

The Lord's Service

Worship at Providence Reformed
Presbyterian Church



Jeffrey J. Meyers

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9124 Sappington Road, St. Louis, MO 63126

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PREFACE

About a dozen years ago I began working on a series of essays explaining the meaning of the Lord's Day service. They were first distributed as newsletter articles for my congregation in Houston (Covenant Presbyterian Church). I revised them slightly about five years ago for the congregation of Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church in St. Louis. Since that time my own understanding of the meaning and practice of Christian worship has developed significantly as I have participated in the worship of the church and continued to study the Bible as well as liturgical history and theology.

I offer this revised version now in the hope that it will help explain our morning service at Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church. My intentions are both to equip the membership of PRPC for intelligent participation in worship and also to provide visitors with a biblical and theological rationale for our form of corporate worship. The leaders of Providence want to be sure that the inquiring visitor as well as the committed member will know the biblical explanations for our corporate, Sunday worship, and so be able to worship intelligently with us, experiencing the fullness of reverent worship and praise. We have thought through our worship services. We have *reasons* why we do things the way we do—sound biblical, theological, and historical reasons. We are not simply following the dead, musty, liturgical traditions of our denomination. Neither are we clamoring to be “trendier than thou,” like too many twentieth-century American churches seem to be doing these days. Drawing on the wisdom of the historic Church, especially the Reformation tradition, our worship is grounded in the Word of God. We hope that this book will help you see that.

In order to accomplish this goal, the main body of this book is divided into two major sections. First, I will briefly discuss the biblical reasons for the overall order and content of our worship. Then, secondly, in Part II we will walk through each element of the service step by step as I explain its place and significance in the movement of the liturgy as a whole.

Only a few “footnotes” will appear at the bottom of any page in this booklet. I have chosen not to clutter up the text with academic references and extended polemical arguments because I intend, first of all, to write a relatively simple explanation of our service, accessible to any adequately educated member or visitor. Nevertheless, for the benefit of ministerial students, church officers, and others who wish to dig deeper into the study of worship and liturgy, I have written a separate edition that includes extensive reference notes for the first two chapters (Parts I & II) as well as two additional chapters (Parts III & IV). Part III is an extended bibliographical essay that should be useful to those who are interested in more advanced study. Finally, in Part IV I have addressed a few of my concerns about traditional (and untraditional) themes in Presbyterian worship. If you would like a copy of the beefed-up edition, please contact Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church, 9124 Sappington Road, St. Louis, MO 63126 (phone: 314-843-7994).

Pastor Jeffrey J. Meyers
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PART I

The Divine Service of Covenant Renewal

The first foundation of righteousness is undoubtedly the worship of God.

— John Calvin

There is a great deal of confusion today about the meaning and practice of Christian worship. Why does the church come together on Sunday? What is the purpose of a church service? What is supposed to happen? What part does the congregation have in the service?

One way to answer these questions would be to compose a list of the various activities that we typically engage in during the Sunday meeting. We assemble together, sit, meditate, stand, hear, sing, pray, confess, praise, read, think, eat, drink, etc. Of course, with such a list we have not really answered the question: *why* do we do those things? To what end? For what purpose? What does all of this hearing, speaking, standing, sitting, singing, praying, eating, and drinking accomplish? At the end of the service what will have happened? What will have changed, if anything? Are we there for an emotional experience? An educational lesson? What is the point of doing all this?

Moreover, if we can ask questions about the grand, overall meaning of the service, we can also ask about the form and content of each specific activity. Why do we do *these* things and not others? Why do we sing some prayers and say others? Why do we stand sometimes and sit others? Why do we say these words and not others? Why do we sing these hymns and not those? Questions about the *sequence* of activities must also surface. Why do we do them in the *order* that we do them? Why does this come first and that second and this other thing third? Specific questions like these are intimately related to the question of the overall purpose of the whole assembly.

Perhaps I should make it more personal. Why do *you* come to church on Sunday morning? What are you hoping to do? What are you hoping to *give*? Or what do you anticipate *receiving*? What do you expect to be accomplished as a result of your being at church? Everyone comes for some reason! Do you come for the *right* reasons?

Why Go To Church on Sunday?

When you come together as a church. . . —1 Corinthians 11:18

Before we go any farther, then, we must answer this very foundational question: what is the *purpose* of our Lord's Day assembly? Why do we come to a church service on

Sunday? The answer to this crucial question will help explain why certain words and actions are included in the church's worship and also determine the way in which the service is ordered from beginning to end.

Unfortunately, there are serious disagreements about the purpose of Sunday worship. There are at least four different popular perspectives on the purpose of the Sunday worship service.

Worship as Evangelism?

First, some feel that the purpose of the service ought to be evangelism. Many "independent" and "community" churches tend to adopt this view, although more and more Presbyterian and Reformed churches also think that outreach defines the chief purpose of the Sunday service. Accordingly, worship becomes a technique for evangelism. Too often, according to this view, *results* are what counts. The worship service is then evaluated based on the results obtained. At its worst, a church that adopts this posture may end up accepting whatever techniques that it judges to be *effective* in attracting unchurched people into the service. Churches that choose *evangelistic effectiveness* as the criteria by which they evaluate their services tend to look for ways to attract and entertain people, and they generally model their services after the broader cultural events (T.V. talk shows, concerts, sitcoms, etc.).

It is important to stop and note that these pop "styles" are not neutral. They embody a distinctly American, 20th century world view. Transforming the worship of the church using these cultural "styles" and the latest technological innovations in communication will affect the mindset and lifestyle of the community which submits to these popular "forms." Form matters. Style = form. The manner in which doctrine is embodied, communicated, lived, and sung is not neutral. Form is not something entirely "indifferent" (*adiaphora*). The *way* we pray/worship is inexorably related to *who* we are praying to and *what* we believe about the one we engage in prayer and praise. Style (form) and doctrine are mutually conditioning. Or at least they *ought* to be. What you believe will influence *how* you pray, worship, and sing. And conversely, the *way* in which you worship will impact *what* you believe. I maintain that we have really *not* thought through this issue at all in our circles. When we say things like, "I am not concerned with the music style just the doctrine" or "musical style is merely a matter of taste, what's really important is our confession" or "as long as you believe correctly it doesn't really matter what style of worship you choose," I think it is frightening evidence of our sloppy theology of worship and music.

These evangelism-driven church services are very carefully engineered to produce the desired results. Ed Dobson describes the seeker church criteria for music selection:

We wanted a musical style that would elicit a response. Unchurched people come to a service hesitantly. Their mind-set is 'you're not going to get me.' Their defenses are up. We felt that a style of music that would get them moving in a physical way (nodding

heads and tapping feet) would help break down their defenses. This does not mean that the crowd are on their feet nodding heads and clapping; they seldom clap during a song, but they always applaud at the end (*Starting a Seeker Sensitive Service: How Traditional Churches Can Reach the Unchurched* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993], pp. 42f.).

There you have it: “breaking down their defenses” and the *crowds* always “applaud at the end.” You see how marketing and emotional manipulation often play key roles in determining the shape of these services. The inside of the church may look and feel like a concert hall (with a large band and choir up front), a movie theater (where everything is projected up onto a large screen), or an auditorium (with a “stage” up front). Typically, during the service the people are relatively passive: they function less like a congregation of active worshipers and more like an audience. Generally speaking, what happens in practice in these churches is that most of the traditional forms are jettisoned, and the church unashamedly embraces the dominant and omnipresent entertainment models so prominent in American culture.

Worship as Education?

Another segment of the church believes that the Sunday service ought to be for the purpose of communicating truth. Education is the chief end of worship. Churches that have this emphasis tend to degenerate into lecture halls complete with overhead projectors and armies of note-taking members. Presbyterians and Bible churches often fall into this error. The sermon is elevated all out of proportion as the key element of worship. Education is the primary goal. Nothing else is of much importance in the service. Most of what comes before the sermon functions as “pre-game ceremonies” for the main event. People may like to sing, and singing may make them feel good, but they have not really thought through what purpose, if any, hymns and songs ought to have in the overall structure of the service—besides preparing the congregation emotionally for the sermon.

Worship as Experience?

There are others who emphasize the experience of the congregation in worship. They believe that the Sunday service ought to produce some kind of beneficial emotional response in the people. Many liberal churches fall into this category. Religion is reduced to sentimental and pious feelings. Pastors smile all the time and read poems from the pulpit to help the people feel good about themselves. For those who have embraced this philosophy of worship (a kind of liturgical *Pollyanna-ism*), the focus of the church is anthropological—that is, on *man*. I recently phoned the office of a church whose biblical orthodoxy is questionable and heard the following answering machine message: “Remember God loves you *just the way you are!*” Actually, God loves his people in spite of what they are, through faith in Jesus Christ. At all costs, people must leave the service feeling that they are O.K. and believing that everyone else is too. Christianity is reduced to religious sentimentalism. In modern American church services, edification is cut loose from

its doctrinal moorings and is blown about by every humanistic, trendy gust of psychological and sociological silliness.

Worship as Praise?

I tried but couldn't think of a suitable synonym for "praise" that begins with an "e"! From this perspective the purpose of worship is to gather and give praise to God. Churches that emphasize praise as the goal of worship often style their services "celebrations." All of those passages that call believers to "ascribe" or "give to the Lord the glory due to his Name" can be marshaled in support of the truth that the corporate service is a service of praise (Psalm 29:1-2; 96:7-8). This fourth conception of worship is much closer, but still not quite adequate to express the fullness of biblical worship. Certainly there are numerous passages that exhort us to "Praise the Lord" and to "worship" him. I would caution you, however, that in many cases the word "worship" has not served us very well. It is not the most helpful translation of words used to designate "bowing down" or "prostrating oneself" (e.g. Psalm 95:6). For example, when we are called to "prostrate" ourselves before God, this does not exactly correspond with the way we use the word "worship." To fall down before God is to allow oneself to be lifted up by him. It is to give one's self over to the Lord's service. In effect, falling down before God puts us in the position to be served by God. Much more, therefore, is often going on in these passages than merely ascribing "worth" or "praise" to God.

Often the giving of praise or glorifying of God is set over against the worshiper's expectation of *receiving* anything from God in church. Worship is what we *give* to the Lord, we are told. I will examine the one-sidedness of "worship as praise" in the next section as well, but here let me say that not only is the super-spiritual-sounding assertion that "we just gather together to give praise to God taking no interest in what we might get from him" unbiblical, it may also easily slip into doxological hubris. Presbyterian pastors and theologians are particularly vulnerable to this distortion of the purpose of worship. The slogan "we gather for worship to give not to get" has become something of a Reformed shibboleth. We love to beat other evangelicals over the head with it. It makes us feel superior. As if we don't go to church because we *need* anything! We Reformed Christians go to church to *give* God glory and honor. As I hope to show, this kind of thinking is extremely dangerous.

For us, as *creatures* of God, there can be no such thing as "disinterested praise." We simply cannot love or praise God for who he is apart from what he has given us or what we continue to receive from him. We are not his equals. The notion that pure love and worship of God can only be given when it is unmixed with all thoughts of what we receive, has no biblical grounding. To be sure, it sounds very spiritual and pious. It even comes across as self-denial. In fact, however, there is no such worship in the Bible for the simple fact that we cannot approach God as disinterested, self-sufficient beings. We are created beings. Dependent creatures. Beings who must continually *receive* both our life and redemption from God. Our "worship" of God, for this reason, necessarily involves our passive

reception of his gifts as well as our thanksgiving and petitions. We cannot pretend that we do not depend upon him. We will always be receivers and petitioners before God. Our receptive posture is as ineradicable as our nature as dependent creatures. We must be served by him. Recognizing this is true spirituality. Opening oneself up to this is the first movement in our “worship,” indeed, the presupposition of all corporate worship. It is faith’s posture before our all-sufficient, beneficent Lord. Praise follows after this and alone can never be the exclusive purpose for our gathering together on the Lord’s Day.

* * * * *

Obviously, there is some truth in each of these four perspectives. A Christian service that does not proclaim the Gospel to the lost (and saved!), engage the emotions of the congregation, teach God’s word, and ascribe to God praise and honor will likely be a distorted, dangerously truncated service. All four of these opinions, however, err to the extent that they *reduce* the purpose of the church to one of these dimensions. Moreover, those who embrace one of the first four purposes tend to see the Sunday service as primarily a *technique* for producing a particular effect on the members of the congregation, either on their will, mind, or emotions. All four of these dimensions—evangelism, preaching, edification, and praise—in and of themselves are important. They each have their proper place in the worship service. But the overall purpose of a biblical worship service should not be *reduced* to any one of them. Moreover, the purpose (and practice) of our Lord’s Day worship service must never degenerate into an attempt to engineer or manipulate some desired effect in the congregation. Worship must not be understood as a technique. “As C. S. Lewis said, ‘The charge is feed my sheep not run experiments on my rats.’ When worship is reduced to a pep rally for the pastor’s latest crusade or to a series of acts that contain the minister’s own hidden agenda, our concern for worship is called into question” (William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979], p. 17). Every conception and form of liturgy that focuses on man will eventually degenerate into intellectual or psychological manipulation.

The Biblical Purpose of The Divine Service

Through Christ we . . . have access by one Spirit to the Father —Ephesians 2;18

What, then, is the purpose of our Lord’s Day service? According to the Scriptures, in corporate Christian worship members of the believing congregation are engaged by the Spirit and drawn into the Father’s presence as living sacrifices in Christ. “Through Christ we . . . have access in one Spirit to the Father” (Eph. 2:18). Our reasonable liturgy, the apostle Paul says, is to offer ourselves as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1-2). On the Lord’s Day the Lord himself visits his people in judgment and salvation, reconstituting and restoring them for life in his presence and work in his kingdom. In response to God’s covenantal initiative—his drawing near to us—we confess, thank, praise, and pray as renewed creatures who through the Spirit are enabled to give unto our Covenant Lord the glory due his Name.

God's Serves Us First

In view of the one-sided emphasis in some evangelical (even Presbyterian) circles that the congregation gathers to *give* praise to God and not to *get* anything, I must insist on the lopsided, impoverished nature of this teaching. We have been told by well-meaning teachers, even Reformed theologians, that it is downright wrong to come to church in order to get something. A popular shibboleth has it that Reformed or Presbyterian worship stands apart from other theologies of worship in that we don't come to *get* anything but to *give* praise and honor and glory to God. This conception must not be permitted to go unchallenged.

First, and above all, we are called together in order to get, to receive. This is crucial. The Lord gives, we receive. Since faith is receptive and passive in nature, faith-full worship must be about receiving from God. He gives, and by faith we receive. We are given his forgiveness, his Word, his nourishment, his benediction, etc. We come as those who receive *first* and then, second, only in reciprocal exchange do we give back what is appropriate as grateful praise and adoration. More and more I am discovering how crucial (at least in our current situation) such a conception of worship is. Too often in current Reformed and evangelical circles worship or liturgy is described first of all as the “work of the people.” While I do not deny that we “work” during worship, I do regard this definition as dangerously one-sided. Whatever we “do” in worship must always be the faithful *response* to God's gifts of forgiveness, life, knowledge, and glory—gifts we receive in the service! Much of what goes by the name “contemporary” worship has evacuated the Sunday service of God's service to man! It is all about what *we* do. The reduction of Christian worship to “praise” and “giving worth to God” by well-intentioned pastors desirous of purging the church of superficial worship forms will only continue to feed the very thing that they oppose.

