

RRPC Philosophy of Worship

The purpose of RRPC corporate worship is to acknowledge the supreme worthiness and majesty of the Triune God and to give him the praise, honor and glory that he is due. We bow before him because he is our Maker; we praise and thank him because he is our only Redeemer and Savior; we obey and serve him because he is the Sovereign King.

The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* instructs us that our “chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.” The primary way to fulfill this end is in corporate worship. In worship we praise his eternal qualities because they reflect who he is. In celebrating who he is, we declare the reality of his eternal being. This enables us to see more clearly who we are—redeemed sinners, united to Christ, in order to enjoy him. Through all of the elements of the worship service, we are strengthened to delight in God and in the fellowship that we have with him. Thus, the blessing we seek to give God in our worship falls upon us, his people, equipping us to serve one another in the body of Christ and to be his people in his world.

Biblical basis for worship

From the beginning of creation, humans have worshipped their Creator. Although not explicitly stated in the opening chapters of Genesis, we can infer that worship—like labor and marriage—was a creation ordinance, given to Adam for the sake of all his posterity.¹ Adam’s task was to “work and keep” the Garden (Gen. 2:15), the same expression used to describe the function of Old Testament priests with respect to the Tabernacle and later the Temple (Num. 3:7-8). We thus see Adam as foreshadowing the priesthood, and Eden as foreshadowing the Temple.² Immediately after the Fall, we also see the beginnings of a sacrificial system already in place with Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:3-4), pointing to humanity’s recognition of the need for atonement for sin. The principle of atonement through sacrifice is reaffirmed in God’s covenant with Noah (Gen. 8:20-21) and again with Abraham (Gen. 22:13). The prescriptions for worship are then greatly expanded with the Mosaic Covenant. Through Moses, God gave Israel numerous ceremonial laws, stipulating the time, place, and manner of worship. These laws included the Sabbath, the Tabernacle (and then the Temple under the Davidic Covenant), the priesthood, sacrifices, ritual cleansings, and holy days and festivals. Further, the Psalms command God’s people to worship him with singing and musical instruments (Psalm 150). These ceremonial laws were much more elaborate and detailed than those of the New Testament, inasmuch as Israel’s worship was intended to be a visible signpost to the future, multi-faceted work of Christ.

In the New Testament, with Christ’s saving work accomplished, the form of worship has been radically transformed, just as the covenant community has been radically transformed. God’s

¹ For a defense of worship as a creation ordinance, see John Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (P&R, 2008), 202.

² For more on the significance of Eden as Temple, see G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (IVP, 2004).

people are no longer restricted to one ethnicity or geographical location, but instead all believers throughout the world together form a spiritual temple to the Lord (John 4:24; 1 Cor. 3:16). Likewise, the priesthood is no longer restricted to one tribe or class, but rather all believers now constitute a holy priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5-9), with Christ as our eternal High Priest, who sanctifies our worship and presents it pleasing to the Father (Heb. 7:23-28). Further, the ceremonial ordinances have been replaced with the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:23-26), and to the preaching of the OT Law has now been added the preaching of the Gospel of Christ (Luke 4:43; 2 Tim. 4:2). Sunday (the Lord's Day) has replaced Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) as our holy day of rest and corporate worship (Rev. 1:10). And significantly, the very concept of worship has been expanded from the narrow, formal rituals of the Old Testament, to include all of life as worship in the New Testament (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:12). This does not by any means diminish the place for formal corporate worship in the New Testament era, but it does situate such worship within the broader context of holy Christian living.

Confessional basis for worship

Within the Reformed tradition, the foregoing biblical teaching has formed the basis for what has been called the "regulative principle of worship." Simply put, this principle teaches that God must be worshipped only in the manner that he himself commands. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 21.1 describes it in this way:

...The acceptable way of worshipping the true God is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshipped according to the imaginations and devices of men, or the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the holy Scripture.

God has established specific requirements as to how He is to be worshipped, and we are free neither to ignore them nor to add to them. However, within an adherence to the principles of worship laid out in Scripture, there is room for variation with respect to matters not specifically addressed. Since the New Testament does not provide exhaustive guidance on all details of worship, we distinguish between the *elements* of worship—those basic aspects of worship that are explicitly commanded (or inferred by logical necessity) in the New Testament, such as preaching, sacraments, prayers, etc.—and the *circumstances* of worship—secondary aspects of worship, such as the time and place of the services, the use of robes for preachers, etc. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.6 describes this distinction as follows:

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as are revealed in the Word: and

that there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and 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.

