

Celebrating Presbyterian Worship Part 1. Overview

Our Book of Common Worship says that “Worship is at the very heart of the church’s life. All that the church is and does is rooted in worship.”

Why do we worship the way we do?

Back in the 1500’s, during the Reformation, John Calvin and John Knox were asking similar questions. They and the other reformers had rejected many of the practices of the Roman Church – the Catholic Church. Think of the contrast between austere churches of the Puritans – and early Presbyterians – and the elaborate cathedrals, such as the Basilica in Rome, that were being built through the sale of indulgences and church offices. While our protestant churches are a little more comfortable and decorated today than in Puritan days, we still reject many of practices that continue in the Catholic church, such as the intercession of Saints, and the use of icons.

But the early reformers couldn’t just reject the worship practices of the Roman church; they needed to discern what kind of worship God ordained. The Calvinist reformers said *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone should dictate all that is done in worship – for through Scripture God has told us how he wants to be worshiped.

This idea has also been called the “Regulative Principle of Worship” – meaning that worship is *regulated* by, or limited to, those elements commanded within the Bible. Among the reformers, none was so forceful as John Knox in condemning worship practices which were *not* clearly ordained by God as pleasing or desired by him. Knox said: "**All worshipping, honouring, or service invented by the brain of man in the religion of God, without His own express commandment, is idolatry.**" Knox's views led him to oppose both the worship of Rome, and many elements of the Anglican liturgy.

Today, our Presbyterian worship is divided into four basic parts: (1) The Gathering; (2) The Word; (3) The Eucharist (or Thanksgiving); and (4) The Sending.

“Gathering” is just what it says – the gathering of God’s people for worship. We begin with a Call to Worship, an Opening Prayer, and a Hymn – all of these things help us focus our attention on God.

(One quick technical note: we have asked our Beadle and our Acolyte to bring the Word and the Light to the Chancel during our pre-service music. So the Congregation will not be asked to stand until the actual Call to Worship.)

After our Opening Hymn, we confess our sins and receive God’s pardon, which is traditionally concluded with the *Gloria Patrie*. We confess our sins early in the service and we are reminded of God’s mercy. We are then prepared to hear and receive the Word.

The “Word” holds the central place in our worship because this is when we listen to God. We listen to God through scriptures, as well as through the interpretation of scripture through both song and sermon. The roll of the choir’s anthem is to emphasize God’s Word to us, just as the roll of the sermon is to further interpret the scripture and to increase our understanding. As we listen – hopefully “actively” – we should be prepared to respond.

The “Eucharist” is the next general phase of our worship. Now you may be thinking “but we don’t have communion every Sunday.” Eucharist actually means “Thanksgiving” and celebrating the sacrament of communion is only one aspect. Our “Thanksgiving” really encompasses our entire response to God’s Word – we make our Affirmation of Faith, we pray for others, and we return and share our offerings of time, talents and treasure, and, periodically, we also share communion. When the people of God hear the Word, we respond.

The final phase is The Sending – When Bob says “You are the People of God – so go out and act like it,” he is actually giving us a good “Sending.” Our closing hymn often encourages action – and we receive the charge and a closing blessing. It always reminds me of the Great Commission in Matthew. We need to live that charge and carry that blessing out of the sanctuary into the world of our lives.

Following the Reformers’ emphasis on *Sola Scriptura* - Scripture Alone - we preserve this tradition by forming our worship around scripture. Over the next few weeks we’ll be discussing the role of prayer and music, how we practice Communion, and our Eucharist or Thanksgiving in Responding to the Word.