

A Theology and Philosophy of Worship

Rincon Mountain Presbyterian Church

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Introduction

Do buildings tell stories? Any architect would say so, and so would most of us. We have different feelings, thoughts, and mindsets when we enter into an ancient and sacred gothic cathedral than when we enter into Costco or Best Buy. The structural designs of buildings are intended to communicate. Martin Luther knew this when he designed the first Protestant church in Torgau, Germany. The main external architectural change that Luther introduced was the replacement of a cross on the spire of the church with a rooster, symbolizing the new dawn of the Reformation (Luther was never one for subtlety)! More importantly, Luther intentionally placed the pulpit at the front of the congregation while the altar, although still present in the sanctuary, was no longer separated from the congregation by screens that had designated sacred space for clergy alone. Clearly he was intending to communicate in this the major Reformation tenets of the centrality of the Word in Christian worship, as well as the “priesthood of all believers.”

If the architectural patterns of church buildings tell stories, then so do the architectural patterns of the worship services that occurs within those buildings. Bryan Chappell, in his recently published book *Christ-Centered Worship*, writes that “Structures tell stories. Gospel understanding...is ...communicated in the worship patterns of the church.”¹ The structure of a church’s worship service is called its liturgy.² Many Protestants think that “liturgy” only describes highly ceremonial worship in Catholic, Orthodox, or Anglican churches. We normally talk about our worship in terms of a “Sunday service” or the “worship time.” The activities that surround the sermon we may describe as the “song service” or “the praise and worship time.” However, the biblical word for all that’s included in our worship is “liturgy” (*latreia*, see Rom. 12:1), and it simply describes the public way a church honors God in its times of gathered praise, prayer, instruction, and commitment. All churches that gather to worship have a liturgy – even if it’s a very simple liturgy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the theological foundations of the gathered worship of the church, to describe the regular elements of worship (or liturgy) at one particular church – Rincon Mountain PCA in Tucson, AZ, and to provide biblical support for each of those elements. Put simply: we are asking the question “why do we do what we do in worship?” This is always a fundamental question that needs to be asked of everything that occurs in the life of a church; particularly in something as central as worship. Thus, I hope to educate the members of Rincon Mountain as well as clarify the thinking of the elders of Rincon Mountain in the all-important endeavor of worshipping Almighty God.

¹ Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 15, 17.

² Peter Leithart, “For Whom Is Worship?” *New Horizons* 23, no. 4 (April 2002): 5.

What is Worship?

Before we jump into the more nitty-gritty details of the separate parts of the weekly worship service, it would serve us well to simply ask: “what is worship?” Most Christians are probably aware of the lexical background of this word. The English word *worship* is a contraction of the original Anglo-Saxon word *worth-ship*. Thus, originally, to give worship to anyone meant simply to accord him the proper recognition of his inherent dignity and value, or to put it another way, to accord him his worth or his worthiness. So, worship in the context of the Christian faith is giving to God all of the praise and dignity and honor – all of the *worth* – that is due him as the Creator and Redeemer. Thus it is an intrinsically Christian practice, reserved for those who know the living God through saving faith in Jesus Christ.

This is important to recognize, for worship has been variously defined, and the definition varies widely! For example, Evelyn Underhill offers the following definition: “Worship in all its grades and kinds is the response of the creature to the Eternal.”³ This definition seems to me quite inadequate, for there are many responses which the creature makes which would certainly not be considered worship, especially Christian worship. Julius Melton says that “worship, in its most profound sense, is coextensive with the entirety of a Christian life.”⁴ Well, ideally this would be true, but the statement still does not clearly define what worship actually is! Robert Rayburn offers a much better definition: “Worship is the activity of the new life of a believer in which, recognizing the fullness of the Godhead as it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and his mighty redemptive acts, he seeks by the power of the Holy Spirit to render to the living God the glory, honor, and submission which are his due.”⁵ Now, this activity can and should characterize the daily life of the Christian (see 1 Cor. 10:31), but my concern here is particularly with the activity of the individual believer when he is consciously seeking to give God acceptable worship in the setting of a corporate worship service.

Having come to a workable definition of worship, let’s examine some of the theological foundations for worship that should be consciously recognized by Christians.

Theological Foundations for Worship

1. Worship is the fundamental activity of humanity

First and foremost, it would do us well to recognize that worship of the living God is *the* reason why we exist. The famous first question and answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* lays this out:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

The Biblical witness shows us the same thing as the catechism. Of particular importance is John 4, where Jesus of Nazareth encounters the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus tells the woman that “the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: *for the Father seeks such to*

³ Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (Scranton: Harper & Row, 1936), 3.

⁴ Julius Melton, *Presbyterian Worship in America* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1967), 9.

