative in the liturgy reflects the consistent pattern of God’s actions in history: God always takes the initiative to pursue and to save sinful and broken people and to make us participants in his mission to the world. Therefore, the first major action in the liturgy is God’s call for us to come and to respond to the uniquely powerful way that God reveals and gives himself to us in the worship service. When we hear the call to worship, we ought to be attentive and respond with faith, love, and joy because it is God himself who summons us to receive him and his gifts of grace.

We Praise God

Q: Why do we sing songs of praise following the call to worship?

A: God calls us to worship in order to bless us, and thankful praise is the most fitting way that God’s people respond to their Father and King when he invites them to share an audience with him. In the Old Testament, when God’s people gathered at the Temple to draw near to God in corporate worship, they entered into God’s special presence with singing. For example, Psalms 120-134 were psalms of “ascent,” which the people sang as they went up to worship God on Mount Zion, the mountain where the Temple stood (see also Ps. 95:1-2, and Isa. 35:10). It is fitting that Christians continue to enter his presence with vigorous songs of praise and thanksgiving (Ps. 100:2, 4) because the Christian church is now God’s temple, the place where God’s special presence, grace, and glory are revealed and experienced by his people (e.g., 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:5; see also Eph. 5:19 and Col. 3:16 for commands to sing together). The opening song is usually a general hymn of praise and thanksgiving that focuses upon God’s nature and character as revealed in his mighty works of creating the world and delivering the world from sin and death. Our opening song is God-centered in this way because his works of creation and salvation are the foundation of the church’s covenant relationship with him and thus the very reason that we gather for corporate worship.

We Pray for God to Help Us Worship

Q: After the opening song of praise, why do we “pray for God to help us worship”?

A: In this prayer, we are not calling upon God to be present with us because he has already called us. This prayer acknowledges that we can only respond to God from the depths of our heart and soul if he is present within and among us to give us the desire and the power to do so.

Therefore, it is fitting at the beginning of the worship service to ask the Lord to give us the ability to respond to him by the supernatural power of his Holy Spirit with faith, hope, and love and with all our mind and strength (John 14-17; Rom. 8:1-11; Gal. 5:16-26; 1 Cor. 2:1-16; Eph. 1:13-21). When we realize the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us to worship God as we were created to do, we understand that in corporate worship we participate in the very life and communion of the Trinity. We worship God the Father only through God the Son (Jesus) by the power of God the Holy Spirit in us, who brings us into a living union and relationship with Christ our High Priest as he leads us in worship before the heavenly throne of God (Heb. 4:14-16; 7:1-10:25).

God Calls Us to Confession

Q: Why does God call us to confess our sins?

A: Since God's primary purpose in the worship service is to renew his covenant relationship with the church, the beginning portion of the service includes an opportunity to clear away the barriers to relationship created by our sins. When the worship leader calls us to confess our sins, it is God who is taking the initiative to pursue us with grace and to deal with the obstacles of guilt, alienation, and shame that inhibit us from knowing and responding to God. He wants to forgive us, and he knows that we need assurance of his love and willingness to forgive in order to come to him freely with our confession. Therefore, the biblical texts through which God invites us to confession (e.g., 1 John 1:8-9; Ps. 51:17; Isa. 55:6-7; Prov. 28:13; Heb. 4:14-16) not only command us to confess our sins and repent but also promise God's forgiveness to all who acknowledge their sins and turn away from them to seek God's mercy.

We Confess Our Sins Together

Q: Why do we confess our sin?

A: Whenever God renews his special relationship with his people (his covenant), he begins by forgiving our sins, which removes the barriers that create distance between us and God. In the Old Testament, when God renewed his covenant with Israel in worship at the temple, the main part of the service began with a purification or sin offering, a sacrifice that was both a confession of sin and also a cleansing and purification of sin (Lev. 9; 2 Chron. 29). This practice taught that the way to be restored to right relationship with God was through the sacrifice of a substitute who receives the penalty of sin's guilt in our place. This practice is fulfilled in the death of Jesus on the cross, which was the ultimate and final sin offering (Rom. 8:3) to cleanse us from sin (1 Pet. 2:24). Since the church is God's new temple (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16), and since Jesus is both our sacrifice and our new high priest leading us in worship, we still follow the pattern established in the Old Testament but in a new way: we begin the main part of the service by confessing our sins to God in order to receive anew his forgiveness on the basis of Christ's atoning death for us (1 John 1:7-9).

