



Our Order of Worship

Visitors to our churches and also our members sometimes ask why we follow a certain order or sequence of liturgical order in our worship services. Why do we repeat the same or similar phrases and introduce few or hardly any changes in the liturgy? Other churches, both evangelicals and reformed, seem less tradition bound when it comes to experimenting with new approaches to worship. To answer questions like these it will be helpful to explain first, why we adhere to an *Order of Worship* that was adopted several centuries ago.

The Reformers and Worship

The great objective of the Protestant Reformation was to correct the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church. By the beginning of the 16th century that Church had gone through a steep decline, not only theologically, morally and spiritually, but also liturgically. The Reformers therefore, were also concerned with the way the Church worshipped. According to Rome, we are free to worship God as we will, provided we do not practice anything that is clearly forbidden by Scripture. Luther agreed, but he found many things in Roman Catholic worship that the Bible forbids; so he removed those elements and retained the rest. Calvin, however, insisted that worship should be based on strict biblical principles, clearly stated and commanded. His position on worship is reflected in Article 32 of the *Belgic Confession*, which states:

Those who are rulers of the Church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the Church, yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, has instituted. And therefore, we reject all human inventions and all laws which man would introduce into the worship of God, thereby to bind and compel the conscience in any manner whatever.

Consequently, our Reformed fathers did away with everything they believed was not according to Scripture and they kept only what was authorized by God's Word, specifically in the New Testament.

Worship Is Spiritual

The key text is John 4:24, "*God is a Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship him in spirit and in truth.*" Only that worship is acceptable to God which is spiritual. What is meant here is not that worship needs to be in the Holy Spirit, although this is also required, but what Jesus meant here was that worship had to proceed from man's inner spirit, and should not be with outward forms only.

"Worship in truth" does not mean true as opposed to false, but rather true as contrasted with the incomplete or shadowy forms and sacrifices of the Old Testament. In John 1:17 the apostle writes: "*...the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.*" Here is the same contrast, not between truth and falsehood, because the Mosaic revelation was not without grace and truth. But grace and truth came in a richer and fuller measure by Jesus Christ.

The Order of Worship

Our worship, therefore, must be New Testament worship: spiritual as opposed to formal and external. Yet, while on earth, we cannot attain to such worship without the assistance of some external aids. Here is where the 'order of worship' or liturgy comes in.

The New Testament does not contain a lot of detailed prescriptions for what constitutes proper worship, but it does offer some basic rules and general principles, which are simple and straightforward. The church, therefore, needs to devise liturgical procedures in accordance with biblical principles and guidelines. There must be order and decorum in our worship services.

Our Reformed Fathers have paid close attention to these requirements. Calvin has written extensively on this subject. The essence of the liturgy he introduced in Geneva was its simplicity. Calvin did, however, allow for some variety. One particular form might be suitable for one era or one country but unsuitable for another, he said. Yet, while some flexibility exists, especially in continental Reformed churches, most of them, including the Free Reformed Churches, follow a carefully drawn up order of worship.

Votum and Salutation

The liturgical order begins with a *votum* and *salutation*. Some church bulletins refer to an organ prelude and silent prayer as the first items of worship. These are not properly part of the worship service but serve only as preliminaries to it. The same applies to a “call to worship,” which some churches are introducing. The actual worship service starts with the Votum and Salutation.

The word *votum* is a Latin word which means word of dedication. In the Free Reformed Churches, as well as many other biblical and Reformed denominations, the *votum* consists of Psalm 124:8, “*Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*” With these words the official worship service begins. By pronouncing the *votum* the minister puts the congregation on notice that God is about to meet with His people. This declaration changes the character of the gathering from an unofficial to an official one. In that respect there is similarity between a church service and a court session. Court proceedings begin when the clerk gets up and declares: “The court is now in session.”

As Abraham Kuyper writes in His recently translated book, *Our Worship* (Dutch: *Onze Eredienst*), “*The votum, as an opening statement, turns a casual get-together of individuals into a united assembly and is intended to confirm ‘the presence of God’ in the midst of his people.*” Kuyper also explains why the Synod of Dordrecht (1574) of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands chose Psalm 124:8 as the best suitable words for the *votum*. Until that time, many ministers began the worship service with the words, “*Our beginning is in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,*” which of course is also a biblical way to start the sacred proceedings. But gradually a consensus was built to use Psalm 124:8.