⁵ Robert Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1980), 20-21.

worship him. God is a Spirit; and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth”⁶ (4:23-24; italics mine). Of note is that this is the only place in the entire Bible where we read that God *seeks* anything from his people.⁷ Worship is central to God’s mind, and thus it should be central in ours as well.

The Psalms provide ample support to the claim that worship is the central human activity. Psalm 29:2 says, “Give to the LORD the glory due unto his name; worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness.” Also, Psalm 95:6-7 reads, “O come, let us worship and bow down; let us kneel before the LORD our Maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.” The Psalms are replete with such statements – commands for the people of the earth to give God the honor and reverence that he deserves. Also, worship is going to be central in heaven. Its importance is seen in that it is not only our main objective in this earthly life, but will continue to occupy our time and energy in the eternal Kingdom (see Rev. 4:10, 11; 5:11-14; 19:1-7; 22:8-9). Eugene Peterson, as usual, sums it up beautifully:

Worship is a meeting at the center so that our lives are centered in God and not lived eccentrically. We worship so that we live in response to and from this center, the living God. Failure to worship consigns us to a life of spasms and jerks, at the mercy of every advertisement, every seduction, every siren. Without worship we live manipulated and manipulating lives. We move in either frightened panic or deluded lethargy as we are, in turn, alarmed by specters and soothed by placebos. If there is no center, there is no circumference. People who do not worship are swept into a vast restlessness, epidemic in the world, with no steady direction and no sustaining purpose.⁸

2. *Worship and idolatry*

With this in mind, it is crucial to understand that our problem as sinners is not that we have ceased worshipping; rather, it is that we are worshipping things and people and institutions and ideas in place of the LORD God. In other words, we are idolaters. Only God can satisfy our innate longing to worship, but we suppress this truth in unrighteousness, as Paul writes in Roman 1:18-20, and worship created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. G.K. Chesterton put it this way: “Even the man knocking at the door of the brothel is looking for God.” Our problem, then, is not that we *desire* too much; it is that we *desire the wrong things*. C.S. Lewis famously wrote: “It would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”⁹

Idolatry can be very obvious: lust for power, sex, and money. Yet, often in Christian circles, it is much more subtle. It can take the form of legalism: attempting to absolve a guilty conscience by going to church, giving money, confessing sin, or

⁶ For a wonderful discussion of what Jesus means by “spirit and truth”, see D.A. Carson’s fabulous commentary on John.

⁷ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 15.

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 122.

⁹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 1-2.

manufacturing certain feelings, even in the context of worship. Or it can take the form of apathy: the barely concerned conscience is absolved by sentimental music, aesthetics, or a nostalgic moment in worship.¹⁰ It can take the form of irreligious abstention or religious pretension. In worship, we are fighting a battle in our hearts – will we love, serve, and praise the Redeemer God, or will we love, serve, and praise anything else?

3. *Worship is primarily a matter of the heart*

With the first two theological foundations in mind, it becomes clear that worship is a matter of the heart, first and foremost. The prophets make this abundantly clear. God is not interested in formal rituals where the heart is absent. In fact, he abhors such behavior. He spoke through Isaiah: “Bring no more vain sacrifices; incense is an abomination to me; the new moons and Sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot put up with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they are a trouble to me; I am weary of bearing them” (Isa. 1:12-14). Without purity of heart our worship, just as OT Israel’s, is a hateful thing in God’s eyes. It is possible to attend worship services your whole life and arouse the anger of wrath of God on a weekly basis.

The question is the state of the heart towards God. God looks on the inside, not the outside. What we need to worship rightly is the gospel of Jesus Christ changing our hearts from inside out. Therefore, *true worship is the renewal of the Gospel in our hearts* (this is true for Christians and non-Christians both). The question is what can rescue a sin-burdened, idolatrous heart. There is only one thing: The Gospel message. It is the only message in the world distinct from the world’s message. The world says do something, experience something, learn something and build a record through which you can stand before God and gain his approval. The Gospel says that Christ built a record for us so that we can stand before God and receive his approval. When the Gospel is washing over your heart, you will worship. As Michael Marshall writes, “Living worship and true liturgy are essentially the gospel in action – an action that, like all actions, has the terrifying potential of being able to speak louder than words...In some ways they are a kind of shorthand, quickly conveying what it would not be easy to put into words.”¹¹

4. *True worship is the activity of Christians*

True worship is always regulated by true faith. That is part of what Jesus means when he claims in John 4 that God is seeking worshippers who will worship in *truth*. Rayburn writes,

A man’s worship is governed by what he believes, for worship is man’s means of ascribing to God that adoration, reverence, praise, love, and obedience of which he sincerely believes God to be worthy. Worship which is truly Christian must of necessity declare and demonstrate the believer’s understanding of the attributes of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.¹²

¹⁰ For a great discussion of idolatry, see Tim Keller, *Countfeit Gods* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

¹¹ Michael Marshall, *Renewal in Worship* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1982), 68.

