

An Historical Overview of Worship, I: Pre-Reformation

Gospel-centered worship, in its simplest form, says that we are coming into the presence of a God who is much more holy than we dare imagine. We are sinful people, blind to much of the depth of our sin, and unwilling to even acknowledge how much we need God. God, in His grace, graciously provides His Son Jesus Christ. He has provided means for our growth in grace, some of which should be happening rightly in a worship service. We hear the sermon; we receive instruction regarding how we are to live as those sinful people in the presence of a holy God who have been provided for and forgiven in Christ. Then we are sent out to live for His glory in all that we do. There is an entrance into worship—understanding who God is, who we are, and what He has done for us in Christ. We come together, not just to glorify Him, but to be strengthened in our faith and walk with Him that we might go out and live for Him. There is a sending out that goes into all of life and back into Gospel-centered, corporate worship. You do not always have to have a prayer of confession at a specific point in the service. You could acknowledge in a more general prayer of invocation that we stand in need of God, come before Him as sinners, and thank Him for His provision. If you are preaching on Psalm 51, you may want to have a corporate prayer of confession after the sermon or before you come to the Lord's Table. There are Gospel purposes in particular services that may alter what you do and where and what you select to use in a given week. You may decide to sing the Lord's Prayer in a service. The rationale for singing the Lord's Prayer could be that you normally say it, and it has a tendency to become rote if you just keep saying it. To sing it brings it into a different realm, and you think about the words. Before the call to worship, you could have a choir or the worship team sing through a song that is going to be a new song you are teaching the congregation that day. So there are both practical and biblical Gospel-centered reasons for organizing a worship service in a certain way.

In our tradition the sermon is usually what the rest of the service flows out of. There are basically three general structures of the worship service. The higher liturgy is the dialogical format: God speaks, we respond, God speaks, we respond. It is worked through in a more serial way with a sermon then the Lord's Table. The content-driven format usually takes the sermon, and the call to worship anticipates it. The hymn serves it, and the prayer is built for it. All these things are building toward it, and then some things come out of the other end of it. You can do a dialogical, content-driven service too. But you also have what some call a flowing praise service. It is mostly music with some prayer and maybe some Scripture interspersed. But there is a sense of coming into God's presence and reaching this climactic moment. This usually happens through effective use of song. Then it winds back down to lead into the sermon. In charismatic circles, this is where you have the out breaking of speaking in tongues and that sort of thing. Some of the extreme expressions of it happen at this "holy of holies" point. You have probably all been in churches where one is higher liturgically, another is less formal but still very well structured and planned, and another that feels more informal. There is room to do Gospel-centered worship, as we will be discussing it, in any of these. This does not include some of the Pentecostal side in the flowing praise service or a certain view of the sacraments in the high liturgy service. But you can opt for any of these or some hybrid of them to accomplish Gospel-centered worship.

In some churches, like mine, we do not say creeds. But we sing, "In Christ Alone," which is like a creed. It expresses what we believe about the person and work of Christ and our union with Him. I lead worship once a month there, and I asked the worship director if the next time I lead we could do "In Christ Alone." I want to make a point about professing our faith. The church has always expressed its faith in statements of what we believe. Early on it was, "Jesus is Lord." Some people got put to death for saying, "Jesus is Lord" rather than "Caesar is lord." That was a profession of faith that they stood on. Some churches use the Apostles' Creed or the Nicene Creed. In our church we do many of our elements

through song. Prayers of confession are often songs. Creeds, what we believe, are the content of what we sing. So I said, “Let us profess what we believe by singing ‘In Christ Alone.’” What would that do? There are some who, because of background or baggage, do not want to be in a church that does creeds. It may remind them of something that was oppressive or whatever. They may realize that they do something like a creed, but they just do it through songs. Others say that they need to do creeds and realize that they do it through songs. My church may get to the place where we say the Apostles’ Creed. But one of the things that is likely to happen before that is to use a Scripture passage creed. For example, Colossians 1:15-20, which says, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.” How could you be against that, even if you had a bad experience with creeds that were just rote? We will talk more about these things later on.

