

Celebrating Presbyterian Worship Part 5. The Response and Sending

The Worship Committee has been talking about our worship tradition as Presbyterians for the past 5 weeks. At the beginning of this series we explained how our service is divided into 4 general parts: (a) the Gathering of the people, (b) the Proclamation of the Word, (c) the Response to the Word, and (d) the Sending out. Last week Tom Carr talked about part of our Response when we observe the Lord's Supper. Today I am talking about the rest of our Response and the Sending.

We begin our Response to the Word with our affirmation and commitment: right after the sermon we typically recite the Apostle's Creed. In that Creed we affirm what we believe, and we recommit ourselves to those beliefs. We could use any of the Creeds that summarize our beliefs as Christians. Sometimes we've used excerpts from the Brief Statement of Faith or other Confessions adopted by the Presbyterian Church; we could sing our affirmation, too.

After that affirmation, the Book of Order says that other appropriate responses to the Word are acts of "commitment". This includes the observation of the two sacraments, the Lord's Supper and Baptism. We generally have our Baptisms earlier in the service simply because it works out better for families – but baptisms are viewed as part of our response to God's Word.

Another act of commitment is marriage. The Book of Order recognizes that weddings are usually performed in separate services, but it says we *could* have them during this portion of our regular Sunday service! (Just wanted you to know that it's an option!)

We do use this part of our service for ordaining elders and deacons; if we were ordaining a new minister, this is when it would happen, too. We sometimes give special recognition to people or events that are relevant to our church family. For example, if a member of the congregation happened to receive a lifetime award from Habitat for Humanity, or if a minister was retiring after being with a congregation for, say 28 years, those are things that could be recognized at this point in a worship service! We can also commission church members who are embarking on a new mission effort – like when our members go to Malawi, Peru, or Hungary.

Another part of our response to the Word are our prayers of Intercession – prayers that ask for God's guidance and provision for our world, our community and those close to us.

Also part of our response are our giving of our tithes and offerings. We often use the phrase "tithes and offerings". There *is* a difference. In the Jewish tradition, there was a tithe – it was like a temple tax – it was the traditional 10% of what God has given us - which we still hear about today. A tithe was viewed as what we *owed* God – like rent for being here, the tithe was a non-negotiable obligation. Offerings, on the other hand, are our gifts of free will – what we give without any obligation. Some of those offerings may be for the church – like when we ask for an extra gift to support a building fund or a special mission. Other offerings are really "alms" – the gifts we make that are intended for the poor and others who need extra help.

At the very beginning of the Reformation the churches didn't actually collect the alms during the service – people would put their alms – their gifts for charity – into a chest as they left the church – the minister would remind them to do so when he gave the benediction. This helped their alms-giving be anonymous and just between them and God. Today we generally combine our tithes and all of our offerings – but it's good to appreciate their different purposes.

We share a closing hymn – often a hymn that encourages us to live according to God's Word, to be *do-ers* in the world.

Finally there is the charge and a blessing that sends us on our way back into the World. We're reminded that we are the people of God and we're challenged to act like we are.

In our church we began a practice several years ago of carrying the Bible out of the Sanctuary to symbolize our charge to carry God's word out into the world when we leave this place.

We call the person carrying the Bible the Beadle – that's an old administrative position in the Scottish church whose job it was to care for the church Bible – they were expensive back then and needed to be replaced in their locked box for safe keeping after the service! Today our Beadle and our Acolyte lead us out of the Sanctuary at the end of our service to symbolize carrying both the Word of God and the Light of God into the world.

Finally, while most of us are picking up our things and making our way to the door to shake Bob's or Dave's hand, we have closing music – a postlude – that has been selected enrich the end of our worship service. If you don't want to stand in line at the door, you are always welcome to just sit back down and listen!