

## **RECOVERING THE ANCIENT DANCE: A GOSPEL COMPASS**

The Gospel reconciles fallen man to holy God, but for what? To dance! Now when you hear the word “dance”, you don’t first think of God. But when the word “dance” appears in the Bible, it carries images of joyful relations between God and his people. A few scriptural examples will suffice.

The Psalmist praises God for his love and life in the covenant. “You have turned for me my mourning into dancing; you have loosed my sackcloth and clothed me with gladness.” (Psalm 30:11) Again the Psalmist exhorts Israel to gladness and anticipation of God’s kingly rule. “Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King! Let them praise his name with dancing.” (Psalm 149:3)

The Prophet Jeremiah foretold a future joy when Israel would be released from exile and a new covenant would be established. “Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy; I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.” (Jeremiah 31:13)

The parable of the prodigal son tells of a father rejoicing over the reconciliation of his son and there was dancing. “Bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate. “Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. (Luke 15:23–25)

The Gospel brings us back into a right relation with our creator God, which is appropriately regarded as a dance, which initiates a redemptive dialogue and liturgical movement in the act of worship. This “ancient dance” of worship is essential to the Christian life.

The puritans stated it this way, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and to fully enjoy him forever.” Pastor John Piper has rightly said, “Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church, but rather, worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever.”

Worship on the Lord’s Day is the way we cultivate the vision that keeps us alive—the vision of the glory of God. The Sabbath was a “little eternity” for the Old Testament people of God—a few hours in the freedom from the present temporal kingdom of necessity to the coming eternal kingdom of Glory. It is the same on the Lord’s Day, which likewise points to the goal to which all of history is moving—the great rest of God.

The change from the seventh day to the first day acknowledges the beginning of the outworking of the rest of God—the new creation. This is what the Puritans called “market day for the soul.” Ireneaus said, “The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of the glory of God”. This is true of churches as well. We must come alive to worship and by means of worship. God loves for us to worship Him. Worship was made for us and we were made for worship. God will be no better off because of our worship, but we will be! Let us anticipate that and enter in.

As creatures of desire, made like God, made for God, and made for worship, we always have to ask ourselves, “What is it that we truly want? What is the object and aim of our seeking. What do we love and long for? Is it the presence of God? Or the experience of peace, prosperity, and pleasure that sometimes accompany the presence of God? Do we seek God himself as an end or as a means to another end.

Every generation of Christians must examine the world in which it lives and ask, “how is the gospel to be lived out in this cultural moment?” These are days of decline and separation, in which both the culture and the Church are unraveling and being reshaped. While we recognize God’s power to reverse trends in the lives of individuals and societies, we also recognize that in his providence, God directs people through means. It does not appear that he transforms cultures by the simple wave of his hand, but uses people.

Worship is something which should be taken seriously in its own right and which should be viewed in light of this cultural moment. It would be a mistake simply to import something from the past or make adjustments in light of the present without serious reflection upon what worship is and what it means for people today.

Worship is a distinctly counter-cultural activity, which trains our senses and practices toward God. Attempts to strip worship in order to make it accessible to the uninitiated will be, in the short term, self-defeating. A failure to learn from the past and benefit from forms that have served centuries of Christians will leave us malnourished. Insensitivity to the environment in which we live will leave unnecessary obstacles in the paths of those whom God is gathering to Himself. Just a brief reflection on these observations is sufficient to prompt a re-evaluation of our liturgical commitments.

What is “liturgy” anyway? We are creatures of desire and liturgy engages our whole person in corporate reverence for God. Rather than the repetition of dead rituals or the pursuit of spiritual highs, liturgies are the living habits of the heart, which shape our desires and fuel our imagination to live out our faith bodily. Liturgies do more than just pass on information about God. They train us to image God in particular ways, which make believers better followers of Christ. They tune our spiritual senses and form our vision of the future.

Not all liturgies, however, are equally effective. Some liturgies convey God's person and presence better than others. It is not a question of whether people will be formed by liturgy, but which liturgies will form them. Nothing is more effective at conveying God's truth than liturgies that are faithful to Scripture. The liturgy of ancient Christian worship forms around the life of Christ, voices the dialogue between God and his people, and nurtures a vision of eternal hope. Liturgy rehabilitates our deepest affections and enables us to imagine God's kingdom.

Our understanding of worship is informed by Jesus. He said, "And this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." (John 17:3). This knowledge of God is not mere information about God, but rather personal affection for God. To know God is to love God and to know and be known by God is the highest aim in life. Thus, worship of the true God is the highest activity, in which we can be engaged.

Worship is both an individual and a corporate activity. Knowing, loving and delighting in God finds expression in the devotional life of the believer. We pursue God because He is supremely lovely and worthy of our devotion. A believer's private devotion nurtures personal affection for God, which in turn prepares individuals for corporate worship. God calls his people out of the world and comes to dwell with them in all of His glory. His people rise up to enter His presence to sing his praises, to offer their prayers, to receive his Word, and to observe the Sacraments.

