

Christ-Centered Worship

Session 4: Gospel-Centered Worship

Opening Question: What are the basic elements of the gospel message?

What happens in worship is not simply content delivery. The sermon is not a lecture. The music is not simply there to get you ready to receive the message. Worship is forming you, as much as it is teaching you.

James K. A. Smith writes, *“Jesus is a teacher who doesn’t just inform our intellect but forms our very loves. He isn’t content to simply deposit new ideas into your mind; he is after nothing less than your wants, your loves, your longings.”*

The Structure of Worship: Is Liturgy a bad word?

Liturgy is simply the word we use to describe all that is included in our worship service.

Every church, no matter how informal, has a liturgy. Every liturgy has a movement that sends a message. Every liturgy communicates something about God, ourselves, and our relationship with him.

- What is being communicated by a service movement that begins with music designed to wake people up, then gets them fired up, and then moves them to be settled down for a sermon?
- What’s being communicated by a service that ends with a charge to the congregation to evangelize the world?
- What’s being communicated by a series of songs performed by a soloist, or orchestra or choir without participation from the congregation?

Revival services (particularly in the First (1730-50) and Second Great Awakening (1790-1840) in America, have deeply influenced modern worship. These services were built upon an emotional flow of the service. Music, testimonies, sermons, and prayers all worked up to a crescendo of emotion designed to move the congregation to a decision.

The prevailing movement in evangelical worship services today is based on this revivalist model. The movement is from band to Bible. The music serves the purpose of getting you ready to receive the message.

Participating in the Gospel (“Doing the Gospel” vs. Hearing the Gospel)

As we’ve seen (Sessions 1&3), we believe Christ is uniquely present with his people in worship. This is contrasted with a belief that he is not. The structure of the service will change dramatically based on whether or not Christ is present in the service.

- Memorial: if he is not present, we are simply gathered to hear about him and remember the gospel.
- Sacramental: if he is present, we truly meet with him and really experience the covenant pattern or dialogue with God.

The covenant interaction with God moves from God revealing himself to us, our realization of our own sin, his grace that redeems and renews, our receiving his forgiveness by faith and dedicating ourselves to him, and his blessing. It is the pattern of the gospel.

In *Desiring the Kingdom*, Smith examines what it means to “To put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 13.14). He asks,

“And how does that happen? By being regularly immersed in the drama of God in Christ reconciling the world to himself, which is precisely the point of Christian worship—to invite us into that story over and over again, ‘characterizing’ us as we rehearse the gospel drama over and over. If our loves are liturgically formed—if learning to love takes practice—then we need to be sure that the practices of Christian worship reflect the plot of the gospel.”

What is the pattern of the gospel? (adapted from Bryan Chapell’s *Christ-Centered Worship*)

- Recognizing God’s character
- Realizing our sinfulness
- Receiving God’s grace and assurance through Christ’s work
- Responding by faith with thanksgiving and dedication
- Receiving God’s blessing

The gospel pattern is the pattern of worship in the Bible:

Worship by Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1-13)

- God’s character recognized (v. 1-4)
- Human character confessed (v. 5)
- God’s grace exhibited (v. 6-7)
- God’s grace assured (v. 7)
- Response of thankful devotion (v. 8)
- Instruction for obedience (v. 9-12)
- Promise of covenant blessing (v. 13)

Worship at Sinai (Deuteronomy 5)

- God’s character recognized (v. 4, 22-24)
- Human character confessed (v. 5, 25-27)
- God’s grace exhibited (v. 2-3, 6)
- God’s grace assured (v. 2-3)
- Response of thankful devotion (v. 27)
- Instruction for obedience (v. 6-21, 32-33a)
- Promise of covenant blessing (v. 33b)

Worship in the Temple (2 Chronicles 5-7)

- God’s character recognized (5:1-5)
- Human character confessed (5:6-10)
- God’s grace exhibited (5:11-14)