Let us talk about a pre-Reformation historical overview of worship. We pick up with this early church legacy of the synagogue and the temple. What influences the way the early church worships God? There are elements of synagogue worship. This is made up of reading of Scripture and expounding of Scripture, which is similar to preaching, devotionals, or exhortations from Scripture. There are prayers and the singing of psalms. Those are the key elements of the synagogue worship. If you go to synagogue today, in a Jewish context, you will get that. There will be the reading of the Word, there will be some comments about the Word, there will be prayers, and there will be singing. It will be devoid of Christ, though. The elements of the synagogue service were there because of things in the Old Testament about the way God communicates His Word to His people, invites them to come before Him and pray in the temple, and psalms in the Psalter. The thing that is distinctive about Christian worship is that Christ is central to all of it. It is about Him as we now focus these elements around Him. Then you have the perfect sacrifice of Christ reflected in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The content of early church worship, in its simplest articulation, was Christ. The structure was Word and sacrament with prayer and praise. That is what Christian worship is, in its simplest formulation.

The context was the fellowship of house churches. At the end of the book of Romans Paul says, “Greet the church that meets in the house of...” There are a whole lot of these churches. Sometimes you wonder if people rode their donkeys past one house church to go to another house church because they liked the style of preaching of the guy at this house church. Or maybe they loved the music leader over here! They may have said, “Music is important to me, so I will not go to the closest house church but to another house church that is more consistent with my personal preferences.” We sometimes have so glorified the early church to think they were beyond such disputes. Have you ever read 1 Corinthians? There are all kinds of disputes in the church at Corinth that Paul has to address. Many of these disputes relate to worship practice. The church has always been fighting over worship practices, essentially. On the pages of Scripture we see it. Romans 16:3 says, “Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them. Greet also the church that meets at their house.” The portion of the body of Christ that meets at Priscilla and Aquila’s got a separate greeting at the end of Romans. That was the context. But he writes the letter to the Romans, if you look at the very beginning in Romans 1:7, “...to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.” He is writing to the church in Rome, which happens to be made up of all these house churches. You have local expressions of the church in Rome that meet in particular people’s homes.

The fact that I belong to Christ is my most fundamental identity as a Christian. I also belong to the people who belong to Christ. I am part of His church. When I think of church, do I think first of the church that I attend? Or do I think of the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ that is way beyond even my denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)? If Paul were writing a letter to the church in this city, Saint Louis, would he be writing just to one particular church? The letter would to all in Saint

Louis who are loved by God and called to be saints. These people are not identifiable in any one particular house or local church alone. I am part of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ in Saint Louis, Missouri. This is bigger than the PCA, which is bigger than the particular church I go to. There is place for expression of corporate public worship at times, when all the house churches rent out some town hall in Rome and come together because Paul or somebody else is coming to town. Maybe they would have a Sunday evening service where they all joined together and worshiped together. There should be a place for the expression of the oneness of the church in ways that are beyond our ordinary, local Lord's Day house church equivalent expression. We do not have a lot of information about what that looks like. But it at least means that we reach out to other people who share a common faith with us even though they may not be Reformed or Presbyterian. We should seek to put on display the oneness of the Body of Christ in the way that Jesus said in John's Gospel: "By this all men will know that you belong to me, by the love you have for each other." What better way to express love to each other than to gather in worship together? "By this all men will know that the Father sent the Son, by the love you have for one another."

How do you make that unity visible? One of the ways that the Missouri Presbytery tries to do that is they have three services a year that rotate around to a few churches with big enough gathering space, and they have presbytery-wide worship services. They are around the Sanctity of Human Life Sunday, Reformation Sunday, and one other Sunday. Different people preach, and there is a combined choir from different churches, among other things. That is helpful. We should also be a part of joint worship services that include Bible-believing Christians outside our denomination, too. We are not denying our distinctives by joining with others who believe that the Bible is the Word of God, that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, and that He is the only Savior of sinners. It tells Saint Louis that Christians can transcend their local expressions and join together in a common faith around Christ. Those are promising things. I can find fault with certain things if you press me. But that does not mean we should not attend something like a Promise Keepers for men. There is a place for larger expression in the Body of Christ than just the little church that we attend. Promise Keepers was a tremendous encouragement to the men of the church that I used to pastor. In addition, God used it to help spawn a Saturday morning men's gathering once a month where we had breakfast together, prayed for each other, and worshiped together. In sum, we are talking about the fellowship of house churches with the recognition that the church is bigger than just their house church.