Worship can be simply defined a meeting of God with His beloved people, who ascribe to him the worth he is due. Our worship should emphasize this relational dimension. Worship is covenantal, in that God has promised to meet with us graciously and within the bonds of security, love and intimacy. Corporate worship is central to the life of the church. Everything either leads to or flows from worship. We desire our worship to be the expression of reverence, praise, adoration, thanksgiving and honor which are the natural fruit of tasting and seeing that God is supremely good.

Our Salvation through Jesus Christ is illustrated in the Old Testament "Exodus" of God's people from Egypt into the Promised Land. The pivotal event is the gathering of the people at Mt. Sinai, where God enters into covenant with the nation. Everything leads to and flows from that event.

Redemption from Egyptian bondage was for the specific purpose that, "they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness" (Exodus 5:1). The covenant was established in order that the nation Israel might be a light among other nations. The paradigm for our worship is the exodus experience. We don't gather on Sundays to make yet another covenant, but rather to celebrate the reality that we have been gathered to God through the blood of the everlasting covenant shed on the cross in the work of Christ. The Gospel is a recapitulation of the Exodus.

The imagery is appropriate (Hebrews 12:18-24). God summons us to Himself and we come out of the world and to the Lord. He descends from the heavens with all of His angelic host attending Him. Like Israel, we come out in order to meet with Him, not to a frightening earthly Mt. Sinai, but to Mt. Zion, the heavenly city of the living God.. He comes in great power and glory to us just as He did to Israel in the exodus. Then his glory was seen in the fire, clouds, and trumpet blasts, but now it is revealed as the Spirit of God inhabits the praises of his people in worship.

The fact that this is what happens in worship is underscored by our practices from the invocation, calling on the presence of God, to the benediction, receiving the promise of God. Everything in between is shaped into a dialogue between the God of heaven and earth and his beloved covenant people in Jesus Christ.

Many Christians today regard historic liturgy in the church as a piece of religious theater that we conduct for God's entertainment. God is not a mere observer, but an active participant in worship, just as He was at Mt. Sinai. Hence, worship is not a performance, but a meeting between God and His people. We come together as God's people believing that He is already there. We come expecting that He will hear our requests and dwell in our midst, inhabiting our praises.

Worship is dynamic. It is a dialogue. Our part is to praise, give thanks, sing, pray, adore, revere, and delight in God. God's part is to dwell in our midst, to minister His grace—comforting, encouraging, convicting, and revealing Himself, to speak through His Word read and preached, to nourish our souls in the Sacraments, and delight in us as the object of His affection in Christ.

There is an appropriate sense of anticipation which should accompany our worship. We are not passive in worship, but work. On the one hand, worship involves God coming down to meet with us. On the other hand, worship involves us, going up to the heavenly Sinai to unite our voices with the assembled saints of all ages gathered to exult in the lover of our souls. If those images of dialogue, devotion, and dance do not stir up in us a sense of wondrous expectation, then there is something amiss. It is this glory of worship which I believe the Church needs to recover and develop more fully.

Perhaps you have never thought of worship as an apologetic for the Christian faith, but it certainly seemed to be that for the apostle Paul. When he admonished believers in Corinth concerning their worship and the proper exercise of gifts, he comments that an unbeliever in the midst of their assembly would be so affected by the presence of God among them that, "the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you." (1 Cor. 14:25).

I have often said to people, who have asked me what I believed and why, "Come worship with me and you will see who and what I love." Worship was meant to be the end game for the people of God. Israel was to be a servant to the nations in order that they too might know and worship the one true God (Is. 2:2-4; 56:6-8). The Psalms make this truth abundantly clear (Ps. 67:1-7; 47:1; 100:1-5; 102:18; 105:1-2).

Worship is the end to which redemption points. It is the goal of our evangelism. Peter writes, "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." (1 Pet. 2:9). Jesus himself is said to have sung praise to God (Heb. 2:12). Even God delights over his people with singing (Zeph. 3:17).

I am convinced that the Church and culture need the same thing: a renewed worship, in which God is present in power; moving, convicting, thrilling, breaking, rebuilding, revealing, and comforting, his people. Contemporary society has not merely forgotten or discarded God, we have made Him weightless. The Hebrew word of glory means weighty. It is the glory of God, which must be restored to the Church and her worship.

When we consider the form of our worship, a basic question comes to mind. What does God require in worship? Scripture alone addresses this question. While application in a local situation will vary dependent upon differences in culture, time, preference. The patterns and guidelines that determine what is normative in Christian worship, however, must be deduced from the whole of the Bible. I refer to our form of worship as a "common sense" liturgy.

This distinction between general principle and proximate application is recognized in the Westminster Confession of Faith: ". . . there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God and the government of the church, common to human actions and societies, which are to be ordered by the light of nature and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the Word which are always to be observed." (WCF I:6).

We have freedom to regulate our worship so long as the biblical guidelines for worship are not violated. Elements of biblical worship which are to be present in our services include: reading Scripture, singing of psalms and hymns, prayer, preaching, presenting offerings, confessing the faith, and observing the Sacraments. The exact ordering of these elements is not stipulated, that being the responsibility of the church leaders.