¹² Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 21.

Therefore, only worship based upon saving faith in Jesus Christ, the absolutely unique Son of God, is acceptable to God. As John Frame writes,

Biblical worship, then, as distinguished from pagan worship, is full of thanksgiving. When you are thankful, you come before God and say, "I know I can give you nothing you don't have already. I know that you've given me all that I have, and I glorify you in thanks." The thankful worshiper says, "I know I should obey you, because this is your world. I should keep my promises. I shouldn't be joining in with thieves, adulterers, blasphemers and deceivers. You have been so very kind to me; I must behave as you wish." And he adds, "I continue to need you every day. Please deliver me from trouble, for I have no other hope. If you, the owner of all things, aren't with me, no one will be; and if you are for me, nobody can be against me."¹³

Clearly if worship is an expression of thanksgiving for God's grace and mercy, it can only be expressed by those who have experienced that grace and who are actually thankful.

5. *Worship should be intelligible to non-Christians*

However, the fact that true worship is the domain of the believer in no way implies that non-Christians are not welcomed (and desired) in corporate worship services. Edmund Clowney points out that Israel was called to make God known to the unbelieving nations (Ps. 105.1) by singing his praises (Ps. 105.2). The temple was to be the center of a "world-winning worship." The people of God not only worship before the Lord but also before the nations (cf. Isa. 2.1-4; 56.6-8; Ps. 47.1; 96:1-6; 100.1-5; 102.18; 117). God is to be praised before all the nations, and as he is praised by his people, the nations are summoned and called to join in song.¹⁴ Believers are continually told to sing and praise God before the unbelieving nations.

The NT is also replete with evidence that this is an intention of biblical worship. For example, in 1 Cor. 14:24-25 Paul is addressing the misuse of the gift of tongues. He complains that speaking in tongues will cause unbelievers to say that the Christians are out of their minds (14:23). *He insists that the worship service must be comprehensible to them.* He says that if an unbeliever "or unlearned one" (an uninitiated inquirer) comes in, and worship is being done "unto edification", *"he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all"* (14:24). Of what does this conviction consist? *"The secrets of his heart will be laid bare"* (14:25). It may mean he realizes that the worshippers around him are finding in God what his heart had been secretly searching for, but in the wrong ways. It may mean the worship shows him how his heart works. Either way, the result is: *"so falling on his face, he will worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you.'"*¹⁵

So, unbelievers cannot engage in proper worship before God, but one way that they come to know God is by joining and watching believers gathered in the church to

¹³ John Frame, "Worship and the Reformation Gospel." http://www.frame-poythress.org/frame_articles/worshipandref.htm.

¹⁴ Tim Keller, "Reformed Worship in the City." *Worship by the Book*. Ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 218.

¹⁵ Tim Keller, "Evangelistic Worship." <http://www.redeemer2.com/resources/papers/evangelisticworship.pdf>

worship God (see also Acts 2). That is the meaning of the term that Clowney coined, “doxological evangelism.” Keller’s seminal article, “Evangelistic Worship”, follows Clowney’s initial insights. He argues that the first step to having unbelievers in worship and, more importantly, affected by the service, is to make the service comprehensible to them. Mark Driscoll has said that we should not be seeker-*sensitive*, but seeker-*sensible*. Everything should be communicated intelligibly, and “insider” or “tribal” language, of which Reformed Christians in particular are so prone, should be avoided. Once unbelievers are thought about in the service and spoken to intelligibly, our Christian members will begin to invite their unbelieving friends, knowing that they will be addressed in words that they can understand. In other words, *contextualization* precedes *conversion* in most cases. Finally, the service must include some means by which the unbeliever can be led to commit to Jesus. So, the gospel is present in every service, both for the long-time believer and for the most hardened unbeliever to believe and repent.

6. *Worship is dialogical*

Worship is to be looked upon as a dialogue between God and his people. As one of my mentors, Tom Gibbs of Redeemer PCA in San Antonio, has said, “worship is not a spectator sport; it is a contact sport.” God speaks to his people first, and they respond to him. God speaks again and they reply. This insight shapes the form of the service (the liturgy) on a basic level. The pattern of dialogue is found again and again in the Bible, particularly in the OT where much detail is given concerning the worship of the Lord’s people. One of the best examples of the dialogue pattern, and the one which is the starting point for many theologians in their study of worship, is found in Isaiah 6. God is present in his throne room, surrounded by angelic beings whose task it is to serve the Lord and who therefore stand in his presence awaiting their orders. The seraphim begin the dialogue as they speak for God. Their words are both an ascription of praise and a call to worship: “And one cried to another, ‘Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory’” (6:3). The prophet responds in 6:5 with a confession: “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.” The dialogue continues as God acts and speaks again through the seraph that flies to the prophet, bringing a burning coal from the altar, laying it upon his mouth, and pronouncing absolution: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for” (6:7). Then the Lord continues the dialogue by immediately calling Isaiah into service (6:8), to which Isaiah again responds (6:8b).

