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Abstract

"Worship, in the Reformed understanding, is a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which God speaks, and we respond."

Posting about the role of worship in Christian life formation from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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How Does Worship Shape Us?

Karen A. DeMol

How does worship—Reformed worship in particular—mold us into the likeness of Christ?

Worship, in the Reformed understanding, is a dialogue between God and his people, a dialogue in which God speaks, and we respond. Many of us appreciate this Reformed concept of worship, and we come to communal worship prepared to participate in the dialogue and intent on the glory of God—at least theoretically or to the best of our ability. For we know that worship is to be Christ-centered, not me-centered. But our focus can be shot through with distractions, conflicts, and doubts. We come desiring to give honor to God and to become better disciples, but we also come in need of restoration, healing, and direction. Someone has said that all week we fray and unravel, and then on Sunday, worship “ravels” (weaves) us together again.

How do these things work together—Christ-centeredness as well as our growth and need? We expect to grow through the sermon and to be strengthened through the sacraments, but how formative are the other actions in our worship? Let us take a look at three of the basic liturgical actions— how we understand them, and how they shape us.

1) The call to worship and God’s greeting:

“God, you call us to this place.”

God has the first word in worship. We gather to worship because he calls us to do so. We might entirely agree that this is a good idea, and we might heartily long for the courts of the Lord; but God remains the initiator. He calls us, and we come because we *obey*.

How does that shape us?

Our responding to God’s call shapes us in obedience and that discipline is training for all the other ways that we will obey God in a life before his face. It also shapes us in confirming our identity; after a week filled with the noisy and conflicting messages from the world about who we are or who we should be, the call to worship confirms our true identity as people who are loved and called by God. It also strengthens us by giving us comfort and reassurance; however confused we may be, however shabby the circumstances of the past week, God is including us—*us*—in the gathering of his people. We still belong to him, body and soul, as do the other people gathered in worship. Our focus on ourselves is moderated when we see the vastness and variety in Christ’s body—old and young, new and life-long believers, “lofty and lowly” as the Christmas carol puts it.

2) The confession of sin, assurance of pardon, and call to holy living:

“Called, forgiven, loved, and freed.”

Covenant renewal includes a service of reconciliation. The back-and-forth of our dialogue with God is strongly evident here. God calls us to confession, reminding us that though we are completely forgiven and redeemed at the cross, our lives continue to include lapses and offenses. We respond in the spoken or sung prayers. God again assures us of his forgiveness, and we respond in renewed commitment to live holy and obedient lives.

Confessing our sin calls us to reflect honestly on our lives, something we may have been too preoccupied or afraid to do on our own. Now, in the company of believers, we are enabled by the liturgy to do so. Confessing our sin should shape us in humility, cleansing us of smugness and sticky self-righteousness and self-justification. Confessing our sin levels us in our gathered community: none of us have lived blameless lives in the past days, each of us trembles in our heart to remember “what we have done and have left undone.” On any given Sunday, we may not fully realize our sin or “feel” repentance. But this worship practice “gradually work[s] on us, until we grow in our feelings, in what older theologians call our godly sorrow for the brokenness in ourselves and in our world.”¹ Hearing again God’s word of forgiveness restores our relationship with God and others, and it helps us to start afresh. Then God’s words for holy living, whether in the reading of the Ten Commandments or other Scripture, remind us of how to live, week by week deepening our understanding. Pledging our dedication to that life aloud with others commits us to renewed obedience; we are to hold ourselves accountable for the holy life to which we publicly commit. The worship service of reconciliation forms habits of heart and behavior, and is training for our daily lives, shaping us in a way similar to how we hope to shape the character of our children by teaching them to say, “I’m sorry;” “I forgive you;” “Thank you—with your help, I’ll not do that again.” In worship we *practice* these habits that build our Christian character.

3) Benediction

“Called from worship into service, forward in your name we go.”

Just as it is God who calls us to worship, so the last word in the liturgy is his—the benediction, his blessing. As he called us together, so he sends us out. The benediction is often accompanied by a charge to be witnesses and workers for the Kingdom; he sends us out both blessed and commissioned.

How does that shape us?

The benediction strengthens our inner being; we dare to leave this place of worship because God will go with us and before us. Though like Peter on the Mount of Transfiguration we may want to stay and to prolong the sublime experience of worship, we must get up and go out. But with God’s blessing, we can be of clear purpose and good courage in our lives outside the church walls. The benediction also strongly tells us that we do not leave a precious but self-

contained hour that is detached from the rest of life. We are to go out, equipped and eager, to be God's hands in his world.

Song

What about the songs? Songs can address all the actions of the liturgy, as the brief song quotations above illustrate. Through some mystery of the mind, words attached to music "stick" in unique ways. That is why we have often been able to recite the books of the Bible or the names of the twelve disciples—because in our childhood we sang these words to a tune. Because words attached to a melody stick so well, we need to make sure that the words we sing in our worship are true and appropriate, are Biblically, theologically, and emotionally mature. John D. Witvliet writes, "Hymn texts are super-concentrated theology. The church that sings excellent hymn texts—even more, the people that are fortunate enough to memorize excellent hymn texts—are being formed in a fine school of faith."² The music shapes us as well. Music that is fitting to the text will reinforce the text. In contrast, music that is insipid and lacking the same strength as the text will contradict and diminish the text. By way of a very bad example, consider an old song titled "On Calvary's Brow." The text is a Good Friday text, a somber and vivid account of the crucifixion. But when we sing this text to John Sweney's tune of the same name, we find that the text and tune are misaligned. The music is jaunty, up-beat, dance-like; it trivializes the text—even contradicts it, making Good Friday shallow. We cannot afford to be shaped by this music! In addition, we are shaped by balance in our song repertoire. Just as preachers pledge in their ordinations to "preach the whole counsel of God," so should we have a song repertoire that fits every part of the liturgy, every tenet of our Christian faith, every aspect of our Christian life. Imagine, for example, how we could be miss-shaped by never singing any songs about Christ's resurrection or about penitence.

In such a liturgy and with a good song repertoire, we give honor to the triune God, acknowledging that he has and is the first and the last word, the Alpha and Omega. We honor him by listening to his Word and by praising him for who he is, what he does, and for the relationship with us that he desires, initiates, and strengthens. And we ourselves are shaped—affirmed in our identity, washed clean, renewed, and empowered. The formative power of liturgy is strengthened through repetition: through practicing weekly the various actions of worship, we build faithful Christian habits of the heart and behavior that spill over into our daily lives. We become more and more molded into Christ's likeness—a weekly and a life-long formation process.

For further reading:

James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009.

John Witvliet, "The Super-Concentrated Practice of Public Worship." (*Reformed Worship* 119, March 2016) pp. 42-43.

Peter Schuurman, "Metamorphosis: Becoming a Christian Character." (*Reformed Worship* 114, December 2014) pp. 3-19.

FOOTNOTES

1. William Dyrness: *Confession and Assurance: Sin and Grace" in A More Profound Alleluia*, ed. Leanne Van Dyk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 43.
2. John D. Witvliet, Introduction, *A More Profound Alleluia* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. xvi.