



What About: The Way We Worship?

If you are relatively new to Christ Church, chances are you probably have questions about our worship. Euphemistically speaking, it is for many visitors so . . . “different,” so . . . “regimented,” so . . . “Catholic.” Or it may even be that you’ve worshipped with us for quite some time, and the novelty of ancient worship has gone away, but you have forgotten why we do what we do. Either way, God wants you to worship with understanding. And so we have assembled some answers to questions you might (or ought to) be asking.

So, why do we worship the way we do? We’re glad you asked. Whether stated or not, every church has an “order of worship” or a “liturgy.” In many modern churches this order does not necessarily seem to be self-consciously thought through. But something as important as a meeting with the living God should merit some reflection. As we have studied the subject of the flow of worship, it seemed fitting to follow that suggested by the order of sacrifices in Temple worship.

“When more than one kind of offering was presented (as in Num. 6:16, 17), the procedure was usually as follows: (1) sin offering or guilt offering, (2) burnt offering, (3) fellowship offering and grain offering (along with a drink offering). This sequence furnishes part of the spiritual significance of the sacrificial system. First, sin had to be dealt with (sin offering or guilt offering). Second, the worshipper committed himself completely to God (burnt offering and grain offering). Third, fellowship or communion between the Lord, the priest, and the worshipper (the fellowship offering) was established. To state it another way, there were sacrifices of expiation, consecration, and communion.”

This quotation comes from an unlikely but broadly evangelical source—the *NIV Study Bible* (P. 150). It makes sense that when we worship the Holy One we first deal with our sin (confession), then we

dedicate ourselves completely to Him (consecration), and finally God seals his covenant promises to us through communion.

You may have also noticed that the sacrificial system and our order of worship follow the order of salvation. First we are justified (sin offering; confession); then we are sanctified (burnt offering; consecration); and finally, we are glorified and have intimate table fellowship with God (peace offering; communion). Add a call to worship to begin, and a commissioning to send the saints out with, and you have our order of worship: Call to worship, Confession, Consecration, Communion, and Commissioning. This is often referred to as “Covenant Renewal Worship” because through this worship, God renews his covenantal promises to us, and we pledge our continuing love and loyalty to Him.

So is worship the same every week? Only in the same way that dinner is the same every night at your home. Just because all the food groups are always represented and served in the same order doesn’t mean every night you have a salad, meatloaf and potatoes, and then cap it off with chocolate cake.

Why no children’s church? There is a bit of irony at work here. In many modern churches, we are anxious to hustle the kiddies out to children’s church so the adults can worship in peace and without distraction. But then when we finally have gotten rid of them, we worship like children anyway, complete with hand motions accompanying our trite choruses. In contrast, we believe that God meets with his people, even the small ones, on the Lord’s Day. Not wanting to deprive our children of time with their God, we do have children’s church, but it is no different than our normal service in which we all seek to mature like little children. But given our current culture, where children (and adults) simply have very little practice sitting still, we all have to be patient with one another.

Why do we say the creeds and the catechism? This is part of the “consecration” section of our worship. God tells us what to believe—with the creeds we say back to God, “this is what we understand You are telling us to believe.” More than intellectual assent, the creeds are our declaration of Whom we trust. We *believe* (trust!) the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: The Triune God.

Why do we kneel at confession and lift our hands while singing the Gloria Patri? God made us with bodies, and he wants us to use them in worship. Kneeling and lifting up the hands are biblical expressions of worship (Ps. 95:6; 1 Kings 8:54). Kneeling—like prostration—is a posture associated with humility, reverence, and penitence. It is a posture appropriate for subjects before their King. Kneeling at confession expresses, with our bodies, our sorrow and submission to our Lord. Lifting hands is a posture of supplication and

entreaty—think of your child lifting up hands to be held. At the end of our service we lift our hands up together as an expression of praise.