While we acknowledge that worship must be regulated by God's Word, we also desire to maintain an appropriate place for freedom in worship, provided that such freedom serves as a help rather than a hindrance to the church's observance of the elements of worship. Thus the regulative principle may not be invoked to determine whether contemporary or traditional songs are used, whether three verses or three chapters of Scripture are read, whether one long prayer or several short prayers are made, or whether a single cup or individual cups are utilized at the Lord's Supper. To all of these issues, the principle "all things should be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40) must be applied. The PCA's *Book of Church Order* 47-6 describes our freedom in worship as follows:

The Lord Jesus Christ has prescribed no fixed forms for public worship but, in the interest of life and power in worship, has given His Church a large measure of liberty in this matter. It may not be forgotten, however, that there is true liberty only where the rules of God's Word are observed and the Spirit of the Lord is, that all things must be done decently and in order, and that God's people should serve Him with reverence and in the beauty of holiness. From its beginning to its end a service of public worship should be characterized by that simplicity which is an evidence of sincerity and by that beauty and dignity which are a manifestation of holiness.

What worship is not

Right worship is glorious in its focus and edifying to the body. Wrong worship, by contrast, dishonors our Creator and creates disunity within the body. As Ecclesiastes 5:1 says, "Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil." To offer "the sacrifice of fools" is to participate in corporate worship with an attitude that displeases God. There are many ways that we do this.

One thing we do with our worship is to take a *casual* view of it. We treat it as though it is not that important to us, or at least not as important as other things in our lives. We show up for worship tired, sleep deprived and distracted by the pressures and pleasures of our lives. We attend church for sentimental reasons, perhaps because we did it as children, or because our friends are there, or because we like the music and songs. Perhaps we feel some cultural pressure to attend. A second way we engage in wrong worship is that we take a *performative* view of worship—to appear pious, to gain the respect of others, or to make connections for physical and emotional support. Some of that is good but is not worship. Thirdly, we may take a *transactional* or *quid pro quo* view of worship. We show up with the idea that by coming to worship and taking part we are answering an obligation we have to God in order to get what we want from God.

The Pharisees could be given as a good example of all of these wrong views of worship. They were well known for imposing sanctions and duties upon the people that were in addition to and outside of what Scripture required. They placed more importance on the act than on the heart behind the act. They believed their piety made them worthy. Jesus declares to such people, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote, ‘These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’ For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition” (Mark 7:6-8 NLT).

When it comes to worship, as in most things, we are our own worst enemies. When we approach our worship together, we must look to our own hearts and see what our thoughts of worship include. To what extent are we focused on the attributes of God and our relationship to him as opposed to being focused on our own self-pleasing agendas? We are all born worshippers and our tendency is to worship ourselves above all else. We need to learn to lay our fallenness down at the foot of the cross and worship our God in spirit and truth so that “the things of Earth will grow strangely dim in the light of His glory and grace.”

Preparation for worship

Sunday worship plays a vital role in spiritually preparing us to fulfill our earthly callings throughout the rest of the week. However, Reformed churches have traditionally put greater emphasis on the reverse truth—namely, that our earthly callings should serve to prepare us to fulfill our highest end, which is glorifying God as we come together in corporate worship. In other words, we need to learn to subordinate our *work* to our *worship*. The *Westminster Larger Catechism* Q/A 117 says that in order to sanctify the Lord’s Day, we must “prepare our hearts, and with such foresight, diligence, and moderation, to dispose and seasonably dispatch our worldly business, that we may be the more free and fit for the duties of that day.” Christ-honoring participation in corporate worship therefore requires that we set aside, to the best of our ability, anything that may hinder single-minded devotion to the Lord on his appointed day of worship.

This entails a right ordering of both our emotions and our actions. It means realizing that when we join the congregation on Sunday morning, we don’t *begin* to worship; rather, we come *already* worshipping.³ As we experience the trials and temptations of life throughout the week, our hearts and our priorities naturally become misaligned, and we must be diligent in allowing God’s Spirit to reorient our hearts so that we may rightly direct our worship to him alone. On a practical level, this means that we should make every effort to arrive to worship on time and in an alert frame of mind. We should also enter the sanctuary in silence as we prepare our hearts for the worship service (conversations with others are best reserved for outside the sanctuary or after the service). Likewise, we should strive to actively participate in corporate prayer and

³ See Zac Hicks, “Lord, Tune My Heart for Worship” at *DesiringGod.org* (accessed June 25, 2018).

singing, as well as actively listening to the reading and preaching of God's Word. This process transforms our emotions, not in order to create a façade of happiness, but rather to bring our emotions into conformity with God's truth. Proper worship trains us to love what God loves, to hate what he hates, to rejoice in what is worthy of rejoicing, and to grieve what is worthy of grieving.