For example, to name one side effect of this kind of thinking, the disappearance of the pastor as the Lord's representative and spokesman, the ordained man through whom the Lord gives, is tied to this kind of mentality. Many pastors no longer lead the worship service. This departure of the leadership of the pastor in contemporary worship follows from the kind of one-sided conception of the Lord's Day service that I have been critiquing. If what the people are doing in worship is merely getting together to praise and pray and offer God all kinds of human devotion, then we can all just do it together and anyone can lead us. If, however, *the Lord himself* is meeting us and giving us his gifts, then the ordained minister will be prominent so that the people can be left in no doubt that it is the Lord himself who is speaking, forgiving, baptizing, offering us food and drink, and finally blessing us and sending us out into the world to further his kingdom.

That is not to say that the Lord serves us in worship *exclusively* through the pastor, since the Lord is at work even in the corporate praying, reciting, and the singing of the congregation. How many times have we been truly served by God as we listened to and joined in with the united voice of the church in prayer and praise? The Lord, then, serves us on the Lord' Day as his Spirit speaks through both the voice of the minister as well as the

voices of his people. We should never lose sight of the primacy of the Lord's service to us when we gather to him on the Lord's Day.

Moreover, the terminology we use to describe what happens on the Lord's Day can be confusing. We've inherited the designation "worship service," which, to my mind, tends to introduce confusion. "Service" comes from the Latin *servitium*, as in *servitium Dei* ("the service of God" or "God's service"). This older way of designating the Christian liturgy is delightfully ambiguous. In the "Divine Service" or "the service of God" who's serving whom? Is God serving us? Or are we serving God? Or is it both? Classically, the "Divine Service" was thought to include both God's service to us and our service to God. Even so, our fathers in the faith considered God's service to us (the forgiveness of sins, the ministry [service!] of the Word, the Sacraments, etc.) as primary and our service to him as secondary response. But this emphasis is exactly what is lost when we call our corporate, Sunday assembly "worship." This term comes to us by way of the Anglo-Saxon word "worship," which simply meant to accord someone his proper worth. What we appear to be emphasizing with this term is not God's gifts and ministry to us through his Word and Sacraments, but our ascribing "worth" to him. Some Reformed writers have a tendency to miss this. We are too ready to accept the misleading definition of liturgy as "the work of the people," which is in fact only half of the story, and the second half at that! What happens on Sunday is the continuation of the service of the ascended Lord Jesus for his people. "For who is greater: the one at the table or the one who serves? The one at the table, surely. Yet here am I among you as the one who serves! (Luke 22:27; see also Matt. 20:28; John 13:5-16; Phil. 2:7-8).

Allow me to hammer this point home. Without this understanding, our worship inevitably degenerates into paganism with a Christian veneer. Our service is *not* first of all *for* God. We first receive *from* God, then, *secondly*, we give back *to* him with gratitude precisely that which he graciously continues to give us. He stands in no need of our service or praise. He has not created us primarily so as to get glory for himself, but to distribute and share the fullness of his glory with his creatures. He is not like the pagan gods who need to suck up as much of the glory and praise as they can. With the true God the determination of the amount of glory possessed by him and us is not a zero sum game. If he has all glory, that does not imply that we have none. If we possess glory, it does not come at the expense of his glory. Only when we refuse to acknowledge the source of our glory and assert our own over against his do we then fall under the condemnation of the prophets. Thomas Howard rightly challenges this distortion:

If God alone is all-glorious, then no one else is glorious at all. No exaltation may be admitted for any other creature, since this would endanger the exclusive prerogative of God. But this is to imagine a paltry court. What king surrounds himself with warped, dwarfish, worthless creatures? The more glorious the king, the more glorious are the titles and honors he bestows. The plumes, cockades, coronets, diadems, mantles, and rosettes that deck his retinue testify to one thing alone, his own majesty and munificence. He is a very great king to have figures of such immense dignity in his train, or even better, to have raised them to such dignity. These great lords and ladies, mantled and crowned with the highest possible honor and rank are, precisely, his

vassals. This glittering array is his court! All glory to him, and in him, glory and honor to these others (*Evangelical Is Not Enough* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1984], p. 87).

It is this cruder form of the doctrine that is too often the popular view. If anyone has an ounce of glory, then it must be confiscated by God. This is pagan, not Christian. Rather, we must say that if anyone has an ounce or two pounds of glory, it has been bestowed by God from the plentitude of his own glory and so all glory in the world must ultimately redound to him. “For of Him and through Him and to Him [are] all things, to whom [be] glory forever. Amen” (Rom. 11:36).

Christian worship provides the occasion for God’s service to the church, that is, in the liturgy *God serves us* by granting us the gifts of the kingdom, which includes, but is not limited to knowledge. We gather to receive. The Lord gives. So, for example, I believe, the diminishing place of the pastor in the Sunday service corresponds to the deformation of the service from what God does for us to what we do before God. When the robed pastor is prominent the people are left in no doubt that God is speaking and acting through the instrumentality of the office of the Ministry to deliver his gifts to the congregation.

Thus, God’s operations on us come first and our actions are in grateful response to God’s gracious activity.[†] If the Church’s worship is the place where God himself distributes his life-giving Word and Sacraments, if it is the occasion for God to *serve* the congregation, then with this understanding we can, to some degree, transcend the rigid dichotomy regarding the purpose of the Sunday service—is it for evangelism or worship? Why do we have to choose between one or the other? Is worship for the people of God or unbelievers? Well, primarily for the people of God, but if unbelievers are present they may be served as well. If through the liturgy God graciously delivers gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, then he offers them to everyone present, the people of God as well as those who are not yet part of his people. Inasmuch as the Lord’s Day service is the place and time where God comes through his Word and Sacrament to serve people, it is obviously beneficial to both. The Spirit can enliven any unbeliever present and use his Word as it is read, prayed, sung, and preached to bring them new life. What else is this but evangelism?

Therefore, the fundamental purpose of the corporate Sunday service is to receive by faith God’s gracious service in Christ and then to respond with thanksgiving in union with Christ *worshipping* the Living God. This is what we call “covenant renewal worship.”

[†] I do not mean to suggest that our response is not also included in God’s gracious provision in Christ. It is. It is not as if God works but then stops just where our human response begins. Rather, God’s grace includes precisely that human response to the extent that our human response takes place “in Christ.” God is at work in us even when we are at work praising him. We “work” at thanking and praising him because he is at work in us (1 Cor. 12:3; Rom. 8:26; Phil. 2:13). The entire process of covenant renewal or sacrificial worship can only be performed as we are graciously given to participate in the priestly work of Jesus Christ. Our offering of ourselves as Christians will always be a participation in Jesus’ own priestly offering of his humanity to the Father in the Spirit.

Covenantal Worship

Why do we use the word “covenant” to describe the renewal that God accomplishes in the service? The Bible uses the word “covenant” over three hundred times in the Old and New Testaments to describe the precise nature of God’s relationship to his people. God enters into, remembers, and renews his covenant with his people (Gen. 6:18; Deut. 5:3; Ezek. 16:60; Heb. 8:10; Luke 1:72; 22:20, etc.). The people must not break, but remember and renew their covenant with God (1 Chron. 16:15; Psalm 103:18; Hos. 6:7, etc.). In our American cultural climate we need to stress that our “relationship” with God is not merely a “personal relationship,” but a *covenantal* relationship. This is an important qualification. The phrase “personal relationship” is used rather freely in popular culture. It usually describes very informal, often casual relationships between people. Popular television sitcoms like “Friends” and “90210” celebrate “personal relationships.” These kinds of relationships can be on one day and off the next. They involve no formal or binding responsibilities. They bend, sway, and stretch according to the desires of the individuals involved in these “relationships.” They have no objective shape or form. This is not the case with covenantal relationships in the Bible.

God’s personal relationship with us takes the *form* of a covenant. The “covenant” *structures* God’s personal relationship with us. We do not merely have a personal relationship with Jesus. That might mean almost anything. To some it simply means that Jesus is going to take them to heaven when they die because they prayed a prayer or walked an aisle in church. To others it might mean more, so that they talk to him when they are in trouble or come to church to think about him occasionally. A covenantal relationship, however, is a formal, binding relationship between God and us. Like marriage (which is a human covenant modeled after God’s covenant with us, Eph. 5:22ff.), God’s covenant with us has a definitive shape and content. The covenant contains promises that are made to be kept (by God and us), privileges that we are to enjoy, and stipulations that we must strive to obey. Furthermore, there is distinctive way of renewing covenantal relationships in the Bible, and that is by way of sacrifice (Gen. 8:20-9:17; Gen. 15:8-18a; Exod. 24:4-11; 34:15; Lev. 2:13; 24:1-8; Num. 18:19; 1 Kings 3:15; Ps. 50:5; Luke 22:20; Heb. 9:15, 18; 9:20; 12:24; 13:20).

This means that we could also call our corporate service “sacrificial worship,” because God renews his covenant with us by way of sacrifice. That is, the Lord himself graciously gathers us together as the church to draw us anew into his glorious, life-giving presence by way of sacrifice. What is this “way of sacrifice”?

Worship as Sacrifice

The word “liturgy” is a Bible word and ought not to scare us, if we properly understand and qualify its meaning. In Romans 12:1, for example, we are urged, in response to God’s mercy, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Such a course, we are told, is holy and pleasing to God; it is our “reasonable service.” The word translated “service” (or “worship” in some translations) is the Greek word *latreia*, which refers to

the sacrificial “service” or “liturgy” by which the worshiper presents himself to God (Phil. 3:3; Heb. 9:9; 10:2; 12:28).

In Acts 13:2, for example, the Antioch church’s worship on the Lord’s Day is described as follows: “On one occasion, while they were engaged in the liturgy of the Lord and were fasting, the Holy Spirit spoke to them” (my translation). Many newer translations speak of the church “ministering” to the Lord. The word “ministering” means “serving,” and the Greek word is *leitourgeo* which refers to public, congregational service—whether God’s service to the people or the people’s before God is hard to know. The language of Acts 13:2 (“the Lord’s liturgy” or “service”) is ambiguous, maybe purposefully so. Nevertheless, the assembled congregation at Antioch was engaged in what we would today call a “worship service.” We gather on the Lord’s Day as the church, not to serve ourselves, but to be served by and to serve God.

In Hebrews 9:6 the word “liturgy” (*latreia*) refers to the ceremonies or rites of the priests in the Old Covenant tabernacle and temple. In the New Covenant God’s people as a whole are priests. United to Jesus our high priest, the entire congregation has sanctuary access as “saints.” Therefore, as New Covenant priests the people of God perform priestly service (*latreia*). This mode of “sacrificial living” should characterize our daily lives, to be sure, but on the Lord’s Day there is a special sense in which we are gathered together by God as the body of Christ in order to be drawn into God’s presence as “living sacrifices.” But we are not used to thinking like this. Robert S. Rayburn explains why:

Part of the reason why so many Christian worship services have no logic, no order, no movement, is because those who superintend those services of worship have not paid attention to the Bible’s main instruction in the formation of a worship service *because that instruction is found in the Old Testament*. . . . It is this disregard for the importance of what is done in the worship of God and the order or logic with which it is done that has led to the common pejorative use of the words ‘liturgy’ and ‘liturgical’ in many evangelical and even Reformed circles. This is a mistake in more ways than one. Every church service is a liturgy, if it has various elements in some arrangement. That is what liturgy is. Liturgical churches are churches that have *thought* about those elements and their proper order. Non-liturgical churches are those which have not. It is no compliment to say that a church is a non-liturgical church. It is the same thing as saying it is a church that gives little thought to how it worships God (Robert S. Rayburn, “Worship From the Whole Bible,” in *The Second Annual Conference on Worship: The Theology and Music of Reformed Worship, February 23-25, 1996* [Nashville, TN: Covenant Presbyterian Church, 1996], pp. 22-23).

The meaning of “liturgy,” therefore, according to the New Testament, is intimately connected with the biblical practice of “offering” and “sacrifice.” More important than finding the word “liturgy” in the Bible, is the recognition that God has established the *way* of approaching him. God’s way of graciously drawing us into his presence is not arbitrary, but follows a predictable *sequence* that is controlled by his holy and merciful character as the Triune God. According to the New Testament, the way or order in which God draws the sacrificial animals into his presence in the Old Testament symbolizes God’s appointed way

of drawing sinful human beings into his holy, but life-giving presence. This is the way of sacrifice. Sacrifice answers the question: “How are we drawn into God’s presence?” The sacrifices are *qorban*, “that which is brought near” (Lev. 1:2; 2:1; 3:1-2; 4:23; 5:11; 7:38). Biblical Sacrifice is not a technique invented by man in order to secure something from God. Rather, God has graciously provided man with a way of entering into his presence, and that way is the way of sacrifice. The worshiper is mercifully brought near to God’s presence by means of the substitute/representative animal. Ultimately this is the way of Jesus Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and the resulting incorporation of his (and our) humanity into the Trinitarian family life of the Godhead. Jesus Christ offered himself by the Spirit to the Father once for us all, *and* we, too, united to Christ, must follow his lead. By the Spirit we are drawn into God the Father’s presence through the priestly work of Jesus Christ. This is what happens every Lord’s Day in the worship service. This is the way of sacrificial worship—united to Christ we are not only brought together by the Spirit, but by the same Spirit we are drawn into the Father’s presence by cleansing, consecration, and communion.

The primary focus of Part I is on issues surrounding the *order* of the service. Even though this dimension of biblical worship has been almost totally neglected in our own tradition (the emphasis instead being on the “elements” of worship), I believe that discovering the biblical order or sequence of man’s approach to God in the service may be the key to resurrecting a powerful Bible-based liturgy in our churches. You will find very little help from our own tradition in this area. Most Reformed theologians and pastors do have a proper sense of how a worship service should be ordered, but they may not have thought through why this order is appropriate. I believe that the traditional Christian liturgical order arose in the early church from a gut-level familiarity with the biblical way of approaching God, even if church theologians have not always explicitly identified the biblical source of their intuitions. What I offer is a reasonable biblical explanation of the order of Christian worship as the corporate, sacrificial, covenant renewal service of God.

The Three Crucial Steps in the Service

Without going into too much detail, the basic order of sacrificial/covenantal worship ought to be clear in your mind before we proceed to explain the service in detail. You might think about the three major “sections” or “movements” within the service as three “steps.” The movement of the service is something of an “ascent” into God’s presence along the pathway he has established. (In some sense it is also God’s “descent” as well, but we will discuss that aspect when we come to the Communion meal.) Just as every sacrificial animal passed through three “zones” and underwent three major “operations” on its way up the altar and into the presence of God, so also the human worshiper travels the same sacrificial pathway up the “holy mountain” into God’s presence. By faith we understand our progress during the Lord’s Day service to be God’s graciously drawing us into his presence, making us fit, in Christ, for fellowship with him.

The three steps are cleansing, consecration, and communion. These are just convenient labels that we attach to the three major operations performed on the sacrificial animals as the

Lord drew them (and the worshipers symbolized by them!) into his presence. Each sacrificial animal is always 1) killed and its blood splashed on the altar (cleansing), then 2) washed, skinned, cut up, and arranged on the altar grill (consecration), and finally 3) turned into smoke and incorporated into God's presence as food (communion). This is the sacrificial pathway/liturgy that every animal/worshiper experienced as God brought him near.