Q: How do we confess our sin? Why do we confess our sin together many types of sin including some sins that not everyone has committed?

A: Following model prayers in the Bible (e.g., Ps. 32; 51; 130; Ezra 9-10; Neh. 9), we confess by naming our sins with clarity and honesty. This is followed by an appeal to God for forgiveness and a new ability to love and obey the Lord by the Holy Spirit's guidance and power. We also demonstrate humility with the posture of our bodies by lowering ourselves to sit or kneel while we pray.

We confess our sin together in unison to express our unity as one people before God. Because Christians share a deep spiritual bond and common identity as the family of God, the body of Jesus Christ, and the temple of the Holy Spirit, we enact that solidarity by confessing together the sins of the whole church and not merely our own individual sins, which we confess silently. (See Psalm 51, Daniel 9, and Nehemiah 9 for biblical examples of confessions of sin that assume and express this corporate identity and responsibility.) Therefore, our prayers of confession address many categories and types of sin found in the church and in the various cultures in which we live.

God Declares Our Forgiveness

Q: Why does God's declaration of forgiveness follow our confession of sins?

A: God promises to forgive the sins of everyone who turns away from their sins (repents) and confesses them to God seeking his mercy (e.g. Ps. 32:5; 103:8, 10-12; 130:1-4; 1 John 1:8-9). We change our posture at this point from sitting in humility before God to standing and looking up to receive the Lord's merciful answer to our prayer with confident hope. This shift in posture helps us recognize that the worship leader's declaration is not the conclusion of our prayer of confession to God but rather God's own response to our confession in which he grants us fresh forgiveness and cleansing and raises us up to join in the worship of all heaven and earth before his throne with a clear conscience (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:19-23, 12:18-29; Rev. 4-5).

We Greet One Another with the Peace of Christ

Q: Why do we greet one another with the peace of Christ?

A: The passing of the peace of Christ is more than a "meet-and-greet" moment. Belief in Christ brings us the peace of reconciled relationship with God, but it also brings us into peaceful relationship with God's people, some of whom we otherwise might not have anything to do with. By greeting one another in worship, or even saying to one another "the Lord be with you" or "the peace of Christ be with you," we are celebrating that our union with Christ also unifies us with each other, thereby creating a community characterized by forgiveness and bearing with each other—a community of gospel-peace.

God Instructs Us in Scripture Reading

Q: Why do we read the Bible in the worship service, and what is the purpose of the prayer that comes with the reading?

A: God requires scripture reading as a core element of Christian worship (1 Tim. 4:13; Exod. 24:3; Deut. 1-32; Josh. 8:30-35; 2 Kgs. 23:1-3; Neh. 8:1-8). The Bible is the word of God in written form, and it is one of the primary ways that God speaks and reveals himself to us. We usually read consecutively through books of the Bible in order to provide a systematic understanding of the Bible. We pray to ask God's help when we read the Bible because we cannot understand and respond to God's word rightly apart from the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit who opens our minds and hearts to receive scripture as God's personal word to us (1 Cor. 2:6-16).

(11:15 service) Q: What is the purpose of the corporate response [This is God's word/This is our story. Thanks be to God!]?

A: When scripture is read in public worship, Christians have historically declared together their belief about and acceptance of scripture through a proclamation and response. The reader proclaims that scripture is God's very words, the revelation of his plan of redemption ("This is God's word."), and we respond by declaring that we are included in that plan ("This is our story.") and that we are grateful ("Thanks be to God!"). The value of this is not only expressing our faith but also having our faith formed by what we say together.

God Instructs in Preaching

Q: Why does the pastor preach a sermon after the reading of the Bible, and how can we benefit from preaching?

A: The preaching of scripture is a vital component of biblical patterns for corporate worship (Neh. 8:8; Rom. 10:14; 1 Tim. 4:13-15; 2 Tim. 4:1-5). The sermon explains the text(s) that we read and also applies it to the life and mission of the church in our contemporary cultural setting. In the sermon, God himself speaks to us to remind us of his grace and to call us to a renewed commitment to him and to the growth of his kingdom in the world. As the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* explains, "the Spirit of God causes...the preaching of the Word, to convince and convert sinners, and to build them up in holiness and comfort through faith to salvation." Because the sermon in corporate worship is an especially authoritative declaration of God's word to us, ordained ministers preach because they have been called and authorized by God through the church to speak and act as Christ's representatives in order to serve the church. The *Catechism* also summarizes the way that we should receive the sermon in order to benefit from it: "For the Word to become effective to salvation, we must pay careful attention to it, prepare ourselves, and pray for understanding. We must also receive it with faith and love, treasure it in our hearts, and practice it in our lives."