There are many striking examples in the OT of such dialogue in the worship of God (see Jer. 1:4-8; Hab. 2:20; Gen. 28:10-22; Exodus 24:1-7). In the Revelation of St. John we see that dialogue continues in the worship in heaven: “Praise our God, all you his servants”...“Alleluia, for the Lord God reigns in power” (Rev. 19:5-6). Those who lead in worship should be aware of this principle of dialogue, as it helps all individual worshippers unite in meaningful praise to God. Active involvement and participation by all worshippers is a presupposition of biblical corporate worship.¹⁶

¹⁶ See Rayburn’s discussion in *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 118-129.

7. Corporate worship is necessary

Finally, it should be made clear that *corporate worship* is necessary for individual Christians to participate in. The first reason for this is that it is biblical. There is explicit evidence in verses like Heb. 10:25, where the author exhorts us “not to neglect to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encourage one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” Apparently already in the NT church, some thought that a personal quiet time with just them and God was enough to fully meet their spiritual needs.

There is also implicit evidence that corporate worship is essential in the life of a healthy Christian, and that it is commanded by God. We can deduce this by “good and necessary consequence.”¹⁷ Rayburn writes: “Another consideration which gives import to corporate worship as distinct from individual worship is the fact that every believer is a member of the body of Christ. He is never merely an individual but is part of a divine society...he functions properly only when discharging his own responsibilities in the body.”¹⁸ 1 Cor. 12 is very instructive here. The problem Paul was dealing with in this text was the fact that some members had seen fit to “detach” themselves from the corporate body, thinking that they were an entity to themselves (1 Cor. 12:19). He argues that this is illegitimate behavior for the Christian, for every believer is a “member” of the body. He writes, “For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, ‘because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less a part of the body...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:14-15, 27). There are no lone-ranger-Christians. No Christian is an island. So, we can deduce the following: *if* the highest aim of the church is worship, and *if* every member is responsible to be involved in the body, using his members as part of the whole, then it follows that *every member must participate in the worship of the body*. This is not only necessary but needed.

John Frame gives another reason why corporate worship is essential. He writes: “Even in the very act of worship, God calls us to serve one another. Hymns, teaching, and other elements of worship ‘must be done for the strengthening of the church’ (1 Cor. 14:26). In worship, God does call us to think of one another. We should see that the rich don’t get all the good seats (James 2:1-4). And at communion, we should make sure that no believer is excluded (1 Cor. 11:22-23).”¹⁹ So worship is not a time for us to cut ourselves off from one another in order to meditate on God as individuals. At worship, as everywhere else, *God calls us to serve him by serving one another*. It is a time to pray for one another’s needs. It is a time to look around and see that everybody has a seat, has the bread and wine. It is a time to welcome strangers and explain to them what is going on, to help them find bulletins, bathrooms, nursery facilities. Again, Frame reminds us that “worship has a horizontal dimension, not only a vertical one. Our *object* of worship is exclusively vertical: our sovereign Father who dwells in heaven. But our *concerns* are both vertical and horizontal. For we do not worship our Father rightly unless we share

¹⁷ See *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1.6.

¹⁸ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 31.

¹⁹ John Frame, “Serving One Another in Worship” *In Covenant* 4:3 (Mar., 2001), 1-2.

his love for human beings made in his image. Jesus says, ‘By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:35).”²⁰

Elements in Worship and Biblical Support

Having laid the theological and biblical foundations for Christian worship, this section will explore briefly each particular element in the liturgy that we practice at Rincon Mountain with an effort to explain its importance and provide biblical support.

Call to Worship

The Call to Worship begins each service. It intends to exhort God’s people “to turn from worldly distractions and to focus hearts, minds, and actions on revering him.”²¹ If this is its purpose, then the Call to Worship should actually contain a call to worship! I once was at a church where the call to worship was a reading of John 3:16, a great text, but not appropriate for the call to worship. Further, because the call to worship is from God, we are reminded that he always initiates; we respond.