Contrary to popular Christian opinion, the New Testament does not abrogate sacrifice, but rather, Jesus Christ fulfills and establishes the genuine meaning and practice of sacrifice and offering. Sacrificial images and rites are part of the *central core* of the biblical revelation of the personal relations between God and man (from Gen. 3:21 through Rev. 21:22-27), possibly even constitutive of the personal relations within the Godhead. The sacrificial language and imagery is not merely fulfilled in the work of Jesus Christ, but also serves to define and shape the life of the believer in Christ. In the Old Covenant both the work of Christ *and* the work of the believer in Christ is couched in the symbolic structures of animal sacrificial rites and all the accompanying things— altars, bowls, knives and other assorted hardware. In the New Testament the Old Testament sacrificial typology is fulfilled *by* Christ and *in* the believer who is united to Christ by faith. In union with Christ—who offered himself as *the* Sacrifice (capital “S”)—we not only have the penalty for sin removed, but we are also *being made into acceptable sacrifices ourselves* by faith. The promise is that if we by faith offer ourselves to the Father through Christ in the Spirit we will become what we are meant to become as men and women re-made in the image of God.

Interestingly enough, in addition to the three “steps” taken by (or “operations” performed on) each sacrificial animal, there were also three types of sacrifices that were part of the normal tabernacle/temple liturgy of Old Testament worship: a purification offering, an ascension (or whole burnt) offering, and a fellowship (or peace offering). The inauguration of the priesthood of Aaron in Leviticus 9 shows us the order in which each of these sacrifices were offered in the tabernacle liturgy. Each specific type of sacrifice highlights one of the three major operations:

(1) **The Purification offering** highlights and expands on the cleansing or purification dimension of sacrificial offerings. That's why it is called the *purification* offering. The act of the slaughter and the display of the blood is accented. For example, Lev. 17 (the day of atonement) is an elaborate purification offering where the act of confession and forgiveness is highlighted. The other two aspects are there, but downplayed.

(2) **The Ascension Offering** expands on the element of *consecration* and *ascension* of the animal/worshiper into God's presence. That's why it is named '*olah*' (Hebrew for “ascension”). The offering is caused to ascend. That is why the ascension offering highlights the acts of skinning, cutting up, washing, and then the transformation of the entire representative animal by fire and its incorporation into the cloud of God's special presence at the tabernacle.

(3) **The Communion Offering** expands on the element of union and *communion* with God which is present in all the sacrifices, but highlighted in this offering. The food aspect of sacrifice is emphasized. In the communion offering fellowship and peace with

God are not merely symbolized by the sacrifice being turned into smoke and assimilated into the glory cloud. Here fellowship with God is communicated by means of a common meal. There is cleansing and consecration, but the focus in this offering is on the communal meal that the worshiper enjoys with Yahweh, the priests, and his family by means of the sacrifice.

Furthermore, these three types of sacrifices are always offered in the same order: sin offering (cleansing), ascension offering (consecration), and fellowship offering (communion meal). Thus, we have *revealed* an order or liturgy of approach to God not only in each individual sacrifice, but the same path is manifest in the liturgical order by which the three ordinary sacrifices were regularly offered.

Another biblical way to think about these three steps in the service is to consider God's three ways of serving us or God's three gifts given to us on the Lord's Day. These are his gifts of glory, wisdom, and life. They correspond to the three hidden gifts locked away in the Tabernacle's Most Holy Place: Aaron's rod with almond blossoms (glory), a copy of the Torah (wisdom), and a pot of manna (life). What was hidden in the Old Testament is now revealed in Christ (Exod. 16:31-34; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26; 2:3; Heb. 9:3-4; Rev. 2:17). He is the final and faithful high priest (the greater Aaron). He is the Word of God incarnate (the true wisdom of God). And Jesus is the heavenly manna, the bread of life come down from heaven to give life to the world. These three gifts correspond with the three ways in which God serves us as he draws us along the sacrificial pathway into his presence.

During the first stage of the service God reconstitutes us in our personal, covenantal relationship with him. We are granted the gift of the forgiveness of sins and the clothing of the righteousness of Christ. We receive from God a renewal of our standing in his presence. We are fully restored as priests in Christ who have the authority to come boldly into the Father's presence by the Spirit. This corresponds to the first operation performed on the sacrificial animal—he is executed and his blood must soak the altar from top to bottom, thus opening the door in heaven from God to man. It also correlates with the "sin (or purification) offering," which is the *first* sacrifice when all three of the normal sacrifices are offered. Blood must be shed. The animal (worshiper) must die. The blood must then be applied on the altar (the way of ascent into God's presence) from top to bottom. The presence of the blood opens up a pathway into God's holy presence. No one dare come into God's presence without confessing their sins and re-appropriating the efficacy of the shed blood of Christ. There is no sanctuary access without confession and forgiveness.

Secondly, God speaks to us from his Word as the pastor explains and applies the Bible. Listening to the Word of God, we hear the Spirit's guidance for our lives. The double-edged sword of the Word chops us up and rearranges us as living sacrifices (Lev. 1:6). The sword of the priest, which earlier had executed the animal, now serves to prepare him for his transformation into fire on the altar. The sword and the fire on the altar do not destroy, but transform. The judgment has been rendered by the knife when the animal was killed. The fact that more happens to the animal than merely his death tells us that from that point on the animal is being made fit for God's presence. The final operation is performed when the

animal is transformed into smoke on top of the altar and is transported into God's glory-cloud presence. The New Testament makes clear that the transforming sword of God is the Word which the fiery Spirit uses to transfigure Christ's people (Heb. 4:12). The sermon occupies the major place in this second step of sacrificial worship. We should note that the tribute or meal (grain) offering, which symbolizes the offering of the worshiper's work, is placed on top of the animal sacrifice just as it is being turned into smoke. This corresponds to the collection of tithes and offerings from the people after the sermon.

The third and climactic step in the sacrificial/covenantal renewal liturgy is the Lord's Supper. In the Old Covenant this was symbolized when the animal is turned into smoke, ascends, and is assimilated into God's glory cloud, which corresponds to the worshiper's being drawn into the nearest possible relation to God. This union with God may also be seen in the third and last sacrifice offered in the liturgical sacrificial sequence—the fellowship/peace offering. There can be no more intimate symbol of the close fellowship of God and man than the covenant meal. From Genesis to Revelation the meal remains the preeminent symbol of God's intimate love and presence with mankind in Christ. God and man are at one (atonement) and at peace around the table. In our order of worship once the congregation has received the forgiveness of sins and experienced the transforming ministry of the Word of God, then the Lord provides them with the assurance of peace—a covenantal memorial meal. Sacrifices are “food” (Lit. “bread” in Hebrew) for God (Lev. 3:11, 16; 21:6; Num 28:2; and in Lev. 6:10 the fire is said to “eat” the sacrifice), which means that the Lord delights in those whom he draws near. God does not *need* food (Ps. 50:7-15), but he takes pleasure in “tasting” his people. Being eaten is symbolic for being incorporated into fellowship with God.

Based on this analysis, we can now offer a synopsis of the service. The congregation will be served by God as they move from prostration (confessional obeisance in response to being called into God's presence) to standing (praise for God's renewed forgiveness) to sitting (in order to hear the Word) to reclining at the Table (to enjoy table fellowship with God). The basic three-fold pattern of God's service to us may be outlined as follows:

God Cleanses Us
 God Consecrates Us by Teaching Us
 God Communes With Us

Our response to God's work (our service to him) corresponds to his service to us and gives us this three-fold sequence:

We Confess Our Sins
 We Respond in Prayer and Offering
 We Feed on Jesus.

If we put this all together and include the call to worship at the beginning and the blessing or commissioning of God at the end, then we have the following five-fold order of sacrificial or covenant renewal worship:

God Calls Us
 We Gather Together and Praise Him
 God Cleanses Us
 We Confess Our Sins
 God Consecrates Us
 We Respond in Prayer and Offering
 God Communes With Us
 We Eat God's Food
 God Commissions (Blesses) Us
 We March Out to Serve God

The liturgy moves from tension to rest, from mourning to joy. God calls us together, cleans us up, tells us how to live, fuels us for service in his kingdom, and sends us forth. We strip off our soiled garments, are washed clean by the blood of Christ, are given white robes of holiness, wedding garments of glory for the meal, and finally, as a result of our worship, we are fitted out with armor to carry out our mission in the world. This is what happens to us in sacrificial, covenant renewal worship.

The Biblical *Form* of The Divine Service

Day and night they never stop saying: Holy, Holy, Holy. . . —Revelation 4:8

I must pause to defend the corporate nature of our liturgy, specifically the use of coordinated, congregational prayer in our service. I am referring to the responses and prayers that we recite together. My goal in this section is to discuss and defend the use of set or fixed congregational prayers—that is, printed prayers prayed in unison by the congregation. The question I want to answer in this section is a very common one: Why does the congregation often use printed, pre-composed prayers? I thought spontaneous, free prayer was more spiritual?

The Heavenly Pattern

Jesus taught us to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). He thereby established heaven as the pattern for what is done on earth. (Actually, this pattern is symbolized in many places in the Old Testament, beginning in Genesis 1:1-2.) This is especially the case with regard to the church’s worship. Surely the manner in which worship is conducted in heaven functions as a model for the church on earth. When the Apostle John was privileged to observe heavenly worship, as he records for us in the Revelation, he saw an *orderly, formal service* performed by angels, living beings, and the twenty-four elders (the precise identity of each of these beings is not our concern here). They repeated various rituals and ritual responses (Rev. 4:9-11). They alternated responses antiphonally (Rev. 5:11-14). They sang hymns in unison (Rev. 5:9). They fell down *together* (no doubt, a prearranged liturgical action), and they jointly recited prayers of praise and thanksgiving that must have been *pre-composed* and *memorized*. How else would they

have all prayed (or sung) *simultaneously*? Here, then, we have a *biblical* model for corporate Lord's Day prayer in our worship services.

An Unwarranted Assumption

Consider the manner in which the question about pre-composed prayers is often asked. Even though the question is often put in these terms: why does the congregation *read* these prayers?—as if they were *merely* reading them—it is important to note that the congregation does *not* merely read these prayers, they *pray* them. One could just as well question the manner of praying at another church where the pastor does all the praying from the pulpit: why does that congregation merely *listen* to the pastor pray throughout the service? That would not be fair. The very way in which the question is put prejudices the case from the outset. Presumably, a congregation is able to pray *with* the pastor while he prays. The same ought to be true when the congregation *recites* prayers. Certainly the congregation is able to do more than *merely* recite these prayers. They can make the written prayer their own. They can pray sincerely. In fact, I believe, practically speaking, that it is easier to pray sincerely when one actually takes up a written prayer on one's lips, than when one merely listens to another person pray. Surely it is much easier to daydream when one is *listening*—eyes closed—to another pray than when one concentrates on *praying* a printed prayer.

The Road To Rome or Canterbury?

Isn't this the kind of thing Roman Catholics do? There is a tendency in our circles to jump to conclusions about whether a liturgical practice is Romanism or Episcopalian. Let me give you an example of how quick we are to jump to the wrong conclusions. I was approached once after a service by a worshiper who was sure that we had lapsed into Catholicism because we had prayed for the dead in our service. Actually, the prayer did not explicitly mention "the dead"; rather, it was a prayer of thanksgiving in *remembrance* of those who have died. The exact wording of the petition is as follows:

Minister: We remember with thanksgiving those who have loved and served You in Your church on earth, who now rest from their labors (especially those most dear to us, whom we name in our hearts before You). Keep us in fellowship with all Your saints, and bring us at length to the joy of Your heavenly kingdom;

People: We ask You to hear us, good Lord.

Read the petition carefully. Notice that this prayer is not a prayer *for* the dead. We are not asking God to do something for the dead. We are not praying for their release from purgatory or for a second chance. In this petition we are giving thanks for the faithful Christians whom we have known and from whom we have learned so much. We are thanking God for their love and faithfulness. We are thanking God for godly parents and relatives, who have meant so much to us, who have now gone to be with Christ. We are thanking God for departed teachers, elders, pastors, etc. who have been a positive example to

us of the Christian life. We are giving thanks to God for the exemplary lives of the great saints of the past. And finally, we are petitioning God to give us the grace to follow their example of faith and perseverance. We pray the same thing when we sing hymn #489: “O God to us may grace be given to follow in their train” (*Trinity Hymnal*). When properly understood, then, this is a very appropriate and powerful prayer. It is not the kind of petition that we might spontaneously offer. Thus, it serves as an excellent example of the principle I have explained above. There are many ways to express this petition. Here is another example from the older Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship* (1946):

O Lord God, the Light of the faithful, the Strength of those who labor, and the Repose of the blessed dead: We give Thee thanks for all Thy saints who have witnessed in their lives a good confession, for all the faithful departed, and for those dear to our hearts who have entered into rest. . . . Grant us grace so as to follow their good example, that we may be one with them in spirit, and, at last, together with them, be made partakers of Thine eternal kingdom; Through Jesus Christ our Lord . . .

Back to the objection: all this talk about responses and printed prayers seems more Episcopal, Lutheran, and Catholic than Presbyterian. Yes, Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians practice similar forms in their worship services. So what? Does that make it wrong? Roman Catholics and Episcopalians kneel for prayer; does that make kneeling dangerous or wrong? I always chuckle a little inside whenever I call the congregation to worship on Sunday morning using Psalm 95: 6, “Oh, come let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the Lord our maker.” And then, what do we do *after* I read these words? We stand up!/? Why don’t we kneel in worship like the Bible directs? I suspect that one of the reasons is that we are afraid that we might look like Roman Catholics or Episcopalians. As far as I’m concerned, that’s a pitiful reason for not obeying the Bible.

Of course, we would need kneelers in our pews to kneel for prayer. During the confession of sin the congregation *ought* to be on their knees, but, alas, our tradition has largely ignored the need for kneelers because it has failed to guard and pass on the traditional Christian teaching and practice regarding the importance of bodily posture throughout the entire worship service. I have heard people say that God is not interested in the posture of our bodies, but only the attitude of our hearts. Well, that’s not exactly what the Bible says. There are too many references in the Bible to outward bodily postures in worship to dismiss kneeling as mere formalism.

What most people fail to recognize is that one’s bodily posture will both express as well as help establish the posture of one’s heart. When we are humbled, we hang our heads. When we are joyful, our arms and head fly up and we begin to move. More often than not, the reason most American Protestants don’t kneel in worship is not because they are too humble, but too proud. It is all too convenient for us to keep to ourselves and not reveal our true selves in such bodily postures. This is pride. After citing numerous biblical references, Robert S. Rayburn notes,

. . . the position of the body is itself an act of worship. When you kneel or stand because you are in the presence of the Almighty and are to speak to him, you are honoring him with your entire self, with your soul and body together expressing reverence. In Holy Scripture, whenever men or women came face to face with God, they always immediately and instinctively assumed postures which were appropriate for a creature and a sinner before the living God. . . If we are really worshiping God as his children, then we are to worship him not with half ourselves but with our whole selves and our bodies ought to be as involved as our souls. . . This was the feeling of the church in the days of the Reformation. A failure to take proper positions of body in the church was regarded as an act of irreverence” (“Worship and the Whole Man,” *The Second Annual Conference on Worship: The Theology and Music of Reformed Worship, February 23-25, 1996* [Nashville, TN: Covenant Presbyterian Church, 1996], pp. 42, 43).

Rayburn then quotes from the *Book of Discipline of the French Reformed Church* (1559):

That great irreverence which is found in divers persons, who at public and private prayers do neither uncover their heads nor bow their knees shall be reformed; which is a matter repugnant unto piety, and giveth suspicion of pride, and scandalizes them that fear God. Wherefore all pastors shall be advised, as also elders and heads of families, carefully to oversee, that in time of prayer all persons, without exception do evidence by these exterior signs the inward humility of their hearts and homage which they yield to God; unless anyone be hindered from doing so by sickness or otherwise” (Chapt. 10, Art. 1).