It all seems so formal. My God isn’t cold and aloof. Amen! And neither is ours. Our relationship with God is unlike that which we have with any other. He is at the same time our Father and the Sovereign Ruler of the Universe; our Lord and Judge, as well as our Friend. But this Friend isn’t like any *other* friend we have. That is why the psalmist calls us to “Worship the Lord with reverence, and rejoice with trembling” (Ps. 2:11). Also, God calls us to do all things “properly and in an orderly manner” (1 Cor. 14:40)—and the context of this passage is corporate worship. In obedience to this, well-planned worship is our way of honoring and loving God. So our worship is *somewhat* formal, yes, but this enhances and does not inhibit our intimacy with Him.

What about this music! The hymnal doesn’t have time signatures, and sometimes it’s missing other standard musical notation. Well the quirks of the *Cantus Christi* belong to our friends down at Canon Press. They think that the time signatures should be obvious. Whether or not that’s the case, we couldn’t do without the glorious music. If you hang around for a while, we think you’ll be spoiled forever.

Why don’t you sing choruses? Your observation is correct, we don’t sing choruses, but focus rather on psalms and hymns. This comes from both theological and musical convictions. Theologically, many choruses are wanting in accuracy and depth. Even those that are accurate (like those which are simply singing Scripture) when taken as a whole body of work tend only to emphasize attributes of God with which our culture is comfortable (his mercy, love, and grace, for instance). While these are glorious, no doubt, and we love them too, God is also majestic, transcendent, just, unchanging, etc. Older hymnody, and especially psalm-singing, emphasizes *all* the perfections of God. They also emphasize something we just don’t see in modern worship music: antithesis. You are either with God or against Him. There is no neutrality. We see this in the psalms. There is the usual section churches sing about the faithfulness of God to bless His people. But then also in the psalm are verses speaking of the fate of those who refuse to love the Lord. These parts the modern church has edited out of its hymnody. We sing whole psalms because we want God’s inspired Word to shape our whole minds. So we sing not only the blessings, but the curses as well.

There are also musical reasons for our preferences. The hymns and psalms are more excellent and beautiful. They have rich harmonies and rhythms we just don’t find in most choruses. Generally speaking, Christians have not demonstrated as much skill in composition today as we did a few hundred years ago. And so we

have found psalms and hymns to be the more appropriate medium to convey the rich perfection of God. While this is hard work, God calls us to sing skillfully to Him (Ps. 47:7). So though we aren't *there* yet, we certainly are seeking to grow in skill and faithfulness.

Is our love of older music just a fad? An example of what C.S. Lewis calls "chronological snobbery"? Do we love old psalms and hymns merely by virtue of their age? Of course not. Beauty, and not age, is the issue here. And surely the church has some beautiful *new* music to look forward to that has yet to be composed. It just so happens that we are finding beauty in old music, and having a harder time finding it in contemporary compositions.

Wow, that was a bit more than I asked for. In any case, I find it hard to worship when the songs are so difficult to sing. It's true that many of these songs are difficult to sing. And some of the Genevan ones sound funny on the ear at first. But difficulty should not keep us from excellence. In fact, the preface to the Genevan Bible says, "All things are difficult which are excellent and fair." Expressing God's glory is surely excellent and fair, and so it shouldn't surprise us that it is difficult. Worship is something to prepare for during the week – practicing the music so we can sing our best for our King.

We have found when the saints really apply themselves to learn this music that they are blessed. Their former notions of what constitutes glorious worship have been challenged and transformed, and they can never go back. So come to psalm sing and learn with us as we pursue all 150 psalms, and recover many of the magnificent ancient hymns the church has left behind.

After the prayer of confession, the pastor declares our sins to be forgiven. Isn't that more than a little presumptuous? That's a good question, and gives us an opportunity to address the difference between faith and presumption. Presumption is assuming privileges you do not have. Faith, on the other hand, is grounded on real promises. We only claim that which God says is ours for the asking.

