

“Getting to Know COTR: Why do we worship like we do?”

(September 5, 2018)

Every church has a liturgy (i.e. a particular order of service). It is impossible to worship non-liturgically – the only question is what sort of liturgy will we have. **We are not free to worship in any way we choose.** We must approach God in the way He has commanded. In Leviticus 10, we see how God views entering His presence in a way He has not authorized. The “strange fire” Aaron’s sons brought was fire that they started, as opposed to using the fire that God kindled on the altar as He had commanded them to do. So, it was autonomous, prideful, “doing what feels right” approach to worship. This passage reminds us that drawing near to God is dangerous if you ignore His ordained order. We must honor/reverence Him, when we draw near to Him.

1. We’re seeking to conform our worship to the pattern of worship we find in the Bible.

Our form of worship conforms to the normal order of sacrificial worship (Leviticus 9). First, God calls them into His presence. Then, the purification or sin offering was brought (the animal was killed and the blood splashed upon the altar; Lev 9:15). Next, the ascension offering was made (Lev. 9:16 – the animal is cut in pieces and burned on the altar). Finally, the peace (or communion) offering is brought (Le 9:18-21). God communes with us, sharing a portion of the sacrifice with the worshipper. Then the benediction is given and the worshippers are sent out. Our worship follows this general pattern:

First, we have the procession, salutation, and call to worship. This represents the transition that we are making as we approach God in worship. We don’t move from the “secular” world to the “sacred” world, but we do go into the special presence of God. The procession reminds us that we are moving into God’s presence and are enjoying a foretaste of what we shall enjoy throughout eternity. And so, it is appropriate that we enter into His gates with thanksgiving (Psa. 100) – so we sing a **hymn of praise and thanksgiving** as we enter into His gates.

After our hymn of praise, we are given a **salutation**. The minister speaking for the triune God, says, “Grace to you and peace, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

Then he says, “The Lord be with you” and you respond, “The Lord bless you.” This is an ancient form of greeting among the people of God, reflecting the covenant promise of the Messiah that He would be “God with us” (see Ruth 2:4).

Then we have **the call to worship**. We cannot go into God’s presence at our own whim, God must issue a summons to us to come. Though we are welcome in His presence, our welcome is not based upon who we are or what we have done and thus, we must be invited into His presence.

God is everywhere. But we must remember that He is not everywhere in the same way. God is present with His people when they gather together in a way that He is not present in the mall, at the football stadium, or on the hunting or camping grounds. We have His sure promise that He will meet with us when we gather in His name.

Having gathered in God’s presence, we then kneel before Him and confess our sins together. We must be cleansed of sin before we ascend up into His presence. So the confession of sins is the first thing that must be done upon our entering into God’s courts.

And *kneeling* is the appropriate posture for confession (Psalm 95:6-7). It reminds us that our proper attitude before God is one of humility not pride. But kneeling is also the posture of the man who has nothing with which to defend himself or to provide for himself. It is a physical reminder that we are utterly dependent upon the Lord for forgiveness and all blessing.

Notice also that *the prayer of confession is a corporate prayer* (we say “we” in this prayer and we say the prayer together). We do it this way because in doing so we confess both the fact that each of us has sinned against God, and the fact that “we” collectively have sinned against Him by not living faithfully as His people together. Further, we worship as priests representing the world. We not only speak for ourselves but we are speaking for the world that has sinned and forgets to confess its sins.

Finally, note that *the prayer of confession is a “common prayer”* of the people – again that reminds us that we are all one body. Our unity should be expressed in every appropriate way in the liturgy. Thus, common prayers, common responses, common hymns, the corporate “amen” are all good and necessary reminders of our unity in Christ.

After the confession comes **the absolution**. It is vital not only to ask forgiveness but to know that forgiveness has been granted. The absolution is not an additional prayer for forgiveness. It is a declaration that our prayers have been heard and an assurance that the Lord has forgiven us as He promised.

After the Lord declares that we are forgiven in accordance with His promise, we are ready to ascend up into His throne room with the holy angels and the spirits of just men made perfect (Heb. 12:22-24). And that is what happens in the next part of our service:

Our ascension into God’s presence begins with the “sursum corda” – when the minister says, “Lift up your hearts.” and you respond, “We lift them up to the Lord!”

After the sursum corda we offer our “eucharist” [thanksgiving] to God. The minister says, “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God” and you respond, “It is meet and right so to do.” And again, this is an ancient formula by which God’s people have reminded themselves and declared to the world that God is always worthy of praise and thanksgiving. After the response, the minister gives thanks to the Lord for His glorious work in our behalf.

After expressing our thanksgiving to God, we sing the “Sanctus” – the song of the angels who surround God’s throne (“Holy, holy, holy” Isaiah 6 – It also combines with this song, the praise of the people when Jesus entered into Jerusalem “Hosanna in the highest, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord”). This leads us to adore the living God and the minister leads us in a prayer, praising God for His glorious works.

Then we respond with joy by singing one of the ancient canticles of praise and thanksgiving (the Gloria, the Benedictus, Magnificat, Te Deum, etc.). Involving the congregation in the music of worship was one of the great contributions of the Reformers. The congregation had been turned into spectators by the Roman church. But the Reformers changed this by transforming the congregation into participants. Reformational worship is participatory.