Reformation churches knelt for prayer. It would have been hard for them to conceive of any other posture for prayer (besides standing, of course). Nobody sat for prayer. Calvin and Luther would have been baffled at our arrogant refusal to practice what the Bible instructs merely to avoid being identified with another branch of the church, however wrong that church may be about other doctrinal matters.

The fact that Catholics and Episcopalians practice congregational and responsive praying and kneeling might make such practices suspicious in our eyes, but we must be careful not to define how we ought to worship primarily in reaction to what Rome or Canterbury does. We might very well end up throwing out the baby with the bath water, which has been done all too often in the history of Protestant worship. It may be helpful to review briefly the liturgical renewal of the sixteenth century Reformation and the rationale behind it.

The Reformation and the Priesthood of All Believers

One of the central intentions of the sixteenth century Reformers remains virtually unknown in many of our churches today. The reformers to a man, especially Luther and Calvin, sought to correct the late medieval distortions of worship by restoring *congregational participation*. The late medieval mass was hardly a *congregational* worship service at all. The service was said in Latin, which very few laymen understood. There was

virtually no congregational participation in the service beyond *watching* the visual “performance” by the priest at the altar. The bread, (supposedly) transformed into Christ’s real body, held up for the people to adore, was the climax of the mass. The people almost never partook of the Communion elements; only the priest ate and drank. There were no congregational prayers or singing or recitation of the creeds. The congregation merely watched and listened. They were largely passive. As *individuals* they may have performed private devotions completely independent of what the priest was doing up front, but as a *community* they did not participate in the liturgy.

To the Reformers this was a gross distortion of biblical and early church (second-third century) worship practices. One of their greatest achievements was to restore intelligent, unified participation by the body of Christ in worship. They transformed the people from uncomprehending observers of the worship of the sacrificing priests into an active royal priesthood. Calvin, echoing the early church fathers, insisted that “each Christian bears the exalted title of sacrificer,” and therefore has a rightful place in the *offering* of praise and prayer in the liturgy. It is not the priest alone who has access into the heavenly sanctuary, but rather every member of the body of Christ has heavenly access into God’s throne room on the Lord’s Day. In the New Covenant there are no degrees of nearness (as there were in the Old Covenant), but every worshiper is a “saint,” that is, one who has *sanctuary* access.

This, of course, is the great Reformation principle of the *priesthood of all believers*. The principle manifestation and evidence of the reality of this fundamental truth takes place during corporate worship as the whole congregation *participates* in offering to God prayer and praise. The congregation prays, praises, and communes with God. The pastor does not worship *for* them as a proxy; the people worship as the pastor *leads* them. What this means is that the priesthood of all believers demands a corporate liturgy!

Thus, the Reformers restored many of the pre-medieval practices of the post-Apostolic church. They intentionally sought to recover what has been called “Old Catholic” forms of worship while bypassing the distortions of medieval *Roman Catholic* liturgical rites. The Reformers restored frequent Communion. They all sought to reintroduce *weekly* Communion at every Lord’s Day worship service. They all effectively revived preaching and teaching so that the people could be instructed by God’s Word every week. They all brought the recitation of the creeds by the congregation back into the worship service. They all rediscovered the inspired Psalms as the prayer and hymn book of the Church.

Moreover, congregational singing was resurrected and became one of the hallmarks of Reformation worship. Calvin discusses music and singing under the heading of *prayer*. The people were taught to sing the Psalms in corporate worship, since the Psalter is the *prayer book* of the Bible. All the Reformers wrote model liturgies and prayers for use in the churches. This revival of congregational prayer was based squarely on the priesthood of all believers, which demanded that the people *participate* in the prayers and not just *listen* to them. In fact, the liturgies of the Reformers, Calvin included, were much more fixed than we modern Americans would feel comfortable with. The point I am trying to make here, though, is that congregational praying of pre-composed prayers, either spoken or sung, has

a long and venerable history in Reformation churches and ought not to be jettisoned merely because they are not familiar forms to twentieth century American Presbyterians.

Exposing an Absurd Objection

Back to the main issue. What about pre-composed prayers recited by the congregation? I often hear a complaint that runs like this: “How can I pray what someone else wrote? These words are being *forced* on me. They are not coming from my heart and so I should not be made to pray them. I am against all forms of liturgies that are imposed on the congregation. They put the Spirit in a straight jacket.” This kind of objection is often sincere and well meaning, but (to be frank) it is easily reduced to absurdity.

If the only prayer that a participant in the congregation can pray during a worship service is one which comes spontaneously from the individual worshiper’s heart, then, first of all, *congregational* worship as such is ruled out. *People must do things together in congregational worship.* The people of God gather *together* as a *community*, to offer unified prayer and praise to the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. If all prearranged liturgies and prayers *per se* are impositions on the individual worshiper’s freedom, then the only thing left is for everyone to gather and worship the Lord spontaneously as individuals. (This radical “free” worship is fundamental to Quaker worship.) But even then you run into trouble. If worship must be free in the sense that no external forms are allowed whatsoever, then no one, not the pastor, nor anyone in the congregation could ever be allowed to impose *any* form on *anyone* in the congregation, except possibly if a unanimous vote was taken each time a suggestion was made. To press a little more, *someone* would have to determine the *time* to begin the service and this would be an artificially imposed regulation that would shackle the Spirit’s freedom. Some people may not be ready to worship at 9:00 A.M.! Why restrict their freedom in the Spirit?

We must be clear on this point. If one objects to pre-composed prayers because one believes they unnecessarily bind the conscience of the believer to a particular form, then logically one must also reject all hymns, all prayers spoken by the pastor, and, indeed, any *order* of service whatsoever. If pre-composed spoken prayers are a hindrance to the spontaneity of the Spirit, then so are pre-composed *sung* prayers—hymns! After all, hymns are prayers—pre-composed prayers. Singing is just a heightened form of speech—glorified and beautified speech. Not many people ever really think clearly about this. There is really no fundamental difference between a congregational prayer *recited* in unison by the people and one that is *sung* in unison by the people. Make no mistake about it, hymns are pre-composed prayers of praise or petition written (usually) by someone outside of the congregation and “imposed” on the people by whoever prepares the bulletin. These hymns (to continue our *reductio ad absurdum* argument) then become an imposed, alien form which stifles the freedom of the Spirit and hinders all heartfelt spontaneity. Logically, as I indicated above, one would also be forced to reject all prayers by the pastor as well, since the pastor’s prayers are nothing but an external form of prayer imposed on the congregation. I think you get the point now. Formal prayer is not necessarily the same as *formalism*.

Corporate Prayer in the Bible

Pre-composed prayers are Biblical. This practice is not merely some leftover from Roman Catholicism. Our use of set prayers is very self-conscious. The historical church got the idea from the Bible, particularly the Psalms and the book of Revelation, but not exclusively so. The Old Testament is filled with examples of how the saints used set forms of prayer to confess and praise God (Ezra 3:10; Neh. 12:24; Psalm 136). David appointed Levites to compose prayers and songs to be used in the corporate worship of Israel (I Chron. 6:31-48; 15:16-24; 16:4-6; 25:1-5). These prayers and songs were then preserved for corporate use by the Israelites during their weekly and annual worship services (Lev. 23). Moved by the Holy Spirit, David himself composed prayers for corporate and individual use (I Chron. 16:7). Do not miss my point. The *Holy Spirit* moved David to compose and preserve for posterity a corporate prayer book for the saints. David in his Spirit-guided wisdom appointed Spirit-filled men to compose a song book/prayer book for the people to aid them in their public as well as private worship.

The Psalm titles, contents, and structure all witness to the fact that they were used primarily by the community of faith in corporate worship. Just scanning through the Psalms one finds that many of them begin with words like “A Psalm for the Sabbath Day” (Ps. 92) or “To the Chief Musician: A Psalm of the sons of Korah” (Ps. 47). The *content* of many of the Psalms also witnesses to their intended use in public worship: hymns of praise (Ps. 95, 145-150), community confessions (Ps. 78, 105, 106, 135), and Psalms to be sung as the people ascend to Jerusalem for worship (Ps. 120-134).

Notice the many references to *specific postures* of worship within the Psalms (Ps. 5:7, Ps. 63:2-3, Ps. 95: 6, “O come let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker”). Even the *very structure* of the poetry supports its appropriateness for responsive and antiphonal recitation and singing in worship. They were written for congregational recitation and singing. Their structure testifies to the fact that the Spirit composed them to be recited and sung responsively or antiphonally in congregational worship (Neh. 12:24). Psalm 136 is an obvious example, cast as it is in the form of a litany.

So, when we use the Psalms in worship, whether we are reciting them in unison, reciting them antiphonally or responsively, or whether we are praying them by singing them, by so doing we are following God’s appointed forms of worship. Furthermore, when we include in the service Psalm-like prayers to be said by the congregation in unison, we are seeking to follow biblical guidelines that enable the congregation to *participate together* as a community in the *activity* of worshipping the Lord.

These kinds of prayers also help to guide and *train* the congregation in the art of biblical praying. We do not “naturally” know *how* to pray. The fact that one is a Christian does not guarantee that he will know how to pray. There is a silly myth that goes pretty much unchallenged in American Evangelicalism—that worship comes “naturally.” As someone has nicely put it: “Christians have to be taught everything from how to study the Bible to how to love their wives, husbands, and children. But when it comes to worship,

evangelicals are nervous about someone teaching them prayers, chants, and even a ‘set form of worship.’ Worship is supposedly the one thing that every living, breathing Christian automatically does the right way.” This is a myth, a dangerous myth. When I look at the Bible I see all kinds of instruction and forms given to help us learn *how* to approach the King of Kings properly. Coming into God’s presence is different from anything else we do, and it is one of the most difficult activities we do.

Consider again what we discover when we look into *heaven* and see how worship is conducted there. Lo and behold, we hear prayers spoken or sung *in unison* by great throngs of people and angels (Rev. 4 &5). Notice that heavenly worship is conducted with set prayers and responses. How else would they all know what to say and when to say it? In heaven the saints triumphant pray responsively and antiphonally in concert with the angels. Remember that Jesus taught us to pray “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Earthly congregational praying ought to be modeled on heavenly congregational praying!

The Usefulness of Congregational Prayers

Finally, summing up our argument so far, pre-composed, congregational prayers are a very valuable aid to worship. How so? First, we don’t know how to pray, and pre-composed prayers can help train our minds to pray biblically. Good prayers guide us and assist us in composing our own prayers, both with respect to content and structure. Almost all the phrases from all the prayers that we use in our worship come right out of the Bible. Thus, ultimately, we are praying God’s Word. There *are* biblical ways to pray, and these pre-composed prayers, used consistently, will help you *learn* how to pray. Surely that’s the reason why so many prayers are recorded for us in the Bible. These prayers offer the worshiper guidance and direction, oftentimes by utilizing the language and structure (order of prayer) lifted right from the Bible itself.

Second, prayers sung or said in unison manifest the *unity of the church* in prayer. We all pray *together* as the corporate body of Christ, not just as a bunch of individuals. Corporate worship is not designed merely as an aid to each individual’s devotions. We don’t come into church to worship merely as individuals with our own private tubes to God. We come together as the body of Christ, and as the body of Christ we confess our sins, pray, and praise God together. The Spirit re-creates us into a community.

Third, printed prayers insure congregational participation in the prayers. Remember worship ought not to be something you come to watch or hear, rather you come to perform worship yourself. Think about this: it is very difficult to get distracted when you are saying a prayer out loud. It is hard to do anything else but pray the prayer. A set prayer insures your participation and guards against your mind wandering.

Now, of course, *someone could merely read the prayer*. It is possible that a recited prayer could become *rote* (= a reading mechanically recited from memory without understanding). This kind of routine, rote reading of prayers would happen much more readily if we used the *same* prayers over and over again; but we don’t. We vary the

prayers from Sunday to Sunday. In fact, there is very little danger of mechanical, unthinking routine—*rote* recitation in our church. Not only do we occasionally vary the printed prayers we use, we are even careful not to use pre-composed prayers every Sunday! Nevertheless, when everything is said and done, I submit to you that it is much more difficult for your mind to wander when your attention is focused on *reading* and *saying* a prayer that you are holding in front of you than it is when you have your eyes closed and are merely listening to the pastor pray. Let's face it—most people find it very difficult to concentrate on praying when someone else is saying a long prayer.

Fourth, no church can avoid prayer rituals altogether. You either have *good* prayer rituals or you have *bad* ones, helpful or dangerous ones, but it is impossible to be free from all *forms* in a church's corporate prayer life. Congregations that never use prayer books or set prayers, nevertheless, *do* develop, sometimes unknowingly (which is unfortunate), certain habits with respect to praying. You know very well what happens when there is no guidance or direction to the prayers. Prayers become tedious: "I *just* want to thank you, Lord. . . and I *just* want to ask. . . and I *just* want. . ." Or they become trivial and down right silly: "O Lord, help us to *be all that we can be*" (the *Army Prayer*) or "Lord, help us to *reach out and touch somebody* this week" (the *AT&T prayer*).

Now, of course, we are not obliged to use all kinds of pretentious words and grandiose phrases in order for our prayers to be acceptable to God. I'm not trying to put down anyone's prayer merely because it is not as well structured and manicured as someone else's. God is pleased with the meager and unsophisticated prayers of his people, just as he is pleased with a young child's. But—and here's the important point—if the child never grows up and learns how to pray biblically, if the *content* of his prayers remain the same, then it is not so cute anymore. God may be *pleased* with a childlike prayer, but he is not *satisfied* with it either. He expects us to grow up and learn how to pray like adults, to conform our prayers more and more to the models He has given us in the Scriptures.

Some churches never get beyond praying for sick people and saying grace at the table. That's fine as far as it goes, but have you ever noticed that the Bible does not contain a whole lot of prayers for sick people and pretty much assumes that we know how to give thanks for our food? Again, I'm not talking here about a fancy, flowing style. My concern centers on the *content* of the prayers: confession of sin; thanking God for creation and providence; thanking God for the person and work of Christ; praying for strength in the midst of temptation; praying that His kingdom would be protected from all its enemies and extended throughout the world. These are petitions that do not come "naturally" to us. We need to be trained. Printed, set prayers help to discipline and educate us. They help us to grow up and pray like mature Christians.

PART II

The Lord's Service Explained

God never frustrated his worshipers, but ever received them graciously, provided they came to him in sincerity.

— John Calvin

G. K. Chesterton once said, “As is common in most modern discussions the unmentionable thing is the pivot of the whole discussion.” The unmentionable thing in discussions of Reformed worship is “liturgy.” I have broken the verbal taboo numerous times already in this book. One of my seminary professors, the late Dr. Robert G. Rayburn, never tired of reminding us that *every church* has a *liturgy*. Not every church uses the *word* “liturgy,” but every church *orders* its worship service according to some rationale. It is impossible not to have an *order* of service. Even if the order is not well thought out or is insufficiently prepared beforehand by the pastor, some order of worship will prevail during the Sunday morning worship hour.

Unfortunately, many American Protestant churches, in their zeal to abandon anything that smacks of Roman Catholicism with its formalism and fixed liturgies, end up with a haphazardly thrown together worship service that consists of various elements dropped into the program here and there without any biblical rationale. Sometimes practical reasons are given for such a random “order.” A hymn follows a prayer because the congregation needs to stand up and stretch after sitting for a while. A solo follows a Scripture reading just to add some variety to the service. Ordinarily spontaneity is elevated as more “spiritual” than pre-planned arrangements. Whatever the case may be, the one thing that is too often missing is any biblical/theological reflection on *how the church ought to approach the living God*.