So, the Call to Worship is not simply a perfunctory greeting of human cordiality but is at once a weighty responsibility and a joyful privilege. God is inviting us by his Word to join the worship of the ages and the angels. He invites us into the presence of the King of the Universe before whom all creation will bow and for whom all heaven now sings. Further, because the Call is from the Bible, we are reminded that “we do not approach God on our terms, but his. When he speaks, it is our obligation and privilege to respond appropriately in praise, prayer, repentance, testimony, encouragement of others, and service to what he declares about himself.”²²

Finally, the call is not just a piece of advice, but a holy command from the Lord God Almighty. He is demanding our worship in the Call, and thus it is to be heard seriously and reverently and joyfully. All calls, then, should have this imperatival aspect to them. The Call reminds us that God has established the relationship he has with us, that God has initiated salvation, and that God is present with us in this service of praise. He calls us to respond to his grace, mercy, holiness, majesty, and love. The call will often be responsive, but can simply be read by the presiding minister as well.

Hymn of Response or Hymn of Adoration²³

Our opening hymn is a response to God’s calling us into holy worship. Thus, it is generally a hymn that focuses on the character of God and the aspects of his saving grace. It echoes the call to worship and helps the congregation to reflect on who it is that they

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 159.

²² Ibid, 161.

²³ I assume here that hymns and songs of praise are legitimate forms to praise God in public worship. In other words, I am not an exclusive psalmody proponent. Those who favor such a view would do well to read Rayburn’s treatment in *O Come, Let Us Worship* (228-241) and Edmund Clowney’s *The Church* (133-136).

are focusing on. Also, the hymn of adoration should be a well-known hymn – one that the congregation can sing loudly, joyfully, and reverently as we triumphantly gather in the name of Jesus before the throne of God above. This hymn intends both to remind us of where we now are – in the presence of God in gathered worship – and who we are worshipping. Examples include hymns like Holy, Holy, Holy; O Worship the King; All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above; or New Songs of Celebration Render.

Confession of Sin

In Calvin’s Geneva Liturgy, the Confession of Sin was the first element of the liturgy.²⁴ This was certainly appropriate for it reminds us that we are not fit to enter into the presence of a Holy God (as Isaiah 6 reminds us!). We feel that it fits best here in our liturgy because we have opened by focusing in on who it is we are worshipping – we have been called by him to do what we are created to do and we have sung about his wonders, his mighty character, his powerful grace, his awesome holiness. Now, we need to recognize who we are and how far we fall short of God’s infinite glory (Rom. 3:23). 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” (Psalm 66:18). “Until we have truly and sincerely confessed our sin before the Lord, our worship will not be acceptable in his sight.”²⁵

Also, recognizing the importance of the gospel being made clear in our worship structure, we confess our sin because we cannot appreciate the gospel without appreciating and understanding rightly our own “fallen-ness”. “The grace of God has no present glory if the sin it overcomes is not a present reality, and the ministry of Christ has no significance if the sin he came to defeat will not even be faced.”²⁶

We offer prayers of confession in various ways. We want our liturgy to be similar in form and structure, but variegated in wording. We want to avoid worship becoming rote and familiar, and the confession of sin should never become automatic. So, we will sometimes sing a confession of sin, or meditate as the choir sings. More often, we read together corporately (remembering that worship is dialogical and active) prayers, such as *The Valley of Vision*, or psalms, such as Psalm 51.

Assurance of Pardon

No element of the gospel is more essential than the good news that in Christ Jesus we have received pardon from sin. The Assurance of Pardon in our worship service announces God’s forgiveness. “God’s people, many of whom are inwardly tormented by their sense of guilt, need to be reminded that they have a gracious God who has provided a full atonement for the sins of his believing children.”²⁷

It is important to note, contrary to Roman Catholic worship services, that the minister pronouncing the Assurance of Pardon is not him taking the role of a priest in granting absolution. We believe all God’s people have immediate access to his grace

²⁴ Ibid, 46-47.

²⁵ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 187.

²⁶ Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 182.

²⁷ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 192.

without the need of a human intermediary. The worship leader simply leads the people in remembering the mercy of God in pardoning our sins. Thus, instead of saying something like, “I grant you God’s pardon,” the minister always communicates that God is the granter: “Now hear the pardon God grants you because of the ministry of Christ Jesus,” or something similar.

Our Assurances of Pardon are almost always responsive readings from some portion of the Bible that focuses clearly on the gospel of grace. Readings such as Romans 5:1; Rom. 5:8-9; Eph. 2:7-8; Isa. 53:5-6; Ps. 103:8, 10-14; 1 Pet. 2:24; 1 John 1:9; 2 Cor. 4:6; 2 Cor. 5:21 are used regularly. We will sometimes read from a catechism or confession, such as Heidelberg Catechism, questions 59-60. This is one of the key parts of the service where unbelief can be addressed with the gospel, and so we want to make the work of Jesus in paying our sin-debt very clear.

Songs of Praise

In the liturgical structure, the Songs of Praise (usually two songs) are responses to God’s forgiving grace, freely offered in the gospel message. They should always hone in on the work of Jesus in his death and resurrection, and the subsequent peace, joy, hope, and love that believers experience in Christ. The songs can be up-tempo or more relaxed, but the theological content of the songs are primary in importance.