It is necessary to recognize that elements and forms are not the only considerations for the meaningful worship of God. There is an important interplay between the hearts of God's people and the form of worship employed.

External forms of public worship shape our approach to and our experience of worship. Liturgy is a form which enables God's people to give verbal and physical expression to what is in their hearts corporately. All true believers want to worship and need help. Liturgy provides that help.

In our age of individualism and brokenness there is a need for corporate forms. Liturgy connects this generation of believers to rich traditions shaped by previous generations. It facilitates an awareness of the transcendent Glory of God. Because historic liturgy is a retelling of the gospel, it expresses the radical nearness of our Redeemer as well. The particular liturgy practiced at Christ Church Ventura may be new to this generation, but it has served the Church for years and I hope for years to come.

When we consider our own public worship, we recognize that all worship services have a liturgy or some form of order. Even the most spontaneous services, if observed over a period of time, will manifest a form. That is obviously true of more clearly liturgical services such as our own. Whether in a formal or informal service, the elements of the service are there to assist people in their worship.

Liturgy derives from a Greek word which means 'people work.' It is what we do in worship: singing, praying, reading, listening, preaching, and confessing. The question becomes a qualitative one: What form best facilitates worship? While there is room for diversity in answering that question, I am convinced that a recovery of the ancient liturgy of the church is greatly needed and here's why.

First, liturgy is theo-centric. It is cognizant of the living God from the beginning to the end. This focus upon the presence of God emphasizes his transcendence, which produces a holy reverence of him; and his immanence, which strengthens those upon whom God has set his affection. God delights in inhabiting the praises of his people, in caring for their souls, and in moving powerfully among them by his Spirit.

Second, the progression of the liturgy follows the pattern reflected in the OT Exodus of Israel and serves as a dramatic restatement of the Gospel. Liturgy sequentially moves from the call to worship, to the invocation of God's presence, to the confession of sin, the assurance of pardon based on the finished work of Christ, to the reading and preaching of the Word of God, to the response of the people in their prayers, to the celebration of the covenant meal marked by great joy and gladness in our salvation, to the sending of the people into the world for service, All of this 'work of the people' is liberally integrated with songs and hymns and responses of one kind or another.

A third reason for liturgy is simple that history has value. The various pieces of the worship service each week are taken from the Old and New Testament Scriptures, ancient confessions and creeds, and prayers and devotions, which have been preserved over the centuries.

These patterns serve to connect us to our past. We are not the first generation of Christians ever to have lived. There are countless believers, who have gone before us and faced the struggles of life, while maintaining a degree of obedience to the Father which is hard to find in our day. We need them and their spirituality. This is one small way to make that connection. "We believe in the communion of saints." (Apostles Creed)

A fourth reason for liturgy is that our union with Christ and communion with other believers in worship is consistent with the commitment we have made to our covenant children. As we want to be aware of our great heritage, so also we want our children to know that past. We want them stand on the shoulders of believers from ages past, viewing the glory of God, the wonder of his redemption in Jesus Christ, and the hope which the Holy Spirit presses into our hearts with the same reverence and affection reflected in their prayers, confessions, and hymns.

Fifth, this form of historic liturgy reinforces that idea that we are a pilgrim people. Worship is the most counter-cultural activity in which we can be engaged. This is something that must be understood deeply and bears repeating in sermons and conversations. When we cross the threshold at the rear of the sanctuary (or the place designated for worship) we are crossing over into a different world. That world is the world of heaven and the glory of God and the marriage feast of the Lamb. If unbelievers enter the midst of that nexus, they cannot help but feel uncomfortable. Indeed, it is unfamiliar and edgy to us! Nevertheless, for us it is home. We leave that world only reluctantly in order to serve God as pilgrims in this world.

This kind of worship restores a much needed emphasis on the majesty and glory of God. Our culture tends to trivialize everything, but God is supremely great and worthy of reverence. Cultivating a proper fear of the Lord should be a goal for the church and an emphasis in her message. It is a marvelous paradox of the Christian faith that as our awareness of God's greatness is heightened, so is our experience of his tenderness.

That is the staggering thing about being a Christian. God, whose majesty and glory exceed our comprehension, has made us His children and takes great delight in us as any father would His own children. We ought to enjoy worship as the meeting between God and those whom He loves.

Worship clarifies what we love—our core values for all of life, public and private. It gives shape to how we regard the passing of time. What is the "Church Year?" The church year reinforces the idea that worship is an activity rooted in what it means for us to be a pilgrim and covenant people who are aliens and strangers in a foreign land. The ancient Israelites marked time differently from the surrounding culture. While their "church year" followed the cycles of seed time, first fruits, and full harvest, God infused those seasons with rich new meaning by making them redemptive in character and by using them to teach His people.

Springtime was the Passover celebration, Pentecost was the season of the initial harvest, and the Feast of Booths (Tabernacles) was the celebration of the final ingathering (Leviticus 23:1-22). The Hebrew calendar was a re-enactment of the redemptive work of God from deliverance through consummation. The church or Christian year, like the Hebrew calendar, serves a similar purpose.