I have heard our form of worship contemptuously described as “worship by recipe,” a reference to our practice of following a basic order and our repeated, but not slavish, use of various printed prayers, confessions, and other congregational recitations within the service. I have to ask: what’s wrong with recipes? A recipe is “a set of directions with a list of ingredients for making or preparing something” or “a formula for or means to a desired end.” Is having a “recipe” for worship something *bad*? I doubt that anyone prefers to eat dinners that are *not* made according to a recipe? No doubt some of our favorite dishes are very thoughtfully prepared and carefully cooked according to detailed recipes. Does anyone really want their chef (or wife or husband) to *spontaneously* prepare and cook their meal? The only way this would work is if the cook had, through extensive experience, internalized the “rules” for cooking. Every meal is the product of some recipe just as every worship service will inevitably follow some order or liturgy.

I question the wisdom of not having consistently recurring patterns in our Sunday morning service. C. S. Lewis called the constant itch for novelty in worship the “liturgical fidget.” Repeatedly changing the form and content of the Sunday service is actually an obstacle to worship. Lewis says that a worship service “is a structure of acts and words through which we receive a sacrament, or repent, or supplicate, or adore.” Just as one must “know” the steps in order to dance, so also one needs to be thoroughly at home with the liturgical form in order to perform the action that the form is meant to enable! “As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you are not dancing, but only learning to dance.” In the same way, if the worshiper is confronted with novelties in the service, she will be distracted from the very *point* of the service. The best liturgy “would be one we were almost unaware of; our attention would have been on God. But every novelty prevents this. It fixes our attention on the service itself; and thinking about worship is a different thing from worshipping.” Lewis concludes with a call for “permanence and uniformity” in the Sunday service, explaining that he could “make do with almost any kind of service whatever if only it would stay put. But if each form is snatched away just when I am beginning to feel at home in it, then I can never make any progress in the art of worship. You give me no chance to acquire the trained habit” (C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcom: Chiefly on Prayer* [New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964], pp. 4-5).

The real question is not *whether* but *what kind* of established liturgy (or recipe, if you prefer) does the congregation follow. Is it a *good* liturgy? Which is to say, is the liturgy self-consciously biblical in form and content? Since, as we have seen, the liturgy is chiefly God’s service to us, we must first inquire of any “liturgy”: does this liturgical order and content embody *God’s service* to his assembled church? Is this the biblical way in which God draws his people close to himself by way of sacrifice, weekly renewing his covenantal love for them? And because worship also consists in the congregation’s active praise before God, the second question we ask is: does this order and content of worship enable the congregation to *respond* to God’s gracious service, gratefully giving back to God worship and praise that is pleasing to him?

Here, then, is a good rough-and-ready definition of liturgy: *the orderly, biblical way in which the congregation is drawn into God’s majestic, life-giving presence.* As we have seen, the biblical way is the way of sacrifice and the purpose is covenant renewal. God has informed us in Scripture concerning the manner in which he serves his people and his people serve him on the Lord’s Day, and we must be very careful to follow his guidance. The movement of the worship service corresponds to our movement into God’s presence, or better, the order corresponds to the way in which God draws us into his presence. The Bible reveals how God graciously draws men and women into his loving fellowship and this sacrificial “order” or “way” by which God brings us near and renews his covenant informs the order of our corporate service on the Lord’s Day. This *order of approach*, this *movement into God’s presence* is what we call the “liturgy” or in our case the “Morning Service.”

Our Sunday morning service follows a similar order and pattern each week. Each element of the service is briefly explained below, with special attention given to its place in

the overall order of worship. The titles given to the various elements below are not always exactly the way they appear in the Sunday bulletin, but the *substance* of each of the elements and their relative *order* remain regularly constant, with a few noted exceptions.

Before the Service Begins

Only one thing is needed. . . — Luke 10:42

Make every effort to *prepare* yourself and your family for the worship service. Many people act as if it is sufficient to strut into God's presence with an attitude like this: "Hey, God! How's it going? Here's a few bucks. Have a nice day!" Such an attitude often permeates modern laid-back, trendy worship services. No preparation is required, so none is made. No preparation is required because the worshiper often doesn't really *do* much of anything. He is a spectator, a part of the *audience*. With our understanding of worship, however, preparation is necessary. What we experience as a congregation on the Lord's Day should not be confused with our other, normal activities. This is the special time that the Lord has set aside. We ought to follow the example of Mary and not of her harried sister Martha. Jesus commends Mary when she ceases from her normal work and prepares herself by sitting at Jesus feet in order to attentively listen to him: "Mary has chosen what is needful, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:42).

Prayer of Preparation. Steel yourself against the wicked temperament illustrated above. Stop a moment and pray on Saturday night that God would put you in the proper frame of mind in the morning to worship Him. Go to bed early enough to provide a good night's rest. Give yourself enough time in the morning before you have to rush out the door. You might even make the atmosphere different on Sunday morning for the family by playing some appropriate music on the stereo. Sit down for a few minutes (don't overdo it, just a *few* minutes), open your Bible, read through a Psalm, and say a brief prayer out loud—something like this: "O Lord, enable me this morning to worship you sincerely and in truth. Help me, Father, to receive again your gracious service to me in the Word and Sacraments. Assist me also so that I can give to you the kind of praise and adoration appropriate to the One who loved me, sent his Son to die for me, and continues to provide all things for me. Amen."

Be on time. Now, of course, there are Sundays when something goes wrong at home and we are providentially hindered from arriving on time. The Lord knows and understands when things happen that are out of our control. But the Lord is not amused when, for no good reason, you stroll into his Majestic Presence after everyone else has properly approached him in prayer and confession. Dare we saunter into the worship service after the confession of sin? Is it not pure presumption to imagine that God will be pleased with this kind of carelessness? If any important *human* official were to invite you to a special meeting, surely you would try your best to be on time! You wouldn't want to walk in late to a meeting with the President or the Mayor, would you? Why, then, when the King of the universe summons you into *his* presence, do you treat it so casually? Do you *really* think that God is meeting with you on Sunday morning?

The Prelude. When the piano or organ starts to play, this is the signal that you should take your seat, quiet your children, stop all conversations, and engage in silent prayer and/or meditation. An appropriate Scripture meditation is provided at the top of each morning service in your bulletin. Take advantage of these guides for preparation. Normally the Scripture meditation is connected with the call to worship so that you can again remember and reflect upon your momentary entrance into heaven itself, into the very presence of the Lord of the universe.

Announcements. Announcements come before the beginning of the worship service *because they have nothing to do with public worship whatsoever.* Everything done after the call to worship is done for a reason and in its proper place. We should not simply stick things here and there in the service merely to get them done. I find mid-worship announcements such as committee reports, financial updates, and other sorts of ecclesiastical “news” items offensive and annoying since they have no legitimate function in the order of covenant renewal. More often than not, they function like commercial or advertisement breaks intruding into the flow of congregational worship (assuming that there is such a flow in the service). The announcements are important, but they have no proper place in the biblical order of worship.

Confession & Cleansing

The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin — 1 John 1:7

We have called the first step in God’s service to us Confession & Cleansing. Even though this name keeps up the alliteration of “C’s” (confession, consecration, & communion), one should not forget that our worship always begins with and presupposes *God’s* service to us. Our confession can only be a response elicited from us by the Lord’s gracious invitation and enabling presence. Thus God first calls us into his presence and his first service to us is that of cleansing us from the guilt of our sin. This first stage in our being drawn into God’s presence will bring us to the point where we are able to hear the instruction of God’s Word as he speaks to us through the Scripture readings and the sermon.

The Call to Worship

God himself calls us to worship. He *summons* us to assemble. We don’t decide to gather together and then ask Him to be present. This is the *Lord’s Day*. He commands us from heaven to enter into his presence, and we respond in obedience as the Spirit effectually enables us.

That we do in fact enter into God’s *special* presence in the midst of his gathered congregation must never be slighted or forgotten. True, God is present everywhere. But his omnipresence is not what I am referring to here. God has promised to be present with his people in a special sense when they gather on Sunday. The one who skips church for the golf course or shopping mall or state park may not argue from God’s omnipresence to

justify his not being in church. Sure, God is present on the golf course, just as he is present in hell. But this general presence of God doesn't do the people in hell much good. God is present in heaven and hell, but he is not present *in the same way* in each of these locations. That is the difference. Even if we cannot define it precisely, God is present in a special sense when his people gather as the church on the Lord's Day. He is present there *for us*. This is the place, the location where he gathers his people around the Word and Sacraments. He has promised to be there *for us* when his people gather. It is not so much that God was not present in, say, Damascus, when the pillar and fire led the people of Israel out of Egypt or when his presence filled the tabernacle upon its completion; rather, the Lord was at these appointed places in a special, life-giving way.

Similarly, it is not that God is absent from the food court in the mall on Sunday; rather, he has promised to be present in a special way, the way of salvation and blessing, at the Communion Table in church. He has not promised to be in the mall on Sunday *for you*. Actually, he may be present there *against you* so that you could very well experience his judgment and curse, rather than his promise of blessing, life, and salvation. Moreover, when we are in God's special presence every week, receiving from him his promise through his Word and Sacrament, we can go forth out of church into the world with the full assurance that God will be with us and for us wherever we may be during the week. Without being in the Lord's special presence we have no assurance of his omnipresent help in every situation and location. See Gen. 3:8; 4:16; Exod. 33:14-15; Deut. 4:37; Deut. 12:7, 18; 14:23, 26; 15:20; Judges 18:6; 2 Kings 13:23; 17:18-23; Matt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:18ff.; etc.

Returning to the call to worship, we must remember that God himself is graciously summoning us into his special presence. Even if we use one of the Psalms where the worshipers call each other into God's presence, the presupposition is that God is summoning us through the voice of another. That external voice will normally be that of the pastor (or an officiating elder or intern), but it also may come from the congregation itself. In either case, we respond to the call that comes from outside of us as the very voice of God. Typically the pastor utilizes some portion of God's Word (usually a passage from the Psalms) that contains a clear call to worship, authoritatively summoning the congregation into God's presence. Psalm 135: 1-3 is a good example of a passage that may be used as a call to worship: "Praise the LORD! Praise the name of the LORD; Praise Him, O you servants of the LORD! You who stand in the house of the LORD, in the courts of the house of our God. Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing praises to His name, for it is pleasant."

Our Response to God's Call to Worship

The Opening Hymn. This is the first of our responses to God's words and actions in the worship service. Remember, the entire service moves forward as God speaks and the congregation responds. It is something of a conversation between God and his church. God calls and we respond. God speaks and we listen. God gives and we receive. God acts and we thank Him. We say "amen" each time the Lord *speaks* to us or *acts* for us. The dialogue pattern is found throughout the Bible when men find themselves in God's

presence (Isa. 6:1-12; Jer. 1:4-8; Rev. 4-5, 19:5-10; etc.). It is the biblical way to approach God in worship. So, here, at the beginning of the service, the Lord calls us and we gather to praise him. This first hymn will usually highlight some aspect of the character and/or work of God thereby giving concrete form to the congregation's adoration and praise.

Choral Anthem. Since a choral anthem may be used here or almost anywhere else in the service, the function and placement of the choir calls for a comment or two at this point. There are a number of ways in which the choir can function within the service, but the most prominent is their bolstering congregational praise. Historically, choirs have stood to the side of (in a transept) and behind (in a loft) the congregation in order to sing in dialogue with the people (antiphonally, from the side) or strengthen and enable (from behind) their singing. More and more American evangelical churches are placing choirs in the front in order to “perform” and in effect “entertain” the congregation. Choir anthems and solos come across as “entertainment” not as supplementing and strengthening the congregation's praise to God. We have positioned our organ and choir in the back of the church in order to fortify the people's worship and keep the congregation's focus directed toward the Lord whom we are praising.

Our Initial Trinitarian Confession. The minister proclaims: “In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” To which the people respond with a hearty, “Amen!” Here we are carefully identifying ourselves and our worship as *Christian*. As baptized believers we bear the Name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is the God we worship. This is the God under whose authority and in whose presence we live and die. This is our Lord who serves us in worship; the one from whom we by faith are receptive to throughout the morning service. The Bible clearly admonishes the faithful: “whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. (Col. 3:17; also Eph. 2:18; 1 Cor. 12:3). The liturgy includes this right up front so as to insure that we remember that everything that happens in the service comes under the sign of our Three-Personed God. We solemnly and publicly call God and the world to witness that we are “gathered together” in his Name (Matt. 18:20) and in that Name alone we offer our prayers, praise, and thanksgiving (John 16:23).

Give careful consideration to the fundamentally trinitarian nature of our worship as a whole. We don't simply *say* the Name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the beginning of the service. Although I cannot very well be saying this at every turn in this book, nevertheless, my entire approach presupposes that *Christian* worship must be explicitly trinitarian in content and shape. James B. Torrance says it well, describing two views of worship:

A unitarian view that worship is what we, religious people, do to try to please God, and a trinitarian one, where worship is the gift of grace to participate through the Spirit in the incarnate Son's communion with the Father—the way of joy and peace and confidence. The church which takes her eyes off Jesus Christ, the only mediator in worship, is on the road to becoming apostate. There is no more urgent need in our churches today than to recover the trinitarian nature of grace—that it is by grace alone, through the gift of Jesus Christ in the Spirit that we can enter into and live a life of communion with God our Father” (*Worship, Community & the Triune God of Grace*)

[Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996], p. 59).

The Salutation. The salutation is a greeting, a salute. The pastor hails the congregation, “The Lord be with you!” and the people respond, “And also with you!” This Hebrew form of greeting and response arises out of the promise of Emmanuel, “God with us.” We see it in the book of Ruth. When Boaz arrives at work he greets his harvesters with “The LORD be with you,” and they respond, “The LORD bless you!” (Ruth 2:4). This was a common greeting exchanged between people in Israel. Even the Lord and his angels greet people in this way (Judges 6:12; Luke 1:28). In the New Testament it becomes common among Christians as well (John 20:19; cf. 2 Thess. 3:16; 2 Tim. 4:22). By the end of the third century it had become an almost universal practice in all of the liturgies of the churches. It was the greeting that signaled the beginning of the worship service.

Aside from the obvious fact that it is more dignified and reverent than “Hello” or “Good morning,” this salutation has a meaningful function in the inauguration of the worship service. When the minister says, “The Lord be with you,” he declares his intention to lead the people in worship: he desires and prays that the Lord would bless the congregation as they worship under his leadership. The minister acknowledges that he will be the instrument by which the Lord is present with and serves his people during the service. When the people respond, “And also with you,” they verbally affirm their pastor’s leadership as well as their desire to see him blessed as he performs his Pastoral office. The bond of trust and love between the pastor and the congregation having been renewed, the people are now ready to receive the Lord’s service and gifts as they are delivered to them through the instrumentality of their pastor. In addition to the receptivity of the congregation, the pastor himself should now be ready to become transparent as a vehicle of the Lord’s voice to his people.

Votum. The salutation is followed by the *votum*. *Votum* means “prayer” or “petition” in Latin. The votum is a short initial prayer expressing our need for the Lord’s help in order to worship him properly. The minister says, “Our help is in the name of the Lord,” and the people call back, “Who made heaven and earth.” These are the words of Psalm 124:8. By reciting this prayer at the beginning of the worship service we confess that without the Lord’s assistance we dare not enter his presence. We cannot genuinely worship God “in the flesh,” for without his enabling power all our worship is worthless (John 6:63; 15:5; Phil. 2:12, 13; 4:13). He himself is the one who “helps” us enter his presence.