[2. We want our worship to remind us of our connection with the Church throughout the centuries. We use these ancient songs to remind us that we are a part of the Church that has existed since Jesus’ resurrection. We are part of an old and distinguished family and we want to

acknowledge our gratitude to our fathers as well as realize the wisdom God has given to His people over the centuries.]

After we sing the canticle, we read the Lesson (a passage from the Old Testament) and we follow the common lectionary – these passages are read by most churches around the world. And we follow with a reading from the epistles and the gospels.

After the O.T. reading, we sing a psalm. Chanting is simply another form of glorified speaking. But our singing of the psalm is significant because there we are allowing the words to dictate and lead the musical accompaniment. This is distinctively *liturgical singing* – it is the music of the Garden and the Garden is unique from the world.

After the reading of the Scriptures we respond with an expression of thanksgiving to God for His gift. The minister says, “The word of the Lord” and the congregation responds, “Thanks be to God.” The response to the gospel is different, highlighting the fact that Jesus is worthy of all glory and honor and power and dominion because He is the Lamb who has been slain and raised from the dead. This response trains us to be thankful even when we don’t feel thankful, we *ought* to be thankful. It is an important discipline for us.

After the reading of the gospel we respond again with praise using the “Allelujah.” We respond with joy over the grace and mercy of God shown to us in Jesus.

Then comes the reading of the text of the sermon and the preaching of the word.

Our response to the Word. The word of God is not given simply to inform us. Indeed, nothing is learned truly until it transforms our lives. And we begin to respond to the Word right in our service. **First by giving ourselves through the giving of tithes and offerings.** Our giving expresses our gratitude for the work of Jesus in our behalf. Giving is the proper response to God’s overflowing generosity to us in the gospel.

Prayer of Thanksgiving: One of our deacons offers a prayer of thanksgiving. In this we together acknowledge to the world and remind ourselves that all that we have comes down from the Father of lights.

Then we make our requests before the Lord, praying for ourselves and others. Corporate prayer is prayer that gets God’s attention. We see this illustrated strikingly in Acts 4:23-31 – the church prayed (quoting the 2nd Psalm) and God responded (Acts 4:31).

Next, we **confess our faith** in the God who has spoken to us in His word. We are reminded as we do this that we are not making up a private faith – rather, we are believing the faith that has been delivered to the Church by God Himself. Thus, our creeds acknowledge that the Holy Spirit is the One who guides the Church into an understanding of the truth.

Then we commune with the Lord at His table. The Lord’s Supper is the supreme way in which we renew covenant with God. It is the family feast. We enter the family in baptism; we remain in the family by faithfully participating in the life of the church. So we acknowledge that this table belongs to the whole church, not just to us here. The only ones excluded are those who have refused to believe in the Savior. We follow the order that Jesus gave us: take the bread, give thanks, break it, distribute it. Take the wine, give thanks, drink, distribute it.

Worship enables us to receive the word through every sensory gateway that we have – through the eye as we read, through the ear as we stand to hear it read, through our mouths, nostrils, tongues, and fingers as we take the bread and drink the wine at the Lord’s Supper. Our Liturgy makes the Word visible, audible, tangible, and edible.

The Benediction: The benediction is the declaration of God’s blessing upon His people who have gathered to renew covenant with him. With the benediction, the Lord sends us out to be His servants to the world. This is the final service God renders to His people in the worship.

3. Worship disciplines and shapes us for distinctively Christian living. We are shaped by the way we worship. Worship is central to life. Worship molds us and equips and strengthens us to stand against the pressures of the world (Rom. 12:1-2). Through worship, we are shaped by God’s Spirit and strengthened against being conformed to the world.

The rule of *lex orandi, lex credendi* (i.e. “the rule of prayer is the rule of faith”) is unavoidable. This is always how the Church has prioritized its work – prayer (worship) always precedes and molds faith and life. Worship always molds and disciplines our lives (for good or ill). And that means that not only *what* we do in worship, but *how* we do it becomes important.

Thus, a Biblical liturgy molds us into a certain kind of people. It teaches us who we are. It reminds us that we are not individuals doing our own thing, but members of the great city, the holy nation, family of God, the body of Christ. And as such we are distinct from the world:

- We are the people who repent of their sins by confessing and forsaking them
- We are the people who are forgiven by God
- We are the people who have a real reason to rejoice and give thanks every day
- We are the people who listen to God’s Word and take it seriously
- We are the people who give liberally and sacrificially and do it gladly
- We are the people who have a calling. We have been given a mission by God Himself – a mission that cannot fail and is sure to succeed

As we worship week by week, following the pattern that God gives us in His word, we “*become the liturgy.*”

“We confess our sins on Sunday because we want confessing our sins to become second nature on Thursday. We sing our praises to God on Sunday so we instinctively praise him on Friday nights. We pour out our hearts in prayer to God on Sunday so that we can turn toward him in prayer when our lives fall apart on Wednesday.” We give on Sunday so that we know what to do when we’re faced with a need on Monday. We listen to God’s word on Sunday so that we will know what to do in order to avoid sin on Saturday night.

We are transformed and conformed to the image of Jesus. We become fountains of living water – instruments to bring the life of Jesus to the death of the world. As we are transformed, the world is transformed.