Let us talk about the status of music and worship in the early church fathers. In about 150 AD we have the writing of one of the early church fathers named Justin. It is called his *First Apology*. Apology does not mean, "I am so sorry." It means, "Here is where I stand, and let me tell you why." We find a few things in Justin's *First Apology* about the format of a worship service in around 150 AD. There are Scripture readings and sermons or lessons. There are intercessory prayers followed by a summary prayer. This is probably praying for specific things and then a general prayer. There is the kiss of peace, as one of the formal elements in the worship service. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." The kiss of peace means we are reconciled to one another, we are greeting one another, we love each other, and we are delighted to be in each other's presence. It is not an erotic kiss; it is a kiss of friendship and fellowship. Different cultures would express that in different ways. Different people within a culture express it in different ways. There were offerings, which included the actual bread and wine that was used for the Lord's Supper that day. This continues to be a practice in some churches. I think the Eastern Orthodox churches particularly do this. They had Eucharistic prayer, which means the prayer related to the celebration of the Lord's Supper. They set apart the elements and thanked God for what He had done in Christ. There were also extemporaneous prayers, spontaneous prayers. There was singing and weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper. Justin's comment on worship being like this was that he was viewing it as a reordering of the apostolic tradition and not the creation of something new. It was fairly close to the

apostolic tradition of what worship looked like in these early house churches. Justin viewed that he had liberty to take the same elements and ingredients and put them together in a way that serves the churches of our day well. It is more in the realm of application than a change of elements or a change of purpose for those elements.

There is a famous letter from a statesman called “Pliny the Younger to Trajan the Emperor” written sometime between 62 and 113 AD. That is a wide range, but we know it was written during his reign as emperor. He described what Christians do when they get together as “to utter in turn songs to Christ as to a God.” That is what struck Him about observing a Christian worship service. They sang songs to this man named Jesus Christ as though He were God. That is pretty cool. It tells me several things. It tells me they sang more than psalms. They sang their theology that Christ is God. It is as though He were real and present.

There was a growing concern in the early church about the use of instruments. This is partly because of their association with Greek pagan influences. There is nothing new under the sun. Augustine in particular was concerned because of the association of certain instruments with some of the most drunken orgy-type gatherings of pagan, unbelieving people. It is analogous in my lifetime the correlation between sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Rock and roll music is evil because of its association with drugs and illicit sex. There was a pulling back from the use of instruments. If you go back even further the Christian churches did not have access to all of the instruments of the temple. It is not like they were starting a church and they only wanted 40% of the temple instruments in their Christian worship services. People who had instruments and were gifted in playing them were not necessarily all flocking to the early Christian church. Even some of the synagogues did a cappella music partly because they were removed from the central worship place of Jerusalem where the school of musicians was among the Levites. So just because some of the instruments were not used in some synagogue worship does not necessarily mean there was a biblical theological rationale against the use of them. It may just mean they did not have anybody who had them or was skilled at playing them. That is different from what later became this association of them with the Greek pagan influencers.

An interesting dynamic happened in the whole issue of the Arian controversy and heresy. The Arians were people who denied that Jesus was fully God. They said He was firstborn, the most exalted man, but not God. The Arians used hymns to spread their heretical teachings. It was pop music, the music of the masses. The people would pick up on these great tunes that they loved to sing, which were filled with the false teaching of Arians. My generation was accused of loving the music but not being aware of what the words said. It did not matter what the words said. We could say all the words to the great songs of the sixties, but we said it was not impacting us. It was really the music that we liked. Our parents would say that it was subtle, but the bad words and content would influence our lives. The Arians were making use of that connection between good music and words. As a way of responding to that, Orthodox teachers like Ephraim Syrus wrote faithful texts to the Arian tunes. Wow! This was not very successful, so the council of Laodocia, between 360 and 381, prohibited the singing of non-Scriptural texts. They thought, “Here is how we will make sure we will not sing heresy; we will sing only Scripture.” That is true, but it is not necessarily using music to engage with biblical theological application for the lives of people. It is like saying, “This preacher preaches heresy; therefore, the only sermons we are going to have are going to be the recorded words of Peter, James, and Jesus in the Bible.” We would not do that, so why would we do it with music in that regard? That is what they did, though.