The church year is a plausibility structure to make our convictions more fully expressed in the totality of life. It is intended to reinforce Christian values as it focuses on God's redemptive acts in history fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. Advent celebrates His coming in fulfillment of the promise, the Christmas season His incarnation and Epiphany His role as Savior of people from every nation, tribe, and tongue.

The intervening ordinary time until Lent focuses upon His life in obedience to the Father. Lent prepares us for the completion of His work. Holy Week takes us through the cycle from deep repentance to great joy in the celebration of the Lord's victory over sin and death in His resurrection. Ascension focuses upon Christ's reign. Pentecost focuses upon the gift of the Spirit for the empowering of the church and the living of the Christian life.

In following the church year, our church and future generations of Christians will understand and mark their time differently, and live in ways that are distinct from the surrounding culture. Liturgy and the church year assist us in doing that. They have served the church well for centuries. Structures like the church year, as with our own convictions, must be continually reformed lest they become hard, obscure, and lifeless traditions. We all recognize that any form can lead to formalism. I would suggest, however, that in our day evangelicals need much more form than they have. We suffer not from a dead formalism, but from a kind of ecclesiastical drift and liturgical anarchy. We are not the better for it.

Meeting outdoors removes us from some of the visual objects that we ordinarily associate with worship—the vaulted ceiling, the pews, the organ, the rail, the table, and the pulpit. The symbol of the Cross in the church points us to the work of God and the common faith we have in Jesus Christ.

Symbols have always been a part of the life of God's people. Piles of rocks in Israel, alters, trees, rivers, etc. have been used to focus upon the character of God or to serve as reminders of the great redemptive acts of the Lord. We are people with senses. We see, hear, taste, smell, and touch the world around us. Worship should engage all the senses. Again, we want to be careful and take appropriate steps in creating and using symbols, but their proper use will serve God's people well to enhance their worship.

There are many illustrations of the use of symbols in worship. Celtic Crosses served as pictographs telling the redemptive stories of the Bible to the illiterate masses.



Hand-carved lecterns from European churches communicate similarly. As the congregation viewed the reader, they would see the Bible resting on the outstretched wings of an eagle—the natural enemy of the viper. That visual imagery communicates that the Word of God destroys the works of the Devil.

Even congregational posture and movement are powerful symbols in worship. When congregations kneel in prayer, they express bodily the humility and dependence that is appropriate in prayer. When freshly baptized infants are carried into the midst of the congregation, their inclusion in the covenant community is visualized. When families come forward to receive the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the multi-generational nature of the Church is displayed.

The colors of the church year also serve as another example of the use of symbols in worship. Blue signifies the preparatory nature of Advent season as well as the royalty of Christ. White expresses the celebrative nature of the season at Christmas, Epiphany, and Easter. Red is used as the color of the blood of Christ and the martyrs. It also symbolizes the fire and coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Green represents the ongoing work of God and growth in the church.

Such symbols reinforce the drama of our worship and leave impressions upon the mind and soul. Even the robe worn by ministers of the Word and Sacrament communicates the office they fill in worship as under shepherds or vicars of Christ.

In worship there is a union of Word and Sacrament as God's means of grace for his people. If God appoints something for us that by it we might grow in our knowledge of Him and His grace, and thus cultivate health in our souls, then we would be wise to take advantage of it and employ it at every possible opportunity. A more frequent practice of Lord's supper is a first step to recovering the means of God's grace.

Preaching is also a means of grace and it is right that we should have a high regard for it. It is the Word of God which regulates all of life and stands above us and all our activity. We submit ourselves to its teaching and seek to practice in thought, desire and action, all that it commands. That is our tradition as Protestants and particularly as those who are heirs of the English Puritans. I am convinced that our day is in desperate need of a restoration of true preaching that is both exegetical and theological in its application of the gospel.

Westminster Larger Catechism #155 expresses how the preached Word is made effectual to salvation. "The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word an effectual means of enlightening, convincing, and humbling sinners; of driving them out of themselves, and drawing them to Christ; of conforming them to His image, and subduing them to His will; of strengthening them against temptations and corruptions; of building them up in grace, and establishing their hearts in holiness and comfort through faith unto salvation."

There is a famine in the world for the hearing of the Word of God and the people are malnourished as a result. The kind of preaching which is needed begins with a text but doesn't stay with that text. Preaching should show that there is a connection in each text or sermon with the whole counsel of God. Preaching should exalt God and display His grace in such a way that the soul is enticed to seek Christ and His sufficiency. Preaching is the means by which God gathers and sanctifies his people.

Believing that the Word of God preached is central to worship is not to say that it is all that there is to worship. While preaching is the glue which holds life together, it is not all there is to life. It is also necessary to restore the sacraments and other important elements of worship to a more prominent place, not in terms of order but in terms of practice.