Some may object to these weekly *rituals* (the trinitarian declaration, the salutation, and the votum). Surely, someone may object, saying the same thing over and over again may become rote and meaningless. Well, it *may*, but it doesn’t have to. We have not often thought very carefully about the place of ritual in our lives. Our tradition makes us suspicious of certain kinds of ritual. Some things strike us as too Catholic or Episcopal. All the while, without much serious reflection, we develop rituals of our own—rituals that remain unexamined theologically and biblically.

It might be helpful to note that repetition is not inherently bad. I say, “I love you” to

my wife over and over again without much variation. I kiss her the same way. Our family sits down to eat, going through the same rituals every night. I introduce myself and extend my hand for a handshake the same way as everyone else. These activities are not meaningless simply because they are repeated without much variation. Just the opposite. The uniformity and continuity of these repeated rituals provide stability, security, and structure to our lives. This is what living is all about. We inevitably dispose our lives ritually. Ritual repetition is evidence of life! G. K. Chesterton makes just this point:

The sun rises every morning. I do not rise every morning; but the variation is due not to my activity, but to my inaction. Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. The thing I mean can be seen, for instance, in children, when they find some game or joke that they specially enjoy. A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence, of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we. The repetition in nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical *encore*. Heaven may *encore* the bird who laid an egg (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* [New York: Image Books, 1959], pp. 60-61).

We move through life ceremonially. It is reoccurrence and repetition that make life worth living. If rituals like the salutation, vatum, or even the Lord's Supper become for us meaningless and boring, it is not the fault of ritual per se but of the one doing the ritual. I highly recommend reading Thomas Howard's refreshing treatment of the place of ritual in his *Chance or Dance? A Critique of Modern Secularism* (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1969).

Psalm of Remembrance. Here we may recite or sing a Psalm that reflects either on God's character or on his work in behalf of his people. Thus, we remember the person and work of our God right up front. We are brought face to face again with our Covenant Lord and God.

The Apostles' or Nicene Creed. It is also appropriate to confess our faith at this point in the service, thereby reciting aloud God's great covenantal acts in history, especially the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Reciting a creed at this point in the service is a proclamation which publicly identifies us as the church of Jesus Christ. The word "god" means all kinds of things to all kinds of people these days. Without an identifying creed, the world may be left wondering which god we worship and serve. The Apostles' and Nicene Creeds publicly proclaim that *this* is the God we worship—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We will tolerate no other gods before Him. We serve Him alone!

We will not waffle in our public confession. We will be clear, courageous, and precise in our confession of faith. The first commandment demands as much.

Moreover, the congregation should recite these creeds vigorously as confessions of *faith*. The first two words of these creeds are often dangerously misunderstood. These creeds begin with the words “I believe.” Unfortunately, in the minds of many Christians this assertion is basically equivalent to “I think” or “I am of the opinion.” Nothing could be more erroneous. The word “creed” comes from the Latin verb *credo*—the first word in the Latin creeds. The Greek translation of the creeds uses the word *pisteuo*, which is precisely the word that is used for “faith” in the New Testament (John 3:16, 36; Rom. 10:10).

Therefore, when you say, “I believe [*credo, pisteuo*] in God the Father Almighty,” you are not stating an opinion or even assenting to a doctrine; rather, you are confessing your personal *trust*, your *faith* in the Father Almighty. “I believe [*credo, pisteuo*]” is exactly equivalent to the language of *personal* trust used in the New Testament: “I believe in” or “I place my faith in” or “I trust in” (“Believe [*pisteuo*] on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household,” Acts 16:31). Both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds provide us with an opportunity to recite our trust in the Persons of the Trinity and their work on our behalf. We should enthusiastically and energetically proclaim our God’s gracious saving work for us in Christ!†

The *Te Deum*. Singing the *Te Deum* may substitute for a Psalm or Creed as a way of confessing our faith. The title comes from the first two words of this ancient Latin hymn: *Te Deum laudamus, te Dominum confitemur* (“We praise thee, O God; we acknowledge thee to be the Lord”). In this hymn we join with the angels, apostles, martyrs, departed saints, and the whole universal church to confess and praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Shamefully, this great hymn has fallen out of use in the modern church. It ought to be sung energetically with full conviction of faith!

In addition to all of this, the recitation of these Psalms, Creeds, and the *Te Deum* also reminds us of the rich heritage that has been entrusted to us. As we worship the Lord, we are united not only with each other at Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church, not only with all the orthodox Christians alive on earth at the moment, but we also have union with all the departed Old and New Testament saints in heaven, who worship God *with* us on the Lord’s Day. The Church of all ages has been united in her confession of the Psalms, the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, and the *Te Deum*. They are truly *ecumenical* creeds (in the best sense of the word).

Prayer of Adoration and Praise. Normally, we enter into God’s presence singing. The opening hymn is almost always a Psalm of praise or a hymn of adoration. This song is addressed to God, which means it is a prayer. The prayer is then continued when the pastor extols the Lord’s greatness with a short prayer of adoration and praise. As a result of this

† For more on the use of these creeds in worship see my pamphlet *In Whom Do You Trust: An Explanation of and Apology for the Use of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds in Worship* (St. Louis: Providence Reformed Presbyterian Church, 1997).

prayer, God's people should be awakened with a sense of awe and reverence at being in the very presence of God.

God Calls Us to Confess Our Sins

Always in the Scriptures, when men are ushered into the presence of Almighty God, they are made painfully aware of their own sinfulness and guilt. Consider Isaiah's experience. His translation into heaven and his vision of God's majestic holiness had an immediate effect: Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). Essentially the same thing happened to Ezekiel when he had a vision of the glory of God by the river Chebar. "When I saw it," Ezekiel explains, "I fell on my face" (Ezek. 1:28). The beloved Apostle John, the disciple who was so "close" to Jesus during his earthly ministry, when confronted with the glorified Lord Jesus Christ, "fell at his feet as dead" (Rev. 1:17). These examples are given so that *we* might know *how* to approach our Holy God.

Therefore, after we are brought face to face with the Lord of Glory at the beginning of the service and are made conscious of our own unworthiness and sensitive to the guilt and pollution that adheres to us because of our sin, it follows that *the first and most appropriate act* for us as God's covenantal people is the act of confession of sin. Now it is true that contemporary people simply do not like to be reminded of their sins up front in the worship service. They bristle when reminded of them *anywhere* in the worship service. This is too heavy for them. Too negative! Modern pagan Americans are not comfortable with being reminded of their guilt when they appear in God's presence. So what? Just because the "unchurched" feel uncomfortable with confessions of sin—does this mean that we should drop them from the order of worship? Should unbelievers feel comfortable and at ease in a Christian worship service? If they are not brought face to face with their sins, how can they be brought to the place where they "fall on their faces and say, 'God is really among you!'" (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

The principle question for us is not, "Will it make our church *user unfriendly* for the *unchurched*," but rather, "Is it *biblical* to confess one's sin when entering into God's holy presence?" Does anyone in the Bible stroll into God's presence singing, "I've got joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart"? They may eventually express their joy, but their *first* response is always confession of sin. Are contemporary worship services really training people how to worship, how to pray, how to enter into God's presence, if they omit corporate confessions of sin? Robert G. Rayburn's comments are timely:

One of the serious weaknesses of our modern worship lies in the fact that we have failed to make clear the inflexible holiness of our God. It is true that he is the God of all grace, that he is infinite in his kindness and mercy toward us, but he is also a God of manifest righteousness who cannot look upon sin. Entirely too many ministers give the impression that all we must do is rest in the lovingkindness of God, knowing that he will always supply all the healing and strength that are needed. The Christian life is not as

simple as that. The believer must honestly and reverently deal with sin in his life continually day by day. Before we presume to worship God, we must remember the clear teaching of the Word of God, ‘If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me’ (Ps. 66:18). Until we have truly and sincerely confessed our sin before the Lord, our worship will not be acceptable in his sight (*O Come, Let Us Worship* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980], p.87).

Furthermore, the confession of sin is a *corporate* prayer. It is the prayer of the whole local church, and therefore the best *forms* for this prayer are those which emphasize the corporate nature of the prayer. Prayers prayed in unison by the whole congregation, responsive prayers (called “litanies”), responsive praying of penitential Psalms (32, 51, 130, etc.), and hymns of confession are all well-suited for use as prayers of repentance at this point in the service.

Like every other element of worship, the congregational confession of sin comes as a *response* to God’s call. He has called us into his Presence and in doing so gives us the opportunity to confess our sins and receive forgiveness once again. Generally speaking, the very *layout* of the service in the bulletin helps to remind you of the *dialogical* nature of all of worship. God speaks and then we respond in obedience. Consider an example of a portion of a typical Sunday morning bulletin:

God Calls us to Confession: 1 John 1:8-9
We Confess Our Sins (*in unison*)

Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred, and strayed from your ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against your holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But have mercy upon us miserable sinners, O Lord. Spare those, O Lord, who confess their faults. Restore those who are repentant, according to your promises declared unto mankind in Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for Christ’s dear sake, that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life; to the glory of your holy Name. *Silent Prayer.* Amen!

The Lord Assures Us of Forgiveness
We Respond with Thanksgiving and Praise: Hymn # 514 (*Psalms 124*)

In this example, God calls us to confession when the minister reads 1 John 1:8-9, and we obediently respond with a prayer of repentance. Even the layout helps reinforce the order—response of God’s people is *indented* to *visually* remind you that you are responding to God’s Word. The confession of sin in this case is a pre-composed prayer of repentance prayed in unison by the congregation. Ideally, when possible, the congregation should be on their knees to make their confession.

A very important note: the public confession of sin is not designed to be an exercise in breast-beating. An intensely personal expression of your abhorrence of yourself and your sinful tendencies is, of course, appropriate for *private* or *silent* worship. The confession of sin, however, in a public, corporate worship service is more like the confession of faith, like reciting the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed. As someone has aptly put it, the corporate confession of sin “is a statement in which we confess *that* we are sinners, whether we *feel*

particularly rotten at the moment or not.”

After the corporate, formal prayer offered by the congregation, there is always an opportunity for the members of the church to confess their sins individually and privately. Each member should use this time of silence to repent of particular sins. The confession of sin ought to be a very important part of your weekly routine. It offers a recurring opportunity for you to “come clean” before your Heavenly Father.

God Forgives Our Sins

After the confession of sin we hear the pastor proclaim the Lord’s forgiveness to all who have honestly confessed their sin and trusted in Jesus Christ alone. Again, the Word of God is proclaimed, usually a portion that announces God’s love and favor toward those who humbly admit their need of Christ. This is *God’s* word of assurance to us, and we *need* it every week.

This element of worship (in conjunction with the confession of sin) has largely vanished from contemporary Christian worship. Typically, no public confession of sin ever finds its way into a modern evangelical worship service (after all, it wouldn’t sit right with the visiting “religious consumers” who do not believe they are sinners), and so, consequently, no declaration of God’s forgiveness of the past week’s sins ever shows up either. Thus, God’s people often miss out on one of the central blessings of the Lord’s Day: the opportunity for weekly cleansing and covenant renewal—the *assurance* of God’s grace authoritatively proclaimed by the minister to believers who repent of their sins.

There are a variety of ways to communicate the assurance of pardon. The pastor will almost always use a Scripture passage that announces God’s grace, but he may also add to it a brief explanation and application of the passage. Some Presbyterian liturgies contain a brief *declaration* that can be used at this point in the service. Here is an example from the older Presbyterian *Book of Common Worship*:

Almighty God, who does freely pardon all who repent and turn to Him, now fulfill in every contrite heart the promise of redeeming grace; remitting all our sins, and cleansing us from an evil conscience; through the perfect sacrifice of Christ Jesus our Lord.

Someone may be inclined to ask: “Is this an *absolution*?” Well, that depends upon what one means by absolution. It is not an absolution in the Roman Catholic sense. The pastor does not have any special *power* to remit sins (like the Roman Catholics believe), but he *does* have the office entitling him to proclaim *authoritatively* God’s forgiveness of sins to all who truly repent. There is a difference. The Protestant, especially traditional Lutheran and Reformed churches have understood the Scriptures to teach that the pastor has been ordained by God to represent Christ to the people during the worship service. He thus has the *authority* to proclaim God’s forgiveness, but he does not have the *power* personally to pardon anyone (Matt. 16:17-20; 18:18; and *WCF* Chapt. 30). This means that the pastor can (indeed *must*) make a powerful and authoritative declaration of God’s redeeming love in

Christ to those who truly believe. Tender consciences often need such a weighty pronouncement. Just as the Apostle John can *write* to assure the saints, so the pastor may also *proclaim* the forgiveness of sins in Christ to his people (1 John 2:12).

I once challenged a member of another congregation about her sporadic attendance on the Lord's Day. Why is this, I asked? She said something like this: I just don't feel worthy. When I come into church and see all those godly men and women and families, I don't feel like I should be there. I know myself, pastor. I am no saint. I cannot seem to prepare myself, get myself adequately cleansed and ready to come to church and worship. I know I'm guilty. I *feel* guilty even coming to church! I said to her: Jill, think about this. You don't come to church because you are guiltless. Rather, you come to church guilty because you need forgiveness! You come to the service to hear Jesus Christ say to you: "Your sins are forgiven." So does everyone else! I reminded her that our liturgy always included a confession of sin up front, followed by the declaration of forgiveness by the minister. "What do you think that's all about?" I asked her. She said that she had never really thought very much about it. She thought that she was the only one who needed the assurance of God's love and forgiveness in Christ every week!

We give thanks to God for his renewed grace. If we are to maintain the dialogue between God and redeemed sinners, then after the assurance of pardon comes the people's response to this declaration of God's grace. This can take the form of a hymn of thanksgiving, a Psalm of thanksgiving, or even a sung "Amen." In any case, responding to God's grace means joyfully singing of God's sovereign mercy in Christ. You will notice that all the hymns or Psalms used at this point in the service are vibrant and joyful, both in their content and musical form.

Consecration

The Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword —Hebrews 4:12

Having confessed our sins and been cleansed by the blood of Jesus, the congregation is now prepared to enter the second stage of sacrificial, covenant renewal. Just as the priestly sword was at this point trained on the sacrificial animal to prepare him for his ascent into the Lord's presence, and the fire on the altar was stoked up to purify and transform him for fellowship with a holy God, so also now the Spirit will use the Word of God during this part of our service to "chop" us up, wash us up, and transform us into holy people prepared to meet our holy Lord (Heb. 4:12; 12:14; Ps. 24:4; Eph. 5:26-27). During this part of the worship the Lord serves us through his Word and we respond by obediently hearing and submitting to the priestly sword of the Spirit: "For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

The Recitation of God's Law

After receiving forgiveness and restoration in Christ, it is appropriate to rise and recite the covenant law of God. Usually, this is a recitation of the Decalogue, but not always. We might recite a Psalm or even a portion of the New Testament that describes our duty to God as redeemed men and women. Why should we recite the law at this point in the worship service? Does it make any difference where the recitation of the law is placed?

According to the Bible, the law has at least three foundational purposes: first, widespread public knowledge of the law functions to restrain sin. This is sometimes called the law's *political* use because the knowledge of the law and its penalties will help restrain the wickedness of fallen men in society, even if they are not believers (Deut. 13:11; 17:13; 19:20; 1 Tim. 1:3-10). Certainly the recitation of the law of God in a public worship service can have this effect on those who may not truly be members of the Church of Jesus Christ, but this is not the chief reason for putting the law of God in our worship service, neither does it explain its place in the *order* of worship.