- God's grace assured (5:11-14)
- Response of thankful devotion (6:1-11)
- Petition (6:12-21)
- Instruction for obedience (6:22-42)
- Promise of covenant blessing (7:1-3)
- Communion (7:4-9)

Worship in Ephesians

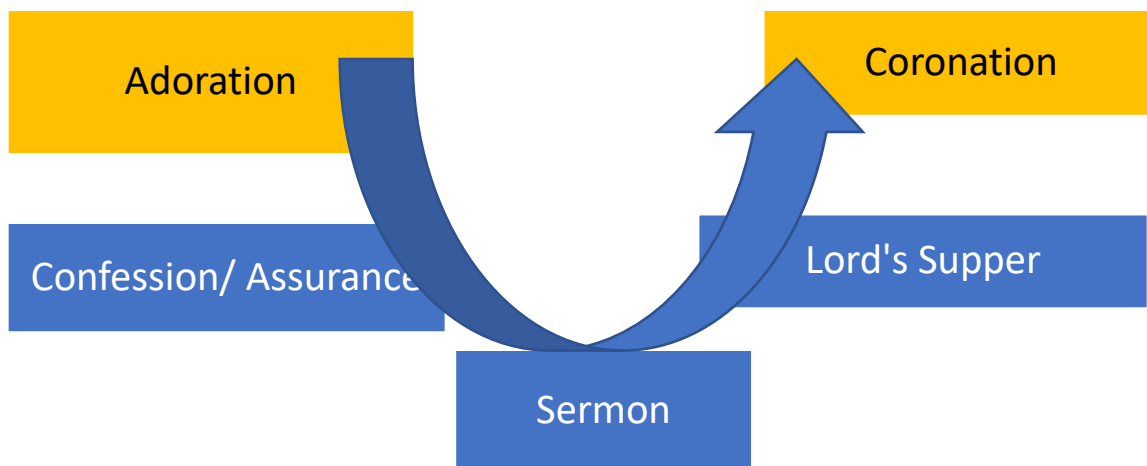
- God's character recognized (ch. 1)
- Human character confessed (2:1-3)
- God's grace exhibited (2:4-10)
- God's grace assured (2:4-10)
- Instruction for obedience (2:11-6:18)
- Promise of covenant blessing (6:23-24)

Common Liturgical Names for this Pattern

- God's character recognized (Prayer of Adoration)
- Human character confessed (Confession of sin)
- God's grace assured (Assurance of Pardon)
- Response of thankful devotion (Songs or Prayers of Thanksgiving, Eucharist)
- Instruction for obedience (Sermon)
- Promise of covenant blessing (Benediction)

***Key Observation: The Pattern demonstrates a covenantal dialogue between God and his people.**

The dialogue moves from transcendence to imminence back to transcendence (or from God to us back to God).



This pattern can be grouped into four distinct movements. Notice how this pattern is illustrated in the worship of Revelation 4-5.

After this I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven! Revelation 4:1

I: REDISCOVERING GOD'S GLORY

God's desire initiates an invitation into His presence. Through worship, we rediscover the holy otherness of God in His glory revealed through creation and salvation.

And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here...At once I was in the Spirit, and behold, a throne stood in heaven, with one seated on the throne [...] And around the throne, on each side of the throne, are four living creatures...and day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" Revelation 4:1-2, 6-8

II: CONFESSING OUR SIN AND RECEIVING GOD'S GRACE

Entering God's presence naturally leads us to face our sin, yet in Christ we do so both mournfully and courageously, with the knowledge that his abundant mercy awaits. God makes it safe to be honest, real, and transparent about our moral failures and brokenness because we have nothing to prove or hide in Christ.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who was seated on the throne a scroll written within and on the back, sealed with seven seals... "Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?" And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to look into it, and I began to weep loudly because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to look into it. And one of the elders said to me, "Weep no more; behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals." Revelation 5:1-5

III: RENEWAL IN CHRIST'S WORD AND COMMUNION

The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God, wherein it becomes the very Word of God proclaimed and received by the illumination of the Holy Spirit to believers. This is not a lecture based on a dead letter, or a self-help talk, but an encounter with the living God in the flesh of His people.