We Offer Ourselves in Gifts and Song

Q: Why do we offer ourselves to God with money and song after the sermon?

A: In the offering, we respond to God by offering our whole lives to God with renewed faith, love, gratitude, and commitment. The offering is a privileged opportunity to support the mission of God through his church in a very concrete and practical way. We do this not only by offering our money to God but also our praise in song sung by the choir or by the congregation as a whole. The songs we sing to respond to God are expressions of our love, commitment, and submission to God. In other words, the offering is a tangible act of giving our whole lives to the Lord and to his mission in the world. This act has roots in the Old Testament pattern of corporate worship where a tribute offering of grain and wine was given as a regular part of worship (part of which was used to support the priests financially). This offering was a token of the congregation's labor and a tangible response of renewed commitment to God. In the New Testament, the church continued this pattern of giving in worship to care for the financial needs of their leaders (1 Cor. 9) and the poor and needy both inside and outside the church (e.g. Acts 2:44-45, 32-37; 1 Cor. 16:1-3; Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 6:18-19).

We Offer Our Prayers for the Church and the World

Q: Why do we pray together for the church and the world?

A: Praying for the needs of the church and the world is a way we respond to God's word together and put his word into action. Our petitions seek to apply God's word in our local context and also express our complete dependence upon God to provide what we need to do so. This practice has always played an important part in the worship of God's people. In the Old Testament order of worship, the offering that expressed renewed commitment to God (the ascension or burnt offering) included incense (Lev. 2:15-16; 9:17), which is a symbol of prayer (Ps. 141:2; Rev. 5:8, 8:3-4). Israel prayed together by singing the psalms, and the early church also prayed when gathered for worship (Acts 2:42, 4:23-31; 1 Tim. 2:1-8). Jesus is now the one who leads us in prayer by interceding for us and with us before the Father (Heb. 7:25). No matter who voices these prayers aloud, we are all participants together with Jesus in this prayer and ought to focus on praying actively with the person who leads us. When we bring the needs of the church and the world before God in prayer, we are exercising our collective role as a kingdom of priests who represent the world before God and seek God's blessing for the world (Gen. 12:1-3; Exod. 19:6; 1 Pet. 2:9-10; Rev. 1:6, 5:10).

Q: Why do we stand to pray the prayers of intercession?

We stand to pray because this is a sign of active response and reverence in prayer (Neh. 9:2, 4; 2 Chron. 20:5,13; Matt. 6:5; Mark 11:25; Luke 18:11, 13).

Q: Why do we pray the Lord's Prayer together at the conclusion of our prayers for the church and the world?

A: The Lord's Prayer is the model for prayer that Jesus himself taught his disciples when they asked to learn how to pray (Matt. 6:5-15). Praying this prayer together expresses the corporate nature of the whole time of prayer (thus, we pray "*Our Father...*"). The central petitions in the prayer for the honoring of God's name in the world, the doing of his will, and the coming of the fullness of his kingdom are a fitting summary of our prayers for the church and the world. The repetition of this prayer each week helps us memorize this important prayer (which Jesus gave as a paradigm for all prayer), and the memorization of this fixed form teaches our children how to pray and facilitates the participation of younger children in prayer in the liturgy. Finally, praying the Lord's Prayer connects us to the ancient tradition of the one holy, catholic, and apostolic church, which has regularly prayed the Lord's Prayer in corporate worship since at least the fourth century A. D.

(11:15 service) Q: Why do we use a modern language version of the Lord's Prayer, which changes the old English verb "art" and the pronouns "thy" and "thine" to "your" and "yours"?

A: The older English translation comes from the King James translation of the Bible, which was completed in 1611. The second-person pronoun forms "thy" and "thine" and the third-person verb form "art" reflect patterns of written and spoken English that were familiar in the early seventeenth century.