The second purpose of the law is sometimes called its *pedagogical* use. The commandments teach us to look to Christ for justification since "through the law comes the knowledge of sin," and without the knowledge of sin no one will flee to Christ for forgiveness and grace (Rom. 3:19-20; Gal. 3:24). The law, then, teaches believer and unbeliever alike that no one makes himself righteous in God's eyes by means of the works of the law. "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all" (James 2:10). Consequently, it is not inappropriate for us to use the law *before* the confession of sin in the order of worship. Nevertheless, this is not the best place for it in the liturgy, because the pedagogical purpose of the law is not the law's *chief* function.

The so-called third use of the law reveals its most basic purpose. The law serves to teach us what God expects from us, to inform us of God's holy standards. This third function of the law is usually called its *didactic* use. The commandments originally given to Adam and Eve—till the ground, guard the garden, be fruitful and multiply, cleave to your wife, do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, etc.—were all given in the context of God's loving instruction. After the fall, the law took on added significance, but the didactic function takes priority. Instruction (Hebrew, *torah*) is the first and most basic function of the law of God (Psalm 1:2; 19:7; 119:1).

Furthermore, if we look carefully at the Old and New Testaments, we discover that *the law of God is always given in the context of grace*. Take the Ten Commandments, for example. Are they given to teach people how to earn God's favor? No. Are they a republication of the "covenant of works"? Hardly. How do they begin? "And God spoke all these words: 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.'" (Exodus 20:1-2). We begin with grace! *After* this announcement of his redeeming grace to Israel God summarizes their duty as saints.

This grace-then-law pattern appears throughout the Bible: God redeems, then gives his redeemed people the law. God saves his people in order that they might obey him (Eph.

2:8-10). This is the structure, the order of God's covenant. Even the New Testament epistles are structured this way. They are *covenantal* documents. Romans is not best divided into doctrinal (1-11) and practical (12-16) chapters, as if Paul was working with a Greek conceptual distinction between theory and practice. No! This ignores the Old Testament covenantal precedents. Rather, Paul's letters are ordered with a covenantal logic. Romans is a covenantally structured document where grace and redemption in Christ (chapters 1-11) provide the context for laying out the duties of those privileged with such a deliverance (Rom. 12-16). The same is true with Ephesians: redemption in Christ (chapters 1-3) is followed by what God requires of us (law) in view of his mercy (chapters 4-6). Incidentally, our Westminster Larger and Shorter Catechisms have been arranged the same way.

We are now in a position to answer the question: why do we recite the law at this point in the worship service? Because we are engaged in covenant renewal worship. According to the configuration of the covenant, law follows grace. So, after being reminded of God's grace, we are ready to listen to God's righteous requirements. Ready to hear and obey! Ready to respond in thanksgiving to God's forgiveness in Christ. God's law is a delight and a blessing to the believer saved by grace. He is to meditate on it and find happiness in the knowledge of it as both Old and New Testament believers testify (Psalm 112:1; Rom. 7:22, "I delight in the law according to the inner man"; and 1 John 5:3, "His commandments are not burdensome"). The law is a gracious gift of God, and the worshiper gratefully acknowledges it to be so. I have a book by Ernest Kevan with a title that gets it just right: *The Grace of Law*. Its 300 pages are devoted to an historical study which details the Reformation and Puritan insistence that the law of God was a gracious gift to man. The grace of God leads us to embrace the commandments of God. "Oh, how I love your law, it is my meditation all the day" (Psalm 119:97).

The Bible Lessons

The congregation is now ready to hear the Word of God as it is read aloud by the pastor. We pause in silence to prepare to listen while God speaks. The pastor announces, "This is the Word of God. Pay careful attention!" At the conclusion of the reading, the pastor says, "Thus far the reading of the very words of God." The call to hear God's word can take several forms, but it always includes the solemn reminder that what the congregation now hears is the very voice of God speaking to them. Nothing we say or do during the service can compare in importance with our thoughtful, open-hearted reception of God's spoken word.

The modern church has failed to ascertain the centrality of the public reading and hearing of the Word of God. Much too often one can sit through an entire service (even in "Bible-believing" churches) and only hear a verse or two of the Bible read before the sermon. This is inexcusable. Among other things, it will insure the biblical ignorance of the next generation. Most of the Bible was written in order to be read aloud in the congregation. Private Bible reading and study must certainly be encouraged, but such an individualistic appropriation of the Word is not the Spirit's *primary* way of illuminating

and sanctifying the minds of Christians. The Spirit uses the *oral reading* and *preaching* combined with the congregation's *hearing* of the Word in church to bring life to his people.

“Hearing” the Word of God creates an orderly community of love and mutual submission. The Bible comes to us out loud in the community, most notably when read by the pastor in the corporate worship service. We don't choose what part of the Bible comes to us. We are commanded to “hear.” The whole word of God is brought to bear upon us, and we are called to submit ourselves by faith to the authority of the Word of God. God speaks, we listen. Speaking and hearing God's Word is the most fundamental ritual activity in the church. When the pastor reads the lessons, you may follow along in your own Bible if you want, but you might also hold your head up and listen intently to the reading.

The Prayer of the Church

Having been forgiven and renewed in Christ, we now have confidence to approach God's throne of grace with some measure of boldness, as a child confidently approaches his daddy when he knows that his father is well disposed toward him (Rom. 5:1-2; 8:12-17; Heb. 4:14-16). This portion of the service provides the opportunity for God's people to intercede for the needs of the church, both local and universal, as well as for the world.

Again, we approach God with our petitions *after* he has invited us. Accordingly, this movement in the liturgy, as every other, begins with the pastor reading a portion of God's Word that appropriately calls us to prayer. Such passages as Ps. 4:3; 5:1-3; 9:10; 19:14; 34:15, 17-18; 55:22; 62:8; Jer. 29:12-13; Matt. 7:7-8; Phil. 4:6-7; Heb. 4:15-16; 1 John 5:14-15, and many more have been used to invite God's people to pray.

Unfortunately, this portion of the service has often been called the “pastoral prayer.” It may sometimes be referred to with less than affectionate overtones as “the long prayer.” And you know why. First of all, the pastor is often the only one praying during this time. Everyone else has drifted off five minutes before. They may have followed the first minute or so, but, let's face it, participating in a 10-15 minute prayer (with your eyes closed) is tough. It is especially tough when the pastor rambles—as pastors who pray *extemporaneously* so often do. They end up repeating the same pat phrases week after week. Or they (I guess I should say “we”!) end up not *praying* at all, but using the prayer as an opportunity to *preach* to the people indirectly. You know what I mean. The preacher ends up praying *at* the congregation instead of *leading them in prayer before God*.

The form of this prayer ought to vary. The pastor ought not to lead this prayer *every* Sunday. Nor should his prayers be exclusively extemporaneous. He should either compose the prayer beforehand, jot down three or four important petitions to bring with him to the service, or he should use some of the many excellent model prayers found in some of old Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Lutheran manuals of worship. This prayer may even take the form of a litany. Remember, a litany is a responsive prayer where pastor and people alternate (modeled after Psalm 136 and others). This form of prayer is an excellent way to insure the participation of the congregation in the prayer. At the end of each petition the congregation responds with something like “Hear us and help us, we ask you, O Lord,” or

“We beseech Thee to hear us, good Lord.” This has the same function as a corporate “Amen.”

The Sermon

Too many American evangelicals think that everything that comes before the sermon is little more than “pre-game” ceremonies. Unfortunately, in many contemporary services this is exactly how the pre-sermon activities are treated, even by the pastor and worship leader! The sermon is the big event. All kinds of stuff is placed before the sermon (announcements, solos, hymns, testimonies, dramas, etc.) with little or no thought to the question “why?” Just fill up the time so that everybody has a chance to get settled in by the time the sermon begins. It doesn’t matter if we come in a little late, as long as we hear the sermon. Everything else is superfluous. It is not uncommon to sit through the first half hour of an evangelical service without ever hearing the Word of God read until immediately before the sermon. In a biblical, covenant renewal worship service, however, *the entire worship service is saturated in the Word of God*. The entire service is in some sense *sermonic*. We read, sing, pray, and recite the Word of God from the opening of the service. Therefore, the worship service as a whole is in some sense sermonic. If our worship is sacrificial, God has been wielding the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word, throughout the liturgy, and we have been responding to his voice from the moment we heard him call us into his presence.

Do not hear me saying that the sermon is not important. It is! It has a *crucial* significance, but it has taken on an importance all out of proportion to the rest of the worship service in too many churches. This is because it has not been properly situated in the overall context of sacrificial, covenant renewal worship. It has become a big rhetorical event—an opportunity for the pastor to make a big impression. I think that James B. Jordan makes a telling point when he writes,

Since all that is left [in contemporary evangelical worship] is preaching, the act of preaching takes on dimensions foreign to the Bible. Preaching has become a great rhetorical event. Sermons ought to open with a stunning introduction, proceed through three alliterating points, and conclude with a gripping application. People should be stirred, moved, etc. The full-orbed worship of Scripture, with congregational prayer, singing, and the Supper has been lost, and this leaves the people psychologically starved, so the preaching must make up for it. The history of the church becomes the history of preachers. People leave one church and seek another on the basis of who is preaching. If one is in a church with bad preaching, there is nothing else to look forward to in going to church: no worship, no real singing the Word, no Sacrament. Everything hangs on a man, and that man is not the Lord Jesus Christ (James B. Jordan, *The Sociology of the Church* [Tyler, TX: Geneva Divinity School, 1986], pp. 225-6).

The sermon ought to be the time when Christ personally speaks to his bride through the ordained pastor (Eph. 4:11-13). We sit down and listen to our Husband speak to us through his appointed representative (Eph. 5:26). The pastor has studied and prepared his sermon so as to instruct God’s people (2 Tim. 2:15). This means that the purpose of the sermon is not primarily evangelistic, at least not in the narrow sense. Of course, the good

news of forgiveness and grace should always be prominent in the sermon, but I am not convinced that the sermon in the midst of covenant renewal worship ought to be directed to unbelievers. On the Lord's Day *believers* "come together as the church" (1 Cor. 11:18). We need the Gospel applied to *our* lives.

If unbelievers are present when the church gathers together, that's fine (1 Cor. 14:23), but they are not the reason why the church congregates. The church congregates as the temple of the living God, an assembly of priests offering the sacrifice of praise to their Savior (1 Pet. 2:5, 9). Visiting unbelievers will hear the Word of God expounded and applied. They will hear of Jesus Christ, his grace and his law. But they need to realize that apart from faith in Christ they are not members of the priestly assembly! I am especially opposed to dumbing down the sermon (and the liturgy!) so that "seekers" will feel comfortable. When unbelievers are present in the worship service, the Apostle Paul does not expect them to feel at home, but precisely the opposite. If the service is a genuine *worship* service, then an unbeliever will be "convicted" and "judged," with the result that "he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you.'" (1 Cor. 14:24-25).

That's all well and good, but the primary audience addressed on the Lord's Day is the people of God who have just now been reconstituted as God's covenantal community. On the Day of the Lord (= the Lord's Day!) God's people are in the process of being offered as "living sacrifices" (Rom. 12:1). One of the essential means of sacrificial consecration is the "renewing of the mind" so that it will not be "conformed to the pattern of this world" (Rom. 12:2). The Word of God is the priestly knife that chops us up and prepares us as sacrificial "food for God" (Heb. 4:12). Therefore, after we have praised God, confessed our sins, accepted Christ's forgiveness, thanked God for his love in Christ, recited his law, and entered his presence boldly to pray—*after* we have done all of this, then we are ready to listen to the pointed and sharp voice of God from the Scriptures. This powerful Word of God is able to "pierce even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).

The sermon is the time when the pastor ought to *explain* the Word of God and bring it to bear upon the life of the congregation. My job is to keep your nose in the Book. The Word of God is more important than the pastor's stories, illustrations, mannerisms, or rhetorical skills. As a pastor, I want you to *learn* the Bible! This has been a central aspect of the Reformed tradition. This is why we preach through books of the Bible. We believe that you need to know "every Scripture" in order to be "complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). Hopefully, when I concluded my sermon series on the book of Haggai, you learned something about the prophecy of Haggai. When I finished the book of Ruth, you should have been able to read Ruth with fresh insights and convictions. I know that sounds rather simplistic, but in the past I have sat through sermon series and at the conclusion wondered whether I really learned anything about the book the pastor supposedly expounded. Did the pastor *explain* the book of the Bible? Or did he merely use the book to serve his own purposes? This is a real danger in evangelical circles. I know the temptation. My calling is to "preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:2), not my own

clever ideas. My job as the called *Teaching Elder* of this congregation is to teach you the Bible and to exhort you from it. That's what the sermon is for. When the pastor announces, "This is the Word of our God!" then stir yourself up to listen intently. You ought to be poised to hear the marching orders of the King of Kings. If you are a genuine member of Christ's flock, you should be *anxious* to hear God's Word preached. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27).

The Offering

This is the final element in our consecration to God (the second "step" in our three-step sacrificial entrance into God's presence). The presentation of our tithes and offerings to God marks the completion of God's corporate sanctifying work. The Word has done its proper work in our lives, if by the Spirit and from the heart we offer our selves and our works to God. This is the meaning of the tribute (meal/grain) offering which was placed *on top* of the ascension offering in the order of Old Testament sacrificial worship (Lev. 2:1-3; Num. 15:8-10). The offering is an act of corporate worship. As a sign of her thankful dedication to the Lord, the church offers to the Father a tenth of the profit with which the Lord has gifted her (Gen. 14:20; Lev. 27:30-32; 2 Chron. 31:5-6; Neh. 10:37-38; 13:12; Mal. 3:10; Matt. 23:23) and any free-will offerings that are over and above the tenth required by God (Lev. 22:29; 2 Cor. 8:2-4).

Occasionally one hears that the Christian should leave behind the "world" as he or she comes into the Sunday morning service. Is this correct? Surely we should purify our minds and hearts from the *fallen* values and concerns of our culture as far as we are able before we come into the service on Sunday (Rom. 12:2; Col. 3:1-2; 1 John 2:15; James 4:8). Indeed, this ethical/moral understanding is often the meaning of the "world" in the New Testament (John 15:19; 1 John 4:5; Eph. 2:2; James 4:4). Apparently, however, this is not exactly what is usually meant by "leaving the world behind." It is as if Sunday worship means escaping from the worldly occupations, physical possessions, and other so-called material concerns that dominate our weekly routines.

This kind of dualism between spiritual and physical, religion and everyday life must not be allowed to stand. We are drawn into God's presence to present our "bodies" as living sacrifices, which means that by the Spirit we present our entire being in Christ to the Father, including the work that we have accomplished at home and in the marketplace during the week. God accepts our work offered to him by faith. We are not merely giving money during the offering, we are gratefully giving ourselves, the token of which is our tithes and offerings that we freely give (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

The offering ought to be part of the corporate service. It is not merely an opportunity for *individual* Christians to give their tithes and offerings, but also a *corporate* act of the body of Christ. As the body of Christ we present ourselves for service in God's kingdom. If every person individually dropped a check in a bucket in the foyer of the church, the act would not rise to the level of corporate worship. Christians would lose the opportunity to offer themselves and the work of their hands, in union with the whole congregation, to the

Lord in gratitude for his mercy and grace in Christ.