The Songs of Praise are usually more contemporary praise hymns or choruses. We believe that a balance between ancient and contemporary forms is appropriate for Christian worship in our era. We freely admit that there are many theologically shallow praise songs and frankly un-singable hymns. We want both our praise choruses and our hymns to be theologically profound and singable. Thus, we generally draw from the best works of artists like Chris Tomlin, David Crowder, Indelible Grace, Stuart Townend, and others. We believe that these artists have been gifted to both write new music and recast old music in modern forms that are honoring to God and accessible to congregants.

Not surprisingly, the Songs of Praise are the most controversial part of our worship service. Vestiges of the “worship wars” from the 1980s and 1990s still exist in our congregation, as in most PCA congregations. However, we want to clearly state worship styles are not *the issue*. Hopefully, by now this issue has been put in a new light. Rincon Mountain’s worship will first and foremost seek to *see God rightly and savor God truly*. No matter what style—contemporary, high church or traditional—one adopts, the liturgy must incorporate the elements of worship revealed in Scripture—Apostles’ Teaching, Fellowship, The Sacraments and The Prayers (see Acts 2:42-47), and must address the human heart with the penetrating power of the gospel. So, the theological is primary and the methodological is secondary.

But we still believe the methodological to be important. And we recognize that both “traditional” and “contemporary” forms of worship (really, every form of worship) have strengths and weaknesses. The goal methodologically is to maximize the strengths of the chosen worship style and minimize the weaknesses. To go into more detail, the strengths of “contemporary” worship revolve around the immanence of God, his closeness. Contemporary services often convey a sense of warmth and intimacy. In a broken, fragmented generation this has some real advantages. Even so, its weaknesses are manifest when this emphasis loses balance with the transcendence of God.

Contemporary worship tends to an uncritical acceptance of anything “popular.” This can lead to several problems which result in trivializing God and ultimately trivializing us. As the saying goes, “You are what you worship.” CW can create a restlessness characteristic of the age.

On the other hand, the strengths of “traditional” worship revolve around the transcendence of God, his otherness/holiness. Traditional worship services are often strong on conveying a sense of the majesty and splendor of God enabling the worship to consider and reverence God. Even so, its weaknesses are manifest when this style hides issues of spiritual ill-health (e.g. an unconverted congregation where the Spirit does not live—Dead Orthodoxy; or a congregation where the Truth of the Scripture is no longer upheld—Heterodoxy), is characterized by stiffness and a formality that is inconsistent with the joy of Jesus, chooses word selections/vocabulary that seems “weird, out of date, or out of touch” or becomes a badge of cultural elitism (e.g. what we do is excellent and other people are just dumb, unenlightened, etc.).

Thus, broadly speaking (and realizing I might offend some here!), our Songs of Praise are intended to maximize the intimacy and vibrancy of theologically sound and singable contemporary praise music, while our hymns are intended to maximize the truth and transcendence of theologically sound and singable hymnody. Both are intended to be “contextualized” – that is, understandable to the average attendee at Rincon Mountain.²⁸

Confession of Faith

Our Confession of Faith provide for the expression of the church’s most basic and deeply held beliefs. Through corporate reading, recitation, or singing, the contemporary church expresses its continuity with the church of the ages and its solidarity with fellow believers throughout the world. As Chappell puts it:

By affirming what we believe, we renew our convictions, attest our continuing belief in the historical truths of Christianity, indicate our support of those who have been persecuted for their faith, humble ourselves before the truths of Scripture, provide testimony of our faith to our children and the watching world, declare our loyalty to God, and renew in heart and mind the truths on which we will base our daily lives and on which we have staked the eternal destiny of our souls.²⁹

The Confession of Faith is an opportunity to train our members in the basic teachings of the Christian faith, as well as to “inform” the unbeliever of what is required that he or she believe in to be saved. Our Confessions are often somewhat theologically dense, yet we believe that this is appropriate and important for the furtherance of theological training among our people. We regularly use the ancient creeds such as the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, as well as the confessions of the Reformed churches, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, The Heidelberg Catechism, The Canons of Dort, the Scots’ Confession, and the Belgic Confession. Sometimes we will adapt biblical texts that clarify core Christian teaching and use it as a Confession of Faith.

²⁸ I have been influenced here by two of my mentors in ministry: Tom Gibbs, pastor of Redeemer PCA in San Antonio, and Leo Schuster, pastor of Redeemer PCA in New York (formerly of Christ the King PCA in Houston). Much of the material in this section is taken from the unpublished writings of these two men.

²⁹ Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 169.