John Calvin's convictions led him to argue for such elements to be included in the services at Geneva. He desired the sacrament of the Lord's Supper to be observed at least weekly (Institutes, 4:17:44ff). He also felt that the confession of sin should be properly followed by an "assurance of pardon" as we say. "It is no trivial thing to have Christ's ambassador present, furnished with the mandate of reconciliation." (Institutes, 3:4:12ff).

Reference to Calvin simply makes the point that our older tradition retained much more than has been eclipsed in our time. The church needs to recover an ancient worship form while retaining the centrality of the Word of God as the defining element for all of life. In doing so, we are seeking something which the Reformers sought and which can have great power in our day.

With these various aspects about the design of worship behind us, consider now the practice of worship. What are we actually doing? There are two ideas to keep in mind as we think about worship. The first idea is relationship. Worship is a meeting between God and his people. Worship is a reenactment of the Exodus. God gathers His people out of the world and to the heavenly Sinai (Heb. 12:22). He then comes to dwell in their midst in all His splendor and glory.

At the heart of Christianity is a relationship. It is a love affair between God and his people. The Bible uses romantic language to describe the relationship between Christ and his bride. Worship is about God the infinite person gathering to himself his church, which is made up of redeemed finite persons. God's aim is that they may know mutual joy and delight in his presence.

This is not to bring God down, or diminish any of his majesty, or to make God in our own image. In fact, it is God himself, who has called us and who identifies us with this language. The God of the Bible God—infinite, eternal, and unchangeable—does not need us, nor require our praise, but freely communicates his love to us.

The triune God of the universe is interpersonal; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the wonderful union within the Godhead there is mutual joy and delight, communication, love, and purpose. They don't need to create in order to be praised.

Creation is a sheer act of God's condescension. It is even more extraordinary, having created human kind with the capacity to love and obey him and who rebelled against Him, that God would then redeem them as the object of His affection and gather them to Himself in mutual joy and delight.

The second idea is summarized in the word dialogue. God is not a distant observer. Worship is not a performance at which God is the audience and we are the entertainers. God is present and is an active participant. Worship is not something horizontal that we do for one another. The rhythm of worship is that of a dialogue in which God speaks and His people respond. As you worship using our liturgy I suggest that you look for this dialogue of interaction and exchange.

These two ideas of relationship and dialogue create a sense of expectation for our worship and give shape to the entire experience. We are disconnected with the previous generations and outside the stream of history. We are not standing on the shoulders of the giants of the Christian faith. We need to reconnect with our Christian heritage and to learn from those who have gone before us.

Following a "common sense" liturgy is a way to rediscover the lost riches of Christian worship as a relational dialogue between God and His people. Consider it an invitation to the ancient dance. Using the analogy of worship as dance, what is peculiar about the liturgy of Christ Church Ventura? Why these elements and this order? No one learns to dance in just one lesson, so let's consider these things in batches.

Our services open with a greeting from the pastor and some announcements to help the worshipers focus their attention on church family "business", which is horizontal. It is important to welcome people and remind them of who they are and why they have gathered. Having these comments before the service begins also ensures that worship, which is vertical, flows in an interrupted manner.

A moment of silence and contemplation helps make the transition from the outside world full of noise and distraction. This acknowledges that something significant is happening in the presence of God. It is as if we are being carried away by Aslan into the land of Narnia and heaven and earth are conjoin into sacred space.

The call to worship summons us to God and to the purpose he has given us: to live before him in truth and gladness. An anthem, chorus, or piece of instrumental music is intended to heighten our sense anticipation upon entering the presence of God. Music in worship focuses our hearts toward God, his glory and grace, and the joy of worship. These are intentional reminders of God's majesty and grace.

An invitation is then given to praise God, to which the congregation joins their voice in expectant response. We sing as a heavenly choir ascribing blessing, glory, honor, and praise to the eternal and triune God.

The prayer of adoration is the first in the service and acknowledges who God is as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and our utter dependence upon him. We call on him to show us his mercy and to meet us with grace. This prayer follows a classic pattern: an address to God, acknowledgement of divine attributes, a petition, an application to our lives, and a final doxology praising Christ as the mediator of our prayers.

Now that we are gathered to God, our first act in his presence is to confess our allegiance to him using the historic creeds, confessions and catechisms of the Reformation. It is like the covenant renewal conducted at the highland of Shechem between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal after the conquest of the land. Just as Israel reaffirmed her commitment to the one true God in the midst of the nations, so we also as those who have been gathered from the peoples of the earth, reaffirm our faith in God who has redeemed us. This is a declaration of our allegiance—a covenant renewal in the likeness of Joshua 8:30-35.

God now speaks to His people often in a Psalm, reminiscent of its use in Old Testament worship or a biblical narrative, which highlights attributes of God. It reminds us that all of worship stands under the authority of Scripture. In keeping with the dialogue in worship the people respond in gratitude to God for his goodness. The music underscores the truth of the Word of God read, focuses on some aspect of its teaching, or directs our attention to the coming time of prayer. Sometimes this is simply an outpouring of praise and adoration, a time for reflection, a choral anthem, or a prayer sung on behalf of the people. Symbolically, it adorns the truth of God's Word with beauty.