Order of worship

According to *BCO 47-9*, the proper elements of worship are the reading and preaching of Scripture, the singing of psalms and hymns, prayers, confessions, presentation of offerings, sacraments, and on special occasions taking oaths (such as oaths of church membership). These elements can all be expected in a typical service at RRPC, where the order of worship generally runs as follows:

- *Prelude.* We often begin the service with a musical prelude, during which time the congregants are encouraged to take their seats and meditate quietly, setting aside worldly distractions and focusing thoughts and affections on the worship of God.
- *Welcome and announcements.* Our pastors greet members and visitors in the name of Christ as an expression of our Christian unity, announcing to the congregation any relevant information or news that needs to be communicated.
- *Call to worship.* The pastor summons the congregation to enter into worship, often through the responsive reading of a Psalm or other portion of Scripture. This enables the congregation to enter into the proper frame of mind as we begin the worship service.
- *Psalms and hymns.* The congregational singing of psalms and hymns is an essential part of Christian worship. It engages the whole person—thoughts and feelings, mind and body—in praise to the Lord. We sing four to five psalms or hymns (both traditional and contemporary) in a typical service.
- *Confession of sin and assurance of pardon.* The essence of the gospel is repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). We as Christians must therefore acknowledge our unworthiness to enter into God's presence, and also our confidence in Christ and in the grace that covers our sins.
- *Collection of offerings.* The New Testament exhorts believers to give cheerfully and sacrificially (2 Cor. 9:7). Following the pattern of the early church (1 Cor. 16:2), we give back to God out of the abundance with which he has blessed us.
- *Prayer of intercession.* We approach the Lord in humble reliance upon his grace and provision, offering up to him our needs and requests in accordance with his will.
- *Reading and preaching of Scripture.* We place a primary emphasis on the expository preaching of God's inerrant Word. The purpose of preaching is to proclaim the truth of Scripture and apply it to every area of our lives.
- *Baptism and the Lord's Supper.* In accordance with Scripture and with our Reformed confessions, we offer the sacrament of baptism to all believers and to their children (Acts 2:38-39), as a sign and seal of our adoption into the New Covenant. We also celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first Sunday of every month, offering it to every professing believer in good standing in an evangelical church.

- *Benediction*. In keeping with the pattern of the OT priesthood and the NT apostles, our pastors conclude the service with a word of blessing to the congregation (Num. 6:24-26). This is not a prayer, but rather a word of encouragement to the congregation to go forth in the power of the Lord. We lift up our hands as an expression of our dependence upon the Lord and our willingness to receive his grace (1 Tim. 2:8).

Music in worship

The purpose of music in worship at RRPC is the same as that of the spoken word—praise, prayer, and proclamation. In praise we give a biblical and musical response to God’s person, work, and Word. In prayer, music can help us approach God rightly by putting our hearts in a proper posture for prayer and by giving voice to our deepest need. In proclamation, we use music to teach and preach God’s Truth. Music is language enhanced by rhyme and melody. Done well, it engages the emotions and intellect, heart and soul, in the act of worship. Songs are often easily committed to memory making them useful aids to both public and private worship.

Public worship is a corporate act of believers toward their God. As a part of that corporate act, music at RRPC presents an opportunity to demonstrate unity in praise, prayer, and proclamation. The purpose of music in corporate worship then is to engage the hearts and minds of the congregation to the greatest degree possible in the act of worship, to shut out worldly or selfish cares and turn our whole being toward our creator, and to demonstrate our love for one another. One of God’s means for this is through congregational singing.

In congregational singing, we join together as a body in acts of praise, prayer, and proclamation. As a result, we seek not to please ourselves in singing, but to please God. Congregational singing should not be a performance subject to critique on musical grounds but an act of worship. While we strive for technical excellence in our musical accompaniment and instrumentation, we believe that these aspects are secondary to the place of congregational singing in our worship. The choice of music in congregational singing is an opportunity to practice both preference and deference. As a result, RRPC chooses songs from a variety of sources. We consider the Trinity Hymnal to be a treasure of hymnody that should be used as much as possible. We also recognize that more modern hymns such as those of the Gettys or Stuart Townend are excellent choices for congregational singing. We also appreciate the new settings of old hymns done by groups like Indelible Grace and others. We choose the best from these sources to teach to our congregation and use in our worship services. We should sing all songs, regardless of source, as an act of love both for God and for our brothers and sisters in the congregation.