The Confession is a clear sign that we at Rincon Mountain are a *confessional* or a *creedal* church. There are many churches and traditions in the American church today that eschew “confessionalism.” Such folks will regularly say things like, “my only creed is the Bible.” However, it is naïve to presume that any church can escape creedalism. Every church has (whether consciously or not) a statement of beliefs, which is all a creed is. We believe that this is a natural and helpful development in the life of any local church, and thus we gladly and openly “confess” our confessionalism!³⁰

Greeting

Acts 2:42 clearly tells us that an element of NT worship was “fellowship.” That is the intent of our Greeting, which we want to be an expression in the liturgy of what we hope is taking place much more regularly and at greater length before and after the service as well as throughout the week in the lives of our members. So, the Greeting is not a “break” in the worship service. It is a part of the worship service. This is an insight that needs to be better communicated by the worship leaders. The Greeting is not the time to “shoot the breeze” and talk about whatever. It is the time to greet your brothers and sisters in the name of Jesus, to lovingly encourage them, to offer friendly smiles and welcomes to visitors (particularly non-Christians), and to build up the body in love. The Greeting reflects the horizontal dimension of worship, which is an important part of the liturgy that is often overlooked.

Pastoral Prayer

The Pastoral Prayer at Rincon Mountain is basically a prayer of intercession. Having worshipped God through song, confession of sin, receiving an assurance of pardon, confession of faith, and greeting one another in the Lord, we now turn to spending time with God in prayer. Prayer is ironically one of the most obvious biblical elements of worship and one of the most neglected. Many modern services have a prayer after the sermon, and that is all. We believe that prayer is central to the service of worship, and that the Pastoral Prayer is the central prayer of all the prayers.

The term “Pastoral Prayer” can be misleading, for it might imply that it is only the pastor praying! But, the intent is for the pastor to guide all of the worshippers before the throne of God, beseeching him to work in their midst and to bless their labors. Thus, even the Pastoral Prayer is *active and engaging*. Many Christians (me included) find it very difficult to keep their attention from drifting during the Pastoral Prayer. Thus, it is important for the pastor to keep his prayer from dragging on, and to keep his prayer orderly. Further, we often ask the members of the congregation to share prayer requests before the prayer is offered as a way of showing our unity and as a means of involving the church more actively.

The prayer is intercessory in nature. In other words, it is intended to be a prayer for the particular needs of our own local congregation. Thus, it will often mention people by name – those who are sick, hurting, struggling, or being blessed. It will usually include prayer for local mission works or foreign missionaries that our church supports.

³⁰ The work of Darryl Hart is helpful on this subject, despite his sometimes glowering stance on peripheral issues. See, for example, *Recovering Mother Kirk* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

Thus, the prayer is one of the primary ways that other members in the church can know the prayer needs of the congregation at large. It is a wonderful expression of unity in the body.³¹

Scripture Readings

The first formal reading of Scripture in the history of Christian worship is found in Deut. 31:9-12, where Moses assembles the people at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles to read and understand the Law. This practice has been continued throughout Christian history, because the Word of God is the very core of worship. Our Scripture readings, therefore, afford each hearer an opportunity for ongoing, personal encounter with God himself.³²

If Scripture is God's incarnate voice for the ages, it should be well-known and regularly read in public at our worship gatherings. At Rincon Mountain, we have an OT and a NT reading each week. We follow the Christian calendar year readings to honor the idea that we are, in reading this portion of God's Word on this particular Sunday, uniting with the practice of millions of believers over centuries. Many churches no longer read Scripture publicly in the service apart from the sermon text; but we believe that regular exposure to the various genres of the biblical literature is important and worthwhile. Often, we are in a sermon series for a number of months and in order to give our members wide lenses towards the Bible, readings from other genres are very helpful.

Because the reading of the Word is an important element in the service, it should be read well! John Broadus, in his classic work, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, observes, "To read well is a rare accomplishment. It is much more common to excel in singing or in public speaking. Good preachers are numerous compared with good readers."³³ Scripture readers need to grasp groups of words or phrases properly, begin and end selections in the right contexts, speak in tones that are congruent with the sentiment of the text, and in short communicate well what the text says. Our readers, then, will make efforts to make climactic what the text makes climactic and to connote feelings appropriate for the sense of the passage. When this is done well, the reading of God's Word in worship can be quite powerful. As S.S. Curry puts it:

The reading of the Scriptures must never be perfunctory or merely formal. It should not be a mere authoritative presentation of facts or proclamation of words...The read must live his ideas at the time of utterance...He can manifest to others the impressions made on his own being...[For] when one soul is made to feel that another soul is hearing a message from the King of kings, he too bows his head and hears the voice of the Infinite speaking in his own breast.³⁴

Offering

³¹ Rayburn's discussion in *O Come, Let Us Worship* (197-203) is excellent.