And between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, And he went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who was seated on the throne. And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song... Revelation 5:6-9

In the Covenant Meal, we both remember the sacrificial life of Christ's atonement and partake of Christ's ascended presence by the Holy Spirit, wherein no extent of space separates us from the life-giving power of God. All Christians being united to Christ are united to each other in love and have communion in each other's gifts and graces.

...for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. Revelation 5:9b

IV: CORONATING CHRIST AS KING AND RECEIVING GOD'S BLESSING

From the throne of heaven, God's power and grace is with us. In reverence and awe, we worship an exalted King and receive a kingdom that cannot be shaken, going forth in his immeasurable power working within us.

...and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth. Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures... numbering myriads of myriads...saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" Revelation 5:10-13

Congregational Participation

Because it follows a covenantal dialogue, worship should limit aspects of the service that discourage full participation. Special music or solos may be enjoyable to listen to, but there are times when they change the dynamic from dialogue to performance. Choirs can be helpful in leading a congregation in singing but when they replace congregational singing, they can disempower the role of the people.

Sample Structure of Worship

There are many legitimate variations in the order, yet the general flow should match the logic of the gospel.

Pre-Worship

- **Gathering Song:** "Praise is the gateway to God's presence" Hughes Old
 - We enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise" Ps. 100:4
- **Welcome/Announcements:** Greeting and orienting people to worship. Promoting the "one anothering" of the Body of Christ

Worship

Movement 1: Rediscovering God's Glory

- **Call to Worship:** Who is calling us to worship? What does that imply?
- **Prayer of Invocation and Adoration:** By invocation we do not demand that God meets us, but pray for him to be there (not presuming). And, we offer praise for who he is. Prayers of Adoration tend to be Trinitarian and focus on God's attributes.
- **Praise:** In response to God's character, we sing songs that celebrate him. We could also enter a time of prayers of praise from the congregation.

Movement 2: Confessing Our Sin and Receiving His Forgiveness

- **Confession of Sin:** "true knowledge of God leads to a true knowledge of ourselves" Terry Johnson. We confess corporately and individually
- **Assurance of Forgiveness:** Confession of sin is not Christian confession until it leads the sinner to Christ.

- **Thanksgiving:** The word of absolution should produce in us a response of heartfelt gratitude. It is only appropriate to sing or offer prayers of thanks.

Movement 3: Renewal in Christ's Word and Sacrament

- **Hearing God's Word Read and Preached:** God is present mediated through his means of grace to bless his people. "The preached Word is the Word of God" 2nd Helvetic Confession
- **Offering:** We respond to God's word by giving back a portion of all that belongs to him. Our giving demonstrates our commitment to Christ's Lordship.
 - **Doxology:** Praising God for his blessing may be appropriate here, or during praise and thanksgiving sections, or concluding worship.
- **Intercession:** We respond to God's word by giving our entire lives to him. We give him our burdens and ask for his presence in the situations of our lives
- **Confession of Faith:** We respond to God's word by declaring our faith. The primary purpose of saying a confession is not instruction but testifying to our belief. Confessions should be able to be proclaimed by any Christian and should unite us to the church in all places and at all times.
- **Celebrating the Lord's Supper:** Our faith is the only thing that qualifies us for this meal. We receive it as a communion with Christ and each other. It nourishes and strengthens our faith as we participate in receiving Christ.

Movement 4: Coronating Christ as King and Receiving His Benediction

- **Proclaiming Christ's Rule and Reign:** Songs honoring Christ as king completes our journey of redemption and reconciliation. We endeavor to live in service to him.
- **Benediction:** God gets the last word. As the book of Revelation ends the Bible, we conclude with God giving his blessing to his people.

Discussion Questions

- What difference does it make to believe God is present and active in our worship liturgy?
- How does "doing the gospel" rather than just "hearing the gospel" change worship?
- How can this pattern be used in private worship?