God has spoken to us, we have responded in thanks, and now the dialogue continues as we speak to God, expressing our personal and corporate needs and praises. These prayers are intended to direct us in specific avenues of intercession. Again, it must be emphasized that God loves to hear and answer the prayers of his people. Petitions are presented singularly and then affirmed in unison. Worshipers are encouraged to pray both aloud and in silence. Once the flow of audible prayers has ceased, the congregation concludes by saying the Lord's Prayer together. This prayer is offered in confidence that the Lord Jesus will answer our prayers and teach us to pray, as he did his disciples.

Having approached God in dependence and prayer, we sing again, reflecting on the grace of God in the Gospel. The theme of the music directs our minds to the truth of God's Word that is about to be read and preached. In this respect, the great hymns of the faith are like sermons set to music. At other times these truths can be a simple expression of praise in choruses.

God speaks again to His people. We stand in order to show particular honor attention, and reverence for God and his Word. The biblical warrant for this comes from Nehemiah 8:1-8. When Ezra, the priest, read from the law, all the people stood to receive God's Word. We stand for a minute or two to hear our lessons read, but they stood all day long to listen.

A prayer of illumination precedes the sermon as a plea for God, the Holy Spirit, to do in our hearts what Jesus did among the disciples on the road to Emmaus. You will remember, "They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?'" (Luke 24:32). This prayer is a request that what God has previously inspired He will now illumine and apply to believers.

This prayer follows the reading of God's Word and is arguably the most important prayer of the entire worship service. Because of the coldness of our hearts it is necessary for God, the Holy Spirit, to come and to anoint the reading and preaching of the Scriptures. If the Holy Spirit does not come to do this, then we might as well go home. At best the preaching will be information stored in our heads, which will only puff us up. We ask this prayer so that our eyes, ears, and hearts may be opened to embrace the truth of the gospel

We hear from God again in worship, when the Word is preached. This deserves a separate treatment from the other elements of worship. True preaching is the opening and applying of God's truth to our lives. This was how the prophets viewed preaching as well as the Reformers. The Puritans believed that God's Word preached was God's Word to you.

Preaching is one side of a dialog. First, it is a dialog between God and his people through an appointed messenger. The Word of God has a prophetic function to speak into the lives of God's people. Just as the Prophets spoke for God, the Word of God preached has this same prophetic function.

Second, preaching is also a dialog between the preacher and the people. On one hand, my preaching is shaped by the conversations and relationships among us during the week. On the other hand, my preaching is informed by my study of Scripture and prayer for those whom God has given me to shepherd.

Preaching is not merely about explaining what a text of Scripture means. That is a point of departure for the greater thing of applying God's Word to the particular needs and concerns of a congregation and community. We don't need preaching primarily because we are ignorant, but because we are sinful. Application is rooted in Scripture and preaching is not merely a Bible study.

Shepherds have to be among the sheep in order to know where they are hurting and to apply the gospel to their wounds. As a congregation gets larger, it becomes more difficult to do this. Conversations and relationships are what make preaching work. Pastors must be well acquainted with their people in order to be effective preachers.

And then there is mystery at work in preaching. How can one person presume to speak for God in the first place, and then speak to dozens of people? It is hard to explain, but we must acknowledge the unseen presence of God in all this. The pastoral prayer, which follows the sermon, asks God to seal to the hearts of his people the truth they have heard. It is a prayer that God will shape the lives of his people and move them to obedience. The Holy Spirit works remarkable and surprising things in the context of worship and through the ministry of the Word of God as it is read and preached. That is the only way I know to account for what happens in people lives in the context of worship.

The act of worship is a symbol of our response to the grace of God. All that we are and all that we have belong to him and we freely give because we have so freely received. Why do we receive offerings in worship? In both the Old and New Testaments, offerings were received from the people of God as they assembled for worship (1 Cor. 16:2). These offerings were given to support the work of the ministry and we do the same in our day.

As we sing a doxology of common thanks, we offer these “words of glory” to the triune God by our praise of him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Our prayer of dedication which follows sets apart our offering before God asking that he would be pleased to use our gifts and our lives for the cause of Christ’s kingdom and glory.

Our common doxology opens another vista of thanksgiving in preparation for the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The confession of sin and assurance of pardon reminds us of who we are and what we need. Here we place ourselves in the proper attitude by saying what is true, namely, that we have in fact sinned in thought, word, and deed, and that we need God’s forgiveness. What a relief to unburden ourselves before our gracious God!

The announcement of our pardon declares that we, being repentant, are forgiven by God for Christ’s sake and on the basis of His merits alone. Again, this is a reminder to God’s people that he loves, forgives, hears and responds to them. Jesus prays for us as our advocate in heaven, who ever lives to make intercession for us.

This comes as a word of encouragement as if God is in effect saying, “I have heard you and I am indeed your God and Father and you must never forget that.” Typically, When given in the context of a corporate confession, this word will include a reminder from Scripture regarding the forgiveness of our sins. This assurance of pardon launches us once again into praise and thanksgiving.