The deacons collect the offerings and present them to the pastor, who gathers up the congregation's offering in his prayer of dedication. His prayer will follow this basic model: "We stand now before you, Heavenly Father, to present ourselves for service in your kingdom. Thank you for your rich, undeserved mercy, which you have so freely bestowed upon us. In union with the perfect sacrifice of Christ our Lord, receive these tithes and offerings as the token of our whole-hearted dedication to your service. Use these gifts, and our lives as well, as the means of advancing your Gospel among your people here and to those whom you lead us to serve both here and around the world. Receive our offering in the Name of Jesus. Amen."

The *Gloria Patri* ("Glory be to the Father") caps off the pastor's prayer as the people of God ascribe all *glory* to the Triune God—in other words, whatever riches, beauty, honor, and significance (all of which are aspects of the biblical concept of "glory") that we possess have been received by us as a gift from the Triune God of grace and will ultimately be received back by him for all eternity. The *Gloria Patri* arises from biblical texts like Romans 16:27; Eph. 3:21; Phil. 4:20; and Rev. 1:6). The singing of the *Gloria* serves as the transition into the third and final stage in the Lord's sacrificial work of renewing his people.

Communion

A communion in the body and blood of Christ — 1 Corinthians 10:16

The service is not over yet. It should not end without communion. We have been cleansed and consecrated, but before God sends us out to serve him in the world he first sits us down for a meal. He must strengthen and nourish us for the task ahead of us with bread and wine. Therefore, we are invited to sit down and eat dinner with Jesus and receive from him by faith his own life-giving flesh and blood.

John Calvin accurately observed, "The devil, knowing that our Lord left nothing more beneficial to the Church than this holy Sacrament, according to his accustomed manner, exerted himself from the beginning to contaminate it with errors and superstitions, and to corrupt and destroy its fruit, and has not ceased to pursue this course, until he has almost wholly subverted this Sacrament of the Lord and converted it into falsehood and vanity." Most of us have some idea about how the devil has converted the meaning of the Lord's supper into "falsehood." We can all probably identify in general the erroneous teaching of other branches of the visible church concerning Communion. But what about "vanity"? When something is vain it is useless, empty, worthless, or without effect. How has Satan converted this Sacrament into vanity?

The Lord's Supper has become a vanity in 20th century evangelicalism wherever it is emptied of its rich meaning and significance. It becomes "vanity" when we fail to understand the rich, multi-faceted significance that this Sacrament ought to have in our lives. For many of us much of the mystery and power of Holy Communion has been drained

from it. It has become something anemic and paltry.

This happens when we *do* the Lord's Supper badly and when we come to it in the wrong frame of mind, with the wrong attitude. If we come expecting to be emotionally stimulated and moved, we may be disappointed. Have you ever said or thought something like this: "Well, I didn't get much out of that Communion service today" or "The Lord's Supper just doesn't do much for me. I'm glad we don't have it very often. Its not very exciting." This kind of attitude is also often behind the practice of infrequent Communion. If we do it too often, so it is thought, it will get old. I've never quite understood this argument. Should we, then, not kiss our wives but once a quarter in order to keep the ritual fresh and new?

I am convinced that one of the fundamental problems here is that we have *reduced* the Lord's supper to a means of providing mental stimulus for individual religious meditation. It is thought to be just another opportunity to exercise personal, private devotions at church. To some extent, the way we practice the Supper encourages this. Everyone closes their eyes, turns inward, and mediates privately. The corporate, communal dimension of the Sacrament gets smothered beneath what in effect becomes an opportunity for personal quiet time in church. There is, of course, room for silence during the rite of Communion, but there is so much more going on than merely private devotions with the visual aids of bread and wine.

Some of this has come about because of a very anemic understanding of the words "do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19; 1 Cor. 11:24-25). The translation "do this in remembrance of me" has come to mean "do this as a way of helping people remember me." Just as a photograph of an absent friend helps stimulate your memory, to recall to your mind what your friend was like, so the Lord's Supper is denigrated to function like a picture to remind us, to aid us in remembering Jesus. We greatly impoverish the Sacrament when we reduce it to such a humanistic conception. If we restrict its meaning to the level of an illustration or picture to stimulate our memory, we have converted it into little more than a technique to arouse pious thoughts in people. The Lord's supper is thereby stripped of any mystery and becomes a purely naturalistic stimulus to aid the religious memory, God's flannel graph for adults.

By translating the original "do this as my memorial" we are led to ask certain questions that will lead to a more satisfying understanding of this passage. "Do this as my memorial" alerts us that here there is something richer, something more profound than a mnemonic technique to help us remember Jesus. First, what is the meaning of this word "memorial"? Where should I look in the Bible to find out what a memorial is? Answer: the Old Testament. The Old Testament forms the context, the background against which the New must be interpreted.

When we look at the Old Covenant memorials and ask how they functioned, we discover something startling: most of them were designed to remind the Lord of his covenant! The Old Testament memorials were erected or enacted for the purpose of reminding God of his covenant with his people. By means of the memorial God's people

dramatically rehearsed his covenant to him so that he would act to fulfill his covenant promises. The name “Yahweh” is given to Israel for this very purpose: “this is my memorial name” (Exod. 3:15). In other words, this is the name that you must use in prayer to remind me to keep my covenant, so that I will come to your aid. As the psalmist says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horse but we will memorialize the Name of Yahweh our God” (Psalm 20:7). Which means that when the Israelites prayed “in the Name of Yahweh” they were reminding him of his covenant love and promises so as to move him to answer their prayer for help. The Name of Jesus functions the same way in Christian prayer. We memorialize the person and work of Jesus before the Father when we conclude our prayers with “in the Name of Jesus. Amen!”

The Passover functioned as the most prominent of all the covenant memorials in the Old Testament. It was a covenant memorial meal (Exod. 12:14). When the Lord saw the blood on the door post, he remembered his covenant and spared his people. Indeed, all the sacrifices made by Israel were offered as memorials directed toward God so that he would remember the covenant (Exod. 12:14; Lev. 2:2; 6:15 calls sacrifice “a memorial for the Lord”). When the smoke rose up to heaven, God smelled the pleasing aroma, he remembered his covenant, and he was at peace with his people. Many other passages speak of memorial objects or events as dramatic ways in which to petition God to remember his covenant (Gen. 9:8, 11-17; 8:1; Exod. 20:24; 28:12, 29; 30:16; Num. 10:10). We even find this use of the word memorial in the New Testament. Cornelius, the Gentile God-fearer, learns from an Angel that his “prayers and alms have ascended as a memorial before God” (Acts 10:4).

When understood against the backdrop of these Old Testament memorials, the Lord’s Supper as a “memorial” is shown to be first of all a dramatized ritual prayer reminding God of his covenant. The Lord’s Supper is the New Covenant Memorial. It is the fulfillment of all these older ways which the Lord instituted as the means whereby his people would call upon his Name and dramatically ask him to remember his covenant. All the Old Covenant memorials are fulfilled and completed (compact) in the one simple covenantal memorial meal of the New Covenant. Jesus says, “do this as my memorial.” This means that there are two major moments or actions in this Sacrament.

First, there is our memorializing of the death of Jesus, our action toward God, our prayer to God to remember Jesus and keep his covenant. We show forth the death of Jesus to the Father asking him to keep his gracious promises to us in Christ. In the case of the Lord’s Supper this memorializing is *an act of the congregation*, a pleading of the promises of God. Here is the memorial of your Son’s atoning sacrifice for us, O Lord, remember and be gracious towards us! This comes to focus in the prayer of thanksgiving (Greek: *eucharist*) and memorial. Have you ever noticed that this prayer always includes a summary of the life and work of Jesus Christ? The eucharistic memorial prayer will go something like this:

It is truly appropriate and right that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, O Lord, our heavenly Father, almighty everlasting God. But it is

especially fitting that we should now, gathered around this Table, thank you for your gracious covenant promises to us in Christ. Remember, Father, our Lord's humble birth, his holy life, his innocent sufferings and death, and his resurrection and ascension for us. Faithfully keep your covenant with us for Jesus sake and come now to nourish and equip us for service in your kingdom. Amen.

This prayer and the doing of the Lord's Supper then "show forth the death of Jesus" (1 Cor. 11:26) to the Father. It is a dramatic prayer, a pleading of the promises of the Father by memorializing his Son's birth, life, suffering, death, and resurrection for us. That is the first major moment in the movement of the ritual of the Lord's Supper. We memorialize Jesus to the Father.

Second, there is God's faithful response to our plea. He *comes* in blessing for his people and in judgment on his enemies. Memorializing Jesus to the Father causes him to act, to come, to visit his people. This fits with the pattern in 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. God's coming in blessing, however, is not highlighted in the Corinthian church; rather, because of their rebellion God *was* indeed coming, but coming in judgment (v. 29-30).

The Sacrament of Communion is connected not merely to the work of Christ in the past, but the Spirit communicates to us the life-giving, glorified, flesh of the resurrected and enthroned Christ in this Sacrament. How he does so is a mystery, but we receive it by faith. We receive the Bread and as a community are (re)formed into his Body, and we drink from the Cup we are, through the Blood of the covenant shed for our forgiveness, ourselves made into living sacrifices.

Thus, the Lord's Supper is both a dramatized, ritualized prayer, in which we call upon God to remember the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ to keep his covenant with us, and then in response to our memorial prayer, God comes near to serve and nourish us with the life-giving nourishment available to us in Christ, reconstituting us as one body with his Son. The Lord's Supper marks the culmination of our being drawn into God's presence by way of sacrifice and thereby anticipates the Wedding Supper of the Lamb when the process of our being conformed to the image of Christ will be finally and comprehensively accomplished in us. At the Table the Church ritually anticipates the New Heavens and Earth, when she will participate in the Son's eucharistic offering of the entire creation to the Father.

The closing psalm or hymn. The first Lord's Supper was capped off with the singing of a hymn (Matt. 26:30; 14:26). One of the best ways to bring the Lord's Supper to a fitting conclusion is to sing the *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32).

The Benediction

If the whole service has been a "dress rehearsal" for life, now, as the service ends, it is time to start living differently as God blesses and commissions us to go back into our families, communities, and marketplaces as the Lord's peculiar people. The Benediction (or "blessing") is the final service God renders to his congregation as a whole on the Lord's Day. He assures us of his peace, promises, and his gracious presence as we leave

his special presence (in the midst of his assembled human temple) to return to the world.

The pastoral benediction arises both from the Lord's direction to Aaron and his sons (Num. 6:22-27) as well as from our Lord's practice. According to Luke 24:50, Jesus' final recorded act was a blessing pronounced upon his disciples: "He led them out as far as Bethany, and He lifted up His hands and blessed them." So also, the pastor faces the congregation, lifts up his hands, and communicates the Lord's blessing to his people. The benediction is *not* a prayer. It is a performative utterance. The congregation should not bow their heads and close their eyes, but receive the blessing facing the minister with their eyes open.

Our final response to God's gift of his peace and presence usually takes the form of solemnly singing a three-fold Amen with an awareness of the finality of the close of the service. Sometimes, however, we will respond with a counter-blessing for God by singing Psalm 72:18-19 (*Trinity Hymnal #7*) or even a blessing upon each other ("God be with you 'till we meet again").

The Rest of the Lord's Day

There remains a Sabbath-rest for the people of God — Hebrews 4:9

The Morning Service is now over, but the Lord's Day is not. The Lord has gifted us with an entire day for worship and rest. In the Bible this is called the "Sabbath." The Hebrew word is derived from the verb which means "to cease, to rest," a reference to the fact that you cease from your normal six-day work to do something else. A one-in-seven-day break from our normal six-day work is given to us so that we can worship God and experience rest and refreshment. This has been the beneficial purpose of the Sabbath since its inception after God rested from his work of creation on the seventh day. He blessed the day and set it apart as holy (Gen. 2:2-3). What else could this mean but that God blessed the day and set it apart for humanity's benefit.

Humanity was made to image God, and therefore just as God worked six days and rested one, so too would man participate in that same pattern of work and rest (Gen. 1:26ff; Exod. 20:11). Our Lord said, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). In saying this he was not abolishing the Sabbath principle, but restoring it from the Pharisaical distortion to which it had been subjected. Since Jesus is "Lord of the Sabbath" he has the right and duty to determine its proper use and correct distorted teachings concerning it. Our doctrinal standards set forth what we believe on this issue. The answer to Q. #117 of the Westminster Larger Catechism is helpful: "How is the Sabbath or the Lord's Day to be sanctified (or set apart)?" Answer:

The Sabbath or Lord's Day is to be sanctified by a holy resting all the day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; and making it our delight to spend the whole time (except so much of it as is to be taken up in works of necessity and mercy) in the public and private exercises of God's worship: and, to that end, we are to 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.

The Lord Day, therefore, is a gracious gift of God. We should take full advantage of it by spending the time between the two worship services with our family in restful, refreshing activities and wholesome (not “worldly”) recreation. Since the Lord has gifted us with a day of rest, we should “make every effort to enter that rest,” as the author of Hebrews admonishes us (Heb. 4:11).

Our Evening Sacrifice of Praise, Prayer, and Thanksgiving. The Lord assembles us again in the evening. By concluding our Sundays with an evening service we bracket off the entire day as the Christian Sabbath. Just as sacrifices were offered morning and evening on the Old Covenant Sabbath (and the people understood that this meant morning and evening prayer on their part), so also we gather again in the evening to hear the Word of God, sing praise to God, and pray. The evening service takes a little bit different form since it is an extension and expansion of the morning service with an emphasis on the church family. In the morning service the Lord has formally cleansed, consecrated, and communed with us at his Table. The evening service may be likened to the family time spent after a formal meal at home. The family leaves the table and assembles somewhere to talk to one another, pray for one another, and listen intently to the father’s instruction. The prayers that are offered on Sunday evening will insure the progress of our church in service and obedience. Historically it has afforded pastors important opportunities for more intensive preaching and teaching of the Word of God. Such in-depth Bible preaching is desperately needed in our day of sound bites and slogans. Thus, our evening service is an indispensable element of our life together as a Christian community. After 40 years of ministering to one church, Pastor Paul Alexander of Huntsville, Alabama, has testified to the impact of Sunday evening worship on his people:

Forty years in one pastorate has given me a somewhat unusual perspective. I have been able to watch people in my congregation grow up, get married, raise children and finish careers—in short, live out large parts of their lives—during that lengthy tenure. My generalizations about my parishioners may seem too narrow a data base to satisfy all the demands of contemporary scholarship, and I am sure that I am lacking in total objectivity. At the same time I am confident of one conclusion: those who regularly participate in the morning and evening worship over a period of years are the most stable and productive Christians. They are, furthermore, the most joyful and effective.

Our present membership is 300. Over the years more than a 1000 have come and gone, largely because of the nature of employment in Huntsville. Among those who have come to church twice on Sunday there is a remarkable record of family stability and spiritual productivity. Of course there have been exceptions, but from these families has flowed a constant stream of children who have grown to maturity honoring the Lord, marrying in Christ, and following the Lord in their vocations. This is what it’s all about.

* * * * *

That concludes our Lord's Day services and my explanation. If the Lord has used this book to help you better understand the meaning and significance of our Morning Service at Providence, and if you are thereby enabled to offer yourself with the assembled church more intelligently and freely to the Father through Christ in the Spirit on the Lord's Day, then, by God's grace, I will have accomplished my purpose. Those of you who wish to pursue the study of worship and liturgy a little further are welcome to consult the remaining two parts of this book. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of God the Holy Spirit be with you all