Let us talk about the Roman Mass. It originally was simple, dignified, beautiful form. It carried much of Gospel-centered worship. In fact, Luther wanted to return to the Roman Mass in its earlier forms as a

way of restoring biblical worship to the church of his day. It had increasing focus on the doctrine of transubstantiation in terms of the understanding of the Lord's Supper. This is based on the teaching regarding that doctrine at the Lateran Council of 1215. This focus also increased because there were monks and clergy who were cloistered in monasteries who became the musicians. It is almost like the temple musicians in the Old Testament. Certain monks were gifted in music, so they wrote and sang music in worship. This music was beautiful, but because it was often in Latin it was not very congregationally friendly for the masses to be able to sing along. So the congregation became more and more passive in the Roman Mass rather than participatory. At the Council of Constance in 1415, congregational singing was actually prohibited in the Roman Mass. So Mass became more and more elaborate, austere, and distant. The clergy did worship with the congregation looking in as spectators rather than fellow worshippers.

It is easy to be critical of the Roman Mass in that context. But I have been in some churches and have been guilty myself of planning worship services that have more to do with what the up-front people are doing and saying. I focused on choirs, preachers, and testimony givers, but it did not engage, draw in, and have a dialogue of worship in which the congregation was involved. There might be a preacher coming to do a weekend of worship service Bible teaching. But it could be more about being impressed by this great effective orator and public speaker than it is about coming together in the presence of Christ to worship Him. Do not hear what I am not saying, though. I am not saying that a sermon is unimportant. A sermon should serve these Gospel purposes of a worship service in a way that has humility, draws people in, and gives people an opportunity to respond to the preaching of the Word.

One of the problems I have with a lot of our churches is that we will have a great, powerful, Christ-centered 40-minute sermon, but if you notice the time from when the sermon is done to when the pastor is at the door greeting people, it is sometimes less than 90 seconds. We will sing one stanza of a hymn while he walks to the back door and gives a benediction from the back door, and then he is greeting people. There is nothing wrong with giving a 45-minute sermon and standing at the door and greeting people. But it is pretty hard to digest the meat of such a sermon without some time to sing all the stanzas of a song to respond, leading into the Lord's Supper, or having time for reflection and response. It is as though you cannot quite take all of it in and now you are out the door and gone. You know this with the study of the deep theological things in the courses you take. Early on in the semester you have some time to process things a little bit. You are excited about what you are learning, and you are thinking it through. You may go home and talk to your wife or friends outside the library about these great things in which you are engaging. But as the semester goes on and things get busier, you are not talking to anybody and you are not processing the things you are learning. You just wish you could have a little more time without the pressure of assignments to work these things into your life. It is the same way with preaching. We need to think about that in our worship services. We may need to move the sermon a little earlier in the service. Or you could extend the amount of time you are gathered for worship and have two or three songs, prayers, or Scripture readings after the sermon. You could take the offering and practice the Lord's Supper more regularly. This lets it become a part of who we are rather than getting all the notes down and heading off to Sunday lunch. That is worth thinking about.

In most of our circles, there are three movements in a worship service. You have the pre-sermon, the sermon, and the post-sermon. Churches that have the Lord's Supper every week after the sermon have a built-in processing and reflecting time upon the sermon and the other elements of the service. While the elements are being served you are thinking through the application of this Christ-centered sermon to the meaning of the Lord's Supper and the things that God is engaging me about in my own life. Calvin tried to get the Lord's Supper weekly in Geneva, Switzerland, but could not because the elders would not agree to it. But he would structure several things as though they were preparing to have the Lord's

Supper as part of the coming out of the sermon time. We need to think about these things. A lot of our services have the sermon as the biggest part of the service. But if you have to have it that way as part of who you are and how you believe God wants you to do Gospel-centered worship, lengthen your service and make it more balanced. You need to give a little more attention to the before and after of the sermon. That is one of the weaknesses of our services. The reason is because the preaching of the Word is not the only means of grace present in a Sunday worship service. God's design for corporate public worship is to have a convergence of multiple means of grace: praying, preaching, reading of the Word, sacraments, and singing. There is a synergy that develops when there is the recognition of how those things interact and impact together the body of believers who gather in the name of Christ to worship God. It is not that I want to take anything away from the sermon. I love to preach as much as the next guy, and I love to preach an hour if I can. But it is not about how much and how long I want to preach. It is about what all of these means of grace together are doing to glorify God and build up His church. The service is to equip us to be a worshiping community on a kingdom mission.