The Lord's Table having been set for the communion supper, begins with a focus of gratitude on the redemptive work of Christ in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and heavenly intercession. The Sanctus is a song of the angels to which we join our voices in ascribing glory to God. The text comes from Isaiah 6:3 and Rev. 4:8. In keeping with the assurance of pardon, the Sanctus directs our devotion and reflection upon the holiness of God.

In final preparation for the Lord's Supper, we join in a prayer of consecration asking that God would meet with us at his table, and by the Holy Spirit, remind us of Christ's sufficient work, stir up faith in our hearts, set apart the elements from a common to a holy use, and mediate Christ's presence to us.

The words of institution come from the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians 11:23-26 and indicate that the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper is an ordinance established by Christ himself and clearly articulated in Holy Scripture. In our weekly celebration of this sacred meal, we acknowledge our unworthiness to come to the Lord's Table and our need for his mercy by offering together a prayer of humble approach.

We invite all those who profess faith in Christ, who have identified with Jesus in baptism, and who are committed to following him in a gospel proclaiming community to participate in the Lord's Supper. We state publicly that if these particular facts do not describe you, we respectfully ask you to refrain from participating in the sacrament.

The Agnus Dei is referenced in John 1:29, where Jesus is recognized as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." This anthem points to Christ who gave himself for the life of the world as the only sufficient sacrifice for sin, who was offered once and for all time for repentant sinners and who alone can atone for our sins and grant us true peace. The congregation is encouraged to reflect on the greatness of the gospel and to sing in praise and celebration of God's mercy as the sacrament is observed.

Having heard the Word and received the Sacrament, the service of worship draws to a close with a prayer of commitment. We offer thanks to God for what he has done for us in these holy mysteries and ask him for strength to go out into the world to do his will. Then comes the benediction, through which God pronounces his blessing upon his people and reassures them that he will be with them all their days. The term "benediction" comes from two Latin words, bene (good) and dictum (speech) and simple means "good word".

When God told Moses to bless the people, He said to do it in this way, "The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace". (Numbers 6:24-25)

This benediction is remarkable because you know from your Old Testament reading that the face of the Lord was a frightening thing. When the voice of God was heard and the face of God was seen, it was crushing. This was true of the Israelites with Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19; Hebrews 12:18-24), as well as in the terror of Samson's parents. (Judges 13:2-23)

Again, it is God who speaks this word. We use this benediction a lot in worship and I never tire of it. It reminds us of God's presence. This is the "beautiful vision" of what awaits us in glory when we will see God face to face and be unashamed because of the work of Christ (Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 John 3:2; Rev. 12:15-17).

As we go from the sanctuary, we leave in peace knowing that His favor is upon us and we go into the world with the praise of Christ on our lips, to serve Him and point others to His grace. The music of joy and hope is played to encourage us as we go into the world to be Christ's servants and witnesses.

This is the basic rhythm of our corporate worship service. We want to worship corporately and not merely individually. While there is no systematic treatment of corporate worship in the Bible, there is a distinctive people of God worshipping corporately in both the Old and New Testaments. The New Testament church gathered on the Lord's Day for worship and to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. The Book of Revelation provides windows into the glory of the worship, which fuel the desire to join the communion of saints.

We know theologically and experientially that we were made for community. While worship is primarily a vertical thing, there is, within the community of God's people gathered, the means God employs to shape and assist His people. The Psalms are filled with references to God's assembly and God is present in the midst of that assembly. This is not to negate His presence when we are alone, but there is something qualitatively different about corporate gatherings for worship. God promises to inhabit the praises of His people.

The image of a fire with only one log burning comes to mind. That one log will soon go out if left to burn alone. Place another log beside the one and they will both burn better and longer. The biblical practice of the people of God was a robust corporate worship and so should ours be. Isolation is not a good thing for us. Lone Ranger Christianity is a bad idea.

When we receive the sacraments of the Baptism and the Lord's Supper we practice them "covenantally". For instance, we encourage families to come forward with their children for communion because this is a covenantal meal. We pray for children before they are born and after they are born. We pray for families because that is what it means to be covenantal. When we call a covenant meal, we believe the whole family needs to be there. You don't leave your children out in the garage at dinner time. No, you bring them to the table. The Lord's supper is a family meal.



Those children who have not made a credible profession of faith before our pastor and elders, are still invited and need to come. They are not second class citizens, but are members of the covenant community by virtue of their parent's faith. They may not have confessed faith in Christ yet, but they are members nonetheless. We have them come with their families, so we can pray for them. We trust God will use these parents to raise these children in such a way that they themselves will come to trust Christ.

The sacrament of Communion, or the Lord's Supper, is a means of grace for the people of God. All who have trusted in Christ alone for salvation, have identified with Jesus in baptism, and are committed to following him in a Gospel proclaiming community are encouraged to participate. We come to this table because Christ is the Host and has invited us to come. We come to it with great joy because in doing so we affirm that we are redeemed sinners.