³² See J. Edward Lantz, *Reading the Bible Aloud* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 43.

³³ John Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, ed. Jesse B. Weatherspoon, rev. ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1944), 360.

³⁴ S.S. Curry, *Vocal and Literary Interpretation of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 132.

It is important that every believer realize that the giving of an offering to God is an act of worship (see Acts 2:42). This needs to be made clear every Sunday. “Any other motive for making an offering is unworthy...The tithes are recognition of the sovereign authority of God and the offerings are an expression of deep love and thanksgiving to him for the riches of his salvation.”³⁵ During our offering there is always some musical element – either a congregational hymn that generally focuses on the lavish grace and gifts of God to us, or a piece of special music that draws the congregation to meditate on God’s goodness to them. The offering is collected as quickly as possible by the deacons, and then they come forward and await a simple and short prayer by the pastor. What an opportunity we have as Christians who live in the wealthiest country to ever exist to show our thanksgiving and commitment to God in the giving of our tithes and offerings to him and his church!

Preaching the Word³⁶

The sermon is the central part of the worship service. There is much that can be said here, but I will briefly lay out three things that every sermon at Rincon Mountain will possess: expository, Christ-centered, and applicable. First, expository preaching is our emphasis. This sort of preaching has a simple goal: to say what God says. The purpose of preaching is to explain the meaning of a given text and to apply it to the hearts of God’s people. This means that the preacher will seriously study God’s Word during the week so that he can carefully articulate its original meaning and its present significance. “Making sure God’s people know what God has said and why he has said it is the tandem goal of expository preaching.”³⁷

Second, every sermon at Rincon Mountain is going to be centered on Christ and his gospel. Jesus himself told us that every part of the Word is about him and his work (Luke 24:44-47), so if we are going to truly lay out the meaning of a text, Christ must be there! As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon put it: ‘The motto of all true servants of God must be, ‘we preach Christ; and him crucified.’ A sermon without Christ in it is like a loaf of bread without any flour in it. No Christ in your sermon, sir? Then go home, and never preach again until you have something worth preaching.” Frankly, no one cares about what a preacher has to say. We need to hear the gospel and that is all. So, we are committed to giving the gospel – to giving Jesus Christ in all his glory and grace – to the people gathered for worship every Sunday.

Third, every sermon at Rincon Mountain will be applicable. As John Stott put it, we bridge two worlds in preaching. We take a text that was written thousands of years

³⁵ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 194.

³⁶ Some of the best resources on preaching include: Robert Dabney, *Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1870); Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994); John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); Edmund Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961); John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); Pierre Marcel, *The Relevance of Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1963); David Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965); Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980); and Tim Keller, “Preaching in a Postmodern World”, available online at <http://www.endangeredleadership.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/keller-on-preaching-syllabus.pdf>

³⁷ Chappell, *Christ-Centered Worship*, 234.

ago and was originally intended for a completely different audience and “bridge the gap” to our culture, our situation, our time, and our needs. Thankfully, humanity in every age and place has at least one need the same: to hear about how our sins can be forgiven. Yet, we recognize that there are an infinite number of contextual variables in any given congregation. So, it falls upon the preacher and pastor to know what his people need to hear, to apply the Word to their needs, and to strengthen them in their walk.

Hymn of Response to the Word

Rayburn reflects, “I have sometimes listened to good sermons which seemed to demand a particular hymn that came to mind as I listened; yet the closing hymn which was eventually announced was not only not the hymn I had in mind, but one which was completely unsuitable to express the response of the congregation.”³⁸ The purpose of this hymn is to drive home the point of the sermon again. Thus it should generally be in line with the main message of that day’s sermon. It is also a summons to the people of God to live on mission as they re-enter the world for another week.

Benediction

The Benediction, like the Call to Worship, comes from God. Thus the Word of God forms an *inclusio* for the liturgy. “No worshipers should ever be sent forth to serve in their own strength. They must ever be dismissed in the name of the Lord with the assurance of the power and presence of the Triune God to accompany them always.”³⁹ The Benediction will almost always come from a biblical text, such as Num. 4:24-26; Heb. 13:20-21; Rom. 15:13; or 2 Cor. 13:14. With the Benediction, a pastor communicates the care of the Heavenly Father with such tenderness and power that the worshipers leave the service full of confidence and joy for their work in the world.

Conclusion

Worship is the greatest thing we can ever partake in. Therefore, doing it properly and biblically is of extreme importance. This paper has been an attempt to lay out the foundations of biblical worship and to explain briefly the reasoning for the various elements of worship at Rincon Mountain Presbyterian Church. May we praise the Lord, our Maker and Redeemer, with all that is within us, let us praise his name!

³⁸ Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship*, 216-217.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 217.