The Rich Meaning of Psalm 124:8

Why did Psalm 124:8 become the more or less authorized *votum* to be used in the churches? Because in this psalm Israel acknowledges the Lord’s protecting care for His people. They express their gratitude this way: “*Blessed be the LORD, who hath not given us as a prey to their (our enemies’) teeth. Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowlers: the snare is broken and we are escaped*” (Ps.124:6, 7). Therefore, “*Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth*” (Ps. 124:8).

Although the reference here is to a temporal deliverance from deadly enemies, Kuyper applies it to the believers’ spiritual deliverance.

We, lost sinners, who were almost devoured by sin and Satan have been kept safe by God and we now gather here as the redeemed multitude that was set free and the first utterance of our heart is that it was God, and God alone, who saved us from death. And He is the one who now gathers us, saved and redeemed people, under the sounding forth of his Word (p.114-15).

What a wonderful way to begin a worship service! To praise our faithful covenant God for His great salvation! How many of us think of this when the *votum* is heard from the pulpit? It is not just the minister but the whole congregation that joins him in saying: “*Our (saving) help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.*”

Can we say this from the heart? Have we experienced this deliverance from sin and Satan? Here we see that right from the start we are confronted with a searching question – not just in the sermon that follows, but in the very first item of the order of worship.

The Salutation

Next comes the salutation in which the Lord conveys His greeting to His people. Various passages are used for this purpose, all of them drawn from the New Testament epistles. Most often the minister uses

Paul's greeting to the churches: "*Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,*" or "*Grace, mercy and peace, from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

Somewhat surprisingly, Paul never mentions the Holy Spirit in his salutations. But John does refer to the Spirit in his seven-fold operations in Revelation 1:4, when he writes to the seven churches which are in Asia: "*Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, and the first-begotten of the dead and the prince of the kings of the earth.*" Free Reformed ministers generally use one of Paul's salutations in the first service, while in the second service (afternoon or evening) many use the one by John.

In the *votum* the minister, representing the congregation, speaks to or about God, while in the *salutation* it is God who addresses the congregation via His servant. But notice how He does this. God meets His people in grace. Having been reconciled to Him through the finished work of His Son, they are greeted as children of their heavenly Father.

The Grace Communicated by the Salutation

How amazing it is to be greeted like this on the Lord's Day after having sinned and fallen short of God's law during the past week! God would have every reason to cast His congregation out of His sight. Those who fear the Lord understand this with increasing clarity and the more they realize what sinners they still are, the greater the wonder becomes that the first thing they hear in church on the Lord's Day is this warm and loving salutation from the Lord Himself.

In spite of their sins they hear the minister say in the name of the LORD, their covenant God: Grace be unto you and peace. This is not a mere wish as if the minister means no more than 'May the Lord give you grace and peace.' The grace and peace referred to here are actually bestowed on the congregation.

Grace is Offered to All

All present are offered God's grace. No, this does not mean that all who hear these words are or even will be saved. For unbelievers the salutation is intended to lead to repentance (see Rom.2:4). The Lord's goodness is extended to all who have come to worship and this should result in sinners turning to the Lord with the prayer that they may truly experience His grace and peace.

What a blessing, but also what a responsibility this brings to all who attend worship services! If God wants to meet with us every Lord's Day in grace, whenever we meet in worship as His people, how can we possibly remain cold and indifferent when this love is offered to us? How can anyone stay unmoved and unconverted when so much divine labour is expended for the benefit of our souls?

To those who are burdened under their load of sin, the salutation at the beginning of the worship service offers great hope. Already in the opening statement of the minister the covenant God comes with the Gospel of grace and peace. For needy sinners who repent and believe this Gospel, God says, this grace and peace is yours. I give you these blessings for Christ's sake. And to unbelievers the Lord says, I offer you this grace and peace because I have no pleasure in your death but in your repentance and life.

How necessary, then, and how beneficial it is to reflect on these things! How often we take our beautiful and well-thought out order of worship for granted so that we hardly listen to the familiar opening words, to the detriment of our spiritual life. Let us concentrate on what is said from the pulpit in God's name, as well as what we say to God by the mouth of His servants, our ministers. In this way we may already receive a blessing before the sermon begins.

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