Our sin is great and is not to be minimized. Yet our Savior is greater and delights to minister his grace in this covenant meal that the joy of salvation may be enjoyed. The pastor serves the congregation at the front of the meeting place as they come forward. The people are to receive the elements of bread and wine with gratitude and humility before God, acknowledging that we are under His authority and direction. Some congregations kneel as an appropriate posture to receive the sacrament.

Because of the busyness of common life, we have found our weekly communion services to be times of special and profound ministry. Communion is the covenant meal in which the covenant community (believing parents and their children) celebrates its redemption and eats together with its covenant redeemer anticipating the fulfillment of His promises.

Parents are encouraged to come with their covenant children so that the pastor and elders may pray with and for them and their salvation. The sick, discouraged and needy are prayed for as well. What makes this time so tender is the personal attention given to each one who comes.

If you are not a Christian and therefore not in a position to receive communion, you are welcome to come forward and ask the pastor to pray for you, any needs you have, and for your salvation. This manner of serving may be different to you but we encourage your participation and trust that you will enjoy its benefits.

Baptisms in our church are not rituals added to the service, but become the centerpiece around which we will build the prayers, readings and exhortations. When children baptized, the pastor walks the child into the midst of the congregation and calls on them to vow their help to these parents and children in the life to which God has called them. This act reinforces the covenantal bond of the sacrament and dramatizes the multi-generational nature of the church. Scripture teaches that children of believing parents are members of the covenant community. We baptize them trusting that everything symbolized in the sacrament is or will become a reality in their lives.

Services, which include infant baptisms, are celebrations as well as times for sober reflection. Parents make vows before God promising to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of Christ. Congregation members promise to assist the parents in that task. The liturgy for the service reflects the joy and seriousness of the occasion as prayers, Scripture readings, explanatory remarks and a hymn focus upon the sacrament.

The use of liturgical colors and vestments are new to many of you. Here are a few reasons for the use of these. First, worship is to engage all the senses, including our seeing as well as our hearing. Look at the example of the Old Testament tabernacle. The beauty of God was put on display by the things that were made. All of the diversity of color and the lavish expression of the architecture symbolized the God of beauty who stood behind it all.

When we walk into our place of worship, I want very much for us to be reminded of three things: God is great, God is beautiful, and God is near to His people. I want those things to mark the place in which we meet for worship. The colors are just one little expression of that.

Second, the Old Testament people viewed time differently and although their calendar was structured around significant agricultural times, those seasons of the year had redemptive significance imported into them. Passover was in the spring time of planting. Pentecost was the time of the initial harvest, the first fruits of what was to come later. The feast of Tabernacles was the last feast in celebration of the final harvest. These feasts had agricultural moorings, but each of these seasons of the year also had redemptive significance. In this way, the people were conditioned to think redemptively about time and not merely agriculturally.

Third, we observe the church year in remembrance of the life of Christ. The Christian calendar basically follows the person and work of Christ from Advent to Easter to Pentecost—His incarnation, His life and ministry, His passion, His resurrection and ascension, and His extending His kingdom, which begins after the season of Pentecost. We do this because we need to think differently about time. In January, I want to be thinking about Epiphany rather than the Super Bowl. In July, rather than thinking about parades and Independence Day, we think first about the extension of Christ's kingdom.

The church calendar is there to shape our thinking about time. Time is different for believers. It is the stage upon which God acts out His redemptive purpose. The liturgical colors correspond and give expression to these various seasons of the Christian year and reinforce this way of thinking. They are called paraments and change periodically in order to create visual associations with the different aspects of the life of Christ. Liturgical colors have the instructive purpose of pointing us to the work of Christ and the great acts of redemptive history. The four most commonly used colors are as follows.

White represents purity and is used for festivals of the Lord Jesus, primarily Christmas and Easter. It is also the color for All Saints Day. Blue represents royalty, repentance, and even suffering. It is used during Lent and Advent, times of preparation and penitence. Red represents the fire of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. On Good Friday, it signifies the blood of Christ. It also signifies the blood of the martyrs. Green is used during the so called "ordinary time," the period from Pentecost to the beginning of Advent, which is anything but ordinary as it represents spiritual union and growth in Christ and his mission to the peoples of the world.

### **A PHILOSOPHY OF WORSHIP IN A NUT SHELL**

Worship is the ultimate aim of the church and all history.

Worship is the way we cultivate our vision of God's glory.

Worship is the means by which we express our love of God.

Worship is the source from which Gospel ministry flows.

Worship is both the goal of our evangelism and compassion.

Worship is a distinctly journey-like, counter-cultural activity.

Worship is a dramatic covenantal reenactment of the gospel.

Worship is a supernatural meeting of God with His people.

Worship is a corporate, relational dialog, not a duty performance.

Worship is patterned after the redemptive experience in the exodus.

Worship is an awareness of the transcendent majesty of God.

Worship is an expression of the radical immanence of our loving redeemer.

Worship is to be God-revering, Gospel-centering, and grace-directing.

Worship is rooted in the OT feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles.

Worship is typologically driven by the life of Christ through the Church Year.

Worship is the court in which God realigns his people by the preached Word.

Worship is the sanctuary in which God renews his people by holy sacraments.