Applying this to confession of sin, our Father promises us repeatedly that if we confess and forsake our sins, he will forgive and heal us (1 Jn. 1:9; Prov. 28:13; Rom. 5:1 etc. etc.). The minister is simply to say what God says. So after we confess our sins, it actually would be arrogant for the minister *not* to declare our sins forgiven when God makes that declaration.

Why is the sermon so long? Long is a relative term, isn't it? Several centuries ago, you could easily find yourself listening to a sermon of a few *hours* in length. The listeners at the time had the mental stamina to listen *and profit* from that. Yet today, many modern churches have sermons half the length of our usual 40-50 minute sermon. Ironically, this seems to match the length of your average

sitcom: 22 minutes without commercials. This seems to say more about the impact of television on our attention span rather than dictate an ideal length of sermon.

One reason for the length is there is so much to learn and know in God's Word. When God spreads a table for His people, he does not present "California-cuisine" sized portions. You may have encountered them before: three green beans, a 2" by 2" piece of grilled chicken breast, a dozen or so grains of wild rice – and all of it *ingeniously* presented. Many sermons in modern pulpits are just like this, and though entertaining, it doesn't make for robust spiritual health. Sitting for a long time under this preaching, God's people begin to show their ribs. Now, there *should* be creativity and beauty in the pulpit, but never at the expense of nutrition. God's people need milk and meat in the teaching – and that takes a bit of time.

It might help also to think of it this way. Where ever you are on Sunday for worship, the preacher is to speak, as it were, the very utterances of God (1 Pet. 4:11). In fact, historically, the consensus of the church has been that *to the extent the pastor is accurately declaring the Word of God, to that extent it is the voice of Christ*, and not the pastor, *you are hearing*. Herman Hoeksema explains this:

"Through preaching you do not hear about Christ, but you hear him. The difference is easily understood. When you hear about someone, he is not present. You do not hear his own voice, but the voice of someone else who tells you something about him. But when you hear someone, you hear his own voice. He is present with you. He is addressing you personally."

Well that changes things a trifle, doesn't it? If it was announced that Jesus were speaking for forty minutes on Sunday at such and such a place, who wouldn't flock to hear Him? The point is, He *is* speaking for forty minutes on Sunday – at your church. But are you listening for Him? Do you come with that sense of anticipation that God is going to speak to *you* this Sunday? If you do, would you mind if God "went a little over"? The thought would never cast the merest shadow on the threshold of your mind.

Why do you have communion weekly? Doesn't that depreciate it? Kind of like having Thanksgiving every Thursday? That depends how you view the Lord's Supper. If it is merely a memorial, an opportunity to remember the sacrifice of Christ, then *perhaps* it should be celebrated less frequently (just as you only pull your photo album out once in awhile). But even this seems flimsy reasoning. Should we then have communion only once a year? Then it would be *really* special. We think a more biblical way to look at the Supper is that it is not only a memorial, but a means of grace. Through the Lord's Supper we commune with Christ, are given Christ as bread from heaven, and somehow (mysteriously) we are strengthened

spiritually. So we liken the Lord's Supper more to the importance of eating three square meals, and less to paging through a photo album of past events.

I love the Lord, but haven't been baptized. Why can't I partake of the Lord's Supper? Think of it like getting married. You may love your intended before the wedding day, but you cannot go on the honeymoon until you say your vows. The wedding is a covenantal ceremony that changes your status from outsider to insider. Once inside the marriage, you have the *privileges* of marriage – but not before then. Baptism is a covenantal rite that formally acknowledges you as a child of God and grants you access to the privileges of the family of God. Just as you are born once, so you are baptized once. But that child gets dinner every time the family eats. So baptism is a sacrament of initiation, and the Lord's Supper a sacrament of continuation. Baptism is an individual sacrament, and the Lord's Supper is a community sacrament. So if you love the Lord, please talk to us about baptism, and then come to the Table.

Adapted from an article of the same title written by Rev. Joost Nixon, Pastor of Christ Church in Spokane, Washington. Used with permission.

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