When God revealed himself to ancient peoples in Hebrew and Greek, however, he used forms of language that those peoples spoke and understood in their own day. Furthermore, there are no grounds in biblical language to use special pronouns to refer to God. In the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, the pronouns for God are simply the same pronouns forms used for any other subject. Thus, it is not necessary to say "thy" and "thine" in order to be faithful to the Bible or to show reverence for God. The biblical authors inspired by God did not use any special pronouns to refer to God that were distinct from those used in ordinary language about other topics.

We now employ Bible translations in modern English in scripture readings, in sermons, and in every other form of spoken prayer in our worship services in order to translate and use biblical prayers in a manner consistent with the original purpose and function of God's use of those languages in scripture. This is especially important for expressing hospitality in our worship because it eliminates unnecessary obstacles to understanding and makes this part of our worship more accessible for children and others who are beginning to learn the Christian faith and our traditions of worship.

(11:15 service) Q: Why do we say "evil one" rather than "evil" in the Lord's Prayer?

A: This phrase occurs in the form of the Lord's Prayer recorded in Matthew 6:13. In the original Greek language of the book of Matthew, the use of the adjective "evil" (*poneros*) with a definite article ("the") always refers to a personal being: "the evil one" (Matt 5:37; 5:39; 13:19;

13:38; 13:49). In the context of Matt 6:13 and 13:38, the reference is to Satan, and this reading fits quite naturally within the flow Matthew's narrative in which Jesus successfully resists the temptations of the evil one (Matthew 4) just prior to Jesus' instruction on prayer and other topics (Matthew 5-7). Other New Testament books use this phrase "the evil one" in the same manner (John 17:15; Ephesians 6:16; 1 John 2:13-14; 3:12; 5:18-19). The most ancient Christian treatises on the Lord's Prayer all translate the text as "evil one" (including scholars who spoke ancient Greek), and many modern biblical translators and commentators also render the phrase as "the evil one." (See, for example, the footnote in the English Standard Version (ESV) that suggests "the evil one" as a translation.) The practical effect of this change is that we remember the reality of spiritual warfare. Jesus and the New Testament writers routinely warn us that Satan and his demonic allies attack us. The Lord also assures us that he is able to protect and deliver us by enabling us to resist and stand firm in the truth and strength he supplies (Ephesians 6:10-20; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-11). By praying "deliver us from the evil one," Jesus teaches us to seek God's strength continually to resist the personal attack of the particular evil embodied in this adversary who seeks our destruction.

God Feeds Us at His Table

Q: Why do we often conclude the service with the Lord's Supper, and what does it mean that "God feeds us at his table" [Part 1]?

A: When God renews his special relationship with his people in corporate worship, he serves a meal as the climax of that event. In the Old Testament, services of worship regularly concluded with a peace offering, which was a meal served from God's altar-table celebrating renewed reconciliation, peace, and communion with God (Exod. 24; Lev. 9; 2 Chron. 29). In the New Testament, this pattern finds its fulfillment in the Lord's Supper, a ritual meal with bread and wine that Jesus established to celebrate his saving death and resurrection and to be a means through which he is present with the church and bestows the blessings of salvation upon all who believe (Matt. 26:17-29/Mk. 14:12-25/Lk. 22:7-23; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-22; 11:17-34). Following Jesus' example, we begin the Supper with a prayer of thanksgiving, and we serve and receive bread and wine because it is a meal that we continue to eat with him. God has designed this meal to be a festive meal of joy and hope. It is an occasion to relax and enjoy our peace and friendship with God and one another as we celebrate Christ's victory over sin, death, and Satan in the past, present, and future.

Q: Why do we often conclude the service with the Lord's Supper, and what does it mean that "God feeds us at his table"? [Part 2]

A: In the Lord's Supper, we are restored to humanity's proper priestly role within creation. By receiving food from God with thanksgiving, we are confessing that our life and the created world as a whole come from God, and we are leading the whole creation in our response of thanksgiving and praise. The Lord's Supper is also a "memorial" (or "remembrance") in which God remembers his covenant with us in Christ by blessing us on the basis of Christ's death and resurrection for us. In the meal, we receive the very life of the risen Christ in a way that strengthens our union with him (1 Cor. 10:16; cf. John 6:22-59). It also expresses and renews

the unity of the church community, for “we who are many are one body for we partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17). In the Lord’s Supper, we also proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes again, and Jesus himself promised that he would one day eat the Supper again with us in his kingdom in the universal banquet (Isa. 25; Matt. 8) that is a great wedding feast between Jesus and his people (Rev. 19). Thus, Jesus identifies the Lord’s Supper as a foretaste of this future victory and peace in the fullness of God’s kingdom in the new heavens and the new earth (Rev. 21-22).

Q: Why do we sit down and serve one another to celebrate the Lord’s Supper?

A: (1) Jesus’ example and command: At the Last Supper, the disciples did not stand up and receive the bread and wine directly from Jesus individually. Jesus and his disciples sat together to eat and drink around a table. (In the gospel narratives, Jesus always instructs people to sit down whenever he takes food, gives thanks, and serves people. See Matt. 14:19; 15:35; 26:20; Mark 6:39; 8:6; 14:18; Luke 9:14–15; 22:14; John 6:10). He then passed the bread to them, which they in turn passed to one another. He did the same thing with the wine. Finally, he commanded the disciples to follow his actions: “Do this.”

(2) Meal posture: We sit because communion is a meal, and thus the form of celebrating the Supper matches its meaning as closely as practically possible. The disciples sat because that was how they ate a meal in their culture, and this is how we also eat meals together with other people in our cultural context. Presbyterians have historically sought to maximize the meal character of communion by sitting to serve one another.

(3) Receptive, relaxed posture: The Lord’s Supper celebrates peace and friendship with God, and sitting at a meal is a posture well suited for relaxation and peace. The Bible prescribes standing or kneeling for other kinds of active responses in worship (e.g., kneeling for confession, standing and raising hands for prayer, etc.). But communion is first and foremost a sacred meal, which is a moment of *receiving* life and grace from God in a spirit of joyful thanksgiving and peace. For that kind of event, Jesus always commands people to sit when he serves them food in the gospels.

(4) Family and friendship: Sitting together at a table to share a common meal signifies the kind of acceptance and familiarity found between friends and family. God has given us the Lord’s Supper to signify that we are more than mere servants to him; rather, we are highly honored servants, children, and friends of God because of what Jesus has done. This is the meaning that Jesus attributes to the posture of sitting for a meal in Luke 12:37 and 17:7.

(5) Serving one another: Celebrating communion while seated enables us to serve one another. This embodies one of the major theological meanings of the Supper, namely, its horizontal/social purpose of expressing and fostering the unity of the whole church (1 Cor. 10:16). This social purpose is also the reason why we speak words of blessing to one another when we serve one another.

(6) Singing: Sitting facilitates active singing by the whole congregation because we have access to the songs in our bulletins, and we are not interrupted by having to move throughout the sanctuary.

God Blesses Us and Sends Us Out

Q: Why does the worship service conclude with God's blessing and sending?

A: In the Bible, corporate worship often ends with God's blessing pronounced by the priests or ministers who are called to speak and act as God's representatives to serve and bless his people (Lev. 9:22; Num. 6:22-27; 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 13:20-21). God thus has the final word in the liturgy to send us out into the world to serve him with the blessing of his favor and strength. Our response to the Lord's blessing is to love him and do the work of his kingdom in the world wherever he has called us. Thus, our whole lives become an act of worship as we go forth to live out of the relationship with him and with one another that God renews with us each week in the liturgy.

In order to emphasize that we are responding to God with our whole person, we express our thankful praise not only with the words of our mouths but also with the posture of our bodies by raising our hands. In the Bible, this posture is associated with expressions of praise (e.g., Ps 63:4; 134:2), and here it is also a receptive posture indicating that we eagerly desire to receive God's blessing.

At baptisms and some other special occasions, we sometimes profess the two great ecumenical creeds of the Christian faith, the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed.

Q: Why do we confess our faith with the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed?

A: The Christian Church formulated the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed in the early centuries of the Church's history for use in corporate worship, baptism, and Christian education. They are based soundly upon biblical revelation, and they are the most ancient and universally received summaries of the foundational content of the Christian faith. Thus, by confessing these ancient and universally accepted creeds, we also confess our unity with the whole catholic (i.e., universal) Christian Church throughout history and across different denominational lines. In the liturgy, we confess these creeds not merely as a list of facts or ideas that we affirm but more as an expression of our personal trust in God in response to God's call to renew our commitment to him in the reading and preaching of Scripture. We are saying not simply "I think that..." but rather, "I put my trust in God the Father...and in Jesus Christ...[and] in the Holy Spirit." Therefore, these creeds are an oath of covenant loyalty to the Triune God, a renewal and remembrance of our baptism into Christ and the covenant.